

REVEREND JAMES WILSON

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Foster Great-Niece, 3 times removed
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Reverend James Wilson was born in Tatty Keel, County Tyrone, Ireland, in February 1821 (as self-reported by him to Princeton Theological Seminary, although his headstone says 1819). He came to the United States in 1842, and graduated from Lafayette College, Boston, PA, in 1847. He then graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, in 1850, and was licensed as a minister of the Gospel by the Presbytery of Philadelphia on April 5, 1850. He was then ordained as an evangelist by the Presbytery of Mississippi on October 23, 1852, where he served as a missionary to the slaves around Natchez, MS, from 1850-1856 (Alumni of Princeton Theological Seminary, 1871-1905).

He was then sent to Texas in 1856, as a missionary to the “Godless West,” and settled near what is now Edge Community, in northeastern Brazos County. During his 53 year ministry, he served as a circuit preacher or “stated supply” (a term used by the Presbyterians for a circuit preacher or interim preacher) and organizer for many small Brazos Valley Presbyterian congregations from 1856-1904. Because many of the Brazos Valley’s early immigrant residents were Irish Presbyterian farmers, he established congregations at Bethel and Concord (near Edge Community, Brazos County) and served them continuously “but for two short intervals” 1856-1894; the church at Concord became the Brazos Presbyterian Church (near Edge Community), where he served 1872-1903. He established a congregation at Wheelock (southern Robertson County, not far

from Edge Community) in 1858, and served them simultaneously until 1872 and again 1879-1903; he also taught in a small private school near Wheelock 1858-1864. He served as stated supply also for a church at Centerville (Leon County) 1866-1872 and again 1873-1877, and established churches at Sand Prairie (northeastern Brazos County) date unknown, Elmwood date unknown, and Lebanon (1888) (Alumni of Princeton Theological Seminary, 1871-1905; Princeton Theological Seminary, 1905; Brazos Presbytery, 1905). Although most of those communities listed were at one time thriving little towns, with stores, cotton gins, blacksmith shops, a post office and churches, Wheelock and Centerville are the only towns that still exist; none of them still have an active Presbyterian congregation (Hare, 1995; Rice, 1995).

With the Reverend J.R. Hutchinson, Reverend Wilson helped found the First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, on the “fourth Sabbath of November, 1867,” with 24 charter members (Wilcox, 1952; Monroe, 1993). The First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, was the only surviving Presbyterian congregation of those that Reverend Wilson organized. One can only surmise that with the growth of other denominations and the increased mobility of the population in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, many of those early Presbyterians either changed denominations or decided to make the 20-odd mile trek into Bryan to worship with a larger, growing congregation.

Because Reverend Wilson had served in Mississippi as a missionary to the slaves, one can also surmise that he also ministered to slaves in Brazos County as well. He owned several hundred acres of land in northeastern Brazos County after the Civil War, and no doubt hired many of his neighbors’ and church members’ former slaves to help work his land. He was recorded as performing many marriages in the 1860’s to 1870’s,

including some of Brazos County's early freed slaves (Brazos County Marriage Records, 1850-1910). Reverend Wilson was also something of a writer, and published "a few" newspaper articles in local newspapers (Princeton Theological Seminary, 1905).

Reverend Wilson married Miss Laura Barnes, from Leon County, on December 28, 1866. She was an accomplished poet, with several of her works published in local newspapers. They had no children of their own, and ultimately divided their land between Samuel Huckaby (a nephew of Mrs. Wilson's) and James Wilson, Jr. (a nephew of Reverend Wilson's and his namesake), whom they brought to help work the land around 1870, much of which still is held by descendants of the two nephews. Mrs. Wilson preceded him in death on December 19, 1900, and was buried in the New Church Cemetery, site of the old Concord or Brazos Presbyterian Church congregation, near the Edge Community (off Macy Road, off FM Hwy. #974, northeast Brazos County). The land for the cemetery and the church was donated by a Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Chapman, members of his congregation, who lived on adjacent land (Brazos County Deed Records, Book U, p. 500). Because the congregation had disbanded or combined with others long before, the old church building was finally dismantled in the early 1950's.

Reverend Wilson died on August 24, 1904, just ten days after preaching his last sermon to the congregation at Wheelock. He was said to preach with the same zeal and vigor as in his younger years. He was buried beside his "beloved Laura" in the New Church Cemetery (Wilson, 1904; Brazos Presbytery, 1905). Although the old Brazos church no longer stands and other congregations have dissolved or been absorbed, Reverend Wilson's legacy lives on in the hearts and minds of generations of relatives and friends, whose lives were touched by his Christian witness.

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