Hugh Williamson (1735 – 1819): Jack of All Trades

The coined adage “jack of all trades and master of none” certainly does not apply to Hugh Williamson. In all fairness, Williamson was jack of all the trades he pursued, and indeed he mastered them all. During his well accomplished lifetime, for every endeavor he pursued he was sure to be certified in that field. He as a Presbyterian minister and a well respected scientist, mastered all areas within the two extremes of religion and science. Before delving into this man’s impressive accomplishments it is imperative we start from where everything begins—birth.

Hugh Williamson was born to a religious, Scottish father and an Irish mother on December 5, 1735 in the town of West Nottingham, Pennsylvania. His father—a very successful clothier—guided his eldest son to become a Presbyterian minister. His early education at schools like the New London Cross Roads, DE, and Newark, DE, was a testament to this fact. Upon completion of his early education, at the age of sixteen in 1751 the young Williamson was among the first group of students to enter the first class of the College of Philadelphia, which would become part of the University of Pennsylvania. Six years later he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree at the tender age of twenty-two years old. Two years after that his family moved to Shippensburg, PA. While there his father passed away and Williamson worked fervently to settle his father’s estate. Once that was completed he moved to Connecticut, where he trained to become a licensed Presbyterian minister in 1759. In so doing he realized what his father had envisioned for him, even though he was never an ordained preacher. In 1760, Williamson returned to the Philadelphia region and received the degree of Master of Arts; and he was soon appointed professor of mathematics in his alma mater. Four years later he embarked on a mission to Europe for further studies in the area of medicine, which caused him to resign the professorship.

While in Europe, Williamson first attended the University of Edinburgh and then moved to London for additional medical studies. After staying in London for a gruesome twelve-month period, he traveled to Holland to finish his medical aspirations at the University of Utrecht. Williamson’s stay in London was gruesome in the sense that he was regularly called upon by the British Privy Council to testify on what he saw with regards to the Tea Party in Boston. In one of these meetings, according to an article written by Jeoren Daanen of the Nation Archives and Records Administration, Williamson was said to have warned the councilors that the Colonies would rebel if the British did not change their policies. While in Europe, Williamson contributed to other areas of the sciences, especially astronomy, and wrote several articles and papers on how the United States’ climate condition changed. In consideration of some of his well written and well articulated papers, Williamson was honored with several awards and honorary degrees in Europe.

Upon returning to his native country, the United States, in March 1779, Williamson successfully practiced medicine in the Philadelphia region and later moved to North Carolina, where he was appointed as a surgeon in the army. Williamson’s interest in politics led him to be sent as a representative in the House of Commons of North Carolina. Two years later he was sent to the General Congress, and in 1786 he was appointed a member of the team that helped revise and
amend the constitution of the United States. A year later, in 1787, Williamson returned to Philadelphia, this time as a delegate from North Carolina in the general convention to help in the process of drafting the federal constitution of the United States.

In 1793 Hugh Williamson moved and settled in New York to facilitate his literary and philanthropic pursuit. He was also the founder of the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York and a prominent member of the New York Historical Society. Therefore, based on the personal history of the esteemed Hugh Williamson, one can certainly claim that he was an enigma, an enigma because he constantly changed careers in an unpredictable manner, and never stayed in one place for too long to be either married to a job or a particular field of study. Williamson was everywhere and did everything. He contributed to the fields of education, politics, philosophy, science, and religion. In 1819, at the age of 83, Williamson died in New York City; he was buried in Trinity Church.

Bibliography
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