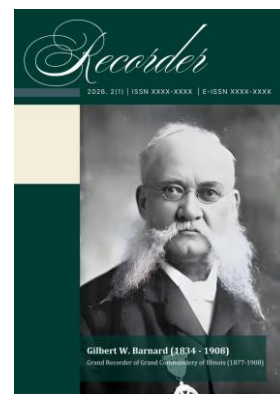




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Sir Knight Samuel May Williams (1795–1858): Missionary Activity of the First Texas Knight Templar

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Abstract

This article examines the missionary activity of Sir Knight Samuel May Williams (1795–1858), the first Knight Templar of Texas. Having been received into the Masonic Order of Knights Templar on December 1, 1835, Samuel M. Williams devoted the remainder of his life to service within the Order.

In the conclusion, the author argues that the activity of Samuel M. Williams represents a rare example of the combination of political, civic, and Masonic missions that exerted a long-term influence on the development of Texas. His assistance to the Republic of Texas, although it followed the Battle of San Jacinto, played a crucial role in stabilizing the young state and preventing a possible renewal of Mexican military intervention. In subsequent years, Williams became one of the central figures in shaping the institutional structure of Freemasonry in Texas: from the establishment of the first regular lodge and participation in the formation of the Grand Lodge to the organization of Royal Arch chapters and the higher chivalric degrees of the York Rite. Of particular significance was his contribution to the establishment of the Grand Encampment, later the Grand Commandery of Texas, which laid the foundation for the rapid growth of Templarism in the region. The history of the development of Masonic organizations in Texas clearly demonstrates that the mission of Samuel M. Williams was not only successfully accomplished, but also determined their trajectory of development for decades to come.

Keywords: Samuel May Williams (1795–1858), San Felipe de Austin Commandery No. 1, Galveston, Texas, Freemason, missionary activity.

Introduction

Samuel May Williams (1795–1858) was one of the most prominent figures in the history of the state of Texas. He was an American businessman and politician, as well as a close associate of Stephen F. Austin. His biography has been studied in considerable detail. He was born on October 4, 1795, in Providence, Providence County, Rhode Island. At the age of twenty-seven, in 1822, he arrived in Texas, where he initially engaged in clerical work, including service as a secretary of the local Mexican government. From 1834 onward, he turned to commercial activities, and in 1835, when the Texas Revolution became inevitable, he openly supported its cause.

Materials

The study is based on the following collections of documentary sources: Proceedings of the General Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States, 1816 to 1856¹; Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Texas, from Its Organization in the City of Houston, Dec. A.D. 1837, A.L. 5837 to the Close of the Grand Annual Communication²; Twenty-Third Annual Conclave of the Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of

¹ Proceedings of the General Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States 1816 to 1856. New Orleans, La.: Bulletin Book and Job Office. 1859.

² Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Texas, from its Organization in the City of Houston, Dec. A.D. 1837, A.L. 5837 to the Close of the Grand Annual Communication Held at Palestine, January 19, A.D. 1857, A.L. 5857. In Two Volumes. Vol. I. Galveston: Richardson & Co., News Office. 1860.

the State of Illinois¹; Transactions of the R.E. Grand Commandery of Knights Templar and Appendant Orders of the State of Texas²; Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States of America. Forty-Sixth Triennial Conclave³; Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States of America. Fifty-First Triennial Conclave⁴; and other materials.

Results

It is important to note that until 1821 Texas was a province of Spain. After Mexico gained independence, the former Spanish province became part of the Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas. In 1833, General Antonio López de Santa Anna was elected president of Mexico. He abolished the Constitution of 1824 and began to rule as a dictator. Several unpopular measures introduced by the Mexican president over the following two years created conditions in which Texas—where Spanish-speaking citizens constituted less than 25 percent of the population—stood on the brink of a war for independence.

Because Texas had first been part of the Spanish Crown and later, for a short period, part of Mexico, Masonic organizations of the York Rite were absent from the territory. Another reason for this absence was the relatively small population (approximately 40,000 inhabitants in 1836).

Returning to Samuel M. Williams, after Antonio López de Santa Anna came to power, an internal political crisis unfolded in Coahuila y Tejas, dividing the province into two political camps: supporters of the Mexican president and federalists. In 1835, Samuel M. Williams was elected as a delegate to the legislature of Coahuila y Tejas. In May, following the first legislative session, the federalists were subjected to repression by supporters of the Mexican president. Many federalists were arrested and imprisoned, among them Samuel M. Williams. He did not remain in prison for long, however, as he managed a successful escape, first reaching Texas and then traveling through the eastern states of the United States to raise capital for his bank⁵. While in New York, he received information about the imminent possibility of war in Texas and redirected his efforts toward the cause of Texas independence.

From this point onward begins the missionary activity of Samuel May Williams (Fig. 1).

¹ Twenty-third annual conclave of the Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of the state of Illinois. Chicago: Hazlitt and Reed, printers, 1879.

² Transactions of the R.E. Grand Commandery of Knights Templar and Appendant Orders of the State of Texas. Houston: W.H. Coyle, Printer and Lithographer, 1883.

³ Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States of America. Forty-Sixth Triennial Conclave. New York, 1955.

⁴ Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States of America. Fifty-First Triennial Conclave. Denver, 1970.

⁵ Henson, Margaret S. (1976). Samuel May Williams: Early Texas Entrepreneur. College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press. P. 79.



Fig. 1. Samuel May Williams (1795–1858)

Sir Williams received favorable recommendations in the highest Masonic circles from individuals who were well acquainted with his personal qualities. In the autumn of 1835, he entered the Masonic movement and, within only eleven days (from November 21 to December 1, 1835), passed through all the degrees of the York Rite—from Entered Apprentice to Knight Templar.

Jewel P. Lightfoot, in his work *History of the Relations Between the Grand Chapter of Texas and the General Grand Chapter of the United States of America*, notes: “By whom recommended; by what right of jurisdiction; by what custom; the Masonic Bodies in New York acted, the record is silent”¹.

Thus, on November 21, in Independent Royal Arch Lodge No. 2, he was initiated into Freemasonry and immediately received the first three degrees of Freemasonry². On November 25, he received all the degrees of the Royal Arch in Jerusalem Chapter No. 8, Royal Arch Masons, and on December 1, in Morton Encampment No. 4 (Fig. 2), he was knighted as a Knight Templar.

¹ *Lightfoot, Jewel P.* (1943). *History of Relations Between the Grand Chapter of Texas and the General Grand Chapter of the United States of America*. Fort Worth. P. 10.

² *Duncan, William J.* (1904). *History of Independent Royal Arch Lodge No. 2, F. & A.M., of the State of New York*. New York: Grand Lodge of New York, F. & A.M. P. 280.



Fig. 2. Badge of Morton Encampment (Commandery) No. 4, KT (MHAKT CGU. Collection 3rd. Catalog no. 017)

Thus, on December 1, 1835, Samuel May Williams was knighted as a Knight Templar. It is important to note that between 1816 and 1848 the number of Knights Templar in the United States increased from approximately 500 to 1,200 members¹. Consequently, it can be stated with a high degree of probability that in 1835 Samuel May Williams belonged to the first thousand Knights Templar in the United States.

However, Samuel M. Williams not only passed through all the degrees of the York Rite, but was also vested with exceptionally broad authority. As early as December 8, 1835, the General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons, meeting in Washington, D.C., granted Williams a charter for a chapter of Royal Arch Masons to be known as San Felipe de Austin Chapter No. 1—the first Royal Arch chapter in Texas—and installed him as its first presiding officer².

Less well known is the fact that only two days later, on December 10, 1835, Sir Knight Samuel M. Williams received authorization to open the forming San Felipe de Austin Encampment of Sir Knights Templar, No. 1, and was appointed to the office of Eminent Commander³. This document is reproduced in full below.

“On Thursday, December 10th, A.D., 1835,

The General Grand Encampment convened pursuant to adjournment, and was called to order.

PRESENT.

The M. E. Sir Jonathan Nye, G. G. Master.

And officers and members as before.

The minutes of the meeting held last evening were read and approved.

The committee appointed to nominate officers, reported that they had not been able to agree on a list of officers, and asked to be discharged. The committee was accordingly discharged.

The committee on the application for a Warrant to constitute an Encampment of Knights Templar in Texas, reported as follows:

¹ Twenty-third annual conclave of the Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of the state of Illinois. Chicago: Hazlitt and Reed, printers, 1879. P. xxxvi.

² *Lightfoot, Jewel P.* (1943). *History of Relations Between the Grand Chapter of Texas and the General Grand Chapter of the United States of America.* Fort Worth. P. 10-11.

³ *Proceedings of the General Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States 1816 to 1856.* New Orleans, La.: Bulletin Book and Job Office. 1859. P. 40.

The committee to whom was referred the application of Sir Knights Samuel M. Williams, James H. C. Miller and other Sir Knights of Texas, in the Republic of Mexico, for a Warrant for an Encampment of Knights Templar, to be located at San Felipe de Austin, in the State of Coahuila and Texas, respectfully report: That after mature examination and deliberation, it is the opinion that the application is constitutional and proper, and ought to be granted, although the application is not made by a number sufficient to the opening of an Encampment; it being completely within the power of this General Grand Encampment to authorize the opening of such an Encampment in Texas so soon as a competent number of Sir Knights shall be assembled as is required. Therefore, your committee recommend that a Warrant by the name of San Felipe de Austin Encampment of Sir Knights Templar, No. 1, of Texas, issue to Sir Knight Williams, as Grand Commander, Sir Knight Miller, as Generalissimo, and Sir Knight — as Capt. General; and would further recommend, that the Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of New York be, and he is hereby authorized to install into the office of Grand Commander, Sir Knight Williams.

All which is respectfully submitted.
By order of the committee,

[Signed]
PETER GRINNELL, Chairman¹.

Thus, by December 10, 1835, Samuel M. Williams had obtained the authority to establish an extensive network of Masonic organizations in Texas, and, most importantly, Masonic bodies encompassing all degrees—from the lowest to the highest.

From this moment, his missionary activity truly began. He launched an active campaign to raise funds to support the Republic of Texas. He secured a loan to purchase the schooner *Invincible* in order to support the naval forces of Texas, and in May 1836 he returned to Texas with ammunition and provisions, as well as 700 volunteers².

On the one hand, this assistance was somewhat delayed, since the decisive battle at San Jacinto had taken place on April 21, 1836, ending in a Texian victory. Almost immediately after the battle, soldiers residing in Texas, believing that hostilities had ended, left the army and returned home, reducing the strength of the Texian army to approximately 400 men (on April 21 its strength had been about 1,200). On the other hand, this assistance sharply increased the size of the Texian army in May and, in effect, protected the young Republic of Texas from a renewed Mexican invasion. In the following months, the Texian army continued to grow due to the arrival of volunteers, and by September it numbered about 2,500 men, of whom 1,800 had arrived in Texas after the Battle of San Jacinto³.

This period was followed by intensive administrative and public activity. Harmony Lodge No. 6 began with 20 members, with its first initiation held in 1839. Harmony Lodge No. 6 is the oldest chartered Masonic organization in Texas, and Samuel M. Williams is regarded as its founding father⁴. In 1839, Williams became a representative of Harmony Lodge No. 6 in Galveston⁵. In 1840, while serving as Junior Warden of Harmony Lodge No. 6, he was nominated for the office of Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Texas and was elected to that position by a majority vote⁶. From 1841 onward, he held the title of Past Grand Master⁷.

Thereafter, he turned to the establishment of Royal Arch chapters and the organization of similar chapters in other parts of Texas. On December 30, 1850, this work was completed with the establishment of the Grand Chapter of Texas, Royal Arch Masons, and Williams was elected its first presiding officer⁸.

¹ Proceedings of the General Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States 1816 to 1856. New Orleans, La.: Bulletin Book and Job Office. 1859. P. 40.

² Nichols, Ruth G. (1952). "Samuel May Williams". *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*. 56 (2): 200.

³ Lack, Paul D. (1992). *The Texas Revolutionary Experience: A Political and Social History 1835–1836*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press. P. 134.

⁴ Turner, Bronwyn (2015). Harmony Masonic Lodge No. 6 celebrates 175 years. *The Daily News*. 2015. Jan. 11.

⁵ Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Texas, from its Organization in the City of Houston, Dec. A.D. 1837, A.L. 5837 to the Close of the Grand Annual Communication Held at Palestine, January 19, A.D. 1857, A.L. 5857. In Two Volumes. Vol. I. Galveston: Richardson & Co., News Office. 1860. P. 48-49.

⁶ Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Texas, from its Organization in the City of Houston, Dec. A.D. 1837, A.L. 5837 to the Close of the Grand Annual Communication Held at Palestine, January 19, A.D. 1857, A.L. 5857. In Two Volumes. Vol. I. Galveston: Richardson & Co., News Office. 1860. P. 49.

⁷ Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Texas, from its Organization in the City of Houston, Dec. A.D. 1837, A.L. 5837 to the Close of the Grand Annual Communication Held at Palestine, January 19, A.D. 1857, A.L. 5857. In Two Volumes. Vol. I. Galveston: Richardson & Co., News Office. 1860. P. 86.

⁸ Lightfoot, Jewel P. (1943). *History of Relations Between the Grand Chapter of Texas and the General Grand Chapter of the United States of America*. Fort Worth. P. 34.

The most difficult task proved to be the accumulation of a sufficient number of Knights Templar of the higher York Rite degrees within Texas. After the opening of San Felipe de Austin Encampment No. 1 in 1835, thirteen years passed before a second encampment was established in Texas—Ruthven Encampment No. 2 (Houston, Texas), opened on February 2, 1848¹. Five years later, on May 16, 1853, the third encampment—Palestine Encampment No. 3 (Palestine, Texas)—was opened², providing the legal basis for the creation of the Grand Encampment of Texas.

In 1854, the Grand Encampment of Texas was established, and Samuel M. Williams became its first Grand Commander³, assuming the title of Past Grand Commander in 1855. In that same year, Colorado Encampment No. 4, Dallas Encampment No. 6, and San Antonio Encampment No. 7 were opened. In 1856, all Knights Templar encampments in the United States, both local and state-level, were reorganized into commanderies.

Samuel M. Williams died on September 13, 1858, in Galveston, Galveston County, Texas.

The next Knights Templar encampment was established only after the death of Samuel M. Williams. Looking ahead, it should be noted that a century later, in 1955, the Grand Commandery of Texas already comprised 89 commanderies with a total membership exceeding 22,000 Knights, and its numbers continued to grow. In that year, the Grand Commandery of Texas ranked third in size in the United States, surpassed only by the states of Pennsylvania and Ohio⁴.

By 1970, the number of Knights Templar in Texas exceeded 30,000 members organized in 91 commanderies, placing Texas first in the United States⁵. Yet the beginning of this story dates back to December 1, 1835, when in New York, at Morton Encampment No. 4, Sir Samuel M. Williams was knighted as a Knight Templar. His mission was the creation of a network of Masonic organizations throughout Texas, and this mission was successfully fulfilled.

Conclusion

The activity of Samuel M. Williams represents a rare example of the combination of political, civic, and Masonic missions that exerted a long-term influence on the development of Texas. His assistance to the Republic of Texas, although it followed the Battle of San Jacinto, played a crucial role in stabilizing the young state and preventing a possible renewal of Mexican military intervention. In the years that followed, Williams became one of the central figures in shaping the institutional structure of Freemasonry in Texas: from the establishment of the first regular lodge and participation in the creation of the Grand Lodge to the organization of Royal Arch chapters and the higher chivalric degrees of the York Rite. Of particular significance was his contribution to the establishment of the Grand Encampment, later the Grand Commandery of Texas, which laid the foundation for the rapid growth of Templarism in the region. The history of the development of Masonic organizations in Texas clearly demonstrates that the mission of Samuel M. Williams was not only successfully accomplished, but also determined their trajectory of development for decades to come.

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³ Transactions of the R.E. Grand Commandery of Knights Templar and Appendant Orders of the State of Texas. Houston: W.H. Coyle, Printer and Lithographer, 1883. P. 44.

⁴ Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States of America. Forty-Sixth Triennial Conclave. New York, 1955. P. 148-149.

⁵ Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States of America. Fifty-First Triennial Conclave. Denver, 1970. P. 64.

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