

## ALEXANDER HAMILTON WILLARD

The old man looked around. Things were getting very settled. The farmland was cleared. Roads crossed the land. There was talk of railroads everywhere. Steamboats regularly passed on the river. He was 74 years old now, but still tough and spry enough to dream of the distant shore he would lead his family to - California. His son was there and gold continued to flow from the land. He decided to sell out, leave Platteville, and join a wagon train bound for the far west. Some of those leaving Old Grant were headed for Oregon and some for California. He was confident that he could make it, and God knew he had seen much more rugged traveling. He had been west many years ago. He had been one of the first Americans to see the Pacific Northwest. In 1804 he had signed on with the Lewis and Clark expedition; the "Corps of Discovery", favored project of President Jefferson who had just shepherded the Louisiana Purchase (announced July 4, 1803). Jefferson wanted to know what the new nation had bought. The old man had suffered more than most by his own failings, but he had persevered. He was the only member of the Corps of Discovery captured by the camera's lens. For more than 20 years he had lived in Southwest Wisconsin; first in Elk Grove, and then in Platteville. He had been happy farming the land, a citizen of a new territory; just one of many citizens.



His name was Alexander Hamilton Willard. He was born in Charlestown, New Hampshire on August 28, 1778. By 1800 he had moved west to Kentucky. On June 9, 1800 he joined the United States Army. His induction papers showed him as a blacksmith. It was in the routine and inglorious service of the nation as an army private that his opportunity to intersect with history occurred. He was physically strong and handy with his hands. He knew ironwork, gun repair, and a little carpentry. He was an accomplished hunter. In short, he was the kind of man that would be needed to get the expedition up the long rivers and over the endless plains and mountains that entailed the massive west. He was enlisted in Captain Amos Stoddard's artillery company at Fort Fayette (modern Pittsburgh). He went west when Stoddard's company was assigned to Fort Kaskaskia (near Ellis Grove Illinois – 75 miles south of St. Louis). In November 1803 Captain Meriwether Lewis and William Clark arrived to recruit troops for the expedition. Eleven men were recruited from fort Kaskaskia, six from the infantry company commanded by Captain Russell Bissell and five from the artillery company commanded by Captain Amos Stoddard. In January 1804 he joined the expeditions company. On May 14, 1804 the

expedition commenced.

The story of the Hardships and triumphs of the Corps of Discovery are well known. Many articles and books recounted the story at its bicentennial, which we justly celebrated as an extraordinary feat; a feat requiring, as Steven Ambrose's book title trumpeted, "undaunted courage." Despite his accomplishments, Alexander Hamilton Willard is not generally known or celebrated in Grant and Lafayette Counties where he resided from 1827 to 1852, a span of 25 years. Perhaps this is because he did not promote himself or his deeds. Years later, a grandson Austin J. Willard wrote to an inquirer: "*I would not give a penny to have every man woman and child in America know that I was the grandson of one of the men who went with Lewis & Clark. I would not give a fig to know if I was the great grandson of Simon Willard or anyone else. Grandfather crossed the Plains in 1852, had no trouble with Indians or any adventure worth relating.*" To those who have viewed even dimly the panorama of his life, such an attitude is unfathomable. Perhaps his grandson felt, as his grandfather apparently did, that greatness is not inherited, it is earned. Here is how Alexander earned his:

He and George Drouillard, the chief scout were the primary hunters who went to shoot game needed to feed the members of the expedition. He was good with horses and was responsible for their care. He did many things well, but did have several mishaps. He was a young man like many of the others, and they abused the whiskey. As a soldier on a military venture he had to take his turn at guarding the camp while the others slept. On July 12, 1804 at Camp New Island north of the present day Kansas-Nebraska state line Sergeant Ordway found him asleep while on Sentinel Duty. This was potentially a capital offense punishable by death, because failure to keep guard could have resulted in the death of all. The captains convened a court-martial. Willard pled "Guilty of Lying Down, and not Guilty of Going to Sleep." The verdict was guilty, but death was not the sentence. He was sentenced to one hundred lashes over four consecutive days, a punishment so awful that he could well have died, but he didn't. In August He left a tomahawk at the previous night's encampment and was ordered to return and retrieve it. On the way back, fording a stream, he lost hold of his rifle and it sank into the deep water. As he could not swim, Reuben Field was sent to dive in and retrieve it.

He didn't give up; he didn't bury himself in bitterness. He grew up and did better. Soon he was trusted to negotiate purchases with natives. He walked with the others, he nearly starved with the others, and he carried loads in long portages when the rivers were impassible. While hunting he was attacked and almost caught by a Grizzly Bear which chased him almost into the camp. Vicious Grizzlies were the bane of the expedition. In the winter of 1804-1805 he used his blacksmithing skills to make iron weapons to trade to the Mandan for food. In Montana in August 1805 Clark named "Willard's Creek" after him. In early February of 1806 he cut his knee badly while butchering Elk, but like all the others he had to keep moving. By the end of that month he was taken with fever, and remained ill and weak until the end of March, but he still had to travel onward. He continued to hunt and bargain with the Native Americans along the way for food. In late August of 1806 he was swept into a raging river in his canoe during a thunderstorm and almost drowned. Despite these hardships, he and his men collected samples of the unique plants and animals of the west for Jefferson's collection.

In September of 1806 they were finally back from the long voyage. Lewis and Clark were treated as national heroes. The men of the expedition got double pay (\$166.66 for Alexander) and 320 acres of bounty land. Most now had to take up the pursuits of ordinary men, making a living. In 1806 Willard took up residence in Saint Genevieve Missouri where Henry Dodge, future territorial governor and Senator from Wisconsin was a deputy sheriff under his father. On February 14, 1807, Valentine's Day,

Alexander Willard married Eleanor McDonald of Shelbyville, Kentucky. Eleanor was the younger sister of Christiana McDonald Dodge, wife of the same Henry Dodge (married 1801) who was to play so large a part in Wisconsin's history. Alexander and Eleanor had twelve children, five daughters and seven sons.

Willard bought land in Missouri and kept in touch with William Clark. In June 1807 Clark wrote the following to General Dearborn, the Secretary of War: "*Sir: . . . The Saukees wish to be furnished with a Blacksmith, one has offered to go to the Nation who is a farmer in this neighbourhood (Willard) with a large family.* He performed these duties, and on July 1, 1809 was employed by Clark as a blacksmith for the Shawnees and Delaware. He is said to have participated in the Indian war of 1811 with Tecumseh. In 1812, when the Winnebago (Ho-Chunk) were threatening hostilities Willard served Clark as an express agent (bearer of dispatches) from Saint Louis to Prairie Du Chien, at serious risk to his life. Clark wrote to the secretary of war: "*The views and intentions of those Bands of Indians whome we have suspected were hostilely inclined, are no longer to be doubted; the Winnebagoes are Deturmined for War. On the 8th instant a party of that nation [Winnebagees] (some of whom were known) fired on my Express [Alexander Willard] about 40 miles above the Settlements, who was on his return from Prarie de Chien, the Mines & Fort Madison, on the 9th an American Family of women & children was killed on the bank of the Mississippi, a few minits before the Express passed the house. . .*"

Between 1825 and 1827 Willard moved from Missouri to Illinois. He stayed there but a short time, and in 1827 moved to land near Elk Grove, Lafayette County, Wisconsin. He purchased and cleared land for himself and his sons. When the Blackhawk War broke out in 1832 he, and four of his sons served in the militia. One son, George Clark Willard, was injured, losing the use of his right hand. Alexander H. Willard then in his 50's, enrolled for two months in Captain DeLong's Company, Iowa Militia beginning June 3, 1832 and was mustered out on 20 August 1832. On June 6, 1836 Alexander suffered the senseless death of his son George. A letter written to the Galena Northwestern Gazette and Galena Advertiser explained it:

*SIR: — The citizens of this county have been much excited by the late atrocious murder of Mr. Geo. C. Willard, a justly esteemed and worthy member of society, cut off in the bloom and vigor of manhood by the assassin hand of one Lyndon B. McUmber, late a deserter from the U.S. Army and Fort Winnebago, and formerly an inmate of the Sing Sing State prison of New York: On the 6th ult., McU. came to the house of the deceased, armed with a large club, for the purpose of taking away a son of his wife, (by a former husband), whom they had entreated Mr. Willard to take and bring up as an act of charity - being utterly unable to provide for their family, honestly or otherwise, as the whole neighborhood can testify. Mr. Willard took him under his protection, and treated him as his son. The boy had been living with him since last fall, during which time McUmber had once taken him forcible from Mr. Willard for the purpose of carrying on more extensively his pilfering in the country; but the youth (be it said to his credit), refused to aid or abet him in his dishonest career, for which he received a most unmerciful beating from the heartless miscreant, when he fled for succor to that friend whom he knew was ever ready to protect and defend him.*

*Mr. Willard was absent from home when McUmber came on the 6th June, and demanded him of Mrs. Willard; but, returning while McUmber was searching for him, he desired him to leave the premises, which he was formerly forbidden to intrude upon, on account of having stolen from Mr. Willard and otherwise harrassed him, by repeatedly threatening to kill him; but, McUmber refused to go away, and being armed, as before stated, with a club, Mr. Willard stepped into the house and procured his gun to defend himself and save the boy from the clutches of the wretch, who had*

*formerly sold him to a citizen of this county as a slave until of age; seeing McUmber riding towards the spot where the youth lay concealed in the field, he mounted his horse to follow him; but McUmber perceiving that he was pursued, returned and [-illegible blot-] and encountered Mr. Willard, striking him a tremendous blow on the left arm with the club. Mr. Willard, having considered the sight of the gun a sufficient protection from any assault, was thus disabled in that arm, not anticipating so bold a manoeuvre, and having been wounded severely through the wrist of the right hand, in his country's service at the battle of the Bad Axe, in the late Indian War so that he could grasp nothing strongly in that hand, his gun was wrested from him by McUmber who immediately ran off with it.*

*Anxious to gain possession of his property, Mr. Willard pursued him three miles, and came up to him at the Diggings of Mr. Stuart, having no firearms, and riding with a small dead stick, (which was sworn to at the inquest), only, where he repeatedly desired McUmber to "lay down his gun and go away, and he would not harm him." But McUmber advanced upon Mr. Willard and said "stand off, or I will shoot you," and then passed on two hundred paces farther - Mr. Willard still riding in pursuit, striking at him, though not near enough to inflict a blow. At this juncture they were partially hidden from the view of the witnesses, by an intervening ridge, when the report of the gun was heard, and McUmber was seen running from the spot, on foot, where he had so basely fulfilled his impious threats.*

*Mr. Stuart hastened to the place, where lay weltering in his blood, this noble, generous man, the pride of his family, the darling and idolized son, brother and husband, thus untimely torn from his beloved wife and unconscious babes, and hastened into unexplored futurity. He had fallen from his horse on his breast, having been shot through the head - the ball entering to the right of the left ear and passing through the brain, out at the top of the forehead. Mr. Stuart stated that he was speechless and suffering the agonies of death, when he left him in search of the assassin, in company with Mr. R. R. Willard, who nobly forebore to shoot him when he discovered him, choosing rather to deliver him over to the laws of the country, although he had just witnessed the dying struggles of his beloved brother, thus basely murdered without the slightest means of defence. So died one of his sons, but life requires stoic determination to persevere, so Alexander went on. Between 1844 and 1850 Alexander sold land to his sons, establishing them as farmers, and he moved to Platteville. One son, Alexander Hamilton Willard Jr. went to California in 1849 and settled near Sacramento*

Willard decided to go to California too. He had heard of the gold fields and the growing wealth and opportunity of that new land, and he determined to sell his land, organize an ox drawn wagon train and go. In 1852, 74 year old Alexander with his wife, some of his children and their families, and some others prepared a train of 49 people and left Platteville for the Sacramento Valley of California. On the way they lost only one man and some livestock. He applied for more Blackhawk War bounty land in California in 1856, naming as his representative and attorney Hon. Henry Dodge of Wisconsin to receive the Bounty Land Warrant. He eventually owned land in Lake County and Yolo County near Sacramento. In 1860 his land was valued at \$8,000.00 and his personal property at \$2,000.00. In early 1865 Alexander wrote his son Joel and offered to give him his land if he would manage his ranch and care for his mother. He said he could not do the work and he did not feel he would live much longer. His long life ended on March 6, 1865. He was 87 years old.



## Obituary

**Alexander Willard**, a native of New Hampshire, died at his residence on the lower Stockton road, in Sacramento county, Cal., on the [6th] of March, 1865, at the advanced age of eighty-eight years. He was perhaps the last survivor of the exploring party sent out by President Jefferson, under **Captain** Meriwether Lewis, for the purpose of discovering the course and the source of the Missouri river, upon the acquisition of [Louisiana]. He started with the company in the spring of 1804, returning with it in 1806, sharing the toils, dangers and hardships incident to such a perilous journey, [and] Is very favorably mentioned in the report of Lewis and Clark for his valuable services as a gunsmith and for his boldness, intrepidity [and] endurance during the trip. In **1798**, when difficulty was apprehended with France, he was among the first to enlist in the army ordered raised by Congress under Washington, but the pacific settlement of that question relieved him from lengthened military service. He actively engaged in the Indian war prosecuted by Tecumseh in 1811, and was selected for his courage, perseverance and sagacity by Gen. Clark, to convey dispatches from St. Louis to Prairie Chien which service he ably and faithfully performed, with much suffering and many hairbreath escapes. He emigrated to this state in 1852. Mr. **Willard** left a widow aged seventy eight to whom he had been married fifty-eight years, four sons, and two daughters, in California, besides grand children and great-grand children. His remains were interred in the burying ground at Georgetown, in Sacramento county to which place they were followed by a large concourse of friends and neighbors, by whom he was respected and beloved in life. (*Sacramento Union*, 11 March 1865)

Alexander Hamilton Willard is buried in Franklin (formerly Georgetown), California about 20 miles south of Sacramento. In 1943 The Mountain Democrat and Placerville Republican of California carried an article headed "**Franklin's Pioneer Willard Trekked 3000 Miles with Sacagwea.**" It reported that "*Very little is known about the early settlement by folk now living there. They merely tell that the old folk have died off who knew anything about it. Mrs. Smith, brilliant widow of the town, who was born in 1872 frankly admits she knows nothing of the whereabouts of the pioneers. When she learned that the grave of Alexander Willard, one of the members of the Lewis & Clark expedition, had been outside her front door for the seventy years she has lived there, the lady was flabbergasted. One ventures to say that before a fortnight has passed the whole town of Franklin will journey out their back doors to read the dimly outlined letters:*

**"Alexander H. Willard"**

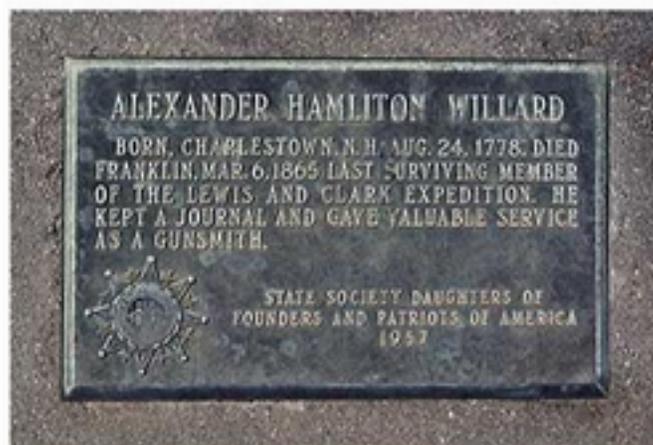
**Died March 6, 1865**

**Aged 87 years 7 months**

We in Southwest Wisconsin seem to remember even less of this man and his life than they had in

California. Since the 1943 article the state of California has designated his grave as a landmark and a plaque is there to remind the occasional visitor of who this man was and what he did. Perhaps we should take a few steps to memorialize him for those who occasionally come here in the future looking for the shadows of a man who showed the spirit of our young country in the things he did.

**California Landmark 657  
Willard Grave  
Franklin Cemetery  
Hood-Franklin Road Near Franklin Boulevard  
Franklin**



**Grave of Alexander Hamilton Willard**

1778, August 28: born in Charlestown New Hampshire in 1778.

1800, June 9th: He enlisted in Captain Amos Stoddard's artillery company at Fort Fort Fayette (modern Pittsburgh), Occupation - blacksmith. Stoddards artillery company transferred to Fort Kaskaskia

1803: Captain Amos Stoddard's artillery company was stationed at Fort Kaskaskia, Ellis Grove, Illinois, on November 29<sup>th</sup> 1803 (about 75 miles south of St. Louis) when when Captain Meriwether Lewis and William Clark arrived to recruit troops for the expedition. Eleven men were recruited from fort Kaskaskia, six from the infantry company commanded by Captain Russell Bissell and five from the artillery company commanded by Captain Amos Stoddard.

May 14 1804 Expedition commenced

23 Sep 1806 The Corps of Discovery reached St. Louis and ended their round trip. He was discharged from the Corps of Discovery on 10 Oct 1806 at St. Louis, Louisiana Territory. His private's pay amounted to \$166.66 2/3 plus the 320 acres Bounty Land.

1806 was living in Ste. Genevieve Missouri where Henry Dodge was deputy sheriff under his father.

Feb 14, 1807: Alexander Sr. Marries Eleanor McDonald of Shelbyville, Kentucky (born 1774 in , Fauquier, VA) they had five daughters and seven sons. Eleanor is the younger sister of Christiana McDonald Dodge, wife (married 1801) of Henry Dodge, who became Governor of Wisconsin Territory and a U.S. Senator.

Letter from William Clark 1 June 1807

"Sir: [to the Secretary of War, General Dearborn]

. . . The Saukees wish to be furnished with a Blacksmith, one has offered to go to the Nation who is a farmer in this neighbourhood with a large family. . . ." [51](#)

Alexander Hamilton Willard Sr was employed by Clark as a blacksmith for the Shawnees and Delawares on 1 Jul 1809 at Louisiana Territory.

1812 – express agent for Clark-Letter from William Clark to Secretary of War William Eustis 13 Feb 1812: "The views and intentions of those Bands of Indians whome we have suspected were hostilely inclined, are no longer to be doubted; the Winnebagoes are Deturmined for War. On the 8th instant a party of that nation [Winnebagees] (some of whom were known) fired on my Express [Alexander Willard] about 40 miles above the Settlements, who was on his return from Prarie de Chien, the Mines & Fort Madison, on the 9th an American Family of women & children was killed on the bank of the Mississippi, a few minits before the Express passed the house. . ."

1811: He was actively engaged in the Indian war of 1811 with Tecumseh and was selected by General Clark to carry his dispatches from St. Louis to Prairie du Chien(see above), which he did with many

hairbreadth escapes and much suffering.

1812: Son Alexander Jr. Born in Missouri

Between 1825-1827 moved from Missouri, to Illinois

1827 - History of Lafayette County (pg 438) lists as those settling in 1827 as including "a brother in law of Governor Henry Dodge named Willard"

1832: He, with four of his sons (George, Austin, Royland and Hamilton, Jr.), fought in the Black Hawk war.

1836, June 6: George Clark Willard, son killed at Stuart's Diggings, Elk Grove, Lafayette County, WI

1844-1850: sell land to sons, moves to Platteville area but still a farmer with \$6800 in land

1849: Alexander Jr. goes to California and settles in Sacramento Valley

1852: Crossed the plains from Platteville to California to join Jr. the 74 year old Alexander and his wife, some of his children and their families, and some of the in-laws made up a train of 49 people and left Platteville, Wisconsin for the Sacramento Valley of California. They lost only one man and a few head of stock.

Feb 16 1853 – living in Yolo County California near Sacramento – applying for Blackhawk War bounty land

July 1856: Alexander age 80 sells 160 acres he owns in upper lake county CA

20 Jun 1860 at Elk Grove Post Office, Franklin township, Sacramento county, California

March 6, 1865: Died at age 88 (or 87) and is buried in Georgetown near Sacramento

## Alexander Hamilton Willard

M, b. 24 August 1778, d. 6 March 1865

Alexander Hamilton **Willard** was born on 24 August 1778 at **Shelbyville, Kentucky**. He married **Eleanor McDonald**, daughter of **James McDonald** and **Elizabeth Piety**, on 14 February 1806 at **St. Louis Co., Missouri**. Alexander Hamilton Willard died on 6 March 1865 at **Franklin, Sacramento Co., CA**, at age 86.

### Children of Alexander Hamilton Willard and Eleanor McDonald

- **Clark Willard**
- **Calista Willard**
- **Narcissa Willard**
- **Austin James Willard** b. 1808
- **George Clark Willard** b. c 1810, d. 1836
- **Alexander Hamilton Willard** b. 12 Feb 1812, d. 14 Mar 1870
- **Eliza Martha Willard** b. 21 Jul 1814, d. 1 Mar 1911
- **Roland Rudolph Willard** b. 1 Jun 1816, d. 11 Jun 1859

- **Christiana D. Willard** b. May 1819, d. 7 Mar 1869
- **Joel Willard** b. 8 Mar 1822, d. 17 Aug 1879
- **Nancy A. Willard** b. 4 Aug 1824, d. 14 Aug 1859
- **Eleanor C. Willard** b. 31 Dec 1828, d. a 1900
- **Lewis Augustus Willard** b. 28 Dec 1831, d. 9 Jun 1911