

Margaret Roberts: Daughter of Llanbrynmair



Last updated: 29 April 2009

Margaret Roberts went to America with her uncle and father in the 1850s to found a Welsh 'Utopia' settlement. However their efforts were doomed from the start, when the American Civil war broke out and they found themselves in the thick of the war. Read the introduction to their story written by Fiona Richards:

- **More about the Roberts' story...**

"A while ago I did some research on the first owner of my house in Deganwy in North Wales. The lady in question was a Margaret Roberts and after a bit of research I found out that she was the niece of Samuel Roberts of Llanbrynmair, a well known preacher and social reformist written about in a few books

It was whilst reading about him and his efforts to set up a Welsh 'Utopia' settlement I realised that Margaret as a young child had gone with her uncle and father to the States to found this settlement.

However their efforts were doomed from the start, then the American Civil War broke out and they found themselves in the thick of the war.

Eventually the Roberts family returned to Wales and settled in Conwy with another brother, John, a minister in Conwy. Margaret's young life had been fraught with danger!

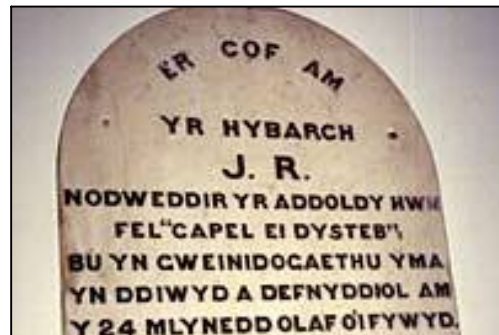
A Daughter of Llanbryn-mair: Part 2

Last updated: 29 April 2009

Margaret Roberts went to America with her uncle and father in the 1850s to found a Welsh 'Utopia' settlement. However their efforts were doomed from the start, when the American Civil war broke out and they found themselves in the thick of the war. Read the second part of their story written by Fiona Richards:

- **More about the Roberts' story...**

The first owner of my former houses, Brig-y-Don and the adjacent Min-y-Don, built in 1882; on Ty Mawr Road in Deganwy was a Margaret Roberts. Margaret appeared not to have lived in either of the houses but over the Conwy estuary at first her uncle's house, Brynmair on Conwy Morfa, and, after her marriage to John Williams, at Bodhyfryd in Gyffin. From a chance visit to the former Capel-y-Dyserb in Crown street, Conwy (now the Royal Cambrian Academy of Art), I noticed a memorial plaque to a Roberts family.



Richard Roberts (Gruffydd Risiart) a bu farw Gorph. 25 an 1883, Hefyd en braw yr hybarch Samuel Roberts MA fu farw Medi 24 1885, Hefyd Anne brioch yr uchad Richard Roberts bu farw Mai 5 1886, Hefyd Margaret Williams Merch GR & Anne Roberts bu farw Rhagfyr 31 1929.

The fact that there was a Margaret Roberts nee Williams in about the right time-span made me wonder if this was the same lady who had first owned Brig-y-Don and Min-y-Don. Further title deeds to these houses showed Margaret's address was Brynmair, Conwy Morfa; census data showed that the household comprised her uncle John Roberts, an Independent Minister as head of the household together with his brother Richard Roberts, a retired farmer, and his wife Anne and his daughter Margaret.

Their eldest brother, Samuel Roberts, also an Independent Minister, also lived with them.

As I discovered more about the Roberts family, I realised that Margaret's childhood and early life had been one of adventure and at times danger. Much has been written on Samuel Roberts and his work; the main works are 'Samuel Roberts, A Welsh Colonizer in Civil War Tennessee' by W. Shepperson (1961) and 'Samuel Roberts, Llanbryn-mair.' by Glanmor Williams (1950) as well as the work on the three brothers by E. Pan Jones in 1892, 'A Cofiant a Tri Brawd o Llanbryn-mair a Conwy'.

Much of the Roberts family correspondence exists, in a collection in the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, which provides an interesting insight into their lives; their letters have been used in two works; 'Samuel Roberts and his circle: migration from Llanbryn-mair, Montgomeryshire to America, 1790-1890.' by C. Taylor (1974) and 'The Welsh in America: Letters from the Immigrants.' by A. Conway (1961).

Another source of information was an essay written by the late Joan Adams, a descendent of George Roberts (John Roberts senior's brother).

Also inside the 'Yr Hen Capel' in Llanbryn-mair there are portraits and memorial tablets relating to the Roberts family as well as Robert family gravestones in the churchyard.

The Roberts family originated from Nant Llanbryn-mair in Montgomeryshire and the father of the three brothers was John Roberts, a minister and well-known theologian. John Roberts senior was the minister of the 'Yr Hen Capel' in Llanbryn-mair.

At first the family lived in the chapel house adjacent to the chapel but as the family expanded, as there were several sisters as well as the three brothers, they moved to a nearby farm called Diosg. In time this proved to be an unfortunate move as the farm was not particularly productive and required much repair work. In return for the improvements made to the farm, their landlord increased the rent! Much of this was to influence their later lives, especially the eldest son Samuel.

Richard worked on the family farm but was an effective lay preacher and a well known writer of prose and poetry.

In February 1853 he married Anne Jones, some fifteen years younger than him, who came from Castell Bach in Rhaiadr in Radnorshire. Their daughter Margaret, often referred to as 'Margaret Fach', was born on 30 July 1854.

Samuel in addition to his ministerial work (on his father's death he became the minister at Yr Hen Capel) was much concerned with the plight of tenant farmers in Montgomeryshire. An earlier generation of the Roberts family had migrated to the States and Samuel came to think of emigration as a way out of oppression.

He was already assisting Welsh people who wished to migrate to the states by operating a brokerage system in conjunction with an American cousin, William Bebb."

A Daughter of Llanbrynmair: Part 3

Last updated: 29 April 2009

Margaret Roberts went to America with her uncle and father in the 1850s to found a Welsh 'Utopia' settlement. However their efforts were doomed from the start, when the American Civil war broke out and they found themselves in the thick of the war. Read the third part of their story written by Fiona Richards:

- **More about the Roberts' story...**

In the summer of 1851 there came an opportunity to buy some land. Their American cousins, William Bebb and Evan Bebb Jones, were visiting the home country and were hoping to sell some land in Tennessee on behalf of E.D. Saxton, a well-known land and railroad promoter.

The American cousins convinced Samuel and Richard together with their nephews William Jones and John Robert Jones and a friend Gwilliam Williams of buying land in East Tennessee and forming a Welsh settlement there.

Together they purchased an initial 100,000 acres in East Tennessee and later purchased further tracts of land. An enticing prospectus was drawn up to sell this land at half an acre to their fellow countrymen with the aim of setting up a thriving Welsh community...

'...The above -named persons intend to settle upon these lands, clear farms, erect habitations, and build up their churches, academies, and schools; and they hope and expect to see soon, flourishing neighbourhoods of industrious, energetic, and honest families, cultivating peace, charity, and hospitality, loving the Bible and considering their later end. And they expect as a result of these advantages, natural, commercial, social, intellectual, and religious, that these lands will rapidly advance in value..'

Despite widespread advertising only thirty-two certificates of purchase were ever legalised. More did buy certificates for purchasing land but equally quickly changed their minds and asked for their money back.

In early 1856 William Bebb and Evan Bebb Jones travelled to Tennessee to decide on a location for this venture and settled on Nance's Creek in Scott County. Work on log cabins, financed by William Bebb, commenced in July 1856.

The original plan was for all the immigrants to set out for Tennessee in the spring of 1857; however Gwilliam Williams persuaded Richard to lead an advance party in 1856 to prepare the land for the main immigrants who would follow a year later under the leadership of Samuel. Richard, by now in his mid forties with a new wife and baby daughter aged about two years, somewhat reluctantly agreed. Richard, his wife Anne and daughter Margaret Fach together with others in the party sailed from Liverpool aboard the 'John Bright' on 3rd July 1856. The 'John Bright' was not as well organised as its advertising made out to be as Richard's letter written aboard the ship shows.

'...I must admit that I was disappointed at all the disorder after all the boasting and advertising about the John Bright. I expected that every emigrant and his baggage would fit in his place like a plat in a mortise but instead men, boxes and hogsheads were thrown down exactly as we use to throw potatoes into odd corners.....I had brought new slippers and white stockings for walking on the deck, but on the deck of the John Bright there was hardly room for a man to turn let alone walk with barrels, Irishmen, ropes, cooking stoves, old masts, smoke, tar, pitch, grease, water, and dirt. Slippers and white stockings indeed!'

They arrived in New York on 4 August 1856 and were met by William Bebb; together they travelled to family in Ohio. In early September they finally reached Nance's Creek; their new home. Unfortunately the log cabins, started in July, were still incomplete and in need of considerable work to make them habitable. By late September they moved into their new homes after holding a little service and the settlement was christened Brynyfynnon.



Reports from Richard during that first winter of 1856/57 were discouraging. One problem soon emerged; the legality (or rather the lack) of their title deeds coupled with land falling short of the 100,000 acres, boundaries were not defined and the land not being in a continuous tract as well as a dispute with a neighbour over ownership of land. Richard warned Samuel of these problems but Saxon's agent in London assured him that all was well.

In following spring of 1857, Samuel together with the main party of emigrants sailed on the 'Circassian' on 6th May 1857 and Samuel arrived at Brynyfynnon in June. Many of the other newcomers soon realised the doubts about the legality of the land titles and decided to move on to family and friends in established communities such as in Ohio.

By the autumn of 1857, disillusionment had set in amongst the remaining settlers. The situation was not probably helped by Samuel leaving to go on an extensive lecturing tour two months after his arrival when there was much to be done in the new settlement. On November 11th their nephew, William Jones and his wife decide to go and live with relatives in Ohio; his brother, John Robert Jones, shortly followed suit. Two other key members, William Griffiths and Gwilliam Williams had also left.

By November 25th 1857, only the two brothers, Samuel and Richard together with Richard's wife Anne and daughter Margaret were left with their dream of a Welsh Utopia shattered.

A letter from Richard to Gwilliam Williams and William Jones, his nephew, shows his feeling at the time. Richard had been reluctant to come out as the advance party but Gwilliam Williams had urged him on. However once they were in Tennessee and

realised the problems besetting the new community, Gwilliam Williams all too soon gave up and left them. Richard then contemplated leaving but with the arrival of his nephew, William Jones and his family, decided to carry on. However, the enthusiasm of his nephew waned and in November 1857 he decided to leave.

'...When the main one i.e. Mr. W. turned back, it seemed hopeless to get on with everything and my intention was as soon as the second lot got here in the Spring to give it all up and leave without delay. Well this Mr. Jones came and he liked the place very much and he and his wife were quite determined to settle here, whatever happened and so instead of carrying out my intention of leaving we started to prepare a new field. Well, Mr. and Mrs. Jones came and we and they got on with it each on our own farm until my brother went to New York but that very day, when we came back from seeing my brother off, Mr. J. said that he would not stay here any longer- I believe somehow that it was that morning that he made his mind up and had he said so before my brother had gone it would have made a great difference to me, because his deciding to settle here and then to go away- and not tell us until after my brother's departure deprived us of one more year of our short lives.'

Later letters written by Samuel indicated that his brother was still uncertain. Letters from their family in Wales also urged them to consider leaving and to join their relatives already settled in Ohio. The whole affair put a strain on the Roberts' family relations both in the States and back in Wales.

The next problem to beset the Roberts' brothers, apart from the legality of their title deeds, was that many of original purchasers of land had become convinced of the impracticality of the settlement scheme and requested that their investments were returned.

Samuel was reluctant to do so and indeed unable to meet their demands. This caused much adverse publicity and in time opinion turned against him.

Samuel was spending much of his time away on his extensive clerical and literary tours; these did have the benefit of raising funds. Much of the day-to-day work fell on Richard's shoulders. They tried to attract further settlers and some relatives of Anne Roberts joined them."

Article written by Fiona Richards



A Daughter of Llanbrynmair: Part 4

Last updated: 29 April 2009

Margaret Roberts went to America with her uncle and father in the 1850s to found a Welsh 'Utopia' settlement. However their efforts were doomed from the start, when the American Civil war broke out and they found themselves in the thick of the war. Read the fourth part of their story written by Fiona Richards:

- **More about the Roberts' story...**

By 1861, the American Civil War had started; unfortunately for the Roberts, Tennessee was on the North/ South divide and the state itself was split. East Tennessee remained loyal to the North and the Union whilst the rest of the state was Confederate. Diary extracts show that stores at Brynyfynnon were plundered, and meals and board had to be offered to soldiers; sometimes payment, at best desultory, would be made for these but not always.

At first it was mainly providing food and shelter but as the war progressed the Union troops took more of their provisions and supplies. Sometimes the troops left insufficient hay for the Roberts' animals to feed on which subsequently died. Troops also took away their fowling guns, rifles, pistols, powder, stirrups, in fact anything that could be of use. At times their lives were threatened and several of their friends were killed.

The Civil War restricted movement although Samuel managed two tours in the North. However he was coming under increasing criticism from the North; some found it hard to equate his residency in Tennessee against his anti-slavery stance, particularly whilst their friends and family were fighting in the Civil War. Whilst in the South the Roberts were suspected of being Fifth Columnists working for the North.

The end of the Civil War did not improve their lot; they still were beset with financial problems and legal wrangling over land. There was still much opposition and misunderstanding from the Welsh speaking communities over their position in the War. Samuel's dream of Welsh Utopia was broken and he decided to return home to Wales. Even so, this return home was conceived as something of an experiment by Samuel; he would return to Wales whilst Richard and his family remained in Tennessee.

Despite his long absence Samuel was still a celebrity to some of the Welsh Independents and Liberal Radicals; there was a welcome home meeting in March 1868 at Hope Hall, Liverpool and a testimonial of £1245 was collected for him.

Samuel returned to the States in April 1870 to arrange the sale of the land in Tennessee and to bring his brother Richard and his wife Anne and daughter Margaret home to live with their other brother John who now a Minister in Conwy, residing at Bryn Mair on Conwy Morfa. Samuel arrived back at Brynyfynnon on 19 May 1870 and the Roberts family set out for New York on 10th August and sailed from there on 27 August to Liverpool.

By now Margaret was a young lady of sixteen years, having lived much of her life in Tennessee including the turbulent years of the American Civil War.

Whilst his brothers had been away in the States, John had become a minister first in London and by 1860 became the minister at the Capel-y-Dysleb in Conwy. Since his return from the States Samuel had been staying with his brother John in Conwy and was to remain there for rest of his life, devoting his energies to life of the denomination, to theological colleges and to political journalism.

Samuel worked hard for agrarian reform, and in support of civil and religious rights, not just in Wales but also amongst other European minorities and was a determined opponent of slavery.

Richard's daughter, Margaret, by now in her early twenties, helped manage the household and often stayed behind to look after Samuel whilst her parents or John were away.

Margaret bought a pair of houses, Brig-y-Don and Min-y-Don on Ty Mawr Road, Deganwy, in 1882. Judging from the information available Margaret probably didn't live in either of the houses but bought them as rather as an investment.

One of the issues that concerned Samuel and Richard was the question of a government refund for losses sustained during the Civil War. In April 1881, their claim for \$1315 was eventually dismissed on the grounds that the Roberts were British subjects and therefore should make representation first to the British Government.

Richard died first in 1883, followed by John in 1884, Samuel in 1885 and Richard's wife Anne in 1886; a collection was made to erect a memorial on their grave to the 'Tri Brawd o Llanbrynmair' which is in St. Agnes's Cemetery Conwy.



Margaret married John Williams of Conwy and their daughter Anne Grace was born in 1887. A second daughter, Catherine Elenor (Kate) was born later in 1897. John Williams was educated at the Conway National School and later was apprenticed to the drapery trade with Alderman Edward Jones in Conwy. Later John Williams had a grocery shop on Bangor Road, Conwy. He was heavily involved in Chapel life, both at the Zion Congregational Chapel and after marriage at the Capel-y-Dysteb as well.

John Williams was also involved in local affairs as a councillor, being first elected in 1891 and went on to serve on various improvement committees and was appointed to the Board of Guardians in 1907.

In November 1909 John was elected as mayor of Conwy with Margaret serving as Mayoress. Today his official photograph hangs in Conwy Guildhall. The North Wales Weekly News of Friday 19 November 1909 gives a good description of Mayor's day. On the afternoon of 19 November with the flag flying on the Mayor's tower of Conwy Castle and Conwy Borough Band playing, John Williams wearing his robes and chain of office headed the procession to the Zion Congregational Chapel from the Guildhall. Large crowds came to watch the procession of dignitaries.

At Zion Chapel, the Rev. John Luther Thomas (John William's son-in-law) conducted the service. After the final hymn had been sung, the procession formed again and wended its way to the Town Hall where at the invitation of the Mayor and Mayoress close upon 500 sat down to a sumptuous tea.

Here Dr. Arthur- Pritchard proposed a toast to the Mayor and his wife and said of Margaret Williams, 'With reference to the Mayoress, it would quite enough for he to say that if she attended to her duty as Mayoress as did as a wife and mother, he was sure Conwy would be proud of her. She was a lady who had endeared herself to all.'

Margaret and John Williams lived for most of their married life at Bodhyfryd, a large detached house on the Llanwrst Road in Gyffin. In 1921, Margaret sold both her Deganwy houses, Brig-y-Don and Min-y-Don, to their respective tenants.

Margaret died on December 31 1929 and John died the following year on 23 December. They are both buried in Henryd cemetery near Gyffin together with their eldest daughter Ann who had married the Rev. John Luther Thomas. Ann and her husband appear to have no children and Margaret's second daughter, Kate, appeared not to have married, although, very little mention of her can be found.



The Rev. Luther Thomas deposited many of the Roberts' family papers with the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth.

What happened to Brynyfynnon, their Welsh settlement? In 1934, a Horace Fayette Cooper, a local businessman from nearby Oneida, purchased the land around the former Brynyfynnon, by then known as the Pistol Lane area. Cooper developed the land into farmland and constructed several lakes. It was reported to be one of the most progressive farm and resort lands in Scott County.