

## WILLIAMS, FRANCES (FANNY) (?1760 - c.1801), convict and Australian settler

**Name:** Frances (Fanny) Williams  
**Date of birth:** ?1760  
**Date of death:** c.1801  
**Partner:** Robert Ryan  
**Partner:** John Cropper  
**Partner:** Noah Nathaniel Mortimer  
**Child:** Sarah Williams  
**Child:** Elizabeth Williams  
**Child:** Jane Cropper  
**Child:** James Jacob Williams  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** convict and Australian settler  
**Area of activity:** Offenders  
**Author:** Ffion Mair Jones

What we know of Frances Williams, a woman from the parish of Whitford, Flintshire, arises from one central event in her life. Under cover of darkness on 1 August 1783, she apparently broke into the home of a former employer, the artist [Moses Griffith](#), and stole items belonging to him, his wife Margaret, and their maid, Elizabeth Cotterall. This act had far-reaching consequences for her.

Frances's date of birth is uncertain and she may have been one of the three Frances Williamses baptized in the parishes of Halkyn, Flint or Northop, Flintshire in 1760 and 1762. As a young, unmarried woman, she was employed by Griffith at Wibnant cottage near Holywell - the home rented to him by his master [Thomas Pennant](#), esquire of Downing, following his marriage to Margaret Jones in January 1781. By August 1783, Frances had left Griffith's service and moved to live in Liverpool, on the other side of the Dee estuary, with her brother. Several reasons have been suggested for this move, ranging from a need to find work in the city to the urge to escape from the clutches of Griffith (who had a reputation for inappropriate behaviour towards women).

We can only speculate about this; more detailed evidence survives regarding the next hours and days in Frances's life. Nonetheless, since this comes in the form of reports recorded in the hand of Pennant, a Justice of the Peace charged with reporting cases to the assize courts but also one who would have had a personal interest in vindicating Griffith - his treasured artist - questions inevitably arise regarding the impartiality of the testimony. The evidence consists of examinations made by Pennant of six witnesses, the fullest of which was that provided by Margaret Griffith. She testified to having heard a noise in the house between one and two o'clock on the morning of 2 August, but said that she dismissed it at the time. Upon getting up in the morning and entering the kitchen, however, she found that clothes left there the previous evening had disappeared, items including female shifts and aprons; shirts, stockings and neckcloths belonging to her husband; along with petticoats, a bed gown, blue cloak, felt hat and silk hat of her own. In recording Margaret's lengthy list, which testifies to further intrusion and losses, Pennant made several inserts above the line, as if the witness had remembered additional items while recounting her evidence - whether voluntarily or spurred on by the Justice we cannot tell. Margaret related how she had gone to inform Pennant's butler, William Cooper, of the event before going on to Downing to tell the story to Pennant himself. When word came from the butler's maid, Elizabeth Jones, that she had found a hat believed to be Frances Williams's in the nearby field of Dole Bychton, Pennant sent Cooper in pursuit of the suspected offender. Cooper caught Frances just as she was landing from a boat at Parkgate, Cheshire, and brought her back to Downing. Margaret Griffith swore that Frances was clothed in her own bed gown, blue cloak and shift when she made her appearance and, furthermore, Cooper brought a large bundle wrapped in a check apron which he had found in Frances's possession. The contents of the bundle corresponded to the items described by Margaret as missing from her home since the night of the theft, and contained several additional items, including dimity cloth and a petticoat of the same material, numerous caps, soap, a brush and a plate.

A case was fashioned to be presented before the assize court on 2 September 1783, and a 'True Bill' secured. Frances was accused of breaking in to Wibnant and stealing possessions valued at £2 2s 1p. From the six original witnesses, four appeared before the court; the name of Elizabeth Jones, maid to the butler, was deleted from the witness list, and Moses Griffith's name did not appear at all. In spite of the confession to which she had set her mark (like each of the other female witnesses, she was unable to write her name), Frances pleaded not guilty at the hearing. She was nonetheless convicted to 'be hanged by the Neck untill she be dead'. The sentence remained in place until at least August 1784 but before the execution was carried out, it was assuaged to a verdict of transportation for seven years. This did not happen quickly: Frances was imprisoned at Flint old gaol for four years. There is evidence to suggest that Pennant, who had been very

prominent in securing the original verdict, felt a particular interest in seeing the back of Frances: the 'precious cargo' among 'the Flint convicts' whom his acquaintance, judge [Daines Barrington](#) mentioned in a letter dated 25 January 1786 was no doubt a reference to her. Eventually, the time came for Frances to be conveyed to Portsmouth, bound in irons and escorted by guards Joseph Simon and Daniel Jones. There, she boarded the *Prince of Wales*, one of the eleven ships of the First Fleet - six of which transported convicts while the remainder carried the first European and African settlers to Australia. The fleet departed from Portsmouth on 13 May 1787 under the leadership of admiral Arthur Phillip (1738-1814). The journey was to end eight months later at Port Jackson (modern Sydney) rather than Botany Bay, which had been the destination originally intended for a settlement and penal colony.

During the journey or shortly afterwards, Frances began a relationship with a private in the Marines 32nd (Portsmouth) Company of the *Prince of Wales*, Robert Ryan (b. 1758) from Newry, Armagh. By March 1790 the pair had reached Norfolk Island, Frances nursing their daughter, Sarah Williams, who had been born at Sydney Cove and baptized on 16 July 1789. Robert was discharged from the navy in December 1791 and became owner of 60 acres of land on Norfolk Island. The subsequent years saw some movement to and fro between the Island and Sydney, Robert sharing his time between military work in New South Wales and acquiring and selling land on Norfolk Island and the northern shore of Port Jackson. Frances became involved with two further partners - John Cropper (c.1756-c.1822) and Noah Nathaniel Mortimer (1761-1846), both convicts transported to Australia. Between 1791 and 1796, she gave birth to further children - Elizabeth, Jane and James, Jane the daughter of Cropper although Ryan fathered the fourth child, James. Sometime during 1801 Frances died on Norfolk Island, leaving her children in the hands of foster carers there. Ryan returned to England in 1811, dismissed from his military duties.

## Author

Ffion Mair Jones

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## Further reading

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