

## DONALDSON, JESSIE (1799 - 1889), teacher and anti-slavery activist

**Name:** Jessie Donaldson

**Date of birth:** 1799

**Date of death:** 1889

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation:** teacher and anti-slavery activist

**Area of activity:** Education; Activism

**Author:** Norena Shopland

Jessie Donaldson was born on 18 February 1799 in Ware, Hertfordshire, the daughter of Samuel Heineken (1768-1856), a London lawyer, and his wife Jannet. She was baptised on 11 April at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Swan Yard, Ware. Later the family moved first to Bristol, then to Swansea where they made their home in Dynevor Place. From 1829 she and her sister, Mary Ann, ran a school for girls and boys at 32 Wind Street, Swansea.

The Anti-slavery Society was very active in Swansea, and Jessie's family became dedicated abolitionists. Her aunt, Anna Margareta, emigrated in 1822 with her husband Francis Donaldson Sr., to Cincinnati and set up home near the Ohio River, in a house called Frandon (short for Francis Donaldson). At this time, Kentucky, just across the river, was still a slave state and escapees would cross the river to find safe houses before moving on, through a clandestine network that became known as the 'Underground Railroad' helping self-emancipated enslaved people gain their freedom in the north. Anna Margareta and Francis Donaldson made their home available as a safe house.

In 1840, Jessie married her cousin Francis Donaldson Jr., the eldest son of her aunt Anna Margareta, at Betws Church near Ammanford in Carmarthenshire. He was visiting the area as his permanent address was given as 'of Frandon, Ohio.' They lived at 9 Grove Place, Swansea until 1854, when they decided to move to America, buying 251 acres of land in Clermont County, Cincinnati, close to Anna Margareta. They too set up their own safe house called Clermont, risking fines and imprisonment for doing so.

Through her abolitionist work, Donaldson became acquainted with some of the key figures of the movement, such as formerly enslaved people Frederick Douglass, Ellen and William Craft, campaigner William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Douglass and the Crafts later visited Swansea to give lectures and it is possible that Donaldson may have provided letters of introduction.

The date of her return to Swansea is uncertain. She appears there in the 1861 Census with her husband, who is described as an American Landed Proprietor. The United States abolished slavery in 1865 and they may not have permanently left until after that date. On returning to Swansea they lived briefly at 2 Phillips Parade before settling at Ael y Bryn in Sketty. Jessie attended a Unitarian chapel in Swansea.

Francis Donaldson died in March 1873, aged 78, and Jessie Donaldson died at her home in Sketty in September 1889 aged

91.

In 2021 a blue plaque was placed on the Dynevor Building of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, near to Donaldson's first home in Swansea.

## Author

Norena Shopland

## Sources

'[Jessie Donaldson](#)', WEN Wales 100+ Women

John Cooper, '[The Welsh woman who left everything behind to help slaves to freedom in America](#)', Wales Online, 5 July 2020

'[Swansea Anti-slavery campaigner to be remembered on International Women's Day](#)', University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 6 March 2024

Jen Wilson, *Freedom music* (Cardiff 2019)

'[Jessie Donaldson](#)', Black History Stories Wales

'[Jessie Donaldson blue plaque](#)', Swansea Council

'[Memorial to Jessie Donaldson, Swansea](#)', Historypoints.org

[Ffeil / File 2/29 - Jessie Donaldson](#), National Library of Wales

## Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Jessie Donaldson](#)

## Archives

NLW Archives: [Ffeil / File 2/29 - Jessie Donaldson](#)

## Additional Links

Wikidata: [Q104499562](#)

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