

Naming of Williamsburg, Iowa

Source: Journal Tribune of August 22, 1957 The secretary's book for the Williamsburg Masonic lodge gives us a clue concerning the confusion that once existed over the naming of our town. It starts out: "Stated Meeting, Hall of Stellapolis Lodge No. 392, Chester (Williamsburg), Iowa, Jan 9, 1879." Stellapolis still remains the name of the lodge. It is the only vestige of the day when Williamsburg's post office bore that unusual title.

There are many people today who will claim that Stellapolis was the first name of the town. Their basis for this belief is supported by various accounts which assume it to be fact. The Wanderer's Edition of the Journal Tribune published March 1923 states "Williamsburg was first called 'Stellapolis' and the post office was known by that name." But the following year, 1924 another Wanderer's Edition reputed the statement through a letter from John E. Evans, "I had in mind to suggest some corrections in the 'History of Williamsburg'. With your permission; I shall do so now. The sentence on the first page, 'Williamsburg was first called Stellapolis' should be eliminated because it is incorrect. It was called Williamsburg from its beginning and for several years before the name Stellapolis was invented. The objection to the name (Williamsburg) was its similarity to Millersburg located in the same county. Both names (e.g. Williamsburg and Stellapolis) were used for several years, one for the town and one for the post office. David E. Evans can tell you of the long squabble over the change of names."

Various explanations have been given for the name "Stellapolis". One is that some of the early settlers came from a town of that name in some other state. Another was that "Stella", Latin for "Star", was used because there was once a family here by the name of Starr. The one most accepted, of course is the one quoted in Mrs. O. G. Jones' "Early History of Williamsburg as Told to the Grade Pupils in 1948". "When the Rock Island Railroad was built as far as Marengo in 1860, Williamsburg petitioned for a post office, and Homer Paige was named the first postmaster. In the Paige family there were three daughters, and the youngest was called Stella. Her father honored her name by having it incorporated in the name of the new post office, and it was named 'Stellapolis', meaning Stella's City. The Paige family soon moved to Des Moines. Stella died soon after her marriage, but her name was the name of the post office for 29 years. Even though the town was named Williamsburg, all mail was addressed 'Stellapolis'."

Supporting the latter view concerning the name "Stellapolis" are two references. In the Atlas of Iowa County, Iowa by Harrison and Warner, 1874, the map of the state shows the town to be Williamsburg. The county map shows "Williamsburg, P.O. Stellapolis." The Troy Township map mentions only Williamsburg. The detailed map of the town shows it as Williamsburg, Stellapolis P.O. However on this map the part west of present Highway 149 in green color is listed as Williams Addition, and the part east in pink color is listed as "Chester". The other reference supporting the view that Stellapolis was only the name for the post office is found in the biographical section for Troy Township in the History of Iowa County 1881. The men listed who were farmers have the address quoted as P.O. Stellapolis, while the town residents are given as Williamsburg. Following is a partial list showing this tendency.

- M.S. Anderson, Farmer, P.O. Stellapolis
- J. Birgham, Farmer, P.O. Stellapolis
- John J. Jones, Farmer, P.O. Stellapolis
- W.E. Evans, Merchant and Postmaster, Williamsburg
- George Fletcher, Justice of the Peace and Merchant, Williamsburg, P.O. Stellapolis
- J.E. Jones, Physician and Surgeon, Williamsburg
- Rev. James V. Jones, Williamsburg

At no place in the 1881 history does one find mention of “Chester”, which leads us to believe it never was a very well accepted name. However, in most deeds and abstracts covering the period of the 1870’s, the name “Chester” is used, with the name “Williamsburg (now Chester)” or “Chester, formerly Williamsburg.” The name Chester seems to apply to either the original town east of Highway 149 or to the Williams Addition west of the same. For example, the deed give to the American Congregational Church (now the Presbyterian Church) speaks of the “trustees and their successors in office of the American Congregational Church of Chester”.

Just how did “Chester” get into the records? One resident of Williamsburg who takes a great deal of interest in the history of the town maintains that Chester was the first name of the man who first surveyed and laid out Williamsburg. A study of the Iowa County records, fails to support this conclusion, as they name the surveyors for both the original town and the addition. Could it be that the attorney who did most of the legal work for Williamsburg residents simply decided on his own to name the town “Chester” as a compromise to the other two names Williamsburg and Stellapolis? Certainly there was no legal machinery for changing the name, as the town was not yet incorporated. How “Chester” got started as a name for Williamsburg may never be known but there is a very good reason why it ended – there is another town of Chester in Iowa.

Here then is a summary of what appears to be facts of the case: Richard Williams had the original town surveyed and platted in 1854. He had it recorded under the name Williamsburg. In 1856 he had the eighty acres west of it platted and recorded as the Williams Addition to the Town of “Williamsburg.” Some time after the death of Richard Williams in 1860, the town contained a post office which went under the name of Stellapolis, to which all Williamsburg mail was addressed. Later on, those connected with the making of property deeds made use of the name “Chester”, but usually in conjunction with the name “Williamsburg”. The coming of the railroad in 1884 and the subsequent growth in population led the village to be incorporated as a city under the name “Williamsburg”. Also at that time the name of post office was changed to correspond to the name of the town. So now, as it was in the beginning, the name is Williamsburg. And as the sign says it’s “Always on the Square”.