

BEGINNINGS IN LONDON

The Young Men's Christian Association was founded in London, England, on June 6, 1844, in response to unhealthy social conditions arising in the big cities at the end of the Industrial Revolution (roughly 1750 - 1850.) Growth of the railroads and centralization of commerce and industry brought many rural young men who need jobs into cities like London. They worked 10 - 12 hours a day, six days a week. Far from home and family, these young men often lived at the workplace. They slept crowded into rooms over the company's shop, a location thought to be safer than London's tenements and streets. Outside the shop things were bad - open sewers, pickpockets, thugs, beggars, drunks, lovers for hire and abandoned children running wildly by the thousands.

George Williams, born on a farm in 1821, came to London 20 years later as a sales assistant in a draper's shop, a forerunner of today's department store. He and a group of fellow drapers organized the first YMCA to substitute Bible study and prayer for life on

the streets. By 1851 there were 24 YMCAs in Great Britain, with a combined membership of 2,700. That same year the Y arrived in North America, first in Montreal and then Boston.

The YMCA idea, which began among evangelicals, was unusual because it crossed the rigid lines that separated all the different churches and social classes in England in those days. This openness was a trait that would lead eventually to including in YMCAs all men, women, and children, regardless of race, religion or nationality. Also, its target of meeting social need in the community was dear from the start. George Williams was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1894 for his YMCA work and buried in 1905 under the floor of St. Paul's Cathedral among the nation's heroes and statesmen. A large stained glass window in Westminster Abbey, complete with a red triangle, is dedicated to YMCAs, to Sir George and to the Y work during the first World War.

George Williams
October 11, 1821 - 1905