# The Life
# of
# William Lewis Gilbert

1806-1890

WILLIAM LEWIS GILBERT

# William L. Gilbert

WILLIAM Lewis Gilbert was born in Northfield in the Town of Litchfield, Connecticut on December 30, 1806. Not very much is known of his boyhood, although it is known that his youth was spent on a small farm where his parents lived with their one son and three daughters, one older and two younger than himself. William attended the neighborhood district school, which was the only available source of education, and evidently he was an apt pupil, for later on he taught school for several winters, for which he received a salary of nine dollars per month and board. It seems quite reasonable to assume that the extreme simplicity of his upbringing was largely responsible for the pronounced traits of economy and habits of industry which were so manifest in his later years.

Apparently neither farming nor teaching appealed to him as a life work, for at the age of twenty-two, in 1828, he left home and journeyed to Bristol, Connecticut where he and his brother-in-law, George Marsh, established the business of making parts for clocks, since they lacked sufficient capital to establish a plant for the making of complete clocks. As a matter of fact, their joint capital consisted of $300 which Mr. Gilbert had borrowed in order to set up the small business into which they entered.

He continued in this business in Bristol, later in Farmington, and again in Bristol, for thirteen years, and in 1841 at the age of thirty-five he decided to enter for himself the business of

making complete clocks. Accordingly he came to Winsted where he entered into a partnership with Lucius Clark and Ezra Baldwin and bought the Riley Whiting plant, which stood where the present William L. Gilbert Clock Company buildings stand today. For several years Mr. Gilbert lived in a house on the grounds of the factory, later removing to the house on Prospect Street, just east of the present home of the Winchester Historical Society, where he spent the rest of his life.

While his income in Bristol had been exceedingly modest, it is evident that he was considered a valuable man, for when it became known that he was about to leave and set up business for himself, one of the clock manufacturing concerns offered him an unusual salary for that time, $2,000 a year, if he would enter their employ. His answer was characteristic of the William L. Gilbert of later days: "If I am worth $2,000 a year to you I am worth more than that to myself," and so he came to Winsted. The new business prospered and later he bought out his partners and conducted the business alone, making it as time went on the largest factory in town.

At a later date he made his brother-in-law, Isaac B. Woodruff, business manager of the Gilbert Clock Company, and began to devote his time increasingly to other interests. He was much interested in the founding of the Connecticut Western Railroad, of which he was at one time treasurer and later president, and with Mr. Henry Gay he established the banking house of Gilbert and Gay. Later on he was for several years president of the Hurlbut National Bank. While he was never much interested in politics, he was a Republican and twice represented the town in the General Assembly.

In 1835 he married Clarinda K. Hine of Washington, Connecticut, who died in 1874. In 1836 a daughter, Harriet, was born, but she was always frail and lived to be only twenty-four years old. In 1838 a son, James, was born, but he died in infancy. In 1876 he married Miss Anna E. Westcott of New London, Connecticut, who died before Mr. Gilbert did, so that at his own death on June 29, 1890 he had no relatives nearer than nieces and nephews to whom to leave his then large estate. This condition, together with the fact that he had already manifested an interest in establishing some form of school for adolescents and that he had always had a keen interest in and sympathy for the under-privileged child, led him to provide for the establishment of the two institutions which to-day bear his name and for which he is perhaps best remembered—the Gilbert School and the William L. Gilbert Home.

He, himself, established and built the Home during his lifetime and saw its early beginnings, although he lived less than a year and a half after its establishment. While the Gilbert School was a definitely conceived project in his mind, and while he had discussed its later erection with men of his close acquaintance, such as Henry Gay, David Strong, and Dwight Case, it did not come into existence until five years after his death.

That Mr. Gilbert was much interested in doing all that lay in his power for the youth of Winsted many years before his death is evidenced by the fact that in January 1864 he offered to give $20,000 towards the establishment of a seminary, by which he undoubtedly meant an institution of what we would call today high school rank, provided the citizens of Winsted would give another $20,000 in addition to his gift. Judging from

articles in the Winsted Herald of that year, of which Thomas M. Clarke was editor, it is evident that not enough interest was manifested to produce the needed $20,000, and the project failed to materialize. Apparently it was the old question of jealousy between the east and west ends of the town which interfered with the success of the undertaking.

The following quotations from the Winsted Herald are interesting as sidelights on this proposition. Under date of January 1, 1864, the editor says, "A school project is now well on foot which our citizens may contemplate with the most lively satisfaction. Last Christmas Mr. William L. Gilbert of this village, as the noblest present he could make his town, placed his name to a document pledging $20,000 to the erection of a public school, with the provision that an equal amount should be raised to aid the project." Under date of January 22, the Herald gave a list of subscribers to the fund for a seminary, which had then reached $34,000, and under date of January 29 says, "It is useless to attempt to conceal the fact that Mr. Gilbert's noble proposition does not meet that cordial response that it should receive. In several instances those best able to aid the project have utterly refused any assistance whatever. What is to follow? Are we to give it up? For heaven's sake—for the sake of the five hundred children growing up uncouth and uncultured—no. The industriously insinuated suspicion that Mr. Gilbert wishes to hamper the enterprise with restrictions and limitations—to make exclusively an institution for 'rich men's children'—to make it 'pompous and stately' is unworthy and untrue. He makes his offer without limitation of any kind."

The above is apparently the last word that was ever printed

on the subject. The concluding scenes of the Civil War filled succeeding editions of the local paper to the exclusion of all other matters, and so the project failed of realization, but it is apparent that Mr. Gilbert never lost his interest in the subject as is shown by his exceedingly generous gift twenty-five years later when in his will he provided for the establishment of the present Gilbert School.

Personally Mr. Gilbert was a man of few words, of great industry and perseverance, extremely saving even to the point of penuriousness, a strong advocate of temperance and a hater of tobacco. On the subject of temperance he once said, "I drank grog until I was twenty-one, but everybody did then and there were fewer drunkards than now." Later he concluded that it was a senseless habit and gave it up, thereby evidencing his strength of character.

Mrs. Mary Mix, a niece of Mrs. Gilbert's, who lived in Mr. Gilbert's home for many years, has this to say of him, "He was a very amiable, good tempered man, wonderfully forbearing and patient under provocation. He had remarkable self-control and no one ever heard him use profane or violent language."

While he was not noted for interest in religious work, he nevertheless attended the Second Congregational Church and contributed towards its support during his lifetime. Although he was not particularly religious he was noted as a man of exemplary private life and personal habits, and at his death he left $15,000 to the two churches in his native town.

That he had a great sympathy for the poor and unfortunate is shown by his many gifts of food and fuel to the deserving poor. However, he always made these gifts through some mer-

chant who had strict instructions not to reveal the identity of the donor. This last trait was certainly an outstanding characteristic, as evidenced not only by the testimony of several of his contemporaries, who knew him well, but by his gift of $10,000 to erect buildings for an industrial school for colored boys and girls in LaTeche, Louisiana, to which institution he left in his will an additional $40,000 endowment. Once, in referring to this gift, he said, "It gave me more pleasure than any one thing I have ever done." After his death the name of this school was changed to Gilbert Academy and Industrial College, and still exists under that name.

On the occasion of his eightieth birthday, on the 30th of December, 1886, a complimentary dinner was given him at Hotel Beardsley at which about sixty men and their wives were present and at which the high esteem in which he was held as a man of integrity and character, even though he may have been subject to criticism for financial closeness, was very evident. Dr. Steele, according to the Winsted Herald, was toastmaster at the dinner, at which "there was no lack of expressions of the most thorough good will toward the distinguished manufacturer, bank and railroad president, and philanthropist, Mr. Gilbert." In introducing the guest of honor, Dr. Steele, among other things which he said, used these words: "His money has not only built large industrial establishments but he has also dotted the hillsides of Winsted with neat, comfortable, happy homes for its working men."

At this same dinner, Mr. T. M. Clarke, former editor of the Herald, in speaking of the many benefactions to poor families which Mr. Gilbert had provided in the form of tons of coal and barrels of flour, said jokingly that he barely escaped being called

a "*Bill* for the Relief of Destitute and Needy Widows and Orphans."

In 1890 Mr. Gilbert and his brother-in-law, I. B. Woodruff, went to Cedardale, Ontario to visit Mr. Gilbert's nephew, Edward G. Whiting. While there he was taken ill and died of pneumonia on the 29th day of June. His body was brought to Winsted where he was buried in the Center Cemetery, and upon his grave the students and teachers of the Gilbert School have placed a wreath each Memorial Day for many years as a mark of appreciation and respect.

While in his last sickness he added a codicil to his will in which he provided for the completion of the Rugg Brook reservoir whereby Winsted is assured an ample supply of pure drinking water.

In his obituary the Herald says, under date of July 4, 1890: "To him the saving of a dollar was equivalent to earning one, but notwithstanding his shrewd characteristics as a money maker, he was always on the square, and never failed to pay every penny he owed. However men may regard Mr. Gilbert's characteristics as a business man, the fact that he was saving and careful of his expenditures and perhaps more inclined to 'count the cost' than is regarded with favor by some—the very fact that he had these peculiarities so strongly marked, enabled him to accumulate the wealth (estimated at one and a half millions) which he at the last so largely bestows upon Winsted. Had he been a free liver or spendthrift, there would be to-day no 'Gilbert Home for Friendless Children' nor any prospect of a Gilbert School in the East Village nor any gift for the improvement of Winsted's water power."

Then the editor sums up, in what seems like a sensible way, by saying, "We accept his gifts with thankfulness and ought to look with leniency upon such of his characteristics as may not have been to our liking."

So much, then, for the history of the man himself—on the one hand, undoubtedly sound of character, absolutely honest, sympathetic toward the deserving poor, and eager to do all in his power for the youth of Winsted; on the other hand, without doubt almost miserly in his economies and as such sadly misjudged by many of his contemporaries, unable or unwilling to be warmly friendly, evidently not knowing or caring what opinion others held concerning him. He lived out his eighty-four years of life—fifty of which were spent in Winsted—and at his death achieved greatness and everlasting remembrance for the wisdom and generosity which dictated the disposition of the fortune he had worked so hard to accumulate.

In his will he left numerous bequests to nieces and nephews, $15,000 to churches, $40,000 to the negro school in Louisiana, $50,000 for the completion of the tunnel from Rugg Brook reservoir to Crystal Lake, and the balance he divided between the William L. Gilbert Home, to which he gave $400,000, and the Gilbert School which received the residue of his estate, which proved to be approximately $600,000.

It is a matter of record that his will was contested and went through the courts and that in May 1893 the Supreme Court ruled that "the bequests of the late William L. Gilbert are valid" and the trustees were authorized to proceed to carry out the duties imposed upon them in his will.

Accordingly, the original Gilbert School building was erected

and the school opened its doors to students on the tenth day of September 1895.

Fourteen of the original trustees named in Mr. Gilbert's will were living: William L. Camp, Judge Augustus H. Fenn, Winfield J. Garvin, Henry Gay, Charles B. Hallett, Rufus E. Holmes, Joseph H. Norton, Lyman R. Norton, George B. Owen, Eugene Potter, Harvey L. Roberts, David Strong, Isaac B. Woodruff, and Charles J. York. Two trustees had died before 1895—Dr. Harvey B. Steele, who died a month before Mr. Gilbert did so that he never really qualified as a trustee, and whose place was later taken by Dr. William S. Hulbert, and Theophilus Baird, who died in 1893 and whose place was taken by Lorenzo M. Blake.

The minutes of the early meetings in the handwriting of the first secretary, William L. Camp, describe the legal tangles involved in settling Mr. Gilbert's will, the necessity of making room for the proposed school building by the moving of the Winsted House (now the Park Hotel), the Adams Block, which stands just south of the Park Hotel, and of Mr. Hitchcock's law office to its present location near the bridge over Still River on South Main Street, and the erection of the original Gilbert School. These things are all interestingly told as matters of record.

The history of the school during the past thirty-five years is soon told. It opened with seven teachers and one hundred twenty-three regular and twenty-three special pupils, and offered purely a classical education as was true in practically every high school in the country at that time. Since then, step by step, it has changed its policy largely to conform to the needs of its student body until to-day it teaches seven complete courses, each

independent of the others, so that it now not only fits for college, as is evidenced by the fact that seventy of its graduates are now in college, but it trains students with equal thoroughness to prepare them for normal schools, for hospital training schools, for business, agriculture and the various trades. In other words, it is now a comprehensive high school where pupils of widely varying abilities and aptitudes may select the course which seems best suited to their individual needs and desires.

To date there have been forty-one trustees of whom sixteen constitute the board provided in Mr. Gilbert's will. Eight of these must live in what was the fourth school district, and eight in what was the first school district. Trustees are elected by the board and each member is chosen for life—only one having ever retired except by death. Trustees serve without compensation or reward of any kind except the satisfaction of managing the school and its finances in a safe and sound manner. To the credit of all trustees, past and present, it should be said that the finances of the school are in a most satisfactory condition.

Mr. Gilbert provided with an almost uncanny foresight that $10,000 a year must be saved out of the school's income for one hundred years and added to the principal endowment. If this had not been done the large increase in expenses and the rapid growth of the school would have wrought havoc long ago.

During the years of its existence the Gilbert Home has taken care of 3812 young people, of whom 2252 have been boys and 1560 girls, for each of whom it has acted in the capacity of home and parents and upon whose lives it has made a deep and lasting impression. Its former students regard the Home with

real affection, and are proud of its achievements, than which there can be no stronger evidence of its value in their lives.

During the years of the Gilbert School's existence it has given instruction to 3120 different boys and girls, of whom 1312 hold the school diploma. These graduates are scattered in every state and in many foreign countries, and are serving mankind in every known profession and business. If the purpose of this history permitted, a very considerable list might be given of graduates who have distinguished themselves to a very large degree even in the relatively short period of time since the school was established.

Not until 1918 did any one of so-called foreign blood graduate from the school, but since that date the student body has become entirely cosmopolitan in character until to-day practically one-third of the students were themselves born in foreign countries or are descended from foreign born parents. The school, therefore, is an exact cross section of modern society—its student body representing as it does every class in the community, the rich and poor, the purely American, the foreign born, the brilliant and those of less ability, the law abiding and the lawless, the ambitious and the shiftless, those who are potentially fine citizens and those who will be undesirable as citizens, and this is exactly what every high school in America represents to-day and must represent if it is to function as the agency for the spreading of universal educational opportunity, which is the greatest agency for safety in a democracy, and which the founder—Mr. Gilbert—saw as a large factor in determining the use to which his fortune should be put, namely, that of "providing such assistance and means of educating the young as will help them to become good citizens."

The benefits deriving from Mr. Gilbert's bequests are only in their infancy; thirty-five years in the life of any institution are but a beginning, and while we point with pride and satisfaction to the results of those years, we turn our eyes and our hopes to the years that are ahead with a definite feeling of security that the Gilbert School and the Gilbert Home will continue to contribute in an increasing measure to the well-being of the community which they have the good fortune to serve.