

## WILLIAM CAMP GILDERSLEEVE

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD CONDUCTOR

WHEN?  
1795-1871

EVENT  
Underground Railroad  
conductor



WHERE? Wilkes-Barre

VOCABULARY  
Dry goods  
fugitive

In the decades preceding the Civil War (1861-1865) Pennsylvania was well-known for its abolition societies particularly in and around Philadelphia and escape routes for runaway slaves. The Appalachian Mountains, Susquehanna river, wagon routes, and canals, were part of the nationwide network active in helping slaves get to freedom. While Wilkes-Barre had numerous conductors on the railroad including Henry Brown, arguably the most well-known was William Gildersleeve.

His mother, Rennie Elliott Gildersleeve, had been married previously. She brought her plantation and slaves into her marriage with Cyrus Gildersleeve. He served as a minister in the Presbyterian Church in the town of McIntosh (Lottick). Born on December 6, 1795 in Liberty County, Georgia, William saw the ugliness of slavery first-hand as a child. After his mother died when he was 12, his father moved the seven children to Bloomfield, New Jersey to provide a better environment for his family. Then, in 1821, he moved to Wilkes-Barre where he took the reins of the Congregational Society Church (now the First Presbyterian Church of Wilkes-Barre) as well as the Presbyterian Church in Kingston. He also spoke regularly at the Forty Fort Meetinghouse.

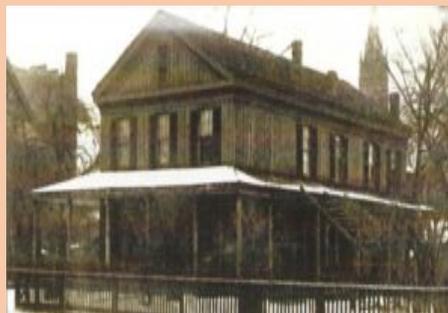
William and his wife Nancy followed his father to the valley establishing a home on North Franklin Street. About two blocks away, he set up a dry goods store on Northampton Street. After 1839, according to Lottick, the family later moved to South Main Street. He and Nancy had a son, Cyrus, and two daughters, Ann Elizabeth and Mary. Unfortunately, Nancy died in 1830 when Mary was just four-years-old.

Helping slaves who escaped was illegal and after 1850 when the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, the matter became federal law not just state. A person could be fined \$1,000 for aiding any fugitive as all people were required to assist law enforcement in the capture of a runaway.

In his book, *Families of Wyoming Valley*, George Kulp described Gildersleeve.

*W.C. Gildersleeve was a decided anti-slavery man. He knew something of it from personal observation on his father's plantation and other plantations in Georgia, and did not hesitate to denounce it as unrighteous and an abomination, although by doing so he became alienated from all his kindred in Georgia. He was a pronounced abolitionist, as much as Garrison or Wendell Phillips, at a time when it cost something to take such a position, and as such he stood almost alone in this city.*

Gildersleeve did have help from others who supported abolition such as Henry Brown who helped to transport runaways to Scranton, Montrose, or Abington, Charles Miner as well as a few other friends. He also had help from two fugitive slaves that he employed, Lucy Washburn and Jacob Welcome. Both his home and business served as hiding places for those seeking refuge. One time he had food and water taken daily by a Mr. Emmons to a fugitive hiding in the Baltimore Mine tunnels near what is now



Home Depot in Wilkes-Barre (Lottick). He had numerous abolitionist speakers come to Wilkes-Barre. His home was invaded on one occasion when Gildersleeve was hosting an abolitionist speaker. The interior of the house was ransacked, windows smashed, and furniture broken. A day later, a mob surrounded him, threw hatter's ink in his face, tied him to a rail, and planned to drag him through the streets of the city after forcing the tee-totaler to drink a quart of whiskey. They were stopped by his daughter, his servant Lana, and Mr. Andrew Beaumont. None of the persecutors were arrested though it was known who they were. His daughters also suffered name calling and ostracization from some in the community. Due to the controversy that surrounded him, he was asked to resign from his position as an elder in his church and so he transferred his membership to a Presbyterian church in Montrose.

He is most famous for his participation in the Fugitive Slave Case. In short, three federal marshals came to Wilkes-Barre to arrest a fugitive slave named William Thomas. Thomas made it from the hotel where he worked as a waiter and ran to the river where a standoff occurred that drew many onlookers. Later, the marshals were arrested, and the case went to court. The state of Pennsylvania was challenging the federal law. More information is available in the lesson plan Fugitive Slave Case.

He donated \$10,000 as one of the founders (there were two others) for the Home for Friendless Children; now known as the Children's Service Center in Wilkes-Barre. The home was to support orphans of Civil War soldiers.

He died in 1871 having lived long enough to see the tide of popular opinion turn against slavery culminating in the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment being added to the constitution.

#### PRINT RESOURCES

Lottick, Sally Teller. *Bridging Change A Wyoming Valley Sketchbook*. Wilkes-Barre, PA: Wyoming Historical and Geological Society. 1992.

Kashatus, William. *Valley With A Heart*. Luzerne County, PA: Luzerne County Historical Society and Luzerne County Community College. 2012.

Kulp, George B. *Families of the Wyoming Valley*, 3 volumes. Wilkes-Barre: Yordy, 1885.