

CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES  
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY  
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES  
By Jeannie Watson

# WILLIAM BRAGALL GILBERT

William Bragall Gilbert was an original pioneer of Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. He migrated to Indian Lake in 1839, had a major impact on the development of northwest Cass County, was a farmer, became a land speculator, and influenced the development of the Sister Lakes Resort Community. As his descendants intermarried with other original pioneer families, he contributed extensively to the Silver Creek Township gene pool, and the history of said region. He, also, built, locally famed landmark, Gilbert's Castle.

The Gilberts were of French descent. European ancestry of the Gilberts can be traced back to Sir Walter Gilbert FitzGilbert, who in May of 1711 (long after his death), by edict of French King Louis XIV, was declared to be in line of descent of the French Gilbert Dukedoms. French titles were only passed down to the "oldest living sons," or those the king wanted to reward (who may or may not be related to the original predecessor). If an oldest son died, his rank transferred to the next "oldest living son" (the younger brother), or someone the king "declared was the heir if the original line died out." In this case, the king's declaration gave Sir Walter Gilbert FitzGilbert's "oldest living male heir right to the French title many years in the future." Younger sons had to make their own way in the world. Gilbert family originally came from Ste-Madeliene, Besancon, Franche, France.

Around 1720, the Silver Creek branch of the Gilbert family (younger sons who did not inherit a title) came to North America, and at that time were known as "Gilbet dit Comtois" (Gilberts of the country). They "have ties (however) to the first permanent settlers of "New France" (1663-1763) "who sailed with Robert Gifford and arrived at Fort Quebec (Canada) in 1634." New France was that portion of Canada and the United States claimed by the French, after the Spanish "discovered North America." They are, also, related to Daniel Gilbert (born 1729) of Massachusetts and Isaac Gilbert (born 1717) of Quebec.

William B.'s grandfather, Captain Walter Gilbert (5/3/1745-1776), was an American sea captain in the Revolutionary War. When French King Louis XVI, sent troops to help the Americans defeat the British, and enlisted his French Canadian colony's aid, French and colonial Canadian ships anchored off the northeastern Atlantic coast, and funneled the Native American Indians guns and ammunition from France. They taught them how to attack the British, and help the Americans win their independence. Captain Walter Gilbert, and his crew, were guarding several French ships, with their cannons ready, when a fleet of British-Man-Of-War Vessels attacked. Out numbered, the ships headed out to sea. Captain Walter Gilbert and his sailors were captured in the Atlantic Ocean, and imprisoned, where he died. Martha Starr Cornwell, wife of Walter (and William B. Gilbert's grandmother), was in Dutchess County, New York and pregnant at the time. Several months later, she gave birth to John Gilbert (1777- ), who was William B.'s father. Sometime after the Revolutionary War ended, the family then moved to Long Island, Queens County, New York, where John Gilbert was raised, and his mother Martha died.

William B.'s ancestors participated in "The Wallace Land Patent of 1770 in New York. This patent allowed the acquisition of land in the Colony of New York, granted by Great Britain, before the United States became a country. Many "letters patent" were created between 1768-1775.

While living in New York City, John Gilbert met and married "Lany" Lena Bragall. Their sons, were William Bragwall Gilbert (1791-2/18/1864), the subject of this profile, and Asenath Gilbert (1790-1885), who both were born in Long Island, Queens County, New York. In 1794, when William B. was three years old, his parents moved to Herkimer, New York, and then to Springfield, Otsego County, New York. They died before the boys reached adulthood and are buried in New York. When they passed away, William was raised by his uncle "Jimmie" James BeGau, and his aunt.

William served in the War of 1812. When he enlisted, he was given the rank of private, but due to his leadership skills and heroism, he rose through the ranks and was made an officer. The war was fought between the U.S.A. and Great Britain mostly at sea, at the Canadian border, by the Gulf of Mexico, and in Chesapeake Bay. The English had been stopping American ships at sea, and forcefully removing British and American sailors. They, also, refused to withdraw troops from the Great Lakes Region after the Revolution, and were causing a depressed economy in the U.S. by interfering with trade. When America won the War of 1812, it rewarded many of its heroic officers with land gifts and pensions. William was given 68 acres of land in the wilderness of Michigan, and officer benefits.

William Bragall Gilbert married Cynthia Sammons (1795-1886) around 1815, when he was 24 years of age. In 1819, at age 28 years, he began "teaming" between Albany and Buffalo, New York. "Teaming" refers to the fact that William drove teams of horses pulling wagons filled with various merchandise, or stage coaches. He was described as a "slim man of iron constitution." He traveled back and forth between the two cities at high paces, procuring fresh horses at relay stations, following set routes, and meeting arrival deadlines. The horses were large, muscular beasts, and capable of drafting heavy loads efficiently, but also were powerful runners, who were hard to control. It was a highly skilled job, requiring the control of fast powerful teams of horses harnessed together. "To require even more horse flesh management," he was often grouped with other drivers, who likewise drove their "cattle" (old fashioned term for matched pairs of horses, not cows) at fast paces to meet the same deadlines. It was not a job for "the faint of heart," both dangerous and challenging at the same time. Errors in judgment meant accidents and death, so not everyone could do the job, as teaming was a "brawny business." It was during his teaming days, that William was given the nickname "Uncle Tommy," and it stuck with him throughout his entire life. Uncle Tommy "teamed" for almost 20 years in New York, and "made a fine living for his family."

In New York, with his young family outgrowing his log cabin, William built a fine house with a library that housed over 1500 books. He was an avid reader, spent much time with his young children and wife, and enjoyed the freedom to relax. His first child, Belinda, had been born in 1816, when he was 36 years of age. By the time the last one was born (Jane in 1835) he was 45 years old.

William's next job involved "burning lime." Lime, sometimes called caustic lime or calcium hydroxide, was extracted from limestone by heating it, and was used in the making of cement. The caustic cement was used in the building of foundations for houses and buildings. Wood could not be allowed to sit directly on soil, because termites and vermin would destroy the lumber structure, so cement and local stone was poured into forms to make raised basements or footings that supported the buildings off the ground. Today, despite many renovations, you can recognize extremely old buildings all over the country, because they used "burning lime" cement and stone, not concrete blocks or bricks in the foundation. William and his co-workers provided the lime to build the Town of George Clark, which rests on the banks of Otsego Lake in New York.

By early 1837, living in Springfield, Otsego County, New York, William was growing restless, had yet to visit the Michigan property given him by the government, and decided the family needed

a change. Hearing of the uncivilized wilderness of Michigan, talking with the Hawks who had family there since 1829, and being a long term planner at heart, he decided to explore the possibilities.

In 1838, leaving his wife and children in the care of friends and neighbors, William made a scouting expedition "out west" (everything west of Ohio was considered "out west" in this era). He traveled first to Michigan, and stayed for a few days in Pokagon Township (where the government gifted property was located), "then he headed for lands west of the Great Mississippi River." That journey, however, was cut short, when he had the opportunity to compare the wilderness areas of western Indiana, Illinois and Iowa with Michigan. Instead of heading further west, he turned around and retraced his steps.

William returned to Pokagon Township, in Cass County, Michigan (where the government gave him land for military service), and decided that the fertile soil, natural resources, and expansive wooded acreage was "his promised land." He made a brief trip home to collect his family, and convinced New York neighbors David Walter and Daniel Shaul to join him (safety in numbers). He sold his New York holdings, secured wagons, prepared farm animals (especially a cow who was tied to the back wagon and chickens) for travel. "The covered wagons were heavily loaded with all their earthly goods, supplies, and family members." Sometimes men and women walked beside the wagons. They traveled through Ohio and Indiana, arriving in Pokagon Township in June of 1838. William built a log cabin, and began making improvements immediately, while his friends pursued their own plans. However, the more he learned about the surrounding area, and the more intensely his interests shifted to Silver Creek Township.

Silver Creek Township was named after a slow moving stream that "emanates from Magician Lake" in that township. Magician Lake was originally named "Silver Lake," because of the "colored marl at the bottom of the lake" that made it glint silver in the sun. In 1834, James Mc Daniel was the first settler in this area, and he built a saw mill to process the huge trees that covered the region. In 1835, James Raymond settled there, later followed by the Suits, Mortons, Barneys, Deweys, and Woolmans. In 1836, John Woolman and George Kimmel sold 400 acres to William Gilbert. In 1837 a township government was established. In 1838, there were 300 Potawatomi Indians living there.

In 1839, William Gilbert, Cynthia Sammons and their children settled on the "banks of Indian Lake in a log cabin," Section 29 of Silver Creek Township. The lake was originally named "Woolman's Lake," but was changed to "Indian Lake," because so many Indians kept several sugar camps there every spring when the sap rose in the maple trees. In that same year the first school was established on School Street, east of Indian Lake Road (which still stands today and is an historic site).

When his farm was in working order, William set about growing enough crops to feed his family, and began exploring the potential of the undeveloped land around him. His plan was to become a "land speculator," buying tracks of acreage by paying the low prices the government used to lure settlers. His strategic course of action was to hold the land until eager new settlers arrived, and were ready to buy their own piece of property at his now inflated prices.

In 1840, Uncle Tommy (William) joined John Woolman to bid for a state of Michigan contract to build a four mile road between Pokagon Township and the undeveloped Silver Creek Township. It became known as the "town line road."

By now Uncle Tommy, had amassed a very significant financial reserve, and began implementing his land speculation plans. Living in their meager cabin on the shores of Indian Lake

and practicing frugality at home, Uncle Tommy poured all of his financial resources into the focused purchase of Silver Creek land. He systematically bought property, held it for as long as possible, and sold it for a profit, always to the highest bidder. He leveraged himself into an admirable financial position. The man was not only a long term planner and hard worker, he was a truly excellent financial strategist. His brilliant early pioneer real estate endeavors became legendary in the local community, and many versions of his activities still exist in old newspapers and history books today. The irony, of course, was that despite his financial success, he and his family were living in a meager log cabin.

Cynthia, who was just as hard a worker as her husband, made it known that the family needed more space, better accommodations, and declared that it was time to put William's success to good use. She convinced him to build a new home. The interesting thing about Uncle Tommy was that he never did things in a small way, once he set his mind to a task.

William Bragall Gilbert decided that he would build his wife "the biggest, fanciest house in the county." He and Cynthia designed and sketched the first mansion plans themselves, based on homes they were impressed with back east, and then they hired an architect.

There is a high bluff on the east side of Indian Lake. Between that hill and the lake, Indian Lake Road closely skirts the shores. "William and Cynthia used to walk hand in hand around the top of that hill in the early evenings, sit on a rough bench William had placed there, and watched the sun set over the lake to the west." The last rays of "sun would glint off the lake, in brilliant orange and yellow rays, and finally dip below the tree line." Then, in twilight, with darkness quickly descending, Uncle Tommy and Cynthia would hurry to their cabin. Once the sun set, if they did not hurry, "the buzzing, ravenous, blood sucking mosquitoes would eat them alive." This bluff, with its beautiful view of Indian Lake, is where Cynthia and William decided to build their new home.

In 1850, when most people in Silver Creek Township were living in pioneer log cabins and simple farm houses, William built what a newspaper reporter later called "Gilbert's Castle," and had "the entire county abuzz," because (for that era) it was the "grandest house in the county." The sturdy mansion home still exists today, is now over 160 years old, and is still called "Gilbert's Castle."

The Gilbert home has a third story captain's cupola lookout-post that gives a spectacular view of Indian Lake and the setting sun. Over the years, "Uncle Tommy and Cynthia would settle themselves in the lookout, hold hands, and watch the boats on the lake or the setting sun, never having to hurry indoors at twilight to avoid those pesky summer mosquitoes." Every grandchild in the Gilbert's extended family played in that cupola at one time or another, often taking a hand mirror and focusing the reflected sun's rays on boaters who were fishing on the lake. The home is barely visible from Indian Lake Road now, because of the trees which block most of the view. At one time, people would take buggy rides on Sunday's just to drive by and "have a gander." It is reached by a long narrow private driveway that goes up the hill on the south and descends to Indian Lake Road on the far north side. Gilbert's Private Cemetery is behind the house, as well as the foundation of an old Indian school and church.

Some winters, when the snows were really bad, the family would move into the cottage on the shore of Indian Lake to avoid being snowed in by that long driveway. Summers they would move back into the big house on the hill, and rent the cottage to early era Chicago vacationers. In 1965 there was a fire in the place, and it sat vacant for 12 years. Upon occasion, "a sorry soul would put on the snow shoes, drudge up the hill through the deep snowdrifts, and set a fire in the fireplace," thinking it was better for the structure to have a little heat, rather than set dormant all winter.

William Bragall Gilbert served as Justice of the Peace, concerned himself with community development, engaged his family in social activities, and "embraced" political issues. He became a man of influence and was highly respected within the growing area. His six children married into four other pioneer families (Bedfords, Conklins, Hawks and Garretts) and with the affiliate families exert a lot of political clout.

Uncle Tommy was extremely sympathetic to the plight of the Native American Indians. They initially had a difficult time adjusting to the white man's concept of private property or boundary lines. On his property there were huge maple trees, and for generations the Indians, in the spring, would come to what was now his land to tap those trees. When the spring sap rose from the roots of the trees, they would breach the truck and let the sweet sugary sap drain into containers. Over a roaring fire, they would boil the liquid down and then stirring constantly cool it until it slowly crystallized, "thus graining it." The Potawatomi then stored the sugared maple sap into "Mococks," which "were made of birch bark, sewed together with thongs made from slippery-elm bark." The Mocock were then paired together like saddle bags, and loaded onto the backs of ponies, while Uncle Tommy and his family watched the proceedings. The Potawatomi would then "go to the She-mo-k-man's cabin to swap (barter) for quas-gun (bread), sam-mock (tobacco), and other articles they wanted." Uncle Tommy could never find it in his heart to deny the Indians access to those trees, or their heritage sugar making traditions. In fact, they whole experience was looked upon, by the Gilberts, as an enriching experience (watching ancient practices p, though they could never bring themselves.

William was of French descent, and as a result befriended those in the local area who were likewise French. Although, he himself did not speak French, he purchased French story books for the children of French friends. He made a point of having his wife shop at the William's emporium in Niles, and was said to be willing to loan money to French immigrants in Silver Creek Township.

The development of the Dowagiac-Sister Lakes Resort and tourist economy started, in part, with investors like Uncle Tommy. His advice, to the rest of his family was to retain ownership of lake frontage, sell "time limited use contracts" to eager Chicago vacationers, and grant them the right to build their cottages on locally owned land. The rents collected was a major boost to the local economy, and fueled the eventual rapidly expanding tourism trade.

"Uncle Tommy" William Bragall Gilbert, to quote family genealogist Guy Wesley Hawks, "was a man of vision, iron will, stamina and innate real estate savvy. His energy, morality, devotion to family, and work ethic put lessen men to shame." He was one of the five Silver Creek Township pioneer patriarchs whose families intermarried, supported one another, and shaped the structure of northwestern Cass and mid eastern Berrien Counties. The Gilbert family owned land in Silver Creek, Pipestone, Wayne, and Porter Townships. The extended family of the William Bragall Gilberts (real estate), George Bedfords (farming), John Weston Hawks (logging), Abram Conklins (farming), Hugh S. Garretts (farming), and their affiliate families formed a political, social and financial base. "Family meetings and planning sessions always preceded decisions," and they often acted as a unit, "functioning in solidarity."

William Bragall Gilbert died on February 18, 1864 at age 73 years. He is buried in the Gilbert Private Cemetery behind Gilbert's Castle, in Section 29 of Silver Creek Township.

In conclusion, "Uncle Tommy" William Bragall Gilbert was an original pioneer of Cass and Berrien Counties, Michigan (owning property in both areas). He was an entrepreneur, land speculator, farmer, and family man, who helped form a local power base that influenced the development of western lower Michigan. His colorful life was filled with challenges and successes,

that still today, add flavor to local history and genealogy. What Uncle Tommy is remembered for most is that he built a historic landmark, Gilbert's Castle.

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