

Fugitive Slave Case

William Camp Gildersleeve

WHEN? 1850s

EVENT

The incident involved the capture and escape of a runaway slave and the court case that followed.



William Camp Gildersleeve

WHERE?

Wilkes-Barré

VOCABULARY

Abolition
Slave catcher
Sovereign
Underground Railroad

A compromise had to be made between the southern slave states in the US and the anti-slavery states in the North or the country would be torn apart. In 1850, Henry Clay helped to hammer out an agreement in Congress to keep the union together—at least for another eleven years. One of the parts of the agreement was that if a slave escaped from the South, those in the North would have to capture the slave or face fines. In addition to the obvious human aspect of the law, it would become a real test of which level of government had sovereignty: the Federal government or the state.

One of the first times this law would be tested would be in Wilkes-Barré, Pennsylvania. The city had become a frequent stop on the Underground Railroad to points farther north to Scranton or Montrose on the way to Canada. One of the most well-known abolitionists in the area was William Camp Gildersleeve. He was born in Georgia and saw slave horrors first-hand as a child (Gildersleeve n.d.).

Gildersleeve had been sorely tested for his support of runaway slaves. His home was ransacked by a mob, he and his family were ridiculed, he had been tied to a rail, and forced to appear in federal court in Philadelphia for aiding runaways. In 1853, a fugitive slave named William Thomas was working as a waiter at the Phoenix Hotel located at the corner of River Street and Market Street in Wilkes-Barré when three slave catchers walked in. Federal Marshall George Wynkoop and his two deputies, John Jenkins and James Crossen, sat at a table pretending to order food. Suddenly they jumped Thomas who fought them off with a fork and knife grabbed from a nearby place setting. The men managed to get one handcuff on Thomas before he ran out of the hotel toward the Susquehanna River. Shots were fired; one grazed his ear. All the commotion brought people out into the street where the crowd quickly realized what was going on. Thomas plunged into the river shouting “You

can shoot me, but you can never take me!” (Gildersleeve n.d.). The federal officers stood on the riverbank trying to convince Thomas to come to shore. The crowd sympathized with Thomas and turned against the officers who were forced to retreat from the riverbank. Sheriff Gilbert Burrows later arrested the three catchers for causing a riot (Kashatus 123). Later, Gildersleeve helped Thomas move to Canada.

By October the sheriff and the federal marshals were in court as well as Gildersleeve who was appearing before Philadelphia Judge Robert Grier again. He had threatened to hang Gildersleeve in 1837 when Gildersleeve appeared before him for abolitionist activity. Grier dismissed the case stating the state government did not have authority to disregard federal rule. That decision proved to be a contentious one as northern abolitionists were outraged that slavery was now obviously not limited to the South and a state could not challenge a federal law.

Frederick Douglass, the great orator and former slave, compared Wilkes-Barre to the courageous patriots at Boston during the Revolutionary War when he said “There, in immortal splendor, Wilkes-Barre will remain until the Almighty has allowed us to work out the most glorious triumph of Liberty in America – the complete abolition of slavery.” (Kashatus 123).

CHECK IT OUT ONLINE:

1. [Gildersleeve and Fugitive Slave case](#)
2. [Hidden History: William Thomas](#)
3. [Time for a Marker](#)
4. Dig Deeper: 1850 Fugitive Slave Law [Slave Catchers Arrested](#)
5. Read about another Wilkes-Barré conductor: [Henry Brown Conductor on the Underground Railroad](#)

PRINT SOURCES

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

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Research William Gildersleeve to find out how he arrived in Wilkes-Barré from Georgia. How did he earn a living?
2. Why do you think Gildersleeve took such risks to help people he did not know?
3. Consider starting a campaign to create an historical marker for William Thomas and others who arrived in Wilkes-Barré running for their lives and were helped on their way to freedom.
4. Consider developing a monologue of Henry Brown. He is buried in Wilkes-Barré city cemetery.

