

Gifford, William

(1798–1903)

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William Gifford was a manufacturer in the New England shipping industry whose life was remarkable both for its longevity and for prioritizing radical causes such as abolitionism and Adventism over business success.

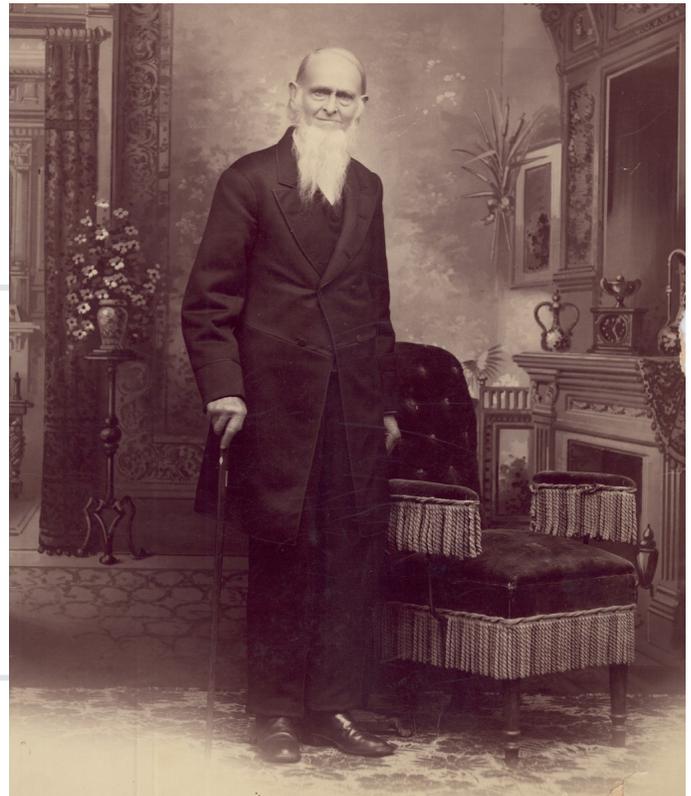
Early Life

Born in Rochester, Plymouth County, Massachusetts on September 22, 1798, William was “left without a father” in early childhood. His mother had a substantial fortune but it was taken from her “by the hand of injustice,”¹ leaving her without means to support her children. William was sent to work for a farmer at the age of seven, but the man treated him so badly that he ran away, returning to his mother.

He soon found employment in a cotton factory, enabling him to help support his mother and three younger siblings. William managed gradually to work his way out of poverty. Shipbuilding and whaling thrived in Rochester, located on the Mattapoisett Harbor,² and at age 14 William was apprenticed to his uncle, Captain John Attsalt, to learn the pump- and block-making trade. After completing the apprenticeship he became an employee and eventually partner in the firm.

Principle vs. Profit

Already prosperous as a young man, Gifford married Mary Bowlin, daughter of Captain Josiah Bowlin, in 1820. William and Mary would have eleven children. In 1831, Gifford sold his share of the partnership with his uncle



William Gifford

Photo courtesy of Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.

and set up his own shop a few miles away in Fairhaven. He prospered there as well and became deeply involved in politics and social reform movements. He joined the first national association organized to advocate for temperance and prohibition – the American Temperance Society formed in 1826.³ Gifford was a strong partisan for the Democratic party and also a staunch abolitionist. He and his grandfather “were among those early underground railroad men” who assisted fugitives from slavery, according to a biographical sketch by his daughter, Anne E. Gurney.⁴

These commitments put Gifford at odds with the shipowners and sea captains of the Fairhaven business community, but that did not deter him. His daughter characterized her father as “one of those outspoken men who dare to state what they think is right, and will sacrifice much for a principle,” wrote his daughter. Gifford liked to say, “No half-masts for me.” He flew the flag of his convictions at masthead despite the costs because “for him business was but a secondary matter.”⁵ His clientele diminished and he eventually sold the pump and block firm and got out of the business entirely.

Awakened by Adventism

Gifford experienced conversion to Christ as a young man and joined the Christian Connexion church in 1819, the same church in which Joseph Bates became a deacon. However, his wife apparently came to sense that his personal spiritual fervor did not match the passion he devoted to politics and reform causes. During times when excitement ran high in the controversies that embroiled him, increasingly the case in the 1830s, Mary would tell him, “William, I hope I may be permitted to live to see you as wide awake in the cause of religion as you now are in politics.”⁶

It was the Second Advent movement that awakened new zeal in Gifford’s Christian experience. When William Miller preached in Fairhaven in 1839, Gifford and several others from the Christian Connexion church, including Bates, welcomed the message enthusiastically. According to Anne Gurney’s account, her father had already become part of a group that had left their “former church association” and met in “cottage meetings” held in private homes. However, it is more plausible, as suggested in Gifford’s obituary by I. D. Van Horn, that this development took place at some point after Miller’s Fairhaven preaching series of 1839.⁷ An elderly black man, one of the fugitives from slavery whom Gifford assisted who had settled nearby, learning to read with the help of William’s mother, was among those who accepted Miller’s message. The man died not long thereafter in the “blessed hope” that he would soon see his Savior.⁸

Pioneer Sabbatarian

William Gifford took another step forward in his radical pilgrimage in 1845. He was one of the earliest to accept the message about the seventh day as the biblical Sabbath that Joseph Bates presented after returning home to Massachusetts from his visit to the earliest Sabbath-keeping Adventist group in Washington, New Hampshire.

James Madison Monroe Hall and his wife, Abigail, were the first two who accepted Bates' Sabbath witness and, according to an obituary of Mrs. Hall, Gifford was the next to do so. However, Gifford's son-in-law and one of Bates' preaching partners, Heeman S. Gurney (d. 1896) also claimed to be the first after the Halls.⁹ Either way, Gifford was part of the earliest group of Sabbatarian Adventists to form through the teaching of the movement's co-founder, Joseph Bates. Gifford would often provide hospitality for "traveling ministers" during these early years.

Gifford acquired a small farm in Parma, Michigan, and, along with his wife Mary, moved there in 1857. Just three weeks after they got settled, Mary died. Devastated, Gifford rented the farm and went to live with his daughter Anne in Jackson, Michigan. He lived with her for most of the remainder of his life, except for a few years with his son on property acquired in Brookfield, Michigan. For the remaining decades of his life, "Father Gifford" was a faithful, active church member, assisting in evangelistic and church planting efforts from time to time. For example, he assisted D. H. Lamson with meetings held in Greenwood, Grant, and Smith's Creek in 1876.¹⁰

Vegetarian Centenarian

As the decades rolled by and he continued to enjoy robust health, William Gifford came to be noted as something of a living advertisement for the church's health message. He was a life-long teetotaler and never used tobacco. He drank coffee in the mornings until he was in his 30s. But, around 1836, when his doctor told him the tremor in his hands was due to too much coffee, he did not simply cut back but, ever the radical, stopped using it entirely and banned it from the home. Gifford was "laid up with rheumatism" one winter but never had a similar attack thereafter. An article in the Adventist periodical *Good Health* celebrating Gifford as a "Vegetarian Centenarian" attributed the nonrecurrence of rheumatism to his "banishing all flesh foods from the table" for the last four decades of his life. A case of typhoid fever not long after Gifford's move to Michigan was the only other serious illness he suffered in his lengthy life.¹¹

In her biographical sketch, written when her father was 102 years old, Anne Gurney gave a detailed report on his health. He would get out to Sabbath services when the weather was good and would bear "a decided testimony to those present." He still did some light gardening, small household chores, and woodworking projects. Though he could no longer hear, his eyesight remained good and his main activity was reading. Usually he did not lay down during the daytime, but sometimes nodded off while reading.¹²

Contribution

According to *Good Health*, William Gifford was the oldest resident of the state of Michigan when he died at his daughter's home in Memphis, Michigan, on December 19, 1903, at the age of 105. He left five children, 27 grandchildren, 20 great-grandchildren, and one great-great-grandchild. The profile in *Good Health*, presumably authored by the editor, Dr. J. H. Kellogg, declared Gifford "a fine specimen of the results of healthful living."¹³

Good genes also contributed to his longevity – Gifford observed that “some of his ancestors lived to quite an advanced age.”¹⁴

It was remarkable, as his daughter observed, that “so much radical truth” centered in one individual.¹⁵ The courage to follow the inconvenient truths that he believed without fear or favor made William Gifford’s longevity meaningful.

SOURCES

Gurney, A. E. “Brief Sketch of a Review and Herald Centenarian.” *ARH*, January 14, 1902.

“Hundred Year Club: A Vegetarian Centenarian.” *Good Health*, April 1904.

Van Horn, I. D. “William Gifford obituary.” *ARH*, January 7, 1904.

NOTES

1. The quoted phrases are from the principal source available about Gifford, authored by his daughter Anne E. Gurney, “Brief Sketch of a Review and Herald Centenarian,” *ARH*, January 14, 1902, 19-20. Gurney does not specify how Gifford was “left without a father,” though death may be the likeliest reason, nor does she give further details on how his mother was unjustly deprived of the fortune.
2. “Town History,” Rochester, MA, accessed January 4, 2021, <https://www.townofrochestermass.com/about/pages/town-history>.
3. “Hundred Year Club: A Vegetarian Centenarian,” *Good Health*, April 1904, 53.
4. Gurney, 19.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 19-20; I. D. Van Horn, “William Gifford obituary,” *ARH*, January 7, 1904, 23.
8. Gurney, 19.
9. C. H. Edwards, “Abigail Hall obituary,” *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, February 19, 1902, 10; George R. Knight, *Joseph Bates: The Real Founder of Seventh-day Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2004), 80-81.
10. D. H. Lamson, “Michigan,” *ARH*, June 29, 1876, 6.
11. “Vegetarian Centenarian”; Gurney, 20.

12. Gurney, 20.

13. "Vegetarian Centenarian."

14. Gurney, 19.

15. Ibid.

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