



## *March 2024*

*~Carol Schweizer*

The February program was a video which had been produced and narrated by GPS member David Waite titled Ballston Spa's Mexican War Monument: The Village Honors Its Fallen Sons. I believe all of us learned interesting information about the Mexican War.

Once again, we are sorry to have lost one of our GPS members, Ronald Feulner. Ron brought programs to our meetings about area history. He was president of the Greenfield Historical Society, and also served as Greenfield Historian, as well as being an author and teacher.

Unfortunately, we have lost far too many members in the last few years.

David Brooks, who presented our January program on video, will be with us live, and in person, for our March 4<sup>th</sup> meeting. He will bring us a program called DeWitt's Duel, an interesting exploration of the life of DeWitt Clinton. We will learn about early American life and New York politics in the early part of the 1800s. Please join us!

## *The Gilchrist Brothers: West Charlton's Millionaire Bachelors*

by Dave Waite

In May of 1908, Thomas Mairs Gilchrist passed away, with his death followed less than two months later by the passing of his older brother Alexander. With both men in their eighties, the record of their passing is hardly in itself a story. Neither is the fact that they were bachelors and had lived for many years in a modest 100-year-old farmhouse on the western edge of Charlton, Saratoga County. What sets these brothers apart is that during their lifetimes they were strictly focused on gaining wealth and became some of the richest men in the county, a notable feat in itself when measured against the high society that inhabited Saratoga Springs during those years.

Ancestors of these two brothers had come to this country from Scotland, and by 1778 found their way into Saratoga County. Once here, Alexander Gilchrist established a farm on land granted by King George III of England to his brother William in the hamlet of Scotch Church in the town of Charlton. By the time Alexander passed away, his children had spread throughout the area, with one son, John A. Gilchrist, settling his family in West Charlton on a farm that he had acquired through a foreclosure sale. This farm was one of the properties that passed to his sons Thomas and Alexander upon his death in 1858 and was their residence, as well as the home of their maiden sister Margaret, for the rest of their lives.



*The Gilchrist home today*

Along with the land that they had inherited, these two brothers also continued their father's business of lending mortgage money and buying property throughout Albany, Schenectady, Montgomery, and Saratoga Counties. They were so successful it was said that they owned forty-five farms throughout the Mohawk Valley. The Gilchrist wealth was built on having the financial freedom to take advantage of opportunities, with one example being their response when railroad tycoon Jay Gould

attempted to corner the gold market causing a financial panic of 1869.

In the summer of that year, Thomas Gilchrist set off for New York City with a large quantity of gold, and with a \$100 gold piece selling for over one hundred and thirty dollars, he was able to make a sizeable profit with his sales. To further his increase, he then invested the money in stocks and bonds. This was not the only time that Thomas took advantage of an upheaval in the markets, as in November of 1907 he again left West Charlton for New York City with a large amount of money which he sold at a premium and reinvested the profits. Not only were Thomas and Alexander adept in the world of finance, but they also were working their land and maintaining an orchard of two hundred apple trees for producing cider and vinegar. During the Civil War years, they even found a profitable market in New York City for their produce. Besides the numerous financial responsibilities and managing their farms, Thomas Gilchrist also made time for his community by serving several terms as Charlton Town Supervisor.

While activity in the big city was a major contributor to their financial success, little did Thomas realize at the time that a visit he made in the summer of 1882 would set off a series of unfortunate events that brought the two brothers and their wealth months of scrutiny and public attention.

The episode began as nightfall had just finished blanketing West Charlton in mid-August darkness and the residents of the Gilchrist homestead had settled in the parlor to rest from the labors of the day. Thomas, who was fifty-five that year, opened the newspaper and as was his routine, read the news of the day to his sixty-two-year-old brother Alexander, as their sister Margaret, who was a year younger than Alexander, sat nearby stringing beans. Suddenly and without warning five men wearing derby hats and white hoods burst through the front door brandishing pistols and manacles. Yelling "Make no trouble, or we'll blow your

**FIVE MASKED BURGLARS.**

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**They Enter Supervisor Gilchrist's House at Charlton, Saratoga County, Gag and Tie the Inmates and Rob the Safe of \$800 and Valuable Bonds—A Daring Crime Boldly Performed \$150,000 in Securities Stolen—One of the Burglars Stabbed with a Fork.**

One of the boldest crimes ever committed by masked burglars in this vicinity occurred at Charlton, Saratoga county, last night. The audacity of the robbers is shown by the fact that they entered upon their daring crime early in the evening, though the darkness of the night gave them abundant cover during the outrage.

**A SUDDEN ENTRANCE.**

About 9 o'clock last night five masked men suddenly entered the house of Supervisor

*Troy Daily Times, August 17, 1882*

brains out," two of the men jumped onto Alexander, as the other two attempted to subdue Thomas. Margaret, with a full view of the assault, was threatened by the point of a gun by the fifth assailant and sat frozen in fear.

Thomas raised a chair over his head as the assailants came across the room to restrain him. Moving quickly through the house, he then backed into the pantry hoping to find a weapon but was only able to blindly grab a three-tined fork. Though he attacked his foe bravely, even breaking off a tine as he thrust the fork into one of his opponents, he was quickly knocked nearly senseless by the butt of a revolver, his hands shackled, ankles tied, and a gag placed over his mouth. Alexander, having barely time to rise to his feet before being attacked, was pushed over backward in the chair and quickly bound and gagged.

Once subdued, Alexander was ungagged, with the intruders demanding he turn over the key to their safe. Even with threats of instant death, the hiding place was not revealed, and the intruders began to ransack the house. It was not long before the key was found between two mattresses in a nearby bedroom, and after several unsuccessful attempts, the safe was finally unlocked.

Rifling through the safe, the thieves found eight hundred dollars in cash and countless bonds and mortgages dating back three generations. The robbers next turned their attention to a nearby cabinet which yielded silverware and an heirloom gold pocket watch, which Alexander protested at being taken as part of their loot. After much debate between the five men, it was decided they would leave the watch as it would be easily identified and could lead to their capture. After the cellar had been searched for hidden valuables, the two brothers were dragged downstairs and bound to a post. As they were being tied, the thieves realized the injuries they had inflicted on Thomas and took time to offer him a glass of water. Once back upstairs the vandals continued with their plundering of the Gilchrist home.

When they were finally satisfied that nothing else of value remained, the robbers put out all the lights, and after warning their victims against escape, headed into the darkness.

No sooner had the vandals left the house than Margaret began fighting to free herself. Despite having wrists that the *Troy Daily Times* described as both "fleshy" and "very large," she was able to maneuver out of one manacle and get free from the ropes that bound her. Lighting a candle, Miss Gilchrist quickly went into the cellar and untied her brothers. It was only then that the injuries inflicted on the brothers were realized, with Thomas, his shirt soaked with blood and two large cuts on his forehead and Alexander's face beaten and cut. Hardly taking time to bind their wounds, the two headed out to get assistance from their neighbors. With the help of Cornelius Watson Robbins, they had the chains that secured their manacles cut, soon followed by a member of the Jolly family with a hammer and chisel that were used to cut the bindings from their wrists.

The next order of business was to notify the authorities, and as telephone service was still twenty years in the future for West Charlton, the only choice was to make the trip themselves. So only hours after the assault and robbery, the brothers headed out, Alexander alone for Schenectady and Thomas to Amsterdam with Cornelius Robbins. It was soon realized that the robbers had come into West Charlton from Hoffman's Ferry as even in the darkness the path of the men coming and going were easily seen. Thomas and Cornelius followed their footprints until they were lost along the railroad tracks near Hoffman's.

While the route that the robbers used that night is no longer a public road, at the time of the incident it passed directly in front of the Gilchrist house south towards the railroad tracks along the Mohawk River.

With authorities in Amsterdam, Schenectady, and Saratoga all actively investigating and rumors of a ten-thousand-dollar reward, only one tip surfaced concerning the robbers. The tipster reported that on the afternoon before the robbery an "odd-looking buggy" had been seen coming out of Cohoes, and then again on Albany Street in Schenectady in the early hours that next morning. As the investigation progressed it became clear that the thieves had traveled by rail and likely timed the robbery to hop a passing train for their escape. Over the days that followed no other clues were found, and the search for answers was stalled with little hope of ever locating the criminals.

It was during this time that Thomas Gilchrist revealed what had likely brought the robbers to their door that summer night. Only a brief time before the robbery Gilchrist had been in New York City and had been looking into purchasing a new, more modern safe. Looking back, Thomas realized that he had let slip that he often kept a large amount of securities and bonds at his home. From this, he surmised that this news had been passed to the men who had attacked and robbed them.

A break in the case came only a month later when two strangers to the area stopped at the American Hotel in Ballston Spa and asked for directions to the office of Saratoga County Sheriff Vandenburg. When they finally met, the two men introduced themselves as New York City detective John W. Luke and John Lee, an agent for the Mosher Bank Safe Company out of Cincinnati, Ohio. The pair suggested that for a fee of five hundred dollars, they could recover the documents stolen from the Gilchrist home. The two departed Ballston Spa with their proposal accepted by the Gilchrist brothers, but soon wrote to the sheriff demanding more money. The Gilchrist's offer of an additional two hundred and fifty dollars was accepted and arrangements were made to meet in New York City and recover the stolen goods.

In mid-November Sheriff Vandenburg, Deputy Sheriff Wolf and Thomas Gilchrist took the train to New York City to make the exchange, meeting Luke at a restaurant on West Street. In what was beginning to resemble a dime-store detective novel, the group was told that the price was now \$1000, and they were to meet next at the Astor House. At that meeting, the deal was made, with an agreement the exchange would happen at the National Bank building on Nassau Street. When John W. Luke stepped off the elevator that afternoon, he had the stolen papers under his jacket and strapped around his waist. After examining the documents, Gilchrist was satisfied that everything was being returned and the exchange was made.

Now with someone connected to the robbers revealed, evidence was brought before a grand jury in Saratoga County and a case was opened. In January of 1883, John Luke was contacted to appear as a witness, but when he arrived in Ballston Spa he was immediately arrested and put in jail with a trial already scheduled for February. Though unable to secure a bond to cover the five-thousand-dollar bail, Luke did secure representation from the law firm of Varney & Allen in Saratoga. When brought before the court, the prisoner pleaded not guilty to the charges against him, complaining that it was "exceedingly cruel" that he had been indicted and asked that as he was poor the bail be reduced.

During the trial, the only substantial evidence to be presented was possession of the stolen documents by Luke and Margaret's testimony that his voice and features matched her memory of one of the thieves. The trial ended with the jury deadlocked at eleven for conviction and one for acquittal. As the prosecution

was not satisfied with the verdict, Luke was returned to jail to await another trial. On July 12<sup>th</sup> his second trial ended with the jury even less convinced of his guilt with only eight for conviction.

Still not done with the case, a third trial was held in September. Despite rumors in the local news that John Luke was actually “New Orleans Jack,” a notorious New York City pickpocket, the trial ended with the jury deliberating eight hours only to return a verdict of eleven for conviction and one for acquittal. As the

**Sequel of the Gilchrist Robbery.**  
**SARATOGA, Sept. 8.**—Ex Detective John W. Luke, of New York city, has been discharged from custody, by County Judge J. S. Lamoreaux. Mr. Luke has had three trials. He was indicted for alleged complicity in the theft of \$300,000 worth of bonds from the Gilchrist Brothers, of Charlton, in this county. It was decided not to have a fourth trial, and he was given his freedom.

court had no interest in pursuing a fourth trial, on Friday, September 14<sup>th</sup>, eight months after being arrested, John W. Luke was released on five thousand dollars bail. He immediately left the courthouse, jumping onto the passing Saratoga Special as it slowed down on the tracks that ran through the village.

Life returned to normal at the Gilchrist home for the next eighteen years, with the brothers, and at times their sister Margaret, buying and selling property in the Saratoga and neighboring counties. In 1901, Margaret passed away at the age of 81, with her funeral held at the family home, and being laid to rest in the family plot in the West Charlton Cemetery across the road from the United Presbyterian Church where she had been a lifelong member.



*Gilchrist Monument, West Charlton Cemetery*

Soon after the loss of their sister Thomas and Alexander began planning to install a family monument at the West Charlton Cemetery. In mid-August of 1905, immense blocks of granite for this monument were brought to the cemetery, on wagons each drawn by ten horses. It took five trips to the cemetery and another three carloads of stone to Ballston Lake for engraving to complete the deliveries. After the monument was erected, Thomas left nine thousand dollars from his estate to be used for “placing of a suitable and appropriate curbing walk and markers” on their plot, and another six thousand dollars to the United Presbyterian Church to be used to maintain the cemetery. Today the massive monument dominates this tiny country cemetery as it stands over the resting places of members of the Gilchrist family.

As we noted at the beginning of this story, both Thomas and Alexander passed away only weeks apart in 1908. As they worked and lived together for all their lives, I will draw this story to a close by sharing some of the words from the eulogy for Thomas Mairs Gilchrist from the March 27, 1908

*Amsterdam Recorder*, given by Reverend Frank A. Collins, pastor of the United Presbyterian Church:

When death enters any home, the shadow rests over the whole community. Especially is this true when the person has for a great many years been a prominent element in community life.

From early manhood to within a few hours of death, his alert mind was devoted untiringly and with great success to business affairs. In an age and county remarkable for the prominence given to business enterprises, it is seldom that you find such a record of great and unbroken success, extending over such a long business career. This is more noteworthy as it has not been the work of lucky chance but has been hewn out of the native rock by sheer force of mind and determination of character.

The long and successful career and that life which linked a former generation with our own has come to a close. Its pages are as an open book in the hands of you who have been neighbors and friends.

Illustrations:

The Gilchrist home today, by the author

"Five Masked Burglars," *Troy Daily Times*, August 17, 1882

"Sequel of the Gilchrist Robbery," *Rome Daily Citizen*, September 18, 1883

Gilchrist Monument, West Charlton Cemetery, by the

Sources for this article include The Charlton House Letters at [charltonnyhs.org](http://charltonnyhs.org), the website [history.com](http://history.com), deeds and other records held at the Saratoga County Clerk's Office, and online newspaper archives at [fultonhistory.com](http://fultonhistory.com) and [nyhistoricnewspapers.org](http://nyhistoricnewspapers.org).