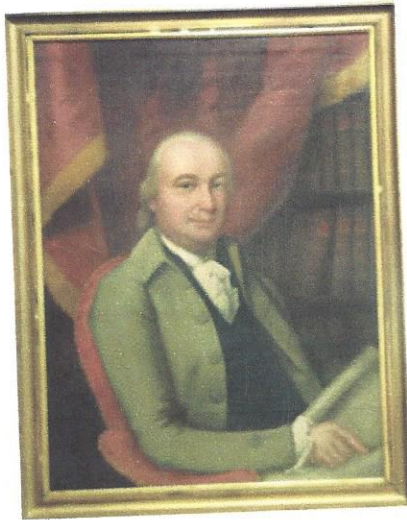


9.20.15 Received Appraisal to be
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**WILLIAM GILLILAND
1734-1796**

**PIONEER SETTLER OF ESSEX
AND CLINTON COUNTIES, NEW YORK**

**By: David Glenn
August 22, 2008
Revised March 15, 2009**



William Gilliland was born about 1734 in Keady, County Armagh, in what is now Northern Ireland. His father, William, died when he was young leaving a known family of four living children, daughters Susan, Charity, and sons William and James in that order. His mother Jane (Stoker) later married Michael Watson with whom she had three known children, Mathew, John, and Edward Watson. Young William was said to have a cultivated mind, polished manners, been talented and ambitious. After completing his education in Armagh, he initially attempted to establish himself in business and soon secured an elevated position in the society of that city. However, a relationship with a young lady, Jane Eckles of noble birth, was frowned upon by her family who apparently considered William of too low an estate for their daughter.

At a little over twenty years old, Will, as he called himself, emigrated from Ireland to America and arrived in New York City in about 1754. He soon established himself in the mercantile trade working for others then established his own business by April of 1759 when his advertisements first appeared in the City's newspapers. Some time prior to 1759, Will had met a young lady named Elizabeth Phagan at the home of mutual friends. At that time young Elizabeth, also of Irish extraction, was an orphan with an estate of some 1500 pounds, a considerable sum in those days. Upon the earlier death of her mother, her father and only brother had returned to the island of Jamaica where they both had soon died. As a result and because of her young age, she had been placed under the guardianship of two prominent men of the City. A relationship between Will and Elizabeth soon developed and they were married in February of 1759. He was 25, she 19. A daughter Jane soon followed in 1760.

By early 1763 Will, highly successful as a merchant, had determined to become a baronial land owner in the Province of New York in the mold of Sir William Johnson, the Livingstons and the Rensselaers. Anticipating his need for settlers, he advertised in April of 1763 in the newspapers of Ireland for people interested in becoming tenant farmers on his properties in America.

With this dream in mind he traveled to Johnson Hall in September of 1763 to seek the advice of Sir William Johnson on where to purchase lands. Johnson recommended the west shore of Lake Champlain north of Crown Point. Will immediately started obtaining the rights of British veterans of the French and Indian War, which had just ended in 1763, to lands in the Champlain Valley. The veteran would obtain title to the land from the King of England and Will would purchase the land by prior arrangement from the veteran. Under this method Will became the owner of upwards of 50,000 acres of land in the valley concentrated in what was then northern Albany County but are now Essex and Clinton Counties.

In March 1765, he read a paper before the "Society for Promoting Arts, Agriculture, and Economy in the Province of New York" on the value of wilderness land and the benefit to the Province if it would build roads into the wilderness area for its development.

Two months later, Will left his wife Elizabeth and two young daughters, almost five year old Jane and year old Elizabeth, in New York City and set off on May 10th for his property in the north. He traveled with a company of fourteen people including a clergyman, carpenter, millwrights, weavers, a clerk, housekeepers, wives, and a slave (Not included in his list of people) along with oxen, cows, calves, a bull, other farm animals, some eighty barrels of stores and building materials. They stopped in Albany where others joined his company as well as at Half Moon, Forts Edward, George, Ticonderoga and Crown Point.

They arrived at the mouth of the Boquet River on June 8, 1765 and moved a couple of miles up the river to the first falls and founded the settlement of Willsborough, named after Will. They immediately erected a home for Will and a saw mill on the falls.

In the summer of 1766 Will brought his young family north to Willsborough. Tragically his almost six year old daughter Jane drowned in an accident going north on the Hudson River near Half Moon, and was buried at Stillwater. His wife Elizabeth was expecting and gave birth in September of 1766 to a daughter, again

named Jane in memory of her deceased sister. A brother William, Junior came along in 1768. Both Jane and young William were born in Willsborough.

Daughter Charlotte was born in 1770, and Will was appointed that same year as a Civil Magistrate for Albany County by recommendation of Sir William Johnson. In May of 1772, Will's wife Elizabeth was expecting for the sixth time. She gave birth to a son but soon both mother and unnamed son had died and were buried on the family property. By 1772 Will also owned a home in Albany. He listed it as an asset in his will which he composed after his wife's death. It is believed to be shown in 1779 as a taxable property in the second ward.

On March 17, 1775 Will orchestrated a significant event well ahead of his time. At the first Town of Willsborough town meeting he gave each of his tenant farmers the right of one man, one vote, an idea unique in that era.

The American Revolution was breaking out in 1775. Will was involved in the momentous events of that spring. He was in Vermont with Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys planning the taking of Fort Ticonderoga, in fact he claimed he was the first to propose the idea. Upon the arrival of Benedict Arnold and the resultant argument over command, Will arbitrated the agreement of a joint command. Will was not with the first group that crossed Lake Champlain and took the Fort early on the morning of May 10th but arrived soon after.

Later that fall Will aided General Montgomery and his American Army as they headed north down the Lake to attempt to take Quebec City. He transported some of them from Crown Point to Canada in several of his craft and provided invaluable navigation assistance.

Will formed a company of Minute Men at his settlement and was its Captain. He was recognized as having been a Revolutionary War soldier as a result of that service.

On June 15, 1775 Will signed a "Declaration of Principles" at Crown Point along with many others, including Benedict Arnold. This document was a precursor to the Declaration of Independence and by signing it Will was judged to be a traitor by the British. As a result, Will claimed General Guy Carleton, the Governor General of Canada, placed a bounty of five hundred pounds on his head for his capture dead or alive and taking to Canada. This was attempted by the loyalist Sheriff of Tyron County with a group of white men and Indians. Will narrowly avoided capture but in turn captured the Sheriff and his men.

After the retreat of the American Army out of Canada in the spring of 1776, Will was instrumental in aiding the Army as it retreated south up the lake. He fed and cared for about 3,000 to 4,000 men including the sick and dying without regard for small pox which was devastating the Army. Many soldiers were buried at his settlement with full military honors.

Benedict Arnold returned to Lake Champlain to build a fleet of craft to oppose the British for control of Lake Champlain in the summer of 1776. Arnold, Gilliland, and the commanding General Philip Schuyler at Ticonderoga had a cordial relationship. This continued as General Horatio Gates took command and lasted until one of Arnold's fleet raided Gilliland's settlement at Willsborough in late August and stole them blind. Will sent a letter to Arnold asking for compensation. Arnold ignored him perhaps for good reason. The Continental Congress was not supplying Arnold with proper equipment, supplies and food. Raiding Willsborough was a simple solution for starving, ill clad and ill equipped soldiers serving on unfamiliar sailing craft.

Will's next reaction was to fire off a harsh letter of condemnation of Arnold to General Gates, Arnold's commanding officer. In hindsight it was terribly accurate about Arnold's character. However, this did two things detrimental to Will. First, in order to defend himself Arnold called him a Tory, a spy, a loyalist. At the time Arnold was an American hero and Will was defenseless against this unfounded charge. Second, Gates had to make an easy choice. Which man did he need most in that theater? Arnold in command of and building the fleet was essential. As a result Will was removed by the Army to Fort Ticonderoga. Gates kept him there briefly but realizing the untruth of Arnold's charge released him to join his family who had earlier been sent to Ticonderoga. Will moved to his house in Albany in November of 1776.

Once in Albany, Will penned a lengthy 1777 Memorial to the Continental Congress which detailed his many services to the country. He also wrote a long letter dated August 20, 1777 to General Horatio Gates detailing his losses of property and crops at Willsborough in 76. Headstrong Will again ran afoul of the authorities. He was imprisoned for a week in December 1777 for picking up Saratoga battlefield remnants consisting of powder, guns and cartridge papers. He was released on bail but was rearrested within days after a charge was filed by General Gates. While imprisoned he wrote a lengthy Memorial to the Albany Committee of Safety from Albany Fort dated January 15, 1778 again detailing his many patriotic services to the country and the improper reasons for his being held. After the witnesses against Will did not appear, he was again released on bond February 5, 1778 and the charges

disappeared. He spent the remainder of the Revolutionary War years in Albany as a merchant.

The loyalist paper of British controlled New York City noted Will's Albany presence in a July 1781 article. They said "The infamous old Gilliland...is now frequently invited to the nocturnal meetings of the rebel cabal in Albany; to give a toast of his own invention, which is To the tree that furnished the coal, that heated the iron, that made the ax, which cut off the head of King Charles the First."

After the war was over he visited his settlement at Willsborough in the summer of 1783 to find it in total ruin and with unscrupulous people claiming and settling on his lands. While living in Albany, he spent much of what remained of his fortune in defending his claims, deeded large portions of his land to his four surviving children, and started to sell off what remained of his holdings. He wrote a long petition to the Honorable Legislature of the State of New York dated December 30, 1783 requesting they grant title to various petitioners some 8,850 acres of land which would then revert to Gilliland. These lands were in present Essex and Clinton Counties. Will's petition was denied.

His daughter Jane Willsborough Gilliland married the Albany merchant John Bleecker in 1786. They lived in Albany for a time and later moved to Stillwater. His youngest daughter Charlotte married another Albany merchant, Stephen Cuyler in 1787, and they moved to Willsborough.

In 1786 Will refused to pay a claim against him as a matter of principal. It had been initiated by a Massachusetts law firm. As a result he ended up in debtor's prison in the confines of the gaol of New York City and remained there almost six years from February 1786 until released in December 1791. During his stay, he had his portrait painted in 1789 by the renowned portraitist Ralph Earl who earlier had also been in debtor's prison with him. While in the gaol Will's health deteriorated and he became at times disoriented. He possibly suffered a stroke. Having regained his health, he moved to his daughter Elizabeth's home in Essex, New York built on land he had given her. He lived there with Elizabeth, her husband Daniel Ross, the first settler of that community, and his four Ross grandchildren as they came along.

The First Census of the United States in 1790 incorrectly spelled the town of Willsborough, then in Clinton County, as Wellsburgh and lists a William Gilliland with a household of one male and four free white females. This would have been Will's only son, William Gilliland, Junior who would have been 21 or 22 in late 1789 when the data was collected, and was unmarried and living in Willsborough.

Will was still in the gaol in New York at this time. Later in history the spelling of the town was changed to Willsboro after Essex County was set off from Clinton County.

Will Gilliland lived out the remainder of his days in Essex and is said to have become incompetent to handle his own affairs, wandering about the scenes of his early enterprise under the delusion of ownership. In February of 1796, on a cold winter's day he visited his friend Platt Rogers in Basin Harbor on the Vermont shore. Walking back home to Essex across the lake ice he became lost in the woods on the New York side and perished in the cold. Will was 62. His frozen body was found some days later. He is now buried in Lakeside Cemetery, Willsboro, New York in the Cuyler plot.

Thus ended the life of the pioneer settler of Essex and Clinton Counties. History has largely forgotten his invaluable service to his country in the Revolution and the memory of him is clouded by the unfounded charge of disloyalty made against him by Benedict Arnold. It was not until Arnold had turned traitor in 1780 that the angry words of Gilliland written to General Gates in 1776 became prescient in their opinion of Arnold's true character. William Gilliland was a true American Patriot, a man who believed strongly in the cause of liberty and was one of its earliest proponents. He interacted with some of the most important men of that period. His strength of character, courage in adversity, and pioneer spirit were attributes that helped form our great nation.

Sources: This sketch is derived from over ten years of research into the family records of William Gilliland held by various family members; the study of the original Willsborough Town Book or Journal kept by Gilliland with almost daily notes from May 10, 1765 through June 2, 1767 and various notes and letters through May 28, 1793; the review of the original documents, memorials, letters and petitions mentioned in this sketch; the Family Sketch composed by his daughter Charlotte Gilliland Cuyler; original letters from Will to his son William, Junior and other friends and family members; and the Pioneer History of the Champlain Valley written by Winslow C. Watson and published in 1863 based upon the earlier manuscripts of Oscar Sheldon and interviews with William Gilliland, Junior and after his 1847 death his sons William and Henry Gilliland.

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Portrait of William Gilliland courtesy of the Ft. Ticonderoga Museum. Ticonderoga, New York.

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