

WILLIAMSPORT SUN-GAZETTE

Early African American activist Catherine Gilchrist Thompson

LIFESTYLE NEWS

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Catherine Gilchrist was a teenager when she came with her family to Lycoming County. Born in 1817 in Lehigh County, she was the daughter of Simon Cornelius Gilchrist and Elizabeth (Wolf) Gilchrist.

Simon Gilchrist was a free black man; Elizabeth may have been of German and African ancestry. Catherine had one brother, Enoch, and three sisters, Lucretia, Ann and Mary. She was baptized in the Moravian Church, a community where blacks and whites often worshipped together.

Her father and brother worked in the lumber industry and became community leaders in Williamsport. Simon was hired to be a teacher of African American students, who were not allowed to attend the white schools. Enoch petitioned the city to establish a brick-and-mortar school for African American children; he also served on a jury and was active as a lay preacher.

Underground railroad

Both Simon and Enoch were noted abolitionists and conductors on the Underground Railroad.

One of the slaves they assisted was a Virginia teenager named Joseph Pascal Thompson, who had run away from his master, Richard Pritchard of Winchester, Virginia. In Williamsport, Thompson found a home with an abolitionist family, most likely the Gilchrists. Thompson, who could not read or write when he arrived, went to night school and also learned blacksmithing.

He went on to become a licensed preacher in 1839, a physician in 1858 and a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1876.

On Nov. 16, 1841, 22-year-old Rev. Thompson married 24-year-old Catherine Gilchrist. The wedding took place in Williamsport, most likely at the home of Catherine's parents.

Rev. Thompson's first assignment was at the newly established African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Elmira, New York. Catherine

supported her husband at this and his other various church ministries in New York and New Jersey.

One church he pastored was in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he fled in 1853 after the fugitive slave law was passed, for fear of being captured and returned to slavery. The last church they served was the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Newburgh, New York.

Along with her husband, Catherine was active in promoting freedom for slaves and civil rights for all African Americans. The couple worked with Catherine's father to help escaping slaves find transportation from Williamsport to the north. Bishop J. W.

Hood wrote of Catherine, *"During the dark days of slavery her mind was riveted on allaying the suffering of her unfortunate fellow-creatures. Many clever schemes she devised in effecting their escape from bondage"* (One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, 1895).

Generations

The Thompsons passed this passion for freedom on to their daughter Mary. She and her husband, music teacher Dubois Alsdorf, ran a stop on the Underground Railroad from their home in Newburgh. Thus, three generations of Gilchrists participated in this great endeavor.

According to Bishop Wood, Catherine was *"an exceptional woman in many respects — amiable, pious, devout. She was a great organizer and had wonderful executive ability."* Her learning was said to rival that of many of the clergy of the day.

In Newburgh, where they were assigned several times, *"The Thompsons became known as a powerful ministry couple who served the entire local community in the areas of racial and economic justice, education, and spiritual empowerment,"* according to an article on the family by Janet Denise Jones (*"Bishop Joseph Pascal Thompson and Family: Lives and Legacies in Newburgh, New York,"* AME Zion Quarterly Review, v. 114, 2002).

In 1848, Rev. Thompson helped to establish the Glebe School, the first school for African American pupils in the city of Newburgh. Although the reports cannot be confirmed, oral tradition has it that Catherine Thompson was one of the teachers at this school.

Well respected in the community, the Thompsons were known as a refined, wealthy, and educated couple.

According to Jones, *“Their prominence was due to their intellect, cultured ways, and exposure to many parts of the world. Included in their social circle were influential ministers, abolitionists, performers, and writers of the day.”* (AME Zion Quarterly, 2002).

Anniversary

Just two years before Catherine’s death, the couple, both in failing health, celebrated their golden wedding anniversary.

The New York Age reported, *“Just fifty years ago a wedding ceremony occurred in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, in which Joseph P. Thompson and Miss Catherine Gilchrest were made man and wife. The officiating clergyman was Rev. Solon T. Scott, pastor of Zion Church, Philadelphia. During all the days and months and years that have followed this event, the couple have lived a life of happiness and prosperity”* (“A Bishop’s Golden Wedding,” Dec. 26, 1891).

The article continues with a description of their beautiful home and a list of the guests, noting the gift each guest presented to the couple. In keeping with the Golden Anniversary, many of the gifts were gold: Gold butter knives and spoons, gold sleeve buttons, gold cuff links and gold thimbles.

Catherine Thompson died in 1893 and Bishop Thompson in 1894. Both of them, as well as their daughter Mary and her husband, Dubois Alsdorf, are buried in the colored section of Woodlawn Cemetery in New Windsor, New York.

In the Newburgh AME Zion Church today are a plaque honoring Bishop Thompson, a stained-glass window dedicated to Catherine Thompson, and another window dedicated to the Alsdorf family.