

## **Early Chief Engineers Of The Midland**

### **Part II - William B. Gilbert**

**By Richard Palmer**

Archibald C. Powell was quickly succeeded by William B. Gilbert of Albany as chief engineer of the New York & Oswego Midland Railroad. Gilbert was born June 16, 1810 in Rome, N.Y., son of Ephraim and Zilpaly (Fellows) Gilbert. He entered Norwich University in Vermont in 1826 and graduated in 1828. His first railroad work was as a roadman during survey work on a proposed railroad from Canandaigua to Geneva in 1829, and assistant engineer on the Mohawk & Hudson, working with the famous railroad, canal and bridge civil engineer, John B. Jervis of Rome. This was the first railroad built in New York State. After that he was assistant engineer on the Saratoga & Schenectady, New York & Harlem and the Havana & Renan in Cuba.

He was chief engineer on the Buffalo & Aurora, Erie & Kalamazoo, Ogdensburg & Lake Champlain, Champlain & Connecticut River, and the Burlington & Rutland before becoming chief engineer of the Syracuse & Binghamton and then superintendent of the 80-mile Syracuse & Binghamton Railroad, in May, 1852. This line was opened on October 23, 1854, being the first north-south line in this region of the state. He prided himself for being able to build the line for \$52,000 less than his original estimate.

Dewitt C. Littlejohn was on the Board of Directors of the Syracuse & Binghamton and this may have been Gilbert's avenue to the Midland. On April 23, 1857 Gilbert became superintendent. A locomotive was named in his honor which was the custom then.

When the first train operated over the line on October 19, 1854, Gilbert was presented with a silver pitcher by the "ladies of Homer in appreciation of his faithful and efficient services as Superintendent of the Syracuse and Binghamton Railroad." He was chief engineer of the western division of the New York Central from 1866 to 1868. Then he was surveyor for the city of Buffalo. He joined the Midland in 1868 when the railroad was headquartered in Oneida, and later, Oswego.

"Mr. Gilbert is a gentleman of large experience in the construction of railroads. The interests of the Midland will be vastly promoted by his energy skill and ability," the Oneida Dispatch reported on February 14, 1868. "He arrived yesterday and has taken rooms at the Eagle Hotel. From now till the first of April he will be actively engaged in getting everything in readiness for the letting of the work." There was plenty to do, including surveying, drawing up maps and overseeing construction work. Many original Midland maps printed on vellum, remain on file in county clerk's offices with his and the names of officers written on them. Gilbert was always known for staying calm, and for his congeniality, even when under a great amount of pressure.

The office carpets wore thin by a continual trail of people from up and down the line pleading for the railroad to pass through their respective communities, regardless of the cost. Those willing to pay for it their towns conveniently located on the Midland right of way might eventually get the railroad. A bit different was the Auburn branch, even it seemed this line wasn't likely to succeed. But it was to be a part of D. C. Littlejohn's dynamic scheme to build to Buffalo. Also mostly engineered by Gilbert, the Auburn branch seemed a bit more visionary than the rest of the Midland. It was a line incurring high construction costs through a territory bereft of business opportunity. Struggling for nearly a decade, it was abandoned to DeRuyter in 1879 after proving next to impossible to keep open during the winter. The balance of the line west of DeRuyter eventually went to other railroads. It was a financial failure. As a result towns grudgingly paid hundreds of thousands of dollars of principal and interest on bonds for decades after the line was abandoned. Furious, some towns went to court and successfully shed themselves of this burdening financial obligation.

One of Gilbert's early projects was construction of an underpass beneath the New York Central mainline in Oneida in June, 1869. This required a new overhead bridge. As a result the New York Central had to raise approaches to the bridge by two feet. The Midland headquarters was moved to Oswego in September, 1870 when the new station and office building there were completed. Gilbert's assistant was Division Engineer William Rock.

Gilbert was always at any major or minor project he thought required his attention - even closely monitoring construction of Lyon Brook viaduct just south of Norwich in 1869. This was the most impressive and famous bridge on the Midland and was built by the Baltimore Bridge Company.

His first wife was Mary C. Hubbell of New York City who he married in 1833 and appears to have died young. They had several children, including Fred W. Gilbert, a superintendent on the Northern Pacific Railroad; and Mrs. George E. Russell of Great Barrington, Mass. He retired in 1873 and married into the moneyed Beckwith family who had a comfortable home, a landmark in the village of Palmyra, New York. Gilbert's second wife, the former Amelia S. Beckwith, who he married when 70, was born October 16, 1829. She was the daughter of Colonel George Beckwith, one of the pioneers of Palmyra and a prominent local merchant. She died April 22, 1909. He died on September 6, 1897. They are both buried in Palmyra Cemetery. But even in old age Gilbert was frequently consulted by railroad executives from all over the country for technical advice. In 1882, he obligingly surveyed the newly-formed Boston, Hoosac Tunnel & Western, a 46-mile line between North Adams, Mass. and Mechanicville that became part of the Fitchburg and then the Boston & Maine in 1887.

Occasionally he would return to visit old friends and relatives in the area. The Norwich Telegraph of September 15, 1883 noted:

For 'Auld Lang Syne' he took a run over the O. & W., and speaks in high terms of its road bed and equipment. His many friends are glad to see that time deals gently with the veteran engineer.



Walrath Block in Oneida, original home of the New York & Oswego Midland Railroad.



Beckwith mansion at 213 W. Main St., Palmyra, last residence of William B. Gilbert. This was once one of the notable social centers of the village.

Monument in Palmyra Village Cemetery to William and Amelia Gilbert.