

Ship Wreck on the River

Sylvester Gildersleeve (indented) & Doris Sherrow

The part of Portland known as **Gildersleeve** derives its name from **Sylvester Gildersleeve**, born on Indian Hill Avenue in 1795, and living until 1886. When he was 80, Gildersleeve decided to set down an account of his life. He had been a shipbuilder since the 18-teens, but he had also established other industries in the Gildersleeve area, including a mattress factory and a wagon shop. At one point in his memoirs he mused, "I still feel a satisfaction in giving employment to men that want to work..."

As March brings us spring, and maybe some freshets, and maybe some ice down the river, let's listen to Gildersleeve's account of an early spring near-tragedy, which took place down on the river's edge, near the end of Indian Hill Avenue in 1801:

At another time, there having been a heavy storm of rain in the spring of the year, that had broken up the ice in the river and had gone down, the River being then free from ice at this place, my father with my brother **Jeremiah, Mr. John Pelton & Mr. John Button** had on the early part of the day crossed this river, there being then no ice running in the River, for the purpose of settling with a Capt. **Timothy Savage** of Upper Middletown for whom they had built a vessel...

Sylvester's father was **Philip Gildersleeve**, who, with his wife Temperance, lived at 58 Indian Hill Avenue, which he had built in 1787. 20-year-old Jeremiah Gildersleeve was their oldest child. He built the house at 618 Main Street, but not until 1804. John Pelton lived in the house at 64 Indian Hill, having built it about 1799, and John Button lived in the house at 15 Indian Hill, which he had built in 1796.

...and in attempting to return in the evening in their small rowboat, they were surrounded by the floating masses of ice, which soon crushed through their said boat and left them in the water among the broken ice. They then by a great effort turned over their broken boat and all of them got upon the bottom of it where they remained for a long time before they were rescued, which was at last accomplished by the wonderful courage and persistence of my Brother Henry, my brother-in-law Elizur Abbey with two other noble hearted men, Mr. Wm Norcott and Mr. Albert Savage, at the great peril of themselves...

Henry Gildersleeve was only 16; and **Elizur Abbey** was married to Gildersleeve's sister Betsey, who would have been 18 at this time. **William Norcott** lived in the little gambrel roofed house at 76 Indian Hill. **Albert Savage** may have come from Main Street—597 and 598 were Savage houses for many decades.

...notwithstanding the warnings of some others [underlining his own] that they were placing themselves in a very dangerous situation—but the call for help that was heard on the still night air was more powerful and the noble hearted and fearless men launched forth a Ship's Yard Boat which was fortunately at hand and which better adapted to be forced through and over the floating masses of broken and surging perils of ice which were rapidly propelled down the River at the time.

One wonders why Gildersleeve forcefully underlined "some others"—the gesture suggests long-lingering animosity for those who would discourage the rescue of a little boy's father...

All this time the wife and mother was in the hearing of these calls for help, having perfect control of her feelings—

Gildersleeve's mother, **Temperance**, was probably no stranger to trial by water. Her father, **Captain James Gibbs** who built the house at 513 Main Street, had been a sea-faring man. Her

husband and his family had escaped over the Sound from the British attack of Long Island in 1776, and he and their sons had always worked in the boat building industry, where there was no small amount of risk.

Well do I remember that terrible trying scene, altho some seventy-four years since, that fearful night and seeing my mother walking back and forth on the beach of the River with clasped hands and uplifted eyes; we can better imagine than express the troubled thoughts of those sad hours, and the joy and thankfulness we all felt at the final rescue of our friends.