

July 17th. It was the successor of a Catholic Mission that first celebrated Holy Mass November 23, 1930. Father John F. Fannon serves the church.

Benjamin Franklin Gilbert

Founder of Takoma Park

By MARGARET GILBERT JAMISON

Benjamin Franklin Gilbert was born on March 2, 1841, in the village of DeRuyter, Madison County, New York. He was the fifth child of John Gilbert and his wife Sally (Allen) Gilbert. The family was of English stock. Ethan Allen, whose name has been given to one of the streets in Takoma Park, was in a collateral line on the maternal side.

A few years after the birth of Benjamin, who was generally called Frank, the family moved to a farm in Allegany County, New York, and the boy grew up on that farm. He received such education as the country schools afforded, and later attended Richburg Academy.

At the age of 21 Mr. Gilbert came to Washington and found employment as a clerk in a hotel, of which he became the manager within a year.

His first business venture, in 1865, was a restaurant known as the Temperance Dining Room, located on F street between Ninth and Tenth. He conducted this restaurant for about two years.

In 1867 he embarked on his career as a real estate promoter and builder. He built several hundred houses in Washington, including Grant Place and the row on the north side of K street between Ninth and Tenth. These were firstclass modern dwellings according to the standards of that period. Within five or six years he had accumulated a modest fortune, the greater part of which was swept away in the panic of 1873. Making a fresh start with very little capital, he was again rated as a fairly rich man by the close of the "seventies".

Washington was originally planned with the idea that it would expand in all directions about equi-distant from the Capitol. Mr. Gilbert had lived there only a few years when he perceived that the future growth of the city must necessarily be toward the North and Northwest. This fact appeared to be self-evident, and about the year 1880 he endeavored to make it the basis of action in his field of activity.

At that time the built-up part of the city extended five or six blocks beyond K street east of Fourteenth, but west of Fourteenth it stopped at K street. A little beyond K street, and running parallel with it, there was a deep ravine. It was generally believed that this ravine could not be filled in except at a prohibitive cost. Mr. Gilbert did not agree with this view. Believing that the ravine was not an impassible obstacle, he secured an option on a tract of land including what is now DuPont Circle. Several wealthy men had agreed to associate themselves with Mr. Gilbert in the development of this tract, but they changed their minds about it. The course of later events proved that they were wrong and that Mr. Gil-

bert's judgment was correct, but Mr. Gilbert, being unable to finance the project without some help, abandoned it and lost whatever amount he had paid for the option.

In 1881 Mr. Gilbert decided to try his fortune in Chicago, a city which had been growing rapidly and showed no signs of coming to a stand-still. He started for Chicago, by way of New York. If he had not stopped in New York for a visit, he would probably have continued his intended journey and settled in Chicago. However, that was not his destiny. He met a friend in New York, who persuaded him to test the opportunities there. Mr. Gilbert opened a real estate office in New York, making his home at Dunnellen, N. J. He continued this business for less than two years, and then returned to Washington. In this move he may have been influenced somewhat by Mrs. Gilbert's wishes. Whatever the reason, he came back to Washington in 1883, opened an office at the southwest corner of Ninth and F streets, and resumed his former business.

At that time there were no desirable suburbs adjacent or even convenient to the city of Washington. In pondering over the opportunities which this condition presented, Mr. Gilbert had a vision, an impractical dream it may have seemed, which finally became a substantial reality in the beautiful city of Takoma Park, in which the residents enjoy a rare combination of the advantages of both rural and urban life. Mr. Gilbert discussed his plans with a business associate, who was keenly interested at first but finally backed out. Mr. Gilbert then decided to carry out his own plans without any partners.

In November, 1883, he purchased the Grammer farm, consisting of about 100 acres, lying on both sides of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad tracks and on both sides of the division line between the Districts of Columbia and Montgomery County in the State of Maryland. This location possessed all the natural advantages that Mr. Gilbert had in mind. It was high ground, about 350 feet above the level of down-town Washington, and there was a bountiful supply of pure water. The latter item was important, because the water supply of the city of Washington at that time was none too good.

The Sligo deserves a special mention, because those who have been familiar with it only in recent years do not know its pristine charm. Its volume has been greatly reduced as the land adjacent to it has been built upon, and most of the water from this land goes into sewers instead of flowing into this once enchanting stream.

While Mr. Gilbert was considering the purchase of the Grammer tract, he mentioned his plans to the Misses DeMowbray, friends of the Gilbert family. These ladies were quite enthusiastic about the possibilities, and each of them purchased a lot and paid for it, cash in advance. Thus two lots were sold before the Grammer tract was subdivided. Evidently these ladies had faith in Mr. Gilbert. The plot of the subdivision was made a few weeks later, the Misses DeMowbray selected their lots, and a dozen more lots were sold almost immediately.

The story that the first residents of Takoma Park lived in a stable or a barn has no foundation in fact. The first building was an eight-room house in which four families, those of Mr. Gilbert, Mr. Dudley, Mrs. Veitenheimer

and Col. Kniffin, lived for a short time while their own houses were in process of erection. This building was jocularly called "The Barn", because living in it was not much more comfortable than living in a barn. It was put up very quickly, and was occupied before it was finished. The walls were not plastered, the roof leaked, and it had no heating facilities.

The first house to be completed was that of Mrs. Veitenheimer. Mr. Dudley's house was finished a week or two later, and Col. Kniffin's was finished a week or two after that.

Seven houses were built and occupied before the end of the year 1884.

Mr. Gilbert's house, which cost over \$20,000, was occupied by the family in the spring of 1885, though it was not completed until the summer of that year. This house was located on Oak Ave. near Tulip Avenue. In 1892 Mr. Gilbert sold it to Mr. Shedd, who afterward sold it to Mr. Culley, and it was destroyed by fire while in the possession of Mr. Culley.

In 1886 Mr. Gilbert added another tract of land to Takoma Park, and in 1888 he purchased the North Takoma tract. At that time, 1888, there were 70 houses and 2 stores in Takoma Park. Mr. Platt built the first house in the North Takoma section.

The hotel at North Takoma, in which the Gilbert family lived for several years, was completed in 1892. According to the original plan the Takoma Park Loan & Trust Co., which Mr. Gilbert had organized, would have built this hotel and held the title to it. The directors of the company, however, believed that Mr. Gilbert's plans for this hotel were extravagant. They favored a structure built on a smaller scale. Mr. Gilbert then went ahead with the building on his own account.

In 1892 Mr. Gilbert was rated as a wealthy man, and his credit was almost unlimited. He was an excellent business man in some respects, but not so good in other respects. Although he made a great deal of money in early and middle life, he was essentially an idealist rather than a cold, calculating money grabber. He did many things that a hard-headed practical man would not be likely to do. For example, he spent over \$150,000 in grading and improving streets and in laying sidewalk without charging a dollar of this expense to the owners of the adjacent lots. He devoted a great deal more of his time and energy to persuading people with children to buy a lot and build a home in a pleasant place like Takoma Park than he did in trying to persuade wealthier people to invest their money in his subdivisions. When the town of Takoma Park was incorporated and a town charter procured for it, he was especially interested in those provisions that would affect the personal welfare of the inhabitants, such as a provision to the effect that the new spring should never be closed. In the matter of keeping a close account of the details of his business affairs he was, perhaps, a little careless. For example, the bookkeeper at the hotel embezzled over \$1,000 before Mr. Gilbert had the least suspicion that anything of that sort was going on. He refused to prosecute; and as no restitution was ever made, he lost the money. On several occasions he paid a bill twice because he could not find the receipt or cancelled check, though he remembered clearly that he had paid the bill. In such ways as that, he was probably too lax in his business methods.

The panic of 1893 caught Mr. Gilbert in a very bad position. Practically all of his fortune was in real estate, much of it unimproved and the improved portions heavily encumbered. The result of that depression was financial ruin for him, and he was never able to recover his position.

In 1901 he suffered a stroke of paralysis. During the last six years of his life he was in ill health, but not entirely inactive. His last business deal was the negotiation of the sale of a large tract of land to the General Conference of the Seventh Day Adventists, which later proved to be of immense benefit to Takoma Park.

Mr. Gilbert was married in 1872 to Margaret Sloan Allen, who died in 1908. They had one son J. Ordway Gilbert, who died in 1905 at the age of thirty, and one daughter, now Mrs. Alexander Jamison, of Wilmington, Delaware.

Mr. Gilbert himself died of uremic poisoning on April 19, 1907.

In personal appearance Mr. Gilbert was tall and well formed, giving the impression of being robust, but in fact he never enjoyed perfect health.

His remains rest in beautiful Cedar Hill Cemetery.