

## From Property to Proprietor: The Exceptional Journey of Alexander Gilson

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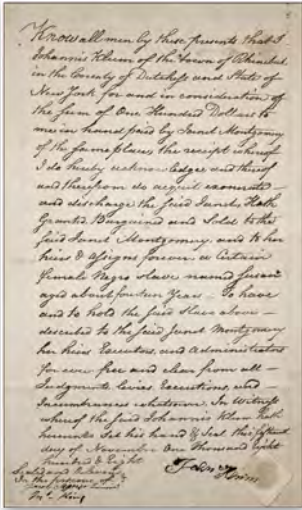
Experimentation was common among American gardeners by the early nineteenth century, and horticultural publications regularly reported on latest developments in the field. Two new varieties noticed by readers after the Civil War were an original begonia and a novel coleus. *The American Agriculturist* informed its subscribers about both plants in 1876: “Peter Henderson, Jersey City, N. J., exhibited a cut bloom of a double *Begonia Verschaffeltii*. This, the first of the double flowered Begonias, originated, we believe, with Mr. A. Gilson, a colored gardener, in charge of Mr. Barton's grounds at Barrytown, N.Y. Mr. Gilson was also the raiser of *Achyranthes Gilsoni*, that has for some years, by its extensive cultivation as a massing plant, made his name famous.”<sup>1</sup>

The “colored gardener” was Alexander Gilson (ca. 1824-1889)—African American, born a slave, and attached to Montgomery Place, the extensive property owned by Janet Livingston Montgomery (1743-1828) in Red Hook, New York. As a slave, Gilson inherited the legal status of Africans and their descendants in the agricultural economy of the Hudson Valley since the colonial period. By 1790, in fact, over 1,800 men, women, and children representing 80 percent of the black population in Dutchess County were enslaved. At the same time, however, a combination of factors—growing commercialism, an embrace of free labor market ideals, and philosophical reflections about liberty inspired by both the Revolutionary War and a reinvigorated Christianity—all led the New York State Assembly to pass a Gradual Abolition Law in 1799. With later amendments, in 1827 this act eventually manumitted all slaves who had been born in the state. Gradual abolition reduced the number of slaves in Dutchess County in 1820 to 772 slaves or 29 percent of all local African Americans.<sup>2</sup> Janet Montgomery owned twelve of these.



*Begonia 'Gilsonii'* (aka *Begonia gilsonii*, *Begonia x gilsoni*).





*Bill of sale for Susan, "a female Negro slave," from Johannes Klum to Janet Montgomery, November 15, 1808. Princeton University Library.*

labor.<sup>6</sup> If these generalities applied to Gilson, maybe he began showing an enthusiasm for botanical garden work instead of regular farm labor as a child. His employers and first heirs to Montgomery Place, Edward Livingston (1764-1836) and his wife, Louise Livingston (1785-1860), apparently allowed Alexander to concentrate on such work in his teen and young adult years because a later heir, Louise Livingston Hunt (1834-1914), implied that Gilson served as head of the estate's nursery, beginning around 1835.<sup>7</sup>

Gilson was among the "thirty people to provide for on the place" that Louise Livingston referenced in 1833 when she made financial arrangements for her family's long absence from the Red Hook property after Edward's acceptance of a post as U.S. ambassador to France. Although she felt the need to reduce the number of servants there while they were away, she deferred to

Edward's final opinion on this with the following advice: "I am no judge of the capacity of the gardener, but would not dismiss him in any event and take a new one just as we are going away . . . [T]here are five men under the two gardeners." Alexander was either "the gardener" or one of "the two gardeners" she mentioned.<sup>8</sup>

In the late 1830s, when the recently widowed Louise Livingston returned to live at Montgomery Place with her daughter, Cora Livingston Barton (1806-1873) and son-in-law, Thomas Pennant Barton (1803-1869), they began a close, working relationship with Gilson, owing to shared botanical interests. The trio reconfigured the landscape of Montgomery Place as a beautiful, park-like "Pleasure Ground" complete with scenic walking trails, constructed a conservatory, and removed the farm to the periphery of the property at a farther distance from the residence. Louise Livingston Hunt reported that "Mr. Barton occupied himself with great taste with landscape gardening and in collecting and acclimating specimens of foreign and native trees. Mrs. Barton who had known the whereabouts of the kitchen-garden at Montgomery, studied botany and became widely known for her skill in gardening and floriculture, while Mrs. Livingston's administration of the farm was economical and prudent."<sup>9</sup>

Louise Hunt's estimation that Mrs. Livingston's "servants worshipped her" surely reflected some familial bias, but it cannot be ignored that it was under the latter's supervision that Alexander Gilson

rose to become “gardener and manager.” He continued in this position under the Bartons and eventually under Hunt herself until his retirement.<sup>10</sup> An example of the confidence in his administrative abilities that Gilson enjoyed from Hunt is demonstrated in the following newspaper notice she placed in the *New York Tribune*:

Mill property to Lease at a bargain. 129 horse power, on a never-failing stream; building, 54x30, with wheel and shaft in perfect order, at Montgomery Place, Dutchess County, New-York, distant 1 ½ miles from Barrytown dock and station by a good road.<sup>11</sup>  
Apply to ALEXANDER GILSON, Barrytown, Dutchess County, N.Y.

Clearly, the family trusted Gilson to accept all applicants’ bids for this Montgomery Place operation and probably to vet them as well.

The relationship between antebellum aristocratic employers and their servants was complex, even baffling, by today’s standards. For example, in order to emphasize Louise Livingston’s excellent rapport with her workers, Hunt wrote that Mrs. Livingston was “condescending, liberal, and kind to inferiors.”<sup>12</sup> To the modern mind, these descriptors clash. They illustrate that American hereditary elites in the first half of the nineteenth century retained Old World conceptions of rank and hierarchy despite it being a time of expanding democratic rights for white males. Yet Gilson’s gardening acumen won him esteem in high circles. Expertise was expertise. An unidentified resident of a neighboring estate declared, “Everyone respected the knowledge that this extraordinary Negro gardener absorbed under Senator Livingston and Mr. and Mrs. Barton, knowledge of trees and shrubs as well as flowers and vegetables.”<sup>13</sup> When Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852), the nationally prominent expert in garden nurseries and landscape design, toured Montgomery Place in 1847, he admired the “delicate green-house plants; and . . . groups of large Oranges, Lemons, Citrons, Cape Jasmines, Eugenias, etc., in tubs—plants remarkable for their size and beauty” on the north side and in front of the conservatory.

After viewing the flower garden, he enthused, “Here all is gay and smiling. Bright parterres of brilliant flowers bask in the full daylight and rich masses of colour seem to revel in the sunshine.”<sup>14</sup> These scenes reflected Gilson’s labors.

Gilson developed his coleus in the late 1860s, and his hybrid begonia by 1876.<sup>15</sup> Peter Henderson (1822-1890), a top market gardener located in New Jersey, tested the *Achyranthes* in 1868 and submitted the following glowing report:



*Gardener’s Cottage at Montgomery Place, photo by Chris Kendall, ’82.*

The great fault with the original species was the dull crimson shade, inferior to Coleus and other plants of dark foliage; but in the variety Gilsoni, the color of the leaves is a carmine rather than a crimson, with the stems of a deep shade of pink, giving to the plant a bright and lively appearance, far surpassing the old variety; it is also of dwarfer and denser growth, and is an improvement so decided that it will, without doubt, throw the original one out of cultivation. We grew them side by side during the past summer, and the superiority of this was apparent to all who saw them. As I write, (14th October), it is one of the most attractive plants in our grounds. The merit of originating this valuable plant is due to Alexander Gilson, gardener to Mrs. Cora L. Barton, Barrytown, N. Y. <sup>16</sup>

Gilson's coleus garnered praise and commentary in American publications into the early twentieth century. His begonia even received international reviews in Batavia (now Jakarta) and Germany.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to his celebrity in national horticultural circles, Gilson enjoyed a favorable local reputation as a fine gardener and community member. Dutchess County contemporaries remembered him in that capacity. Eight years after Gilson's death, Frank Lown (1849-1927), a noted Poughkeepsie lawyer who grew up near Montgomery Place and an avid horticulturalist himself, fondly recalled the man he remembered as "old Alexander":

When I was a child I lived in Barrytown, in this county, and I well remember Alexander Gilson, who was then the gardener on what was known as the 'Barton place', a couple of miles north of where we lived. He was a colored man, but he very justly earned and received the cordial liking and respect of the entire community.<sup>18</sup>

Gilson even mentored his neighbor in horticulture. Edward Bassett (b. 1866), a Red Hook native, recalled that Henry Osterhoudt (b. ca. 1867) informally apprenticed under Gilson as a youngster. Young Henry imitated his father's experience in a way because the elder Osterhoudt, John (b. ca. 1847), whom Bassett described as "an old employee at Montgomery Place" and who is listed in the 1880 federal census as a gardener, certainly had worked under Gilson's supervision. John, in turn, wisely entrusted his son to Alexander's guidance with positive results: Henry went on to enjoy a successful career as a florist-gardener in Poughkeepsie.<sup>19</sup>

Gilson's success won him more than acclaim by horticulturalists; it brought him a good income. Eighty percent of African American males in Dutchess County in 1850 were unskilled workers lumped under the heading "laborer"; Alexander, however, was among the 5 percent who were skilled—tailors, carpenters, barbers, iron molders, tin men, blacksmiths, pot bakers, and gardeners. Eighty percent of African Americans at mid-century held no property. But Alexander's brilliant

gardening prowess eventually enabled him to supplement his Montgomery Place earnings with additional income from a separate nursery business he established and somehow ran simultaneously at a property he purchased less than a mile south in Barrytown. He purchased the land in 1874, the year after Cora Barton died. When he retired from running “The Nursery Gardens at Montgomery Place” in 1885, he was a comfortable owner of at least one house and lot in Rhinebeck and another one in the village of Red Hook at the corner of Church and Fraleigh streets, where he enjoyed his final days with his mother and sister.<sup>20</sup>



*Gravestone for Alexander, Sarah, and Cornelia Gilson.*

The placement of Gilson’s grave and a grave marker in a single, shared plot in the United Methodist cemetery in Red Hook hints that he and his family were members of the church’s forerunner, the Methodist Episcopal Church, first formed in Red Hook as a mission in 1840. This conclusion makes sense because Louise Livingston became “a devout member of the Methodist Church” and was buried in the cemetery of Rhinebeck’s Methodist Church. Manumitted slaves, especially those who continued in the households of their former masters, often kept the same religious affiliations of those who once owned them. Moreover, Methodism was the ascendant Protestant denomination of the nineteenth century, and a combination of its antislavery stance in the North after

the 1840s and its expressive pietism appealed to African Americans. In Dutchess County, the first Methodist congregations to appear were racially integrated. A separate, black Methodist denomination—the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, officially established in New York City in 1821—drew away many African Americans from predominantly white churches to its new congregations in Fishkill Landing and Poughkeepsie in the 1820s and 1830s. But AMEZ leaders never attempted to found an outpost among black Methodists living in Red Hook, leaving them to fellowship with their white brothers and sisters.<sup>21</sup>

Alexander Gilson was an exceptional man in nineteenth century America because, having once been legal property, he became a legal property owner. Property ownership has been a bedrock principle in American society and in idealized conceptualizations of America’s political economy. From the nation’s beginnings, the ideal citizen of the

republic has always been a property owner. Drawing from notions of natural rights and from John Locke's theories of government, Thomas Jefferson inscribed this idea within the Declaration of Independence. While scholars disagree over whether Jefferson intended his reference to "the pursuit of happiness" to be literally synonymous with "property," there is consensus that the nation's founders all understood the right to property to be a human right, a natural right--one critical for the experimental democratic government they were announcing to the world.

Legal scholar, Leonard Levy, explained:

They regarded property as a basic human right, essential to one's existence, to one's independence, to one's dignity as a person. Without property, real and personal, one could not enjoy life or liberty, and could not be free and independent. Only the property holder could make free decisions and choices because he was not beholden to anyone; he had no need to be subservient. Americans cared about property not because they were materialistic but because they cared about political freedom and personal independence. They cherished property rights as prerequisites for the pursuit of happiness, and property opened up a world of intangible values--human dignity, self-regard, self-expression, and personal fulfillment. <sup>22</sup>

Before emancipation, profits from black human property helped to "make" white people, especially white men. Slavery, restricted in America to blacks only, ensured that black people and their progeny would be constructed as society's most inferior caste. After emancipation, continuing and new forms of racial discrimination helped whites protect their privileged status in relation to African Americans. Alexander Gilson's unusual connections to powerful employer-patrons coupled with his own inventiveness enabled him to escape the fate of most of his black contemporaries by becoming a successful, propertied man.



*Workers at the Montgomery Place Conservatory (detail), by A. Watson. Albumen stereoscope print, August 1861. Bard College, Montgomery Place Collection.*

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *American Agriculturalist*, June 1876, 234.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Groth, *Slavery and Freedom in the Mid-Hudson Valley in Dutchess County* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017) and David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom 1777-1827* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Joel E. Spingarn, "A Negro Gardener's Diary," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 1938), 130; *Marriages: Four Reformed Churches of Old Rhinebeck, N.Y., 1731-1899*, transcribed by Arthur C. M. Kelly, 1971; Darlene C. Goring, "The History of Slave Marriage in the United States," *The John Marshall Law Review*, Vol. 39, Issue 2 (2006), 314.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Livingston Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, Princeton University Library.

<sup>5</sup> Groth, *Slavery and Freedom*, 72.

<sup>6</sup> Damian Alan Pargas, "From the Cradle to the Fields: Slave Childcare and Childhood in the Antebellum South," *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (December 2011), 477-485.

<sup>7</sup> In repeat notices placed by Louise Livingston Hunt in the *Red Hook Journal* on August 14, 1885, August 21, 1885, August 28, 1885, and September 4, 1885, she announced the closing of "The Nursery Gardens at Montgomery Place upon the retirement of Mr. Alexander Gilson, for fifty years past, gardener at Montgomery Place," thus indicating that his starting date in that position was 1835.

<sup>8</sup> Louise Livingston Hunt, *Memoir of Mrs. Edward Livingston* (New York: Harper, 1886), 111-112.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>11</sup> *New York Tribune*, February 28, 1874.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Spingarn, "A Negro Gardener's Diary," 130. Edward Livingston was a U.S. Senator from Louisiana from 1829-1831.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, "A Visit to Montgomery Place," *The Horticulturalist, and Journal of Rural Art and Rural Taste*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (October 1847), 52.



*Achyranthes verschaffeltii*, var. *Gilsonii* (aka *Aschyranthus 'Gilsonii'* and *Iresine 'Herbstii'*).

<sup>15</sup> *American Agriculturalist*, June 1876, 234; *Begonia 'Gilsonii'*, Plant Database, The National Gardening Association, <https://garden.org/plants/view/683928/Begonia-Gilsonii/> accessed 8 May 2019.

<sup>16</sup> *American Horticultural Annual* (New York: Orange Judd and Company, 1869), 112.

<sup>17</sup> Liberty Hyde Bailey, *Manual of Gardening: A Practical Guide to the Making of Home Grounds and the Growing of Flowers, Fruits, and Vegetables for Home Use*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1918), 236; *Gardener's Chronicle, Horticultural Trade Journal* (Haymarket Publishing, 1927), 423; William Scott, *The Florists' Manual* (Chicago: Florists' Publishing Company, 1906), 34; Dr. J. Van Breda de Haan, Dr. W. R. Tromp de Haas, and H. G. Wigman, *Teysmannia*, Vol. 14, (Batavia: G. Kolff & Co., 506; Dr. L. Wittmack, *Gartenflora*, Vol. 52 (Berlin: Verlag von Gerbrüder, 1903), 430.

<sup>18</sup> Groth, *Slavery and Freedom*, 144; *American Gardening*, Vol. 18, No. 218 (March 27, 1897), 227.

<sup>19</sup> Edmund Bassett, *Reminiscences of Some of the Highways and Byways of Red Hook* (Red Hook, NY: Reprinted by the Red Hook-Tivoli Bicentennial Committee, June 1976; originally published in the *Red Hook Advertiser* in 1926 and 1930), 29; U.S. Census 1920; U.S. Census 1940.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Gilson deed for Barrytown nursery, 1874, Dutchess County Land Records, County Clerk's Office, Poughkeepsie, NY; Deed for Cornelia's inheritance from Alexander, 1895, Dutchess County Land Records, County Clerk's Office, Poughkeepsie, NY; Sarah Gilson's Will, 1890, Probate Records, Office of the Dutchess County Surrogate Court, Poughkeepsie, NY; *Vail's Dutchess County Business Directory for 1876-1877* (Poughkeepsie: John P. A. Vail Publisher, 1876), 100; Bassett, *Reminiscences*, 29; *Red Hook Journal*, September 4, 1885.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Hasbrouck, ed., *The History of Dutchess County, New York* (Poughkeepsie: S.A. Matthieu, 1909), 434; 171, 176; See Anna M. Lawrence, *One Family Under God: Love, Belonging, and Authority in Early Transatlantic Methodism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006); Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Groth, *Slavery and Freedom*, 97-100; John Jamison Moore, *History of the A.M.E. Zion Church in America* (York, PA: Teachers' Journal Office, 1884).

<sup>22</sup> Leonard W. Levy, "Property as Human Right," *Constitutional Commentary*, Vol. 5: 169 (1988), 175.