

Dedication of William B. Gould Memorial Park

Remarks of William B. Gould IV

Author of *Diary of a Contraband:
The Civil War Passage of a Black Sailor*
(Stanford University Press, 2002)

34 Milton Street
East Dedham, Massachusetts

September 23, 2021, 4:00 P.M.

It is both an honor and a privilege to be with you today, to return to Massachusetts, the Algonquin word meaning “the people living near the great hills” – the land of the Blue Hills, near Blue Hill itself, which I saw frequently here as a child. Today we celebrate William B. Gould and the dedication of the William B. Gould Park here on the banks of the Mother Brook, selected, as I’m told, with a nod toward his extraordinary escape to freedom down the Cape Fear River at Wilmington, North Carolina.

It is meet and right that this ceremony takes place in the area where my father often spoken of seeing hundreds of Civil War veterans march through the streets of Boston – and many here in Dedham too.

I want to extend my thanks on behalf of the Gould Family to so many of you who made this day possible: Brian Kearney, who, I believe, initially came forward with his “dream” of this project - and others who worked with him, like Dan Hart, Tracey White, and Tom Sullivan from adjacent Hyde Park on the boundary of Dedham where the Goulds resided for more than a century.

I am also grateful to Senator Mike Rush and Representative Paul McMurtry who helped make this day possible as well and, I am pleased to meet Father Wayne Belschner of Saint Mary's Roman Catholic Church (of which I had heard as a child) as well as to renew my acquaintanceship with Father Noble Scheepers who held a special commemoration in 2012, on the 150th anniversary of WBG's escape to freedom, at the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd - where I was baptized, as were the three William B. Goulds who went before me.

When this project's organizers first approached me about this idea, they referenced a theme which has seized more attention with each passing year - the importance of building upon memories which enhance a democratic vision, not simply tearing down what has existed. As statues fall, things appear to fall apart, to paraphrase Yeats¹; the center cannot hold.

¹ William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming", *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (1989); see also Philippe Sands, "Monumental injustice" *Financial Times*, September 5, 2021 at B7; Alex von Tunzelmann, "Fallen Idols: Twelve Statues That Made History" (2021)

But “What will take its place?” is a question we have discussed as the Robert E. Lee statue in Richmond was dismantled a couple of weeks ago. “What will take its place?” En route to Wilmington, when WBG was first honored there in 2003 we asked this question as we drove through Richmond’s avenue of monuments which even had one for the Confederate Secretary of Navy who fought against the United States and William B. Gould’s Navy.

There has been a tearing down all over the world, the statues of slavers in Bristol, Great Britain and Belgium, where Leopold II was responsible and there too this question is always asked.

It is estimated that there are somewhere in the vicinity of 1,800 Confederate statues and memorials to those who revolted against the duly constituted authority of the United States in 1861. It is estimated, in a 2018 Smithsonian article, that American taxpayers have paid over \$40 million in the last decade for preservation and upkeep of them.

While I cannot be certain what William B. Gould would say today, I know from his diary that the honor given to Jefferson Davis’

Confederacy through national memorializations – “would, be King Jeff”, as WBG called him, would be anathema to my great-grandfather. For his support was for the United States before, during, and after those three years at sea for the Navy, pursuing, as he called it, the “holiest of all causes”.

William B. Gould, born in Wilmington, North Carolina on November 18, 1837, escaped from slavery in Wilmington on September 21, 1862 to serve “Uncle Samuel” as he called our Uncle Sam, in the United States Navy, as a “contraband”, seized human property, as escaping slaves from rebellious states were called prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. Gould first patrolled the southeastern United States aboard the U.S.S. Cambridge as part of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, attempting to interdict supplies destined for Lee’s army in Virginia. In the spring of ’63, his ship moves north and on March 27, 1863 he writes in his diary: “At Boston. We arrived and came to anchor off the Navy Yard about 2 Oclock...Set foot on the old Bey

state.” This was part of the diary which he kept from 1862 through ’65, which indicates some familiarity with this area prior to his arrival.

At that time there were two obvious connections to Massachusetts. The first is through his mother’s sister, “Aunt Jones”, née Mary Moore who lived just behind the State House in Boston. I visited her residence there two decades ago.

The second is my great-grandmother, Cornelia Williams Read, whom he would marry at the war’s end. She had lived in Nantucket subsequent to her purchase out of slavery in 1857.

When WBG finished his tour of duty with the U.S.S. Cambridge, a second assignment was to place him aboard the U.S.S. Niagara in Gloucester. This involved chasing Confederate vessels across the Atlantic, they being constructed in Britain and France, placing him in a relatively unchronicled portion of the war arena. This effort took him in pursuit of such ships in Britain, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, as well as islands in the Atlantic. Before his service was complete, he was to disembark in the Charlestown Naval Shipyard in September 1865 where

he received his discharge papers. A couple of months later WBG and his fiancé were married in Nantucket.

But even aboard the U.S.S. Niagara in the Atlantic, his mind was not far away from developments in the Bay State. Listen to what he says in 1864 about events 2 miles east of 303 Milton Street where he was to settle: “[H]eard of the departure of one battalion of the 5th [54th] Regiment Massachusetts Cavalry from Camp Meigs for Washington, D.C. May God protect them while defending the holiest of all causes, liberty and Union.”

When WBG and Cornelia settled here in Dedham in 1871, the first two of eight Gould children were already born – Medora (or Aunt Dora as I called her) born in 1866 (I have some of her books in my house today) and William B. Gould Jr., my grandfather, a veteran of the Spanish American War, who was born in Taunton, Massachusetts in 1869 and died before my birth. I knew the other sons, all World War I veterans, from our summer visits to Dedham: Lawrence, Frederick,

James Edward – and Ernest, Edward’s twin brother, from our visits to Washington, D.C., where he taught dentistry at Howard University.

Beyond WBG’s own statement, that his home had burned during the War and that his birth had been recorded in a Bible in his home, hardly anything is known about him or Cornelia prior to their respective departures from Wilmington in 1857 and ’62. But subsequent to my 1996 visit to Wilmington’s Bellamy Mansion – where I had observed the fine tapestry on display in this most elegant antebellum mansion at a Civil War Seminar - I received an excited telephone call from the Mansion’s curator, advising me he had found my great-grandfather’s initials on some of the plaster lying in the old slave quarters behind the mansion. The work that I had observed was that of my great-grandfather.

And so it was that when WBG came to Dedham he worked as a plasterer and brick mason, ultimately as a contractor employing other men, fulfilling President Lincoln’s dream of a fair opportunity for all.

With the help of Morris Rabinowitz, the Dedham librarian, I was to learn of a number of the buildings which had been constructed here through his work.

But there was one building about which I had already known since I was a child, St. Mary's Church in Dedham, a magnificent cathedral-like church, as most of you know, that can be seen for a great distance. As a child, my father had told me that William B. Gould had done the plastering in the construction or renovation of the church in the 1880s when he was a contractor. But, according to my father, some of WBG's workmen fell asleep at a critical time in the process relating to cement. Their failure could not be observed and could have been easily covered up without the defects becoming apparent until years later. My great-grandfather had all the plaster ripped out of the church and had the work done again at such great expense that he was nearly bankrupted. From this moment on, his stature in Dedham was enhanced, as was the name Gould. For even then, well before the disastrous collapses of

structures in this century, people knew the results of shoddy workmanship and that William B. Gould would not tolerate it.

The second major Dedham contribution made by WBG flowed directly from his service to Uncle Samuel - his work for the Civil War veterans' association, the Charles W. Carroll Post Chapter 144 of the Grand Army of the Republic, or GAR. WBG was to become Commander of this Dedham GAR chapter in 1900 and 1901 and in later years served as Adjutant for the organization.

His fervor for the War's mission and objectives, is expressed well in much of what he says in his diary. Listen to him speak of the Confederate surrender at Appomattox:

“On my return on board I heard the Glad Tidings that the Stars and Stripe[s] had been planted over the Capital of the D--nd Confederacy by the invincible Grant. While we honor the living soldiers who have done so much we must not forget to whisper for fear of disturbing the Glorious sleep of the ma[ny] who have fallen. Mayrters to the cau[se] of Right and Equality.”

This translates directly into his commitment to the United States itself and his judgment about the ideals for which our country stands. In 1865, he writes: “We see by the papers that the President in A speech intimates Colonization for the collard people of the United States. This move of his must and shall be resisted. We were born under the Flag of the Union and we never will know no other. My sentiment is the sentiment of the people of the States.”

His third connection here in Dedham consisted of his role as one of the founders of the Church of the Good Shepherd in 1871. Father William Cheney, the Good Shepherd’s Rector in much of the previous century, was spoken of with considerable reverence in the home to which we had moved in New Jersey. My parents, my sister and I attended the Good Shepherd on our many visits here, from the 1940s, ‘50s, and again, when my wife, children and I lived here for a year in Cambridge in the early ‘70s. If you go to the Good Shepherd, you will find the Chapel of All Saints dedicated to Father Cheney, which bears the names of those Goulds, beginning with WBG and Cornelia

themselves. And thus the Good Shepherd and Dedham are deeply embedded in our fabric.

And so, on behalf of the entire Gould family, we thank you for this dedication. I am not sure how William B. Gould would react if he were here today. I am certain that he would be horrified, as am I, with the recent destruction of the San Francisco monument of General (later President) Grant, whom WBG called the “invincible Grant”. (The same would hold true of the attempt to remove Abraham Lincoln’s name from one of the San Francisco public schools.)

I feel confident that he could not abide the false argument that dismantling of Confederate statues contravenes a proper examination of past and present or erases history anymore than statues honoring Hitler would be appropriate in today’s Germany. True, as Santyana has said, “[t]hose who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat

it.”² But in understanding the world today, to what past shall we provide laud and honor?

My judgement is that more than mere iconoclasm is required. In order for history to be preserved, surely the past reflected by Frederick Douglass, Robert Smalls, who seized a Confederate vessel in South Carolina, and yes, William B. Gould provide a narrative too often obscured by the icons of Lee, Stonewall Jackson and likeminded luminaries who betrayed their pledge of allegiance to our country. Roy Wilkins the measured secretary of the NAACP in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s and John Lewis, now so well known for his role in voting rights in the previous century and this one, are more contemporary figures warranting attention. Contrarily, the Confederate legacy is similar to what we witnessed in Washington on January 6 of this year.

² GEORGE SANTYANA, THE LIFE OF REASON: REASON IN COMMON SENSE 284 (Scribner’s 1905)

Whatever WBG's views of 2021, I know that he would be proud as he was in the previous centuries for the abiding cause of "right" and "equality" and the "reckoning" aimed at its implementation.

My hope is that that is what will take the place of the now falling statues. My sense is that this is what William B. Gould would want, not only in his birthplace of North Carolina, but also here in Massachusetts and indeed the entire United States.

Then our celebration of William B. Gould today and all that he accomplished in the time available can be more full-throated and clearheaded. For this will not only fill the empty pedestals of this past century and a half, but strike a chord for the propositions that he stood for so emphatically i.e., preservation of the United States itself and achievement of a more equal society.