

**WILLIAM BRANCH
GILES: A BIOGRAPHY;
A DISSERTATION**

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William Branch Giles: a biography; a dissertation by Dice Robins Anderson

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A DISSERTATION**

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WILLIAM BRANCH GILES:
A BIOGRAPHY

A DISSERTATION

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WILLIAM BRANCH GILES: A BIOGRAPHY

D. R. ANDERSON

CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS

If legend could be accepted as truth the biographer of William Branch Giles would be compelled to go back at least as far as Roman days. For Caius Licinius Stolo, author of the Licinian rogations, also discovered "the best method of clearing away" "useless suckers" from trees and furnished to his family occasion to place the "verdant branch" upon their coat of arms. All the Branches, Brancos, Braunches, Branshes and the rest, whether found in Spain, France, Italy, England, or America, according to the story, owe the origin of their name to the horticultural genius of the ancient patriot. It may, as says the family genealogist, to whom the present writer is much indebted, be "a deal more easy to shrug aside the Licinian origin of the Branches than it is to disprove it."¹ But this writer will attempt to do neither, and will pass on therefore, to the next items in the list. The reliable history of that portion of the Branch family in which we are interested, begins with Richard Branch who moved to Abingdon in Berkshire County, England, in the latter part of the fifteenth century. This Richard was a woolen draper by trade and likewise master of the important guild entitled, the Fraternity of the Holy Cross. His second son was William Branch, mayor of Abingdon, who married into the ancient family of Bostock. Lionel, third son of the aforesaid William, was an "unthrifty and disobedient son" and left his son Christopher with such small support that at the age of seventeen years Christopher and wife set sail for the new land of promise—the land of the Virgin Queen.

They settled at "Arrowhattocks" in that part of Henrico County subsequently to be called the County of Chesterfield.

¹James Branch Cabell,—*"Branch of Abingdon."* To this book and its companion, *"Branchiana"*, I am indebted for some genealogical matter.

Christopher Branch's son and grandson bore the same Christian name as himself. The third of that prenomens had a son Henry by name, to whom was given in the providence of God a daughter, Ann. Ann Branch married William Giles, father of the subject of our biography.

William Giles, the father of William Branch Giles, was the son of John Giles, who was the son of William Giles and Bethenia Knowles, the only child of Captain John Knowles who left any issue. William Branch Giles, born August 12, 1762, was the youngest child of William Giles and Ann Branch. There was an older brother, John, who served in the Revolutionary war and received bounty lands in Kentucky which on his early death he is said to have left to his younger brother.² Of John an interesting story is told by Colonel William Fontaine in a letter dated October 26, 1781, seven days after the surrender at Yorktown of which he writes: "All property taken from the inhabitants by the British is liable to be claimed by them. In consequence Master Tarleton met with a most severe mortification yesterday. The hero was prancing through the streets of York on a very fiery, elegant horse, and was met by a spirited young fellow of the country, who stopped him, challenged the horse and ordered him instantly to dismount. Tarleton halted and paused a while through confusion, then told the lad if it was his horse, he supposed he must be given up, but insisted to ride him some distance out of town to dine with a French officer. This was more, however, than Mr. Giles was disposed to indulge him in, having been forced when he and his horse were taken to travel good part of the night on foot at the point of the bayonet; he therefore refused to trust him out of sight, and made him dismount in the midst of the street crowded with spectators. Many such instances have since happened on the road."³

² MS. Memoirs of Mrs. William Overton, a granddaughter of William B. Giles.

³ Memoirs of a Huguenot Family. Translated and compiled from the original autobiography of the Rev. James Fontaine, etc., by Ann Maury, N. Y. 1853, pp. 444-447.

The father of the statesman was a man of influence in the county of Amelia and vestryman of the parish church.⁴ When he died his son William Branch became executor under a bond of 5000 pounds and on the death of the widow, William B. was to receive her five hundred and seventy-six of the nine hundred and seventy-six acres belonging to the home place.⁵ To these five hundred and seventy-six acres Congressman Giles—for the father died in 1793—was to add many hundred more.

To understand the life of Giles one must understand the section and county of Virginia in which he and his people for two generations before him had lived. Amelia county is one of the eastern counties of the great Piedmont section of Virginia. Set off from Prince George in 1734, it bore during the youth of Giles some of the characteristics of a semifrontier region. It was sparsely settled, its roads were bad, and though rich in gentle blood and distinguished citizens, gave to the traveler no very pleasant impression. According to a neighboring clergyman writing in 1776 "it had for many years been notorious for carelessness, profaneness, and immoralities of all kinds. Gaming, swearing, drunkenness, and the like, were their delight, while things sacred were their scorn and contempt."⁶ Francis Asbury, however, writing in 1804 speaks of "solitary Amelia, with its worn out fields of hundreds of acres, and old houses falling into ruins."⁷ Into Amelia as into the rest of the Piedmont and western portions of the state dissenting sects and preachers found their way. The wave of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians passing from Hanover west and the wave from the valley passing east made their contribution to the population of the circle of counties within which Amelia lay.⁸ In 1771, also, the separatist Baptists of Virginia had in this county their largest congregation.⁹ And in May 1780, dissenters from Amelia sent a petition to the legislature desiring that the vestries in

⁴ See Order Book of Amelia County 1780-1782, 26. Meade's Old Churches, Ministers, and Families, ii, 22.

⁵ Will Book of Amelia County 5:107.

⁶ Asbury's Journal, vol. i, 211 (3 volume edition, N. Y., 1852).

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. iii, 169.

⁸ Meade, ii, 20.

⁹ Semple, Virginia Baptists (Beale's revision), 70.

the several parishes be dissolved and hereafter be freely elected by the people; further also, that marriages by dissenting ministers be declared lawful.¹⁰ The established church of which William Giles was vestryman had fallen into a bad way. From 1773 to 1776, the minister in Raleigh parish was Rev. John Brunskill—and to his unpopularity is attributed some of the misfortunes of the established church in the county. Brunskill was a loyalist—an imprudent loyalist. He is alleged to have declared from his pulpit that to take part in the Revolution was rebellion. The Archers, the Tabbs, the Egglestons, and probably the Gileses arose on this occasion and walked deliberately from the building threatening bodily chastisement on the “execrable parricide.”¹¹ What Episcopalians remained faithful, no doubt, were not far removed in faith and practice from the dissenting sects. The soil of Amelia, therefore, was suitable for a gospel of discontent and democracy. Amelia county was fated to follow Jefferson and Giles.

In such an environment was Giles born and brought up. Nothing whatever of his youth has come down to us. His father was anxious that his youngest son should receive an education and therefore sent him to the newly-established college of Hampden-Sidney. Hampden-Sidney College, located in Prince Edward county, the next county southwest from Amelia, was established by the Presbyterian Scotch-Irish of Virginia and was liberally patronized by ambitious young men of the Piedmont section of the state. At Hampden-Sidney, Giles was under the immediate care of President Samuel Stanhope Smith, an eloquent preacher as well as able administrator. When President Smith resigned in 1779 to accept the chair of Moral Philosophy in another Presbyterian College dear to the hearts of Piedmonters, the college of New Jersey, he took along with him a number of Virginians and Hampden-Sidney students. Indeed it was no unusual occurrence for sprightly young men from the regions of the south to make their educational pilgrimages to the famous Presbyterian College at the north. James

¹⁰ See Copy in James's *Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia*, 70.

¹¹ Meade, *Old Churches, Ministers, and Families of Virginia*, ii, 21.

Madison and Henry Lee both had done so, and many of Giles's associates in Virginia were Princeton men. He and his negro¹² under the especial care of Professor Smith went along with the rest. Giles's most cherished friend, Abraham B. Venable, his predecessor in the Senate of the United States, and a victim of the horrible theatre fire in Richmond in 1811, was a fellow student as were the two other Venable boys, Samuel and Richard N. Also many of his associates in national politics were fellow students during a part of his course. The most distinguished of his classmates in 1781 was Edward Livingston, afterwards member of Congress, Secretary of State, and Minister to France.¹³ Livingston and Giles, with four others received the degree of Bachelor of Arts at the Commencement of 1781.

From Princeton, Giles went to William and Mary, following another precedent established by eminent men—to study under the great legal teacher, Chancellor Wythe. In the Amelia County Order Book under date of December 22, 1785, occurs the following item: "On motion of William B. Giles Gent this court doth recommend the said William B. Giles to the Examiners appointed by law as a Person of Probity Honesty and Grand Demesne." On the twenty-third of March, 1786, the said "William B. Giles Gent." produced his license, and was admitted to practice in the Court.¹⁴ Launching into the practice of the law, he qualified in the courts of Petersburg and the neighboring counties.

Petersburg, where by 1790 Giles had a "house,"¹⁵ "was a tolerably neat little town, built along the riverside, only two streets deep, and a mile and a half in extent, on a hill of pretty rapid elevation." Its society was "polite, obliging, and hospitable." Its principal business was the tobacco trade. Wagons bearing hogsheads of this product came in from the

¹²The wealthier Virginians took negroes with them when they went off to school. For instance in 1754 eight of the students at William and Mary had negroes to wait on them.

¹³See Samuel Davies Alexander—"Princeton during the Eighteenth Century," N. Y., 1872. This gives a list of the graduating classes and very brief biographical sketches.

¹⁴Amelia County Order Book.

¹⁵Letter of Edward Bland, May 27, 1790, Ms. Va. Historical Society.