



A woman in period dress kneels behind actors portraying British troops advancing toward Patriots at a battlefield reenactment.

That Gilmore Girl

Elizabeth Gilmore was a rifle-carrying nurse who served alongside her husband in the Continental Army.

By Jeff Walter

A young immigrant named Elizabeth Gilmore found multiple ways to contribute to the War for Independence, starting soon after her arrival from Ireland in the early days of the Revolution.

Most of the available information on Gilmore and John Berry, the man she married in 1780, comes from genealogical records. She was born in Ireland in 1759, a daughter of William and Agnes Gilmore. Berry, son of John Berry and Sarah Symes, was born August 4, 1754, in Dublin, Ireland.

Gilmore immigrated to the Colonies sometime in 1775–1776 with her family, or at least her sister. Accounts differ as

to where she met her future husband: It could have happened on the ship to America, or later at Valley Forge, Pa., where both served the Continental Army under General George Washington. John Berry, according to one account, served as a private at Valley Forge in Colonel Daniel Brodhead's 8th Pennsylvania Regiment.

According to a family genealogical website, Elizabeth Gilmore and her sister Ann served as nurses to the Continental Army

after being “inspired by the revolutionary cause.” Elizabeth would have been a teenager at this time. The sisters both were at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777–78, a pivotal time for the rebel forces. “While nursing the sick and wounded, she carried a rifle at times,” says a Gilmore family genealogical site.

At Valley Forge

Valley Forge, about 20 miles northwest of Philadelphia, served as the winter encampment—from December 19, 1777, through June 19, 1778—for the main body of General Washington's army, which numbered about 12,000 men. The British army had captured Philadelphia in September 1777, forcing the evacuation of the Continental Congress.

There was clearly a need for nurses in the camp, where women—many of them

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Elizabeth Gilmore and other women served as nurses to General Washington's army at Valley Forge. Disease killed an estimated 2,000 men during the six-month encampment.

the wives of enlisted men—also worked as laundresses, housekeepers and cooks. Disease was a formidable foe at Valley Forge, claiming the lives of an estimated 2,000 men (or 1 in 6) during the six-month encampment. The most common illnesses were influenza, typhus, typhoid fever and dysentery, which thrived due to the lack of hygiene and sanitation opportunities. Also taking their toll were a lack of food, suitable clothing (particularly shoes), money and organization.

Despite these conditions, the Continental Army's sojourn at Valley Forge was a turning point in the War for Independence, as Washington and Friedrich Wilhelm Baron von Steuben, a former Prussian military officer, shaped the battered and weary troops into a formidable fighting force that ultimately would prove worthy of defeating the Redcoats.

Ranger on the Frontier

Gilmore and Berry married in 1780 and, according to various genealogical websites, served in the same company for the rest of the war. Her pay records, preserved in the Pennsylvania Archives, refer to her as a Ranger on the Frontier.

The Rangers on the Frontier were created under the Pennsylvania Constitution in March 1777, as county militias also were being established throughout the state. Stephanie Hoover wrote in her article "A Discussion of the Forms of Military Service During the Revolutionary War." According to Hoover, the state provided the rangers' arms and uniforms. During their

long commitments, the rangers were tasked with patrolling Pennsylvania's western frontier, serving as scouts and helping to avert Indian attacks, rather than participating directly in the War for Independence. The Seneca and other nations of the Iroquois Confederacy were particular threats to settlers during this time, with some Indians paid by the British to attack Colonial settlers.

Accounts differ on exactly when Elizabeth became a member of the Rangers on the Frontier, with some saying she served in that group during the war and others saying later, but apparently she remained a ranger for four years after the conflict ended. She is credited with fighting in several battles.

Later Years

John and Elizabeth Gilmore Berry moved to Washington County, Pa., in 1794 and two years later settled on land purchased from George Washington. They had eight children: William, John, Elizabeth, Nancy, James, Isabelle, Mary and Ann.

Both Elizabeth and John died in Washington, Pa.—Elizabeth on August 21, 1824, and John on June 7, 1809. They are buried at Robinson Run Cemetery in McDonald, Allegheny County, Pa.

In 1932, the Pennsylvania State Society DAR erected a monument to honor the memory of Elizabeth Gilmore Berry, praising her as a nurse and ranger who "fought by the side of her husband to the close of the war." ☉



Top to bottom: Elizabeth Gilmore Berry's tombstone; the 1932 monument from DAR