

“They Died the Same Day”

by

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One of my Loyalist ancestors is Isaac Gilbert, who was a Sergeant in the Queen’s Rangers during the Revolutionary War.

Isaac was born 21 October 1742 in Ridgefield, Connecticut. His great-grandfather Mathew Gilbert was one of the seven men who founded New Haven Colony, later part of Connecticut, in 1635.

Isaac proudly joined the militia at age 16 and accompanied British Army regular forces to the second siege of Louisbourg on Cape Breton in 1758. He then returned home, thinking he was done with fighting, and settled down to start farming. In April, 1771 he was married in Fairfield, CT to Mary Rowland (b 24 Nov 1754), whose family had been living in Fairfield since the mid-1600s.

Isaac and Mary soon started their family, eventually having 11 children, 9 of whom made it through the perils of 18th-century childhood to adulthood. However, by the time their third child was born in July 1775, the country was at war with Britain. Isaac and Mary had to decide where their loyalties lay, and Isaac signed up with the Queen’s Rangers, a regiment recruited mainly from New York and Connecticut, to fight the rebels. At first they just did a lot of drilling on Long Island, but eventually the regiment was involved in fighting that took them all the way down to Yorktown in Virginia, where the Revolutionary War ended.

Mary, meanwhile, had to keep the farm going, tend to the children, and bury wee Abigail who died in 1777 while her father was away. Mary also had two more daughters during the war; their dates of conception tie nicely to periods when the muster rolls show that Isaac was away from the regiment, “sick in the country”.

Their six later children were all born in New Brunswick, after the Gilbert family left with the Fall Fleet sailing from New York to British territory, after the end of the Revolution. Those who took the King’s side, now known as Loyalists, were no longer welcome in the land of their birth or residence. Regiments were generally granted land in a specific area, to keep the men together. This made sense: they’d fought together for up to eight years, so they would be used to working together and could count on one another for help as they settled in a strange land. The Queen’s Rangers were given land along the Saint John River in Nova Scotia (which within a year was divided into two administrative provinces, due to the great influx into the area now called New Brunswick).

The Gilberts and their companions began the work of clearing land, building cabins and getting their lives back into order. One of the first things they built in the village they named Gagetown was a church. Isaac and Mary’s daughter Sarah was married in that church on 9 April 1799 to Platt Wood, son of another member of the Queen’s Rangers who had left New York province and lived in Gagetown. Sarah Gilbert and Platt Wood are my 4th-great-grandparents.

By the time they were married, plans were already being made to move yet again. Word had reached even the wilds of New Brunswick that the Queen's Rangers' former commander, Col. John Graves Simcoe, had returned to British North America. In 1791 he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of the province of Upper Canada. Evidently the men who had served under Simcoe had great admiration for him, as a large percentage of his former Rangers sold or just abandoned the land they had been granted in New Brunswick and moved to Upper Canada.

The trip up the St. Lawrence and along Lake Ontario would have been a slow one, with rapids to be bypassed, and all their worldly goods, probably including animals, to be transported. Most of the men applied for and received new grants of land in the vicinity of the new town named in honour of their former colonel, Simcoe, in Norfolk County. Once again they had to clear land, plant crops, and help one another survive. By now, most had sizeable families so there were a lot of helping hands.

The War of 1812-14 of course affected all of these Norfolk County settlers, but did not directly affect Isaac and Mary: they were getting on in years, so stuck close to the farm and just heard about the progress of the war from their children and grandchildren. They were thankful that none of their young folk were killed in the war, particularly their son Isaac Junior who fought at the battles of Fort Erie and Lundy's Lane. Junior came out of the War in 1814 as a captain, and in later life was made a colonel of the Norfolk militia.

Harriet Walker, a descendant of Isaac and Mary, tells the following story of their death in a family history published in 1981:

Both died on Sept. 5, 1822, she of a lingering illness, and after her passing he, aggrieved and weary with long watching, rested in his chair. Within the hour, the gathered family were shocked to discover he too had passed away, but perhaps it is most fitting that two who had endured so much together in life, should not be separated in death, and they were laid to rest in a common grave in Woodhouse Cemetery.