

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

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## Elizabeth Gilbert

BY

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HISTORIAN TOWN OF GAINES

It's difficult for us in 1989 to imagine what it was like to be a pioneer in 1807. We can get a feel for it, though, thanks to settlers who recounted their experiences cutting their way through the woods west from the Genesee River.

In 1810, three years after our settler arrived, Seymour Murdock reported that from the Genesee River to Clarkson it was one dense forest and in fact took two days to get from Clarkson to Ridgeway. "The roads, if roads they could be properly called, were almost impassible." Added to the difficulties of dense forest and difficult travel, this area was abundant in wild life not only including deer, raccoons, woodchucks, beaver, mink and fox but also rattlesnakes, porcupines, and a goodly supply of bears and wolves.

It was into this wilderness setting that our pioneer came. On March 3, 1807 Mrs. Elizabeth Gilbert arrived at the Holland Land Office in Batavia and obtained an article for 123½ acres on Lot 39, township 15, Range 1 in the new County of Genesee. An article was a contract of intent to purchase which had to be signed in person at the Company office. We don't know Mr. Gilbert's first name as Elizabeth was the person who signed the contract, an unusual occurrence for a married woman in early 19th century America. Early histories do not tell us where the Gilberts came from, but they do tell us that their niece Amy Scott arrived with them in what was to become the Town of Gaines. The Gilberts were the only settlers for many miles in any direction in 1807.

Within the next two years several others arrived in this area. In fact, among the next 20 settlers no other woman signed an article for land. Abigail Burger was listed on the 1810 census as the head of a household consisting of herself and two males; one 10-16 and one 16-26, presumably her sons. Even though the small influx of settlers must have eased the Gilbert's isolation, tragedy struck in 1809, Mr. Gilbert was found lying dead on Ridge Road. One author speculates that he might have died of a seizure as it was rumored that he was epileptic. Early histories tell that Mrs. Gilbert buried her husband in what is now Murray and after returning from the funeral found that the fire in the cabin had gone out; this was a major problem in an age before matches. It is told that Elijah Brown, son of Bathshua Brown of Carlton, who had accompanied the widow to the funeral sent word to Elijah Downer who sent his son, David, to the widow's cabin with hot coals to rekindle the fire. Mrs. Gilbert must have been a hardy and brave pioneer as she did not leave the wilderness after the death of her husband. This widow and her niece chose to remain in their new home even though the survival of her animals, lacking enough cleared land on which to graze, required that she go into the woods and cut browse, or small trees, in which they could feed.

In the summer of 1809 Noah and Polly Burgess and family arrived from Canada by boat on Lake Ontario. They coasted to the mouth of Oak Orchard Creek and then to the head of the stillwater. Noah Burgess was ill upon arriving and word was sent to Elizabeth who took her oxen to the stillwater and carried the family and their belongings to the Ridge west of what would become the Village of Gaines.

This new family needed a shelter and because one husband had died and the other was ill these two women took up the job of building a cabin. Polly Burgess cut the logs and Elizabeth hauled them



Decendents of J. Howard Pratt gather by the New Historic Marker at the Gaines Carlton Community Church, which was unveiled recently.

to the building site with her team of oxen. The log cabin was built with the aid of newcomers passing by selecting the land for their new homes in the Holland Land Purchase. The Burgesses shortly abandoned the cabin and moved, just west of what is now Childs, a little closer to Elizabeth. The abandoned cabin for which the two women had provided the initial labor, gave welcome shelter for several families who arrived here later. Families such as the Andersons, Lewises and Clifts, lived in this cabin while building their own.

The 1810 census lists Elizabeth Gilbert as the head of a household consisting of herself, one girl between the ages of 16-26 (presumably Amy Scott) and a boy and girl each under the age of ten. Whether these were Elizabeth's children or Amy Scott's is unknown. Elizabeth stayed here for another year or so. It is unclear exactly when she left but she, Amy and the two small children might well have fled, as many settlers did at reports of the British and Indian attacks at the outset of the War of 1812. The last record we have of her is that she moved to Canandaigua.

There is a two-fold reason for erecting this marker in the Town of Gaines. One is to commemorate the beginnings of the settlement and the second is to expand knowledge of the role of pioneer women in the beginnings of Western New York, as their deeds have often been overlooked.

The marker to commemorate Mrs. Gilbert as the pioneer settler in Gaines is dedicated to the memory of J. Howard Pratt. Historian Emeritus of the Town of Gaines whose pride in his town's history and the history and influence of the famed Ridge Road will be long remembered.

The marker states:

"PIONEER SETTLER  
MARCH 3, 1807 THIS LAND WAS  
CHOSEN BY THE FIRST SETTLER  
IN THE TOWN OF GAINES, & ON  
RIDGE RD. IN ORLEANS COUNTY,  
MRS. ELIZABETH GILBERT."