

Revolutionary War hero John Gilliland is buried in Pigeon Forge

By Carroll McMahan

When a death occurred in the late 1700s, the deceased was usually buried very close to where they had died. This is the case of John Gilliland, a prominent Revolutionary War soldier and who was laid to rest in the burying ground at Ft. Wear in what is now Pigeon Forge; after he was killed in an Indian attack.

Gilliland fought under Col. John Sevier at the Battle of Kings Mountain. Although wounded three times during the battle, he ascended the hill on the final push to the top alongside his father-in-law, Robert Young.

His participation in the battle is documented in “The Patriots of Kings Mountain” by Bobby Gilmer Moss.

Gilliland, who had been shot three times with 69 caliber musket balls, had spotted British commander Patrick Ferguson atop his white horse wearing a red checkered shirt with a sword in one hand and a whistle in his mouth. Gilliland fired, but his flint snapped. He then said to his father-in-law, “There’s Ferguson shoot him.” Robert Young is credited with firing the fatal shot which knocked Ferguson out of his saddle with his spur catching in the stirrup.

After the horse ceased spinning and running wildly, Ferguson’s body was riddled with seven bullets. Earlier that day Patrick Ferguson had declared that God himself and all his angels couldn’t get him off that mountain and he was right, he is still there today buried under a pile of rocks.

Fortunately, Gilliland recovered and was one of the early settlers in Cocke County near the mouth of the Pigeon River. He raised a corn crop on his land in 1783, and a couple of years later brought his large family from Washington County to live there.

Although the actual date of his birth is unclear, some records indicate he was born as early as 1725 which would have made him in his mid- fifties during the battle.

Before the Revolutionary War, Gilliland was instrumental in the establishment of the Watauga Association, a government created in 1772 by frontier settlers living along the Watauga River in what is now Elizabethton, Tennessee.

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Gilliland mustered at Fort Watauga where he and others joined other Overmountain Men under the command of their good friend, John Sevier. Enduring the elements as well as hunger they made the 263-mile journey over the mountains arriving at Kings Mountain on October 7, 1780 to engage Patrick Ferguson and his 1200 loyalist.

In 1785, Gilliland was a delegate to the convention that wrote the constitution of the State of Franklin. He donated fifty acres of his property for the county seat of Cocke County, named Fine's Ferry because Peter Fine operated a ferry there. The original county seat was located on the French Broad River about a mile and a half from the present county seat of Newport.

He was a constable, a lawyer, and a surveyor. In fact, he was the surveyor of Jonesborough, the first town in the State of Tennessee. Gilliland was also noted as an interpreter between white settlers and Cherokee Indians.

Gilliland married a daughter of Robert Young and Mary Douglass. One of their daughters, Mary, was the second wife of Col. Samuel Wear who was a comrade of Gilliland's at the Battle of Kings Mountain and served with Gilliland as a delegate to the State of Franklin's constitutional convention.

Col. Wear married Mary Gilliland after the death of his first wife, Mary Thompson. He had several children with both wives. Gilliland was returning from a visit with his daughter at Ft. Wear when he was killed by the Indians.

Some accounts indicate that his wife was also killed at the same time and they were buried side by side at Ft. Wear.

The first name of Mrs. Gilliland is somewhat in dispute with some sources saying it was Elizabeth and others say she was called Margaret. It is possible her name was Elizabeth Margaret or Margaret Elizabeth.

According to the account written by John Wilkerson in his autobiography, John Gilliland was killed by the Indians and his widow moved to south Alabama. Several years later she returned to East Tennessee to visit her daughter, who was then Col. Wear's widow.

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Within eight miles of her daughter's home she became very ill and died. One of her last wishes was to be buried beside her husband at Wear Cemetery. In the years since John Gilliland's death other interments had taken place some which were unmarked and it was difficult for anyone still living to recall exactly where John was buried.

Finally, an old slave named Frank who had accompanied the Wear family into the wilderness, and had helped construct the fort and house remembered that a large tree stood near John Gilliland's grave. Thus husband and wife are buried side by side.

On Saturday April 23, 1016 at 10 am, a ceremony honoring John Gilliland will be held at his gravesite and a new plaque will be unveiled. The event will be hosted by the General Henry Knox Chapter of the Tennessee Society of the Sons of the Revolution and the descendants of John Gilliland.

One of the missions of the organization is to locate and formally recognize Tennessee Revolutionary War veterans. The keynoter speaker will be John Slaughter, Superintendent of the Southern Campaign of the Revolutionary War National Military Parks. The public is invited.

***Carroll McMahan** is the Special Projects Facilitator and serves as Sevier County Historian for the Sevierville Chamber of Commerce.*

The Upland Chronicles series celebrates the heritage and past of Sevier County. If you have suggestions for future topics, would like to submit a column or have comments; please contact Carroll McMahan at 453-6411 or email cmcmahan@scoc.org; or Ron Rader at 604-9161 or email to ron@ronraderproperties.com