

Elizabeth Gwillim Simcoe... A lady of means

By Mary Beacock Fryer,
Author

Elizabeth Posthuma, nee Gwillim, was the wife of the first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, John Graves Simcoe. She is best known for the diary she kept between 1791 and 1796, and for her watercolor sketches of the Canadian landscape.

Some of the people in the neighbourhood of the Holland Marsh know her better as the person for whom the Townships of West and East Gwillimbury are named. While selecting names for many places, Governor Simcoe saluted his friends and relatives.

In this year 2007, Bradford residents are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the beginning of their town. Under the leadership of the Gwillim Group, a new monument has been commissioned – a statue of Elizabeth Gwillim to be installed at the Post Office parkette, at Barrie and John St. W.

In the Archives of Ontario and the records of the County of Devonshire, England, are two voluminous collections of documents that cover her entire life, before and after the Canada years. These sources reveal more of the

person than does her diary. At the same time, Mrs. Simcoe is not easy to get to know. Like most ladies of the Age of Reason, she wrote in a style intended to amuse, rather than reveal her emotions.

John Ross Robertson, who contributed much to the history of Ontario, brought a copy of the diary from England and edited and published it in 1911. It was edited again in 1965 by Mary Quayle Innis. According to both versions, Elizabeth Gwillim Simcoe was born in 1766 at Old Court House in Whitchurch, Herefordshire.

More recently, however, Hilary Arnold, of York, England investigated Mrs. Simcoe's genealogy and found a different date and place of birth than that given by Robertson and accepted by Innis and others.

When Arnold did not find a record of Elizabeth's birth at St. Dubricius Church, Whitchurch, she looked into the records of All Saints Church, Aldwinkle,

Norhamptonshire, near the Hall – the home of Mrs. Simcoe's mother, Elizabeth Spinckes Gwillim. There she found that Elizabeth Posthuma Gwillim was baptized on September 22, 1762. She was orphaned at birth, hence the middle name. Her mother was buried the following day.

Her father, Thomas Gwillim, had been the colonel of the 50th Regiment until the end of January 1762. Soon after, he died in Germany, where he was serving with his regiment, and was buried there. Robertson miscalculated the date of Mrs. Simcoe's birth because a Thomas Gwillim was buried outside St. Dubricius Church, Whitchurch, in 1766. He was Elizabeth's grandfather, who died when she was 4 years old.

Elizabeth was a wealthy orphan, the only heir to extensive estates in Whitchurch, Herefordshire and Aldwinkle, Northamptonshire.

To be continued...



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