

Eliza Gabbert, Lady Bushwhacker, found

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On a mild November Saturday, Tom and Terry Ramsey and I were in the old Montevallo cemetery, pursuing our odd hobby, "cemetery crawling." We'd already stopped by the Sandstone cemetery to photograph the newly discovered burial place of Lt. Joe Wood. Now Terry was photographing the gravestones of Lt. Wood's children by his first wife, Susan.



I strayed aside to try and read the inscription on a broken white marble slab. "Eliza A., wife of Dr. John Lipscomb," I read. I called Terry over to see what she could make of it.

She all but laid an egg. "Why, that's Eliza Gabbert, the lady Bushwhacker!" she cried. "Of course! She married Dr. John Lipscomb!" And so, once again, one thing had led to another. Lt. Wood, Gen. Sterling Price's personal guide, whose true burial place genealogist Nancy Thompson had discovered only a few weeks before, had led us to another longlost Confederate stalwart.

We'd learned, a while back, of Eliza's marriage to Dr. John Lipscomb, who reportedly practiced in the Montevallo area. They had children; but the story went no further.

Dry vital statistics, however, did turn up. Eliza Ann was the oldest child of William "Old Man" Gabbert, leader of his own Bushwhacker band in Dover Township, and his wife, the former Rebecca Wade. She was born Dec. 12, 1834, in Washington County, Ind., and came to Vernon County with her parents and their eight other children, about 1858.

One of those other children was Martha Emeline, 18 years younger, who would marry Jesse VanBuren Thomas, this writer's great-uncle. That's how my Grandmother Thomas happened to have in her family album a tintype of Eliza.

Pierre Weltmer, who copied the image, said Eliza's face appeared to be badly scarred, presumably from smallpox. Mercifully he "retouched" the copies, a mercy seemingly no longer available in the era of colored photographs.

Oddly, the Gabberts rounded things out by naming their last child, like their first, Eliza! Eliza T., born in 1858, was the only one of the children born in Vernon County. She'd have been still an infant while big sister Eliza A. was busy being a lady Bushwhacker.

Eliza A. (our Eliza) married John W. Lipscomb April 12, 1868. She died June 6, 1884, reportedly of cancer of the womb, then aged 49 years, 7 months, and 6 days.

When the Civil War broke out, in 1861, she would have been 27, by the cruel standards of those times a homely "old maid." Her brother John married Leonora, one of the famous Mayfield sisters, forming only one of many connections between the Gabbert and Mayfield families, near neighbors in Dover Township. That marriage took place Aug. 10, 1861, only a few months into the Civil War, when the two families probably were already embroiled in guerrilla activities.

At least one other Gabbert brother, Jefferson (Jeff), was active in his father's band.

Every Mayfield, down to infants in the cradle, says the History of Vernon County, was a staunch Confederate, and clearly as much was true of the Gabberts. Nothing daunted by the violent deaths of many of their menfolk, the daughters and sisters took up the cause in their stead. Ella Mayfield was the most noteworthy, with Eliza Gabbert running a close second.

What a loss that none of these women ever set down an account of her wartime doings! We have to remember, the Civil War took place at the height of the Victorian era, when people set great store by propriety and "respectability." Doubtless the unconventional behavior of Eliza and company raised matronly eyebrows at the time. Likely, when peace came, they were glad to forget the troubled past and just get on with their conventional lives. The things they'd done as young women they probably looked back on as "not quite respectable." Most of Eliza Gabbert's exploits come down to us only by implication. She gets merely three explicit personal mentions in the county history.

In early winter, 1862, when the Mayfield boys and John Gabbert captured, disarmed, and unhorsed 27 Federal cavalymen going, a few at a time, to water their horses in McCarty Creek, west of Old Montevallo, they sent their respective sisters Ella and Eliza to the Federal camp to offer to trade the 27 for Capt. Henry Taylor, then a prisoner at Ft. Scott. The offer being refused, they simply released the 27, after making them swear allegiance to the Confederacy!

This reminds us that in those days chivalry still wasn't dead. Women came and went through disputed territory, almost through the battle lines, in perfect safety. Vernon County girls innocently shopped at Fort Scott and smuggled ammunition back to their menfolk, doubtless under their hoopskirts, safe in the knowledge no "gentleman" would dream of searching them.

Doubtless the Feds knew perfectly well that Eliza and Ella technically were combatants, just like the men. But what could they do, being gentlemen? Lady Bushwhackers were still ladies!

Eliza was one of a number of young women who helped bury the "ghastly" gory bodies of seven Bushwhackers killed in "the fight at Old Man Gabbert's" on May 26, 1863. Eliza would have watched the "bluebellies" burn her family home on this occasion.

"In August, 1862, when so many Vernon County men were in prison at Springfield, captured during Coffee's campaign, Ella Mayfield and Miss Eliza Gabbert went unattended to the prison and by their persistent intercession with the Federal military authorities secured the release of half a dozen or more men." The "persistent intercession" consisted of baldfaced but very persuasive fibs, swearing to the innocence of the men in question.

On this occasion their fate crossed that of our other resurrected Rebel, Lt. Joe Wood, in town as a prisoner of war. The girls found themselves unable to pay their hotel bill till, gallantly, Lt. Wood came to their rescue.

The Col. John T. Coffee Camp of the Sons of Confederate Veterans wonders what to do about Eliza's broken gravestone. Surely, like the menfolk, she deserves a "veteran's marker" of some sort, however modest!