



Historically Speaking: The Honorable Nicholas Gilman Jr.

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Nicholas Gilman Jr. wasn't college educated. He was born in Exeter in 1755 during the French and Indian War. His father, also named Nicholas Gilman, was a local merchant.

When the younger Nicholas finished attending the local schools, he clerked in his father's trading house in downtown Exeter. There he overheard his father's talk of oppressive taxation and colonial overreach. The elder Nicholas was a leader of the local militia and a stalwart supporter of the Patriot cause. When hostilities broke out, young Nicholas joined up at the tender age of 21. He served throughout the war - rising to the rank of captain and serving on George Washington's staff during the dreadful winter at Valley Forge. After the war, he returned to Exeter and became politically active. He served in Congress under the Articles of Confederation in 1786, which convinced him that the new nation needed a strong central government. When a New Hampshire delegation was needed at the Constitutional Convention a year later, Nicholas Gilman and John Langdon were appointed.

Gilman and Langdon arrived late, after most of the big issues were already ironed out. Placed on the Committee of Postponed Parts, Gilman assisted in ironing out details such as the president's term of office, taxes, declaring war, Indian affairs, patents and copyright laws. After the new Constitution was sent to the states for ratification, Gilman stayed with Congress in New York, tossing the job of advocating for the document to his brother, John Taylor Gilman. In a letter addressed to Joseph Gilman, he wrote that the Constitution, "was done by bargain and compromise - yet,- notwithstanding its imperfections, on the adoption of it depends (in my feeble judgement) whether we shall become a

respectable nation, or a people torn to pieces by intestine commotions, and rendered contemptible for ages." New Hampshire secured the ninth and deciding vote in favor of ratification.

Gilman went on to serve in the House of Representatives for eight years and in the Senate for nine. He was on his way home from Washington in May of 1814 - a time of war like the year of his birth - when he fell ill in Philadelphia and died at the home of another Exeter native, Woodbridge Odlin on Monday, May 2. An obituary was published in Exeter's *The Constitutionalist and Weekly Magazine* the following Tuesday, May 10. "His remains were respectfully entombed on Tuesday last, attended by a large number of citizens, and the Society of the Cincinnati. In the death of Mr. Gilman the public have suffered a great loss, and his relatives and friends an irreparable breach." He was clearly well-loved and his contributions to the formation of our country were noted. It's the phrase "Tuesday last" that causes some confusion. Generally, this would mean the previous Tuesday - in this case, May 3, the day after his death. As there was no way in 1814 to rapidly transport remains from Philadelphia to New Hampshire, it sounds like he was buried in Philadelphia. His grave, however, was in Exeter in the Winter Street Cemetery. Records for this cemetery are sparse, and we haven't been able to find an exact interment date. In any case, if his remains were returned to Exeter for burial, they didn't stay in the Winter Street Cemetery for long. In the 1840s a new cemetery was laid out on Linden Street and the Gilman family bought four adjoining lots. A large slab was installed with the engraving: "In memory of Nicholas Gilman, Esquire late Senator from New Hampshire in the Congress of the United States. He was born at Exeter August 3rd, 1755 and departed this life at Philadelphia May 2nd, 1814, aged 58 years & 9 months." Also listed on the slab was his brother, Daniel, who died in New York in 1804. Over the years the slab cracked and fell into poor condition.

In 1986, at the 200th anniversary of the Constitution, various organizations tried to list the final resting places of all the signers. Gilman proved to be troublesome as he was listed in several places. One source incorrectly had him in Exeter, Pennsylvania. Nancy Merrill, the director of collections at the Exeter Historical Society, was asked by the Secretary of the Army for the exact location of Gilman's grave. Her reply indicates that there had been no small amount of confusion: "One of the requests for information we have received is: 'Where is Nicholas Gilman buried?' People are collecting photographs of the gravestones of

all the signers; the National D.A.R. wants to put a marker there. You can imagine how embarrassed we were, because we did not know where; he is not buried in the Winter Street Cemetery. We finally learned that some years ago his body had been reinterred in the Exeter Cemetery on Linden Street.” Of course, there’s no date or record of his remains being moved to the Exeter Cemetery. There was only the slab with “In memory” inscribed rather than “Here lies.”

We may never know the exact final resting place of Nicholas Gilman. In speaking with Quentin Gilman this past Sunday when the memorial was re-dedicated with a new slab, he told me he’d like to know where Nicholas is buried, but in reality it doesn’t really matter. It’s more important to recognize the man and his achievements. Exeter is honored to have had such a man among the founding fathers.

Barbara Rimkunas is curator of the Exeter Historical Society. Support the Exeter Historical Society by becoming a member. Join online at www.exeterhistory.org.