

IOWA HISTORY



(Courtesy Library of Congress)
Jennie Wade House, Gettysburg, PA

She Hath Done What She Could

Mary Virginia “Jennie” Wade was the only civilian killed at the Battle of Gettysburg during the Civil War, but her sacrifice would have been overlooked if not for a group of Iowa women.

Jennie was only 20 years old when she was killed. She and her mother were visiting her sister, Georgia Wade McClellan, at Gettysburg, PA, when the battle broke out. The house was situated between the Union and Confederate armies. As the army prepared for battle, the Wade women cooked and served the Union soldiers who were stationed near the McClellan home. As the battle commenced Jennie continued to do all she could to feed the troops. By the third day of the battle the house had been hit by artillery from both sides. But it was a stray Rebel bullet on the last day of the fight that killed Jennie. She was inside the kitchen kneading bread when she was hit in the back by the bullet that penetrated two doors to enter the kitchen. It pierced her heart, and she died instantly. It was July 3, 1863.

The Union army lost over 3000 men at the Battle of Gettysburg and the Confederates lost 4500. Jennie was the only civilian and the only woman who died during the battle. Her body was placed in a coffin built for a rebel officer who had also died. (When the positions of the armies changed and the Confederate army moved to a new location, they left the unused coffin behind. Jennie’s body was placed in the coffin meant for her enemy.) Jennie’s final resting place was

Evergreen Cemetery in Gettysburg. A small stone was placed at the grave to identify the only civilian killed that day.

After the war Jennie's sister, Georgia, moved to Iowa with her husband. She was an active member of the Iowa chapter of the Woman's Relief Corps (WRC). It was a group that provided relief to sick and impoverished Civil War veterans and their families.

In 1899 some of the women made a trip with Georgia to visit Jennie's grave in Pennsylvania. They were disgusted to see the insignificant stone that commemorated Jennie's contribution to the war effort. They decided to do something about it.

The women returned to Iowa and formed a committee headed by Margaret Hinman of Belmond. Through many small contributions by the WRC members and others the committee raised enough money to have a large monument made.

In 1901 the 12-foot tall Italian marble monument was erected. It portrayed a young woman holding a glass of water in her outstretched arm. The inscription read "Jennie Wade, killed July 3, 1863, while making bread for Union soldiers. Erected by Woman's Relief Corps of Iowa. She Hath Done What She Could."

At the dedication ceremony Georgia looked around the cemetery where thousands were buried and commented, "The only monument for a woman among all these!" She added she was proud of Iowa for "placing the first monument to the memory of women who served their country in the Civil War.

Sources

"Iowans Honor JW; local Heroine," *Star and Sentinel*, Jun 18, 1932.

"Monument to Iowa Heroine," *Davenport Daily Republican*, Sept 6, 1901.

"The New Era," *Humeston New Era*, Aug 14, 1901.

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