

HISTORIC RED HOOK

Viola Kilmer

Born Jan 1886 Died Feb 21, 1956

St. John the Evangelist Cemetery, Barrytown

Granite memorial shared with her parents, straight back from driveway, North West of a cedar tree

Viola's mother Julia Alice Moore of Madalin was Webster Kilmer's second wife whom he married after his first wife had died, so Viola had many siblings: three half siblings, Georgiana (married Joseph Watson), Webster Jr., and Florence (married William Munro), and three full ones, Bertha (married Clayton Hermans), Percy, and Walter. Both of Viola's parents were of German Palatine descent. Webster was a teamster and carpenter on the New York Central railroad. Their family home was on River Road in Annandale and still stands today, though it is owned by Bard College and operated as housing for graduate students.



*Viola in uniform,
courtesy of Sarah K. Hermans*

Viola was born in January of 1886 in Milan. She did not marry and was recorded in the 1910 census of Red Hook as residing with her family and having no occupation, but just five years later she can be found in the 1915 census in Rochester, working as a nurse in the home of Francis Ward and his family. The Wards had two other servants, a wet nurse and a cook. For whatever reason, by 1920 Viola removed to New York City and along with nine others worked for the family of Manhattan lawyer McDowell Hawkes. She would remain in this occupation for the rest of her life, but a few years after her stint in Manhattan moved in with her half-sister Florence and her husband, Australian William Murno in Albany. In 1932 Viola completed her education at the National Training School for Certified Nurses in June of 1932. Established around 1890, this not-for-profit institution offered schooling for women hoping to work in both the private and public sectors of the profession. Such opportunities were not widely available to women until the second half of the nineteenth century, spurred on by the visibility provided by their contributions

during the Civil War and famously by Florence Nightingale championing their work following the Crimean War. Nursing was then one of the few professions deemed acceptable in polite society for women to pursue, be they married or single. Schools like the National Training School would proliferate and by the turn of the twentieth century hundreds of such institutions would come into operation across the country. As students, many worked in hospitals, but most that completed their training would go on to work in private homes. It would seem that Viola's career was entirely private, even before gaining her certification but perhaps this was less about choice and more to do with convention. Jean C. Whelan in her article "American Nursing: An Introduction to the Past" stated that "It was not until the mid-twentieth century that hospitals hired nurses as regular staff on a permanent basis, providing full professional nursing services to all hospitalized patients."

Viola died on February 21, 1956 in Albany at 70 years of age and is buried with her mother and father.



*Viola Kilmer,
courtesy of Sarah K. Hermans*

Research and writing by Sarah K. Hermans, 2024

Sources:

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