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## Autobiography

Elizabeth Digby Pilot

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# Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

## Elizabeth Pilot, Autobiography



- Silhouette of Elizabeth Digby Pilot (Courtesy, Esmond Black, Northallerton, North Yorkshire, U.K.)

*Surviving primary source documents that detail life in East and West Florida during the British Period are exceedingly rare. Such journals or diaries written by women are even more scarce. Elizabeth Digby Pilot (1742-1826), wife of a British infantry officer, wrote one of only two known surviving accounts. She was born in 1742 in Geashill, County Laois, Ireland. In 1762, she married to Henry Pilot at Kilmalogue House, Portarlinton, Ireland after she ran away with him as her parents opposed their marriage. Henry, a member of the British military, was soon posted to the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment which was to be stationed in the newly acquired province of West Florida.*

*In July 1765, the British 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment arrived in Pensacola, the capital of West Florida. As the regiment disembarked and began to repopulate the almost completely empty former Spanish settlement, all of the men and their families were in perfect health. Within three weeks, military physicians diagnosed the majority of the infantry with a sickness described as a 'distemper.' It was most likely yellow fever. Within six months, half the regiment succumbed to the illness and died. Henry and his wife Elizabeth, or Betsey, as she was more affectionately known, were two of the few survivors of the epidemic. After her recovery, Elizabeth maintained relationships with some of the most elite members of Pensacola's small social circle. Her acquaintances included several members of the governor's royal council and Brigadier General Henry Bouquet and Brigadier General Sir Frederick Haldimand, commander-in-chief of the Southern District of the British troops in North America.*

*In 1769, Elizabeth and her family moved to St. Augustine, the capital of East Florida when the 31<sup>st</sup> Regiment received orders that reassigned them from their duty post in Pensacola. Elizabeth lived in St. Augustine between May 1769 and February 1770. Eventually, she returned to Pensacola and lived there until 1773. During that year, Henry and Elizabeth left East Florida and spent some time in New York before they returned to England. Henry was reassigned from the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment. Elizabeth seemed pleased at their departure from Florida because of fears that fighting would soon break out between Great Britain and some of her North American colonies. Upon their return to England, Henry and Elizabeth settled in Bath. Henry served as a major within the British military during the American Revolution.*

*Throughout the years she spent in British Florida, the observations Elizabeth made in her diary reflect both exceptional and ordinary events. She survived a yellow fever epidemic in Pensacola in the summer and fall of 1765 and weathered a disastrous hurricane in September 1769 while living in St. Augustine. However, in some ways her diary offers unique insights in the more mundane details of what life was like in Great Britain's fourteenth and fifteenth colonies. Themes she touches on in her diary include the experience of migration and immigration for British citizens of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, Anglo-Spanish relations with New Orleans during the 1760s, issues of gender and sexuality including child birth and morality, health and disease, slavery, British relations with the Lower Creeks, and military matters during the Age of the Imperial Crisis.*

*After she left North America in 1773, Elizabeth divided her time between Henry's ancestral home in Portloughton, Ireland and the household she had established with her husband in Bath, England until her death in 1826. She was buried in Weston near her beloved husband, Henry, who had predeceased her in 1820. Elizabeth was survived by a number of her children including Jane, Elizabeth, Frances, Judith, and Henry Digby Pilot. The following selection includes seven pages from Pilot's Diary; bracketed numbers indicate the manuscript page.*

Edited by Deborah L. Bauer, University of South Florida

### **Further Reading**

Bauer, Deborah L. "Chasing the Faces of Florida's Colonial Ladies: A Brief Memoir on Assembling Primary Source Material for the Study of Gender and Sexuality in the British Floridas, 1763-1784." *Florida Studies: Proceedings of the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Florida College English*

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Schafer, Daniel L. "St. Augustine's British Years, 1763-1784." *El Escribano – The St. Augustine Journal of History*, 2001.

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*from The Autobiography of Mrs. Elizabeth Pilot (nee Digby), Born 1742, Died 1826, with a Concluding Memoir by Her Daughter, Judith Henrietta Pilot.*

[page 36] ... A sudden order came from General [Thomas] Gage for our Regiment to go to East Florida. This was a stroke that would deprive my husband of his employment as Fort Major, thus reducing our income. It would remove me from my friend, Mrs. B. [Rebecca Blackwell], whose chief inducement in coming from England was to be with me, and it would deprive me of her care and support in my approaching confinement. Add to which, we had laid out a good deal of money in making our house comfortable. But it was necessary to obey. It was Autumn. [37] However, a reprieve individually was granted, though the Regiment was to go. In consideration of my situation, the General allowed my husband to remain till after my confinement, when we were to follow. On the third of December, I was again blessed with a daughter, whom I had baptised by Dr. Cotton. Captain [George] Murray of the Navy and Mrs. B., were her sponsors. She was named after me, Elizabeth. In January, having no longer any excuse to remain, we prepared for our departure. I took a melancholy leave of my friend, and with my husband and two babes, went on board a transport, which General Gage had left for our accommodation. He likewise permitted a surgeon to accompany us. When the moment of our departure arrived, my friend and myself wept together, and I continued to do so after I had got into the barge which Captain M.[Murray] had ready prepared to convey to us to the transport. He had paid us the high compliment of having his ship manned, as we passed under her Stem, but my tearful eyes were too dim to see it. My husband was obliged to go again on shore to settle some business, after he had placed me and my children, my white servant and my black woman in a nice roomy cabin. I hastened to settle my infant and laid down myself on the bed much exhausted and soon fell asleep. My maid had the care of my little Jane, while I took my infant to myself, and desired Emma (the black woman) to

wait for her master, and to watch the candle till he should prepare the lamp. She became sleepy, and by way of resting the candle she placed it in the basket with the child's clothes, and in this state she fell asleep. The candle burnt down, and the twigs of the basket took fire but did not blaze out. It smoldered on without as yet touching the clothes. Her master arrived, and found poor Emma on the floor of my berth, with the basket burning. I tremble when I think of what the consequences would have been in a few minutes. My husband in his haste, on first coming on board, had thrown a large paper of gunpowder into the basket. He came softly into the cabin, and on seeing what I have just described, he was greatly agitated, and flew to see the paper just in time probably to prevent [38] an explosion in which we must all have been destroyed. Thus the Providence of God saved us from a dreadful death, and though I was preserved to suffer many sorrows yet, I praise God for this and all His mercies. The next day we sailed and advanced on our voyage, the weather was cold, and we had much calm, so that our progress was slow, and obliged us to economise our provisions. At the end of three weeks, we got so near the Bar of St. Augustine that we heard the evening gun fired. We anchored outside, waiting for a pilot boat. I was happy in the prospect of going on shore in the morning. In the night, however, a violent gale of wind arose, and it was deemed necessary to take up the anchor, as our situation was not a safe one, and we were actually blown out to sea. The storm continued, and I was attacked with fever which confined me to my bed. You may suppose I wanted many things at such a time. The surgeon was most useful, and my sweet babe was quiet, and easily managed. We continued to be tossed about for an entire week, when we again arrived at the Bar of St. Augustine. The pilot boat came, and the morning being fine, I was wrapped in a blanket and placed on a mattress in the boat, and so brought to shore. The bar is a dreadful one, not always safe, being very shallow and the breakers frightful. However, we landed safely and I was taken to the house of Captain [name illegible], one of our officers, till I was sufficiently recovered to go to a house which he had taken for us. Our regiment was encamped a mile from the town in a pleasant situation. The town of St. Augustine was regularly built by Spaniards. It had been an old station of theirs. It was close to the sea, in front of which was the Governor's house, large and airy. There were rows of good houses on each side, forming three sides of a square, with a row of orange trees in front of them, the shade of which was delightful added to their sweet perfume. A long street extended from the corner of the Governor's house to the end of the town, and there were also rows of house from the corners by the sea, parallel to [39] them. At the end of the town was a most beautiful fort [Castillo de San Marcos] built of stone with great regularity down to the sea, and strong batteries. At the other end was a large building, which had formerly been a Nunnery [St. Francis Barracks], but was now converted into a barrack, and at the time I mention was occupied by the 9th [East Norfolk] Regiment. They were soon to leave it, when our Regiment should encamp. The country round was poor and barren, but there were excellent fruits, such as oranges, lemons, citrons, pomegranates, figs, and melons. With much labour, good vegetables were raised. There was pleasant society and larger than we desired. Our house was small and became hot, so that as the summer was advancing, I requested that my husband should remove to the camp, where the officers had built airy huts. We proposed building one as convenient and as cheap as we could. General [Frederick] Haldimand, who was likewise at St. Augustine, had some time before procured a number of regular wooden frames to join and take asunder, designed to constitute moving barracks. He lent us one or two frames, on which we soon constituted a very nice house, one of the pleasantest I have ever lived in. The frames were jointed, and put up with an open space between, but covered in with the rest making the length of the building 63 feet. In one frame was a large sitting room with two doors and five windows. In the tower was a bedroom and nursery. A long covered piazza went

the whole length of the house. The windows were not glazed, but were latticed to admit the air, with shades from the top to keep out the sun. The whole was covered with rushes on laths, tied with packthread, with an inside lining of a silky kind of grass, also tied with packthread, which looked beautiful and was calculated to defend us from the weather. Our kitchen was fifty yards from the house. We had plenty of workmen to carry all this into effect, and contrived to furnish the house neatly. The Governor [James Grant] gave us ground to keep a cow and some poultry. Thus comfortably settled, we spent our time pleasantly from May till the end of September. The summer was very hot, nor had we the fine refreshing breeze which we had at Pensacola, as in the front of St. Augustine, [40] between the harbour and the sea, lies the island of Anastasia, which though narrow, intercepts the sea breeze, and this latter, passing over the hot sands, brings an oppressive air, quite overcoming. Nor does even this prevail as much as the land breeze, which comes as from an oven. West Florida we had become inured to, and from various causes, I should have preferred being at Pensacola till the expiration of the time we were to spend in America, which we had been led to hope would not exceed five years from the time we came out ....

[page 43] ... My hopes as to my father were at an end, and now all seemed centered in my hitherto exiled home. My spirits consequently became cheerful. About the time of the Equinox, the weather was rough, which induced some of our officers to quit the camp and remove into lodgings, but our house being more secure, we resolved to stay as long as possible. One morning at the end of September, a violent tempest arose, attended with heavy rain. The whole camp was in uproar. The soldiers huts were mostly blown down, the women and children were running out screaming with consternation. The men were all in confusion, and a scene of sad devastation presented itself. You may be assured I felt alarmed. Judge then how this alarm increased when I heard a part of the house crack. I seized my [44] eldest child (who was standing by me) and taking her in my arms ran out to lodge her in some place of safety. I then flew back for my other precious infant, who was asleep quite unconscious of the storm. Several of the officers hastened to assist me, and my husband, who had been out, flew to his home. Having placed the children in safety with our servants, I went back with my husband to secure our little property. We were completely wet, nor could we change our clothes. While we were thus busily engaged, we went for a carriage to convey us to town, and with my two children, arrived in safety at Captain O.'s, who had invited us to his house. My husband saved as much of our furniture as he could, and our loss was very trifling. The house did not actually fall, though so much injured. The camp broke up. The poor soldiers were sheltered in an old building for that night, and the next day all hands went to work to get the barracks in readiness for their reception. We took a house for the winter, and prepared to leave our hospitable host. Our house was pleasantly situated a quarter of a mile from the town. Having some land we removed there in the middle of October, and expecting to remain for a time there we went to expense in making it comfortable. But a military life is one of uncertainty. In January, our Regiment was ordered back to Pensacola, and on the 4th February the Regiment embarked in four sloops of war to return to our old quarters. I was not sorry to leave St. Augustine, and felt a partiality for Pensacola. Our voyage was tedious and we encountered some difficulties, but these are not sufficiently interesting to detain you with their relation. On the 4th of March, we arrived at Pensacola, where the barge of the Druid Man O' War came for us, and we landed on the wharf which we found crowded with our old acquaintances who welcomed our return; nor were we less glad to join them.