



# Ralph Waldo Emerson Gilbert

January 17, 1882-July 30, 1939

Interred: Section P, Lot/Row 21E1, Space 2



Ralph Waldo Emerson Gilbert was born on January 17, 1882, in Taylorsville, Kentucky. He moved to Shelbyville in 1886, alongside his father, mother, older brother and sister. After he got his high school diploma, he graduated in 1901 from the University of Virginia, then the University of Louisville (UofL) Law School at 19 years of age. After he graduated from law school, he carried on his family's legacy as a U.S Congressman in the General Assembly, following his father and grandfather.

Ralph was the husband of Jane Tompson Gilbert and they had a daughter, Jane Emerson Gilbert Wells. Ralph's first wife died in 1883. Two years later, Ralph remarried. His second wife was Victoria M. Vodito, his secretary.

Ralph's grandfather served in the General Assembly as a representative. Ralph's father, George G. Gilbert, served as a U.S. Congressman and a state senator. George attended the common schools of Cecilian College and Lyndland Institute. After his diploma from Cecilian and Lyndland, he graduated from UofL law school. After passing the bar he served as a prosecuting attorney for Spencer County from 1876 to 1880. George then became a member of the Kentucky Senate from 1885 to 1889. After serving as senator, George was a delegate at the 1896 Democratic National Convention. He was elected to the 56th District and to the following three seats of Congress from March 4, 1899, to March 3, 1907. He began practicing law before he died in Louisville on November 9, 1909.

After Ralph graduated from the University of Virginia and the UofL Law School, he served as a defense attorney, then was elected as the Shelby County Judge, serving for seven years, from 1910 to 1917. He then served four terms in the U.S. Congress, from 1920 to 1928. One year later he served only one term as Kentucky Legislative Representative.

Afterward, he returned to his roots and served another term in the U.S. Congress in 1931. Lastly, in 1936, he served in the Kentucky State Senate until he died in 1939. Mr. Gilbert died July 30, 1939, in Louisville, KY, but no cause of death was explained.

Ralph Gilbert is also remembered for his assistance in the defense of the Garr brothers during their notorious murder trial in Shelbyville, Kentucky. The sister of the Garr brothers was found with a 0.45 caliber bullet in her chest, lying in a ditch. The caliber was found to be that of her boyfriend's gun. The night before he was sent to trial he was staying at the hotel in Shelbyville. The Garr brothers shot him because they thought that he had killed their sister. In the end, the three Garr brothers were cleared of the charges. One brother claimed self-defense, one claimed mental illness, and the last claimed that he was unarmed. Ralph Gilbert was such a skilled defense attorney that he got them out of being charged with murder.

Written by: Jacie Brown, Dixie Calvert, Toby Gilpin, & Cambelle Montfort  
Final editing and formatting by Friends of Grove Hill.

#### **Resources:**

*The New History of Shelby County, Kentucky*, “Henry H. Denhart,” (Prospect: Harmony House Publishers, 2003), 331-333.

*The New History of Shelby County, Kentucky*, “Ralph Waldo Gilbert,” by Kevin Collins (Prospect: Harmony House Publishers, 2003), 572-3.

**Stories Behind the Stones** – A Project Based Learning Partnership of Shelby County High School Junior History Class 2024, Friends of Grove Hill Cemetery, Calvary Cemetery Friends, and Shelby County Historical Society.

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