



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### **“Sister” Elizabeth Kenny: Veteran, bush nurse, pioneer**

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On Nov. 11, 1946, Sister Elizabeth Kenny placed a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Revolutionary Soldier in the cemetery of the Old Presbyterian Church on South Fairfax Street. The *Alexandria Gazette* claimed that she was the first British subject to decorate the tomb. The newspaper included a list of dignitaries, primarily American Legion members, who accompanied Sister Elizabeth. In the same year, a biopic of her story was released as *Sister Kenny*. Rosalind Russell was nominated for an Oscar for her portrayal of her. Her fame grew and five years later, Sister Elizabeth topped Eleanor Roosevelt in a poll as the most-admired woman in the United States.

Sister Elizabeth started as a bush nurse in her native country of Australia. She gained the title of “Sister” not by taking religious vows, but by serving as a nurse on cargo ships carrying troops between Australia and England during World War I. At the time, the rank of “Sister” was one below “Matron” in the nursing hierarchy, equivalent to the Rank of First Lieutenant. She would use the title for the rest of her life.

When she returned to her native state of Queensland, she invented an improved stretcher for ambulances called the Sylvia Stretcher. But her next invention brought about the invitation to place the wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Revolutionary Soldier. While nursing a friend’s child, Kenny observed that applying warm compresses and using motion on pediatric polio patients brought better results than the conventional treatment of splints and braces. She began to use this treatment on other patients. Sister Elizabeth also treated shortened muscles by encouraging patients to learn the name of the muscles they were using, how the muscles worked, and to take a role in their own recovery. After success in her home country, she set out to educate caregivers in England and the United States about her polio treatments. Today, she is often credited as the founder of modern physical therapy.

While she had practical experience, Sister Elizabeth Kenny did not have any medical education. And that led to immense resistance from the medical community, as you can imagine. In her 1943 autobiography *And They Shall Walk*, she remembered, “I was wholly unprepared for the extraordinary attitude of the medical men in its readiness to condemn anything that smacked of reform.”

While her outreach met resistance in New York and Chicago, her treatment found a home at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. In 1942, four years before she visited Alexandria, the Sister Kenny Institute opened in Minneapolis to treat polio patients. Later, her work did receive widespread acceptance in the United States, and in 1950, President Harry Truman signed a bill allowing her to enter and leave the United States without a visa. The only other person so honored at the time was the Marquis de Lafayette.

The 1953 invention of the Salk vaccine changed the hold polio had on the lives of American parents and children. While physical therapy continues its wide acceptance in our country, its roots as part of Sister Kenny’s polio treatment are long forgotten. It’s too bad, as, during her visit to Alexandria in 1946, she was one of our most famous visitors.

*“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical*



## **Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia**

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*images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

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