

The Finger Lakes region of New York is famous for beautiful landscapes, agricultural bounty, entrepreneurial spirit, and historic heroes who changed America. Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Elizabeth Blackwell, and Clara Barton are just a few of the famous women from our area who were abolitionists and suffragettes, the first woman to become an American doctor, and the founder of the American Red Cross, respectively. Another local woman who should be added to the list is Irena Joyner Totman, Civil War veteran from Bristol, NY..

Born on October 20, 1814 in Sullivan, NY in Madison County, Irena married Ward Totman in 1831 and moved to Bristol, NY in an oxcart from Jefferson County NY with 3 daughters, the youngest just months old. They had seven children, built a log cabin, and farmed the land, humble beginnings for a woman who made a heroic journey. In August of 1862 Irena, not only encouraged her son, Levi Ward Totman, to join the Grand Army of the Republic, she followed him to Rochester for his enlistment and proudly stood next to him for his induction photo. It is recorded that her husband, Ward, was not as happy about the enlistment into Company K., First NY Mounted Rifle, and his absence from the photos and journal entries suggest that he would have preferred his son to remain and help on the farm. It must have taken a great deal of courage and strength of character to disagree with her husband and send her oldest son off to war especially after losing two sons in infancy. Later that year while fighting in Virginia, Levi became ill with typhus and Irena took it upon herself to travel to Virginia in January of 1863 to nurse him back to health. Her military pass issued by the provost Marshal, Capt. A.P. Davis, orders her to report to the Provost Marshal at Norfolk. Taking this piece of paper, that amounts to a passport to allow her to travel to the front lines of combat, she took her medical supplies to the field hospital to find her son and help him and his friends as well.

Family journals report that Irena paid \$10 to practice medicine in Bristol, NY and was always called to doctor someone and therefore her experience was officially recognized and welcomed upon her arrival in Virginia. According to family sources, she stayed for months and cared for other wounded men in Levi's company and recognizing the great need for nurses, trained women to help her. Some journal entries suggest that she wore herself to exhaustion and other entries say that when she brought the seriously ill Levi home to recover she succumbed to stomach cancer in July of 1865. She is buried prominently in the front row of the Bristol Center Cemetery and her grave is adorned with a flag to honor her as Bristol's first female veteran. Her children revered her memory and her service by passing along her name through many generations and some of them are buried behind her on the same hill. Her son returned to the war in 1864 and fought at Gainesford, Blackwater Bridge, Edenton Rd. and Laurel Hill. After discharged on June 12, 1865, he returned home to Bristol and his younger brother headed to medical school to become a doctor. Irena's influence again.

It would have been altogether appropriate and poignant if Clara Barton and Elizabeth Blackwell had met Irena during her service in the Civil War or during her tenure as an unofficial doctor in the small town of Bristol. They surely were kindred spirits in service to our patriots in war and those who were ill at home. How much more Irena would have accomplished if she had lived is unknown, but for what she did she deserves the title of American heroine.