

## The Very Long Life of a Former Slave in Perinton

Newspapers in several New York towns trumpeted the amazing news: the death of Fairport's Nancy Armstrong, a former slave, at 127 years of age. If true, she would have lived five years longer than the oldest documented person on record. But it's not true.

Reports of the longevity of Nancy Armstrong were greatly exaggerated, and it's difficult to say just how old she was when laid to rest at Fairport's Greenvale Cemetery on February 28, 1894. Documents place her birth as early as 1767 or as late as 1797. Regardless of her age, she lived a remarkable life. Nancy and her brother, Richard Armstrong, were said to be the slave property of Solomon Cook, a tavern owner in Amenia, Dutchess County. When New York abolished slavery in 1827, Nancy stayed with the Cook family. After Solomon Cook died, she went to work for his son, William Cook.



*1940s view of the former Cook home at 182 West Church Street*

In 1833 William Cook and his family, Nancy included, left Dutchess County and headed west to Perinton. They likely traveled north on the Hudson River aboard a steamer, then took a packet boat to Fairport on the Erie Canal. Nancy moved on to her third generation of the Cook family upon the marriage of William's son, John Wesley Cook to Sarah Marie House. The young couple began their marriage in a new home near the Erie Canal at Fullamtown in about 1847. Nancy Armstrong spent the rest of her life helping to raise the children and grandchildren of John and Sarah Cook, preparing meals, housekeeping, and ultimately caring for five generations

of the family. She sometimes worked for other Perinton families as well, but she always returned to the Cook family.

Upon her death in 1894, newspapers near and far reported on the life of the woman known throughout Perinton as “Aunt Nancy”. By all accounts she was a loved and respected member of the community. Reverend Hunt of the Fairport First Baptist Church conducted the service, where it is likely there was not an empty pew or a dry eye. According to the newspaper, “Beside her coffin wept the little grandchildren of the man (John Wesley Cook) ... whose father she had held in her arms as a newborn infant.”

Nancy Armstrong never married, had children, a home of her own, or even a gravestone at Greenvale Cemetery. Still, she lived what seems to have been a life of contentment, for a century, give or take, with the family she first served as a slave. It was said that she had forgotten that in her younger days she was a slave. Perhaps that was a blessing.

*Written by Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian*

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