

REMEMBERING

NANCY HARRIS QUACKENBUSH

by Rose O'Keefe

(Editor's Note: This article was written for publication in 2018, the 200th birthday of Nancy Harris, but there wasn't enough room in the Epitaph to include it among all the other 200-year-old subjects to commemorate.)

The artist's conception of the southeastern area of the original cemetery, seen in the artist's rendering at right, gives us a feeling for the landscape at the time of the cemetery's inception in the late 1830s. There is farmland to the south with the Bristol Hills visible in the far distance. The farm building on the right was demolished when the land became a cemetery. The man is walking along the path that became Mount Hope Avenue. Nancy Harris' cabin was located just to the north of where the artist saw this view.)

Nancy Harris Quackenbush (1818–1900) has a distinct claim to fame. Her marker text in Mount Hope Cemetery reads: BORN ON THIS SITE. She was in fact born in a cabin in what is now land in the cemetery. Even if you've walked the unpaved trails near the north entrance, it may be a

stretch to picture the landscape *before* it opened in 1838, let alone 20 years *earlier*.

Let's try to picture what it was like for Nancy's family when they first arrived in 1816. It's easy now to read online about "The Summer That Never Was"; for two weeks in 1815, a volcano in Indonesia spewed so much ash and gases that it killed hundreds of thousands there and

cooled global weather for a year. Crops died in most of New England, eastern Canada and parts of western Europe. A hard frost in May 1816 killed crops from New England to upstate New York. In June, there were frosts and snow from Maine to New Jersey, and in July and August, reports



of the ground being frozen, hills “barren like winter”, everything stopping growing and ice on lakes and rivers as far as northwestern Pennsylvania.

We don't know which month her parents reached her grandfather's cabin, but it wouldn't have made much difference that summer. The lifestyle of early settlers was well described in *Northfield... on the Genesee* by M. S. MacNab, K. W. Thompson and S. C. Husted, who demystify those times. In 1808, Nancy's grandfather Jacob Miller Sr. most likely traveled in March while the ground and



Jacob Miller's log cabin would have looked very much like this, which was typical construction for the period.

streams were still frozen, in an ox-drawn sleigh with the oxen feeding on tender spring buds along the way. By 1808 native trails which, when enlarged, were called a white man's trail, would have made travel possible from Canandaigua to the Oliver Stone Tavern in Brighton. What made him choose a remote spot near the river, five slow miles along what is today's Elmwood Avenue?

Miller would have spent a year or two clearing land and planting crops between the stumps while the family lived through summer's sweltering heat and winter's brutal cold in a rugged cabin. That cabin had a lifespan of about 10 years—long enough to build a first farmhouse. By the time Nancy's family arrived in 1816, after years of wind, rain and woodsmoke, Grandpa Miller's first cabin would have been weather beaten.

We can get a glimpse of what Nancy's early life was like from this write-up in the *Epitaph*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Winter 1990, by *Richard Reisem with Betty Schmidt*.

“When little Nancy was born in 1818, a log cabin stood on the site of her present grave. The cabin had been built by her maternal grandfather, Jacob Miller. Miller came

here prospecting for land around, we think, 1808. He established a farm in what is now the Elmwood/Mount Hope Avenue area. The western part of his farm formed the southeast portion of the old section of Mount Hope Cemetery. Jacob Miller built a log cabin on that portion of his land in 1810. They had to barricade the door of the cabin at night to keep out the bears and wolves.

“When the British invaded Charlotte [N.Y.] in the War of 1812, Miller feared he might lose his ox team to the British, should they be successful in their invasion. So his son, Harvey, drove the oxen through the woods near the cabin into a marsh (now Sylvan Waters in the cemetery) and hid there in the thick brush with the oxen until the all-clear signal came.

“When Jacob Miller and his family moved out of the cabin in 1816, he let his daughter and son-in-law, Amanda and Daniel Harris, have the Mount Hope cabin. It was a crowded little cabin, because Amanda and Daniel arrived from Otsego County with nine children in tow. And Nancy hadn't even been born yet. When Nancy Harris was born in 1818, the area surrounding her home was still wild.

“One pioneer's letter describes the place where the old entrance to Mount Hope Cemetery (a stone's throw from Nancy's cabin) stands today. He wrote: ‘There was a low, swampy place in there, filled in with a perfect mat of high alders, choke cherries, and high bush huckleberries, and people said that lights moved around there in the daytime, and in the night would start up and move off up into the hills and that horrid sounds had been heard, and we boys always ran like a streak through there, or if we had a horse, we put him through on the double-quick till we rose on the hill going by Judge Warner's. It was literally a howling wilderness, so howling with wild beasts that at night, alone and unarmed, no individual dared venture along the road there, much less to penetrate the woods at the base of those hills. I can remember when no common Indian, versed as he might be with the voices of the wild animals of the forests, could interpret the discordant sounds of beast and fowl and frog that were sprung upon the air there any fall night. It was through this passage that George G. Sill of Old Lyme, Connecticut, afterwards the first bookseller in Rochester, had to be escorted in the night by Daniel Harris, because the road was so blind, and there were so many wildcats, bears, and wolves in that neighborhood.’”



To save his oxen from being drafted in the War of 1812, Harvey Miller hid them in this marsh, which is Sylvan Waters today.

Here is where little Nancy spent her early years. She saw the forests leveled, the roads cut through, and the marshes drained and filled. She married a boat builder, John Quackenbush, on December 18, 1845, in the town of Greece. In the 1850s, Nancy and John Quackenbush, along with their young daughter Mary and Nancy's mother Amanda, lived at 7 Marshall Street, while John supported them with his boat building trade, a highly needed craft in the days of the Erie Canal. Records that we studied disagree on when Quackenbush died, but it was probably in the late 1850s, so Nancy's marriage was all too brief.

Widow Nancy spent her final years in Buffalo, where she died of influenza at the age of 82. She was buried on April 3, 1900, in Mount Hope Cemetery on the site of her birth

where the log cabin had disappeared perhaps 60 years before. Why not pay a visit to the grave of this Rochester pioneer and let your mind imagine the surroundings that young Nancy experienced.

When her obituary in the *Democrat and Chronicle* of April 9, 1900, said "she saw the forests leveled, the roads cut through, the hills lowered and the marshes filled", that work could have been done by her grandfather, father or brothers with the help of sturdy oxen.

In the obit, she is said to have seen "the erection of every building in the city, and the removal of every old landmark. A volume could be written concerning the history and reminiscences of Jacob Miller Sr. and his family. Mrs. Quackenbush was laid in her final resting place only a few

rods from the location where stood the log house in which she was born, and from which could then only be seen a bubbling spring, and an Indian trail. Her life was exemplary and her daughter and family will sadly miss her genial companionship.”

It was because of reading *Northfield* that I don't feel nostalgic about the old days. That “bubbling spring” was mostly likely in the area now filled by the artificial Sylvan Waters and someone had to trek uphill to fetch pails of water and carry them back. If not for her distinct birthplace, Nancy's life between childhood and old age could have been like that of countless women who were the anonymous backbones of growing villages like Rochester. She may not have had much time to notice the view from her laundry tub, especially if she had to find work after being widowed. My guess is that until she became too old, Nancy could have been a model for the saying, “A man works from sun to sun, but a woman's work is never done.”

NANCY'S FAMILY

One detail from a clipping by the late author Arch Merrill is that the 1820 census listed Daniel Harris with eight unnamed others at that location, including three children under 10. This doesn't tell us how many were born or died between their arrival and the time of the census.

Nancy's obit filled in the names of the extended family and mentioned that Climena, Nancy's maternal aunt, as the first burial in the small graveyard on the east side of Mount Hope Avenue, near Highland. (West Brighton Cemetery was closed in 1878.) It lists brothers Linus, Sluman, Chauncey, Daniel, and sisters Mrs. William Smith and Mrs. Luther Crittenden. Linus is

described as a prominent business man in Buffalo, and her brother-in-law William Smith as a boat builder in Rochester known for integrity, business savvy and building up “quite a fortune.” Daniel, who became an Odd Fellow, spent the first three years of his life in the log house. Did *D&C* readers know what was meant by “the last nine years of his life were spent on the grounds”?

Nancy only had one daughter. Even so, she probably spent hours cooking, baking, sewing and doing laundry. There's no way of knowing if she knew how to read or if, as was common, she listened to the Bible and news, read by others. Most likely, her life would have revolved around her family.

The City Directory lists eight canal basins in the village and vicinity in 1827. The Directory for 1841 lists no women but some men by the name of Harris, including: Linus, weighmaster, h. South, and Sluman, contractor, h. Broadway; 1844 includes only Linus, h. 17 Elm; 1845 has Linus, boat captain, h. 79 Monroe; and Sluman, contractor, h. Broadway near Union. With her brothers working around the Canal, would she have heard from them or seen for herself the building of the aqueduct over the Canal between 1836 and 1842?

And, what is one to make of a newspaper notice from October 1845? It includes the name of a Nancy Harris among those listed under “Indictments: The Grand Jury,



Nancy Harris Quackenbush (1818-1900) Born on this site.

during their recent sessions, found 23 indictments. The following persons were arraigned yesterday and severally [sic] pleaded not guilty.” Two women were charged with keeping a “disorderly house”. Whether it was the same Nancy or not, at the time, women’s names were only printed in the papers at their wedding and death, so this record, even if it were for someone else, would have been public shaming of the worst sort. Like many women looking for income, did she rent rooms to boarders? If that was her, how did her life change with her marriage at age 27 a few months later in December 1845? We don’t know, but New York State law did not let married women keep their own money. The city directory for 1855 lists Quackenbush, John, boat builder, h. 7 Marshall; for 1857, John, carman, h. 7 Marshall; nothing for him in 1859, and Nancy, Mrs., b. 7 Marshall in 1861. That house number was close to the Erie Canal near Griffiths Street. The family’s remains were returned to Rochester for burial, but a search of the records in Mount Hope showed only a Maria Quackenbush, age 4, who died of influenza on Aug. 1, 1854; and John A. Quackenbush of Marshall Street, who died of consumption on March 10, 1861, age 40. He sounds like Nancy’s husband. If she had grown up under rugged conditions, how did she take to living in her wealthy brother’s house in Buffalo? Such questions often gives rise to more.

EARLY BOUNDARIES

The area of today’s cemetery gatehouse was not in fledgling Rochester on the *west* side of the Genesee River – then in Genesee County, which stretched all the way to Lake Erie. It was in Brighton, for which an early map shows 18,000 acres of 80 or so lots in Ontario County on the *east* side of the Genesee River to Seneca Lake. What may be hard to understand is that Brighton was an expanse of such dense woodlands stretching from the marshland north of Rush to Lake Ontario, that it was a struggle for people to move there and getting across the river wasn’t easy either. The closest bridge was about 10 miles to the south at Avon and it wasn’t until September 1812 that state funds were used to build a north state-road bridge downtown in Genesee County, two miles to the north of the Harris family’s cabin.

The first census in December 1815, showed that Rochesterville, as it was called, had a population of 331. It grew to 1,049 in September 1818 when the second census was taken. They lived on the west side of the Genesee River, in Genesee County. Some digging revealed that Brighton, in Ontario County until 1821 when Monroe County was created, had a population of 1,972. What do those numbers tell us? For starters, that there were more people *east* of the River because access to the west was still difficult. Just as a tombstone doesn’t tell someone’s life story, census statistics don’t tell us what life was like for those thousand or so people on either side of the river. Those on the west side usually traveled up from Pennsylvania through Dansville and Avon. For decades, the Genesee River was a formidable barrier and those on the east side came across rough trails, now Routes. 5 & 20. Ah, if her cold stone marker could talk, what would it tell us about Nancy’s early days in the wilderness by the river?





CLEANING STONES IN MOUNT HOPE

Eight volunteers from the Rochester Renegades Women's Rugby Team cleaned gravestones in the cemetery. From left, they are Diana, Cassie, Marissa, Sophie, Eibhlin, Vicki, leader Anna Jannes, Kate, and Starla.

by Richard Reisem

Last September Anna Jannes, a former trustee of Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery and now co-chair of the Stone Cleaning Committee, led a group of volunteers from the Rochester Renegades Women's Rugby Team to clean gravestones in Mount Hope Cemetery's Section G. They used a new product called Wet-and-Forget, which was provided by Mayer Hardware as a donation to the Friends of Mount Hope.

The process involved spraying Wet-and-Forget on gravestones that had, over many decades, collected moss, lichen, tree sap, acid rain, dirt, and other detritus. Wet-and-Forget is an easy one-step process. Spray it to cover the stone and leave it on to dry. By the time the solution dries on the gravestone, it is already starting to work to remove the unwanted organic material. The results to the gravestones can take up to a month to be seen, but most

stones have a noticeable difference in appearance within a day or two. The product has been approved by the U.S. Department of the Interior for use on gravestones in historic cemeteries.

Working in Section G, which is a particularly large and hilly area of the cemetery, the eight young ladies from the Rochester Renegades not only systematically sprayed dirty gravestones, but in their enthusiasm also pulled weeds, dug out fallen stones, sprayed poison ivy, and, according to their leader Anna Jannes, "asked tons of questions and were just the greatest group of volunteers to have around." They want to come back next summer.

When you are next in the cemetery, take a walk in Section G and see how great it looks.





Bluebird Trail

by Richard Reisem

In 2006, Sheryl Gracewski, reported that there were bluebirds living in Mount Hope Cemetery, but the nest boxes were in bad shape. Sheryl and her husband, Tom Nash, volunteered to refurbish the bluebird trail if they were given money for new boxes and poles. The FOMH board provided money for materials, and 12 new boxes were installed. One old one that was in fairly good condition was cleaned and reused. Sheryl and Tom monitor the boxes regularly, although friends check them during the spring and summer when they are away for more than a week.

In the fall of 2018, Sheryl reported, “The number of bluebird broods nesting in our 13 boxes decreased this year, after a near steady increase since the box revitalization in 2006. Part of the reason for this decrease is the absence of second broods. This year we initially had 6 bluebird nests, each of which yielded 3-4 fledglings. There were a few additional bluebird nests built later in the season but we didn’t see any eggs in them. In addition, there was only one successful wren brood and no chickadee broods in our boxes. Biology Professor Jack Werren at the University of Rochester collected most of the nests just after fledging to be used in studies of the evolutionary changes in blowflies and their parasites.

“We are delighted that a flying squirrel is continuing to use one of our boxes for nesting. We try not to disturb her, so we do not check that box when we think she is there. We did spray a wasp nest in the box in late June. In late October there were new leaves in the box, so perhaps she is building a new nest.

“We had a great summer observing not only the bluebirds but also all the birds and wildlife in Mt. Hope Cemetery.”



There are 13 bluebird boxes in the cemetery tended by volunteers.



One family of flying squirrels is believed to reside in a bluebird house.



Flying squirrels actually glide, not fly.





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A masterful polished memorial was recently added to Range 7 at Adlington Avenue near Oak and makes a truly compassionate statement in Mount Hope Cemetery.



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