The Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince
by Nancy Gardner Prince

NARRATIVE OF MRS. PRINCE.

400 STORIES PROJECT

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ABOUT THE MISSION OF THE GLOUCESTER400+ STORIES PROJECT

An important part of the mission of the Gloucester400+ Stories Project is to hear the unheard voices and share the untold stories of people who may have been persecuted, oppressed, misrepresented, or marginalized in the past. Given a choice, our preference is to hear the stories directly from the writings of such people. Of course, that is not always possible. Freely writing about one’s own experiences in times of slavery, war, and persecution would have been a great challenge for anyone in those conditions. However, their stories do exist.

FOREWORD

Meet Nancy Gardner Prince. She was a black woman, born free in 1799, and for a period of time her family lived in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Her father, stepfather, and other family members had been enslaved or escaped enslavement. According to her memoir, her “stepfather was stolen from Africa, and while the vessel was at anchor in one of the Eastern ports, he succeeded in making his escape from his captors by swimming ashore. After a lapse of two years he came to Gloucester and followed the sea....”

Here we present an excerpt from the 1850 edition of Prince’s memoir. We have left the words untouched. The excerpt is from the start of her story, and you can find a link to the rest of her story at the end of this document. We strongly encourage you to read the rest of her memoir which leads her out of Gloucester to the royal courts of Russia, and to humanitarian work in Jamaica. Quite a life she had, full of both struggle and achievement, in a world full of challenges.

Thank you Mrs. Prince. We are honored to share this story, in your words.
A

NARRATIVE

OF THE

LIFE AND TRAVELS,

OF

MRS. NANCY PRINCE.

BOSTON:
PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHOR.
1850.
The Narrative of Mrs. Prince

An Excerpt from the Memoir of Nancy Gardner Prince

As my unprofitable life has been spared, and I have been, by the providence of God, wonderfully preserved, it is with gratitude to my Heavenly Father, and duty to myself, that I attempt to give to the public a short narrative of my life and travels.

I was born in Newburyport, in 1799. My mother was the daughter of Tobias Wornton, who was stolen from Africa, when a lad, and was a slave of Capt. Winthrop Sargent; and, although a slave, he fought for liberty, and was in the Revolutionary army at the battle of Bunker Hill. My grandmother was an Indian. My father, Thomas Gardener, was born on Nantucket; his parents were of African descent, and he died of bleeding at the lungs, leaving my mother a widow the second time, with an infant in her arms. She then returned to Gloucester, her native place. My mother soon married again her third husband, by whom she had six children. My step-father was stolen from Africa, and while the vessel was at anchor in one of the Eastern ports, he succeeded in making his escape from his captors by swimming ashore. After a lapse of two years he came to Gloucester, and followed the sea, and was twelve years with Capt. Elias Davis, in the employ of Capt. Fitz W. Sargent. During the war he was taken by a British Privateer, and pressed into their service. He was sick with the dropsy a long while, and died in 1813. My mother was again left a widow, with an infant six weeks old. When she heard of her husband’s death, she replied, “I thought it; what shall I do with these children?” Her grief, poverty, and responsibilities, were too much for her; she never was the mother that she had been before. I was at this time in Capt. Sargent’s family. I shall never forget the feelings I experienced on hearing of the decease of my father-in-law; he was never very kind to the first set of children. But by industry, a humble home was provided for my mother and younger children. Death had twice visited our family within three months, my father having buried my grandfather before he sailed. I thought I would go home a little while, and try to comfort my mother. The three oldest children were put into families. My brother and myself went out of town, in one family, where we staid until the war was over. We often went home with our wages, and all the comforts we could get; but we could not approach our mother as we wished. God in mercy took one little brother of seven years, who had pined in consumption; thus our family was scattered. I determined to
get more for my labor, and I left Essex and went to Salem, in 1814, to service in a family. I had always enjoyed the happy privilege of religious instruction. My dear grandfather was a member of a Congregational Church, and a good man; he always attended church in the morning, and took us with him; and in the afternoon he took care of the smaller children, while my mother attended with her little group. He thought it wrong for us to go to a school where the teacher was not devoted to God, for I early knew the difference between right and wrong. They had family prayers morning and evening. I often looked at them, and thought to myself, “Is this your religion?” I did not wonder that the girl who had lived there previous to myself, went home to die. There were seven in the family; two of them being sick, one with a fever and the other in a consumption, of course the work must have been very severe, especially the washing. Sabbath evening I had to prepare for the wash. I was then but fourteen years of age, and a stranger. I was called up at two o’clock in the morning, and what embittered my heavy task, I was not spoken kindly to, but was blamed for being slow, and for not performing my work well. Hard labor and unkindness were too much for me, and in three months my health and strength were gone. I went home to Gloucester in their chaise. I found my mother in poor health, but through the mercy of God, and the attention and skill of Dr. Dale, and the kindness of friends, I was restored, so that in a few months I was able again to go to work, although my side afflicted me, which I attributed to over-working myself.

In 1815 I returned to Salem, accompanied by my eldest sister, and obtained good places. She afterwards returned to Boston as a nursery girl, where she lived a few months, and was deluded away on February 7th of 1815. A friend came to Salem and informed me of it. Her death would not have been so painful to me. We loved each other very much, and more particularly as our step-father was not very kind to us; we used to say as soon as we were large enough we would go away, as we did. It was very cold, but notwithstanding, I was so distressed about my sister, that I started on foot the next morning after I heard of it. At Lynn Hotel we refreshed ourselves, and all seemed much interested about me. Two women took me aside, and inquired how it was I was with that woman. I told my reason. My companion had a little son of hers in her arms. By the time we were seven miles from Salem, cold and fatigued, I could walk no farther, and we hired a horse and sleigh, and a man to drive us to Boston, where we arrived at seven in the evening. I put up with a friend of mine, who lived in Bedford street, who received me very kindly. My feet, hands, and ears, were all frost-bitten. I needed all the hospitality that was extended to me. I was young and inexperienced, but my object was hallowed. God chooses
in his wisdom the weak things of earth; without his aid how could I ever have rescued my lost sister! Mr. Brown, when he learned my errand, kindly offered to assist me. He found where my sister resided, and taking with him a large cane, he accompanied me to the house. My sister did not see me until I clasped her round the neck. The old woman flew at me, and bid me take my hands off of her. Mr. Brown defended me with his cane from her attacks. There were many men as well as girls there, and all was confusion. When my sister came to herself, she looked upon me. I said, “Sylvia, my dear sister, what are you here for? Will you go with me?” The enraged old woman cried out, “No, she cannot go.” Sylvia replied, “I will go.” Then followed a scene. The old woman seized her to drag her down into the kitchen; I held on to her, while Mr. Brown, at my side, so used his great cane, and so threatened her, that she was obliged to let her go; and, after collecting her things, she left the house with Mr. Brown and myself.

The next day we started for Salem, and went to the stage-office; we expected Mr. Low, the driver of the Gloucester stage, who knew us as his towns-people, would let us take passage with him without any difficulty; but he refused, unless we would ride upon the top. It was very cold, and we had never rode in that way; his inhumanity grieves me even now. I had sent my mother my wages the week before, and what money I had, I had taken in advance of my employers. We were greatly embarrassed, when a colored man, unknown to us, penetrated our difficulties, and asked us if we had two dollars; we told him we had; he very kindly took us to another stage-office, and we bargained for a horse and sleigh to take us to Salem, where we arrived safely in about two hours and a half; and we gave up our conveyance to the same owners, with ten thousand thanks to our colored friend, and to our Heavenly Father; for had we attempted to walk, we must have frozen by the way. The lady I lived with (Mrs. John Deland,) received us very kindly, and permitted my sister to remain with me awhile; then she returned to Gloucester, to the family who brought her up, and I thought we had gained a great victory.

My brother George and myself were very desirous of making our mother comfortable; he went to sea for that purpose. The next April I came to Boston, to get a higher price for my labor, for we had agreed to maintain our mother, and we hoped she would take our little brother, who was supported by the town, and take care of him. George came home, and sailed again in the same vessel, leaving her a drawbill of half of his wages. My sister returned to Boston to find me, and wished to procure a place to work out. She tried me much. I thought it a needy time,
for I had not yielded my heart to the will of God, though I had many impressions, and formed many resolutions; but the situation that I had been placed in, having left my mother’s home at the age of eight, had not permitted me to do as I wished, though the kind counsels of my dear grandfather and pious teachers followed me wherever I went. Care after care oppressed me; my mother wandered about like a Jew; the young children who were in families were dissatisfied; all hope but in God was lost. I then resolved in my mind to seek an interest in my Saviour, and put my trust in him. For that purpose I changed my place for one more retired, got my sister with me, and then God blessed my soul; being justified by faith, I found peace with God, even the forgiveness of sins, through Jesus Christ. After living sixteen years and five months without any hope, myself and seven others were baptized, in obedience to the great command.

My brother George returned home, and we again provided a home for mother and the little ones; he went to sea, and affairs now seemed to promise comfort and respectability. But mother chose to marry again; this was like death to us all. George returned home, but was so disappointed, that he shipped again to come no more. Although a boy of sixteen years, he was as steady and capable as most men at twenty. My cares were consequently increased, having no one to share them with me. My next brother, who lived in S. Essex, came to Salem to his mother, but was driven away by her husband, and came to me. I carried him to Gloucester, and left him in the hands of the town; but he stayed but three weeks, and returned to me again. I then boarded him for one dollar a week, until I could procure suitable employment.

When winter came, poor mother’s health was declining; little Samuel could do but little; my father-in-law was very cross, for he expected to be supported by my brother George. I could not see my mother suffer; I therefore left my place and went to Salem, to watch over her and Samuel, and lived with the Rev. Dr. Boles’s family. In the spring I returned to Boston, and took my brother with me. Soon after, my sister Lucy left her place and went to her mother, but was not permitted to stay. My mother wrote to me, requesting me to take care of her. I then determined in my mind to bring her to Boston, and, if possible, procure a place for her; and on her arrival, I obtained board for her and Samuel at a friend’s, for one dollar a week. My brother John, that I had boarded, at last got a place where he had wages; soon the Lord opened a way for little Samuel. Dr. Phelps took him to bring up, so that I was left with one only to sustain. Soon my hopes were blasted. John left his place, and was several months on my hands again; finally, he made up his mind to go to sea. I was so thankful that he had concluded to do something,
that I took two month’s wages in advance to fit him out for Liverpool. In five months he returned, without a single thing but what he stood in; his wages were small, not enough to render him comfortable; had not a friend given him a home, he would have been again dependent on my exertions. Another friend took Lucy, with whom she staid eleven months; she continued in different families for some time, till she was about twelve. I left her at the Rev. Mr. Mann’s family, at Westminster, for a certain time, thinking it would be best for her, and John I left to fight his own battles. My sister Sylvia was one of my greatest trials. Knowing she was in Boston, my mother, in one of her spells of insanity, got away from her home, and travelled here after her. She came where I lived. My employers were very kind to her. After tarrying a few days with me, I hired a horse and chaise, and took them both back to Salem; and returned back to my place in 1822, with a determination to do something for myself. I left my place after three months, and went to learn a trade; and, after seven years of anxiety and toil, I made up my mind to leave this country.

AFTERWORD

So began Nancy Gardner Prince’s travels around the world. But her journey was more than just geographical. Hers was an inner journey of faith and despair, kindness and cruelty, which led her to become one of the notable abolitionists of her time. We salute Nancy Gardner Prince for speaking out and fighting for the rights of others, even when it meant risking her own life.

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