

Nancy Ward Statue – Origin and travels of a unique historic art sculpture

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 23, 2006)

The following story is a one that is very personal to me. For the past 30 years I have researched the history of Nancy Ward, Beloved Woman of the Cherokee who lived in what is now East Tennessee during the Revolutionary War era. She was likely the single most influential woman of the era in this area of our country. I got started in this research when John Rice Irwin introduced her to me in a most unusual manner – he asked me to photograph a granite statue of an Indian on a white woman's grave.

To appreciate this unique granite statue, one must first understand this most famous Cherokee Beloved Woman - Nancy Ward. She was born in 1738 in the sacred Cherokee village of Chota on the Little Tennessee River. When she died in 1822 in a small inn she kept on the Ocoee River the story is told by eyewitnesses of a light that left her body floated up to the ceiling and out the door traveling in the direction of Chota.

This tumultuous period of history in the land west of the Appalachian mountain range and in the river valleys of the frontier lands in what is now East Tennessee saw the influx of thousands of white settlers and much blood shed. Nancy Ward's cousin, Dragging Canoe, took a strong stand that to save his people the white settlers must be killed and that no land treaty should be agreed to that took the Cherokee land and gave it to the white settlers. Nancy Ward choose the path of peace and worked toward helping her people learn the ways of the ever growing number of settlers coming through the gaps in the mountains.

When Nancy was only 17 years old she fought along side her husband Kingfisher in a battle against the Creeks chewing his bullets to make them more deadly. When he was killed and the battle seemed lost, Nancy took up his rifle and led a charge that rallied the Cherokee to win the battle. The honorable title of Beloved Woman was bestowed on her after that demonstration of valor and leadership and she went on to serve the people all her life. She spoke in treaty negotiations, had a seat on the Council of Chiefs, made the "black drink" for battle and could determine life or death for captives.

She once saved the life of Lydia Bean, the wife of William Bean, first permanent white settler, in what is now East Tennessee, when she was captured by the Cherokee and was going to be burned at the stake. Nancy learned to make butter and cheese and keep dairy cattle from Mrs. Bean before letting her return to her husband. Nancy also warned the white settlers when Dragging Canoe made raids allowing them time to get to their stockades before the attack.

Both Cherokee and the white settlers recognized Nancy Ward as a woman of the highest influence. She married a white settler named Bryant Ward and they had one daughter, Catherine. Ward also had a white family in South Carolina. Nancy Ward became a well-known and highly respected leader whose council was often sought and who came to be likely the single most influential Cherokee woman ever.

Just after the turn of the 20th century in 1906 a young white woman named Maggie Farmer died in Grainger County Tennessee. Her father was Ebb Walker and her uncle was James Abraham Walker a stonemason known to have carved several unusual tombstones. One such tombstone was intended by Walker to be placed on Nancy Ward's grave near Benton, Tennessee. However, Walker was unable to transport the statue all the way south to Nancy Ward's grave on the Ocoee River.

His brother purchased the statue and placed it on his young daughter's grave where it stood for 70 years from 1912 until stolen in the early 1980's. The small community near the Arnwine Cemetery on Norris Lake grew attached to the statue and sought to protect it from the numerous attempts to remove it over the years. The state of Tennessee tried to purchase the statue in the 1970's with an offer of \$1,000 to the descendants of Maggie Farmer. When an agreement was finally reached the state could not provide the \$1,000. However, members of the Polk County

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Historical Society picked up the effort and reached agreement to purchase and remove the statue. When they arrived at the cemetery to transport the statue, it was no longer on the grave, only the small concrete base with a small metal rod protruding upward approximately six inches remained.

In the mid 1970's, I photographed the statue at John Rice Irwin's request for use in the Tennessee Blue Book. I also placed a brief history of the statue along with a photo in both the Museum of Appalachia in Norris, Tennessee and our own Children's Museum here in Oak Ridge. I published the history of Nancy Ward in *The East Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. A web page <http://smithdray.tripod.com/nancyward-index-5.html> was also created as a part of the www.SmithDRay.net website.

When I learned that the statue had been stolen, I interviewed all the families living near the cemetery to learn when the statue was removed and any information I could find about who might have taken it. An eyewitness saw the statue being removed in the trunk of a large gray automobile in what they recalled as the summer of 1983. The earlier mentioned attempt to remove it by the Polk County Historical Society happened in 1980 – either the 1983 date is in error or the statue was stolen at least twice. I have now found evidence that it was removed at least another time and found by the daughter of Maggie Farmer in the barn of someone living near the cemetery.

So the Nancy Ward statue was carved just after 1900 out of Bear Creek Valley granite by James Abraham Walker in memory of what he thought was his ancestor and created in honor of her warning message to the Watauga settlements in 1776 that saved the settlement from slaughter at the hands of Dragging Canoe. It was placed on a white woman's grave to remain there for approximately 70 years before being stolen.

The next installment of this story will tell of the more recent history of the statue. The stories of contacts I have made with the descendents of Nancy Ward, Maggie Farmer and James Abraham Walker through the Nancy Ward web page will also be featured. Finally the astounding story of how the statue was found by a person in Alabama, was shown at an art show in New York City, is now in Maine and how it came to be there as well as what is being done now to return it to Tennessee will be included.

The encounter in Nashville's Opryland Hotel where I met the two persons who have the statue and are attempting to sell it for \$165,000 and finally the day when I took Maggie Farmer's great grandson to see her grave will help you put actual people with the intriguing story of the famous Beloved Woman - Nancy Ward and her also legendary granite statue that is still making history as this update is being written. And finally, what is planned regarding possible replicas of the famous traveling Nancy Ward Statue with one of the replicas possibly coming to the Museum of Appalachia!

I will end this segment of the story by thanking Congressman Zach Wamp's Oak Ridge representative, Gina Broom, for her most able assistance in bringing appropriate attention and action to help the descendent of Maggie Farmer, Dave Alexander, at my request. In the near future, I will publish another update of this personal story of research, intrigue and unusual events surrounding a granite statue of an Indian woman that was placed on a white woman's grave.

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May 16, 2006

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Nancy Ward statue that stood on Maggie Farmer's grave for over 70 years before being stolen – the statue has recently been located after being missing for 23 years!