A Day in the Life of Nancy Toney

By Karen Parsons

One of the many treasures in the Looms Chaffee’s art collection is a small oil painting of an African-American woman. Seated in a ladder back chair, she wears a loose-fitting shift and apron with a colorful fichu draped over her shoulders. A flax wheel, fibers spun at the wheel and tools used for chores at the hearth suggest the woman’s contributions to a household. Oral tradition tells us that this scene depicts long-time Windsor resident Nancy Toney. Born into slavery at Greenfield Hill, Connecticut, Nancy lived with three generations of the Bradley, Chaffee, and Loomis lineage until her death at age 82 in 1857. While many remember her as one of the last slaves in Connecticut, Toney’s story — like that of many 19th-century formerly enslaved African Americans living in New England — is one of ambiguous freedom. This painting offers a window onto that tenuous identity.

Curators and art historians note that few 19th-century oil paintings of African-American women at work provide this level of detail about daily life, especially such clear evidence of work clothing. It’s even rarer, perhaps impossible, to find an image from this time period depicting a laboring African-American female subject gazing directly at the viewer. Nancy Toney is, in essence, engaging her audience.

The artist did not sign or date the painting. A paper label affixed to the back of the gilded frame reveals that O’Brien’s Art Galleries of Chicago framed the painting in January 1899. Many of the paintings bequeathed to The Loomis Institute from John Mason Loomis’ Chicago home bear O’Brien’s labels, suggesting that the Toney image found one of its audiences at Loomis’ Lake Shore Avenue mansion. Perhaps John received and re Framed the painting following the 1898 dispersal of his sister Abigail Loomis Hayden’s estate. Perhaps the artist did not sign the painting because it was meant to pass intimately from creator to intended owner, and it remained for decades at Hayden’s home in Windsor. Indeed, oral tradition contends that artist Osbert Loomis, brother to John and Abigail and their co-founder of The Loomis Institute, created this painting.

Osbert traveled to Windsor in 1862; his father’s death and mother’s illness beckoned him home many times over the next several years. During these visits Osbert painted local scenes including his childhood home, an elegant federal-style brick house on Broad Street. These paintings diverge from dark still-life paintings, grand sweeping landscapes of untamed wilderness, and the traditional commissioned portraiture work that Osbert relied on as his sources of income. Perhaps his return to Windsor inspired a streak of nostalgia, and Osbert set down to remembering with his palette and brush in hand.

Nancy Toney was born around 1774. Her mother was most probably a slave and possibly owned by wealthy Fairfield County resident Hezekiah Bradley. Colonial law dictated the children of slave women be enslaved from birth, and thus Nancy’s fate was cast. When Bradley’s daughter Charlotte married Dr. Hezekiah Chaffee Jr., Nancy moved to Windsor
with the newlyweds. Barely 10 years old, she served as a wedding gift to set Charlotte off to a good start in her new life. For the next 36 years she lived with the Chaffee family in their expansive home facing the Palisado Green. Dr. Chaffee’s 1821 will bequeathed “my negro slave Nancy” to his daughter, Abigail Chaffee Loomis. Already well along in her married life and with five children aged 14 to 6, including young Osbert, Abigail surely welcomed Nancy’s labor into the household. Toney remained here until her death in 1857. According to U.S. census records, her status — as reported by the Loomis family — changed from slave to free person sometime between 1821 and 1830. Manumission papers cementing Nancy’s freedom continue to elude historians.

Connecticut law prohibited slavery in 1848. Although earlier gradual abolition laws applied to slaves born after 1784, older Connecticut slaves, including Nancy Toney, relied on their owners for emancipation. It is curious that once Nancy was freed, she chose to stay with the family that had enslaved her. Local lore states that Toney suffered disabilities preventing her from gainful employment. Emancipation laws required a slave owner to pledge his former slave would not be a burden on the local poor relief system. Perhaps the Loomis family could not make this pledge and yet they considered Toney a free person. The historical record does not preserve Nancy’s thoughts regarding this unusual status.

Osbert Loomis created his portrait of Nancy Toney after her death and as America faced civil war and an uncertain future. One wonders if Loomis meant only to evoke an intimate past within his family’s household. Or might he have thought that this unique painting of an African-American working woman could inspire others to ponder the definitions of freedom far beyond the elegant brick house on Broad Street?