

ESTHER “GRANNY” PENNY

Esther “Granny” Penny was born in Southampton sometime in 1734, as she is stated in her obituary to have died on April 22, 1837 in her “103rd year.”¹ Mr. Case was Esther’s first husband and according to research of a Southold historian he simply disappeared without a trace.² Mr. Jonah Halsey was Esther’s second husband and their exact dates of marriage are unknown, however, they had two children together, John and Phebe.³ Phebe was born on May 31 1767 and died January 1838.⁴ After Mr. Halsey died, Esther remarried William Dickerson.⁵ William Dickerson was born sometime after 1710 and died in 1796.⁶ Dickerson likely married Esther by 1776. Thus, they were married for at least 20 years, as according to a 1776 Census another female was listed as part of William’s household (by this point all his daughters had been married off).⁷ Therefore, while previously it has been believed that Esther was a Dickerson by birth, these records indicate that she was rather a Dickerson through marriage. After Mr. Dickerson died, Esther married William Penny. Following the American Revolution, they moved to Orange County where they lived for 40 years before Mr. Penny died.⁸ It is unclear when he died, but it was sometime before Esther moved back to Wading River to live with her daughter Phebe in the Hulse house, the family home of Phebe’s husband.⁹

No matter what changed about Esther’s personal life, however, she was a constant in the lives of those who lived along Granny Road. Known as an “angel of mercy,” Esther was a general practitioner who had a large practice because the population was so scattered, traveling to regions no other doctors would go to.¹⁰ What came to be known as “Granny’s Road,” because it was the way in which she reached her many patients, runs from Farmingville to the fullers mill in Yaphank. She helped the sick without pay,¹¹ and was known as “Doctress” for her exceptional healing ability, and

¹ Long Island Farmer, May 31, 1837.

² Kate Wheeler Strong, *Who Was Granny?*, New York, Friends for Long Island’s Heritage, 1970, 214.

³ Kate Wheeler Strong, *Who Was Granny?*, New York, Friends for Long Island’s Heritage, 1970, 214.

⁴ Wesley L. Baker, *Dickerson and Dickinson descendants of Philemon Dickerson of Southold Long Island, N.Y.*, Douglaston, Adams Press Chicago, 1979, 60.

⁵ *Ibid*, 62.

⁶ *Ibid*, 62.

⁷ *Ibid*, 53.

⁸ Kate Wheeler Strong, *Granny Road and Others*, New York, Friends for Long Island’s Heritage, 1952, 93, Long Island Farmer, May 31, 1837.

⁹ Kate Wheeler Strong, *Granny Road and Others*, New York, Friends for Long Island’s Heritage, 1952, 93.

¹⁰ Kate Wheeler Strong, *The Tale of Grannie Road*, Long Island Forum, 1951, 155.

¹¹ Wesley L. Baker, *Dickerson and Dickinson descendants of Philemon Dickerson of Southold Long Island, N.Y.*, Douglaston, Adams Press Chicago, 1979, 59.

then later as “Grannie.”¹² She is thought to have used many of her own natural remedies to heal her patients. She healed broken bones, drew blood for fever reduction, aided in childbirth, and is even believed to have reduced labor pains.¹³

There are few documented instances of her doctoring, yet, even those few events we know involving Esther indicate her compassion and bravery. One of these captivating stories involved a woman suffering from a serious felon on her finger, otherwise known as an infection. Esther Penny rode to the woman’s house in the middle of the night to help ease her pain. Upon arrival Esther had a peculiar request, of black sheep’s wool. When it was retrieved, Esther burnt the wool and held its smoke to the woman’s hand, and her pain was lessened greatly.¹⁴ Another event in which Esther’s compassion for her patients was clear, was when she was informed of a man bleeding heavily from his leg. Another man came to ask for her help, with only his tired horse and an unbroken colt. Esther took pity on the horse that had rode there, and took the unbroken colt to the injured man, as her own horse could not be taken for reasons unknown. She ended up saving the injured man’s life despite riding the young horse.¹⁵ This speaks to her incredible doctress skills as well as her skill in horse-riding. Indeed, she rode a white horse, and wore deep red wool cloak which flew in the wind along Granny Road as she would make her way to her next patient.¹⁶

Even in her later years, Esther still had a great desire to heal others. One of her descendants, Susan Dickerson, recalled when her Uncle Halsey was sick, that at the age of 95 “old Mrs Penney is there doctering him.”¹⁷ Moreover, she had a sound mind in her old age. According to the journals of Augustus Griffin, by 1836 Esther was then a widow with a sharp memory and wit.¹⁸ His journal states, “I shook hands with a widow Penny, aged 101 years, if she was born in 1735 as she is pretty positive she was--She was she says nineteen years old in 1754--She is the oldest person I ever see--She has a dignified expression of countenance-- is sociable, intelligent, and free, and pleasantly communicates interesting circumstances, which came under her observation 80 or 90 years ago. Her features, are so marked with precision, and traits of correctness that we must conclude she once possessed an agreeable pleasing face, united to a handsome

¹² Kate Wheeler Strong, *The Tale of Grannie Road*, Long Island Forum, 1951, 155.

¹³ *Ibid*, Kate Wheeler Strong, *Who Was Grannie?*, New York, Friends for Long Island’s Heritage, 1970, 214.

¹⁴ Kate Wheeler Strong, *The Tale of Grannie Road*, Long Island Forum, 1951, 155.

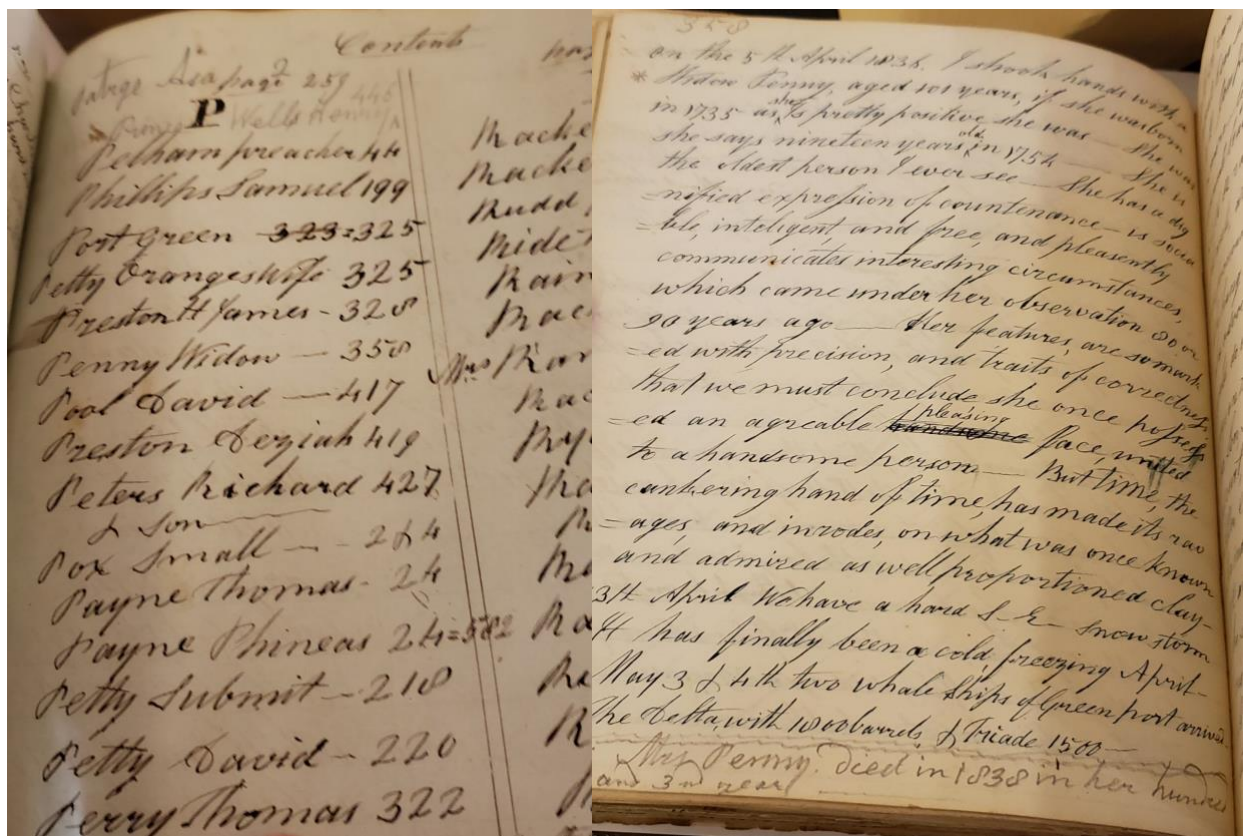
¹⁵ Kate Wheeler Strong, *Granny Road and Others*, Long Island Forum, 1952, 93.

¹⁶ Kate Wheeler Strong, *Who Was Grannie?*, New York, Friends for Long Island’s Heritage, 1970, 214.

¹⁷ Wesley L. Baker, *Dickerson and Dickinson descendants of Philemon Dickerson of Southold Long Island, N.Y.*, Douglaston, Adams Press Chicago, 1979, 62-63.

¹⁸ Augustus Griffin, *Augustus Griffin’s Journal*, 1857, 208.

person. But time, the conkering hand of time, has made its ravages, and inroads, on what was once known and admired as well proportioned clay."¹⁹



Esther is said to be buried with other Hulses on Jonah Hulse's farm without a gravestone.²⁰ The Hulses are buried at Wading River Cemetery, Wading River, Suffolk County NY, and Phebe's gravestone is located there.²¹ Esther died in 1837 and her obituary is as follows:

"Died at Wading River, Suffolk Co., L.I. on the 22nd of April last, Mrs. Esther Penny, widow of Mr. William Penny, in the 103d year of her age. She was a native of the Town of Southampton where she spent most of her life. She subsequently resided for nearly 40 years in the County of Orange. The residue of her life was spent alternately in the Towns of Southold & Riverhead. Her descendants were very numerous, embracing the 4th generation. She rode a short time before her death between twenty and thirty miles, without manifesting any inconvenience or bodily fatigue. She was a woman of great intelligence and communicative powers; and retained her mental faculties in a

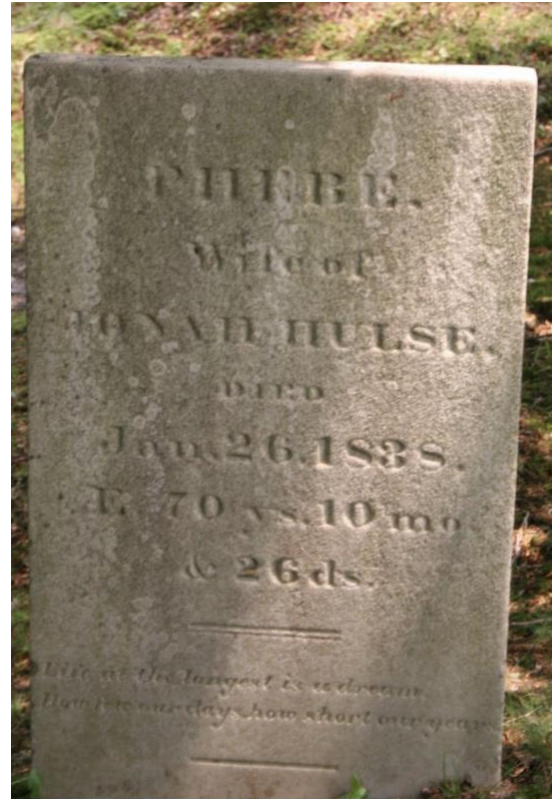
¹⁹ Augustus Griffin, Augustus Griffin's Journal, 1836, 358.

²⁰ Wesley L. Baker, Dickerson and Dickinson descendants of Philemon Dickerson of Southold Long Island, N.Y., Douglaston, Adams Press Chicago, 1979, 59.

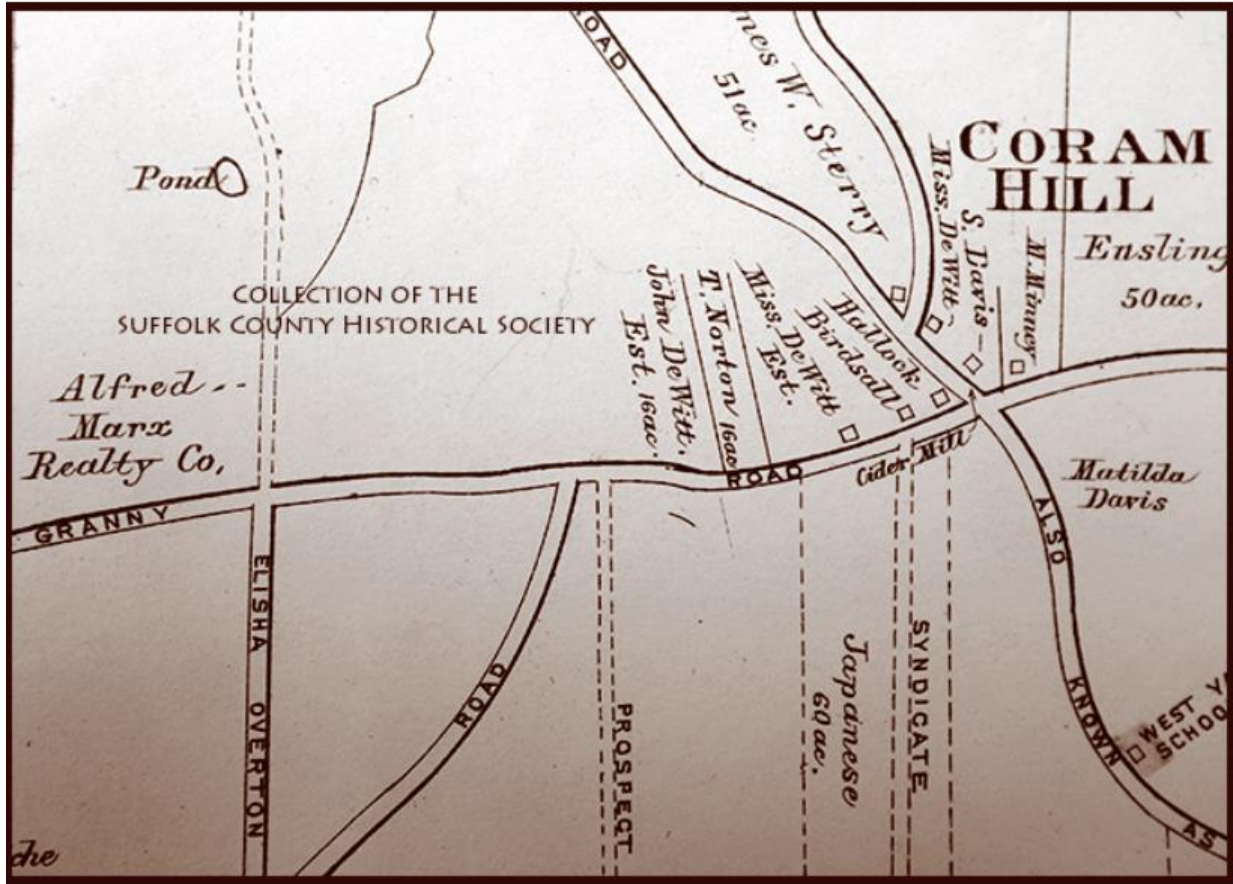
²¹ <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/27598475/phebe-hulse>

remarkable degree, to the latest moments of her life."²² Esther Penny was thus an extraordinary woman who lived a full life caring for those in need, and her memory lives on each time anyone travels along Granny Road, just as she once did.

Died,
At Hempstead, Mr. Thomas Dorlan.
At N. Hempstead, Mrs. Mary Marvin.
At Wading River, Suffolk County, L. I., on the 22d of April last, Mrs. Esther Penny, widow of Mr. William Penny, in the 103d year of her age. She was a native of the town of Southampton where she spent the most of her life. She subsequently resided, for nearly forty years, in the county of Orange. The residue of her life was spent alternately in the town of Southold and Riverhead. Her descendants were very numerous, embracing the fourth generation.— She rode, a short time before her death, between twenty and thirty miles, without manifesting any inconvenience or bodily fatigue. She was a woman of great intelligence and communicative powers; and retained her mental faculties, in a remarkable degree, to the latest moments of her life.
In Davidson County, Tenn., Col. Adam Binkley, aged one hundred and thirty six years! He served throughout the Revolutionary war, at which time he had a wife and eleven children.
In Sag Harbor, Mr. William Babcock.
At the Poorhouse, town of Southampton on the 29th April, Eunice Achilles, a colored woman, aged 106 years.



²² Long Island Farmer, May 31, 1837.



Granny Road (From the 1909 Belcher Hyde Map Collection of the Suffolk County Historical Society Library Archives.)

GRANNY ROAD



Granny Road, Davis Erhardt Collection



Granny Road, Davis Erhardt Collection, Birdsall house on southside of road.
