

Lewis (Louis) Armstrong

A Short Biography

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Lewis (Louis) B. Armstrong was born free about 1833-1835 in Medford, New Jersey. He enlisted in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on December 22, 1863 and on the same day was mustered into Co. D, 22nd Regiment USCI (United States Colored Infantry) at Camp William Penn near Philadelphia for a three-year appointment. He could read and write and was a 5 foot 4-inch tall, 28-year-old laborer with hazel eyes, black hair and a black complexion.

All information and testimonies for his sickness and disabilities incurred during the war comes from one medical report and several soldier witness accounts in his pension file. These referred to several incidences where he was taken ill or wounded.

The first occurred sometime in early March 1864 “on the march through western Virginia on the return to Gloucester Point, Virginia” where exhausted, Private Armstrong collapsed. Soldier and friend Cpl. William Davis, along with other comrades from the same company and regiment, quickly came to his rescue and carried him on board a vessel that crossed the York River to Yorktown where he was sent to a hospital. He was diagnosed with typhoid fever and suffered from a high fever, diarrhea and lower back pain. According to his medical record, he soon after developed pneumonia, pleurisy, bronchitis and then mumps. There were no antibiotics during this time and recovery took a long time. With consequent weakness, he was only able to engage in light duty. He was then detached from his regiment and became part of the Ambulance Corps, where according to military records, he served from May 4, 1864 until his discharge from the Army. However, he claimed to have been sent home on furlough in the late summer of 1865 due to a relapse of typhoid fever. He was honorably discharged on October 16, 1865 in Brownsville, Texas.

He was also wounded while he served in the Ambulance Corps. He claimed to have been slashed by a saber to his left thigh during battle. On another occasion, he claimed a gunshot wound to his lower left leg above the ankle. It was probably a minie ball that fractured the bone in his leg, which healed so poorly, the broken bones joined to form an angle. This caused him to walk with a limp. After the war, he was left with an entry and exit scar to mark the injury.

When he returned home, he suffered from chronic diarrhea, a bad back, and weakness that never allowed the heavy manual labor that he had done before the war. He had been a blacksmith and a hod carrier (hauler of bricks), but his only option after the war was light labor. He was described as prematurely old and decrepit. To support his large family, he worked at numerous jobs in Mount Holly that included cleaning rooms and running errands for Hampton Gage’s grocery store and working for Amos Gibbs, the county clerk.

Lewis was the son of manumitted slave, Benjamin Armstrong.¹ His mother was Atta Armstrong. Lewis had several siblings. One younger brother, Charles B. Armstrong, enlisted in the same 22nd Regiment USCI, but in company G. His other known brothers, Edward and George, died before the war.

Brother Charles Armstrong was quickly promoted to first sergeant but was soon reduced to a private after he was tried in July 1864 for “sins of disobedience” where he incited a mutiny. The “spirit of mutiny” in April 1864 had prevailed amongst the members of the of 55th Massachusetts black regiment because they had not been paid in more than a year.² The reason for the Armstrong mutiny was unknown but could have been caused because of wide disparities between white and black soldiers that included unequal pay. This did not seem to impact his service as a soldier, since he was wounded on July 30, 1864 at the Battle of the Mine explosion before Petersburg, Virginia. He lost the entire use of his left hand due to a shell wound at his left wrist and was honorably discharged early from the service on a Surgeon’s Certificate of Disability. He was married once to widow Letitia Staat (maiden name Flight) who had been married twice before. He died January 14, 1904 and was buried in the in the Riverview Cemetery in Trenton, New Jersey.³

Around 1857, Lewis married first wife Annie Christy, the daughter of Richard Christy, a founder (1854) of the Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church of Timbuctoo.⁴ The marriage was short lived without children. They separated, she left him and eventually resided in Delaware until her death.

Interestingly, Annie and Lewis had been married in the house of Julia Simmons, the mother of 15-year-old Aramintie (Araminta) Hopkins. Araminta would become the future second wife of Lewis.

According to the *1860 Westampton, Burlington County Federal Census* dated August 1, 1860, Araminta Hopkins age 22 lived in an African American household with [stepfather] Perry Simmons, [mother] Julia Simmons and younger [half-sisters] Rebecca A. and Mary M. Simmons. In her pension file, the marriage certificate for Araminta and Lewis Armstrong had recorded that her mother was Julia Simmons and that she did not know who her father was.⁵

On several occasions, slave-catchers would enter Timbuctoo, capture alleged runaway slaves, and when successful, carry them back to bondage in the South. One well known incident referred to by *The New Jersey Mirror* local newspaper in December 1860 as the “Battle of Pine Swamp”, involved a confrontation between the armed residents of Timbuctoo and the Deputy U. S. Marshall Shivers, notorious slave catcher, George Alberti, black informant, Caleb Wright, and a six or eight-member white vigilante party from Camden and Philadelphia. Having procured, and subsequently deceived a Moorestown constable, the slave catchers cautiously and late at night, approached the tenant house of Maryland fugitive Perry Simmons and his family, who now resided on the farm of Allen Fennimore, having lived in freedom for 10 or 12 years. This must have been the same Perry Simmons household where Aramintie Hopkins now lived. She would have experienced this terrifying scenario:

“They [the apprehending posse] proceeded to the door of Perry’s ‘castle’ and gave some tremendous knocks which aroused the family, consisting of Perry and his wife, a son age 17, a daughter age 21 [Aramintie], and 2 small children.” Trying to con Perry, the group conveyed that they had a warrant for Perry Simmons, who was charged with stealing chickens at Moorestown. Suspecting who they were, Perry let them know that he was not a fool and with his family “retreated to the loft, where he had two loaded guns, and an axe.” Eventually the intruders broke down the door and found Perry and his family in the attic which could only be reached by a winding stairway. With undaunted valor, Perry vowed never to surrender and standing at the top of the stairway, threatened the group with his gun. The assailants fired two pistols loaded only with powder up the stairway in hopes of intimidating Simmons. Even bold Alberti was unsuccessful in his daring attempt to capture his sought-after prey. For hours while the invaders waited, warming themselves around a fire, the hostage family screamed “*murder*” and “*kidnappers*”, desperately hoping to arouse the neighbors. Luckily, a son of Allen Fennimore, while visiting the stable early in the morning, heard the terrific cries of “*kidnappers! kidnappers!*” and saw the carriages near Perry’s house. Ordered off by the kidnappers, he immediately headed towards Timbuctoo (Figure 2). Then “the war tocsin was sounded, and in a few minutes, the inhabitants turned out *en masse*, and armed with every conceivable weapon, were soon on a ‘quick march’ for the field of strife [to their Pine Swamp destination], yelling and screaming at the top of their voices.” Courageously and confidently, “under the command of “King David” or David Parker, this army of “Timbuctoo’s Fusiliers, Reserved Guard, and Petticoat Rangers” charged forward in an “infuriated and determined” procession. When the slave-catchers realized what was coming their way, they hastily retreated to their carriages and “went down the road at a rapid rate”. Justice had prevailed under the leadership of David Parker and his warriors. The raiding party left without their spoils. “It [was] thought that the ‘kidnapping party’ intended to carry off the entire family.”⁶

The summoned local constable, believing the arrest warrant was for stealing only, went to the house. When he discovered the group’s real intentions, he walked back home having “nothing to do with making the arrest”. “He had a long and dreary walk, but he considered it infinitely more pleasant than to remain and assist such a man as George Alberti, in carrying off a negro and his family.”⁷

Perry Simmons died in February 1862, because of a severe cold that developed after the frigid December 1860 Pine Swamp Battle with slave-catchers.⁸

Lewis Armstrong, a prominent elder in the Timbuctoo Church, was considered a pillar and the leader of the community, especially after the demise of past leader, “King David Parker”. He was even referred to as the second “King of Timbuctoo.”⁹ As a custodian of the community, he frequently took the time to appear as an affidavit witness for many veterans and their widows before Pension Bureau investigators. On August 4, 1890, he was issued a small pension for lumbago and loss of teeth under the Act of June 27, 1890.

He married his second wife and the same Aramintie Hopkins, on July 21, 1883. Living in Timbuctoo, they had several children prior to their marriage. When he died on May 11, 1903, at about age 70 from throat cancer, only one child out of eight, Benjamin Armstrong, survived his father’s death.

Aramintie would also qualify for a widow's pension after proof of Annie Armstrong's death. Agents avidly pursued the evidence and found one interesting source in the possession of neighbor and veteran William H. Davis. It was an "old memorandum", a very dilapidated old book with some of the first names torn away and frayed, a record book of the Zion Wesleyan African American Church of Timbuctoo. This showed that Annie had died on December 10, 1880 one day before her Uncle Benjamin Christy's death in Timbuctoo. Father and brother, Richard Christy, was able to attend his daughter's funeral in Delaware, but not his brother's in Timbuctoo. *The New Jersey Mirror* thought the delayed pension situation worthy enough to publish: "After a long delay on account of difficulty in proving the death of the first wife of Lewis B. Armstrong, deceased, of Timbucto, [Attorney] Blanchard H. White has succeeded in securing back pension to the amount of \$375 for the widow, Araminta Armstrong."¹⁰

Aramintie died December 29, 1909 at about age 69. It was never revealed where she was buried.

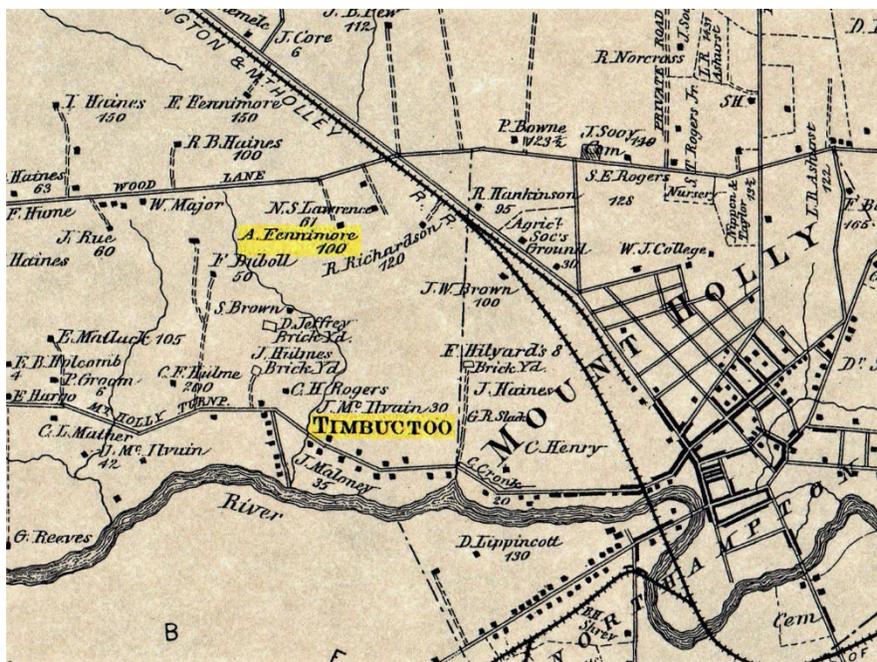


Figure 1. Westampton 1876 Map showing location of Timbuctoo and the Allen Fennimore Farm (Scott's Historical Atlas of Burlington County, 1876)

General References

Burlington County Federal and New Jersey State Census records (Ancestry.com)

Lewis B. Armstrong Pension File application # 772,610 and # 785,343 (widow), pp. copies, *Compiled Military Records*, microfilm (National Archives, Washington, D.C.)

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Eckhardt, Charles and MacAvoy, Robert, *Our Brothers Gone Before* Vol. 1 (Hightstown, New Jersey: Longstreet House, 2006)

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Citations

¹ “Timbuctoo” “Ben Armstrong”, *The New Jersey Mirror*, June 21, 1855, p.3

² Garrison, Webb 2001, pp. 40, 258-259

³ Eckhardt, Charles and MacAvoy, Robert 2006, p. 38

⁴ Burlington County, *Deed Book E-6*, p. 256 (Burlington County Courthouse)

⁵ *State of New Jersey Marriage Return* (Aramintie Pension File)

⁶ “Excitement at Timbuctoo”, *The New Jersey Mirror*, December 6, 1860, p.3

⁷ “The Kidnapping Party”, *The New Jersey Mirror*, December 20, 1860

⁸ “Local Facts and Fancies: Perry Simmons”, *The New Jersey Mirror*, February 13, 1862, p.3

⁹ “A Jersey King”, *Courier Post* (Camden, New Jersey), January 16, 1886, p.3

(Newspapers.com)

¹⁰ “Local Briefs: about Lewis B. and Araminta Armstrong” *The New Jersey Mirror*, January 31, 1906, p.3