



## Nancy Reynolds Beck

July 19, 1927 - September 29, 2019

Portsmouth - Civic icon and cultural leader Nancy R. Beck, 92, passed away on Sunday, September 29, 2019. Nancy created projects that transformed Portsmouth from an industrial port into a vibrant historic and cultural destination. Her leadership and fundraising prowess led to the development of Strawbery Banke, the groundbreaking outdoor museum that has become the most popular historic attraction in the region. She was an early supporter of Theatre by The Sea, the first professional repertory theater in Northern New England, and renovated a vacant downtown warehouse on Bow Street into a popular theater venue. With her hand in dozens of civic initiatives from saving buildings across Portsmouth to the creation of the annual Prescott Park Arts Festival, Nancy leaves an indelible mark on the city she loved for over 60 years.

Rescued from the rip tide of urban renewal beginning in the early 1960's which leveled ageing neighborhoods across the country, Nancy and a group of local citizens were among the first to see value in the historic narrative of Portsmouth and move to preserve some of its most precious original buildings. Many structures in the North and South End and The Hill were saved and remain a vital part of the city's fabric.

The birth of Strawbery Banke heralded a new way to experience history - not as antiques frozen in time but as living environments linking past, present and

future. Nancy became president of the Museum twice – two decades apart – and helped raise nearly \$3.5 million to double the endowment and ensure its long-term success.

Nancy was an original founding member of Theatre by the Sea in 1964 and raised the money to transform a waterfront warehouse into a dynamic 350-seat performance space. Renown for introducing bold work by emerging playwrights, the theatre presented plays such as *Night, Mother* and *K2* next to classics such as *West Side Story* and *Evita*. Known today as the Seacoast Repertory Theatre, its stage continues to enthrall audiences with a full season of plays.

A former Managing Editor of *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, Nancy was raised in Boston and graduated from Mount Holyoke and Harvard. She married Dr. Peter Beck of Portsmouth in 1959, moved to his Austin Street home and lost little time in engaging with the civic life of her adopted city. Her work spanned organizations such as Portsmouth Preservation Inc. and the Greater Piscataqua Community Foundation.

Nancy was a relentless supporter of causes and individuals who had interest in building a better city. She would invite travelers, actors, merchant captains and the occasional political operative to stay in their home, creating a salon for exchanging ideas and seeking mutual understanding.

What many now take for granted - that Portsmouth was always a beacon for the arts - greatly underappreciates the role of a handful of cultural pioneers who set about recasting the city's persona. In an interview with the *Portsmouth Herald*, Nancy summed up her mission, "You can't say everything is fine- it isn't. You have to keep moving if you live in a community and want to contribute to it".

Nancy Beck is remembered for her roles in service to the arts, historic preservation and in celebrating Portsmouth's great story. She has been honored with numerous awards including the Portsmouth Advocates' Arthur J. Gerrier Award and the Rotary Award for Excellence in the Public Sector. In her passing she leaves generous donations to Strawberry Banke, Portsmouth Historical Society, Seacoast Science Center and the UNH Shoals Marine Lab.

A celebration of Nancy's life is scheduled for Friday, November 15, 2019 from 5:00 to 7:00 pm at the Strawberry Banke Visitors Center in Portsmouth. Family & friends may also visit [facebook.com/nancy.reynolds.beck](https://www.facebook.com/nancy.reynolds.beck). In lieu of flowers, please send donations to the Seacoast Repertory Theatre.

# Previous Events

## Celebration of Life

NOV 15. 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM (ET)

Strawbery Banke Visitors Center  
14 Hancock Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801

# Tribute Wall



“ *Nancy Reynolds Beck*

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September 18, 2022 at 12:49 AM



“ *Jack and I have known Nancy and Peter Beck for over 50 years, ever since they discovered the fledgling Shoals Marine Laboratory being built on Appledore Island at the Isles of Shoals. They saw both the need to increase educational opportunities for students to study the marine sciences in an island setting, and that it needed help. This they supplied, materially, financially and with moral support over the years.*

*Only in reading Nancy's obituary have we realized the full extent of her involvement in the transformation of Portsmouth into the vibrant city it is today. We hope she has inspired many by her life of service to the city she loved and its people. The world needs more like her.*

*Jack and Louise Kingsbury*

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**Louise Kingsbury** - November 15, 2019 at 04:14 PM

JS

“ *May all who loved and were touched by Nancy find peace during this difficult time.  
May her good work inspire others to pick up what she is passing to the next generation.*

*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.  
-Wendell Berry*

*Rest in Peace Nancy.  
-Jennifer Seavey*

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**Jennifer Seavey** - October 22, 2019 at 09:35 AM

KA

“ When I moved to Portsmouth, I was a stranger... but after meeting Nancy, I knew I had made a very special friend. She and Leona, who in my mind were connected like mother and daughter, were two of the most generous, kind, and indelible women I had the luck to meet during that transitional time - the Dream Team. They played off of each other sometimes like a duet, sometimes like a comedy team, and my family and I will always remember this with a smile. Together they helped make my move to a new home one of my dearest memories yet. I'll never forget how Nancy used to joke with that wry smile about being a "delicate flower," and follow up with a quip that was sharp as a tack... In the short time I knew her, Nancy made quite an impression on me, and from now til forever, I'll always think of Nancy when I see a show at Prescott Park Arts Festival, hear a song by James Groban, or spot a beautiful red rose in full bloom... and I'm delighted I can learn so much more about her from others on this page!

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**Kelly Ashe** - October 15, 2019 at 06:08 PM



“ Nancy was a friend for many years. I shall miss our chats. And Portsmouth will miss her support for so many organizations. Her generous bequests will benefit several worthy organizations keeping her memory alive and inspire other folks to do likewise

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**Peter Randall** - October 14, 2019 at 01:03 PM

JS

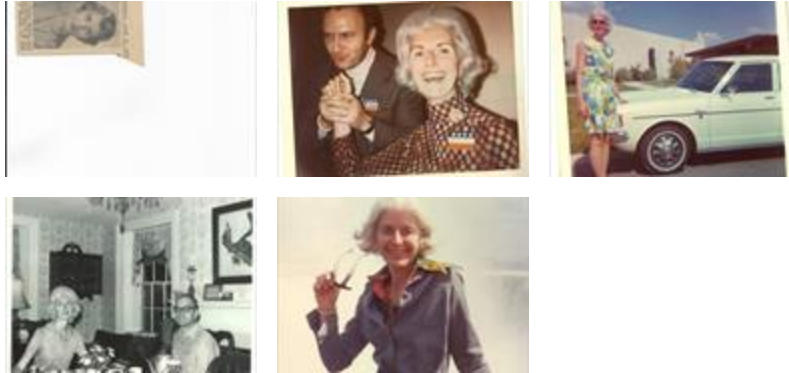
“ The Seacoast and Portsmouth in particular, has lost a great civic leader, a champion of the arts and a generous philanthropist. I have lost a long and wonderful friend and she will be deeply missed by all who had the privilege to know her.  
*Jim Somes*

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**Jim Somes** - October 13, 2019 at 01:07 PM

LB

“ 42 files added to the tribute wall



leona beck - October 09, 2019 at 09:54 PM

JK

“ *My deepest condolences to Nancy's family. We now must celebrate her extraordinary life and be thankful that we were able to share time with her.*

*Nancy gave so much to the Portsmouth cultural community. Her home was always open for meetings, committees, actors, artists and anyone who had an interesting story to tell or was in need of help in some way. She was a mentor to me personally and I shall always treasure her guidance, her sense of humor, her fairness and her intelligence. What a lovely person!*

*Portsmouth is blessed to have had her energy, commitment and her generosity. She literally changed lives through her dedication to improving our cultural life.*

*Jon Kimbell*

Jon Kimbell - October 09, 2019 at 11:47 AM

GB

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



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**Gregory Beck** - October 06, 2019 at 09:21 PM

“ *Thanksgiving  
Continues.....*

*No matter where we were, we always come back to spend celebrating Thanksgiving with the Becks. This will be the first year Greg and I have the Thanksgiving without the Becks. We will set two place setting in their honor and invite a few foreigners to the dinner to carry on the tradition. They are truly a gift to our lives - for that we are forever thankful.*

*Match Maker*

*Nancy was a matchmaker for a few happy unions. Her marriage to Dr. Beck was a result of her dearest friends Charlotte and Cameron Beers. She always referred with a beam in her eyes as a "blind" date with an eye doctor. She had arranged to have her favorite cousin meet with me at their home with when he was teaching at Harvard in the summer. The mischievous side of Nancy was doing it without telling us. I was very taken with the cousin and was not sure if it could work out since it was a long distant romance. We kept it secret for a while. It did not take her long to figure out we were serious when we were at her house. She proudly proclaimed it was an arranged marriage and her "scheme" of making me a Beck. I am forever thankful she saw the goodness in my husband and wanted me in good hands. They have forever changed my life. Not only are they my hero's, mentors, they also play matchmaker, I'm married to Nancy's cousin, my wonderful husband, Gregory Beck.*

*I want to thank Greg for his immense support allowing me to spend three plus wonderful intimate years with Nancy in her golden years. She was as much a mom to me as I'm a daughter to her. Also, Sparky, our loveable Corgi, to allow us to share him back and forth between GA and NH. Despite his love for barking at strangers, he became Nancy's buddy and fearless protector.*

*Family Affairs*

*They opened their home and themselves to allow me to be a part of their family. I've so privileged to include to their family homestead and countless trips in their farm in Vermont, Portsmouth and Switzerland and introduced me to their friends and relatives. I also took him to visit my hometown and relatives in Asia. I was so proud showing him off as he was always the life of a party for his commanding intelligence and curiosity of people and things.*

*When I spent over a decade working in Peterborough, I will spend every weekend with the Becks except when I was travelling for work. My colleagues will fondly have greeted me at the end of the work week, "You are going to home. Have a good weekend". Yes - I'm going home. Home is where the Becks are. They are forever having a room in my heart. Dr. Beck will love it- it's rent free!*

*I have gained a band of family whether it is generic and those they adopted along the way, Jana, Mary, Shauna are my sisters bonded by the Becks.*

*Life without the Becks will be challenging. I had continued sending love letters to Dr. Beck after his passed away and will I continue to send both of them. I live well by their samples as they wanted me to. I take the best of them with me and will be a better human being because of them. They are reunited with their family in heaven and they were such a shaker and mover as they were in this earth. I hope this time Dr. Beck will chase after Nancy instead. I will see them again in heaven*

#### *Life of Service*

*Nancy devoted herself to her beloved Portsmouth since she moved here in 1959. She served on the board and presidents of many institutions and received numerous awards for her service. Her commitments to historic preservation, theatre, museum and humanitarian causes with her dynamic leadership and volunteerism greatly contributed to what make Portsmouth a vibrant historical importance and culture city today.*

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**Leona Beck** - October 04, 2019 at 07:42 PM

GB

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



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**Gregory Beck** - October 04, 2019 at 07:03 PM

SB

“ Nancy was one of my Mom’s best friends. They met for coffee and a muffin every Friday and shared stories and chatted. I suspect many of us feel Nancy was one of our best friends too because Nancy was always generous, warm, and greeted everyone with a beautiful smile and a chuckle. She was genuinely interested in me and my brothers and sister since I can remember, asking what we were doing and where were we going next. She was particularly kind to me when her support for my next step renewed my confidence in myself and set me on a path to success at Mount Holyoke.

Nancy also loved travel and adventure. Once when we were together with Peter somewhere near Alice Springs, Australia, we were asked if we wanted to ride a camel. I looked over to Nancy as she replied, “ Of course we want to ride the camel”, which we did with many laughs along the up and down journey.

Nancy was fun, so bright, always a lady, always gracious, humble and good. She was an elegant woman of many talents whose company and companionship will be greatly missed. But we know she is always nearby, staying interested in our lives until we all meet again.

Love you with all my heart, Nancy. Big hugs and God bless,

Shauna Doyle de Brun

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Shauna de Brun - October 04, 2019 at 05:41 PM

“ This is the beginning of writing Nancy a love letter, part of my healing process when one swims in this world of profound sadness and loss of Nancy in my life. Our conversation will not stop here...

*Anchor*

*Nancy is one of the two most important women that have shaped my life path.*

*How lucky can one can be to have two incredible role models to provide boundaryless love and nurturing. My sister reminded that I was with Nancy more of my life than with my own mother. The lines blurred with these women towering me with deep love and devotion. Nancy was a career woman who broke glass ceilings and was the Managing Editor at Atlantic Monthly magazine. She was always a champion for women's advancement. She would always fill me with encouragement and cheerlead to be a strong women's executive.*

*She always sent my husband and I newspaper clippings on things of our interest and related our career and wellbeing over the years.*

*As a young Political Science undergraduate student at Mount Holyoke College, Nancy met Eleanor Roosevelt when she visited the campus. It inspired her for her civic duties, interest in politics and to be a force for good. She received a Master's Degree in Teaching from Harvard University. She taught only a year at a boarding school in PA after her graduation. Homesick, she returned to New England and began a career in book and magazine editing. Although no longer in the classroom, she became a lifelong mentor and great teacher to many.*

*When Nancy was in the hospital with the fine line that she could go either way. I felt like a sail flapping in the wind, untethered and directionless. I kept mumbling to myself, what am I'm going to do without you?*

*When she passed, she looked so peaceful and beautiful. Her eyelid was slightly opened, and I know she was talking to me: "I'm safe and happy to be with my parents and siblings."*

*Nancy was forever cheerful and celebrating life by dedicating herself by showing us human decency, family, community and culture.*

*She is saying to me - You go on to live her life, be good and I will always be your anchor."*

*Love at first sight*

*I was recruited by Timberland in 1995 and looking for a place to settle in Portsmouth. In October of that year, Dr. Beck volunteered to help a friend without a telephone to show her rental house. It was one of those fateful meetings, the chance of a lifetime. I decided it was not the house for me. But Dr. Beck was so charming, able to draw out my life story and giving good advice. He asked if I wanted to meet his wife and their dog. I gladly said yes. When the door opened, I saw his extraordinary elegant wife Nancy and Nina, their regal Standard Poodle. It became a lifelong relationship*

*Throughout the years I had watched and learned from Nancy. Everywhere we went with, she received respect, love and admirations from the others. She kept friendship for lifetime. There are always flows of cards, calls and visits from friends. Everyone loves Nancy.*

*How can one possess so many superb qualities - not only a stunning beauty outside but also equally amazing inside. She was kind, intelligent, quick witted, generous, can do attitude and lived life with great optimism.*

*She is loved and my love for her will never end.*

*Thanksgiving*

*This holiday has a special meaning to me with the Becks. I came to the seacoast 24 years ago when I was recruited by Timberland. It was close to Thanksgiving. They instantly invited me to Thanksgiving dinner. It has been a family tradition ever since. They extended their welcoming hands and told me it is good luck to have a stranger at the table for the holidays. Dr. Beck will go to UNH or as far as Dartmouth to pick up foreign students to stay over for Thanksgiving. The tradition carried on and celebrated two dozen of Thanksgivings together wherever Greg and I were- in MN, GA, AZ or Austria.*

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**Leona Beck** - October 04, 2019 at 11:58 AM

GB

“ 1 file added to the album Nancy Beck



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**Gregory Beck** - October 03, 2019 at 06:53 PM