

## VIRGINIA (“JENNIE”) PRENTISS: JACK LONDON’S WET-NURSE AND FOSTER MOTHER

Virginia (“Jennie”) Prentiss (nee Daphne Virginia Parker) was a formerly enslaved person born in either Virginia or Tennessee in 1832.<sup>1</sup> Jennie’s father is unknown. Her mother was sold as a slave and taken away from her infant daughter. Jennie learned to read and write while working in the “Big House” on the plantation. She was freed at age 33.

At age 34, Jennie married Alonzo Prentiss, a former Union officer in the Civil War. Alonzo looked Caucasian. His mother was mulatto<sup>2</sup> but she was very fair skinned and “taken for white”; his father was Caucasian. During Alonzo’s military service, he was “outed” as a “negro” due to his grandfather’s race. As a result, First Lieutenant Prentiss was either prompted or forced to resign from military service. Alonzo’s first wife, Ruth, who was Caucasian, became upset over his racial identity and subsequently left him with their children to move back to Ohio with her family. Jennie met Alonzo when she worked for him and Ruth as their housekeeper.

Jennie and Alonzo moved to San Francisco where Alonzo worked as a carpenter and became friends with Jack’s stepfather, fellow carpenter, John London. (Flora, Jack’s mother, would later meet John London through this connection.) Jennie and Flora shared the same doctor and each woman gave birth on the same day, January 12, 1876. Jennie gave birth to their third child, a daughter, who was stillborn. Flora had trouble nursing baby Jack so their mutual physician arranged for Jack to live with Jennie until weaned, when he was around 3 years old.<sup>3</sup>

Jennie was proud of her Black heritage, believing her race to be superior. Nonetheless, Jennie loved her little “towhead” Jack like one of her own children; the two formed a life-long close bond. Jennie showered Jack with love and affection, calling him her little “towhead,” “cottonball,” and “Jack-in-the-box.” Jennie also called him “Jackie” because he reminded her of a “jumping jack,” jumpy and squirming all the time. Jack referred to Jennie as “Mammy” or “Mammie Jennie.” Jack’s daughters and others referred to her as “Aunt Jennie,”

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<sup>1</sup> Some biographers believe she was born on the Tennessee plantation where she worked while others believe she was born in Virginia, her name sake. Others say she was born on a Virginia plantation and sold to a plantation owner near Nashville, TN.

<sup>2</sup> A person of mixed white and black ancestry, especially a person with one white and one black parent.

<sup>3</sup> There are some conflicting accounts of when Jack was returned to Flora, ranging from 8 months to around 3 years of age.

not liking the racially derogatory association with “mammy.” Later in life, Jack signed his books to her with love from “Your son, Jack” or “Your white picaninny.”<sup>4</sup>

Jennie read from her Bible and sang to Jack. Jennie’s other children, Will and Priscilla, welcomed young Jack as well. Due to Alonso’s Caucasian appearance, people often thought Jack was their son. Even after Jack returned to live with Flora, Jack continued to spend periods of time with the Prentiss family throughout his youth. When the Londons moved to Alameda, Jennie moved her family there to stay close to Jack. When Jack was 15 years old, Jennie lent Jack \$300 (which he paid back) so that he could buy his sailboat, the Razzle Dazzle.

Jenny worked as a nurse/midwife and a housekeeper. Jennie helped with the care of Jack’s daughters and tended to Charmian after Charmian had a miscarriage. She also worked cleaning Flora’s home. For his part, Jack provided financial support on a regular basis with money to help with the payment of medical bills, taxes, mortgage, insurance, among other things. He also gave generously to her church. Later in her life, he bought her a home in Oakland where Flora and Johnny (Jack’s stepsister Ida’s son), also lived for a time. Jennie was a leader in the African American community and specifically the Federated Negro Woman’s Club.

Jack made sure Jennie was provided for in his will so that she would continue to be taken care of after his death. Jennie died at age 90, on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1922.<sup>5</sup> She outlived Jack, Alonzo, both of her children and her grandchild. Jack said of Jennie, “I loved her almost as I loved no one else, for it was from her black breasts I drew the milk of life. In her I had all faith.”

#### Resources:

Labor, Leitz, Shepard, *The Letters of Jack London: Volumes 1 through 3* (1988) Stanford, Stanford University Press, pp. 21(fn. 2), 319, 322 (fn. 5), 234, 283 (fn. 2), 319, 322(fn. 5), 487, 831, 1479, 1481, 1525

Lasartemay, Rudge, *For the Love of Jack London: His Life with Jennie Prentiss – a True Love Story* (1991) New York and Los Angeles, Vantage Press, pp. 2, 6, 8, 9, 12-14, 28, 42, 55, 148, 159, 168, 173-176, 179, *en passim* [NB: parts of this book are fictionalized]

Labor, Earle, *Jack London: An American Life*, (2013) NY, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, pp. 10-11, 34, 149, 327, 358

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<sup>4</sup> The term “picaninny” is an ethnic slur for a Black child.

<sup>5</sup> Some biographers state her age at death as 91.

London, Joan, *Jack London and his Daughters* (1990) Berkeley, Heyday Books, pp. 24, 39, 52, 54, 62

Stasz, Clarice, *Jack London's Women* (2001) Amherst, Univ. of Mass. Press, pp. 1-2, 7, 15-16, 22, 29, 77, 109, 166, 221, 348

Haley, James, *Wolf, the Lives of Jack London* (2010) NY, Basic Books, pp. 12-13, 34, 37, 152, 185, 219-220, 314

Reesman, Jeanne Campbell, *Jack London's Racial Lives: A Critical Biography* (2009) Athens and London, University of Georgia Press, pp. 3; 23-29; 310 (fn. 32: for Becky as with her father, Jennie was "the person who meant the most to me as a little girl (aside from Daddy). She loved me and I loved her. I knew that, never doubted it.") See also, Reesman, Jeanne Campbell, *London in his own Time* (2020) Iowa City, Univ. of Iowa Press, pp. 151-153.

Kingman, Russ, *A Pictorial Life of Jack London* (1979) NY, Crown Publishers, pp. 24-25, 36, 163, 227

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Kershaw, Alex, *Jack London: A Life* (1997) NY Thomas Dunne Books, p. 17, 263-264

Andrew Sinclair, *Jack: A Biography of Jack London* (1977) NY, Harper & Row, pp. 4, 12, 176-177

London, Charmian, *The Book of Jack London* Vol. 1 (1921) NY, The Century Co., p. 35

Goldstein, Ben, "*Jack London and the African American Community*," a video interview with Mary Rudge (12/19/2013) Filmus, Inc.

<https://london.sonoma.edu/biographies/virginia-prentiss>  
<https://london.sonoma.edu/biographies/virginia-prentiss/becky-london-aunt-jennie>  
<https://californiarevealed.org/do/e44afb19-2250-4614-af90-dc21be83add5>

(NB: There are some factual errors in these links. For example, Becky states Jennie could not read or write.)

Written by Kate Johnston (abbreviated version in Jack's Facts #7, May 2025)