



# Monumental devotion

With decades of research, **Darrel Blaine Ford** is detailing the life of **Capt. Joel Cook**, an early American soldier

BY JOHN HANC  
Special to Newsday

**C**apt. Joel Cook led the kind of adventurous life Darrel Blaine Ford could only dream of. Maybe that's why Ford has devoted a significant part of his life to learning about a man who died 165 years ago. "He's been a friend of mine for a long time," says Ford, 85.

Not that Ford has been walking around like James Stewart in "Harvey," talking to an invisible companion. But over the past four decades, the longtime Babylon resident has devoted so much effort to retracing the steps of the peripatetic Cook (1760-1851), he feels like he knows him. "I'm the world's leading authority on Joel Cook," Ford boasts, adding that he doesn't have much competition. He has spent years cataloging the captain's deeds to preserve his memory as a part of local history.

Unlike Cook, who lived past 90 years old, Ford never strayed far from his birthplace. He grew up in Amityville and has lived in Babylon since 1955. "I'm the exact opposite of him," chuckles Ford, who used to work in the financial services industry and later for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A widower, he has four grown children (a fifth died as an adolescent) and four grandchildren.

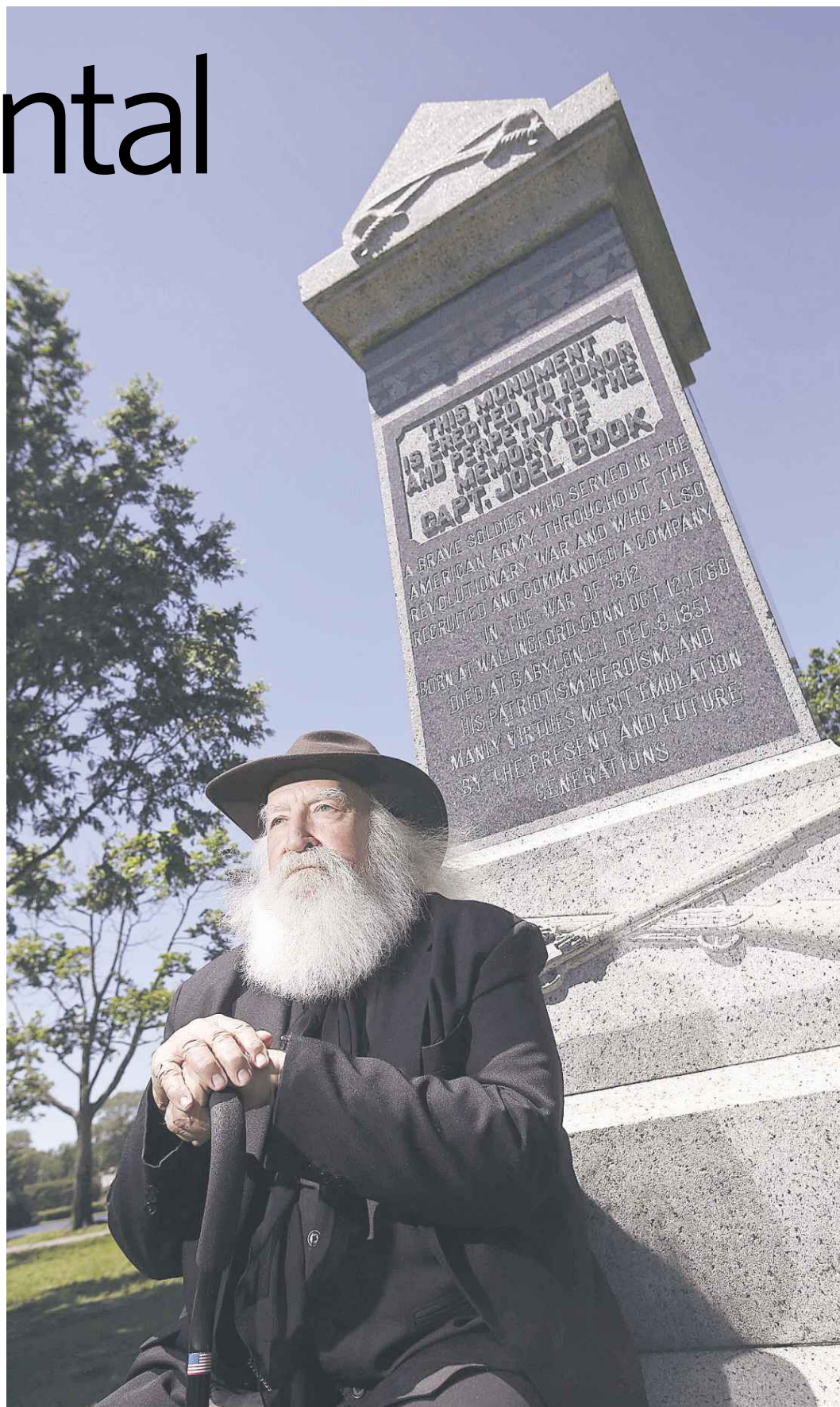
In Ford's daily travels, he often would pass a monument to Cook in Babylon's Argyle Park.

"I'd been looking at it for years," he says, "and I'd been curious about it." One day in the 1970s, he read the inscription and became intrigued. "Who was he, and why did he inspire people, who only knew him briefly at the end of his life, to build a monument to him," 56 years after his death, Ford says.

Answering those questions in the pre-internet age meant long hours in the library and lengthy correspondence with historical societies, museums and archives. It even took Ford to Wales, where, during a visit to a military museum in Cardiff, he found himself looking at the colors of Cook's unit that had been taken by the British at the Surrender of Detroit and a diorama depicting a soldier in blue (presumably Cook himself) handing over his sword. (The commander of the U.S. forces, William Hull, refused to attend the ceremony, and the ignominious duty devolved to Cook.)

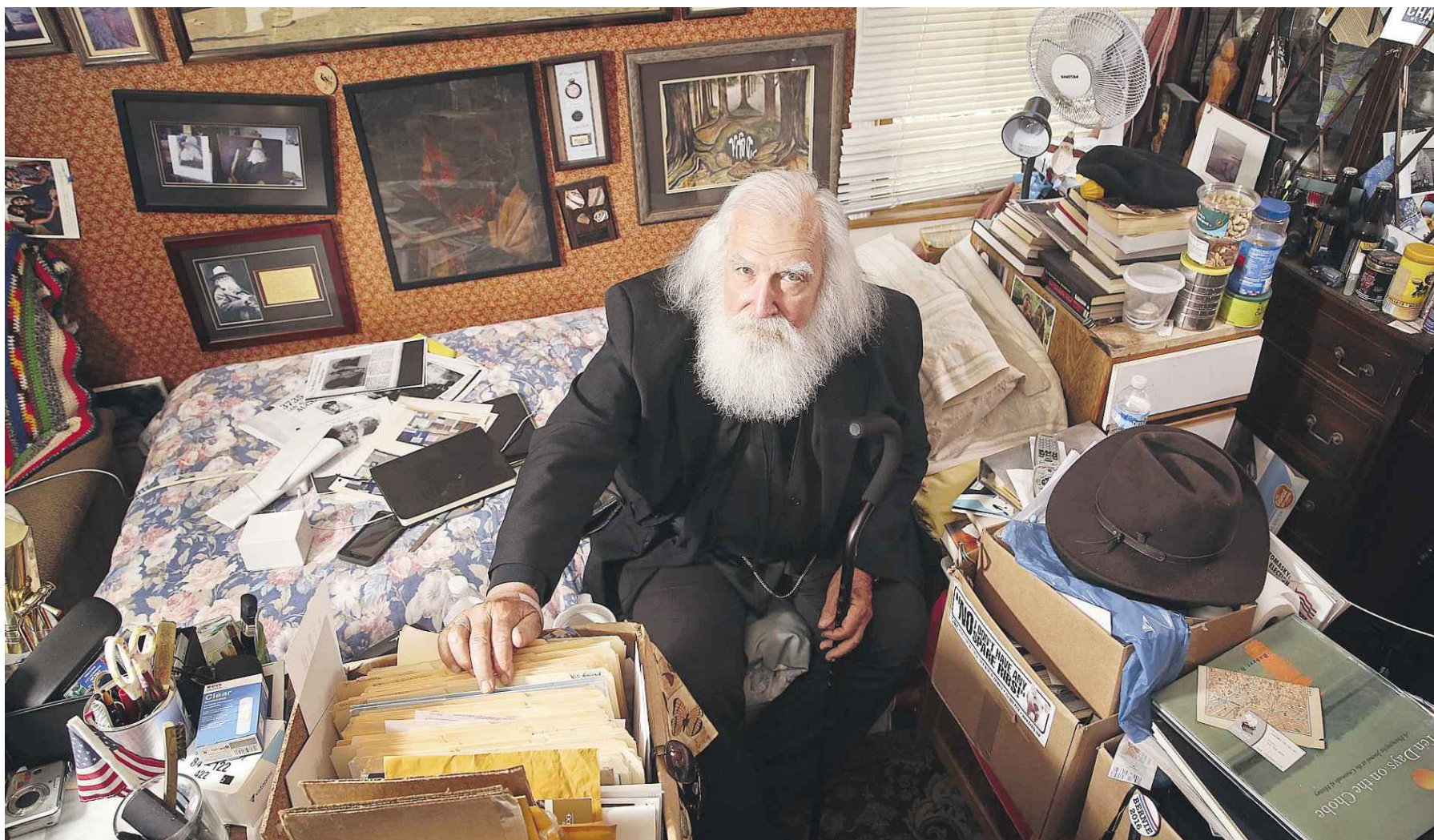
"Imagine, going to Wales and finding this," Ford says.

See COVER STORY on E24



Darrel Blaine Ford, intrigued by this monument in Babylon's Argyle Park, has become an authority on Capt. Joel Cook, a soldier who fought in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.





Ford with boxes of documents in his Babylon Village home; his research on Capt. Cook has taken him as far as Wales.

# Reviving a soldier's story

## COVER STORY from E23

In the late 1980s, Ford wrote two lengthy articles on Cook's life for the local Babylon newspaper based on his research. He also gave presentations to school and local groups.

"Remarkable," is how Babylon Town Historian Mary Cascone characterizes Ford's work. "To uncover all that information in the pre-digital age took patience, dedication and a bit of obsession."

Gerald Smith, president of the Association of Public Historians of New York State, calls the Cook saga "a great story." He adds that it's often older adults like Ford who bring such aspects of local history to light. "Most of the stories I've learned about our community are from people, often older people, who come into my

office and say, 'Did you know . . . ?'" says Smith, historian for the City of Binghamton.

### OUT OF OBSCURITY

Although Cook's history is obscure to many, he was a remarkable figure who — as Ford learned — was a well-traveled soldier in America's early years. Originally from Wallingford, Connecticut, Cook fought in America's War of Independence as a teenager, first as an aide to an officer in George Washington's army. Later, he saw action as an infantryman at several key engagements, including the Battle of Stony Point in 1779.

Ford also became familiar with the privations and hardships of a Revolutionary War soldier. For example, during the bitter winter of 1779-80, Cook was granted a leave to return home — a journey he

most likely had to make by foot, walking about 120 miles from Washington's camp in Morristown, New Jersey, to Wallingford.

After the Revolution, Cook moved to what was then the Wild West — the Ohio territory. He led troops in the bloody Indian Wars on the American frontier, including the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811, fought near present-day Lafayette, Indiana. The battle later inspired a campaign slogan ("Tippecanoe and Tyler, too!") that helped propel Gen. William Henry Harrison into the White House.

Cook, by then in his 50s, continued his military service in the War of 1812. During the United States' ill-fated invasion of Canada early in that conflict, it was his duty to surrender an entire American army to the British after a battle near what

was then the remote settlement of Detroit. He subsequently languished on a prison ship in Quebec, and after his release, moved to Hartford, Connecticut. Cook was cited for bravery by Harrison and later received a gold medal for his service. But late in life, the restless veteran moved to the then-rural Village of Babylon, where his son, Joel Wilcox Cook, was living. The captain lived on a 16-acre farm (now a strip mall) on what was then Babylon Turnpike (now Deer Park Avenue), and is buried in the old village cemetery on Deer Park Avenue.

While local residents likely never heard of him, Cook's memory looms large in Babylon. A nearly 12-foot-high granite monument to the captain was erected in 1907. Originally situated in front of the old Babylon High School

(roughly where Babylon Junior-Senior High School is today), the Cook monument has stood for many years in Argyle Park. The carved inscription memorializes Cook as "a brave soldier"; noted for "his patriotism, heroism and manly virtues."

### BEHIND THE MONUMENT

Ford says of his years of research on Cook, "It was pure joy." As to why the citizens of Babylon would erect a tribute to a man who lived only briefly in their midst, Ford discovered that two of the people who led the fundraising effort for the monument in the early 1900s had grown up in the village. "They remembered Joel Cook from when they were children," Ford says.

Apparently, the old soldier would speak at the local school.





Ford visits Cook's grave at the historic Babylon Rural Cemetery.

"He brought along the gold medal he was given and a scalp he had taken during one of his battles," Ford says. He suspects the scalp was a memorable, if grisly, part of the show. "I think he had a flair for the grandiloquent," Ford says. "I know a little about that."

Indeed, until last year — when Ford injured his spine in a fall from a stage — he made regular appearances at schools, libraries and other venues posing as Long Island-born poet Walt Whitman, performing readings. With his flowing white beard, he looks the part. He continues his work as Whitman, but on a reduced schedule.

Friends from Ford's "Walt World" didn't know about Joel Cook. But, they say it's in keeping with the man. "It doesn't surprise me that he has this alternative friend, besides Walt," says Cynthia Shor, executive director of the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association in Huntington Station. "When I converse with Darrel in

general, he's a fount of information about a lot of historical things."

Ford continues to explore Cook's history. "There's still some mystery about him," Ford says. For example, how did a man honored by his country become nearly destitute? Why did he and his son live in separate residences in Babylon; and why did the son refuse to allow his father a military funeral after his death? Despite hints of a darker side to Cook, Ford remains fascinated by this unsung hero of early America. "He was a participant in many significant events," he says. "He was a man with a lot of grit . . . he was a pioneer. I would have loved to have known him."

As he grows closer to the captain's age when Cook arrived in Babylon in 1849, Ford says he feels an even stronger connection to the man he has come to know so well. "I am enjoying my old age," Ford says. "And I'd like to think that Joel Cook enjoyed his old age here, as well."

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