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A BIOGRAPHY OF
ALEXANDER HARRIS
(1818-1909)

History 300
Dr. Warlick

By
Maureen O'Brien
Winter, 1982

**The Biography of Alexander Harris is
dedicated to the Savannah Black Man.
Deprived of many things, he should
not be deprived of his history.**

Alexander Harris lived from 1818 until 1909. He was born to a Free Black family. He lived most of his life in the same house on Williams Street. He was married and had three children. He was employed as a dreyman, a musician, a soldier, and a Pastor. His appointment to the ministry almost split his church. He served at this post until his death. During his term as Pastor, he was instrumental in developing various social and civic groups in the lively Free Black community in Savannah.

The life of Alexander Harris is a particularly interesting topic. He was very many things. He was a father, a musician, a wagonman, a husband, a Mason, a soldier, and a loyal friend. Most of all, Alexander Harris was a Black man living in a very cruel period of history. He never tired from the never ending task of making a better place for his fellow brother to live. This is the story of a man's struggle in almost every arena of life.

Alexander Harris was born October 9, 1809 in Savannah, Georgia. He was born to "free parents and therefore never felt the yoke of Slavery, and the weight of bondage had not stamped out his individuality."¹

Very little is known about his early life. He married Frances F. in 1844. Her maiden name never came to the surface, but many of her relatives were Fullers. There is a chance that this may have been her maiden name. She was also a Free Person of Color. In the early census she was listed as a seamstress. They had three children. The oldest was a daughter named Valarie F. Harris. She was born in 1848. The next two children were sons. William H. Harris was born in 1857 and Nathaniel was born a year later in 1858. None of Alexander's children survived him.

Early records list Alexander as a "Dreyman" or a "Wagoner"² Financially, he was better off than the average black man during this period. He owned a house on William street. Around 1905 this street's name was changed to Olgethorpe. His home was located at the present day site of Greyhound Bus Lines. In the 1860 Census report, at the eve of the Civil War, his personal value was listed at \$100.00. A women named Fuleria Fuller lived with the Harris most of their married life. She was a mantus maker. A mantus was a loose fitting dress that was popular during this period. She was probably Frances' sister. She lived with them, but was never listed as a boarder. She was buried in the family plot and mentioned in Alexander's Will.

During the "Lost Cause," also known as the Civil War, Alexander served as a drummer for the respectable Second Republican Blues. They were an independent company of Georgia in the volunteer infantry. He was listed as "colored man, not mustered, but in service."³ He served a short term of sixty days. He entered on June 30, 1862 and exited on August 30, 1862. ⁴

During this short hitch in the service, he met a life long friend George Dwelle. Dwelle was also a free black. They both served as musicians. "Through all their struggles in after life, neither lost sight of the other. Both interested themselves in the education of the negroes in Georgia and were instrumental in establishing the Industrial School of the State. Both became Baptist ministers and both have for years been acknowledged leaders of their race in the state,"⁵

After a series of different type jobs, Alexander settled down to the occupation of minister at the First Bryan Baptist Church. This church is the first black Baptist Church in North America. From the period of 1836 until 1916, First Bryan Baptist Church went through a period of struggles.⁶ Alexander was named as Pastor during the absence of Ulysses Houston. By 1871 a discrepancy arose over the legitimacy of Alexander's appointment. The congregation was torn over the question. The situation grew worse when actions began to take place. The Savannah Morning News accused them of acting like the Ku Klux Klan. "It seems that the colored brethren have concluded to mix their religion with a slight modicum of Ku Kluxism."⁷

On July 27 the church began to take steps to drop Alexander from the roll of the Church. The opposition was lead by Deacon William Green. The opposers decided to ask Alexander to leave their church if he tried to preach. William Green asked Alexander Harris to leave three times; Harris ignored him every time. The next day "Harris placed Green upon the docket of the city, charged with a violation of the law, by disturbing the public services of his church."⁸ The Mayor dismissed the case.⁹

Then the members of the opposition tried to have Harris turn over the keys of the church. He refused. A new set of locks were added to the church. They attempted to have Harris banned from the church, but since the Judge was out on vacation, their efforts were postpone for several months.¹⁰

On September 17th, the church adopted resolutions concerning Harris. In this resolution they accused him of assuming powers that were not delegated to him. Because of this, he had "inflicted great evils upon this church."¹¹ Also, they accused him of ignoring the church authority. For all of these charges, the church admonished Harris from their membership. Also, this included those that had "illadvised Brother Harris and lent their aide to these illegal acts."¹² These resolutions were passed unanimously.¹³

In December of 1871, Rev.U.L.Houston was recalled to the pastorate by a unanimous vote of one hundred and thirty four. At a church meeting on February 22, members tried to reconcile with Harris and his supporters. This was also a failure. The trustees "called upon Brother Harris and desired him to deliver to them any books, papers, or other property he held belonging to the church."¹⁴ They also were issued an injunction that would restrain Harris from interfering with the church.¹⁵

A few weeks after this injunction, Harris entered the church during a service. He went directly to the pulpit. "But as he arose, hymn-book in hand, to announce the number and recite the stanzas, the death-like stillness of the moment was broken by a brother sitting in the front pew nearest the pulpit was seized with a violent fit of coughing."¹⁶ This coughing became contagious. Before long, a police-officer was called. He said,"I see nothing disorderly, only that everybody seems to have a bad cough."¹⁷ After a few moments the police-officer left and so did Harris and his band. In the afternoon service that day, Harris returned with his men. Upon entering, a police officer who had been hidden cried out "Rush in, men." Harris was captured, but somehow was able to escape.¹⁸

This whole ordeal was set before Chatham County Superior Court. The Judge W.Schley ruled against Alexander Harris. "It Being Made To Appear, That The Complainant, Alexander Harris, although elected for one year pastor of the First Bryan Baptist Church, was a member of said church, and as such is under the dealing of the church, and by virtue of the Sovereignty of Baptist churches, the church has the power to deal with him in their own way; And it further appearing that his pastoral year for which he was elected has expired or nearly so, it is ordered that the said injunction be dissolved."19

For a short period he returned to his former occupation as a wagoner.²⁰ Although no records on this have been found, it seems that Alexander Harris repented and returned to the First Bryan Baptist Church and was installed as an assistant minister under Rev. U.L.Houston.

In 1887 Alexander Harris was named as Chairman of the Centennial Program Committee for the First Bryan Baptist Church. The event was scheduled to begin on the first Wednesday in June and last for the following two weeks. The committee expected 50,000 to visit during the festivities.²¹ The actual number of visitors to attend the celebrations was considerably less than the committee had expected. Including the clergy that attended, about 5,300 were present for the opening events. Before the two weeks were through, about 8,000 had registered. The two weeks were filled with lectures, services, and receptions.²²

Alexander Harris was a very active social man. He was involved in a number of social and civil activities. He was a member of the Grand Lodge of FAM. This was the Colored Masons. In this lodge he was elected Chaplin in 1877.²³ In a Chatham County Commissioners meeting Alexander was appointed by the Court to investigate all applicants of color persons for court aide.²⁴ In 1880, he and Abraham Burke were instrumental in raising \$5,000.00 for the building of a new West Broad Street School. The community was concerned about the unsafe conditions of the school.²⁵

In October of 1881, Alexander Harris was also active establishing "The Self Insurance Association of Georgia." This insurance service was set up for mutual protection and benefit. Many people became sensitive to the large amount of heads of households that were dying and leaving their families poor and helpless. The plan was for every member to pay one dollar as an entrance fee and an assessment of one dollar for every death in the service. A ten cent charge was collected for expenses. The plan was to establish branch offices throughout the state.²⁶

In 1891, Alexander came together with a number of other civic leaders in the black community to secure a Colored College in Savannah. There was some mention of placing the college in a more centrally located area in the State. This group of men felt that Savannah was the most eligible sight since it was in the "Black Belt." They also felt that the College should be located in Savannah since the oldest colored school, Chatham, was already located in Savannah.²⁷

Alexander's life began to slow down after the death of his wife Frances. She died at 81 years old. She had been sickly for about two months. The death records listed her cause of death as diarrhea and old age. She was buried at Laurel Grove South.²⁸ "The deceased, like her husband, was one of the oldest and best known of the colored residents. She was held in high esteem by both White and Black citizens. She was known for her gentleness and good deeds."²⁹ She had spent her entire life in Savannah. The old couple had celebrated their golden anniversary six years before. The death of Frances left Alexander practically alone in the world. They both survived their children.³⁰

Alexander lived another nine years after the death of his wife. He had been sick for about six months. He died of Senility. He too was buried at Laurel Grove South.³¹

George Dwelle, his life long friend, performed the funeral. The two men had

formed a pact. They decided that when the first was to die, the other was to provide for his friend's burial, with all the rites and solemnities. 3.

Surviving members of the Republican Blues were expected to attend the funeral. There are around ten member left. 3

The cemetery plot at Laurel Grove South is about 20' by 20'. It is located on Issac and Fifth Ave. inside the cemetery. It is an impressive black marble monument that, oddly enough, faces north. All of the other stones in the cemetery faced east (to face the morning sun). There is a possibility that the reason why this stone faces north is because Harris was in the Civil War. Many Confederate statues face this direction. There are individual markers representing the Masons and the Confederate Army. All of his family is buried in this plot except his daughter Valarie. There was no evidence as to where she was buried

Alexander Harris was a man of many chapters. He had his hand in many spheres of life. He was more than a Free Black man. He was a Free Black man's man. He helped the Black man become free.

Notes

1

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2

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25

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26

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27

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28

Physician's Certificate of the Cause of Death, for Frances Harris on 2 October 1900. Chatham County Health Department Records, Vital Statics.

29

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30

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31

Physician's Certificate of the Cause of Death, for Alexander Harris, on October 9, 1909. Chatham County Health Department Records, Vital Statics,

32

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33

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34

Tombstone of Alexander Harris, Laurel Grove South Cemetery.

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