

Catherine Harris, Africa, and some history of Jamestown, NY

June 10, **1809**. Catherine Harris was born in Meadville, Pa of a free Negro father and white mother. Her father dies when she was seven.

1828 Harris marries a Negro named Butler and they move from Meadville to Buffalo New York. Butler dies leaving her with one daughter (in 1902 the daughter's name was given as Mrs. Hall).

1831 Harris and daughter move from Buffalo to Jamestown, New York. When she arrived there were "no colored" persons living in Jamestown.

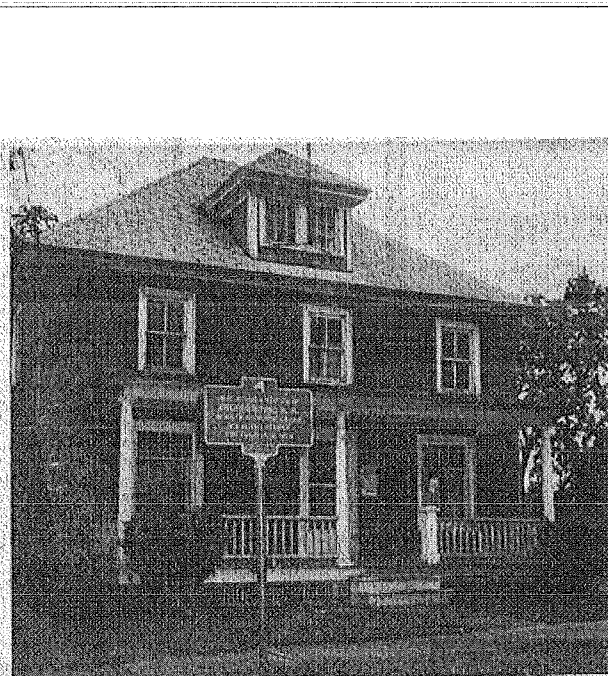
Mrs. Harris said that the slave hunter was rampant causing no Blacks to stop for long. But towards the end of the 1830's "colored" people began to move into Jamestown. Some of the early people were John Ackley and wife; Richard Sweezer and his wife who was an escaped slave; Johnson Wright and wife; runaway slaves Wade Hamilton and Harry King.

1835 Catherine married her second husband John Harris and they moved into the house only 16 feet in length at what later became 12 West Seventh St. located off the old road to Fredonia. Colored [Negro] families settled near the Harris' home, sometime in the 1840's whites began to call the area *Africa*. Harris was one of the few blacks in the United States to maintain a station, it is maintained that Mrs. Harris could hide as many as 17 runaway slaves at one time in the attic of the original house.

1849 Nearly 100 Blacks were living in the area *Africa*. Some were running from slave hunters, some even spied for the slave hunters. People were captured and some free people were kidnapped south. However, the underground railroad was also quite active: Catherien Harris says (in 1902), "Yes, I remember the underground railroad, it was here [in Africa] and I worked on it; this place of mine was a depot where slaves came and were brought; Silas Shearman, Dr. Hedges, Phineas Crossman, and others would bring here runaway slaves. At one time they brought nine, another 17. I cooked and fed with them with eatables brought by friends; others would help me."

From Phineas Crossma: Addison A. Price, Frank VanDusen, and Dr. Brown of Busti and Dr. Catlin of Sugargrove, Pa, were conductors and workers on the underground railroad. Contributing from their pockets were Alonzo Kent, Orsell Cook, Lewis Hall, Albert Partridge, and Madison Burnell, all of Jamestown.

Crossman, "I took as many as five from the back door of the Silas Sugarman house on the east side of Pine Street; took them in covered carriages and carried them to Nessel's in Ellington Center; I took them up to the door, would ring the bell, and someone would open the door and I would say 'here dey is', unload, turn and go away; the slaves would exhibit great fear, but keep mum and obey orders."



Underground Railroad Station

An historic marker stands near the site of Catherine Harris' home on West Seventh Street. The house, much altered since her time, was a refuge for runaway slaves fleeing to Canada. It was also here that the local A.M.E. Zion Church was founded. The house later served as a parsonage. Post-Journal photo

Mr. Page, a white man born in 1831, living in Falconer, but then in Ellington, said, "I took runaway slaves from Nessel's, slaves got in the sleigh and were covered with blankets. I drove towards Sinclairville and came to a house where I saw the designated light and drove up; I rapped on my sleigh with my whip handle and someone came to the door; said I, 'here they are,' and they got out, and I turned around and went back at 3 o'clock in the morning.

1852 Mrs. Harris' husband John Harris dies

1881 Mrs. Harris house was the site for the A.M.E. Zion Church. In time it served as the church's parsonage. In appreciation and in honor of Mrs. Harris' contributions to the history of Jamestown and to blacks of generations past and present, the church erected a monument marking her grave in Lakeview Cemetery in March 1976.

1902 Harris lived in the Jamestown Community called "Africa" along Fredonia Road. Two articles, interviews with Catherine Harris on the history of Africa were published.

1907 Catherine Harris died from pneumonia Feb. 12, 1907, nearly 98 years of age. Her daughter died from pneumonia a few hours earlier.



Catherine Harris

For more see the new <http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/archives/urr/jamestown.html> and the interesting AAUW article <http://www.prendergastlibrary.org/jamestown/catherinedickesharris.html>.

References:

1. *AFRICA* (Interview with Catherine Harris) by C. R. Lockwood, Jamestown, New York, Evening Journal, Saturday May 3, 1902
2. *AFRICA 2* (Black History of Jamestown) by C. R. Lockwood, Jamestown, New York, Evening Journal, Saturday, May 10, 1902
3. *Obituary of Catherine Harris and her daughter* (double funeral)
4. *The Circle Of Distinction Welcomes Catherine Harris* by B. Dolores Thompson, Jamestown (NY) Post-Journal, 10 March 1984
5. University of Buffalo Archivist Christopher Densmore <Densmore@acsu.buffalo.edu> 1999.

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