

A rustic Walton County farm dating to the ante bellum era has been so faithfully preserved that it takes visitors back to a bygone era.

SHELLI BOND PABIS

On Ga. Highway 11 a few miles north of Monroe, a historic treasure is nestled behind a thick wall of hardwood, pine, forsythia, crape myrtle, native azalea, holly, boxwood, and spiraea. Many motorists drive by without noticing the small sign next to the road for the William Harris Homestead, and they probably don't know that the road they are traveling was once known as Rogue's Road because of the number of horse thieves that traveled the route.

Those who are lucky enough to venture into the well-preserved Harris homestead will feel their pulse slow as the peaceful scenery and historic buildings capture their imaginations and take them back in time. The descendants of the William Harris family hope visitors will stay awhile and learn about life in the 19th century.

The log house (circa 1825) is a "plantation plain-type house" with two rooms upstairs and two downstairs. It is the first thing a visitor sees as he or she walks across a large yard surrounded by several majestic walnut trees. In addition, there is a family cemetery and other original outbuildings, including a smokehouse, salt shed, corncrib, and barn. A short walk from

the barn and down a wooded path is the natural spring where the early Harris family drew their drinking water.

The Harris family was not the first to own this house or land. In 1818, the State of Georgia bought 1.5 million acres of land from the Creek Indians for \$120,000. The state divided the land into counties, and this was when Walton County was born. In order to entice people to the largely unpopulated area, the state conducted six land lotteries to distribute the land.

According to Anita Sams' *Wayfarers in Walton*, those who wished to participate in the lotteries had to meet certain qualifications. Among those eligible were veterans of Indian wars who resided in Georgia during or after their military service. Some widows and orphans also qualified with certain stipulations.

During the third land lottery of 1820, James Gardner of Richmond County drew lot #149, and a widow, Barbary Wilson of Washington County, drew lot #122. Each of these lots was 250 acres and would later make up the Harris land. Soon after, William Carr bought both tracts of land. It is thought that he built the log house, now known as the William Harris Homestead, sometime between 1821 and 1825.

ROGUE'S ROAD LANDMARK:

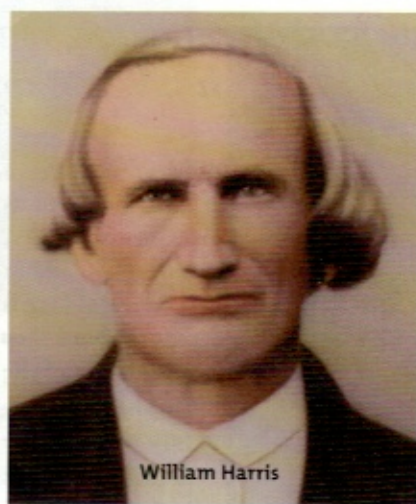
THE WILLIAM HARRIS HOMESTEAD



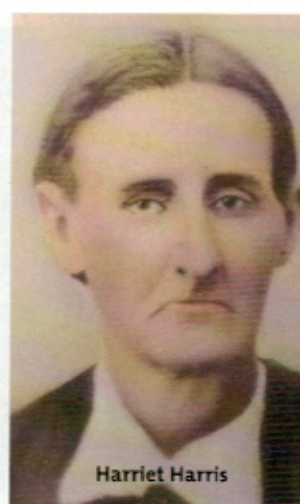
Elizabeth Doster (William Harris's daughter-in-law) and several descendants pose at the house in 1898.



The William Harris house in 1982, before restoration.



William Harris



Harriet Harris

Carr also drew land in the sixth lottery, known as the Cherokee Land Lottery of 1832, which may be a reason why he sold his land on October 29, 1836, to John D. Harris and Willis Kilgore. John was William Harris's older brother, and Willis was their brother-in-law. John and Willis deeded the land to John's mother, Milly Harris, a widow, and she and two sons, including William, who was 21 years old, moved into the log house. The property has belonged to the Harris family ever since.

William's father, John Harris, was born around 1738 in Virginia, and there are no records to indicate whom his parents may have been. John was a Revolutionary War soldier, and it's possible that he trained under General George Washington. After the war, he married twice. He had five children by his first wife. After her death, he married Milly Bowling, and they had ten children. The family would move to Georgia, where it is believed John Harris operated a cotton gin. He lived to be 83 years old, and his youngest child was only three years old when he died.

William Harris was John's third-youngest child. William married Harriet Amanda Davenport, of Athens, in 1841. They raised twelve children and worked the land at the homestead. Much like any family in the 19th century, they provided for themselves and "raised row crops, wove wool and cotton cloth for clothing and household linens; raised livestock for milk, butter and meat; raised chickens, ducks and geese; grew their own wheat and corn for flour and vegetable gardens and orchards; preserved fruits and vegetables for the winter; and they kept small formal gardens for flowers and shrubs."

William Harris was a successful farmer. According to the 1850 census, he owned 18 slaves, and in 1860, he owned 10, but unfortunately, few stories or records exist about them. His cash crop was cotton. During the Civil War, when Sherman marched through Georgia with the intention of destroying the rail system, one wing of his army passed at a distance of just 17 miles and spent a night at Social Circle. Though Sherman's march did not directly affect the Harris homestead, it had a drastic affect on the region's farmers, who depended on the railroad to ship cotton to Savannah and other places for export. Through inventories and census information it is clear that the Harris farm never fully recovered, though the family maintained a certain standard of living.

After William's death in 1879, his property was appraised. According to the Walton County Estate Returns 1885 (p. 270), his land, which at the time consisted of 365 acres, was worth \$2,000.

William raised resourceful children. According to *Wayfarers in Walton*, William's grandson, G. C. Harris, was part of the ten-man corporate body that established the Greene County Railroad, incorporated July 27, 1911. On August 1 of that same year, the Greene County Railroad Company purchased the property rights and franchise of the Bostwick Railroad Company. The venture later added several miles of track and remained in operation until 1942.

Another Harris grandson, Rufus C. Harris, also knew a great deal of success. According to *Wayfarers in Walton*, he was born in Walton County in 1897 and attended high school there. He married Mary Louise Walker, and they had three sons. He studied at Gordon Institute in Barnesville and received an A.B. degree from Mercer in 1917. During World War I, he served with the U.S. Infantry in France, receiving a Purple Heart and the Chevalier French Legion of Honor. After the war he studied law at Yale and became a faculty member at Mercer University. He was dean of the law school there from 1925-1927. Then he moved to New Orleans and became dean of the law school at Tulane University. In 1937, he became Tulane's president. He served in that capacity for 23 years. In 1960 he returned to his alma mater to serve as president of Mercer.

The William Harris Homestead also has a dark story in its history. There are conflicting accounts about a terrible crime committed by William's younger brother, Jourdan. According to Jesse Harris, who is responsible for restoring the log house and preserving its history, Jourdan and his young bride Comfort had domestic problems, so Comfort took their children, a two-year-old daughter and an infant daughter, to live with her parents in Barrow County. On August 17, 1842, Jourdan rode on horseback to the Whaley house where he found Comfort sitting in a buggy with her mother and the children. Jourdan shot both his wife and her mother, but the children were unharmed.

By this account, Jourdan rode his horse back home with the Whaley brothers following. He was "cornered in front of the old mulberry tree in front of the smokehouse beside the



The barn, corn crib and farm tools.



The circa 1825 Harris log house in autumn.

ash pit. The Whaley brothers shot Jourdan, and he toppled from his horse, dead."

A different account of the murders appeared in the *Southern Whig* newspaper on August 26, 1842: "Mr. Jordan J. Harris, who had separated from his wife about two months, went to the house of Ely Whaley, where she was, armed with a gun and other weapons. After firing at her, without effect, he caught her and cut her throat from ear to ear; while in the act, her mother ran to her relief, and received from Harris a blow that broke her skull, from which she died..."

The Harris family was outraged at Jourdan for committing such a crime, and it is said that Harriet Davenport Harris insisted that Jourdan not be buried in the family cemetery. On Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 1978, Jesse Harris was walking with her husband, Hubert, grandson of William Harris, when they found Jourdan's grave. He was buried in one of the farthest corners of the property at the time.

Despite this dark and tragic story, current visitors to the Homestead find the property enchanting. The William Harris homestead evokes nostalgia for a time gone by, reminding us when people worked more directly with the earth and depended on its resources.

The Evergreen Garden Club of Monroe is just one of the adult groups to tour the log house and grounds. They visited the landmark on a mosquito-biting, humid day in July, but the sultry weather did not put a damper on their experience.

"It's a holy place, isn't it?" commented Jean Hoffman, one of the garden club members.

This group learned that the house and land passed through additional generations of the Harris family until 1935, when Hubert Harris and Mell Harris bought the land. Then, in 1956, Mell Harris conveyed his part to Hubert.

Hubert's wife, Jessie Ginn Harris, worked for more than two years to have the William Harris Homestead listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1982. Her original application, submitted in 1980, requested that the log house and surrounding four acres be considered for the register, but much to the delight of the Harris family, the entire farm was included since the land had been owned and farmed by the same family for several generations. Not only does the property represent life in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it "con-

stitutes the major portion of a farm that has been in continuous operation for nearly 150 years and, thus, it represents the initiation and evolution of farming practices in the Georgia piedmont."

Today, the children of Hubert and Jessie Ginn Harris own and operate the property. In 2001, they established the William Harris Homestead Foundation, a non-profit organization devoted to "heritage, environmental, and agricultural education." Fifty acres of land have been placed under the protection of the Foundation.

This is the dream that Jesse Harris had for the Homestead when she restored it. Dottie Zazworsky, one of Jesse's daughters and managing director of the site, says, "My sisters and brother and I all had the same favorite haunts—places we remembered playing as children—so adding this land to the Foundation is our way of preserving our memories as well as our ancestor's home."

Over the past 16 years, 55,000 elementary, middle and high school students have participated in "A Day in the 19th Century" field trip program. They learn the ways of a 19th century family, what life was like for a Civil War soldier, and about the Creek Indians, who fished and camped in this area before and during the time when the first white settlers arrived. Zazworsky notes that some of the touring students say it's the best field trip they've ever been on.

Every few years, the Homestead hosts Heritage Day, which is a fundraiser open to the public. More than 1,000 people attended the event last year. The highlight of the day was a Civil War commemoration of the Walton Infantry recruits and the "Camp of Instruction" reenactment. There were candle making, spinning, and sheep-herding demonstrations throughout the day. Attendees had the opportunity to try out old-time plowing techniques with Belgian mules. There were vendors selling antique and specialty items, a gift shop, and for children, there was a petting zoo, pony rides and 19th century children's games.

"My husband and I drove by many times and wondered what this was," says Judy Anderson, a visitor to the site. "It's refreshing to see this home being preserved."

The William Harris Homestead is a treasure not only to the Harris family but also to Walton County and the state of



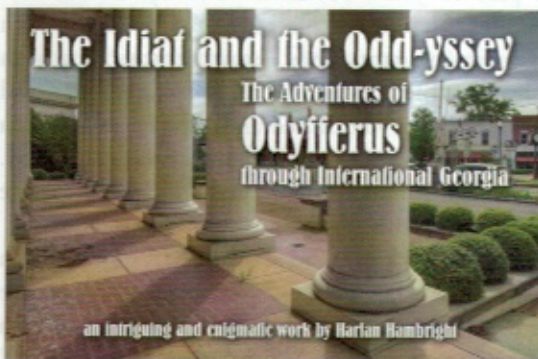
Georgia. If one stops to gaze out at the cars whizzing by on Highway 11, or Rogue's Road, one might imagine the first white settlers slowly plodding through the mud in their carriages, on horses, or perhaps on foot, to begin lives in an unknown place. The Harris Homestead does what it can to preserve these stories so that future generations will know their past and be better equipped to navigate the future. ■

Important Information: The William Harris Homestead is open the first and third Saturday of each month, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and also by appointment. For more information, visit www.harrishomestead.com or telephone (770) 267-5844.

Shelli Bond Pabis is a newspaper columnist and photographer in Barrow County. View her photography at www.shellipabisphotography.com.



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