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Joel Chandler Harris: Aesop of the South

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JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS - AESOP OF THE SOUTH

by

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TOPIC OUTLINE

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   C. Apprenticeship at Turnwold
   D. Influence of friends and acquaintances

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Joel Chandler Harris, born on December 9, 1848, in Eatonton, Georgia, was the product of a respected, middle-class family in a typically Southern, central-Georgia town. Though the actual site of his birth is disputed, Putnam County is proud to claim him as a native son. As with many of the families in that section, the Harris family was of Scotch-Irish ancestry.

The Harris family was a prominent one in middle Georgia, and had well-known connections all over the state. Because of the family's social position, it was common knowledge that Joel's mother married a man beneath her station. Despite family and friends' objections, and possibly to some extent because of it, Mary followed her heart in this matter, and separated herself from her family to follow her husband.

The period after the marriage and before the birth of Joel Harris is a void in family records. The father, from whom Joel inherited his red hair and much of his mischievous personality, deserted his wife shortly after the birth of their only child. Little is written about Joel's father, but it is generally agreed that he
was inferior in station and education to Mary. An Irish day-laborer of humble calling and with a lack of ambition, Joel's father left him a legacy of wit and charm, but little in other assets that could be marked on the credit side of the ledger.

What would have been Joel's fate had his father not deserted the family is problematical. The truth is that it was a determining factor in Joel's life, particularly in his early years. He became the son of a community—a healthy, wholesome community, populated by colorful, considerate people who helped to mold Joel into the healthy, wholesome, colorful, considerate person he became.

Joel's mother was the antithesis of her own mother, who was a quiet, reserved little woman, seldom leaving the house even to go to church. The two were reconciled prior to Joel's birth, following a period of disassociation after Mary's elopement and subsequent marital difficulties.

Miss Mary was a person of rare mental qualities. Joel frequently said that she was the smartest woman he ever knew. Her strength of character paralleled her strength of intellect, and when she awakened to her mistake in casting her lot with a man so lacking in courage and loyalty, she put aside all romantic notions,
took up her burden, and staked all on her son. She discarded his father's name and gave her family name to Joel, and no one ever heard her mention his father again.¹

Life in Eatonton was not hard for Joel's family, though it was necessary for his mother to sustain them by sewing. Friends in the town admired her courage, and, without considering them charity cases, were particularly solicitous of their welfare.

Eatonton itself was a remarkable community. It had a court-house, a town square, a tavern, several wide, shaded streets, and a number of stately colonial homes. The countryside surrounding it was sprinkled with plantations, each one an independent social and economic entity. Eatonton was at the same time an entity to itself and the hub around which separate entities revolved. For those days, it bustled, in the slow, sleepy manner of the Southern way of life.

Within a day's drive from Joel's village were born, before and during his life, many of Georgia's outstanding leaders in religion, literature, government,

and war. L. Q. C. Lamar, Ben Hill, Henry Grady, Atticus Haygood, Alexander Stephens, Robert Toombs, Sidney Lanier, and Richard Johnson are among the leaders who claim this region as their own.

Too, Eatonton was surrounded by institutions of higher learning. Within a day's travel were the University of Georgia, Emory University, Wesleyan, Mercer University, Oglethorpe University, and several academies. Milledgeville, the capital of the state, was twenty miles away. Thus, Joel lived in an environment that loved and appreciated learning. His town was a wealthy, cultured community, which he loved.

In one of his short stories, Mr. Harris wrote of his hero's native town:

His lot was cast amongst the most democratic people the world has ever known, and in a section where, to this day, the ideals of character and conduct are held in higher esteem than wealth or ancient lineage.²

It is probable that he had his own hometown in mind when he wrote this. He did not find in his native people the snobbery which could easily have been the lot of a half-orphaned boy, the son of a hard working, seamstress mother. Rather, the hospitable town furnished

²Harris, Life and Letters, p. 9.
a neighborliness which softened his attitude toward people and life.

The proximity of Eatonton to centers of culture led to the availability of leading religious speakers for its pulpits. Joel was no stranger to church. He, like many of the boys of his or any town, considered church-going a chore similar to school attendance.

There is, of course, no possibility of determining just what good seeds were sown by some of the visiting preachers in the receptive mind and heart of this more or less recalcitrant young hearer, but we are probably apt to underestimate the influence of these speakers. ³

The post office at Eatonton was a social as well as the communications center of the town. The kindly postmaster, Mr. Prudden, took an interest in Joel, as did many of the town's merchants. Since Joel was an avid reader, Mr. Prudden saw that he was given copies of all the newspapers received. The paper of that day was filled with political essays and with long reports of political conventions and meetings. Thus, Joel developed at the same time an interest in politics and a

love for newspapers. The newspaper bug bit hardest, and it was this bite which initiated his move to strike out on his own. The first issue of "The Countryman", given him by Mr. Prudden, determined Joel to become a newspaperman.

In later years Harris wrote of these days:

I have not the slightest difficulty in the world in referring all that I have done or hope to do to the kindly interest which people of Eatonton took in my welfare when I was too young to know anything of the difficulties of life or the troubles that inhabit the world by right of discovery and possession. But Eatonton was not a newspaper office, and I had to leave there in order to stick my head in an ink fountain.

The influences which had combined to mold his future thus far, were Harris' mother, his friends, reading, school, atmospheric inspiration, the church, and the press. Of them all, the press had made the greatest impact, and had claimed a disciple.

An advertisement in "The Countryman", edited by plantation owner Joseph Addison Turner, seeking a boy to learn the printing trade, led to Joel's apprenticeship at Turnwold. In direct relation to his future life, the time spent under the wing of the competent journalist-educator-politician-philosopher-farmer, Mr. Turner, did more to determine his vocation

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4 Harris, Life and Letters, p. 23.
than any other thing.

Mr. Turner was a highly cultured lawyer-planter of the old school. His library was extensive and at the disposal of Joel. A more versatile plantation owner than Mr. Turner could hardly be found, for his enterprises included not only the farm, but a hat factory, a tannery, a distillery, and a printing press. Joel later referred to his benefactor as a "miscellaneous genius."\(^5\)

A member of the Georgia legislature, a student of the classics, a writer who modeled his style after Samuel Johnson, and a Sunday School teacher who was not a church member, the squire of Turnwold was in every way a conservative. While Mr. Turner was an ardent Southerner and an avowed Yankee hater, the greatest influence he exerted upon Joel was in seasoning the youngster's mind and heart with sympathy for the negro and a longing for peace for the nation.

There were one hundred and twenty slaves on the plantation, and they lived in the benevolent atmosphere which most Southerners like to picture as typical of plantation days. Young Joel was exposed to an interracial atmosphere which bred a minimum of prejudice.

\(^5\) Harris, Life and Letters, p. 26.
The slaves had a confidence in their master which enabled Joel to be at ease in the company of the negroes, and allowed him to hear the recital of the wonderful folk tales inevitably reserved by the slaves for the children whom they favored. Even in the early war days when other plantations were alerted for uprisings, Turnwold never feared violence from the negroes.

Joel was a shy boy, despite his good humor and his inquisitiveness, and it is possible that he turned to the companionship of the negroes to keep from being hurt. There were the three Turner children for companionship, also. Approximately his own age, they were fine friends for a growing boy. The animals on the farm, too, were instrumental in furnishing background for the Remus Tales. Horses with such names as Butterfly, Tadpole, and Bullfrog, and dogs named Hell Cat, Biscuit, or Devil, were easy to get to know and love. As Mr. Turner sometimes did, Joel was inclined to consider the animals as persons.

Having seen something of the "campus" which was to be Joel's home for four years, it may be well to survey the product of the plantation printing press, "The Countryman." Its initial issue displayed the slogan: "Independent in everything--neutral in nothing."\(^6\)

\(^6\)Harris, *Life and Letters*, p. 29.
The announced intention of the paper was to provide a complete review of the history of the day. War news was given a prominent place. Included in its repertory were comments upon agriculture, humor, philosophy, religion, politics, art, literature, science, and general miscellany. In short, everything that was for the instruction or entertainment of the reader was the paper's province. Published weekly, and selling for ten dollars a year, the columns of the paper were open for advertisement. Primarily, the advertisements were used to promote the industry of the plantation.

There is little wonder that a liberal education was in store for one who read the paper, much more for one who worked on it. Starting on the ground floor, Joel learned the trade well from every standpoint. His teacher, Mr. Turner, was a master, and the supervisor of the plant, an itinerant "tramp" printer, was more than comic relief in Joel's journalistic education. It was from the kindly Irish journeyman that Joel got the technical skills of the trade, and it was from him that Joel acquired a humor polished in the style of the professional journalist.

A listing of Joel's friends and acquaintances and their influences upon him would take into record almost everyone the boy met during his formative years.
at Eatonton and Turnwold. We have mentioned the essential parts played by his mother, his other kin, Mr. Turner, the shop foreman, and the postmaster. In the light of his later success with Uncle Remus, it is well to mention Old Harbert and Uncle George Terrell.

In company with the Turner children, Joel spent many evenings in the chimney corner of the negro cabin listening to the legends handed down from African ancestors. These stories frequently placed animals in the major roles and gave them human personalities. Joel consciously and unconsciously recorded the dialects and the picturesque images in his literary storehouse.

It is probable that Uncle George came nearer to being the inspiration for Uncle Remus than anyone else. Mr. Harris himself said that the character was a "kind of human syndicate" of several negroes he had known. Many contemporaries of Mr. Harris recall Uncle George's proficiency at both telling tales and making ginger cakes.

Of Harbert, the other especially colorful storyteller, Harris had this to say:

Harbert used to sit at night and amuse the children with his reminiscences and his

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7Wiggins, Life of Joel Chandler Harris, p. 33.
stories. The children might tire of their toys, but they could always find something of interest at Harbert's house. There were few nights, especially in the winter, that did not find them seated by the negro's white hearthstone.

We have seen how Turnwold was a great contributor to Joel Harris' development as a person, but we have yet to see its influence upon his skill as a writer. In an environment that loved learning and journalism so much, it is not strange that Joel finished his four years of apprenticeship with an appreciation for culture, an inordinate desire to learn more, and ink in his veins.

His first efforts in writing were a series of puns, or "fillers", inserted in the columns to give the paper a more orderly appearance. These squibs were sharp and amusing, but they contained little of literary merit. At the same time they served a utilitarian journalistic purpose and as an expression of an inborn spirit of fun and mischief. In the language of the printer, the barbs were signed by "The Countryman's Devil."

Newspapers of wider circulation on "The Countryman's" exchange list began to note the fresh humor and to comment upon the little paper's originality. Mr.

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8 Wiggins, Life of Joel Chandler Harris, p. 34.
Turner encouraged Joel by his silence, and with each issue the "devil" became a little bolder and a little more sophisticated. The editor, of course, passed these trivia into print from his position as proof-reader, giving his unannounced blessing to Joel's efforts. Joel set his work directly into type without committing it to paper, thus leaving no evidence of authorship.

Later he became more courageous and submitted some of his more serious work to Mr. Turner. The editor scrutinized it frankly and criticized it severely. Thus was set a pattern of exactness and excellence which was to serve Joel well during his career. His literary advisor, Mr. Turner, could see his own limitations in the field of literature, and perhaps even at this early date foresaw a champion for the Southern cause in Joel.

Since "The Countryman" was admittedly patterned after Addison and Steele's "The Spectator", and "The Tatler", Johnson's "The Rambler", and Goldsmith's "The Bee", it specialized in essays, poems, sketches, and articles on choice miscellany. There was never a lack of opportunity for Joel to compose, because one of the paper's marks was that it reprinted no articles from other papers. Therefore, the budding genius was invited to fill the columns with the fruits of his effervescent mind.
A critique by Mr. Turner of one of Joel's rejected efforts may show the tone of the paper. In a note to his prodigy, the editor wrote by way of instruction:

In writing hereafter, First, select a good—a worthy subject. Second, stick to that subject. Third, say what you have to say in as few words as possible. All this is for your good.9

Paragraphing is the term given by newspapermen to the type of writing that Joel specialized in for "The Countryman". On whatever subject struck his fancy, Joel was able to express his thoughts clearly, briefly, (as was the need of the journalist), and usually with more than a thinly veiled touch of humor.

His newspaper contemporaries perhaps thought of him first as a wit, and only secondly as a thinker. However, with a love of the Romantic gleaned from Mr. Turner's personal library, from a world of experience packed into seventeen years, and with a heritage of culture handed down by his mother and Mr. Turner, Joel was peculiarly able to drive straight to the heart of his subject.

Poems were sprinkled among his literary efforts, indicating that he was not too much taken up with fun and work to be mindful of the charm of sentiment. Competence in that field, as evidenced by "Nelly White", "Moselle", "Nature", and "Mary", flavored his other writings with a musical sensitivity and an emotional awareness.

The war inspired much of Joel's writings during his Turnwold years. He composed a patriotic ballad, "Ode to Jackson, the Martyr of the South." He wrote a play, never finished, entitled "Butler, the Beast". He also published a letter to President Lincoln, written in "cracker" dialect, his first effort in a field of which he was to become a master. Signed "Obadiah Skinflint", the letter advised Lincoln to leave Washington in "less time than a sheep can skin a 'simmon tree". 10

The instrument which launched Harris into the space-world of journalism, "The Countryman", was doomed with the South's defeat. Shortages of material seriously limited its effective operation in the closing days of the war. Manpower for operation, difficulty of distribution, and the promise of enforced "thought control", all

10 Harris, Life and Letters, p. 46.
contributed to its demise in May, 1866. It died only after a struggle, however, and not without martyr-like defiance to any change in the purpose for which it was established.

In one of his final issues, Mr. Turner editorialized:

While I might have made a fortune, perhaps, by falling into the Yankee style of literature, and might have gained notoriety, if not fame, at the hands of the Yankee critics by pandering to their vicious tastes, I refuse to make money and accept such fame in order to remain peculiarly and entirely Southern.\(^{11}\)

The defeat of the war and the death of "The Countryman" preceded by only two years the death of Mr. Turner. He died in poverty, as did many other Southern planters, but he left an inheritance for the whole world in his protege, Joel Harris. Joel, in his usually philosophic and ironic way, stated that he too was ruined financially by the war.

You see, I trapped rabbits and sold their skins for twenty cents apiece and saved the money in my trunk. Well, all the money, of course being Confederate, went out of circulation when Lee surrendered at Appomatox.\(^{12}\)

\(^{11}\)Wiggins, Life of Joel Chandler Harris, p. 47.

\(^{12}\)Harris, Life and Letters, p. 54.
With many misgivings at leaving a life he loved, but with the typical enthusiasm of youth, especially red-haired youth, Joel left the plantation for Macon and "regular" newspaper work for the Macon " Telegraph". Never was the influence of the plantation life to leave his soul, however, for its pictures are painted in every tale he wrote.

Joel's tenure in Macon was of only four month's duration. Little was produced by him there, but it is likely that since Macon was the home of Sidney Lanier, Joel came under the spell of this rising Southern poet.

From Macon, his path wound to New Orleans, where as secretary to the publisher of a monthly magazine devoted to literature, science, art, and society, he was able to broaden his literary capacity and contacts. Soaking up atmosphere like a blotter, Harris got a new view of the negro along the river. Frequent side trips into the Delta country of Mississippi widened his picture of plantation life.

Illness forced his return to Georgia. By his own admission, a good portion of the sickness was homesickness. On his return to Eatonton, he secured employment at Forsyth, Georgia, working as a departmental editor on the country weekly only fifty miles from his hometown. Now a youth of nineteen, with much less than
a strong body, but with a splendid mind, cultured people sought his company.

His years at Forsyth saw him increase in stature among his peers in journalism. His paragraphing gems were frequently copied by other papers, particularly the Atlanta Constitution, and the Savannah Morning News.

Because the editor of the Monroe Advertiser was well known and had the same initials as Joel, much of the writing done by Joel was credited to James Harrison. The paper had an apprentice working much as Joel had done at Turnwold. Joel befriended the youth, possibly recalling his own kind treatment when he was an apprentice. In later years the youth remembered Joel as an extremely fast pressman, but one whose work was exceptionally neat.

He could say more in ten lines than some editors could say in a column; consequently the Advertiser had a large circulation. I can recall how thoughtful Mr. Harris was toward every one he came in contact with, especially those in a humbler position than himself. He composed all his work in the case, even long articles. He never signed his articles, and would not read in print what he had prepared if he could avoid it. I never called Mr. Harris 'Joe', though he was only twenty years old when I met him. In spite of his close application to his work (I never knew him to be absent during working hours even for an hour), Mr. Harris found time to associate with other young men. He was full of fun and fond of jokes.  

13 Harris, Life and Letters, p. 65.
Aside from its role in further polishing the work of Joel, Forsyth was noteworthy for two friendships which developed. One was an artistic interest shown by the sister of his employer. The second was his devotion to Mrs. Georgia Starke's daughter, Nora Belle.

Joel was an awkward, country-bred boy, painfully conscious of his social deficiencies, handicapped by his tendency to stutter, and believing himself much uglier than he really was, for his red hair and freckled face had caused him to be the butt of many rough jokes. It was a critical period in his life—a time when he was in danger of drawing more and more within himself as he advanced among strangers and lost contact with those old friends who made allowances for his lack of assurance.

It was Nora Belle who enabled Mrs. Starke to gain the confidence of Joel so that he would reveal himself to her in conversation and correspondence. Nora Belle was unconscious of his shyness, and her affection for him, being sincere, was even more effective in endearing her to Joel. His natural fondness for children, as evidenced by his Uncle Remus stories later, was the thing which cemented a friendship with Mrs. Starke.

Mrs. Starke thought highly of young Joel's ability as a poet, and begged him not to neglect his
lyrical gifts in the grind of newspaper work. Even after he had attained fame through his inimitable dialect stories she urged him to attempt poetry, despite his protests that he could write only "doggerel". She also fostered in him his ambition to attain a clear, simply rhythmic prose style and a command of English, and she did not hesitate to criticize him severely when the situation called for it. Along with Mr. Turner of Turnwold, Mrs. Starke gained a place of prominence among those who inspired Joel to the literary heights he attained.

Typical of the more literary writings of his Forsyth days, are the poems "To Nora Belle", and "A Remembrance". The Starke influence was a continuing thing, for it continued into the Savannah days and beyond. His letters to her poured out his heart, and were liberally laced with references to his "girl", Nora Belle. Indeed, if she had been several years older, it would have been inconceivable that he would not have married her.

In summing up the formative influences upon Joel's career, one must place the three years in Forsyth as second only to the four years at Turnwold. In Forsyth the youth became a man. He entered the Advertiser employ to set type and prepare the forms, but before long he was preparing a regular column. From being only a
member of the typesetter’s union, Joel became a marked figure among the editors, correspondents, and reporters at the press conventions of the state. The bright office boy became the accomplished journalist. Best of all, Joel learned in Forsyth what it means to have friends.  

An offer and a salary that he could not turn down sent Joel to Savannah. At forty dollars a week, and with the title of associate editor, Joel had arrived at the summit—a respected editor of a nationally-known daily.

Possibly few American humorists have been funny in appearance, but Harris was. One of his colleagues later described his appearance in the offices of the Savannah Morning News thus:

We thought at the time he was the greenest, gawkiest-looking specimen of humanity our eyes had ever rested upon. He was small of stature, red-haired, freckle-faced, and looked like a typical backwoods country youth. His apparel hung upon his person as if thrown at him. He appeared awkward in his movements, but smiled pleasantly as he was introduced around.

He was made the object of many jokes. However, he was a jokester himself, so he took them rather good-naturedly. His friends soon used colorful adjectives to describe him. "Red-Top", "Pink-Top", "Molasses-haired Humorist", and "Naughty Boy of the Savannah Morning News",

\[14\] Wiggins, Life of Joel Chandler Harris, p. 89.
were some of the nicknames bestowed upon him. His paragraphs, copied all over the state and South, were reproduced under such titles as "Harrisgraphs", "Red-Top Flashes", "Harris-Sparks", and "Hot Shots from Red Harris".\footnote{Brookes, Joel Chandler Harris—Folklorist, p. 16.}

Harris was inordinately shy. Like many other geniuses, he was a creature of paradoxes. He was extremely sensitive, incurably modest and shy, and he refused to make public appearances or to read publicly any of his stories. Still, in informal conversation with friends, he was more often than not the jolliest one in the group. His humor was apt to crop out at even the most unlikely places. The story is told that he once left Savannah on account of the fever which was raging, and sought refuge in a hotel in Atlanta. He signed the guest register, "J. C. Harris, one wife, two bow-legged children, and a bilious nurse."

During his Atlanta sojourn, street-car riders often allowed cars to pass while they waited for Joel Harris' car. In Savannah, where he lived with other young men at a boarding house, he upset the routine of the household frequently with his pranks.

The people at Eatonton have a legend about their famous son's one public speech. At one time in that
little town the people thought they had him cornered. He was on the platform with Henry Grady, and when the humorist's turn came, the people called: "Harris; Harris." "I'm coming," he answered, and walked down among the people and was lost in the crowd, escaping while the people laughed and cheered.16

On another occasion Mrs. Starke was entertaining Joel in the family sitting-room in Milledgeville. In the company were a number of congenial friends, and Joel felt at home. Strangers were welcomed to the room, which had only one entrance and was some distance up from the ground. Mrs. Starke, seeing the embarrassment that swept over Joel, remarked that he was trapped now and that she saw no way for him to escape meeting the guests. He did, however, by jumping out the window.17

The humor which was so much a part of him and which was preparatory for the writing of the Uncle Remus stories, he carried with him all his days.

In a letter to his son, he once wrote, "Humor is a great thing to live by, and other things being equal, it is a profitable thing to die by." A few days before his death, in answer to his son's inquiry about his

16 Brookes, Joel Chandler Harris--Folklorist, p. 18.

17 Harris, Life and Letters, p. 71.
health, he replied, "I am about the extent of a tenth of a gnat's eyebrow better."\(^{18}\)

As great an advocate of humor as he was, Harris knew the proper limits of the medium. He never used humor to hurt others, only to amuse. The creator of Uncle Remus, Billy Sanders, and Brer Rabbit would have been unhappy to see the negro mimicked in the manner of movies and theatre. Neither did his humor follow the pattern of the "dirty story", or suggestive tale.

Perhaps examples of the wit which gained Harris his reputation as journalism's premier punster would serve in a way toward understanding his genius. Examples from the Savannah paper show his paragraphing at its best.

The colored people of Macon celebrated the birthday of Lincoln on Wednesday. This is the third time since last October.

A negro pursued by an agile Macon policeman fell into a well the other day. He says he knocked the bottom out of the concern.

There will have to be another amendment to the civil rights bill. A negro boy in Covington was attacked by a sow lately and

\(^{18}\)Brookes, Joel Chandler Harris--Folklorist, p. 18.
narrowly escaped with his life. We will hear next that the sheep have banded together to mangle the down-trodden race.19

Typical of the reaction of other newspapermen of the state is this comment about Harris:

What shall we say of the bright, sparkling, vivacious, inimitable Harris? There is no failing in his spirit of wit and humor, playful raillery and pungent sarcasm. As a terse and an incisive paragraphist, he is unequaled in the South. One wonders at times that his fund of quips and odd fancies does not occasionally become exhausted, but the flow continues from day to day with no sign of diminution or loss of volume. J. C. Harris is a genius of rare and versatile abilities.20

The Savannah days were not restricted to turning out newspaper copy, however. Harris was becoming increasingly interested in versification. Sometimes in the humorous vein, but more often the result of having been touched by some beauty, his poems were probably given special notice because of his previous success as a paragrapher of note. Typical of his more serious work was his poem, "Juliette", written in 1870.

As it could be said that Harris became a man at Forsyth, it could be said that he achieved fame at Savannah.

19 Harris, Life and Letters, p. 96.
20 Ibid.
His stay there was notable for another reason also. It was there he met and married the beautiful Esther Larose. The courtship was not a whirlwind one. He knew her parents for two years before he met the daughter. When the family returned to Canada, Harris probably had no intention of continuing the friendship with more than an occasional letter. The letters were his real way of expressing himself, however. He was far too shy to express himself in person. It would be unfair to say the courtship was conducted by correspondence, but the truth is that had Esther not returned to Canada, it is unlikely that they would have been married.

A rather superficial attempt by Esther's father to discourage, or at least postpone the marriage, by the offer of a European tour, only served to hasten the date of the wedding.

The marriage was followed in a year by the birth of their first son, Julian, and in two years by the second, Lucien. Harris' love of children was one of his most marked qualities, and the development of these two boys was a constant source of interest and delight to him. In explaining his love of children, Harris said,

I am fond of children, but not in the usual way, which means a big hug, a kiss, and a word in passing. I get down to their level, think with them and plan with them.21

21 Harris, Life and Letters, p. 125.
Later he was to express in his matchless stories his tenderness and sympathy for the spirit of children. Even in those days when it would have been easy to confine his love to his own family, the joys and sorrows of other youth moved him profoundly. An example of his feelings is the poem, "In Memoriam," written upon the death of a little girl of his acquaintance who died while on a fishing trip.

His love of the universal child did not lessen his concern for his own family, though. When the yellow fever epidemic hit Savannah in 1876, he found it wise to move his family to the "high country" of Atlanta. While he did not have a particular job in mind at the time of the move, his fame was now such that immediate employment no longer worried him. In a short time he renewed his acquaintance with Henry Grady, who had an editorial position on the Atlanta Constitution. Thus began an association which was to last for twenty-four years.

His arrival at The Constitution was greeted by editors all over the state as one greets a lost friend, and Harris was greeted by another son at the unpretentious house on Whitehall street. The family circle was still further increased by the arrival of Harris' mother from Eatonton, who came to spend her remaining days with
her son and his family. These were days of strict economy and mutual sacrifice. The household was a happy one, lightened by love and harmonious understanding. The first grief to overtake the young family was the death of the youngest boy, as a result of measles, contracted from Joel himself. When Esther took the other boys to Canada to escape the hot summer months, Joel was left to grieve alone. The grief passed slowly, but in time a fourth son came as if to replace the lost son.

Harris continued to increase his fame as a member of the Constitution's unique newspaper twins, of which Henry Grady was the other member. A contemporary expressed the impact made by the two in these words:

On the Constitution we have two opposites, Harris and Grady. Harris is retiring, never speaking unless spoken to, but the words flow as freely from his pen as is possible. Grady, on the other hand, is gifted with extraordinary conversational powers; his tongue moves with the rapidity of a needle on a sewing machine. But when he attempts to write, he is less facile, and sometimes the words stick. 22

The two were great friends, and were members of a mutual admiration society. Of Harris, Grady said:

"Through his jagged and crude work of daily journalism there shines the divine light of genius." 23

22 Harris, Life and Letters, p. 140.
23 Wiggins, Life of Joel Chandler Harris, p. 123.
In an attempt to make the original literary matter of the paper as attractive as its political and news departments, the Constitution inaugurated a new feature. The paper ran in serial form, a complete novel of Harris', "The Romance of Rockville." It was a promising piece of work, indicating the author's powers of sustained narrative that were to be further developed in his later writings.

In addition to his humor, his sentimental poetry, and his works of prose, Harris began to experiment in writing dialect, the medium through which the Uncle Remus stories were to be told. The first of Harris' songs written in dialect was "Revival Hymn," which appeared in the Constitution in January, 1877. It met with immediate and widespread approval throughout the South, and was copied by many newspapers.

Several months later, a version of the song was published in a New York paper and credited to another author. The Constitution did not take kindly to the theft, but characteristically, Harris was unmoved.

By 1878 Harris was established in reputation as a humorist and as a writer of dialect. The opportunity then came for the Uncle Remus stories upon which his fame now rests. Upon the change of ownership of the paper, the writer of a column of negro character anecdotes
left the employ of the Constitution. Harris was asked to continue the column, but declined to do so, offering instead something new. His offering was the famed Uncle Remus songs, sayings, and fables.

There are two questions the reader is likely to ask about the Uncle Remus tales. First, did Uncle Remus really tell those tales to the little boy? The answer is yes, for through the years there has always been an Uncle Remus, a story teller, to tell folk tales—the stories of the people. He has told them to someone, and the listener is often a little boy. Especially did the negroes in the days of slavery tell to the children, white and black, simple folk tales, some of which they had brought from Africa.

The second question may well be, "Is there any truth in them?" The answer is this question is also yes, for they tell of primitive folks and their feelings toward animals; and of the negro and the life of the South during plantation days.

Harris was remarkably suited as the author of such tales as Uncle Remus told. He was able to sense what a child would want to hear and the manner in which he would want to hear it. He himself had said that he thought like a child. When asked to write a preface to a new edition of Uncle Remus—His Songs and Sayings,
he wrote,

I seem to see before me the smiling faces of thousands of children--some young and fresh, and some wearing the friendly marks of age, but all children at heart--and not an unfriendly face among them.

On an occasion when he was asked to explain his genius as a folklorist, he steadfastly denied any resemblance to a genius, insisting that the success of his Remus stories was pure accident. He commented:

I had no more conception of that than the man in the moon. The first one was written out almost by accident, and as a study in dialect. It was so popular that I at once began to ransack my memory for others. My friends ransacked their memories, and the result was the book as it was printed. I took pains to select the version that seemed to be most characteristic of the negro; so that it may be said that each legend comes fresh and direct from the negroes. My sole purpose in this was to preserve the stories dear to Southern children in the dialect of the cotton plantation. 24

His life as a whole fitted him to be a plantation chronicler. His youth at Eatonton was filled with study of the life about him, and hunting 'coons, 'possums, and rabbits with his dogs helped him absorb the language, superstitions, and habits of the people of the South.

24 Harris, Life and Letters, p. 156.
His days at Turnwold issued him into the world of journalism and increased his store of knowledge of the negro, his legends, superstitions, and dialect. His years at Macon, New Orleans, Forsyth, Savannah, and finally Atlanta, polished his literary style and introduced him to immortality.

His home in Atlanta, called "The Wren's Nest", and located beyond the car tracks, was ideal for reflection and for work on the Remus tales. It was reached by an inviting drive through beautiful forests. The drive became Brer Rabbit's Trail, and the famous briar patch was located on another portion of the estate. Nine children were born in "The Wren's Nest" to the Harris family, but only four sons and two daughters reached maturity.

Harris, in presenting his immortal legends, gave the world more than just a series of tales. He also gave the unique Uncle Remus, the kindly story-teller. Folklore could be called a science, but Uncle Remus, one of the few original characters of our literature, stamped the stories as an exceedingly valuable contribution to American fiction.

In the time of the old slave, Uncle Remus, the South was very different from the South of today. In
other sections towns and cities were developing, but in the South, the poor conveniences for travel, the grouping of many people about the home of the master, and the vast plantations prevented this development.

As a result, life was quiet, and much attention was given to social graces. The neighborhood was made up of a few leading families whose members intermarried and took much pride in the old traditions. With the chief occupation agriculture, with the slave labor very profitable, with the cultured class aristocratic, and with the old traditions cherished, new ideas had little effect on the current thought.

There were also in the South the "poor whites," and below those were the negro slaves. The slaves had no respect for the "poor whites," whom they called "po white trash," and they persistently influenced the children of the "big house" to have nothing to do with such.

Literature did not flourish in this feudal atmosphere. The leisure class with its slave labor did not choose the drudgery of literature. In addition, the climate was warm, there were no centers to encourage the producing of literature, no large public libraries, no great publishing houses, and a poor system of public education. They had only the old Southern life that has since inspired writers of poetry and romance.
The typical Southerner looked upon literature as a means of entertainment, but not as a vocation. Nevertheless, the educated people of the Old South cared for literature, for many of them had their own libraries of the best classic authors. They were lovers of literature, and they were idealists.

Harris presented the life of a vanishing race, the antebellum negro, and distinguished himself with the contemporary writers of local color fiction, for he gave a real setting of natural scenes—a picture of Georgia life.²⁵

Publication of the first book of the Uncle Remus stories was really the beginning of American folklore, some literary historians declare. Others claim that Franklin and Irving were folklorists, but it is true that Harris' Tar Baby story antedates the organization of the American Folklore Society by nine years. Joel Harris was a charter member of that society, and the society's first president stated: "To Joel Chandler Harris belongs the credit for introducing to the public the type of story known as the 'Uncle Remus' story."²⁶

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²⁶ Brookes, Joel Chandler Harris--Folklorist, p. 23.
A recounting of the familiar tales should not be necessary. Who could fail to remember the characters of Brer Rabbit, the Tar Baby, Mr. Possum, Mr. Fox, Mr. Wolf, Mr. Terrapin, and Mr. Bear? The characters live not only in the minds of everyone who heard the tales as a child, but also in the hearts of all who love fantasy.

The question always arises, when the Remus stories are analyzed, as to why the rabbit was chosen as the hero. Harris himself said that it was a matter of linking up the rabbit's salient characteristics with the psychology of the negro.

It needs no scientific investigation to show why he (the negro) selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness; it is not malice, but mischievousness.27

Indeed, the parallel between the case of the weakest of all animals who must, perforce, triumph through his shrewdness, and the humble condition of the slave raconteur is not without its pathos and poetry. Harris was not the little boy of the stories. Strangely enough, he never told the stories to any of

27Harris, Life and Letters, p. 152.
his own children. His role was to record, not to recount. If that were truly his role, he must know that it was done exceedingly well, for his amiable brethren of the woods and fields have been the dearest friends of thousands of children all over the world, for they have been translated into many languages.

If one were to chronicle the works of Joel Chandler Harris, it would be necessary to list thirty complete books, scores of poems, hundreds of essays, and countless articles. Insisting to the end that his fame was but an accident, humility almost became a fault. In assessing his own worth and the literary value of his works, he wrote to William Baskerville:

I have tried to keep Joel Chandler Harris as much out of my work as possible and I think I have succeeded in the sense that so many others have failed—that is to say, what I have written was for its own sake, and not for money nor for the glorification of the man who was accidentally behind it all. And yet the man is there somewhere—standing for lack of cultivation, lack of literary art, and lack of all the graces that make life worth living to those who affect culture; but I hope that honesty, sincerity, and simplicity are not lacking. I have tried hard to get at the secret of literary art, and have failed. I have had the knack of hard work, but the gift has somehow been lacking. Nobody knows better than I do how far below the level of permanence my writings fall.  

28Brookes, Joel Chandler Harris--Folklorist, p. 34.
This self-evaluation was in keeping with the character of Harris. It is certain that had he been evaluating the work of someone else whose genius paralleled his own, he would have been most liberal in his praise.

Mark Twain realized his friend's modest valuation of his talents, and in a letter to him stated:

You can argue yourself into the delusion that the principle of life is in the stories themselves and not in their setting, but you will save labor by stopping with that solitary convert, for he is the only intelligent one you will bag. In reality the stories are only alligator pears--one eats them merely for the sake of the dressing. 'Uncle Remus' is most deftly drawn and is a lovable and delightful creation; he and the little boy and their relations with each other are bright, fine literature, and worthy to live.29

On the occasion of one of his visits to Atlanta, during his term as President, Theodore Roosevelt made these comments about Mr. Harris' work:

Where Mr. Harris seems to me to have done one of the greatest services is that he has written what exalts the South in the mind of every man who reads it, and yet what has not a flavor of bitterness toward any other part of the union. There is not an American anywhere who, on reading his writings, does not rise up with a more earnest desire to do his part in solving American problems aright.30

29Brookes, Joel Chandler Harris--Folklorist, p. 40.
30Harris, Life and Letters, p. 141.
These are but two of the countless legions of admirers of Harris. His fame opened doors to the homes of the great and the famous. All were lavish in their praise of his sincerity and of his genius.

A fine look into the make-up of the person that was Harris may be found in a questionnaire, answered by Harris, and published in "The Critic."

My favorite authors of prose...Hawthorne, Thackeray.
My favorite poets...Shakespeare, Burns.
My favorite composers...The People.
My favorite book...Vicar of Wakefield.
My favorite play...King Lear.
My favorite heroes in real life...Lincoln, Jackson.
My favorite heroines...Women who love their homes.
What I detest most...Applications for autographs.
Quality I admire in men...Modesty.
Quality I admire in women...Charity.
Where I should like to live...At home.
The gift I would like to have...The gift of gab.
My ideal state of happiness...A cold night, a hot fire, and taters in the ashes.
My motto...Wait for the wagon.31

Such was the life and personality of the person among all Southern poets who best presented the picture of plantation life to the world. His was a picture colored by his own life. He saw the plantation way of life as an expression of its people. Those people were

31Harris, Life and Letters, p. 569.
a happy, contented, well-adjusted people who wanted more than anything else to pursue happiness in their own way. They did not deny others the right to their own way of life, and resented any interference with the traditions they held dear.

Harris' picture of the negro was one of contentment. He saw no prejudice in the way they were treated. He saw the plantation owner as a benevolent overseer of the welfare of the negro who could not have the same concern for non-slave negro. More than any other credo, Harris believed in a life of "live and let live."

Harris is buried in Atlanta, under a boulder of Georgia granite. On it are recorded these words:

I seem to see before me the smiling faces of thousands of children--some young and fresh and some wearing the friendly marks of age, but all children at heart--and not an unfriendly face among them. I seem to hear a voice lifted above the rest, saying: 'You have made some of us happy.' And so I feel my heart fluttering and my lips trembling and I have to bow silently, and turn away and hurry into the obscurity that fits me best. 32
BIBLIOGRAPHY


The Wren's Nest
THE WREN'S NEST

Located at 1060 Gordon, S. W., in the heart of bustling Atlanta, the family home of Joel Chandler Harris is now a memorial to him and to the wonderful world of fantasy he created for the world's children, young and old.

A plaque of metal taken from the Battleship Maine marks the highway in front of the house as the Boone Trail Highway. In Harris' lifetime the house was located at the "end of the street-car tracks", but today the West End section of Atlanta is a busy commercial center, near downtown Atlanta.

Harris' estate nestles among shady oaks and magnolias, flanked on one side by the spacious and modern West End Baptist Church, and on the other side by a super service station. Only in this one spot has the street been able to retain its original character of slow, lazy, homey atmosphere.

The home was originally known as the "snap-bean farm", but its name was changed to The Wren's Nest when an itinerant bird family chose the mail box for its home. For weeks the postman was forbidden to place mail in the
box or to disturb the new residents. Finally, the entire mail box was removed to a more secluded spot on the grounds to accommodate the visiting family. The wren's nest is now a novel exhibit in the home itself.

Some effort has been made to recapture something of the original character of the grounds, but the effort falls short because of the suspicion of commercialism. The "original briar patch" which was overlooked from Harris' study window, falls far short of the home which any respectable "Brer Rabbit" would choose. In reality, it looks more like what it is, an unkempt flower bed. An old-fashioned grape arbor, complete with shaded love-seat swing, lends something to the plantation atmosphere. However, another attempt to capitalize on the plantation flavor by the removal to the site of a plantation slave-cabin, appears to be somewhat out of keeping with the true character of the "city-farm". The cabin is doubtless authentic, as a historic marker attests to its originality. However, the cabin's presence is obviously an after-thought, and not a very well thought one.

The back lawn, which in Harris' time was his "snap-bean farm", has been turned into an amphitheatre. It makes an ideal site for the presentation of Little Theatre efforts to commemorate Harris' works, but would
probably be the last thing that Harris himself would
wish to be included in the memorial to him. Such a
setting is more in keeping with tributes to Shakespeare
than to the originator of Uncle Remus.

The feeling of a visitor familiar with Harris' works and somewhat conversant with his philosophy is
that the grounds as they are now kept are completely
out of harmony with the idea of Joel Chandler Harris.
One has the feeling that too much consideration has
been given to commercialization and too little attention
to restoration.

The house itself is another matter. It is filled
with possessions and mementos of Joel Chandler Harris,
and one can hardly fail to have a better insight into
his character after a visit to the house.

A person familiar with the architecture of the rural South is made immediately to feel at home when
he climbs the front steps and finds himself on the "veranda", or front porch. The wooden floor, the
wooden rocking chairs, and the old side porch swing,
are all reminiscent of days of pleasant and easy living.
The porch reaches three-fourths of the way around the
house, so that there is always a shaded side for sitting
and watching the world go by. The house is perched high
on brick pillars, allowing almost head-high clearance under the house for the children to have a rainy-day play area. Criss-crossed lattice-work coverings between the pillars make the secret hideaways even more mysteriously inviting.

The front door opens into the hallway, from which one may enter the "parlor", the study or the dining room. Dominating the hallway is a spiral staircase, rather small and flimsy, leading to Harris' "hide-away". He designed the house to have a workroom upstairs overlooking the front lawn, where he could work in solitude, away from the frequent though welcome interruptions from the children. He announced soon after giving it a fair trial that the "loft" could be used as a sewing room, and that he would work in the study, on the ground floor, with a view of the side lawn and in the direct path of all the activity of the house. He never again retired to the "attic", but continued to work in the wholesome hubbub of the family activity.

The parlor, on the left of the hallway entrance, was a "company" room. The central figure of it is a homey fireplace, complete with a mantel filled with figurines and family pictures. Truthfully, Harris felt ill-at-ease in the parlor, and seldom entertained friends
there, preferring to invite them into his work-room study across the hall. The mood of this room now is harshly violated by the addition of a plate glass showcase alcove, horribly set with colored lights. It purports to depict the slave's cabin where Joel listened to the negro slaves tell the Uncle Remus stories. Life-sized dummies represent "Uncle George", Joel, the negro Mammy, and the darkies. Realistic accessories abound in the "cabin", and from the standpoint of transporting children to the land of make-believe the showcase may be justified. From the standpoint of realism, however, it is a pretentious sham.

The room is very un-Harris. The family piano, too large for the room, was moved from the study so it could be replaced by a modern one which could be tuned to accommodate Historic Society members who meet there periodically. Pictures of famous visitors to the Wren's Nest are placed throughout the room, together with mementos of their visits.

Perhaps one of the most interesting rooms in the house is the library, which opens into Harris' study. Many first editions of Harris' works are on display there, together with his typewriter, pens, personal effects, and manuscripts which were written by hand.
The dining room-kitchen area still remains unrestored. Much of the china and silver were removed by family members after Harris' death, and are slowly being replaced by similar but unauthentic pieces. The heavy mahogany dining table remains, as does the unique "side-board", but the room does not reflect the warmth and part it doubtlessly played in the family life of the Harris clan. The portly Mr. Harris no doubt enjoyed his meals.

A unique feature of the grounds is the "friendship walk" which leads from the main entrance walk to various parts of the grounds. Marble stepping stones form the walk, each inscribed with the name of some personal friend or visitor to the Wren's Nest. President Johnson has a similar walk at his ranch in Texas, and recently it has been given much publicity. The probability is that President Johnson got the idea from Joel Chandler Harris.

The custodian-guides of the Harris home are cordial and helpful. They seem to be pleased that the visitor is interested in Joel Chandler Harris and his family, and are anxious to answer any questions or give any information they have. Naturally, a majority of their visitors are children, so their "sales talk"
is somewhat juvenile. However, a sincere interest is rewarded with more than the usual retelling of some of the Uncle Remus Tales.
Eatonton Scenes
Uncle Remus, the Little Boy and all "The Critters"

Eatonton, Georgia, Birthplace of
Joel Chandler Harris, "Uncle Remus", 1848-1908
"Beloved of All the World"
Eatonton, Georgia, in Putnam County, was the birthplace of Joel Chandler Harris. Had he been born in Scooba, Mississippi; Binegar Bend, Alabama; or Opeleusus, Louisiana, it is probable that he still would have become the sensitive, shy, compassionate person he was.

The physical environment of Eatonton was like many Southern communities in 1848. Putnam County was a land of cotton, slave-holders, wealth, and plenty. The relationship between the Negro and the white man was one of affection, mutual dependence, and respect. It is easy to understand how much young Harris could gain from the culture and folklore of the Negro, fresh from West Africa and endowed with an imagination second to none.

The countryside around Eatonton is typically Central Georgian. The rolling red hills are pine clad and beautiful. Two-story, white frame houses, complete with green shutters, and elevated from the ground, are the typical homesites. It is possible to imagine how the region was once a flourishing farming section, though now its primary agricultural potential seems to be tree-farming. This is the country ravaged by Sherman on his march to the sea, but nothing remains of the physical scars he left.
The county took the name of General Israel Putnam, a Revolutionary War hero. Putnam was born in Old Salem, Massachusetts. When the French and Indian War broke out he joined the army and rendered good service throughout the conflict. He was taken prisoner by the French and fell into the hands of the Indians, who tortured him cruelly. In the disturbances which led to the Revolutionary War, Putnam showed himself a most determined opponent of British aggression, and when the war began, he joined the army. He was in the Battle of Bunker Hill and later destroyed much of the British shipping on the Expedition of Noodles Island. In 1775 he commanded the Army of Long Island and in the following year took part with General Washington in the operations in New York and New Jersey. An attractive restaurant outside Eatonton now is named in memory of him.

The central tourist attraction of Eatonton is the Uncle Remus Museum. Located in the center of town, opposite a new high school and in a park named for Harris' benefactor, J. W. Turner, the museum draws visitors from every state and many foreign nations. It consists of a log cabin made from two original slave cabins in Putnam County and is similar to the
one occupied by Uncle Remus, the character made famous by the tales of Mr. Harris.

From the windows of the cabin is seen the beautiful and active countryside of the Southern plantation of ante-bellum days. The other world of Uncle Remus is captured in shadow boxes, containing delicate wood carvings of "de critters" humanized by the author. The animals illustrate twelve of his best known stories and were done by Mr. Frank Schnell of Columbus, Georgia. The artist who did the outside scenes which capture the period authentically is Wyndell Taylor, also of Columbus. Mr. Taylor did the large portrait of Uncle Remus and the Little Boy, a focal point of the display.

One end of the cabin depicts the fireside of Uncle Remus, where most of his stories were told to the Little Boy. Mementos of the era shown here are reminiscent of the close affectionate relation between the old man and his friend. It is generally believed that Joel's Negro friend, George Terrill, became his Uncle Remus.

A counter separating the fireplace from the rest of the cabin contains many first editions and articles of interest. Letters in Harris' handwriting are featured, as are letters written to him. Copies
of "The Countryman", the paper on which Joel worked at Turnwold, several personal possessions of the great man, such as his watch, a favorite pen, and a jacket worn when he was an apprentice, give the visitor a feeling of closeness to the genius.

Joseph A. Mahan, Jr., curator of the Museum of Arts and Crafts of Columbus, directed the construction of the museum. Emory Tucker, Georgia's official Uncle Remus, and W. W. Walker acted as co-chairmen in the construction. Serving with them was the president of the corporation, Mrs. Tom Thompson, Sr., Mrs. John L. Adams, and Jack Cardwell, all of Eatonton.

The grounds are in charge of the Town and Country Garden Club of Eatonton with Mrs. N. D. Horton, Sr. and Mrs. T. H. Resseau, Sr. in charge. Both are knowledgeable guides and sources of information about Harris.

Turner Park is owned by the City of Eatonton. It was a part of the home place of Joseph Sidney Turner, the "Little Boy" of the famous stories. The home was located across the street, where the Putnam County High School now stands.

Eatonton is a friendly town. One inquiry about Harris is sufficient to send any native into a lengthy
discourse on the gentleman, and with offers of help in visiting the points of interest. The post office is no longer the post office Farris knew. In fact, it is amazingly similar to the one in Jacksonville, Alabama.