

## **Hon. Josiah Harris**

*March 30, 2017*

*Col. Matthew W. Nahorn, The New Indian Ridge Museum, Amherst*

Judge Josiah Harris was born in Becket, Berkshire County, Massachusetts in 1783. As a true philanthropist, politician, and civic-minded individual, he should rightly be remembered or known as the founder of the original downtown area of Amherst, Ohio. Jacob Shupe and his wife Catherine were the first settlers of Amherst, as a whole, and started industry in this town, spurring development and growth in the general area. Before Shupe's grist and sawmills, anyone wanting to settle here and get lumber sawn or grain ground was required to travel either to Chagrin Falls or the Huron River, the locations of the closest mills – this was truly an “in-between” area. Shupe and Harris were two pillars of the fledgling Amherst community. A need has been found to compile an article recording and exploring Josiah Harris' history in and contributions to the Amherst area.

Josiah Harris visited the area that would become Amherst in 1814, selecting a particular portion of land, making the purchase, and then returning to permanently settle here in 1818. He selected the particular parcels of land because of the large seep spring (unconfined aquifer, located at the base of the west end of what is now known as the North Ridge, an ancient sandy beach ridge of a former level or stage of what today is Lake Erie) located here – and this became the nucleus of present-day Downtown Amherst.

While Harris was falling trees for a small log house, Jacob Shupe, who had already settled about 1 ½ miles north along Beaver Creek in 1811, heard Harris in the distance. Harris was met with two curious visitors: Shupe and his hired carpenter, Ralph Lyons, who, being curious, had trekked to (present-day downtown Amherst) investigate the noise. Shupe had established a distillery by now, and he brought some of his brew with him to properly greet Harris. The two then welcomed Harris this way, and as it was July 4, they celebrated the first Fourth of July in Amherst in this manner. The year was 1818. Josiah Harris was a leader and philanthropist in Amherst. His original land titles encompassed where the downtown commons area/central park and Amherst Town Hall are located today (originally known as the “Commons” area).

The first acre of land cleared in the downtown area was the area bordered by Beaver Court today (and the future Braun Homestead). Harris himself performed the axe work and land clearing. Loosely designing the downtown Amherst area with a central park/community space and area for a town hall and surrounding residential and business venues in mind, similar to that “back home” in the east (Massachusetts), he donated the centrally located land to the fledgling town for the creation of a Town Center and where a Town Hall of sandstone would later be built.

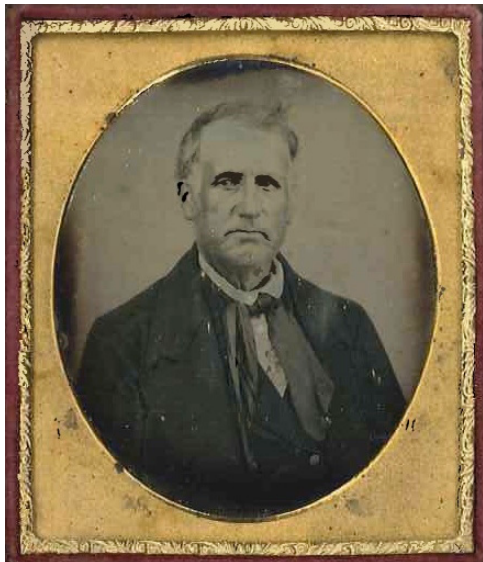
A restriction was placed upon the land, dictating the construction style and materials calling for a Hall of Amherst sandstone to be built here, when this permanent Town Hall venture could be funded. Over the years, the townspeople voted down constructing such a Town Hall of sandstone, largely because of the cost, but by 1884 it had been approved and built. The building boasts three floors, including a former opera house/stage in the uppermost level, and the fire and police stations were in the lowest level. Town (City) offices and Council chambers are still located on the first floor. The fire department was moved out of this building in 1959; and police department was relocated in 1996.

Interestingly, Josiah Harris donated the first Amherst Town Hall as well, which was originally a two-story wood frame house (see an article we have exclusively on that structure), believed to have originally been located behind the present Town Hall and later moved to its former location, until being demolished. Harris donated land for the first separate Union schoolhouse in Town, a brick building.

At the time when Mr. Harris arrived here, Amherst was not known as such in the local government, as the area was a part of Black River Township and located in Huron County. In 1819, the first election of Black River Township was held in Harris' log house, located near the Old Spring site of today, in the area upon the high overlook. This election included Black River (Lorain), Amherst, Russia, Brownhelm, and Henrietta Townships. Josiah Harris was elected Justice of the Peace of this territory in 1821. He was also elected to serve in the House of the General Assembly of Ohio, representing Lorain and Medina, and then as a State Senator for the same area. This was a time when the decision was made to create Lorain County (1822; 1824) and carve it out of Cuyahoga, Huron, and Medina Counties. In 1829, he was elected the first sheriff of Lorain County. Harris also served as the first postmaster in this area for a lengthy period of time (appointed in 1823 and serving for over 40 years). While in the State House, he worked against those who championed the cause to rescind Oberlin College's charter, largely because of the College's strong stance on abolitionism.

Other ventures in which Josiah Harris was involved included operating a tavern and a brickyard. He shall be remembered as a great statesman and forward-looking philanthropist, who moved the fledgling community of what ultimately became Amherst, forward. The City of Amherst today is indebted to both Shupe and Harris for their steadfast dedication to the community of what would become Amherst, Ohio.

The Honorable Josiah Harris died at the age of 84 in 1868. He is buried at the Cleveland Street Cemetery in Amherst.



Original daguerreotype from the collections of the Amherst Historical Society