

The Harper Family Legacy: Two Homes Memorialized

HARPER CABIN AND JONES HALL SIMS HOUSE FACT SHEET

The Harper Cabin, now located at the Brookside Nature Center in Maryland, is one of two Harper Family log homes being preserved from the Jonesville and Jerusalem free African American communities formed in the late 1800s. The other, the Jones Hall Sims House is located in Washington, DC in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). Both homes were originally built in Jonesville in Montgomery County Maryland.

HARPER CABIN

Brookside Nature Center, Wheaton Regional Park
1400 Glenallan Avenue, Wheaton, Maryland 20902



The Harper Cabin is a post-civil war log cabin, said to have been built in 1870. Originally located in the historic community of Jonesville in Upper Montgomery County. The Harper Cabin was the home of several generations of Harpers from the 1870s until 1935, when it was sold to Harry Williard. Williard's heirs donated the cabin to Montgomery County in 1976. It was then dismantled, moved, and reassembled in part at Brookside Nature Center for the United States Bicentennial celebration.

Oral histories provided by Joseph Clyde Harper in 1978 indicate that his grandfather, John Thomas Harper (August 17, 1837 – April 19, 1912) and then later John Thomas' first born, Richard Thomas Harper (Joseph Harper's father) owned and occupied the structure. The cabin looks different today than when the Harpers lived there. It had a rear addition, was covered by clapboards which hid the logs, and was white-washed inside and outside. Behind the cabin were a hen house, smokehouse, hog pen, vegetable garden and orchard with apple, peach, plum, and crabapple trees.

The cabin had no indoor plumbing or electricity, so a fire in the fireplace was almost continuously maintained in the winter months. Candles and kerosene lamps were used for light. Water needed for everyday use came from a spring about 200 feet away. *"Inside the dwelling consisted of one room down and two up. The downstairs room served multiple purposes: kitchen, dining, sitting room, washroom and family room for work and gathering. There was a wood cook stove. The upstairs was frame, instead of log. One room was for the parents and infants, and the other a bedroom for the children."*

Descendants of John Thomas Harper have been able to trace their family roots to John's father, Alfred Harper (born circa 1810) and a brother, George Columbus Harper.

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JONES HALL SIMS HOUSE

Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC)
1400 Constitution Ave NW, Washington, DC 20560



Original



NMAAHC

The Jones Hall Sims House is one of several surviving examples of a Reconstruction-era homes built by freed slaves in the country. The four-room house marked the crucial transition from slavery to freedom, and its exhibition at the NMAAHC represents *Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: The Era of Segregation, 1876 – 1968*.

In 1866, the year after the Civil War ended, former slave Erasmus Jones purchased 9 & 1/8 acres of land on part of Aix la Chappelle, a plantation not far from where he and his brother Richard once lived. Eight years later, Richard Jones purchased nine acres of land and built what is now known as the Jones Hall Sims House—or “*Freedom House*” as it’s called by staffers—at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, in Washington, D.C.

The original house measured approximately 16-by 25-feet. It was crafted from hand-hewn logs. There was a kitchen along with a chimney and fireplace. It was white-washed on the inside and outside, and had a wooden floor, with an upstairs level with windows. Behind the walls were pine, poplar and oak timbers that had been cut and notched in the Maryland woods and stacked two stories high. The timbers still bear the adz marks (saw cut marks on lumber that help indicate the age of a building), and some of the original chinking between the logs. The chinking was in part made of small, flat stones that were carefully arranged like books leaning on a bookshelf. And, the first floor still had the crude storage closet under the steps that was typical of the time.

Although the house was modest, it was equal in design to homes built by white Americans after the war. “*The home itself tells the story of African American know-how, engineering, and creativity,*” says NMAAHC curator Paul Gardullo. “*All of these things let us know the community was filled with black artisans...who were skilled at creating and constructing their own complex structures.*” Those who built the homes used skills acquired while working as slaves such as farming, blacksmithing, rail splitting and carpentry, and proved them ready to build and maintain their own homes and farms.

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Jonesville

Richard Jones and his brother Erasmus Jones founded the freedman settlement known as Jonesville where the Jones Hall Sims House was constructed. Over time, other family members settled in Jonesville, building houses of their own. Montgomery County historian George McDaniel describes the Jones Hall Sims House as *“truly the center of the historical Jonesville community.”*

Jonesville *“was part of a network of black communities coming out of slavery in the post-emancipation era, that clustered around each other for freedom, security and economic empowerment,”* explains NMAAHC curator Paul Gardullo. *“Their structures reflected the needs of the community to worship as they saw fit, to educate their children in a world that hadn’t educated them before, and sustain them through living off the land that they now owned.”*

National Museum of African American History and Culture

The Jones Hall Sims House was the first object Gardullo collected for the museum. He said, *“When you’re tasked with building a museum from the ground up...there’s an amazing amount of freedom and possibility,”* He realized that the Jonesville house was, *“an incredible evocation of freedom after slavery. It’s a tangible symbol of this period...where there’s great aspiration and equal amounts of limitation. I was convinced we needed to collect it.”* The house was cleaned out; stripped down to its original frame, disassembled piece-by-piece while being photographed, catalogued and labeled; and then most of it reassembled inside the museum.

What visitors to the NMAAHC may not immediately see in the house is the uncertain promise that the period held for freedmen and their families who banded together in places like Jonesville to build for the future. *“The real history of the house is long and deep and complex, and can’t be easily told in a museum where you are trying to use it as just one moment in time”*, Gardullo says.

Family Legacy

The Harpers represent 9 generations and over 400 descendants from every walk of life, with a large contingent living in Maryland, the second largest in the Philadelphia area, and the remaining in at least 13 other states throughout the U.S. and overseas. We’re from different socioeconomic levels. We’re graduates of colleges, universities and training programs. We have proudly served in every branch of the armed forces. We claim a doctor, lawyers, entrepreneurs, photographers, singers, dancers, teachers, secretaries, moms, dads, landscapers, farmers, government workers, actors, writers, supervisors, company presidents and vice-presidents, cashiers, and many other occupations. We look at the Harper Cabin and the Jones Hall Sims House and value the legacy from which we came, knowing that we’ve come a mighty long way. We aspire to go higher and know that all things are possible.

Bradley and Shannon Rhoderick purchased the House from the Sims family with hopes to demolish it and build a new home. At the closing, after all the papers were signed, they were told the house was historic and they couldn’t destroy it. Soon after they were asked about donating it to the Smithsonian.

The Jones Hall Sims House is a part of our family legacy. The home built by Richard Jones passed through two generations of the Jones family, was sold to Levin Hall (related to the Jones family by marriage), and then passed on to Hall’s descendants the Sims through the 1970s. Many of our Harper Family members are related to the Jones’, Hall’s and Sims.

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Anna Jones, who married William A. Harper, (brother of Clyde Harper) was the granddaughter of Richard Jones. Anna and William, along with his sisters (Genevieve, Edith and Patilla) moved to Philadelphia and birthed the Philly contingent of the Harper Family.

Stories about these two houses have appeared in the following publications and on-line resources:

Washington Post

Two-story house symbolizing freedom for former slaves to be displayed in new museum

The Atlantic

Rebuilding a Former Slave's House in the Smithsonian

The Smithsonian

For Nearly 150 Years, This One House Told a Novel Story About the African-American Experience

Montgomery Parks

The 1870s Harper Cabin

The Historical Marker Database

The Harper Family Homestead

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