

2020 AND THE FUTURE OF ALABAMA HISTORY

ABOUT

2020 and the Future of Alabama History: The Charles Oscar Harris Marker Story was held on Tuesday, November 17. The panel featured Barbara Hilyer (descendent), Stephen Davis (descendent), Richard Bailey (historian), and Scotty Kirkland (Chair, Alabama Historical Association Markers Committee).

Sponsored by the [Alabama Historical Association](#) and the [Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University](#).

Visit aub.ie/2020alabamahistory to view a video recording of the program.

TRANSCRIPT

Mark Wilson:

Hello and welcome. I am Mark Wilson, secretary of the Alabama Historical Association and director of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts and Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University.

Mark Wilson:

We're delighted to convene another 2020 and the Future of Alabama History conversation on historic markers. First, a word of welcome from President Frazine Taylor.

Frazine Taylor:

Good afternoon. I bring you greetings from the Alabama Historical Association. National and global events all happen somewhere and historical markers mark the place where many occurred. But the richness of history is in its local details that can be insignificant on the global stage. For example, the home of an individual who made a difference in the community or state, a national feature, a building, a byway or just something interesting that happened nearby. Historical markers can tell stories and point out facts. Now let us enjoy our program today. Thank you.

Mark Wilson:

Thanks, President Taylor. We appreciate those thoughts and today we do have a rich story and our group represents three different time zones across the United States. Today, we welcome Barbara Hilyer from Seattle, Washington, Steven Skip Davis from Washington, DC, Dr. Richard Bailey, and Scotty Kirkland of Montgomery to discuss the Charles Oscar Harris marker story.

Mark Wilson:

Our first speaker will be Barbara. Thanks, Barbara for joining us. We look forward to hearing this story of a unique important marker.

Barbara Hilyer:

Thank you, Mark and thank you to the Historical Association for inviting us to share our story and our connections to Alabama history. Thank you to Frazine for pointing out that a home is a place to be remembered. The marker that we'll be talking about was the home of Charles Oscar Harris.

Barbara Hilyer:

He lived in Montgomery and was a well-known Republican and active member of the Montgomery Black community. He was born in Tuskegee in 1858, died in Montgomery in 1913, having served more than 30 years in the Montgomery post office and the state legislature.

Barbara Hilyer:

Dr. Bailey will be talking more about his accomplishments in this program and my cousin Skip and I will be talking more about the personal aspects of his life and family.

Barbara Hilyer:

I want you to know the story of how a historical marker in Montgomery united the descendants of Charles Oscar Harris, my great-grandfather, for the very first time. I grew up white on the west coast and I never knew any of my dad's family or where he came from. I became a public school teacher and I taught U.S. history among other subjects.

Barbara Hilyer:

Years after my father died I was in my thirties and I learned that he had a sister in Hawaii and I went to meet her. She explained to me how my father's family was African American and that he had begun passing as white in the 1940s, which was before I was born, which is why I had never met my aunt or other members of their family.

Barbara Hilyer:

I became close with that aunt. I met her in 1988. She had held various political offices in Hawaii for over a 50 year span. Maiben, can you show that photo of her? She was featured on the cover of Ebony magazine in 1963 when she was elected to political office in an era when neither women nor Black people were welcomed in leadership positions. She was the granddaughter of Charles Harris. She left the mainland to go to Hawaii in 1947 because of limited opportunities for her to become a teacher or otherwise become involved in politics.

Barbara Hilyer:

After my aunt died in 2013, I became interested in learning more about the rest of my dad's family. Helene's daughter had told me about a cousin in Washington, DC, so I planned a trip in 2014 to meet my cousin, who you'll meet soon, and his family.

Barbara Hilyer:

Now Skip grew up African American in Washington, DC, so as you can imagine, we had a lot to catch up on when we met. I was in my sixties and Skip was in his seventies. When he was a child, he had lived with his grandmother, who would be my great-grandmother, Ellen Hassell Hardaway Harris, who was the widow of Charles Oscar Harris.

Barbara Hilyer:

He knew the family history from his mother, my grandmother's sister. I had no idea that my grandmother had grown up in Montgomery because I didn't know her at all and, in fact, that her family went back generations,

both white and Black, and that made me very curious about Alabama history, which I otherwise knew very little about.

Barbara Hilyer:

Skip gave me more family photo ... Let me back up and say while I was researching from my home in Portland, my brother lives in Seattle, I live in Portland, Oregon, I came across the book, hopefully, you can see this, Neither Carpetbaggers Nor Scallywags: Black Office Holders During the Reconstruction of Alabama 1867 to 1878 and Charles Oscar Harris was mentioned in this.

Barbara Hilyer:

When I went to visit Skip I thought it would be a good hostess gift or a guest gift to bring with me, however, when I got there, Skip pointed out that his name was in the index. I was a little bit late in buying that but I was just learning all of this.

Barbara Hilyer:

Skip filled me in on what he knew about his mother's family and shared more family photographs. He encouraged me to go to Montgomery and meet Dr. Richard Bailey, the author of the book. Now I never thought about going to Montgomery but it seemed like a good idea. Two years later, in 2016, I did that. Dr. Bailey generously agreed to meet with me and took me to the Alabama archives where I met Scotty Kirkland and I spent a few days tracing down information there at your archives.

Barbara Hilyer:

As a history teacher, I was very interested in all the plaques that made history so available on the street. I couldn't help but notice, although, there were many plaques, designated people, events, locations, during the times of slavery and the modern civil rights movement, there was very little information about Black people in Montgomery in the decades between the civil war and the civil rights movement.

Barbara Hilyer:

It was a struggle to find much evidence at all of the life and times of Charles Harris in all the decades he lived in Montgomery. There was a plaque near the capitol commemorating Reconstruction-era legislators and Charles Oscar Harris' name was on that but other than that, the public recognition that I saw was overwhelmingly a perspective of white history.

Barbara Hilyer:

Dr. Bailey graciously toured my friend and I around Montgomery where we saw the Montgomery Theater in the process of being demolished. He explained to me that he believed that Charles Oscar Harris was among the first African Americans to challenge civil rights laws in Alabama when he bought tickets to be seated in that theater. He also took me to Oakwood Cemetery where Charles Harris is the only member of his large family who is buried there. The rest of the family left.

Barbara Hilyer:

At that time, Dr. Bailey asked me if our family would be interested in sponsoring a commemorative plaque to celebrate the accomplishments of our esteemed ancestor on the occasion of Alabama's bicentennial in 2019. I enthusiastically contacted my brother in Seattle and Skip and his family on the east coast and they all thought it was a great idea to embark on the project.

Barbara Hilyer:

In April of 2019, 16 members of the extended family of Charles Oscar Harris came from Seattle, Washington, I came from Portland, Oregon, my niece from Madison, Wisconsin, Skip and his family from Washington, DC and New York City, to meet each other for the very first time. We gathered for three days in Montgomery to commemorate the plaque and how lucky now we know that it was 2019, not 2020 or this would never have happened.

Barbara Hilyer:

We were honored to be able to tell our story publicly and to give Charles Harris the place he deserves in Alabama history. That's pictures of us gathering. We were ages eight to 99, Skip's mother-in-law was there and she was 99 at the time. She's now 100.

Barbara Hilyer:

We need to thank Richard Bailey for keeping history alive long enough to invite us back into it because without his research and his book, we never would have been reconnected to each other or to Montgomery. Now my cousin Skip will fill in some more details.

Skip Davis:

Hi. Let me introduce myself. My name, technically, is Steven Davis but everyone, as you can see, calls me Skip so we'll stick with that. I am, to my knowledge, the last living grandson of Charles Oscar Harris and Ellen Rhetta Hassell Hardaway Harris. I have one other cousin, Jacqueline Harris, who lives in Connecticut and is the daughter of Booker and Alberta Harris.

Skip Davis:

I would like to personally thank Mark, Barbara, Richard and Scotty for allowing me to join them in this presentation and discussion. I have enjoyed researching my family history, mainly with the assistance of my older daughter Stephanie who is the master of the Ancestry.com searches. Barbara and Richard, it's been a lifelong quest and continues as more and more information comes to light.

Skip Davis:

My knowledge of Charles Oscar Harris has been very limited and until the last few years. He died in 1913 and the raising of his 10 children fell upon his wife, Ellen Hardaway. Ellen, who I did know and liked and like as a good child, spent my early years around her until she eventually passed away in 1956. She was 95 and is currently buried in Lincoln Cemetery outside of Washington, DC.

Skip Davis:

After the children were grown and most had moved on, Ellen moved from Montgomery to Washington and lived with my mother. I believe that it was because she lived with us that I got to know all of my relatives. It fell upon my mother to be the family caretaker of her until she died and it was probably on her 90th birthday that this picture was taken. She's the one in the center with the bouquet on. Actually, she looks younger than her two oldest daughters, Countess on the right and Georgie on the left.

Skip Davis:

Most of the family is in the picture. Ellen Harris, Charles' wife, is the one with the bouquet. We've had more luck researching her ancestors than those of Charles Oscar Harris, who as we know was born in Tuskegee to Georgia Floyd and that's all basically we know.

Skip Davis:

All of Charles and Ellen's children were educated, obtained college and professional degrees, and went on to develop successful careers. Most married and raised families. Note, the boy in the lower left corner sitting on my cousin's lap. That is me. That's why everyone else has passed on.

Skip Davis:

As you may see from the plaque, Charles Oscar Harris was born in Tuskegee on August 5th, another day I have in common with him. We do not know his father and all we have been able to gather is the name of his mother. As a child and when the family was together, I never heard any of the family members speak of their father. Although, I assume that they must have.

Skip Davis:

I was born in '44 and it was a crazy time with very serious events happening irrespective of where you lived. America was engaged in World War II and segregation was still in effect, even in Washington, DC. I do not know when Ellen moved to Washington but all of her children except Dr. Charles Oscar Harris Jr, who is not in that picture, never moved back to Alabama.

Skip Davis:

Around the age of 17, Charles Oscar went to Oberlin Preparatory School and College for possibly a year and then to Howard University as one of their first students. He was at Howard from 1868 to 1871 before returning to Montgomery.

Skip Davis:

He married Ellen Hardaway December 27th, 1882. During his career, he worked in several politically-related positions. First, as the port collector of revenue. Then assistant and rolling clerk in the Alabama House of Representatives. Then chief postal mailing clerk, a presidential appointment, that he held for 30 years.

Skip Davis:

He was elected as one of the last Reconstruction legislators in the Alabama legislature from 1876 to 1877. He was very active with local, state, and national politics. As you can see ... Can we see the next slide? No. That's another picture of the family. The one after that. As you can see, he is participating here in the Republican national nominating committee ... I forget that year but I know that in that picture there's a picture of President Harrison and Senator McKinley and way down in the corner, second from the end, the gentleman leaning forward with the bald head is Charles Oscar Harris. I was talking to Richard earlier, in the back there's Frederick Douglass in it as well.

Skip Davis:

Dr. Bailey, from which I gained most of my information on my grandfather, more than I gained from my family, mentioned that Charles was well liked by both Black and white communities, highly respected by various social, cultural, and political circles and was associated with and was an early leader in various civil rights activities.

Skip Davis:

I will now turn it over to Dr. Bailey to speak on those points.

Richard Bailey:

Thank you very much. I would just like to say I am overjoyed to be here today. This is a historic moment for me. I want to applaud Ms. Barbara Hilyer and Mr. Steven Davis for their interest in their relative Charles Oscar Harris.

Richard Bailey:

We would not be here today if it were not for Scotty Kirkland and the kind people at the Alabama Department of Archives and History. Nor would we be here ... We would not be here, in fact, if it were not for the excellent work of Mark Wilson and the Alabama Historical Association and the good people at Auburn University.

Richard Bailey:

I would just like to say that our theme, 2020 and the Future of Alabama History, gives us an excellent opportunity to not only focus on statewide history but also to focus on local history. Charles Harris was involved in many activities in post-Civil War Alabama.

Richard Bailey:

The reason I want to profusely thank those family members is simply this. I have talked to many persons who I have connected to Reconstruction office holders and I'm just impressed with the interest those family members have taken in their ancestors. What I want to do today is just to talk about Charles Oscar Harris and some of his activities and some of the activities of his day.

Richard Bailey:

You see a photograph of the state capitol in front of you and we want to emphasize that the state capitol was located and is still located two blocks from the residence of Charles Oscar Harris. You can see he could get to the capitol in a matter of minutes, if he was walking as many people did in that day.

Richard Bailey:

Let's talk about some of the activities that went on during Charles Oscar Harris' life. We've already mentioned that he served on the Alabama legislature from 1876 to 1877. One point we haven't focused on is that these were turbulent times for Black office holding. I can understand, especially when you look at the photograph in front of you, the members of the Alabama legislature in 1872, but these were turbulent times for these Black office holders, especially when Oscar Harris becomes an office holder because Alabama at that time had been redeemed by Democrats.

Richard Bailey:

In other words, the Democrats were in charge of the governor's office and state government in Alabama and almost nobody welcomed Black office holding. It took a bit of courage during Reconstruction but especially after the redemption by Democrats to even seek political office in the state of Alabama. We want to applaud Charles Oscar Harris and Herschel B. Cashin and many others who would even dare to seek political office in the state of Alabama.

Richard Bailey:

Let's put a couple of other things in context. Alabama today brands itself as the cradle of the Confederacy and the birthplace of civil rights. Let's talk about the latter of the two. We have not discussed, many of us, the fact that the first civil rights bill in Alabama was introduced by Ladder J. Williams, representative from Montgomery County in 1872. Then the next year, the first civil rights bill in Alabama senate was introduced by Jeremiah Haralson of Dallas County.

Richard Bailey:

These are some of the early civil rights bills that were introduced in the legislature and each one of these bills was lost, stolen or otherwise misplaced. We don't have any account of what actually happened to those bills.

The point is we don't even discuss those civil rights bills when we begin to discuss Alabama history. There's something else that we want to talk about here today that brings Charles Oscar Harris squarely into focus.

Richard Bailey:

On March 11th, 1875, at the Montgomery Theater, for those persons who grew up in Montgomery in the decades past, they might remember the Weber's Building on the corner of Monroe and Perry Streets in downtown Montgomery. That was the Montgomery Theater. On March 11th, 1875, a planned demonstration was held at that theater.

Richard Bailey:

The civil rights bill of 1875 had just been passed the first of March 1875, and a group of African Americans decided they would test the public accommodation feature of that civil rights act of 1875. Charles Harris was among those, John William Jones, and Herschel Cashin. I just want to add here that a son of Herschel Cashin married a daughter of Charles Oscar Harris. You can see the Harris family and the Cashin families are blood relatives.

Richard Bailey:

Carol Wagner and his minstrel group have been invited to Montgomery with his minstrel shows and these are the people who had the white actors with the black faces. He had promised his audience that he would give them much fresh and new materials, new songs, new acts, everything so this would be a big deal that would be held at the Montgomery Theater.

Richard Bailey:

Harris and Cashin and Jones and Whittaker and Thomas and some of the others decided they would test that civil rights act by sitting in the circle area that previously was designated for whites. When Carol Wagner heard about the fact that these people planned to test that civil rights bill, he had alerted the ticket seller not to sell any tickets to anybody Black for the section that was designated for whites.

Richard Bailey:

You can just imagine the surprise on his face when he saw these African Americans sitting in the section at the Montgomery Theater that was designated for whites only. Pandemonium probably could have gone through that place but he asked those guys if they would quietly leave. There were some white gentlemen in the audience that evening who were ready, willing, and more than likely able to come to the aid of Carol Wagner in helping these Black gentlemen to get out of that theater.

Richard Bailey:

When they realized what Carol Wagner was willing to do, they left in a haste and pandemonium broke out and Carol Wagner assumed that was the end of it, not realizing that that was just the beginning. The next day, they filed for a warrant because after all this is in violation of the civil rights act of 1875. Carol Wagner found success in that he found someone who would agree to his side but those guys persevered. They filed another warrant. He said it's best that he left Montgomery. With some aid from some prominent whites, he was able to catch a train and head for Decatur, Alabama.

Richard Bailey:

As the story is told, that train got out of Montgomery at the fastest speed you can imagine, going down hills and around curves and everywhere else because they wanted to get away from that Black, I won't use the word, group, angry group that was after Carol Wagner for having denied them the opportunity to sit and enjoy that minstrel show.

Richard Bailey:

This becomes the first planned demonstration, civil rights demonstration, I have records of for the state of Alabama. Now in Mobile around 1867, Lawrence Berry had engaged in what we might call a demonstration but that wasn't planned demonstration. The one in Montgomery in March 1875 is the first planned demonstration, civil rights demonstration, if you will, that I have records of for this state, which means then that because of Charles Harris, we have to reframe the beginning of civil rights activities in the state of Alabama and, certainly, we can now say that the cradle of civil rights, as we might want to call it, can go back to 1875 instead of any events that might have taken place in the 1950s.

Richard Bailey:

The story doesn't end there. When the Constitutional Convention delegates met in Montgomery starting in May 1901, those delegates were determined to disenfranchise every African American possible. When they successfully did so, with the Constitution of 1901, a group decided to challenge the results of that Constitution.

Richard Bailey:

Jackson W. Charles led that group to challenge that development. Booker T. Washington in Tuskegee decided to secretly fund Wilfred H. Smith, a personal friend and a New York attorney to represent that group. They filed in state court ... Booker T. Washington assumed that his petition would prevail because Thomas Goode Jones, a person whom he had ensured and used his influence to become a judge here in the state of Alabama and in Montgomery. That would not be the case.

Richard Bailey:

That case was eventually appealed to the Supreme Court. It didn't work out any better for Booker T. Washington or for Wilfred Smith. Here's what I want to say was the result of that court case. Charles was thrown out on technicalities. At first, because Charles has attacked the validity of the state Constitution under which he sought to register and the second because he had failed to claim the state courts that his rights as a United States citizen were denied, although, that was the basis of his appeal.

Richard Bailey:

Here's what Smith wrote to Booker T. Washington and I might want to add here is that much of this was done in secret, the relationship between Smith and Booker T. Washington. Booker T. Washington had his secretary, Emmett J. Scott, to use code names for all of the parties in these communications. Booker T. Washington assumed a code name and Wilfred Smith assumed a code name so that if anybody read the communication they would not know who these people were.

Richard Bailey:

Here's what Smith said to Washington, "To my mind, the Supreme Court took advantage of the only loophole in sight to get around the decision of a question fraught with so many important political consequences. We would have to find a way to hem them in as they do in playing checkers." Washington advised Smith to press on but Smith and his attorneys advised Washington against any further work regarding that.

Richard Bailey:

As most people know, African Americans in this country did not receive the right to vote until August 1965 when President Lyndon Johnson signed that Voting Rights Bill to give African Americans in the 20th Century the right to vote.

Richard Bailey:

The point is in talking about Charles Harris, we want to set the record straight that Black office holding and Black office holders were not persons who did nothing, they were not persons who did not understand political issues. They were very intelligent persons and they were concerned about more than just winning a reelection. They were concerned about the electorate. They were concerned about the people. They were also concerned about the state of Alabama. They were not persons who were not unmindful of what was at stake. They understood political matters.

Richard Bailey:

In closing, what can we say about Charles O. Harris and his colleagues but Charles O. Harris in particular? What we have before us is an opportunity to reframe African American history, state history, Alabama history and we can actually say that because of Charles Harris and his group, Alabama and Montgomery become a cradle for civil rights activities and because of Charles Harris, people in Alabama today can say that this state can lay claim not to one Nobel recipient but actually to two. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and Ralph Bunche, who became a son-in-law to Charles Harris and he became a Nobel recipient in 1950.

Richard Bailey:

I'm going to pass it back over to Ellen and we will continue our discussion of Charles Oscar Harris.

Barbara Hilyer:

Thank you very much, Richard. That was great. You'll see a map there that shows where the marker is and it marks the family home of Charles Oscar Harris. It's a two-sided plaque. I just wanted to say a little bit about the process of getting a plaque done.

Barbara Hilyer:

We really just have to thank everyone involved. It was not a daunting process at all, although, I was a little intimidated at first by how we would do it but the information that's required online is fairly minimal and after that our hand was held every step of the way. We submitted our text and submitted it to Scotty, who helped us edit it a bit in order to have the correct number of words and lines and how much we could do. Richard backed us up in making sure that we were accurate.

Barbara Hilyer:

It unfolded over a period of maybe three or four months and, for us, none of us lived there so we were completely reliant on the historical association and the city and Dr. Bailey to help us through. If we can do it from the two coasts of the country, you folks down there should be able to have no problem at all. I just think it's a really marvelous opportunity for people to participate in history. Like I said, as a history teacher I know there's an awful lot of American history that needs to be retaught to be inclusive and tell everybody's story.

Barbara Hilyer:

It was really quite an honor to work on this with everyone. We owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Bailey and thank you, Mark, for including us in your program. Now Scotty could not be here today but he has some recorded words about the process of the historic markers.

Scotty Kirkland:

Thanks, Mark. I'm sorry I can't be live with you all today but I'm happy to comment and say a few words about this program. I first want to thank Barbara and Skip and Dr. Richard Bailey for participating today and to Mark and Maiben for setting everything up.

Scotty Kirkland:

You know, I really think the Charles Harris marker is a public history success story. When Mark and I first talked about that, that was what came to mind because it really conveys I think all of the important aspects of what public history tries to do. We, of course, try to educate the general public and we try to talk to them about what's around them, the landscape, the historical landscape that lives around them.

Scotty Kirkland:

I think that the Harris marker does this but it also provides a real unique connection between the study of history and between genealogy and bringing these people together. I remember when we had the dedication last April. I remember telling Dr. Bailey afterwards that I hoped that he felt like the marker and how it came about and the fact that his research into Charles Harris played such a pivotal role in it, that I hoped that he felt like that that day was one of many crowning achievements in his illustrious career. I certainly feel that way and we couldn't have done the marker without him.

Scotty Kirkland:

I think the story here of bringing people together, bringing this far-flung family back to Alabama where it began, I think is just incredible but I think ... It's definitely one of my favorite stories from my five years as marker chair. I think that it was important for us to put the names of the descendants on the back of the marker, the names of the children and then to say that the marker had been installed by Charles Harris' descendants. I think that's important. This is a Reconstruction-era marker but it's also a Great Migration story marker and I think sometimes it's equally important to look at that aspect of history as well.

Scotty Kirkland:

The Harris marker I think is indicative of what we've been working on doing with the AHA marker program in the last several years. You know, we're working towards telling more complete stories of Alabama history and, certainly, we don't have nearly enough Reconstruction-era markers. If you're in a community that has a Charles Harris story of your own or if you're in a community and you want to look at ways that you can improve the diversity and inclusion of your historical landscape, then I encourage you to take a look at Reconstruction-era history and to think about contacting us for the work to put in a marker.

Scotty Kirkland:

Sorry, again, that I can't be live with you today but if you have any questions about the marker program I would direct you to the AHA's website. There's a tab for historical markers and a new request tab that will give you all the guidelines, sample text, and my contact information but if you have any general questions about the Harris marker or really about anything else today as you're watching the program, please feel free to comment on the Facebook comment section and when I return to the city later tonight I will look at that and I will comment later today.

Scotty Kirkland:

Thank you for giving me a few moments to talk about the program and thanks again to Dr. Bailey and to Skip and Barbara and Mark and Maiben and I'm just very happy that we were able to have this marker and I'm very happy that we're able to come today and speak to everyone about this incredible story, this public history success story in downtown Montgomery. Thank you.

Mark Wilson:

Thanks, Scotty. Well said and thanks to Barbara and Skip and Dr. Bailey. I think anyone who knows Dr. Bailey is not surprised that a conversation with family members results in a historic marker in an important landscape, his enthusiasm for local history and for the well documented research that he has done.

Mark Wilson:

I've got a quick question for each of you and we welcome any questions on Facebook. We do congratulate you on this project and I think all of us in the state of Alabama, anyone who visits Montgomery owes you a thanks because now we know more of our own history because persons from your family and you, in particular, helped make that so. We are deeply grateful for the work that you've put into this project.

Mark Wilson:

I've got a question for each of you. Barbara, as you reflect on being a teacher and discovering your own family's story, particularly, for the era of history, as you already said, that is often not gone into in-depth and maybe as honestly as it needs to be, the era of Reconstruction.

Mark Wilson:

When you think about discovering this family's story and you think about the teaching career that you had, do you think teachers could benefit from learning some of their own family history to help them with the teaching that they are doing?

Barbara Hilyer:

Oh, absolutely. There's no doubt about that but we need to have diverse teaching staffs too. We need to have people with diverse stories and we need to encourage diversity in teaching staffs throughout the country. I taught in a very white part of the country and I was always interested in Black history so I always taught that. Teachers always teach their own stories. You know what I mean? Teachers teaching experiences that they have had. So, undoubtedly.

Barbara Hilyer:

Mark, let me ask you something. I notice that I might have been muted when I was talking. Was I muted?

Mark Wilson:

You were not. We could hear you loud and clear.

Barbara Hilyer:

Okay. Perfect. Good. You never know with all this technology. There's no doubt ... I think from my teaching perspective, it bothers me when you would hear mainstream talk about revisionist history or we're trying to rewrite history. We're trying to write it right. We're not trying to rewrite it. We're trying to tell everyone's story. That's why these markers are so important and textbooks need to be changed and the winner gets to write the history and the history that Americans have written, I'm sorry, but a lot of it is just kind of mythology. I know that's going to raise a lot of hackles but we have to address that. Thank goodness for historians and people like Dr. Bailey, who are willing to go in and let's just tell the story. Let's tell everybody's story.

Mark Wilson:

Yeah. As Scotty said, once these markers are placed and people understand the story and they see a living landscape of memory, and so it really is important. Skip, you talked about I think a granddaughter is the keeper of the ancestry file to help with all of the genealogy work that takes place in your family. Is that correct?

Skip Davis:

That's correct.

Mark Wilson:

We thank her for helping as well. As you discovered this story and as you reflect on being the last of the grandsons, what do you hope future generations of your family will remember about Charles Oscar Harris?

Skip Davis:

Oh, there are two parts to that question. First, I hope future generations continue to do research on our family. My father-in-law was very active and wrote a full volume set of history on his family, which is out of North Carolina. We just built it into our lifestyle of talking about the history of our family. I hope they continue to find more and more about Charles Oscar Harris. I hope they continue to find more and more about the Hardaways and the Hassells that were actually part of my history as well.

Skip Davis:

It never ceases to amaze me how much when you personalize history, you really learn a lot more than you think you're learning. You learn about the times, the lifestyles, the cultures that are going on, the politics that existed. I just try to endear the love of history in all my kids and I hope they continue with my grandkids.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Well, you really illustrate how it is an entire family endeavor and the way which this project has brought family members together is really quite beautiful and quite memorable.

Mark Wilson:

Dr. Bailey, thinking about Charles Harris, he's from Alabama, he's from Montgomery. He gets educated away. He probably could have had many opportunities outside of Alabama but he came back to Montgomery. How does that influence, Dr. Bailey, your understanding of who he is as a person and as a leader?

Richard Bailey:

Well, first of all, just the fact that he decides to return to Alabama says something about him. He had become exposed to environments and Ohio and the nation's capital and the fact that he would come back to Alabama, I think he found himself, for lack of a better word, a man on a mission. He probably said to himself that he's answering the clarion call to service, to public service, and he came back here and embarked on that very kind of mission, public service in the legislature, being active in the community.

Richard Bailey:

Let me just say something else. One of the things that a person will probably discern quite quickly in reading my book is how light complexion Charles Harris was. That person might say that I know he did not identify with African Americans of darker complexion. When you look at the record, I don't think there is any evidence whatsoever that Charles Harris distanced himself from the rest of his race who might have been darker in complexion.

Richard Bailey:

Let me give you a good example of that. Giles, who worked at the post office, worked as a janitor there. Charles Harris might have said, "I have a white collar job in that I'm a clerk." I don't feel from where I'm sitting there was any kind of discord between the two of them. I don't see anything else that might have indicated that Charles Harris did not identify with the Black population at large.

Richard Bailey:

What we have on our hands here is a role model, a person who did not go around trying to ensure that he received more credit than he deserved or to take away credit from someone else. That's why I want to ensure that people such as Charles Harris are remembered and remembered well.

Mark Wilson:

Barbara and Skip, when you first understood this story of his courage and commitment and determination, even though it's been overlooked except for the work of Dr. Bailey and others but that we haven't remembered this particular period and the courage of these persons as much as we should have, how does it make you feel as a descendant to be a part of this family? Barbara?

Barbara Hilyer:

Well, I knew after I had met my aunt that she was an amazing person. Like I said, in Hawaii, Helene Hale. She served in elected office every decade for 50 years. She was the oldest member elected to the Hawaii and House of Representatives. She was elected at 80. I campaigned with her when she was 80, when she was 82, and when she was 84. I knew that once I found Charles Harris, she was in his mold. There was no doubt.

Mark Wilson:

That's great. The family shares the DNA. That's great. Skip?

Skip Davis:

When you grow up in the family that we grew up in and, like that picture showed, every one of those men and women in there were successful, academically and professionally. It puts a heavy burden on those who were sitting in the lower front row to rise to the same level or go higher than they had, meaning in that way like Richard pointed out, is Ralph Bunche, who had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1949.

Skip Davis:

I had a doctor, I had a lawyer, I had a dentist, I had a dean of engineering. I mean, it was a professionally educated family and it puts a lot of pressure on the children, the next generation to want to succeed and achieve as they have. I don't know ... When you find out about Helene and her daughter and her husband, who was a chief judge in California, I mean, it just runs in the family. I just want to do this so that more and more families will realize how important history and education are to the growth of families in the future.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Well stated. We have a question. How did Charles and Ellen meet? Is much known about their courtship?

Skip Davis:

I'll take the first crack at that. I don't know how they met but Hardaway and Tuskegee are very close together. When we came down for the dedication of the state plaque we drove over to Tuskegee and then drove back through Hardaway. It's not inconceivable, they were both colored, as shown on their marriage license. It's not inconceivable that they were running in a certain level of class where they would come together. That's why it's so important for us to find the history of Charles Oscar Harris and his early youth. Who paid for him to go to Oberlin? Was he freed? Was he born a slave? We don't know.

Skip Davis:

I mean, there's so many other questions as Richard clearly points out that we don't have ... Why did he come back to Alabama? Was it for the political rights? The dedication? His purpose in life? What of Ellen Hardaway? All could be true, all of the above could be true.

Mark Wilson:

[crosstalk 00:50:12].

Skip Davis:

... I do have an answer to that.

Mark Wilson:

It's quite compelling questions and, certainly, much more study to be there. Dr. Bailey, do you have any thoughts on the courtship and their meeting?

Richard Bailey:

Well, first of all, let me just say I don't think it was an accident by contemporary standards. During that day, persons knew other persons of like affiliations, et cetera, et cetera. You knew people in your community, your network, if you will. It was not difficult by my estimation for a Charles Harris to meet or to learn of an Ellen Hardaway. That wouldn't have been difficult.

Richard Bailey:

In fact, the parents probably knew each other. The Harris family knew that they had a son on their hands and the Hardaway family knew that they had a daughter on its hands and you want a certain son to meet a certain daughter and vice versa. We don't know that for certain but we can say that the communities were not so large, so broad, that a Harris would not have heard or have known about a Hardaway and vice versa.

Richard Bailey:

Having met in those days was not difficult at all. That's how they met. When, where, we don't know if somebody introduced them. Much of this is conjecture but we do know that it was not difficult. It was not something that was beyond the imagination. Persons knew each other. When you live in rural communities, you knew somebody who lived 10 miles down the road, if you know what I'm saying. You knew somebody who lived in the next county because people socialized on weekends. They went to the churches on Sundays, et cetera, et cetera. A person in this church might have had a cousin who was a member of another church in a neighboring county or a neighboring community and they saw this guy, they saw this gal, and they said, "Hey ..." You get my drift.

Richard Bailey:

These are the way that people met in 19th Century in rural settings. People talked, people had social gatherings on weekends, et cetera, et cetera, and word just passed that a certain person over here ... As I said, the parents probably knew each other also.

Barbara Hilyer:

I would add to that as well, Richard, that we do know that Ellen Hardaway Harris was a teacher so she, herself, was educated. I think she went to Fisk. We know that her family home was very near there. She was born and raised in Montgomery very near that same family home that is where the marker is. We do know that they lived nearby and that she spent her life in Montgomery. It would be easy for them to meet I would think.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Thank you for that response. We really are truly thankful for being with us today to help us understand this story so that when we see that historic marker and learn about Charles Harris, we know the story behind the story, which is as compelling as the story itself. We are thankful that now we know about Charles Oscar Harris, now we can help interpret his life in its context and all of the questions that you raised and more and give us future opportunities for study, interpretation, and discussion.

Mark Wilson:

We are thankful to all three of you and to Scotty Kirkland for chairing our marker committee to make this program possible. We look forward to connecting with you in the future.

Skip Davis:

Thank you.

Barbara Hilyer:

Thank you.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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