

ESSEX HARRIS

And the Ku Klux Klan in Chatham County

Jim and Beverly Wiggins, February 2022

Who was Essex Harris, and what role did he play in Chatham County's history? Few people have heard of Harris, perhaps because his story highlights some of the county's more disgraceful history. But his is a story of courage in response to danger and injustice that was faced by many of Chatham's Black citizens of the time, so here we share what can be gleaned from existing records.

Essex Harris grew up in Chatham County, enslaved by G.W. Harris, who owned a large plantation in Oakland Township in southeast Chatham County. Essex stayed in Chatham County after Emancipation and, in 1870 was a 30-year-old, illiterate, mulatto farmer who rented land in Oakland Township from white farmer, Edward (Ned) Finch.¹ He lived with his wife, Anna B. Harris, and five children aged 2 to 8.²

On Wednesday night before Christmas in 1870, and again in early 1871, members of the Ku Klux Klan³ attacked Essex Harris and his family. We know about the attacks because, unlike many of the others who suffered this kind of abuse, Essex reported it to authorities and eventually testified in Washington, D.C. to a Congressional Committee looking into Klan activities. The account of the attack recounted below is excerpted from that record, made July 1, 1871, to the Joint Select Congressional Committee to Inquire into the Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States. In that report, the Committee recorder identified him as "Essic Harris."

They came to the door and knocked. I was asleep when they came. My wife, when they commenced knocking at the door, said, "Essic, Essic, there's someone at the door." I jumped out of bed. By the time I got out of bed they had knocked both my doors open. They asked where my gun was. By the time I understood what they said, they had my gun out of the rack. They asked me if I had ever seen the Ku-Klux. I told them "No, sir." They said: "Here they are; we are the Ku-Klux. Did you ever see them before?" I said: "No, sir."

They asked me where my shot and powder were. I told them up in my little bag. They took the shot and powder and walked right out, and never said anything more... They sort of scared me at first. Some of them had on some women's clothes ... [Some covered their faces with what] "looked like a sort of paper or sheep-skin; it was a sort of black thing.

[A week or two later, Harris and wife had laid down in bed, when his wife said] "Essic, the Ku-Klux is coming." I never said anything but bounced out of my bed and went to the door. I took my bar down and looked to see what was the matter. They cried "Hello!" I peeped out and saw my yard was full of men. I jumped against the door and fastened it...By the time I had got my gun, they had knocked my window open. I had to fall to my knees, then, to keep from being shot. My wife was lying in bed [in the one room house]. After they got the window open they commence firing in the window. Some of them said they were going to come in at the window and get me out. As soon as they came, and by the time I could shut my door, Mr. Ned Finch, the man I stay with, a white gentleman, came out among them...He said "What do you all want? What are you going to do? Let this nigger alone. He is a nigger I have here to work my land. He has a family, and is a hard working man, and don't bother anybody. Please leave him alone." He kept on talking, and walking around the house, and begging them to leave me alone. They were all around my house. After a while they got vexed, and ran him back into his house, and told him that as soon as they were done with me they would fix him. He got scared very much then...

They kept knocking at my door, saying that they had killed me. It was half an hour before they knocked the door down, I reckon; but as soon as they got the door down, so they could shoot in, they commenced firing in the door, though they had been firing in the window all the time.... I was sitting very close to the window. When they put pistols in at the window I could see them and prevent them from hitting me...There were five children in the house. I never had time to see what they were all doing; but they all got out of the way. I thought they were all dead. My wife had got between the bed-ticking and the mat; my little children were in another bed; they had got in a pile, right on top of one another; like a parcel of pigs...They came to my window and pulled off their caps. Some of them I knew, and some I would not know in the daytime if I was to see them...They always say in my county that a man could not kill a Ku-Klux; they said they could not be hit; that if they were, the ball would bounce back and kill you. I thought though that I would try it; and see if my gun would hit one...It had only a common load with one or two big shot, such as I always put in it...I shot this man, xxxxxx, and Mr. xxxxx⁴... [A pair] carried off the shot one. They said, "Boys, the old man is calling for his five-shooter and loading his gun; let us leave." Upon that they went off...I was hit in nine different places...there was three bullets---one through the thick part of my hip, just

above the knee; one right through the muscle of the arm; one cut through the hair, taking skin and all; the balance were shot. I have got a shot in my left toe, which cannot be got out; it is there among the joints, and it has to stay...

Miss Sally [Ned Finch's spinster sister] came out and walked among them and walked till they left. She was all the time begging them to leave me alone...after they left, Miss Sally came out and said "Ann! Ann!" My wife said "Ma'am?" (Miss Sally raised her from a little bit of a thing.) Miss Sally said, "Are the children dead?" My wife said she did not know whether they were or not. I looked around, and they were not. Miss Sally said "Come out and carry all the children into our house and let them stay there till day; the men are coming back to burn the house. I thought they were coming back; I told them to go in the house; I walked around all night; I never slept a bit.

I went to Pittsborough that Sunday morning [walked seven miles]. I was then shot pretty well all over, so I could hardly get along...I went to get the ball out of my arm. Dr. Hanks asked me what was the matter with me. I told him I was shot. He asked me how I came to be shot...Said he "Go and see Mr. Aleck Ramsey and see what he says about it." I went down to Ramsey's house. I told him that I got shot...I knew some of them. Then he said "All I have got to tell you is, to carry them to the law; that is all I could do when I had the power; and now I have got none." I thought it stood them in hand to seek out these men when I told them I was shot. But no man made any move, and I had to go to Raleigh...I had to walk ten miles to get to the cars [the railroad where he sometimes worked to earn money].⁵

According to Harris, the men he identified were arrested by Mr. Hester, the Marshall, remained in jail a while, and then they were bailed out. Hester also gave testimony before the Congressional Committee and probably suggested that Harris be invited to testify.

The Harris testimony suggested that the assault was carried out by a group of local men who decided to first take Harris's guns and then later to intimidate him by shooting up his place. Testimony reported that two of the attackers recognized by Harris sold liquor at a small building at a crossroad. Harris himself testified that he had purchased liquor there. "There never was any quarrel between us. I've never had a falling out with any white man." It is possible that the group took the mantle of the Klan to scare people even more.⁶

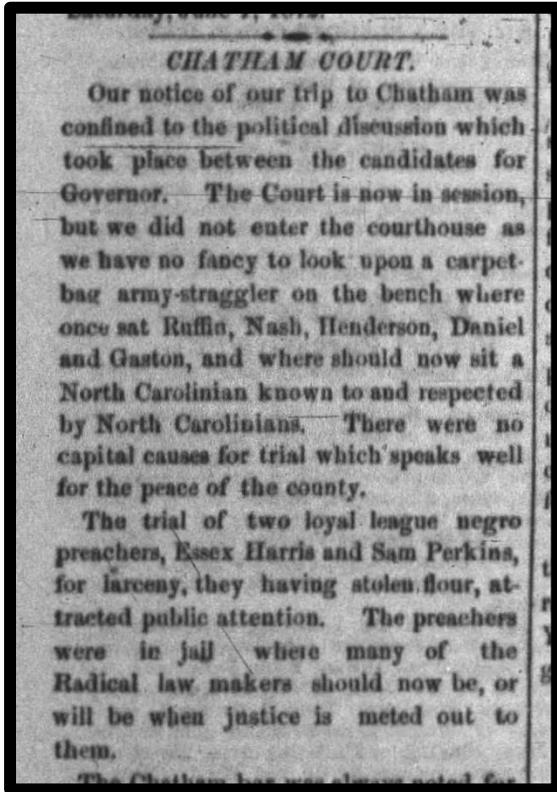
During his testimony, Harris was asked if he knew of other Ku-Klux violence. He answered, "They have whipped and shot some people about there, right bad, and burned some houses...I have heard of them killing them here and yon, but not close to me. There was a black man not far from me, named Anthony Davis. They went one night and got hold of him, and whipped him very bad...They whipped him and shot two of his children...Right now there are not more than five or six or seven colored men within no more than four or five miles of me... Some have moved out; some have gone away off...The Klan got so bad that they said they might be punished, and they left."⁷

Also during his testimony, Harris was asked about his politics. He responded that he did vote Republican, but did not make political speeches and did not expect to vote again because, "That is just the way it is. It is not worthwhile [sic] for a man to vote and run the risk of his life...Within the last few years I have moved my voting place to Pittsborough, on account of not wanting to vote where I had been voting. A number of people belonging to the same township---fifteen or twenty---quit voting for the same reason...Now I have got so I am afraid to vote."⁸ This would prove to be the most significant portion of his testimony! The goal of the Ku-Klux was to end the black vote and maintain white supremacy.

Was Essic/Essex Harris a credible witness? According to several who testified on his behalf, he was. Mr. Elias Bryan, a farmer from Haywood, testified that he had known Harris for 30 years and vouched for his good character. Further, Mr. Bryan had discussed Harris with the man who "raised him"—in other words, the man who formerly enslaved him—W. G. Harris, who said that Essic's "character was as good as any man's," as did Mr. Ned Finch, from whom Harris rented the land on which he lived and worked. Finch had come to him and said "Essic, I want you to go and farm on my plantation. I've got plenty of land there; I have bought some land lately; and there's enough for us all. You come and stay with me, and I will always try to furnish you with horses and land."⁹

As noted, Essex Harris had been enslaved to William G. Harris, a former state legislator representing Chatham County whose large plantation was in Oakland Township. He enslaved forty people in 1850, thirty-five in 1860. The ages of their children suggest that Essex and Anna B. (who apparently was enslaved by Ned and Sally Finch), had two children, daughter Flora and son Thomas, before Emancipation. After Emancipation and the family's move to the Ned Finch property in Oakland Township and before the KKK attack, Essex and Ann had three more children, daughter Catherine and sons Edgar and Mathew.

But what happened to Essex after his historic testimony? On 18 May 1872, less than one year after his testimony, the Raleigh *Sentinel*, a conservative Democrat newspaper, reported--



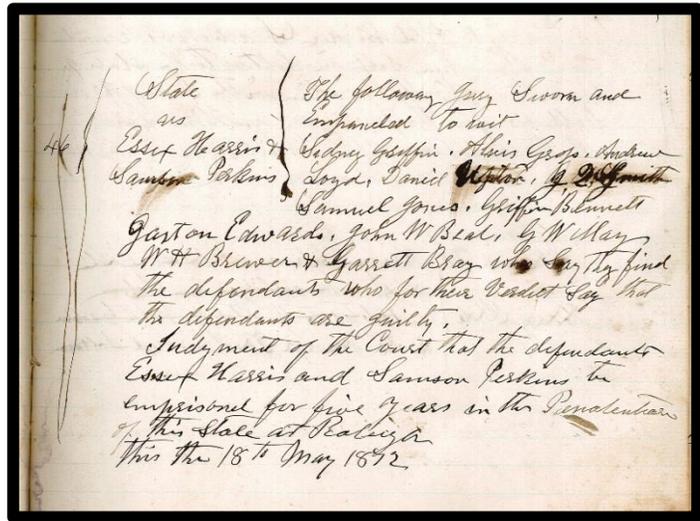
Our notice of our trip to Chatham was confined to the political discussion which took place between the candidates for Governor. The Court is now in session, but we did not enter the courthouse because we had no fancy to look upon a carpetbag army-straggler on the bench... [Judge Albion Tourgee, a Republican Union veteran from Ohio, had moved to North Carolina and played a significant role in writing the new State Constitution during Reconstruction].

The trial of two loyal league negro preachers, Essex Harris and Sam Perkins, for larceny, they having stolen flour, attracted public attention. The preachers were in jail where many of the Radical law makers should now be, or will be when justice is meted out to them.

During his testimony before the U. S. Congressional Committee, Harris had identified Samuel Perkins as a "colored neighbor." Why the reference to them as "loyal league preachers"? The Loyal League was a national pro-Union organization which after the Civil War appealed to former Southern enslaved persons as a means of improving their economic situation. According to Harris's Congressional Committee testimony, the Loyal League was present in Chatham County until the Klan became active. He said he had attended two or three meetings. Was he still active after the KKK attack? Was the theft charge a trumped up one in retaliation for his testimony? We find no information to answer these questions.

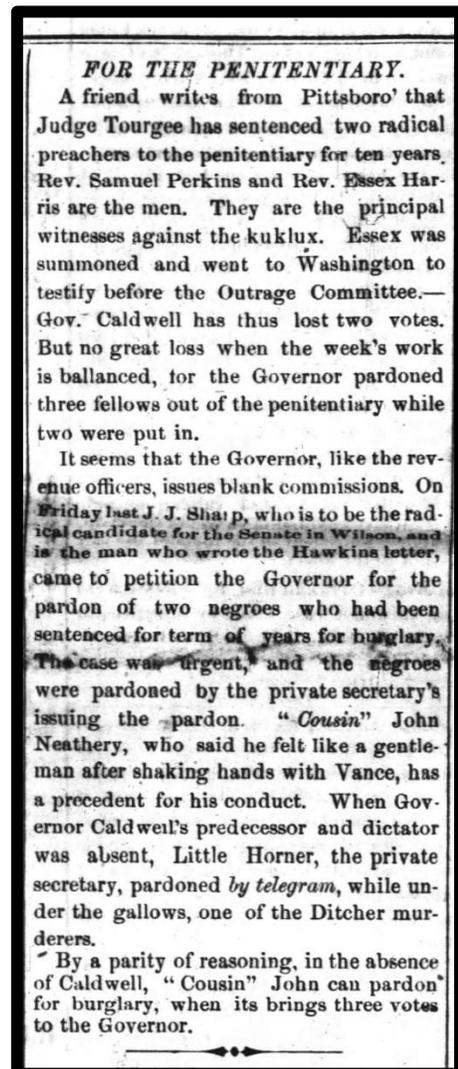
Harris and Perkins were tried in the Chatham County Superior Court. The minutes of the trial read—

State vs. Essex Harris & Sampson Perkins. The following were sworn and empaneled to wit Sidney Griffin, Alvis Gross, Andrews Loyd, Daniel Upton, J.D. Smith, Samuel Jones, Griffen Bennett, Gaston [Gustin?] Edwards, John W. Beal, G.W. May, W. H. Brewer, & Garrett Bray who say they find the defendants who for their verdict say that the defendants are guilty. [Edwards, a 32-year-old illiterate farmer from Center Township, was the only Black among the twelve jurists.] Judgment of the Court that the defendants Essex Harris and Sampson Perkins be imprisoned for five years in the Penitentiary of this State in Raleigh this the 18th of May 1872.¹⁰



On the following 28th, the *Weekly Sentinel* reported--

A friend writes from Pittsboro that Judge Tourgee has sentenced two radical preachers to the penitentiary for ten years. Rev. Samuel Perkins and Rev. Essex Harris are the men. They were the principal witnesses against the kuklux. Essex was summoned to Washington to testify before the Outrage Committee--Gov. Caldwell has thus lost two votes. But no great loss when the week's work is balanced for the Governor pardoned three fellows out of the penitentiary while two were put in.

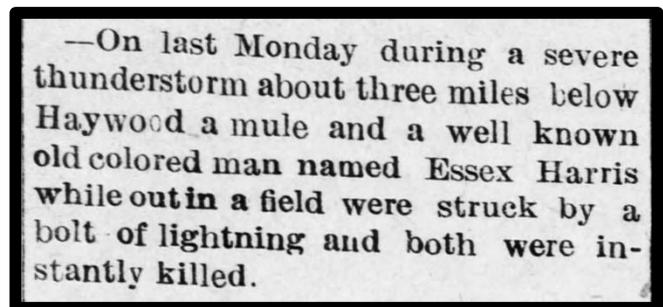


But the “two” may not have been “put in.” There is some reason to doubt that Essex served a ten-year, or even five-year sentence. He and his wife Ann had three more children between 1872 and 1877 (daughters Cornie and Notie and son Right). And the 1880 U. S. Census reported that the Harrises, ages 45 and 35, were farming in Cape Fear Township in the most Southeast part of Chatham. The *Sentinel’s* reference to Governor [Tod Robinson] Caldwell, a Republican, and his willingness to pardon those who might vote for him raises the possibility that Harris, who testified that he voted Republican but wouldn’t do so again, was also pardoned. Unfortunately, no records of Governor Caldwell’s pardons can be found.

After this, records pertaining to Essex become less clear, and there is a suggestion that there may be two persons of about the same age named Essex Harris. By the 1900 U. S. Census it was recorded that Essex Harris, now age 65 and widowed, was living as a boarder and laborer on the Amos Byrd farm near Haywood in New Hope Township. The date of record was 12 June 1900. No death record of Ann Harris can be located. On 30 August 1900, marriage records indicate that Essex Harris, age 60, married Nancy Stewart, Black, age 30, and also living in New Hope Township. She was recorded as single, living in a rented house with three children (the youngest age 2), and employed as a day laborer.

On 17 June 1908, the *Chatham Record* reported--

On last Monday during a severe thunderstorm about three miles below Haywood a mule and a well known old colored man named Essex Harris while out in a field were struck by a bolt of lightning and both were instantly killed.



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Further confusion results from the 1910 U.S. Census which recorded that Essex Harris, age 65, was living in Pocket Township, southwest of Sanford, in Lee County. He was working as a farm renter. Bewilderingly, his wife is listed as Anna B., age 44, and they had been married 23 years. At that time 18-year-old Edwin Harris, identified as a grandson, living at home, and working as a farm laborer. Of course, Census records are far from perfect. Cumulatively, records indicated that Essex had been married to Ann/Anna at least 36 years and/or to Nancy only 10 years. Such is recorded history! This Essex Harris died in Pocket on 18 November 1915, age 77, married, and a farmer.

This messiness in the later records does not do justice to Essex’s legacy. His testimony, as well as that of others, before the Congressional Committee had significant consequences—at least for a time. On April 20, 1871, the U. S. Congress passed the

Third Enforcement Act or “the Ku Klux Act” as it was more popularly known. It targeted secret organizations that used intimidation and violence to achieve their objectives. Whenever Klan activities were too powerful for civil authorities to suppress, the president (Grant) could call in the military and suspend the writ of habeas corpus.

On the eve of the August 3 state election, Company K of the 2nd Artillery was sent into three North Carolina counties—Chatham, Moore, and Harnett. The commander of the Company later reported that the election “passed off very quietly.” By the end of 1871, federal officials had used the Act to make twelve hundred arrests in North Carolina, but which resulted in only twenty-three guilty pleas and twenty-four convictions. In 1873, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the Amnesty Act which absolved Klansmen of all crimes committed while in disguise. And by the end of 1874, the U. S. attorney general ordered all remaining Klan cases dismissed.¹¹ Essex Harris should be recognized for his courage to speak out, which resulted, even if only temporarily, in a reduction in the terrorism of the KKK in Chatham.

¹ Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States 42nd Congress 2nd Session House Report 22 vol. 2, p. 76.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081782785&view=1up&seq=100> Accessed 18May2020.

² Year: 1870; Census Place: Oakland, Chatham, North Carolina; Roll: M593_1129; Page: 133B

³ In this paper the Ku Klux Klan is variously referred to as the Ku Klux Klan, the Ku Klux, the Klan, and the KKK.

⁴ Names are given in the Joint Select Committee Report, but we have not included them here.

⁵ Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States 42nd Congress 2nd Session House Report 22 vol. 2, pp. 87-90.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081782785&view=1up&seq=111> Accessed 18May2020.

⁶ Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States 42nd Congress 2nd Session House Report 22 vol. 2, p. 91.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081782785&view=1up&seq=115> Accessed 18May2020.

⁷ Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States 42nd Congress 2nd Session House Report 22 vol. 2, p. 95.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081782785&view=1up&seq=119> Accessed 18May 2020.

⁸ Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States 42nd Congress 2nd Session House Report 22 vol. 2, p. 95.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081782785&view=1up&seq=119> Accessed 18May2020.

⁹ Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States 42nd Congress 2nd Session House Report 22 vol. 2, p. 76.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081782785&view=1up&seq=100> Accessed 18May2020.

¹⁰ *Chatham County Superior Court Minutes, May 1872, Page 187, State v. Harris and Perkins*. Scan from State Archives of North Carolina.

¹¹ Bradley, Mark L., *Blue Coats and Tar Heels: Soldiers and Civilians in Reconstruction North Carolina*, University Press of Kentucky, 2009, pp. 237, 246, 251.