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Harris, James Henry [1]

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1832–31 May 1891

James Henry Harris, North Carolina politician, was born in Granville County [2]. Described as "a base born boy of color," he was apprenticed on 3 Aug. 1840 to Charles Allen to learn the carpenter trade; at age nineteen he was described as a dark mulatto. After his apprenticeship, he started his own business in Raleigh. Later he attended school for two years in Oberlin, Ohio, followed in 1862 by travel to Canada, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. In 1863, he was commissioned by Governor Levi Morton of Indiana to help raise the Twenty-eighth Regiment of U.S. Colored Troops. In June 1865, he returned to Raleigh as a teacher for the New England Freedmen's Aid Society.

Harris quickly realized that blacks needed legal and political equality to ensure their freedom. Thus, he entered politics, playing a major role in the state and the nation from 1865 through the 1880s. Elected to the 1865 North Carolina Freedmen's Convention [3], Harris began his political career by urging moderation, reconciliation with whites, and education for blacks. However, by 1866, as president of the 1866 freedmen's convention, he was pushing forcibly for black rights. He began his national political involvement as a vice-president of the National Equal Rights Convention of 1865 and as deputy president of the 1867 convention.

James Harris's life and work is also significant for his effort to found a freedmen's village in Raleigh following the Civil War. In 1866, he founded a freedmen's village in Raleigh. It was later named for the college he attended in Ohio, Oberlin College. The Oberlin African American community was located along what is today Oberlin Road, Wade Avenue, and Clark Avenue. Harris also founded the Raleigh Cooperative Land and Building Association to provide loans to freedmen to buy land and build homes.

During congressional reconstruction, Harris emerged as one of the most prominent black politicians in North Carolina. He was a charter member of the state's Republican party [4], a delegate to the state's 1868 constitutional convention [5], a state legislator for several terms (house, 1868–69, 1869–70, 1883; senate, 1872–74), a Raleigh city alderman for many years, and a deputy tax collector. In 1869, he served as president of the National Convention of Colored Men as well as chairman of the delegation that presented a memorial to President Ulysses S. Grant, urging him to use his influence with Congress to pass supplemental legislation securing equal rights for blacks. In 1877, Harris was vice-president of the National Black Convention. He also attended the 1868, 1872, and 1876 Republican National conventions and was a presidential elector in 1872. In the 1880s he edited and published the *North Carolina Republican*, dedicated to work "in behalf of the Republican party and the advancement of the negro."

As a politician and officeholder, Harris was an eloquent spokesman for a variety of causes. His major interests were education for blacks and an end to legal discrimination. He also pushed for legislation for prison reform, aid to mechanics and laborers, protection for women and debtors, and care for orphans. In addition, he worked for the erection of the Colored Institution for the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind in Raleigh and became one of its first trustees. Throughout his career, Harris believed that blacks and whites had to work together, that their interests were intertwined. This is why he so actively opposed black emigration to Africa [6]. But although often urging moderation, he always insisted that blacks fight to keep their political rights and to gain equality before the law.

Harris also held a life membership in the North Carolina Agricultural Society [7], was one of the original trustees of St. Ambrose Episcopal Church, and attended the National Labor Conference in Washington, D.C., in 1869.

He married Bettie Miller, who died in 1935; they were the parents of two children, David Henry (d. 1955) and Florence (d. 1889). Harris died in Washington, D.C., and was buried at Mount Hope Cemetery, Raleigh. He was eulogized by both Democratic and Republican newspapers as a gifted politician and a talented orator.

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Subjects:
Biographies [12]
Black and African American People [13]
Civil Rights [14]
Political leaders [15]
Public officials [16]
Authors:
Alexander, Roberta Sue [17]
Origin - location:
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Wake County [19]
Raleigh [20]
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1 January 1988 | Alexander, Roberta Sue

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