

The Ezekiel Harris House  
Georgia Historical Marker Application  
Research Paper

The Ezekiel Harris House has had many names since its construction in 1797 at 1822 Broad Street in Augusta, Georgia. Now known for its first owner and builder, it has been referred to as the Walker House, the Harris-Pearson-Walker House, the White House, and even erroneously as the Mackay House. Each of these names evokes a period of history, all of which accumulate to a rich story. The house was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1969 due to its architectural significance,<sup>1</sup> but there is much more to the Harris House than its Federal style. From the front porch of the house, a visitor could see major changes to the economic landscape of Augusta over the next two-hundred years. In the 1700s, the Savannah River flowed straight ahead, along with Native American trading routes cutting through the tract. Less than fifty years after the Harris House was built, the view of the river became a view of the Augusta Canal. First constructed in 1845, the Canal shifted Augusta into a decidedly industrial town, similar to several other larger cities throughout Georgia<sup>2</sup>. Numerous factories opened and closed along the Canal, which constantly altered the vista. By the late 1800s, the Harris House sat in the middle of the textile mill village Harrisburg, with Ezekiel Harris as its namesake. Until the mills began closing in the latter half of the twentieth century, visitors would see a bustling sea of workers coming and going to the mills. Furthermore, the residents of the Harris House epitomize the progressive history of Augusta and, on a broader scale, the nation. Beginning with the enterprising Ezekiel Harris, the owners range from an established Augusta family, to Irish immigrants, to mill employees. Considered the oldest remaining wooden-framed home in Augusta, the Harris House stands as a landmark to over two centuries of history.

Born in 1757, Ezekiel Harris grew up in what is now Edgefield County, South Carolina.<sup>3</sup> Directly across the Savannah River from Augusta, Edgefield has a vibrant past of its own. Harris joined the American Revolution with Captain Patrick Carr's Company of Rangers out of Burke County, Georgia.<sup>4</sup> After the War, Harris received a plot of land in Wilkes County,<sup>5</sup> but chose to move to Augusta around 1789. At that time, Augusta was the capital of Georgia and a hub of the

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<sup>1</sup> "Harris-Pearson-Walker House," *National Register of Historic Places*, United States Department of Interior, ref. 69000052.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Gagnon, "Antebellum Industrialization," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/antebellum-industrialization/>

<sup>3</sup> "Relive History! Ezekiel Harris House," Historic Augusta, Inc., symposium brochure, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Howard H. McCall Compiler, *Roster of Revolutionary Soldiers in Georgia*, Vol. III, pg. 271.

<sup>5</sup> Lucian Lamar Knight, *Georgia's Roster of the Revolution*, the Georgia Legislature, 1920, pg. 323.

tobacco industry. Harris has very few official records. The date of his marriage to Eleanor and the birth of their four daughters is unknown.<sup>6</sup>

A few years after moving to Augusta, on April 4, 1794, Ezekiel Harris purchased 323 acres of the historic White House Tract,<sup>7</sup> which at that point was outside the city limits. Harris had grand ambitions for his new property. Harris's primary goal with his new property was to compete with Augusta's older and established tobacco inspection warehouses.<sup>8</sup> Approved by the Georgia Assembly in 1797, Harris's tobacco warehouse opened adjacent to the Savannah River in the fall of that year. Harris began advertising in the *Augusta Chronicle* in 1797, the oldest active newspaper in Georgia and one of the oldest newspapers in the United States.<sup>9</sup> In the same advertisement, Harris stated that a "good frame house with a brick chimney will be ready by the first of January 1798, for the accommodation of the tobacco planters."<sup>10</sup> He made every effort to appeal to planters of the cash crop. Harris's other lofty goal was to establish Harrisburg – a town to rival Augusta – on the property. Part of his master plan included a free ferry to run from Harrisburg, "for the benefit of the community at large."<sup>11</sup> By 1800, Ezekiel Harris's section of the White House Tract was known as Harrisburg.

The house, dated to 1797, is a wood frame structure with two stories and an attic. Some sources write that it was built in the Georgian style, typical of homes during the colonial period. It was relatively normal for high styles to permeate back country designs after their technical date range. The Harris House has some Georgian elements, such as overall symmetry, columns and pilasters, transom over the entry, and center hall. However, other architectural details indicate the Federal style, indicative post-Revolutionary War. Notably, the first-floor hallway has an arched, barrel vaulted, ceiling. The house also has a gambrel roof. While there are some finer

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<sup>6</sup> "Georgia Family Group Sheet for the Ezekiel Harris Family," *The Family Group Sheet Project*, <https://www.fgs-project.com/georgia/groups/h/harris-ezekiel-.html>. Harris's daughters' names are: Elizabeth [Harris] Houghton (ca. 1783-1856), Mary [Harris] Evans (ca. 1785-1847), Matilda (dates unknown), and Anna [Harris] Carter (ca. 1795-1863).

<sup>7</sup> Note, there is an existing historic marker for the White House Tract. The marker's text is for the original 500-acre parcel as the site of Mackay's Trading Post, the First Siege of Augusta, the town of Harrisburg, the Canal and factories. The Harris House is mentioned in the very last sentence: "One of the most lasting monuments build on the tract is the Harris-Pearson-Walker House, c.1797, which was restored in the 1950's." A future marker on the Ezekiel Harris House would add to the narrative begun in the 1978 marker.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Cashin, "The Story of the Harris House," *Historic Augusta Newsletter*, Vol. 12 No. 3, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> "Advertisement," *Augusta Chronicle*, September 30, 1797, pg. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

details, such as dentils on both the exterior entablature and interior trim in the public rooms, the home is more vernacular than high style.

An interesting characteristic of the house are the traveler rooms on the back porch. These rooms had no access to the main house, with doors directly off the porch, one on each floor. The home's only staircase was also open-air on the back porch. Harris could invite journeying merchants or farmers to stay in these rooms, without inconveniencing his own family.<sup>12</sup> Such a home, catering to not only a family of six, but additional travelers, would have several outbuildings. However, by the time the home was restored in the 1960s, any original outbuildings were lost.

While there are no records currently identified that list an enslaved population at the Harris House during the family's time of occupation, there is contextual evidence. Harris placed several advertisements in the *Chronicle* for runaway slaves for other people, which alludes to the fact that, not only was Harris complicit with slavery, he participated in the institution enthusiastically.<sup>13</sup> Once he became affluent enough, there is every chance Harris took the opportunity and became a slave holder himself. In the last census taken before Harris's death in 1828 shows him living in Wilkes County, Georgia in a household of four white and eight enslaved persons.<sup>14</sup> Considering the size of the home and tobacco operation, along with his disposition towards slavery, it is an educated assumption that enslaved people lived at the Harris House property during Harris's residency.

Ezekiel Harris was a controversial figure with a questionable reputation during his own lifetime. Before buying his portion of the White House Tract and building the home, Harris took part in a politically-driven lynching. In the 1790s the Yazoo Land Fraud engulfed the citizens of Augusta. Harris was decidedly anti-Yazooist. In his book, *Story of Augusta*, historian Edward Cashin wrote, "Harris and three friends openly lynched a man and brought to trial before Judge William Few. When judge and jury learned that the murdered man was a Yazooist, they concluded that he got what was coming to him and let Harris and his friends go free."<sup>15</sup> While

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<sup>12</sup> "A mistake saved Harris House," *The Augusta Chronicle, Today's Home*, January 12, 1997, pg. 2.

<sup>13</sup> "Unclassified," *Augusta Chronicle*, January 16, 1796, pg. 3. "That there is at the house of the subscriber, a negro man, appears to be between 20 and 30 years old, says he belongs to William Poaden, near Winsborough, South-Carolina, and that his name is Joseph, outlandish, and that he left is hamster in June last".

<sup>14</sup> *Fourth Census of the United States, 1820, Census Place: Wilkes, Georgia*, pg. 192, NARA Roll: M33\_9, Image 297.

<sup>15</sup> Cashin, *Story of Augusta*, pg. 51.

Harris did not face legal repercussions, the incident set many in town against him. Even with Harris's public ferry and the advertisements stating that he charged less than competitors, twenty-one Augusta tobacco merchants signed a joint statement that they preferred the Augusta and New Savannah warehouses over the new one in Harrisburg.<sup>16</sup> In a curious turn of events, that was not Harris's only alleged murder. Ezekiel Harris had a long-standing feud with John Hammond, another ferry owner. Events culminated when Harris's ferry was stolen from his land during the night on November 11, 1797. Harris took out an advertisement, writing that "I have good reason to believe that John Hammond of Campbellton was the instigator to such villainy," and offered a reward of five-hundred dollars for any white men apprehended and twenty dollars for any African Americans convicted of the crime.<sup>17</sup> The two had a back and forth in the *Augusta Chronicle* for years.<sup>18</sup> The quarrel ended with Ezekiel Harris bankrupt, and Hammond slain.<sup>19</sup> Harris was never charged, but it was common knowledge that he was the most likely culprit. Shortly after Harris built his home, he had mortgaged it to Peter Crawford to cover legal fees.<sup>20</sup> By 1807, Crawford foreclosed the home and the Harrises left Harrisburg. Ezekiel Harris moved to Wilkes County, where he died in 1828. Even though the Harris family only lived in the home for about a decade, the house went on to have a long legacy.

In 1809, George Pearson purchased the Harris House. George married Lucy Moore Foll in 1803 and they went on to have numerous children – multiple generations of the family retained occupancy of the Harris House through the 1870s. Unlike Harris, George Pearson was a wealthy landowner, and was more typical of the established Augusta gentry. He served in the Georgia Militia as a captain during the War of 1812. When Pearson died in 1818, he left his estate to his wife and two daughters, one of whom married into the Walker family.<sup>21</sup> After Pearson's death, Lucy and John Mann, as administrators of the estate, created an inventory and appraisal of all George Pearson's property. He enslaved fifty-one people, each listed with a

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Advertisement," *Augusta Chronicle*, November 25, 1797, pg. 1.

<sup>18</sup> In an article entitled "Ezekiel Harris, Character Application", Hammond claims that Harris is "neither a man of truth, honor or honesty." *Augusta Chronicle*, April 7, 1798, pg. 4.

<sup>19</sup> "Ezekiel Harris Background Information," Docent Training Manual, Augusta Museum of History. On the night of June 21, 1800, John Hammond's home in Campbellton was set on fire. Hammond was shot immediately upon exiting the burning house. A large reward was offered by the current Governor of South Carolina, John Drayton, but the assassin was never discovered.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Ezekiel Harris was brought to trial or sued at least nine times in his first ten years of establishing Harrisburg. This caused him to sell off Harrisburg plot by plot.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

valuation depending on age, gender, and skill. Other items listed include all furnishings, farm animals, and vehicles.<sup>22</sup>

During the Pearson-Walker tenure, numerous changes shook the landscape. In 1816, the Augusta Arsenal began operations along the Savannah River, a few hundred yards in front of the Harris House.<sup>23</sup> Set parallel to the Savannah River, the Augusta Canal opened in 1845, again, directly in front of the house. The Pearson-Walkers would have excellent views of the Petersburg boats moving cotton downriver below the fall line towards Savannah. Factories, such as a saw mill and gristmill, were built along the canal as early as 1847. In 1861, the Confederacy chose the old White House Tract to build the Confederate Powderworks, which supplied the South with gunpowder. Another major change came after the Civil War and the Emancipation of the enslaved people living at the Harris House and in Harrisburg. The Harris House stood right alongside Augusta and Georgia's shift from a simple agricultural society based on slavery towards its industrial future.

By 1876 a new family moved into the Harris House: Patrick and Eliza Walsh. Born in Ireland, the Walshes came to Augusta for economic opportunities. Eliza kept house, according to the 1870 U.S. Census, while Patrick was a grocer.<sup>24</sup> Augusta, like much of the country, had an influx of Irish immigrants in the 1870s seeking new possibilities. Many came to Augusta to enlarge the canal, which reopened in 1875. After the canal widened, more factories came to Harrisburg. On the former site of the Powderworks, King Mill was built in 1881 and Sibley Mill shortly afterward in 1882. Both textile mills still stand across Broad Street from the Harris House. By the late 1800s, Harrisburg had become a mill village with the Harris House at its center.

Eliza Walsh sold the Harris House in 1901, after which a series of at least seven people took ownership in quick succession.<sup>25</sup> During the next fifty years, the home saw time as a boarding house and kitchen for mill workers. The last owner was the Sibley Presbyterian Church, which stood across the street and now belongs to the Salvation Army's Kroc Center. During that time the Harris House acted as a manse for incoming pastors.<sup>26</sup> Even with continual ownership

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<sup>22</sup> "Inventory and Appraisement of the personal property of the Estate of George Pearson late of Richmond County," May 22, 1818.

<sup>23</sup> The Arsenal would close in 1827 to move to the nearby neighborhood of Summerville.

<sup>24</sup> *Year 1870, Census Place: Augusta Ward 4, Richmond, Georgia*; Roll: M593\_172, pg. 175B.

<sup>25</sup> "Relive History!"

<sup>26</sup> "Rev. James Davis Pastor at Sibley," *Augusta Chronicle*, June 5, 1948, pg. 5.

and occupation, the house was in poor shape. In the 1940s, the Richmond County Historical Society formed to save the Harris House.

In 1948, the Historical Society acquired what they believed to be the “White House” of Revolutionary War fame. Built in 1750, the Mackay House, or the White House, was built alongside the Savannah River and served an active role in the First Siege of Augusta, with thirteen patriots hung from the staircase after their defeat. It was a story that intrigued the Georgia Historical Commission, who assumed the responsibility of the home’s full restoration. The 1950s restoration took the house back to its original design as a “shrine to the Revolution.”<sup>27</sup> However, it became obvious after restoration and further architectural investigation, that this house was not the Mackay House, but rather the Ezekiel Harris House. A costly mistake, especially considering the condemning report published by Martha Norwood one year shy of the bicentennial in 1975.<sup>28</sup> Historian Bill Mitchel was quoted:

“...you obviously can’t go on calling it [the Mackay House], assuming the Norwood Report is accurate. But it’s still one of the best 18<sup>th</sup> century houses in Georgia, it’s part of the historic White House tract, site of the First Augusta Arsenal, the Confederate Powder Works and the King and Sibley Mills, and despite reports to the contrary, the legend lives on.”<sup>29</sup>

It is unclear how local memory transformed the Harris House into the Mackay House, but it was in approximately the same location and by the 1900s it was also painted white, run-down, and modified a great deal from its original floorplan. Through extensive historical research, the house was appropriately dated to 1797 and returned to its blue-grey paint color. Much of that work was undertaken by Historic Augusta. In the last fifty years, several agencies have occupied and managed the Harris House, before transferring over to the city of Augusta. It has operated as a historic house museum, with regular tours since the 1970s.

Historians and locals alike would be hard pressed to name a home with a more archetypal history of Augusta than the Harris House. Built by a man who wanted to make a name for himself in the new state of Georgia, purchased by an upper-class family with a hint of pedigree, owned by an Irish immigrant who moved to the newly industrial South, then passing through a

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<sup>27</sup> “Augusta’s Mackay House: Shrine of Independence,” Newspaper clipping in Harris House record at Augusta Public Library, Georgia Heritage Room.

“Mackay House,” Georgia Historical Commission, date unknown.

<sup>28</sup> Martha Norwood, *A History of the White House Tract, Richmond County, Georgia, 1756-1975*, Department of Natural Resources, 1975.

<sup>29</sup> Keith Coulbourn, “The ‘Mackay House’,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine*, September 14, 1975, pgs. 20-21.

series of mill workers, the Harris House has endured over two-hundred years of history. The Harris House still stands proudly along Broad Street as the city continues to evolve. The old textiles mills, which closed their doors decades ago, have been revitalized into new economic opportunities. Ezekiel Harris's enterprising spirit would be proud.