



The Sarah Harris Window

The stained-glass window in the west wall of Mt. Zion Baptist Church depicts Jesus as The Good Shepherd cradling a lamb in his arms. Below the window is a panel of colored glass bearing the words IN MEMORIAM SARAH HARRIS.

Sarah Harris, whose family name remains unknown, and her husband James H. Harris were natives of North Carolina born about 1820 and 1837 respectively. Their only child, Emma, was born about 1856 in North Carolina.

Soon after Emma's birth, the family moved to Marietta, Ohio, where James worked as a laborer. At the outbreak of the Civil War, the family moved from Marietta and spent the war years as tenants on several farms in the vicinity of Cutler.

In 1872 Sarah and James purchased two lots on Dean Avenue in the new Guthrie, Gould & Co. residential addition to the village of Athens. These lots were offered for sale to the public "in order to place within the reach of a large number of our citizens suitable lots for building purposes, have purchased and laid out into streets and squares, that beautiful ground known as the Dean property, situated between the town of Athens and the Columbus and Hocking Valley depot. These lots will be made a pleasant and healthy location for persons wanting low priced lots. They will be sold on such terms as will be satisfactory to purchasers, and at prices that will place them within the reach of all parties."

The Harrises paid \$335 for the parcels of land on which they built a house situated at the southwest corner of present-day Smith and West Washington Streets.

Two years later, Sarah and James's daughter Emma wed John B. McClellan. The marriage was solemnized by Rev. Grayson Jones, first pastor of what was then called Zion Baptist Church. This union produced two children, Lucy and James, both of whom died in infancy. Their mother died soon after. Emma's widowed husband became the first pastor of the newly formed A.M.E. church. This congregation built a fine brick structure located adjacent to the Harris's property in 1881.

In 1876 Sarah and James sold part of their property to attorney Andrew J. Davison and his wife Eliza of Civil War fame. Attorney Davison was a firebrand orator of the Democratic Party,

and James H. Harris was active in the Republican Party. Sarah and Eliza must have witnessed many an interesting discussion between their husbands. The Harrises and Davisons lived as next-door neighbors for the remainder of their days.

James was about eighteen years older than Sarah and was certain to precede her in death. In 1889 he transferred ownership of their property to Sarah for “one dollar and love and affection to him paid.” This was a common means of assuring that the widow would become sole owner after a husband’s death. James H. Harris died in 1894. Sarah continued to live in their Dean Avenue home until her death. She supported herself by employment as a washerwoman.

Sarah’s health began to fail in 1905. Mrs. Cora Pettiford and Mrs. P. Richardson were paid to provide nursing care during her last weeks as she was attended by Drs. J. M. Higgins and F. P. McVay. She died at her residence on Dean Avenue July 27, 1905, and was buried in the West States Street Cemetery.

A few weeks before her death, Sarah published her last will and testament stating: “I will and bequeath all the income and proceeds of all my property, both real and personal., to The First Colored Baptist Church of the city of Athens, Athens County, Ohio, and commonly known as “The Zion Baptist Church” of said City, and to be paid to the same by my Executor hereinafter named, or by his successor.”

At Sarah’s request, Edward C. Berry, the hotel owner, served as executor to her estate. She had no known living relatives. Berry paid her debts and sold her property to Miss Susan Carter. The proceeds from the estate amounted to \$537.42 This sum was paid to the trustees of the newly renamed Mt. Zion Baptist Church, which was under construction at the corner of Carpenter and Congress Streets.

Although Sarah Harris was buried in West State Street Cemetery without a grave marker, she will be forever memorialized on the window in Mt. Zion Baptist Church.

John D. Cunningham October 28, 2022