

# African American Roots in Clifton

## Harriet and William Harris

The land you are standing on was once part of a 77 acre tract left to Harriet Harris and her seven children, Joshua, Coleman, Sarah, Sophy, William, Charlotte, and Luellen, as part of the division of William E. Beckwith's 1200 acre plantation. Born into slavery in the 1820s, Harriet was among the sixteen formerly enslaved people granted their freedom under the terms of Beckwith's will. When he died in 1863, in his will William left 200 acres of land south of the railroad tracks to these sixteen individuals. In 1868, each person received a 1/16<sup>th</sup> share of the property.

In 1847 Harriet had "married" William Harris. It is not known if Harris was a freed man, but he is not listed as an enslaved person in Beckwith's will. After the Civil War ended, William and Harriet built a home on their land where they raised their family.

The remaining 1001 acres of the Beckwith estate was purchased by New Yorker Harrison G. Otis in 1868. By 1869, Otis had opened a hotel and established a post office here. The Harris family sold Otis a 2 acre parcel where he constructed the Clifton railroad station and a sawmill.

Harriet and William Harris played a vital role in the formation of Clifton by subdividing some of their property located between the railroad tracks and the street leading to their home into 10 lots. They also gave land for, and helped establish the Clifton Primitive Baptist Church which served as the first school for the local African American children.