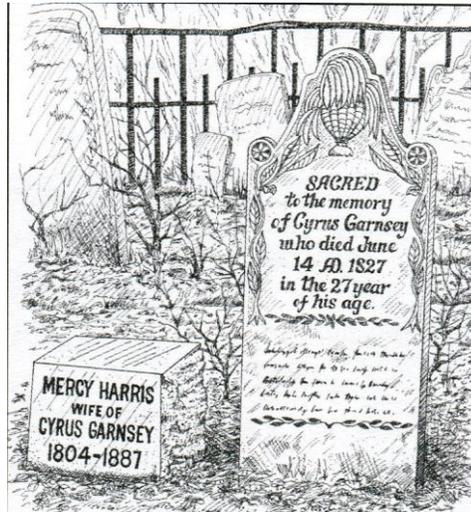


This Week in Saratoga County History

Clifton Park's Ties to Lincoln Assassination

Submitted by John L. Scherer, April 14, 2022

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Drawing by George Hubbard, Rexford, of Mercy Harris's tombstone in the Garnsey Cemetery.

April 14 marks the 152nd anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's assassination by John Wilkes Booth in 1865. This tragic event, like the later assassination of John F. Kennedy, had a tremendous impact on the nation. There was a period of twenty days of mourning from the time Lincoln was shot to the time he arrived by train for burial at his home in Springfield, Illinois. The first of his twelve funerals was held in Washington, then his funeral procession began by train across the land to Illinois, stopping at major cities for additional funerals. It was the mightiest outpouring of national grief the world had yet seen.

The funeral train arrived at Albany the night of April 25, and Lincoln's coffin was moved to the Capitol where it lay in state all night. At noon the following day, Albany's grand parade got under way with a specially built catafalque, the marchers, the bands, the tolling bells. One wonders if Mercy Harris Garnsey was present at this mournful occasion. Her niece, Clara Harris, had been sitting in the box seat at Ford's Theatre with President and Mrs. Lincoln the night the President was shot.

Mercy Harris, a sister of Albany lawyer, Ira Harris, married Cyrus Garnsey of Clifton Park in 1825. They built and lived in the brick farm house on Route 146, Rexford, now marked with a historic roadside marker. Cyrus was the son of Nathan Garnsey, Jr., who in 1829, became the second

supervisor of Clifton Park. Cyrus died in 1827, possibly of food poisoning contracted while on a business trip.

Mercy and her two young children, Lucy and Cyrus, moved to Albany to live with her brother, Ira. Ira's eldest daughter, Clara, was born in 1835, and after her Aunt Mercy moved with her son to Seneca County in 1848, she was a frequent visitor to their home.

Ira Harris handled Cyrus' estate for Mercy. He gradually advanced in his profession and eventually was named a New York State Supreme Court Justice in 1847. In 1860, when Senator William Seward was named to Lincoln's cabinet as Secretary of State, Ira Harris filled his seat as a U.S. Senator. Thus, Ira was a senator in Washington during the Civil War, and became a good friend of Lincoln's.

Originally, General Grant and his wife were to accompany the Lincolns to Ford's Theatre, but when they could not make it, Clara Harris (Ira's daughter) and her fiancé Major Henry Rathbone were invited instead. In a letter written from Washington, April 29, 1865, Clara tells a friend:

"We four composed the party that evening. They drove to our door in the gayest spirits; chatting on our way--and the President was received with the greatest enthusiasm. They say we were watched by the assassins, as we alighted from the carriage. Oh how could any one be so cruel as to strike that kind, dear honest face! And when I think of that fiend barring himself in alone with us, my blood runs cold. My dress is saturated with blood; my hands and face were covered. You may imagine what a scene! and so, all through that dreadful night, when we stood by that dying bed. Poor Mrs. Lincoln was and is almost crazy."

Clara's fiancé, Henry Rathbone received a knife wound to his arm in his attempt to tackle John Wilkes Booth. Because of loss of blood, he later fainted and had to be carried home. Senator Harris was one of those who accompanied Lincoln's funeral train to Springfield. His sister, Mercy Garnsey, surely must have received first-hand accounts from both her brother and niece.

Although Clara Harris and Major Rathbone were step-brother and sister, he being the son of Ira Harris' second wife, they were married in 1867. They were wealthy and lived in Europe with their children, but he became mentally unstable. In 1883 he went completely crazy and murdered Clara, stabbing and shooting her. He then spent the last thirty years of his life in an insane asylum.

According to Garnsey Family historian, George Hubbard, who brought the Garnsey-Harris connection to my attention, Mercy Harris Garnsey never remarried. She lived with her son Cyrus in his home "Lakeholme" near Lake Cayuga, Seneca County until her death, in 1887, at age 83. She was returned to Clifton Park, for burial in the Garnsey family cemetery, on the north side of Route 146 near Rexford. Here she lies today, a mute witness to the tragic events of April 1865.