

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

Harriet E. Wilson

(March 15, 1825 – June 28, 1900)

First Black Published Author in North America



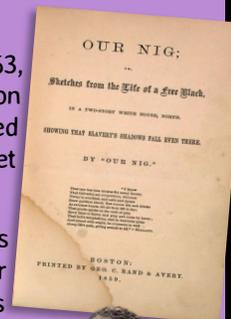
Harriet E. "Hattie" Wilson was born on March 15, 1825, in Milford, New Hampshire. She was born free to an Irish mother and a black /Indian father. Her father died when she was a child, forcing her mother to leave Harriet with the white, Haywood family who owned a large farm nearby. When her mother failed to return for her, Harriet was made a ward of the courts and was designated an indentured servant to the Haywood family. This was common practice that ensured orphaned children received room and board and a basic education. Although she was not considered a slave, she was not treated as a member of the family and was often mistreated. After she turned 18, Harriet, or "Hattie" as she was known, left the farm and began working as a seamstress and house servant in southern New Hampshire. From 1847-1850 she is listed as a town pauper, boarding with local families. The abuse Harriet suffered with the Haywood family would influence Harriet's work later in life.

In 1851, Harriet married Thomas Wilson, a conman who portrayed himself as an escaped slave, traveling the New England area, speaking of the horrors he suffered. Thomas told stories to garner the sympathy and financial support of abolitionists. Shortly after Harriet became pregnant, Thomas abandoned her, forcing her to live at the Hillsborough County, New Hampshire Poor Farm. He reappeared after the birth of their son George and moved the family to a new home. Thomas died while working on a ship, leaving Harriet destitute. She was forced to leave George at the Poor Farm when she left for Boston to earn money.

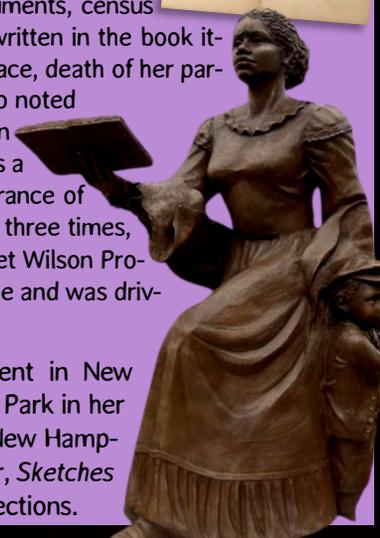
While she worked as a seamstress, Harriet developed a hair product business - "Mrs. H.E. Wilson's Hair Dressing". The business was successful and the bottles that carried her products also had her name embossed on the side. During this time, she was also writing the story of her life. In 1859, Harriet submitted her book, "*Our Nig, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-story White House, North*", for publication. On August 14, 1859, she officially registered the book and gave a copy to the U.S. District Court in Massachusetts. On September 5, 1859, the book was published - without her name - by an abolitionist printer in Boston. The book was considered unsettling because the powerful narrative wasn't a "feel-good" story about over-coming adversity, but instead, a story of struggle, physical abuse and racism, in the North. She noted that "slavery's shadow falls even here in the North". The book's main character, Frado, is tortured by the family matriarch, beaten and forced to sleep in a frigid crawl space. The book's short title, *Our Nig*, is a derivative of a racist nickname given to Frado, a little girl of mixed race, who grows up as an indentured servant to a white family. Since it was published anonymously, many thought the story was fictional, which led to a lack of sales. There were rumors that the author was white, which also affected the credibility of the publication.



Harriet's seven-year-old son died of yellow fever on February 15, 1860, just five months after the book's publication. In 1863, she appeared on a report for the poor and disappeared from public records until 1867, when she was mentioned in a Boston Newspaper for Spiritualists. Harriet later became known as "the colored medium", a Spiritualist nurse and healer, who helped organize and run "Children's Progressive Lyceums" - Sunday Schools for children of Spiritualists. On June 28, 1900, Harriet Wilson died at age 75 in Quincy, Massachusetts and was buried in that town's Mount Wollaston Cemetery.



In the early 1980s, Harvard University Professor, historian and leading scholar of African American studies, Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., discovered an original copy of "*Our Nig*" in a rare antique bookstore. His curiosity about the "anonymous" author led to a collaboration with other historians to discover her true identity. The group dove into historical documents, census records, marriage and death certificates, along with other historical archives. But it was Frado's own words, written in the book itself, that helped researchers match the specifics to Harriet's own life story - down to the details of her mixed-race, death of her parents, childhood of indentured servitude in the Milford area, and the 7-year-old son that she lost. Historians also noted the book starts out written in first person before changing to third person, indicating it may have started as an autobiography. The author describes her physical appearance: "Frado, as they called one of Mag's children, was a beautiful mulatto, with long, curly black hair, and handsome, roguish eyes, sparkling with an exuberance of spirit almost beyond restraint". Since Gates' rediscovery of *Our Nig*, the book has been republished three times, each edition containing new details uncovered by historians. JerriAnne Boggis, director of The Harriet Wilson Project, was instrumental in locating the Milford farmhouse where Harriet spent her indentured servitude and was driving force behind the establishment of a Harriet Wilson monument.



In 2006, a sculpture of Harriet by Fern Cunningham, the first monument in New Hampshire to honor a person of color, was erected in Milford's Bicentennial Park in her honor. In 2023 the Harriet E. Wilson marker on the Black Heritage Trail of New Hampshire was unveiled. Only 42 copies of the original 1859 edition of *Our Nig; Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* are known to exist in libraries and or private collections.

