GEORGE HENRY HARRIS (1843-1893)
ROCHESTER'S HENRY DAVID THOREAU

by Bill Davis

(Editor's Note: George H. Harris has been called "Rochester's most capable amateur historian." As a youth, he spent a lot of time in Tall Chief's Seneca encampment and wrote *The Aboriginal History of Rochester*. He worked in Mount Hope Cemetery under Superintendent George Stillson, learning surveying, drafting, and landscape gardening. With this training, Harris laid out and beautified Little Lake Cemetery in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, and later was appointed superintendent of Elmwood Cemetery in Detroit. Returning to Rochester in 1877, he became the manager of the Reynolds Arcade. Part I, covering these first 34 years of Harris' life, was published in the last issue of the Epitaph, Winter, 2001. Part II is presented here.)

PART II.

In 1877 at age 34, George Henry Harris brought his wanderings to an end and moved back to Rochester to manage the Reynolds Arcade for Mortimer Reynolds. The arcade housed offices of lawyers, the telegraph office, the post office, art studios, retail shops, the Athenaeum and its library, a lecture hall, and business offices. Automobile inventor, George B. Selden, had his office in the arcade. Daniel Webster delivered lectures there. It was the business and cultural center of Rochester in the 19th century.

Once he was settled back in Rochester, Harris focused his research on early area inhabitants and white pioneers. Every holiday was spent exploring the sites of villages, lines of trails, the burial grounds and camping places for the Indians of the Genesee country and in studying their customs. At the same time, he collected data concerning the white pioneers to the area. His collection of books, manuscripts, and Indian relics grew rapidly and his notebooks filled fast.

George Henry Harris (1843-1893) was a prominent Rochesterian with broad interests and abilities.

His search along the trails of native Americans was started by a chance find of an Indian burial or an artifact in a former Indian village. When informed of a possible discovery site, he would hasten to it and make a careful scientific evaluation of the find. For example, he studied an ancient Indian fireplace, which was found 20 feet below ground in Gaines. He rescued fragments of several mastodons, including one at Nunda and another one near Plymouth Avenue, which were excavated during the construction of the Genesee Valley Canal.

Harris traced the route of Denonville's expedition from Irondequoit Bay to Victor and determined from evidence where the stopping points had been. Many of the artifacts he gathered were the result of his own findings. A careful analysis of the find at old Carthage revealed mounds that contained a pipe similar to the mound-builders' pipes in Ohio. He found evidence of a two-to-three-acre fort and a flint worker's shop near Hanford Landing.

Not content with discovery alone, Harris was zealous in writing newspaper articles about his archeological research. He was a member of the Rochester Historical Society and lectured there frequently, as well as at other historical societies in Genesee country and at many Rochester schools. He sometimes carried as many as 1,000 artifacts to illustrate his lectures.

He regularly visited John Minard, Allegany County historian, and together, they studied the last Seneca habitation on the Genesee River, Chief Gordon's house at Canadice. In 1892, using his Kodak camera, he made the last photographs of the Gordon house before it blew down in a windstorm two weeks later.

Harris' interviews with early pioneers were extensive. Horatio Jones, who had been captured by the Seneca Indians, much as Mary Jemison was, proved to be an interesting subject for his research. At his death, much of Harris' work on early area pioneers was given to the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. His writings on Captain Hosea Rogers was published by the Rochester Historical Society in Volume IX of their history series. His research of the Markham family in Rush was given to the family. His extensive writings about the Abelard Reynolds family was published in a local newspaper.

George Harris also interviewed many early settlers in the Penfield and Brighton areas. These stories are now in the Local
History Division of the Rochester Public Library, Harris, incidentally, organized the first collection of books for the library.

The writing skills of George Harris were exemplary. William H. Samson, editor of a local newspaper and president of the Rochester Historical Society, said, "Those chapters of his concerning the history of Rochester will have a place in literature as long as the English language is read."

Typical of Harris' descriptive style is the following passage:

"One hundred years ago the present site of Rochester was a wilderness. Here, nature reigned supreme in the majesty of solitude, and the changeful hand of approaching civilization had not yet marred the beauties nor altered the natural features of the landscape.

"From its mountain sources, on its way down to meet and mingle with the blue waters of the great Lake Ontario, came the beautiful Shen-e-se-ho (the pleasant valley), the river of the Senecas winding in and out around sharp corners of rock, sweeping in great folds and curves like the trail of a mighty serpent, gliding smoothly along through the plain and by the side of low swamps, rushing, roaring, and tumbling through deep gorges over huge boulders and high precipices, cutting a broad channel in the rock foundations of the earth, its strong currents as yet unfettered by the works of man, in its never-ceasing journey through the wilds.

"To the river's verdure-trimmed banks and sandy shallows, the timid deer came to drink. On its restless bosom, flocks of wild fowl floated undisturbed. From hiding places in the tangled thicket on the shore, the dismal howl of the wolf, the sullen growl of the bear, and the scream of the panther were heard. Through the narrow trails leading back into the deep recesses of the woods, the fleet-footed Indian pursued his course in search of game and bore his message of peace or war to the neighboring tribes. High up in the heavens the giant monarchs of the forest reared their heads, writhed and clashed their mighty arms in fierce storms, while over all the varied sounds of murmuring waters, cries of wild beasts and other voices of nature, the soft breezes of summer - swaying the emerald treetops to and fro - sang a mournful requiem of the days of primitive peace soon to pass away forever.

"Today, we are here, the living representatives of a great city containing within its limits 100,000 souls. North, south, east, and west, in every direction extend broad avenues lined with palatial structures and modest homes. Columns of smoke curling upward denote the centers of industrial occupation in the form of great manufactories, while the stirring sounds of labor and busy hum rising from the thousand marts of trade sound to our listening ears like the glad music of a steadily increasing prosperity.

George Harris' gravestone is located in Lot 51, Section E, Mount Hope Cemetery. Photograph by Frank A. Gillespie.

"Follow the line of the streets away from the confusion of congregated sounds in the city center, pass beyond the town, to the natural roads that stretch away in the distance, and we behold smiling farms with their divided fields, bending orchards, comfortable houses, and outbuildings well stored with abundant products of agriculture. On every hand we see accumulating and unending proof of the presence of a people with the possession of lands, houses, flocks, herds, and goods of every product peculiar to the requirement of civilized life; with untold millions expended in improvements required for the public welfare.

"Surely, it is the most marvelous contrast, worthy of the accredited powers of the gods, and far surpassing in its magnitude and grandeur, the fabled kaleidoscopic changes wrought upon the destinies of men by the powerful genie of old."

In a beautiful tribute to George Harris, Dr. John Norton said, "He was a true lover of nature and found the fields, the woods, and the streams never-ending sources of instruction and delight. Men, eminent in learning, counted the moments precious that they could spend communing with George Harris about the secrets time had hidden from common eyes. The farmer felt a new interest in the fields he tilled after the graphic recital of Indian warfare or pioneer adventure that the research of Harris located within his boundaries. The dusky sons of the forest loved him as a brother and sought his aid, his counsel, and his hospitality as freely as though he was by birth, instead of by adoption, a member of their tribe."

Because of his interest in canoeing, Harris organized and was the leader of two canoe clubs: the Genesee Canoe Club on the river and the Rochester Canoe Club on Irondequoit Bay.

All of his life, Harris spent as much time as possible outdoors to offset an illness that had plagued him from early childhood. In 1892, however, his health failed him. In a
letter from the Jackson Sanatorium in Dansville addressed to Jane Parker, Harris wrote, "The frightful mental and physical strain to which I have been subjected ended in my complete breakdown in November. I have been an invalid since December 1 (1892). The doctors tell me I have passed the danger line and with proper care and rest, they see no reason why I shall not recover." But he did not recover. He died in October 1893 and was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery.

At his funeral, representatives of the many clubs and societies of which he had been a member formed a line and marched after the horse-drawn hearse. The canoe clubs provided a floral piece in the shape of a canoe. Various lodges performed appropriate ceremonies. His fire-fighting helmet topped his casket. (He had served as the elected head of the Rochester Volunteer Fire Department.) There was an outpouring of testimony of his service to the community. John Norton said, "His keen intellect, brilliant talents, and unflagging industry won our admiration, but it was his pure and noble nature, his generous and unselfish devotion that gave him so warm a place in all of our hearts. He was always so helpful and full of enthusiasm, with a mind so active and clear that it was impossible to realize how slender was the hold he had on life. We were fortunate to have known and loved him while he lived, and in the rich legacy he bequeathed us."

What is his legacy to the community? There are the first 15 chapters he wrote for William F. Peck's semi-centennial history of Rochester. There is a collection of over 200 folders of his papers in the Local History Division of the Rochester Public Library. His many lectures are reprinted in the publication fund series of the Rochester Historical Society. And there are additional George H. Harris papers in the Rare Books Section of the University of Rochester Library. His lifelong search for the beginnings of the Rochester community and his exemplary life will not be forgotten.

(Bill Davis is a Kodak retiree and a local historian. One day while researching early Rochester history at the public library, he saw Stephen Thomas, executive director emeritus of the Rochester Museum and Science Center, and expressed his interest in George H. Harris. Thomas pointed out the complete collection of Harris papers nearby, and that started Davis on a 20-year search of Harris' material - at the Smithsonian Institution, the New York State Museum, the Wheatland Historical Society, the Allegany Historical Society, the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, and the Ontario County Historical Society.)

A EULOGY FOR PRIVATE HENRY CLAY CARR

by Union Army Chaplain Philo Cook

Private Henry Clay Carr, was killed at Perryville on March 2, 1865 in the closing days of the Civil War. He was the only Union casualty in a battle where the Confederates knew that defeat was imminent. Private Carr's body was returned to Rochester in November, 1865, and he was buried in Section O, Lot 9.

On the Civil War tour last September, Ben Maryniak read a eulogy to Private Henry Carr. It was the speech originally delivered by Chaplain Philo Cook on this site in 1865.

At the graveside service for Private Carr, Army Chaplain Philo Cook delivered the following eulogy. (The scene was reenacted by Ben Maryniak at last fall's Civil War tour of Mount Hope Cemetery on September 16, 2000. That tour was led by Friends trustee Marilyn Nolte and her Civil War reenactment friends.) That eulogy reads:

"My brothers and sisters, four years have passed since the first gun of trea-
son summoned us to the defense of our government. In those four years, we have come to a fresh evaluation of the principles which our government pretended to represent. There has been work enough and sorrow enough in these years, and gray hairs have been made more rapidly than usual.

“We have been sternly taught to know things we never before suspected. We had to quickly revise what we used to believe. We now have to count our acquisitions by marks of suffering. New York State can count her graves by thousands of sons. Sons who took the field for the common defense. Sons for whom all the ordinary implements of trade and labor were welded into a weapon.

“When our state - from Lake Erie to the New York harbor - can count its graves by thousands of sons, there is a unity like that which sorrow creates within a house. There is a common throb of anguish and pride, a common prayer for strength, a common glorying that death came in the way of duty.

“Every time I hear a father read his dead son’s last letter, it seems to me as if the souls of these brave boys had not gone to heaven, but that they have come home. Death said to them, ‘Your country must be reinforced,’ and these sons hastened to the call. Their deaths deepen our religiousness. Their deaths inflame our patriotism. Their deaths confirm our thoughts with the sincerity which they gained in dying.

“They died in defense of their country! What is more eloquent than the majestic simplicity of that phrase - ‘their country?’ Let not him try to measure the length and breadth of these words, who thinks of his country only as a place to buy and sell, and get gain. Let him not try to sound the depth of these words, whose idea of his country is only a place where he shall get public office, and honor, and profit. Let him not aspire to the height of these words, who thinks that peace is better than righteousness, safety better than manhood.

“They who endured hardship and dauntlessly met the fiery storm. They who poured out their blood and lay with their white faces upturned to God; they knew - in their lifetime knew - what ‘our country’ means.

“They, in their graves, tell us that no country can live without law and liberty, and true manhood. Because they saw, in our national flag, the soul of the Great Republic, with strong hearts and chivalric daring they planted themselves by the Stars and Stripes, and now sleep until the reveille of the resurrection morn.

“Comrades and citizens, you have walked by many gravestones on your way here today. Better than my words do the things of this day speak. Hear them. In truth, everyone here today has been brought by a voice that softly calls to you from the solemn trees which surround us. A voice that comes from the many battlefields that border the Potomac, the Rappahannock, and the Appomattox rivers. A voice that comes from Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, and the Shenandoah Valley. A voice that asks a kind recognition for those who sleep in a soldier’s grave. Theirs are the holy rites of commemoration that we celebrate today.

“Think of all that the remains of this boy have passed through. Picture in your mind all that happened to them since the stately and beautiful frame to which they belonged left his peaceful home for the camp and the battlefield. Beaten up and down by all the storms of war, carried back and forth by the changeful movement of the army, blackened by the sun and bleached by the frost. Exposed to all the mutations of the weather, pinched with hunger, stiffened with cold, drenched with rain, hardened by toil, sleeping on the ground, begrimed by smoke and powder, a target for saber cut and for rifle ball, shot down in battle, buried, with no shroud but his coat. In hostile soil, lifted from the ground and brought here at last.

“His return home was a long time coming. But he is here at last. And we are here, honored by the presence of his remains. This body tells a touching and solemn story of toil, fatigue, suffering, peril, and death. But it also speaks of patience, fortitude, bravery, and cheerfulness. It also manifests the devotion of a generous, pure, and earnest heart.

“I cannot utter words of common consolation here. Certainly, there is the thought of the infinite God, just and loving. There is the vision of a kind and tender Providence. A Providence which allows nothing to be wasted. A Providence which picks up the fragments of our broken existence, a Providence which ties together the loose threads of our activity, a Providence which makes good the imperfection of our labor, a Providence which permits no good hope to fail.

“There is the thought of a vast hereafter where every life shall be made complete. But these consolations are open to all people in ordinary times. In the case of Trooper Carr, there are more consolations. There is the sympathy of a great multitude of noble mourners. There is the tender respect and love of strangers. There is the recognition of a country.

“The memory of such a career, of such a character, is - alone - consolation sufficient for more than ordinary grief. What greater comfort could there be for a mother than to have had such a son? To be recognized and honored as the mother of such? To live in his reflected light and glory?

“Killed in battle for the Union! No prouder epitaph need any man want. Do you know what that means? It means, died that the best government under the sun might not be bound and powerless. It means, died for the land’s salvation. Died for the opening of the prison doors to them that are unjustly bound. Died to proclaim the day of vengeance of our God to the oppressed nations of the earth. Died that men might still hope and struggle upward to life and liberty, civil and religious. It means, died that God’s kingdom might come, that his will might be done on earth as it is in heaven. Mourn not, my friends, for the departure of such a son, brother, companion, friend.

“If the death of such a one is a high price to pay for victory, consider the higher
estimate to be placed on the government whose stability - and the country whose existence - was secured by that victory. Think how much it has done to increase your faith in God to know that he cares for our nation.

"It is sad to see young manhood laid low in its bloom, laid low by that barbarian war, pushed on by his more loathsome brother, slavery.

"But I have said too much. I have broken the sacred silence too long. I should have allowed Henry Clay Carr to speak more. Had he been able to speak, he would have rebuked us for praising what he did in the sincerity of his heart, because he could not help it.

"Let us lay what is left of his poor body in the ground. Let us think of him as living and working on. In the future time, when sweet peace shall come back to us, he will live in the pure sentiments he has aided in strengthening. He will work in the noble institutions he has died to establish.

"No, Brother Carr, we will not falter. While the memory of your life holds a place in our hearts, we will be true to our country and true to our God.

"And now, we ask God's blessing on this grave. Bless it, oh God, and all the other boys who rest here at Mount Hope. Bless the parents who bid their sons do brave deeds. Bless the wives who weep for husbands who will never come back again. Bless the children whose heritage is their fallen father's heroic name. But chiefly, oh God, bless this stone in honor of Private Henry Clay Carr. In honor of a man who counted not his life dear when his country needed him.

"A grander monument has not been chiseled in stone at this gathering today. It certifies that our living labored and our dead died not in vain. This afternoon we proclaim and certify to the world that they fought a good fight and kept their faith in those days gone by, whose deeds we celebrate."

**DEATH OF A SOLDIER CHARLES D. HOWELL (d. 1862)**

by Caleb Ford

On December 13, 1862, a young 18-year-old soldier was part of a series of futile frontal assaults against an entrenched Confederate army in the city of Fredericksburg, Virginia. The Fredericksburg campaign, led by Major General Ambrose Burnside, aimed to capture this area, which would be vital to any assault on the Confederate capital of Richmond. General Robert E. Lee, anticipating the attack, established positions high above where the Union army was coming from. This was the situation young Charles D. Howell faced as he was part of wave after wave of soldiers thrown at the rebels, leaving over 13,000 of the 100,000 Union soldiers wounded or killed.

During the attack, Howell took shrapnel in the thigh. After being removed from the battle, he was taken to the 5th army corps hospital near Falmouth. There, he was treated for his wounds, however, due to his injury he contracted lockjaw. He died 9 days after the battle on December 22. He was 18 years, 1 month, and 22 days old.

Charles Howell was a resident of Anson Park in Rochester, where he lived with his parents. He had joined the 108th Regiment of the New York State Volunteers in August of the year of his death. There was no clear evidence that Howell had participated in any battles prior to the Battle of Fredericksburg. However, the Army of the Potomac, of which the 108th NYS Volunteers were a part, had seen heavy action in those months. Yet even when not in combat, life still revolved around the battle. Often, days would start at 5 a.m. for a quick breakfast and then drill sessions to learn how to shoot guns and perform various maneuvers. It was not uncommon to have five drill sessions in a single day. The grueling work and horrible conditions, mixed with boredom and extreme homesickness, made it a truly hard experience for all of the soldiers.

Still, no matter how hard it was for the Union soldiers, the parents of Charles Howell had it worse. Whenever a parent is faced with the tragedy of outliving a child, one must wonder how they deal with their grief. It must have been especially hard in this case, because their child died hundreds of miles away, and by the time they heard of the injury he suffered on December 13, Howell was already dead. Perhaps they found solace in the fact that Charles had died fighting for the Union and defending the ideals of the Union. The first evidence
that points to this conclusion is Charles’ gravestone itself. It is simple and reads:

Charles D. Howell
108 Regiment N.Y.S. Vol’s
Who fell wounded at the storming of Fredricksburg,
Dec. 13, 1862,
And died in the 5th division
Hospital, Falmouth, Dec. 22.
Aged 18 years, 1 mo & 22 days.

It must be noted that the most prominent date on the gravestone is not his date of death, but the date he fell wounded. This speaks out to say that their child died doing his duty for the Union.

The idea of one’s duty to the Union was a new one. Northerners had to deal with the massive numbers of husbands, sons, brothers, and neighbors losing their lives. Much of the time, it was impossible to return the bodies to their homes for proper burials. The established rituals could not be performed when the men died in battle, hundreds of miles from their loved ones. In his book, The Sacred Remains, Gary Laderman wrote, “In order to alleviate the anxieties and grief of northern citizens, religious and political leaders and much of the popular media imaginatively transformed the destruction of life into something heroic; their message inevitably returned to the sacred life of the nation and the promise of a ‘good death’ in the service of the Union.”

The second piece of evidence is the epitaph written along the bottom of the stone. It is a poetic verse, which reads much like some Civil War hymns of the time. It reads:

O shroud him in a flag of stars,
Beneath whose folds he won his scars,
Through which his spirit fled,
From glory here to glory then.

From the parents point of view, this verse may be saying to wrap their child in the American flag for which he died, and that the glory he earned on the day of his death will be remembered and he will be acclaimed in heaven. Charles Howell died for a cause and people will not forget his sacrifice.

Douglas J. Davies states in Death, Ritual, and Belief: “Death rites do entertain hope as an important human attribute helping to drive communities forward by providing an optimism for life.” Perhaps the parents found consolation in this gravestone, because it celebrated what Howell had accomplished in life. This is along similar lines to a point Jay Lifton made in The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life. He speaks of five general modes of the sense of immortality: the biological, the theological, the creative, the natural, and the special mode of experiential transcendence. This stone shows a strong reliance on the creative sense of immortality, for Charles is living on through his influence on other people and what he did for the good of this nation during his short time on earth.

Even now, almost 140 years later, people continue to find solace in this stone of a fallen soldier. The grave is still tended, and a new American flag has recently been placed in the ground next to it. We, as Americans, revere those fallen in battle, thus guaranteeing their symbolic immortality.

Charles D. Howell led a short, but eventful life. As his obituary in the Rochester Union and Advertiser said, “He was an estimable young soldier, and the captain of his company bears testimony to his bravery and good conduct.”

(Caleb Ford is a student at the University of Rochester. He prepared this essay as a requirement for Professor Emil Homerin’s course, Speaking Stones, Religion 167.)
7. Machines must always keep to the right of the road.
8. Automobiles must always be driven so as not to give off smoke or to drop oil, nor shall mufflers be opened while within the cemetery.
9. When the machine stops, the engine must be stopped.
10. Automobiles shall not be turned around on the avenues.
11. Roads posted “One-Way Road” must only be used as such.
12. Automobile funerals shall enter the cemetery only at main gates near the office, and after entering the grounds, shall be subject to the direction of the superintendent or his assistants.
13. Motorists must not use roads posted “Not for Automobiles.”

The change from horse-drawn to motor vehicles had worked havoc with the roads in the cemetery. Heavily loaded limousines and hearses ripped up and rutted the dirt thoroughfares so that their use in some sections was found impossible. It was reported that cemetery officials had to keep two teams of horses in readiness at all times to pull the frequently mired automobiles from the mud.

In 1920, just 2 1/2 years later, plans drawn up by the city engineer included repairs to and extension of the existing road system in the cemetery. The road repairs and resurfacing with bituminous composition and extensions to the water distribution system cost the city approximately $350,000.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Do you want to get out of the house and spend a Sunday afternoon in a particularly pleasant place? May we suggest that you volunteer to be a receptionist for our Sunday tours on a couple or more Sundays this summer. It's easy duty, and you'll meet a lot of nice people. Give it a try. Call JoAnn Belle-Isle at 436-2951 or send an e-mail to joann@netacc.net. It will change your life.