



MOVING AWAY & HANGING ON



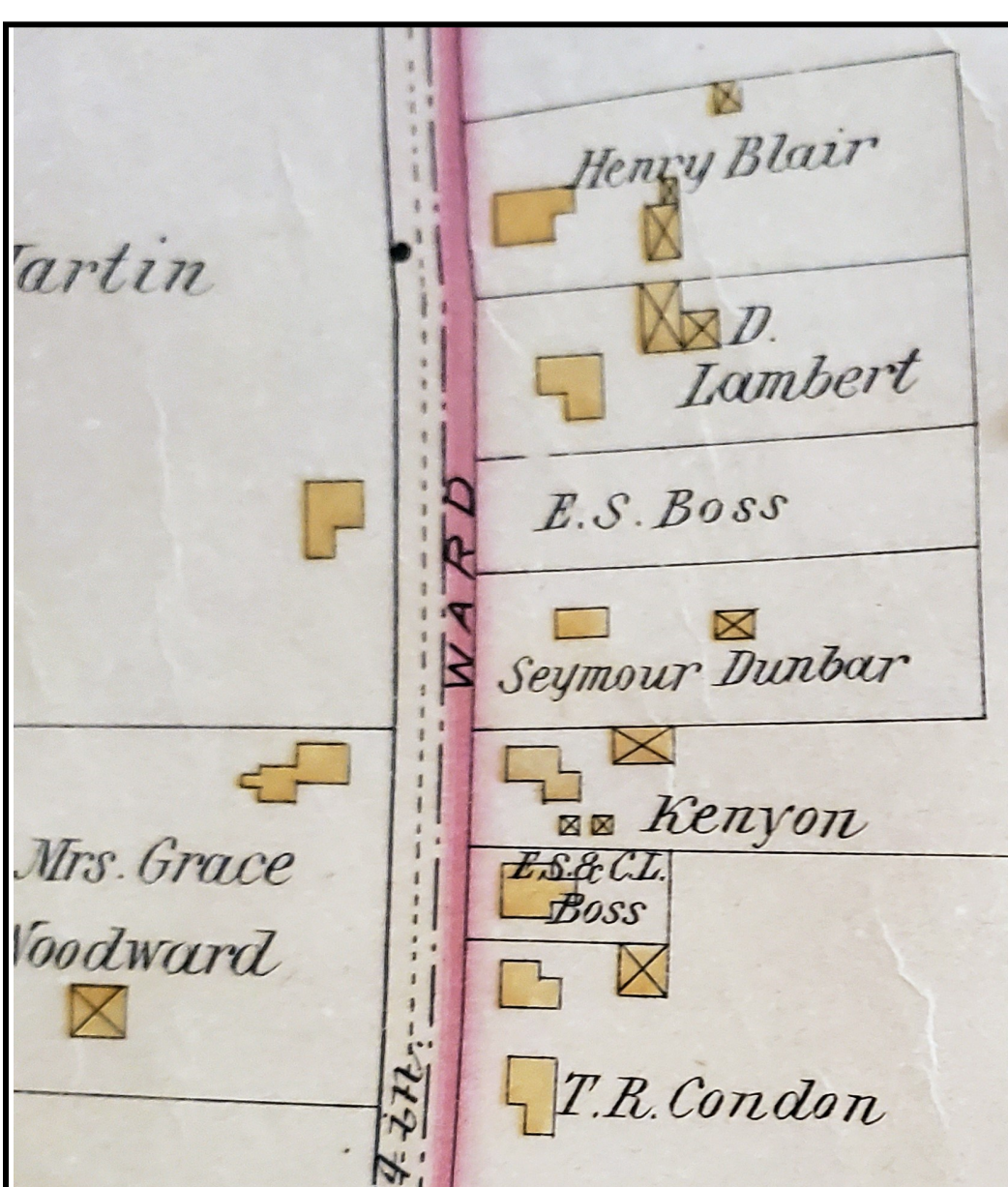
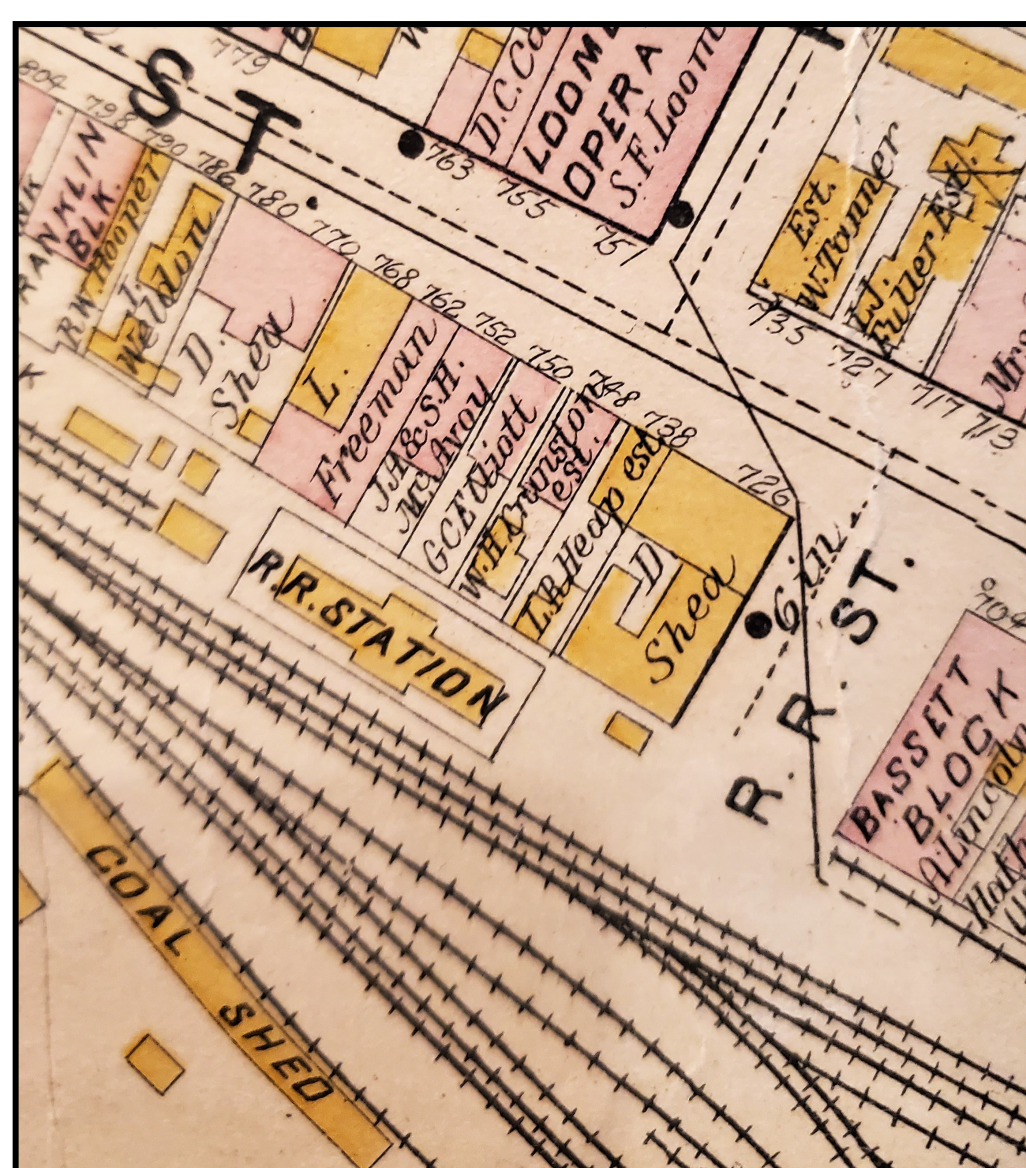
In the second half of the 19th century, the African American population in northeastern Connecticut began to decline. African Americans moved away from both the rural farm towns and the growing textile mill cities. Part of the explanation was economics – agriculture in Connecticut was in decline, and rural communities in general were losing population. But another part of the explanation was racism. The new factories declined to hire non-white workers, so none of the new jobs went to people of color. Even domestic service, which had formerly employed Blacks, was becoming increasingly the preserve of immigrants from Europe. In the town of Windham in particular, the African American population dwindled as the 19th century waned. Yet, while many of northeastern Connecticut’s African Americans left for new homes in Norwich, Hartford, and especially New Haven, others remained, hanging on by filling the few jobs open to Black people: laundress, day laborer, housecleaner, cook, hostler. After 1910, when the Great Migration of Southern African Americans and West Indians to Northern cities began, the new arrivals found Black Connecticutans still here – as they had been here all along.

AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULATION OF CONNECTICUT (1880-1900, 2020, DISTRIBUTION BY COUNTY)

County	1880	1880 %	1890	1890 %	1900	1900 %	2020	2020 %
Fairfield	2,182	0.189	2,503	0.194	3,227	0.212	106,756	0.275
New Haven	3,513	0.304	4,085	0.317	5,085	0.334	118,933	0.306
Hartford	2,232	0.193	2,276	0.176	3,191	0.210	127,194	0.327
Litchfield	1,026	0.089	807	0.063	967	0.064	3,348	0.009
Middlesex	371	0.032	418	0.032	452	0.030	8,565	0.022
New London	1,480	0.115	1,473	0.114	1,669	0.110	16,026	0.041
Tolland	195	0.017	191	0.015	91	0.006	5,450	0.014
Windham	548	0.047	509	0.039	544	0.036	2,403	0.006
TOTAL	11,547	1.000	12,902	1.000	15,226	1.000	388,675	1.000

AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULATION OF CONNECTICUT (1756-1970, AS A PERCENT OF THE TOTAL POPULATION)

Year	African American Population	Percent
1756	3,587	.028
1774	6,464	.033
1790	5,419	.023
1810	6,763	.026
1820	7,967	.029
1830	8,072	.027
1840	8,159	.026
1850	8k	.025
1860	9k	.020
1870	10k	.019
1880	12k	.019
1890	13k	.016
1900	15k	.017
1910	15k	.013
1920	21k	.015
1930	29k	.018
1940	33k	.019
1950	53k	.026
1960	107k	.042
1970	181k	.060



THE HARRIS FAMILY

On an earlier display panel, we introduced you to John C. Harris, an African American Civil War soldier from Massachusetts, a member of the celebrated 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry (Colored), the subject of the movie *Glory*. Harris was born in New York City in c.1843, a son of George and Mary Harris. As a teenager, he moved to Sheffield, a farm town in western Massachusetts, where he worked as an agricultural laborer for Frederick Cooper, a white farmer. Also part of the Cooper household was Emma Freeman, a Black woman a year older than John who worked as a domestic servant. Emma had come from western Connecticut, born in 1844 in the Talcottville section of Torrington, not far from Sheffield. The Freemans were a large family. Besides Emma’s parents Charles and Lucy, there were siblings Sarah, Lewis, Louisa, Charles, John, and Jane. Nearby was the home of Henry and Julia Freeman and their children. Another Black family, the Jenkinsons, also lived nearby. John and Emma became a couple, and in 1862 Emma gave birth to a daughter, Flora. In 1863, John went to war. He returned to Sheffield in 1865, and shortly after, he and Emma married. John’s enlistment papers described him as 5’ 6” with black eyes and black hair. John continued to work as a farm laborer, although by 1870 he had acquired a small farm of his own, valued at \$350. Alas, by 1874 it seems that he no longer owned the farm and was once again a landless agricultural laborer. Besides Flora, the Harrises had children Eddie (who died in 1872), Gertrude, Frances, Anna (Anne Bella), William (Willie), Albert, Charles, Philip Stanley, Fred, and Olive, all born in Sheffield. For awhile, Sarah Freeman and her infant daughter Fanny Freeman lived with the Harrises, probably kinfolk of Emma’s.

In c. 1891 the Harrises (except for Flora, who by this time had married) left Sheffield and moved to Willimantic, CT. With agriculture declining throughout New England, and unable to own a farm of their own, there were good reasons for leaving rural Sheffield and moving to a city. The 1891 Willimantic street directory records the family living at 509 Jackson Street, on the northern edge of the city. John worked as a laborer, employed by T. R. Condon. More children were born: Harry in 1894, Bertha in 1895, Roland Stanley in 1897, and Grace in 1898 – a large family. The 1896 street director shows John and Emma living at 521 Jackson Street, not far from 509, where they had lived in 1891. Son Charles lived with them and worked as a laborer. Willie also lived with his parents and worked as a driver, or teamster. The 1900 Census recorded John and Emma still residing at 521 Jackson Street, a small house that they rented. John still worked as a day laborer. Charles, still living with his parents, was listed as a farmer. Philip was a hostler. Fred was a farmer. They were not alone – their neighborhood had become a small African American enclave of four Black families living on the northern edge of the city. Along with the Harrises at 521 Jackson Street were the Robinsons at 509, the Hills at 501, and the Sloanes at 513. Most of the men worked as day laborers. All rented their homes. By 1906, though, the Harrises had moved closer to downtown, renting homes on Raynes Court, Meadow Street, Turner Street, and Temple Street. John Harris died in 1906 and was buried in the Old Willimantic Cemetery, in what would become a family plot. There are still Harrises living in Willimantic today.

JULIA HALL

Cpl. Caesar Hall, the African American Civil War soldier whose service is described on another display board in this exhibit, was discharged in 1865 and came home to Hampton, CT. His wife Julia and children were waiting for him. Caesar had married Julia, who was also African American, shortly after 1850. The 1860 United States Census recorded them living in their own household in rural Hampton, where Caesar worked as a farm laborer. Julia was 32, a year older than her husband. Like Caesar, she could read and write. They had three children in 1860: Nancy N., 9; William P. 3; and Susan E., 1. Nancy attended school. The 1870 Census, taken after the Civil War, saw life for Caesar and Julia apparently returned to normal. Julia was “keeping house,” which means that she undertook the myriad tough chores associated with being a farm wife. The Census listed Caesar as a “farmer,” not a farm laborer, which may mean that he rented a farm, either for cash or shares. He did not own land. Nancy was 19, finished with school, and – although still living at home – worked somewhere as a household servant. William (13), Susie (11), and Mary (9) were in school, and would have helped with farm chores. The Halls made sure that all of their children got an education.

But something was wrong. Within five years of the Census – less than ten years after Caesar returned from the Second War for Freedom – he and Julia separated and left Hampton. They moved to Willimantic, a nearby cotton mill city. Julia was listed in the 1875 Willimantic City Directory as the head of a new household – although as “Mrs. Cesar Hall” – a household that did not include Caesar. Julia listed her occupation as “laundress,” a task that she would have performed as a farm wife. She lived with her children in the rear of a commercial block – the so-called Heap Block – that fronted on Main Street, entering and exiting through a back door that faced the railroad tracks. Her income could not have been much.

The 1880 Census revealed that Caesar had moved to Willimantic, too, but that he lived at a different address, in the household of Nancy Hendley, a white woman who took in boarders. His occupation was recorded as a laborer, but as he now lived in a city, it was unlikely that he was doing his former farm work. The children lived with their mother, who was still working as a laundress, residing in the same back-door tenement by the railroad tracks. By now, Nancy had grown up and moved away. William, 24, worked as a cook. Susan, 22, and Mary, 19, were employed as domestic servants. By 1892, according to that year’s street directory, Caesar and Julia (although not the children, who by now had all moved away) still resided in Willimantic, still at separate addresses, Caesar as a boarder at 74 Elm Street and Julia as a tenant at 68 Jackson Street. It was during these years that Caesar joined the local branch of the Grand Army of the Republic, a nationwide organization of Union Army veterans. Clearly, his years of service remained important to him. He died on March 15, 1896, at the age of 68, and was buried in the Old Willimantic Cemetery beneath an official United States military headstone, proudly proclaiming his one-time rank of corporal.

What had happened? Had Caesar and Julia’s marriage always been rocky, and simply came to an end sometime after 1870? Or had his wartime experiences changed Caesar in ways that affected his marriage. Had he tried renting a farm when he got back from the War, only to fail financially, and lost his marriage in the bargain? What eventually became of Julia? She is not buried in Willimantic; Caesar is all alone on his plot. Did she eventually move in with one of her children? Where did the children go?

And one more mystery: Who arranged for Caesar’s burial? Was it the Willimantic G.A.R.? The veteran’s headstone was free, but someone would have had to arrange for it. Who had made sure that it said “corporal”? Had Caesar ordered it himself as he approached death? Or was it Julia that arranged for the stone and burial, carrying out one last wifely duty?

Illustrations, clockwise from upper right:

After she moved from Hampton to Willimantic in the 1870s, Julia Hall and her children lived in the rear of the Heap Block. This is the building as it looks today, photographed from the back. The brick structure with the tailor shop sign was not there in the 19th century, but a previous wooden structure was. Unlike most of Willimantic’s Main Street commercial buildings, the Heap Block was made of wood. Today, it houses a vape shop.

Julia Hall would have reached the rear of the Heap Block via this alley, still there today.

Detail from a 1897 map of Willimantic, showing the Heap Block, Union Railroad Station, and the rail yards. The Heap Block fronted on Main Street.

Detail from a 1897 map of Willimantic showing the small African American neighborhood on the northern edge of the city, on Jackson Street – four of the houses in the image. The names on the map are property owners (landlords). Condon was John Harris’s employer in 1891.