

**MEMOIR OF  
THADDEUS WILLIAM  
HARRIS, PP. XI - XLVII**

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Memoir of Thaddeus William Harris, pp. xi - xlvii by Thomas Wentworth Higginson

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**THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON**

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*Mr Hodges.  
with the kind regards of  
Mrs Harris.*

**MEMOIR**

**OF**

**THADDEUS WILLIAM HARRIS.**

**BY THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON.**

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FROM THE OCCASIONAL PAPERS OF THE BOSTON SOCIETY OF NATURAL HISTORY,—I.

pp. xi—xlvii.

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PRESS OF A. A. KINGMAN,  
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BERKELEY STREET.

MEMOIR  
OF  
THADDEUS WILLIAM HARRIS

BY  
THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON.

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"Were I to be required to say, in one word, what is the system of Nature, I should say—Variety."

Dr. HARRIS to EDWARD NEWMAN, 1844.

ONE of the ablest of American botanists writes in respect to Dr. Harris,—"Of other genuine naturalists I have read, but he is the only one I ever knew." This is hardly too strong a statement of the loyalty entertained toward this eminent man by those who had the privilege of being his pupils in Natural History. In him there lived for us the very spirit of Linnæus, or whatever name best represents the simplest and purest type of the naturalist. The personal attachment thus won, the healthy influence thus exerted, and the slow and gradual recognition of the merit of his methods, are a form of success more congenial to the temperament of Dr. Harris than would have been any more immediate and superficial applauses.

Thaddeus William Harris was born in Dorchester, Mass., November 12, 1795. He was the son of Thaddeus Mason Harris, D. D., and Mary (Dix) Harris. The elder Dr. Harris was a native of Charlestown, Mass., born in 1768, graduated at Harvard College in 1787, and was librarian of that institution from 1791 to 1793. He left that position to be ordained over the First Congregational Church in Dorchester, where he remained until within a few years of his death, which occurred in 1842. I remember in my boyhood the little quaint old man, bent almost incredibly, but still wearing a hale aspect, who used to haunt the alcoves of the old library in Harvard Hall. It was rumored among us that he had once been appointed private secretary to Washington, but had resigned from illness; and it was known that he was arranging and indexing for Mr. Sparks the one hundred and thirty-two manuscript volumes of Washington's correspondence. He was not without his poetic laurels, too, since it was whispered that he had composed for Mr. Everett's youthful recitation the verses:

"You'd scarce expect one of my age  
To speak in public on the stage."

He was, moreover, a learned antiquarian and divine, and had come to Natural History by a strictly professional path; for besides his proper harvest of fifty-eight occasional sermons, and seventeen other publications,<sup>1</sup> he had found time for an elaborate "Natural History of the Bible," which was published in 1820, and long remained a standard work,

<sup>1</sup> See a list of them in an admirable memoir of the elder Dr. Harris, by N. L. Frothingham, D.D., in the *Mass. Hist. Coll.*, 4th series, II, 180.



both here and in Europe. It aimed to describe and identify every animal, plant and precious stone mentioned in Scripture; and must have involved, on many of these points, enough of minute investigation to enlist the whole family in the work. And as Mrs. Harris was at the same period a diligent rearer of silkworms, and supplied herself for ten years with sewing-silk from their labors, it is evident that Natural History must have been a topic of habitual household interest. It is certain that at this time (1820), the younger Dr. Harris began his permanent collection of insects.

He entered Harvard College in 1811, in his sixteenth year, and graduated, with respectable rank, in 1815. One of his classmates describes him as "a timid, sensitive, rather nervous and recluse youth," who was not at that time conspicuous for his love of Natural History. There was a college society, called first the "Lavoisierian," and then the "Hermetic," for the study of Natural Philosophy, and especially of Chemistry. It is very probable that Dr. Harris was inclined to this last study, as he was appointed, some years after his graduation, a member of the Examining Committee in that department. But the college afforded no direct instruction in Natural History at that time, except in the lectures of Prof. W. D. Peck. These were accessible by a special fee, and do not seem to have left a very palatable impression on those who heard them. Dr. Harris, however, attributes to Dr. Peck his first interest in his favorite study. "It was this early and much esteemed friend who first developed my taste for entomology, and stimulated me to cultivate it." This probably refers, however, not to college days but to a renewal of intercourse with the Pro-

fessor, about 1820. Prof. Peck died two years later, and his manuscripts were submitted for examination to the two Doctors Harris, who reported adversely to the publication, finding them apparently correct and faithful, but a little behind the times. Yet Prof. Peck was reputed a man of real science in his day, and a recommendation of him by Sir Joseph Banks used to be quoted. His only memorial now remains in the baptismal name of one minute insect, the *Xenos Peckii* of Kirby, which as being at that time the only species of its genus, and the only genus of its order, represented in a certain degree the very aristocracy of science.

After his graduation Dr. Harris devoted himself to the study of medicine, took his medical degree in 1820, and entered on the practice of his profession at Milton, in connection with Dr. Amos Holbrook, whose daughter (Catherine) he afterwards married. Dr. Holbrook was an eminent practitioner in his day, being Vice-President of the Massachusetts Medical Society, and Corresponding Member of several foreign associations. After two or three years, Dr. Harris took an office for himself in Dorchester Village, near Milton Lower Falls. I do not know how far he became really attached to his profession; he never refers to it in his correspondence, and seems to have entirely quitted it after his academical appointment, except when he once took for a few weeks the practice of Dr. Plympton, during the illness of that well known Cambridge physician. It was while he was a resident of Milton and Dorchester that the greater part of his out-door researches in entomology must have been made. Yet he wrote to Prof. Hentz (June 5, 1829) that he "had but very little time to devote to the

study of insects." "My leisure moments," he adds, "are principally employed in collecting and preserving such as I can discover, in order to replenish my cabinet of duplicates." For this reason, and from pecuniary anxieties, it is evident that he was quite ready to contemplate a change of residence. For instance, when Prof. Hentz was about taking a professorship in an Alabama university, Dr. Harris was evidently not indisposed to go with him. He wrote March 25, 1829:

"As to the intimation respecting a professor's chair, I can but repeat what I once mentioned, that my qualifications are not adequate; but if the climate should admit, I could prepare myself for the department of obstetrics or materia medica. Some experience for ten years in the former, and my knowledge of botany, and necessary acquaintance with the manipulation of drugs, would not render it difficult to attain, in a short time, a tolerable knowledge of either of these branches."

Two months later (June 5, 1829) he wrote to the same friend:

"I am very desirous to learn the issue of your contemplated change of place. Such are the embarrassments and anxieties of my present situation, that your hints in regard to myself would receive serious consideration; especially if the climate, the professional department and the emolument should coincide with my wishes. You may not know that my friends endeavored, some time ago, to procure for me an appointment as librarian at Harvard University, a situation which would have suited me exactly; but unfortunately the place was pre-engaged."

This refers, doubtless, to the appointment of Mr. Benjamin Peirce to the librarianship in 1826. It would appear from this that Dr. Harris had for some time looked with