

This Day in History... December 9, 1848

Birth of Joel Chandler Harris

Author Joel Chandler Harris was born on December 9, 1848, in Eatonton, Georgia.

Harris never knew his father and was raised by his mother who worked as a seamstress and gardener to support herself. She instilled Harris with a love of literature from a young age. He once said that, “My desire to write—to give expression to my thoughts—grew out of hearing my mother read *The Vicar of Wakefield*.”

In school Harris did well in reading and writing, but was more known among his classmates for his jokes and pranks. Harris ended up leaving school at an early age to work. He was hired as a “printer’s devil,” a young boy whose position was apprentice or lower, for *The Countryman* newspaper. With a circulation of about 2,000, the paper was one of the largest to serve the Confederacy during the Civil War.

The editor, Joseph Addison Turner, allowed Harris to publish his own work in the paper and include humor in his journalism. Turner also let Harris live at his Turnwold Plantation, where the youngster spent hundreds of hours in the slave quarters during his time off, speaking with the enslaved people and learning their stories and dialect. Harris later incorporated their animal tales in his famous Uncle Remus stories.

After *The Countryman* shut down in 1866, Harris worked for other papers, but found a home with the *Monroe Advertiser*. His humorous writing was popular and reprinted in other papers around the state. This success led to an even better job offer – associate editor of the *Savannah Morning News*, where he quickly became the state’s most popular humor columnist.



A.B. Frost’s illustration of the Brer Rabbit

Then in 1876, Harris took a job with the *Atlanta Constitution*, where he would remain for 24 years. During that time he also wrote for *Scribner’s*, *Harper’s*, and *The Century*. The same year he began working for the *Constitution*, Harris began writing his Uncle Remus stories to “preserve in permanent shape those curious mementos of a period that will no doubt be sadly misrepresented by historians of the future.” The stories were serialized in newspapers across the country.

Harris’s Uncle Remus stories were so popular, he was approached to have them compiled and published into a book, which he did in 1880. *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* received hundreds of positive reviews and was a best seller.

Harris retired from the *Constitution* in 1900, but continued to write for *The Saturday Evening Post* and his own novels. He preferred to stay home and work, despite being offered several honorary degrees. However, he did travel to Washington, DC, after President Theodore Roosevelt invited him. Roosevelt had said, “Presidents may come and presidents may go, but Uncle Remus stays put. Georgia has done a great many things for the Union, but she has never done more than when she gave Mr. Joel Chandler Harris to American literature.”

Harris died on July 3, 1908, in Atlanta, Georgia.



Stamp issued on Harris’s 100th birthday.

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