

Certification in Fairfax County Chancery Court, courtesy of Fairfax County

Many people who are familiar with Clifton know that the picturesque little railroad town owes its existence to a northerner from New York who arrived on the scene shortly after the civil war ended. Much has been written about Harrison G. Otis, a man with a vision, who made the first payment on the purchase of a 1001 acre tract of land in 1867 that had been part of the estate of William E. Beckwith. Many also know that Beckwith, a white plantation owner, left the remaining 200 acres of his estate to his 16 slaves when he died in 1863. Fewer people realize though that Beckwith considered those slaves to be his family. Two of them of them were his actual children. Freed by the terms of his will, some of them went on to play an integral role in the formation of the village of Clifton.

I first became aware of the relationship between Beckwith and his slaves ten years ago when I came across the deposition of John Beckwith in which he stated, "...I am therefore the son and was the slave of William E. Beckwith, who never married but had four children born to him by my mother." Intrigued (and sobered) by the revelation I determined to learn more of the story.

Researching the history of African Americans can be challenging. Prior to the civil war there wasn't much in the way of record keeping and because so few were able to read or write, documents such as letters and diaries are rare. Like the title character of Ralph Ellison's novel they are seemingly invisible men.

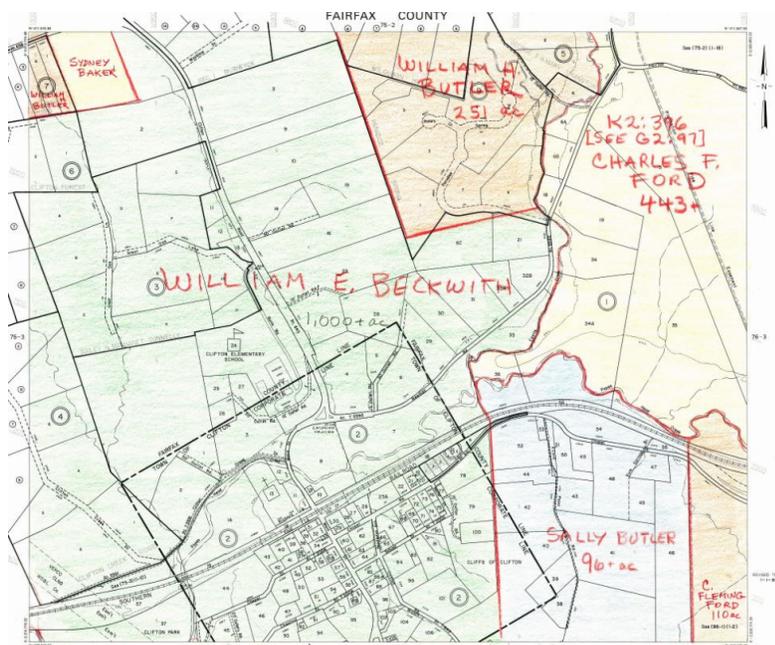
William E. Beckwith was born in Fairfax County in 1785. He was the grandson of Sir Marmaduke Beckwith of the Northern Neck and the son of Marmaduke the Younger and his wife Sybil Ellzey. William's father's plantation was located where Whitehall Farm is between Newman and Colchester Roads.

In 1810 William fathered a son, John, with a slave named Sophie belonging to William's mother, Sybil. Shortly thereafter Sophie was sent away by Sybil to a neighboring plantation. Sophie had three more children while living there - Willis, Harriet, and Cornelia. Upon the death of William's mother in 1825 he purchased Sophie from the estate and brought her back to live with him on land he had begun acquiring in the early 1800s. His home, a log cabin, was located behind where Clifton School is today. Three more children were born to William and Sophie - Caroline, Alfred, and Mary. Willis, Harriet, and Cornelia took the surname of "Ellzey," while John, Alfred, Caroline and Mary went by "Beckwith."

The relationship between William and Sophie was probably a love match, given the fact that William never married a white woman. He of course would not have been able to marry Sophie because miscegenation had been illegal in Virginia since 1691. Almost three centuries would pass before the Supreme Court of the United States, in the case of *Loving v. Virginia*, would strike down state laws prohibiting interracial marriage, and make a union like William and Sophie's legally possible.

In the 1850s William freed his daughters Mary and Caroline. When his son John inquired about the possibility of his freedom, he was told by his father that he couldn't spare him. He was needed to help run the plantation. John was permitted to come and go on the estate as he pleased and he functioned as an overseer. The second son, Alfred, must have been more scholarly because Beckwith taught him to read and write. These details were related to me by Alfred's great granddaughter Laurence Hughes Nolan, a recently retired law professor from Howard University.

Harriet had "married" William Harris in the 1840s. Little is known of William's background. He was not listed as a slave of Beckwith, but neither is he found in the Registration of Free Negroes in Fairfax County. Most likely he came from a community of Free Black people, many with the surname of Harris, who owned property nearby.



Beckwith Land Holdings, 1860 map, Courtesy of Fairfax County

By the time of Beckwith's death, William and Harriet had seven children together. The sixteen people listed in the will were Harriet and her children Joshua, Coleman, Sarah, Sophie, William, Llewellen, and Charlotte; Cornelia and her children Amanda, Lewis, Jane and Isaac; and John, Alfred, and Willis. Harriet and Cornelia apparently lived with their children as family units on the estate. All were living north of the railroad tracks.

After the war the 200 acres south of the tracks designated in the will was parceled out among the 16 formerly enslaved people. Harriet and her seven children were allotted an 8/16th portion. She and William constructed a house on part of their land and lived there with the

children, thus becoming the first family to live in the newly forming village of Clifton. They subdivided another part of their land into ten lots, which they began selling. They also provided a lot for the building of the Primitive Baptist Church, which still stands today, and which functioned as the first school house for the African American children of the area.



The house built by Harriet and William Harris, Chapel Street, courtesy of Mark Khosravi

The town recently renamed its playground park in honor of Harriet and William Harris. In light of the fact that the park land actually belonged to them, and the significant part that they played in the early history of Clifton, it is a well- deserved tribute. The town also plans to erect two informational markers which will list the names and detail some of the contributions of the others. The “invisible men” will be invisible no longer.

Margo Khosravi has served the Town in many capacities over the years on the Town Council, the CBA, and the Clifton Historic Preservation Committee (CHPC). She lives in Clifton with her snake wrangler husband Mark.