

Black Kentucky Pioneers:

William Henry Edwards (1857-1960)

By Jerry Long, Owensboro, Ky.
1988 & 2026



William Henry Edwards



The following article was published in the Messenger & Inquirer, Owensboro, Ky.,
Sunday, 29 May 1955 p12D:

One of Last Leaves
**Owensboro Man Born Into Slavery
Recalls Coming Of Union Cavalry**

By Margaret Morgan

One of Owensboro's last links with the Civil War is William Henry Edwards who was born a slave in Owensboro 98 years ago.

The fact that he has attained this advanced age is amazing enough in itself. But yet more remarkable to his many friends in Daviess County is the fact that a week ago last night he was taken to Our Lady of Mercy Hospital as a surgical case in a critical condition. Doctors debated

operating, and decided that although Henry would have only about one chance in ten of living if they did operate, he had no chance of living until morning if they did not.

He was given a local anesthesia and he talked to the doctors throughout the operation. He was given neither glucose nor blood transfusion.

He told the doctors that there had to be a first time for everything, and he bet he was the first 98 year-old man on which they'd ever operated.

That was a week ago. As this was being written, the patient was walking about over the hospital, the pet of the staff and of the other patients. His perseverance seems to bear out a statement of one of his daughters who said, "Papa always was stubborn!"



LINK WITH THE PAST – Henry Edwards, who underwent major surgery last weekend, is a source of entertainment for his fellow patients at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital, Henry will be 98 on August 10. He remembers when Union Cavalry units went through Owensboro, then very much a rural community.

Henry was born a slave to the McFarland family here. He vaguely remembers Union soldiers going through Owensboro. History shows that they were troops of Gen. T. J. Crittenden encamped between Main Street and the Field Packing Co.

But Henry doesn't remember that much about them. He does, however, recall that he was hulling walnuts in the yard when a cavalry unit wandered past his home. One of the soldiers asked him if the walnuts were good. Henry says he told them they would be if they were ripe, but green as they were they would give a fellow a stomach ache. But the soldiers wanted some walnuts and Henry gave them to them. He'll never know whether his part of the war effort was to make some Union soldiers sick.

With the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation the slaves were freed, and Henry's master gave his mother a sow and seven pigs, and two silver spoons. Later his mother gave Henry one of the spoons and his sister the other. Henry had his spoon made into an intricate ring which he treasures highly as a reminder of his mother and of slavery.

He told some of his fellow patients at the hospital this last week that one way you look at it, emancipation wasn't so good. "I never had to work while slavery existed," he said, "then Mr. Lincoln came along and declared the Emancipation Proclamation, and I've been working ever since!"

Henry neglected to tell his listeners that at the end of slavery he was only five years of age.

Owensboro was really a farm community in Henry's youth, he recalls. Frederica Street was a plank road. Triplett Street was Hartford Road. There was a cornfield around the

courthouse. When he bought ground where Sweeney Street is now, and built there, his was the only house in the area. A path led from his home to the courthouse. There were no streets anywhere.

Henry was a janitor at Settle Memorial Methodist Church for half a century until his retirement almost 30 years ago. After that his son, Essex Edwards, took Henry's place until his death two years ago. Essex would be 72 if he were living now. Henry has another son, Burrell, who at 70 is retired after years of work with Texas Gas Transmission Corp. and Western Kentucky Gas Co. Henry's two daughters are Anna and Emma. The latter is principal of Paul Dunbar School.



The following was researched by Jerry Long, Owensboro, Ky:

William Henry Edwards had been a slave in the John H. McFarland (1798-1887) family. He was born in Owensboro, Daviess County, Ky. on 10 August 1857. Earlier in the same year John H. McFarland had moved into Owensboro from his plantation in the Murray Precinct of Daviess County, a few miles south of Owensboro. The McFarland family was one of the first to settle in the county, arriving in 1805. In the 1876 Historical Atlas Map of Daviess County, Ky. (p.41) it was said of John H. McFarland that "for many years he was the largest farmer and planter in Daviess County, and was known as the best tobacco raiser in either the county of Daviess or Henderson. Each year he usually planted One hundred and thirty acres of tobacco." After moving to Owensboro McFarland resided on a ten acre estate, extending southwest from what is now the intersection of Frederica and 9th Streets, running along the south side of 9th all the way to Walnut Street, 9th was formerly called McFarland Street.

The History of Daviess County, Kentucky (c.1883, p.56) states that John H. McFarland "was a serious sufferer by the events of the war ... losing \$40,000 in slaves." The 1850 Daviess County slave schedule shows John H. McFarland as having 19 slaves and the 1860 lists 18 slaves; in these schedules only the age and sex of the slaves are listed. Among these were William Henry Edwards, his mother, Ellen McFarland (born ca 1840), his sister, Emma E. McFarland (born ca 1860), and several other slaves of the McFarland name, including William (born ca 1838) and Eldred McFarland. Several slaves had accompanied the McFarland family on their trip from their former home in Person County, North Carolina in 1805. One of these was Isham McFarland, who was born in North Carolina about 1799, he was about the same age as John H. McFarland. Isham McFarland was enumerated in the 1870 & 1880 Daviess County censuses, his place of birth was reported as N. C., in the latter his parents were also listed as being born in the same state, and his wife, Milly, was shown as being born about 1804 in Tennessee.

In the family bible of Miss Emma Edwards, a daughter of William Henry Edwards, it is written that the parents of her father were Del Sawyer and Ellen McFarland. The family of William Henry Edwards was living at Masonville, a few miles south of Owensboro, at the time of the 1870 Daviess County census. In this census (p.212, #7) the family was recorded as: Edwards - Henry 37, Ellen 34, Henry 15, Emma 12, George 5 and James 1, all born Ky. William Henry Edwards was not listed in the 1880 Daviess County census, but his mother, Ellen (McFarland) Edwards, age 40 (parents born Ky.), and his sister, Emma Edwards, age 20 (parents born Ky.) were enumerated in District 2 of Owensboro. Ellen Edwards, a widow, was listed in

the 1889-90. Owensboro City Directory. She was then residing on the north side of Johnson Lane (now 18th Street), between Moseley & the Hartford Road (now Triplett St.), which was a short distance from her son, Henry Edwards' residence on Sweeney St. She was not listed in subsequent Owensboro directories. Emma E. Edwards, a sister of Henry, was born about 1860 in Daviess County. She married twice, in Owensboro she married Charles H. Jones on 2 August 1882, bond on her marriage was by Henry Edwards, and in Owensboro she married second G. Albert Board on 30 July 1891. She later lived on Sweeney St. in Owensboro near her brother, Henry Edwards. She was buried at Owensboro's Elmwood Cemetery on 26 February 1919.

On 9 March 1882 William Henry Edwards married Mary Starks. They were married. in Owensboro at the residence of her stepfather, William McFarland, bond was by Eldred G. McFarland (Daviess County Negro marriage book E, p.29). In the bible of their daughter, Miss Emma Edwards, it is written that Mary Starks was born 15 April 1860 and her parents were Essex Starks and Anna Pope. Mrs. Ann (Pope) Starks married second William McFarland on 11 April 1868. In Daviess County Negro Marriage book A (the first black marriages were recorded in 1866), p.167 it was recorded that William McFarland was age 30, his 2nd marriage, a farmer, he & his parents were born in Daviess County, Ky.; his bride, Mrs. Ann Starks, was age 32, her 2nd marriage, was born in Shelby County, Ky.; both were residents of Daviess County and they were married at the home of Mary Yewell.

Anna (Pope) Starks McFarland was born about 1845. Her parents were probably Stephen & Mary Pope, who were listed near the Henry Edwards family in the 1870 Daviess County census and near the family of William & Ann (Pope) McFarland In the 1880 Daviess census. Stephen Pope was born about 1804 in Ky. (his parents in 1880 were reported as being born in Ky.), and his wife, Mary, was born about 1814 in Ky. (in 1880 her father was reported as being born in Ky. and her mother in Virginia). Their children probably also included: a son, Benjamin Pope, born ca 1832 Ky., who married Lottie Wilson 13 March 1869 in Daviess County; and a daughter, Sarah Pope, born ca 1827, who married Jack McFarland 13 December 1866 in Daviess County. On the latter couples' marriage bond it was reported that he was born about 1827 Daviess County, Ky., his father was born in North Carolina and his mother in Ky. At the time, of the 1870 Daviess County census living with Jack & Sarah (Pope) McFarland (p.312) were: Isham McFarland, age 10, & Fred Starks, age 16. The latter was probably their nephew, a brother of Mary Starks Edwards, and a son of Essex Starks and Anna Pope.

The family of William & Ann (Pope) McFarland were listed in District 2 of Owensboro in the 1880 . Daviess County census. Their family was recorded as: McFarland - William 42, Ann 45 wife, Mary 20 daughter, Oskar 18 son, Annie 16 daughter, Adar 12 daughter, Howard 9 son, Jennie 7 daughter, and Sarah 3 daughter, all born Ky. The oldest daughter, Mary, was Mary Starks Edwards, daughter of Ann McFarland by her first marriage. In the obituary of Mary Starks Edwards in 1946 among the survivors was listed a brother, Howard McFarland. Howard McFarland died in Owensboro on 1 March 1950 and was buried in the Greenwood Cemetery in Owensboro.

Henry Edwards on 19 March 1879 purchased a lot on the south side of Owensboro near the Fair Grounds, on the lot was a one story frame house. He sold the same lot, on 23 February 1883 to his brother-in-law and sister, Charlie & Emma Jones. W. N. Sweeney on 6 May 1889 sold W. H. Edwards a lot in Sweeney's addition, on the east side of Sweeney Street, between Johnson & Griffith Sts. (deed book 49, p.348). In the 1889-90 Owensboro City Directory Henry Edwards was shown as residing on the east side of Sweeney St., south of the town's incorporation line. From about 1898 to 1910 Henry Edwards and his family lived at 927 Lewis

St. in Owensboro. At this residence he was listed in the 1900 Daviess County census; in this census, a niece, Sarah E. Starks, born Feb. 1888, was shown as living in the same home. About 1910 he returned to his property on Sweeney St. and he lived there at house #1509 the remainder of his life. This property remained in the family for about 90 years, a great-grandson, Robert Rates, sold it about 1980.

William Henry Edwards was employed as a janitor at the Settle Memorial Methodist Church for about 50 years, he also worked in the same occupation at the Odd Fellows Building in Owensboro for several years. At the time of the publication of the preceding article in the Owensboro newspaper he was 97 years of age. He lived to be 103 years old and on 5 October 1960 died at his home at 1509 Sweeney St. He was one of the charter members of the Sweeney Street Baptist Church. His wife, Mary ("Mollie"), preceded him in death on 10 March 1946, at the age of 85, she also died at the same house.



**Sixty Years of Owensboro, 1883-1943, William Foster Hayes
(Owensboro, KY: Messenger Job Printing Co., 1943) pp.185 & 187:**

SETTLE MEMORIAL METHODIST CHURCH

In 1935 a full and most interesting history of this church by Miss Cora Webb, one of its faithful members, was published....

... The writer finds it hard to deny himself the pleasure of paying tribute to a number of faithful laymen and women, many of them his personal friends, whose devoted labors have contributed to the building of this great church but this pleasure he must forego. Fortunately they are fittingly remembered in Miss Webb's brochure. I heartily endorse too her cordial and feeling tribute to the janitor, Henry Edwards. Himself, like so many of his race, a Baptist, he has had charge and has taken faithful care of this church (with the exception of two or three years) since 1894. It may well be that he is the oldest church "official" in point of service in Owensboro....



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 18 November 1956, p.5D:



Uncle William Henry Edwards, 99,
at his home, 1509 Sweeney Street.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 9 August 1959, p.8B:



TO OBSERVE 102ND BIRTHDAY – William Henry Edwards will observe his 102nd birthday tomorrow at his home at 1509 Sweeney St. He was born in Daviess County Aug. 10, 1857. He retired as custodian of Settle Memorial Methodist Church some 30 years ago. Three children, Misses Emma and Anna Edwards and Burrell Edwards make their home in Owensboro. Three others, Essex, Wilbur, and James Edwards, are deceased.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 6 October 1960, p.14A:

**William Henry Edwards,
Former Slave 103,
Dies In Owensboro**

William Henry Edwards, a 103- year-old former slave, and father of the Dunbar School principal, died at his home at 1509 Sweeney St. here yesterday. Born on August 10, 1857, Edwards, , known as "Uncle Henry," had been a slave in the John H. McFarland family.

Edwards was the sexton of the Settle Memorial Methodist Church for 50 years. He was the last surviving charter member of the Sweeney Street Baptist Church.

Surviving are two daughters, Emma E. Edwards, principal of Dunbar School, and Anna B. Edwards, both of Owensboro; one son, Burrell Edwards, Owensboro.

The body will be taken to the residence tonight where funeral services will be conducted by the Rev. Benjamin Green, Hopkinsville, at 2:30 p.m. Friday. Burial will be in Elmwood Cemetery. Griffith Funeral Home is in charge of the arrangements.

Kentucky Death certificate: 1960 – certificate #23887:

FORM V.S. NO. Y-A REV. 1-54 FEDERAL SECURITY AGENCY U. S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE NATIONAL OFFICE VITAL STATISTICS		COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH DIVISION OF VITAL STATISTICS CERTIFICATE OF DEATH		FILE NO. 116 60 23887	REGISTRAR'S NO. 579
Registration District No. 410 X		Primary Registration District No. 245			
1. PLACE OF DEATH a. COUNTY <u>Darves</u>		2. USUAL RESIDENCE (Where deceased lived. If long(itudinal) residence (indicate residence) a. STATE <u>Ky</u> b. COUNTY <u>Darves</u>			
b. CITY (If outside corporate limits, write RURAL and give township) <u>Owensboro</u>		c. LENGTH OF STAY (in this place) <u>Life</u>		c. CITY OR TOWN <u>Owensboro</u> IS RESIDENCE ON A FARM? YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
d. FULL NAME OF HOSPITAL OR INSTITUTION <u>1509 Summers</u>		d. STREET ADDRESS <u>1509 Summers</u> IS RESIDENCE INSIDE CITY LIMITS? YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>			
3. NAME OF DECEASED a. (First) <u>William</u> b. (Middle) <u>Henry</u> c. (Last) <u>Edwards</u>		4. DATE OF DEATH (Month) (Day) (Year) <u>10 5 1960</u>			
5. SEX <u>M</u>		6. COLOR OR RACE <u>C</u>		7. MARRIED, NEVER MARRIED, WIDOWED, DIVORCED (Indicate) <u>widowed</u>	
8. DATE OF BIRTH <u>10/10/1857</u>		9. AGE (In years last birthday) (Month) (Day) (Hour) (Min.) <u>103</u>		10. CITIZEN OF WHAT COUNTRY? <u>U.S.A</u>	
10a. USUAL OCCUPATION (Give kind of work done during part of working life, even if retired) <u>Janitor Service</u>		10b. KIND OF BUSINESS OR INDUSTRY <u>00</u>		11. BIRTHPLACE (State or foreign country) <u>Darves County</u>	
12. FATHER'S NAME <u>Unknown</u>		14. MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME <u>Mrs. M.S. Fordard</u>			
13. WAS DECEASED EVER IN U. S. ARMED FORCES? (Yes, no, or unknown) (If yes, give war or dates of service) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		16. SOCIAL SECURITY NO. <u>1</u>		17. INFORMANT <u>Emma Edwards</u>	
18. CAUSE OF DEATH PART I. DEATH WAS CAUSED BY: IMMEDIATE CAUSE (a) <u>Chr. arteriosclerotic Heart Disease</u> <u>= uremia</u> DUE TO (b) <u>Sensitivity (r. coronary plus)</u> DUE TO (c) <u>Chr. Inst. Nephritis, Chr. colitis</u> PART II. OTHER SIGNIFICANT CONDITIONS CONTRIBUTING TO DEATH BUT NOT RELATED TO THE TERMINAL DISEASE CONDITION GIVEN IN PART I (a) <u>Dehydration. 1/300</u>		19. WAS AUTOPSY PERFORMED? YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
20. ACCIDENT SUICIDE HOMICIDE <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		21a. DESCRIBE HOW INJURY OCCURRED! (Enter nature of injury in Part I or Part II of item 18.)			
21b. TIME OF INJURY a. hr. b. mo. c. day. Year		21c. INJURY OCCURRED WHILE AT <input type="checkbox"/> HOT WHILE AT WORK <input type="checkbox"/>			
21d. PLACE OF INJURY (e. g., in or about home, farm, factory, street, office bldg., etc.)		21e. CITY, TOWN, OR LOCATION COUNTY STATE			
22. I hereby certify that I attended the deceased from <u>1-12-1960</u> to <u>10-5-1960</u> , that I last saw the deceased alive on <u>9/25/60</u> , and that death occurred at <u>1:30</u> p.m., from the causes and on the date stated above.					
23a. DATE SIGNED <u>10/10/60</u>		23b. ADDRESS <u>626 3rd St. SW Owensboro Ky.</u>		23c. SIGNATURE (Devisor or title) <u>R. E. Yeboer, M.D.</u>	
24a. BURIAL, CREMATION, REMOVAL (Specify) <u>Burial</u>		24b. DATE <u>10/7/60</u>		24c. NAME OF CEMETERY OR CREMATORY <u>Elmwood</u>	
24d. LOCATION (City, town, or county) (State) <u>Owensboro Ky</u>		25a. DATE REC'D BY LOCAL REG. <u>11-2-60</u>			
25b. REGISTRAR'S SIGNATURE <u>Honeyed. Dr. Carmichael</u>		26. FUNERAL DIRECTOR <u>Griffith</u> ADDRESS <u>721 W. 4th St.</u>			

The 1900 census records that nine children had been born to William Henry Edward's wife, Mary, and three of them were then deceased. Eight of the children of William Henry Edwards (10 August 1857 – 5 October 1960), his wife, Mollie Starks Edwards (15 Apr 1860 – 10 March 1946) are buried near their parents at Elmwood Cemetery in Owensboro, KY. Their names are engraved on two monuments at the northwest corner of section E (lots 110-113). No dates were recorded on the monuments. The eight children named on the monuments were – “Frances, Burlee, Wilbur, James, Essex, Burrell, Emma and Anna.”



EDWARDS: Frances – Burlee – Wilbur – James – Mollie – Henry



EDWARDS: Essex – Burrell – Emma - Anna

The following are children of William Henry & Mollie Edwards. Names and dates were recorded in a family bible by their daughter, Miss Emma Edwards. The bible in 1988 was in the possession of William Henry Edwards' great-grandson, Robert Rates, of Owensboro, Ky. Details about deaths were added from death certificates and obituaries:

1. Thomas Essex Edwards was born 12 January 1883 and died 5 October 1950 at 1509 Sweeney St. in Owensboro, Ky.
2. Burrell Elmore Edwards was born 21 January 1885 and died 28 May 1965 at the Owensboro-Daviess County Hospital.
3. Wilbur Frederick Edwards was born 17 May 1890 and died 7 December 1928 Indianapolis, Ind.; he was a World War I veteran.
4. (Miss) Emma Ernestine Edwards was born 7 April 1892 and died 2 June 1991 at the Hillcrest Nursing Home in Owensboro, Ky. at the age of 99. She was a teacher in the Owensboro schools for 50 years. She served as principal at the Dunbar School in Owensboro, 1923-1962, and as the president of the Mary Harding Nursing Home in Owensboro.
5. (Miss) Anna Beatrice Edwards was born 31 May 1894 and died 21 July 1971 in Owensboro.
6. Frances Willard Edwards, a daughter, was born in 1897 and died 23 April 1899 in Owensboro, Ky.
7. James Alexander Edwards was born 26 September 1899 (a family bible lists his year of birth as 1900, but he was evidently born in 1899 since he is listed in the 1900 census which had not been enumerated by the date of Sept. 26), he died 26 March 1944 in Indianapolis, Ind.

8. Burlee Edwards was born & died prior to 1900.
9. child born & died prior to 1900.



Part of the preceding article was published in the periodicals: Kentucky Pioneer Genealogy and Records, Vol. 7, Society of Kentucky Pioneers (Utica, KY: McDowell Publications, 1988), 101-104. And Kentucky Family Records, Vol. 37, West-Central Kentucky Family Research Association (Calhoun KY: 2013), 20-23.



Owensboro Messenger & Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 3 June 1991:

Former teacher, principal Emma Edwards dies at 99

Messenger-Inquirer

Emma E. Edwards, a former schoolteacher, principal and rest home administrator who has been described as an "Owensboro legend," died Sunday morning at Hillcrest Health Care Center in Owensboro. She was 99.

Edwards worked for the city for more than 50 years. She was a teacher at the old Paul Dunbar school in Owensboro when it opened in 1923 and served as its principal until she retired in 1962.

The all-black elementary school was named for Paul Laurence Dunbar, one of the most popular writers and poets of the 1890s and 1900s, who died at age 33 in 1906. The integration of city schools in 1963 brought about an end to the two-story brick building at 721 Jackson St. It was too small to serve an integrated student body.

Edwards, called "Miss Emma" by students and friends, was credited by many as being the single most important factor in the influence Dunbar School had on its community. Theodora Smith of Pleasant Ridge said Edwards was her first teacher. Smith said her teacher was a "lovely person and she helped lots of people. She gave her life for her community and her people."

Edwards was determined that the children she taught learn and receive an education. The Rev. R.L. McFarland, who was one of Edwards' students, said she was an outgoing person who tried to do something to help others. She was sort of a foster mother to a lot of young people, he said, and she saw to it that some kids had food and clothes at her own expense.

Edwards was a force in the operation and maintenance of the Mary Harding Home, founded in 1910 to care for the needs of Owensboro's blacks. Her association with the personal care home began in 1933 shortly before her mother moved into it.

During the time she worked at the home, 28 years were spent without pay. She and friends and co-workers helped clean and maintain the building and later she organized several renovations and helped raise funds for the home. She would stop by the home most every day after teaching school and sometimes would sleep overnight to be available to help out when the need arose. She later became administrator and resigned from that position in May 1979.

The Mary Harding Home closed in June 1988 and was later used as a mission and shelter for the homeless for a while.

Miss Emma E. Edwards, 99, of Hillcrest Health Care Center, Owensboro, died there Sunday, June 2, 1991. She was born in Owensboro, retired in 1962 from the Owensboro school system, and was a former principal of Paul Dunbar School and a former administrator of the Mary Harding Home. She was a member of Fourth Street Baptist Church and Kentucky Retired Teachers Association.

Survivors include three great-nephews, Robert Rates Jr. of Aurora, Colo., William Rates at Atlanta and Glahn Rates of Las Vegas, Nev.; and two great-nieces, Mrs. Pearlene Baughman of Owensboro and Ms. Helen Rates of Los Angeles.

Young's Funeral Home is in charge of arrangements.