

## **RICHARD HARRISON, SADDLER AND HARNESS MAKER**

Smithville Flats, New York

Christine E. Buck

Richard Harrison, a saddler and harness maker, was among the wave of Harrison family members who found their way to the Central New York hamlet of Smithville Flats, a community in the Town of Smithville, Chenango County. Many families of Scots-Irish and Irish descent settled in the town, a small, rural, agricultural area, yet historians cannot answer a basic question: What led the earliest Scots-Irish families to Smithville? We know that those who followed the earliest immigrants were part of a so-called chain migration. People from a town or family group were inclined to follow those they knew to a destination. The chain migration immigrants learned of opportunities and were given help with transportation, initial housing, and employment. Smithville's Scots-Irish immigrants included natives of County Monaghan, many related to the Harrison family.

Richard Harrison was born on 5 July, 1805 in Ireland's Border Region. He was a Protestant and according to family tradition, of English descent. Richard was born in Church Hill townland, town of Castleblayney, County Monaghan, Ireland to Arthur Noble Harrison and his wife, Jane Phillips.

Beginning in 1827, Richard, his parents, and his siblings emigrated to the United States, traveling in groups of two. Once in New York State, Richard married Mary Schriber, a Dutchess County native. The couple settled in Hobart, Delaware County, where four of their five children were born: Andrew Noble, Mary Jane, Arthur Mandeville, and Edward N. Harrison.

The Harrisons moved to New York City about 1840, where they lived only a brief time because of Mary Schriber Harrison's ill health. In June of 1842, the family travelled northward to their new chosen community, first by steamboat up the Hudson River to Albany and then on the Erie Canal to Utica by mule-drawn canal boat. There they transferred to the Chenango Canal for the final leg of their journey, disembarking in Greene, New York. Greene was the closest port to their destination, the hamlet of Smithville Flats, home to a host of Harrison aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Because of Mary Harrison's illness, she and her youngest child Edward spent several months at the hotel at McDonough Springs near Smithville, noted for the medicinal properties attributed to the waters of its sulphur springs. Several years later, a fifth child, Margaret Rebecca, joined the family.

On his arrival in Smithville Flats, Richard Harrison opened a saddlery and harness business and was regarded as a talented craftsman. He was experienced, having operated a saddlery shop in New York City on the corner of Canal and Broadway.



1855 map of Richard Harrison's home and shop on today's Route 41 near Collyer Road



1863 view of the home and shop

Saddlers and harness makers learned their trade from their fathers or by serving as apprentices. Following the tradition of the industry, Richard's sons Andrew and Arthur learned the trade. The work consisted of standing at a broad, flat-topped table on which was spread a hide. With a ruler and straightedge, the craftsman used his judgement to choose which section of the hide worked best for cutting pieces of the proper length and width.

He needed to be familiar with the intricacies of the various types of lines and straps used for saddles and harnesses.

In larger communities, saddle making and harness making were specialized trades, with a saddler making and repairing saddles and bridles for the well-to-do, and the harness maker seeing to farmers and their working horses. In small towns such as Smithville Flats, trades were often combined, the craftsman also making other leather items required locally, such as straps and belts.



*Richard Harrison home, Smithville Flats*

According to *Smith's History of Chenango County*, Richard's son Arthur M. succeeded his father as the harness shop owner in 1865. In the mid- to late-1860s, Arthur moved the business into new premises on Smithville's Main Street. It was a small shop adjacent to his brother Edward's "New York Store" in the newly erected Harrison Block. Smithville merchants and developers were building and buying, preparing for the advent of the Central Valley Railroad, an anticipated economic boon for the hamlet.



*Arthur M. Harrison, 1864*

Newspaper advertisements for the Harrison shop in the late 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s show diversification through additional product offerings of boots, shoes, gaiters, trunks, satchels, whips, saddlery hardware, and horse clothing.

Census records indicate that Richard Harrison continued to work as a harness maker at least through 1870. He and Mary lived in Smithville Flats until their deaths. Richard died of lung disease on June 10, 1875, and Mary's death, after a brief illness, was on December 18, 1891. Both are buried in Sylvan Lawn Cemetery in nearby Greene.

Richard's sons Arthur and Andrew, having learned from their father, carried on the family tradition by earning their livings as harness makers, as did Andrew's son Judson: Arthur in Smithville Flats, Andrew in Greene, and Judson in Oxford. As the use of horses became overshadowed by the automobile and gasoline-powered farm equipment, business for saddlers and harness makers dwindled. Arthur, Andrew, and Judson each adapted by changing their focus from manufacturing to the retail sale of shoes and leather goods. By then, Arthur had moved his business to Scranton, Pennsylvania, leaving Smithville Flats behind.



*Former Arthur Harrison saddlery shop, Main Street, Smithville Flats*

*Details about Richard Harrison's life are based on census records, Smith's History of Chenango County, a newspaper interview with his son Edward, his son Andrew's obituary, Richard's own death notice and gravestone, and information from Harrison family members.*

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