

Katie Hart – Projecting Education and Herself

By Marvin Tupper Jones, Chowan Discovery Group

Katie Marie Askew Hart (1899 – 1984) has long been remembered by her Hertford County, North Carolina community for establishing a bookmobile and a library that served primarily people of color from 1938 to 1969.

Hart's father, William David Askew, was a student in Harrellsville, NC in the late 1860's. In the early 1880s, he attended the Plymouth State Normal School in Plymouth, NC, one of two state normal schools for African Americans.¹ Twenty years after the school's founding, it was moved to Elizabeth City, NC and is now the Elizabeth City State University. Askew taught school after graduating from Plymouth. In 1886, William and Texana Jordan married and had six children between 1887 and 1899². Texana was a laundress, mid-wife and a church leader.^{3,4}



Katie Marie Askew Hart at her retirement in 1969.
Roanoke-Chowan News-Herald

The Askew family lived in Winton, NC where Katie was born in 1899. Winton had an elementary school since the 1860s and Mr. Askew may have taught there. In 1886, the Chowan Educational Association, led by local Baptist leaders, founded Chowan Academy - North Carolina's first stand-alone normal or high school for people of color. The school is now the C.S. Brown High School STEM.

Chowan Academy provided a new economic engine for Winton which was still recovering from its burning in 1862. Families of means built two-story houses and

bungalows around the school. Many of the residents housed teachers and students, and most of the school's teachers lived nearby.

By 1910, Katie's sister, Lizzie, was a teacher and her sister, Nettie, would become a teacher a few years after.⁵ Katie Askew, the daughter and sister of teachers, thus grew up in a community of educators. She probably graduated from high school in 1915 and attended what is now the Elizabeth City State University.⁶

In a 1979 research paper about Hart, she told the interviewer that she received higher education by attending Hampton University, Virginia State University and the North Carolina Central University School of Library Science. Hart took correspondence courses from Columbia University, University of Missouri and the University of Utah.⁷

In 1921, Katie Askew married Reverend H.H. Hart in a union that lasted until his death in 1953.^{8,9} Reverend Hart was pastoring in Conway, NC, fifteen miles west of Winton.¹⁰ By the time of her marriage, she was teaching at the Philippi School in nearby Cofield.¹¹ That same year, although a young teacher, she was appointed as Hertford County's supervisor of teachers of color.¹² As the supervisor, Hart was probably the only Black woman in the county with an office, something few White women had. She raised \$33,975.00 from parents for community school support.¹³

She saw the need for a library for African Americans, and in 1932, opened a lending library in her office. In 1938, she found independent funding to buy a new Ford station wagon to begin the Hertford County Colored Public Library bookmobile service.

Written on the rear was, “Free Book Service.”¹⁴ This well-maintained vehicle still exists.

The bookmobile visited churches and the outlying community schools. Books were available to all, including Whites. The state government asked her to serve Gates County which was across the Chowan River from Winton.¹⁵



Katie M. Hart's first bookmobile - 1938 Ford Station Wagon
Photograph by © Marvin Tupper Jones

Katie Hart established the bookmobile service in her home community, the Winton Triangle. The Winton Triangle is the community of landowning people of color whose lands traverse the triangle formed by the towns of Winton, Cofield and Ahoskie, North Carolina. Many of its families were free for more than a century before the Civil War, and there was a good deal of literacy among them. This is evident from letters found among family collections and public documents including pension records filed by the Winton Triangle's United States Colored soldiers.

Hart's experience as a supervisor allowed her to visit every school of color in Hertford County. This gave her access to all of the communities targeted for the bookmobile service. Her next step was to write the educational story of the county's people of color.

Katie Hart's Essay – a Pathway to Research

In 1939, the town of Ahoskie published a book of essays about the county's history and progress. Katie Hart was invited to contribute. Her five pages of "Hertford County Negro Rural Education" provides numerous keys for researching the history of people of color during the Civil War and after.

The essay's opening reveals two of the ways pre-war literacy was achieved:

"Prior to the Civil War Negroes had very little advantage of education. Slaves were not allowed to be seen with a book except in the case a very good master allowed his slaves to be taught, probably by a member of the master's family.

The writer has been told by R[ufus]. H. Reynolds of Winton that the free colored people went to school with the white people prior to the Civil War, there being no law against it."

William David Newsom, born in 1824 and later cited in the essay as W.D. Newsome, stated that he was taught in a White school. This corroborates the Rufus H. Reynolds interview. Hart describes the early school days of five Hertford County communities, three being within the Winton Triangle.

Pleasant Plains and Winton: The heart of the somewhat learned and advantaged Winton Triangle community was the settlement of Pleasant Plains. Its church was

founded in 1851 and it had its own school in 1859. Katie Hart introduces us to the aforementioned W.D. Newsom (William David Newsom) as having taught in 1865 in Murfreesboro, northwest of the Winton Triangle. Documents reveal that he also taught at the Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony from May to July of that year.

“During 1866 ten men were responsible for building a school house at Pleasant Plains. Some of the available names are listed: Lawrence Weaver, Dukie (Marmaduke) Hall, Willis Weaver, William Jones, Jesse Keene and James Reynolds. W.D. Newsome was the first teacher.”

It was later found that “Lawrence Weaver et al” received county community school funds in 1859, thus suggesting that Pleasant Plains had a school but, perhaps, no schoolhouse before 1866. It is significant that a school of color would receive government funds before the Civil War. Founders of Pleasant Plains Baptist Church were among the schoolhouse builders. We later learn that at least four of Willis Weaver's children attended Hampton Normal School (now University) with his oldest son, Joseph P., joining Hampton's first class.

Hart's reporting about Pleasant Plains School was later used to place the school on the National Register of Historic Places.

“In 1868 W.D. Newsome taught in the Winton District as a county-paid teacher [...] Miss Little Worrick, who graduated from a college in Boston, taught several years in Winton district, county paid.”

That same year, Newsom served in the North Carolina House of Representatives. Lydia Warrick, “Little Worrick,” was from Philadelphia and previously taught at the

Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony along with William David Newsom. This suggests that Warrick may have come to Hertford County at the invitation of Newsom. Warrick - probably the first college-educated teacher of color in the area - brought local teaching to a higher level.

Among the other Pleasant Plains teachers, named by Hart, were Willis Weaver's son, Joseph P., who was an inaugural student at Hampton, and Joseph Catus, who later co-founded the first stand-alone high school of color in Winton - now the C.S. Brown High School STEM.

Katie Hart's passages about Pleasant Plains School and the Winton District are sources for a stage production, several lectures, an historical essay and a school history.

Harrellsville: Most of the people of color in Harrellsville, outside of the Winton Triangle, were enslaved until the time of the Civil War.

“In 1866, Sunday school was conducted at Lincoln Grove, Harrellsville Township, by Ben Morris. Nancy Askew, who had been educated in her master's home, taught Bible class. One Bible was available. Ben Morris, superintendent, taught reading, writing and spelling[...] In 1867, private school was taught by Thomas Collins.”

Note that Katie Hart reports of an enslaved woman being taught in her enslaver's house. And what of the two men in Hart's passage? Later, it was discovered that Ben Morris, who was probably enslaved, enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1862. Thomas Collins enlisted in the United States Colored Troops in 1864, was wounded at the battle of Cold Harbor, outside of Richmond, and later was a pastor at Pleasant Plains Church.

Hart writes that in 1868, Harrellsville gained a public school. She listed over 25 students including her father, W.D. Askew. She noted that, “Children walked more than four miles to get to school. A one-teacher school was operated in this place until consolidated with Waters Training School [C.S. Brown High School STEM] in 1934. The first school built was of logs with a huge fireplace.” Hart’s father gave her the information about the early schools in Harrellsville.

Murfreesboro: Northwest of the Winton Triangle is the town of Murfreesboro, North Carolina. Hart listed teachers and students of Murfreesboro’s early school. These include W.D. Newsom - again. “Beginning [in] 1868 Miss Little Worrick taught the first county-paid school in Murfreesboro.” Later research showed that student, George Reynolds, later became the town’s postmaster and Lydia Warrick received school payments from the Freedmen’s Bureau.

“John Jones[...]taught in the township for \$20 per month, but his father drew the salary because he was only 16 years old[...]was a county-paid teacher[...]in 1870 and in 1874 attended Shaw University.” Hart cites John Jones as the source of Murfreesboro’s story.”

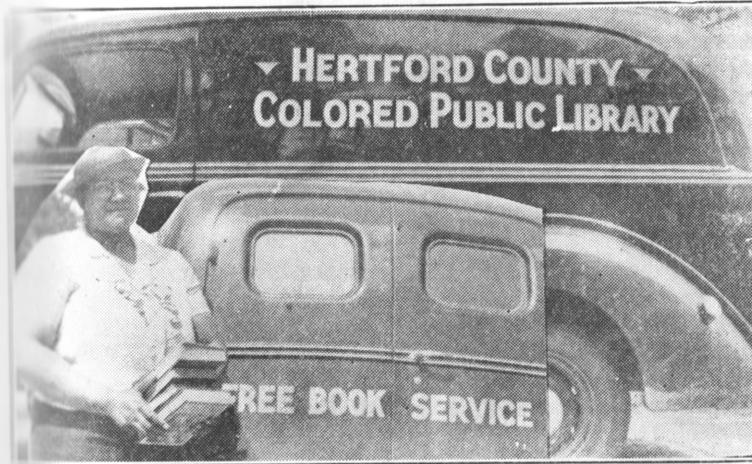
Ahoskie: “In 1866 Sunday school was taught in Ahoskie each Sunday...Beginning in 1868 Gran (Granville) Butler taught the first county-paid school [for Ahoskie?] He was followed by John Newsome of Winton, later Daniel Caraway of New Bern and Miss Rachel A. Jenkins of Ahoskie who was educated at Shaw University.”

These named teachers provide for future research, and Jenkins is another example of an early teacher with a higher education.

Katie Hart continues her essay by demonstrating further developments: brief mentions of the founding of the high school in Winton and previous teacher supervisors. She added a broader description of her own accomplishments as a supervisor which includes her fundraising for local schools. The county school superintendent described her as “the best colored teacher in the county...”.

Another page of the book, “Only One Of Its Kind in the U.S.”, features her bookmobile along with photographs of the bookmobile and herself. Much would be lost if Katie Hart had not tooted her own horn. Furthermore, among the 300-plus pages of the *Ahoskie Era of Hertford County 1889 – 1939*, she was the only female contributor and the only woman whose story was told.

ONLY ONE OF ITS KIND IN THE U. S.



KATIE MARIE HART is the founder and operator of the only independent public library in the United States. She raised money and purchased the only bookmobile owned by Negroes in the United States. Recently she succeeded in securing cash subscriptions to a fund with which to build a public library, and with other help, a \$3,000 building will be under construction soon.

She was supervisor of Negro schools in Hertford County for 16 years; is a Baptist, and is chairman of the colored division of the Hertford County Red Cross Chapter, which she helped to organize. Her parents, W. D. Askew, and the late Texana Askew. She has lived in Winton all her life.

Bookmobile page from *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County*, 1939

In the quick, five pages of the “Hertford County Negro Rural Education” essay, loads of research opportunities are brought forth. Many people who rose after the Civil War were collected there: William David Newsom – teacher, businessman and state

legislator; Joseph P. Weaver – one of Hampton U’s first students and teacher; Thomas Collins – Civil War veteran, teacher and pastor; Ben Morris – another U.S. veteran and teacher; George Reynolds – postmaster; John Jones – a teenage teacher who sought higher education at Shaw University; Lydia Warrick – bringer of education from that great source of schooling, Boston; Joseph Catus – teacher and who along with Newsom founded what is now C.S. Brown High School STEM; and Katie Hart’s own father - William David Askew, who was one of the first to seize a higher education and, with his wife Texana, reared three teachers.

Katie Hart’s sources for each community were living during the late 1860’s, and they remembered well the incredible breakthrough for freedom, leadership and education that arose after the Civil War’s end. Having taught, supervised teachers, supported schools and surveyed the educational past, she moved forward with her library building.

Katie Hart’s Library Building and Beyond

A few years later her library building opened. She donated its land to the town of Winton in order to acquire Federal Works Progress Administration funds, which may have paid her salary. Hart also contributed money to the library and to buy books.¹⁶

From the 1979 thesis:

“This library...was the results of Mrs. Hart’s own initiatives. She received used books from the public library in Dayton, Ohio; from the Handbook Mission, Boston, Massachusetts; and from friends of both races in the area. At this time also, Mrs. hart realizing the problem of transportation, borrowed a bookmobile from the state library. This created the incentive within the black community to purchase their own. A sixty-

day drive was begun to solicit funds for the purchase of a bookmobile. The amount solicited was more than \$1000. The bookmobile was purchased, and became one of the first bookmobile [sic] in the southern United States to be owned and operated by blacks.”¹⁹

Katie Hart held several positions of leadership in the local and state Prince Hall Order of the Eastern Star - the women’s auxiliary of the Prince Hall Masons. She may have received library support from them. Hart taught piano, and for years her students were the youth choir pianists at her church, First Winton Baptist. She also gave private reading lessons to Black and White children.²⁰



Katie M. Hart as an Eastern Star leader. (r – front row)
Photograph courtesy of Shawnee Smith Ball

In the 1940 census, Hart, her father William David Askew and her oldest sister, Lizzie, lived together in Winton.²¹ Mr. Askew died in 1942. Her husband, Reverend

H.H. Hart, D.D., pastored a church in Durham, and shuttled between there and Winton. Reverend Hart died in 1953 after 32 years of marriage.

The 1960's were busy ones for Katie Hart. For most of her library career she was not a trained librarian, so she took library science courses at North Carolina Central University.²² A few years after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Katie Hart's library and bookmobile became part of the Albemarle Regional Library. Before she retired in 1969, she used her own money to enlarge the library, giving it a larger reading room, an office and an enclosed garage.²³ She died in 1984 and was buried next to her husband in Winton, a short walk from her library and home. In her honor, a new library in Winton installed her portrait above the desk counter. Decades after Katie Hart's retirement, books from her library were in circulation at the Winton library. Her library building on Murfree Street is now a private home.



Hertford County Colored Public Library in Winton, now a private home
Photograph by © Marvin Tupper Jones

A story about her first bookmobile was distributed by the Associated Press in 1997.²⁴ Retired teachers and others continued to pass on their memories of Katie Hart, and in recent years interest in her life and work increased.

Since 2016, lectures have been given about Katie Hart. The following year, filmmaker Caroline Stephenson wrote a play about Hart, *Books Are My Children*, and it was produced in Winton at Hart's high school alma mater.²⁵ The play was video-recorded and made available to the public.²⁶ Further inspired by Katie Hart, Stephenson also created Cultivator, Inc., which provides free bookmobile services and drop-boxes in the area. There are efforts to acquire Katie Marie Askew Hart's 1938 Hertford County Colored Public Library bookmobile for the public's benefit.

NOTES

1 Katie M. Hart, "Hertford County Negro Rural Education", (Ahoskie NC, *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County*, 1939), pages 253.

2 1900 Census for William David Askew and Texana Askew, Winton Township, National Archives and Records Administration

3 Ibid.

4 "The Women's Missionary Union Meets", *Waters Institute Journal*, Vol. I, (Winton NC) November 1911, page 4.

5 1910 and 1920 Censuses for William David Askew and Texana Askew household, Winton Township, National Archives and Records Administration

- 6 Donald Bradsher, “Katie Marie Hart: A Pioneer in Library Services in Northeastern North Carolina”, research paper, North Carolina Central University (Durham NC), 1979, Chapter III
- 7 Bradsher, Chapter III
- 8 July 14, 1921 Marriage license, H.H. Hart and Katie M. Askew, Rich Square, State of North Carolina, (Ancestry.com record)
- 9 H.H. Hart headstone, Winton NC
- 10 George Thomas; Rouson, “Sketch of Murfreesboro and Vicinity”, *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County*, 1939, (Ahoskie NC), pages 266.
- 11 Tupper W. Jones interview, Cofield NC, 2009.
- 12 “Only One Of Its Kind In The U.S.” (Ahoskie NC, *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County*, 1939), page 251.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 “Only One Of Its Kind In The U.S.” (Ahoskie NC, *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County*, 1939), page 251.
- 15 “Mrs. Hart Pioneered In Library Service”, the *Roanoke-Chowan News-Herald*, (Ahoskie NC), September 4, 1969, page 9 and page 12.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Katie M. Hart, “Hertford County Negro Rural Education”, *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County*, 1939, (Ahoskie NC) pages 252—256.
- 18 “Only One Of Its Kind In The U.S.”, *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County*, 1939 (Ahoskie NC), page 251.

19 Bradsher, Chapter III

20 Barbara Boone Buescher, “Katie Hart and Negro Library Service in Winton and Hertford County”, unpublished private document.

21 1940 Census for William David Askew and Katie M. Hart, Winton Township, National Archives and Records Administration

22 Bradsher, Chapter III

23 “Mrs. Hart Pioneered In Library Service”, the *Roanoke-Chowan News-Herald*, (Ahoskie NC), September 4, 1969, page 9 and page 12.

24 “Man discovers he owns early black bookmobile”, Associated Press, *The Times and Democrat*, (Orangeburg SC), June 15 1997, page 4a.

25 “Stage Plays tells the story of Katie Hart, Hertford County Library pioneer”, *Roanoke-Chowan News-Herald.com*, (Ahoskie NC), August 29, 2017, <https://www.roanoke-chowannewsheald.com/2017/08/29/stage-play-tells-story-of-katie-hart-hertford-co-library-pioneer/>

26 (<https://vimeo.com/257280226>).

SOURCES

Books:

Katie M. Hart, “Hertford County Negro Rural Education”, *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County*, 1939, (Ahoskie NC) pages 252—256.

George Thomas; Rouson, “Sketch of Murfreesboro and Vicinity”, *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County*, 1939, (Ahoskie NC), pages 266.

“Only One Of Its Kind In The U.S.” *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County*, 1939, (Ahoskie NC), page 251.

Newspapers:

“Man discovers he owns early black bookmobile”, Associated Press, *The Times and Democrat*, (Orangeburg SC), June 15 1997, page 4a.

“Mrs. Hart Pioneered In Library Service”, the *Roanoke-Chowan News-Herald*, (Ahoskie NC), September 4, 1969, page 9 and page 12.

“Stage Plays tells the story of Katie Hart, Hertford County Library pioneer”, *Roanoke-Chowan News-Herald.com*, (Ahoskie NC), August 29, 2017, <https://www.roanoke-chowannewsherald.com/2017/08/29/stage-play-tells-story-of-katie-hart-hertford-co-library-pioneer/>

“Straight from the ‘Hart’”, Holly Taylor, *Roanoke-Chowan News-Herald.com*, (Ahoskie NC), February 26, 2021, <https://www.roanoke-chowannewsherald.com/2021/02/26/straight-from-the-hart/>.

Manuscript:

Donald Bradsher, “Katie Marie Hart: A Pioneer in Library Services in Northeastern North Carolina”, research paper, North Carolina Central University (Durham NC), 1979.
Barbara Boone Buescher, “Katie Hart and Negro Library Service in Winton and Hertford County”, unpublished private document.

Ancestry.com online records:

1900, 1910, 1920, 1930 and 1940 Census records of William David Askew and family,
Winton Township, United States Censuses, National Archives and Records
Administration.

Marriage record Katie Marie Askew and H.H. Hart, July 14, Rich Square, State of North
Carolina.

Video

Caroline Stephenson, *Books Are My Children* (<https://vimeo.com/257280226>), 2017.

Interviews:

John Eley, March 19, 2015, Winton NC

Dr. Dudley Flood, March 27, 2013, Raleigh NC

T. W. Jones, Cofield NC, January 9, 2008.

© 2022 Marvin Tupper Jones