Nathan Fleeson
Wren's Nest Proposal

While Joel Chandler Harris went on to become a well-known writer, his first forays into writing came at the Turnwold Plantation working on *The Countryman*, a plantation newspaper. This experience set the stage for his later work with journalistic establishments like the *Macon Telegraph*, the *Savannah Morning News*, and ultimately the *Atlanta Constitution*. It was with the *Atlanta Constitution* that Harris first began publishing the Uncle Remus stories, drawing on encounters with enslaved people from his youth. Given this history, I propose a small-scale exhibition in the Wren's Nest gallery space that presents printing in the late 19th Century American South and how that impacts the oral tradition of storytelling of the enslaved people that Harris was drawing upon.

This exhibit would utilize the Joel Chandler Harris papers, held at Emory University's Stuart A. Rose Library, to present Harris's process of writing newspaper articles related to the Uncle Remus stories. This might include final versions of Harris's articles, along with the drafts and proofs, held in the collection (see Series 2) to help show the ways that Harris would often revise his writings, the various early starts, partial drafts, and final drafts that worked their way into print. Harris's hands-on process of preparing an article for publication would be held in tension with practices of oral tradition, which vary and find new meanings in each telling. As such, the contrast could exemplify the way that the Brer Rabbit and Uncle Remus stories lose elements of their original context in Harris's work. Additionally, this exhibit might draw on the Rose Library's collection to show Harris's active involvement in passing copyright legislation in Congress and problems with copyright infringement (see Series 1.2). This highlights another tension with the way that Harris took many of his stories from the enslaved people he met while at the Turnwold Plantation and other points in his life, which now come under legal protection attributed to his name. As such, we might explore the way that oral and written traditions of

storytelling enter under the protection of copyright laws, and how that establishes or erases voices from the conversation. In this instance, we could show this difference in whose name becomes attached to Uncle Remus in the popular imagination as opposed to the names of the various enslaved people, which are not common knowledge.

This exhibit aims to serve several audiences by appealing to interests around print media and oral traditions. The attention to print media would be of interest to older attendees to the Wren's Nest, with its connection to the rise of newspapers, particularly the newspapers of the Post-Bellum South and their lasting impact today. Since we approach this through the lens of Joel Chandler Harris, the exhibit may also continue to interest visitors that want to learn more about his life. At the same time, the play between print media and oral tradition offers a learning opportunity for high school and college students studying journalism. Specifically, it brings to the forefront the ways that articles and print media erase and empower certain voices, creating the space to consider journalistic ethics and how Harris serves as an example for future considerations. From this perspective, a partnership program with local high school or college journalism programs (such as Mercer or Georgia State) could become another means for the Wren's Nest to play a role in the local community.

Primary expenses for an exhibition such as this one will come from ensuring the Wren's Nest is a suitable environment for presenting archival documents and the costs associated with borrowing the documents from the Rose Library. Given the historic nature of these documents, it is likely that there will be questions of security and environment control. While ensuring that the Wren's Nest has the necessary facilities for such documents might carry a greater cost upfront, it could also open the door for future rotating exhibitions that use archival documents. As such, making the necessary adjustments could be a timely improvement to the space to allow for these

future opportunities. Moreover, grant programs from organizations such as the National Endowment for the Humanities or the National Trust for Historic Preservation may provide the funding for such an upgrade given the ways in which it could aid the sustainability of the Wren's Nest by fostering a space for exhibitions and community conversation.

Sample Archival Document and Associated Label:

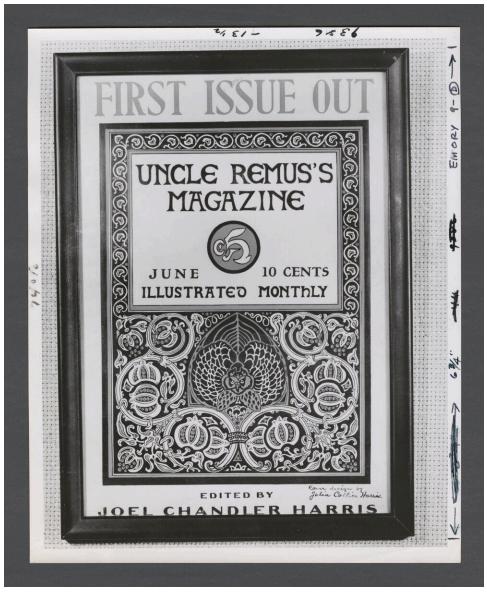


Figure 1: Uncle Remus's Magazine Cover. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. Box 10, Folder 12. https://digital.library.emory.edu/catalog/3418kprrsg-cor

In 1907–1908, leading up to his death, Harris and his son Julian began editing the *New Uncle Remus Magazine*. This was a monthly publication including articles from Harris and others. This first edition included several contributions from Harris, including a new Uncle Remus story. When Harris passed away in 1908, his son published story drafts that Harris had been putting together. This practice emphasizes the subtle differences between an oral and written tradition. Since Harris wrote the stories, they remain connected to him even after he dies. This overlooks

the editorial work completed by his son and the origin of the stories with enslaved African Americans.

Bibliography:

Bickley, R. "Joel Chandler Harris." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, last modified Dec 2, 2019. https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/joel-chandler-harris-1845-1908/

Mugleston, William F. "The Perils of Southern Publishing: A History of *Uncle Remus's Magazine*." *Journalism Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (1975): 515–521.

Uncle Remus's Magazine Cover. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. Box 10, Folder 12.