Thomas H. Harris (T.H. Harris), Educator, was the dominant figure in Louisiana public education in the first half of the 20th century through his role as the then elected State School Superintendent from 1908 to 1940. He was born on March 26, 1869 near the Arizona community of Claiborne Parish in north Louisiana. He was the son of a Baptist minister, and teacher of languages, the Reverend Austin Dabney Harris, and the former Rebecca Amaretta Flovilla Milner, known as Rettie Harris.

He briefly attended the former Arizona Academy conducted by his father. In 1889, at the age of 20, Harris enrolled for eight months in the former Lisbon Academy in the Lisbon community in Claiborne Parish. From 1891-1892, he attended the former Homer College in Homer, the parish seat of Claiborne Parish. Thereafter, he taught school in Claiborne and Winn Parish, the latter being the ancestral home of the Long political dynasty. Harris, in the fall of 1893, enrolled at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, then known as "Louisiana Normal."

Thomas H. Harris was the Assistant Principal at Central High School in Lake Charles, Louisiana. While teaching in Winnsboro, in 1896, he married the former Minnie Earle and converted to the Methodist denomination. The couple had one child, Sadie Grace. In 1897, Harris was again on the move. He was named principal of St. Landry High School in Opelousas in 1897. He also studied and taught part-time at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge at that time. Minnie died in 1899. The next year, he wed the former Mary Elizabeth Blackshear Evans, a widow with three small sons. In 1900, he briefly attended the University of Chicago, and in 1901 he studied for a summer session at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He later became Principal of Baton Rouge High School in 1903; and studied courses in law at Louisiana State University Law Center while employed in Baton Rouge. He left the education profession and resigned from Baton Rouge High School to sell life insurance.

In August of 1908 Harris was appointed State Superintendent of Public Schools and he retained this position until 1940. Under Harris' tenure in the State Education Department in Baton Rouge, the system of combined local and state financial support for public schools was established. More consolidated schools replaced traditional one-room facilities in rural areas. Standards for teacher certification were increased to the minimum level of a bachelor's degree. He hired a New Orleans educator, John R. Conniff, to direct the Teacher Certification
Bureau from 1910 to 1926, when Conniff left to take a two-year position as the seventh president of Louisiana Tech University in Ruston. State laws established teacher tenure and a retirement system. A system of state-operated vocational schools was also created. Louisiana state colleges became four-year degree granting institutions with improved physical plants and financial support. During the year that Superintendent Harris began his long tenure in office he also began to build a staff that became very active in the affairs of the education in the State at the elementary and secondary levels. In addition to Harris, the Staff of the State Department of Education consisted of one other full-time professional staff member, a State Institute Conductor. During his first year, Harris appointed a State High School Inspector, and the next year he received funds from the Peabody Fund to pay the salary and travel expenses of an inspector of elementary and rural schools. In ensuing years, the professional staff of the State Department of Education was increased substantially. The term "supervisor" was first used in a State Department biennial report during the 1914-1915 school session. Oddly, Harris did not receive his Bachelor of Arts degree from Louisiana State University (LSU), until 1922, and the Masters of Arts degree from LSU in 1924. He later received an honorary doctor of Law degree from LSU in 1935.

Harris was the dominant figure in some of the accomplishments in state education during his tenure; the system of school finance combined local and state support. Most appreciated by him was the establishment of the state legislature in 1938, of the T. H Harris Scholarships by which an annual appropriation of $40,000 which helped students secure a college education. During his tenure, a State system of public education became a reality.

T.H. Harris, along with Dr. Joseph S. Clark, was instrumental in the relocation of Southern University from New Orleans, Louisiana to Scotlandville, Louisiana. Thomas Harris, whose service as superintendent of public education spanned the years during which Dr. Joseph S. Clark was President of the Southern University. In fact, he was Superintendent of Public Education for the State of Louisiana five years prior and two years after the administration of President Joseph S. Clark. Both of their lives are strikingly similar. Both of their immediate ancestors were born in Georgia. Both of their ancestors transferred to North Louisiana. Those of President Clark migrated to Bienville Parish and those of Mr. Harris migrated to Claiborne Parish. Both had names not assigned to them in childhood. President Joseph Samuel Clark was christened Josiah and Thomas H. Harris was christened Lee Marcus.

Harris believed that a black education institution in Louisiana should be located in the rural areas and “organized to train colored teachers along the lines of agricultural, manual training and domestic science.” He further
observed that there should be no expense to the state by selling Southern University in New Orleans, and investing the money in facilities in the country. By remaining in New Orleans, Harris asserted that the institution was limited in the number of students it would serve. Harris and Clark were joined on the same side for the first time. The facts were evident in the biennial reports to Governor Sanders covering the session between 1908-1909 "Education for Negroes," in which Harris observes:

> *In order to establish Negro education in the State upon a sane basis there should be a state institution organized to train colored teachers along the lines of agriculture, manual training, and domestic science. This institution should be located in the country, and not in a town or city. The town is filled up now with many worthless Negroes who should be earning an honest living in the country. The state should be able to establish such a school without being put to any expense by selling the Southern University, located in New Orleans, and investing the proceeds in a plant located in the country.*

> The academic work which is being done by Southern University is excellent, but necessarily it can reach only the colored population of New Orleans. The agricultural work of the institution is from the nature of the case productive of but little if any good . . . if the school was located in the country, a model school of several hundred children could be maintained. These children could be made to cultivate crops on the farm and could be instructed in a valuable way along agricultural lines. Teachers would come to such a school from all sections of the state, where they could secure training in farm operations, shop work, etc. It would be possible under such conditions to maintain a real agricultural, industrial normal school and to reach the Negroes of the state.

> “I recommend, therefore, that Southern University be sold and the money invested in an agricultural, industrial, normal school, located in the country.”

On November 17, 1927, Harris attended the dedication of his former high school, Homer High School and Junior College building in his home parish.

**Thomas H. Harris** died on February 24, 1942 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and is interred at Roselawn Memorial Park, Baton Rouge.

The **“T.H. Harris Hall”** on the campus of Southern University and A&M College is named in his honor.


Jones, John Sebastian. *Personal Papers.* Archives and Manuscripts Department, John B. Cade Library, Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.


*Courtesy of: The Archives and Manuscripts Department/John B. Cade Library/Southern University and A&M College/Baton Rouge, LA.* 70813-0001.