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AFRICAN AMERICANS AND CHINSEGUT HILL: RACE RELATIONS IN HERNANDO COUNTY, FLORIDA, DURING THE JIM CROW ERA
by Michael Lee Correia

Chinsegut Hill lies nestled on a high Florida ridge, seven miles north of Brooksville in Hernando County. Long a kind of oasis and a monument to the twentieth-century dreams of Raymond and Margaret Dreier Robins, Chinsegut – as Raymond Robins called it – dates its recorded history to antebellum slave society. Indeed, until 1938, it retained a direct link to slavery in the person of Elizabeth Carr Washington, who was brought to Chinsegut as a young slave just before the outbreak of the Civil War. She made the transition from slavery to freedom at Chinsegut, where she worked for a succession of owners, including the famous Robins family, and she achieved local prominence as a midwife, delivering more black and white babies than any Hernando County physician at the time. The story of her family, in contrast to the well documented lives of the Robinses, reveals a little known side of local history.

The first white settler on Chinsegut Hill was Colonel Byrd Pearson, a South Carolina lawyer and planter, who took possession of the area, under the terms of the Armed Occupation Act of 1842. In 1849, Pearson built a manor house on Chinsegut Hill, the foundation shell of which still stands. Actual construction was originally by a New England ship’s carpenter, who framed the building with hand-hewn, twelve-inch cypress timbers that were hauled from the Gulf Coast by oxen and mortarized with wooden pegs.¹

A few years later Chinsegut was purchased by Colonel Francis H. Ederington, who brought with him slaves from his former home in the Abbeyville district of Fairfield, South Carolina. One of these was Elizabeth Carr, who had been born into slavery in 1848. In addition to her African ancestry, she claimed Irish and Native-American heritage.² Her original owner, C. Q. Nevitt of South Carolina, sold young Elizabeth to his brother-in-law, Francis Ederington, who brought her to Hernando County when she was twelve or thirteen years old, according to a descendant of the Ederington family. In the late 1800s, the estate came into the possession of Precious Anne Ederington, who later married Dr. T. R. Snow.³

In 1905, the property known as “Snow Hill” was sold to Raymond Robins. Raised by relatives after his father deserted the family, Robins had spent his teenage years on a grove near Snow Hill in the 1880s, when he apparently dreamed of buying the property. After several years seeking gold in Alaska’s Klondike and pursuing social work in Chicago, he purchased Snow Hill and renamed it “Chinsegut,” which in Alaskan Innuit dialect meant “the spirit of things lost and regained,” according to Robins. At the time he claimed that he bought Chinsegut with funds from a small fortune he had made in Alaska, but a recent biography shows that the money came from a $5,000 loan from his sister. He used this to purchase sixty acres on the crest of Chinsegut Hill and 120 surrounding acres.⁴

While in Alaska, Raymond Robins had found not gold but God. After undergoing a religious experience, he became a Congregational minister and turned his attention to social causes, joining the growing movement for progressive reform at the turn of the century. Based in
Chicago, he followed the social gospel into settlement house work. In 1905, on a speaking tour in New York City, he met another reformer, Margaret Dreier, who was active in various reform causes, along with her sister Mary. The Dreier sisters were the children of middle-class German immigrants who had settled in New York City. Margaret first worked as a volunteer in New York hospitals and asylums where she advised gentle, compassionate treatment of patients. Later she dedicated herself to improving the living and working conditions of women and children through labor unions, and by 1905, when she met Raymond Robins, she had become associated with the Women’s Trade Union League, which she later headed, making it an effective voice for “helping women help themselves.” Within months of their first meeting, Margaret Dreier and Raymond Robins married. They spent their honeymoon at Chinsegut, which Raymond had recently purchased, but they settled in Chicago.

From 1905 to 1924, the Robinses pursued their interests in reform and social justice. While Margaret directed the National Women’s Trade Union League, Raymond tried his hand in politics. In 1914, he ran unsuccessfully for a Senate seat in Illinois on the national Progressive Party ticket of Theodore Roosevelt. In 1917, President Woodrow Wilson appointed Robins to a Red Cross mission to Russia that was designed to relieve the starvation caused by the Russian Revolution. While there, Robins met Lenin and Trotsky, and upon his return to the United States, he campaigned unsuccessfully for better relations with the Soviet Union. As a result of his dedicated work with the Red Cross, Robins received the title Colonel. The causes championed by Raymond and Margaret Dreier Robins led to unjust criticism by opponents who labeled them
Raymond Robins and Margaret Dreier Robins seated together, soon after their marriage in 1905. Standing behind the couple are Margaret’s sisters Katherine (top) and Mary (beside Margaret).

Photograph from *Reform and Revolution* by Neil V. Salzman.
as socialists or anarchists. Nevertheless, Chinsegut developed a special cultural and political milieu, owing to the Robinses’ proclivity for liberal causes and their civic sense of service to their country, county, and community.

Chinsegut always held a special attraction for Raymond Robins. Thought by Robins to be the “highest hill in Florida” (it was in fact the second highest point on Florida’s peninsula), “this hill...drew him when he felt alone,” his sister-in-law Mary E. Dreier noted in her biography of Margaret Dreier Robins. “He used to ride there to look out upon the vast forest as far as the eye could see, and beyond to the distant horizon where one’s soul could stretch toward the infinite.” However, the estate had fallen on hard times by the time Robins purchased it. “The great freeze of 1895 had killed the orange trees which once clothed the hill, and the house was forsaken,” Mary Dreier wrote. “To Raymond’s amazement, he found the house still lying on its side, held by a chain to a huge water oak.” Robins immediately had necessary repairs made. After Margaret saw the property for the first time on their honeymoon, she too developed the same love for the area. During a 1908 visit, Margaret wrote her sister: “It is wonderful out here and I dream visions in the silence of the pines.”

The Robinses’ politics and their attempt to create an Arcadia on Chinsegut Hill strongly influenced their relations with the African Americans who worked there, especially Elizabeth Carr Washington and her family. Little is known of Elizabeth’s early life dating back to slavery, but she worked at Chinsegut until she died at the age of ninety in 1938. She married George Washington, a former slave who also assisted with chores at Chinsegut, and the couple had nine children. At Chinsegut, Elizabeth (“Lizzie”) Washington did a variety of jobs, including the cooking. “She could cook out of this world,” noted a black woman who knew Lizzie as a girl in the 1920s. Mrs. Washington also did laundry at Chinsegut. “She would carry huge baskets of it on her head and she would open the gate for me,” recalled Lisa von Borowsky who began working there as the Robinses secretary in the 1920s and soon became “the little daughter of Chinsegut” for the childless couple. Elizabeth Washington also had a wry sense of humor, which may explain why she would sometimes charge people twenty-five cents to enter the gate at the bottom of Chinsegut Hill.

By the 1920s, Elizabeth Washington was well known in Hernando County as a result of her work as a midwife, and she won the respect and admiration of both the black and white communities because of her selfless devotion to both black and white families, reflected in the fact that she delivered more babies than any physician in the county during the 1920s and 1930s. Lisa von Borowsky remembers driving Mrs. Washington to deliver babies. “She helped both black and white families who couldn’t afford doctors or hospital bills,” notes Ms. von Borowsky who cannot remember that Mrs. Washington ever got paid for her midwife services.

Elizabeth Washington’s character traits and demeanor left a lasting impression on people. As Margaret Dreier Robins once noted, “She walked as if she were the Queen of Sheba!” She could be, by turns, eccentric (she was often seen smoking a pipe), outspoken, and assertive in her dealings with both blacks and whites. “I would drive her to town,” Lisa von Borowsky recalled. “Negro men were sitting by the side of the store, [and] she’d call them over to the car. ‘You go in and get me some backie [tobacco],’ she’d tell them, in the commanding way she had.” She also gave orders to her grandchildren, telling them, in one incident, to enter a local store when they
Elizabeth Carr Washington.
hesitated. This assertiveness served her and her grandchildren well, especially during the Jim Crow days in the first half of the twentieth century. A granddaughter remembers that “if she didn’t like you, she’d tell you.” As a result, she often got her way. For example, after Mrs. Washington purchased a car from a Brooksville mechanic, she told the man point blank and without equivocation, “If you don’t fix my car, I’m goin to take it somewhere else!” She would not have her dream of a car – and the freedom it symbolized – destroyed.¹¹ Even her inability to drive did not deter her; she had her daughter and granddaughter drive for her.¹²

The other African American who figured prominently in the history of Chinsegut was Fielder Harris, a former slave who eventually became Elizabeth Washington’s son-in-law. Harris was born in South Carolina in the mid-1850s and moved to Florida at an unknown later date. Harris and Raymond Robins developed a long and unusually close relationship, especially considering the dictates of the Jim Crow South. The two met in the 1880s, when Raymond was a thirteen-year-old living with his relatives on a grove near Brooksville and Harris was a hired hand. The boy who had been shifted among various relatives as a youngster found in Fielder Harris a source of strength and knowledge that opened up a new world. Fielder mentored the young man in the ways of nature and farming, and a lifetime friendship evolved. According to Robins’s biographer, “it is safe to say that the single individual that left the most profound impression on him was Fielder Harris.”¹³ Robins himself reflected on the relationship shortly before Harris died in 1924.

Uncle Fielder had the unbound confidence of my foster mother and he was during those impressionable years my closest associate. Unable to either read or write, his mind was filled with the immemorial wisdom of the field and farm, forest and stream. A wise fisherman and a mighty hunter, he knew the signs and ways of fish, fowl and beast.

He fished by the moon’s phases; planted crops and trees and killed hogs and hunted deer and bear by the same high wisdom. He believed unalteringly in the efficacy of the left hind foot of a graveyard rabbit captured at midnight in a cemetery in the dark of the moon. He carried one for years and may do so still. He was the best axman, oarsman, runner, wrestler and jumper in the county. He was a master of horsemanship; broke the wildest of mules, tamed range cattle and was altogether my ideal for those seven years.

As in the way with arrogant youth I would now and again expatiate upon my splendid and prosperous future – I was a poor relation on a sandhill farm – and promised him among other glories that after I had made a fortune and built a home I would surely take him to New York.¹⁴

Fielder Harris reciprocated this strong feeling of attachment. In a 1912 letter he wrote to Robins:

Dear Boy, I want to say this to you. The day you and I were sitting in the sitting room I taken [sic] a close observation of you, whither you knew it or not, and such eyes I ve never beheld in a man before, pure, clear and bright. If you[r] heart (which I certainly believe it is) is as pure as your eyes depict, you are heaven bound.¹⁵

After purchasing Chinsegut, Robins wanted Fielder Harris to become caretaker, but first he had to locate his old friend. According to his sister-in-law, Robins “wrote to every post office in Florida to see whether he could find Fielder and, suddenly, one sunny morning he heard steps coming up the walk leading to the house in Brooksville, leaped to his feet and said to Margaret,
Fielder Harris (with his son Raymond) in 1914.

Photograph from *Reform and Revolution* by Neil V. Salzman.
‘That is Fielder,’ and there stood Fielder! He became the most important figure on the place.”

Harris served as foreman at Chinsegut, which was unusual in the Jim Crow South because it meant he supervised not only blacks but also whites who worked there. His ties to Chinsegut were reinforced by his marriage to one of Elizabeth Washington’s daughters, Pet. In a tribute to the Robinses, the Harrises named a daughter Margaret and a son Raymond, and the Robinses served as the children’s godparents. During their long absences from Chinsegut, the Robinses gave Fielder Harris enormous latitude, “virtually allowing Fielder to exercise Raymond’s power of attorney in matters related to the estate,” according to Robins’s biographer. Harris proved himself indispensable in many ways, including on one occasion rescuing Robins after a fall. Raymond “was building a dam over our spring-run,” Margaret wrote in a 1914 letter; “the earth was very slippery and in reaching forward he slipped and fell. Dr. Coogler, our Brooksville physician, says that Fielder, our old Negro, saved the day by pulling the leg into place at once.”

The following year, Robins fulfilled his youthful promise to take Fielder to New York. They traveled together by rail to Washington, D. C., and New York, where they stayed with Margaret’s brother on Long Island. There they visited Theodore Roosevelt who gave Fielder a horseshoe which he nailed to the great Altar Oak at Chinsegut. “It’s still there today!” notes Lisa von Borowsky.

Fielder Harris’s death in 1924 hit everyone hard at Chinsegut. “You can imagine how tremendously topsy-turvy the world seems with Fielder stricken,” Margaret Robins wrote her sister in May. “As I wired you yesterday, he went out fishing Saturday and was taken ill in the boat. But somehow with his indomitable will he climbed the hill and milked the cow. He seemed to grow worse and so about midnight, Pet [Harris] sent for Doctor Coogler.” Having suffered a stroke, Fielder Harris died six months later. The Robinses organized a memorial service at the Lake Lindsay Cemetery, where Harris and his son Raymond were buried. Margaret Robins described the ceremony in a letter.

We all drove over after dinner and with the other white men and women present were twenty whites and one hundred and fifty Negroes. It was a beautiful day and Lisa [von Borowsky] and Raymond had covered the grave with cedar and pine boughs and Lisa made two beautiful wreaths, one for Fielder’s grave and one for little Raymond’s grave....Raymond made a beautiful address. I wept like a little child! When Raymond finished he paused for a moment and then said: “And now, Margaret, Fielder’s youngest daughter, will unveil the monument which we are here dedicating to a man brave and true and fine – my friend Fielder Harris.” Margaret stood like a great Egyptian statue and at Raymond’s word she unveiled the monument. With one accord the Negroes started singing, “Nearer my God to Thee.” It was very touching and beautiful.

Religion was clearly one of the ties that bound blacks and whites together at Chinsegut. Raymond Robins was Congregational minister, and Margaret was the granddaughter of a Protestant minister. They shared their strong Christian faith with the family of Elizabeth Washington and with Fielder Harris, who was himself a preacher at a local church supported financially by Raymond Robins. On special occasions, whites and blacks joined in religious celebrations at Chinsegut. For example, in 1933 Margaret wrote her sister about “our little service on Sunday. I told Pet [Harris], Margaret [Harris] and Aunt Lizzie [Elizabeth Washington] and of course...Lisa [von Borowsky] that it was the anniversary of Mother’s birthday. So we read the 103rd Psalm and then after singing some Negro spirituals, Lisa sang ‘Lobe den Herren.’”
Elizabeth Washington died in 1938. “I was getting my mail,” her granddaughter Margaret Harris recalls. “A man working at Chinsegut told me the bad news. Lizzie was walking, perfectly healthy looking. She passed at the dinner table. Must’ve been a heart attack. She was ninety years old and had spent [almost] ninety years at Chinsegut!” Born into slavery, Mrs. Washington had experienced the trials and tribulations that confronted many African Americans – the evils of slavery, the benefits of emancipation, the fears provoked by lynchings, and the discrimination of Jim Crow laws. Yet, despite the many obstacles, she kept her faith in God and in her people, and she prevailed. As a midwife, she made a singular contribution to Hernando County, and as a mother and grandmother, she nurtured a strong family that has also prevailed. Her granddaughter, Margaret Harris, studied nursing at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and worked as a counselor for African-American youth in Hernando County. A great granddaughter, Lenore Washington, attends St. Leo College. In addition to the profound influence of Elizabeth Washington and Fielder Harris, this African-American family also undoubtedly benefited from living and working at Chinsegut in the midst of the Arcadia, whatever its limitations, that Raymond and Margaret Dreier Robins tried to build.

Despite their efforts to improve the lives of African Americans employed at Chinsegut, the Robinses faced insurmountable obstacles in confronting issues of race in Hernando County. As Mary Dreier emphasized in her biography of her sister, “The Negro’s position in the South seemed one of the injustices which could not be remedied by Northerners and Margaret chafed under that limitation, for she had been accustomed to ride over obstacles ever since she was a little girl.” Margaret Harris later related an incident from the 1930s that showed both how Jim Crow victimized African Americans and how some fought back. “Here in Brooksville they got me for walking down the street,” Harris recalled. “A white man said, ‘I don’t see why the hell you don’t walk on the other side of the street.’” The man then prodded her in the back with something. “We actually fought it out...till a man across the street said, ‘you let her alone!’” After a sheriff’s deputy was called, Margaret left, but her tormentor followed her until she finally eluded him.

Unable to change segregation in Hernando County, Margaret Robins worked to improve services for local blacks. In 1930, she helped organize the first Institute on Negro Education that was held in Hernando County. “We are hoping,” she wrote, “that the Rosenwald gift of three thousand dollars toward a school [for black children] to cost six thousand [dollars] can be accepted, and that the Negroes and the county will build it.” During the Depression, when a typhoid epidemic hit, Margaret Robins personally paid “the larger end of the salary” for Hernando County to hire two public health nurses. As a result, she wrote her sister, “all the children in the schools are being given anti-typhoid serum.” She also insisted that hundreds of pounds of flour and grains go to impoverished African Americans in the county. Reflecting on Raymond Robins’s racial attitudes, Fielder Harris’s daughter Margaret declared that “he would allow a black person at his front door, before he would allow a white person there.” However, Margaret Robins recognized that she and her husband could not change the community’s racial hierarchy. “All the years that she had been at Chinsegut,” according to her sister, “she was troubled that she could not effectively help in bringing about a more tolerant attitude toward the Negroes. She realized very early that being a Northerner she could do nothing to help directly except by and through her personal relation to Negroes.”
Nevertheless, the personal relations of the Robinses certainly made a difference in the lives of African Americans like Elizabeth Washington, Fielder Harris, and their descendants. And, it should be remembered, Fielder Harris was the most significant influence on young Raymond Robins, demonstrating the complex interactions that could exist between individual blacks and whites during the days of Jim Crow. Put simply, Fielder Harris may be considered as responsible for the development of Chinsegut as Raymond Robins, for it was Harris who taught Robins much of what he came to love about Chinsegut Hill.
Margaret Dreier Robins and Raymond Robins in the garden at Chinsegut.

2 Population Census, Hernando County, Florida, 1880; author’s interview with Margaret Harris, July 14, 1993. Mrs. Harris, a resident of Brooksville, is the granddaughter of Elizabeth Carr Washington.

3 Alfred A. McKethan, *Hernando County, Our Story*, ed. by Patricia Rogers (self-published: Alfred A. McKethan, 1989), 25-26. Alfred A. McKethan is the son of Mary Alice Hale and William M. McKethan. Mary Alice Hale was the daughter of John Hale and Dorothy Ederington, the daughter of Francis Ederington, Sr., who originally transported Elizabeth Carr from South Carolina to Chinsegut Hill.


8 Death certificate of Elizabeth Carr Washington, Lake Lindsay Cemetery Records, Brooksville; Harris interview.


11 Dreier, *Margaret Dreier Robins*, 212; Von Borowsky telephone interview; Harris interview.

12 Washington interview.


15 Ibid., 21.


21 Ibid., 233; Salzman, *Raymond Robins*, 389 (note 23).
22 Harris interview.

23 Drier, Margaret Drier Robins, 220.

24 Harris interview.