"Our Nig" and the She-Devil: New Information about Harriet Wilson and the "Bellmont" Family

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The recent rediscovery of Harriet E. Adams Wilson's \textit{Our Nig}, a narrative first published in 1859, was an important event in the history of African American letters and American literature as a whole. As Alice Walker has confessed, "I sat up most of the night reading and pondering the enormous significance of Harriet Wilson's novel \textit{Our Nig}. It is as if we'd just discovered Phillis Wheatley—or Langston Hughes."\(^1\) The discovery radically alters the standard chronology, dislodging an 1892 work previously considered the first novel by an African American woman and establishing Harriet Wilson as the first black person known to have published a novel in the United States.\(^2\) Moreover, \textit{Our Nig} expands the literary terrain in other ways with its unconventional treatment of racism in the North. The heroine is a Northern servant, not a Southern slave; at the tender age of six Frado finds herself indentured to the Bellmont family, becoming "our nig" to Mrs. Bellmont, a "she-devil" who overworks and beats her (17).

But if the text provides, as Walker asserts, a "vastness of heretofore unexamined experience, a whole new layer of time and existence in American life and literature," we know very little about the author. It was only in 1982 that Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. set out to trace the "Mrs. H. E. Wilson" mentioned in the copyright of \textit{Our Nig} and to demonstrate that she was a black woman. Gates's spectacular success in tracking down Harriet E. Adams Wilson of New Hampshire restored the narrative to American literature, but at the same time he had to conclude, "What we know to be the case about the life of Harriet E. Wilson, although sufficient to establish her existence and her authorship, remains frustratingly sparse" (lix).
In this essay I undertake to increase our knowledge of Wilson’s life on the basis of documents I have discovered. I have also found the true identity of the “Bellmont” family; the family has interesting features, some of which should have a bearing on interpretations of Our Nig. In the next section of the paper I will discuss the rediscovery of the narrative and the findings of Professor Gates, and in the third section I will provide new information about Harriet Wilson and her son. The fourth section describes the “Bellmont” family and begins to connect some of the prominent facts in their history to Our Nig; the fifth section treats the most important aspect of the family in regard to Wilson’s narrative—their abolitionist connections. Except for this one detail, the lives of the real-life family correspond very closely to the lives of the Bellmonts; in my conclusion I will take up the often asked and still difficult question of whether Our Nig is primarily autobiography or fiction.

Our Nig opens with the marriage of Frado’s parents—Mag, a “fallen” white woman, and Jim, a “kind-hearted African” (9). After Jim dies of consumption, the poverty-stricken Mag abandons Frado at the Bellmonts’ farm. Only six years old, Frado is overtasked and mistreated by the evil Mrs. Bellmont. Although Frado is befriended by other members of the family—Mr. Bellmont, his sister Abby, and the sons James and Jack—the cruelties of Mrs. Bellmont and her vicious daughter Mary ruin Frado’s health so that she has trouble supporting herself once she escapes the indenture at age eighteen. The last chapter shows Frado marrying a professed fugitive slave who turns out to be a fake and leaves her with a son to feed. Thus the writing of Our Nig: Wilson tells us in her preface that having been “deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life.”

The writing experiment had succeeded for many a white woman, beginning in the 1820s with New Hampshire widow Sarah Josepha Hale, who became a famous editor and sent her son to Harvard. It cannot have worked at all for Wilson because, even though we know she managed to publish Our Nig at her own expense, the book was not reviewed or even mentioned in the periodicals of the day (xxx). Our Nig was never completely lost, for it is sometimes referred to in literary histories and bibliographies, but the title alone put people off—one writer even decided to change it, renaming the book Our Meg.3 The title may also have contributed to the rumor that the author was white. Rare book dealers de-
bated the question for years until the enterprising Henry Louis Gates Jr. resolved to prove that Harriet Wilson was truly a black woman. Gates and his colleagues turned to Milford, New Hampshire, a town mentioned in one of the testimonials appended to the narrative, and found the evidence they sought.4

The proof of Wilson's race, sadly and ironically, turned out to be the death certificate of her son. George Mason Wilson died of fever in February 1860, only six months after the publication of the book intended to raise money for his support. The death record lists his parents as Thomas and Harriet E. Wilson and his "color" as "Black." In the obituary notice in the Farmer's Cabinet, Milford's local paper, George Mason is referred to as the "only son of H. E. Wilson," the name given on the copyright notice in Our Nig.5 Having established that Our Nig was written by Harriet E. Wilson, a black woman, Gates went on to find two other documents. First, Milford marriage records show that a Harriet Adams of Milford married Thomas Wilson of Virginia on 6 October 1851 in Milford (about nine months before George Mason was born). Second, the 1850 federal census for Milford lists Harriet Adams, a twenty-two-year-old black woman born in New Hampshire, as residing with the family of Samuel Boyles, a white carpenter. The Boyles family, Gates speculates, may have been the Bellmonts, and Mary Louisa Boyles, Samuel's wife, the original of the she-devil Mrs. Bellmont.6 At the least it would seem that H. E. Wilson was originally Harriet Adams, who was born in New Hampshire in 1827 or 1828.

Our Nig ends, however, with Frado leaving New Hampshire, and we know the narrative was printed in Boston and entered into copyright in Massachusetts. In investigating the Massachusetts connection, Gates found in Boston city directories a "Harriet Wilson, widow," living at 4 Webster Avenue from 1856 to 1863. This Harriet Wilson has the same address as an African American widow listed in the 1860 federal census; the widow's birthplace is given as Fredericksburg, Virginia, and her age as 52. Can we assume that this older "Harriet Wilson, widow," is the same woman who wrote Our Nig? Gates suggests that we might, and either the 1850 Milford or the 1860 Boston census is wrong or unclear (as early censuses so frequently were) about her age. Or, alternatively, there might have been two widowed Harriet Wilsons living in Boston, one on Webster Avenue and the other our author, who either died sometime between February 1860 when her son died and the summer of 1860 when the census was taken or has not yet been located in the unindexed census records. The contradictions are reflected in the second edition of Our
Nig (1983): while Gates favors 1828 as Wilson's probable birthdate, the Library of Congress catalogers chose to credit the 1860 Boston census instead, assigning Wilson the dates 1808–ca. 1870.

The dearth of information about Wilson's life has made interpretation of Our Nig even more difficult than it might otherwise have proved. The narrative is often puzzling. Why, for instance, is there so much emphasis on Frado's near conversion to Christianity and Frado's newfound independence (105) when the subjects are never resolved? Is the narrative a straightforward account of Wilson's life or is it truly fiction? Why, if Wilson wrote the narrative to earn money, did she do everything possible, seemingly, to make it unpopular—from using the epithet "nig" to portraying an interracial marriage involving an "immoral woman" and "bad mother" to introducing a fake fugitive slave when the very idea would guarantee enmity from abolitionists? Indeed, it seems odd to attack one's most likely source of support, as Wilson does when Frado is "maltreated by professed abolitionists, who didn't want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North" (129). We might speculate that Wilson was too naive or untalented to disguise autobiographical fact; but in that case how do we account for the art of the ironic use of "our nig" or the brilliant employment of the dog motif whereby Frado's double, Fido, comments on the quality of the white humans?

These are just a few of many questions that have been asked about Wilson and her narrative. My research provides some answers, though before I begin to fill in the gaps I should say that several bits of information I have uncovered raise new difficult questions, and we may expect the search for Harriet Wilson to continue. But it can now be asserted that the Harriet Wilson who lived in Boston from 1856 to 1863 is almost certainly the Harriet Wilson who wrote Our Nig. She seems to have been born between 1824 and 1828, whether in New Hampshire or Virginia I do not know, and she was definitely still alive, in fact was back in New Hampshire, in 1863, when she disappears from sight. Wilson spent her childhood serving not the Samuel Boyleses but the Nehemiah Haywards, an established Milford farming family, and she appears in the (1 June) 1840 census for Milford. Although only heads of household were listed by name in 1840, the Nehemiah Hayward family includes for the first time a "free colored person" in addition to the "free white persons"; she is a female and at least 10 years old but under 24 (thus Wilson would be born after 1 June 1816 and before 1 June 1830). The 1840 census does not list any other female "free colored persons" residing in Milford.
Documentary evidence regarding the Haywards shows that many of Wilson's stories in *Our Nig* are literally true. The patriarch (Nehemiah Hayward Jr./Mr. Bellmont) did inherit the family homestead from his parents, who had first established it; his sister (Sally Hayward/Aunt Abby Bellmont) did own a "right in the homestead" (45) and occupy a section of the house; the farm did have orchards and sheep and an energetic river capable of endangering the life of "our nig" as she played the trick on the sheep. Just as in the narrative, the youngest daughter (Rebecca Hayward the younger/Mary Bellmont) died in her teens on a visit to Baltimore; the other daughter (Lucretia Hayward/Jane Bellmont) married a Vermont man and eventually settled in "the West"; the eldest son (George Hayward/James Bellmont) worked in Baltimore and returned home ill with his wife and child to die an early death and be buried in Milford, and so on. This son is even named George M., suggesting that Harriet Wilson named her own son, George Mason, after her favorite in the Hayward family.7

The lives of the Haywards correspond so closely to the narrative, in fact, as to remind us that Henry Louis Gates Jr., not Harriet Wilson, classifies *Our Nig* as fiction; Wilson simply subtitles her work "Sketches from the Life of a Free Black" and refers to her "narrations," while the author of the longest testimonial at the end calls the book "an Autobiography" (137). I will return to the autobiography/fiction issue in my conclusion; suffice it to say at this point that I uncovered information about Wilson and the Haywards by assuming the details of her story to be true. For instance, the comment that after leaving the Bellmonts Frado was "thrown upon the public for sustenance" (128) led to the discovery of Wilson's name on Milford reports of expenditures for the town poor. I found the Haywards by investigating Milford doctors, because Wilson says the doctor who treats Frado is Mrs. Bellmont's brother (119); Dr. Jonas Hutchinson had a sister Rebecca who married a Hayward and moved in her old age to Baltimore, just as Mrs. Bellmont does. But before I discuss the Haywards in more detail I will review in chronological order the documents I have discovered that pertain directly to Harriet Wilson and her son.

* * *

Two records provide a glimpse of the previously undocumented period of time before Wilson appears on the 1850 federal census. In addition to the 1840 census, where she is a "free colored person" between 10 and
24, there is the "Report of the Overseers of the Poor for the Town of Milford, for the Year ending February 15, 1850." One "Harriet Adams" appears on the list of "Poor not on the Farm" as costing the town $43.84. Presumably she had managed to avoid the town pauper farm and lived with a family reimbursed by the town, either the Boyleses or one of the other families mentioned in *Our Nig*. The fact that Harriet Adams does not appear on the overseers' report for the previous year, covering February 1848 to February 1849, indicates that she sometimes succeeded in supporting herself after leaving the Haywards (the Haywards went to Baltimore in 1847). Probably the dependency of 1849–50 strengthened her "resolution to take care of herself, to cast off the unpleasant charities of the public" (124), and precipitated the move to "W," Massachusetts, where she met her husband.

The reports of the overseers of the poor for 1851–54 are missing, so we do not know what support Wilson received from the town of Milford during the years right after her marriage and the birth of her son. In *Our Nig* she says Prado was "thrown upon the public for sustenance" before her child's birth, and "Allida," the author of the long testimonial, claims that Wilson had to go to the county home to have her baby (according to the boy's death certificate, he was born in Goffstown, the location of the county farm). Then, says Allida, Thomas Wilson returned; but he eventually left his wife for good, and her "struggles with poverty and sickness were severe" (136). In the February 1855 list of "Support of Poor not at the Pauper Farm," Wilson appears as "Harriet E. Wilson" at $45.45, and in the 1856 list the reference is to "Harriet E. Wilson and Child." That this period must have been particularly excruciating for mother and child is attested to by another document from the time. The records of the Hillsborough County Farm show that George Wilson, age three, a "colored" resident of Milford, was admitted for four weeks beginning 19 August 1855. On September 11 he was discharged to Milford to his mother.

Allida recounts the "cold civility" that greeted the pregnant Harriet Wilson in her desperate stay at the county farm (135); the author of *History of the Town of Goffstown* notes the terrible conditions there, including an outbreak of smallpox in 1853, just two years before George Wilson's stay (xxiv). The situation for a "colored" child must have been insupportable, perhaps even worse psychologically than physically. The reminiscences of a Major D. E. Proctor, whose parents ran the Milford poor farm from 1848 to 1854, tell a dismal tale. Proctor recalls Dimon or Diamond Prince, a sixty-year-old "herculean negro" with a crippled hand.
and hip. Prince sometimes acted “a trifle unruly but his little rebellion was soon quelled by the judicious application of a woman's weapon, the broom.” He engaged in an “everlasting war” with an old man who “would make faces at the negro just to provoke him to anger.” Prince was also harassed by “an insane man by the name of Bradbury,” whose claim to fame was having once disrobed at a matron's tea party. Bradbury “tied the old negro up in the stantions with the cows and danced around him swinging his tomahawk just near enough as not to hit him. He also took the negro who was sitting near the kitchen window and threw him out without raising the sash.”

Prince’s reaction to this treatment is not surprising. Proctor says he “sought to frighten my mother at one time by threatening suicide but my mother asked him to hold on till afternoon till the men folks came home to lay him out. That took the suicide idea out of him.” Apparently thoughts of suicide were a common reaction to life at the poor farm, as an “insane” woman named Mollie also “attempted suicide once by jumping into a well but the cold water cooled her ardor and she cried lustily to be saved.” Mollie and an “insane” Mrs. Hopkins were both distraught at having been separated from their children, and Proctor’s idea of fun was to hide in the woods and call to them, pretending to be a lost child. There also lived at the farm a man with delirium tremens, a woman “of simple mind the butt of many good-natured jokes,” and a Mrs. Foster, who “created a great deal of trouble by telling outside how badly she was abused at the farm.” Proctor concludes that the inmates were unlucky in being poor but “fortunate in living in so good a town as Milford as to so kindly care for them in their misfortune.”

Although the Milford town farm was not the same as the county farm, the permanent residents were transferred to the Hillsborough County Farm after its purchase in 1849. Dimon Prince definitely lived at the county farm during George Mason Wilson’s stay, and one rather hopes he befriended the child. At any rate, it becomes clear why Harriet Wilson would go to any lengths to keep her son off the poor farm, including separating from him and leaving him with a foster family while she sought work in Massachusetts—and later, it should be added, writing Our Nig. Knowledge of George Mason Wilson’s stay at the county farm and the terrible living conditions at the poor farms should make us very cautious about questioning Wilson’s stated motive for authorship, as some recent literary critics have done.

The reports of the Milford overseers of the poor support Wilson’s
contention that she left her son in New Hampshire and went to Massachusetts; the records indicate that she was gone between February 1856 and the time of the boy's death in 1860. In the 1857, 1858, and 1859 reports Harriet Wilson herself does not appear; there are listings solely for "Harriet E. Wilson's child" and "Wilson Boy." Interestingly, this proves Wilson's friend Allida wrong in one of her statements in the appendix and makes one wonder whether she made other mistakes recounting Wilson's life. Allida claims that a "kind gentleman and lady took her little boy into their own family, and provided everything necessary for his good; and all this without the hope of remuneration" (136), but we know that the town paid approximately $20 a year for the boy's care.

Harriet Wilson's appearances on the overseers' reports form a pattern that points to her as the Harriet Wilson listed in the 1856–63 Boston city directories. For these are the very years the town did not support her, and it seems too much of a coincidence that another Harriet Wilson would reside in Boston during the exact same years that the author of Our Nig absented herself from Milford. In the 1863 report Wilson re-appears, but she is entered under "Support of County Paupers" instead of "Support of Paupers not on Farm." So she must have been staying at the hated county farm rather than residing with a family as before. Did Harriet Wilson come home to die? Her name does not appear in Milford or Boston records after 1863, and, given her poor health in the past, it seems a strong possibility that she returned to Milford ill and/or in crisis. She tended to retreat to her hometown at critical times of her life, such as to marry and give birth; the latter was an economic practicality because towns would more likely aid long-time residents, but one suspects a more sentimental reason for her return to marry since she did not live in Milford immediately before or after the marriage. At any rate, I have not been able to find a trace of Wilson after 1863, but neither is she listed in the (very incomplete) admission or death records of the Hillsborough County Farm. Maybe she died in 1863 or maybe she recovered and left Milford for another place.

If the author of Our Nig lived at 4 Webster Avenue in Boston from 1856 to 1863 and is thus the widowed Harriet Wilson of the 1860 Boston census, the census must err in giving her age as 52 (or perhaps the five was supposed to be a three, which would be consistent with the ages given in the 1840 and 1850 censuses and with the plot of Our Nig). The birthplace of Fredericksburg, Virginia, is probably wrong too, as the 1850 census, her marriage record, and the plot of Our Nig all indicate she was born
in New Hampshire.17 We may eventually find birth and death records for Harriet Wilson, especially as Milford town papers become more accessible. But it must be remembered that in the early nineteenth century birth records were sporadically kept, often by the church rather than the town. At a time when some births were recorded years afterwards and some not at all, it would not be surprising if the birth of the socially least valued kind of child, a poor black female, went unrecorded. The most plentiful documents from the time are the property records of white men, and the sparse documentary evidence of Harriet Wilson’s existence stands in sharp contrast to the pages and pages of property transactions involving Nehemiah Hayward and his sons.18 The Hayward family also boasts an extensive genealogy that necessitated research in England and traces the family back to the 1300s.19

The Nehemiah Haywards were moderately well off, but not wealthy or formally educated,20 and the fancy genealogy was prepared by a descendant of the one character in Our Nig to end up rich and famous. This is Lewis Belmont, or Jonas Hayward, the brother associated in Baltimore business with Frado’s beloved James (George Hayward). Wilson presents Lewis in a negative light as “an especial favorite of sister Mary; more like her, in disposition and preferences than James or Jack” (78). He turned out the better businessman, however; when he arrived in Baltimore, brother George was engaged “in a small way” in a stove business so “little known” that in Jonas’s favorite story, told and retold, he could not find his brother until he accidentally stumbled upon him.21 Jonas quickly became senior partner and transformed the company into what a news article calls “an American industrial giant.”22 He developed a system of hot-water heating for large buildings and employed thousands of men in iron works and heating apparatus plants. Needless to say, Jonas became a leading citizen of Baltimore; in one of the many ironies involving Wilson and Our Nig, he acted in the 1860s as “Ward Manager of the Poor” for the eighteenth Baltimore ward.23 Jonas’s descendants rose up rapidly: his son, Thomas Jonas (1847–1909), attended a New England prep school; his grandson, E. Bartlett (b. 1882), studied under private tutors in Europe and then went to Harvard.

The family genealogy set down by one of these descendants shows the early Haywards to have been the proverbial horse thieves, who seem also to have stolen corn and timber. Later they became London merchants
and in the 1640s emigrated to Massachusetts, where one finds a long line of Nehemiah Haywards in Beverly, Reading, and the surrounding area. The first Hayward of interest to us, Nehemiah (1738–1825), whom I will call "Nehemiah Sr.," is the "sire" referred to in Our Nig who obtained the property and built the "large, old fashioned, two-story white house, environed by fruitful acres" (21). Nehemiah Sr. was born in Hardwick, Massachusetts, but in 1761 went with his brother George to explore New Brunswick on behalf of the Massachusetts government. He became one of the first settlers of Maugerville, New Brunswick, where he amassed "considerable property" (BG, 47). In 1786 Nehemiah Sr. sold his Maugerville land and bought 118 acres in the "mile slip," an unincorporated (and thus untaxed) bit of land about ten miles long by one mile wide lying between Milford and Wilton, New Hampshire. In 1794 he joined others
in petitioning to become part of Milford. Although Nehemiah Sr. was neither one of the biggest landowners in Milford nor a town leader, he made frequent land transactions and participated in local affairs, acting occasionally from 1794 to the early 1800s as “surveyor of highways” and “fence viewer.” The census of 1800 lists him as over 45 and having a wife, son, and daughter.

The son, Nehemiah (1779–1849), “Nehemiah Jr.,” or John Bellmont in *Our Nig*, inherited the “old homestead,” as Wilson describes it (21); his parents, Nehemiah and Mary, gave him half the family farm when he turned 21, and he essentially took over from his father. Wilson notes that “John, the son, had not in his family arrangements departed from the example of the father” (22). Although she goes on to make a sentimental point about boyhood pastimes, the statement is literally true. Nehemiah Jr. continued the pattern his father set in Milford, buying and selling small parcels of land and acting in the same positions, such as surveyor of highways and fence viewer (he was also constable and member of the Committee to Examine Bridges). Nehemias Sr. and Jr. either had religious inclinations or wished to appear solid citizens, for in 1805 they bought a church pew together. As Mr. Bellmont in *Our Nig* does not consider himself a believer (89), it may be that the young Nehemiah was trying to impress the woman he would marry the next year, Rebecca S. Hutchinson; they were married in 1806 by Congregational minister and abolitionist Reverend Humphrey Moore. Nehemiah Jr. seems to have departed from his father’s example only in marrying a “she-devil” and having a large number of children—nine that we know about, seven of whom lived to adulthood (see Fig. 5 for Hayward family tree).

In terms of family prominence, at least, Nehemiah Jr. “married up.” The Baltimore genealogy claims that Rebecca S. Hutchinson Hayward (1780/81–1850), the evil Mrs. Bellmont in *Our Nig*, was a “direct descendant of Anne Hutchinson, one of the ‘Pilgrim Mothers’” (BG, 48). She certainly hailed from one of the most distinguished families in Milford. Her maternal grandfather, William Peabody, was the town’s first settler, and her paternal grandfather, Nathan Hutchinson, could match Peabody in being both a town founder and Revolutionary War veteran; he is eulogized throughout *The History of Milford* as “one of the most active and useful citizens” (32). Rebecca’s parents were well off, and four of her brothers would own their own farms, the other brother becoming a doctor and her sister marrying a noted physician who was elected state senator.

But if Rebecca was born to social prominence, she also received a less
attractive heritage. A startling revelation about her father appears in a chatty history of Milford published in 1963:

Have you ever been spanked in order to make you remember something? There is an old story about the grandson of one of Milford’s earliest settlers who received just such a spanking!

In 1744 Nathan Hutchinson bought a part of the Charleston School Farm from Benjamin Hopkins. He settled on it in 1748. And it was Nathan Hutchinson’s son, Nathan [Rebecca’s father], who was said to have taken his son Reuben to the large rock which is the southwestern boundary of the Charlestown School Farm. There he gave the boy a serious whipping as a life-long reminder that that particular rock was the southwestern bound of that particular tract of land! Reuben never forgot the lesson, either.28

In other words, Rebecca’s father may have been a child beater. The tone of the passage reminds us that standards for the treatment of children were different 250 years ago (and perhaps 25 years ago) or this story would not have been handed down and repeated with such insouciance. To the modern sensibility it reveals a bit more than the overriding significance of property to men in 1800, for we are told that child abusers have usually been abused themselves when they were children.29 If Rebecca Hutchinson Hayward received some of her father’s “serious whippings,” she may have felt all the more entitled to beat her servant. In Our Nig Wilson hints that the “she-devil” abused at least one of her children when he was young. When Frado and her beloved James first meet in Our Nig, Frado has just been whipped and banished from the house and James is eager to talk with her. Wilson’s comment that “a frail child, driven from shelter by the cruelty of his mother, was an object of interest to James” (50) implies that James’s identification with Frado might arise from shared experience.

The living patterns of the Hayward family, in addition to the history of violence in Rebecca’s background, suggest that Wilson based her characterization of Mrs. Bellmont as a she-devil on reality. Although Wilson was familiar with contemporary novels like Susan Warner’s The Wide, Wide World (1850), wherein cruel guardians mistreat orphans, she probably did not need fictional models. There is direct evidence, for instance, that Rebecca Hayward had trouble living in the same house with others, just as Mrs. Bellmont does. Mrs. Bellmont cannot keep hired help because no servant “will live in the house with her; she’s so ugly, they can’t” (18).
Figure 3  District School No. 3, where Wilson would have attended school. Courtesy of the Milford Historical Society.

At the end of *Our Nig* Wilson says Mrs. Bellmont worsened with age so that finally “no one, even her own children, could remain with her” (130). Interestingly, in the 1850 census Rebecca Hayward and her three surviving sons—Jonas, Nehemiah P., and Charles—are all shown residing in Baltimore (Nehemiah Jr. died there early in 1849). Rebecca’s address, however, is in a different ward from any of her sons.

 Apparently the young Rebecca could not live in the same house as her in-laws. The family was together in Milford at the time of the 1810 census, but in 1818 Nehemiah Jr., Rebecca, and their children moved a short distance away to Wilton (the Hayward farm lay close to the Wilton border). Although land records do not reveal any new financial stresses, Nehemiah Jr. started keeping a store in Wilton Centre, and the 1820 census lists the senior Haywards and their daughter Sally (Aunt Abby) in Milford and Nehemiah and his wife and children in Wilton. As soon as Mary and Nehemiah Sr. were dead, the Nehemiahs Jr. moved back to the family homestead in Milford. In his will Nehemiah Sr. left the farm to his son but specified that his daughter Sally would have during her lifetime “the right of occupying one undivided half of all buildings except
the barn,” along with the privilege of keeping a cow and a horse in the barn.\textsuperscript{31} It would seem that unless there were conflict or some likelihood that Sally might be prevented from living on the homestead, her father need not have provided for her so specifically. Wilson says in \textit{Our Nig} that one reason Mrs. Bellmont hated Aunt Abby was because “she did not give her right in the homestead to John, and leave it forever” (45).

Mrs. Bellmont is also portrayed as greedily pushing her children to marry into affluent families (56, 111), and this characteristic too was probably based on reality. At least Rebecca Hayward’s oldest child Elizabeth (Betsey) provided a model for the lucrative matches Mrs. Bellmont tries to set up for Jane and Jack. Betsey, who is referred to in \textit{Our Nig} only as one of the grown-up children “already settled in homes of their own” (22), married an ambitious man known for his “hardness in driving a bargain.”\textsuperscript{32} He made the fortune he sought, and the couple’s sons were all successful in business, “some unusually successful” (Ramsdell, 483).

There are numerous indications of a strong materialism in the Hayward family, ranging from the decision of the “sire” to buy untaxed land to the overriding emphasis of the Baltimore genealogy a hundred years later on the Haywards’ “thrift and economy” and “financial and managerial abilities” (BG, 50, 52). No doubt Rebecca would have been gratified to know that her grandson’s “business qualities were similar to those of a great military commander” (BG, 53). While the values of the author may account in part for the genealogy’s foregrounding of financial success linked with domination, the same concerns appear in stories that obviously originated with Jonas Hayward and are repeated in several sources. The anecdotes all validate Jonas’s status as self-made man. We have already heard the one about his search for his obscure brother; there are also tales of how his brother paid him only fifty cents a day when he joined the business and how throughout his rise Jonas’s talisman was “his first dollar, a silver one,” which he earned on his father’s farm and “has been retained in the family as a useful souvenir, all of his children having cut their teeth upon it.”\textsuperscript{33}

This coin recalls the silver dollars in \textit{Our Nig}, such as the half dollar Mrs. Bellmont gives Frado as a “present” for twelve years’ drudgery (117). The prevalence of “thrift and economy” (or greed and rapaciousness, depending on one’s point of view) in the lives of the Haywards should make us take a closer look at economic themes in \textit{Our Nig} and recognize the extent to which economic motives predominate in Wilson’s narrative. Even Mrs. Bellmont’s cruelty stems from her financial inter-
ests; she discourages Frado's religious proclivities, for instance, because she fears they might induce her to leave and "just think how much profit she was to us last summer." Mrs. Bellmont decides to beat Frado because "I'll beat the money out of her, if I can't get her worth any other way" (90). Frado has "worth" to Mrs. Bellmont as a workhorse, but there are other villains in *Our Nig* and almost all human interactions are shown reduced to economic exchanges. Frado learns early that women count not only as workers but as ornaments for men. Her mother gave away her "priceless gem"—virginity—for nothing but was later able to trade her second "treasure"—white skin—to Jim for a living (6, 14). Even a white invalid has more value than a black supergirl. Frado remarks wistfully of Jane Bellmont (Lucretia Hayward), "Although an invalid, she was not excluded from society. Was it strange she should seem a desirable companion, a treasure as a wife?" (55). Despite its seemingly happy ending, Jane's courtship story has more to do with bargaining than love; the suitor who fails in "possessing her" ultimately "balanced his disappointment by a few hundreds" (55, 60).

In an environment where everything is for sale, not even Frado can remain untarnished. The first silver half-dollar she receives is for her ornamental value. Although Frado cannot be a "treasure as a wife" to the Bellmont men, throughout the narrative she plays the part of clown for her so-called friends in the household, Jack and Mr. Bellmont. Twice she endangers her life to amuse them (the climb to the roof of the barn and the sheep episode), and the encouragement she receives "constantly nurtured the inclination" (53). The ultimate entertainment for Jack is when Mrs. Bellmont orders Frado to eat from her dirty plate and Frado has the dog lick it first: "Jack was boiling over with laughter. He related all the circumstances to James, and pulling a bright, silver half-dollar from his pocket, he threw it at Nig, saying, 'There, take that; 'twas worth paying for' " (72). Although Frado/Wilson seems to relish this silver dollar, it is hard to ignore the dehumanizing parallel between throwing a coin at Frado and tossing a bone to the dog.

* * *

The dollar signs that reverberate throughout *Our Nig* and the lives of the Haywards are intriguing, but probably the most important piece of information about the Hayward family, in terms of its implications for interpreting *Our Nig*, is their strong abolitionist connections. Rebecca Hayward, who descended from the eminent Hutchinson family, was related
to another branch of the Milford Hutchinsons, the Hutchinson Family Singers. The Hutchinson Family Singers gained international recognition in the late 1840s and 1850s as a group of folksingers who supported progressive causes, most notably abolition but also women’s rights and temperance; they were the nineteenth-century equivalent of a Pete Seeger or an Odetta. Brothers Judson, John, and Asa, and sister Abby Hutchinson believed themselves engaged in a “great moral combat” against slavery, as Asa noted in his journal: “Only let knowledge be generally diffused and slavery cannot any way be tolerated. . . . let us, the Hutchinson family, tune our voice for the cause of freedom.”34 The Hutchinson Family Singers knew most of the abolitionist leaders and were considered a huge success in raising consciousness. Frederick Douglass himself wrote John Hutchinson, “I especially have reason to feel a grateful interest in the whole Hutchinson Family—for you have sung the yokes from the necks and the fetters from the limbs of my race.”35

Milford, New Hampshire, abounded with Hutchinsons, and Rebecca’s blood relationship with the Hutchinson Family Singers was not close; so far as I can tell, she and their father were second cousins. However, the relationship was cemented through two marriages. In 1843, the same year as a massive abolitionist rally in Milford, Judson Hutchinson wed Rebecca’s niece. The avaricious man whom the Haywards’ eldest child Betsey married was the singers’ eldest brother David. In a biography of the Hutchinson Family Singers, Betsey’s husband is presented as a materialist and skinflint, the only one of the siblings to deny support to a needy sister: “David, the eldest, had always seemed the farthest away from them. The younger boys had resented his Yankee hardness in driving a bargain. He had had a good deep bass voice, but music had been less important to him than was the fortune he was amassing” (Brink, 274).

The character of David Hutchinson reminds us that strong differences can exist between siblings, to say nothing of cousins, and Rebecca Hayward’s connection to the Hutchinson Family Singers does not necessarily make her an abolitionist. But there is strong evidence that her son Jonas, the Baltimore entrepreneur, was just that. Both John Hutchinson in his reminiscences and Asa in his journal describe a concert tour to Baltimore in January and February of 1844, at a time when the singers were struggling to establish their national reputation.36 Not surprisingly, Baltimore gave a chilly response to the singers of “O Liberate the Bondsmen” and “The Slaves’ Appeal”; the Hutchinsons complained of small, “panic stricken” audiences, and they had trouble finding personal accommodations and
Figure 4  The Hutchinson Family Singers, 1846.
concert space once people learned who they were. Asa calls himself “an Unwelcomed Stranger” and says bluntly, “I don’t like the slave states. Freedom does not reign here.” The bright spot of the Baltimore trip was the support of the Haywards, Jonas and Nehemiah P. (not Nehemiah Jr. but his son Nehemiah Peabody, who had joined Jonas in the business after George’s death in 1840).

The Hutchinson Family Singers socialized nearly every day with Jonas and Nehemiah and their wives and for a time even resided with them. Asa notes, “Here I am in the corner of our chamber in the house of our much esteemed townsmen and friends, the Messrs. Hawards, who are a fine specimen of the true Yankee character. Their wives are true-hearted Baltimoreans. [“True-hearted” probably means antislavery.] Jonas’ wife is rather more healthy than Nehemiah’s, but they are all very kind and therefore we feel very much at home here.” The relationship was not merely social, because Jonas acted as an informal manager for the Hutchinsons during their stay. It was he who found lodgings and concert halls, provided an escort to Washington for some concerts, took care of the luggage, and acted as “door agent pro tem.” Asa reports that Jonas also sold tickets in advance, once having disposed of a third of the tickets himself. He even dispensed sympathy after unsuccessful concerts and “told of trials he had himself experienced.” What these trials were—and whether they stemmed from holding unpopular abolitionist views—is unclear, but Jonas probably would not have gone to all this trouble for the Hutchinsons unless he shared their sentiments.37 Certainly Asa Hutchinson would have described Jonas less warmly, for a perusal of the journal shows that Asa calls antislavery people “true” and “kind”; proslavery people are quickly dismissed or termed a “disgrace to the country.”

Jonas Hayward may thus have been one of the hypocritical (racist) abolitionists Wilson excoriates in Our Nig, and it is quite possible that the she-devil herself had abolitionist sympathies. Rebecca could have been influenced not only by her son and Hutchinson cousins but also by her minister, the Reverend Humphrey Moore; he presided at her marriage in 1806, and in Our Nig Mrs. Bellmont is still a churchgoer. Milford’s most distinguished minister, Moore served as pastor of the Congregational Church from 1802 to 1836. He was such a strong abolitionist that he was elected by antislavery men to the House of Representatives in 1840 and to the New Hampshire State Senate in 1841; in both places he delivered stirring orations against slavery.38 It is one of the many ironies involving Our Nig that Milford, the site of Harriet Wilson’s oppression, should have
been an abolitionist stronghold and station on the Underground Railroad (Frado’s cramped attic chamber would have made a good hiding place). A citizen stated at Milford’s centennial celebration in 1894, “If Milford is distinguished for anything, it is for the unselfish and sublime work” of abolitionists.39

The likelihood that one or more of the Haywards was an abolitionist provides an answer to the often asked question of why, if Wilson was really writing to earn money for her son, she risked alienating abolitionists. Why suddenly mention in the last chapter being “maltreated by professed abolitionists, who didn’t want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North” (129) when abolitionists were the most important, if not the only, source of support for African American writers? A reasonable explanation is that a critique of abolitionists’ racism was more central to Wilson’s story than we have previously supposed. In the narrative the only reason suggested for Frado/Wilson’s hostility to abolitionists is not a very compelling one—they simply failed (like Frado herself) to detect that her husband was a fake. Nor is the comment about being maltreated by professed abolitionists developed; it is simply mentioned as one of the several “strange adventures” Frado experienced after she left her child in Milford and sought a living elsewhere. It would seem that Wilson may have deliberately pushed the maltreatment by professed abolitionists forward in time in order to disassociate it from the Bellmonts. As she says in the preface, she has not divulged everything about her life, having “purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home.” The principal omission may well have been the abolitionist views of the Bellmonts, our bad antislavery friends. If this were the case, it would have intensified the crucial dilemma Wilson faced in publishing her story: how to tell the truth about the racism she experienced in the North without harming the cause of slaves in the South. How could she tell the truth, even slant, about the racism and hypocrisy of abolitionists themselves?

Wilson clearly wanted to tell a more complex story than the political agendas or literary forms of her day could contain. As Barbara Christian has noted, she “questioned the progressive platform of her time—that white northern women were the natural allies of blacks, that the North was not racist, that all Black men were devoted to the women of their race.”40 And, we might add, that all abolitionists were friends of all African Americans. At the same time Wilson found the “progres-
sive platform” of her time too simplistic, she also found the two literary models available to her—the slave narrative and the sentimental novel—ineffective for her purposes. Obviously, she could not plot a clear-cut movement from slavery to freedom, as in the slave narrative. She was supposedly “free” to begin with, and “slavery’s shadows” in the North ended up making her economically dependent. Nor could Wilson create a social world of clear-cut friends and enemies of an orphan on the rise, as in the sentimental novel. At first reading, it may appear that she has divided the Bellmonts very clearly into friends or foes: Mr. Bellmont, James, Jack, Jane, and Aunt Abby are portrayed as empathetic and kind, while Mrs. Bellmont, Mary, and Lewis are mean. But upon closer examination Frado’s relationships with the kind Bellmonts dissolve into relations plagued by money and power. The role of Mr. Bellmont provides a good example of the way Wilson complicates her narrative. If the “humane” Mr. Bellmont is Frado’s main protector (24), his complicity in Frado’s oppression is simultaneously made clear; if Wilson often seems to want to excuse him, the text finally does not.

Although Mr. Bellmont claims that “women rule the earth, and all in it” (44), he in fact makes the big decisions, as when he “declared decisively” that Frado should attend school (30). “The word once spoken admitted of no appeal,” and despite Mary’s objections “the word became law” (31). The same is the case when he proclaims that Jane can reject Mrs. Bellmont’s choice and marry someone else. However much of a “scold” Mrs. Bellmont may be, she accepts her husband’s authority as head of the household. When he tells her not to beat Frado, she is reduced to tears and obeys him (47); unfortunately, he usually leaves the house to avoid a confrontation and thus gives Mrs. Bellmont tacit permission to administer a beating (34). Mr. Bellmont’s advice to Frado—that “when she was sure she did not deserve a whipping, to avoid it if she could”—betrayed his belief that sometimes she does deserve to be whipped (104). The mixed character of Mr. Bellmont fits with the complexity of the world portrayed by Wilson, where things are frequently not as they seem. The appearance of a good Northern antislavery society juxtaposed to a bad Southern slave society may be deceiving, just as slavery shadows freedom and just as Frado’s father’s black outside conceals a white inside (12) and Mrs. Bellmont’s light skin covers the inner darkness that can be glimpsed through her “black eyes” (68).

But if Wilson had a complex story, her husband, the fake fugitive slave,
did not. In the last chapter of *Our Nig* she says that Samuel recounted his supposed personal experience of slavery “in homely phrase” and that “his illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists” (126, 128). In other words, the content of his narrative was false and the form bad enough to be termed “illiterate.” Yet Samuel had no trouble getting an audience from abolitionists, for they were “hungry” for his lies; they preferred his story to hers, even when hers was both highly literate and based on true experience. The tartness of Wilson’s appeal to the reader in her last chapter (“Refuse not . . . Enough has been unrolled to demand your sympathy”) suggests that she anticipated she would not get much of a hearing and would have to publish the book herself.

As Wilson prepared to publish, she had to face another predicament: although it was necessary to receive the support of at least some “good antislavery friends” to sell her narrative, she could not distribute it very widely without alerting the surviving Haywards, who all had abolitionist connections. Even though most of the family was dead by 1859, Wilson had much to fear from Jonas and Betsey, both of whom still lived, Betsey in the same town as Wilson’s son. Both Jonas and Betsey were rich and powerful and had been allied with the she-devil. Jonas may have encouraged abolitionist concerts, but he also took the Hutchinson Family Singers to the grave of his sister Rebecca (Frado’s tormentor, Mary Bellmont). Asa writes, “It was a very solemn occasion. Jonas could not refrain from shedding tears, copious tears of grief.” (By contrast, Frado had found Mary’s death “a thanksgiving,” 107). Thus Wilson needed to change the names of the family, even if she intended her narrative as a straight autobiography rather than a work of autobiographical fiction.

There are striking parallels in the circumstances of *Our Nig* and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Jacobs also had to use different names to protect herself, and until the recent discovery of her letters, which show the book to be an autobiography, *Incidents* was considered a work of fiction heavily edited and possibly even authored by a white woman.41 Now *Incidents* is classified as autobiography and *Our Nig* as fiction, but the only clear difference in form lies in the point of view, *Incidents* being told in the first person and *Our Nig* in the third. *Our Nig* is told *mostly* in the third person, that is—we need the qualification because Wilson sometimes shifts, as in the early chapter titles “Mag Smith, My Mother,” “My Father’s Death,” and “A New Home for Me.” Perhaps these titles are leftovers from an earlier draft Wilson thought
too little distanced. At the least, they reveal a strong ambivalence on her part regarding the whole autobiography/fiction issue.

It might seem that my discoveries about the Haywards would allow us to come down firmly on the autobiography side of the frequently asked question of whether *Our Nig* is autobiography or fiction. The similarities between the lives of the Haywards and the lives of the Bellmonts are indeed many, and we now know that because Wilson's enemies were not all dead in 1859 she had to adopt disguises, like changing names and separating the Bellmonts from the abolitionist cause, in order to protect herself. But I think the information I have uncovered could just as well be used to support a description of *Our Nig* as fiction (albeit strongly autobiographical fiction). Even though there are numerous correspondences between the Haywards and the Bellmonts, the correlation is not precise enough to allow us to reconstruct Wilson's life in detail, and I have also found evidence that she deliberately changed some facts.

It first appears that information about the Haywards can be used to determine Wilson's birthdate. If we know the date of Lucretia Hayward's marriage, for instance, can we not count back to Wilson's date of birth? Lucretia married her Vermont lover in September of 1834, just a month after George Hayward's wedding. In *Our Nig* the marriages occur after a spring visit from James (George) when Frado is nine years old. Frado would thus have been born between the summer of 1824 and the spring of 1825. Spring 1825 would be the most likely date because almost all the age markers in *Our Nig* are given in the spring—Frado has just turned six when she goes to the Bellmonts in summer; she is seven when she starts summer school; she is "now nine" when James (George) visits in late spring; and she becomes eighteen and finishes her indenture in spring. But a spring 1825 birthdate for Wilson is problematic for two reasons. First, it contradicts the 1850 census, which gives Wilson's age as twenty-two. Second, in *Our Nig* Mary Bellmont (Rebecca Hayward the younger) has "just glided into her teens" when Frado joins the household (27); Rebecca the younger was born 3 February 1822 and would not enter even her second decade until 1832, a year after Frado would have joined the Bellmonts if she had been born in spring 1825. The puzzle pieces do not fit together if one tries to assume an exact correspondence between Hayward and *Our Nig* chronologies.42
Figure 5  Hayward genealogy. Corresponding characters in Our Nig are enclosed in brackets.
But there are strong aesthetic reasons for Wilson's having changed the order of events in *Our Nig*. Let us suppose she was born on 2 June 1827, a date that satisfies most of the requisites: Wilson would thus have been born in the spring, been 22 at the time of the 1 June 1850 census, and have come to the Haywards in the summer of 1833 after she had turned six and Rebecca the younger eleven. In this case she would have met George Hayward during her first year at the Haywards, earlier than in *Our Nig*, and the weddings of Lucretia and George would also have taken place earlier, just after her first year. But it is clearly more effective artistically for Wilson to postpone the weddings, which are uncommon events, and show herself established in a regular routine at the Haywards. Her school experiences need to be described right away because of their importance to her relationships with young Rebecca, Mrs. Hayward, and ultimately George (she must be able to read the Bible when she meets him). Before George and Lucretia can marry, there has to be a context set up for the friendship with George and sufficient leisure for the long courtship story of Lucretia. Wilson did not hesitate to make other alterations in the lives of the Haywards. One change she may have made out of ignorance—she says the Bellmont "sire" died before his wife (21), though Nehemiah Hayward Sr. outlived Mary—but in two other instances she must have changed the facts deliberately.

Sally Hayward (Aunt Abby) was not really Nehemiah's "maiden sister" because she married at some point between 1825 when her father died and 1837 when she suddenly appears as "Mrs. Sally Blanchard" right beneath the Haywards in Milford tax records. In 1840 "Widow Sally Blanchard" is listed as a taxpayer, and the census of that year suggests she lived with the Haywards; at the time of the 1850 census, a Sally Blanchard was residing in Milford with Betsy Hayward Hutchinson's teenage son and daughter. There is no death record for a Sally Hayward, but in 1859 a Sally Blanchard died in nearby New Ipswich. (Wilson says Aunt Abby "entered heaven" only a few months before the completion of *Our Nig*). Since Wilson would have known that Sally was a widow, she may have made Aunt Abby a "maiden sister" for aesthetic reasons. Certainly it obviates the necessity of going into a long explanation of her past. Wilson makes a slip at one point and introduces some of this material when she describes Jane's husband-to-be as "a visitor [who] came to Aunt Abby's; one of her boy-favorites, George Means, from an adjoining State" (57). It is never explained why Aunt Abby should have "boy-favorites" from any state, but in reality they were probably relatives of her late hus-
band. (Sally married a Blanchard and Lucretia wed Samuel Blanchard from Vermont.)

Presumably it was also in the interest of streamlining the narrative that Wilson made another change: she combined two Hayward brothers, Nehemiah P. and Charles, into one character, Jack Bellmont. It appears initially that Jack was based on the youngest Hayward son, Charles, and Nehemiah P. falls into the category of children already away from home when Wilson joined the Haywards. But as I gathered more facts about Nehemiah P. and Charles, it became clear that aspects of both are combined in the character of Jack. It would have been difficult to individualize too many brothers, and Wilson may have further simplified reality by suppressing the presence of a second or even third Hayward son living with the family when she arrived in 1831–33. Nehemiah P. would have been 21 and may already have left home, but Jonas was younger and did not seek his brother in Baltimore until 1837 (BG, 50). These kinds of changes suggest a shaping of the narrative more consistent with autobiographical fiction than “pure” autobiography (if such a thing exists). So there is probably some accuracy in a critic’s prediction that “readers of Our Nig will be debating for some time the question of whether the work is fiction or autobiography.”

Wherever Our Nig falls on a fiction/autobiography scale, it can still be considered a link between, as Gates puts it, “the sustained and well-developed tradition of black autobiography and the slow emergence of a distinctive black voice in fiction” (lii). And wherever Wilson’s book falls on the scale, she clearly had a strong aesthetic consciousness: we see it at work in her efforts to complicate the narrative and simultaneously provide a clean, dramatic story line; we see it in her struggles to negotiate the Haywards’ abolitionist connections. Of course, my discoveries about the Haywards indicate that whatever conscious changes she may have made Wilson adhered closely to her real experience. Much of what she says is literally true, as Wilson herself tells the reader in her preface; she has only “purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends.” In addition, we now know for certain that Wilson’s stated motive for writing the narrative, to maintain her child, was no rhetorical device. Her appearance on the lists of the Overseers of the Poor and her boy’s month-long stay at the horrid county farm attest to her compelling need. Our Nig differs markedly in this respect from Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Jacobs told her story to “arouse the women of the North” to political action on behalf of slave women in the South (1),
but Wilson could not tie hers to any political agenda of the day, and neither could she demand any action other than buying her book. As she anticipated, her story about a complex North, a "two-story white house," could be received only by a small group, her "colored brethren" (Preface, my italics). And so Our Nig disappeared for more than a century.

Yet, if Our Nig once fell out of history, it has now fallen back in. The process of restoring the author's identity begun by Henry Louis Gates will surely advance as more researchers pursue her story. In 1983 Gates called the "story of the life and times of Harriet E. Wilson . . . curiously compelling" (lix), and if the latest chapter is any indication, it will continue to be so. Certainly the lives of the real-life Bellmonts are not lacking in drama. The career of Jonas Hayward, in particular, seems the stuff of an overly ironic novel; it is hard to forget his selling tickets to abolitionist concerts while his parents keep a slave at home, or his rising to ward manager of the poor while the family's former "nig" struggles to keep her three-year-old from going "insane" at the county pauper farm. As Wilson's friend Allida proclaims in her testimonial, "'Truth is stranger than fiction;' and whoever reads the narrative of Alfrado, will find the assertion verified" (133).

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Notes

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1 Quoted on the cover of H. E. Wilson, Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1983). Further references are from this edition and will be noted in the text.

2 The 1892 work is Iola Leroy by Frances E. W. Harper, the most prominent black woman writer in the nineteenth century. The first African American novelist is thought to be William Wells Brown, who published Clotel (1853) in England. In his introduction to Our Nig, Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls Harriet Wilson "one of the first two black women to publish a novel in any language" (xiii); also in 1859 the Brazilian Maria F. dos Reis published Ursula.

For an account of the search, see David Ames Curtis and Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Establishing the Identity of the Author of *Our Nig,*” in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton and Andréé Nicola McLaughlin (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1990), 48–69. Milford, New Hampshire, is fifty miles from Boston, and its southern border is five miles from the Massachusetts line. At the time *Our Nig* was published, its population was 2,223. For a more thorough description, see George A. Ramsdell, *The History of Milford* (Concord, N.H.: Rumford, 1901), 10–11, 272–77. Further references to this history will be noted in the text.

*Farmer’s Cabinet*, 29 February 1860. The death record is located at the New Hampshire Bureau of Vital Statistics. Because George Mason Wilson died in 1860, a census year, his death is also recorded in the mortality schedule of the federal census for Milford. This record provides more detail than the death record Gates and Curtis found, establishing that Wilson died of “bilious fever” after an illness of 12 days. His “color” is given as “mulatto,” the choices being white, black, or mulatto.


This report is located in the Town Clerk’s Office in Milford; I thank Nancy Gray for discovering it. According to the WPA Historical Records Survey, the Town Clerk’s Office had in 1937 “reports of Treasurer and overseer of poor” from 1839 through 1856. I have seen only 1839 and 1840 (at the Milford Historical Society), 1843, 1845, 1849, 1850, 1855, and 1856. It is not clear whether the others have been temporarily misplaced or permanently lost; the town clerk was uncooperative. For the WPA Historical Records Survey, specifically “Inventory of the Local Archives of New Hampshire/Town of Milford,” consult Special Collections, Dimond Library, University of New Hampshire.

Milford followed national trends in poor relief, moving from the “outdoor” relief of the eighteenth century, in which the poor were auctioned off or bound out, to the “indoor” relief of the nineteenth century, in which they were kept on town and later county poor farms. But there was always over-
lapping. Around the time Harriet Wilson was born, Milford still made use of the vendue system or "New England method" of disposing of the poor, whereby "the town's poor were sold at auction . . . once a year, usually at the close of the annual town meeting. . . . when the maintenance of the pauper was struck off to the lowest bidder" (Ramsdell, 75). In the 1830s the town established a poor farm, and by the time Wilson needed assistance paupers might either be living on the farm or boarding with a family. As Timothy Dodge notes, "In many instances there was a combination of old and new methods. A town farm might be in operation and at the same time some forms of 'outdoor' relief would also be relied on" (17); see his master's thesis, "Poor Relief in Durham, Lee, and Madbury, 1732–1891" (Univ. of New Hampshire, 1982).

One of the "old methods" that probably applied to Harriet Wilson as a child was the binding out of poor children. The terms were usually specified in written contracts setting the period of indenture until adulthood (18 for girls and 21 for boys) and requiring a minimum of education to be provided the child; see Marcus W. Jernegan, Laboring and Dependent Classes in Colonial America, 1607–1783 (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1965), 107. Although Wilson does not mention a formal written contract, and none has been found, she refers to "the term of years which Mrs. B. claimed as the period of her servitude" (116). Also, Frado is allowed three years, and only three years, of education: "Her education completed, as she said, Mrs. Bellmont felt that her time and person belonged solely to her" (41). The choice of wording suggests that, no matter how informally, Frado was "bound out" to the Bellmonts.

"Paupers Received and Discharged, 1852–1885," Hillsborough County Nursing Home (formerly Hillsborough County Farm), Goffstown, N.H. This is one of the few county farm records listed by the WPA in 1937 to survive the nursing home's move to a new building.

Proctor reminisces in two documents, both located at the Milford Historical Society. One is a 1918 letter addressed to George A. Worcester, who was a member of the Town History Committee, and the other document, which contains similar material, is a six-page typed manuscript entitled "Sixty Years Ago."

All the paupers at the farm seem to have been badly treated, whether black or white, but one of Proctor's "jokes" attests to the racism there. One day when bread was short, Dimon Prince said "Better kiss the cook," and the cook replied, "I had rather cook another dinner than be kissed by a nigger." Proctor mentions two African Americans at the farm other than Prince, "two boys Henry and James Blanchard mulattoes." During the Civil War, Captain Proctor ran into James, who had "enlisted from Amherst in the 10th N.H. Vols. where he served until his death, in Norfolk, Va. Aug. 19, 1863." It is not certain whether James and Henry Blanchard were ever transferred to the county farm, but their lives may have intersected with Harriet Wilson's
in another way. They were sons of Timothy Blanchard, a black man and property owner in Milford, and Dorcas Hood, a white woman. James and Henry were born sometime between 1835 and 1839, when Timothy died (the 1850 census lists Henry Blanchard, a ten-year-old “mulatto,” as residing in the poorhouse). Perhaps they were abandoned by their mother, since one wonders what they were doing at the poor farm when Dorcas remarried (a white property owner, Luther Elliot of Mason). The parallels with Our Nig are intriguing. At any rate, the descent of James and Henry happened quickly, as their grandfather was a distinguished Milford citizen; George Blanchard (d. 1824) was a Revolutionary War veteran and “veterinary surgeon” who owned a farm in Milford. His son Timothy (1791–1839) “remained on the homestead for many years.” In the 1820 and 1830 censuses Timothy has several “colored” men living with him who are not members of his own family; these residents are prime candidates for Wilson/Frado’s father “Jim.” (Residing with the Nehemiah Hayward Jr.s. in 1820 is a white woman, aged 16–25, whom I cannot identify—a possible candidate for Frado’s mother, “Mag.”) For information about the Blanchards, see “George Blanchard” family register in Ramsdell, 592–93, and Probate Records 977 and 1872, Hillsborough County Courthouse, Nashua, N.H.

13 Prince’s name also appears in “Paupers Received and Discharged, 1852–1885.” The simultaneous existence of a town farm and a county farm for about fifteen years is typical of the overlapping relief systems described in Note 9; see discussion in Winifred A. Wright, The Granite Town: Milford, New Hampshire 1901–1978 (Canaan, N.H.: Phoenix, 1979), 339–40.


15 The smallness of the amount ($12) suggests that she did not reside at the farm for the whole year. Wilson’s name appears as “Mrs. Wilson,” so it is conceivable, if not very likely, that some other Mrs. Wilson was meant.

16 From colonial times there were laws to keep out nonresident paupers. New Hampshire citizens could even be fined for bringing an indigent person into the state—Laws of the State of New Hampshire (Concord, N.H., 1811), 70.

17 It would not be unusual for the census to err. Gates rightly points out that “discrepancies in census data were common even among stable and middle-class white Americans” (xv). He notes that Samuel Boyles, the carpenter with whom Wilson boarded in 1850, is 50 at the time of the 1850 census and 52 in 1860; his birthplace shifts from “Vermont” to “Massachusetts.” People often did not know exactly when they had been born, and their recollections
could easily be distorted by sickness or trauma. There were also frequent mistakes in birth records. To again use Samuel Boyles as an example, the Boyles family register in Ramsdell's *The History of Milford* has him born in 1806, but his tombstone (West Street cemetery) says he “passed to spirit life” in 1871 at the age of 63. We have three different birthdates for the she-devil herself. According to the Hayward family register in Ramsdell, Rebecca Hutchinson Hayward was born in October of 1780, and according to the Hutchinson family register in November of 1781; the Baltimore genealogy (see Note 19) gives her birthdate as October 1781.

18 These may be found in the *Register of Deeds*, Hillsborough County Court-house, Nashua, N.H. It should be remembered that spelling was inconsistent in the nineteenth century and “Hayward” can be given several differing spellings, including Heward, Hawood, Haywood, Heyward, Heywood, and Howard.

19 “Hayward,” in *Baltimore: Its History and Its People*, 2 vols. (New York: Lewis Historical, 1912), 2:42–54. I call this work the “Baltimore genealogy” and abbreviate it as BG in further references. There is a more modest “family register” in Ramsdell, 735.

20 Jonas provides the information, however, that his parents were “able and willing to assist him” in his ambition to become educated (BG, 49). The Nehemiah Haywards seem solidly middle-class, better off than the “lower middle-class family” Gates views the Bellmonts as being in *Our Nig* (xliii). Their financial position can be assessed through deeds (see Note 18) and tax records. The latter, thanks to the efforts of Arthur Bryan, may be found at the Milford Public Library. Records mentioning the Haywards include the following: “The South-west Parish Book March 1784”; [Invoice and Taxes 1807–1834]; “Book of Records of Selectmen of the Town of Milford Commencing 1829”; “Records [Invoice and Taxes] 1835–56”; “Invoice and Taxes 1843–1852”; “Invoice and Taxes” [1848–1850]; and “Record of Taxes, 1853–69.”

21 The story is told in the following sources: BG, 50; “Jonas Hutchinson Hayward,” in *The Biographical Cyclopedia of Representative Men of Maryland and District of Columb ia* (Baltimore: National Biographical, 1879), 246–47; and William Stump, “Hayward,” *Baltimore Sunday Sun Magazine*, 20 June 1954, 3. See Fig. 1 for Jonas’s portrait in BG.

22 Stump, 3. Jonas Hayward’s accomplishments are also described in “Recollections of George A. Frederick,” a speech by an architect on building innovations in Baltimore. The 1912 manuscript may be found at the Maryland Historical Society.

23 Baltimore, Md., “List of Committees,” 1863 (73)-RG.25, S.1, Baltimore City Archives.

24 The story of the mile slip is told in Christopher D. MacLeod, “The Mile Slip: A New Hampshire Oddity,” *New Hampshire Profiles* 15 (Nov. 1966): 36–39. The Haywards’ 118 acres is described in Hillsborough County *Register*
of Deeds, 16/423, and Probate Record 05297, Hillsborough County Court-
house, Nashua, N.H. See Fig. 2 for the location of the property on the Map
of Milford . . . from Actual Surveys by E. M. Woodford (Philadelphia: Richard
Clark, 1854). Although the white house no longer stands, there are still
orchards in the area today (the "fruitful acres" of Wilson's description); ac-
cording to Ramsdell, Milford farmers produced "large quantities" of apples
and a smaller amount of peaches (12). The Souhegan ("crooked") River,
which flows nearby, is subject to sudden flooding and energetic enough to
have destroyed several bridges; see A. B. Rotch, Pictures of Old Milford
(Milford, N.H.: Cabinet, 1912), 61–62. The school Wilson attended was
probably the District School No. 3 (see Fig. 3).
25 See "The South-west Parish Book" (Note 20) for appointments to town
offices and purchase of church pews. The petition to incorporate is discussed
in David Goodwin, Historical Sketch of the Town of Milford, New Hampshire
26 See Register of Deeds, 49/47, Hillsborough County Courthouse, Nashua,
N.H. The authors of the Baltimore genealogy must not have seen this deed,
for they did not know about Mary and assumed that because Nehemiah Sr.
left "no wife" when he died in 1825, he had no wife when he moved to Milford
(BG, 48). But Mary died before him, and her name appears on this deed in
1800. See Fig. 5, "Hayward Family."
27 The two children who did not survive are not mentioned in the Baltimore
genealogy or the family registers in Ramsdell. There was a daughter who
was born in Wilton 6 February 1820 and died 9 February (Wilton Town
South-west Parish Book," on 27 August 1814 a child of "N. Haywood" died
of dysentery. The Haywards whose graves I have located in Milford are
Charles, James, James's wife Nancy, and their son C. Francis (Elm Street
Cemetery) and Betsey (North River Cemetery).
28 Alberta T. Hagar and Edith F. Hunter, Milford: Our Home Town (Milford,
N.H., 1963), 24. No source for the anecdote is provided.
29 See, for instance, Murray A. Straus, Richard J. Gelles, and Suzanne K.
Steinmetz, Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family (New York:
30 The date can be determined from the Hillsborough County Register of Deeds,
116/185 and 117/419, Hillsborough County Courthouse, Nashua, N.H., and
[Invoice and Taxes 1807–1834], Milford Public Library. The Haywards' resi-
dence in Wilton is described briefly in Abiel Abbot Livermore and Sewall
31 See Probate Record 05297, Hillsborough County Courthouse, Nashua, N.H.
32 Carol Brink, Harps in the Wind: The Story of the Singing Hutchinsons (New
York: Macmillan, 1947), 274.
33 "Jonas Hutchinson Hayward," 246. For various versions of the anecdotes
about Jonas, see the three sources listed in Note 21. Jonas also empha-
sizes his "military commander" qualities, as when he taught in Milford and felt called upon to "demonstrate in short order who was the master of the school" (BG, 50). Thanks to Maria Fahey for ideas about the silver dollars and economic themes in Our Nig.

34 Asa B. Hutchinson, "The Journal of Asa" (1844), available at Milford Public Library. In Milford the Hutchinsons were "come-outers," that is, abolitionists who came out of the churches because they felt the churches were not taking a strong enough stand against slavery (see Ramsdell, 106–09). There were various configurations of the Hutchinson Family Singers over the years, as different siblings and their families came and went. Judson, John, Asa, and Abby formed the quartet that originally gained fame; Jesse Jr. composed many of the songs. For an account of the different groupings, see Brink (Note 32). See Fig. 4 for a portrait from John Wallace Hutchinson, Story of the Hutchinsons, ed. Charles E. Mann, 2 vols. (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1896), 1:142.

35 Quoted in Brink, 286. Douglass wrote an introduction to John Hutchinson's Story of the Hutchinsons.

36 See Story of the Hutchinsons, 102–03. The relevant entries in Asa's journal are 21 January–21 February 1844.

37 The Baltimore genealogy says Jonas was "an earnest member of the Whig, and later of the Republican party" (51).

38 Moore's papers, including abolitionist sermons and speeches, may be found at the Milford Historical Society. See Ramsdell, 370–75, for a biographical sketch. Humphrey Moore was Rebecca Hayward's cousin by marriage as well as her pastor (he married Hannah Peabody, another granddaughter of the original settler).


41 For an account of the dispute over the authenticity of Jacobs's work, see Jean Fagan Yellin, "Texts and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself," in The Slave's Narrative, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 262. For Jacobs's letters, see the Harvard Univ. Press edition of Incidents (1987); further references to this edition will be noted in the text.

42 Other attempts to make a precise match of Hayward dates and the events in Our Nig end in similar contradictions. Wilson tells us, for instance, that Frado is 14 when Mr. and Mrs. Bellmont make a fall trip to Baltimore. Since James comes home sick the next spring, and we know that George Hayward returned in May of 1839, Frado must have been 14 in the fall of 1838. If so,
she would have been born in 1823 or 1824, yet there are several indications that any date before spring 1824 is too early (for they would make Frado over 18 when Mary dies 3 August 1841, and she hasn’t yet completed her indenture; also, if Wilson joined the Haywards at age six she would have appeared on the 1830 census). Spring 1824 is a possible birthdate, but it also runs up against the 1850 census and Mary’s entrance into her teens. If we want to take Mary’s age into consideration in dating Wilson’s birth, she would have to be born in 1826 at the earliest; this would also be the case if we assumed that her father died in the Milford consumption epidemic of 1831. Crediting the census of 1850 leads to an even later birthdate of 1827 or 1828, and Wilson could not have been indentured at age six and spent three years with the family before the weddings of summer 1834.

43 Our Nig, 130. According to the New Hampshire Bureau of Vital Statistics, Concord, N.H., the Sally Blanchard from New Ipswich died 18 January 1859 of “paralysis.” Sally Hayward Blanchard should not be confused with other Sally Blanchards (at least two) with Milford connections. Timothy Blanchard, a black man (see Note 12), had a daughter Sarah born in 1830. Another “Widow S. Blanchard,” once married to Phineas, appears in Milford tax records prior to 1836; she was Sarah, who lived in Milford’s fourth district from 1824 to 1835 and then moved to Temple where she died in 1857. There are several Blanchard families whose lives intersect those of Harriet Wilson and the Haywards and who might be more thoroughly investigated. Not only did Sally and Lucretia Hayward both marry Blanchards, but the Haywards’ closest neighbors were the Simon Blanchards, and Timothy Blanchard is a possible candidate for Frado’s father’s associate, “Pete Greene.”

44 Charles did not marry until 1853, long after his parents had died, so his wife could not have been the “Jenny” who falls victim to the she-devil’s plots. Nor was Charles “forever after alienated from his early home” (115), since he lived on the homestead in the late 1850s. The alienated brother sounds more like Nehemiah P., who seems to have left Milford for Baltimore permanently by 1840. For this same reason, however, he would not have gone West after his youngest sister’s death, as Jack does in Our Nig, nor would he have had any reason to leave his Baltimorean wife in New Hampshire. Nehemiah P. is an attractive candidate for Jack, if only because he has the same name as his father (as in John-Jack Bellmont). Yet Jack and his wife supposedly “rest[ed] in heaven” (130) by the time Wilson published Our Nig, and Nehemiah P. and spouse were still alive (Charles died in 1857). Charles’s wife, Sophia, was still alive, however (Probate Record 02794, Hillsborough County Courthouse, Nashua, N.H.).