

## NYACK'S MYSTERY MAN

### INTRODUCTION

*The death of Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison on August 5, 2019, attracted local attention to the celebrated former resident of Grandview-on-Hudson who in May 2015 participated in a dedication ceremony in Nyack's Memorial Park honoring another former African-American resident Cynthia D. Hesdra. In 2006 the Toni Morrison Society started "The Bench by the Road Project" on the occasion of Ms. Morrison's 75th birthday. The name was inspired by remarks made in 1989 when she spoke of the absence of historical markers that help remember the lives of Africans who were enslaved: "There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower, **there's no small bench by the road.**" The bench placed in Memorial Park to honor Cynthia Hesdra was the 14th in the series and by now there are 25 in the United States and beyond.*

*A plaque placed adjacent to the Bench provides these few facts about the honoree: "Cynthia Hesdra, an African American woman who was enslaved early in her life and after gaining her freedom became a successful entrepreneur, land owner, and Underground Railroad Conductor. She lived in Nyack during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, was born in Tappan, New York, acquired her wealth through her thriving laundry trade and purchased a number of properties in both New York City and Nyack. She and her husband Edward opened their house to countless fugitive slaves who made their journey north along the Hudson River. This memorial honors Cynthia Hesdra's personal fortitude, entrepreneurial vision and her compassionate commitment to freedom."*

## “THE BENCH BY THE ROAD” IN NYACK



*It's remarkable that this brief description is virtually all that's known about Cynthia Hesdra although when she died in 1879 she was thought to be one of Rockland County's wealthiest citizens - white or black- her estate valued at about \$100,000, equivalent in today's currency to about \$2,500,000! No books or articles were written about the Hesdras, Rockland County historians seemed uninterested in them and there were no contemporary descriptions of their personalities. The sole exceptions were newspaper accounts concerning the contesting of their wills that played out over some two decades and attracted national attention. But when newspapers become primary historical sources their accuracy is a legitimate concern and very likely some descriptions of the Hesdra family narrative were flawed or unbalanced.*

*In her book "The Ex-Slave's Fortune" (2008) Dr. Lori Martin acknowledged that much of the biographic content therein concerning the Hesdras had to be "inferred" or extrapolated from general historical sources. Cynthia and Edward had no children and neither they or friends or relatives wrote memoirs. Details about how and when Cynthia became enslaved in Virginia remain unknown and as for her involvement with the Underground Railroad, of course it was cloaked in secrecy and some historians have been skeptical about how active the Hesdras were in the covert activities.*

*If details about Cynthia's implausible life are frustratingly scant, even less is known about her husband Edward. Indeed, no benches celebrate his life. Was he a less successful entrepreneur than his wife? Was he equally engaged in assisting escaped slaves as Cynthia? Was he a scoundrel who forged his wife's will in order to be the sole beneficiary? One newspaper account described him as a "free Hebrew mulatto [who] identified as negro... but in religion was a Jew." Another reported, "He was a believer in the Jewish faith and belonged to a Jewish society at Nyack." The focus of this essay will be upon Edward Hesdra's roots, his business acumen and his connection to Jewish institutions, but first a little more about his wife of some four decades.*

**CYNTHIA** was born in Tappan in 1808. Her father John Moore was a freed man described in one newspaper account as "a half breed Indian" (his father Native American, his mother African-American.) She grew up in Piermont's Mine Hole district - except then the village still was called Tappan Landing - where during the 19th century a black community lived along Sparkill Creek. Nearby was a small community of freed slaves in Skunk Hollow, Palisades where for nearly three decades the pastor of their "Swamp Church" was the charismatic preacher "Uncle Billy" Thompson.

Cynthia's father John Moore owned and operated several businesses, including a saw and grist mill on Sparkill Creek, known to the locals as "Moore's Mill."\* The *New York Times* (Dec. 15, 1887) recalled, "In his day [John Moore] ranked with the wealthy and influential men of that section. In intelligence and education he was far in advance of the whites by whom he was surrounded." Little is known about Cynthia's mother Jane other than that she probably was Baptist and in early life had been a slave.

When Cynthia was born in New York State in 1808, emancipation laws already were in place and children with one free parent were considered born free. It's been suggested that she may have been kidnapped and brought to Virginia where her legal status would have been different.

\*John Moore probably was born in 1766 and came to Piermont from Franklin Township in New Jersey in the early 19th century. He was a mill wheel maker by trade and wheels he designed were said to have produced blankets for soldiers fighting in the Civil War. Listed in Orangetown's assessment book as early as 1807, he sold his holdings along the creek to his neighbor William Ferdon for \$6,000 in 1815. At ten persons in the census of 1810 (when Cynthia was two years old), John Moore's family was the largest black household in the county. He was described as "an intelligent and upright man" and local historian Carl Nordstrom suggested that his removal from the scene [in Piermont] was "a real loss because he clearly was a person who could have provided capable leadership for the black people of Rockland had he stayed around." (Nordstorm, p. 288)

In 1832 Cynthia Moore met and married Edward Hesdra in Virginia. According to some accounts he purchased her freedom and then they fled north and settled on Amity Street in Brooklyn. A newspaper ad described Edward's business as a "cabinet, chair and sofa warehouse." Cynthia ran a laundry and soon owned several properties. Perhaps she'd inherited her entrepreneurial skill from her father and an article written a decade after her death recalled her as "An industrious, saving and money-getting woman who in addition to her laundry trade, carried on a quiet money lending business among her neighbors and rapidly grew rich. Finally tiring of the city, she removed to Nyack where she also established a laundry and skillfully retained her city trade." (*New York Times*, June 8, 1890.)

During many years in Nyack, the Hesdras were among the county's most successful business people and wealthiest citizens, black or white, and were involved as "stationmasters" on the Underground Railroad. Edward owned three houses on Main Street and Cynthia five. According to historian Carl Nordstrom, "Edward Hesdra did, to his credit, organize an underground railroad station at Nyack, but otherwise he and Cynthia took little part in village affairs" (*Nyack Black & White*, p. 106.) A history marker at Main Street and Route 9W (Highland Avenue) now stands on the place where their house once stood that may have served as a station for escaping slaves on "The Freedom Trail." Cynthia's name isn't mentioned on that marker - only "the family of Edward Hesdra."

The tale of the uneducated and brilliant washerwoman who accumulated a fortune made compelling reading - and still does - but what remains unclear is the extent to which her husband contributed to the family's success. There may have been practical reasons why much of their property was listed in Cynthia's name and defamatory testimony against him by those with vested interests is unconvincing. Who really was Edward Hesdra and has he been fairly treated by history?

**EDWARD** was born in Port-au-Prince Haiti in 1811. No doubt his ancestors were Sephardic Jews who were expelled from the Iberian peninsula during the Inquisition and migrated to southwestern France. The family surname may have been derived from a small community of Esdra (or Esra) near Bordeaux when Napoleon Bonaparte required Jews to take surnames in 1812. Richard Levine of Mahwah, a self-described "amateur historian," was generous in sharing information with me that he uncovered in 2014 while assiduously tracking the Hesdra family's roots and collecting obscure records.

Edward's father Leon Hesdra seems to have been born in Bordeaux around 1764 and may have served as an officer in Napoleon's army. Spain and France had competing claims on the island of Hispaniola and eventually the western portion of the island was ceded to the French who named it Saint-Dominique - today's Haiti - where Leon owned a sugar plantation that was destroyed during the slave revolution in 1789.\*

\*Sugar cane plantations were worked by slaves brought from Africa until in the midst of the French Revolution, they revolted. They were led by a former slave Toussaint L'ouverture who became the first black general of the French army and whose political acumen transformed an entire society of slaves into an independent country. It culminated in the the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte's army and abolition of slavery. Later Haiti was established as the first independent nation of Latin America, the second republic in the Americas, and the only nation in the world established as a result of a successful slave revolt.

Leon Hesdra moved to Portsmouth Virginia where he continued business dealings with the West Indies Company and owned slaves. According to historian Barbara Rosen of The Jewish Museum and Center in Portsmouth, Leon participated in setting up a branch of the Masons there and reportedly was "not happy" about Napoleon's trip to Virginia.

After Leon Hesdra died, his wife Fanny - a former slave in Haiti - sold their property and in about 1820 brought her two sons Solomon (age 10) and Edward (age 7) to New York City where they learned the carpentry trade. Leon's will (written in French) listed among many bequests \$2,000 to each of his "nephews" Solomon and Edward with nothing left to "sons" or to his wife. Lacking any documents to clarify this discrepancy, the reference to nephews instead of sons remains a mystery. Indeed it's been suggested that Leon was not Edward's natural father, that perhaps Edward was an adopted slave who was given the Hesdra name after his mother's marriage and was brought up as Leon's son - or nephew (?) - including his Jewish religion. And there was one other tantalizing rumor heard in Virginia - that Leon Hesdra may have been a pirate! Again, no further details are known.

A newspaper article described the narrative in greater detail. Titled "People of African Blood. Something about the Wealthy or, Well-to-Do Negroes of New York and Brooklyn" was written in 1878 when both Hesdras were in their sixties and shortly before the acrimony that would arise over their respective estates. It's noteworthy that the focus in this article was almost exclusively on Edward.

*There is no one of the race living in this city who has more material wealth than Edward Hesdra of No. 101 West Third Street. He is a native of Virginia and was a cabinet-maker in the Bowery. He retired several years ago, having amassed a handsome fortune which he has since greatly increased by fortunate investments in real estate. The house in which he lives is owned by him, and he owns ten tenement houses in the block bounded by Sullivan, Bleeker, MacDougal and Third Street. He also has a large and valuable property in Nyack, where his summer residence is, and several houses and a piece of farming land in Flemington, N.J. from which he derives a large income. His wife is a native of Rockland County and both give liberally of their means towards all schemes tending to improve the condition of their race. (New York: *The World*. Dec. 10, 1878.)*

After Edward's death, another newspaper article summarized his life in some more detail:

*[He] engaged in a cabinet business and...laid a substantial foundation for a fortune but it was swept away by business reverses. He then with his wife conducted a laundry and together they saved over \$10,000....Mrs. Hesdra, in whose name the property was vested, died in February 1879 at an advanced age....He was a Hebrew, a member of the Jewish church and was buried with Jewish ceremonies....He was an intelligent man and spoke four languages with fluency.” (N.Y. Daily Tribune, June 14, 1884)*

During the presidential election of 1872, Edward had served on the executive committee of the *Nyack Grant and Wilson Campaign Club* that favored Republican candidates. The 15th Amendment that provided suffrage to black males had passed two years earlier and several were among some fifty members of the party's executive committee. (Carl Nordstrom, *Nyack in Black & White* (2005) p. 89)

## **CONFLICT**

After Cynthia died of an unknown cause in 1879, there was a bitter dispute among the family over her estate. There was no indication that she'd made a will until after several months Edward suddenly produced one that left everything to him. Cynthia's relatives argued that the will was fraudulent and signatures were forged. The battle over the fortune went to court and the dispute included the first application of a new law in New York State that allowed for comparisons between known and disputed signatures. Many people testified at several trials, but the courts eventually decided that Cynthia's will was legitimate and awarded the entire estate to her husband. This was appealed and eventually reached the state's Supreme Court, but Edward prevailed.

When Edward died (June 6, 1884 at age 73, also of unknown cause) and about four years after his wife, once again there was a legal dispute. This time his contested will wasn't found among his attorney's papers until three years later! Newspaper accounts reflected defamatory claims made by various family members. Although some reflected badly on Edward, the reader should be skeptical of their veracity; however they do fill in certain gaps in the narrative.

*The money was amassed by the shrewd investment of the savings of Mrs. Hesdra who worked as a washerwoman at first and afterward opened a laundry in New York in which her husband took his place at the washtub side by side with the employees. (The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, June 29, 1885.)*

*The “old colored washerwoman...kept a laundry in Nyack and is said to have made her money by washing for members of disreputable houses in the city. Her husband Ed, carried the washing back and forth between New York and Nyack.....[After the final court judgement in his favor] he was so elated that he is alleged to have contracted consumption [TB] as a result of the dissipation incident to his celebration.” (Mount Vernon, N.Y. Chronicle. May 18, 1886.)*

*She is a respectable colored woman [who] attended a Baptist Church. He, a cabinet maker, amassed a snug fortune at his trade which for safekeeping he placed in her name. (New York Herald. Dec. 16, 1887.)*

*“Were Both Wills Forgeries? Remarkable Claims for the \$200,000 Accumulated by an Old Negress” (title): Edward was a worthless fellow. His wife was burdened with his support after they arrived here. But all he got was his food and simple garments with an occasional quarter for liquor, and he earned all that by doing the small chores his energetic wife laid out for him... He went around with a big basket on his shoulder....accompanied by his utterance that ‘Ned’ would always be around to call for and deliver on time. Ned was never allowed to collect any money [because] he was indian-like in his tendencies. (New York Herald, Nov. 24, 1889.)*

Testimony from Edward’s niece Mrs. Amanda Tordoff (Solomon’s daughter):

*Mrs. Hesdra was noted for her beauty and was an intelligent woman.... [They] accumulated property to the amount of \$125,000 in New York and in Nyack and other investments, this all stood in Mrs. Hesdra’s name, the husband at the time being unable to hold any property in his own name....He made money and invested it. He got into some trouble and deeded some of his property to his wife, but a good deal of it was actually his own. That is how so much stood in her name but a good deal of it was actually his own. (City & Country. Feb. 19, 1886.)*



The following articles surely reflected biased testimony.

*How little could the casual reader imagine the train of fraud, insanity and death gathered by the drudgery and parsimony of a colored washerwoman... The husband was lazy and thriftless but the wife was a wonderful worker... She took in washing and did it so well that she got an immense run of business from boarding houses and employed help... 'Aunt Cynthy' as she was called hoarded her money and soon bought the house, and then bought another and another until she owned four - all paid for by her labor and thrift... [She] eventually concluded she could live cheaper and work better in the suburbs and therefore moved to Nyack but kept up the laundry and bought more property...and was really the richest of her trade in the country. [!]*

*People wondered what Aunt Cynthy would do with her money, for she had no children and her husband, known as 'Ned Hesdra' was no man to manage property...Now 19 years after the washerwoman's death her estate is brought into the market and sold at auction...Truth is stranger than fiction. It will be some time, indeed, before a colored washerwoman will have a similar record. (Troy, N.Y. *The Daily Times*, April 6, 1896.)*

*"Great Will Contest: End of a Suit After 25 Years in the Courts" (title). One of the most sensational and remarkable will contests, after considerable bitter litigation has now reached a climax and will be settled to the ostensible satisfaction of all parties concerned as claimants and litigants within a few days....From the affidavits or papers in this case it appears that over 25 years ago, Cynthia Hesdra, with her husband Edward, both colored people and slaves of a planter in Virginia came to this city [NYC] after the war, with a sum of money given to them by their former master. Cynthia secured quarters on Thompson Street [Greenwich Village] and began to take in family washing. It was not long before Cynthia's industry had for her a bank account. Then she invested some money in real estate and at the time of her death, which occurred in 1879, she was estimated to be worth at least \$100,000.*

*It was found after her death that the formality of making a will had not been gone through and, accordingly, her husband took possession of all her property....A petition suit was filed against him before the surrogate at the*

*instance of two sisters several nieces and nephews of Cynthia Hesdra who claimed their share of the washerwoman's property as lawful heirs....The petition proceedings had been pending for some time when an arrangement was decided upon by which the alleged heirs agreed to concede to Hesdra one sixth of the entire property as his share.*

*The papers were drawn up and all made ready for the signatures when one claimant stubbornly refused to sign the document. Just at this juncture, and to the utter amazement of all claimants, Edward Hesdra appeared in court and presented what he said was a will made by Cynthia leaving her entire property to her husband....The alleged heirs next applied the general term of the supreme court to have the surrogate's action on this will set aside. This resulted in the decision of the surrogate being reversed and a new trial on the validity of the will to be before a jury. This jury, curiously enough, also pronounced the will genuine. The strain of this contest made Hesdra so sick that he took to his bed at Nyack and died. (Glens Falls Morning Star. June 20, 1894.)*

The circumstances of Edward's death also raised questions:

*Numerous friends believed that somebody, taking pity on the sorrows of the poor old man Hesdra, who was greatly troubled about his property helped him to an euthanasia. [!] It is certain that his sickness, death and burial were attended by circumstances calculated to excite painful suspicions. (The Omaha Daily Bee. Feb. 20, 1886.)*

In 1896 Edward's niece and claimant to his estate, Amanda Tordoff testified that she'd received "many blackmailing letters" and, reportedly, "became insane from protracted worry and is now in an asylum while the estate has been reduced one half by the costly litigation." Perhaps this next account described the lengthy saga best: "The story has romance sufficient about it to make a three volume novel filled with startling incidents and scenes." (*City & Country*, Feb. 19, 1887.)

I won't address the many questions raised by these articles nor review the contentious court battles that are well described in Lori Martin's book. Suffice it to say that the courts ultimately ruled in Edward's favor, his will was declared

legitimate and when he died the following year, his estate, almost all in property, was reported to be worth about \$100,000 (roughly \$2.5 million today based on a conversion factor of \$1 in 1870 = \$25 in 2017.) Edward's will stipulated that after paying off "my lawful debts", \$19,000 would be divided among seven family members in order "to obliterate past differences." Apparently the size of those debts were sufficient to deplete the remaining bequests, but they are of historic interest because they demonstrated Edward's generosity to Jewish causes:

1. \$20,000 (now worth about \$500,000) to "the Trustees of the 19th Street Synagogue, which is presided over by the Rev. Dr. Mendez (sic) in trust to needy societies."\* Synagogue records from 1887 noted that \$7,500 had been received from Edward's estate that enabled the congregation to make special grants to the Jewish Theological Seminary, a synagogue in Woodbine, N.J. and a kindergarten for poor Jewish children.\*\*

\*The synagogue's formal name was the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation Shearith Israel. When it opened in 1654 it the first Jewish congregation in North America and in 1860 when it moved into its fourth building on 19th Street just west of Fifth Avenue, it was described as "probably the handsomest edifice of its kind in the United States" and the tallest building north of 14th Street. Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes, who took over as "minister" in 1877, served for sixty years and was famous for promoting philanthropic activities.

\*\*Edward Hesdra's's will suggested that Rabbi Mendes use his judgement about how to dispense the money. Among the recipients was the Jewish Theological Seminary, opened in 1886 to combat the growing Reform movement, where for several years Rabbi Mendes was president of the school's faculty. Other beneficiaries were an agricultural colony established in 1891 in rural Woodbine, N.J. by German philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch for Russian immigrant Jews and a nursery-kindergarten on the Lower East Side, opened that same year by the synagogue's Ladies Aid Society.

Shearith Israel's Yearbook in 1908 noted that there was only \$3,160 remaining in the Hesdra Fund. Although \$20,000 had been pledged, only \$7,500 actually had been received, presumably the rest going to pay state taxes and legal fees. To this day the "Edward D. Hesdra Memorial Fund continues to be listed in Shearith Israel's annual reports although now the money is combined with other bequests. Edward's older brother Solomon (who became a barber, lived in lower Manhattan and predeceased him) was a member of the 19th Street Synagogue, but while there's no evidence that Edward had any formal connection the size of his bequest to the congregation was impressive for the time.

2. \$5,000 (now \$125,000) was donated to “the Jewish Hospital”\* that was established in 1852 by eight wealthy members of Shearith Israel to provide free medical care for indigent Jews. Among many bequests listed in Mount Sinai Hospital’s Annual Report of 1919 was \$2,500 from Edward D. Hesdra that had been received in 1895.

\*The hospital’s name was changed in 1866 to Mount Sinai Hospital. As demand for beds increased, it couldn’t accommodate the growing number of patients with tuberculosis and chronic diseases and when the trustees planned to open a new facility, Rabbi Mendes came up with a brilliant idea. The fabulously wealthy English philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore was nearing his 100th birthday and Mendes convinced the leading Jews of New York to mark the event. They wrote to Sir Moses announcing plans to name the new hospital in his honor and, obviously, they expected a generous gift in return. Montefiore must have been pleased because he sent a fine bronze bust of himself to be placed in the lobby, but when the great man died in 1885, the Montefiore Home for Chronic Invalids was not mentioned in the philanthropist’s will. Nevertheless, the bust still is on display.

3. \$2,000 (now \$50,000) “to purchase a lot in the Jew’s burying ground and the erection of a monument and inclosing the lot with a suitable fence on the said lot, the lot to be large enough for myself, my brother and his family.”\*

\*When their mother Fanny Hesdra died, she also was buried next to her sons at the orthodox Mokom Sholom Cemetery in Queens. The Rockland County *Journal* (Jan. 2, 1897) reported that Edward was buried in “a very pleasant spot... with full Jewish rites” and that a “handsome” granite monument was erected. When Cynthia died in 1879, not being Jewish, she was interred in the Moore family plot in the private Fisher Road Cemetery in Mahwah. Funds were provided in Edward’s will that “her grave be cleaned and properly cared for and a suitable stone erected in her memory.” Today that cemetery is abandoned.

4. \$1,000 (now \$25,000) to the First Jewish Society of Nyack. In 1870 twenty families had informally established the Jewish Society of Nyack and their first regular meeting place was a space at the back of Abe Brown’s tailor shop.\* The Society was incorporated in 1891 as Congregation of Nyack, B’nai Israel and eventually became the current Congregation Sons of Israel.

\*In her book Dr. Lori Martin wrote that according to 1880 census records, “Abraham Brown was black and married [and] owned a tailor shop on Main Street in the village” (pg. 135). Although I could find no Abraham Brown listed in the 1880 census, there were two living in

Orangetown listed in the previous 1870 census. One Abraham Brown, born in 1840, was black while the other, born in 1833, was white and no doubt Dr. Martin mixed the two up. When the white Brown bought a farm somewhere in Orangeburg in about 1850, he became the first recorded Jewish landowner in Rockland County and about that same time he opened a clothing store in Piermont. When half that village burned down in a catastrophic fire in 1861, he and his neighbor Moses Oppenheimer moved their businesses to Nyack where they were instrumental in developing the town's Jewish community and reportedly were supporters of The Underground Railroad. There's no evidence that Edward actually was a member of the Society although in his will he made a hefty bequest to them.

Perhaps some questioned the authenticity of Edward's Jewishness because of a traditional religious requirement for matrilineal descent, but his mother seems to have converted when she married Leon Hesdra. Whatever the degree of his religious observance and whether or not he belonged to Jewish organizations, Edward certainly adhered to the moral obligation of charitable giving called *tzedakah*. Because it's well documented that both Shearith Israel and Mount Sinai Hospital received their bequests, it can be presumed that Nyack's fledgling Jewish Society also must have been a recipient of Edward Hesdra's largesse, albeit probably less than the amount originally pledged.

Imagine if today someone donated the equivalent of \$25,000 to any organization - wouldn't there be some public acknowledgement? Testimonials, photos, plaques? None of those happened. In 1991 when the current Congregation Sons of Israel celebrated its centennial, no mention was made of Edward Hesdra in their published history. Apparently no one knew about this generous Jew who'd once lived in their midst. To be sure, in 2005 Edward was elected to Rockland's Civil Rights Hall of Fame and one of three roadside history markers in Nyack about the Underground Railroad mentions his name - but there's no park bench yet.

Furniture Maker. Property owner. Activist along The Freedom Trail. Philanthropist. "An intelligent man." "A worthless fellow." Rumored to be the son of a pirate! Who really were you Edward Hesdra? More questions remain than answers about this enigmatic man but, alas, the trail has grown cold.

## SELECTED SOURCES

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