

GABRIEL FRANKLIN HARGO

Michigan Law 1870

Michigan Law has, almost from its very beginning, had a diverse student body. Gabriel Franklin Hargo, an African American, was graduated from the Law School in 1870, and in 1871, [Sarah Killgore](#) became the first woman to both graduate from a law school and be admitted to the bar. Although both were present in Ann Arbor in 1870, they probably did not meet because Hargo graduated and took the bar exam in July, while Killgore did not start at Michigan until October, 1870.

The record for Hargo is much less complete than for Killgore, but here is what we know and can confirm in reliable records.

Hargo was the first African American to graduate from the University of Michigan—not just the first to graduate from the Law School. He was only the second African American in the nation to earn a law degree. The first was George Lewis Ruffin, graduated from Harvard Law in 1869.ⁱ

Gabriel Hargo was born in 1843 in Ohio, according to the 1870 U.S. census. He may have come from central western Ohio, where there were black communities in Paulding, Van Wert, Mercer, and Shelby counties (along the Indiana border) that have since vanished.ⁱⁱ The 1860 U.S. census shows a 20 year old Gabriel Hargo in Van Wert County, but that may not have been the same person who attended Michigan.

Gabriel Franklin Hargo entered the Law Department at the University of Michigan in October 1868, and received the LL.B. degree in July, 1870. During his senior year, he served as Sergeant-at-Arms of the Lincoln Debating Society, one of six such groups in the Law Department with a total membership of 192 of the 308 enrolled law students.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hargo seems to have lived in Adrian, Michigan, around the time he started Law School, but why he was there is not clear.^{iv}

The U.S. Census reports that on June 21, 1870, Franklin Hargo lived in the 5th Ward in Ann Arbor, in a block that contained 6 houses. Hargo lived with a “mulatto” family, the Pearls, and was himself classified as “mulatto.” A white peddler, Henry Wilmot, lived there too. The six houses held six families and some borders or servants. There were 14 white females and 2 colored females; 22 white males and 2 colored males. Two of the men were foreign born.

The Ann Arbor *Argus* reported on July 1, 1870, that the LL.B. degree was conferred on Gabriel F. Hargo. Hargo’s July graduation was unusual, for the Law Department held its commencement in March and had graduated 119 LL.B.’s then. In July, Hargo was the lone recipient of an LL.B., graduating at the same time as a couple dozen BA’s from the Literary College, a few mining and civil engineers, and three M.D.’s.^v

The commencement, in the Methodist Episcopal Church, occurred on a hot day and drew a great crowd. The *Argus* reported a “church filled to suffocation”. There was a prayer, a Latin oration, and 10 separate speeches with 4 musical interludes. “In delivery there seemed a lack...of spirit and animation, a want of action...” the *Argus* declared, even after stating “our reporter is not disposed to criticize...and will leave that to the dailies.” The nature of this commencement may explain the tradition of the Law School holding its own, separate celebration of its Seniors.

The *Chicago Post* and the *Marshall Statesman* distorted this news of the degree granted to a colored man, reporting it as an LL.D. The *Argus* responded to this error on July 15, commenting that the LL.D. is “sometimes conferred ... upon worthy professors...but more often by some impecunious institution upon some man of means who is expected to pay for it.... Be it known that Gabriel Franklin Hargo...worked for and *earned* the degree of LL.B....Why can’t these Radical journals do the colored brother justice?”

“Gabriel F. Hargo (colored) admitted [to the Michigan bar] as an attorney on diploma” reported the Ann Arbor *Argus* in September 23, 1870. Hargo was still in Michigan then. We find him next in Ohio, teaching school, in 1872-73, in Grover Hill, located in Paulding County. He taught in Sub-District No. 2 (Negro). This was one of two schools in Washington Township where all students and most teachers were Negroes. Fifteen years later, Ohio abolished separate schools for Negroes.^{vi} Paulding County is just north of Van Wert County, where a 20 year old Gabriel Hargo lived in 1860. Grover Hill is the nearest town to one of the vanished black communities.^{vii}

Hargo was admitted to the practice of law on April 8, 1873. The Paulding County *Plain Dealer* reported on April 17, 1873, that W. F. Hargo, a colored man of this county was admitted to the practice of law by the District Court held at Defiance last week.^{viii} The *Defiance Democrat* added that “he had persued [sic] his studies in Michigan, and passed a very creditable examination. He purposes [sic], we understand, to locate in Paulding county for the practice of his profession.

Hargo seems to have wanted more than a change from teaching to practicing law. On June 4, 1873, perhaps right as the school year ended, Franklin Hargo and Mary Elizabeth Smith took out a marriage license, and were married on the 12th, still in Paulding County.^{ix}

And then, like the four black communities clustered on the western edge of Ohio, Gabriel Franklin Hargo vanished.

The Michigan Law Library will continue to look for more information about him, and will update this part of the website as we find more.

--Margaret A. Leary and Barbara J. Snow
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ⁱ J. Clay Smith, *Emancipation: the making of the black lawyer 1844-1944* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, p. 36; and Peter Orleans, *Race, change and urban society*, New York, Sage, 1971, p. 506.

ⁱⁱ Mary Ann Brown, “Vanished black rural communities in western Ohio, 1 *Perspectives in vernacular architecture* 98-116 (1982)

ⁱⁱⁱ Elizabeth Gaspar Brown, “The initial admission of Negro students to the University of Michigan”, 3 *Michigan Quarterly Review* 233-236 at 234 (1963). This information came from the *Palladium*, 1868-69 and 1869-70.

^{iv} *The Michigan University Book 1814-1880*, Detroit, Richmond Backus & Co., 1880, lists “Hargo, Gabriel Franklin of Adrian Michigan, Law 1870”, p. 235.

^v The newspaper reports are confirmed in the *Proceedings of the Board of Regents of the University of Michigan*, meeting of June 27, 1870, voted to confer the Bachelor of Laws on Gabriel Franklin Hargo. All the rest of the Law graduates in 1870 had been approved at the March meeting.

^{vi} Laurence R. Hipp, *History of Grover Hill (Latty and Washington Townships of Paulding County, Ohio)*, the author, Grover Hill OH, 1971, p.299.

^{vii} Brown, supra note 2, p. 101.

^{viii} Paulding County *Plain Dealer*, April 17, 1873, p. 1.

^{ix} Marriage record from Paulding County

