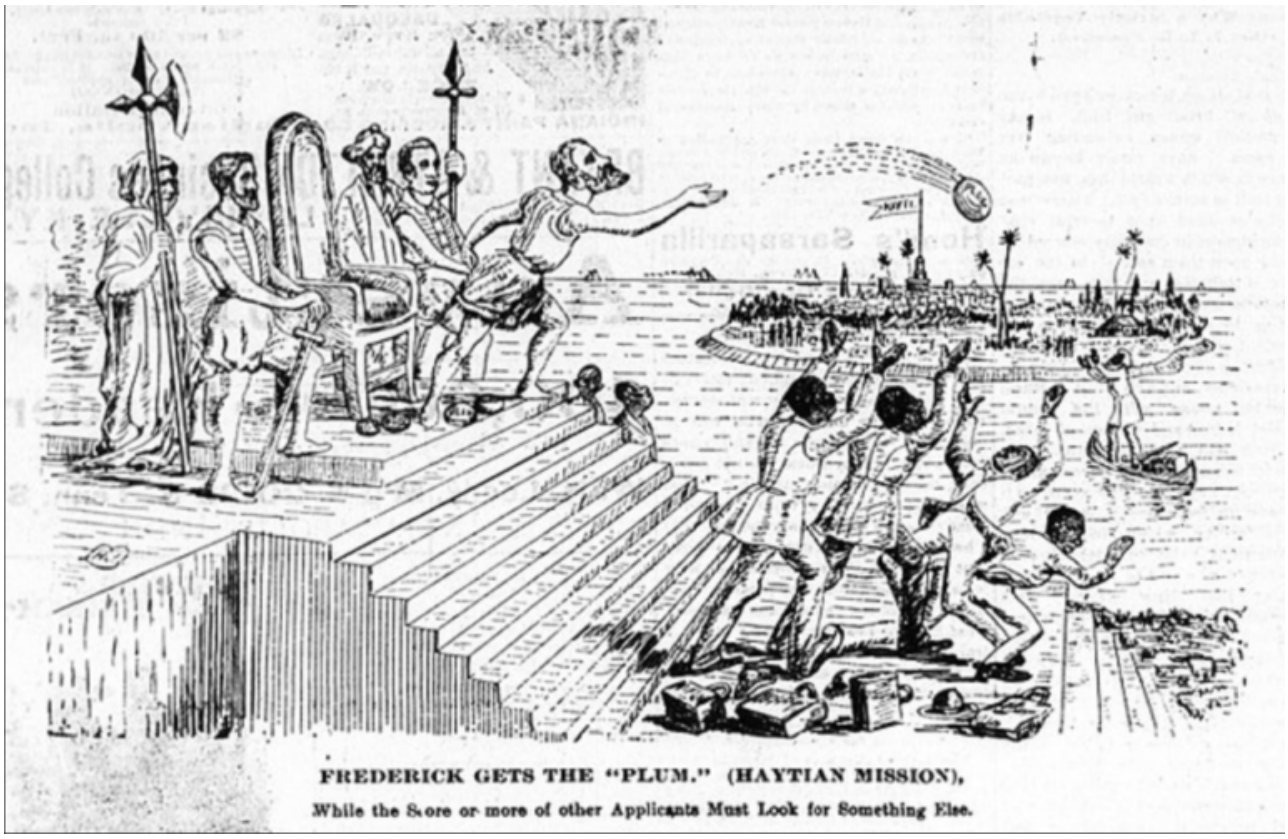
H. J. Lewis, Free man and Freeman artist



The first African American political cartoonist

What would it be like to start off in life as a severely handicapped slave? Not a very auspicious beginning, to say the least, but H. J. Lewis overcame it and became the first African American political cartoonist.

His early years are obscure, and it is difficult to define even general contexts, due to uncertainties about dates and to some extent about places. Henry Jackson Lewis was born in or near Water Valley, the seat of Yalobusha County in north-central Mississippi, about twenty miles south of Oxford. The year of Lewis's birth is uncertain. Some sources say 1837, but one of his sons, Chester A. Lewis, said 1838. Other sources suggest later birth years, some as late as the 1850s.

The general setting of Lewis's upbringing was not the stereotypical plantation of the "Delta Blues" lowlands of northwestern Mississippi but was about thirty miles east of the Delta margin, in rolling, low-hilly country. While still a small child, he fell into a fire, blinding his left eye and crippling his left hand. He "never had a day's schooling in his life, but . . . educated himself," according to an 1883 article in the New York periodical *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, which blithely characterized him as "a remarkably bright

colored man.” But we know little more about his early life or young adulthood.

We also have no information at all on H. J. Lewis’s situation during the Civil War or the early postwar years and Reconstruction. We do not even know whether he still lived in Mississippi. If he did spend the war years there, they might well have been relatively quiet for him. There were no important battles in the Yalobusha County vicinity, which was remote from major strategic locations such as Memphis and Vicksburg.

We next pick up the Lewis trail in February 1872, when records show that a Henry Lewis bought a house in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The Pine Bluff city directory for 1876-77 lists a “Lewis, Henry J., colored, laborer” living in that location, and the 1880 census includes an “H. J. Lewis” household there, including his wife (Lavinia Dixon Lewis) and their first three children (John, Richard, and Lillian). His age is listed as “40,” which would imply a birth year of 1839 or 1840.

Lewis probably did not earn his living primarily as an artist during the 1870s. We have no record of any of his drawings before 1879. In January, March, and August of that year, six engravings made by *Harper’s Weekly* staff artists and credited to “sketches by H. J. Lewis” showed scenes and situations along the Arkansas River in the Pine Bluff region. Then there is another frustrating gap: we have no further published Lewis drawings or derivative engravings until early 1883. But we do know that his fourth child and second daughter, Elizabeth, was born in Pine Bluff around 1881.

Lewis must have remained active artistically, at least locally and probably regionally. In its October 25, 1882, issue, the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, a white newspaper (still in existence), in a series of one-paragraph entries under the heading “Additional Local News,” stated, “J. H. [*sic*] Lewis, the caricaturist and pencil artist is still aboard in Pine Bluff. His sketches of both imaginary and real scenes, are wonderfully correct and we bespeak for him a brilliant and successful future in his line of business.” This prediction, and the characterization of the artist as a “caricaturist,” foreshadowed Lewis’s ultimate career.

But very shortly after the article appeared, Lewis took on a new and unexpected line of artistic work, making pencil drawings of prehistoric Indian mounds and their surroundings for the Smithsonian Institution. In early November 1882, he was hired by Dr. Edward Palmer, a pioneering and prolific field worker and specimen collector in “natural history” and archeology, who had been working about a year on the Smithsonian’s great “Mound Survey.” That project covered much of the eastern United States and ultimately disproved the racist theory that the mounds had been built by a “lost race” of non-Indian “Mound Builders.”

It is not clear how Lewis came to work for Palmer, but the latter had been working at a hectic pace in northeast Arkansas and had traveled by train and boat from Forrest City eastward to Memphis. Lewis’s first mound drawings were

made in early November, either in the southern part of Memphis or along the Mississippi River to the north on the Arkansas side, so they may have met on the waterfront in Memphis. Perhaps Lewis had traveled by steamboat and set up his easel there to sketch river life and make caricatures for passersby. Palmer himself was not a good artist, yet had been charged with bringing back drawings of the mounds. In Lewis, he found just the person to make such drawings.

Lewis may well have influenced the coverage of the survey, for within a few days after he joined Palmer, they traveled by train from West Memphis to Little Rock and thence almost immediately to Pine Bluff, which was used as a base for forays to mound sites in the southeast Arkansas interior. Lewis worked with Palmer from that time until March 1883, producing at least thirty-four pencil drawings (including a few valuable maps) of mound scenes in Arkansas, plus one in Tennessee, two in Mississippi, and three in Louisiana.

Fig. 1. H. J. Lewis, “Mound at Walnut Lake Station (Desha County, Arkansas),” November 1882. MS 2400, (Box 1), National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

Engravings made from a number of Lewis’s drawings by Smithsonian artist-archeologist William Henry Holmes were published in the 1894 final report on the Mound Survey project, but Lewis was not acknowledged. For nearly a century, Lewis’s originals were more or less unseen but were well curated in the Smithsonian’s National Anthropological Archives. A few of them were published by archeologists in the 1970s and 1980s, but his works were not fully published and properly credited until 1990 (fig. 1).

Several engravings derived from Lewis’s Mound Survey work (some showing flood scenes rather than mounds, or mounds as islands surrounded by floodwaters) were published in April and May 1883 in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*. But *Leslie’s* engravers grossly exaggerated mound heights and the sizes and decorations of artifacts such as pottery vessels. In late May 1883, *Leslie’s* published one more engraving derived from a nonarcheological Lewis sketch, showing an Arkansas River ferry near Pine Bluff, perhaps indicating that the artist had returned home. His fifth child and third son, Chester, had been born in January of that year.

The next five years are, once again, lost ones as far as the artistic evidence is concerned. We have not found any further Lewis-derived engravings in *Harper’s* or *Leslie’s* from these years, nor anything at all in issues of *Puck* and *Judge*, two pictorial humor weeklies to which several sources say he contributed. If one April 1891 obituary’s statement that Lewis moved to Indianapolis “two and a half years ago” is correct, he must have made the move in late 1888, but we have no evidence of his presence there until the publication of a February 2, 1889, cartoon.

Our only real clues to Lewis's whereabouts and activities during those "lost years" are the births of his two youngest children, Henry W. and Francis Louise, in Pine Bluff around 1885 and 1887 and a brief interview with him published in the November 24, 1889, issue of the *Indianapolis Journal*, a white newspaper. In the interview he reported that "only four years ago" he ran out of work in Pine Bluff and went (about fifty miles) to Little Rock, where he was hired as a "porter" by the *Arkansas Gazette*, one of the oldest newspapers west of the Mississippi. While there, he watched some white engravers and learned something of their trade.


Fig. 2. H. J. Lewis, "The Race Problem Again," Freeman, June 2, 1889. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Meanwhile, in mid-1888, an energetic virtuoso of Victorian eloquence, Edward Elder Cooper, founded an Indianapolis-based weekly black newspaper called *The Freeman.* Some sources have credited Lewis with being a "co-founder," but this seems unlikely. Neither his name nor his cartoons are to be found in the seventeen surviving 1888 issues of the paper. Moreover, a white newspaper's April 10, 1891, obituary stated that "Mr. Lewis was brought here a couple of years ago from Arkansas by Mr. Cooper."


Fig. 3. H. J. Lewis, informal self-portrait in the offices of the Freeman, pen and ink drawing (Indianapolis, c. 1890). Courtesy of the DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago.

The *Freeman's*inception more or less coincided with Cooper's participation in a "black bolt" from the Republican Party and a black endorsement of the Democratic incumbent, President Grover Cleveland. "Not a colored man from Indiana had a voice in the last National Republican Convention," said Cooper in an early issue of the *Freeman*. Shortly afterward, he proclaimed that the Republican Party had "willfully abandoned its first principles for the gold and silver of the country; best known as trusts, monopoly, syndicates and combinations . . . A few men, like hungry vampires are sucking the life blood from the honest labor of the country." Cooper endorsed the Democratic slate for all offices on the national, state, and local levels.

When Republican Benjamin Harrison was elected president, Cooper responded by transforming the rather conservative-looking, sparsely-illustrated *Freeman* into a "National Illustrated Colored Newspaper," which he billed as "the *Harper's Weekly* of the Colored Race." He used the new national paper as a platform for his intensifying attack on the turncoat Republicans. The January 5, 1889, issue featured a new engraved masthead laden with symbolic illustrations, including Abraham Lincoln loosening the shackles of a slave. The issue also included a

cartoon by someone named Beck, showing an “intelligent colored man” being refused admission to a theater, while a “seedy Irishman” was welcomed. This cartoon was more social than political, so Lewis’s status as the first explicitly and predominantly political black cartoonist remains intact.

The next surviving issue of the *Freeman*, for February 2, 1889, includes Lewis’s earliest known work for the paper: a two-panel cartoon entitled “The Race Problem Again” (fig. 2). The cartoon addressed the recurring issue of federal appointments for blacks and introduced figures that became essentially “stock characters” in Lewis’s later work. One was Uncle Sam, generally represented as benevolently inclined toward blacks and a sort of conscience for white leaders. Another was Benjamin Harrison himself, depicted upon a throne-like chair and having the power and obligation to help blacks but somehow lacking the motivation or fortitude to act. More ominously, a southern planter type exerts his baleful influence upon the president. Along with these figures, Lewis included a black cherub, pointing to a wall clock whose hands approached twelve o’clock. Referring to the clock, the cherub says, “Ben did you say [’tis?] too soon for the colored man?—This is the hour—the XIth NOW.”

Fig. 4. H. J. Lewis, “The Political Pharisees,” Freeman, April 27, 1889. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The cartoon’s crude and sometimes reversed or inverted lettering suggests that Lewis was still learning the art of woodblock engraving. But his style and lettering would rapidly improve thanks to a new, and for Lewis, more congenial reproductive technique. In a later editorial, Cooper proudly mentioned the paper’s “chalk plates made in two hours by the best Afro-American artist in the country,” and a self-caricature of Lewis at his drawing board (now in the collection of the Du Sable Museum of African American History in Chicago) included a sign reading, “Chalk Plates done here” (fig. 3).

Fig. 5. H. J. Lewis, “Frederick Gets the ‘Plum’ (Haytian Mission),” Freeman, July 20, 1889. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Chalk-plate printing was a cheaper and more efficient way of reproducing images than was woodblock engraving. Instead of a mirror image, cumbersomely carved in a wood block, the artist could simply carve the image into a hardened layer of chalk on a metal plate. Then, through a casting process involving molten lead, a reverse image for printing could be readily created. The process was especially advantageous for creating the textual elements of prints, since the artist would no longer have to produce backward letters.

The most common theme of Lewis's 1889 cartoons was the failure of particular politicians to support job opportunities for blacks. Among his subjects were well-known African American figures of the day, including Frederick Douglass and Blanche K. Bruce, as well as prominent white politicians including, of course, President Harrison.

This theme reached its apex with Lewis's April 27 cartoon "The Political Pharisees" (fig. 4). It shows Harrison and his powerful secretary of state, James K. Blaine ("the man from Maine" who was widely regarded as the power behind the Harrison presidency and had been considered a presidential possibility himself), "cooling the ardor" of a well-dressed black applicant for an ambassadorship with a spray of water from a pump labeled "ICE . . . very cold." Although Harrison is shown as the sprayer and principal pumper, "BLANE's [*sic*] fine Italian hand" can be seen subtly adding a little extra pressure on the pump handle. Lewis's best cartoons included a number of such details as well as several layers of symbolism, such as the U.S. Capitol in the background and Uncle Sam's head as the benevolent sun.

After Harrison appointed Frederick Douglass ambassador to Haiti, the black press attacked the president for insulting Douglass and black Americans in general. Surely so distinguished a man deserved a post of greater importance. Lewis's response was an ironically titled cartoon published in the July 20 *Freeman*, "Frederick gets the 'Plum'" (fig. 5), showing Harrison as a monarch, with Blaine to the right of his throne, flanked by "Oriental" attendants. Harrison tosses the "plum" to Douglass, who already has put out to sea in a rowboat headed toward the distant tropical isle of "Hayti."

Fig. 6. H. J. Lewis, "Protection for the Negro," Freeman, June 1, 1889. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Beyond the patronage issue, Lewis addressed the more general and persistent issue of racism and politicians' general refusal to acknowledge the issue's importance. Using another ironic title, Lewis depicted "Protection for the Negro" in a June 1 *Freeman* cartoon (fig. 6). It showed four recent outrages against blacks. Off to the right side, with the nation's cornucopia of wealth and armaments at his disposal and the scales of justice readily at hand, Harrison disdainfully looks back on these scenes and inexplicably strides away.

Fig. 7. H. J. Lewis, "H. J. Lewis," Freeman, July 13, 1889. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Near the apogee of his all-too-brief new career, Lewis's formal self-portrait appeared in the July 13 *Freeman* (fig. 7). It shows his face in right profile to

conceal his blinded and misshapen left eye. On the table in front of him are various tools and texts of his trade and a copy of the *Freeman*. His palette bears a Latin motto meaning, “Not for ourselves alone but for the whole world.” He is flanked by two black children, a boy whose hat ribbon is labeled “J. W. L.” (the initials of his oldest son John W. Lewis) and a girl whose fluttering hair ribbon is labeled “L. E. L.” (the initials of his oldest daughter Lillian Estella Lewis). Perhaps in tribute to Lewis’s technical skill, in the portrait’s background are the recently completed engineering marvels, the Brooklyn Bridge and the Eiffel Tower.

Although Lewis’s most significant (and probably, most heartfelt) works were in the political vein, he also produced artwork for the *Freeman* on other subjects. These included race relations in general, humorous caricatures, and cartoons inspired by holidays and amusements. A few were in comic-strip format, which was then in its infancy. Lewis also produced architectural drawings and many portraits of leading or up-and-coming African Americans around the country. But his passion was most deeply expressed in political cartoons, such as ” *The Freeman’s* Political Horoscope” in the August 3, 1889, issue (fig. 8). One of Lewis’s major works, this cartoon predicted defeat for the Republicans in 1892. On the left, a black man is shown painfully climbing up a set of steps constituting a sort of bar graph of progress from 1889 through 1892. Meanwhile, Harrison is actively demolishing the steps of progress with hammer and chisel as Blaine and others (including an unidentified black man) wait their turn to swing the hammer. The panel’s right side offers “A Prospective View of 1892,” with the four competing political parties lined up in phalanxes. The Republicans are labeled, “White man’s Party,” and are represented by a long line of white men, but they are outnumbered by an endless line of white and black Democrats labeled, “The People’s Party.” In the foreground, Uncle Sam guards the ballot box and reads the *Freeman*.

Lewis returned starkly to the theme of Harrison’s inactivity in “The National Executive Asleep” in the October 19 *Freeman* (fig. 9). Here, the president is depicted sleeping on his throne despite the presence of two black men blowing trumpets in his ears. In his lap, Harrison holds a tablet labeled, “I Must Attend to the Race Question at Once.”

Fig. 8. H. J. Lewis, “The Freeman’s Political Horoscope,” Freeman, August 3, 1889. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

After October 1889, the *Freeman* ran only two new political cartoons by Lewis, one in December 1890 and another in January 1891. Although these cartoons contained veiled criticism of Harrison and his administration, the paper had essentially abandoned its oppositional tone.


Fig. 9. H. J. Lewis, “The National Executive Asleep,” Freeman, October 19, 1889. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Cooper and his newspaper were chronically in financial difficulties (the subject of some of his editorials and some of Lewis’s cartoons), and it is quite likely that creditors aligned with Harrison (who was from Indianapolis) put pressure on Cooper to stop the attacks. Perhaps significantly, Lewis’s final two political cartoons depicted Uncle Sam in a less idealistic manner, as if Lewis, already in poor health (according to his obituary in the *Freeman*) and only a few months away from death, had given up any hope for true racial justice. Appropriately for a religious man, Lewis’s last known work was a well-done architectural drawing of the new St. Paul A.M.E. Church in St. Louis, which appeared in the *Freeman* on March 28, 1891.

Lewis died in Indianapolis, probably on April 9, 1891. The *Indianapolis News*, a white paper, reported, “Mr. Lewis stood toward the head of the colored artists of the country . . . but never was well in this severe climate, and died of pneumonia.” The *Indianapolis Journal*, in a more expansive obituary, praised his work while noting Lewis’s unfulfilled promise: “[H]e was a genius, and with proper direction might have made his way in the world.”

Lewis’s life is perhaps best summed up in an obituary notice from the April 18, 1891, *Freeman*, undoubtedly written by Cooper at his eloquent best.

Mr. Lewis, in many respects, was a remarkable man, and had his lines been cast in different places, and his earlier years been spent under different skies, surrounded by other influences and aids, the space he would have filled in the world’s notice might have been one that biography would not have spurned . . . [H]ewas a genius, and when his equal shall come to us again, we do not know . . . It were but simple charity to hope that it is well with him to-day, and that his death was but an aperture through which his feverish and worn spirit took its way to spheres of higher mysteries, and a completer life, where conditions may not interfere, or man’s narrowness or unfair hatred prevent the full expression of his unique and striking gifts.

Further Reading:

For Lewis’s drawings of Indian mounds, see Marvin D. Jeter, *Edward Palmer’s Arkansas Mounds* (Fayetteville, Ark., 1990) and *The Palmer-Lewis ‘Mound Survey’ Forays into Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana, Mississippi Archaeology* 25 (December 1990): 1-37. Additional biographical information and a few more drawings are in Jeter, “H. J. Lewis and his Family in Indiana and beyond, 1880s-1990s,” in Wilma L. Gibbs, ed., *Indiana’s African-American Heritage* (Indianapolis, 1993): 161-176. Marvin Jeter and Mark Cervenka are

planning a full-length biography of Lewis, which will include virtually all of his political cartoons and many of his other drawings for the *Freeman*. The racist pictorial milieu of the late nineteenth century in which Lewis lived and worked is delineated in the visual essays in Eric Foner and Joshua Brown, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York, 2005).

This article originally appeared in issue 7.3 (April, 2007).

Marvin D. Jeter has been the UAM Research Station Archeologist for the Arkansas Archeological Survey since 1978 and emphasizing Indian mounds and other prehistoric sites. His long-standing interests in African American culture include not only work on the H. J. Lewis project but also research on the tombstone symbolism of several early twentieth-century organizations, mainly the Mosaic Templars of America.

Mark Cervenka is director of the O’Kane Gallery and assistant professor of art at the University of Houston-Downtown. In 2004 he co-curated—with Dr. Windy Lawrence—the exhibition “Drawing the Line: The Emergence of Editorial Cartoons by African American Artists in The Freeman and the Richmond Planet.” The exhibition included original drawings by H. J. Lewis and original and facsimile examples of Lewis’s work in the Freeman.