

O. D. Harris & Sons Funeral Home, Incorporated

Founded: 1870

Location: Lemmon Church Community near Portersville (1870–early 1890s); Otwell (1890s–); Petersburg (1901–22); Seventh and Walnut Streets (1922–)

In 1870 Nicholas Harris founded his funeral service company in the small village of Lemmon Church in Boone Township, Dubois County. Harris had been working under a master carpenter and was helping put up a barn when the property owner's son died. The master carpenter delegated the responsibility of crafting the coffin to Harris. After that duty was finished he opened a furniture and undertaking business under the name Harris Funeral Service. Harris often sawed the boards used in the coffins from trees he had felled himself. Rather than simply making the coffins, Harris also presided over the services, an unusual practice at a time when most funerals were held at the home of the deceased.

In the early 1890s Harris moved his family to Otwell, Indiana. At Otwell Harris, with the help of his children Orace D., Ovid, Emmett, and Grace, operated a furniture and funeral service business under the title N. Harris & Company. Orace undertook his father's business.

In 1901 Orace Harris moved from Otwell to Petersburg and, in partnership with George Scaper, opened a furniture and funeral service. Joel Coan soon joined the partnership. A few years later the company was reorganized, and Harris partnered with Oliver Colvin and Fred Brenton, renaming the business Colvin, Brenton & Harris. Sometime later Colvin moved to Princeton, but the firm continued as Brenton and Harris Furniture & Undertakers.

In 1920 Brenton and Harris dissolved their partnership. Orace then joined with his sons Owen D. and Lee N. Harris to form O. D. Harris & Sons. The partnership continued until 1941, when Orace died. Owen, born in 1898, had worked with his father in the business as a teen. Both he and his younger brother, Lee, were active in the civic, religious, political, and social life of the town. Owen was elected to the office of county coroner seven times. In 1962 Owen died, and Orace's remaining children, Lee and Fay, and Owen's children William, Robert, and Richard, took over management of the firm. In 1976 the company was incorporated and an additional chapel was purchased at Monroe City, Indiana. Robert and Sondra Seneff Harris became the sole owners of the business after they bought his siblings' shares in the concern. They then placed the company in trust for their daughters Lisa, Clara, and Gretchen. In 1999 Robert and Sondra continued to operate the facility with the help of their daughters.

The Petersburg business was originally housed in an old Victorian home that had a large porch that many people around town would use to visit with one another. After a brick addition was constructed, which included a modern chapel and lounge area, the porch was removed and the community lost a gathering place. The home had been built by Congressman Arthur Taylor in the 1890s. In 1922 Orace Harris purchased the property. For eleven years the home served the dual purpose of funeral parlor and family home. Increased business demanded a change, however, and in 1933 the family moved next door, converting the entire structure into a funeral home.