Harold J. Harris, former fur store owner

The 76-year-old Mr. Harris was chief executive of Harris Furs for nearly 50 years.

BY ELIZABETH GUDRAIS
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE — For nearly a century, if you've wanted to buy a fur coat in Rhode Island, Harris Furs has been the place to go. Harold J. Harris, son of the store's founder and its chief executive for nearly 50 years, died yesterday at his Lincoln Avenue home. He was 76.

The store — whose official name is William H. Harris Furs, after Harris' father — still operates in Warwick. Harold Harris sold it two years ago when his health failed.

"It was hard for him to walk away," his wife of 24 years, Nancy Siegal Harris, said last night. "He loved that business. That was his life."

William Harris founded the company in Providence in 1908, selling lace blouses from a push-cart. The first storefront was on Westminster Street, on the city's west side; its subsequent location, downtown at 400 Westminster, is still known as the Harris Furs building, although the store there closed 20 years ago. (The City of Providence Department of Planning and Development has offices there now.)

Harold Harris grew up in South Providence, and then on the East Side. The youngest of three children, he graduated from Classical High School and Brown University.

He began working for the business at age 16, selling furs on the floor and taking the train to New York to buy furs. When he was 27, his father died and he took over the business.

He made it the foremost furrier in New England, Nancy Harris said. "Customers came from all over," she said. "Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire."

Harold and Nancy Harris lived and worked together: after they married, Nancy became the buyer for the ready-to-wear clothing the Warwick store sold. "We spent 24 hours a day together," she said. "We had separate offices, but we kept the door open."

Together, they watched the fur industry change to emphasize fashion over function. Instead of long, warm coats, women were buying novelty items dyed flashy colors. "With women having their own careers, they didn't have to wait for their husbands to buy them fur coats," Nancy Harris said.

Harris had two daughters — Elizabeth Baird, a lawyer who lives in McLean, Va., and Amy Talkow, a Realtor who lives in Boca Raton, Fla. — and four grandchildren.

He was a member of Temple Beth El, the University Club and the Carnegie Abbey Club. He served on the boards of two public companies, the Fairchild Corp., a Virginia-based manufacturer of aviation parts, and Capital Properties Inc., of East Providence.

A funeral service will be held tomorrow at 10 a.m. at Temple Beth El, 70 Orchard Ave., Providence.

PROVIDENCE

HARRIS, HAROLD J., 76, of 76 Lincoln Ave., Providence and Newport, died Wednesday at his residence. He was the beloved husband of Nancy (Siegal) Harris.

Born in Providence the son of the late William H. and Ruth (Make) Harris, he was a graduate of Classical High School and Brown University, class of 1950.



He was the retired chief executive and president of William H. Harris Inc. Furs founded by his father in 1908 in Providence. He was an avid tennis player and boater and was a member of Carnegie Abbey, Portsmouth, RI, The University Club and Temple Beth El. Mr. Harris also served for many years with distinction as a member of the boards of The Fairchild Corporation of McLean, VA and Capital Properties, Inc. in Providence. He also served on the endowment fund of the Jewish Federation of RI, and was actively involved with Hospice of RI, Project Aids of RI, RISE and First Night.

Besides his wife, he leaves two daughters, Elizabeth Baird of McLean, VA and Amy Talkow of Boca Raton, FL, four grandsons, William, Sam, Jack and Benjamin, a sister, Bernice Levine of Rehoboth, MA. He was also the sister of the late Muriel Bregstein.

Funeral services will be held on Friday at 10 am at Temple Beth El, 70 Orchard Avenue, Providence. In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to Dr. David Steele, c/o MGH, Renal Assoc., GRB1003, 55 Fruit Street, Boston, MA 02114. Shiva will be observed at his late residence following interment and on Saturday 7-9 pm, and Sunday 2-4 and 7-9 pm. The family was assisted with the arrangements by SUGARMAN-SINAI MEMORIAL CHAPEL.

The management and employees of

WM. H. HARRIS

Respectfully mourn the passing of

Harold J. Harris