

Uncovering the Underground Railroad in the Finger Lakes

Introduction

The term “Underground Railroad” refers to the effort of enslaved African Americans to gain their freedom by escaping bondage.¹ It was neither “underground” nor a “railroad” but rather a loosely constructed network of escape routes that originated in the Upper South, intertwined throughout the North, and eventually ended in Canada. It also included escape routes from the Deep South into the western territories, Mexico and the Caribbean. Most “freedom seekers” (i.e., fugitive slaves) began their journey unaided, either alone or in small groups, and were frequently assisted by African Americans and European American “agents” who risked their lives and property to allow their homes or barns to be “safe houses” (i.e., “stations”) en route or to physically escort or transport them (as “conductors”) on to their next stop. Providing aid to a runaway slave was an illegal activity, especially after Congress’ passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 with much greater fines, etc. As a result of this law, the numbers of people providing assistance to Underground Railroad operations actually increased, but the operations often became much more clandestine in the hopes of avoiding prosecution under the provisions of this law.²

In very recent years, there has been a greater realization that examining still existing documents—such as census records, newspaper articles, deeds and mortgage records, wills, diaries, church records, and records of subscriptions to abolitionist publications—that we can learn a great deal more about Underground Railroad activity than had been previously thought.

In this article there will be discussion of both the Underground Railroad and other types of antislavery activity. This is necessary to comprehend the complexity and enormity of the antislavery movement in the Finger Lakes region. Many of the specific examples in this article come directly from information gathered in the 2005-06 sites survey project conducted in Seneca County that resulted in a report titled *Discovering the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism and African American Life in Seneca County, New York, 1820-1880*.

Who Was Involved in the Underground Railroad in the Finger Lakes?

Clearly people of different social classes and religions, and both racial groups and sexes were involved in the Underground Railroad and other antislavery activities in the Finger Lakes region. This will be further explained using information gathered from the Seneca County sites survey project.

In terms of social class, there is the obvious role that “prominent” citizens of a community would play. For example, Ansel Bascom, a prominent real estate developer for the south side of Seneca Falls, became the Free Soil Party candidate for Congress in 1848. But we also have the efforts of more middle class and working class families, such as the Gibbs, DeMott, and Rumsey families who lived in adjacent houses on West Bayard Street in Seneca Falls. Lucius Gibbs was a carpenter who signed at least four antislavery petitions sent to Congress from Seneca Falls in May 1850. Lewis DeMott was a carpenter who supported the Free Soil party as it was being organized in Seneca Falls in the summer of 1848 and he signed antislavery petitions. Moses, Mary and Doriskie Rumsey were affiliated with the antislavery Wesleyan Methodist Church that started in Seneca Falls in 1843.

Religion was a major factor that motivated many people to get involved in the Underground Railroad and other antislavery activity. Quakers are an obvious example. Because

of their innate belief in the equality of everyone, many Quakers—but not all Quakers—were involved in the Underground Railroad. It is easy to envisage how Quaker households in one community would network with Quaker households in a neighboring community to help freedom seekers on their way through the Finger Lakes region.

Throughout central and western New York we have many Protestants who became involved in antislavery activity as an outgrowth of the Second Great Awakening. This portion of New York State became known as the “burned-over district” with many people determined to “correct” social evils with their new strengthened belief that man can avoid sin and should do so. Many “come-outer” churches arose with a renewed determination to do away with slavery. New Wesleyan Methodist churches were established in many communities when a sufficient number of the congregation split away from the existing Methodist church which they felt did not take a strong enough stand against slavery. These Wesleyan Methodist churches also attracted strong antislavery people from other church denominations. It is probably safe to say that the members of these churches would not turn away and refuse to provide food and housing to any freedom seeker coming to their house.

The comments made so far illustrate the involvement of various classes and religions of European Americans. African Americans were also directly involved in the antislavery efforts. There were growing numbers of African Americans living in the Finger Lakes region. Many African Americans had been brought to the Finger Lakes region as slaves and were later granted their freedom and continued to live here, as did their children. We also have some free African Americans who came into the Finger Lakes region, taking advantage of the job opportunities in this region, stimulated by the completion of the Erie Canal and its connecting canals, and the coming of the railroads.

It is important to realize that it took both females and males to provide the necessary shelter and food for the freedom seekers as they made their way on the Underground Railroad through the Finger Lakes region. It clearly was the females in the household that cooked the food, etc. But females were important in other ways, such as in organizing antislavery fairs, for example, to raise funds that freedom seekers needed for train or boat fares, etc.

What Kinds of Antislavery Activity Were Taking Place in the Finger Lakes Region?

The antislavery activities of Finger Lakes residents were not just the Underground Railroad itself. Many other activities will be mentioned with some specific examples to help illustrate the activity. To begin, many antislavery societies were established. In 1836 Geneva established its Colored Anti-Slavery Society. In 1837 the Seneca County Anti-Slavery Society was formed in Seneca Falls. In 1838 the Rochester Anti-Slavery Society was established and the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society in 1842.

Many communities sent antislavery petitions to Congress. In 1838, 1839, and 1844 Waterloo sent antislavery petitions. In fact, more petitions were sent from Waterloo than from any other township in upstate New York except one (Paris, NY). Sometimes these petitions were signed only by females, such as one from Seneca County in 1849 with Charlotte Jackson of Ovid being the only female African American to sign it. Seneca Falls sent its first documented antislavery petitions to Congress in May 1850.

Many communities conducted antislavery fairs to raise revenues needed by freedom seekers passing through the area. The first woman’s antislavery fair in Seneca Falls was held in October 1843.

Antislavery speakers came to various Finger Lakes communities, helping to stir up antislavery sentiments among more community residents. In 1842, both Abby Kelley and William Lloyd Garrison spoke, in Seneca Falls and Waterloo respectively, as part of their circuit of speeches throughout upstate New York. In August 1843, Abby Kelley spoke in the apple orchard south of Ansel Bascom's home in Seneca Falls when no church in town would allow her the use of their church. This was not surprising in that Kelley's speeches stressed that northern churches were as guilty as southern slaveholders for the sin of slavery, because northerners had the majority population of the country and could "make things right." Elizabeth Cady Stanton's husband, Henry Brewster Stanton, was often on the antislavery speaking trail.

Antislavery people made efforts to avoid using products made by slave labor. For example, the M'Clintocks, a Quaker family in Waterloo, advertised in the newspapers that no products made by slave labor were sold in their drugstore. (As an aside, they also had people coming into their drugstore sign antislavery petitions, even though this clearly "cost" them some of the business they might otherwise have drawn to the store.) The Waterloo Woolen Mills and the Seneca Woolen Mills in Seneca Falls were both started as deliberate attempts by antislavery people to produce textiles that were woolen rather than slave-produced cotton.

Biracial antislavery churches were established in many communities. One good example of this is the Wesleyan Church in Seneca Falls, organized in 1843. Prominent European Americans in the community such as Joseph Metcalf served as a church trustee, as did the freedom seekers Thomas James and Joshua Wright.

New York State abolished slavery in 1827 but kept a property qualification for free African American males to vote. Peterboro (southwest of Utica) resident Gerrit Smith, cousin of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in 1846 gave away more than 120,000 acres of land to African Americans (typically in 40 acre units) so they could vote in New York State.³ Out of gratitude many African American couples who received such a gift of land named their next born son Gerrit Smith (first and middle names).

Political party activism was another way Finger Lakes residents used to promote their antislavery beliefs. In the summer of 1848 the Free Soil party was being organized in western New York. This party was determined to prevent any of the lands acquired from Mexico in the Mexican War from becoming open to slavery. The Seneca County sites survey project documents the names of Seneca Falls residents that appeared in the newspaper notices for various party meetings taking place that summer. Seneca Falls resident Ansel Bascom was the local Free Soil candidate for Congress that year. Many Finger Lakes residents opposed to slavery had been involved in the Liberty Party which was established in Warsaw in 1839 in an attempt to elect a pro-abolition U.S. President because they felt that the Democratic and Whig Parties were not pro-abolition.

In some rare cases, there was headline-making direct defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The so-called Jerry Rescue in Syracuse on October 1, 1851, was a famous one. William "Jerry" Rescue was removed from the jail by a local vigilance committee and he was transported safely out of Syracuse and to Canada. One of the vigilance committee leaders was Jermain Loguen, himself a former freedom seeker. Fearing for his life because of this illegal rescue, Loguen decides to go to Canada for a while. On the way from Syracuse to Canada, he spends the night at the M'Clintocks in Waterloo, pacing the floor most of the night with pistol drawn, determined to die rather than be forcefully returned to slavery.

What Were the Underground Railroad Routes through the Finger Lakes?

It is probably safe to say that most of the freedom seekers who came into our Finger Lakes region came north through Pennsylvania to Elmira, although some came by train west from Albany and Syracuse. John W. Jones was the key station agent in Elmira.

From Elmira, there were several possible routes:

- northwest to Rochester and then across Lake Ontario or on to Niagara Falls
- northeast to Syracuse and then to Oswego and across Lake Ontario
- north to Cayuga and/or Seneca Lakes on to Seneca Falls-Waterloo

From the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area, there were several options:

- east to Auburn to Syracuse to Oswego and across Lake Ontario
- west to Geneva and then either north to Pultneyville or Sodus Point and across Lake Ontario or on to Canandaigua and Rochester

While many freedom seekers went to Canada in the years preceding the Civil War, many freedom seekers settled in the northern states, especially in those areas where there was a sympathetic support network as well as job opportunities. Areas within the Finger Lakes region clearly were attractive locales for freedom seekers to take up residence and work.

How Do We Separate Fact from Fiction in Terms of Underground Railroad Sites?

It is clear that there are strong “oral traditions” about various sites in the Finger Lakes having been “stations” on the Underground Railroad. While in the years leading up to the Civil War, this amounted to engaging in an illegal activity, today it has become more desirable to be able to “boast” that a particular site was an Underground Railroad station. Often there is little indisputable evidence to support these oral traditions. Sound historical research can lend more and more circumstantial evidence to help support the oral tradition about a particular site’s involvement in Underground Railroad activity. In some rare cases, an eye-witness kind of evidence exists for a certain site.

Dr. Judith Wellman, head of Historical New York Research Associates, has developed what has become popularly known as the Wellman Scale to help separate fiction from fact regarding a particular site. If there is an oral tradition about a particular site, using the Wellman Scale, the site would be labeled as Level Two—the story is possibly true, but at this point there is no written evidence but there is no reason for doubt. If information is found to doubt the truth of the oral tradition about a particular site, then the site would be relabeled as Level One—story probably not true; reason for doubt. As supporting circumstantial evidence about a site is found, the site could be relabeled to Level Three—good chance the story is true; evidence of abolitionist sympathies, abolitionism or African American background but no direct evidence of Underground Railroad activity. If clear evidence of the site’s actual involvement in Underground Railroad activity is found, then the site can be relabeled as Level Four—considerable evidence of involvement; story almost certainly true. If conclusive evidence of involvement in Underground Railroad activity—such as a diary entry or a portion of a letter where the person states clearly his/her providing aid to certain freedom seekers on a certain date—is found, then the site would be considered Level Five—conclusive evidence of involvement.

A few quick examples will help illustrate how this Wellman Scale gives us insight into oral traditions about certain sites in the greater Finger Lakes area. First, for many years there has been an oral tradition about the Horace W. Knight house at 96 State Street in Seneca Falls having been an Underground Railroad station—hiding freedom seekers until they could be safely placed on the train at the nearby station. As part of Seneca County’s 2005-06 county-wide survey of

sites of Underground Railroad activity, researcher Tanya Warren found through deeds research that the house was not built until 1871—a few years after the end of the Civil War and adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery! What had been a level two site early on in the year-long sites survey project became a level one site. Tanya Warren’s research found that it was Horace W. Knight’s father, the Reverend Horace B. Knight, who was actually the abolitionist minister of the Wesleyan Chapel that was the Underground Railroad participant. This additional information perhaps lends some explanation as to how the oral tradition developed about the particular house at 96 State Street.

Gathering of evidence about the freedom seeker Thomas James who lived at 52 State Street in Seneca Falls illustrates how what was a level two site at the start of the Seneca County sites survey project ended up as at least a level four site. Prior to the start of the survey project it was commonly known that Thomas James was an African American who became a rather prosperous barber in Seneca Falls. There had been some indication from census records that Thomas James might have been a freedom seeker. In the Seneca County sites survey project, project researcher Tanya Warren found newspaper clippings in scrapbooks of a Mrs. C.O. Goodyear. These newspaper clippings described how this Thomas James in 1863-64 was building a new three-story brick building at the corner of Fall and Cayuga Streets in Seneca Falls. One article said that James was a “fugitive from slavery.” Another article also said that he was a “fugitive slave” and “that although he belongs to the down-trodden race he can take care of himself, and we think no one will deny that he has rights which white men are bound to respect, Judge Taney to the contrary notwithstanding.” Upon further research, Tanya Warren found Thomas James’ probated will and executors’ statement. The executors’ statement included the wording that “the said Thomas James...having formerly been a slave and made, during his lifetime, diligent enquiry for his relatives without effect.” The inventory included provides evidence that Thomas James was worth about \$17,000 at the time of his death in 1867—a rather substantial amount for that time period.

One last quick example of a level five site using the Wellman Scale would be that Jermain Loguen advertised in the Syracuse newspaper that his house on East Genesee Street in Syracuse (it no longer exists) was a safe house on the Underground Railroad. It is rare that this kind of conclusive evidence is found, but it is certainly exciting, especially in light of the fact that Loguen himself was a freedom seeker.

Dr. Wellman has led county-wide sites surveys in four greater Finger Lakes counties—Onondaga, Oswego, Cayuga and Seneca. Each county-wide survey includes detailed information to support and/or discredit oral traditions about many sites. Each of these surveys was funded by a Preserve New York grant from the Preservation League of New York State and the New York State Council on the Arts. Each county’s survey report is available online. It is easy to speculate that if other counties within the Finger Lakes would conduct a similar sites survey project that there would be a much more comprehensive understanding of the operations of the Underground Railroad throughout the entire Finger Lakes region.

What Are Some Important Seneca County Sites?

1. M’Clintock House, 16 East Williams Street, Waterloo

The only Seneca County site currently listed on the New York State Tourism Underground Railroad Heritage Trail is the M’Clintock House. It is recognized for its anti-slavery activism, not for its being a station on the Underground Railroad. Currently it is owned by the National Park Service and it is open to the public as part of the Women’s Rights National

Historical Park. It has been restored to its 1848 status—the time of the drafting of the Declaration of Sentiments to be presented a few days later at the famous Seneca Falls Convention.

The Mary Ann and Thomas M’Clintock family rented this house owned by Richard Hunt, who was the brother-in-law of Thomas. The house was the site of meetings and overnight housing for many antislavery reforms as well as other reform efforts. It was here on July 16, 1848 that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a few other ladies met to prepare for the upcoming Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, preparing the agenda and a reviewing a draft of the Declaration of Sentiments to be presented.

The M’Clintocks were progressive Quakers and engaged in many reform movements. They operated a “drug store” just south of the house. They advertised that no merchandise produced by slave labor was sold in their store. In that same store they circulated antislavery petitions that would be sent to Congress.

In conjunction with the findings of the Seneca County sites survey project, the Women’s Rights National Historical Park proceeded to have this site successfully nominated for placement on the National Park Service’s Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

2. Ferry Farm (The Cobblestone), 2534 Lower Lake Road, Seneca Falls

This house is popularly believed to have been a “station” on the Underground Railroad on many occasions. It is reported that slaves came by boat across Cayuga Lake from the abolitionist Quaker town of Union Springs. Crossing over the route once used by the Indians and later the site of the first white man’s ferry, the slaves were landed at “The Cobblestone,” formerly called “Ferry Farm,” about a mile south of Bridgeport. There is a NYS Historic Marker describing its historic role on the Underground Railroad and the western site of a ferry across Cayuga Lake. Once the home and business site of the Caulkins family, the Cobblestone is currently the home and of the Steven Pier family.

A letter from the late Cyrus Garnsey Jr. to a former owner of the house added a bit of color to the home’s history. A young girl who was a friend of the daughters of the family was probably the only person outside the family who knew what took place there, Garnsey’s letter revealed:

“Many a night when she knew that slaves were in the house, she lay awake listening to every sound. Once when a valuable slave was being sought, she happened to be at the railroad depot when the carriage from the Cobblestones pulled up. The owner of the carriage stepped out, followed by a colored man. At that moment another carriage pulled up bringing the detectives who sought the slave. By quick wit and rapid action the slave was shoved into the baggage car and the master of Cobblestone was at once mingling with the crowd, talking to people and avoiding suspicion while the train pulled out.” (The owner of the carriage in this story was Julius Bull.)

Sheriff G. Kenneth Wayne told the story that as a young boy playing in the attic of his grandfather’s home; he would see straw-covered wooden bunks on which the fugitive slaves supposedly slept in the windowless attic accessible by a trap door.

In the Seneca County sites survey project, no definitive documentation of these oral traditions was found. Some circumstantial evidence was uncovered, such as that Julius Bull, who built this cobblestone house, was an abolitionist and member of the Wesleyan Methodist Church and that Slocum Howland, a Quaker businessman in Sherwood in Cayuga County not far from Union Springs, probably did transport items for his business as well as freedom seekers on his

boats on Cayuga Lake, stopping at various ports. Based on the information from the sites survey project, the Ferry Farm house has been successfully nominated for placement on the National Register of Historic Places.

3. Hunt House, 401 E. Main Street, Waterloo

The Richard Hunt House, where Jane Hunt served tea to Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Martha Coffin Wright on July 9, 1848, as they decided to call the first women's rights convention, was an Underground Railroad station.

According to an account in the *Finger Lakes Times*, September 21, 1970, Hunt, an abolitionist, had already made the upper floor of his carriage house a kind of hostel for needy persons passing through. The article says that "He later turned the carriage house into a station for the Underground Railroad and gave lodging and protection to runaway slaves who were trying to reach Canada." Richard Hunt was the wealthiest resident of Waterloo and probably the entire county at the time. Both Hunts were Quaker philanthropists who supported human rights causes.

Like the M'Clintock House, the Hunt House exemplifies the interweaving of anti-slavery activity with other reform activism in the antebellum period.

In conjunction with the findings of the Seneca County sites survey project, the Women's Rights National Historical Park proceeded to have this site successfully nominated for placement on the National Park Service's Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

4. David Kinne House, 6858 Kinne Road, town of Romulus

There was a strong oral tradition that this house was a station on the Underground Railroad. This oral tradition included the idea that the famous abolitionist John Brown had actually been involved in the building of this house with features conducive to harboring freedom seekers in the attic. The Seneca County sites survey project research has basically disproved the possibility that John Brown built this house. No evidence was found in the project research to support that this house actually was a station on the Underground Railroad. Some important circumstantial evidence was found in the project research. This included that Kinne subscribed to abolitionist publications and that Kinne was prominent in the operations of the Waterloo Woolen Mills.

As a result of the Seneca County sites survey project, this farm was successfully nominated for placement on the National Register of Historic Places because of its farm heritage, its architecture and its role in abolitionist activities.

5. Thomas and Elizabeth James House, 52 State Street in Seneca Falls.

Thomas James was a freedom seeker who became a prosperous barber in Seneca Falls. Thomas James is the epitome of what the Underground Railroad was all about—a "freedom seeker" escaping from his enslavement somewhere in the south and taking advantage of the opportunities freedom offered in the North. He built a three-story brick building at the corner of Fall and Cayuga Streets in the heart of the Seneca Falls business district. At the time of his death in 1867, he was worth \$17,000.

Although we have no evidence that Thomas James used his house—so near the train station—as a "safe house" on the Underground Railroad, James took an active part in the fight against slavery. He subscribed to the *Colored American* as well as Frederick Douglass's newspaper, and took part in local and state conventions of colored inhabitants. He joined the

anti-slavery Wesleyan Methodist Church when it was organized in 1843 and became one of its first trustees. He was the only African American to sign an anti-slavery petition from Seneca Falls and the only African American to sign a petition in favor of the new Free Soil party in June of 1848.

Because of his accomplishments and actions, the Thomas James house has been successfully nominated to the National Park Service's Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

6. Joshua W. Wright House, 61 Bridge Street, Seneca Falls

Joshua Wright was a freedom seeker who settled in Seneca Falls and became a prosperous barber. He received a land grant from Gerrit Smith in 1848, so that he could meet the property qualifications to vote. He subscribed to the *Liberty Party Paper* and *The True Wesleyan*. Wright was active in the Wesleyan Methodist Church, including serving as trustee. He signed a notice for a meeting of the Free Soil Party in Seneca Falls in summer 1848.

As a result of information gathered in the Seneca County sites survey project, this house was successfully nominated for placement on the National Park Service's Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

What are Some Documented Sites in Cayuga County with Ties to the Underground Railroad?

There are many wonderfully documented sites in Cayuga County, largely because of a 2005 report titled *Uncovering the Freedom Trail in Auburn and Cayuga County, New York*. In this article, only a few of the key sites in Cayuga County will be discussed. Readers are encouraged to go to the Cayuga County Historian's website to see the full report that deal with over 100 sites.

1. William and Frances Seward House—33 South Street, Auburn

William and Frances Seward devoted themselves to reform and social justice causes, especially the abolition of slavery. During his two terms as New York State Governor (1839-43) he established himself nationally as an outspoken abolitionist. In 1846, as a private citizen, he became the defense counsel for William Freeman, a mentally-ill Auburn resident of African American and Native American descent, who murdered a white farmer and his family. Seward's argument that Freeman's mental state should exculpate his actions is one of the first uses of the "insanity defense" in the United States. Seward became a U.S. Senator in 1849 and was a recognized leader of the Whig Party faction of abolitionists. In a debate over the admission of California to the Union as a state, he pointed out that there was a "higher law" than the U.S. Constitution and warned of the effects of expanding slavery in the new territories of the west gained from Mexico in the Mexican War.

While Henry was pursuing his political career in Washington, D.C., Frances continued to live in Auburn. Various sources indicate that she was instrumental in the Seward House being a station on the Underground Railroad. For example, an 1891 newspaper article reports "it is said that the old kitchen was one of the most popular stations on the Underground Railroad, and that many a poor slave who fled by this route to Canada carried to his grave the remembrance of its warmth and cheer." William Seward himself in a November 1855 letter noted that "the 'underground railroad' works wonderfully. Two passengers came here last night. Watch [the family dog] attacked one of them."⁴

Having inherited money from both sides of the family, the Swards used their personal wealth to support the abolitionist movement. They were financial backers of Frederick Douglass' *North Star* newspaper in Rochester. While serving as a U.S. Senator in Washington, D.C., William worked with African American hotelkeeper James Wormley to transport fugitives to freedom. The Swards support and patronage of Harriet Tubman is well known and documented. The Swards conveyed seven acres of land to Tubman as a home on various generous terms, with the loan not paid off until after Henry Seward's death in 1872.

2. Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged—180 South Street, Auburn

The Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged is the official name of the thirty-two acre property owned by the AME Zion Church and includes Harriet's own brick house, a frame house called the Home for the Aged, and the foundations of a brick structure known as John Brown Hall. Harriet is perhaps the most famous of all conductors of the Underground Railroad.

Harriet Tubman purchased a seven acre farm from William Seward in 1859. She bought the land for \$1200, with \$25 down, and quarterly payments of \$10 with interest. It is believed that her family members did not like the harsh winter climate of St. Catherine's, Ontario, Canada, so there was a desire to move to Auburn, also perhaps because of Harriet's contacts with Lucretia Mott, the sister of Martha Coffin Wright who lived in Auburn. By 1865, twelve people lived in Harriet Tubman's home, all freedom seekers except the youngest children.

Seward's sale of the property to Tubman was a very unusual event. As a woman under New York State law, Tubman would legally have been allowed to own property. But as a black person and a fugitive from slavery, she had no legal rights at all. The Dred Scott decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1857 had declared that African Americans had "no rights" under the U.S. Constitution, and by the terms of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, Seward (a U.S. Senator at the time!) could have been prosecuted with a fine of \$1000 and up to six months in jail for assisting Harriet Tubman in any way.⁵

3. Howland Stone Store—Route 34B, Sherwood, New York

This small cobblestone store anchored one of the most important Underground Railroad nodes in Cayuga County. Sustained by his commitment to the Light within all people and by a national network of radical abolitionists centered in the American Antislavery Society, Slocum Howland, a Quaker abolitionist and Underground Railroad supporter, used his economic resources (including this store, his tenant houses, and his port facilities at Levanna on Cayuga Lake) to help freedom seekers move to Canada and to find homes and jobs for those who wanted to settle in Cayuga County.

Slocum Howland's business dealings included a far-flung trading network that involved the collection, transportation, and sale to both regional and national markets not only of Cayuga County agricultural goods but also the new iron plow invented by Howland's brother-in-law Jethro Wood. Most likely, farmers from all over central Cayuga County brought produce such as wheat, wool, and pork to Howland's store, where Howland barreled it and sent it in wagons to his port at Levanna. There, with the help of African Americans such as Alfred Tate, Howland loaded these agricultural goods onto lake boats and sent them north to Cayuga Village, where he transferred them once more to wagons for transport along the Seneca Turnpike to the Seneca and Cayuga Canal at Seneca Falls or, in the case of raw wool, to factories at Seneca Falls, Waterloo, and Auburn. This transportation network could easily serve as a means of helping freedom seekers from Ithaca and Elmira get to the Erie Canal, the Seneca Turnpike, etc. to get to Canada.

There is a clear historic connection between the antislavery movement and the early woman's rights movement, and this connection can be seen in Sherwood, New York. The Howland Stone Store Museum has an exceptional collection of woman's rights posters and other memorabilia, the direct result of the work Emily and Isabel Howland in the women's rights movement.

Nearby are the homes of Emily Howland, Slocum and Hannah Howland, and Benjamin and Mary Howland.⁶

4. Sennett Federated Church and Parsonage—Weedsport-Sennett Road, Sennett, New York

As a Congregationalist church prior to the Civil War, this church congregation became strongly antislavery. The Reverend Charles Anderson and his wife Elizabeth hosted freedom seekers in the parsonage next door to this church. Through records kept by William Still and the Vigilance Committee in Philadelphia, we have detailed documentation for four freedom seekers who lived in Sennett. As a preacher, Rev. Anderson spoke out against the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and asked each person to consider "the vast importance of doing what we can, individually and collectively, to hasten that day when the nation shall choose the Lord to be its God....God has given to each member of this republic, the power of doing something towards hastening on the time when our land shall be what it ought to be."

What Are Some Other Finger Lakes Sites with Oral Traditions Ties to the Underground Railroad?

Special Note: The information about the following sites, in terms of their involvement in Underground Railroad activity, is based upon oral traditions and not on sound historical research and documentation. Oral traditions are a wonderful starting point for investigation of possible or even probable Underground Railroad sites. The author of this article does not intend the reader to accept as indisputable fact that these sites were involved in Underground Railroad activity.

1. Esperanza—Jerusalem, near Branchport on Route 54A⁷

Esperanza is an impressive 19-room Greek Revival mansion with two-story Ionic columns and 6,000 square feet of space, overlooking the bluff and the west branch of Keuka Lake. Construction was completed on July 3, 1838, by its owner, John Nicholas Rose, who purchased over 1,000 acres in Yates County in 1823. He built the mansion as a wedding gift for his bride. The name Esperanza is an adaptation of the Latin word for "hope." The walls are 27-inches thick. A large bake-oven hearth in the kitchen is one of the two that are "hidden." The columns were made by enclosing large tree trunks in brick and then covering the brick with stucco. According to oral traditions, it was a station on the Underground Railroad—probably the route from Bath to Penn Yan or Bath to Naples.

2. Penn Yan—129 Clinton Street

This two-story frame house is located on the east side of Penn Yan on Route 54 from Dresden. It is believed that escaped slaves were transported from Bath to Penn Yan and then either to Geneva or Canandaigua on their way north.

3. Geneva—20 Pulteney Street--Van Houten House

This is a two-story, frame house with a one-story addition on its south side. When the house was remodeled years ago, a bullet hole was found in the front door. The oral tradition of this place tells of men chasing a freedom seeker fired the shot through the door. Just before they arrived, grandmother Van Houten, a spirited woman and a devout Methodist, heard shouting and saw an African American running up the sidewalk toward the house. She let the freedom seeker in and bolted the door. She gave him part of a loaf of bread, guided him out the back door, and told him to rattle the back fence to let her know that he had escaped. She opened the door to the boisterous man and invited them to search her home. While they were searching the second floor, she heard the back fence being rattled.

4. Naples—1 Mechanic Street

The two-story frame house has one-story additions on each side and was once the home and funeral parlor of William (Uncle Billy) Marks, Jr., who transported slaves in his horse-drawn hearses, according to oral traditions. Sometimes the freedom seekers were transported in coffins; the hearse had a trapdoor if the refugees had to get away in a hurry. Uncle Billy hid the freedom seekers in the loft over his furniture shop adjacent to the house. Loose planks were set aside to admit his visitors to the loft, where they slept on loose straw. The freedom seekers usually came to his house at night via Naples Creek. He transported most of his charges to the Pitt Mansion at Honeoye or on to the Cobblestone Farm just south of Canandaigua. It is said that Uncle Billy helped over 600 freedom seekers escape to Canada.

5. Naples—105 N. Main Street—Maxfield Inn

The Maxfield Inn was built in 1841 as a Greek Revival home for the Maxfield family. It was the carriage house behind the inn that was a station on the Underground Railroad, according to oral traditions. A rock-lined tunnel used by fugitive slaves still exists below the carriage house. The tunnel connected the carriage house with a barn next door that has been torn down. Freedom seekers probably went on to Canandaigua from this Naples station.

6. Canandaigua—3402 W. Lake Road—“Cobblestone Farm”

The house was built by Isaac Parish. According to oral traditions, the freedom seekers were transported to the Cobblestone Farm from Naples, many in one of Uncle Billy Marks' horse-drawn hearses. The fugitives were hidden in a secret room in the attic adjacent to the south wall of the house. They were led up to the attic where they walked on loose floorboards around the south chimney through a doorway and into a small room, which was six feet wide and ten feet long. The ceiling was five feet, four inches high at the peak, sloping down to four feet where the ceiling joined the walls. The room would have been stifling hot in summer—it had no windows—and bitter cold in the winter.

7. Canandaigua—104 Gibson Street

This graceful two-story frame house with a mansard roof and detailed ornamental trim was, according to oral traditions, a station on the Underground Railroad routes both to Rochester

and Pultneyville. In emergencies, the fugitive slaves descended through a trap door in the dining room to a dry cistern in the basement. The trap door was near the north wall of the dining room and was covered by the dining room table. Most of the escaped slaves arrived in Canandaigua either from Naples (probably with a stopover at the Cobblestone Farm) or from Geneva on their way to Canada.

8. Palmyra—322 E. Main Street—Pliny Sexton House

This two-story brick house was built by Pliny Sexton, a Quaker jeweler, in the 1830s. The historic marker in front of the home notes that this home was used as a station on the Underground Railroad. According to oral traditions, Sexton hid the freedom seekers under a load of hay or vegetables in his wagon and then transported them to the next station on the Underground Railroad, either north to Pultneyville on Lake Ontario or northwest via Perinton to Rochester. Pliny Sexton, Jr., who helped his father with the freedom seekers, became a banker, lawyer, and Chancellor of the New York State Board of Regents.

9. Palmyra—101 E. Main Street—Western Presbyterian Church

This church was built in 1832 and was a very active station on the Underground Railroad, according to oral traditions. Fugitive slaves were hidden in the belfry of the church until they could be transported to the next station on the Underground Railroad on the way to Williamson and Pultneyville. These freedom seekers left the church at night via an underground tunnel that led northward toward the Erie Canal. On the outside of the church is a plaque noting that on April 5, 1849, Clarissa Hall and Leonard Jerome, the maternal grandparents of Sir Winston Churchill, were married in this church.

10. Williamson—5825 Route 21—Griffith Cooper House

This three-story fieldstone house with its 18-inch tick walls now covered with stucco was built by Griffith Cooper, a Quaker and active abolitionist, in 1838. According to oral traditions, fugitive slaves were hidden in a secret chamber in the attic. In the 1950s, David Oakleaf, whose parents owned the home at the time, found small doors on the east and west sides of the attic—doors that were blocked by large boxes. Each door led to a triangular space formed by the roofline. David Oakleaf crawled along the passageway and found a chamber that could accommodate 8 to 10 people for short periods of time with much room to spare. David's grandmother, Irlene Oakleaf, told him a story passed on to her by her great-grandfather, Griffith Cooper. The story goes like this: Once slave-catchers came to the farmhouse looking for escaped slaves. Suspecting that the escaped slaves were hidden in a pile of hay, the slave catchers plunged their swords into the hay stack. They left without finding any fugitive slaves. In fact, however, several fugitive slaves were hiding in the hay, and one of them had been stabbed and injured severely. However, he didn't cry out, and he didn't give away his presence and that of his friends.

11. Pultneyville—4184 Washington Street—Captain Throop House

This cobblestone house was built in 1832 by Captain Horatio N. Throop. According to oral traditions, Ledyard Cuyler, the son of Samuel Cuyler who was an associate of Throop, transported many wagonloads of freedom seekers from Sodus and other Underground Railroad stations to his father's estate in the middle of the night. It is said that the Cuylers would take their passengers to Captain Throop and say, "I have some passengers for you." Captain Throop would

respond, “My boat runs for passengers.” One of the vessels that Captain Throop used to transport freedom seekers to Canada was the Steamer *Express*, which was owned by a partnership company. Captain Throop commanded this vessel from 1839 to 1842. It is also reported that Throop’s nephew James T. Holling, who was also a boat captain, was active in the Underground Railroad movement. There is one story that Holling took some freedom seekers across Lake Ontario to Presque Isle, where the slaves were so relieved to have now gained their freedom that they knelt in prayer.

12. Pultneyville—7851 Jay Street—Selby House

This two-story house, with a one-story addition at the back, was built in 1808 by Jeremiah Selby. The piers, which were directly across Washington Street from this house, were the point of departure for freedom seekers being transported to Canada by ship, according to oral traditions. It is reported that the freedom seekers were hidden temporarily behind the Selby home among large piles of wood while waiting to board ship. On another note, during the War of 1812, one of the Royal Navy ships of Commodore Yeo’s squadron fired two cannonballs through the front wall of the Selby House.

13. Pultneyville—4194 Washington Street—Hasselwander House

This beautiful two-story brick home with a cupola was one of the Underground Railroad stations in Pultneyville, according to oral traditions. The freedom seekers were hidden in a frame addition at the rear of the house. The freedom seekers boarded ships in Pultneyville to head to Peterboro and other Ontario ports.

14. Elmira—311 Woodlawn Avenue—Home of John W. Jones

This small one-story bungalow was the home of John W. Jones, an ex slave himself. Jones was born in 1817 on a plantation in Leesburg, Virginia. He escaped to the North in June 1844. In 1847, he became sexton of the First Baptist Church in Elmira. In 1851, he became an active stationmaster on the Underground Railroad. During his 9 years as a stationmaster, he helped over 800 freedom seekers to escape, usually in parties of 6 or 7. Elmira was a principal hub on the Underground Railroad route coming from William Still in Philadelphia. Interestingly, the house had been originally located on a 16 acre farm at 1259 College Avenue, but was rotated 90 degrees when it was placed on a basement constructed for it at its present site.

15. Ithaca—116 Cleveland Avenue—St. James AME Zion Church

In 1833 this church was organized by Ithaca’s African-American community as the home of its first pastor, the Reverend Henry Johnson. The two-story frame church with a two-story tower was built in 1836 on Wheat Street, which was later renamed Cleveland Avenue. The marker in front of the church notes, “It became the religious, political, and cultural heart of the community and, in 1841, the site of a school for black children. It was the home to Pastors Thomas James and Jermain Loguen and host to Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass.” The church was the site of many abolitionist meetings and was a station on the Underground Railroad between Elmira and Auburn/Syracuse, according to oral traditions.

16. Mecklenburg, 4831 Buck Hill Road—Parker Wixom Homestead

The Parker Wixom homestead was one of several homes of Quaker families in the area that were stations on the Underground Railroad, according to oral traditions. It is reported that

the freedom seekers were hidden in a small room under the kitchen at the back of the house. It is also reported that the next station to the north was at Lodi in Seneca County.

17. Burdett, 1780 Main Street---John Ciprich House

This two-story frame house is the oldest house in Burdett. This house served as the next station on the Underground Railroad route from Mecklenberg for those freedom seekers traveling west toward Watkins Glen, according to oral traditions. Mary Pratt, who lived in the house in 1938, accidentally tore some wallpaper covering a fireplace. Freedom seekers had painted symbols in black paint on a cover over the fireplace opening. The letters B, T, and C accompanied drawings of a pointing hand, an African American, a cross, shovels, a horse, and a bird in flight. The symbols were intended to represent the slave's flight as well as the Christian symbols of faith and hope.

Why Bother to Document Finger Lakes Sites Involved in the Underground Railroad and Other Antislavery Activities?

There are two obvious kinds of reasons as to why such documentation should take place. One is that it will enhance our historical knowledge of the obviously important role that the Finger Lakes region played in the Underground Railroad and other kinds of antislavery activities. Much of this "history" is not presently known or interpreted.

A second major reason is that there is much potential for enhanced tourism. Heritage tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the American economy. Coupling the heritage of the Underground Railroad and the woman's rights movement with the growing local wine industries and the natural beauty of the Finger Lakes, one can easily envisage a brighter economy for the Finger Lakes region.

¹ <http://209.10.16.21/TEMPLATE/FrontEnd/learn.CFM> (National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom)

² http://www.afgen.con/underground_railroad.html

³ *Syracuse Post-Standard*, February 7, 2007

⁴ *Uncovering the Freedom Trail in Auburn and Cayuga County, New York*, pp 119-25,

<http://www.co.cayuga.ny.us/history/ugrr/report>

⁵ *Uncovering the Freedom Trail in Auburn and Cayuga County, New York*, pp 143-50.

⁶ *Uncovering the Freedom Trail in Auburn and Cayuga County, New York*, pp 373-90.

⁷ The information for these sites outside of Seneca County and Cayuga County has been taken from Emerson Klees' *Underground Railroad Tales With Routes Through the Finger Lakes*.

[This article was written by Walter Gable, the Seneca County Historian, in early March 2007. Much of the information about Seneca County sites and people comes from *Discovering the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism and African American Life in Seneca County, New York, 1820-1880*. This county-wide survey of sites was conducted by Dr. Judith Wellman of Historical New York Research Associates in 2005-06. The full report is accessible online in the county historian's portion of the Seneca County official website (www.co.seneca.ny.us).]