

# Charlotte Jackson

(c. 1795-1885)

by

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Charlotte Jackson is a remarkable example of a free person of color who survived slavery to live the rest of her life in freedom in Ovid, NY, as a literate, property-owning woman who also took a public stand as an abolitionist.

Not much is known about Charlotte Jackson's life. Charlotte Jackson was born c. 1795 to c. 1815<sup>1</sup> in slavery in New Jersey. The 1876 Seneca County history referred to her as "an aged, colored woman" who resided in Ovid" and at one time was the slave of William Godley under the laws of this state."<sup>2</sup>

She came to New York State enslaved by William Godley, probably sometime before 1827, the year in which New York State began ending slavery. Information has not uncovered to say when she came to Seneca County. Her name, as living in her own household, first appeared in the 1850 U.S. Census, in the town of Ovid. Her name appeared similarly in the 1860 census. She was working as a domestic servant in the home of Belle and Augustus Ayres in the town of Varick.<sup>3</sup>

The 1870 U.S. Census states she was keeping house, and owning property worth \$300. Her house still stands at the current address of 2101 Seneca Street in Ovid. Enough remains of the framing structure of Charlotte Jackson's original home, constructed of hewn beams and logs that are still visible in the basement and in parts of the first floor during remodeling, to suggest that the house was a small settlement house, broad side to the street. The probate petition of Charlotte Jackson prepared by Belle Ayres, the executor, described the real estate as "consisting of a small village lot with a dilapidated shanty thereon." with the real estate having a value of less than \$100 and a personal estate of less than \$5.00.<sup>4</sup>

In  
January  
1849,

## Charlotte Jackson Home



Charlotte Jackson was the only known African American woman to sign a woman's antislavery petition sent by 86 women from Seneca County. This petition was from "Women of America," and was similar to others circulated throughout the north, addressed to Congress "on behalf of the claims of a million and a half of their sex, who are afforded no legal protection for a heart's dearest ties, a Woman's 'Sacred honor,' but with her husband, sons & brothers are the doomed victims that dwarfs the intellect, degrades the morals & debases the entire being."<sup>5</sup>

As to her family, there is no record of her being married. She did have an adopted son, named Jerome (or James). The adopted son died on November 15, 1864 at the age of 34. His remains were removed from his original grave and buried along those of Charlotte Jackson in 1885.<sup>6</sup>

Charlotte Jackson died October 14, 1885, when she was at least 72 years old and perhaps much older (it is difficult to have exact birthdates for most enslaved persons). In 1874

she had made out a will, directing that her property be sold to pay her debts and to buy a monument (shown at left) to be erected over her grave and that of her adopted son, James (or Jerome) Jackson, who had predeceased her, in the new cemetery in Ovid. Because she had worked for many years as a domestic for Belle Ayres, she directed that Belle Ayres be the executrix of her estate.<sup>7</sup>

These are most of the details of Charlotte Jackson's story as we know it from a 2006 report titled *Discovering the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism and African American Life in Seneca County, New York, 1820-1880*.<sup>8</sup> What is the historical significance of her story? To begin to answer that question, early in our year-long study that resulted in that report, we were told that there had been several cabins just outside the village which were the homes for several different African American families. In our year of research we were not able to document any such cabins, but did document that Charlotte Jackson and two other African American families--the Bryant family and the Van Horn family--lived for many years on Seneca Street in Ovid. This fact led us to conclude that probably the Ovid village community provided an accepting neighborhood for these three African American families as well as job opportunities. While the bulk of the anti-slavery activity in Seneca County was taking place in the greater Seneca Falls-Waterloo communities, other parts of the county--such as Ovid--were also historically significant.

That she came to Seneca County as a slave underscores the fact that several African Americans who settled in this county came here as slaves or were descendants of those brought here as slaves. It is a fact that many of the African Americans living in Seneca County did not come here as part of the Underground Railroad itself. Some of the others whites who settled in the southern parts of Seneca County and brought slaves with them include Silas Halsey, and Robert Selden Rose.

Another very interesting thing to note about the Charlotte Jackson story is that this information came from certain kinds of sources: census records, deeds research, probated wills. Although the Underground Railroad operated primarily in secrecy because it was an illegal activity, it is those kinds of sources mentioned, along with newspaper articles and personal diaries and letters, that enable us today to gain much reliable insight into the actual activities of various individuals of all social classes. Charlotte Jackson was clearly not one of the wealthiest individuals living in Ovid, but she personally experienced slavery and the adjustment to life as a free person. Though we do not know what year she actually received her freedom from slavery, we know that as early as 1849 she was an "activist" in the antislavery cause. Her actions may not receive as much attention as those of a Harriet Tubman or a Lucretia Mott, but she also had the courage and determination to do what she could to promote the anti-slavery cause.

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<sup>1</sup> Sources differ as to Charlotte Jackson's birth year, as well as the date of her death. Her cemetery gravestone says she was 90 at the time of her death on October 15, 1885, suggesting her birth year was c. 1795. U.S. Census data for 1850 says she was 40, suggesting a birth year of c. 1810. U.S. Census data for 1860 says she was 65, suggesting a birth year of 1795. U.S. Census data for 1870 says she was 55, suggesting a birth year of 1815. U.S. Census data for 1880 lists her as age 71, suggesting a birth year of 1809. A death notice for her says she was 100 at the time of her death on October 14, 1885. A probate petition record lists her death date as October 14, 1885.

<sup>2</sup> Everts, Ensign & Everts, *History of Seneca County, New York, 1786 to 1876*, 1980 reprint by W.E. Morrison & Co. of Ovid, NY, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Wellman, *Discovering the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism and African American life in Seneca County, New York, 1820-1880*, p. 61. [Full report accessible online.]

<sup>4</sup> *Discovering the Underground Railroad*, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> "Petition of Arvilla Sperry & 86 others. of Seneca Co., N.Y. praying Congress to prevent the extension of Slavery, to withdraw the protection of government from the American Slave Trade, to suppress Slavery wherever Congress has competent jurisdiction." HR30A-G9.2, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>6</sup> *Discovering the Underground Railroad*, pp. 59-61.

<sup>7</sup> *Discovering the Underground Railroad*, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> This report 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. This grant made possible a year-long study in 2005-06 conducted by Dr. Judith Wellman of Historical New York Research Associates. Dr. Wellman has conducted similar concerted research studies in several Upstate New York counties. Most of the project reports are available online, including that of Seneca County.