

Slavery at Rose Hill

The Rose Hill estate, located in the town of Fayette and overlooking Seneca Lake, is famous for its beautiful Greek Revival mansion. It was the site of one of the largest concentrations of people held in slavery in upstate New York.

Alexander Coventry

In 1792, Alexander Coventry, a doctor from Claverack in Columbia County, purchased 900 acres on the eastern shore of Seneca Lake, settling with his family and two people in slavery in the low area at the northeast corner of the lake. This is the first family to bring people in slavery to this area. Hudson Valley farmers often incorporated the labor of people in slavery. Twelve to fifteen percent of New York's colonial population was enslaved. African Americans usually lived in relatively small groups, often part of the household of European Americans, isolated from other people of color. When Alexander and Elizabeth Coventry migrated from eastern New York, they represented this pattern of slave-holding. They brought with them two people in slavery, Betty and Cuffe, husband and wife. He named the property, located on Military Lot 17, "Fairhill" after his ancestral lands in Scotland. Coventry left this area in 1796, but no structure remains to mark this family's location.



The relationship between Cuff and Coventry suggests both the power an enslaver might wield and the limits of that power. Cuff used his considerable strength of will to negotiate basic terms of his work and life. First, he refused to leave without his wife, Bett, who belonged to a neighboring farmer. So early in 1792, Coventry paid about \$130 dollars for the "negro wench named Bett, also her youngest two children, the elder named Ann, and the youngest Jean, together with all their wearing apparel and half their bedding." Cuff worked on Coventry's new farm, but he also worked for himself, Bett, and their children. He raised crops, cut wood, burned ashes, and trapped animals for fur. Coventry let him keep the profits from these enterprises.

Coventry kept a detailed journal. On November 3, 1793, he noted that he "sent Cuff over the Lake for the flour, and he stayed all day. I spoke pretty sharp to him; He said he was getting his pay from Jackson for his ashes. He got 2 yards of red broadcloth at 30/-pr. yard. He took it so hard that I scolded him, he said he wanted another master. I told him to find another master for himself and wife, and I would sell them."

On June 19, 1793, Coventry recorded the death of Bett, who died at his farm of

consumption. Coventry noted that he and his family “tenderly cared for” Bett. They placed her remains in a shroud and a coffin, and buried her on the farm.

The Coventry family moved to Utica, New York, in 1796. Elizabeth Butler Coventry died February 7, 1828, and Alexander Coventry died in 1831.

Cuff may have moved to Utica with the Coventry family. He may also have been sold to Tunis Rappleye of Ovid. On July 21, 1809, Tunis Rappleye called the overseers of Ovid “to examine his negro man Cuff Vandike, who he wishes to manumit.” They found him to be “hail, hearty & sound, about age 28.”

Robert Selden Rose

In 1802, Robert Selden Rose, Virginia planter, purchased this land with his brother-in-law Judge John Nicholas. In 1803, when twenty-eight-year-old Robert and Jane Rose moved their family and thirty-seven people in slavery from Stafford County, Virginia, to Rose Hill, they were part of a migration of landed families who poured into upstate New York after the Revolution. Those who came into the Genesee Country—including Bath, Geneva, and Sodus—included many people from Maryland and Virginia, who established plantations based on a southern model, operated by people in slavery. Encouraged by Charles Williamson, land agent for Sir William Pultney’s land company, the Rose family came as an extended family group with the Maryland-born Fitzhughs, Robert Rose’s cousins, and his brother-in-law John Nicholas. The Fitzhughs were also related to Ann Carroll Fitzhugh, who later married abolitionist Gerrit Smith of Peterboro, Madison County, New York. More than seventy-five enslaved people came with this extended family group.



About 1809, Rose constructed a plain rectangular frame house with a small rear kitchen wing. The old house still stands just west of the new Greek Revival mansion. It became a carriage house and is now used as a visitors’ center. The old kitchen continued to be used

as the kitchen for the new mansion.

It appears that the attempt to transplant plantation type agriculture from Virginia to the Finger Lakes was not a financial success. Robert Rose manumitted many of his enslaved people, beginning in 1809. In 1820, however, he still held nine people in slavery—six men and three women—more than any other single person in Seneca County. He did not always treat even good workers with dignity. An 1893 county history contained an account of Rose striking a man named Peter with a cane. An 1828 newspaper story noted that he shot and wounded “one of his slaves, of the name of Henry” (probably Henry Douglass, Sr.) for refusing to work in the



brickyard on Sunday.

Henry Douglass was born in Maryland about 1776. He married Phillis Kenny, born in Maryland about 1780, who worked as a nurse for the Rose children. Henry and Phillis Douglass had at least eight children of their own. Rose manumitted Henry Douglass on October 10, 1816. Henry and Phillis Douglass later moved to Geneva, where Henry died May 22, 1849. As a widow, Phillis lived with her children, Emily and Charles, in 1850 and by herself at 21 High Street in 1860 until her death sometime before 1870.

A Whig and later an Anti-Mason in politics, Rose served in the New York State legislature in 1811, 1820, and 1821, and as a member of Congress from 1823-27. He was a founder of the New York State Agricultural Society, a member of the board of the Seneca Lock Navigation Company, and a trustee of Hobart College.

William K. Strong

After Rose died in 1835, William K. Strong, a young retired New York City wool merchant, purchased the property in 1837. Strong was a retired (although only age 32) wool merchant from New York City. Since wool was one of Seneca County's most important products, it is possible that he became familiar with Rose Hill as he traveled through the region, collecting wool for his business. In 1839, William and Sarah Strong constructed an elegant 12,000 square-foot double-wing Greek Revival mansion with Ionic columns and cupola on the site of Rose's simple rectangular dwelling. They kept the Rose family's original kitchen on the back. The Greek Revival house had a full pediment facing the street, six slender Ionic columns, a center doorway with sidelights and transom, and a cupola. Matching wings also had Ionic columns. Interior details reflected Minard Lafever patterns. The Strongs finished their new house just in time to welcome President Martin Van Buren to their "splendid mansion."

William K. and Sarah Strong lived at Rose Hill until her death in 1843. In the household were a total of seventeen people, including one free woman of color. Nearby lived the Johnson family, the only African American family in the neighborhood, with eight people. After leaving Rose Hill, William Strong lived in New York City the rest of his life. Active in Whig politics, he was a friend of William Henry Seward. He became a brigadier general in the Civil War. He resigned his commission for ill-health in 1863, but then organized the Union League Club in New York City and responsible for recruiting many African American troops in New York State. He died in 1867, age 62.

Robert J. Swan

In 1850, Robert J. Swan, born in 1826, bought Rose Hill. Sent to live with the Johnston family for his health, he fell in love with Margaret Johnston and married her. As a wedding present, his parents gave the young couple Rose Hill. In August 1850, twenty-four-year-old Robert Swan, farmer, lived there with his wife, M.A. aged twenty-two; Irish-born Bridget Griffen, aged 27, and Eliza Robertson, aged 23, and Edward Evans, aged 21, born in Wales. The property, noted the census, was worth \$40,000.

Two doors away, perhaps still on the Rose Hill estate, lived the African American family of R.S. Johnson, aged 42, cook, with Lucina Johnson, his wife, aged 42, born in Vermont; Stephen A., 20, a laborer; Prince, 13; William R., 11; Sarah M., 7; George W., 4; C.M., six months; Annie E., 16; Fistus, 14; and Levi Ray, 20, born in Vermont and a fiddler by trade.

Robert Swan made Rose Hill into a model New York State farm. Following the lead of his mentor and neighbor, John Johnston, Swan installed drainage tiles throughout his farm to remove spring water from the clayey-loam soil. His first year on the farm, Swan laid 16,000 tiles. Eventually, his 344-acre farm was interlaced with 61 miles of tiles, raising his wheat production from five to fifty bushels per acre. He won a silver pitcher from the New York State Agricultural Society in 1858, became president of the society in 1881, and that same year succeeded in his efforts to have a New York State Agricultural Experiment Station established at Geneva. He died in 1890 in New York City

Conclusion

Today the Greek Revival mansion, the original house built by Robert Rose, and a small portion of the original estate are owned by the Geneva Historical Society and is open to the public. A decedent of the Swan family had purchased the house after it had deteriorated from neglect and financed a major restoration effort. The mansion is listed on the National Register. It is widely known as one of the best examples of a Greek Revival residence in the eastern United States. Hopefully, this article gives the reader greater insight into its important story in terms of slavery and antislavery activism.¹

¹Judith Wellman, *Discovering the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism and African American Life in Seneca County, New York, 1820-1880*, pp 91-98.