

## **The Underground Railroad and Other Anti-Slavery Activity in Seneca County in the Antebellum Years**

It is widely believed that Seneca County played a major role in Underground Railroad and other anti-slavery activism in the years leading up to the Civil War. Documentation of much of that actual activity remains to be completed and is the focus of a grant applied for in spring 2005 with the Preservation League of New York State. Prior to the completion of that grant, this article should summarize much of what is currently thought to be true about Seneca County's involvement. The first part of this article will help explain how and why the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area was a hotbed of reforming zeal at that time. Then the article will provide information on various Seneca County sites, individuals, etc. alleged to be involved in Underground Railroad and other anti-slavery activism.

### **A. The Seneca Falls-Waterloo area was a hotbed of reforming zeal.**

The Seneca Falls-Waterloo area was a hotbed of reforming zeal in the years preceding the Civil War. This is largely explained in simple terms by the major economic and transportation developments occurring in this area, the nature of the people living here at that time, and its being part of the so-called "burned-over district" of the Second Great Awakening. Each of these factors needs to be addressed separately.

A series of transportation developments led to the tremendous economic growth that the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area would experience in the years just before the Civil War. The Genesee Road west from Utica made use of a ferry across Cayuga Lake from 1789 until completion of the Cayuga Lake Bridge in 1800. This bridge was over one mile in length, making it the longest bridge at the time in the Western Hemisphere. Thousands of people used this Genesee Road and Cayuga Lake Bridge to move "west," be it to what is today Seneca County, the so-called Genesee region of western New York or even points further west. The nature of stagecoach travel on this Genesee Road necessitated a tavern and stables about every ten miles or so. So, the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area had its typical stagecoach stops on this route.

A second major transportation development for the Seneca-Falls-Waterloo area came from their location on the Seneca River. Seneca Falls and Waterloo are both located at a site on the river where there were rapids often referred to as waterfalls. In Waterloo the rapids led to about a 14 foot change in the level of the Seneca River while at Seneca Falls the drop was about 49 feet. (As will be discussed in a later paragraph, these rapids will be a major source of waterpower for mills, etc. that sprang up in both Seneca Falls and Waterloo.) In 1818, portions of the first Cayuga and Seneca Canal were completed to get boats around these rapids as well as those in the settlement known as The Kingdom located between these two communities. This canal stimulated economic growth along its route. In 1828, New York State linked the Cayuga-Seneca Canal with the Erie Canal (the initial route of which had been completed in 1825). The Waterloo and Seneca Falls areas were now linked with the outside world by a very practical and improved transportation system. Fleets of canal boats bearing farm produce and merchant goods floated to and through the villages of Waterloo and Seneca Falls. Packet boats carrying people for business or pleasure were competing with the stage coach. Canal rates were much less than those of the Genesee Road and Cayuga Lake Bridge. Now it was possible for Pennsylvania coal

to be brought north via the Chemung River and Seneca Lake to Geneva and then via the Cayuga-Seneca Canal to the Erie Canal and then to Albany and New York City. The Erie Canal stimulated the economic growth and population growth of New York State, making it truly the Empire State. The counties surround the Erie Canal in western New York were the fastest growing portion of the entire United States in the years 1825-1835.

These canals stimulated the growth of the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area, but the advent of railroads in 1841 took the stimulus to much greater heights. Trains quickly became the major means of transporting goods and people, largely because they could operate year-round (the canals froze in cold winter months) and could be built virtually anywhere. From about 1841 to about mid-1853, the route of all trains going west from Albany to Buffalo went through Seneca Falls and Waterloo. One cannot emphasize enough the implications of the fact that Seneca Falls and Waterloo were on the main route west at a time in our nation's history when we seemed obsessed with "manifest destiny." Seneca Falls and Waterloo were bustling train stops, bringing goods and people. Goods, both farm produce and manufactured products (as will be discussed below) of Seneca County could be transported to eastern markets and even for overseas shipment. People seeking job opportunities and even to start their own businesses were drawn to the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area. This also meant that new ideas were coming into our area in the process.

Many industries sprang up in the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area, making use of the rapids that could be harnessed for waterpower. Grist mills were started as early as 1795. The islands in the Seneca River in Seneca Falls were known as The Flats. On The Flats were located many industries. These included Downs & Co. that in 1824 took over a fulling mill for manufacturing purposes, the first knitting mill in 1830, the first pump-making company in 1840, the Seneca Woolen Mill in 1840, and the first hand-held fire engine company in Seneca Falls in 1849. Prior to the Civil War, there were several companies in Seneca Falls making pumps and fire engines. Waterloo underwent a similar growth of manufacturing at this time.

This economic growth had a significant impact upon population growth. Laborers and stone masons had come to help build the Cayuga-Seneca Canal and the Erie Canal. Many of them stayed here to work in the new industries developing and many other immigrants came also to work in these industries. The existing canals and railroads made for easy and cheap transportation from New York City to Seneca Falls and Waterloo. The influx of different peoples and the movement of goods helped to bring about an infusion of new ideas, helping to create a climate for reform movements. Individuals were being drawn to Seneca Falls and Waterloo because of the opportunities for personal gain. For example, Henry Stanton, husband of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, moved his family from Boston to Seneca Falls in 1847 because of the economic opportunities he saw in this growing community. Some residents were becoming quite well-off. They built homes reflecting their wealth. These homes would become places for relatives and friends to visit. An example of this is the July 9, 1848, ladies' tea at the home of Richard and Jane Hunt which was to be a reunion with Lucretia Mott, a Philadelphia resident. It turned out to be a gathering of five ladies who would decide to call the first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls on July 19-20, 1848.

Hopefully, so far the case has been built that we had the key transportation and industrial developments, the resulting population growth and the generation of income, and the influx of goods as well as ideas. Now the focus needs to be turned to the reforming zeal of the so-called Burned-Over District of which Seneca Falls and Waterloo was so much a part. In the decades of the 1820s and 1830s a revivalist zeal swept throughout the United States. This movement was

known as the Second Great Awakening. One historian has estimated that only about 10% of the nation's people in 1800 were church members. So, we can safely say there was a need for a religious reawakening. Much of the nation-wide Second Great Awakening took place in central and western New York. So many people were converted to Protestant religions in this area at this time that the area became known as the Burned-Over District. It got this name because it was felt that there were no more people left to be converted. Between 1825 and 1835, there were at least 1343 "revivals" in New York State, most of them in the Burned-Over District. A key preacher was the Rev. Charles Grandison Finney who preached extensively at revivals in the Auburn to Rochester area. Finney stressed that humans have free will and can choose for God. Those embracing this belief—and there were many who did—will logically begin to think that they should help to improve society. They will look at various evils in society and will want to weed out those evils. In other words, the new religious zeal of the Burned-Over District is going to lead to a reforming spirit. The reform movements spawned included abolitionism, woman's rights, woman's dress reform, education, advocacy of peace, asylum building, and religious reform. We will have the rise of the Millerites and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (more commonly called the Mormon Church). Differences in opinions about the need of their church to become an anti-slavery advocate led to splits within the Methodist Church (creating to Wesleyan Methodist Church) and the Quakers, leading to the formation of the so-called Hicksite Quakers. Interestingly, given the strong anti-slavery sentiment of Quaker groups in the Burned-Over District, as well as the growing economic opportunities of the area, we have the movement from Philadelphia of some key Quaker families such as Thomas and Mary Ann M'Clintock to Waterloo to be a part of the local Hicksite community known as the Junius Monthly Meeting. In 1833, Mary Ann M'Clintock was a founding member, with Lucretia Mott, of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. In 1842, Thomas and Mary Ann M'Clintock became founding members of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Association when it organized in Rochester. In October 1848, they will be officers in the newly-formed Hicksite community called the Progressive Friends. These Quakers are strongly committed to anti-slavery activism.

It can hardly be emphasized enough that there is a strong link between the anti-slavery reform movement and the woman's rights movement that will be born in northern Seneca County in July 1848. This can be shown in various ways. One way is to simply point out examples of individuals who were close relatives of other key individuals who were anti-slavery activists. Elizabeth Cady Stanton is the cousin of the ardent abolitionist Gerrit Smith. Elizabeth Smith Miller, the advocate of women's dress reform (i.e., "bloomers") is the daughter of Gerrit Smith and, therefore, a cousin of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Martha Coffin Wright of Auburn is the sister of Lucretia Mott of Philadelphia. (Mott comes to Auburn in the summer of 1848 to help her sister Martha with her birth of a new child. While in the area, she will be the honored guest at the ladies' tea at the Hunt home in Waterloo on July 9, 1848. It will be a "reunion" of female anti-slavery activists.) Susan B. Anthony is the cousin of Amelia Jenks Bloomer.

An important second link between anti-slavery activism and woman's rights can be understood by pointing out that through their involvement in the anti-slavery movement, several women had a heightened consciousness of their inferior status as women. A good example of this is what happened at the world anti-slavery convention in London in 1840. Lucretia Mott and Henry Stanton were delegates from the American Anti-Slavery Society to this convention. Because Henry Stanton and Elizabeth Cady had recently married, Elizabeth accompanied her husband to London as part of their "honeymoon." At the London world anti-slavery convention,

the seven female delegates from the United States could not be seated as delegates simply because they were females. Elizabeth Cady Stanton meets Lucretia Mott in the visitors' gallery and they talk. They vow they will call a meeting to talk about that problem—the inferior status of women—when they get settled-in back in the United States. It won't happen, however, until the famous ladies' tea on July 9, 1848.

Another important factor in the link between anti-slavery activism and the woman's rights movement is the acquiring of important leadership skills. Anti-slavery activism meant attending meetings—organizing, publicizing, preparing resolutions to be presented and conducting these meetings became important aspects of this. This meant the learning of important leadership skills that could be used in their own woman's rights movement.

A last factor illustrating the link between anti-slavery activism and the woman's rights movement is to talk specifically about another aspect of the ladies who met for tea at the home of Richard and Jane Hunt on July 9, 1848. All five of the ladies were abolitionists. All but Elizabeth Cady Stanton were Quakers—Quakers tended to believe in the equality of all. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was not born a Quaker, but she herself said that she was Quaker in her beliefs. Undoubtedly this meant her strong anti-slavery beliefs as well as how she will express it as woman's rights.

It also needs to be pointed out that there were many Seneca Falls residents, including Ansel Bascom and Henry Stanton, who were intimately involved in the Free Soil Party and later the Republican Party. Amelia Jenks Bloomer started publishing *The Lily* as a temperance society newspaper in January 1849, but Mrs. Stanton seized upon the opportunity to use the publication as a voice for woman's rights. Lastly, we have individuals such as Ansel Bascom, the first president of Seneca Falls, who was actively involved in a variety of reform movements.

## **B. Seneca County Involvement in the Underground Railroad**

### **1. The Tear Underground Railroad Route**

Quite significantly it is believed that many Seneca Falls residents and former residents were exclusively connected with one special Underground Railroad route. This was the so-called Tear station originating in Gordon District in Orange County, Virginia. It may well have been the longest of all Underground Railroad routes and because of that length—penetrating so far south into Virginia rather than simply into Delaware and Maryland as most Underground Railroad routes did—that it may well have also been the most hazardous and dangerous of all. The northernmost station on this Tear Underground Railroad route was the station operated by Judge Gary V Sackett near Waterloo, NY.

The operators of the station in Virginia were Joshua Tear and his wife. Robert Tear, the brother of Joshua, was considered a rich man and was probably an important financial backer of this route. Robert resided in Seneca Falls nearly all his life and later often visited the Tear Station area.

It is believed that the organizer of this Underground Railroad route was Ansel Bascom. Ansel Bascom's sister aided in this venture and she was probably a financial contributor as well. It is reported that many Seneca Falls families aided in this Underground Railroad venture since it met with popular approval.

The Tear Station was founded about 1857. The Tear station was carefully chosen near three roads—the Richmond, the Plank, and the Catharpin—all of which were in constant use. This site was chosen for two major reasons: (1) it would make it easier to contact slaves, using

any of the three roads, and (2) this area in Orange County was outside strongly pro-slave territory. This eastern half of Orange County had few slaves and the residents were not disturbed by abolitionist activities. Nevertheless, Joshua Tear wisely realized that his Underground Railroad activities needed to be conducted in secret.

The Tear Station itself was a house that had a cellar dug out of the ground and walled with rock to accommodate the slaves for a few days while they were being prepared for their long trek northward. Next to this house was a wheelwright shop built to make the house operating as the station on the Underground Railroad look even less likely as being such a station.

After John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in October 1859, virtually all northerners living in Virginia came under suspicion. Underground Railroad activities were drastically reduced. The Tears removed all evidence of their Underground Railroad station and became just caretakers, although the wheelwright shop continued to operate. The Tears left suddenly in late 1861 when they felt they were suspected of their Underground Railroad activities. It has been said that they fled just ahead of the arrival at the station of suspicious Southern officers, but the Tears were never apprehended.

Before this brief discussion of the Tear Station on the Underground Railroad and its connection with Seneca Falls can be completed, a couple of comments need to be made. First, the information presented was taken from an account written in 1966 by Charles S. Seely, a retired Navy Commander. Because he was a descendent of Ansel Bascom, the alleged organizer of this Tear venture, can we be sure that what he has written is sufficient documentation that the Tear Underground Railroad actually existed? Second, while much about the Tear station in Virginia has been said, little has been said of the northern end of this Underground Railroad route, which Seely says was operated by Judge Gary Sackett in Waterloo. Nor can it be said definitively either approximately how many fugitive slaves actually escaped via this Tear station nor exactly what route they took north to get to the alleged northern terminus in Waterloo. This information currently doesn't exist. Hopefully, the Preservation League grant will provide funding to uncover this information.

## **2. Underground Railroad Routes through Seneca County**

There is little real documentation currently regarding Underground Railroad routes through Seneca County. Two major reasons for this are (1) it was typically a clandestine operation, and (2) it wasn't typically an "organized" operation—freedom seekers might vary their path for a variety of reasons, etc., with some house serving as a "safe house" ("station") only once or a few times and not on a regular basis.

It is currently believed that most freedom seekers who came through Seneca County on their way to freedom in Canada came up through Pennsylvania to Elmira. From Elmira there were many routes to get to Canada. Many of the freedom seekers went northwest from Elmira, in many cases by railroad, to Rochester and then across Lake Ontario or west to St. Catherine's, Ontario. Many went northeast from Elmira to Syracuse and then to Oswego and across Lake Ontario.

It is also believed that many went basically north from Elmira and made use of either Cayuga or Seneca Lakes to get to Seneca Falls or Waterloo. It is very likely that the freedom seekers might be transported at night from one side of the lake to the other side, making use of the numerous ferry boat crossings in operation at the time. From Seneca Falls or Waterloo they could go east to Auburn and on to Syracuse to Oswego and across Lake Ontario, or west to

Geneva. From Geneva they could go north to Pultneyville or Sodus Point and across Lake Ontario, or west to Rochester.

Not all freedom seekers went as far as Canada. Many freedom seekers settled in parts of western New York, including Seneca County. The passage of the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, however, motivated many freedom seekers to leave to Canada. They feared that they would be apprehended if they stayed within the United States.

### **3. Likely Seneca County Sites Associated with Underground Railroad Activity**

Stories abound of many places within Seneca County serving as Underground Railroad stations. Below are described the most likely sites. With the exception of the M'Clintock House, currently there is not sufficient documentation for definitive proof of their role in the Underground Railroad.

#### **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.

#### **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.

### **Hunt House**, 401 E. Main Street, Waterloo

The Richard Hunt House, where Jane Hunt served tea to Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others as they planned the beginning of the women’s liberation movement, is believed to be another Underground Railroad station on the long road to Canada.

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 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.

### **Robert Steele House**, 1955 Seneca Street, Romulus

The one and a half story wing to the left of the main part of the house today was the original part of the house, dating back to 1822. It is believed that this wing contained an attic room for “passengers” on the Underground Railroad. A Dutch oven fireplace there is said to have been a source of comfort to these “passengers.”

The house today is privately owned.

### **David Kinne House** , 6858 Kinne Road, town of Romulus

David Kinne, an abolitionist, apparently hired John Brown in the 1850s to build this house. Not surprisingly, it contained many features to make the house especially suitable as a “station” on the Underground Railroad. The house contains a room large enough to hold perhaps a dozen slaves. At the back of the closet, a small door, easily hidden by the full-skirted gowns of one of the girls of the family, provided entry. The children were never allowed to see the slaves, so that if questioned they might answer truthfully that they had never seen a slave about the place.

To further confound pursuers, the abolitionist David W. Kinne built a wooded maze which led only the “conductors” who knew the path to the Kinne back door and a daylight layover in the secret room. It is speculated that the next step for the slaves was probably to be concealed in a wagon for a quick trip north along the Ithaca-Geneva turnpike.

The house today is privately owned.

### **Seely-Bascom House** , E. Bayard Street, Seneca Falls

(This structure no longer exists; it is on the site of current I.G.A. grocery store.)

Charles S. Seely claimed that his ancestors used this home as a station on the underground railroad. According to former Sheriff G. Kenneth Wayne, the house contained a secret cellar, secret compartments beneath a structural china closet, and most perplexingly, is wired extensively with bell wire in tongue-and-groove construction, indicating a signaling system.

This house is described here to indicate how serious a “loss” it would be for any current privately-owned Underground Railroad site in Seneca County to be razed in the name of “progress.”

### **C. Other Anti-Slavery Activism within Seneca County**

In addition to many sites within Seneca County operating as “stations” on the Underground Railroad, there were many other kinds of anti-slavery activity taking place within Seneca County. These include formation of anti-slavery societies, circulating anti-slavery petitions to be sent to the U.S. Congress, and active participation in political parties seeking to prevent the spread of slavery or its complete abolition.

#### 1. timeline of anti-slavery activism

The timeline below identifies several different anti-slavery developments involving Seneca County residents.

**1838**--The Rochester Anti-Slavery Society is established.

**Feb. 1839**--Antislavery Convention of Western New York held in Penn Yan.

**Nov. 1839**--The Liberty Party is established in Warsaw. This is an attempt by a faction of abolitionists to get a pro-abolition President because they feel the Democratic and Whig Parties are not pro-abolition.

**1842**--The Western New York Anti-Slavery Society is established.\*

**1843**--A Wesleyan Methodist Church in Seneca Falls is established because of a split in the Methodist Episcopal Church over the issue of slavery. In August, the Abby Kelley lectures in Seneca Falls galvanized antislavery sentiments. Seneca Falls held its first antislavery fair in October.

**Aug. 1848**--The Free Soil Party is organized in Buffalo.

#### 2. anti-slavery petitions

Many anti-slavery petitions were sent to Congress from Waterloo. The M’Clintock family obtained signatures on petitions from people coming into their store.

#### 3. Some “tidbits” about Seneca County residents

Judith Wellman in her book *The Road to Seneca Falls* states that Henry Stanton, husband of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, by 1840 had been mobbed 150 times in his various speaking engagements on behalf of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

It is very likely that Gerrit Smith stayed at the Stanton house in Seneca Falls before he went on to Buffalo in early June 1847 to deliver the major address at what would become known as the National Liberty Convention.

The June 13, 1848 issue of the *Seneca County Courier* contained an invitation “to the freemen of Seneca Falls,” signed by 196 men, about one-quarter of all potential voters in the village, inviting all “electors of Seneca Falls, irrespective of party” to a meeting at the Wesleyan Chapel. The stated purpose of the meeting was to consider who the Democratic and Whig parties were going to nominate for president and vice-president. The real intent of the meeting, however, was to find candidates for president and vice-president who would restrict slavery which the

organizers of the meeting characterized as “the chiefest curse and foulest disgrace that attaches to our institutions.” The author of these comments was Ansel Bascom. Ansel Bascom was preparing to run for Congress, largely to work for anti-slavery measures. He was the first president (mayor) of the village of Seneca Falls in 1831. As a hardworking abolitionist and a leader of the local Free Soil Party chapter, Bascom may well have used the July 19-20, 1848, Seneca Falls Woman’s Rights Convention as a forum for the antislavery cause.

On July 12, 1848, Henry Stanton spoke in Warsaw, NY to two thousand people. Sixty of them would become delegates to the Free Soil convention to be held in Buffalo in August. A few days after his Warsaw speech, Stanton spoke in Canandaigua. On August 3, he and Ansel Bascom addressed a capacity crowd in Seneca Falls. This crowd elected 102 delegates, including Stanton, Bascom, Milliken, Chamberlain and Hoskins (all Seneca Falls residents at the time) to the Buffalo convention of the Free Soil party.

[This article was written by Walter Gable, the Seneca County Historian, in early July 2005. It should be considered a “working draft” prepared for use at his displays at the Seneca Falls Convention Days that same month. Appropriate reference footnotes have not been included in this draft version.]