

Erie Canal and the Underground Railroad Research Paper by Dr. Judith Welman

In 2000, 524 miles of the New York State's canal system became the 23rd National Heritage Corridor, encompassing four historic New York State canals and the 234 villages, cities, and towns along their routes. The Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor describes itself as "a place with stories to tell, great works of architecture to see, history to be learned, and hundreds of miles of scenic and recreational waterway and trails to explore." Part of those stories, architecture, history, and trails involve the Underground Railroad, abolitionism, and African American life.¹

The Erie Canal, built from 1817-25, extended 363 miles from Buffalo to Troy, New York. It had eighteen aqueducts, eighty-three locks, and a ten-foot wide towpath, where horses, mules, and oxen walked to pull the boats. Between 1825 and 1828, three other canals—the Champlain (1825), Oswego (1828) and Seneca-Cayuga (1828)--connected to the Erie. The original canal was forty feet wide and four feet deep. It could handle boats of only thirty tons. Between 1836 and 1862, the state vastly enlarged it to seventy feet wide and seven feet deep, with the ability to accept boats of 240 tons. Between 1903 and 1918, it was again expanded to 120-200 feet wide and 12-14 feet deep and renamed the Erie Barge Canal.²



George Hervey: Pittsford on the Erie Canal, 1837

... courtesy of: Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, mag.rochester.edu

George Hervey, *Pittsford on the Erie Canal*, 1837

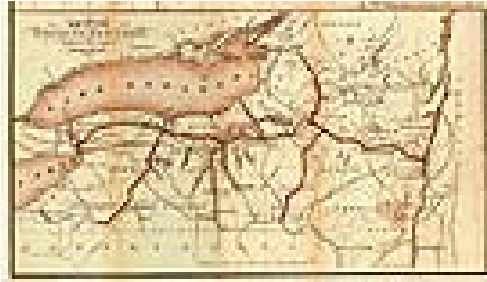
Courtesy Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, mag.rochester.edu

Governor Clinton, a major supporter of the canal, predicted that the Erie Canal, "will create the greatest inland trade ever witnessed." He was right. Based on people and produce funneled to New York City via canal, New York became the premier port in the nation. By 1840, New York's trade was larger than that of Boston, Baltimore, and New Orleans combined. All but two of New York's major cities developed along the canal system, reinforced by parallel

¹ www.eriecanalway.gov/.

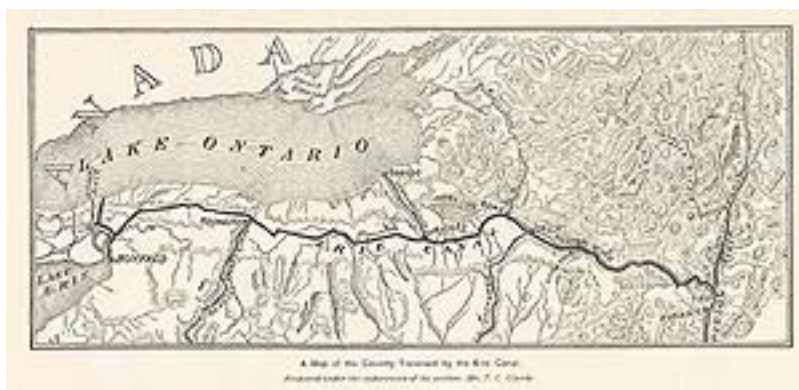
² www.eriecanal.org/.

roads and railroad. By mid-century, eighty percent of New York's population lived within 25 miles of these canals.³



“Map and profiles of New-York State Canals -- designed under direction of Van Rensselaer Richmond, State Engineer & Surveyor, to accompany his report for 1859.”
Annual report of the New York State Engineer and Surveyor (C. Van Benthuyzen, Albany, 1860)
www.eriecanal.org/maps.html.

This map shows the addition of the Genesee Canal, Black River Canal, and Chenango Canal, which New York State later abandoned because they were not profitable.



"A map of the country traversed by the Erie Canal," in Thomas Curtis Clarke, "Water-ways from the Ocean to the lakes," *Scribners Magazine*, Vol. XIX, No. 15 (1896), 104.
www.eriecanal.org/maps.html

Canals in New York State transformed transportation, economic development, and communication throughout the U.S. Along with goods and people, the canal transported ideas, leading to rapid cultural evolution, including the development of key national reform movements. It is no accident that many canal communities became hotspots for the abolition of slavery or that the first women's rights convention happened in the canal village of Seneca Falls.

Our understanding of canal history, while dominated by stories of European Americans, should rightly include also the presence of African Americans. Many African Americans used the canal as a route for escaping from slavery. Other African Americans settled in canal towns.

³ DeWitt Clinton, quoted in Roy Finch, *The Story of the New York State Canals* (1925), www.canals.ny.gov/cculture/history/finch/index.html; "The Erie Canal: A Brief History," New York State History and Education, www.canals.ny.gov/cculture/history/.

Finally, many European Americans kept safe houses in or near the canals to assist people who escaped from slavery on the Underground Railroad.

This context statement supports the nomination of the Erie Canalway Heritage Corridor to the National Park Service's Network to Freedom. It argues that canals were important routes on the UGRR, that African Americans were an important presence in canal villages, and that townships within this corridor contain important sites relating to the UGRR. It will focus on four main topics:

1. **Canals as escape routes from slavery.** African Americans (supported by European American abolitionists) used canals as escape routes on the Underground Railroad. This section will use anecdotal evidence to describe several individual incidents.

2. **Canal villages as havens for people escaping from slavery.** African Americans (including freedom takers) settled in canal towns, where they worked in water-related industries, as barbers, and as domestics. They also purchased houses, raised their children, and attended churches and schools in these villages. This section will be based on both anecdotal and statistical evidence.

3. **Canal villages as sites of safe houses.** Both African Americans and European Americans kept safe houses in canal villages.

4. **Current Network to Freedom listings with the Erie Canalway Heritage Corridor.** This section will be based on a list of UGRR sites in canal towns currently listed on the Network to Freedom.

1. Canals as Escape Routes from slavery

Anecdotal evidence from a variety of sources suggests that people who escaped from slavery regularly used New York State canals. This is not surprising, since canals formed one of the state's most important passenger transportation routes, especially before the completion of statewide rail systems in the early 1850s. Many references describe the experience of women and children as well as men on the canal.

In 1834, for example, Moses Roper escaped from Savannah, Georgia. He worked on an Erie Canal boat headed west until he returned to Albany and boarded a Champlain Canal boat headed for Vermont.⁴

On August 22, 1841, Elizabeth Smith Miller, daughter of abolitionist Gerrit Smith, wrote from Rochester:

We reached here safely, my dear father, about 2 o'clock last night. . . .When Mother left the cabin she found a fugitive slave woman on board with her little boy two years old – we gave her ten shillings. At the landing we took a coach for Rochester. Farewell—God bless you.⁵

That same year, European American Underground Railroad agent William Clarke sent several people north from Syracuse to Oswego on the Oswego Canal. "There were three fugitives shipped on board the old line of packets this morning for Oswego," he wrote on May

⁴ Don Papson, unpublished essay on Champlain route for the Underground Railroad.

⁵ Smith Papers, Syracuse University. Research by Erie Canal Museum, Canasota, New York.

31, 1841, “and amid the hurry and bustle they were not furnished with a ‘pass.’ They are Mrs. Frisbie and wife from Baltimore and another woman from near Baltimore. We commend them to your care.” He added a postscript: “Another is on his way and you may expect him in a day or two.”⁶

Clarke’s cousins Edwin W. Clarke and Sidney Clarke were active Underground Railroad agents in the City of Oswego. In 1841, New York State passed a law affirming that all people accused of being fugitives from slavery were free as soon as they crossed the New York State line. When Edwin W. Clarke discovered that a young woman and her two “owners” were enroute to Oswego via canal, Clarke boarded the boat and informed the young woman that, according to the laws of New York State, she was a free woman. Although the young woman wanted to leave, her owners whisked her away to a waiting lake steamer before Clarke could secure a writ of habeas corpus.⁷

Passage of the Fugitive Slave Act on September 18, 1850, led to an exodus of African Americans who left their homes in free northern states to go to Canada. Many of them used New York State canals. Sometime after September 1850, for example, “a very gentlemanly mulatto” entered the store of Colonel A. Seymour, a European American sympathizer in the canal city of Rome, New York. The man asked Seymour to help his wife and children, still living in New York City. Seymour visited the family on Cherry Street and found “a fine tidy woman—everything in her rooms in good order.” He arranged passage for the family “on one of the Oswego line boats, with a captain who sympathized with the situation of the oppressed.” She stayed briefly with her brother in Oswego before joining her husband in Canada.⁸

Not all escapes went as smoothly. In October 1850, a canal boat crew (including Captain Harwell Webster and crew members Silas H. Cowell and Jeremiah Cluney) cruelly tormented the Harris family--William, Caroline, and their toddler daughter--when they tried to escape from slavery on the Erie Canal. Born in slavery in South Carolina, William Harris moved to Philadelphia and married Caroline about 1843. The Fugitive Slave Act threatened their lives as free people, so they left Philadelphia for New York City. There they purchased tickets for Rochester, where they intended to take a lake ship to Canada. In Albany, their tickets were stolen and destroyed by people who forced them to purchase tickets again. The crew awakened William that night and told him that his master was aboard and that he would be returned to slavery. After three days of “threats and brutal conduct,” Caroline jumped overboard, taking their daughter with her. Passengers rescued Caroline, but their daughter drowned, and the boat did not stop to save her. Threatened with death, William cut his own throat and lay for hours while the crew played cards nearby. Finally allowed to leave the boat, William Harris walked along the canal,

⁶ W[illiam].M. Clarke to Cox, May 31, 1841, Onondaga Historical Association. In September 1839, William M. Clarke was part of a biracial group of abolitionists who arranged the escape of Harriet Powell, then visiting the Syracuse House, a hotel located in Clinton Square, Syracuse, along the Erie Canal. He visited Harriet Powell in Kingston, Ontario, in 1845, after her successful escape. “To the energetic management of William M. Clarke the success of the escape was mainly due,” noted the Syracuse *Sunday Times* in 1877. Clarke’s cousin was the well-known abolitionist Theodore Weld. About 1844, Clarke signed a petition against the admission of Texas along with his uncle Ludovicus Weld. Clarke owned property in Syracuse near the Erie Canal. At one time, Clarke was Deputy County Clerk for Onondaga County. (National Archives/ Deeds, Onondaga County Clerk’s Office; Syracuse *Sunday Times*, June 10, 1877, republished in *The Jerry Rescue*, 57-65).

⁷ Clarke to the Editor, *Oswego Daily Palladium*, August 4, 1841, printed in the *Palladium*, August 11, 1841, quoted in Eleanor Cali, “Samuel B. Ludlow and the Underground Railroad,” unpublished paper in Special Collections, Penfield Library, SUNY Oswego.

⁸ Col. A. Seymour, “The Underground Railroad for Fugitive Slaves,” *Roman Citizen*, February 23, 1872. Research by Maryellen Urtz.

following his wife who was still on board, for twenty miles until he fainted. Rescued by Captain Ogden, another canal boat captain, William was taken to abolitionist Dr. Hiram Hoyt in Syracuse, who treated his wounds. Rev. Lisle, African American minister from Syracuse, found Caroline Harris west of Syracuse, still on board the canal boat. The crew were arrested in Rochester and returned to Syracuse, where they were jailed and then fined. William and Caroline Harris eventually found their way to Canada.

The Harris family received national attention. On October 26, 1850, *New York Tribune* called this “one of the grossest and most inhuman outrages that has ever come to our notice.” The crew were “human fiends,” and this “outrageous affair” illustrated the worst effects of the “bill of abominations.” Newspapers such as the *Louisville [Kentucky] Daily Journal* also carried the story, probably picked up through the *Tribune*.⁹

These newspaper articles and manuscript descriptions suggest the kinds of stories that regularly circulated through the New York State and national press about the importance of New York State canals as routes for people escaping from slavery. A consistent search, using newspapers newly available online through sources such as fultonhistory.com, would most likely yield many more such references.

2. Canal villages as havens for people escaping from slavery

New York State’s canals led to a rapid and dramatic increase in the population of major cities and villages along their routes. Many cities doubled or tripled their populations within five years of the canal’s completion. Albany, e.g., increased from 12,630 in 1820 to 24,209 in 1830. Oswego grew by about five-fold between 1825 and 1835.¹⁰

Most immigrants to these cities were European American, but a significant number were African American. Many of these had escaped from slavery. Since the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 virtually coincided with the final abolition of slavery in New York State in 1827, many African Americans in canal towns had been freed from slavery in New York State. Places of birth listed in census records suggested that others had escaped from slavery in southern states.

Beginning in the late 1820s and early 1830s, African Americans used their new freedom to move to canal cities. In 1855, Utica had an African American population of 170, Syracuse of 251, Rochester of 371, and Buffalo of 775. Near the canal, African Americans found work in canal-related industries, as laborers, boatmen, hotel workers, or barbers. African American barbers were especially important. Every canal village so far studied had at least one African American barber, and most of them had several. They would have served primarily a European American clientele. In port cities such as Oswego, these would have included Canadian captains and sailors, as well as U.S. citizens. What better place to find out which people were sympathetic to fugitives and which were pursuers? Often, the wives of barbers (or

⁹ Elinore T. Horning, “The Harris Harassment,” *New York State Tradition* (Fall 1972), 26-28; *Syracuse Daily Standard*, October 28, 1850; October 26 [?], 1850; *New York Tribune*, October 26, 1850, reprinted from *Syracuse State Journal* and printed in *Erie Canal Museum Newsletter*, Fall 2001; *Louisville Daily Journal*, November 6, 1850, Filson Library, found by Pen Bogert and Christopher Densmore.

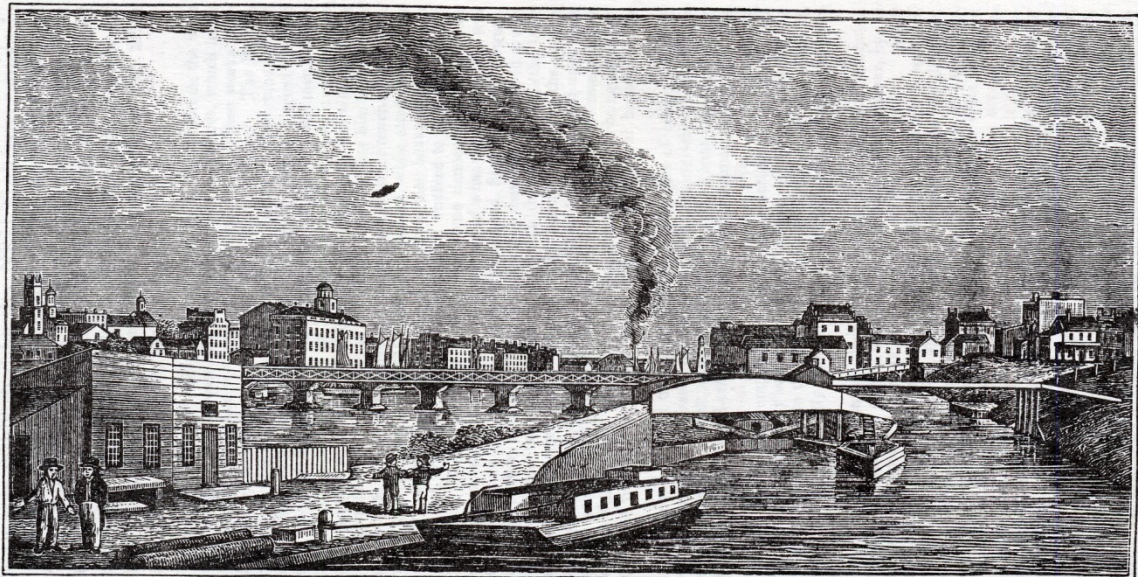
¹⁰ *Census of the State of New York for 1855* (Albany: Van Benthuysen, 1857), New York State Education Department, nysl.nysed.gov/archimages.

the barbers themselves) made a business of dyeing clothes and creating hairpieces, so they would get to know women as well as men. Within the African American community, people passed information through networks of families, churches, and work. African Americans sent their children to school (sometimes to separate African American schools and sometimes to integrated public schools). They also purchased land.

Several examples suggest the importance of freedom seekers and the Underground Railroad in this African American community, beginning in the 1830s. Two men—Thomas James of Seneca Falls and Tudor E. Grant of Oswego--suggest patterns that fit many more: they were barbers, born in the South, who escaped slavery to settle in a canal village in New York State in the early 1830s. They married African American women (perhaps freeborn) and worked on the Underground Railroad.

Tudor E. Grant, Oswego

Oswego grew up around forts at the mouth of the Oswego River, but it grew immensely after the completion of the Oswego Canal in 1828. Among those who came to this expanding city were many African Americans.



SOUTHERN VIEW OF OSWEGO

John Barber and Henry W. Howe, *Historical Collections of the State of New York* (New York, 1842).

In Oswego, Tudor E. Grant was a leader of the African American community, a committed abolitionist, and an outspoken opponent of discrimination in all forms. He was himself a fugitive slave from Maryland. As a barber, he was in a good position to hear news from both blacks and whites, and he very likely helped other self-emancipated slaves, either to find work in Oswego or to escape to Canada.

Born about 1800 as an enslaved person in Maryland, Tudor E. Grant came to Oswego in 1832. Grant did well in Oswego. As one of several African American barbers, he was part of a black elite, well-known both to black and white citizens in the community, active in church activities (including leading the singing) and a leading abolitionist. He ran a barbershop at various downtown locations, within a block or two of the Oswego Canal, until he retired in the late 1860s. He also became an important part of the local Underground Railroad network.

Several sources suggest that Grant had been born in slavery. Minutes of the Oswego County Anti-Slavery Society on April 24, 1838, noted that Mr. Grant had been a “chattel, although he spoke as though he felt himself to be a *man*, and as having *always* belonged to the race [of men].” Grant reported his birthplace in various census records as Maryland (1850) and Westchester County, New York (1855).¹¹

From the very beginning of anti-slavery organization in Oswego County, Tudor E. Grant took an active part. He gave a talk at one of Oswego County’s earliest anti-slavery meetings, held in Mexico in July 1836. In August 1837, he became an agent for *The Colored American*, selling subscriptions to this abolitionist newspaper. In 1838, he presented a resolution to the Oswego County Anti-Slavery Society meeting in Oswego. “Resolved,” he argued, “That we ought to be ready to sacrifice everything, rather than in such an hour as this to shrink from duty. Life without liberty is little worth--and if we cannot enjoy the privilege of speaking freely, and of writing freely, we ought, like Lovejoy [Elijah Lovejoy, the Illinois abolitionist editor who had just been killed], freely to die if necessary.” Mr. Grant had been a “chattel” himself, reported the minutes of the meeting, “although he spoke as though he felt himself to be a *man*, and as having *always* belonged to the race [of men].” At a meeting of the Oswego County Anti-Slavery Society on June 21, 1838, Grant volunteered (along with John Gridley and Sidney Clark) to be part of a Vigilance Committee for the City of Oswego, to organize local efforts to help fugitives from slavery.

As a well-known abolitionist, Tudor E. Grant also signed anti-slavery petitions. In 1838, he and more than fifty other male citizens of Oswego (both black and white) asked Congress not to admit any new slave states to the Union. In 1840, he signed another opposing the admission of Texas as a slave state.

He also protested discrimination in Oswego’s schools. In 1839, he pointed out that “I have not, in common with others, the right of choice in schools for my children.” Two different schools requested that he withdraw his children because of their color. In one case, the teacher explained that if she kept the Grant children, she would lose her white pupils. In the other, the teacher agreed to admit Grant’s children only on two conditions: 1) that parents of her white students all agreed, and 2) that the Grant children “had first learned to read and spell in class.” Where, asked Grant, will they learn to read and spell if they could not go to school?

When the Fugitive Slave Law was introduced into Congress, African Americans in Oswego met on May 6, 1850, to protest. Tudor E. Grant took an active part in the discussions. Among the resolutions he promoted were the following:

Resolved, That this meeting, declare it to be a violation of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of these United States, and contrary to the spirit of a Republican form of Government, and of the first article of our State Constitution, and injustice of the most aggravated character to deprive us of a just and legitimate participation in the rights and privileges of the State, or make us bear the burden and submit to its enactments, all when its arrangements, plans and purposes are framed and put into operation, utterly regardless of our rights as citizens, and which in their practical operation set upon us with destructive tendency.”

Passage of the Fugitive Slave Act brought insecurity for Tudor E. Grant, as it did for every African American in the country. Although he bought a house and continued to carry on

¹¹ *Friend of Man*, May 16, 1838.

his business, he became more careful in his dealings with government officials. In 1850, for example, he had listed his birthplace in the federal census as Maryland. By 1855, when the New York State census taker came to call, he listed his birthplace as Westchester County, New York.

Tudor E. Grant had several children with his first wife. In 1850, four of them still lived at home. Daughters Louisa, Sophie M., and O.C. were born about 1837, 1838, and 1844, while son George F. was born about 1847. Sometime before 1850, Grant's first wife died. By 1855, Tudor Grant had a new wife. Marie Grant was born in Maryland about 1805. She came to Oswego in 1853, when she was 48 years old. Perhaps she was herself a fugitive from slavery. They lived in a substantial house on West Bridge Street near the corner of Lathrop Street. Tudor Grant had purchased this property in 1854 and owned it until the family moved to West Seneca Street in 1858. Perhaps Marie Grant operated a boarding house here, since at least four single African American males lived with the Grant family, including eighteen-year-old W.H. Watson from Chenango County, who also worked as a barber.

At various times, Tudor Grant had barbershops in the Welland Hotel at the corner of West Second and Cayuga Streets, on Water Street just at the southwest end of the Bridge Street bridge, and in the Doolittle House, forerunner of the Pontiac Hotel. He also had a business doing "fancy dying" for silk fabrics. Tudor E. Grant left Oswego sometime in the 1860s to live with his daughter and son-in-law, another barber, in Palmyra (another canal village).

Thomas James, Seneca Falls

Seneca Falls grew up around a 43-foot drop of water in the Seneca River, enhanced by a turnpike and then by the Seneca and Cayuga Canal, which connected Seneca Falls to the Erie Canal. By the 1840s, its population had grown to more than 4000 people, of which fewer than twenty were African American.



East view of Seneca Falls village.

John Barber and Henry W. Howe, *Historical Collections of the State of New York* (New York, 1842)

One of them was Thomas James, born in slavery. When James escaped, he most likely went first to Canada before he moved to Seneca Falls, New York, in the 1830s. There he purchased a lot and built a home right next to the railroad and two blocks north of the Seneca and Cayuga Canal. In his position as barber and real estate developer, James built a major business block that still stands on a main corner in Seneca Falls.

James's birthplace, as reported in the census, gave the first clue that he might be a freedom seeker. In 1850, he listed his birthplace as "unknown." James most likely knew where

he was born but he was also very aware of national politics. On September 18, 1850, three months after the official 1850 census, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, putting the full power of the federal government behind returning freedom seekers to slavery. As a practical strategy, James chose to avoid possible recapture by not revealing his birth in slavery to a federal official. James did report that his wife Sarah Elizabeth had been born in Pennsylvania, and his thirteen-year-old daughter Martha had been born in Canada. In 1860, James reported his birthplace as New York.

Reported patterns of birth such as this—both the use of “unknown” and reporting different places of birth in different census years--are a good indication that such a person was a possible freedom seeker.¹² In Thomas James’ case, we have confirmation from multiple printed sources that he had escaped from slavery. These sources all contrast his status as a “fugitive” with his remarkable success as a businessman.

Based on his daughter’s reported birth in Canada, we can surmise that James had been born in slavery in the mid-18-teens and escaped to the North in the 1830s. At some point, he went to Canada, where he probably married Sarah Elizabeth and where his daughter Martha was born about 1837. He then returned to the U.S., arriving in Seneca Falls sometime before 1840, where his name appeared in the 1840 census.

Sarah Elizabeth James may also have been a freedom seeker. Although every census entry (including 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880, and 1900) listed Sarah James’ birthplace as Pennsylvania, her obituary noted that she was born in slavery, escaped with her parents to Canada, and then came to Seneca Falls, where she lived for 50 years.

From his position as a person who had escaped from slavery to settle as a free person of color in a northern city, Thomas James took an active part in the fight against slavery. In 1840, he subscribed to the *Colored American*. In August 1840, he attended the “Convention for Colored Inhabitants of the State of New York,” held at Albany, August 1840. There he was appointed head of the Seneca County committee along with Thomas Jackson and D. W. Keeler. He continued to be active in state conventions. In 1853, he was appointed at Geneva in November to serve (with Rev. David Blake, Rev. William Cromwell, Perry B. Lee, Henry Highland Garnet, and J. W. Duffin) on a committee to help organize “a society auxiliary to the state council of colored people; and to further consider the proceedings of the National Convention held in Rochester in July last, and to take measures to carry out the same.” He signed an announcement for Democratic League Convention in Seneca Falls, and he agreed (along with George Jackson) to take a census of colored people in his district. He joined the antislavery Wesleyan Methodist Church when it was organized in 1843 and became one of its first trustees. He signed a call for a Free Soil meeting, published in the *Seneca County Courier* in June 1848. In 1850, he signed the first extant antislavery petition sent from Seneca Falls. In the early 1850s (and quite likely longer), he subscribed to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* and the *National Era*.¹³

¹² For more discussion of place of birth as an indication of possible freedom seeker status, see Judith Wellman, “This Side of the Border: Fugitives from Slavery in Three Central New York Communities.” *New York History*, 79:4 (October 1998).

¹³ *The Colored American*, September 12, 1840; *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, June 10, 1852, November 18, 1853; and December 16, 1853; “Seneca Falls Subscription List,” Manuscript Accession #72, Seneca Falls Historical Society; Wellman, “This Side of the Border: Fugitives from Slavery in Three Central New York Communities,” *New York History* (October 1998), 359-92; Minutes of the Annual meeting of the Wesleyan Methodist Society, April 1, 1850, “Book No. 1, The Property of the First Wesleyan Methodist Church, Seneca Falls, New York,” Cornell microfilm, Seneca Falls Historical Society; Antislavery petitions sent from Seneca Falls to the House of Representatives asking for the repeal of slave laws in the District of Columbia, May 7, 1850, National Archives, HR31A-G4.1; Free Soil list, *Seneca County Courier*, June 13, 1848.

Thomas James did exceedingly well economically in Seneca Falls. As a barber, he attracted a steady business, both from local people and railroad passengers. One of his most famous customers was Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In 1852, inspired by movements for the short dress (or the Bloomer costume), homeopathic medicine, and health reform, Stanton and several other women paid James a shilling apiece for a shampoo and haircut. "It would delight all physiologists and lovers of comfort, to see the heaps of beautiful curls and rich braids that have fallen beneath James' magic touch, from the over heated aching heads of about one dozen of our fair ones," Stanton reported in the *Lily*.¹⁴

James' wealth increased dramatically in the 1850s. The census listed the value of his real property in 1850 as \$700. By 1860, the census listed his real property as worth \$6000. In 1863, he had enough money to consider a major real estate investment. In that year, he and Sarah Elizabeth mortgaged all three of their existing properties to the First National Bank of Seneca Falls for \$3500 and began to build a brick business block at the corner of Fall and Cayuga Streets.

Administrative papers at the time of Thomas James' death made it very clear that Thomas James had been born in slavery, noting that "“Elizabeth James, his widow, and the said Thomas James had no other relatives known to the deponents or either of them-**he having formerly been a slave** and made, during his lifetime, diligent enquiry for his relatives without effect.”"¹⁵

We may never know where Thomas James had been born, when and under what circumstances he escaped from slavery, or why he chose to settle in Seneca Falls. We do know, however, that his was a remarkable story of one freedom seeker who, against all odds, found stability, respect, and wealth in one small city in upstate New York.

3. Canal villages as sites of safe houses

New York State had three major Underground routes, intersected by several subsidiary lines. The first main route ran from New York City north to Albany and then north along the Champlain Canal and Lake Champlain to Canada. The second went west from Albany through Utica, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo, with secondary routes leading to Canada along the Oswego Canal and Lake Ontario ports at Pultneyville, Charlotte (near Rochester) and elsewhere. The third followed land routes from southeastern Pennsylvania north to the Finger Lakes and then went either west to Lake Erie (through Elmira) or north along the Finger Lakes to intersect the route from Albany to Buffalo.

Whether freedom seekers arrived by canal, road, or railroad, canal communities formed the backbone of the first two of these major Underground Railroad routes. Every major city along the canal (and probably most of the smaller villages, too) had a network of Underground Railroad supporters.

In his 1892 autobiography, Frederick Douglass outlined the Underground Railroad route that he worked with most often. It extended from Baltimore, Maryland, and Wilmington, Delaware, north to Philadelphia, New York City, and Albany and then west to Syracuse and Rochester.¹⁶

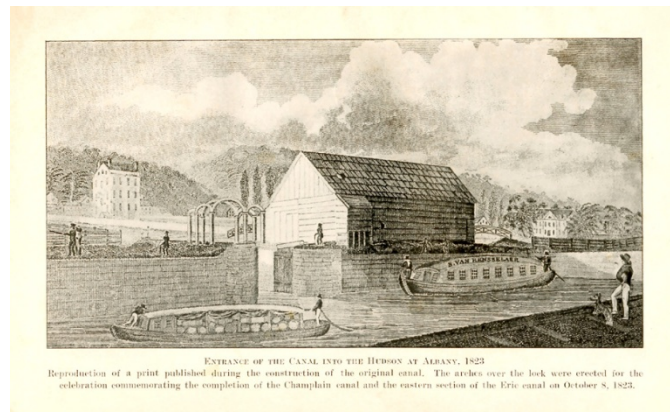
¹⁴*Lily*, June 1852; ECS to M. S. Gove Nichols, August 31, 1852.

¹⁵ Burial Records, Restvale Cemetery, Seneca Falls, Sec. G, lot 26. West of East side.

The three New York State cities that Douglass listed--Albany, Syracuse, and Rochester--suggest consistent patterns. As in most canal villages, a network of both African Americans and European Americans worked on the Underground Railroad in these cities. Working as individuals or representatives of church groups, they formed abolitionist societies in the 1830s and 1840s and then organized broad-based Underground Railroad networks by the 1850s. A group of supporters (both African American and European American) raised money, collected clothes, provided transportation, and arranged work for freedom seekers. Frequently, this group designated one (or more) central spots, often but not always the homes of African Americans, as the main location where freedom seekers themselves would stay.

Albany

The Erie Canal connected to the Hudson River at Albany. By the 1840s (and probably earlier), Albany had become the main forwarding destination for freedom seekers who came through New York City. New York City's Vigilance Committee, formed in the late 1830s by David Ruggles, Theodore Wright, and other African Americans—assisted by the stalwart and long-time Quaker operative Isaac Hopper--sent an estimated 2000 people north by 1849. A few went to New England, but most probably went to Albany. By the 1850s, European Americans such as Sidney Howard Gay, Oliver Johnson, James Gibbons and Abby Hopper Gibbons in New York City, William Jay in Westchester County, and Charles Marriott assisted in this work.



www.eriecanal.org/images/east-2/Albany-1823.jpg



www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=5174

The Albany Vigilance Committee was one of the most active in New York State. A newspaper article in 1842 reported that the committee had raised five hundred to pay for board and passage for about 350 “runaway negroes,” including 150 men, 150 women, and fifty children, “since the opening of navigation last Spring.” Most had come from Virginia, Maryland, or Washington, D.C. Most went directly to Canada.¹⁷

Stephen and Harriet Myers kept one of the main safe houses in Albany. Stephen Myers was born in slavery in Rensselaer County in 1800. Freed at age eighteen, he worked as a grocer and then a steward on the *Armenia*, a steamboat that ran along the Hudson River between New York City and Albany. In 1842, Stephen Myers established the *Northern Star and Freeman’s Advocate*, where he wrote openly about his work on the Underground Railroad.

Newspaper and manuscript sources outline Myers’ work both in the Underground Railroad and in broader movements for African American rights. In one letter, Myers appealed for funds to house people escaping from slavery, as they stopped in Albany on their journey northward. In another letter, Myers lobbied members of the New York State legislature to reject a bill promoting emigration of free people of color to Africa. He urged European American abolitionists to “eradicate prejudice from their own hearts,” in order to receive “the unwavering confidence of the people of color.” He also organized a free black community in Florence, New York, near Utica. Stephen and Harriet Myers lived for a time on Third Street in Albany, before they purchased a brick house on Livingston Avenue, still standing.¹⁸

Harriet Myers, as well as her husband, kept their safe house. In August 1860, she wrote to William Jay to tell him that two fugitives he had forward from Westchester County had arrived, along with the money he had sent. Eight others had arrived without funds, and Harriet took responsibility for them, since her husband was working in Lake George as a butler.¹⁹

¹⁷ Don Papson, northcountryundergroundrailroad.com/NCUGRHA_LakeChamplain.htm.

¹⁸ Lauren Stanforth, “Walking the Abolitionist’s Trail,” *Albany Times-Union*, February 25 2008, <http://www.timesunion.com/ASPStories/Story.asp?newsdate=5/17/2010&navigation=nextprior&category=REGION&storyID=666525#ixzz0rEzgBfmp>, New York State Underground Railroad Trail, Marker for Stephen and Harriet Myers House.

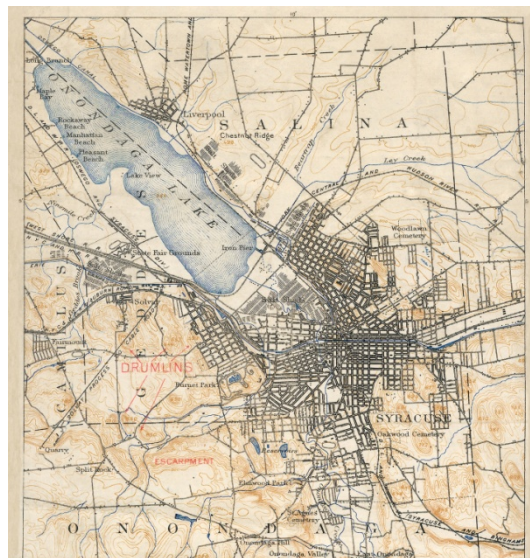
¹⁹ Harriet Myers to William Jay, August 20, 1860. John Jay Homestead State Historic Site, Katonah, New York. Don Papson, northcountryundergroundrailroad.com/NCUGRHA_LakeChamplain.htm.

Other Underground Railroad agents in the Albany-Troy area included Henry Highland Garnet, African American minister in Troy and a freedom seeker himself; Lewis Washington, freedom seeker; and European Americans Charles Torrey, editor of the *Albany Patriot*; Abel Brown, Secretary of the Eastern New York Anti-Slavery Society; Lydia Mott, Quaker, who worked with her sister from their shop in downtown Albany; Fayette Shipard, Congregational minister, or Martin Townsend, abolitionist lawyer.²⁰

People who traveled to freedom from Albany or Troy generally went west to Syracuse, Oswego, or the suspension bridge at Niagara Falls. They sent a few, however, directly north along the Champlain canal and Lake Champlain. In 1842, Myers reported, “We assisted two slaves that were sent to our office by William Garner of Elizabethtown [N.J.]; we furnished them with money for Canada by way of Lake Champlain.” Martin Townsend recalled, “fugitives from slavery always traveled from Troy to the Canada line with perfect Safety—whether by Vermont & Lake Champlain—or by Suspension Bridge.” Those who went north traveled either by canal or (when the canal was close) by road.²¹

Syracuse

Syracuse also revealed a biracial network of Underground Railroad supporters living near the canal. In the 1830s, they worked on an ad hoc basis, as the need arose. By the 1840s, they organized around networks of antislavery churches. By the 1850s, they formally organized to support African Americans Jermain and Caroline Loguen as keepers of the primary safe house.



“Map of Syracuse, New York,”

New York State Museum Bulletin (Albany: University of the State of New York), nos. 227-228 (Nov.-Dec. 1919) -- facing 42.

www.eriecanal.org/maps.html#locations

²⁰ Tom Calarco, ed., Catharine Brown, *Abel Brown, Abolitionist* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2006).

²¹ “To the Public,” *Northern Star and Freeman’s Advocate*, December 8, 1842; Fayette Shipard to Charles Hicks, Nov. 24, 1840, Vermont Historical Society, Don Papsen, northcountryundergroundrailroad.com/NCUGRHA_LakeChamplain.htm.

Early UGRR workers included Thomas Leonard and William Clarke, both of whom lived about two blocks south of the Erie Canal. European American William Clarke was a cousin of the noted abolitionist Theodore Weld, whose parents lived just east of Syracuse. He was also a cousin of Edwin W. Clarke and Sidney Clark, main keepers of the Underground Railroad in Oswego, New York. He owned property about two blocks south of the canal, and rented apartments to African Americans.

Thomas and Jane Leonard, who lived in the same neighborhood as Clarke, just south of the Erie Canal, were part of a stable core of abolitionists in Syracuse. They lived most of their lives in a small frame house, one-and-a-half stories high, at 219 East Fayette Street (later 1113 East Fayette Street) in Syracuse, two block south of the canal.

Tom Leonard arrived in Syracuse in the early 1830s, just after the formal end of slavery in New York State. Leonard was mostly likely a freedom seeker himself, since in census reports he gave inconsistent listings for his place of birth. In federal census records, he listed New York State, yet in state census records he listed either Virginia (1855) or Maryland (1865). In the 1855 New York State census, Leonard's sister Martha Sidney listed her place of birth as Canada. Thomas Leonard worked as a waiter, boatman (most likely on the Erie Canal), and laborer. In the early 1850s, he owned his own horse and dray. Jane Leonard worked as a cook. Both were affiliated with the AME Zion Church. Certainly, both kept their own house as an Underground Railroad station. In 1865, their household included African American boarders who listed their birthplaces as Canada, South Carolina, and Virginia.²²

In 1839, Leonard, Clarke, and others helped rescue Harriet Powell, a young African American woman brought to Syracuse by the Davenport family, from the Syracuse House, located on the southeast side of the Erie Canal in Clinton Square, where Leonard worked as a waiter. Trying to find out what happened to Harriet, her owners had Leonard arrested for stealing her clothes, but all charges were dropped. Harriet was spirited away, after narrow escapes, to Gerrit and Ann Smith's home in Peterboro, and from there she went to Kingston, Ontario. When abolitionists discovered a plot to kidnap Harriet Powell from Canada, Tom Leonard was sent over to warn her about it.²³



John Barber and Henry W. Howe, *Historical Collections of the State of New York* (1842)
Syracuse House on right.

²² Judith Wellman, *Uncovering the Freedom Trail in Syracuse and Onondaga County*, pacny.net/freedom_trail.

²³ "Slave Story of September, 1839, Which Awakened Many Abolition Feelings." (Reprinted from the *Sunday Times*, June 10, 1877), in Judith Wellman, *Uncovering the Freedom Trail in Syracuse and Onondaga County*, pacny.net/freedom_trail.

In the 1840s, abolitionists emerged from key Syracuse churches. Samuel J. May, pastor of the Unitarian Church, was active both locally and nationally in the Underground Railroad and the American Anti-slavery Society. The Merrick family anchored abolitionist and Underground Railroad activities in the Congregational Church. Luther Lee, pastor of the abolitionist Wesleyan Methodist church (established nationally in 1843), led that church in its support for the Underground Railroad. Jermain Loguen, who had escaped from slavery in Tennessee, arrived in Syracuse in 1841 and became part of the core group of local abolitionists. Rev. Lisle, pastor of an African American Congregational Church, also worked actively in the Underground Railroad.

Luther Lee described his Underground Railroad work in the early 1850s. During his three years in Syracuse (1852-55), he reported, “I did the largest work of my lie on the Under-ground Rail-road. I passed as many as thirty slaves through my hands in a month.” He openly advertised that he lived at 39 Onondaga Street (across from the church) and noted that in one year, he offered shelter to an average of one person per day. In the late twentieth century, researchers found sculpted clay faces on the basement walls of the Wesleyan Church.²⁴²⁵

After the U.S. government passed the Fugitive Slave Act on September 18, 1850, federal officials made Syracuse a target of particular intimidation. Secretary of State Daniel Webster, who hoped to become the next president, spoke in Syracuse in May 1851, assuring residents that any attempt to resist the Fugitive Slave Act would be treated as “Treason! Treason! Treason!” On October 1, 1851, federal agents carried out that threat. They arrested William “Jerry” Henry, who had escaped from slavery in Missouri and had lived in Syracuse for about two years. Local abolitionists, hosting an abolitionist convention in the city, went immediately into action. The Vigilance Committee, which included Jermain Loguen and Gerrit Smith (a nationally known abolitionist from Peterboro, New York) made plans to free Jerry Henry. A crowd of about 2000 people gathered in Clinton Square, at the heart of city, and stalwart men battered down the door of his room with a battering ram. Hidden in a butcher’s cart, Henry made his way to Mexico, New York, and then to Oswego, where he left for Kingston, Ontario. Lawsuits, indicting both European Americans and African Americans, made their way through the courts for two years. Only one person—Enoch Reed-- was ever convicted, and he died before his appeal.

Many African Americans left Syracuse for Canada, fearing prosecution as a result of the Jerry Rescue. They included Jermain Loguen and Thomas Leonard. By the mid-1850s, however, Loguen had returned. Syracuse Underground Railroad supporters set up an organized Vigilance Committee to raise money to support fugitives. By 1857, they maintained the primary safe house at the home of Jermain and Caroline Loguen. Syracuse became known as a “free city,” the “Canada of the United States,” and “the great central depot” of the Underground Railroad. People called Jermain Loguen “the king of the Underground Railroad” and “the prince of the Underground Railroad.”²⁶

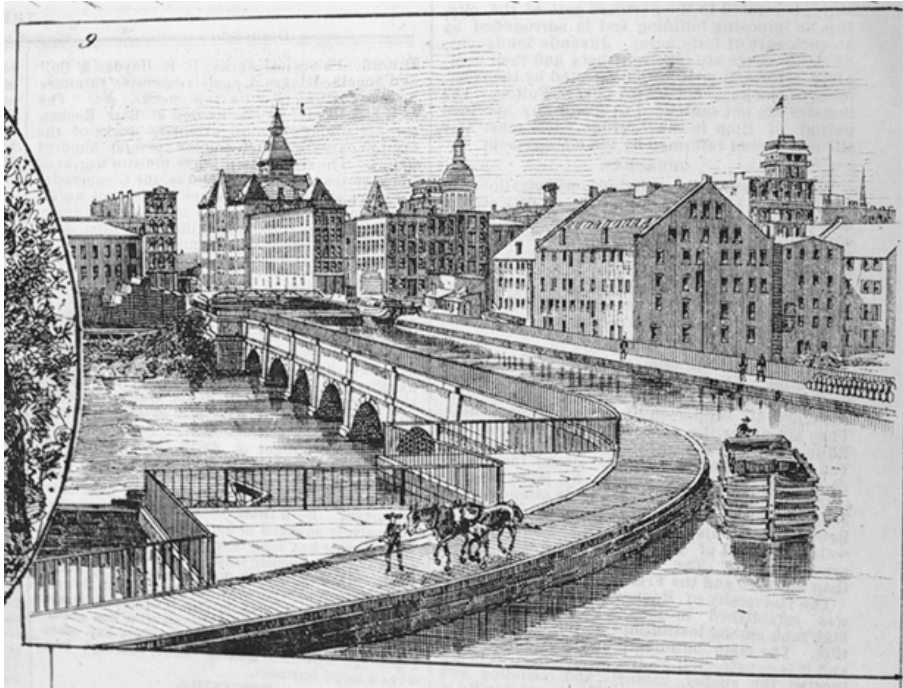
Rochester

²⁴ Luther Lee, *Autobiography of the Rev. Luther Lee* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1882; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 331, 336. Research by Milton Sernett.

²⁵ Douglas V. Armstrong and Louann Wurst, *Faces of the Past: Archaeology of an Underground Railroad Site in Syracuse, New York*, Syracuse University Archaeological Research Center Report 10 (January 1998).

²⁶ Milton Sernett and Judith Wellman, “Multiple Property Nomination for Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, and African American Life in Central New York, 1820-1870,” (2001), www.oswego.edu/ugrr/mpn_e.pdf.

Rochester grew up because of and around the Erie Canal. The original Erie Canal went directly through the middle of the city, crossing the Genesee River on an aqueduct. Because that aqueduct leaked, the state replaced it when it enlarged the canal in 1842. This new aqueduct still stands as the base of the Broad Street bridge.



"A view of Rochester's second Erie Canal aqueduct," *Picturesque Views in Rochester, N.Y.*, from *Daily Graphic*, Vol. 18, No. 790 (Dec. 17, 1878), 222-223.

www.eriecanal.org/Rochester-1.html



“Rochester Special Map,” Silas Cornell, *Cornell’s Maps* (Rochester: Curtis, Butts & Co., 1861), republished in J.A. Bense, *U.S. Geological Survey, State of New York* (1912).

www.eriecanal.org

The canal created Rochester as both a flour city, one of the country’s major milling centers, and a flower city, an important area for seeds and plants. Rapid population growth brought both European Americans and African Americans. By 1850, Rochester had ? black citizens. This rapid growth created not only a need but an opportunity for Rochesterians to define themselves, not only as citizens of this new community but as citizens of this new nation. Religious revivals in the 1820s and 1830s helped build churches as stable institutions. They also created the basis for local people to promote their own ideas of morality, locally as well as nationally.²⁷

The abolition of slavery became one of Rochester’s most important causes. Abolitionists—mostly European American Quakers or Congregationalists--organized the first antislavery society in 1838. In the 1840s, they city became the site of major conventions of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society, a Quaker-dominated regional group associated with the American Anti-Slavery Society. Political abolitionists also took root here. Myron Holley, a founder of the Liberty Party, published the *Rochester Freeman* before his death in 1843.

Women associated with the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society organized antislavery fairs throughout the region, including in canal communities such as Palmyra. These fairs attracted donations from women in Boston and Great Britain, as well as from local farms and sewing societies. With money from these fairs, they invited Frederick Douglass to Rochester in 1847, where he set up the *North Star*, published first in the AME Zion Church (42 Favor Street) and then in the Talman Building, which still stands near the original Erie Canal.

Douglass had escaped from slavery in Maryland in 1838. He traveled through New England and New York State as an antislavery orator before publishing his biography in 1845. The following year, he went to England, where British abolitionists purchased his freedom. By the time he came to Rochester, then, he was legally a free person. He did not neglect those still in slavery, however. With a small group of other African Americans (including barber J.P. Morse), European American Quakers (including Amy and Isaac Post), and other European American abolitionists (including Maria Porter and her brother Samuel Porter), Douglass became an anchor of the UGRR in Rochester. He used his home at 4 Alexander Street (later 297 Alexander) to house freedom seekers. When he moved to South Avenue (near Highland Park) about two miles from the heart of the city, he used this house, too.

In his 1892 autobiography, Douglass described his Underground Railroad work in Rochester:

I was on the southern border of Lake Ontario, and the Queen's dominions were right over the way--and my prominence as an abolitionist, and as the editor of an anti-slavery paper, naturally made me the station-master and conductor of the underground railroad passing through this goodly city. Secrecy and concealment were necessary conditions to the successful operation of this railroad, and hence its prefix "underground." My agency was all the more

²⁷ For more on the impact of the canal and subsequent reforms on Rochester, see Paul Johnson, Nancy Hewitt, and Milton Sernett.

exciting and interesting, because not altogether free from danger. I could take no step in it without exposing myself to fine and imprisonment, for these were the penalties imposed by the fugitive-slave law for feeding, harboring, or otherwise assisting a slave to escape from his master; but, in face of this fact, I can say I never did more congenial, attractive, fascinating, and satisfactory work. True, as a means of destroying slavery, it was like an attempt to bail out the ocean with a teaspoon, but the thought that there was one less slave, and one more freeman--having myself been a slave, and a fugitive slave--brought to my heart unspeakable joy.²⁸

To send freedom seekers from his South Street home to downtown Rochester, Douglass would often send his children with a note such as "Two weary people here; need transportation in the morning." Sometimes he would sign this "D.F.," in a small attempt at disguise. In 1892, Douglass described the largest group of freedom seekers—eleven--that he ever hosted. He had to keep them for several days while he raised money for their transportation. "I had some difficulty," he remembered, "in providing so many with food and shelter, but, as may well be imagined, they were not very fastidious in either direction, and were well content with very plain food, and a strip of carpet on the floor for a bed, or a place on the straw in the barn."²⁹

Fugitives also came to Douglass's print shop for the *North Star* in the Talman Block. Often, Douglass or his printers would arrive at the shop early in the morning to find fugitives sitting on the steps, waiting for them. A historic marker now identifies this site.³⁰

Douglass worked with a small group of both African Americans and European Americans. African Americans included Jacob P. Morris, owner of several barberships, and William S. Falls, production manager for the *Daily Democrat*. Amy Post, one of Douglass' co-workers, described African Americans in Rochester as "always ready to fight for a fugitive slave, and, if they failed to rescue one here, they would form a company of stalwart men and follow the party, spy out where they were stopping for the night, and, generally finding the watchman asleep, they only failed once to return in triumph with their rescued brother or sister."³¹

European Americans Amy Post and Maria and Samuel Porter worked closely with Douglass, as did a wide network to sympathizers (often Quakers), both in the city and in surrounding rural areas. George and Susan Avery (sister and brother-in-law of Henry B. Stanton and Elizabeth Cady Stanton) used their store at 12 Buffalo Street (near the canal and the Talman Building) to host freedom seekers. Amy Post remembered hosting groups as large as twelve at their home on Plymouth Avenue and estimated that 150 freedom seekers passed through Rochester each year.³²

²⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times* (Boston: 1892), 328-29, docsouth.unc.edu/neh/dougl92/dougl92.html.

²⁹ McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 172; Douglass, *Life and Times*, 329-30.

³⁰ Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 149.

³¹ Post, "The Underground Railroad at Rochester," undated typescript in Siebert collection, New York State Underground Railroad Materials, 2-3. Found by Milton Sernett.

³² Cited in Merrill, *The Underground Freedom's Road*, 50. Husted, "Black & White Together," 6.

The Champlain Line of the Underground Railroad **By Don Papson**

Between 1830 and 1860, an estimated 25-40,000 enslaved African Americans escaped to the Canadas seeking the sweetness of freedom. Like a majestic maple tree, the Champlain Line of the Underground Railroad spread its canopy across Northeastern New York, Vermont, and Lower and Upper Canada. Its crown was Montreal, Canada East. A welcoming branch stretched eastward toward Boston, Massachusetts. An opposing branch extended to Toronto and Canada West's cities and farmlands. The powerful trunk of this great freedom tree encompassed Lake Champlain, the Champlain Canal, Troy and Albany, and the mighty Hudson River. It derived its strength from vigilant New York City agents. Its extensive root system spread out toward Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Wilmington, Delaware; Washington, D.C.; Baltimore, Maryland; Norfolk and Richmond, Virginia; Savannah, Georgia; and Galveston, Texas.

The trunk of the Champlain Line rose up from New York City to the state's capital, Albany, where a Committee of Vigilance led by Stephen Myers gained the reputation of being one of the most efficient of all Underground Railroad organizations. Troy, on the opposite side of the Hudson River, was another major center of activity.

Some of the hundreds of fugitives from slavery who followed the Champlain Line may have been forwarded to New York City on a route that first took them to the home of Thomas Garrett in Wilmington, Delaware, and then to William Still in Philadelphia. They may have been rescued in Washington D.C. by Charles Torrey. They may have been forwarded or taken from New York City to Albany or Troy by Rev. Charles Bennett Ray, and then sent to the Canada on the Erie Canal or the Champlain Canal by Stephen Myers or Rev. Abel Brown. They may have been sent into Vermont or to Rouses Point from Troy. They may have been forwarded from Fall River, Massachusetts, by Elizabeth Buffum Chace or from Boston by Lewis Hayden.

They were received and sheltered in Ferrisburgh, Vermont, by Rowland T. Robinson and his wife Rachel; in Burlington by Lucius H. Bigelow and Rev. Joshua Young; in St. Albans by John W. Lewis. Samuel Keese and his wife Catherine sheltered fugitives from slavery in Peru, New York. After a day or two they were driven to the Champlain home of Noadiah and Caroline Mattocks Moore by Keese's nephew, Stephen Keese Smith. Moore then drove them to LaColle, Quebec, and helped them find work. Lucius H. Bigelow used his carriage to drive runaways who were in danger of being captured in Burlington to St. Albans where he put them on trains for Montreal.

The Champlain Line was an extension of the Eastern Seaboard Line. It was the final link between New York City and terminal points in Northeastern New York and Vermont. It was the last stretch of the "Troy Line" from Troy, New York, and of the "Vermont Road" from Massachusetts. It was the last link in a series of road, rail and water routes from Manhattan and Boston to Montreal and Toronto, Canada. Lake Champlain, flowed North into Canada. The completion of the Champlain Canal in 1823 allowed fugitives from slavery to take packet boats to Whitehall and board steamboats for St. John, Quebec, and Rouses Point. At Waterford the canal connected with the Hudson River which flowed South to Albany and Troy and New York City. These interconnected waterways to freedom were Eastern New York's Underground

Railroad highway.

In August of 2009, the National Park Service officially recognized the old Rouses Point Pier as one of its Network to Freedom sites. The busy steamboat landing and railroad station strategically situated one mile south of the Canadian border was the most important stop on the Champlain Line. The Pier became the nexus of a vast transportation network in the 1850s. Trains were operating from Boston to Montreal and Ogdensburgh via Rouses Point by 1851. Ogdensburgh, at the narrowest point on the St. Lawrence River, was an entry point to Canada West.

Moses Roper, Lavinia Bell, Shadrach Minkins and Samuel R. Ward followed the Champlain Line. Jeremiah C. Boggs was forwarded from Albany to St. Albans, Vermont, where he found work and began to learn to read and write. Then he saw a man who knew his master and decided to go to Liberia, West Africa. John Thomas escaped from bondage in Queen Anne's County, Maryland, and established a prosperous farm in New York's Adirondack mountains. In 2006, the recovery of his story led to the discovery of his great-great grandsons, Oscar and Victor Morehouse. Oscar was living less than two miles from where his great-great grandparents are buried, yet he had never heard of them. Victor was living in Lake Placid. Oscar and Victor Morehouse were reunited with their sisters, Joan and Margaret in 2007. The siblings had not seen one another in 47 years.

The Champlain Line of the Underground Railroad is not a 19th century relic. It is a continuing history.

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