

## Uncovering Sites Related to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, and African American Life in Wayne County, New York, 1820-1880

### The Project

Mention the Underground Railroad, and people across the country think immediately of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. Both escaped from slavery in Maryland. Both settled in upstate New York. Frederick Douglass became a major abolitionist orator and editor and diplomat. From 1847 to 1876, he was based in Rochester, New York. Harriet Tubman, the “Moses of her people,” made thirteen trips back into slavery to rescue her family and many friends, about seventy people altogether. Beginning 1859, she brought them to Auburn, New York, where family and friends recreated much of the social network from their old Maryland neighborhood.

But the Underground Railroad in New York State involved far more than these iconic figures. Thousands of people escaped from slavery through New York State, sometimes virtually alone, sometimes relying on a well-organized network of African American and European American abolitionists who kept safe houses, raised money, donated clothing, arranged transportation, and provided jobs and homes for those who chose to settle locally.

Almost anyone in any community in Wayne County (as in most communities in New York State) can tell you something about local sites related to the Underground Railroad. When this project first started, for example, the research team met at a restaurant in Lyons, New York. We asked our waitress if she knew anything about local Underground Railroad sites. “Yes,” she said. “There is a little house in the woods just west of here that was part of the Underground Railroad.”

She was right. There is a small house in the woods west of Lyons. And historical sources bear out its connection with the Underground Railroad, although perhaps not in the way we would expect. It was not an Underground Railroad safe house before the Civil War, but it did become the home of two people who escaped (one by manumission and one by flight) from slavery. Maria Jennings once lived in slavery with the Perine family, who owned the large house nearby. Ann Perine most likely built this small house for Maria Jennings before she died in 1870. Hanson Waples, searching for his family, escaped from slavery in Delaware in 1854. Waples went first to Philadelphia, where activist William Still recorded his escape, and then to Syracuse before following his wife Eliza to Canada. After the Civil War, Hanson and Eliza rescued three of their children in Delaware before they settled in Wayne County. “Uncle Hanson” became a member of the Methodist Church and a respected part of the Newark-Lyons community before he died in this little house in the woods in 1903.<sup>1</sup>

Grassroots surveys such as this one uncover such detailed stories. These stories in turn help us understand more clearly how the Underground Railroad actually operated. Sometimes events confirm common ideas about the Underground Railroad. Sometimes they contradict popular perceptions.

### Sources

One of the most common beliefs about the Underground Railroad is that it was a secret movement. Fearful of discovery, so the story goes, people did not record their activities, so we will never know details of their work. To some extent, this is true. Written documentation emerges when people want to educate, inform, or persuade someone who is outside their ordinary face-to-face contacts. Often, Underground Railroad networks at the community level were relatively closed, because they were stable, long-term, and reinforced through regular personal contact. Underground

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<sup>1</sup> William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1872), 207; *Arcadia Gazette*, November 9, 1903, Wayne County Historian’s Office.

Railroad activists often had little need to record their activities in writing, simply because they could communicate more quickly and easily in person.

People involved in the Underground Railroad were usually connected by pre-existing family and community ties. Freedom seekers had networks within their southern communities that included people, both African American and European American, who kept safe houses. Helpers north of the Mason-Dixon line had networks connected to families, churches, and abolitionist organizations in their own regions. These two networks intersected and sometimes merged in the Underground Railroad, linking people across families, religious groups, communities, and regions to create an increasingly sophisticated national system.

Nevertheless, people involved in the Underground Railroad did create many written documents about their work. Sometimes these were relatively unintentional. After 1850, for example, census takers recorded birthplaces for individuals not enslaved. Freedom seekers who settled in Wayne County (and elsewhere in the North) often recorded their birthplaces as Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, or elsewhere in the South.

Often, Underground Railroad activists also created written records intentionally. Sustained by an abolitionist network, they made extraordinarily successful use of lectures, newspapers, and memoirs to recruit sympathizers to the abolitionist cause. One of their most effective means of convincing northerners that slavery was wrong was to tell stories of the Underground Railroad. Sometimes, this took the form of brief reports on current activity. In 1852, Griffith M. Cooper wrote to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*:

Esteemed Friend: All hail! The three emigrants, from the South, via Rochester, left our port [Pultneyville] for Queen Victoria's dominions the 19<sup>th</sup> inst., at 8 P.M., with three hearty cheers for the land of the free, the home of the exile. The blood hounds may cease to bay, and take the back tract.—Old Ontario is the boundary between liberty and despotism. The underground railroad is in successful operation. He that would not clear the tract [k] for the car of Emancipation is an atheist. Thine for emigration, *North*. G.M.C.<sup>2</sup>

Often freedom seekers told their own story through lectures and memoirs. In Wayne County, speakers such as Frederick Douglass (who escaped from slavery in Maryland), William Wells Brown (who escaped from slavery in Kentucky), and John Jacobs (once enslaved in North Carolina) were regular speakers. Because they transformed slavery from an impersonal institution into personal stories about real people, their message was especially powerful. Charles Lenox Remond, a free person of color from Salem, Massachusetts, also spoke regularly in Wayne County.

Frederick Douglass was especially important as a nationally important lecturer and writer. He came to Rochester in 1847 as editor of the *North Star*. Douglass spoke often in Wayne County communities such as Williamson, Pultneyville, Palmyra, Macedon, and Butler. These speeches recruited many to the abolitionist cause. They also helped Douglass create his powerful oratorical and editorial style, a style that had a major impact on the whole country. In his autobiography, Douglass wrote,

I did not rely alone upon what I could do by the paper, but would write all day, then take a train to Victor, Farmington, Canandaigua, Geneva, Waterloo, Batavia, or Buffalo, or elsewhere, and speak in the evening, returning home afterwards or early in the morning, to be again at my desk writing or mailing papers. There were times when I almost thought my Boston friends were right in dissuading me from my newspaper project. But looking back to those nights and days of toil and thought, compelled often to do work for which I had no educational preparation, I have come to think that, under the circumstances it was the best school possible for me. It obliged me to think and read, it taught me to express my thoughts

<sup>2</sup> *Frederick Douglass Paper*, May 27, 1852.

clearly, and was perhaps better than any other course I could have adopted. Besides it made it necessary for me to lean upon myself, and not upon the heads of our Anti-Slavery church. To be a principal, and not an agent. I had an audience to speak to every week, and must say something worth their hearing, or cease to speak altogether. There is nothing like the lash and sting of necessity to make a man work, and my paper furnished this motive power.<sup>3</sup>

Newspapers—the most public of sources—provide some of the best information about this supposedly secret movement. Before the end of slavery in New York State, newspapers regularly carried advertisements for people who ran away from slavery. In 1808, for example, the *Geneva Expositor* carried a notice about a runaway named "Congo" advertised by John, Richard and Sam. Shekell. In 1820, census records show that Grayson lived as a free man in Phelps. In 1840 and 1850, he lived in Palmyra, Wayne County.<sup>4</sup>

Obituaries also provide a significant source of information about the Underground Railroad. Freedom seekers who settled in Wayne County became well-known members of local communities and churches. Helpers were often recognized for their commitment to difficult and sometimes dangerous work. Mary Jane Graves came to Sodus in 1864, with Benjamin Parker, a local resident. Although census records list her birthplace as South, Louisiana, or Wayne County, when she died in 1905, her obituary recorded her birthplace as Rock Bridge County, Virginia:

FORMER SLAVE DEAD. Mary Jane Graves, of Huron, was set Free by Lincoln's Proclamation. The death of Mary Jane Graves occurred at her home in Huron on Friday last. Miss Graves was a colored woman and had lived and worked in Huron for over thirty years. She came to this part of the country with the late Benjamin Parker. She was born in Rock Bridge county, Virginia, and was born a slave, and was one up to the time of the civil war, when she was set free. She came to Huron in the year 1864, and had lived there, or in the vicinity, during the remainder of her life. The cause of death was old age. She was about 100 years old. She was well liked in the vicinity where she lived. She often amused those of the younger generation with tales of slavery days.<sup>5</sup>

Detailed accounts of abolitionist conventions, debates, and women's antislavery fairs document the extensive organizational efforts of local abolitionists. Local histories, antislavery petitions sent to Congress, names of subscribers to abolitionist newspapers (including the *Liberator*, *Anti-Slavery Standard*, *North Star*, and *Frederick Douglass' Paper*) also help create an understanding of the location and strength of abolitionist networks.

Finally, local oral traditions give tantalizing clues about the Underground Railroad. Sometimes, oral traditions form our only source of information. When Williamson historian Chester Peters was a child, for example, a neighbor told him that she had seen people who were escaping from slavery and were hiding in the attic of the Captain Palmer house on Lake Road. With an eyewitness informant and a clear line of transmission, such a story is highly believable, even without written confirmation.<sup>6</sup>

Often, however, written sources support local oral traditions. Sodus historian Robert Bull keeps alive the oral tradition of several local Underground Railroad safe houses. L.C. Coleman, who himself helped transport people escaping from slavery along the Lake Road, recorded similar recollections in 1898.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes, evidence remains inconclusive. Thomas Young and his son Nelson Young, for

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times*, 326-327, docsouth website. [www.docsouth.unc.edu](http://www.docsouth.unc.edu)

<sup>4</sup> *Geneva Expositor*, August 10, 1808.

<sup>5</sup> *Wolcott Lakeshore News*, 1905.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Chester Peters, October 24, 2007, videotaped by Charles Lenhart.

<sup>7</sup> L.C. Coleman, *Reminiscences in Wayne County Alliance*, 1898, reprinted *Sodus Record*, March 25, 1937.

The Project example, were associated with a house that once stood in Marion, New York. In the 1930s, New York State erected a historic marker on the site that read “THIS HOUSE erected in 1830 was a station of the Underground Railway in the days of slavery.” One newspaper article suggests this family’s connection with abolitionism, noting that Nelson attended an antislavery meeting in 1838. This family was, however, related to other families known to be active in the Underground Railroad.

Usually, oral stories, like the one about the Young house, contain only general information focused on safe houses kept by European Americans. Frequently, current oral tradition is actually based on written records, usually newspaper articles from the early twentieth century. Only rarely does the oral tradition contain information about freedom seekers themselves.

## Methods

To prepare this report, we compiled information from all of these sources. Focusing first on freedom seekers and local African American communities, we compiled names of every African American listed in state and federal census records for Wayne County up through 1880. We also searched oral traditions, local histories, newspapers, and manuscripts for names of African Americans, abolitionists, and people associated with the Underground Railroad. Much of this material is located in the Wayne County Historian’s Office. Increasingly, many local newspapers are now also accessible online through [www.fultonhistory.com](http://www.fultonhistory.com). Abolitionist newspapers are available through the African American newspaper collection online by subscription through many college and public libraries through Accessible Archives.

## Results

Research in local, state, and national sources generated a remarkable amount of detailed information. To organize this, we created Excel databases. Several databases deal specifically with African Americans, including 1) a list of every African American listed in U.S. and New York State census records for Wayne County, 1800-1880; 2) African American property owners, identified through the 1850 census; and 3) African American barbers in Wayne County, identified through census records and city directories.

The project database includes a list of 664 people involved with the Underground Railroad, abolitionism, or African American life, including the lives of people in slavery. In all likelihood, many more people were involved in these movements without leaving written traces.

Using a 1-5 scale, we rated people according to their likelihood of being involved in the Underground Railroad:<sup>8</sup>

Level 1--Probably no Underground Railroad connection, even if local tradition says otherwise. Wayne County residents who “owned” people in slavery (John Perine, Daniel Dorsey, William Helm, Peregrine Fitzhugh, and others) or who supported the American Colonization Society (organized to send free people of color to Liberia) fit this category, even though they may have had antislavery sympathies. Thirty-five people in this database (5.3 percent) were rated “1.”

Level 2—Story possibly true, but no evidence so far. For Wayne County, this group includes people who had some evidence of antislavery commitment (as subscribers to abolitionist newspapers, signers of antislavery petitions, attendees at antislavery conventions) or who themselves had once lived in slavery (as identified by

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of this rating scheme, see *Oral Traditions and Beyond: A Guide to Researching the Underground Railroad*, forthcoming, National Park Service.

manumission notices, places of birth in a southern state or “unknown,” or printed references), but who had no evidence of Underground Railroad work. We rated each person known to have been enslaved and then manumitted as a “2,” unless we had evidence that they had either escaped or helped others escape. Three hundred and seventy-six people (56.6 percent) were rated “3.”

Level 3—Good chance the story is true. Considerable evidence of abolitionist activity (defined by extensive work over many years in abolitionist organizing, supporting abolitionist newspapers, lecturing, and so forth) or strong probability of escape from slavery (as noted by reporting different places of birth in different documents), but no direct evidence of Underground Railroad activity. Two hundred and two people (30.4 percent) were designated “3.”

Level 4—Story almost certainly true. Considerable evidence of involvement, as noted in obituaries or newspaper articles written by people who were not themselves directly involved. Twenty-six people (3.9 percent) in twenty-four separate households were rated “4.”

Level 5—Story almost certainly true. Conclusive evidence of involvement, as noted by primary sources written by people who were directly involved. Twenty-six people or families (3.9 percent) from eighteen different households in Wayne County were rated “5.”

For all those rated a 4 or 5, and for many other people of interest, we researched property documents, including maps (1853, 1858, or 1874), deeds, and mortgages, to see if we could locate related sites on the landscape. All sites described here appeared in Wayne County maps printed in 1853 or 1858. Many of them have also been documented with extensive searches in deeds, mortgages, and assessment records. We were unable to date many extant buildings with a specific year of construction, because tax assessment records (which reflect the construction or loss of property) do not exist for Wayne County before the 1870s.

Finally, we took driving tours throughout Wayne County, to identify the current condition of sites identified through documentary research. With few exceptions, sites without standing buildings from the pre-Civil War period are not described here. In a very few cases, however (mostly relating to the family of Austin Steward, enslaved by William Helm and described in Steward’s autobiography, *Twenty-two Years and Slave and Forty Years a Free Man*), we described sites without standing structures.

A word about what we did not, for reasons of time, include in this report. It leaves out discussions of the many Wayne County churches that had active abolitionist congregations, if the current church was built after the Civil War. The one exception was the Palmyra Baptist Church. That church hosted a women’s antislavery fair in the 1840s, but the current building was built after the Civil War. This report also does not include Wayne County cemeteries (such as those in Lyons, Newark, and Palmyra) where African Americans are buried. Finally, the report omits detailed discussion of many freedom seekers and active abolitionists who settled in Wayne County but did not own property or leave traces about their addresses in city directories. Their story awaits further exploration.

In all, this report includes descriptions of seventy-five sites relating to the Underground Railroad, abolitionism, and African American life in Wayne County, including twenty homes or workplaces of African Americans and more than fifty sites associated with European Americans.

About one-third of these descriptions (twenty-four of seventy-five) relate to people who were rated either a “5” or a “4” on our database. Of those rated “5” (people conclusively involved

with the Underground Railroad), we found extant buildings for nine people, and we described four additional sites that have no buildings dating to the historic period:

1. Hanson Waples—Arcadia/Lyons
2. Samuel R. Ward—Butler
3. Austin Steward
  - a. Huron—site of William Helm’s plantation
  - b. Lyons—site to early home of Henry Tower (also Macedon--Steward/Palmyra—Brister, sites only). The 1816 Farmington Quaker meetinghouse, just south of Wayne County in Ontario County, may be the only standing structure related to Austin Steward. It was built while Steward lived with the Quaker family of Otis and Amy Comstock.
4. Susan Doty--Macedon
5. William R. and Eliza Smith-Macedon
6. Susan Steward—Macedon, site
7. Aaron and Betsey Brister, Palmyra—site
8. Eli and Lewis Clark--Sodus
9. Seth Coleman—Sodus
10. William D. Cooke--Sodus
11. Samuel C. and Julia Cuyler--Williamson
12. Timothy Ledyard—Williamson

For seven other people rated “5,” no sites were discovered:

1. Samuel Cheney/Daniel Robinson/William Thomas--Galen/Lyons
2. Jacob Highwarden—Palmyra, 1830s
3. Asa B. Smith—Macedon, demolished
4. Tudor Grant—Palmyra, lived with son-in-law
5. Robert Steward-Palmyra, d. 1816.

For the twenty-six people in twenty-four households rated “4,” we found extant buildings relating to ten of them (one also incorporated under “5), and we described sites without buildings for two more (one also included in “5”):

1. Jonathan Rice--Butler
2. South Butler Congregational Church--Butler
3. William Clancy—Macedon Academy
4. Elias Doty (Susan)--Macedon
5. Redding Gibbs--Macedon
6. Elizabeth D. Smith--Macedon
7. Shadrach and Mary Jenkins (site only)--Macedon
8. Horace Eaton--Palmyra
9. Western Presbyterian Church--Palmyra
10. Pliny Sexton--Palmyra
11. Samuel Lyman--Rose
12. Levi Gaylord, Sodus—site only

We found no standing sites related to:

1. Rev. George Shumway—Arcadia/Palmyra
2. Eliza Mayberry—living with Cheney/Wray Littlefield
3. Mary Jane Graves/Benjamin Parker—Huron
6. Benjamin Brister—d. before 1830-Palmyra
7. Burget Freeman, Palmyra
8. Salmon and Henry Hathaway, Palmyra
9. Abraham Brown—Sodus
10. Benjamin Cooper—Sodus
11. William G. and Caroline Barker—Walworth
12. George Seelye—Wolcott

This survey, while extensive and detailed, does not pretend to be complete. Further research will undoubtedly reveal more details and a few standing sites related to these movements.

Wayne County has a remarkable collection of buildings, documenting a movement for equality that occupied the best energies of a whole generation of Americans. What can we learn about the Underground Railroad from these people and this landscape? And why did Wayne County citizens have such an intense commitment to egalitarian ideals?

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