

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

Preface

Wayne County has always been (and remains) primarily rural. But it is far more than an immense collection of orchards, farms, and farm-related industries. It is also an immense treasure trove of historic sites relating to religious and reform movements before the Civil War.

Wayne County was an epicenter of the maelstrom of reform known as the “burned-over district,” so-called because it was swept by recurring fires of religious revivalism and reform. Visitors may know about two of these movements, both of which originated in Wayne County and become nationally and internationally significant. Mormonism, now one of the world’s largest religions, began about 1820 near Palmyra. Local sites relating to this movement include Hill Cumorah, the homes of Joseph Smith and Martin Harris, and the first printing office for the *Book of Mormon*. In 1848, Spiritualism, which ultimately counted a million adherents, started in Hydesville, when the Fox sisters communicated with the spirit world through mysterious knockings.

Very few people, however, are aware of the many other historically significant places in Wayne County. In 1826, Shakers set up a community at Sodus Bay, used in the 1840s by an abolitionist and women’s rights utopian community called the Sodus Bay Phalanx, whose members held goods in common. Quakers from Wayne County reflected the influence of both religious evangelicalism and liberal religious values. In 1848, some of these Quakers, meeting in the 1816 Farmington Quaker Meetinghouse, just south of Wayne County, created the Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, a prototype for contemporary Quaker meetings. Mainstream Protestant churches throughout the county (including Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, and Wesleyan Methodists) reeled and often split under the impact of revivalism and reform. Out of this ferment came movements that promoted egalitarian ideals about people of color, women, and Native Americans.

Because most of Wayne County remained rural and because it was largely spared the devastations of urban renewal in the 1960s and 1970s, many buildings relating to these movements still stand. This report identified more than seventy sites relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, and African American Life in Wayne County. Many of them were also associated with religious movements, utopian communities, and women’s rights. About one-third of them are directly affiliated with African Americans, including four areas where people were held in slavery.

What happened in Wayne County was at the cutting edge of national movements for equality and justice. A whole generation of Americans took seriously the ideals of the American Declaration of Independence,

that all men [and many also argued women] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

They also took seriously their heritage as Christians, quoting again and again such Bible verses as: “Remember those in bonds as bound with them” (Hebrews 13:3), and “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (Galatians 3:28). As they worked to protect the rights of people of color, women, and poor people, they defined themselves. They knew that democracy worked, because they lived their principles of equality every day. In attacking all forms of slavery and oppression, they defended their own way of life.

These sites of conscience are important educational and economic assets for the people of Wayne County. Increasingly, Americans and people from around the world seek travel experiences

that are educational as well as entertaining. The National Trust for Historic Preservation defines such travel as cultural heritage tourism, allowing people “to experience the places, artifacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present.” In addition to educating visitors and enhancing the quality of life for local people, argues the National Trust, cultural heritage tourism increases opportunities for “diversified economies, ways to prosper economically while holding on to the characteristics that make communities special.” Cultural heritage tourists are generally older and spend more time and more money on their trips than do average visitors.¹

This report includes a preface and context statement, descriptions of documented sites (with addresses, photographs, and a discussion of significance), several databases, and a brief bibliography. Extensive genealogical reports on both African American families (prepared by Marjory Allen Perez) and European American families (prepared by Charles Lenhart) are either included in this report or on file in the Wayne County Historian’s Office. Marjory Allen Perez wrote all essays on African Americans. Judith Wellman, with the help of Charles Lenhart, Marjory Allen, Peter Evans, Sue-Jane Evans, Jeana Ganskop, Tanya Warren, and others, wrote the rest of the report.

Several databases prepared by Marjory Allen Perez focus on African Americans in Wayne County. They include names of African Americans listed in census reports, 1800-40 and 1850-1880; slaveholders in Wayne County; African American barbers in Wayne County; African Americans from Wayne County who served in the Civil War; and African Americans listed in city directories from Wayne County, 1867-1902. Tanya Warren prepared the database on people who signed antislavery petitions from Wayne County. Innovations in this report include the inclusion of many primary sources. The entire report, including databases, will be available in both hard copy and on the web.

The project database (prepared by Marjory Allen Perez and Tanya Warren) summarizes our initial survey of historical material. It lists names of 633 names of people and sites related to the Underground Railroad, abolitionism, and/or African American life in Wayne County. All names on the project database were rated for their possible relationship to the Underground Railroad according to the following scheme:

- 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.
- 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 manumission notices, places of birth in a southern state or “unknown,” or printed references), but who had no direct evidence of Underground Railroad work.
- 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.
- 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

¹ For more on heritage tourism, see National Trust for Historic Preservation, <https://savingplaces.org/>

involved.

Level 5—Story almost certainly true. Conclusive evidence of involvement, as noted by primary sources written by people who were directly involved.²

Sites and people rating a 4 or a 5 are generally eligible for nomination either to the National Park Service's Network to Freedom or the National Register of Historic Places.

This project successfully nominated two sites to the National Park Service's Network to Freedom program (the Samuel C. and Elizabeth Cuyler site in Pultneyville, now Forman Park, and the Griffith and Elizabeth Cooper House in the Town of Williamson). With the help of Nancy Todd, Field Representative from the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, we were also able to nominate Alasa Farms (originally built by Shakers and then used by an abolitionist utopian community called the Sodus Bay Phalanx) to the National Register of Historic Places.

Since this study is site-based, we have (with a few exceptions) omitted extensive descriptions for important people that did not have a standing site associated with them. This is particularly true for people in two key occupations. **Ministers** (such as George Shumway, James Gregg, and Abram Pryne) often served several different congregations, living in parsonages or rented houses rather than in identifiable homes of their own. Many of the churches they served were rebuilt after the Civil War, so they are not included here. African American **barbers** (such as George Thompson, who worked in Lyons, Newark, and Palmyra from c. 1850 to 1870; members of the Lloyd family, who worked in Lyons, Sodus, Sodus Point, and Palmyra; or Isaiah Foster, who worked in Macedon from c. 1865-1880) are listed in the database developed by Marjory Allen Perez from census records and city directories, but specific addresses proved elusive for all but a few. Many African Americans, born in slavery, lived for most of their lives in Wayne County but did not purchase property. George and Octavia Ballard, for example, came from Maryland to Canada and then migrated in the late 1860s to Wayne County. From the late 1860s to the 1880s, Carrie and Edwards Banks lived in both Lyons and Arcadia, listing their birthplaces as Delaware and Virginia and then as Tennessee.³ Even though we did not find buildings related to the lives of these people, their stories deserve further attention.

Recommendations

The report is thoroughly documented and ready for incorporation into planning documents, tour brochures, exhibit captions, curriculum units, websites, and tours. Future steps may include:

1. **National Register of Historic Places.** Nominate several more sites to the National Register of Historic Places. Because this survey found so many possible National Register sites, we had time to nominate only Alasa Farms, site of the Shaker Community and the Sodus Bay Phalanx. Instead, we wrote a grant to Preserve New York, for funding to list several more sites (including the Griffith and Elizabeth Cooper home in Williamson, the Williamson Baptist Church, the William R. and Eliza Smith home in Macedon, the Job and Phebe Travece home in Galen, the Macedon Academy, and the houses associated with the Perine family, Maria Jennings, and Hanson Waples in Lyons) on the National Register.

Listing on the National Register does not limit what individual owners can do with their property. It does, however, give honorary status to significant sites and may protect such sites from encroachment by state or federal projects. In some cases, especially for properties owned by not-for-profit agencies or for

² For further discussion of this rating scheme, see *Oral Traditions and Beyond: A Guide to Researching the Underground Railroad*, forthcoming, National Park Service.

³ 1870, 1875, 1880 censuses; William Still, *Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia, 1872), 448.

properties in private hands that may be developed for commercial use, it may open the possibility for future tax benefits or grants.⁴

2. **Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.** Nominate key sites to the National Park Service's Network to Freedom. This is especially important for two reasons: a) The Network to Freedom links sites, programs, and research resources relating to the Underground Railroad across the nation, so Wayne County sites become part of a national project; and b) In years when Congress appropriates grant money, sites listed on the Network to Freedom can apply for federal funds. Currently, both the Cooper House in Williamson (in private hands) and Forman Park, site of the Cuyler home in Pultneyville (owned by Wayne County), are listed on the Network to Freedom.
3. **The Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor** is currently applying for Network to Freedom listing. Their application, if successful, will open up many more opportunities for funding for Wayne County communities along the Erie Canal.⁵



Site Map, Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor
www.eriecanalway.org

4. **Seaway Trail.** Lake Road from Sodus Point to Pultneyville is part of New York State's Seaway Trail, listed as a national scenic highway. Several sites relating to the Underground Railroad, abolitionism, and African American life lie either directly on this trail or nearby. These include the Maxwell Settlement, Maxwell School, and Maxwell Mill, and the homes of the Buys, Cooke, Coleman, Clark, Cuyler, Ledyard, Throop, Palmer, and Reynolds families. These could be incorporated into tour brochures, so that Seaway Trail visitors would be aware of them.
5. **National Women's History Project Act.** Passed by Congress in April 2009, this Act authorizes a women's rights history trail through upstate New York. Many sites uncovered in this Wayne County survey relate not only to abolitionism, the Underground Railroad, and African American life but also to the birth of the women's rights movement. Such sites include homes of five of the eight known

⁴ For more information about the National Register of Historic Places, see www.nps.gov/nr/.

⁵ For further information, including site map and funding opportunities, see Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor, www.eriecanalway.org

people from Wayne County who attended the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls (Elias and Susan Doty, Elizabeth D. Smith, Catharine Fish Stebbins, and Eliab W. Capron), the home of Pliny Sexton, who attended the first national women's rights convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1850; and sites of several women's antislavery fairs (including the Williamson Baptist Church).

6. **Tour Brochure.** Like several other counties (including Oswego, Cayuga, Oneida, and Madison), Wayne County could develop a driving tour based on sites relating to the Underground Railroad, abolitionism, and African American life. These tours could be available both as hard copy brochures and online.
7. **Curriculum materials.** At the specific request of teachers from North Rose-Wolcott, we incorporated many primary sources into this report. Students are required to answer "DBQs," document-based questions, writing essays based on primary sources. These sources relating to the Underground Railroad, abolitionism, and African American life offer a wealth of material for student analysis.
 Teachers may also wish to develop lesson plans relating to specific people, events, or communities. Model curriculum units based on similar themes from other counties include "The M'Clintock House: A Home to the Women's Rights Movement" (prepared by Women's Rights National Historical Park), and "Thomas James: Freedom Seeker," prepared by Lori Stoudt and Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian (http://www.co.seneca.ny.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Curriculum_Unit_Thomas_James.pdf).⁶
8. **Alliances with other related historic sites.** Historic sites relating to Wayne County and reform are part of a whole collection of sites throughout upstate New York. Nearby, Hill Cumorah near Palmyra (as well as the Joseph Smith and Martin Harris homes) help tell the story of the origins of Mormonism. While the home of the Fox sisters in Hydesville is no longer standing, its site can help tell the story of the birth of spiritualism. In Victor, Ganondagan focuses on the story of the Seneca and Haudenosaunee. The 1816 Farmington Quaker Meetinghouse in Farmington, New York, was a hotspot of debate about abolitionism, women's rights, and Seneca Indian land rights, as well as the site of a new Quaker group, the Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, that set the tone for many contemporary Quaker meetings today. The Harriet Tubman Home in Auburn focuses on the life story of this nationally important woman who became known as the Moses of her people, because of the many trips she made to help people leave slavery in Maryland. Women's Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls tells the story of the birth of the organized women's rights movement before the Civil War. The Michigan Street Baptist Church in Buffalo, Susan B. Anthony House in Rochester, Howland Stone Store Museum in Sherwood, and the William Henry and Frances Seward House and the Tubman Home in Auburn, the Matilda Joslyn Gage House in Fayetteville, and many, many other sites tell stories of the Underground Railroad and women's rights across central

⁶ Women's Rights National Historical Park, "The M'Clintock House: A Home to the Women's Rights Movement," www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/76mclintock/76mclintock.htm; Lori Stoudt and Walter Gable, "Thomas James: Freedom Seeker" (http://www.co.seneca.ny.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Curriculum_Unit_Thomas_James.pdf). For other examples, see the National Register of Historic Places: Teaching with Historic Places, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/teachingwithhistoricplaces/index.htm>

and western New York.

Developing links among all these sites—through tourism agencies, planning departments, and historical societies will strengthen visitor appeal to all of them.



**Teachers from North Rose-Wolcott
Tour of Sites in Wayne County Related to the
Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, and African American Life, Spring 2008**