NIAGARA FALLS UNDERGROUND RAILROAD HERITAGE AREA MANAGEMENT PLAN

APPENDIX C:

Survey of Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, and African American Life in Niagara Falls and Surrounding Area, 1820-1880

HISTORIC RESOURCES SURVEY REPORT
APRIL 2012

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Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area Commission
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PART I: BACKGROUND AND HISTORIC CONTEXT

Introduction

It was August 1853. We can imagine that it was one of those days of clear air, sunshine, and rainbows shining glory through the mist that brought visitors to Niagara Falls then and now. Martha, a young African American woman, stood talking with her husband in front of one of the main hotels, perhaps the Cataract House. A carriage drove up, and a man got out. He looked at Martha, and she looked at him. Instantly, they recognized each other. She had run away from this man, who had held her in slavery. He greeted her with “How do you do, Martha?” and reached out to shake her hand. Martha would have none of it. She backed off, turned, and ran as fast as she could toward the ferry dock at the base of the Falls, a short two blocks through Prospect Park.

The southerner bellowed that he would give a hundred dollars to anyone who caught her. Several people took up his challenge, but her husband ran quickly to her side, followed by hotel waiters who placed themselves between Martha and her pursuers. She “outran them all, even the husband,” wrote one eyewitness, and “plunged down the ferry steps by hops instead of steps.” The lone boat at the dock was too big for her to push off by herself. Instead, she leaped into it, followed by her husband, while her friends the waiters pushed it off with a handspike. Gliding just out of reach of those who chased her, Martha and her husband “sent up a glad and defiant hurrah,” loud enough to be heard through the roar of the Falls. Afloat like an eggshell on the roiling river, they rowed through the dense mist. Fifteen minutes later, they reached the lea of the Canadian shore and docked just below the Clifton House. They were free!

1 Weekly North American (Toronto), August 18, 1853 [from Cincinnati Christian Press; also published in the Hamilton (Canada) Gazette of the same day and the Norwalk, Ohio Reflector on August 30, 1853. Thanks to Christopher Densmore for finding these materials.
Fast forward to November 1856. The train sat puffing and loud in the New York City station. Harriet Tubman, short and bent, had to pull herself up on the step to enter the cars. With her were four others—Joe Bailey, his brother William, and Peter and Eliza.  

Harriet was, as always, supremely confident, knowing that she was led, as always, by the Lord. The others, however, must have been both anxious and optimistic. They had survived a frightening escape from slavery on Maryland’s eastern shore, hiding in potato holes, taking roundabout routes, crossing from Delaware into the free state of Pennsylvania in the bottom of brickmakers’ wagons. But they all had a price on their heads, and they still had more than three hundred miles to go before they reached the Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge and freedom.

Harriet Tubman, c. 1860  
Courtesy Cayuga County Historical Society

They traveled north to Albany and then turned west. Perhaps they stopped in Syracuse, where Jermain and Carolyn Loguen may have given them food or tickets and money for tolls to finish the journey. Perhaps the rhythmic sound of the wheels on the track lulled them to sleep in the comfortable seats. To cheer their spirits, Harriet Tubman entertained them, teaching them songs to sing for other passengers. To the tune of “Oh, Susannah,” they sang

I'm on my way to Canada,  
That cold and dreary land;  
The sad effects of slavery,  
I can't no longer stand.  
I've served my master all my days,  
Without a dime's reward;  
And now I'm forced to run away,  
To flee the lash abroad.

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2 Harriet Tubman told this story to Sarah Bradford, who recorded it in *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn: W.J. Moses, 1869), 27-35, docSouth.unc.edu. I have changed the dialect in Bradford’s work to standard English.
Farewell, ole master, don't think hard of me,
I'll travel on to Canada, where all the slaves are free.

By the time they approached the Suspension Bridge several hours later, so close to freedom, most of them were refreshed and excited. One of them, however, remained despondent. Joe Bailey, six feet tall, feared nothing except a return to slavery. Oliver Johnson, who worked in the antislavery office in New York City, had greeted him with “Well, I’m glad to see the man whose head is worth $1500.” And Joe was sure that traveling three hundred more miles through New York State would result only in his capture. "From that time Joe was silent," said Harriet; "he sang no more, he talked no more; he sat with his head on his hand, and nobody could amuse him or make him take any interest in anything."

Charles Parsons, "The Rail Road Suspension Bridge: Near Niagara Falls"
(New York: Currier & Ives, 1857).
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, I.D. cph.3b51175.

The train most likely stopped at the passenger depot to let some people out and take others on. Then it crawled slowly toward the Suspension Bridge. This bridge, with its heavy stone piers and huge cables, was an elegant structure, like nothing Tubman’s group had ever seen. Remarkably, no one ever asked for details about who they were or where they were going. U.S. customs’ officials cared about tariffs, so they inspected cargo. People, however, crossed freely, without a need for passports or other identification, as long as they paid the toll (twenty-five cents for people who walked across).
Harriet had been this way before. Like any tour guide anxious to show off the local sights, she called her companions to look at the Falls. Peter, Eliza, and William were impressed, but Joe still sat with his head in his hands. Harriet scolded him. "Joe, come look at de Falls! Joe, you fool you, come see the Falls! It's your last chance." Joe still sat. When they reached the middle of the bridge, Harriet knew they were at last in Canada, and she raced to Joe’s seat, shook him as hard she could, and shouted, "Joe, you've shook de lion's paw!" Bewildered, not knowing what they meant, Joe just looked at her.

"Joe, you're free!" shouted Harriet. Finally Joe responded. He raised his hands to heaven, and with tears streaming down his face, he started to sing in “loud and thrilling tones”:

Glory to God and Jesus too,
One more soul is safe!
Oh, go and carry de news,
One more soul got safe.

Joe leaped off the train. People gathered around him as he continued to sing “Glory to God and Jesus too, One more soul is safe!”

William and Peter, embarrassed, grabbed his arm and shouted, “Joe, stop your noise! You act like a fool!” and “Joe, stop your hollering! Folks'll think you’re crazy!” But Joe kept singing.

"Oh! if I'd felt like this down South, it would have taken nine men to take me,” he shouted. “Only one more journey for me now, and that is to Heaven!”

Harriet’s response? "Well, you old fool you." "You might have looked at the Falls first, and then gone to Heaven afterwards."

Instead of heaven, the whole group went to St. Catharine’s, where Rev. Hiram Wilson operated a fugitive aid society. Wilson reported that Tubman was “a remarkable colored heroine,” “unusually intelligent and fine appearing,” and the men she brought were “of fine appearance and noble bearing.”

These two stories—of the otherwise unknown Martha and the iconic Harriet Tubman—illustrate the remarkable importance of Niagara Falls as a major Underground Railroad crossing point from the United States to Canada. For tourists and traders, crossing the river on the ferry and Suspension Bridge meant entertainment or financial gain. For people escaping from slavery, however, this journey was, literally, a life-changing experience, a trip from Egypt to Canaan, slavery to

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3 Kate Clifford Larson, 136.
freedom. Crossing the river—enveloped by mist from the Falls or viewing the cataract from afar on the bridge—must have seemed to many like a rebirth, a chance to start life anew, free from the violence and threat of sale that had driven them to escape from slavery in the first place.

Almost everyone recognizes Tubman as a hero of the Underground Railroad, a symbol of courage, tenacity, and daring, as relevant to us today as she was to her contemporaries. Tubman, however, was only one of the thousands of extraordinary ordinary people who escaped from slavery in the years before the Civil War through Niagara Falls.

Almost all Americans know something—or think they know something—about the Underground Railroad. In the minds of many, the Underground Railroad was a secret movement, shrouded in a romantic haze through which people dimly see kindly Quakers, tunnels, and quilts. New research in local communities, however, is reshaping our understanding of how the Underground Railroad worked, who was involved, and how it changed over time. Recognizing that the Underground Railroad began with “the effort of enslaved African Americans to gain their freedom by escaping bondage,” we now know that there were indeed a few kindly Quakers (and other helpers), but so far no evidence of tunnels or quilts. 4

Instead, we begin to see that many parts of the Underground Railroad were well documented, that freedom seekers themselves initiated this movement, that African Americans as well as European Americans played key roles as helpers, and that certain communities were exceptionally important in Underground Railroad operations.

One of those communities was Niagara Falls. While people escaped from slavery through almost every border community, Niagara Falls was nationally important, acting like the small end of a funnel to channel people from all over the South across the Niagara River into Ontario. On the Niagara Frontier, other crossing points included Youngstown, Lewiston, and Black Rock. But, nationally, Niagara Falls rivaled Detroit as an international link for freedom seekers.

Freedom seekers came to Niagara Falls primarily because it offered relatively access Canada. The ferry at the base of the American Falls brought both tourists and freedom seekers to Canada in a short, if dramatic, fifteen-minute ride. After 1855, a system of rail lines (including the New York Central Railroad, the Erie Railroad, and the Great Western Railroad in Canada) converged on the Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge, with fifty or more trains crossing a day in this newly-integrated railway system.

An emerging system of roads and railroads alone would have attracted people escaping from slavery to Niagara Falls. But the presence of two groups of people made Niagara Falls an even stronger magnet for freedom seekers. First were large numbers of local and regional abolitionists who actively assisted people escaping from slavery. Most important locally were African American waiters who worked in the large hotels, especially the Cataract House and the International Hotel. Many of these waiters had themselves escaped from slavery. These waiters were an elite group of well organized skilled workers, and they provided critical assistance to freedom seekers on the very last leg of the journey. Abolitionist allies also included European Americans, such as William H. Child, the Whitney family (owners of the Cataract House) and second-generation members of the Porter family (the first major post-Seneca landholders in Niagara Falls).

A second group of people in Niagara Falls challenged the efforts of freedom seekers and their allies. These were white elite families from the South. Of the thousands of tourists who came to Niagara Falls every summer, about twenty percent were residents of the South. Often, these families brought their enslaved maids and valets with them. Close juxtaposition of southern slave-owners and black abolitionist hotel workers created an underlying social instability that threatened to disrupt the carefree holiday atmosphere of this tourist town.

Freedom seekers, their proslavery opponents, and their abolitionist allies (both black and white) made Niagara Falls one of the country’s most important and dramatic crossing points from slavery into freedom. This survey, based on a careful reading of primary sources, tells their stories

through this historic context statement and descriptions of twenty-seven relevant sites (twenty-three
in Niagara Falls and four more—a fraction of the total—for Niagara County).

**Sources, Methods, and Acknowledgements**

On one hand, Niagara Falls—whether you think they are terrifying, dreadful, sublime,
beautiful, or disappointing—are a great equalizer. As we contemplate their power, we don’t forget
categories among us, but superficial distinctions collapse. We are all human, facing a wonder of
nature. But step back from the brink for a moment or an hour or a day, and you realize that you are
standing on one of the most contested pieces of ground on earth. More people have written more
volumes about Niagara Falls—in tour guides, gazetteers, histories, and specialized reports—than
about almost community of its size in the world. Most authors focus on one theme: whether the Falls
should be treated as a wonder of Nature or a human artifact, whether they are most important for
their ability to inspire or their potential industrial power. Tension between untouched nature and
human development has been one of the major themes in the history of the U.S. and the world, and
it focused intently on the relatively small piece of the earth’s surface that surrounds the Falls at
Niagara.

A second but equally important theme—of national and worldwide importance—also
dominated the space that was Niagara Falls in the nineteenth century. That was the tension between
slavery and freedom. This tension, rooted in both the geography and social diversity of Niagara Falls,
has been almost entirely ignored by historians and local economic promoters alike. Part of the reason
surely has to do with photographs. Niagara Falls is one of the most photographed places on the face
of the earth. Yet not one picture has ever been found of a black person on the streets of the village
before the Civil War, and we have only a handful of photographs—not very clear—of Native
Americans in nineteenth century Niagara Falls.

The Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area was created to document and
interpret this basic story of African Americans, abolitionists, and the Underground Railroad in
Niagara Falls. Its goal is to “encourage and foster the discovery, illumination, and celebration of the
rich heritage of the UGRR and the abolitionist movement throughout the city of Niagara Falls and
its environs on behalf of current and future generations.” As part of the development of the Heritage
Area Management Plan, prepared by edr Companies of Syracuse, New York, Judith Wellman,
Principal Investigator, Historical New York Research Associates, conducted this historic resources
survey from June to December 2011, assisted by a remarkable group of researchers and advisors.

Geographically, this survey focused on the City of Niagara Falls in the context of Niagara
County and the Niagara Frontier. Chronologically, the most important period of Underground
Railroad activity in Niagara Falls, extended from 1840 to 1865, but this research also incorporated
background information from 1800 to 1880. Finally, whereas many people define the Underground
Railroad as a series of safe houses, this survey views the Underground Railroad as a network
activated by freedom seekers themselves, whose lives can be documented by routes they traveled,
places they stayed on their journey (the traditional safe houses), workplaces, and homes.
Vicinity of the Falls of Niagara, 1857
Dickinson College, hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/29538.

By locating sites on the landscape of Niagara Falls and surrounding areas in Niagara County and the Niagara Frontier, this survey helps carry out the goals of the Heritage Area. It aims to enhance our understanding of African Americans and abolitionists (both white and black) in Niagara Falls and to highlight the importance of Niagara Falls in the intense struggle between slavery and freedom in the new American republic.

Focusing on this internationally important story, this survey forms the basis for interpretive programs reaching tourists, students, and citizens from around the nation and the world. “In all the world there is probably no other point of interest more widely known than Niagara, and none has been so generally visited by travelers of all nations,” wrote William Pool in 1897. Pool’s statement was as true before the Civil War as it was in 1897 and as it is today. Today, tourists on both sides of the river number in the millions, with estimates ranging from twelve to twenty-eight million people. They come from all over the world. Look around you as you stand at Prospect Point, and listen to the languages you hear. You are as likely to view the Falls with people from China, India, Pakistan, Japan, or Europe as you are with visitors from the U.S., Canada, or South America. By pointing out the importance of ethnic diversity relating to themes of freedom and slavery in Niagara Falls, this survey highlights an important theme that relates to all of us, including tourists, as citizens of the world.

Unlike traditional windshield surveys, which focus on the character and integrity of structures in the extant built environment, surveys such as this one, based on historical themes, begin with extensive documentary research. Phase I focused on both secondary materials and primary documents. Secondary research incorporated the whole Niagara Frontier, including Niagara and Erie

Counties in New York State and eastern Ontario Province in Canada. Lists of known Underground Railroad sites from Erie and Ontario Counties are included in an appendix to this report. Research in primary sources focused on Niagara Falls in the context of Niagara County and included census records, manuscripts, memoirs, newspapers, manuscripts, and property records, many of them now available on the web.

Results from this research phase are summarized in two databases, one of all African Americans listed in federal and state census records in Niagara County from 1850-1880 and the other listing names of people involved in abolitionism or the Underground Railroad in Niagara County. Both of these are available at the website of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area: www.niagarafallsundergroundrailroad.org/.

Only after we identified people and events associated with the Underground Railroad in Niagara County could we begin site-based fieldwork. Phase II involved detailed research linking relevant people and events to specific properties, using maps, photographs, and field surveys. This phase focused on the City of Niagara Falls but also included four key sites in Niagara County (Youngstown ferry landing, Lewiston ferry landing, Mossell house in Lockport, and site of Hannah Johnson’s home in North Tonawanda). Many more sites exist throughout Niagara County and deserve to be thoroughly documented.

This is the first systematic survey of Underground Railroad sites in Niagara Falls. This is certainly not the first time, however, that researchers have worked on this topic. A handful of historians have written books or essays on the Underground Railroad on the Niagara Frontier. First among these was Canadian Janet Carnochan. In 1896, she documented the 1837 rescue of Solomon Moseby at Niagara-on-the-Lake in “A Slave Rescue in Niagara Sixty Years Ago.” In 1899, Frank H. Severance included a large chapter on the Underground Railroad in his Old Trails on the Niagara Frontier. In 1947, Carl J. Costantino wrote an excellent master’s thesis for Niagara University, History of the Underground Railroad Along the Niagara Frontier. In 2000, Christopher Densmore compiled Underground Railroad newspaper articles and lists of agents on his website at the University of Buffalo. Densmore also gave a paper, “Fugitive Slave Cases in Niagara County: A Glimpse into the Underground Railroad, Documenting the Underground Railroad in Western New York,” to the Niagara County Historical Society on February 24, 2000. In 2008, Ginger Strand included a thoughtful comparison of the meaning of crossing the Niagara River for people escaping from slavery, compared to Blondin’s crossings on his high wire. In 2011, Tom Calaraco et al, Places of the Underground Railroad: A Geographical Guide included a section on the Niagara Frontier. 6

Finally, recent work in public history and interpretation—including exhibits at the Castellani Art Museum at Niagara University; exhibits and programs at Murphy’s Orchards; sculptures by Houston Conwill, Estella Conwill Majozo, and Joseph DePace, representing the deep significance of the Underground Railroad in the Niagara Frontier; and the work of Kevin Cottrell and his Motherland Connexions through tours and programs throughout the area—has laid the groundwork for moving forward. 7

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Although few secondary materials have focused on the Underground Railroad story, many local and county historians, including David Dickinson, former Niagara County Historian, have done extensive research in the Underground Railroad and have shared their work in vertical files available in the Niagara Falls Public Library, the Niagara County Historian’s Office, the Niagara County Historical Society, the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, the North Tonawanda Historical Museum, and local historians’ offices throughout the county.

Other primary sources exist in abundance, either on microfilm or on the internet. Newspapers in the collections of the Niagara Falls Public Library, the Niagara County Historian’s Office, and the State University of New York at Brockport, as well as online through Accessible Archives and fultonhistory.com provide extensive documentation. Memoirs, including William Still’s monumental Underground Railroad published in 1872, are often extremely detailed and specific. These are often available both in print and online (many through DocSouth.unc.edu). Manuscript collections, such as those of Wilbur Siebert at Ohio State University, the minutes of the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society at the University of Michigan, and the papers of Gerrit Smith at Syracuse University, provided clues. Census records, maps, and genealogical materials also yielded key information.

Researchers on this project made it all possible. These included Tanya Warren, database manager, researcher, and genealogist par excellence, who has worked on many of these surveys before. Charles Lenhart opened his huge genealogical compilations and thorough research, much of it focusing on Quakers in New York State. Marjorie Allen Perez contributed her meticulous (and extensive) research in African Americans in central New York. The generosity of Michelle Kratts in sharing her extensive knowledge and enthusiastic commitment to local research brought extra energy to this whole project.

Many other people lent important assistance. Andy Obernesser and Misty Messaga prepared the remarkable census database. Pete Ames helped locate key graves in Oakwood Cemetery and important information about the Patterson family. Paul Gromosiak shared his extensive knowledge of Niagara Falls history. Lisa A. Lee sent information and photos relating to her own family, the Pattersons and Kerseys, African American hotel owners in Niagara Falls. Donna Zellner Neale shared her commitment to the story of Hannah Johnson. Richard Palmer, probably the world’s expert on Lake Ontario travel in the age of sail, helped with his incredible resources. Don Papson shared crucial research on the Patterson family. Peter Trinkwalter shed important perspectives on the Hannah Johnson story. Terry Lasher Winslow, one of Niagara County’s most knowledgeable researchers, welcomed us with good information. Tom Yots generously shared his enthusiasm and extensive background.

Formal project advisors included David Anderson, Chair, Rochester and Monroe County Freedom Trail Commission, whose extensive experience in research and organizing for Underground Railroad activities in central and western New York proved as invaluable as his wonderfully wry sense of humor; Michael Boston, Department of History, State University of New York at Brockport, whose work on the Skinner School for Colored Deaf and Mute Children is a model of research, combining themes in education, disability history, and African American history; Anthony Cohen, Director Menare Institute, Montgomery County, Maryland, descendant of Patrick Sneed (Cataract House waiter and freedom finder), and always a source of ideas and joyous energy; Christopher Densmore, Archivist, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, who has worked on this project as long as anyone living and whose extensive research, so generously shared, gave a jump start to this report; Karolyn Smardz Frost, Professor, Harriet Tubman Institute, York University, has more energy and knows more key people in this field than almost anyone I know; Kate Clifford Larson, Northeastern University, Boston, is one of this country’s most knowledgeable Underground Railroad scholars, especially about Harriet Tubman, consistently generous and thoughtful in sharing her information; and Wilma Morrison, who helped save the B.M.E. Church in Drummondville, graciously introduced us to Underground Railroad sites in eastern Ontario, the other side of the U.S. story.
We are deeply indebted to the keepers of the records, without which none of us would be able to write this or any history. We owe immense thanks to Catherine Emerson, Niagara County Historian; Craig Bacon and Ron ?, Deputy County Historians, for sharing their deep knowledge about both Niagara County history and the sources and maps that tell its story; Melissa Dunlap and Ann Marie Linaberry at the History Center of Niagara County, for opening their extensive collection; Linda Reinumagi, Local History Room, Niagara Falls Public Library, who shared the amazingly rich collections of Niagara Falls history anywhere; and Cynthia Van Ness, Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, who cheerfully and efficiently located relevant materials in the Peter B. Porter Papers, an important and under-used collection for Niagara Falls history. Thanks also to the Niagara County Genealogical Society for reprinting the 1860 A.M.Z. Dawson, *Wall Map of Niagara County*. The Lockport Public Library, Lockport City Clerk’s Office, and Niagara County Clerk’s Office also have useful materials. On the Canadian side of the border, the Niagara Falls Public Library has extensive collections, many of them available on the web: http://www.nflibrary.ca.

The Niagara Frontier has some of the most thorough documentation of any area in the U.S. These collections are, literally, priceless. They have excellent care through these local repositories, and they deserve consistent and thorough funding.

Finally, it has been an immense pleasure to work with the Niagara Falls Heritage Area Commission. Chaired by William Bradberry, its members include people who have devoted their lives to interpreting history, especially African American history, as an important tool for shaping the future. We are deeply honored to have had the privilege of working with this Commission and with these committed, knowledgeable, enthusiastic and caring researchers, including Denise Easterly, Carol Murphy, Percy Abrams, and ?. Kevin Cottrell holds a special place, not only in this project but in Underground Railroad work on the Niagara Frontier for the last thirty years. Through his MotherlandConnexions, his visionary plans for the future (including his promotion of this Heritage Area Management Plan), and his willingness to put his life’s energy into making these projects work, Kevin Cottrell stands in a class by himself.

**Survey Results**

Based on primary source evidence, this survey includes detailed descriptions—with photographs, maps, and statements of significance—for twenty-three properties in the City of Niagara Falls and four properties in other parts of Niagara County (a small sample only for Niagara County outside Niagara Falls), along with lists of relevant sites in Ontario and Erie County identified from secondary materials.

Sites within Niagara Falls include the following:

1. Sites related to slavery:
   a. Site of Augustus Porter House
   b. Site of Peter B. Porter House

2. Sites related to abolitionists and the Underground Railroad:
   a. Site of Cataract House
   b. Site of International Hotel
   c. Site of Free Soil House/Patterson House
   d. Site of Robinson Hotel
   e. Site of Peter B./Elizabeth/Josephine Porter House
   f. Site of St. Lawrence Hotel
   g. Site of William Childs House
   h. Site of Whitney-Trott House
   i. Site of Skinner School for the Deaf
   j. Site of Falls Hotel
   k. Oakwood Cemetery
1. Emma Tanner House  
2. Colt House  
3. Colt Block  
4. Jerauld House  
5. Whitney House  
6. Congregational Church  
7. St. Peter's Church  

3. Crossing points:  
   a. Site of Ferry Landing, base of the American Falls  
   b. Suspension Bridge  
   c. Site of Maid of the Mist landing  

Sites in Niagara County outside Niagara Falls:  
1. Site of Ferry Crossing, Youngstown, Town of Porter  
2. Site of Steamboat Landing/Suspension Bridge, Town of Lewiston  
3. Site of Hannah Johnston House, Town of Wheatfield, City of North Tonawanda  
4. Aaron Mossell House, Lockport  

For purposes of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Management Plan, we are highlighting thirteen of these sites:  
1. Site of Cataract House (and related sites of Whitney-Trott, Jerauld, and Solon Whitney Houses)  
2. Site of International Hotel  
3. Sites of Free Soil House/Patterson House/Robinson House  
4. Site of Peter A./Elizabeth/Josephine Porter House  
5. Ferry Landing  
6. Suspension Bridge  
7. Colt Block  
8. Congregational Church  
9. Oakwood Cemetery  
10. Site of Ferry Landing, Youngstown  
11. Sites of Steamboat Land/Suspension Bridge, Lewiston  
12. Site of Hannah Johnston House, North Tonawanda  
13. Aaron Mossell House, Lockport  

All but eight of the sites described within Niagara County have no extant historic structures. In the City of Niagara Falls, three periods of building demolition—in the mid-1880s (to make room for the Reservation in 1885), in the 1920s and 1930s (accompanying industrial development), and in the 1960s and 1970s (as part of urban renewal)—left few historic buildings standing. Similar urban renewal destroyed much of Lockport’s downtown.  

The only seven standing buildings included in this survey in Niagara Falls are the Solon and Frances Whitney House (National Register listed), Emma Tanner House (part of the Chilton Avenue-Orchard Parkway Historic District (National Register), Oakwood Cemetery, Dexter and Angeline Jerauld House, Colt House, Colt Block, and Congregational Church. The Colt House is listed as a local landmark in Niagara Falls, but neither the Jerauld House, the Colt Block, or the Congregational Church are on any known official list of historic structures. All five of these (Oakwood Cemetery, Colt House, Colt Block, Jerauld House, and Congregational Church) should be considered for National Register listing, historically significant under Criterion A (“associated with
events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history”) and architecturally significant under Criterion C, structures that embody “the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction”). In addition to the these seven sites, the Customs House, built in 1863, is peripherally related to the Underground Railroad and is also listed on the National Register.

Three Underground Railroad related sites in Niagara Falls with no standing structures are also important in terms of the National Register. The first is the site at Prospect Point of the staircase and cable railway leading to the ferry landing at the base of the American falls. As part of the Niagara Reservation, this is owned by the State of New York and listed on the National Register. The remaining original fabric of the 1855 Suspension Bridge foundation and the site of the original dock (built in 1846) for the Maid of the Mist might also be considered for National Register listing under Criterion D (sites that have “yielded or may be likely to yield, information important in history or prehistory”).

Several more sites might well be worth exploratory archeological work, to see whether they would be eligible for listing on the National Register under Criterion D. These include sites of the Cataract House, International Hotel, Free Soil House/Robinson Hotel/Patterson House, Augustus Porter House, Peter A./Elizabeth/Josephine Porter House, and Whitney-Trott House.

Finally, the Niagara Falls City Hall, already listed on the National Register, stands on the site of the home of William Childs, a major Niagara Falls abolitionist.

Of the sites described here in detail outside Niagara Falls, only the Aaron Mossell House and Vine Street School remain standing. The school is part of the Lowertown Historic District in Lockport, but the house should be considered for a National Register nomination, historically significant under Criterion A.

The National Park Service’s Network to Freedom lists documented Underground Railroad sites, programs, and research centers. The Underground Railroad program at Murphy’s Orchards, Burt, New York, and the statue of freedom seekers at Lewiston, New York, are both currently listed on the Network to Freedom for their programs. Other possible Network to Freedom nominations include:

1. Ferry Landing, Prospect Point, documented site;
2. Suspension Bridge, documented site;
3. Site of Maid of the Mist landing, documented site;
4. Site of Steamboat Landing and bridge, Lewiston, documented site;
5. Site of Ferry Landing, Youngstown, documented site;
6. Niagara Falls Public Library, research center;
7. Niagara County Historian’s Office, Lockport, research center;
8. Niagara County History Center, Lockport, research center.

Building on this survey, future historical and site-based work might include:

a. Jerauld House. Since this is the only standing building related to this movement in downtown Niagara Falls, discovering more about this building, including its date of construction, is top priority. This will involve research in deeds and assessment records in the Niagara County Clerk’s Office.

b. African American Community in Niagara Falls. Further study of African American families who appeared in two or more census records in Niagara Falls would help us understand the social infrastructure of the local African American community. We have names of about twenty-five of these families.

c. Patterson House/Free Soil Hotel/Robinson House. Deeds for properties owned by James and Luvisa Patterson and Charles Kersey Jackson on Falls Street and Mechanic Street would help us determine whether these two black families own the hotels they operated.
d. **School for Deaf.** We have not been able to determine a specific site for this important school. Further research in deeds, assessment records, and directories for families who owned property in the immediate neighborhood would help us narrow down its location.

e. **Network to Freedom.** Write nominations to this program for selected sites, beginning with the Ferry Landing and the Suspension Bridge, if owners agree. Diane Miller, National Coordinator of the Network to Freedom, visited Niagara Falls in October 2011 and suggested that these two sites would be priorities.

f. **National Register.** Write National Register nominations for selected sites, including Oakwood Cemetery, Dexter and Angeline Jerauld House, Colt House, Colt Block, and Mossell House, based on consultation with staff in Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation.

g. **Underground Railroad Tours.** Develop a driving/bus tour guide for Underground Railroad sites in Niagara Falls. Could be directed toward tour bus operations or toward individuals, in the form of a brochure or downloadable online tour guide.

h. **Underground Railroad Markers.** Provide text and photos for markers at selected sites.

In addition, if the Commission wishes to support further work in Niagara County outside Niagara Falls, there are many sites (for which we have already done most of the research) that could be described. Lyman Spalding’s diary, located at Syracuse University, would also be well worth reading carefully for further references to African Americans and the Underground Railroad. (We have used on the first of eight volumes here, since the other seven volumes have not been transcribed.)

**Historic Context Statement**

**Overview: Geography**

People crossed to Canada from every U.S. port, of course. Along the Niagara River, Black Rock, Lewiston, and Youngstown were regular points of embarkation. Everywhere that boats (whether lake steamers, schooners, or small sailing craft) docked along the shores of the Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, and the other Great Lakes, people left slavery for freedom. On Lake Ontario, villages and cities such as Rochester, Pulneyville, Oswego, and Ogdensburgh were major ports. On Lake Erie, boats of all sizes stopped at Black Rock, Buffalo, Sandusky, Ohio, and ports in between. But from 1827 (when New York State finally abolished slavery) until 1865 (the end of the Civil War), Niagara Falls became one of the country’s major crossing points from slavery to freedom.  

Why was this so? As with so much of human history, the answer is rooted in geography, in the land itself. First, the Niagara River, running north and south, marked the shortest water crossing between Canada and the U.S. along the Great Lakes frontier. The area lay at the intersection of water transportation to the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the upper Great Lakes and the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys to the west. In the colonial period, this water access made the Niagara Frontier a central focus of trade and warfare among Senecas, French, and British, centered at Fort Niagara. In the nineteenth century, turnpikes, the Erie Canal, and railroads enhanced the major east-west land transportation corridor in the United States from New York City to the upper Great Lakes, connecting on the Niagara Frontier with this system of water transportation on the Great Lakes.

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8 This report includes descriptions of the Youngstown ferry, the crossing and steamboat landing at Lewiston, and Hannah Johnston’s home in North Tonawanda.
In terms of the Underground Railroad, the intersection of all of these routes on the Niagara Frontier—from the Atlantic coastline to the Ohio Valley and the upper Great Lakes—meant that people who escaped from slavery (like other travelers) had relatively easy access to crossing points into Canada from Niagara Falls.

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9 Note to edr: This is a reprint from Jonathan Sheppard, most likely from Fanning's Illustrated Gazetteer of the United States (New York: Phelps, Fanning and Company, 1853). I have ordered an original of the Fanning map, so we will not have copyright problems. Alternatively, we could use the 1842 map from Barber and Howe, Google Books. Also reprinted in hard copy. There is an even better map (I think) in Morse's Geography (1851), but it is $350, too expensive to purchase the original, and I cannot find a copy online. (HALL, O.A. (LETTERED BY) - MORSE'S GEORGRAPHY. MAP OF NEW YORK STATE. HORACE THAYER & CO. NEW YORK. 1851. OUTLINE HAND COLOR. ENGRAVING. Nice detailed map showing counties, rivers, creeks, topography, railroads (dotted lines colored red), cities, towns & townships. Such placenames as Oyster Bay, Crown Point, Floyd and Wormly. Tables - Pop. of NY, and stations & distances of railroads. Also short "Historical Sketch". Repairs & browning. Very scarce. 18.7"H. x 24.8"W. GOOD. $350.00. I.D.#03971).
Second, the cataract at Niagara Falls, always spelled with a capital “F,” “Falls,” was a great wonder of the western world, an international tourist attraction, unequalled by any other site in the eastern U.S. By the thousands, travelers came to visit the Falls, not only from northern free states and foreign countries but also from slave states. Often, they brought people in slavery with them. At the same time, the major hotels in Niagara Falls, especially the Cataract House and the International Hotel, hired a predominately African American, entirely male, wait staff. Most of these waiters had been born in southern states and most likely had escaped from slavery on the Underground Railroad themselves. They, along with a few key European American allies, formed a formidable phalanx of radical abolitionists, ready to help any enslaved person who wanted to travel to freedom. The geographic proximity of these slaveholders, enslaved servants, and abolitionist waiters and their allies created a volatile combination that underlay the holiday-like atmosphere of this tourist town.

Transportation Routes

In the colonial period, Fort Niagara, at Youngstown, was a central node in the worldwide struggle for empire between the French and British. In upstate New York, Haudenosaunee people, including the Senecas, held the balance of power between these two European American giants. As keepers of the western door of the Confederacy, Senecas guarded the historic Lewiston landing, where the Niagara Escarpment met the Niagara River. The portage road connected Lewiston, seven miles north of Niagara Falls, to the Niagara River a mile and a half above the Falls. In 1750, the French built Fort du Portage at the upper landing. In 1760, the British took it over and renamed it Fort Schlosser, complete with a chimney that still stands (although in a different location) on the riverbank above Niagara Falls. 10

Stone Chimney from Fort Schlosser, moved twice to its current location, 951 Buffalo Avenue. Niagara River above Niagara Falls. October 2011.

In the nineteenth century, European Americans developed these two portage landings—at Lewiston and Fort Schlosser—as steamboat landings. From Lewiston, passengers could travel by U.S. and Canadian steamboat lines all the way to the Atlantic Ocean by two different routes—one through Lake Ontario, the Rideau Canal, and the St. Lawrence River and the second to Oswego, through the Oswego Canal to the Erie Canal, Hudson River, and New York City. From the upper landing, a mile and a half east of the Falls, travelers could take a steamboat to Buffalo, Black Rock, and the upper Great Lakes.

Lake Ontario Route, 1845, for Lady of the Lake and Rochester /purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/images/pnia181.jpg
Until the completion of a national railroad network in the 1850s, these steamboats (with landings at Lewiston for traffic from Lake Ontario and the landing above the Falls for travel from Buffalo and beyond) remained the easiest way to travel to Niagara Falls, connecting with short rail lines from Lewiston and Buffalo. As J.W. Orr noted in his traveler’s guide in 1842, the most important access routes to the Falls “terminate at Buffalo, the commencement of steam-navigation on lake Erie; or at Lewiston (or Queenston, opposite), the landing place of the lake Ontario, and St. Lawrence steamers.”

East of Niagara Falls, travelers could go by land all the way to New York City. Turnpikes ran west from Albany through the Mohawk Valley and beyond. Each major city along this corridor still has its Genesee Street, named after the original Genesee Turnpike.

After 1825, the Erie Canal paralleled this route, creating the new village of Lockport and entering Lake Erie at Buffalo. Leaving their canal boat accommodations at Buffalo, visitors could take a steamboat down the river to Niagara Falls.

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Lockport itself became a boomtown, with its famous five locks and rapidly expanding industry. In 1832, Frances Trollope described Lockport as beyond all comparison, the strangest looking place I ever beheld. As fast as a dozen trees were cut down, a factory was raised up. It looks as if the demons of machinery, having invaded the peaceful realms of nature, have fixed on Lockport as the battleground on which they should strive for mastery. The battle is lost and won. Nature is fairly routed, and driven from the field and the rattling, crackling, hissing, spitting demon has taken possession of Lockport forever.

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Early settlement by Quakers made Lockport a center of both Underground Railroad activities and African American settlement. Quakers such as Darius Comstock, supervisor of work on the Erie Canal in the early 1820s; Lyman Spalding, mill owner; Isaac Smith, Lockport’s first doctor, and his wife Ednah Smith; and Moses Richardson, publisher of the *Lockport Daily Journal*, made Lockport a strong abolitionist anchor. Sites relating to both these European Americans and to the two hundred African Americans who lived in Lockport by 1855 and afterward, including well known freedom seeker George Goines and entrepreneur Adam Mossell, need further documentation.

By the mid-1830s, railroads led visitors directly to the Falls, first from Buffalo and Lewiston and later from Lockport, Rochester, Canandaigua, and points east. The Buffalo and Niagara Falls Railroad was the first railroad to connect Niagara Falls with the rest of the world. Completed in 1836, it brought passengers to its new stone railroad station at the corner of Falls and Mechanic Streets, right across the street from the Eagle Hotel. Going north, the Lewiston Railroad connected Niagara Falls to Lewiston in 1837. To the east, Rochester was connected to Tonawanda via railroad in 1837. By 1844, this line linked directly to a track running east to Auburn and then, in 1850, to Syracuse. In 1853, another line connected Rochester to Lockport. 13

Many travelers, like the abolitionist who traveled from Rochester to Niagara Falls with Frederick Douglass in 1848, continued to take a steamboat to the Lewiston landing and then to ride the railroad to Niagara Falls. “The view over the verdant valleys lying below,” he reported, “was at many points exceedingly picturesque and beautiful - dotted here and there with a white farm house, or a cluster of venerable trees, the remains of the forest which, not many years since, as appears by the stumps which still stand firm and sound, reigned in undisturbed and silent solitude, over this entire district of country.”14

These small railroads made it easier for travelers to reach Niagara Falls. But the real change came in the 1850s, when all of these lines were consolidated into the New York Central Railroad,

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integrating all of New York State into a national and international rail system that led directly to the Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls. From 1853 to 1855, the New York Central Railroad brought short local lines under one management to form the celebrated “water level route” from New York City to Buffalo. After the Suspension Bridge opened for rail traffic in 1855, this line went directly across the bridge to Canada. About the same time, the New York Central leased the Buffalo and Niagara Falls Railroad and bought the Lewiston Railroad.  

John Thompson, Geography of New York State (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966).

In 1851, the Erie Railroad went directly west from New York City, along what is now Route 17. That same year, six trustees (including Augustus S. Porter, son of the original landowner of Niagara Falls) organized the Canandaigua and Niagara Falls Railroad (familiarly called the Peanut Line). By July 1, 1854, passengers could travel from the Erie Railroad at Elmira to Canandaigua and from there to Niagara Falls. When the new Suspension Bridge added rail traffic in 1855, this line ran directly into Canada. In 1858, the New York Central brought this railroad, too, under its control, creating the Niagara Bridge and Canandaigua Railroad. 

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By the mid-1850s, then, travelers from the east coast of the U.S. could take the New York Central Railroad 144 miles from New York to Albany, 298 miles from Albany to Buffalo, and twenty-two miles from Buffalo to Niagara Falls, a total distance of 464 miles. Alternatively, they could go to Rochester and take the Rochester, Lockport, and Niagara Falls Railroad, a total of 450
miles. Or they could take the Erie Railroad to Elmira (274 miles) and then the Elmira, Canandaigua, and Niagara Falls Railroad to Niagara Falls (166 miles), for a total trip of 440 miles.¹⁷

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By 1856, the New York Central was also directly linked to trains coming north from Philadelphia and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. On May 26, 1856, Joseph Bustill, Underground Railroad agent in Harrisburg, wrote to William Still in Philadelphia that he was sending four people by the new “Lightening Train,” “the Southern route for Niagara Falls.” From here on, he said, he would not send people through Auburn, “except in cases of great danger,” but would rely on this Lightning train, which reached Philadelphia in three and a half hours from Harrisburg.¹⁸

People from the east coast certainly continued to use a variety of crossing points to Canada. Thousands also settled in the northern U.S., including New York State. It is likely, however, that by the mid-1850s a majority of those who escaped from slavery and went to Canada came through Philadelphia and eventually reached Niagara Falls, either through Elmira and the Canandaigua and Niagara Falls Railroad or through New York City and the New York Central Railroad. The route to Elmira took them either north along the Susquehanna River Valley corridor or west from New York City on the Erie Railroad, with six-foot wide tracks. In Elmira, John W. Jones, who had escaped from slavery in Loudon County, Virginia, in 1844, was the main Underground Railroad agent. He would put them on the Canandaigua and Niagara Falls line, going directly over the Suspension Bridge to Ontario. Jones wrote to Wilbur Siebert, noted historian of the Underground Railroad, on December 17, 1896, that he came to Elmira in 1844 and that the North Central Railroad was built through there a few years later. The Railroad was used for Underground purposes from the beginning. He says there had been no means of travel previous to that. Most of the men escaping had money to defray their own expenses. The women and children were supplied with money to pay their fares from a fund of the Anti-Slavery Society. Mr. Jones says the fugitives were always sent

from Elmira at 4 a.m. The railroad employees knew they were fugitives and placed them in the baggage car. They made a through trip to St. Catherines, Ontario, and were received there by the Rev. Mr. Wilson.19

Alternatively, people escaping from slavery could travel 144 miles north from New York City to Albany and then west through Utica, Syracuse, and Rochester on the New York Central Railroad. If they stopped in Syracuse, Rev. Jermain Loguen (who had escaped from slavery in Tennessee) and Caroline Loguen would help them with food, tickets, and a word to the conductor to see them safely through Rochester directly to the Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls into Canada. 20

From the southwest, people coming from Kentucky found it relatively easy to leave Louisville on the mail boat going to Cincinnati, connecting with a train to Sandusky, Ohio, where they could take the steamboat to Buffalo and then the railroad directly to Niagara Falls, a trip of 655 miles with a fare of $23.00. Except for the poor brandy, cigars, and tobacco in the North, commented one enthusiastic traveler, “this is an exceedingly pleasant summer excursion. The stoppages on the route constitute one of its greatest charms, by banishing the hurry, confusion, and fatigue which destroy the pleasure of traveling. The atmosphere of the lake country is some 15 or 20 degrees colder than that of Kentucky, and seems like spring compared with our sweltering summer.”21

Growth of Niagara Falls: Tourism, Industry, and Transportation

In the context of these changing transportation patterns—so dramatic that historians called them a transportation revolution—the village and city of Niagara Falls grew from a small hamlet based on trade along the portage road (approximately the same location as the current Portage Road) in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century to a small city based on tourism and industry by the Civil War.

Two families formed the dominant economic matrix for Niagara Falls. Both established the basis for tourism and industrial development. The first family, that of Augustus Porter and his younger brother Peter B. Porter from Canandaigua, New York, were the major landowners along the river and Falls. They began as slaveholders, but by the mid-1840s, Augustus Porter was advocating universal suffrage for black men as well as white. And Peter B. Porter’s children became abolitionists. The second family, that of Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney from Phelps, New York, opened the first large hotel in Niagara Falls, the Cataract House, where they employed over time hundreds of African Americans who had escaped from slavery, mostly men who worked as waiters.

In 1805, New York State leased the whole mile strip along the Niagara River, acquired from Seneca people, including the portage road from Fort Schlosser to Lewiston, to the Porter brothers and Benjamin Barton, who formed Porter, Barton and Company. They kept this lease until 1822, and travel and trade (principally carrying salt produced near Syracuse, New York) along the portage road remained the company’s major source of income. Early on, however, people recognized both the industrial potential of Niagara Falls and its attraction as a tourist site. 22

Augustus Porter moved to Niagara Falls from Canandaigua with his family in 1806. For two


20 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffalo_and_Niagara_Falls_Railroad

21 Louisville Daily Journal, July 19, 1850. Thanks to Christopher Densmore for this citation.

years, they lived in the old Stedman house at the stone chimney. Porter laid out the new village in 1807 and named it Manchester, hoping it would develop into a major industrial site like its English namesake. In 1808, the Porter family moved into Porter's new home across the rapids from Goat Island. By 1810, the future looked bright. The village contained ten to fifteen houses, along with a sawmill, fulling mill, carding machine, ropewalk, several tanneries, and “one of the best grist-mills in the western country,” noted Horatio Gates Spafford, author of A Gazetteer of New York. People came her from all over western New York to grind their grain. Parkhurst Whitney, destined to become one of the premier citizens of Niagara Falls, moved to the village in 1810.

The War of 1812 brought a temporary halt to these hopes. In 1813, the British burned the whole village in retaliation for American destruction of Newark (now Niagara-on-the-Lake). Returning home after the War, the Porter brothers and Parkhurst Whitney began to develop both tourism and industry. The Porters bought Goat Island in 1816 from New York State. Augustus Porter rebuilt his home on its former site in 1818. Parkhurst Whitney in 1815 purchased the two-story log tavern from Jonathan Fairchilds and turned into the famous Eagle Hotel, enlarging it in 1819-20. And entrepreneurs constructed a new gristmill, sawmill, nail factory, woolen manufactory, and paper mill. At the same time, Augustus Porter and Parkhurst Whitney began to develop facilities for tourists, including a bridge to Goat Island (1817-18) and a stairway to the base of the Falls (1818).

Population growth in Niagara Falls reflected this newfound prosperity. The Town of Niagara had 484 people in 1820, growing to 1897 people in 1825. Already, plans were in place to build a canal from the upper landing above the Falls all the way to Lewiston, paralleling the portage road. Even so, the village could not compete with Lewiston in 1823 as “the leading business village of the county.” And it was far smaller than the entirely new city of Lockport, a creation of the Erie Canal, which numbered 3007 people in 1825.

Completion of the Erie Canal essentially destroyed the portage business. By 1830, the population of Niagara had dropped to 1401 people, reflecting the separation of the new Town of Pendleton in 1827. At the same time, the Erie Canal enhanced the hotel trade by making the Falls more accessible to tourists. To meet the new demand, David Chapman built the Cataract House in 1825. In 1831, Parkhurst Whitney acquired it, combining it with the Eagle Hotel under one management.

By 1835, the population of Niagara Falls had risen to 2013, and the village boasted two churches (Presbyterian and Union), six mills (grist, saw, paper, and carding mills), three hotels, and about one hundred dwellings, complete with mail service twice daily and stagecoaches connecting the village in all directions. One visitor noted in 1838 that “the village of Niagara consists of some four or five small streets, with nothing particular in them to attract attention. Some of the houses are large and aristocratic-looking; but the business of the village is hotel-keeping. There are many hotels, several of which are very extensive, for the accommodation of the numerous transient visitors, who come merely to see the Falls.” Benjamin Rathbun, land speculator, made a major investment in the village, planning a huge new hotel near the Eagle Hotel and selling lots throughout the village to individual purchasers. Unfortunately, Rathbun lost both his fortune and his freedom in the great depression of 1837. From his jail cell, he gave up all hope of making a fortune for himself or for the village of Niagara Falls.

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23 Horatio Gates Spafford, Gazette of New York (1813), 241.

24 William Poole, ed., Landmarks of Niagara County (Syracuse: D. Mason, 1897), 174 ff; Horatio Gates Spafford, Gazette of New York (1823), 354.


In spite of the depression, observers continued to laud both the industrial and tourism potential of Niagara Falls. In 1836, Thomas Gordon commented, for example, that it “combines more of the natural advantages which invite, collect, sustain, and adorn a great population than that of any city in the world. . . . Possessing a water power unparalleled for extent, uniformity, or safety, it has facilities for commerce and manufactures, which cannot be surpassed.”

By the early 1840s, about six hundred people lived in Niagara Falls in eighty-five houses. They supported two churches, two schools, and a variety of “public houses.” The Cataract and Eagle hotels were the village’s most prominent feature, supplemented by the smaller Exchange Hotel.

When they arrived, visitors would be greeted by porters, shouting “Baggage for the Cataract House! Baggage for the Eagle Hotel!” and ‘baggage for’ half a dozen other wooden palaces of lesser note, each bearing some one of the high-sounding titles usually appropriated by these flaunting shrines of fashion and folly, and all included under the aristocratic genera: “First class houses and hotels.” Many of these porters were African American. James Patterson, born in Virginia of Alabama parents, once handled “all the town’s baggage from the corner of Falls and Main Street to the Cataract House on a two-wheeled cart.”

Go to one of the major hotels in town—the Cataract House, the International Hotel, or the Spencer House—and your dinner would be served by a staff of African American waiters, who would bring your meals with military precision. Almost one hundred and fifty African Americans lived in Niagara Falls in 1855, most of them working as waiters.

African Americans who began work as waiters or baggage handlers often earned enough money to invest in businesses of their own. After 1850, for example, if you stayed either at the Free Soil House (later the Falls Hotel) on Main Street or the Robinson House on Prospect Street, you would be patronizing hotels owned by African Americans. If you had your picture taken at Hamilton’s photography studio in the 1880s, you would face an African American photographer. If you looked for a job at Hamilton’s employment agency or ate at Hamilton’s dining hall, you would be supporting African American-owned businesses, all of them started by men who began work as porters or waiters.

Visitors could tour the Falls on their own, assisted no doubt by one of the many published guidebooks for sale. Or they could request a tour from Mr. Hooker and his two sons, who conveniently kept an office between the Eagle and the Cataract hotels. Certainly, they would stroll through Goat Island and the smaller islands (taking a walk over the Falls at Terrapin Point and a hike down the Biddle Staircase). Beginning in 1852, they might stop at Thomas Tugby’s Bazaar at the end of Goat Island bridge (probably on the site of the present Red Coach Inn) to buy souvenirs (many of them pieces of beadwork done by Tuscarora and Seneca women), borrow books from the circulating library, read the daily papers in the reading room, or visit the museum (with a “splendid and valuable collection of indigenous and foreign minerals” and “curiosities of various kinds”), where they could also treat the children to “ices, confections, and other refreshments.” In 1856, one observer described “a great fungus-growth of museums, curiosity shops, taverns, and pagodas with shining tin cupolas.”

If visitors grew tired of looking at the Falls, reading, and eating ices, they could go bowling (to “mingle exercise with amusement”); walk through the public gardens, whose trees and shrubbery

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28 J.W. Orr (1842).


were “laid out in good taste”; or hike into the islands, “the most delightful retreats that can be wished,” “on which not a stick is allowed to be cut.”

Crossing to Canada via the ferry (really a rowboat) at the base of the Falls offered visitors one of the very best views of the Falls, as well as a chance to visit the famed Table Rock and Thomas Barnett’s museum of curiosities. Established in 1827, Barnett’s collection offered exhibits of natural artifacts, Native American objects, Egyptian mummies, and (after 1859) a zoo with greenhouses and ponds and a huge Native American exhibit.

Your fellow visitors would certainly include people from Europe, speaking French, German, or Polish. They would also include people from all over Canada and the United States, including states in the South. “There is a pretty large representation of Southerners, among the guests, and a number of Europeans,” reported the Niagara Falls Gazette in 1856.

Among the thousands of visitors were abolitionists, both black and white. Charles B. Ray, editor of the Colored American, visited in 1837 and carved his name on a tree “with thousands of others.” Frederick Douglass came to Niagara Falls at least three times, in 1845, 1848, and 1849. In 1848, he commented on “this stupendous wonder. It is beyond the power of talent, poetry, or genius to describe it,” he wrote, “this living voice of the ever-living God.” Henry C. Wright, European American abolitionist, visited in 1853. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, just beginning her career as an abolitionist lecturer, visited in 1856.

Tourists then as now had various reactions to the Falls. In 1850, the Buffalo publisher J. Faxon in his Guide to the Fall of Niagara quoted several visitors:

“How magnificent!”
“Truly, the half has not been told!”
“It is grand—it is dreadful!”
“They are terrible, yet beautiful!”
“They appear small at a distance, and, at first sight, I was disappointed. They exceed my expectations.”
“Never have I beheld, or imagined, any thing comparable to this.”

The expansion of the Cataract House in the late 1830s and again in 1846 reflected this huge increase in tourism, driven by the new railroad lines. Using a variety of sources, archeologist Lee Ann Wurst compiled an estimate of numbers of tourists in Niagara, from 12,000-15,000 per year in the late 1820s to 20,000 in 1838 to 45,000 in 1847.

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33 Falls of Niagara (Buffalo: J. Faxon, 1850), 13.

But Niagara did not subsist on tourism alone. Two saw mills, two machine shops, and one each of a grist mill, paper mill, woolen factory, and railroad car factory attested to its growing industrial base. Benjamin Rathbun had just completed a stone millrace to harness yet more of the vast power of the Falls. 35

The Porter families in particular continued to hope for industrial development, based on the immense waterpower of the Falls. In 1846, Augustus Porter proposed a plan to build a new hydraulic canal, extending from above the Falls to the cliffs beyond the Falls. Reflecting its new size and sense of itself, the village incorporated, separate from the Town, on July 7, 1848, with an estimated population of 3500. 36

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35 J.W. Orr, 59.

36 Hamilton Child, 1869, 92.
The growth of tourism continued into the 1850s, as the Falls became more accessible to middle class and working class families who arrived by the thousands on the new railroads. In 1853, completion of the huge new International Hotel, rivaling the size and comfort of the Cataract, virtually doubled the room capacity for tourists in the village. The new Frontier Mart (one continuous brick business block 132 feet long), built by the sons of Augustus Porter in 1854, offered visitors new opportunities to spend money in the nineteenth century version of a shopping mall. White’s Pleasure Grounds opened in 1855 along the banks of the gorge to offer visitors a fine view of the Falls on comfortable seats. Integration of the New York Central Railroad led to a huge new terminal constructed at Falls and Third Streets, with the development of new hotels and restaurants nearby. An excursion train of thirteen cars and four to six hundred people visited the Falls in 1855 from Williamsport, Pennsylvania, coming by the new Canandaigua and Niagara Falls Railroad through Elmira. Accompanied by the Williamsport brass band, they stayed only one night, but they appeared to be “highly pleased with their visit.”

And a new village was emerging just north of Niagara Falls. In the area originally called Bellevue, visitors had enjoyed a mineral spring. But only three farmhouses stood in the area in 1845.

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37 Intensive Level Survey of Historic Resources, City of Niagara Falls: Phase I, 3-14; Niagara Falls Gazette, September 5, 1855. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding this.
Completion of the Suspension Bridge in 1848 changed all that. By the mid-1850s, the area had the qualities of a small city, with 1200 people, a new railroad depot, and several elegant limestone houses, churches, and business blocks. On September 4, 1854, magistrate Marcus Adams wrote in his diary, “I never before realized what a place we are, until having a full view until having a full view of all the bustle noise which prevails here. It was with amazement that I witnessed the cars, carriages, men rushing in all directions.” When the first gas lit the village in April 1855, Adams noted “this is an age of wonders, but this is certainly a wonderful place.” Spurred by a sense of growth and optimism, this village incorporated on June 8, 1854, as Niagara City. People were so busy building, however, that few wanted to enlist in public service. “It is unfortunate for our village which now numbers 1600 inhabitants,” wrote Adams on January 15, 1856, “that we have so few men who will accept the office of trustee. It is certainly true that the men in this place are far inferior to the women in point of intellect and intelligence.”

A cholera epidemic struck the village in 1854 and hit with “peculiar malignity” among working class families employed on construction projects. All the Irish “shanties” were torn down. Nevertheless, immigrants continued to arrive from all over western Europe, Canada, and the U.S. In one neighborhood near the Suspension Bridge in 1860, for example, men and women had been born in Germany, France, Canada, Scotland, and England and New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Michigan. They worked as carpenters, masons, bead workers, schoolteachers, farm laborers, housekeepers, railroad brakemen, shirt makers, servants, and dressmakers.

Tourism was seasonal, of course, as most people wanted to see the Falls in the summer or early fall. But it led to considerable wealth for local entrepreneurs. By 1850, the population of the Town of Niagara was 5457 but seasonal visitation was eight or nine times that, reaching between 45,000 and 50,000 people. Business was, literally, booming.

The new hydraulic canal, from the upper landing diagonally northwest, spewed water through raceways into the gorge half a mile below the village of Niagara Falls. It promised new industrial growth, but the promise was not to be realized until after the Civil War. Tourism remained the queen of the local economy throughout the 1850s. As J.H. French concluded in his Gazetteer in 1860, “The village owes its existence to its proximity to the great cataract. Thousands of visitors, from every part of the U.S. and from almost every country in the world, annually visit this, one of nature's greatest wonders. Nearly all business of the community is connected with this periodical visitation and consists of hotel-keeping, livery business, and matters of kindred nature.”

The result of this newly-integrated railway system and the attraction of Niagara Falls as a tourist destination was the creation, by 1860, of two small villages. Niagara Falls was located around the Falls with 2976 people, and it supported five churches, one newspaper, and eleven hotels. Niagara City grew up around the new Suspension Bridge, with 1365 people, a newspaper, six churches, DeVeaux College for Orphans, and fifteen hotels. “No places of equal size on the Continent have a greater amount of hotel accommodations than these,” reported J.H. French.

38 Marcus Adams, Diary, September 4, 1854; April 21, 1855; January 15, 1856.
39 William Pool, ed., Niagara County Landmarks (1897), 215; William S. Hunter, Jr., Hunter’s Panoramic Guide from Niagara Falls to Quebec (Boston: John P. Hewett, 1857), 18; Quote from Buffalo Medical Journal in Marcus Adams, Diary, August 29, 1854; 1860 U.S. manuscript census, “Niagara Falls,” 211.
African Americans in Niagara Falls

Throughout the history of Niagara Falls, African Americans played a visible part in the village’s development. The first African Americans who came to Niagara Falls were most likely enslaved. The census counted eight enslaved people in the Town of Niagara in 1810, ten in 1814, and 15 in 1820. By 1820, at least two free black families, each holding seven people, lived in the village. Harry and Katie Wood supposedly came from Canandaigua with the Augustus Porter family. Abraham Thompson and his family also lived nearby. \(^{42}\)

By 1850, forty-four African Americans lived in the Town of Niagara. Twenty-eight of them (all male except two, Catherine Polk and a twenty-year-old woman named Hamilton) lived in the Cataract House, including John Morrison [Morosan], forty-year-old waiter with no birthplace listed (who would become head waiter and a core activist in the Underground Railroad) and Lewis H.F. Hamilton, a twenty-five-year-old waiter born in Washington, D.C., who lived at the Cataract with his wife and would become one of the major restauranteurs in Niagara Falls. Five single people lived, most likely as servants, in households headed by European Americans. Four black families lived in separate households. John Slaughter, a pedlar, (born in Ohio) lived with his wife Sarah (born in Tennessee). Juanus Slangter, a barber, lived with his wife Ann (both born in Canada) next door to Samuel Patterson, a tavern keeper born in Virginia, his wife Jane, and their two children. Perhaps Juanus Slangter had his barbershop in Patterson’s hotel (called the Free Soil House). Marshall Berryman was a grocer born in Kentucky, who lived with his wife Loiya, born in Virginia, and their son Henry A., born in Canada.

By 1855, Niagara Falls counted 145 people of color, 105 of them men and only forty of them women, only 2.6 percent of the total population but more than three times the number who had lived there in 1850. The manuscript census for 1855 has been lost for Niagara Falls, so we cannot identify information for individuals in that year. Two hundred African Americans lived in Lockport in 1855, however. Twenty-five lived in Lewiston, eighteen in the Town of Wheatfield and five or fewer in Cambria, Hartland, Porter, Royalton, and Wilson, for a total of 402 throughout the county. \(^{43}\)


\(^{43}\) New York State Census (Albany: Van Benthusuysen, 1855).
In 1860, 244 people of color lived in Niagara Falls, more than ever before. Sixty African Americans lived at the Cataract House, including six female servants and Catherine Polk, cook. Fifty-one male waiters lived at the International Hotel. Occupations of African Americans in the village included one baker, five barbers, one blacksmith, six cooks, six dress makers, two hair dressers, one hotel steward, ninety-three hotel waiters, sixteen laborers, one “plain serving,” two porters, twenty-one servants, one shoemaker, one silver plater, six students, one tailor, six waiters (rather than “hotel waiters”), four washer women, and two whitewashers. The rest were either children, wives at home, or elderly.

Many of these African American residents owned property. While census records appear incomplete, especially for federal censuses, they do indicate increasing numbers of property owners from 1850 to 1880. In 1850, only Samuel (probably the same as James) Patterson was listed as a property owner. Thirty-five years old, a tavernkeeper, born in Virginia, he owned $3000 worth of real estate. Only two people were listed as owning real property in 1860: James Patterson, hotel keeper, born in Virginia, had property valued at $8000, and Samuel Jackson, laborer, born in Ohio, owned $350 worth of property.

By 1865, although the total number of African American residents had dropped to 122, the number of people listed as owning property rose to nineteen. If average household size was five people, then almost eighty percent of African American households in 1865 owned property. John Hunter, barber, owned the most valuable property, worth $4000.

The 1870 listed only twenty-six African American residents of Niagara Falls. Either the Civil War had vastly disrupted the hotel business or the census simply overlooked African Americans in that year. None were listed as owning property.

In 1875, however, the African American population had grown to 165 (1461875—146 in the First Election District and nineteen in the Second Election District). Sixteen people were listed as owning real estate, valued from $600 to $8500. The wealthiest African Americans included Lewis F. Hamilton, proprietor of a restaurant worth $4000; Robert Carter, a barber with property worth $5000; and Jason Young, proprietor of the Falls Hotel (once owned by James Patterson), worth $8500.

In 1880, the African American population had risen to 235 (212 in Niagara District 185, 22 in Niagara District 18 one in the Town of Niagara). Occupations in 1880 included twelve people “at home”; three at school; one barber; one bell boy; two carriage drivers; seven cooks; one “cook at hotel”; one “far” (farmer?); two hackmen; one hair dresser; fifty hotel waiters; seven house servants; one housekeeper; thirteen wives listed as “keeping house”; eight laborers; three laundresses; one with
“no occupation” (Louisa Douglass, who was 100 years old); one pastry cook (Catherine Polk); one servant; and one “works at hair dressers.” Sixteen people—all except one children or grandchildren—had no occupation listed. No real estate was listed for anyone in 1880, most likely reflecting an inaccuracy in the census rather than the reality of property distribution.

In sum, the African American population in Niagara Falls increased more than five times in the decade of the 1850s, from 44 in 1850 to 244 in 1860. During the Civil War, African Americans either left Niagara Falls in large numbers or the census taker was wildly inaccurate (most likely the latter), since the population dropped to a low of twenty-six in 1870. By 1875, however, African Americans began to return to Niagara Falls in large numbers, rising to 146 in 1875 and 235 in 1880, perhaps a reflection of the expanding tourism business in the post-Civil War years. 44

Legal Context: U.S. and Canada

People escaping from slavery, those who helped them, and those who pursued them operated in the context of laws in both the U.S. and Canada. In 1793, the U.S. Congress passed a general law governing the return of “servants” to their masters. That same year, shocked by the return of Chloe Cooley from Newark (now Niagara-on-the-Lake) to her master in Schenectady, New York, the first parliament of Upper Canada passed a law forbidding the importation of people in slavery and freeing all those born into slavery when they reached the age of twenty-five. This law made Upper Canada (now Ontario) an attractive destination for many people escaping from slavery in the U.S.

In the colonial period, twelve-fifteen percent of the population of New York lived in slavery, the largest proportion in any northern colony. In 1799, New York passed a gradual emancipation law, freeing every person born into slavery after that date when they reached the age of twenty-five (if female) or twenty-eight (if male). In 1817, a new law mandated that everyone born into slavery would be freed on July 4, 1827. After 1827, then, New York State became a destination for people leaving slavery.

In 1833, Thornton and Lucie Blackburn tested the 1793 Canadian statute. They escaped from slavery in Kentucky through Detroit to Toronto, and Canadian courts ruled that they could not be returned to the U.S. Since slavery did not exist in Upper Canada, escaping from slavery could not be considered a crime. That same year, however, Upper Canada passed the Fugitive Offenders Act, providing that criminals who came to Canada from foreign countries could be extradited.

On August 1, 1834, Great Britain freed all enslaved people throughout the British Empire. The legal status of people of color as free people was now ensured in Canada and the West Indies, and abolitionists in the U.S. celebrated August 1 as Emancipation Day for years to come.

Slaveowners, however, did not give up. When three enslaved people—Solomon Moseby, Jesse Happy, and George Cabell—escaped from David Castleman’s family in Kentucky in 1837, Castleman decided to use the 1833 Fugitive Offenders Act to retrieve them. He brought warrants for their arrest, not as people who had escaped from slavery but as horse thieves, hoping to extradite them from Canada as criminals rather than as fugitives from slavery. 45

To carry out his scheme, David Castleman received help from his brother-in-law, Peter B. Porter, major investor in both Buffalo and Niagara Falls. In spite of Porter’s assistance, the plan was

44 These figures vary from those given by Lee Ann Wurst, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* (2011) 15:256-59, presumably because Wurst’s data included European Americans as well as African Americans and came from the printed aggregate census rather than from a compilation of names from the manuscript census. Figures for 1870 vary most dramatically. Wurst reported seventy live in hotel workers in 1870 (both white and black), compared to only twenty-six African Americans in total whose names appeared in the manuscript census.

only partially successful. Jesse Happy was captured and returned to slavery. George Cabell seems to have disappeared. Solomon Moseby was captured but escaped in what became known as Canada’s first race riot. African Canadians, led by Herbert Holmes, a local minister in Niagara-on-the-Lake, came immediately to Moseby’s defense. They raised money to hire a lawyer, and seventeen African Canadians sent a petition to support Moseby. Horse theft was a “fraudulent claim,” they argued. They had offered Castleman $1000 toward the expenses and the cost of the horse, and Castleman had refused. 46

On September 6, 1837, Canada ordered Moseby sent back to the U.S. Local sheriffs captured Moseby and held him in the courthouse jail. Immediately, African Canadians organized a vigil in front of the jail, sending people, including children, out to surrounding districts to bring people in. Local whites supported them with food and lodging. Determined to “live with him or die with him,” between three and four hundred African Canadians besieged the jail. African Canadian women were especially active. Sally Carter, who had escaped from slavery in Virginia, spoke daily to the crowd. Women sang hymns. On September 12, the sheriff notified Castleman to wait at the Lewiston dock to retrieve Moseby. Local African Canadians were determined to rescue him, however. Led by women, people formed a solid phalanx before the jail, with Sally Carter standing on a wagon, inspiring them with her impassioned speeches. The event turned deadly when deputy sheriff Alexander McLeod (the same person involved in the Caroline affair in the Patriot’s War later that year) responded with gunfire, killing two people, including Jacob Green and Pastor Herbert Holmes. Women used stones wrapped in socks as weapons, and one woman seized deputy sheriff McLeod around the waist and prevented him from getting away. In the excitement, Moseby escaped.

In the trials that followed, all-white juries acquitted all the whites and all but one of the blacks. Sheriff Hamilton explained that hatred of slavery “pervaded not only the Blacks but the greatest proportion of whites in the vicinity.” Both black and white Canadians, wrote historian David Murray, were “united in their sense that a violation of a principle of British justice had taken place.” Moseby went to London. He returned as a free man and settled in the Niagara District.

The Moseby case did not deter slaveholders, however. One other freedom seeker was returned to slavery in Arkansas in 1841. In 1853, Georgia slaveholder David Dillon tried to use the same ruse in the U.S., falsely accusing Patrick Sneed, a waiter at the Cataract Hotel in Niagara Falls, New York, of murder in order to return him to slavery. Sneed was freed and moved to the Canadian side of the river.

In 1841, New York State passed a law that offered a major benefit to people escaping from slavery. Previously, slaveholders could bring enslaved people into New York State for nine months, keeping them legally still be enslaved. After 1841, enslaved people who entered New York State would immediately be legally free. This law may have influenced Parkhurst Whitney’s decision to hire an almost exclusively African American staff as dining room waiters. Many of these waiters had been born in southern states and almost certainly had escaped from slavery.

Abolitionists across the state used this 1841 law to develop a consistent campaign to inform enslaved people of their new legal status. In Buffalo, William Wells Brown kept on the lookout for enslaved people travelling with their masters and went out of his way to inform them of their status under New York law as freed people. In Oswego, Edwin W. Clarke confronted a young enslaved woman on a canal boat with the same message. In Niagara Falls in 1847, black waiters attempted unsuccessfully to inform a young woman enslaved by a Mr. Stephenson from Alabama of her free

status. The resulting confrontation led to attacks on black homes by a gang of ruffians and shaped the resolve of black (and probably white) abolitionists to help others escape. 47

The worst was yet to come. On September 18, 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, signed by President Millard Fillmore, one of Buffalo's own. This law mandated that 1) slave catchers could call on federal marshals (often deputized local sheriffs) to help retrieve people who had escaped from slavery; 2) anyone who harbored an accused fugitive was subject to $1000 fine (for each person) and six months in jail, and 3) no accused person could testify on his or her own behalf. Judges who ruled on behalf of slave-catchers received $10.00 for their work. If they ruled in favor of accused fugitives, they were paid only $5.00. Abolitionists called this a bribe, and it was.

Abolitionism in Niagara County

Beginning in the 1830s, Niagara County, like much of the northeast, experienced the onslaught of abolitionist organizing from the American Anti-Slavery Society (organized in Philadelphia in 1833) and the New York State Anti-Slavery Society (organized at Utica in 1835). Regular visits from anti-slavery lecturers resulted in the formation of local and countywide abolitionist societies (beginning in 1835), the signing of hundreds of names on antislavery petitions to Congress (beginning in 1837), subscriptions to antislavery newspapers, and debates about political abolitionism vs. nonviolent but radical actions (such as free produce stores and disunion). 48

The presence of Friends (Quakers) in Lockport and elsewhere contributed to the strong and early abolitionist commitment of Niagara County. In 1823, in one of the earliest documented Underground Railroad incidents on the Niagara Frontier, Quaker and Erie Canal supervisor Darius Comstock, along with Irish canal workers, helped rescue Joseph Pickard, barber who had escaped from Kentucky to settle in Lockport. 49

On October 3, 1835, fourteen men from Lockport signed a call to the Utica organizing convention for the New York State Anti-Slavery Society. Their names were Daniel Price, A.H. Spalding, Dr. J.B. Barns, C. Parsons, Jr., Oliver Parsons, L.A. Spalding, Milton Tyler, S.R. Hathaway, Elder W.E. Waterbury, Dr. J. Southworth, J.P. Haines, Theodore Stone, Dr. Royal Sharp, William Bosworth. On October 17, 1835, Spalding wrote in his diary, “Left for Utica, Anti-Slavery State Convention.” His co-delegates rewarded him by electing him one of several vice-presidents. 50

Immediately, the New York State Anti-Slavery sent agents throughout the state to organize local antislavery societies. On March 8, 1836, Lockport citizens organized the Lockport Anti-Slavery Society, the first in Niagara County. On March 11, fifty people joined the society at Friends Meetinghouse. “Hunt Field and Reynolds [?] Jackson. Douglass and Regan [?] tried to excite a mob,” noted Lyman Spalding.

The following month, Theodore Weld, called the “most mobbed man in America,” came to


48 This is only a brief overview of abolitionism in Niagara County.

49 Staats’ Lockport City Directory for 1868-69 (Lockport: M.C. Richardson, 1868), 42. Found by Christopher Densmore.

Lockport, where local ruffians made sure that Weld earned his nickname. Weld lectured in the Presbyterian Meetinghouse “to a large audience on the subject of Slavery.” Presbyterian Trustees granted permission to use the Meetinghouse but not without protest. The *Niagara Democrat* published a handbill: “Notice, all the citizens of Lockport, who are opposed to the doctrines and measures of the Abolitionists are requested to meet at the Presbyterian Church in this village at 1 o’clock precisely, tomorrow afternoon to give an expression of public opinion on this subject. Lockport, April 22, 1836.” In spite of a mob that threatened to take over the meeting, the Niagara County Anti-Slavery Society organized on April 23, 1836, “after a great tumult & the most high handed encroachments upon private rights,” noted Spalding. They held their first annual meeting in the Lockport Friends’ Meetinghouse on July 4, 1836, and 101 people joined.  

Quaker Lyman Spalding remained of particular importance to abolitionism in Lockport. Born in Scipio, a Quaker center in Cayuga County, in 1800, he married Quaker Amy Pound in Lockport in 1824. Spalding came to Lockport in 1822, when it was still mostly woods. He became a major mill owner, land investor, agriculturalist, and reformer in Lockport before his death in 1885. He was also an early supporter of the Underground Railroad. On October 14, 1832, he had written his diary, “Negro here from Georgia,” most likely a reference to someone escaping from slavery. He supported fugitive Austin Steward and his Wilberforce Colony in Upper Canada, hosted Frederick Douglass’s visit to Lockport in 1851, and supported regular antislavery meetings, including an antislavery fair in Ringueburg Hall in 1852, with proceeds given to help people escaping from slavery.  

Abolitionism agents continued to crisscross Niagara County. In the spring of 1837, William T. Allen went from Lockport to Cambria, Gasport, Newfane, Hartland, Somerset, Wilson, and  

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53 “Abstract of Title and Mortgage,” January 4, 1950, Niagara County Clerk’s Office. Thanks to Kevin Cottrell for supplying this.
Porter, holding several meetings in each place. Mobs fueled by alcohol tried to break up the meeting everywhere except Porter and Somerset. Allen signaled Somerset out for special praise, where more than one hundred people joined the new town antislavery society. “The opposition in Niagara Co. is of the mob order, but so weak that it was as ridiculous as it was mean. The cause has triumphed in that county.” “The moral strength of this county,” he concluded, “is without doubt gathered into the antislavery ranks.” By 1838, Niagara County had organized at least twelve town antislavery societies (in Cambria, Hartland, Lockport—which included a female antislavery society and a Wesleyan antislavery society—Newfane, Niagara, Porter, Royalton, Somerset, and Wheatland, and Wilson), plus the countywide society. Lyman Spaulding served secretary-treasurer of the county society, and Josiah Tryon of Lewiston was on of the Board of Managers. 54

Between 1836 and 1850, Niagara County’s abolitionism resulted in a huge outpouring of petitions against slavery and the slave trade in the District Columbia and the territories. This petition campaign, organized by the American Anti-Slavery Society, had three important results. First, it kept local people involved in this national movement. Second, it was inexpensive, since signing a petition and mailing it to Congress cost very little money. And third, it revealed the determination of southern Congressmen to stall any action, even a discussion, on slavery. Through what abolitionists called a “gag rule,” Congress agreed immediately to table any petition dealing with slavery, effectively challenging the rights of free white citizens to petition their government.

Many petitions from Niagara County contained fewer than one hundred names, but some included hundreds of signatures. In 1836, for example, 450 people—both men and women—signed a petition from Lockport to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. In all, Niagara County citizens signed 1156 separate signatures to these petitions. Many families signed together. Almost fifty individuals (all male) signed more than one petition over time. 55

In 1840, abolitionists in western New York, including Royal Sharp from Niagara County, met in the Quaker meetinghouse in Farmington, New York, to form a new Western New York Anti-Slavery Society. They immediately scheduled a series of meetings, including one in Lockport and one in Hartland, inviting abolitionists everywhere to join them. “Friends of the slave, will you not rally? Let the old and the young, the grave and the gay—men, women and children—all who claim to be human, come up to the rescue of humanity!” One of those who answered the call to lecture in Niagara County was Samuel R. Ward, “an accomplished colored gentleman.” Ward had escaped with his parents from slavery in Maryland. He would become a major antislavery lecturer, editor, agent, returning to Niagara County in the early 1850s from his post in Toronto and recording much of his experience in his 1855 *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*. Niagara County abolitionists continued to attend meetings of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society. In 1852, William H. Childs of Niagara Falls chaired the opening meeting and was elected a vice-president. 56

By 1840, Niagara County abolitionists also organized to assist Hiram Wilson with his mission in St. Catherine’s, Canada, to aid people escaping from slavery. Both Lyman Spaulding from

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55 Petitions from National Archives and Records Administration. Excel database containing 1156 signatures compiled by Tanya Lee Warren for this project, 2011.

Lockport and Mr._____[probably Josiah] Tryon from Lewiston were members of the Executive Board, whose names read like a who’s who of organized abolitionism across New York State. After 1838, religious denominations such as Presbyterians, Methodists, and even (in 1848) Quakers divided over the issue of abolitionism. Antislavery Methodists formed new Wesleyan Methodist churches in 1843. Many of these were formed in Niagara County, in places such as Olcott. Some abolitionists formed Congregational churches, breaking off from Presbyterians, such as the one in Niagara City (Suspension Bridge) in 1854. The only known black churches in Niagara County were the African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches in Lockport. Other churches, however, had biracial congregations, including St. Peter’s Church in Niagara Falls.

The 1840s also witnessed the development of a strong antislavery political movement, first in the Liberty Party and then, in 1848, in the Free Soil Party. When the Republican Party organized in 1856, antislavery advocates in Niagara County turned out by the hundreds at political rallies at places such as Warren’s Corners and Ransomville.

These local abolitionists—both black and white—were linked to statewide, national, and international networks of supporters that reached to Maryland, southeastern Pennsylvania, New York City and villages throughout central and western New York. Supplementing personal connections were abolitionist newspapers, including the National Anti-Slavery Standard, North Star, Provincial Freeman, and Anglo-American. In 1846, several black waiters in Niagara Falls appeared on a list of donors to the National Anti-Slavery Standard, edited by Lydia Maria Child in New York City. In 1848, Frederick Douglass talked in Niagara Falls, presumably gathering subscribers to the new North Star, published in Rochester. In 1852, Luvisa Patterson, African American hairdresser and wife of hotel owner James Patterson, was the Niagara Falls agent for the Provincial Freeman, published in Toronto, and her name also appeared on a list of donors to the North Star in 1852.

Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls and Niagara County

We have no real way to estimate the total number of people who crossed from slavery into freedom at Niagara Falls, but it certainly numbered in the thousands. One way to get a sense of the numbers is to estimate the total number of African Americans who settled in Canada.

By the 1830s, there were most likely ten to twelve thousand people who had escaped from slavery living in Canada. By the 1850s, abolitionists estimated the number of fugitives in Canada to be from thirty to thirty-five thousand. In 1852, when Hiram Wilson traveled to the U.S. to raise money, he estimated that the number of African Canadians had increased from ten thousand people in 1836, when he began his St. Catharine’s mission, to thirty thousand in 1852. Others gave similar estimates. In 1853 and 1854, Samuel R. Ward traveled through the U.S. and Canada to raise money for fugitives. He estimated that there were thirty to thirty-five thousand African Americans in Canada, almost all of whom were fugitives. In 1853, he suggested that about three thousand of these crossed annually (or an average of ten per day). In 1854, he increased that figure to four to five thousand who had crossed every year since 1850, when the U.S. Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act. Similarly, Rev. H.H. Hawkins, who had escaped from slavery in Kentucky to live in Canada,


58 Artemus Comstock, Diary transcript, August 23, August 27, 1856, Niagara County Historian’s Office.

59 Provincial Freeman, May 27, 1854, noted that “Your readers . . . may not know that the Provincial Freeman will have more readers there in future, than all of "our" papers together. Mrs. Patterson, our agent there, (who will pardon this use of her name,) did her best to introduce the new journal, and with gratifying success.” Thanks to Don Papson for finding this reference. “Receipts,” North Star, April 22, 1852.
estimated that four hundred people from Kentucky lived in Canada West, with a total of thirty-five thousand fugitive slaves from all parts of the south.  

By the 1860s, as many as 75,000 freedom seekers may have lived in Canada, with a total of a hundred thousand escaping between the Revolution and the Civil War. As Marie Tyler-McGraw and Kira R. Badamo have suggested, “Many scholars and researchers have estimated that about 100,000 persons successfully escaped slavery between 1790 and 1860 . . . . While census estimates indicate an average of 1,000 successful runaways a year, it is reasonable, given the secretive nature of the enterprise, to increase that number by half to 1500.”

If only a portion of this 100,000—even ten percent—came through Niagara Falls, they would have numbered in the thousands. Most likely, a far larger percentage came through Niagara Falls, especially after the completion of the Suspension Bridge for rail traffic in 1855.

A second way to estimate traffic through Niagara Falls is to assume that almost all those African Americans who settled just over the border in Drummondville, Lundy’s Lane, Clifton, St. Catherine’s (the “northern Canaan,” just twelve miles from the Suspension Bridge), and Niagara-on-the-Lake had traveled through the Falls or points close to it on the Niagara Frontier. Many of those who went to Hamilton and Toronto would also have crossed either at the ferry at the Falls, the Suspension Bridge at Niagara City, the steamboat at Lewiston, or the ferry at Youngstown. Most likely the 198 African Americans who lived at Niagara-on-the-Lake in 1842 (and the 166 listed there in 1851 and the 167 in 1861) had crossed at one of these points, along with the 472 African Americans who lived in St. Catherine’s in 1861.  

A third clue comes from agents who recorded numbers of people they forwarded to Niagara Falls. These accounts are sporadic, but they give an idea of how the system operated. In 1857, for example, William Watkins reported to the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society that “from Dec. 15th to Aug. 9th, ’57, I passed 59 fugitives to Canada, as follows: 6 to Toronto, and 53 to Suspension Bridge, St. Catharines, Hamilton, etc.” In a postscript he added “Expended on behalf of the Society, $90.00.” In 1859, the Troy Arena noted that “Some days the ‘train’ takes a dozen at a time, and the aggregate business of the year is counted by hundreds.”

Even though only a small proportion of these thousands left specific written traces of their journey, Niagara Falls has some of the richest Underground Railroad documentation of any community in the United States. For this project, we found many memoirs, newspaper articles, and manuscripts that gave primary source evidence of Underground Railroad activity. Some of these related only general recollections, but we also found forty-five references to specific Underground Railroad events (thirty-four of them in Niagara Falls and eleven in Niagara County). These stories

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63 William J. Watkins to Mrs. Robinson, August 1857, in Records of Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, Clements Library, University of Michigan. Thanks to Kate Clifford Larson for finding this citation. Reprinted in the Niagara Falls Gazette, November 9, 1859. Found by Christopher Densmore.
range in time from 1821 (with the escape of Thomas James from Canajoharie, following the survey stakes for the new canal to Lockport and crossing the Niagara River at Youngstown) to the beginning of the Civil War. Many of these involved more than one person, anywhere from two to sixteen people at a time. These include stories of relatively unknown freedom seekers such as Thomas James, Isaac Williamson, and Charlotte Eglin, as well as details about nationally known African Americans, including Harriet Tubman, Samuel R. Ward, and Ann Maria Weems.


After passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, Underground Railroad activities increased dramatically in Niagara County. Of the forty-five specific stories we found, only three cases date to the 1820s, one to the 1830s, and five to the 1840s. Between 1850 and 1861, however, we found thirty-six documented cases.

When fugitives reached the Canadian shore, they were often welcomed by friends or family who had gone before. Beginning in the 1830s, U.S. abolitionists also sponsored agencies to offer assistance. From 1836 to the Civil War, for example, Rev. Hiram Wilson operated an agency in St. Catherine’s, Ontario, to help fugitives make the transition to homes, families, and work as free people. Much of Wilson’s support came from abolitionists in New York State. In 1841, for example, the Board of Directors of this mission consisted of George A. Avery, Lindley Murray Moore, and O.N. Bush (the Executive Committee, all from Rochester), along with Lyman Spaulding (Lockport), Mr. Tryon (Lewiston), D.W. Williams (Buffalo), Joseph C. Hathaway (Farmington), William R. Smith (Macedon), and others, a total of twenty-four people (nine of whom were Quakers). Harriet Tubman created a refugee aid society in St. Catherine’s. The Anti-Slavery Society of Canada and the Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society in Toronto also provided “food, clothing, tools, or whatever they required,” usually for a period of six days or less. By 1856, Rev. Jermain Loguen, main Underground Railroad agent in Syracuse, had set up a rest house just across the Suspension Bridge in Niagara Falls. 64

Just as escapes escalated, so did efforts by slaveholders to recapture people. In June 1854, for example, Charles Brown, who had lived between Warren’s Corners and Lockport for nearly two years (“and who has won the respect of all,” reported the *Lockport Journal*) was surprised to see his owner’s nephew appear in front of his house. Fleeing to the woods, he headed for the Niagara River.

Although supporters feared for his safety, he successfully escaped, only to return to his home, his wife Martha, his job as a cabinet maker, and his property. 65

In spite of the fact that slavecatchers kept a watch on crossing points at Youngstown, Lewiston, the ferry at the Falls, and elsewhere, people continued to use them. The most common route to Canada, however, became the railroad across the Suspension bridge at Niagara Falls.

The railroad integrated Niagara Falls into the whole northeast rail system. It also brought parts of Niagara County closer together. In 1856, one incident demonstrated the countywide coordination of abolitionists. George Goines, son of Governor John Willis Ellis by an enslaved woman, had escaped from slavery in North Carolina and purchased his freedom with the help of a man in Wisconsin. By the mid-1850s, he lived and worked in Lockport, operating an omnibus service with black abolitionist William Bromley. His genial manner earned him the nickname of “Gentleman George.” Saving money to buy his brother and mother out of slavery, he was desolated when a fire in the Tremont House, where he lived, took all his savings. Led by Judge Jonathan Wood, Lockport abolitionists organized a benefit concert on July 24, 1856, at Arcade Hall. People came from all over Niagara County, including Leander Colt from Niagara Falls. Tickets were $1.00 each, and the concert raised $1070, more than enough to purchase the Goines family. 66

Afterward

Underground Railroad activities in Niagara Falls most likely trickled off by the early 1860s. The last documented Underground Railroad case that we found for Niagara Falls was that of Cassey, who sought help from the Peter A. Porter and Elizabeth Porter family in April 1861. The focus of national attention shifted to the Civil War, which lasted from April 1861 to April 1865.

Locally, men of Niagara Falls both European American and African American volunteered in large numbers to fight in the Civil War. Peter A. Porter raised the Eighth New York Heavy Artillery. Accompanied by his sister Elizabeth Porter as nurse (who collected bandages and food from the women of Niagara Falls), they traveled to Baltimore and then to Cold Harbor Virginia, where hundreds of them died, including Peter A. Porter. Edward Sarsnett, African American, served in the 11th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery. After the war, he moved to Niagara Falls, where he died in 1884.

Edward Sarsnett, his wife Mary, all of the Porter family, and many of the other protagonists of the Underground Railroad, abolitionism, and African American life in Niagara Falls are buried in Oakwood Cemetery. In death as in life, they remain part of this remarkable community. This project helps keep their memories alive. Their voices challenge us to think about the meaning of equality, justice, and respect for all people in our own world.

65 Lockport Journal, June 20, 1854, reprinted New York Tribune, June 27, 1854; Anti-Slavery Bugle, August 12, 1854 (found by Christopher Densmore); census records, 1850-1860.

PART II: UNDERGROUND RAILROAD SITES

Underground Railroad Sites within the Heritage Area

Site of the Augustus and Letitia Porter Home
Buffalo Avenue, just east of First Street, on bank of the Niagara River
Niagara Falls, New York

Significance: Augustus S. Porter and his brother Peter B. Porter were the first private European American owners of land in Niagara Falls. As part of Porter, Barton, and Company, they established ports in Niagara Falls, Lewiston, and Black Rock (now part of Buffalo). Augustus Porter built a house in Niagara Falls in 1808. After the British burned it in 1813, he rebuilt it on the same site in 1818. Before he moved to Niagara Falls, Augustus Porter owned at least one person in slavery in Canandaigua, New York. He reputedly brought the first African American family to Niagara Falls, Harry and Kate Wood. In the 1820 census, the Wood family and the Abraham Thompson family, all free people of color, lived near the Porter family. The Porter family home was demolished in the 1920s.


Sign at site of Augustus S. Porter Home
Looking northwest toward Dexter Jerauld House, August 2011
Description: Augustus Porter built this elegant stone house in 1818 to replace the original 1808 house burned by the British in 1813. He constructed it in a typical five-bay central hallway Federal style, with the broad side facing the street, stepped gables, and oval windows in each gable end. Successive generations of family members lived here until the house was demolished after 1920.

Discussion: Augustus Porter was born in Connecticut in 1769 and then moved to Canandaigua, New York. He first visited Niagara County in 1795, surveying land throughout western New York and Ohio for Phelps and Gorham, Robert Morris, the Holland Land Company, and others. In 1797, he and his younger brother Peter B. Porter (born 1773) owned the first vessel built on Lake Ontario, the beginnings of their investments in lake transportation.

In 1805, the Porters bought much of the mile strip of land along the U.S. bank of the Niagara River, ceded by the Seneca to the State of New York in 1802. They also leased the Portage Road from the State of New York. In 1807, the Porters formed Porter, Barton, and Company to conduct a forwarding business from Oswego to the upper Great Lakes via the Portage Road around the Falls. When Augustus Porter moved to Niagara Falls, Peter B. Porter moved to Black Rock (now part of Buffalo), while Benjamin Barton moved to Lewiston. Only a few buildings stood anywhere in the vicinity, huddled around the old British Fort Schlosser, east of the rapids.

The Porter brothers had a vision of using the immense waterpower from the Falls to create an industrial giant in North America, so Augustus Porter named his new settlement Manchester, after the great English mill village. He built the first sawmill in 1803 and a productive paper mill on Bath Island in 1826. In 1825, Augustus and Peter B. Porter presented a prospectus, touting the economic advantages of developing Goat Island as an industrial site. It was a “situation . . . not surpassed, and probably not equaled, in the United
States, as a site for the establishment of manufactures." “A thousand mills might be erected with the same ease, and equally accessible, as if on a plain; and each supplied with a never failing water-power.”

During Judge Porter’s lifetime, however, the village’s industrial potential was dwarfed by its development as a tourist resort. Augustus and Peter B. Porter exploited this opportunity, also. In 1816, they purchased Goat Island from New York State. Working with engineer and hotel operator Parkhurst Whitney, they developed the first bridge from the mainland to Goat Island in 1818, the first staircase from Prospect Point to the base of the Falls in that same year, a ferry service across the river in 1820, and a whole series of gardens, walks, bridges, staircases, and other attractions, creating a picturesque and romanticized human garden, all mapped out, from which tourists could explore the spectacular natural beauty of the Falls in a semi-controlled environment.

Like many wealthy European American families in New York State, Augustus Porter and his family owned people in slavery. The 1800 census noted that one enslaved person lived in the household of Augustus Porter in Canandaigua, New York. No census listing for Augustus Porter was found for 1810, but in 1820, there were eight people, all European Americans, living in the Porter household. Two African American families lived nearby. Both Abraham Thompson and Harry Wood had seven free people of color living in their households. An article in *Publications of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society* noted that the Augustus Porter family hired “a negro and his family,” brought from Canandaigua. Harry Wood was “the first negro in Niagara Falls,” and his wife Katie was the cook.

Augustus Porter married Lavinia Steele, who died young, and then married Jane Howell, with whom he had three sons (Albert H., Peter B., Jr., Augustus S.) and two daughters (Lavinia, and Jane S.) He died on June 10, 1849, age eighty, and now lies buried in Oakwood Cemetery.

**Site of the Peter Buell Porter House**
Falls Street, south side, just east of Main Street
Niagara Falls, New York

**Significance:** The Peter B. Porter family represents the tension between slavery and freedom embodied in personal family relationships. Both Peter B. Porter and his son Peter A. Porter married women from slaveholding families. In 1821, Peter B. Porter tried to recapture a woman who had escaped from his household at Black Rock, and in 1837, he assisted his brother-in-law, David Castleman, in Castleman’s attempt to recapture Solomon Moseby. The Porter children (Elizabeth and Peter A. Porter), however, had antislavery sympathies and most likely helped on the Underground Railroad.

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69 *Publications of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society*, No. 7, (1879), 265.
Description: Peter B. Porter and Letitia Porter first built a house at Black Rock, now part of Buffalo. When the railroad from Buffalo to Niagara Falls was built in 1836, it cut through part of the Porter grounds. Before 1840, Peter B. Porter sold his house to Lewis Allen and moved to Niagara Falls, where he built a new house on Falls Street. His house in Niagara Falls later became a hotel called the Prospect Park House. 70

70 Souvenir History of Niagara County, New York (The Pioneer Association of Niagara County, 1902), 191; History of Niagara Falls with Illustrations, 305.
Discussion: Peter Buell Porter (August 14, 1773 – March 20, 1844) was born in Connecticut, graduated from Yale in 1791, began work as a lawyer in Canandaigua, New York, and moved to Black Rock in 1809, where he and his older brother Augustus supervised the portage around the falls, as part of the firm of Porter and Barton. He served two terms in Congress from 1809-13, where he became, with Henry Clay from Kentucky, a leader of the War Hawks. He resigned to become a General in the U.S. Army, leading troops in battle at Chippewa, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Lundy's Lane, and Fort Erie, across the Niagara River from his home. After the war, he helped survey the boundary between the U.S. and Canada. He served one more term in Congress (1815-16) and also served on the committee to pick the route for the Erie Canal. He became Secretary of War under John Quincy Adams (1828-29).

On October 16, 1818, Peter B. Porter, age forty-five, married Kentucky-born Letitia Breckenridge Grayson, a thirty-two-year-old widow (January 22, 1786 - July 17, 1831). The Porters had two children, Elizabeth Lewis Porter (April 19, 1823 - January 28, 1876) and Peter Augustus Porter (June 14, 1827 - June 3, 1864). Letitia Porter died at Black Rock in 1831. Peter B. Porter moved to Niagara Falls before 1840 as a widower with two children. He built a new house on Falls Street, just south of Main Street. After his death in 1844, his children Elizabeth and Peter A. Porter continued to live in this house until the late 1850s. Peter B. Porter is buried in Lot 191 of Oakwood Cemetery.

Letitia Breckenridge Porter brought people in slavery with her to Black Rock when she married, but according to a later account, “she did not keep them long. They imbibed notions of freedom which they would not have dared picture to themselves in Kentucky, and one by one they slipped across the river into Canada.”

One of those enslaved by Letitia’s family was Solomon Moseby, owned by Letitia Breckenridge’s brother-in-law David Castleman. In 1837, the Moseby case created Canada’s first race riot, and Peter B. Porter was intimately involved. In May 1837, Solomon Moseby left the plantation of David Castleman in Fayette County, Kentucky, riding Castleman’s horse. Castleman described Moseby as “a dark mulatto about five feet 10 inches high, straight and finely formed quick brisk motion and walk, pleasant & cheerfull countenance—a fine manager of horses and fine driver.” Moseby crossed the Niagara River and came to what is now Niagara-on-the-Lake. In 1837, this was a town of about 4000 people, including about four hundred African Americans, most of whom had escaped from slavery in the U.S.

71 Tanya Warren, Porter Family Genealogy; Peter A. Porter (grandson of Peter B. Porter), sketch of Peter B. Porter’s life, c. 1925, myoakwoodcemetery.com/major-general-peter-b-porter/. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for this research.

72 Peter A. Porter (grandson of Peter B. Porter), sketch of Peter B. Porter’s life, c. 1925, myoakwoodcemetery.com/major-general-peter-b-porter/.

73 Buffalo Courier, August 14, 1867 [?].

74 David Castleman to Peter B. Porter, July 11, 1837, Peter B. Porter Papers, I-3, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.
In July, Castleman notified his brother-in-law, Peter B. Porter, still living in Black Rock, asking him “to employ some man in whom you have confidence, to decoy him [Moseby] over the line, have him apprehended and confined in jail as a felon [sic] or a fugitive [sic] from justice.” George Cabell, owned by Mrs. Breckinridge, had also recently escaped. Both, asserted Castleman, had been helped by “old George, who drove Mrs. Breckinridge to Black Rock.” Castleman also hoped to retrieve Jesse Happy, who had escaped from Judge Thomas M. Hickey in Lexington in 1833 and was last seen living in Hamilton, Ontario. “It is important that energetic measures should be used to put a stop to those escaping,” Castleman emphasized to Porter, “for they are becoming very common.”

Porter offered his home as a base from which to recapture Moseby, and in late August, Castleman arrived with arrest warrants for all three men, not because they had escaped from slavery but because they had stolen horses. Canada did not extradite people accused of escaping from slavery, so Castleman hoped to use the Fugitive Offender Law, which allowed extradition for people accused of criminal offenses. Porter emphasized the importance of secrecy in this mission, and Castleman agreed. He asked Porter to alert his children (Elizabeth, age thirteen, and Peter, age ten) not to mention Castleman’s name. One can only imagine the position in which these children, both of whom knew Solomon Moseby personally, found themselves in terms of divided loyalties.

The Canadian government supported Castleman’s claim, but Moseby escaped with the help of three to four hundred African Canadians, who rescued him. In the process, two people were killed, including Pastor Herbert Holmes. Later historians called this Canada’s first race riot. (For more details, see historic context statement.)

The Moseby case elicited a lengthy philosophical statement from Peter B. Porter about his own views. “I am as much opposed to slavery in the abstract, as they [the Council of Upper Canada]. But this is a subject which cannot be safely disposed of, by the summary application of general principles.” He himself had once owned twenty to twenty-five slaves, he noted, part of his wife’s inheritance. He offered to give them their freedom if they would emigrate to Liberia. “We deemed it unkind to turn them loose among their kindred and connexion in Kentucky while in slavery,” he noted. In effect, Porter espoused the views of the American Colonization Society, which set up the colony of Liberia in West Africa and settled the area with free people of color from the U.S.

The Porters did bring five or six people in slavery to Black Rock, “where they proved to be excellent servants until they were fastened upon by the emancipators and free blacks of Buffalo who persuaded them (with the exception of two only who served their time) to flee across the river.”

Porter asserted in 1837, “I have never made any efforts to recover them.” That was not quite true. In 1821, Porter attempted to retrieve a young woman who had escaped to Canada. Two Canadian officials, Thomas Dickson and Jonathan B. Robinson, both assured Porter that “slavery is no crime for which she can be apprehended in this Province, where she is free and entitled to the protection of the laws the minute she arrives in it.” Robinson did, however, suggest a loophole. A law in 1797, he noted, provided for extradition for anyone charged with “crimes of high return.” This loophole was reinforced by the Fugitive Offenders Act of

75 David Castleman to Peter B. Porter, July 11, 1837, I-3, Peter B. Porter Papers, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

76 David Castleman to Peter B. Porter, August 15, 1837, I-10, Peter B. Porter Papers, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.


78 Peter B. Porter to James Boulton, September 30, 1837, I-13, Peter B. Porter Papers, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

79 Peter B. Porter to James Boulton, September 30, 1837, I-13, Peter B. Porter Papers, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.
1833, and it was this provision that Porter and Castleman tried to use to retrieve Moseby, Cabell, and Happy in 1837. 

Porter feared in 1837 that, if Canada continued to harbor fugitives from slavery, “the borders of our beautiful river will soon become the haunts of a banditti of negroes capable of giving us great & continued annoyance.”

Daughter Elizabeth Porter was fourteen years old at the time of the Moseby affair, and her brother Peter A. Porter was ten. Although their father helped to capture Moseby, both children grew up to support the Underground Railroad.

Site of the Cataract House
Main Street on the banks of the Niagara River
Niagara Falls

Significance: Operated by Parkhurst Whitney from 1825-45 and by his son Solon Whitney and sons-in-law James Trott and Dexter Jerauld from 1845 until the late 19th century, the Cataract House was one of the two largest hotels in Niagara Falls, a magnet both for southern slave-holding families and for African American waiters, many of them southern-born. As a nexus of slavery and freedom, the Cataract House became the focus of many escapes from slavery, as African American waiters (under head waiter John Morrison and others) helped enslaved people escape to freedom. Famous cases included a failed rescue attempt in 1847 and the successful escapes of Cecilia Jane Reynolds (1847), a woman named Martha (1853), and waiter Patrick Snead (1853). In 1850, more than eighty percent of African Americans working at the Cataract listed their birthplaces as a southern state or unknown/unlisted.

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80 Jonathan B. Robinson to Peter B. Porter, May 16, 1821, I-15; Thomas Dickson to Peter B. Porter, May 21, 1821, I-14, Peter B. Porter Papers, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.
Cataract Hotel, 1842

Cataract House from Goat Island, c. 1860s
Stereopticon View, Courtesy Christopher Densmore
Description: The Cataract House stood on a site that is now partly the small Heritage Park, across from the Red Coach Inn and the Turtle museum. It extended across the road to the banks of the Niagara River, overlooking the rapids.
This hotel was built in 1825 as a three-story stone building. Parkhurst Whitney purchased it in 1831 to use for overflow guests from his Eagle Hotel, located just north of the Cataract on Falls Street. In 1835, Whitney sold the Eagle to Benjamin Rathbun and built a stone four-story addition, 40 x 56 feet, to the Cataract. He added another stone addition, 40 x 54 feet, in 1842-43. At the same time, he purchased lots on the river, connecting buildings at the river's edge with the hotel (perhaps those seen to the right of the main hotel and the original three-story building with balconies in the stereopticon view from Goat Island, above.) The Lewiston and Lockport railroad dropped passengers off directly in front of the hotel. This is the building, with the two stone additions to the 1825 structure that J.H. Orr pictured in his *Pictorial Guide to the Falls of Niagara* in 1842.  

![chart]

J.H. Orr, “Chart of Niagara Falls, the Shore & Islands,” 1842.

The Cataract House is listed as No. 7 and the Depot for the Lockport R.R. as No. 8, just across from the canal that paralleled the rapids.

The frame building to the right of the 1842 image was the office and residence of S. Hooker. He had lived in Niagara Falls since 1816, and he and his two sons operated the only regular guide service in the village.

The Cataract Hotel itself was 150 feet wide and ninety feet deep, with colonnades and piazzas on the front and rear of the original section at the south end of complex. (Judging from the later stereopticon views, the 1842 drawing is somewhat distorted, since the stone additions seem actually to have been built at an angle to the original hotel.) “The internal arrangements of this hotel,” noted Orr, “combine every advantage of quiet, comfort, and convenience; and the rooms, among which are two extensive dining halls, are tastefully and even richly furnished.” Standing directly on the banks of the Niagara River, visitors could thrill to the “roll and foam” of the rapids as they stood on the hotel balconies. “Bathing apartments,” “viands that delight both the eye and palate,” and “liquors and wines, pure in quality and mellowed by age” offered the latest in comfort to as many as two hundred visitors at a time (twice the number that the Eagle Hotel next door could accommodate.)

But General Whitney was not yet done. In 1845, he added another stone addition, this one five stories high, 42 x 133 feet, containing a new dining room (perhaps the large wing on the left of the stereopticon view

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of the hotel from the river), along with a new two-story stone kitchen, 25 x 30 (perhaps the two-story building on the river’s bank). At some point, he or his son and sons-in-law also added a cupola as a visual anchor for this sprawling complex. Much of this work was supervised by Walter Williams, master builder. Born about 1824 in England, Williams lived with his English-born wife Susan and their five children in Lockport in 1850. In August 1842, the *Niagara Courier* reported,

> this spacious Hotel has received the last finishing touch and is now complete in all its details, and we refer to it at this time at the request of Whitney & Jerauld, who, in justice to Walter Williams, their Master Builder, desire to signify publicly the high estimation of him as a man and master workman. We have had an opportunity to examine personally the exterior, improving the originals, and details of which have been directed by Mr. Williams to completion, and we consider the compliment to him which Mssrs. Whitney and Jerauld have been promoted to offer, as more than a just tribute to personal merit and professional superiority.  

All these additions kept the feel of the earliest Federal building, with simple exteriors, broad sides to the street, and twelve-over-six (or twelve-over-twelve) window sashes. The style was consistent with that of its owner, who had a reputation as “a staunch republican, and a true patriot; frank, hearty, and familiar in his manners, plain in appearance, and upright in all his transactions.”

In early 1846, Whitney sold the entire Cataract Hotel to his son Solon Whitney and his sons-in-law Dexter R. Jerauld (who married daughter Angeline) and James F. Trott (who married Celinda Eliza at the Cataract House on September 9, 1844). Whitney, Jerauld, and Trott operated the hotel under the name of Whitney, Jerauld, and Company, with their sons eventually working with them. Trott seems to have been in charge of supplying agricultural produce for the dining room, most likely from the farm he and Celinda shared with the Whitneys at the corner of Chilton Avenue and Main Street. (See description.)

By 1848, one local newspaper referred to the Cataract House as “the immense pile of stone and mortar,” which ranked “with the best class of Hotels in the Union.” Whitney, Jerauld, and Company were not yet finished with their expansion, however. In 1853, they added a ballroom. Their new drawing room included a “magnificent piazza,” with “a superb view of the rapids.” In 1868, they added “the massive stone additions” on Main Street, and in 1881, they added electric light to the veranda, giving “a most magnificent view.”

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84 Orr, 57.


86 William Pool, *Landmarks of Niagara County* (Syracuse: D. Mason, 1897), 422; *Niagara Democrat*, June 1, 1848.
When the hotel opened for the season in May 1883, the *Niagara Falls Gazette* noted, “no material change has been made in the building or its appointments during the past winter, none being needed, as they are as nearly perfect as can be.” The traveling public wants “order and cleanliness-- and these two virtues are never found lacking at the Cataract.” The north wing was especially adapted for families, where rooms were “carpeted with velvet, furnished alike and so connected that any two, or the whole number, can be used en suite,” with marble fireplaces to help take the chill off cool evenings. The *Gazette* reserved its highest praise for the parlor, with broad verandas on three sides that gave guests a view of the rapids, falls, and river. The air was “always cool and pure,” no fly had ever been seen in that room. It adjoined the ballroom, where guests enjoyed “promenade concerts.”

One of the Cataract’s attractions, “unsurpassed anywhere in the world,” was, perhaps ironically, its sewage system. All wastes were carried “far out into the river and over the falls.” “A strain of pure water” constantly flowed through baths in both the main hotel and an adjacent bath building.

When the State of New York created the reservation and park in 1885, they bought part of the Cataract property and removed both the ballroom and drawing room.

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87 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, May 23, 1883.

88 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, May 23, 1883.
The Whitney family sold the Cataract to the Peter A. Porter family in the late nineteenth century. John F. McDonald purchased it in 1907. The Union Trust Company later acquired it. In 1945, it was owned by the Eagle Tavern Hotel Corporation. The hotel continued to serve the people of Niagara Falls and the world until it burned to “a water soaked mass of ruins” in October 1945. The fire destroyed the “irreplaceable antiques” which had furnished the building, including “a huge pewter chandelier sent from France by the Marquis de Lafayette” to thank Parkhurst Whitney for his hospitality at the Eagle Hotel.” Plans to rebuild the hotel were never carried out.89

89 “Famed Cataract House Turned Into Mass of Charred Ruins,” and “Historic Hotel to be Rebuilt,” Niagara Falls Gazette, October 1945;
Along with the Porter family, the Whitney family was one of the two most important families in the early development of Niagara Falls. While Augustus Porter and Peter B. Porter invested in land, transportation, and industry, Parkhurst Whitney, Celinda Cowing Whitney, and their son and sons-in-law were practical entrepreneurs, builders, and consummate hosts. They developed the Cataract Hotel as one of the two premier hotels (the other was the International House, built on the site of Whitney’s old Eagle Hotel) in Niagara Falls, a magnet for visitors from around the nation and the world, including wealthy families from the southern U.S. Through its African American waiters, the Cataract House also became a major center of Underground Railroad work in Niagara Falls. Parkhurst Whitney (September 25, 1784-April 26, 1862), Celinda Cowing Whitney (1783-1860), and their five children (Angeline Parkhurst; Asenath Beecher (1809-); Myron Holley, 1810-15; Solon Miron Napoleon (1815-); and Celinda Eliza (1817-1892) all played major roles in the development of Niagara Falls, the growth of the Cataract Hotel, and the hiring of African Americans as hotel waiters and cooks.

Parkhurst Whitney was born on September 25, 1784, in Conway, Massachusetts, of Esther Parkhurst and Jonathan Whitney, who had been a militia captain during the Revolutionary War. In 1789, Jonathan Whitney purchased land in the Phelps and Gorham Purchase in Ontario County, New York. Before his death in 1792, he moved his whole family to this wilderness, including his youngest son Parkhurst, only six years old. On October 10, 1805, Parkhurst Whitney married Celinda Cowing (1783-1860). They lived in Geneva, New York, while Parkhurst worked as a surveyor for the Holland Land Company, and their oldest daughter Asenath was born there in 1809. In 1810, they moved to a farm about four miles up river from what became the village of Niagara Falls. In 1812, just in time for the war, the Whitney family moved to Niagara Falls, where he rented first Peter B. Porter’s sawmill and then, in 1814, the Eagle Hotel, a one-room log structure, twenty-four feet square, located approximately where the Comfort Inn parking lot now stands. (See description for International Hotel.) There the Whitneys had five more children, of whom only four (Asenath, Angelina, Solon, born October 7, 1815, and Celinda Eliza, born July 12, 1817) survived childhood.90

The War of 1812 had a major impact on the Whitney family. The British destroyed the entire village, including the Eagle Hotel. Along with the rest of the residents of Niagara Falls, the Whitneys were forced to flee their homes. As militia captain, Whitney was briefly captured by the British. He later became colonel and, in 1826, major general. After the war, in 1817, Whitney bought the rebuilt Eagle Hotel from Augustus Porter and Peter Barton, built a frame addition to it, and celebrated with a dinner in the new building on July 4, 1820.

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The renowned gold eagle that once graced the roof of this hotel (and was later moved to the Cataract House) now stands in the Niagara Falls Public Library.

Before 1825, most visitors to Niagara Falls stayed on the Canadian side. Completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 vastly expanded public access to Niagara Falls from the U.S. side. Parkhurst Whitney himself entertained the Marquis de Lafayette at the Eagle Hotel on his triumphant tour of the U.S. and 1825 and personally escorted him to Lockport, to celebrate the opening of the Erie Canal.

One result of new public interest in Niagara Falls was construction of the Cataract House in 1825. In 1831, Whitney purchased the Cataract House, as an adjunct to the Eagle, and initiated a decade of growth and change for himself and his family. After he added his first addition to the Cataract in 1835, he sold the Eagle to Benjamin Rathburn, who would become his main competitor until he ended up in prison in the early 1840s. After unsuccessfully leasing the Cataract to Milton Hawley in 1836 (perhaps a casualty of the Depression that began in 1837), Whitney took charge of it once more in 1838 with his son Solon Whitney and son-in-law Dexter Jerauld.

Whitney did not limit his entreprenurial impulse to his hotels. He was a man of “enterprise and public spirit,” noted J.H. Orr in 1842. For the pleasure of tourists and to enhance his own business, he worked with Augustus Porter to establish the first ferry across the Niagara River below Niagara Falls, with the first staircase down the steep bank. He surveyed Goat Island and also built the Terrapin bridge and the first bridge to Iris Island.

U.S. census reports suggest that the Whitney family almost certainly lived in the Cataract House before Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney retired in 1846. James and Celinda Whitney and a daughter, Angeline, lived in the hotel for some time afterwards. In 1830, before Parkhurst Whitney purchased the Cataract Hotel, thirteen free white persons and three people of color were listed as living in the Whitney household. With their four children (Asenath, Angeline, Solon, and Celinda), the immediate Whitney family accounted for six of those free white persons. Seven of them were most likely employees, along with the three people of color.

In 1840, when they operated the Cataract House, thirty-four free white persons (and no African Americans) lived in the Whitney household, including twenty-two people aged 20-49. Eight of these (including daughter Asenath Whitney Kowalewski, her husband, and new-born daughter) were probably members of the immediate family. The remaining twenty-six were most likely hotel workers.

Although the Whitney family most likely lived in their hotel, they did not neglect family for business. Their lives seem to have been not only busy and productive but family-centered and loving as well. The three daughters, Asenath, Angeline, and Celinda, found lasting fame when they were the first women of European American ancestry to visit what became known as the Three Sisters islands.

J.H. Orr described Whitney in 1842 as “a staunch republican and a true patriot; frank, hearty, and familiar in his manners, plain in appearance, and upright in all his transaction.” He was also highly intelligent, and he and Celinda raised children who were well educated and remarkably talented. The oldest child Asenath, noted one family historian, was “a remarkably brilliant woman,” “a very fine scholar and linguist, speaking French, Italian and German fluently,” “a great reader,” “possessed of brilliant conversational powers,” “an exceptionally good musician.” Parkhurst Whitney brought the first piano to Niagara Falls, most likely for Asenath. We can imagine her entertaining hotel guests with music and good conversation when a you

Youngest daughter Celinda Eliza married James Fullerton Trott at the Cataract House on September 9, 1844. Trott had been born in Boston on March 25, 1815, a descendent of Puritans. He was well educated in grammar and high schools in Boston and lived in New York City for several years before coming to Niagara
Falls as a scenic photographer in 1841. After their marriage, Celinda and James moved briefly to Galena, Illinois, and then to Bellevue, Iowa, before they returned home in the fall of 1845, at the request of Parkhurst Whitney.

In 1846, Whitney retired. In a personal memoir, Parkhurst Whitney summed up his career, remembering that he had “changed my circumstances from making my own fires, being ostler, tending bar, waiting on the table, my wife doing the cooking, with, all together, four or five servants, to the employment of one hundred servants, and giving up the establishment to the children and returning to my old calling, farming.” Parkhurst Whitney left the hotel to son Solon Whitney and sons-in-law Dexter Jerauld and James Fullerton Trott. They operated the hotel under the name of Whitney, Jerauld, and Company until 1889. 91

James and Celinda Trott lived at the Cataract House during the main tourist season. In 1849, they moved two miles north of the Cataract to join Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney at their farm at 1139 Main Street (corner of Chilton Avenue). They continued to live at least part of the time in the Cataract House, however, since the 1850 census listed 27 African Americans, all cooks or waiters and all but two of them men, living in their household. It is unlikely that so many people would have commuted two miles each way every day.

In 1855, Parkhurst Whitney and Celinda Cowing Whitney celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary at the Cataract House. The event was the culmination of a successful life, but it did not last. The decade of the 1860s was to bring tragedy to the whole family. On February 17, 1860, their house and all its contents, including their extensive library and Whitney’s collection of military artifacts, burned. On June 12, 1860, Celinda Whitney died. She was eulogized for “her kind and hospitable disposition, . . . in whom the kindly graces of Christian meekness and charity predominated.” Although the family rebuilt the house on the same site in 1861, loss of family members continued. Frederic Whitney Kowalewski, Asenath’a son, died on December 22, 1861. Parkhurst Whitney himself followed on April 26, 1862. His funeral, held in the Cataract Hotel, attracted 3000 people. Two more grandchildren died within three years: Helena Kowalewski died in September 1864, and her sister Olympia died in May 1865.92

By the 1880s, the Cataract House was a national institution. Its popularity, noted the Niagara Falls Gazette in 1883, was largely due to the “long continued management under one head. For nearly seventy years the name of Whitney has been prominent in the hotel interest of our village . . . . Year after year, the same guests come, bringing with them their families.” Dexter Jerauld, with the assistance of James W. Trott, son of James F. and Celinda Trott, focused on buying “the best the market affords” for the hotel, while James Fullerton Trott himself was the chief financial officer. Solon Whitney, Jr., and P.W. Jerauld, sons of the owners, worked in the office. 93

James Trott continued to work as proprietor of the Cataract House until his retirement in 1886. He had been its main proprietor and business agent for forty years. “He not only kept up the reputation which General Whitney had established,” noted family historian Frederick Clifton Pierce, “but added to it, so the hotel became famous.” Trott was also “one of the most public-spirited and upright men in Niagara Falls.” For forty-five years, he was a trustee for the public schools of Niagara Falls, with special responsibilities for the library. So important was he to the development of schools and libraries in Niagara Falls that he earned the nickname “Father of Niagara Falls schools.” James Trott retired in 1886, and after Dexter Jerauld’s death in 1889, Solon Whitney sold the Cataract Hotel to Peter A. Porter, son of Colonel Peter A. Porter.

Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney, followed by their children and grandchildren (especially Solon and Frances Whitney, James W. and Celinda Trott, and Dexter Jerauld) developed the Cataract into the largest hotel in Niagara Falls. Only the International Hotel, built in 1853, challenged the Cataract in size and quality. By hiring African American waiters, porters, and cooks—many of them born in slavery—the Whitney family also created a major node of Underground Railroad activism.

Cataract Hotel Visitors

Clientele at the Cataract House included “princes, dukes, marquises, counts, and lords,” noted J. H. Orr in 1842. Famous politicians and public figures from the U.S. also patronized the Cataract Hotel, including Andrew Jackson and lady, who signed the guest book on June 25, 1827, and Abraham Lincoln, who visited with his family in July 1857. Guests enjoyed the fine air and extensive social life, with dances, dinners, concerts,

91 Parkhurst Whitney, “Private Memoir,” quoted in William Poole, ed., Landmarks of Niagara County (1878), 304.


93 Niagara Falls Gazette, May 23, 1883.
a library with the latest newspapers from all over the country, and lessons in music and foreign languages for their children.94

Life at the Cataract was seasonal. The hotel generally opened in April and served visitors until the end of November. In the winters of 1854 and 1855, the Cataract remained open all year round, but it lost money and reverted to its summer schedule the following year.95

Visitors would be greeted at the railroad depot with cries of “Baggage for the Cataract House!” Accompanied by a porter, they would be escorted to the hotel lobby, where they registered in large books, still extant in the Niagara Falls Public Library. Rooms were furnished with velvet drapes and marble fireplaces, to take the chill off cool evenings. A stroll out to the verandah overlooking the rapids was most likely one of the first things guests would do. Beginning in 1881, electric lights highlighted the rapids, Falls, and Canadian shore.96

Fine dining was also a major attraction. In 1855, breakfast was served at 7:15 a.m., dinner at 3:00 p.m., and tea at 7:00 p.m. Menus changed daily, but included soup, fish, boiled meat, roasts, special entrees, vegetables, pastries (which included puddings and pies), desserts, and all kinds of wines. Always, the food was “the choicest the markets afford,” and the wine cellar was stocked with all kinds of foreign and domestic brands. Music played during the dinner hour. Not all visitors appreciated the musical selections. One described the “wretched band,” which “only served to set our teeth on edge!” Many of the cooks and all of the waiters were African Americans.97

Guests so loved the Cataract Hotel that many of them returned year after year, bringing their families. By the 1880s, a second and third generation of visitors patronized the hotel, pleased to find that Solon Whitney, their childhood friend, was now the proprietor. An article in the Rochester Union, written in the 1870s, narrated the story of an elderly man who visited the Cataract and asked permission to look at the register


95 Niagara Times, December 22, 1856.

96 Niagara Falls Gazette, May 17, 1883.

97 Cataract Hotel menu from michele-dogslife.blogspot.com/2010/08/resturant-and-hotel-menus-from-1850s.html; M’Makin’s Model American Courier, July 8, 1854.
from 1825 to 1830. He found his own name, written fifty years ago, along with that of his wife, as they took their wedding tour."

Popular assumption is that large numbers of southern white elite families came to the Cataract House and stayed for weeks each summer and early fall. A report in the Niagara Falls Gazette in 1883 noted, “it was the custom of wealthy planters from the South to visit Niagara Falls each season and bring with them from one to three body servants. Some of these servants were quite gaily dressed.” As a way to test this accepted wisdom, we took small samples from the registers of the Cataract Hotel for July 6 and August 16 in both 1841 and 1855. While these registers do not indicate the length of time the guests stayed (and only rarely note that some were accompanied by “servants”), they do list places of residence. We counted the numbers of individuals and families who listed their residence as a slave state (or, in the case of two people, the West Indies). The proportion of southern visitors varied from 9.5 percent on August 16, 1841 (when four of the 42 guests who registered were from the South) to 20.2 percent on August 16, 1855, when 21 of the 104 individuals and families who registered that day lived in the South. In both 1841 and 1855, southern guests on July 6 formed 18.4 percent and 18.9 percent, respectively, of the clientele. Additionally, we checked the list of guests registered at the Cataract and listed in the Niagara Falls Gazette on August 4, 1859. Of the 125 people listed, 31.2 percent were from southern states (including one from Maryland, ten from Louisiana, two from Alabama, eleven from Kentucky, five from Delaware, six from Washington, three from Georgia, and one from North Carolina). Such a small sample is suggestive but not definitive. It would be well worth doing this kind of research in more detail, looking closely at changes over time, regions from which visitors came, and sex of visitors. Tentatively, however, we can suggest that about twenty percent of guests at the Cataract Hotel lived in a southern state.

July 6, 1841: Percent from slave states—7/38 = 18.4 percent
August 16, 1841: Percent from slave states: 4/42=9.5 percent
July 6, 1855: Percent from slave states—7/37=18.9 percent
August 16, 1855: Percent from slave states/W.I.—21/104=20.2 percent

We know from anecdotal evidence that many of these visitors brought enslaved people with them, often as ladies’ maids or valets. The presence of so many organized African American men, many of whom had most likely escaped from slavery themselves, created an uneasy tension underlying the smooth operations of this hotel. These

African American Waiters and Cooks

At least by the early 1840s, Whitney hired a wait staff dominated by black men, many of them born in the South. The presence of so many organized African American men, many of whom had most likely escaped from slavery themselves, created an uneasy tension underlying the smooth operations of this hotel. These

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98 Niagara Falls Gazette, May 17, 1883; Rochester Union, c. 1875-80.
99 Niagara Falls Gazette, August 25, 1883; Niagara Falls Gazette, August 4, 1859; Cataract House guest registers, Niagara Falls Public Library. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for help with this research. Local lore also suggests that the Cataract House included chains and tunnels in its basement, designed to restrain African Americans brought to the hotel in slavery. These stories do not seem to have emerged until the 1950s. In 1953, for example, Niagara County historian Clarence O. Lewis reported that a woman reported to him that her father, who used to work in the Cataract, had told her that “there were iron rings with chain attached in the basement walls and indications of tunnels, etc.” Marjory Williams, Niagara Falls city historian, explained, “There were rooms in the basement which were said to have been used for the slaves of Southerners who came here in great numbers to stay the summers. The story goes that Niagara Falls was so near Canada, and so many slaves escaped to its shores, that large iron rings were fastened in the walls to which the slaves were chained. Several of these rings were found there, but whether used for this purpose or not, it is hard to say.” Niagara Falls Gazette, July 16, 1953. No primary source reference has been found to substantiate either the existence of these chains or their use for such a purpose. Given the Underground Railroad activism of African American waiters at the Cataract and the willingness of Whitney, Jerauld, and Company to hire African Americans born in slavery, it seems extremely unlikely that chains in the basement were ever used for such a purpose.
African American waiters became the nexus of a struggle between freedom and slavery, as they helped many enslaved people escape to freedom across the nearby Niagara River.

In 1840, the census did not list any African Americans in the Whitney household. At least by the early 1840s, however, Whitney had begun to hire black waiters. In 1844, Frederick von Raumer, a German visitor, described the work of African American waiters in the Cataract dining room:

In the hotel six long tables were set, full of guests, and served by thirty-six black waiters, among whom the division of labor was carried so far, that each had his department—of bread, knives and forks, spoons, &c.—assigned to him. These solo performers marched with regular steps to villainous table-music, and did all their work in measured time. Thus they came, thus they went; and thus each brought in his hand two dishes, which he deposited on the table as directed by two musical fermate.\(^{100}\)

An employment notice in 1845 in the Liberator (an abolitionist newspaper edited by William Lloyd Garrison), added a footnote to von Raumer’s account:

A most worthy, intelligent and faithful colored man, who has had the superintendence of the Cataract House at Niagara as head waiter for the last four or five years, being desirous of spending the winter in Boston, wishes to obtain a situation in some private family, or public establishment. Application made by made to the Editor of the Liberator, 25 Cornhill.\(^{101}\)

This advertisement offers several clues about waiters at the Cataract House. First, black waiters worked at the Cataract House at least by the early 1840s, since this “worthy, intelligent and faithful colored man” had been working there for four or five years. Second, waiters at the Cataract House were organized hierarchically, since this man was not simply a waiter but a headwaiter. Third, at least some of these waiters had abolitionist sympathies and abolitionist connections. Otherwise, why would this note appear in such a nationally known abolitionist newspaper, and why would William Lloyd Garrison be willing to take job applications for him?

Parkhurst Whitney’s decision to hire black waiters at the Cataract House, beginning in the early 1840s, doubtless had two roots. The first was New York State’s passage of a personal liberty law in 1841. Since slavery ended in New York State in 1827, New York State had allowed enslavers to bring people into New York State for up to nine months at a time, without threatening their legal status. In 1841, however, the New York State legislature received more than fifty petitions asking for the repeal of this nine months law. On May 25, 1841 (while Peter B. Porter, Augustus Porter’s son, was the presiding officer), the legislature passed a personal liberty law, mandating that any enslaved person brought into New York State would be immediately free. Responding to widespread popular support, both Whigs and Democrats voted for this law, and Governor William Henry Seward signed it on the same day. Abolitionists across the state took personal delight in finding enslaved people, often traveling with their “owners,” to tell them they were now legally free. The following year, in Prigg v. Pennsylvania, a federal judge struck down these state personal liberty laws but also made it clear that the federal government had no authority to force states to support the recapture of people who had escaped from slavery. So abolitionists in New York State and elsewhere took this as permission to treat escaped people as free.\(^{102}\)

The second was the increasing tendency of major hotels to hire African American waiters. Beginning in the late 1820s, house work in general and hotel work in particular became increasingly professionalized, and African Americans developed professional standards for black waiters and servants, ensuring increased job opportunities. In 1827, Robert Roberts published the first guide book for African American domestic servants, The House Servant’s Directory (Boston and New York, 1827). In 1848, Tunis G. Campbell published the influential Hotel Keepers, Head Waiters, and Housekeepers’ Guide (Boston: Coolidge and Wiley, 1848). Major hotels in New York, Boston and elsewhere adopted these standards. The Cataract House was one of these.

\(^{100}\) Frederick Von Raumer, America and the American People (New York: J. & H. G. Lngley, 1844), 456. Thanks to Pen Bogart, Filson Club, Kentucky, and Christopher Densmore for finding this.

\(^{101}\) “Wants a Situation,” Liberatror, November 7, 1845. Thanks to Christopher Densmore for finding this.

\(^{102}\) Paul Finkelman, An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity (Lawbook Exchange, 2000), online through Google Books.
In this climate, Parkhurst Whitney decided to hire African American waiters, almost exclusively, without regard to whether they had been born slave or free. It was his own version of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” and it worked to benefit everyone—his employees (who earned good money, especially through tips), his hotel guests (who received excellent service from well-trained people), and, of course, himself and his family, who created one of America’s preeminent hotels.

The Cataract House appears to have been the first—and for a time the only—hotel in Niagara Falls to hire African American waiters. The 1850 census listed twenty-eight African American hotel workers, all but one of them associated with the Cataract House. The exception was Samuel T. Patterson, a thirty-five-year-old tavern keeper, born in Virginia, who owned property worth $3000 and who kept his own hotel, the Free Soil Hotel. (See separate description.)

Of the remaining twenty-seven hotel workers in 1850, two were women. Catherine Polk, age twenty-eight, listed her birthplace as Pennsylvania. (By 1880, however, Mrs. Polk would list her birthplace as Delaware. Had she escaped from slavery? We do not know whether Catherine Polk, pastry cook at the Cataract from at least 1850 to 1883, had escaped from slavery in Delaware. Nor do we know whether she helped others cross the border to freedom. If so, however, she would have been typical of African American employees of the Cataract House.) A twenty-year-old woman named Hamilton listed her birthplace as New York. She was most likely the wife of Lewis Henry Fugigue Hamilton, born in Washington, D.C., in 1824 and a waiter at the Cataract House. Of the twenty-five men, three were cooks and twenty-two were waiters. All—men and women—were listed as living “in home of James Trott, Innkeeper of "Cateract [sic] Home." It is likely that Trott, like his parents-in-law before him, kept an apartment in the Cataract, and that the waiters stayed somewhere in or near the Cataract House, so that the census taker counted them as part of Trott's household.

Of the twenty-five male cooks and waiters, most were working age adults from twenty to thirty-nine years old. One was 19 years old, ten were 20-29, eleven were 30-39, and three were in their early forties.

Using place of birth as a rough surrogate for possible status as a formerly enslaved person, it is clear that Parkhurst Whitney and his son and sons-in-law hired many men and women who had escaped from slavery. Census records in 1850 suggest that only twenty percent of the twenty-five Cataract House male waiters and cooks in 1850 had been born in free states (one each in Connecticut, Ohio, and Wisconsin, New York, and Pennsylvania). The majority (64 percent) had been born in slave states. Of these, all came from the upper South (Washington, D.C. 2; Maryland, 8; and Virginia, 6). Three people listed no birthplace and one person listed unknown (for a total of sixteen percent). If we add southern-born people to those who listed their birthplaces as unknown or with no listing, then eighty percent of Cataract House waiters and cooks may have had origins in slave states. (In comparison, of the total number of forty-four African American residents of the Town of Niagara in 1850, fifty percent had been born in slave states, eleven percent listed their birthplace as unknown or none, and three percent had been born in Canada, for a total of sixty-eight percent born outside free states.) Some of these may have been legally free people of color. Almost certainly, however, many had escaped from slavery on the Underground Railroad.

The census in 1850 was taken in early September. All African American residents of Niagara Falls and northern states in general, whether born free or enslaved, lived under the threat of deportation to slavery as a result of the Fugitive Slave Law passed on September 18, 1850. Knowing fugitive slave legislation was imminent, how accurately did people report their places of birth? If you had escaped from slavery, would you tell a federal census taker where you had been born? Perhaps not. So our count of people born in slave states is most likely an undercount.
By 1860, the black population in Niagara Falls had expanded dramatically, from 44 in 1850 to 145 in 1855 to 244 in 1860. Judging by census records, both the Cataract House and the International Hotel now used African American waiters almost exclusively (although there were a very few European Americans who worked as waiters, also).

In 1860, of the 123 black hotel workers in Niagara Falls, only ten were women, five of whom listed their birthplaces as Canada, one as Maryland, one as New York State, and three as Pennsylvania. Nine of the women were listed as servants, but Catherine Polk, thirty-four years old, born in Pennsylvania, was a cook. Catherine Polk remained at the Cataract House at least from 1850 to 1883. Assuming that the household number for Catherine Polk in 1850 referred to the Cataract House, all of the women except two lived at the Cataract. The exceptions were Mary Markee and Margaret Truss. Mary Markee was fifteen years old, born in New York, and she worked for James Patterson, African American hotel owner. Margaret Truss (24 years old and the only one who listed her birthplace as Maryland) worked in the household of Dexter R. Jeruald, part owner of the Cataract House, who lived in the next block east of the hotel.

Of the 123 black hotel workers in 1860, both men and women, all but ten of them lived and worked at either the Cataract House or the International Hotel. The Cataract House employed sixty African Americans, including one baker, five cooks, forty-four hotel waiters, one porter, and nine servants (all but two of them female). The International Hotel employed fifty-two African Americans, including a steward (Daniel R. Crosby, age 43, born in Canada) and fifty-one waiters. All were male.

Black workers at the Cataract House in 1860 listed their birthplaces as Africa (1), Baden (Germany? 2), Canada (16), Connecticut (2), Washington, D.C. (2), Kentucky (2), Maine (1), Maryland (5), Massachusetts (1), Michigan (1), New York (6), Ohio (1), Pennsylvania (14), Tennessee (1), Vermont (2), and Virginia (3).

In 1860, a total of 53.3 percent of African Americans who worked at the Cataract House (down from
eighty percent in 1850) had been born either in the South or foreign country. Of these, thirteen (21.6 percent) had been born in slave states, twenty-eight (46.7 percent) in free states, nineteen (31.7 percent) in foreign countries.

The pattern of employing African Americans born in slave states continued after the Civil War. While the 1870 census appears to be inaccurate in its count of hotel workers, the 1880 census listed twenty-two African Americans employed at the Cataract. They included a laundress (Henrietta Berry, age 33, born in Maryland), five cooks (Anna Joyce, age 34, born in Maryland; Charles K. Jackson, age 32, born in Virginia; C.H. Jackson, age 38, born in Maryland; and Robert Payne, age 56, born in New York of parents who had immigrated from Washington, D.C.; and Louis Robinson, age 30, born in Virginia). Either Charles K. Jackson or C.H. Jackson may have been the “Jackson” noted in an 1883 list of workers: “Jackson, the popular chef of many years, will prepare the more substantials for the table.” The remaining fifteen African Americans worked as waiters. (In 1880, Charles Kersey Jackson married Luvisa Patterson, daughter of the owners of the Free Soil/Falls Hotel. He later opened his own establishment, the Robinson House, on Prospect Street. See separate descriptions). 103

Many of these black waiters were relatively transient, suggesting the possibility that they used the Cataract House as a way to earn money on their way to freedom in Canada. Others, however, worked at the Cataract for decades. Catharine Polk, for example, had been at the Cataract since at least 1850. In earlier census

103 Niagara Falls Gazette, May 23, 1883.
years, she had listed her birthplace as Pennsylvania. In 1880, when she was 61 years old, however, she told the census taker that she, as well as her parents, had been born in Delaware. She was by then a well-loved fixture at the Cataract House. The *Niagara Gazette* noted in 1883 that “Mrs. Polk—‘Auntie’ as she is familiarly called—who for thirty-three years has had charge of the department where many of the luxuries for the table in the way of pastry, etc., are prepared returns looking as smiling as ever.”

Some waiters and cooks worked in various years for the Cataract House and in other years for other area hotels. Madison Freeman appeared in the 1850 as a thirty-year-old cook at the Cataract House, born in Maryland. By 1865, he was listed as head cook at the International House, born in Canada.

Hotel work was seasonal, usually from April through November. Where did these waiters go during the wintertime? Some of them certainly kept families in Ontario, perhaps right across the river in Drummondville, and returned there once the hotels closed. John A. Bolden, for example, was born in Maryland and worked as a waiter at the Cataract House at least from 1860 to 1880. His wife Catherine was also born in Maryland, but all their children were born in Canada, beginning in 1860. The 1860 census listed John as living alone in Niagara Falls, but by 1875 and 1880, the census listed the whole family together in Niagara Falls. Joseph Hemsley/Hensley appeared in the 1850 census as a twenty-five-year-old waiter at the Cataract House, born in Connecticut. In 1855, however, he and his wife Mary lived in Lockport. They listed their birthplaces as Pennsylvania, but their son Leonard was born in Canada. In 1865, Joseph was listed as a laborer, with all children except Lydia the youngest born in Canada. After the Civil War (and perhaps before), many of these waiters had regular jobs at hotels in other parts of the country. Some may have been students and teachers during the winter, following the pattern in Newport and Saratoga in the late nineteenth century.

These waiters highly trained skilled workers, not unskilled laborers. We know from Frederick von Raumer’s description of waiters in the Cataract dining room in 1844 that they performed their jobs with military precision. This was not an accident. By the 1840s, waiters and domestic servants in major hotels adhered to professional standards.

It is very likely that waiters at the Cataract followed guidelines similar to those recommended in 1848 by Tunis G. Campbell, himself a waiter in New York City and Boston, who outlined the most up-to-date guidelines in *Hotel Keepers, Head Waiters, and Housekeepers’ Guide*. Campbell had first learned of this idea in New York City in 1837, he noted, and had implemented at the Howard Hotel in 1840 and then again at the Adams House in Boston. This book, noted the introduction to the digital edition at Michigan State University, was “the second major Black-authored culinary work in America [after Robert Roberts, *House Servant’s Directory*, 1827] . . . , one of the earliest manuals written by any American on the supervision and management of first-class restaurants and hotel dining rooms.” Promoting the highest standards of service met the expectations of an increasingly sophisticated national and international clientele. It also, argued Campbell, promoted the best interests both of the waiters and their employers.

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104 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, May 23, 1883.

105 Myra B. Young Armstead, 93.

A professional wait staff, advised Campbell, was well-trained, well-dressed, and well-respected. In terms of training, they each had individual duties. Campbell listed these in detail. The headwaiter, for example, should post the regulations of the dining room in the pantry, where everyone could see them, and he should see that all rules were “strictly enforced.” He should hire all his men and keep an account of their time (including the fines they owed if they were absent without leave). The second waiter will divide up the work, send meals to rooms, and account for the table linen and tea table. The third waiter was responsible for cheese, cake, and milk, the fourth for desserts, the fifth for castors, the sixth for bread, napkins, cups, and saucers—and so forth.

At each meal, they performed their work in specific order with military precision. Campbell’s discussion of “Regulations for General and Squad Drills” described these in detail. Here is a sample:

Select men of good appearance, as near of a height as possible. Let the tallest be placed on the right. When they are formed in a line, divide them at every fifth man [and choose lieutenants or file leaders]. Then make all mark the time, by bringing the left foot to the right heel. At the word “mark time,” each man will begin; and at the “halt,” each will stop at once. Then make them divide into squads, by the file-leader placing himself by the side of the last man of his squad, the first man standing fast, and marching round until he comes in front of the last man, who faces to the front also, which will form the men into an open column, four deep. . . . then bring them to the table, give each man his station, and make him fall back one pace from his chair.

Using a small bell, the headwaiter then gave signals to indicate each new phase of serving, all done in synchronized time. Under the supervision of the headwaiter, they trained daily (except Saturday, a day for general cleaning, and Sunday, when waiters were advised to go to church), with an emphasis on “attentive, obliging, and gentlemanly” behavior. Campbell included ten drawings to show how and where waiters should be trained to stand and march. The order of drill could be changed to suit the establishment.

Using this method, Campbell asserted, novices could be trained to be good waiters in two weeks. Weekly reports and quarterly reports, given both in person and in writing, held each waiter to the highest standards. Every six months, “premiums” were given to those who worked best. Under this system, Campbell noted, “waiting becomes what it ought to be—a science, which every many who seeks employment in must first study, the same as any other profession. 107

Reflecting their reputations as professionals, waiters dressed in neat and often elegant attire. They generally wore white jackets (although jackets could be of any standard color for each hotel) and aprons.

107 Campbell, “Division of Work,” 23-26; 34-40, 58. Waiters in the Saratoga hotels seem to have worked under a similar system. See Myra B. Young Armstead, Lord, Please Don’t Take Me in August: African Americans in Newport and Saratoga Springs, 1870-1900 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999),
Campbell recommended a white pocket handkerchief as well, all to be washed by the hotel. “See that each man has his clothes perfectly clean at every meal, with boots or shoes well blacked,” admonished Campbell. “Each man should also have a clean napkin or towel at every meal; and at breakfast and tea their trays should be examined by the officers of the squad to see if they are clean.” Patrick Sneed, a waiter at the Cataract House in 1852 and 1853, noted that he was carrying his jacket and wearing a shirt, vest, and “new silk cravat” wrapped twice around his neck when marshals captured him.\textsuperscript{108}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{“Head Waiter at the Cataract House full blooded Indian a tall man” and “Waiter at Haight House Elmira.”}
\end{figure}

If this is a photo of John Morrison, headwaiter at the Cataract House by 1856, the notation that he was a full blooded Indian is incorrect. He is wearing a jacket and cravat, much like that described by Patrick Sneed in 1853. The waiter at the Haight House, Elmira, is dressed in attire, including white apron and jacket, described by Tunis G. Campbell as appropriate for waiters.


\textsuperscript{108} Campbell, “Dress,” 32; Patrick Sneed in Benjamin Drew, \textit{A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves} (Boston: J.P. Jewett, 1856), 102-03.
Living conditions for the wait staff and chambermaids at the Cataract House were most likely reasonably comfortable. Campbell urged that proprietors occasionally put on a dinner for their servants. It will not cost much, suggested Campbell, “and the advantage arising from it would repay him double.” Moreover, “servants should be conciliated with kindness, as nothing can be gained by harsh treatment.” Establish clear rules for everyone, and “enforce them firmly, but calmly. Every one will then feel that if he breaks these rules there is not escape for him; and in the end will not only endeavor to keep them, but watch that others do not violate them.”

This conciliatory attitude extended to servants brought by guests. Campbell advised that the proprietor himself should always be sure that servants who visited the hotel receive whatever they needed, both in lodging and food, to make them comfortable. “Such little attentions are more highly thought of by them that money in many instances,” he noted.

Following the rules meant that waiters could insist that guests do the same. In 1847, for example, a young southern man “acted the ninny,” reported the Rochester Democrat. When he tried to seat himself and “his ladies” at breakfast in chairs assigned to others, the waiter offered them other seats. The southerner drew his knife, intending to stab the waiter, but “after a few minutes of disturbance,” he was convinced to pay his bill and leave—in pouring rain—to find another hotel.

How much money did these waiters make? We have no specific evidence from Niagara Falls, but we do have evidence from Rochester. From 1837-39, Jermain Loguen, a freedom seeker from Tennessee, worked in the fashionable Rochester Hotel. Arriving as a young man of twenty-four, without resources or friends, he became a porter and “confidential servant” in the hotel. He was, according to his autobiography, “of gigantic strength, temperate, moral, patient, and attentive to boarders and guests; and being economical in his receipts, he laid up from three to five and six dollars a day, and at the end of two years became possessed of a small estate.” It is reasonable to assume that waiters at the Cataract did at least as well as Loguen had done, particularly in the economically prosperous times of the late 1840s and early 1850s. Commonly, European American male workers about 1850 might earn $10.00 per week in wages, while women might earn one-third to one-half of that. Earnings of three to six dollars per day would therefore have been a lucrative income for any

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109 Campbell, 48.

110 Campbell, 61.

working person, whether African American or European American.\textsuperscript{112}

The result of implementing the science of hotel management—outlined by Tunis Campbell and almost certainly implemented at the Cataract House—was an operation designed to impress guests with the hotel’s efficient and courteous service. Everything needs a system, argued Campbell. “If everyone has his work, and is held responsible for it, you can depend upon having it well done.” “By adopting the rules which I have here laid down,” wrote Campbell, every guest in the house is made perfectly easy,—first by the cordiality with which he is received, and then the politeness of all the servants, combined with cleanliness and order everywhere apparent.\textsuperscript{113}

\textit{Cataract Hotel and the Underground Railroad}

African American waiters at the Cataract House were the key group in promoting and carrying out Underground Railroad work in Niagara Falls. Unlike smaller rural communities, in which both European Americans and African Americans often worked together to help house and transport people escaping from slavery, Niagara Falls relied on a disciplined, committed, and well-organized cadre of waiters as the front line of assistance for fugitives. As many as eighty percent of them may have escaped from slavery themselves. And seemingly almost all of them were involved in helping others escape from slavery. Working together as a well-organized group, they were ready to act at a moment’s notice to help people cross the river to freedom, even to the point of street action to stop slave-catchers physically.\textsuperscript{114}

We have excellent primary source documentation—from letters, memoirs, and newspaper accounts—for several cases associated with the Cataract House and the adjoining International Hotel. All of these cases feature hotel waiters, usually unnamed. Two waiters at the Cataract House stand out as leaders and organizers: John Morrison, headwaiter at the Cataract House, and Lewis L.F. Hamilton, a local entrepreneur.

John Morrison was listed in the 1850 census as age 40, a waiter at the Cataract House with no birthplace listed. By 1856, he was headwaiter at the Cataract, according to an article in the \textit{Niagara Falls Gazette}, August 5, 1856. In 1860, Morrison appeared as a hotel waiter, age 44, born in Vermont.

In 1859, he described his experience over several years in ferrying people across the Niagara River to Canada. (See below.) Hints about his importance to the Underground Railroad came in 1856, when his friends presented a gold-headed cane to him at their annual celebration of British West Indian emancipation (August 1, 1834) in a meeting at Union Hall. The \textit{Niagara Falls Gazette} noted, “The anniversary of the emancipation of slavery in the British West Indies is usually celebrated by our colored people, than whom there is not a more orderly and respectable class of colored citizens in any of our villages. The recipient of the cane is worthy of such a mark of respect from his associates.”

\textsuperscript{112} Jermain W. Loguen, \textit{The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman. A Narrative of Real Life} (Syracuse, N. Y. J. G. K. Truair & Co., 1859), 342.

\textsuperscript{113} Campbell, 49, 53.

Lewis Henry Fetigue Hamilton officially presented the cane to Morrison. Born October 2, 1824, in Washington, D.C., he married his wife Clarissa at Geneva, New York, in 1845 and began his career in Niagara Falls as a waiter at the Cataract in May 1847. In 1850, the census listed him as living at the Cataract with his wife, age 20, born in New York.  

Hamilton was at heart an entrepreneur, and by 1855 he had formed the first of several businesses, including a cleaning business (in the rear of Dr. Davis’s office on Main Street) and an employment agency (on Main Street across from the Cataract). His employment agency matched servants with potential employers, suggesting organized efforts to help his fellow African Americans, including those escaping from slavery. In September 1855, the *Niagara Falls Gazette* endorsed his efforts as “a service to the community.” Hamilton advertised “Hamilton’s General Agency” in the *Gazette* in July 1856:

Hamilton’s General Agency and Intelligence Office,  
Nearly opposite the Cataract House, Niagara Falls.  
I would most respectfully inform all whom it may concern that on and after September 6th I shall open books for the convenience of all persons who may wish good servants, and for the convenience of those who may want situations and for persons wishing to buy or sell articles of every description, new or second-hand. Servants supplied places, or persons applied with house servants or laborers. Articles bought or sold for parties with dispatch. This agency will be found convenient for all, as business will be rendered promptly. Don’t forget Hamilton, Main St.  

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115 “Well Known Residents of Niagara Falls,” *History of Niagara Falls with Illustrations* (1878), 316.

116 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, July 11, 1855; September 5, 1855; July 30, 1856. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding these.
An advertisement in 1856 suggested that Hamilton himself either owned Union Hall, site of the emancipation celebration, or managed it. “Union Hall corner Falls and Mechanic streets, having been put in complete order will be let for Concerts, Exhibitions, Political Gatherings, Etc. Apply to L.H.F. Hamilton, on the premises or address Box 271, Post Office, Niagara Falls, May 31, 1856.”

The Union Hall would have stood as part of the building noted here as the Falls Hotel, Corner Falls and Mechanic Street. This hotel burned in 1861, and the hotel owned on Main Street (approximately where lot 57 is marked here) by James Patterson, another African American entrepreneur, took over the Falls Hotel name.


By 1860, the U.S. census listed L.H.P. Hamilton as a tailor, living in his own house with his wife Clarissa (now listed as born in Connecticut) and three children: thirteen-year-old Catharine, eleven-year-old Lewis, and eight-year-old Henry, all born in New York State.

By 1870, Hamilton had become a railroad sleeping car conductor. By the late 1870s, he had opened his own restaurant and dining hall at 17 Falls Street, advertising “Hamilton's Dining Hall. First-Class! Popular Prices! This ladies and gentlemen's lunch room is on the COOL SIDE of FALLS STREET, AT NO. 17, Second block below New York Central Depot. Table d'hote from 12 to 4. Confectionary Ice Cream Soda Water Etc.” By the late 1880s, L.H.P. Hamilton was operating from the Prospect Park House Block on Falls Street, once the home of Peter B. Porter.

U.S. census records listed no property value for Hamilton, but New York State census records suggested that he owned property worth $1000 in 1865 and $4000 in 1875.

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117 *Niagara Times*, December 20, 1856.

118 *Niagara Falls Business Directory*, 1878; *Niagara Falls Gazette*, August 23, 1881; *Niagara Falls Gazetted*, 1886-89, note from L.H.P. Hamilton about selling “two large photographers’ skylights” and other furniture. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding these references.
Lewis and Clarissa’s son Henry F. Hamilton, born about 1853, became a photographer by 1880, with his studio located next to the Falls Hotel on Main Street (a building most likely owned by fellow African American and Underground Railroad activist James Patterson). Henry and wife Jennie A. lived with Lewis and Clarissa in 1880.\(^{119}\)

The Hamilton family lived in Niagara Falls until their deaths. Both Lewis and Clarissa were buried in Oakwood Cemetery, Lewis on May 14, 1903, at age 79 and Clarissa on January 6, 1915, age 90. Jeanne O. Hamilton died May 27, 1920, and Harry (most likely Henry) Hamilton died October 21, 1931.\(^{120}\)

We have the names of other local African American waiters and entrepreneurs who were also likely players in the Underground Railroad. John Murphy worked at the Cataract House from the 1840s on. In 1850, John was thirty-six years old, born in Maryland, and single. He may have lived regularly in Canada, working seasonally at the Cataract House, since he was not listed in the 1860 census for Niagara Falls. By 1865, he, his Maryland-born wife Josephine, and their two children, both born in Canada, lived in Niagara Falls. Murphy listed no occupation in 1865, but he owned real estate worth $1800.00. The 1870 census listed John Murphy as "head waiter" at the Cataract, where he supervised forty-six people. His daughter Sarah had married James Sydney (a waiter born in Canada) and his mother Eliza, (described as "part-Indian), born in Virginia, all lived with John and Josephine Murphy near the Suspension Bridge. Murphy died tragically in 1880 in an elevator accident.\(^{121}\)

Daniel Crosby worked first at the Cataract House and later became headwaiter at the International Hotel. John Anderson, grocer, Alexander Shumite, and James and Charles Patterson were also active Underground Railroad supporters. Their names appeared in the National Anti-Slavery Standard in 1846 and 1847 as part of organized abolitionist work. John Anderson, age 35, born in Canada, was listed in the 1850 census in Lockport as a boatman. Sandy Shamite was listed in the 1850 census as Alexander Shumite, a waiter at the Cataract House, age 30, born in Virginia. In the 1840s, James Patterson was a porter for the Cataract House, using a two-wheeled cart to haul baggage. He earned enough money to purchase in 1850 a small building on the site of the later Falls Hotel, which he opened as the Free Soil Hotel. Samuel Patterson, probably the same man as James, appeared in the 1850 census as a tavern keeper, with property worth $3500, born in Virginia. James Patterson appeared in the census in 1860 as a 48-year-old hotelkeeper, with property worth $8000, born in Virginia. He continued to be listed in the census for Niagara Falls until 1880, as a carriage driver and whitewasher, always with a Virginia birthplace. No Charles Patterson was listed, but (For more on the Pattersons, see description of Free Soil Hotel.)\(^{122}\)

Karolyn Smardz Frost has documented the case of Cecelia Reynolds, who escaped from slavery at the Cataract House in May 1847. At age twenty-one, Cecelia Reynolds came to Niagara Falls from Louisville, Kentucky, as the personal maid of Frances Ann Thruston, or Fanny. The two girls had grown up together, but—much as they liked and respected each other—their status as enslaver and enslaved did not change. Motivated in part by the sale of her own father to enslavers farther South, Cecelia well knew what could happen to someone in her position, even someone as well-loved as she apparently was. Without a word to Fanny (or to Fanny’s father Charles Thruston), Cecelia disappeared one night, eventually moving to Toronto, where she carried on a lengthy correspondence with her former mistress.\(^{123}\)

\(^{119}\) Thanks to Michelle Kratts for locating these graves.

\(^{120}\) Information on John Murphy from Louisville Courier-Journal, July 18, 1870, and Niagara Falls Journal, May 15, 1880. Thanks to Christopher Densmore for sharing these. The Journal reported in 1880: “John H. Murphy, a hotel waiter at the Cataract House, for over 35 years was instantly killed in a remarkable manner on Wednesday evening last. As the elevator was passing down by floor 3 Murphy’s lifeless body was thrown into it with his skull crushed. It is supposed that curiosity caused the unfortunate man to put his head into the opening and that looking down instead of up he was struck as stated. Coroner Cornell investigated and exonerated the proprietors and the person who ran the elevator from all blame.”

\(^{121}\) National Anti-Slavery Standard, September 24, 1846; July 22, 29, 1847; Niagara Falls Gazette, May 3, 1910; U.S. census records.

\(^{122}\) Karolyn Smardz Frost has a book in progress on Cecelia Reynolds’s life. Many thanks to her for sharing this information.
On Saturday, July 10, 1847, two months after Cecelia’s escape, an event occurred that almost certainly deepened the bond among abolitionist waiters and sharpened their commitment to helping people escape from slavery. Christopher Densmore thoroughly researched this story and found distinctly different versions. All agree that the unsuccessful attempt to rescue a young enslaved woman led to riots--first when “colored people” tried to rescue her and then later that evening when whites attacked and burned African American homes. Some versions suggest that the hotel in question was the Cataract, but most report it as the Eagle. Some accounts suggest that the girl did not wish to be rescued and that she left with her enslaver voluntarily. An account in 1883 noted that she was “urged to cross the line and forsake her mistress and become free, but she refused. She chose slavery rather than freedom, because she loved her mistress.” One abolitionist observer, however, recounted that the young woman approached one of the “vast number of colored waiters,” confessed that she was “wretched beyond description” and asked for help in escaping to Canada. The waiter agreed to help, but her master, an Alabama man named Stephens, aided by Hollis White, the hotelkeeper, kept her so carefully guarded that escape was impossible. When the time came to leave, Stephenson and the young woman boarded the Lockport and Niagara Falls Railroad. The girl (in one version “heart-broken” to be taken back into slavery) was forced to sit on the train next to the window, with her owner in the aisle seat. Twenty or thirty African Americans, dressed in “white aprons,” emerged from both the Eagle and Cataract Hotels, with a few from the Falls Hotel, crying “Kidnapping! Kidnapping!” They placed “obstructions” on the track and rushed the train, uncoupling one of the cars, determined to rescue her if she desired or to hear directly from her that she did not wish to be rescued. George Bristol, the engineer; conductor Alva Hill (who was once a clerk at the Cataract House, who would soon be sheriff of Niagara County); John McLellan, “with his brawny arm and a stone in his hand,” and others (including, in some accounts, the local constable), “beat them severely.” The girl was “frightened almost to death.” Conductor Alva Hill reportedly told her to leave if she wished, since she was in a free state, “but she had no desire whatever to leave her mistress who no doubt was kind, and to her the slave woman seemed like a mother.” 124

After the altercation in Niagara Falls, the train left for Lewiston, with the slaveholding Stephens family and enslaved young woman, where they took a steamboat for Ogdensburg and Montreal. Although master and mistress returned to Niagara Falls the following year, they “brought no servants.”

The “riot” in Niagara Falls, however, was not yet over. That evening about 11 p.m., “several wicked boys began to fire off pistols, without balls.” Rumors abounded that blacks had fired upon whites, “a statement utterly false,” noted the writer for the True Wesleyan, “as I saw the whole transaction from beginning to end.” Other accounts suggested that whites believed two fugitives to be harbored in a local home. They threatened its inhabitants, who responded by firing guns without bullets. One account said that “a few drunken Irishmen” and “several wicked young lads” destroyed “the little shanties of the poor blacks,” because local blacks sold “root beer instead of brandy” and took away business from grog dealers. On Sunday, July 11, public notices appeared “ordering all the blacks to clear out in twenty-four hours.” No one left, however. Newspaper reports disagreed about details, but the general consensus was that this whole event was “a very unpleasant and disgraceful circumstance,” “which disturbed the whole village.” 125

Who were the people who tried to rescue this young woman? Three “very respectable coloured persons of Manchester [once the name of Niagara Falls]” sent an eyewitness account to the National Anti-Slavery Standard, an abolitionist newspaper edited in New York City by Lydia Maria Child, naming names. They reported that John Morrison, John M. Anderson, Charles and James Patterson, and Sandy Shamate were all severely injured. John M. Anderson’s grocery store was also torn down that night, and his goods were destroyed and his furniture broken up. The mob did further damage to one of the Pattersons. 126

All of these men seem to have been part of an organized abolitionist movement. As early as 1845, Charles Patterson sent a donation to the National Anti-Slavery Standard from Niagara Falls. In 1846, Patterson,

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124 This incident was widely reported in the press, and this account is a distillation of information from newspaper articles collected by Christopher Densmore and others. In chronological order, they are: Buffalo Commercial Advertiser, July 12, 1847; Buffalo Republic, July 12, 1847; Albany Evening Journal, July 14, 1847; National Anti-Slavery Standard, July 22, 1847; Pennsylvania Freeman, July 22, 1847; National Anti-Slavery Standard, July 29, 1847; Lorenzo Mabbett, Buffalo Democrat and Courier, July 30, 1847; Liberator, August 6, 1847; The Globe (Toronto), August 7, 1847; True Wesleyan, August 14, 1847; Niagara Falls Gazette, August 25, 1883.

125 True Wesleyan, August 14, 1847.

126 National Anti-Slavery Standard, July 22, 29, 1847.
Morrison, and Anderson all sent donations, suggesting that all had been in Niagara Falls since 1846 or before. Patterson, Morrison, and Anderson may, in fact, have been the three “respectable coloured persons” who sent the letter to the *Standard* in 1847.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgments: From November 1, to December 1, 1845</th>
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<td>Thomas Jermyn, La Porte, Ia.</td>
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<td>D. A. Brown, Fisherville, N. H.</td>
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<td>Maria Matherly, Hudson, N. Y.</td>
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<td>M. M. Hyatt,</td>
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<td>John C. Merritt, Farmingdale, L. I.</td>
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<td>Joseph G. Wright, D. W. Carter, N. Y.</td>
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<td>Erasam Hanley, Niagara Falls</td>
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<td>Charles Patterson, Niagara</td>
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<td>John Allen, Brooklyn, N. Y.</td>
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*National Anti-Slavery Standard*, December 25, 1845

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<tbody>
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<td>Charles Patterson, Niagara Falls, N. Y.</td>
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<td>John Morrison,</td>
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<td>John M. Anderson,</td>
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<td>Edward Love, Hamilton, Canada West,</td>
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<td>William Huson, Toronto,</td>
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<td>Brooks &amp; Higgins, Wyoming, N. Y</td>
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<td>Moore &amp; Whitney, Fostilson,</td>
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<td>Jacob Annin,</td>
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<td>Eldred Velzy,</td>
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<td>F. D. Fox, Colerain, Ohio,</td>
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<td>Mary T. Drew, Dover, N. H.</td>
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<td>Wm. H. Humphrey, Millyard, Mass.</td>
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*National Anti-Slavery Standard*, September 24, 1846

Three of these men were associated with the Cataract House. John Morrison and Sandy Shamite both appeared in census records as waiters at the Cataract. James Patterson was a baggage porter at the Cataract and later owner of the Free Soil hotel. No Charles Patterson appeared in census records. John Anderson, owner of a grocery store in 1847, did not appear in Niagara Falls in later census records, but a John Anderson, born in Canada, was listed as a boatman in Lockport in 1850.

Three main points stand out in this story. First, this was an organized effort by African Americans in Niagara Falls, dominated by waiters at the main hotels. This was perhaps the first such effort, but it certainly would not be the last. Second, these waiters were part of a national abolitionist movement, as evidenced by their contributions in 1846 to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and their letter to the *Standard* reporting on the incident in 1847. Third, these waiters—although involved in a public altercation which newspapers labeled a “riot”—did not lose their jobs. In fact, many of them continued to work at the Cataract House for several years, most notably John Morrison, who remained at the Cataract—and continued his work on the Underground Railroad—at least until the early 1860s.

In 1853, waiters at the Cataract House were involved in another Underground Railroad event. This one captured national attention. Patrick Sneed was red-haired and freckled, a cooper by training, with a mixture of African American, Jewish, and Native American ancestry. He had escaped from slavery in 1849, most likely from Washington, D.C., where he been taken by Edwin Delon, the master of Sneed’s half-brother Adam Mendenhall. Sneed had been working at the Cataract Hotel as a waiter, using the name Joseph Watson. Suddenly, on Sunday afternoon, August 27, 1853, about 4:00 p.m., two police officers—J.K. Tyler and Boyington—arrived with a warrant for Sneed’s arrest. Sneed was not charged with escaping from slavery but with the murder in July 1849 of James W. Jones in Savannah.
Three substantial rewards awaited the person who captured his murderer, one for $1500, another for $1000, and a third for $300.

Earlier in the season, an unnamed “citizen of Savannah” had recognized Patrick Sneed as one of the waiters in the Cataract Hotel. This Savannah citizen then travelled to Saratoga Springs, where he supposedly met A.E. Jones, brother of the murdered man. Jones then wrote a letter to Deputy Marshall Joseph K. Tyler, containing copies of arrest warrants and reward notices.

What happened next is best told through Patrick Sneed’s own recollections, augmented by the Buffalo Commercial Advertiser and the Buffalo Republic, who cited Officer Tyler as their direct source. Many other newspapers also carried details of the story. When Tyler, Pierce, and Boyington appeared at the Cataract House, its proprietors (by this time Solon Whitney, Dexter Jerauld, and James F. Trott) asserted that they had no wish to obstruct justice, but they declined to help the marshals arrest Watson/Sneed. The officers then resorted to a ruse: they called Sneed out of the dining room, using the pretext that they wished to tip him for service at dinner. Immediately, Boyington clapped handcuffs on one of Sneed’s wrists, but Sneed “shouted lustily for assistance,” and estimates of sixty to a hundred waiters poured out of the dining room to help him. They dragged Sneed back into the dining hall, tore him from the hands of the officers (in the process ripping

127 Buffalo Daily Courier, August 30, 1853.
“nearly every vestige of his clothing” from him), shut and barred the doors at the end of the hall, and stood guard, preventing the officers from following.\textsuperscript{128} Sneed told his own account to Benjamin Drew three years later:

Then a constable of Buffalo came in, on Sunday after dinner, and sent the barkeeper into the dining-room for me. I went into the hall, and met the constable—I had my jacket in my hand, and was going to put it up. He stepped up to me. "Here, Watson," (this was the name I assumed on escaping) "you waited on me, and I'll give you some change." His fingers were then in his pocket, and he dropped a quarter dollar on the floor. I told him, "I have not waited on you—you must be mistaken in the man, and I don't want another waiter's money." He approached,—I suspected, and stepped back toward the dining-room door. By that time he made a grab at me, caught me by the collar of my shirt and vest,—then four more constables, he had brought with him, sprung on me,—they dragged me to the street door—there was a jam—I hung on by the doorway. The head constable shackled my left hand. I had on a new silk cravat twice round my neck; he hung on to this, twisting it till my tongue lollled out of my mouth, but he could not start me through the door. By this time the waiters pushed through the crowd,—there were three hundred visitors there at the time,—and Smith and Grave, colored waiters, caught me by the hands,—then the others came on, and dragged me from the officers by main force.\textsuperscript{129}

One gentleman in the hotel shouted for the gathering crowd to help the officers, but “none appeared anxious to interfere.” An African American man then attacked the “gentleman” with a hatchet, who defended himself with a chair, shouting for his pistols. Boyington, meanwhile, drew his revolver and fired at a man’s head. Only a misfire in the pistol saved the man’s life, but the shot created a stampede, in the middle of which the officers forced the door.\textsuperscript{130} Too late. As Sneed described the ensuing chase, waiters “dragged me over chairs and every thing, down to the ferry way. I got into the cars [the inclined railway had been built in 1845], and the waiters were lowering me down, when the constables came and stopped them, saying, "Stop that murderer!"—they called me a murderer! Then I was dragged down the steps by the waiters, and flung into the ferry boat.” He made it within fifty feet of the Canadian shore before the ferryman discovered that he was carrying an accused murderer. Instead of taking Sneed to Canada, he brought him to the American shore. “They could not land me at the usual place because of the waiters,” Sneed recounted, so they took him to the Maid of the Mist landing, just south of the Suspension Bridge.

The chase was not yet over. As Tyler and Boyington ran to the dock, they were followed by “troops of negroes,” about 250 to three hundred of them, with waiters from the Cataract augmented by waiters from other hotels and throughout the village, “all the black population of the place,” “armed.” They met the ferryboat at the Maid of the Mist landing. The two officers recruited “a band of Irish laborers,” about two to three hundred in number, living in the village. In the resulting fracas, “long and severe,” blacks yielded to Irish assailants, and officers Tyler and Boyington shackled Sneed, bundled him into a carriage and took him to the Lockport Railroad, where they boarded the train to Buffalo. During the ride, Tyler questioned Sneed, who admitted that he had been enslaved by Mr. Dillon but who had never met Jones.\textsuperscript{131}

Even at the time of Sneed’s arrest, many people considered the charges to be fraudulent, an attempt to get him back into slavery rather than an honest accusation. Nevertheless, Sneed was committed to jail by

\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Buffalo Daily Courier}, August 30, 1853; \textit{Niagara Courier}, August 31, 1853; \textit{Utica Daily Gazette}, August 31, 1853; \textit{Syracuse Daily Standard}, August 31, 1853, copied from the \textit{Buffalo Republic}.

\textsuperscript{129} Patrick Sneed in Benjamin Drew, \textit{A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves} (Boston: J.P. Jewett, 1856), 102-03. No waiter named Grave appeared in the 1850 or 1860 census. Several waiters named Smith were present, however: George Smith, age 21 in 1860, was born in Canada. Henry Smith was 35 in 1860, born in Washington, D.C. James Smith, age 30 in 1860, reported his birthplace as Michigan.

\textsuperscript{130} \textit{Buffalo Daily Courier}, August 30, 1853; \textit{Niagara Courier}, August 31, 1853; \textit{Utica Daily Gazette}, August 31, 1853; \textit{Niagara Courier}, August 31, 1853; \textit{Utica Daily Gazette}, August 31, 1853.

\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Buffalo Daily Courier}, August 30, 1853; \textit{Niagara Courier}, August 31, 1853; \textit{Utica Daily Gazette}, August 31, 1853.
police justice Isaac P. Vanderpoel at 10:00 p.m. that evening. Sneed immediately asked to see a lawyer. Sneed does not name this man in his 1856 account, but he was Eli Cook, who served him well throughout the hearing. The constables were “astonished” to see that he had hired “one of the best lawyers in the place.” Sneed told them that “as scared as they thought I was, I wanted them to know that I had my senses about me.”

The trial opened ten days later, and it was over on day eleven. New information came to light, including a letter from Alfred E. Jones (supposed brother of the murdered to man) to Joseph K. Tyler, offering him $300 in cash for the delivery of Sneed. “If he is convicted I will make it an advantageous job for you,” Tyler added.

The court required a proper affidavit, and Jones assured Marshal Tyler that he would have it within two weeks. “You have the right man,” he wrote on August 31, “and you can swear to the fact, as I had him spotted there, and the person that saw him the day before you arrested him, knew him well, and recognized him as the man. . . . Do not let him escape, as I shall not fail to put you in possession of the right paper.” Tyler heard nothing more from Jones.

More details about Sneed’s background came out in testimony at the hearing. Sneed’s half-brother Adam Mendenhall was owned by an editor named DeLeon. Both brothers escaped and went to Newark, Ohio. The District Attorney in that county reported that he had received several letters—full of contradictions—from Sneed’s owner, David Dillon, who asserted sometimes that they were fugitives from justice, other times that they were fugitive slaves, and still other time that they were neither. Warrants came to Newark, Ohio, for both men. The charge was murder. Patrick escaped, but Adam was returned South. He was never tried, however, only sent back to his original owner. “We are very confident,” reported Samuel B. Sherwood, a Newark banker, “that the charge was only a pretext to get them back into slavery.” J.M. Byers wrote, “there is no doubt at all of the innocence of Sneed of the charge of murder. He is the slave of David R Dillon, who takes that means to get him back.”

Savannah witnesses also wrote, declaring both Adam Mendenhall and Patrick Sneed to be fugitives from slavery but innocent of murder. Judge Mordecai Sheftall wrote from Savannah,

Such a rumor, that either Adam Mendenhall, or his brother Patrick, knew anything or was in any way concerned in the perpetration of the act, never prevailed in Savannah, and does not now prevail. I state to you sir, positively, that no affidavit was ever made by any person or persons against Adam or his brother Patrick, charging them with the murder of Jones, nor have any warrants founded on affidavits been issued against them. The design of Mr. David R. Dillon in moving in this business, is to obtain the possession of his slave Patrick. . . . He well knows they are not guilty of Jones’ murder, but it is the only plan he could devise, they being in a free State, to obtain the possession of his slave.

Toward the end of the hearing, Charles Follett, District Attorney of Licking County, Ohio, doubtless must have made the audience gasp when he testified that he thought letters written by Alfred E. Jones were in the same hand as those written by David R. Dillon. Sneed’s counsel, Eli Cook, took two hours to sum up his argument, in a “most thorough, fair, and beautiful manner,” reported the Albany Evening Journal, and “the intentions in regard to Sneed are as clear as the dawn.” Judge Sheldon thought so, too. On day eleven, court opened at 9:00 a.m. and the judge released Sneed by 10:00 a.m. Sneed immediately left for Canada. Most likely, he crossed the river at Black Rock.

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133 Albany Evening Journal, September 9, 1853.

134 Samuel Sherwood to Eli Cook, August 21 [?], 1853; J.M. Byers to Eli Cook, September 1, 1853, reported in Albany Evening Journal, September 9, 1853.

135 Mordecai Sheftall [Sheftall] to O.A. Blair, February 12, 1854, reported in Albany Evening Journal, September 9, 1853.

136 Reported in Albany Evening Journal, September 9, 1853; Benjamin Drew, North-Side View of Slavery (1856), 104. When Sneed reached Canada, he reported, he walked thirty miles to the Clifton House. His lucrative work as a waiter was disrupted, and he was still paying his lawyer three years later.
The verdict of innocent received confirmation when Judge Sheldon received a letter from a slaveholder in Savannah. His words are worth quoting, as a remarkable example of white elite members of Savannah society standing up for Patrick Sneed. “I have conversed with several gentlemen on this subject,” wrote the author,

and there is but one opinion about the matter, and that is, that you acted perfectly right in discharging the man. The whole matter was fraud from beginning to end... and everyone here was very indignant that Dillon should try to impose upon the officers and Court at Buffalo in such a manner. Mr. Alfred E. Jones and David R. Dillon are one and the same man, as you suspected, and no one here believes that Patrick is the murderer of James W. Jones, and Dillon does not believe it. It was by fraud that he got him arrested, and it was by fraud that he obtained the requisition from Gov. Cobb. The persons I have these facts from are all slaveholders, and some of them lawyers, and all are respectable, and I assure you that the people of Savannah justify you in the course you pursued.

Three years later, Sneed was still in Canada, still missing his lucrative job as a waiter at the Cataract House and having “hardly got over” the cost of paying his lawyer. 137

One well-documented escape story involved a waiter in Niagara Falls in the mid-1850s. Nancy Berry was born in St. Louis to Polly Berry Wash, an enslaved women who had become free by living in Illinois. She was then returned to slavery in St. Louis. Sale of her husband farther South led her to vow never to subject her daughters Nancy and Lucy Ann to the same fate. When Nancy’s mistress, Mary Berry married H.S. Cox from Philadelphia, they brought Nancy Berry with them to Niagara Falls on their honeymoon. Following her mother’s instructions, Nancy Berry took her first opportunity to flee. Nancy told the story in her own words to her sister Lucy Ann:

In the morning, Mr. and Mrs. Cox went for a drive, telling me that I could have the day to do as I pleased. The shores of Canada had been tantalizing my longing gaze for some days, and I was bound to reach there long before my mistress returned. So I locked up Mrs. Cox’s trunk and put the key under the pillow, where I was sure she would find it, and I made a strike for freedom! A servant in the hotel gave me all necessary information and even assisted me in getting away. Some kind of a festival was going on, and a large crowd was marching from the rink to the river, headed by a band of music. In such a motley throng I was unnoticed, but was trembling with fear of being detected. It seemed an age before the ferry boat arrived, which at last appeared, enveloped in a gigantic wreath of black smoke. Hastily I embarked, and as the boat stole away into the misty twilight and among crushing fields of ice, though the air was chill and gloomy, I felt the warmth of freedom as I neared the Canada shore. I landed, without question, and found my mother’s friend with but little difficulty, who assisted me to get work and support myself. Not long afterwards, I married a prosperous farmer, who provided me with a happy home, where I brought my children into the world without the sin of slavery to strive against. 138

Nancy Berry did not record the hotel in which she stayed with the Cox family. Almost certainly, however, it was either the Cataract or the International.

On October 11, 1859, Rachel Smith, a young Quaker woman from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, checked into the Cataract House with two friends, Elenor Smith and P.B. Preston. Headwaiter John Morrison noticed her name in the book and introduced himself, asking if she knew a man named Joseph Smith. Yes, she said, he is my father. Well, he said, “I would like to tell you about the poor fugitives I ferry across the river.

137 Schenectady Cabinet, November 22, 1853, copied from the Buffalo Express, Northern Christian Advocate, November 23, 1853, copied from the Buffalo Republic.

Many of them tell me that the first place they came to in Pennsylvania was Joseph Smith’s. I frequently see them when I visit my parents at Lundy’s Lane. Many of them have nice little homes and are doing well.” During two of the nights that Rachel Smith stayed at the Cataract House, Morrison “ferried some across the river.”

Rachel Smith’s signature in the Cataract Hotel Register, October 11, 1859.
Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding this.
Courtesy Niagara County Public Library.

Although this study does not deal with Niagara Falls in the later nineteenth century, it is likely that the practice of hiring black waiters in Niagara Falls declined precipitously by 1900, as it did elsewhere. Lorenzo Greene and Carter G. Woodson suggested that, throughout the North and West, “most of the best hotels and restaurants replaced their Negro waiters with whites” between 1890 and 1917. During World War I, many such

139 Robert C. Smedley, History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania (1883), 231.
establishments also replaced male waiters with female waitresses, filling in for the shortage of men during the war.  

**Conclusion:** The Cataract House, under the director of Parkhurst Whitney and his successors (son Solon Whitney, sons-in-law Dexter Jerauld, James Trott) was a world class hotel with an international reputation. The Cataract House was also the center of Underground Railroad activism in Niagara Falls, one of the most important Underground Railroad nodes in the entire nation.

The national and international importance of Niagara Falls was due to two main factors:

1) It was located at the convergence of road and rail lines that reached all over the U.S. and Canada, bringing people to one of the narrowest international crossing point in the entire Great Lakes region. Like the narrow end of a funnel, Niagara Falls attracted people escaping from slavery throughout the South, from Maryland to Louisiana, channeling them directly to Canada on the ferry at the base of the Falls or, after 1855, on the Suspension Bridge.

2) African American waiters, with at least the tacit support of the Whitney family, formed a well-organized, long-term, and proactive network of Underground Railroad supporters, with wide contacts on both sides of the border.

The importance of the Cataract House as an Underground Railroad node cannot be over-estimated. Waiters who worked as Underground Railroad agents made this site one of the most important fugitive destinations in the whole Underground Railroad network.

**Site of the Eagle Hotel and International Hotel**  
Southwest corner Falls and Main Streets  
Site of Comfort Inn

**Significance:** The Eagle Hotel was the first hotel in Niagara Falls, owned after 1815 by Parkhurst Whitney. In 1852, B.F. Childs added on to this building to create the world renowned International Hotel, equal in size and stature to the Cataract. Like the Cataract, this hotel employed black waiters. In 1847, waiters from both hotels attempted unsuccessfully to rescue a young woman staying at the International Hotel with her enslaver.

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International Hotel, 1857

International Hotel, 1881

http://64.30.240.5/nfguides/ho41.jpg
Description: The Eagle tavern was built as a log structure on Main Street in 1814. Parkhurst Whitney bought it in 1815. At that time, the building had only one room, used as “bed room, bar room, kitchen, dining room, public hall and office.” In 1819-20, Whitney added a two-story brick step gabled addition, with a wide porch and a large gilt eagle over the door, with parlors and bedrooms for guests. The older section contained the kitchen and dining room on the first floor, with bedrooms for the help upstairs. In front, a tall sign with gold letters read “P. Whitney, Eagle Tavern.” A wide verandah opened on the Main Street and Bridge Street sides. A large yellow barn stood on the Falls Street side of the property, guarded, remembered Frances Bixby, by “a large mastiff named Carlo, a great friend of us children, but very dignified toward strangers.” In 1829, a
journalist recommended the Eagle Hotel as “being in the centre of a pleasant and flourishing village, contiguous to the rapids and the Falls, surrounded by fruit trees, with gardens in the rear, renders it a desirable residence for the visitor.” 141

In 1825, Whitney purchased the Cataract House on Main Street just south of the Eagle Hotel. For a time, he operated the two buildings under one management, but in 1835, he sold the Eagle to Benjamin Rathbun. Rathbun developed plans for a huge new building on the site of the Eagle Hotel, but his own bankruptcy and accusations of fraud and forgery led to a prison term. 142

In 1852, B.F. Childs, for many years proprietor of the Eagle, and John T. Bush of Lockport hired James Shepard, formerly of Lockport, to build the new International Hotel at the southwest corner of Falls and Main Street. “The International is a new hotel of immense dimension—one of the largest out of New York city, and capable of sleeping over six hundred people,” reported the Niagara Courier on June 22, 1853. “It is the Hotel of the Falls,” touted the Lockport Democrat and Courier. John T. Bush expanded the International Hotel in 1856-57, when he took down the old Eagle Hotel on the south side of the International Hotel and replaced it with a new addition to the International. 143

The International Hotel quickly earned a reputation as “a strictly first class hotel.” The Souvenir of Niagara Falls, published in 1881, described the hotel as “a stately four story structure,” “contiguous to the business center of the city,” “provided with every modern convenience and comfort for its guests.” Lighted with electricity, the hotel provided electric call bells in every guest room. Its “office, lobby, reading rooms, and parlors are finely decorated,” with billiard parlors and tennis courts for entertainment and lavish and selected fare in its dining room, with an “accomplished chef.”

Several people subsequently owned the International Hotel, including the Schoellkopf and Gluck families. Alva Gluck, who had previously managed the Spencer House, was proprietor of the International in the 1880s. John F. McDonald bought both the International Hotel and the Cataract House in the late nineteenth century. 144

The International Hotel burned on January 3, 1918, and was never rebuilt. 145

141 Vine H. Hickey, “The Old Eagle Hotel,” Niagara Falls Gazette, May 18, 1901; Frances Bixby, “Early Life in Niagara Village,” Niagara Falls Gazette, April 30, 1938; Niagara Falls Journal, January 4, 1918. When Whitney bought the Cataract House, he moved the gilt eagle to the Cataract House. When Peter A. Porter sold the Cataract House to John McDonald, he kept the eagle. After is death, it was refurbished and transferred to the historical society exhibits at the Edward Dean Adams station of the Niagara Falls Power Company and then to the local history room of the Niagara Falls Public Library. From article in Eagle Hotel folder, Niagara Falls Public Library, n.d.


143 Lockport Democrat and Courier, July 21, 1852, July 24, 1852; Niagara Democrat, July 22, 1852; Niagara Falls Gazette, February 25, 1857. Notes from the Niagara County Historian’s Office.

144 Niagara Falls Journal, January 4, 1918.

145 Niagara Falls Gazette, January 3, 1918.
Discussion: For a time, the Eagle tavern was the only hotel in Niagara Falls. Niagara Falls resident Vine H. Hickey, who played around the Eagle Hotel when he was a boy, recalled the Eagle Hotel as “a homelike hostelry.” Its dining room was the scene of all kinds of entertainments, including concerts by people as varied as Jenny Lind and Swiss bell ringers, and exhibitions by a giant Scotsman and a magician who did card tricks. Famous people such as Marquis de Lafayette, who made a triumphant tour of the U.S. in 1825 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the U.S.; Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune; General Winfield Scott; Henry Ward Beecher, perhaps the most famous preacher in the country; Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin; and Jenny Lind, the “Swedish nightingale.” Local groups such as the Odd Fellows regularly met in the Eagle Hotel dining room.146

African American tourists were welcome at the Eagle Hotel. Charles B. Ray, African American agent from New York City for the Colored American, stayed at the Eagle when he visited Niagara Falls (for the second time) in the fall of 1837. After riding the train an hour and a half from Buffalo, he recalled, “I took my lodgings at the Eagle Hotel (American side), where I was treated like a gentleman.” After listening all night to the roar of the falls, he woke up at 6 a.m., had breakfast at eight thirty, and set off as a tourist. 147

Judging from 1850 census records, the Eagle Hotel did not employ African Americans. In 1847, black waiters—almost certainly from the Cataract House—tried to inform a young enslaved woman, brought from Alabama by her “owner,” Mr. Stephenson, that she was legally free by the laws of the State of New York. Physical confrontations in the street in front of the Eagle Hotel and then on the train to Lockport brought national newspaper attention, accentuated by attacks on African Americans that evening. Hollis White, then proprietor of the Eagle Hotel, supported the efforts of Mr. Stephenson to prevent communication between the young woman and the waiters who would help her to freedom. (For detailed information about this 1847 affair, see the Cataract House description.)

After the International Hotel was completed, proprietors began to employ African American waiters, using the Cataract House model. Many of these, like many of those at the Cataract House, had escaped from slavery. In 1860, there were fifty-two black workers at the International Hotel. Thirty-six percent of them listed their birthplaces as a slave state (including two born in Washington, D.C., three from Kentucky, nine from Maryland, and five from Virginia). Twenty-three percent (twelve people) listed their birthplace as Canada. Twenty-one (40.4 percent) listed their birthplace as a free state (New York, 10; Illinois, 1; New Jersey, 2; Ohio,


6; Pennsylvania, 1, and Vermont, 1). In all, fifty-nine percent listed their birthplace as either a southern state or Canada, suggesting the strong possibility that they (or their parents) had escaped from slavery.

**Site of the Free Soil Hotel**
Main Street, west side, just north of Falls Street
(later the site of the Falls Hotel, shown on this 1875 map)
Niagara Falls, New York

**Significance:** James S. Patterson (a.k.a. Samuel J. Patterson) represents the economic success that some African Americans achieved in Niagara Falls. Born in Virginia, Patterson came to Niagara Falls about 1836 to become a porter and waiter at the Cataract House, an Underground Railroad activist, and a hotel owner himself. James Patterson was remarkable, not only because he owned a hotel but also because he did not fear to advertise his political principles by naming it the Free Soil Hotel.

![Atlas of Niagara County (1875)](image)

*Falls Hotel is on west side of Main Street, top of this map. Note home of S. Patterson just behind it, on Mechanic Street.*

**Description:** We have no images of the Free Soil Hotel. It was described as “a small wooden building,” which Patterson purchased about 1850 and rebuilt as the Free Soil House. This was later rebuilt again, most likely by Patterson, to form the Western Hotel. The *Souvenir History of Niagara County* noted in 1901 that the original Falls
Hotel on the northwest corner of Falls and Main Streets burned while Jonas Minton was proprietor, [about 1861]. Patterson then named his own building the Falls Hotel. James Patterson seems to have retired from active management of the hotel in the early 1860s, leasing this hotel to other proprietors. R.A. Ferguson kept this hotel for seven years before yielding the proprietorship to Chester R. Whiting. 148

**Discussion:** Patterson named his hotel the Free Soil House, reflecting the new Free Soil Party which had formed in August 1848 to oppose the extension of slavery into the territories acquired at the end of the Mexican War in May 1848. Most likely, he also hoped to attract antislavery advocates as guests.

According to his obituary, James S. Patterson was born in Virginia in 1809. He moved to Alabama when he was still a child. The 1880 U.S. census noted that both his parents had been born in Alabama, but whether James moved there voluntarily with them or through sale as an enslaved person, we do not know. He came north in 1836, and his family arrived in 1844. Patterson worked as a porter at the Cataract House and then purchased a small wooden building on Falls Street “which he had rebuilt into a hotel and called the Free Soil House. Several years afterward the Fall Hotel was built and called the Western, which name it bore until after the burning of the Falls Hotel on the corner in 1861.” A note in the *Niagara Falls Gazette* in 1910 asked readers, “Do you remember when James Patterson, colored Porter for the Cataract House, handled all the town’s baggage from the corner of Falls and Main Street to the Cataract House on a two-wheeled cart, and how sometimes he had a pretty big job? Do you remember the furor that was raised when the same James Patterson bought what is now the Falls Hotel for $900.00?” 149

In 1850, James Patterson was listed in the census as Samuel (T. or J.) Patterson, a tavern keeper with property worth $3000, born in Virginia, Black, age 35. His wife Jane was also thirty-five years old, born in New York. They had a son Henry (age 15) and a daughter Georgianna (age 9). Both children had been born in New York State and attended school. An Irish-born laborer, James McKinney, age thirty-three, lived with the family. All members of the household except James were listed as white.

In 1860, the census listed James Patterson as a hotelkeeper, with real property worth $8000 and personal property worth $600. He had been born in Virginia and was 48 years old. His wife was listed as Laura [perhaps meaning Lovisa], age 48, with children Charles (age 12) and Georgianna (age 16). A servant Mary Markee, age 15, also lived with them. All household members were listed as mulatto.

The Pattersons most likely retired as hotel proprietors in the early 1860s, leasing the Falls Hotel to new operators. Patterson’s obituary in 1887 noted that he had “retired from business” about twenty-five years ago, “leasing his hotel property and residing on Mechanic Street.” 150

The 1865 census did not list any occupation for James Patterson, now fifty-three years old, with real property worth $750 (probably the value of his house, not including the hotel). The census noted that both James and his wife Jane, age 52, were born in Virginia. Georgiana, age 22, was listed as born in Chautauqua County, New York. James Young, 26, born in Canada, boarded with the family. Lorisa (or perhaps Lovina or Luvisa) Douglas, a widow aged 76, born in Connecticut, probably Jane Patterson’s mother, also lived with them, as did a nine-year-old girl named Lula, born in Monroe County, New York.

Lula was most likely Mary Luvisa Bruce, as identified by Lisa B. Lee Anderson, a Patterson descendent. In Anderson’s words, “Luvisa [James’ wife] was a dear friend of Mary Luvisa’s grandmother, Priscilla Geer (they were both [hair] dressers). After Mary Luvisa’s parents split, her mother, Caroline, remarried and supposedly Mary and the step-father, John Guy, didn’t get along, so Caroline sent Mary to live with "Gramma Patterson," who ran a hairdressing school, and Mary became a hairdresser.” 151

This story is consistent with references in the 1870 U.S. census to “Luly,” who was listed as age fourteen and “part Indian.” Jane Patterson’s mother Lovisa Douglass also lived with the family. She, too, was “part Indian,” age 90, born in Connecticut and blind, suggesting that Luly may have been related to either Lovisa Jane Patterson or Lovisa Douglass. James Patterson, age 58, was listed as a hotel porter with real estate worth $10,000 and real property worth $1500 (most likely including his house and hotel). Jane was now fifty-seven years old. Daughter Georgiana, age 26, now owned real property worth $4000 and personal property worth $300. She was married to James Young, hotel porter, born in Canada, age 32. Eliza Young, age 20, born


151 Email from Lisa B. Anderson to Pete Ames, August 22, 2011.
in Canada and most likely James Young’s sister, lived with the family as a “hair work mans [?]” Luly was most likely Mary Lovisa, learning the hair dressing business in the Patterson-Young household. All members of the family were listed as mulatto.

In 1875, James and Lovisa Patterson lived alone. James was now listed as age 65, a whitewasher, with real property worth $2000. His wife, now called Lovisa, was listed as age 62.

By 1880, James S. Patterson, age 70, was listed as a carriage driver. His wife, “L.J.,” was 56. The Pattersons were once again surrounded by family. L.J.’s mother, now called Louisa Douglas, was one hundred years old. Daughter Georgiana, now 38 years old, lived with her parents, as did Georgiana’s three-year-old daughter, born in Canada. L.J.’s sister Frances Gilman, age 59 and born in Connecticut, lived with the family. So did Frances Outley, housekeeper, age 51, born in Bermuda. In 1880 (or 1881), adopted daughter Mary Lovisa married Charles Kersey Jackson, a cook in the Cataract House, in St. Peter’s Church in Niagara Falls.

The Pattersons also supported the businesses of other African American families in Niagara Falls. In 1881, Henry Hamilton kept a photography studio next to the Falls Hotel. An notice in the Niagara Falls Gazette advertised “Hamilton’s PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS. Call and see specimens. Main Street, next to the Falls Hotel.” Henry Hamilton was an African American, born about 1851 in Niagara Falls. His father L. H. F. Hamilton, born in Washington, D.C., was a waiter at the Cataract House in 1850 and later became a tailor, owning property worth $1000 in 1865. 152

James Patterson died in 1887. He had attended St. Paul’s Methodist Episcopal Church for many years, and Rev. K. P. Jervis, pastor of that church, held the funeral service in the Patterson home. As befit his status, Patterson was buried in a rosewood casket with silver trimmings. Georgiana and her husband James Young sent a floral tribute in the form of a pillow with the word Father. His “adopted grand children,” most likely the children of Mary Luvisa Patterson Jackson and Charles Kersey Jackson, sent a cross. Mr. and Mrs. L.H.F. Hamilton, old friends from the Cataract, whose son Henry kept the photographic studio next door to the Falls Hotel, sent a basket, and L.H.F. Hamilton was one of the pallbearers. Patterson was buried in lot 97 of Oakwood Cemetery, with a substantial family monolith labeled Patterson on one side and Jackson on the other. 153

By the 1860s, the Pattersons lived on Mechanic Street, just west of the Free Soil/Western/Falls Hotel. After James and Luvisa died, their house was moved next door to the back of a lot on Falls Street to make room for a new hotel, the Robinson House, operated by Mary Luvisa Patterson Jackson and her husband Charles Kersey Jackson. For more on the Patterson-Jackson families, see Robinson House.

Site of the Patterson House and Robinson House Hotel
313 Prospect Street (originally called Mechanic Street)
Niagara Falls, New York

Significance: James and Luvisa Patterson, operators of the Free Soil Hotel on Main Street, lived in this house. After their daughter Mary Luvisa Patterson married Charles Kersey Jackson from Virginia, the Pattersons moved this house to a nearby back lot on Fall Street and built the Robinson House Hotel here, kept by daughter and son-in-law.

152 Niagara Falls Gazette, August 23, 1881. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding this. 1850 U.S. census and 1865 N.Y.S. census.

153 Obituary, Niagara Falls Gazette, c. 1887; Email from Pete Ames, August 22, 2011.
Description: Two important buildings occupied this site on Mechanic Street (which later became Prospect Street). James and Luvisa Patterson, owners of the Free Soil House (which became the Falls Hotel), built their own house here, most likely in the late 1860s. After James Patterson died in 1884, Luvisa continued to live in the house until her death. A local resident described the building in 1929, after it had been abandoned for many years, as “a small frame cottage.” It had a “wide low porch all houses of that vintage proudly boasted. It is painted a dull red, dimmed with age, while broken shutters hang from several of the empty windows.” About 1892, the house was moved to the rear of a lot next door, later owned by John F. McDonald. It was replaced by the Robinson House, a hotel at 313 Prospect Street owned by James and Luvisa Patterson’s daughter and son-in-law, Mary Luvisa Patterson Jackson and Charles Kersey Jackson. When Charles Kersey Jackson died in 1929, the small frame Patterson house was demolished. We do not know when the Robinson House came down.  

Discussion: This house was originally the home of James Patterson, hotel owner and whitewasher, and Jane Luvisa Patterson, hairdresser. By 1929, when the home was demolished, local resident Julius Krakoski remembered it as “the home of Jim Patterson, a slave who escaped from the South during the early years of the Civil War.” “He built the little cottage some time in the latter part of the 60’s and set himself up in business as the village whitewasher,” Krakoski told a reporter for the Niagara Falls Gazette, and was “a highly respected negro [sic],” “known as an authority on whitewashing for miles around.” By the 1920s, local people had forgotten that James Patterson had once owned a hotel, the Free Soil House, on Falls Street, which later became the Falls Hotel. James and Jane Luvisa had at least one son and a daughter, Georgianna. They also adopted a daughter, Mary Luvisa Bruce Patterson (called Lula). Jane Luvisa’s mother, Lovisa Douglass, also lived with them. (For more on the Patterson family, see the description of the Free Soil House.)

In 1880, Mary Luvisa Patterson married Charles Kersey Jackson in St. Peter’s Episcopal Church. Lisa B. Lee Anderson, great-granddaughter of Charles Kersey Jackson and Luvisa Patterson Jackson, tells their story. Jackson was born enslaved in Richmond, Virginia, in March 1847. His mother was Martha Randolph, born in 1823, daughter of John Randolph (known as John Randolph of Roanoke), Congressman and U.S. ambassador to Russia. John Randolph raised Martha as his daughter and taught her to read and write. When Randolph died in 1833, he emancipated his slaves but left Martha’s name off the list, since he did not consider her enslaved. Martha married John Jackson, with whom she had seven children. After her husband died in


1863, Mary brought three of her children—Charles, William, and Mary—to New York City, “passing through Yankee lines to freedom,” as Lisa Anderson wrote.  

Charles Kersey Jackson’s grandfather, John Randolph was a descendent of Pocahontas and one of America’s most brilliant, influential, and eccentric politicians, leader of the conservative wing of the Democratic-Republican Party, devoted to farming, limited federal government, and states’ rights. He was also known for his fiery oratory and ascerbic wit. He was “the most forceful figure at the Capitol,” according to his biographer Russell Kirk. First elected to the House of Representatives in 1799, when he was only twenty-six, Randolph served fourteen terms in the House and one unexpired term in the Senate before going to Russia as U.S. ambassador in 1832. He resigned because of ill health and died in 1833.

As a slave owner, Randolph used hundreds of enslaved people to operate his farms. At the same time, he espoused antislavery, at least in theory. In 1816, he was one of the founders of the American Colonization Society, whose purpose was to raise money to send freed people to the new colony of Liberia. In his will in 1819, he stated, “I give and bequeath to all my slaves their freedom, heartily regretting that I have ever been the owner of one.” He also directed that money be provided to settle these freed people on land in Ohio. His will was contested, but in 1846, 383 of people he had once enslaved settled in Rumley, Shelby County, Ohio.

Randolph never married, and it is quite possible that Martha Randolph was indeed his daughter. If her son Charles Jackson was born in Richmond in 1847, Martha must have remained in Virginia while the rest of the former Randolph enslaved community went to Ohio in 1846. Charles Jackson eventually settled in Jersey City, New Jersey, as Lisa Anderson noted, but he lived part of the year in Niagara Falls, New York, where he worked as a cook at the Cataract House. In 1880, the census listed him as a resident in both places.

By that time, Charles Kersey Jackson had met his future wife, Mary Luvisa Bruce Patterson, daughter of James and Luvisa Patterson. James Patterson had been the first African American hotel owner in Niagara Falls, owning and operating the Free Soil House, and his wife Jane Lvuisa (or Luvisa Jane) operated a hair dressing school. Charles and Mary Luvisa married in St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in 1880 when Charles was thirty-two years old and Mary Luvisa was twenty-seven. They had four daughters, Paulenia G. (1882-1917), Florence Randolph (1884-1965, born in New Jersey), Ethel Luvisa (1895-1884, born in New Jersey), and Cora (1895-1895, who died as an infant).

Charles Kersey Jackson became owner and chef of the Robinson House, built in the early 1890s. The 1900 census listed Charles as fifty-three years old, born in Virginia, fully employed as a caterer. He rented his house, perhaps from his wife’s family. Mary L. Jackson was forty-seven years old, born in New York. Three daughters, Paulenia, Florence, and Ethel (eighteen, fourteen, and four) lived with them. Two doors away lived another African American family. Richard Morgan, born in Virginia in 1867, was listed as a waiter, living with his wife Victoria (born in Virginia in 1856), and sixteen-year-old adopted son Victor Robinson (born in 1883 in Rhode Island), also a waiter. Four boarders also lived in this household: forty-four-year-old George Larke, a “licensed vendor” born in Virginia; thirty-seven-year-old Robert Edmondston, a porter born in Australia (of parents born in Washington, D.C.), and Edmondston’s two children, both born in New Jersey—Hugh, born in 1891, and Albein, born in 1889. Was this household living and working in the hotel itself?

Florence Randolph, daughter of Charles and Mary Luvisa Jackson, married a man named Lee and moved to Buffalo. Florence’s granddaughter, Lisa Lee Anderson, wrote, “In order to be able to purchase and run the Robinson House, Charles had to pass as white, but he never denied his heritage to his family, whom he’d often invite up for Sunday dinner, from Buffalo. They’d have to enter through the servants’ quarters, so as not to alarm the white guests, but his family was a very important part of his life.”

156 Email, Lisa Lee Anderson to Pete Ames, August 22, 2011.

157 Email, Lisa Lee Anderson to Pete Ames, August 22, 2011.


159 Le Family Tree, Ancestry.com.

160 Email, Lisa Lee Anderson to Pete Ames, August 22, 2011.
Charles Kersey Jackson died on October 14, 1929. He was buried in Oakwood Cemetery in the Patterson-Jackson family plot. Mary Luvisa Jackson died in 1935.

Site of the Home of Peter A. Porter, Elizabeth Porter, and Josephine Porter
Southeast corner of Buffalo Avenue and Fourth Street (site Fallside Inn)
Niagara Falls, New York

Significance: From this house, Elizabeth Porter and Peter A. Porter assisted African Americans in many ways. In a dramatic incident in 1861, they helped a young woman named Cassey escape from slave-catchers. Although both his wives came from southern slaveholding families, Peter A. Porter served as colonel of the Eighth Heavy Artillery during the Civil War, facing Confederate troops led by his cousin at Cold Harbor in 1864, where he lost his life.

“Removal of Old Col. Porter House Cuts Links to Early Falls,”
*Niagara Falls Gazette*, May 18, 1935

Site of Peter A. Porter family home, August 2011,
Fallside Hotel, looking south toward river
Porter Home labeled “Mrs. P.A. Porter” in the *Atlas of Niagara County* (1875), along the banks of the Niagara River.

**Description:** Incorporating details from the French Second Empire style, the Porters built this elegant house as the centerpiece of their estate on the banks of the Niagara River in the late 1850s, constructed from plans reputedly brought directly from Paris. In 1900, Henry Perky of the Natural Food Company purchased the property. Occupied from 1909-1935 by the University Club, the house was demolished by the National Biscuit Company in 1935.  

**Discussion:** Elizabeth Porter (April 19, 1823-) and her more famous younger brother Peter A. Porter (June 14, 1827) embodied the best ideals of public service. Their father Peter B. Porter was a general during the War of 1812 and a major real estate developer in Buffalo and Niagara Falls. Their mother Letitia Breckenridge Grayson Porter came from a slaveholding family in Kentucky and counted national politicians among her friends. Letitia Porter’s death at Black Rock on July 17, 1831, left her children without a mother.

Peter B. Porter moved to Niagara Falls in 1836, bringing with him his two children, ages thirteen and nine. They moved to a new house on the south side of Falls Street between Main and First. (See description for Peter B. Porter House site.) Elizabeth Porter became a surrogate mother to her younger brother. When their father died in March 1844, Elizabeth and Peter A. Porter continued to live in that house until the late 1850s.

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Educated at Troy Female Seminary, Elizabeth Porter also traveled widely. Egypt and Palestine were special attractions for her. When she returned to Niagara Falls, she became known as “a lady of superior intellect, high cultivation, and large fortune,” “a reigning belle,” with “a singular charm in her conversation” and “remarkable traits of character—shrewd, practical common sense, unflinching independence, and an undying love of freedom, with a tenderness of feeling, a grace of thought and manner, and a warmth of affection.”

In 1854, when she was thirty-two years old, newspapers published the rumor that she would soon wed ex-President Millard Fillmore, from Buffalo. Although they may have been personally compatible, Elizabeth Porter’s sympathies for African Americans—and perhaps also “her remarkable independence and frankness”—most likely separated her from the former President, who had signed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

Her straightforwardness, honesty, and independent thinking impressed many people. “She always strove to look at things as they were and never allowed mere conventionalities to warp her judgment from the truth and the right, or affect her utterances about manifest falsehood and wrong,” wrote one friend. Another attributed her “independence and self-reliance” to the loss of her mother when she was only eight years old, so that she was brought up in the company of men and felt comfortable expressing her opinions around them.

Peter A. Porter spent much of his time in the 1840s away from home, first in college and then in Europe. He entered Harvard in 1842 at age seventeen and graduated in 1845. He went to Europe in 1846 and spent three years in Heidelberg, Berlin, and Breslau. “I want culture,” he told a friend, “I want the equal development of all my faculties, the realization of the true, the good, and the beautiful; and for this I am willing to give my whole life if necessary.”

He returned in 1849 to oversee his considerable assets in Erie and Niagara Counties. The 1850 census listed him at home as a “gentleman,” with property worth $200,000. His sister Elizabeth lived with him, with property worth $150,000. George W. Hawley, a “gentleman,” forty years old, born in Connecticut, with property worth $10,000, lived in their household, along with his wife or sister Caroline E. Hawley, also age forty, born in Connecticut.

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162 Buffalo News, February 4, 1876, copied from Niagara Falls Gazette Rev. Dr. M. Van Rensselaer, “The Late Elizabeth L. Porter,” Niagara Falls Gazette, April 26, 1876.

163 York Evening Post, February 17, 1854.

164 Rev. Dr. M. Van Rensselaer, “The Late Elizabeth L. Porter,” Niagara Falls Gazette, April 26, 1876.


On March 30, 1852, Peter A. Porter married his cousin Mary Cabell Breckenridge (October 12, 1826-August 4, 1854). They had one child, Peter A. Porter, who was born in the house on Falls Street on October 10, 1853. He became editor of the Niagara Falls Gazette and founder of the Niagara Falls Historical Society. He died December 15, 1925. Mary Breckenridge Porter died on August 4, 1854, in the cholera epidemic that hit Niagara Falls with particular force. She was only twenty-eight years old.167

After his wife died, Peter A. Porter left home once more, first in 1854 to study law in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then to travel through Europe in September 1855. During this period, Porter developed his skills as a poet and writer. He joined the Century Club in New York City in 1853 and found a receptive audience for his work. Among other works, he published “The Spirit of Beauty” in the Knickerbocker Magazine in 1853 and “Arcadia: A Medley” in Putnam’s Magazine in 1857. He worked on plays, essays, poems, and a history of the War of 1812, based on his father’s papers. But it was in conversation, noted friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson, that he most impressed his peers. He was “gentle and wise,” with “a wit that was at once considerate and unrestrained.”168

After he returned from Europe in May 1857, Peter A. Porter began work on his new house, perhaps in preparation for his marriage on November 9, 1859, to Josephine Matilda Morris (January 31, 1831-March 10, 1892). Josephine Morris was born in South Carolina, but her father George Washington Morris had come from Morrisania, Westchester County, New York. In 1828, he built Grove Plantation, the manor house at the center of a rice plantation, which he operated with the help of over one hundred people in slavery. Morris died in 1834, when his daughter was only three years old. Her mother Maria Whaley Morris took over management of the plantation until her son George Washington Morris, Jr., took it over. Son George was not as efficient as his mother, and he ran up huge debts. After he died in 1857, the house and all the assets, including 124 of the 136 people who still lived there in slavery were auctioned in Charleston in January 1858.169

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Josep
hine Morris was twenty-seven years old at the time of the auction of her childhood home and the enslaved people who went with it. How she met Peter A. Porter, we do not know, but in November of the following year, they married, and Josephine moved to the brand new house in Niagara Falls. According to the 1860 census, the family consisted of Peter A. Porter, age 32, land proprietor (with no value listed for real estate). Josephine M. Porter, age 28, had $5000 worth of real estate and $15,000 worth of personal estate. (Did this include the enslaved people who had not been sold at auction in 1858?). Peter A. Porter, age 7, owned real estate worth $15,000 and personal property worth $15,000. A child named John McQuillen also lived with the Porters. He was three years old, born in Scotland, with real property worth $350. Six servants lived in the household: John and James Haney, ages 20 and 16, born in Ireland; Esther Rumley, age 35, born in England; Mary and Sarah McGaffey, ages 20 and 22, born in Scotland; and Sarah Walker, age 22, born in Ireland. Finally, Elizabeth Porter, Peter’s sister, lived in the household. She was 37 years old, listed as a land proprietor with real estate worth $100,000 and personal property worth $2500.

In 1860, the future looked bright for the Porter family, with a new house, a new marriage, and a new political career for Peter A. Porter, who served in the New York State Assembly in 1861 and 1862. In 1863, Porter received an appointment in 1863 as Secretary of State for New York. The Civil War intervened, however, and Porter declined this appointment, explaining that he owed his allegiance to the Eighth New York Artillery, which he had just recruited from his neighbors and friends, and he intended to bring them all back alive.

Such was not to be. Col. Porter and the Eighth New York Heavy Artillery, accompanied by Elizabeth Porter as nurse, headed for Maryland. In Baltimore, Elizabeth devoted her “heart, hand, and purse to the wounded, maimed, and dying.” From the women of Niagara Falls, she received supplies, bandages, food (including Niagara County apples), and even souvenirs from Niagara Falls, which women in Baltimore sold at charity bazaars. 170

Stationed first at Baltimore’s Fort McHenry, in charge of about two thousand men, Peter A. Porter moved the Eighth Artillery to active fighting with General Grant at Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor. Alongside them was the Seventh New York Artillery, commanded by Lewis O. Morris (from Morrisania, Westchester County, second cousin to Josephine Morris Porter). Many soldiers knew in advance that Cold Harbor would be a slaughtering ground, and they pinned slips of paper with their names on their uniforms, so their bodies could later be identified. Ordered to advance on June 3, Porter called his officers around him and told them that “it was almost certain death, but the duty must be performed.” He dismounted from his horse, calling, “Follow me, my brave boys!” He died on his hands and knees, riddled with six bullets. Six hundred of the Eighth New

170 Michelle Kratts, Angels on the Battlefield (Niagara Falls, Oakwood Cemetery, 2011), 8-9.
York Artillery lay dead beside him. Six thousand Union troops died that day, compared to one thousand to fifteen hundred Confederates. Lewis Morris died the next day. One survivor bitterly said, “We felt it was murder, not war.” Grant himself wrote in his Memoirs, “I have always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made. . . . no advantage whatever was gained to compensate for the heavy loss we sustained.”  

For two nights, Porter’s body lay on the field. On the second night, in a rainstorm, five of Porter’s friends and fellow soldiers crawled close to enemy lines, tied a rope through Porter’s belt, and dragged him off the field. John Heany (also spelled Henry, Huney or Hany), his body servant, built a rough coffin for him. After a funeral service at the Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Elizabeth Porter accompanied her brother’s body home. Stores closed in Niagara Falls, and the city was quiet, as the service was held in St. Peter’s Episcopal Church. Peter A. Porter’s body was interred in Oakwood Cemetery. In his last letter, on March 31, 1864, he wrote, “I try to think, and feel, and act as if each day were to be my last, so as not to go unprepared to God.” That became his epitaph.  

The Porter family’s tragedies were not yet over. On July 27, 1864, Margaret Breckenridge, sister of Peter A. Porter’s first wife, died of typhoid fever. On February 16, 1861, Josephine Porter had given birth to a daughter Letitia, named after Peter A. Porter’s mother. Five months after her husband’s death, on October 17, 1864, Josephine lost Letitia to diphtheria. Both were buried in Oakwood Cemetery. Two children remained in the Porter family, Peter A. Porter, son of Mary Breckenridge Porter, born in 1853, and George W. Porter, born to Josephine in 1863, named after Josephine’s father.

Josephine continued her connection with her southern roots after the war. By 1870, John Grimball, who had purchased Grove Plantation in 1858, could no longer pay the mortgage, and the property reverted, at least briefly, to Josephine Morris Porter and her sister Sabrina Morris.

Elizabeth Porter died on January 28, 1876, after a long illness. Elizabeth Porter was lauded for the “perpetual stream” of her “unostentatious charity,” not “an occasional giving of a cup of cold water” but “the well-spring of an unfailing fountain.” St. Peter’s Church was filled with people for the funeral, both “the rich in power and the poor in station.” Protestants and Catholics alike mourned, and for the first time in the history of Niagara Falls, “the great bell in the Catholic Church answered in common sorrow with the measured tolling of St. Peter’s bell.” Rev. Dr. Shelton, the same man who had held services for her father and her brother, delivered Elizabeth’s funeral sermon. John Haney (probably the same man who was her brother’s body servant during the Civil War) was one of the pall-bearers.

When Josephine Morris Porter died on March 10, 1892, she was buried (as was her sister Sabrina) in Oakwood Cemetery. In her will, Josephine made several large bequests to charity, including $4000 to the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church, $2000 to the Genesee Clergy Relief Fund, $1000 “for the poor, sick, and suffering people of South Carolina,” and $3000 “for the religious and educational benefit of the colored people of the South, particularly of South Carolina.”

Porter Family, Abolitionism, and the Underground Railroad

Both Elizabeth and Peter A. Porter Porter family had abolitionist sympathies, perhaps shared by the rest of the family. We have the most detailed evidence for Elizabeth Porter. Two different obituaries after her
death in 1876 noted that she had inherited slaves (one mentioned five slaves) from her mother’s estate, freed them, and found jobs for them. As one friend wrote,

Her detestation of slavery was profound, unmitigated and undisguised. During a visit to Florida she was riding out one morning with a gentleman who pointed out to her a tree, and said: “There we hanged an abolitionist not long ago.” “Well,” said she, I am an abolitionist and you may hang me if you wish. I will be home tomorrow morning at such an hour—if you want me.”

Peter A. Porter also had abolitionist sympathies. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, his classmate and friend, alluded to this. He called Porter “a gentleman of the old school gracefully adapting himself to the duties of republican life,” which helped explain his position, “partly inherited and partly adopted, on the great question of human liberty, to which he bore his testimony in humane and generous actions, down to the last great sacrifice, when he gave to it, all he had.”

Sometime before 1861, the Porter family befriended a man named Major James Wilkerson, who had purchased his liberty in New Orleans and moved north to become an agent for Union Seminary in Franklin, Ohio. Union Seminary was established by the African Methodist Episcopal Church “for educating and instructing youth in literature, science, agriculture, and mechanic arts.” Wilkerson’s job was to raise money to support the school by traveling and lecturing in northern cities. He found little help in Buffalo, so he crossed the river to Ontario, again without collecting much more than his basic travel expenses. In the dead of winter, he wrote, he “would sometimes have to go almost barefooted in the snow, about knee deep.” In this condition, he approached “a certain white family” in Niagara Falls. He had forgotten their names, but from his description, it seems likely that this was the Porter family. “Having made known to them his mission,” he wrote and of his most severe suffering in the cold, and that nearly to the death, the oldest daughter, it seemed, gave him a five dollar piece, and the other members of said family about fifteen dollars, which went to create no little thankfulness of heart, yea, so much so, that he could not refrain from weeping, even in their presence, for such unexpected success in one house.

“God in heaven will know them,” Wilkerson concluded, “even in everlasting blessings upon their loving heads.”

In early 1861, an even more dramatic incident occurred, this one directly related to the Underground Railroad. The story of Cassie’s escape from slavery first appeared in Eber M. Pettit’s Sketches in the History of the Underground R.R. (1879). No corroborating evidence has yet been found, and much about the story is probably overly dramatized. But details of the Pettit’s narrative coincide with what we know about Peter A. Porter and black waiters in Niagara Falls.

Cassey had been enslaved in Baltimore by a man named Claggett. When she learned that Claggett had sold her to a slave dealer named Cathcart, she fled to a Quaker family in Haddonfield, New Jersey, leaving behind her year old son. She returned to Baltimore to rescue her son, but Claggett learned of her plan and sent

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176 Buffalo News, February 4, 1876, copied from the Niagara Falls Gazette; Niagara Falls Gazette, April 26, 1876.

177 Niagara Falls Gazette, April 26, 1876.


constables to arrest her. They were no match for Cassey, who dressed up like a sailor and paraded up and down the dock, smoking a cigar, until she boarded the boat for Philadelphia and freedom. Cassey ended up in Lundy’s Lane, Ontario, across the river from Niagara Falls, New York, earning money to buy her son’s freedom. When a “wealthy gentleman” in Niagara Falls, with “an excellent farm, a fine mansion splendid stock and superb horses” asked her to work for him at much higher wages, she accepted. Pettit identified this man as “the agent of the U.G.R.R.” or “Col. P.____.” One day, as she was leaving church, she saw Cathcart watching her. She eluded him, but Cathcart did not give up. Approaching Ben Jackson, an African American who worked at the hotel where Cathcart was staying, he asked for help. He should have known better. Jackson, said Pettit, “was one of the shrewdest men, either white or black, that lived in that village.” He sent Cathcart to watch the Suspension Bridge, meanwhile alerting Cassey and Col. P.____ of the danger. Col. P. immediately arranged for Cassey to go to the home of Dennis W., an Irishman at Lockport. At the same time, he harnessed his own fastest horses and waited in the barn. When Cathcart arrived, he gave him a chase all the way to Youngstown, at the junction of the Niagara River and Lake Ontario, and back. When they arrived back at the farm, Cathcart was surprised to find no one inside the carriage. Col. P. invited his pursuers in for refreshments, but Cathcart declined. We can imagine his reaction at having been so thoroughly tricked.

Site of the St. Lawrence Hotel
Main Street, west side, near Niagara Street
Niagara Falls, New York

Significance: At a time when many African Americans could not find adequate hotel accommodations, Christopher Smith, proprietor of the St. Lawrence Hotel, hosted Frederick Douglass here in 1848. Although Douglass had to eat at a separate table, he recommended the St. Lawrence Hotel to other abolitionists.
Description: We have no image of the St. Lawrence Hotel and no verbal description of it, either. In terms of its location, G.W. Johnson in 1849-50 clearly showed it on the west side of Main Street (No. 4 on map). He also listed it as one of the four main hotels in Niagara Falls, along with the Cataract, Eagle, and Falls hotels.

Other clues to its location come from both printed sources and maps. By 1855, the St. Lawrence Hotel had become the Mansion House. In February 1855, J. F. Trott, one of the proprietors of the Cataract House, was clerk pro tem of the Trustees of Niagara Falls. In that capacity, he published a note in the Niagara Falls Gazette that “the Annual Election for Village Officers will be held at the Mansion House, formerly the St. Lawrence Hotel, on TUESDAY, MARCH 6, 1855.”

By 1857, the St. Lawrence Hotel, then owned by Peter A. Porter, was for rent. The Niagara Falls Gazette published an ad on July 8, 1857: “To Rent: The house known as the St. Lawrence Hotel, Niagara Falls. A good stand for a hotel or a boarding house. Terms moderate. Enquire of—P.A. Porter.”

Ensign M. Clark, furniture dealer, took up this offer. Succeeding Crossman, who once had a furniture store on Main Street across from the Cataract, Clark and his partner moved the business to the former St. Lawrence Hotel. On June 2, 1858, they published a notice in the Niagara Falls Gazette (dated October 1857), informing the public that they had established their new furniture warehouse in the former St. Lawrence Hotel.
The 1875 atlas for Niagara Falls indicated the site of the E.M. Clark property as the west side of Main Street, near Niagara Street, exactly where Johnson’s map had shown the St. Lawrence Hotel in 1849-50.

By 1890, the E.M. Clark Furniture Store was still at that location, listed at 118 Main Street. The 1902 *Souvenir History of Niagara County, New York*, noted that the St. Lawrence Hotel stood on the site of the E.M. Clark furniture company on Main Street. \(^{182}\)

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\(^{182}\) *Souvenir History of Niagara County, New York* (The Pioneer Association of Niagara County, 1902), 191.
Discussion: The St. Lawrence Hotel was a smaller hotel than the flagship Cataract, Eagle, or Falls hotels, but it was well liked and received unsolicited recommendations in the newspaper. In 1848, for example, Frederick Douglass stayed at the St. Lawrence and recommended it to other abolitionists. “It is now but three years since we were insulted in the most shameful manner,” he wrote,

and excluded from every respectable hotel in the place, solely on account of our color, so that to be decently accommodated, we were compelled to go to the British side of the falls. This time we received no insults, were treated with great civility, and accommodated at the St. Lawrence Hotel with every show of kindness and with only one drawback upon it all; and that was, not being allowed to sit at the table with the other boarders - ourself and company being compelled to sit at a separate table. We mention this fact with no view of reflecting upon the proprietor of the house. He is altogether so much better than his neighbors that we were surprised that he should be allowed to live there at all. We advise abolitionists visiting the Falls to remember the St. Lawrence Hotel favorably.  

In 1851, a temperance traveler from Oswego wrote a similar accolade for the St. Lawrence Hotel:

If any of my readers who contemplate visiting the Falls, desire a quiet, agreeable “Home” while there,—a place where comfort will be consulted in preference to form and ceremony, “substance” receive more attention than “shadow,” and where they will not be charged 25 cents every time they wink or look at a “waiter,”—I advise them to call on friend Smith of the “St. Lawrence Hotel.” Here they will find good accommodations, every attention paid to their comfort and pleasure, and a bill when ready to leave which will not “bankrupt” their “treasuries.”

A later article in the *Niagara Falls Gazette* named the proprietor as Christopher Smith. The 1850 U.S. Census showed Christopher M. Smith as an innkeeper, 54 years old, born in Connecticut, living with his wife Rhoda, age 52, born in New York; daughter Sarah A., age 14; William Davis, waiter, age 25, birthplace unknown; Joseph Wallis, hostler, age 21, born in Ireland; Mary E. Sullivan, age 20, born in Ireland; and John Becket, age 20, porter, born in Ireland. All were listed as white, but it is possible that waiter William Davis, with an unknown birthplace, may have been African American. The building next door was most likely the hotel itself, since it was filled with bartenders, waiters, agents, cooks, porters, and hostlers. By 1860, the Smith family had moved to the Town of Royalton, Niagara County.

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183 *North Star*, June 16, 1848, from Accessible Archives.

184 L.M. to *Daily Palladium*, printed June 25, 1851.

185 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, n.d., NFPL, noted that the proprietor was Christopher Smith; U.S. manuscript census, 1850, Ancestry.com.
Site of the Home of William H. Childs
Corner Ontario (now Main) and Walnut Streets
Now the location of the Niagara Falls Post Office
615 Main Street

Significance: William H. Childs was a major anchor of abolitionism and the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls, “a most zealous anti-slavery man,” from at least 1840 to the Civil War, working with philanthropist Gerrit Smith to distribute land to African Americans in 1846-47, consistently supporting the Liberty Party, and helping to establish the Congregational Church at Suspension Bridge.

Description: The Childs House was a two-story stone house, with gable end toward the street and three bays across the front. A smaller wing extended out the back, with a wing at right angles to this. By the 1870s, a white picket fence surrounded the front yard, with gardens in the yard.

Discussion: William H. Childs was born in Livonia, Livingston County, in 1807. Interested in the ministry, he attended the Presbyterian Seminary in Auburn until “failing health” led him to move to Niagara Falls, where he married Laura Amsden from Phelps, Ontario County, in 1828 and became a merchant and insurance agent for thirty years. In 1850, the U.S. census listed him as fifty-three years old, an insurance agent, with real property worth $25,000 and personal property worth $4,000. His wife Laura was fifty-six and their children Edward (age 20), Augusta (23), and Gertrude (18) lived with them, along with William’s mother Lucy (age 82, born in Vermont) and Elizabeth Grant (age 39, also born in Vermont), perhaps William’s sister.

William Childs was certainly an active abolitionist. Between 1846 and 1850, Childs helped philanthropist Gerrit Smith transfer land tracts in the Adirondacks to African American men throughout Niagara County, as part of Smith’s donations of land to African American males throughout New York State, to allow them to vote under the state’s property qualification laws. By 1850, Smith was also giving land to poor white men and to women. Eighteen-year-old Sarah Christman (or perhaps Christmas), not listed as black or mulatto, born in Canada, lived with the Childs family in 1850 and received a tract of land that year from Gerrit Smith.  

On April 11, 1896, Childs’ daughter S. Augusta Fowler wrote to Wilbur Seibert that her father “was among the first to espouse the cause of the slave, when the feeling was so bitter against him because of his Anti-Slavery principles, he and his family were almost ostracized from society.”

In May 1856, Laura Childs, the eldest daughter of William and Laura Childs, married Dr. Timothy Langdon Andrews, a supporter of the American Colonization Society. In 1849, Andrews had accompanied a group of freed people to Liberia, West Africa. Andrews returned to the U.S. in 1855 and became editor of the Marietta Intelligencer, a Whig newspaper in Marietta, Ohio. There, he was involved in forming the Republican Party. The family moved to Niagara Falls in 1862.

Childs was also actively involved in the Underground Railroad. Fowler recounted two separate incidents, one that she herself saw and another that her father told her about. In the first instance, when she was “quite a child,” her father, “to impress upon me the horrors of slavery, showed me the back of a poor

186 Extensive correspondence between Smith and Childs, Smith Family Papers, Syracuse University. Childs to Smith, February 12, 1850.

187 S. Augusta Fowler to W. H. Siebert, April 11, 1896, Siebert Papers, Ohio Historical Society. Thanks to Christopher Densmore for finding this letter.

188 http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GId=72982404. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding this reference.
colored woman who had gotten that far on her say to freedom, which was covered with the marks of the lash. She was cared for an taken into Canada.” Augusta would have been seventeen years old in 1850, so she could well have remembered such an incident.

In the second story, Fowler remembered her father telling her, “in after years,”

of harboring one slave and in the night taking him to Lewiston, seven miles below the Falls, when he got him over the river into Canada. While he was gone his home was surrounded by an angry mob, my mother could hear their excited, violent, threats, but as there were no lights and everything seem quiet, they concluded not to disturb the household.

Based on these stories, Wilbur Siebert listed William Childs on his 1898 list of Underground Railroad agents in Niagara County.

All his life, Childs retained his interest in the Presbyterian Church. He became an elder and Sunday School superintendent. He helped found the Congregational Church at Suspension Bridge in 1854. At the time of his death in 1885, he belonged to the Presbyterian Church in Niagara Falls.

In 1878, William Pool, History of Niagara County, noted that Childs was a lifelong temperance advocate and “a zealous anti-slavery man, standing in the front ranks on the early ‘days that tried men’s souls.’” At the age of seventy-nine, he remained an active businessman, and he still had “a step elastic as in youth.” When he died on June 13, 1885, he left $5,000 to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, for the education of colored men, $5,000 to North Carolina University for the education of colored woman, and $5,000 to the American Missionary Association of Southern States.

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190 Niagara Falls Gazette, June 19, 1885.

191 Noted by Michelle at http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=26447615; William Pool, Landmarks of Niagara County (New York: Sanford and Company, 1878), 312. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding this.
Site of the Whitney-Trott House
Main Street across from Chilton Avenue
Built 1861

Significance: This site is significant for three reasons: 1) as the home of Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney and James and Celinda Trott, owners of the Cataract Hotel, who hired dozens of African Americans as waiters and cooks, many of whom had been enslaved in the South; 2) as the center of the largest commercial farm in the Town of Niagara; and 3) as the home of James Fullerton Trott, “father” of the Niagara Falls public school system.
Whitney-Trott House, c. 1861
Undated image (NFPL)

Site of Whitney-Trott House, looking northeast, Main corner of Chilton
Looking south along Main Street from corner Main and Chilton Carnegie Library, 1903, on right; Armory on left.

Map 1: Map of the Villages of Niagara Falls & Niagara City, NY and the Village of Elgin and the City of the Falls, Canada (1854). Whitney property to Milestrip line, highlighted in white. ^192

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Description: Anyone who looks at a mid-nineteenth century map of the Niagara Falls area immediately notices two settlement nodes, one around the village of Niagara Falls and the other around the Suspension Bridge at Bellevue. These were separated by a wide strip of farmland which dominated the landscape between these two villages until the late nineteenth century. These were the farms of Augustus Porter and Parkhurst Whitney, two of the three founding families of Niagara Falls.

In 1805, Augustus Porter purchased lots 39 through 44 of the Mile Strip, sold by Senecas Indians to the State of New York and surveyed by the Holland Land Company in 1789. In 1816, Porter sold part of lot 38 to Gad Pierce, who owned a tavern at the corner of Pierce Avenue and Portage Road. In 1828, Pierce sold this parcel to his sons, and Parkhurst Whitney purchased the southern half of lot 38 in 1835 for $2100. It totaled 262 acres. W.O. Buchanan purchased the northern half of lot 38. South of him, Letitia Porter, daughter of August, owned a large swath. In 1851, she gave a large section of to form Oakwood Cemetery. Sometime before 1854, she sold a large strip on the western end, between Oakwood Cemetery and Parkhurst Whitney’s land, to H.W. Clark, who created a hamlet named Clarksville.193

In 1846, Parkhurst Whitney retired as proprietor of the Cataract House, and he and Celinda moved to a farm located between Letitia Porter’s land and W.O. Buchanan’s lot. About 1849, Whitney’s daughter Celinda and son-in-law James Fullerton Trott moved into the farmhouse with their parents. Only two other farmhouses stood near them, the Buchanan house at the corner of Pierce and Main to the north and the home of W.H. Childs, on the site of the current Post Office.

The original house burned on February 17, 1860, and the fire destroyed the house and its contents, including Whitney’s collection of military memorabilia. Minutes of the Cataract Fire Co., No. 1 read: “Niagara Falls, Febry. 17th, 1860. Fire broke out this night in the residence of General P. Whitney near Niagara City. The fire alarm was rung here about 2 o’clock at night and the engine and hose car taken to the fire but was not worked on account of having no water. Night very cold. . . . The Generals residence entirely consumed.” 194

No images of the original house have been found, but the Whitney-Trott family immediately built a new house on the same site. Of yellow brick, it was a five-bay house, broad side to the street, with Romanesque windows and double central doorway, brackets under the eaves, and a projecting central gable. The house included six bedrooms and was only the second house in Niagara Falls to feature the luxury of two bathrooms. Servants lived in a rear wing of red brick (perhaps a remnant of the original house). People called the place “Rose Lawn,” because roses and lilacs filled the front yard, enclosed by a boxwood hedge. A porte cochere was

193 Deed and property research, Chilton Avenue-Orchard Parkway Historic District (2010), Section 7, page 2, Section 8, page 2.

attached to the back of the house, where visitors could enter the back of the main hallway. A summer washhouse stood immediately behind the house.\footnote{195}{Chilton Avenue-Orchard Park Historic District, April 2010, \url{http://buffaloah.com/surveys/chilt/nom.pdf} ; \textit{Niagara Falls Gazette}, article, n.d., in scrapbook at NFPL.}

The house was situated in the middle of a working farm, surrounded by two growing villages. To the west, dirt roads led past farm outbuildings through potato fields (near what is now Chilton Avenue) and apple orchards (located along the present Orchard Parkway) to the Niagara River and gorge. To the south, visitors could see the mist rising from Niagara Falls. Across the river, they could see the emerging city of Niagara Falls, Ontario. By the late nineteenth century (and perhaps earlier) a large barn, stable, pigsty, chicken house, and machine shop with tools and a grindstone stood behind the house, to the east. The machine shop stood on high ground over root house, used for storing root vegetables through the winter. An icehouse, filled with ice in the winter, completed the outbuildings in this area. Pear orchards stood farther north, toward Pierce Avenue.\footnote{196}{Section 7 page 2; The Trott family apparently continued to keep an apartment in the Cataract Hotel, because African American employees of the Cataract Hotel are listed as part of the Trott household. Newspaper article, n.d., scrapbook, NFPL.}

By the 1890s, the pressure to develop the Whitney-Trott farm overcame whatever desires the family may have had to keep their property intact. James F. Trott sold the eastern part of the farm for development by the early 1890s. By the mid-1890s, he also sold the western portion, including the potato fields and apple orchards across Main Street from the main house. In 1895, Chilton Avenue became the first paved street in Niagara Falls.\footnote{197}{Chilton Avenue-Orchard Park Historic District, April 2010, \url{http://buffaloah.com/surveys/chilt/nom.pdf}.}

James and Celinda Whitney Trott continued to live in the family home until their deaths. Celinda Trott died on January 4, 1892. Their son James P. and daughter Elizabeth C. Trott inherited the house. Neither James nor Elizabeth ever married, and brother John Winslow Trott inherited the family home after their deaths. John Winslow Trott died in 1920. The Kellogg Motor Company purchased the house in 1927. In 1949, they demolished the building. In its place, they built a Kellogg Motor Sales used car lot. An Off-Track Betting area now stands on the site.\footnote{198}{Chilton Avenue-Orchard Park Historic District, April 2010, \url{http://buffaloah.com/surveys/chilt/nom.pdf}.}
Map of the Town of Niagara by Tobias Witmer, Surveyor (1854)

Judah (1854)

A.M.Z. Dawson, 1860 Map
Persistent local legends tie this house to the Underground Railroad. Rumors of tunnels from the house to the river and from the house to the barn persist, as does the story of a secret room over one of the bedrooms, 3 x 3 x 3 x 6, accessed by a trap door through the attic. These stories seem to date from the mid-twentieth century, however. No primary sources have been found from the nineteenth century that connects this house directly to the Underground Railroad.

The actions of the Whitney-Trott families, however, offer compelling if circumstantial evidence of their support for the Underground Railroad. They were one of the major employers of African Americans in Niagara Falls, offering seasonal employment to African Americans as waiters and cooks at the Cataract Hotel.

A detailed description of these features appeared in an undated newspaper article in a scrapbook at the NFPL:

“Several people have been interested in this and during the razing of the building, they have kept watch for any evidences of tunnels, secret rooms, etc. At one time, not long ago, a draft of cold air was felt from the cellar and a man was called in to locate the source and stop it. It is claimed that a tunnel was found in the cellar, a light dropped down as far as possible, and all indications were that the tunnel went clear to the river causing the draft of cold air blowing up. This tunnel was covered up at that time. Old timers say that there was a tunnel from the house to the barn. This may have been it or it may have been only a well, since there had to be an adequate water supply to take care of the extensive plumbing in the house, and a number of cisterns scattered throughout the grounds took care of this, the water running through tiles to the house. Another thing that adds fuel to the fire of this story is that a so-called secret room was found in the house. It was a small cube-like box, 3x3x3x6 feet attached to the ceiling of one of the bedrooms, and was entered through a trap door from the attic. (Was this just a cistern? The trap door was too small to admit a tank through it, 12 x 15 inch.) A series of air holes had been bored around the top near the ceiling and these had been tinned over and papered over like the bedroom. This room was big enough to hold three men, and it had flooring in it.”
as well as housing at the Cataract. Census records suggest that a large proportion of these employees had been born in the South. Most likely, they had escaped from slavery on the Underground Railroad. One can image that neither Parkhurst Whitney nor James F. Trott inquired too closely into the status of potential employees. Their policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell” was not only a charitable act but also made for good business, since these black waiters helped make the Cataract Hotel one of the two largest and most successful hotels in Niagara Falls. (For more on the Cataract Hotel, see separate description.)

This house was also important as the center of the largest commercial farm in the Town of Niagara, based on dairy and grain farming. 1860, the U.S. agricultural census listed Parkhurst Whitney as owning a farm worth $50,000. A survey of farmers listed on the same and following page in this census revealed that several nearby farms were worth $10,000 or more (including that owned by Whitney’s son-in-law, Dexter Jerauld, and also one owned by Peter A. Porter), but only one other farmer had property valued as much as $20,000. Whitney also owned more than twice as many acres as anyone else listed on these two pages. It is reasonable to assume that he sent much of this produce, including milk and butter from the forty cows, to the Cataract House.

Parkhurst Whitney, 1860 Agricultural Census:
- Acres improved land—275
- Acres unimproved—105
- Cash value of farm—$50,000
- Value of farming implements/machinery—$1000
  - Horses—14
  - Milch cows—40
  - Other cattle—20
  - Swine—50
- Value of livestock—$3000
  - Wheat, bushels—600
  - Indian corn, bushels—600
  - Oats—300
  - Irish potatoes, bushels—300
  - Barley, bushels—150
- Value of orchard products, in dollars—$250
  - Butter, pounds of—1000
  - Hay, tons of—60
  - Buckwheat, bushels of—180

The family also grew food for their own household. One observer remembered that “in the garden were grown all the vegetables for the family, and at one time, at the instigation of a small grandson, Mr. Trott planted some peanuts and grew quite a crop.”

Finally, this site is significant as the home of James Fullerton Trott, known as the “father” of the Niagara Falls public school system. Following his father-in-law’s interest in schools and libraries, Trott served for fifty years as a member of the Niagara Falls Board of Education. He took a special interest in the public library.

Site of Dr. P.H. Skinner’s and Jarusha Skinner’s School for Colored Deaf, Dumb and Blind Children
Main Street (originally Lewiston Avenue), east side, south of Ontario Street and Colt Block
Niagara Falls, New York

Significance: From 1858-61, Dr. P.H. Skinner and his wife Jarusha Skinner kept a school in Niagara City for African American children who were deaf, dumb, or blind. They specifically espoused ideals of equality and abolitionism. Students included several children born in Canada.

202 Newspaper clipping, n.d., NFPL.

Possible Site of School for Colored Deaf and Dumb and Blind
Red brick building south (right) of Colt Block, looking east

Description: No known image or verbal description of this site exists. Hints from the diary of Marcus Adams, local judge, suggest that it may have been located on the east side of Lewiston Avenue, just south of the Colt Block.

On January 4, 1858, Adams noted, “Deaf and Dumb school about to open in Glover Brick house.” The only Glover listed in Childs’ 1869 Director (the first directory for Niagara Falls) was Reuben Glover, who owned a cooper shop on Niagara Avenue in Suspension Bridge (shown on the 1875 Atlas). A note by transcriber Thomas B. Lovell, however, indicated that “Glover’s Hotel is what is now the United States Hotel opposite Silberberg’s block.” The 1869 directory noted that Silberberg had a readymade clothing store on Lewiston Avenue (now Main Street). In 1875, the Atlas showed Silberberg on Lewiston Avenue three doors north of Ontario Street. Across the street, on the northwest corner of Ontario and Lewiston, stood the Union Hotel. It is possible that this building was the original Glover Brick House and that it later became the United States Hotel. 204

The 1860 map of Niagara Falls, however, located the United States Hotel just south of the Colt Block on Lewiston Avenue. This location would be consistent with other clues in Marcus Adams’ diary. On November 7, 1854, he noted, “Col. Fisk has sold the two corner lots this side Glovers’ to the [sic] Mr. Colts for $3000.00. This is the most important sale that has ever taken place here.” On November 15, Adams added, “Loud complaints made about order of trustees to grade down Lewiston Ave. to a strait grade from R.R. to Glovers Hotel. But it is right in principle.” And on August 14, 1855, he noted, “Swan has bought the place next to Glover’s about which there has there has been so much contention.” Further research in directories, deeds, maps, and assessment records could probably pinpoint this site accurately. 205


205 Marcus Adams, Diary, transcribed, http://www.monroefordham.org/docs/First%20Congregational/Miscellaneous/Marcus%20Adams%20Diary%20-%20First%20Cong%20History.pdf; Map of Niagara Falls (
Discussion: The Skinner School for Colored Deaf, Dumb and Blind Children is one of the most remarkable institutions in this whole survey, unique in the U.S. for focusing on African American children—who were deaf, dumb, or blind. Michael Boston, from the State University of New York at Brockport, has done considerable research on Skinner and his school, and we are indebted to his publications for much of the background on this site.²⁰⁶

The 1860 U.S. census listed nine students living in a “School for Mutes.” Six were noted as “deaf and dumb”: Samuel Brown, age 18; Isaac Brown, age 16; Jane Sly, age 14; and Christian Hartwell, age 13, all born in Canada; Hannah Polk, age 17, born in New Jersey; and Eliza Wilson, age 5, born in New York State. Three were blind: James Smith, age 13, and Nancy Smith, age 10, both born in Canada, and Samuel Stevison, age 17, born in Pennsylvania.²⁰⁷

They lived in a household headed by Platt H. Skinner, age 30, born in New York. Although the 1860 census listed him as blind, he was not. His wife Jerusha, age 29, was, however, deaf. Their son Henry, age 4, had been born in the District of Columbia. Mary Smith, age seventeen and a “teacher of the blind,” born in


²⁰⁷ U.S. Census, 1860.
New Jersey, with personal property valued at $500, was herself blind. Donnelly Dunn, age 40, born in Ireland, a printer, also lived in this household, perhaps working on Skinner’s newspaper, *The Mute and the Blind*, “published for and by colored blind, deaf and mute students at a Niagara Falls school.”

They lived in a neighborhood that included laborers, a jeweler, bead makers, a school teacher, a gardener, servants, a gatekeeper, a butcher, carpenters, joiners, a carriage maker, a grocer, gentlemen, two physicians and surgeons, blacksmiths, a custom house officer (Robert Trafford), several railroad agents, a milliner, a land speculator (James Vedder (with $15,000 of real estate), post master, and New School Presbyterian clergyman (John F. Severance). Neighbors had been born in various states in the U.S., as well as in Canada, parts of Germany, England, and Ireland.

Marcus Adams’ diary gave a brief running account of this opening of this school in January 1858, complete with his almost immediate reservations:

Jan. 4, 1858. “Deaf and Dumb school about to open in Glover Brick house.”

Jan. 6. “Donation for Mr. Crittenden [Presbyterian minister] was quite an affair. Large company, but few from the stone [Congregational] church folks, none from the Falls, or the

other side. Great abundance of refreshments. All our congregation present, with few exceptions. Mr. Wells made himself quite conspicuous. Mr. Wallace enjoyed it. Dr. Skinner, wife and baby were the main attraction as the wife was a mute. He introduced her with the sign language. Deaf and Dumb school opens soon.”

Jan. 10. Sunday. Mr. Skinner, founder of the Deaf and Dumb school, came into the S.S. bringing a little colored girl whom he found in Canada. He made some interesting remarks, and gave illustrations of sign language. (But fear him.)

Jan. 25. “Found an article in Frank Leslie’s newspaper which goes strongly against Dr. Skinner, as an imposter at Washington, and this Col. Fisk sustains in a letter to his wife. So our Deaf and Dumb sch. will probably blow out. 209

To understand both why this school existed and why there were such immediate suspicions about Dr. Skinner, we need a little background. Platt Henry Skinner was born was born on March 11, 1824 in Clinton, New York. He moved at some point to Prattsburgh, New York, and attended Oberlin College from 1843-1846. On July 13, 1854, Skinner married Jerusha M. Hills, daughter of Allen and Ruth Benton Hills, from Fabius, New York. Hills was born deaf in 1831, along with three of her five siblings. Jerusha Hill had attended the New York Institute for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, and Reverend E.M. Gallaudet officiated at their marriage. The Skinners had a son Henry, born about 1854, who could hear. 210

In 1856, Platt and Jerusha Skinner arrived in Washington, D.C., with five deaf children, all African American, all born in Canada. With the help of Amos Kendall, one of Jackson’s former cabinet members, whose deaf wife encouraged him to support deaf education, Skinner started a school for deaf children on the south side of G Street, between 20th and 21st. Beginning in June, the National Era, an antislavery paper in Washington, carried several articles on the Skinner school, including requests for trustees. By November 1856, Skinner was ready to share the burden: “Principal for said Institution is wanted, to fill the place of the present occupant of that situation. The salary is nothing; the duties are, incessant watchfulness, care, toil, and labor, night and day; the praise and glory are slander and contumely. Position given immediately.” E.M. Gallaudet, son of the famous educator for the deaf Thomas Gallaudet, answered Skinner’s plea. His mother, widow of Thomas Gallaudent, served as matron. “The reputation of Mr. Gallaudet is such, and the character of the matron and teachers is so high, that none need for to confide children to their care. They will enter a home, and become a part of the family of the superintendent,” noted the National Era on July 30, 1857. Directors of the school included Hon. Amos Kendall, President; William Stickney, Secretary; G.W. Riggs, Treasurer; William H. Edes, Judson Mitchell, J.C. McGuire, David A. Hall, and Byron Sunderland. 211

On January 21, 1858, the National Era contained a note that “the Columbia Institution for the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind, will hold an exhibition in the old Hall of Representatives, this (Thursday) evening. Mr. Gallaudet, the Principal, will deliver an address.” Amos Kendall, president, chaired the meeting, and “the pupils were examined, with a view to show their proficiency in sign language. The blind also read from books printed with raised letters, and the evening passed off pleasantly, leaving an excellent impression upon the minds of the great crowd present.” In June 1858, Congress appropriated $3000 to educated deaf, dumb, and blind children in D.C., most likely in direct support of the Skinner school. 212

Meanwhile, Kendall and others accused Skinner of neglecting his charges. Skinner went to court at


211 National Era, June 19, 1856; September 11, 1856; November 27, 1856; July 16, 1857; July 30, 1857.

212 National Era, January 21, 1858; January 28, 1858; June 24, 1858.
least twelve times to defend himself and get custody of the five children he had brought from New York State. He was being prosecuted, he argued, not for neglect but for being a northerner with abolitionist views. Eventually, his school was burned down, and he, Jerusha, their son Henry, and a teacher fled to Baltimore before settling in Niagara Falls in January 1858.  

Skinner’s goal in Niagara Falls was to educate African American deaf children, those that had no other resources. As Michael Boston noted, quoting The First Semi-Annual Report of the School for the Instruction of the Colored, Deaf, Dumb, and Blind,

It [the new school] is not intended to take any child whose education is provided for in any other way. The school was at first established for the children of fugitives; but, since its commencement, it has been thought best to open its doors to all such mute and blind colored children as are not provided for otherwise, as far as the means of the school will permit. The command given is, "Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." -- This command seems to reach the lowest of all God's creation. . . . The credentials which are necessary for admission into this school, then, are,

1st. A dark face.
2nd. Deaf ears and a mute tongue, or blind eyes.
3d. That the state or county in which they live has not provided for their education.

Skinner traveled from church to church, all over western New York and eastern Ontario, taking some of his students with them to demonstrate their progress, including the use of Braille and sign language. The Congregational Church of Niagara City (Suspension Bridge) and Presbyterian churches in Niagara Falls and Lockport gave him their endorsement.  

But stories about possible abuse followed Skinner from Washington, D.C. and help explain Marcus Adams’ concern. On December 26, 1858, the Syracuse Central City Courier published an article listing letters published by the Niagara Herald, critical of Skinner, from Rev. Byron Sunderland, Rev. P.H. Gurley, and Hon. Amos Kendall, all of Washington, D.C., along with criticisms from Sidney Dean, member of Congress from Connecticut, and Rev. L.M. Pease of the Five Points Mission in New York City. Finally, the elders of the Presbyterian Church in Niagara City cautioned that “in their judgment he is unworthy of the confidence and contributions of Christians and philanthropists.”

As Michael Boston has noted, Skinner used the Niagara Gazette to reply to the charges in the Herald. In eight articles published from November 1858 to January 1859, he argued that his attackers did not know him and acted simply as tools of Amos Kendall, opposing his efforts to educate black children. The charges had all been disproven in court, Skinner reported, and that should settle it.

By 1862, Skinner and his wife and son had moved to Trenton, New Jersey, where they continued to operate their school until Skinner’s death of typhoid pneumonia, age 42, on January 1, 1866. Jerusha Skinner and her son Henry H. Skinner moved to Elmira, where she lived until her death. Henry Skinner, who could hear, later married Margaret Getz, who was deaf.  

How do we evaluate Dr. Platt H. Skinner? Was he a dishonest scoundrel or a whole souled abolitionist, dedicated to improving the lives of the most forgotten Americans? Michael Boston summed up his legacy: In spite of his ability to evoke strong emotions in his hearers, Platt Skinner, with his wife Jerusha, “sincerely endeavored to educate their pupils, contributing toward making them more involved citizens. They were engaged in a self-sacrificing, unpopular task of assisting a much-despised race and an unfortunate and


neglected group within that race. They should be commended and remembered for their labors.”

Site of the Falls Hotel
Falls Street
Niagara Falls, New York

**Significance:** The original Falls Hotel housed offices of the *Iris*, a newspaper whose editor George Hackstaff and printer William Tunis had antislavery sympathies. Tunis also published tourist guides, was an agent for the Railway Express System (which delivered New York City periodicals in a timely fashion to inland cities), and operated a bookstore across the river in Clifton, Ontario. In 1860, African Americans lived in homes of both Tunis and the proprietor of the Falls Hotel.

![Falls Hotel, showing relationship to International Hotel, Cataract House, and New York Central depot, 1854 (Judah, 1854)](image)

**Description:** No image of the Falls Hotel has yet been found. It burned in 1861.

**Discussion:** From 1847-54, George Hackstaff edited and William E. Tunis printed a newspaper called *The Iris*, “a weekly journal devoted to literature, the arts, and sciences,” in the basement of the Falls Hotel. The *Niagara Democrat* called it “a small, but very neatly executed, sheet, and very creditable industry, taste and talent, is displayed in its editorials and selections,” with Hackstaff as “Editor, Compositor, Pressman & Devil.” The *Democrat* noted that the *Iris* was politically neutral, but on January 1, 1849, the *Iris* sent its annual New Year’s Day card to its customers with a poem that ended: "Vile Slavery, envious of Free Soil, In strife the North and South Embroil.” Hackstaff noted in an editorial that “a slave holder was as bad as a man who threatens to knock you down, if you say he has no right to take his pet rattlesnake for a walk down the main street.”

In another story, Hackstaff reported,

> A slave escaping from servitude, arrived in this village last Tuesday week, and reached the ferry just in time to get into the little boat as it was prepared to leave for the Canadian side. His master was on the same train in pursuit and reached the ferry only in time to see his

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chattel midway across the foaming waters of the Niagara. We learned that the slave was last seen by his master at Cleveland, yet although both were on the same train, the slave succeeded in eluding his vigilance and placing him beyond pursuit.”

The 1850 census reported George Hackstaff as a thirty-eight-year-old printer, born in New York, married to Sarah, age thirty-four, born in Canada. All of their four children, ages three to eight, were also born in Canada, as was James McLaughlin, a twenty-year-old printer. William G. Tunis, then only fourteen years old, lived with the Hackstaff family. This whole household lived near the abolitionist William H. Childs family. Tunis later published tourist guides, kept an office for the Railway Express System, and operated a bookstore across the river in Clifton, Ontario.

People associated with the Falls Hotel hired African Americans. In 1860, Mary Lee, age 25, listed as black and born in New York, lived in William E. Tunis’s home. Sophia Jackson, a twenty-nine-year-old woman, lived as a servant in the home of Jonas C. Minton, proprietor of the Falls Hotel. The census listed Jackson as mulatto, born in Pennsylvania. Minton listed his occupation as railroad conductor in 1860, but a 1901 source suggested that he operated the Falls Hotel when it burned in 1861. “While Minton was proprietor,” noted the Souvenir History, “the house burned and was not rebuilt.”

Oakwood Cemetery
763 Portage Road
Niagara Falls, New York

Significance: In 1852, Letitia Porter, daughter of Niagara Falls founder Augustus Porter donated land for Oakwood Cemetery. Designed originally by Theodore Dehorne Judah, mapmaker, surveyor, and chief engineer of the first transcontinental railroad its plan was further developed in 1882 by Drake Whitney. As a community cemetery, Oakwood Cemetery holds both prominent and ordinary citizens of Niagara Falls, both African Americans and European Americans.

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219 Niagara Democrat, October 14, 1847, January 6, 1848; Marcy Mann, “One More River to Cross,” New Yorker, Vol. 29 (May-June 1969), 4-7; Scott E. Douglas, “Did you Know . . . . ? www.w3design.com/swcs/files/DidYouKnow/DID%20YOI%20KNOW%20%2319.pdf. The Iris did not always appear on time. “We see it stated that the Iris at the Falls is bout to be reinstated,” reported the Lockport Democrat and Courier on April 23, 1853. “The paper has been printed occasionally during the summer seasons for some years back. Whenever the editor had a rush of business or went on a spree, the issue of the paper postponed, in consequence of which, it has never been very popular and has not received the support it otherwise would. Falls people would support a properly conducted paper during the summer, we think.”

220 Souvenir History of Niagara County, New York (The Pioneer Association of Niagara County, 1902), 191.
Oakwood Cemetery has been the main cemetery for the village and city of Niagara Falls since it was established in 1852 on land donated by Lavinia Porter, daughter of Niagara Falls founder Augustus Porter. Designed originally by T.D. Judah, it was enhanced in 1882 by civil engineer Drake Whitney. The marble mausoleum, designed by Green and Wicks of Buffalo, New York, is faced with gray Vermont marble and incorporates two stained glass windows, one by Louis Comfort Tiffany. Part of the cemetery is dedicated to veterans of the Civil War.221

“Oakwood would become the final resting place for families whose names are associated with the growth and development of Niagara Falls as a great industrial city and a world-renowned tourist attraction,” notes the Oakwood Cemetery website. Oakwood also includes many families, both African American and European American, related to the story of slavery, freedom, and African American life in Niagara Falls. These include European Americans such as the Porter, Whitney, Childs, and Townsend families and African Americans such as the Pattersons and Jacksons (Lot 97), Hamiltons, and Lees. Inscriptions on Porter family

221 “Oakwood Cemetery,” myoakwoodcemetery.com/our-history/.
graves were published in *The Sun*, August 2, 1891. For more information about all of these families, see relevant site descriptions.  

Edward and Mary Sarsnett are also buried in Oakwood. Edward Sarsnett was a grandson of John Sarsnett, brought in slavery from Maryland to Lyons, New York, in 1797. Edward was a Civil War veteran, and his wife Mary was active in the Grand Army of the Republic.  

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222 Thanks to Michelle Kratts and Pete Ames for locating these graves in Oakwood Cemetery; *The Sun*, August 2, 1891. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding this article.

Emma Tanner Home
619 Ashland Avenue
Niagara Falls, New York

**Significance:** Emma Tanner represents the social and economic success, as well as the close ties to family members in Canada, of many children of people who had escaped from slavery.
**Description:** This small frame house, with its gable end to the street and unsoffited eaves, is part of the hamlet called Clarksville, built on a tract of land purchased by H.W. Clark just south of Parkhurst Whitney’s land. Clarksville developed along Ash and Elm (later Ashland and Elm) in the years surrounding the Civil War. No streets were indicated on Judah’s map of 1854, but by 1860, the Dawson map showed four houses (two on the north and two on the south) on Ash Street, two on the north side of Elm, and eight on the south side of Elm. [Check to see if this is one of them.][224]

[224] Michelle Kratts and Pete Ames did most of the research for Emma Tanner and her house.
A.M.Z Dawson, Niagara Falls, 1860

Reprinted by Niagara County Genealogical Society

Atlas, 1875
Discussion: Emma Louise Jordan Tanner was born in Lundy’s Lane, Niagara Falls, Canada, about 1859. Her father, Samuel Jordan, had escaped from slavery in Virginia on the Underground Railroad to live in Lundy’s Lane, Ontario, Canada. He married a woman born in the Irish Free State. At some point, she had a daughter, Margaret Z. Smith.

We do not know when she moved across the river to Niagara Falls, New York, but she lived in New York State by 1928, when she worked as a saleslady for corsets, using the slogan “Where Style Begins.”

In 1930, the U.S. census listed her as Emma L. Tanner, 71 years old, a mulatto woman, living at 619 Ashland Avenue with her daughter. She had been born in Ontario of a father from Virginia and a mother from the Irish Free State.

She died in 1953 at her home, when she was about 94 years old. She retained connections to her family members in Canada, however, and she was buried in the Drummondville Cemetery, in Ontario.  

September 19, 1928

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[225] “Mrs. Tanner Dies; Slave’s Daughter,” *Niagara Falls Gazette*, March 4, 1953. Many thanks to Michelle Kratts for her research on Emma Tanner.
**Where Style Begins**

That air of distinguished femininity which is the newest fashion trend, is achieved without effort by the woman who chooses a Modern Corset . . . for style begins with the foundation garment.

Our corsetieres will be glad to show you these lovely garments . . . as well as assist you in selecting the correct model for your particular figure.

*Miss Emma Tanner*

Special representative of the Modart Company will be in our Corset Department all this week. Her helpful advice will be yours for the asking.

*SECOND FLOOR*

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**Mrs. Tanner Dies; Slave’s Daughter**

Mrs. Emma Louise Jordan Tanner, 86, the daughter of a runaway slave who fled to Canada, died suddenly yesterday at her home, 619 Ashland avenue.

Mrs. Tanner was born in Liberty’s lane, in what is now Stamford Township. She was the daughter of Samuel Jordan who escaped from his owner, fled northward and entered Canada on the “underground railroad.” A woman of long memory, Mrs. Tanner recalled the Fenian raid in May of 1866, in which a group of Irish patriots from Buffalo was turned across the Niagara river in scows below Ft. Erie and later fought a battle with British troops at Ridgeway.

Mrs. Tanner is survived by a daughter, Mrs. Margaret Z. Smith, and a grandson, Eldred Smith, both of this city.

Funeral services will be held at 2 p.m. tomorrow at the Cobler funeral home, with the Rev. Edgar Loc. In 18 Mrs. Tanner. It will officiating. Interment will be in Drummond Hill cemetery, Niagara Falls, Ont.

*Wednesday, March 4, 1953*
Colt House
1018 Ontario Avenue
Niagara Falls, New York
Niagara Falls City Council designated this as a local Landmark in May 2006.

**Significance:** The Colt family represents widespread local sympathy for enslaved people. They were founding members of the Congregational Church in Suspension Bridge, which was sympathetic to abolitionism, and in 1856, Leander Colt “and lady” attended a benefit concert in Lockport to raise money to buy George Goines’ brother and mother out of slavery.

**Description:** This house was built as a vernacular Greek Revival building in 1855, shortly after the village of Bellevue was incorporated as Niagara City and the new railway Suspension Bridge was constructed. It does not incorporate Greek Revival details, but it has the typical Greek Revival gable-and-wing form. Its main block has three bays, with a gable facing the street and a small three-bay wing. All eaves are unsoffited. As the Niagara Falls Preservation Commission noted in 2006, windows of this house were most likely originally six-over-six. The house was one of the several limestone structures built in the mid-1850s from stone quarried locally. Village trustee Marcus Adams owned the lot when the house was built. Either Isaac Colt, Jr., or his son Leander Colt constructed the house.

**Discussion:** Leander Colt was one of the most important developers of the area around Suspension Bridge. He and his brother went west to California during the Gold Rush, and he returned to build the Colt Block on Main Street, and he was closely associated with this house and most likely lived here.

In 1855, Leander Colt “and lady” attended a benefit concert in Lockport for George Goines, who had escaped from slavery and was raising money to buy freedom for his brother and mother.226

In 1860, Colt was listed in the census as age 35, born in New York, a shoe dealer, with real estate worth $15,000 and personal property worth $5000. His wife Mary was 25, born in New York. They had two servants, Julia Sax, age 30, born in New York, and Juli Bove, age 25, born in Ireland. William Bovel, age 14, also lived with the family. Their neighborhood included a barber, lawyer, druggist, clerk, millwright, two women each listed as “lady,” and several servants and laborers. They were all European American, born in New York, Connecticut, Canada, England, or Ireland.

Leander Colt established a shoe store in the Colt Block and after the Civil War turned it into a

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226 Artemus Comstock on July 24, 1856. He went to Lockport, he wrote, “accompanied by Miss Eliza Netzel and Leander Colt & lady to listen to a concert given for the benefit of a colored man by the name of George [Goines] to redeem his mother and brother from slavery. The amount necessary to be raised was $1,000 AND $1,100 was procured. The tickets sold for $1.00 each. The concert was a good one.” Typescript Niagara County Historian's Office.
hardware store. During the Civil War, he enlisted with the McClellan Dragoons of Illinois. He firmly supported the Republican Party and was appointed postmaster for Suspension Bridge under President Grant.

In 1869, he built an inclined railway across the river on the Canadian side. 227

Leander Colt, Inclined Plane, 1869-1889
Chris Ennest, getoutniagara.ca/2010/09/colts-creek-falls-an-introduction/

**Colt Block**
Northeast corner of Main and Ontario Streets
Niagara Falls

**Significance:** Leander Colt represents widespread local support for helping people to get out of slavery. After Colt constructed this block in 1855, he rented part of the building to George Hackstaff, editor of the *Niagara Herald*, who had antislavery sympathies. In 1856, Colt “and lady” attended a benefit concert for George Goines in Lockport, who was raising money to buy freedom for his mother and brother.

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Description: Built of local limestone, the three-story Colt Block has anchored the north end of Main Street since its construction in 1855. Brackets add Italianate details to this otherwise simple rectangular structure.

Discussion: Entrepreneur Leander Colt built this block in 1855. The only evidence of his involvement with the Underground Railroad was a diary note from Artemus Comstock on July 24, 1856. He went to Lockport, he wrote,

> accompanied by Miss Eliza Netzel and Leander Colt & lady to listen to a concert given for the benefit of a colored man by the name of George [Goines] to redeem his mother and brother from slavery. The amount necessary to be raised was $1,000 AND $1,100 was procured. The tickets sold for $1.00 each. The concert was a good one. 228

By 1860, Colt rented part of the second story to George Hackstaff, newspaper editor. Hackstaff edited The Iris, a newspaper with antislavery sympathies in Niagara Falls, from 1847-55. In 1856, he began publication of the Niagara City Herald in the Franklin bookstore in Suspension Bridge. By 1860, he had moved here to the Colt Block. Although newspapers changed ownership (and names) frequently, the second story of the Colt Block remained a place of newspaper publication from 1860-1899. The Colt Block also had a large hall for public gatherings. 229

Dexter Jerauld House
Corner Buffalo Avenue and First Street
Niagara Falls, New York

Significance: Home of Dexter Jerauld, part owner of the Cataract House, and employer of African American waiters at the Cataract. In 1836, Dexter R. Jerauld married Angeline Whitney (1847-1857), daughter of

228 Artemus Comstock, Diary, July 24, 1856, typescript in Niagara County Historical Society.

Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney. Two African Americans, Margaret Truss and Sarah Brown, lived in the Jerauld household in 1860.

Jerauld House, August 2011, looking west

Jerauld House, August 2011, looking northeast
Jerauld House, Bay Window, west side

Label on back: “1867 Mason Indian store and dwelling Buffalo Ave. and Main St. 
In the background is the residence of Dexter R. Jerauld, father of Dr. F.N.C. Jerauld. 
In 1877, the late Mrs. Mason sold to Andrew Kaltenbach 71’ of the east side of her property where the 
Kaltenbach Hotel was built and opened January 15, 1878.”

Courtesy Niagara County Historian’s Office
Description: Dexter Jerauld, part owner of the Cataract House, constructed this elegant Gothic Revival structure sometime before 1867 and perhaps as early as the 1840s. Built of gray sandstone with red sandstone lintels and quoins at each corner, the building is comprised of three steep gabled blocks, telescoped into each other, with the main gable facing Buffalo Avenue. Gables on both north and south ends and subsidiary gables on each side of the center of the two rear blocks make this essentially three simple Gothic cottages merged into one. Graceful vergeboards, typical of Gothic Revival buildings, outline each gable. A bay window on the west side is another typical feature. Four-over-two or four-over-four window sashes are unusual.

The design of the Jerauld House reflects the influence of Andrew Jackson Downing, one of America’s best-known architects. Although the Jerauld house was not built exactly to known Downing designs, it does have features similar to Design VII in *Cottage Residences* (1842) and Design XXVI, “Rural Gothic Villa” in his *Architecture of Country Houses* (1852). It is possible that Jerauld built this home in the 1840s, after he married Angeline Whitney in 1836. It is also possible that he built it about 1865, at the time of his marriage to his second wife Harriet. Census records give some credence to this hypothesis. The 1860 census did not list any property values for Dexter Jerauld, except for his farm worth $10,000. The 1870 census, however, listed Jerauld property worth $40,000. It was located on the site of the home of Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney, where the Whitneys moved in 1822 from their original home on Cayuga Creek. Further research in deeds and assessment records might reveal the exact date of construction.

Although street views of this house are restricted by modern additions, and a large brick chimney interrupts the building’s flow on the west side, the house itself is virtually intact, in extraordinary condition. As one of the few nineteenth century buildings still standing in downtown Niagara Falls, only a block from the location of the original Cataract House, the Jerauld House offers an excellent venue to help tell the story of the Cataract House and the Underground Railroad.

Discussion: As part owner of the Cataract House, Dexter Ray Jerauld hired dozens of African Americans, most as waiters and cooks in the hotel, many of whom had escaped from slavery. He also hired two African Americans, including a young girl named Angeline Whitney, who had escaped from slavery.

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American women as domestic servants who lived in the Jerauld household in 1860. Living only one block from the Cataract House, he interacted daily with staff and clientele. He was certainly aware of Underground Railroad activities associated with the Cataract House.

Dexter Ray Jerauld was born in Bennington, Vermont on May 25, 1811. In 1835, he moved to Niagara Falls, where he married Angeline Parkhurst Whitney, one of three daughters of Cataract House proprietors Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney, on November 6 (or 16), 1836. Angeline Parkhurst Whitney was born on August 18, 1812. She and Dexter Jerauld had two children: Parkhurst Jerauld (born August 5, 1840) and Louise (Lizzie) Jerauld (born March 22, 1843, died September 27, 1875). Angeline Jerauld died on March 10, 1857, at forty-four years old, after a long and painful illness. Her obituary noted that “she was greatly beloved by all for her amiable and endearing disposition.” She was “charitable and kind,” “a steady Christian.”

By 1860, the U.S. census listed Dexter Jerauld as forty-eight years old, a hotel keeper, living with son Parkhurst Jerauld, age nineteen, a farmer by occupation, and daughter Lizzie Jerauld, age seventeen. Both children attended school. Other members of the household included five servants. Three of these were European American: Mary Smith, age twenty-three, born in Canada; Joseph Scurrah [?], age twenty-eight, both in England; and Jane Durme, age nineteen, born in Canada. Two servants were African American: Margaret Turss, age twenty-four, was born in Maryland. Sarah Brown, age seventeen, listed her birthplace as Pennsylvania. Jerauld White, age twenty-one, was a farm laborer, born in New York State. Wheelwright Thomas Sharper [?], age 40, born in England, with property worth $300 and four children (Jacob, Daniel, George, and Matilda Bonacker, ages 7, 5, 2, and 1, all born in New York State) completed the household. Interestingly, no value was listed under “value of real property” or “value of personal property.” That same year, however, the agricultural census listed Jerauld as the owner of a 133-acre farm worth $10,000.

Through the efforts of Rev. O.F. Starkey, pastor of St. Peter’s Episcopal Church from 1863-69, The Jerauld Institute, a school for young women, was established in a brick building next to old St. Peter’s Episcopal Church on Third Street. Perhaps it acquired this name in honor of Angeline Whitney Jerauld, supported by donations from Dexter Jerauld.

On February 8, 1865, Dexter Jerauld married as his second wife Harriet C. Taylor, born about 1832 in Connecticut. In 1860, Harriet had been living with her husband Virgil Taylor. The census listed both of them as music teachers, and they lived with children Alice (age 5) and Selina (age 3), along with fifty-seven year old Olivia Dunlap, born in Connecticut and most Harriet’s mother, Irish born servant Ann McMurry, and seventeen year old George DeVal, African American, who listed his birthplace as Canada. The Taylors lived next door to William Tunis, who printed the Iris and whose household included Mary Lee, an African American dressmaker. On the other side of the Taylor house lived two African American families, the first of William Brown, white washer, born in Pennsylvania and the second of John Hanlin, barber, who listed his birthplace as Canada. The Hanlin household also included two African Americans (Mary Hanlin, washer woman, and Eliza Potter, hairdresser), both of whom listed their birthplaces as Virginia.

After their marriage in 1865, Harriet and Dexter had three additional children: Hattie Cecelia Jerauld, born June 2, 1866; Mary Ray Jerauld, born October 3, 1868; and Frederick N.C. Jerauld, born February 23, 1870.

As part of the federal income tax, designed to help pay for the Civil War, tax records exist for Dexter Jerauld in 1864 and 1866. In 1864, Jerauld was assessed for income of $8000 and $4000. The 1866 list was more detailed, listing taxes on income of $4400 and $6667, along with three carriages, two watches, a piano (suggesting that Harriet Taylor Jerauld may have continued to work as a music teacher after her marriage), and plate, for a total tax of $912.40.


234 “Alphabetical List of Persons in Division Number Three, of Collection District Number 29, of the State of New York, liable to a tax under the Excise Laws of the United States . . . October 1864”; “Alphabetical List of
The Civil War years were good to Dexter and Harriet Taylor Jerauld. In 1870, the census listed Dexter as a fifty-nine year old hotel proprietor with real property worth $40,000 and personal property worth $20,000. Harriet Jerauld was thirty-eight years old, and their children Hattie (age 3), Mary (age 1), Park (age 29 and a hotel clerk with real property worth $12,000 and personal property worth $3000) and Louisa (age 28) lived with them. Adella Taylor (age 17) and Saline Taylor (age 15), Harriet Taylor's children by her first marriage, also lived with them, as did three Irish-born domestic servants (Jenny McCune, age 23; Bridget Newcome, age 32; and Abby Agerty, age 20). Sarah Thorpe, a twenty-four-year-old domestic servant born in England, J.F. (fifteen years old and a laborer), and German-born Mat Clink, age 25, completed the household.

As one of the owners of the Cataract House and a mainstay of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Dexter Jerauld earned a reputation as “a wealthy and influential citizen.” He also participated in a handful of local businesses and clubs, including the Niagara Falls Shooting Club (of which he was president in 1862). In 1872, D.R. Jerauld, Solon Whitney, and D.J. Townsend acted as a building committee for construction of the new St. Peter’s, designed by Henry Dudley, a New York City architect. Jerauld was also a founder and director of the Niagara Falls Water Works Company in 1877.

In 1880, the census listed Dexter Jerauld, age 68, as “hotel proprietor,” born in Vermont, with parents born in Rhode Island. He lived with wife Harriet C. Jerauld, forty-eight years old, born in Connecticut. Two children (Mary R., age 11, and Frank N., age 9) lived with them, as did a cousin, Flora A. Hazard, age 23.

Jerauld remained in Niagara Falls until his death on March 13, 1889. He was buried in Oakwood Cemetery.

**Solon and Frances Drake Whitney House**
355 Buffalo Avenue
Niagara Falls, New York
National Register, 1974

**Significance:** Solon Myron Napoleon Whitney, son of Parkhurst Whitney, owned the Cataract Hotel, with his brothers-in-law Dexter Jerauld and James Trott. All of them hired African Americans as waiters. Many of these waiters had been born in the South and had likely escaped from slavery.

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235 *History of Niagara County* (1878), 302, 310; William Pool, *Landmarks of Niagara County* (1897), 146, 214.
Description: Solon H.M. Whitney, son on Parkhurst Whitney, bought the land on which this house stands, lots 60 and 61 of the Mile Strip, in 1837. The only other house on the river side of Buffalo Avenue at that time was Augustus Porter's 1818 mansion. The Depression of 1837 and the Patriot's War delayed construction, and the house was not built until 1849. It is a textbook example of the Greek Revival style. With limestone exterior walls, this house has three bays in its main block. Four Ionic columns grace the front of the building, with a full pediment. The west wing is a later addition. Most likely added in the 1860s, it incorporated new features, such as the bay window and sharply pitched dormer window with Palladian windows.236

236 Gombach Group, adaptation of National Register nomination, Solon Whitney--www.livingplaces.com/NY/Niagara_County/Niagara_Falls_City/Whitney_Mansion.html; Niagara Falls Gazette, February 14, 1883.
After Solon Whitney died on February 9, 1907, the house went to his son Drake Whitney and then to Edwin Whitney, who sold it to A.H. Zimmerman of Moore Business Forms. Edward E. Franchot bought the house and sold it to Carborundum Company in 1953. They used it first as a guesthouse and then as a home for their president, Clinton Robinson. In 1962, the University Club purchased the house. 237

The house is architecturally significant, associated with both tourism and industrial development in Niagara Falls, and also related to the strong presence of African Americans and the Underground Railroad.

**Discussion:** Solon Whitney was in Niagara Falls on October 7, 1815, to Celinda and Parkhurst Whitney, proprietors first of the Eagle Hotel and then of the Cataract House. Educated in the Lewiston Academy and Canandaigua Academy, Whitney returned to Niagara Falls to help his parents manage the Cataract House. In 1846, Parkhurst Whitney passed active management of the Cataract House to son Solon Whitney and sons-in-law James Trott and Dexter Jerauld. Solon Whitney continued as manager until 1883. After Dexter Jerauld’s death in 1889, Peter A. Porter purchased the Cataract House.238

During the Patriot War in 1837, Whitney served as quartermaster and aide-de-camp, with the title of Major Whitney, which he used for the rest of his life. Whitney was active in civic affairs outside the Cataract House, as well. First a Whig and then a Republican in politics, he was warden of St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, president of the Niagara Falls Gas Company, director of the Cataract Bank, president of the village in 1892, Mason, and ardent supporter of local volunteer fire companies. 239

Although there is no documented sources linking Solon Whitney with either abolitionist or the Underground Railroad, his supervision of the Cataract House with a predominantly African American wait staff, suggests that he was one of the most important employers in the whole region for people who had escaped from slavery.

Solon Whitney
Edward Williams collection, Niagara Falls Public Library


238 “Oldest Native Resident Died Last Evening,” *Niagara Falls Gazette*, February 20, 1907.

239 “Oldest Native Resident Died Last Evening,” *Niagara Falls Gazette*, February 20, 1907.
On May 12, 1840, Solon Whitney married Frances Drake from Saratoga Springs, New York. She was born August 17, 1822. Her father owned the famous United State Hotel and Congress Hall in that village, so she was used to serving a wide clientele in the hotel business. Saratoga Springs, with its medicinal springs, rivaled Niagara Falls as a summer destination for elite white slave-owning families. When her father moved to Albany as proprietor of the American Hotel, he placed his daughter in a nearby convent school. In 1832, the family moved to New Orleans and then to Louisville, Kentucky, where her father became the first proprietor of the Louisville Hotel (perhaps the Galt House, which opened in 1834). There, Frances finished her education at Bardstown, Kentucky.

While in Kentucky, Frances Drake visited the home of General Breckenridge in Frankfort, Kentucky, where she met Breckenridge’s niece, Elizabeth Porter from Niagara Falls. Their friendship “grew stronger during the many years they afterwards were neighbors” in Niagara Falls. Undoubtedly, it was through Elizabeth Porter that Frances Drake met her future husband, Solon Whitney. When Frances’ father died in Kentucky, the family returned to Saratoga Springs, where Frances Drake married Solon Whitney at Waterford, New York, in May 1840.

From the time of their marriage to the completion of their new house in 1851, Solon and Frances Whitney lived in an apartment in the Cataract House. The Drakes had four children: Solon Whitney, born in 1841, drowned in 1845; Drake Whitney; Solon Whitney 2nd; and Parkhurst Whitney, born in 1855, who died in 1856. Frances Whitney’s mother lived with the family and survived her daughter.

Beginning in 1846, Solon and Frances Whitney became part owners of the Cataract (with sisters and brothers-in-law, James and Celinda Trott and Dexter and Angeline Jerauld). In this capacity, they were certainly involved in hiring African American waiters and certainly aware that many of them had escaped from slavery. Frances Drake’s friendship with abolitionist neighbor Elizabeth Porter may also have influenced the family’s sympathy toward African Americans who escaped on the Underground Railroad. As a member of St. Peter’s Church, Frances Drake was also known for taking a prominent role in charitable work, “being ready in all ways, and at all times,” noted her obituary, “to lend her assistance, and many a person whom she has cheered and aided will miss her quite charity in their hours of need.”

When Frances Drake Whitney died in February 1883, her pallbearers were her brothers-in-law and nephews: J.F. Trott, W.J. Trott, J.P. Trott, Edward Phillips, D.R. Jerauld, and P.W. Jerauld.

Solon Whitney lived to become the oldest resident of the city. When he died on February 9, 1907, he was buried in Oakwood Cemetery.

First Congregational Church and Society of Niagara City
822 Cleveland Avenue

Significance: Like many Congregational churches, this one had many abolitionist members, including William H. Childs. It was located a block from the Suspension Bridge.

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240 Niagara Falls Gazette, February 14, 1883.
**Description:** The First Congregational Church and Society of Niagara City began to build their new church on land donated by James Vedder, with the cornerstone laid on September 10, 1855. Isaac Colt donated local limestone. Rev. J.O. Knapp from Hatfield, Massachusetts, became the first minister. In September 1856, they hung their new bell. On October 29, 1857, the congregation dedicated the church, which has remained in continual use since that time.

As completed, this church is built of Niagara limestone, the same material used to construct many local houses, as well as Colt’s Block, which still anchors the commercial district along Main Street. The church is Greek Revival in form, with a protruding bell tower and entryway and a full pediment supported by six stone pilasters. Round-topped windows reflect an Italianate influence, with a Florentine window in the bell tower over the front doorway.

The congregation used candles to light the church until November 4, 1860, when the congregation turned on the new gaslights. The steeple clock became the community’s timekeeper, always running twenty minutes faster than clocks on the Canadian side of the river. They added an organ in 1884 and stained glass windows in 1891, with a major interior renovation in 1904 and a substantial addition in 1923. ²⁴¹

²⁴¹ Information for this description comes from Jed Alfred Hyde, “History of the First Congregational Church, Niagara Falls, 90th Anniversary October 1945,” typescript, October 27, 1945, online, and the Niagara Falls Historic Preservation website, niagarafallshistoricpreservation.org/node/17, quoting the church’s 100th anniversary booklet; “First Congregational Church Observes 75th Anniversary,” Niagara Falls Gazette, October 27, 1930, http://monroefordham.org/docs/First%20Congregational/Church%20History/Niagara%20Gazette%20Oct%2027,%201930%20Church%2075th%20Ann.pdf;
Significance: From its very beginning, this Congregational Church found itself involved in debates over abolitionism, and several members withdrew in protest to the abolitionist sympathies of the majority.

In July 1853, a few local citizens organized the Union Sunday School of Bellevue in a brick schoolhouse at the corner of Ontario and Eleventh Streets.

On June 2, 1854, they organized the First Congregational Church and Society of Niagara City (so-called because the people of Bellevue had voted three days earlier to name their village Niagara City). They incorporated June 19, 1854, with Elihu Graves, Marcus Adams, William H. Childs, George Watson, Oliver H. Day, John Fisk, James Vedder, Henry Whitbeck, and William O. Buchanan as trustees.

The First Congregational Church of Niagara City became a major community institution. Because they had a settled pastor, noted the church history in 1945, “the church began to tie the families of the community together in bonds of friendship, lasting in many instances for generations.”

The birth of this church was, however, enmeshed in debates over abolitionism. First was the decision about whether to incorporate as a Congregational or Presbyterian Church. Congregationalists, with ultimate authority vested in local congregations, were often supporters of abolitionism. Presbyterians, with authority coming from a national conference through a hierarchy of presbyteries, often opposed abolitionism and included slaveholders as members. Locally, the question resolved itself into whether abolitionists should be allowed to hold meetings in the church. Marcus Adams, one of the founders of this church, kept a diary that documented these discussions. On February 7, 1855, for example, he noted, “Much discussion among Trustees about church matters. Finally Vedder agrees to make out deed without restrictions of Church Abolition and Temperance features. Mr. Graves & wife call to talk about having church Congregational. We would not consent to bind ourselves to stay nor to be dictated to as to who should lecture at the church.”

Treasurer’s Report from first meeting of Union Sunday School, out of which emerged the First Congregational Church

http://monroefordham.org/docs/First%20Congregational/Treasure%20Book%201853%20-%201882.pdf

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242 Diary of Marcus Adams, First Congregational Church and Society of Niagara Falls, monroefordham.org/churches/First_Congregational.html.
On February 8, he wrote, “Addington, Graves, and Childs will consent that the church may change to Presbyterianism by a provision in the deed, but they will not go on and help build unless the house shall be open to abolition and temperance lectures. To this I proposed a compromise, that the lecture room should be opened to all meetings not immoral. Addington said that would satisfy him.” By March 16, however, the “abolition party” brought a deed making the property solely a Congregational Church. “Now it seems that union is at an end,” he concluded. The division divided neighbors and families. When the Congregational Church formally organized on March 27, Adams was not there, “but all my family were.”

In 1856, James Vedder (another trustee and major funder) withdrew because he did not want to see this church become a haven for abolitionist speakers. He was “mad because a negro [sic] lectured last night in the church.” We do not know who this “negro” was.  

Discussions about divisions between Presbyterians and Congregationalists continued for many years. Throughout 1857, 1858, and 1859, it seemed as if the two congregations might join. Many members of the new Presbyterian Church seemed to endorse antislavery, also. In August 1857, Rev. Crittenden of the Presbyterian Church preached a sermon against the “government of our country trying to sustain slavery, the fugitive slave law, Missouri Compromise, and the endeavor to make Kansas a slave state, all turned to make the people hate slavery.” “Finest discourse yet,” concluded Adams. Others did not think so. Colonel Fisk threatened to leave the church unless the minister resigned. Adams told him to leave. “We do not sustain but condemn the Col’s folly,” he wrote.  

By 1859, the idea of union seemed, finally, dead. On September 1, 1859, Adams confided to his diary, “Union meeting came off today and the thing is ended. Union was voted down and will not be further discussed.”

In the 1860s, Benjamin F. Bradford, a well-known abolitionist, became minister in this Congregational Church. The church is now called the First Congregational Church United Church of Christ.

St. Peter’s Episcopal Church
228 Second Street (NE corner of Rainbow Boulevard and Second Street, historic address is 140 Rainbow Boulevard)
Niagara Falls City Landmark

**Significance:** Many African Americans attended this church, as did Peter A. Porter and Elizabeth Porter, abolitionists.

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243 Marcus Adams, August 23, 1856, monroefordham.org/churches/First_Congregational.html.

244 Marcus Adams, August 30, 1857, monroefordham.org/churches/First_Congregational.html.
Description: The first Episcopal Church was located on First Street just north of the Presbyterian Church. In May 1873, St. Peter’s Episcopal Church laid the cornerstone for this new Gothic Revival building, completed in 1880. Designed by well-known architect Henry Dudley, the building has a central doorway, rose window in the center of the gable, and a bell tower on the east. It is in virtually original condition. (For details, see Niagara Falls Historic Preservation Commission, “228 2nd Street, St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, “niagarafallshistoricpreservation.org/node/5”.

Discussion: Many prominent local families, both African American and European American, were associated with St. Peter’s Episcopal Church. Peter A. Porter and Elizabeth Porter, both associated with the Underground Railroad, belonged to this church, as did Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney, Solon and Frances Whitney, and Dexter and Angeline Whitney Jerauld. Several African Americans were also affiliated with this church, including Samuel Edwards and Charles Kersey Jackson.

The first Episcopal services were held in Niagara Falls in 1823. In 1828, Episcopalians joined with Methodists and Presbyterians to form a Union Church, built on First Street on land donated by Parkhurst Whitney. By 1829, Episcopalians had built their own chapel, Christ Church, with Samuel DeVeaux and Samuel Hooker (who operated a guide service in Niagara Falls) as wardens. In 1839, only the DeVeaux family remained as members, but population increases in the 1840s led to renewed interest in the church. After the death of Peter B. Porter in 1844, his heirs donated land on First Street between Falls and Niagara as a site for a new building. Samuel DeVeaux suggested that they name the new church St. Peter’s, to honor both Peter Porter and St. Peter as the first pope of the Christian Church in Rome. Designed by George Holley, this church was finished in 1849. 245

Peter A. Porter, a mainstay of this church, was killed in the Civil War in 1864, but his sister Elizabeth continued to be a strong supporter. So did members of the Whitney family, including Solon and Frances Whitney. Angeline Whitney Jerauld had died in 1857, but her family established a private girls’ school in connection with this church, located between the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches.

245 Niagara Falls Preservation Commission,
Construction began on the current structure in 1873 and was completed in 1880.

St. Peter’s offered services to many African American families. In 1864, they conducted a burial service in Oakwood Cemetery for Samuel Edwards, “a colored man” and hotel waiter who died of consumption on September 12, 1864, at the age of thirty-three. 246

In 1880, Mary Luvisa Patterson, adopted daughter of James and Jane Luvisa Patterson, local African American hotel owners, married Charles Kersey Jackson in “old St. Peter’s Church.” Whether this was the church on First Street or the one on Rainbow Boulevard, we do not know. 247 (For more on Mary Luvisa Patterson Jackson, see Site of Free Soil House and Site of Patterson House.)

In 1884, Edward Sarsnett, African American Civil War soldier from the Rhode Island Heavy Artillery, died when he was only forty-two years old and was buried in Oakwood Cemetery from this church. (For more on Edward and Mary Sarsnett, see Oakwood Cemetery.)

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When abolitionist Elizabeth Porter died in 1876, she was buried in Oakwood Cemetery, with a service in St. Peter’s Church. The Niagara Falls Gazette, edited by her nephew Peter A. Porter, noted:

Her religion was of that firm and well-wrought composition that grew brighter with the uses of diversity. It was no flimsy material for sunshine and holidays, but it was “the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left” a protection and a glory for all times and all

246 1860 U.S. census noted that Samuel Edwards was a waiter; “Burials,” St. Peter’s Church Records, 208. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding this.

247 Email, Lisa B. Lee Anderson to Pete Ames, August 22, 2011.

248 Niagara Falls Gazette, June 17, 1884.
events. And so she passed away, admired, beloved, respected, lamented, a fountain of blessing to the world and to the Church of God leaving behind a blessed memory.  

(For more on Elizabeth Porter, see Site of Elizabeth Porter House.)

The Site of the Ferry Landing
Foot of Niagara Falls, below Prospect Point

Significance: Many Africans Americans escaped to freedom on the ferry just below the Falls. We have detailed accounts of Nancy Berry, Patrick Sneed, and Martha. John Morrison, head waiter at the Cataract House, often ferried people across the river himself.

“View from the Ferry,” Niagara Falls and Vicinity (Philadelphia, 1853).

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249 Niagara Falls Gazette, April 26, 1876.

Note ferry and Ferry House (No. 13) with raceway bringing water from rapids through it.
Samuel Geil, “Ferry Stairs,” *Niagara Falls and Vicinity* (Philadelphia, 1853), showing relationship to International Hotel and Cataract House, three blocks west.

*Niagara County Map* (A.M.Z. Dawson, 1860)

Inclined Railway, Prospect Park

**Description:** Early visitors, including Native Americans, descended to the base of the American falls from Prospect Point, just north of falls, by clinging to rocks and shrubs. About half a mile farther north, they also used an “Indian ladder.” Before the War of 1812, an eighty-foot-long ladder was constructed directly at the base of the American falls, “placed nearly perpendicularly to the bank,” as Samuel DeVeaux wrote in 1839. It was destroyed during the War of 1812. Three years later, at the request of Augustus Porter, Parkhurst Whitney...
built the first stairs at this location in 1818, echoing a similar staircase on the Canadian side. In 1820, Whitney started regular ferry service with small rowboats, to carry passengers across the river. Augustus Porter owned both the stairs and the ferry. 250

Judging from contemporary images, ferry boats were basically large canoe-shaped vessels. Some seem to have been pointed at both ends. Others had a flat stern. One strong rower could transport up to about ten people.

![Image of ferry boat](image_url)

“View from the Ferry,” Samuel Geil, 1853

Early prints show many views of the stairs and the ferry, and early visitors left many descriptions of their experience. At the top of the bank, they began their steep descent. When English novelist Charles Dickens visited Niagara Falls with two women friends in 1842, he described his excitement as he began to climb down:

I dragged Kate down a deep and slippery path leading to the ferry boat; bullied Anne for not coming fast enough; perspired at every pore; and felt, it is impossible to say how, as the sound grew louder and louder in my ears, and yet nothing could be seen for the mist.251

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251 Charles Dickens to John Forster, 1842, [charlesdickenspage.com/niagara_falls1842.html](http://charlesdickenspage.com/niagara_falls1842.html).
“Niagara Falls (from the top of the ladder, on the American side), J.C. Bentley, 1839. purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/impr1841.html


purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/impr1851.html.

By 1845, at least part of the stairway had been enclosed. D.W. Clark from Richmond, Virginia, wrote a journal entitled “Two Days at Niagara,” in which he described the “descent to the ferry” as made “by means of a stairway, which is laid in a deep excavation of solid rock. It is entirely housed in, and in going down its dark avenue, one experiences the same feelings which would be felt in going through Thames’ tunnel.” 252

By the time visitors reached the river’s edge, they were usually drenched to the skin. If they could see through the mist, they had a fine view of the Falls. In his *American Notes*, Charles Dickens described his experience:

> The bank is very steep, and was slippery with rain and half-melted ice. I hardly know how I got down, but I was soon at the bottom, and climbing with two English officers, who were crossing and had joined me, over some broken rocks, deafened by the noise half-blinded by the spray, and wet to the skin, we were at the foot of the American Fall. I could see an immense torrent of water tearing headlong down from some great height, but had no idea of shape or situation or anything but vague immensity. 253

To protect themselves, some donned the recommended heavy coats or oilcloths and umbrellas. Samuel DeVeaux described the experience of “floating over the convulsed and agitated waters” in 1839: “Hoods, India rubbers, oil cloths and umbrellas, are brought into requisition, to shield them from the descending mist that gushes away from the falling stream.” 254

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252 www.niagarafallsinfo.com/history.


254 Samuel DeVeaux, *The Falls of Niagara, or tourist’s guide to his wonder of nature* (Buffalo: William B. Hayden, 1839), 133.
Crossing on the ferry offered a magnificent view of the falls. As the mist cleared, visitors could see the whole panorama spread out before them. Often, they were stunned to silence, overwhelmed. Charles Dickens wrote in *American Notes*, “When we were seated in the little ferry-boat, and were crossing the swollen river immediately before both cataracts, I began to feel what it was: but I was in a manner stunned, and unable to comprehend the vastness of the scene.” James Faxon noted in 1858, “Seating ourselves in the Ferry boat, we are soon dancing on the agitated waters, and gazing in profound silence and admiration at the Falls.” After he sat in the ferry, Dickens felt that “in an instant, I was blinded by the spray, and wet to the skin. I saw the water tearing madly down from some immense height, but could get no idea of shape, or situation, or anything but vague immensity. But when we were seated in the boat, and crossing at the very foot of the cataract -- then I began to feel what it was.”

Harriet Martineau took the ferry in 1834 and again in 1838. “Our boat was tossed like a cork in the writhing waves,” she recalled. “We soon found that, though driven hither and thither by the currents, the ferryman always conquers at last, and shoots his boat into the desired creek: but the tossing and whirling, amidst the driving spray, seems a rather dubious affair at first.”

Samuel Veaux also described it:

Towards the centre of the river, the mist is dispelled, and the prospect of the immense body of falling water is unobscured by any intervening object. The whole sublimity of the scene is displayed. Besides this, the eddies are strong, the waters dance about the boat, the boat itself rocks and bounds along, and some of the obtrusive waves dash over upon the passengers.

American poet Lydia Sigourney gave a similar testimonial:

You are encompassed by an amphitheatre of towering rocks and hills. Fragments of rainbows and torrents of mist hover around you. A stupendous column rises, whose base is in the fathomless depth, whose head, wrapped in cloud, seems to join earth and heaven. It

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257 Samuel DeVeaux, *The Falls of Niagara, or tourist’s guide to his wonder of nature* (Buffalo: William B. Hayden, 1839), 134.
strikes you as a living personification of His power who poured it ‘from the hollow of his hand.’ You tremble at its feet. With a great voice of thunder it warns you not to approach. The winds spread out their wings, and whelm you in a deluge of spray. You are sensible of the giant force of the tide, bearing up the boat, which like an eggshell is tossed upon its terrible bosom. You feel like an atom in the great creation of God. You glance at the athletic sinews of the rowers, and wonder if they are equal to their perilous task. But the majesty of the surrounding scene annihilates selfish apprehension. 258

Charles B. Ray, African American agent for the *Colored American*, was less effusive in his description of the crossing from Canada to the U.S. in 1837:

After waiting a little for some of our company to come up, we loaded our little boat, and were rowed across the swift running current, to the American shore where we alighted, and ascended the long and tedious, steps, to the top of the bank, and made the best of our way to the hotel. 259

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“Niagara Falls from the Ferry,” c. 1841, after W.H. Bartlett
*Steele’s Niagara Falls Portfolio* (Buffalo: Steele’s Press, 1842)
purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/impr1841.htm

Fred H. Holloway, “View from the Ferry”
(New York: Sarony and Major, 1846-54).
purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/impr1841.html
To many, the trip seemed dangerous if not impossible. In 1830, British traveler John Fowler thought that “the impetuosity and strength of the current, together with its numerous eddies, are not quite pleasant.” Trusting in the strength and experience of the ferryman, however, all travelers made it safely across. There are no known accidents or injuries associated with what looks like such a hazardous crossing. Fowler recounted, in fact, that his ferryman, “grown gray in the service,” had a twelve-year-old son who swam across the river. Now that, he said, was “a feat.”

In 1845, D.W. Clark gave his detailed impressions:

Arriving at the bottom, we found a boat awaiting us, and seating the ladies in the stern, and raising umbrellas to protect them from the drenching spray, which is blown at all times from the Falls in dense clouds, when you are below them, we shoved off into the boiling waves. When we had got a little distance from the shore, our boat, large as it was, commenced reeling and plunging like a drunken man on the vastness of the waters, and it required all the strength of our athletic ferry men for her to make any progress. As some tourist has remarked, she was as a mere "egg-shell," and a very slight alteration of position in her, would cause you to be engulfed in the awful cauldron. The next adventure to going under the Falls, I conceive this of crossing the ferry in an open boat, the most hazardous. Arrived opposite the center of the vast line of Falls, all thoughts of fear are gone, the mind is otherwise filled. You may have heard of Niagara, possessed engravings of Niagara, or read of Niagara; but you will never have seen it until now. The sensation which fills the soul is overwhelmingly sublime. Each moment that you look upwards at the vast volume of descending water, it appears to grow higher and higher, until it seems as if poured by the hand of omnipotence from the clouds.

One of the best descriptions of the complete trip, from descending at Prospect Point to crossing by ferry, appeared in 1873 in *Appleton’s Handbook of American Travel*:

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The best approach to the Falls is that most usually taken, viz., by the American shore. The descent of about 200 feet, by the staircase, brings the traveller directly under the shoulder and edge of the American Fall, the most imposing scene, for a single object, that he probably has ever witnessed. The long column of sparkling water seems, as he stands near it, to descend to an immeasurable depth, and the bright sea-green curve above has the appearance of being set into the sky. The tremendous power of the Fall, as well as the height, realizes his utmost expectations. He descends to the water's edge and embarks in a ferryboat, which tosses like an egg-shell on the heaving and convulsed water, and in a minute or two he finds himself in the face of the vast line of the Falls, and sees with surprise that he has expended his fullest admiration and astonishment upon a mere thread of Niagara—the thousandth part of its wondrous volume and grandeur. . . . The line of the Falls measures three-quarters of a mile in length; and it is this immense extent which, more than any other feature, takes the traveler by surprise. The current at the ferry sets very strongly down, and the athletic men who are employed here keep the boat up against it with difficulty. Arrived near the opposite landing, however, there is a slight counter-current, and the large rocks near the shore serve as a breakwater, behind which the boat runs smoothly to her moorings."

The crossing took only ten to fifteen minutes. To tourists, the 1200-foot passage seemed short, and landing on the Canadian side was almost anticlimactic. “The ladies become alarmed; but they hardly have time to inquire if there is not danger, before the dashing of the waves has ceased, the boat glides smoothly over subdued and dead swells, and soon reaches the Canada shore,” wrote Samuel DeVeaux. 263 “Ere you are aware,” wrote Lydia Sigourney, “the little boat runs smoothly to her haven, and you stand on the Canadian shore.” 264 Several artists’ views show the Canadian landing. A winding trail, about 300 feet long, led visitors up to the Clifton House on the Canadian side.

263 Samuel DeVeaux, The Falls of Niagara, or tourist’s guide to his wonder of nature (Buffalo: William B. Hayden, 1839), 134.

“Falls of Niagara, from the Canadian Side,” after W.H. Bartlett
purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/impr1841.html

purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/impr1841.html
In 1845, an inclined plane was added, paralleling the stairs. This was a cable railway, operated by water power, with two trams—one going up and one going down—riding on rails, counterbalancing each other on the steep slope. 265


265 Charles Mason Dow, Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls (1925), I: 396.
Godfrey N. Frankenstein, “Niagara Falls,” (Philadelphia: E. Ferret, 1853) created this image, showing the small building at the top of the inclined plane, as part of his large panorama of Niagara Falls, which he would unscroll for audiences. purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/impr1841.html.

"Niagara Falls From Near Top Of Ferry Road," (Buffalo: Charles Grebner, 1854-60), showing the inclined plane at left. purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/images/pnia267.jpg
Many people who escaped from slavery took this dramatic ferry crossing. A fifteen-minute ride through heavy mist and spray, with the huge waterfall towering over them, must have seemed like a rebirth, the beginning of a new life in freedom.

Well-documented cases of people who used this staircase and ferry to escape to Canada include that of Nancy Berry, Patrick Sneed, Martha, and John Morrison, waiter, who was an Underground Railroad agent from the Cataract Hotel.

In August 1853, two dramatic and well-documented incidents involving the ferry disrupted the normal carefree holiday atmosphere of Niagara Falls. Both were extensively reported in newspapers across the U.S. and Canada.

One was the unsuccessful escape of Patrick Sneed. For a detailed discussion of this, see the
description under the Cataract House.

The second involved a young woman named Martha. Like almost all documented escapes from Niagara Falls, this one involved the help of hotel waiters. The story is best told in a newspaper article that appeared first in the Cincinnati Christian Press and was reprinted on August 18, 1853, in the Hamilton (Ontario) Gazette and the Toronto Weekly North American and on August 30, 1853 in the Norwalk (Ohio) Reflector.

A gentleman of our acquaintance related to us the following, which took place under his own eyes at Niagara: -- He was standing on the steps of one of the principal hotels there, when carriage drove up, containing a Southerner and his party. In front of the hotel stood a mulatto woman, talking with her husband, while several colored waiters were busy with their various duties. As the man stepped from the carriage, his eye met that of the woman, and on both sides there was an instant recognition. He advanced towards her with the salutation, "How do you do, Martha?" extending his hand. She shrank back, fearing if she took the proffered hand she would be detained by its grasp. He pressed towards her, while she retreated, and finally turned and ran. The Southerner then howled out that he would give a hundred dollars to any one who would arrest her. Several were brutal enough to start like hounds in pursuit, but her husband sprang to her side, and the waiters interposed between them and the pursuers, and all rushed towards the river. The woman outran them all, even her husband, and plunged down the ferry stairs by hops instead of steps. A single boat lay there, while she could not push it off. In a moment her friends were at her side again, while the pursuers were hurrying down the steps. She sprang into the stern of the boat, followed by her husband, others seized a handspike and applied it to the boat. It moved, and as several hands were reached out to seize it, it glided just beyond them. An instant more, and they were afloat upon the broad river, and sent up a glad and defiant hurrah, which was heard above the roar of the cataract. They reached in safety a soil which is truly free.

For a year or two before 1860, W.O. Buchanan, then proprietor of the Maid of the Mist, landed not only at the original landing at Suspension Bridge and at the ferry dock on the Canadian side but also at the ferry dock at the base of the Falls.267 When Nancy Berry escaped from the ferry dock, she most likely did so about 1859, since she mentioned taking a ferryboat “enveloped in a gigantic wreath of black smoke.” Berry’s mother had told her not to return to slavery in St. Louis, and she took her mother’s advice. When her master and mistress brought her to Niagara Falls, one of the hotel waiters helped her escape. Ultimately, she simply walked to the ferry and took it across the river. So easy was her passage that we can wonder if her mistress arranged free time for her to find her way to freedom. In her own words, Nancy Berry told the story:

In the morning, Mr. and Mrs. Cox went for a drive, telling me that I could have the day to do as I pleased. The shores of Canada had been tantalizing my longing gaze for some days, and I was bound to reach there long before my mistress returned. So I locked up Mrs. Cox’s trunk and put the key under the pillow, where I was sure she would find it, and I made a strike for freedom! A servant in the hotel gave me all necessary information and even assisted me in getting away. Some kind of a festival was going on, and a large crowd was marching from the rink to the river, headed by a band of music. In such a motley throng I was unnoticed, but was trembling with fear of being detected. It seemed an age before the ferry boat arrived, which at last appeared, enveloped in a gigantic wreath of black smoke. Hastily I embarked, and as the boat stole away into the misty twilight and among crushing fields of ice, though the air was chill and gloomy, I felt the warmth of freedom as I neared the Canada shore.268

266 Weekly North American (Toronto), August 18, 1853 [from Cincinnati Christian Press; also published in the Hamilton (Canada) Gazette of the same day and the Norwalk, Ohio Reflector on August 30, 1853. Thanks to Christopher Densmore for finding these materials.

267 "The Maid," Niagara Falls Gazette, June 2, 1860, Niagara Falls Public Library.

268 Lucy A. Delaney, From the Darkness Cometh Light or Struggles for Freedom (St. Louis: J.T. Smith, 189?), 17-18,
Berry landed and found a friend of her mother’s, who helped her find work. She married a “prosperous farmer,” moved to Toronto, where she had several children.

One of the waiters who frequently helped people escape from slavery (and who may well have helped Martha) was John Morrison, who by 1859 was headwaiter at the Cataract House. Morrison had been in Niagara Falls at least since 1846, and he regularly ferried people across the river. In October 1859, a young woman named Rachael Smith registered at the Cataract Hotel. John Morrison saw her name in the hotel register and introduced himself. Did she know a man name Joseph Smith in Pennsylvania? he asked. When she replied that Joseph Smith was her father, Morrison said, "I would like to tell you about the poor fugitives I ferry across the river. Many of them tell me that the first place they came to in Pennsylvania was Joseph Smith's. I frequently see them when I visit my parents at Lundy's Lane. Many of them have nice little homes and are doing well." For two of the nights that Rachel Smith stayed at the Cataract House, John Morrison ferried people across the river. (For more on Morrison, see the Cataract Hotel.)

Even after completion of the Suspension Bridge at Bellevue, this ferry route remained a major crossing point for people escaping from slavery, aided consistently by African Americans who worked in the major hotels.

Site of the International Suspension Bridge, 1848, 1855 (replaced by the Whirlpool Rapids Bridge)
Niagara Falls, New York

Significance: Built in 1848 as a carriage and footbridge, the Suspension Bridge was rebuilt in two levels to incorporate rail traffic in 1855. This bridge became a magnet for travelers on an Underground Railroad network that reached throughout the northeastern U.S. and Canada, a crossing point that funneled hundreds and perhaps thousands of people from slavery to freedom, including Joe Bailey and others who traveled with Harriet Tubman.

“Great International Railway Suspension Bridge”
Published and engraved by D. L. Glover. Printed by H. Peters, 1859, showing lower level for foot and carriage traffic and upper level for railroads.

docsouth.edu.

Charles Parsons, "The Rail Road Suspension Bridge: Near Niagara Falls" (New York: Currier & Ives, 1857). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, I.D. cph.3b51175.


Description: Conceived by William Hamilton Merritt, who built the first Welland Canal, this suspension bridge spanned 800 feet across the Niagara River at its narrowest point, just north of the whirlpool. Built in 1848 by the engineer Charles Ellet, this bridge was owned and operated by two companies, the Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge Company of Canada and the International Bridge Company of New York. Work began when the river was spanned by a kite, flown by a young boy named Homan Walsh. A cable, one inch in diameter, was then sent over the river on the kite string. A basket attached to this cable carried passengers, beginning with Ellet himself, two or three at a time, over the river, at a height of 280 feet. 270


When it was completed on July 26, 1848, the bridge was “a very light and fairy-like affair,” as shown in views by Godfrey Frankenstein and Samuel Geil, both from 1853. This bridge was taken down in 1854 to make room for a new railway suspension bridge, taking advantage of the move toward free trade between Canada and the U.S. in the Reciprocity Treaty of 1854. 271


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Under the direction of engineer John A. Roebling (who later designed the Brooklyn Bridge), a new two-story suspension bridge was built between 1851 and 1855. Both elegant and efficient, it supported railway tracks on top and—twenty-eight feet below that—a roadway for foot and carriage traffic. Four cables (each nine and a half inches in diameter) were attached to sixty-foot high towers.

Marcus Adams, local judge and diarist, recorded progress in his journal:

June 5, 1854. Bridge floor timbers rapidly going in for carriage bridge.

June 7, 1854. Carriages will pass over the bridge next Monday, if rain does not prevent laying the timbers.

June 8. I went over to Canada today to see the new bridge as far as it was put up, and to see the manner of putting it together. A large number of passengers from the Canada cars came over while I was on it, and I was much amused while there to watch the different individuals, as they passed up a pair of stairs from the old to the new bridge. Some men seemed almost paralyzed with fear. The women were quite as little alarmed as the men.

June 27. It is said that the work of grading for a new depot was actually begun today.

July 14. Bridge cables being made quite fast.

July 21. The bridge tender was at his post in the morning, but at 10 p.m. was dead [of cholera].

August 2. Bridge work resumed. Lost one third of their old hands [to cholera].

August 17. I went to the upper scaffold on the towers.

September 11. Last wire for the cables carried over last Friday night. After long fixing and trying, they got started on Dec. 17 on the Cables, so that they have been about nine months making them and two of them are to be wound yet, which will take until about Oct. 1.

March 8, 1855. Bridge crossed for the first time by a Locomotive. This day will long be remembered by the people of this village. This was not the opening of the bridge but was intended only as an experiment to test some of the parts to fix their adjustment. The Locomotive and tender was called the “London” from the Great Western and crossed from that side—the track from this side not being yet connected. It started at 3 o’clock. The whole engine and tender was covered with men. Mr. Roebling and some of the officers of the Bridge company, Mr. Church, Brooks, and as many more as could hang on. The two national flags fluttered in the breeze side by side, and shouts and cheers were raised by the beholders from both sides. It stopped in the middle, and the depression was accurately taken and was
less than one half of an inch; as a man said it was no more than a fly on a clothes’ line. The grand opening will not take place until sometime in May.

March 9. Bridge crossed today by a very heavy locomotive with cars attached filled with people.  

March 18. Sabbath. Awful violation of the Sabbath by long trains of freight cars crossing and recrossing the Bridge. This will not soon be forgotten here by those who reverence this holy day.

The first railroad, the “London,” crossed the bridge on March 8, 1855. Bridge operators charged a toll: twenty-five cents for foot travelers. Carriages paid fifty cents for each passenger plus fifty cents for the carriage. Three rail lines (the New York Central, Erie, and Great Western from Canada) sent fifty trains a week across this bridge, which became, as one account suggested, “one of the world’s most famous bridges.”

The first railroad, the “London,” crossed the bridge on March 8, 1855. Bridge operators charged a toll: twenty-five cents for foot travelers. Carriages paid fifty cents for each passenger plus fifty cents for the carriage. Three rail lines (the New York Central, Erie, and Great Western from Canada) sent fifty trains a week across this bridge, which became, as one account suggested, “one of the world’s most famous bridges.”

“Suspension Bridge Over the Niagara River,” Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion (Boston: Maturin M. Ballou, June 16, 1855). Drawn by an artist named Barry, just after the bridge was completed.

purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/images/pnia269.jpg

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272 March 12, March 14, (March 16 “abolition party”)

273 www.niagarafallsinfo.com/history
“Suspension Bridge, Niagara on the Line of the Erie Railway,” Stereopticon View, Courtesy Christopher Densmore.

Walkway across Suspension Bridge Stereopticon View, Courtesy Christopher Densmore.
In 1897-98, a new bridge replaced the Roebling suspension bridge, but in 2011, portions of the limestone foundation of what was most likely the 1855 bridge remained, along with anchor bolts for the cables.

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Discussion: After its completion in 1848, and particularly after the railroad suspension bridge was finished in 1855, the bridge across the Niagara River at Bellevue became a magnet for freedom seekers, a crossing point that funneled hundreds and perhaps thousands of people from slavery to freedom. After 1855, people took the railroad—principally the New York Central Railroad from New York City, Albany, Syracuse, and Rochester or the Canandaigua Railroad from Elmira—directly across the Suspension Bridge. Before World War I, customs officers were interested in trade goods subject to tax, not in people who crossed the border, so fugitives crossed freely, with no intervention from state or federal officials. 274

Harriet Tubman was the most famous person to travel from slavery to freedom at the Suspension Bridge. Her crossings included one with Joe Bailey, who escaped from slavery with Tubman and three others in November 1856. Tubman told this story to Sarah Bradford in her 1869 autobiography, but details also appear in William Still, *The Underground Railroad*, the manuscript records of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committees, and notes from the Syracuse Vigilance Committee and the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society. Kate Larson, *Harriet Tubman: American Hero*, put this story together carefully, and this account draws on all these sources. 275

In November 1856, Tubman brought twenty-eight-year-old Josiah (Joe) Bailey, his brother William, Peter Pennington, and Eliza Manokey out of Maryland. Bailey—“of chestnut color, bald head, with a remarkable scar on one of his cheeks”—worked as an overseer for William Hughlett, who owned thousands of acres of forests and farms along the Choptank River. Routinely Hughlett flogged his enslaved people, simply to assert his authority. Joe Bailey decided that his first flogging from Hughlett would also be his last, and he took a small boat many miles to visit Ben Ross, Harriet Tubman’s father, who alerted him when Tubman came back to Maryland. When Hughlett discovered that Bailey had disappeared, he offered a $1500 reward for his return, sending advertising posters as far north as New York City. Such a high price brought out determined pursuers. Supporters along their route hide the group in a variety of safe places, including potato holes in the field. Even so, it took them two weeks instead of the usual three days to reach Wilmington, Delaware, smuggled over the river by black bricklayers, who hid them in their wagon under a load of bricks. On November 26, they reached William Still’s office in Philadelphia. Still sent them on to Albany and then Syracuse. This was only Tubman’s second trip to Syracuse, where Rev. Jermain Loguen kept the main safe house, with the help of a well-organized support network. The Syracuse group normally sent people directly to the Suspension Bridge, but they had run out of money. W.E. Abbott, treasurer of the Syracuse society, sent them instead via various safe houses to Maria G. Porter, treasurer of the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society. This group sent them across the Suspension Bridge.


275 Sarah Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn: W.J. Moses, 1869), 27-35; Kate Clifford Larson, 133-36; 159;
When Joe Bailey realized that advertisements for his capture had reached as far as New York City and that they still had over three hundred miles to go before reaching Canada, he grew depressed. "From that time Joe was silent," said Harriet; "he sang no more, he talked no more; he sat with his head on his hand, and nobody could amuse him or make him take any interest in anything." Even when they reached the Suspension Bridge, Joe refused to take heart. His fellow travelers brought tears to the eyes of others in the train when they sang a song to the tune of "Oh, Susannah," most likely newly-written by Parson Rezin Williams:

I'm on my way to Canada,
That cold and dreary land;
The sad effects of slavery,
I can't no longer stand.
I've served my master all my days,
Widout a dime's reward;
And now I'm forced to run away,
To flee the lash abroad.
Farewell, ole master, don't think hard of me,
I'll travel on to Canada, where all the slaves are free.276

Their experience of crossing the Suspension Bridge itself is best told in Tubman's own words:

The cars began to cross the bridge. Harriet was very anxious to have her companions see the Falls. William, Peter, and Eliza came eagerly to look at the wonderful sight; but Joe sat still, with his head upon his hand.

"Joe, come look at de Falls! Joe, you fool you, come see de Falls! It's your last chance." But Joe sat still and never raised his head. At length Harriet knew by the rise in the center of the bridge, and the descent on the other side, that they had crossed "the line." She sprang across to Joe's seat, shook him with all her might, and shouted, "Joe, you've shook de lion's paw!" Joe did not know what she meant. "Joe, you're free!" shouted Harriet. Then Joe's head went up, he raised his hands on high, and his face, streaming with tears, to heaven, and broke out in loud and thrilling tones:

"Glory to God and Jesus too,
One more soul is safe!
Oh, go and carry de news,
One more soul got safe."

"Joe, come and look at de Falls!" called Harriet. "Glory to God and Jesus too, One more soul got safe," was all the answer. The cars stopped on the other side. Joe's feet were the first to touch British soil, after those of the conductor. . . .

"The ladies and gentlemen gathered round him," said Harriet, "ill I couldn't see Joe for the crowd, only I heard 'Glory to God and Jesus too!' louder than ever." William went after him, and pulled him, saying, "Joe, stop your noise! you act like a fool!" Then Peter ran over, and jerked him mos' off his feet,--"Joe, stop your hollerin! Folks'll think you're crazy!" But Joe gave no heed. The ladies were crying, and the tears like rain ran down Joe's sable checks. A lady reached over her fine cambric handkerchief to him. Joe wiped his face, and then he spoke.

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276 Stephen Cornelius, Music of the Civil War Era (Greenwood, 2004), 134-35, noted that, in a WPA interview in 1937, Parson Rezin Williams claimed to have written “Aid Me on to Canada” in the late 1850s, which some people sang to the tune of “Oh Susanna.” In 1937, Williams was about 116 years old, the oldest living African American Civil War veteran.
"Oh! if I'd felt like dis down South, it would hab taken nine men to take me; only one more journey for me now, and dat is to Hebben!" "Well, you ole fool you," said Harriet, . . . "you might a' looked at de Falls fust, and den gone to Hebben afterwards." 277

The whole group went to St. Catharine’s, where Rev. Hiram Wilson operated a fugitive aid society. Wilson reported that Tubman was “a remarkable colored heroine,” “unusually intelligent and fine appearing,” and the men she brought were “of fine appearance and noble bearing.” 278

Tubman certainly used the Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls, but so did hundreds and perhaps thousands of others. We do not know—and probably will never know—how many in total escaped through this route, but we do have many references from memoirs and newspapers. Most of these are only brief notes, but some of them give extensive details.

Isaac Williamson recorded one of the most detailed descriptions of the use of the Suspension Bridge. He escaped with two others sometime before the bridge acquired its railroad tracks in 1855. Like hundreds of others, Williamson and his friends came through William Still’s office in Philadelphia, traveled from there to New York City, and then went to the home of Jermain and Caroline Loguen in Syracuse. The Loguens put them on the train headed for the Suspension Bridge. Williamson heard Loguen personally “tell the conductor to be sure and put us safely on the Canada side.” Three men rode the train to look out for danger, and supporters sent telegrams to stations ahead, asking if anyone was on the lookout. When they reached Rochester, the conductor gave them a heads up: “When you hear me cry out ‘Suspension Bridge,’ you must come right up to me,” he said.

We paid due attention and when after a time he thrust his head through the door and shouted out, "Suspension Bridge," clear and distinctly, it fairly electrified us, as we had been growing more and more excited every moment and we knew the final crisis was upon us... On going through a door, we found a buss backed up and ready to receive us. We got in and the conductor said, with a very significant look to the driver, "go quickly" and then the horses sprang forward like lightning, as though they had entered for a race. The buss rumbled and rocked, swaying to and fro and seeming to our excited fancy to be fairly endued with life and sympathy for the three anxious ones it carried. The team had to slow up on the bridge and walk. It seemed a very solemn march to us, but at last we were over on the other side of that raging torrent, the majestic Niagara. . . .

The driver now came around and opened the door, saying, "boys, you are safe in Canada." I jumped out, followed by Banks and Nicholas, and we shouted and hallowed just like crazy folks, "We're free; we're free; bless the Lord for it; bless the Lord for it; blessings on his holy name." I then threw up my hat in the air and we all threw our arms around each other and cried for very joy. . . . Oh this grand, glorious liberty. You have only to be a slave once to appreciate freedom.279

About the same time, “before the bridge was well opened,” a young man escaping from slavery rushed on to the bridge only to be dragged back to the U.S. by his pursuers. J.G. Kohl, a European traveler, used this incident to argue that the bridge should have a line of white paint at its center, marking the boundary between the U.S. and Canada. Suggesting to local officials, he received two replies. “We have not yet thought of that,” said one. Another argued that the bridge was owned jointly by a Canadian and U.S. companies, and that it “has been built by the common efforts of Americans and Canadians and belongs to both countries in common.” Kohl remained firm. “In the name of humanity, such a community ought to be dissolved,” he wrote, “and the national limit clearly defined. Two States, of which one recognizes human rights and the other the most detestable wrong, namely, that of slavery, should hold no property in common.” 280


278 Larson, 136.


From Elmira, John W. Jones sent people on the Canandaigua Railroad directly to the Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls. In April 1857, the Niagara Falls Gazette quoted the Elmira Advertiser that “the branch of the Under Ground Railroad running from that place to Niagara Falls, has been doing a pretty fair business this season.” John W. Jones had already sent ten people from Elmira to Niagara Falls, including “two young men and one female, all ‘freedom shriekers’ from North Carolina.” John W. Jones provided them with ‘tickets over the U.G.R.R. to Niagara Falls.”

From Albany, freedom seekers traveled directly west on the New York Central Railroad after its formation in 1853. An Underground Railroad supporter from the “abolition hole” of Amsterdam, New York, noted, for example, that many people went from Albany west to the town of Amsterdam. From Amsterdam, many were then sent by train directly to the Suspension Bridge. One young woman, “nearly white, crossed the suspension bridge at Niagara one train ahead of her owner, who followed, swearing vengeance upon all who had aided her.”

On February 16, 1855, John P. Van Deusen, who lived in the canal village of Palmyra, east of Rochester, recorded the arrival of a “Negro boy about 16 or 18 years old, a fugitive slave—bringing a line to Mr. Shumway [minister of the Congregational Church] from R.L. Adams, Editor, Wayne County Whig commending him to us for money and to be forwarded via Suspension Bridge to Canada.” They collected $4.50 from six different people and then sent him on to Lockport with a written note, telling him to go from there to Mr. Pardee a hardware merchant in Youngstown.

Of the hundreds of dramatic escape stories from the Underground Railroad, one of the most famous was that of sixteen-year-old Ann Maria Weems, who came over the Suspension Bridge in November 1855. Ann Maria was “owned” by slave-trader Charles Price and lived in his house in Rockville, Montgomery County, Maryland. Her freeborn father raised enough money to buy her mother and sister out of slavery. Her brothers, however, were all sold South, and Price refused an offer of $700 for Ann Maria. Since Ann Maria slept in the same room with Price and his wife, the situation seemed hopeless. James Bigelow, a lawyer and Underground Railroad agent in Washington, D.C., refused to give up. After three years, he finally managed to bring her to Washington, D.C. Supporters dubbed her “Joe Wright” and dressed her in male attire. A local doctor met her in front of the White House with his carriage. Joe jumped into the driver’s seat “with the fleetness of a young deer,” while the doctor sat composedly inside, riding though Maryland to William Still’s office in Philadelphia, where she arrived on Thanksgiving Day.

281 Niagara Falls Gazette, April 22, 1857.


283 John P. Van Deusen, Diary, February 16, 1855, transcription in Wayne County Historian’s Office, printed in Robert Hoeltzel, History of Park Presbyterian Church, Newark, 51. Found by Marjory Perez.

From Philadelphia, Weems (still in male attire) went to New York City, at the expense of abolitionist merchant Lewis Tappan. She stayed for several days with Rev. A.N. Freeman, African American minister in Brooklyn, and then Freeman accompanied her on the train, headed toward the home of relatives in Buxton, Ontario. By the time they reached Rochester, Freeman was worried, wondering if the train went across the Suspension Bridge and if slave catchers would descend upon them, eager for the $500 reward. But his fears were groundless. When the reached the Bridge, the conductor told them, “Sit still; this car goes across.” “You may judge of my joy and relief of mind,” wrote Freeman, “when I looked out and was sure that we were over! Thank God, I exclaimed, we are safe in Canada!” Freeman delivered her safely to her uncle Bradley in Buxton.  

James Forman, “twenty-three years of age, dark mulatto, nearly six feet high,” according to William Still, escaped from Norfolk, Virginia. In June 1856, he was working—most likely as a waiter—at the International Hotel. He wrote to William Still, asking him to meet his fiancée, Mariah Moore, who was taking the steamship Virginia from Norfolk to Philadelphia. “You will oblige me very much by seeing her safely on the train of cars that leaves Philadelphia for the Suspension Bridge Niagara Falls,” he wrote. “pleas to tell the Lady to telegraph to me [“direct to the International Hotel”] what time she will leave Philadelphia so i may know what time to meet her at the Suspension Bridge.” He met Mariah Moore at the train on June 30, and they were married “in the English Church in Canada” on July 22.  

Also in 1856, Harriet Eglin and her cousin Charlotte Gildes escaped from Baltimore on the train by wearing large mourning hats and veils to conceal their appearances. They went to the Loguen home in Syracuse, and Loguen found them safe houses near Auburn. Harriet Eglin stayed with Rev. Charles Anderson and Elizabeth Anderson in Sennett, New York, but Charlotte left for Canada after only a week, where she mailed her letters at Suspension Bridge. Slave catchers intercepted one of her letters to Baltimore, in which she told how they had escaped, implicating both the man who helped them board the train and the railroad company itself. 

In 1857, William J. Watkins, agent for the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, noted that from December 15, 1856, to August 9, 1857, he had spent $90.00 to send fifty-nine fugitives to Canada. He sent six to Toronto (most likely via steamboat from Rochester) and fifty-three to “the Suspension Bridge, St. Catharines, Hamilton, etc.” For the whole year of 1857, he expended $140.00. 

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285 Still, 686.


288 William J. Watkins to Mrs. Armstrong, August 1856, Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, Clements Library, University of Michigan. Thanks to Kate Clifford Larson for finding this. Kate Clifford Larson, email to Kevin Cottrell and Judith Wellman, November 8, 2009.
In 1858, the Niagara Falls Gazette reported, “four highly colored chattels were put aboard the mail train at Rochester on Thursday by Fred Douglas and reached the Canadian side of the Suspension Bridge in safety. They were very suspicious of certain railroad officials who eyed them closely.”

These eleven well-documented cases suggest that, especially after completion of the railroad tracks, the Suspension Bridge in Niagara Falls was a major destination for people escaping from slavery, well known at least as far south as Philadelphia and regularly used. People who escaped through New York State continued to use steamboats leaving from Oswego, Pultneyville, Charlotte (the port at Rochester), Lewiston, Black Rock, and Ogdensburg. They also crossed on the bridge at Lewiston, the ferry at Youngstown, and other points along the shores of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. But, after 1855, the Suspension Bridge became a major point of departure.

Niagara Falls: Suspension Bridge
Documented Fugitive Slave Cases

General:

From Amsterdam, New York, people were often sent by rail directly to Canada. One young woman, “nearly white, crossed the suspension bridge at Niagara one train ahead of her owner, who followed, swearing vengeance upon all who had aided her.” E.B.M., “Underground Railroad Again: Its Operations as Seen at Amsterdam, New York,” Springfield Republican, April 9, 1900.

Before 1855
Isaac Williamson took train to Suspension bridge and then crosses to Ontario on the road. Isaac D. Williams, Sunshine and Shadow of Slave Life. (East Saginaw, Mich. Evening News Printing and Binding House, 1885), 47-49.

February 1855
Congregationalists in Palmyra sent James, a young African American man to Niagara County. Directed to send him to Suspension Bridge but instead sent him to Lockport and then to Youngstown. John P. Van Deusen, Diary, February 16, 1855, transcription in Wayne County Historian’s Office, printed in Robert Hoeltzel, History of Park Presbyterian Church, Newark, 51. Found by Marjory Perez.


June 1856
James Forman wrote to his fiancé, Mariah Moore, asking her to meet him at the Suspension Bridge and to reply to him at the International Hotel. William Still, The Underground Railroad (1872), 269-70.

June 1856

November 1856

August 1857

"Mrs. Armstrong, I find upon examination, that from Dec. 15th to Aug. 9th, '57, I passed 59 fugitives to Canada, as follows. 6 To Toronto, and 53 to Suspension Bridge, St. Catharines,

289 Courier, Sept. 22, 1858. Niagara County Historian’s Office
Hamilton, etc.
Respectfully,
Wm. J. Watkins
P.S. Expended on behalf of the Society, $90.00. W.J. W."

1858
Jacob Blockson, George Alligood, Jim Alligood, and George Lewis all escaped from Sussex County, Delaware. Went through William Still’s office in Philadelphia to St. Catharine’s. Still recorded details about them. Blockson wrote back to his wife in Delaware, asking her to meet him at Suspension Bridge. William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (1872), 488-91.

1858
“The Niagara Falls Gazette says 4 highly colored chattels were put aboard the mail train at Rochester on Thursday by Fred Douglas and reached the Canadian side of the Suspension Bridge in safety. They were very suspicious of certain railroad officials who eyed them closely.” *Courier*, Sept. 22, 1858.

1858
Jacob Blockson, George Alligood, Jim Alligood, and George Lewis all escaped from Sussex County, Delaware. Went through William Still’s office in Philadelphia to St. Catharine’s. Blockson wrote back to his wife in Delaware, asking her to meet him at Suspension Bridge. William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (1872), 488-91.

October 6, 1858

**Site of the Maid of the Mist Landing**
End of Ferry Street

**Significance:** From 1846, when the *Maid of the Mist* began service, until after Captain Joel Robinson took her through the Whirlpool to be sold in 1861, she docked in Bellevue, just above the Suspension Bridge. This dock was the site of the capture of Cataract House waiter Patrick Sneed, who was falsely accused of murder in August 1853.


“THE STEAM BOAT LANDING.—From this point, the Steam boat MAID OF THE MIST, runs up to the Falls and lands on the Canada side, three times a day. The visitor who goes on board of that Boat, is delighted with the sublimity of the surrounding scenery.”

**Description:** In October 1845, the Niagara Falls Ferry Association, whose main investors were J.V.E. Vedder and John R. Johnston of Geneva and John Fisk of Rochester, put sixty men to work constructing a road down the bank of the Niagara River. They planned to build the largest hotel in the U.S. at the head of the road, connecting to a ferry dock where a new steam ferry boat, “handsomely furnished with saloons cabins, &c.” would carry people across the river to the dock just below the Clifton House on the Canadian side. Plans were to build a hydraulic canal from Ft. Schlosser to the head of the ferry landing, so that steamboats could run directly from Buffalo, bringing people to the proposed Suspension Bridge, which would also be linked to a direct rail line from Rochester and then west through Canada into the upper Great Lakes.  

The following summer, two years before the first Suspension Bridge was built, the Maid of the Mist began its operations. It weighed 100 tons and was powered by two twenty-five horsepower engines. The Maid of the Mist docked just south of the Whirlpool on the U.S. side of the river and just below the Clifton House on the Canadian side. Access to boat tours was convenient. Tourists could reach the dock by railroad cars that left major hotels on the U.S. side fifteen minutes before the boat departed. Carriages took visitors to the Canadian side from the dock to local sites. To reassure fearful visitors, broadsides advertised a “sober and experienced crew.”

When the Suspension Bridge was finished for road traffic in 1848, use of the Maid of the Mist as a ferry service declined, and the boat began to cater specifically to tourists who wanted a close view of the Falls. Under Captain Filkin and later Captain Thomas Vedder, the boat made three trips daily from the dock near the Suspension Bridge, swinging near the base of the Falls before docking in Canada and then returning to the U.S. Its first boilers were inadequate, quickly replaced by two more powerful boilers. Still, “many had doubts of her

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290 *Providence, Rhode Island, Journal*, October 27, 1845.

strength and safety and deemed it a hazardous exploit to make one of her brief voyages,” reported the *Buffalo Courier Express*. Visitors nevertheless “trod her quivering deck, as her elfin hull rose and fell in the mad tide.”

From the top of the road leading to the dock, visitors had a “distinct and beautiful view of the entire falls.” After they paid their fifty cent fare, they boarded the *Maid of the Mist* at 9 a.m., 11 a.m., or 3 p.m., for a one-and-a-half to two mile, forty-minute trip through the gorge. Once aboard, thirty to sixty passengers, “some enquiring with earnestness if there is any danger,” enjoyed cabins and a saloon inside. They could also don “india rubber dresses” to view the Falls from the promenade deck outside.

Like a YouTube video in the twenty-first century, he *Geneva Gazette* described the trip in rich visual detail:

The boat begins to move through this quiet eddy with great power and beauty. In a few minutes, you arrive at a bold point of the high precipitous bank projecting into the river, and making the current doubly strong. As the boat strikes the surge, it stops; and you cast your eye on the gentlemanly captain to see if he betrays any emotion. You see him watching, yet confident in the machinery of the vessel. It moves up slowly, soon turns the point, and conquers the current powerful s it is. You pass on with a faster motion. You turn another point—come to the old ferry, pass the inclined plane and approach the American Fall. You course along the white and foaming bills made by the dashing waters. You look up and almost perpendicularly, on the white sheet of waters dashing down this highest portion of the vast precipice. The slow motion of the boat gives you time to contemplate the grandeur of the cataract and the power of Him who made it. You pass the cascade Falls as they are sometimes called, separated from the last by a small island, as if to show that beauty is the sister of sublimity. You move on quietly and slowly near the bank, passing the Biddle staircase, and approach the great Horse Shoe Falls with its measureless volume of water. The now take in, at one view, the sublimest portion of the most tremendous cataract in the world. The boat advances till the prow strikes the foaming, boiling and dashing waters of the immense caldron before you. As if a thing of life aware of the danger of venturing further, the boat turns quickly and glides like a shooting star, in the harbor on the Canada shore. You hear the exclamation repeated by many around you, who have often visited Niagara, “I have never seen the Falls before.”

The *Rochester Daily Advertiser* printed a similar description. The route passed through wild and romantic scenery on either hand, and finally, along in front of and within a few yards—yet perfectly safe—of the American and Canada Horse Shoe Falls. The view from the deck of the steamer, as she moves along under easy steam, with the rainbows on board, and all about you, the roar of the cataract, the rushing over head, and a hundred and sixty feet above you, of that mighty avalanche of deep blue water with the commotion of the waters in which your boat is now gracefully rising and falling, as upon the sea, the huge rocks piled upon rocks, as thrown there in heaps by some all powerful hand, all combine to form a scene of surpassing grandeur; and . . . never to be forgotten.

As for fear, that passed quickly. “The emotion of sublimity swallows up every other feeling. All stand in silent amazement at the unsurpassed sublimity of this new view of this wonderful work of the Creator’s hand.”

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293 *Geneva Gazette*, July 31, 1847.

294 *Geneva Gazette*, June 19, 1847, copied from the *Rochester Democrat*. There are many accounts of taking the tour on the *Maid of the Mist*; Frederick H. Johnson, *Every Man His Own Guide at Niagara Falls* (New York: Phinney, 1852), 79.

295 *Geneva Gazette*, July 31, 1847.
By July 1847, the *Lockport Democrat* could report, “this steam boat is now the attraction at the Falls.”

The business was not without its problems, however. In 1851, the company sustained a major blow when the *Maid of the Mist* sank at its moorings under an avalanche of snow. Without insurance, they lost the whole cost of the boat, nearly $10,000. Undaunted, however, investors launched a new *Maid of the Mist* in 1854, with more powerful engines. Thousands of tourists took the trip up to the Falls, many of them several times.

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296 *Geneva Gazette*, July 17, 1847, copied from *Lockport Democrat*.

For a time in the late 1850s, the Maid of the Mist also landed at the ferry landing at the base of the American Falls. In 1860, however, W.O. Buchanan, then owner of the Maid, was not able to work out an arrangement with the Porter-Whitney families, who operated the ferry, so he reverted to landing on the U.S. side only at the dock near the Suspension Bridge. The boat made four or five trips per day from Suspension Bridge, along with “pleasure trips from the Canada dock . . . to suit the wishes of parties.”

In 1861, however, Buchanan found such an arrangement unprofitable. He sold the Maid of the Mist to a Montreal company, who stipulated that it must be delivered to Niagara, Ontario, across from Fort Niagara. At great risk to his life, Captain Joel Robinson agreed to pilot the boat through the Whirlpool rapids, accompanied by Mr. Jones as engineer and Mr. McIntyre as machinist. They made the harrowing journey with both the boat and their lives intact, but Mrs. Robinson thought her husband had aged twenty years in that one day. The Maid of the Mist, renamed the Maid of Orleans, finished her career giving tourists a view of Quebec from the St. Lawrence River.

298 Niagara Falls Gazette, June 2, 1860.

299 Scientific American, September 8, 1883; www.maidofthemist.com/
Discussion: In August 1853, U.S. marshals pursued Cataract Hotel waiter Patrick Sneed, accusing him not of escaping from slavery but of murder. Ferry boat rowers took Sneed almost to the Canada ferry landing before learning of his murder charge. At that point, they changed course and rowed Sneed to the Maid of the Mist landing near the Suspension Bridge. Aided by Irish workers (perhaps working to renovate the dock or to build the new and more powerful Maid of the Mist, launched in 1854), marshals captured Sneed at the landing and took him by rail and carriage to jail in Buffalo. His subsequent trial revealed the murder charge to be fraudulent and resulted in Sneed’s release. For more details, see the description of the Cataract House.

Underground Railroad Sites in Niagara County outside Niagara Falls

Site of the Ferry Landing at Youngstown
Youngstown
Town of Porter
Near junction of Niagara River with Lake Ontario

Significance: The ferry across the Niagara River here at Youngstown was an important crossing point for freedom seekers, particularly before completion of the Suspension Bridges at Niagara Falls in 1848 and Lewiston in 1851. It remained an alternative even when these other crossing points were patrolled by slave catchers.

The Falls of Niagara being a complete guide to all the points of interest around and in the immediate neighbourhood of the great cataract with views taken from sketches by Washington Friend, Esq. (T. Nelson & Sons, ...1859).

Description: We have not yet located historic images of the Youngstown ferry landing.

Discussion: There are at least three specific references to freedom seekers who escaped to Canada across the Youngstown Ferry. The earliest was Thomas James, who escaped from slavery near Canajoharie and Fort Plain, New York, in June 1821. When he was seventeen years old, James was traded to a new master, George Hess, for “a yoke of steers, a colt and some additional property,” he wrote in his autobiography. Hess worked him hard, but a threatened whipping was more than James was willing to tolerate. Following the “newly staked line of the Erie canal,” he walked westward for about a week, sleeping in barns and begging for food at local houses along the route, until he reached Lockport. There “a colored man showed me the way to the Canadian border. I crossed the Niagara at Youngstown on the ferry boat, and was free!” In Canada, James worked for three months at Deep Cut on the Welland Canal. When he crossed back to the U.S. of the river, a farmer named
Rich, living near Youngstown, hired him to chop wood. He worked there for several months before settling in Rochester, where he became a teacher and minister with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. In 1883, when James was eighty years old, he returned to Youngstown to preach to a full house in the Presbyterian Church. The local newspaper, the *Niagara County News*, noted that Olaf Hathaway had ferried James across the river. After his death, local residents heralded Hathaway, of Quaker background, as a noted man in many respects, especially in seeking to relieve the distress of others. He often jeopardized his life in his efforts to save others. In several instances when small boats were icebound on the Niagara River and the ice was carrying them into the lake to certain destruction, he would, at the risk of his own life, make his way out to them on the floating ice and rescue them. It was a pleasure to him to aid suffering humanity. In all the relations of life he was an exemplary man, and the community in which he lived will long regret his death.

On January 11, 1853, abolitionist orator, editor, and minister Samuel Ringgold Ward, who had escaped from slavery with his parents when he was three years old, traveled across the river to Canada on the Youngstown ferry. On the Canadian side, he met a fugitive from slavery, “old and weak,” wearing rags for clothes, huddling around the stove in the ferry house to keep out the cold. But “he was free! that was youth, health, rest, strength, all things.”

“Crossing the river,” wrote Ward, “it was so cold that icicles were formed upon my clothes, as the waves


301 *Niagara County News*, September 21, 1883, http://newsfeed.rootsweb.com/th/read/NYNIAGAR/2001-09/1000862274: “Rev. Thos. James (colored) of Rochester preached in the Presbyterian church Sunday evening to a full house, comprising the congregations of that church and the M. E. Church. Rev. James is an old man, being now in his 80th year, and was one of the first anti-slavery lecturers of the country, for which he was mobbed at Le Roy and other places. He was born in slavery, but fled from his captors when quite a young man, and crossed the river in his flight sixty-three years ago at this place. Olaf Hathaway, an old resident of this place long since dead, ferried him across. He afterward returned and resided several months in this locality. At the close of the service a collection was taken up for his benefit and about $7 realized. He lectured in the Presbyterian church at Lewiston Tuesday evening.” Information about Hathaway appeared in William Pool, ed., *Landmarks of Niagara County, New York* (Syracuse: D. Mason, 1897), 30.

dashed the water into the ferry boat.” The fugitive had crossed on the ferry “with nothing upon his person but cotton clothing, and an oilcloth topcoat.” He sat not at the stove, “but all around” it, covering it “with his shivering legs and arms and trunk.” And everyone waiting with him was perfectly happy to yield their share of the scarce heat to this man.  

The ferryman was “a bit of a wag—a noble, generous Yankee.” Ward enjoyed some humorous banter with him:

Upon asking the fare of the ferry, I was told it was a shilling. Said I, "Must I pay now, or when I get on the other side?"
"Now, I guess, if you please."
"But suppose I go to the bottom, I lose the value of my shilling," I expostulated.
"So shall I lose mine, if you go to the bottom without paying in advance," was his cool reply. I submitted, of course.  

Further discussion revealed the ferryman to have a sense of compassion as well as a sense of humor. When they were partly across, he asked Ward,

"Stranger, you saw that 'ere black man near the stove in the office, didn't you?"
"Yes, I saw him, very near it, all around it--all over it, for that matter."
"Wall, if you can do anything for him, I would thank you, for he is really in need. He is a fugitive. I just now brought him across. I am sure he has nothing, for he had but fourpence to pay his ferry."
"But you charged me a shilling, and made me pay in advance."
"Yes, but I tell you what; when a darky comes to this ferry from slavery, I guess he'll get across, shilling or no shilling, money or no money."  

Knowing as I did that a Yankee's--a good Yankee's--guess is equal to any other man's oath, I could but believe him. He further told me, that sometimes, when they had money, fugitives would give him five shillings for putting them across the ferry which divided what they call Egypt from Canaan. In one case a fugitive insisted upon his taking twenty-four times the regular fare. Upon the ferryman's refusing, the Negro conquered by saying, "Keep it, then, as a fund to pay the ferriage of fugitives who cannot pay for themselves."  

On February 16, 1855, John P. Van Deusen of Palmyra, New York, recorded in his diary another example of using the Youngstown ferry as an alternative to the Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls. “This P.M.,” he noted,  

Mr. Culver came from the lower to the upper room in the church [Congregational Church in Palmyra, New York], called Mr. Shumway and me aside and introduced a Negro boy about 16 or 18 years old, a fugitive slave - bringing a line to Mr. Shumway from R.L. Adams, Editor, Wayne County Whig commending him to us for money and to be forwarded via Suspension Bridge to Canada. Their master was Wm Anderson who he said owned 200 slaves. The Father's name is Daniel, and the boy's James. Mr. S. Culver gave him $1, Mr. Shumway 4/, Mr. A.F. Cressy 4/, and I 4/, 2 other gentlemen $1 each and gave him written directions to go to Lockport and then to Youngstown to Mr. Pardee, a Hardwar Merchant there, and a Bro. of R. G. Pardee, both originally citizens of Palmyra and good men. We hope he will go along safely and would have been glad could they have stopped

here, but it is not safe and they would feel unsafe.  

Still a fourth example identifying the Youngstown ferry as a major crossing point is revealed in the story of Cassey. In early 1861, “Col. P.” (most likely Colonel Peter A. Porter) helped Cassey to escape through Lockport. At the same time, he diverted attention from her trip to Lockport by leading slave-catcher Cathcart on a wild horse race from Niagara Falls to Youngstown and back. *(For more on this story, see description of home of Peter A., Elizabeth, and Josephine Porter.)*

**Lewiston Landing**

**Significance:** Many freedom seekers used the ferry at Lewiston or the Lewiston Suspension Bridge (from its construction in 1851 to its destruction in 1864) to cross into freedom in Ontario. Steamboats also stopped here six days a week, making a regular circuit of both U.S. and Canadian ports on Lake Ontario. U.S. captains such as Horatio Nelson Throop (master of the *Rochester* and the *Ontario*) and Canadian captains such as Hugh Richardson (master of the *Chief Justice William Robinson*) willingly picked up people escaping from slavery at the Lewiston landing and took them to Toronto and Kingston. Today, the area near the historic landing and suspension bridge is marked by a bronze, larger-than-life statue, designed by sculptor Susan Geissler and erected in 2009 to commemorate Margaret Goff Clark’s *Freedom Crossing* (1969).

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307 John P. Van Deusen, Diary, February 16, 1855, from Robert Hoeltzel, *History of Park Presbyterian Church*, 51. Many thanks to Marjory Allen Perez for sharing this.


James Van Cleve, “Suspension Bridge at Lewiston and Queenston,”
From tourist guide issued by Ontario and St. Lawrence Steamboat Company (published by Jewett, Thomas, & Co).
[purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/images/pnia260.jpg](purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/images/pnia260.jpg)
Description: Seven miles north of Niagara Falls, the village of Lewiston stands at the intersection of the Niagara Escarpment and the Niagara River. Historically, this was the landing place that Seneca Indians guarded as the western door of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. A pre-Iroquoian ancient burial mound still stands near the carrying trail, now part of the Lewiston Art Park, and Joh-gan-so-seh earned her reputation here as the peace queen by brokering peace between warring peoples.

On December 19, 1813, the British burned the small European American settlement at Lewiston, and the village was abandoned until April 1815. By 1820, however, 869 people (including six free people of color and three people in slavery) lived in Lewiston’s fifty houses. The village included the county courthouse (soon to be moved to Lockport) and the customs house for the Niagara District. Three times a week, stagecoaches carried mail and passengers from Canandaigua through Rochester to Lewiston. The Town of Lewiston included Tuscarora homelands, about two miles east of Lewiston Landing. 309

Lewiston’s biggest period of growth occurred before the Erie Canal was completed in 1825. As one observer noted, Lewiston was the main port of entry to the U.S. from Canada on the Niagara River, and Lewiston’s main street, Center Street, was “the great overland route across the Continent.”

Great lines of stages thronged with travelers to the Falls and loaded with heavy foreign mail for Montreal rattled down her broad Avenue. . . . Great ox teams, sometimes thirty a day, bore merchandise up the mountain. The pioneers of Michigan, Illinois, and the States beyond, came in their white covered wagons and were often detained for days by the floating ice in the river. Great droves of cattle passed through.

Such commerce made Lewiston a wealthy village. One measure of its success were the number of pianos in town, one in almost every house on the main street. 310

Completion of the Erie Canal in the 1820s led to an explosion of population in Lockport, and Lewiston lost its relative population importance in Niagara County. By 1840, it contained “only about eighty dwellings and six or seven hundred inhabitants,” according to J.W. Orr. It was, however, “a pretty and flourishing place,” with “a fine academy, one or two churches, and a very excellent hotel, called/the Frontier

309 Horatio Gates Spafford, Gazetteer of the State of New York (1823), 281; J.W. Orr (1842), 66-68.

“On opposite sides of the river . . . repose the peaceful villages of Lewiston and Queenston, shaking hands across the deep water like twin brothers, by the ferry that connects them. These are the landing places of the Ontario and St. Lawrence steamers; and this is the highest point of river navigation below the cataract of Niagara. Both villages are connected with the Falls by rail-road.” J.W. Orr, 66.

Thomas Dickson, collector of customs, operated the first Lewiston-Queenston ferry, beginning in the early nineteenth century. By 1825, Obed Smith had charge of the ferry, advertising, “every attention is paid to the facility and safety of persons wishing to cross the river,” with “moderate rates” and “boats kept in the best of order.”

These ferries were large rowboats which could take horses and wagons as well as people. In the 1820s, however, ferry design changed to the horse-boat, powered by horses walking on a disc, connected to gears that operated paddle wheels on either side of the boat. This is the type of ferry pictured in J.W. Orr’s *Pictorial Guide*, published in 1842. Note the horse housed in a small enclosure toward the rear of the boat.

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311 J.W. Orr, 67-68.

Joseph Wynn ran this ferry from Queenston to Lewiston until 1841, when Thomas Trumble took over. On the U.S. side, Job Chubbuck was the ferryman. Business for this ferry declined after construction of the Suspension Bridge in 1851, but until then, this was the only direct route across the river.

The drawing of Lewiston Landing that appeared in J.W. Orr, *Pictorial Guide to the Falls of Niagara*, 1842, shows what is most likely the house known today as Tryon’s Folly, built with multi-levels along the river bank in 1830. Although we have not so far discovered any evidence connecting Amos Tryon to the Underground Railroad, this house was part of Margaret Goff Clark’s *Freedom Crossing*. Its location and early abandonment have generated considerable speculation that it may have been a hiding place for fugitives.

In 1878, James Van Cleve sketched the Old Ferry House, once the site of cabins erected by Sieur de la Salle, surrounded by a fence, noting that “at the West end of the garden fence large quantities of Flint have been and are still found. It was a place for making arrowheads by the INDIANS.”

In the fall of 1829, William Leete Stone took this ferry. He first rode the mail coach from Lockport to Lewiston, through unsettled land, full of “lofty and imposing” forests with “oaks and occasionally sycamores of immense size” interspersed among “towering maples and elms.” The tops of the trees in the forest stretching toward Lake Ontario looked like a parlor floor, covered with the “most gorgeous carpet ever imported.” “All the colors and hues which Nature can paint, were here blended together in the sweetest harmony.” Noted actress Fanny Kemble took the same road from Lockport to Lewiston in 1833, noting that it was “very pretty,” and “we got out and walked whenever the horses were changed.” Both Stone and Kemble rode directly to the ferry and successfully crossed the “dark and stormy river,” “a thick stream of verdigris, full of pale, milky streaks, whirls, eddies, and counter-currents.”

Steamboats also used the Lewiston Landing, connecting Lewiston to U.S. and Canadian all over Lake Ontario. Lewiston was the farthest point south from Lake Ontario that was navigable on the Niagara River. In 1845, the Ontario Steam and Canal Boat Company operated four steamers between Lewiston and Ogdensburg. Either the *Lady of the Lake* and the *Rochester* left Lewiston at 6:00 p.m. on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday, headed for Rochester, Oswego, Sacketts Harbor, Kingston, and Ogdensburg. Returning, they left Ogdensburg on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday each week at 8:00 a.m, going to Kingston, Sacketts Harbor, Oswego, Rochester, Toronto and Lewiston. Steamboats *St. Lawrence* and *Oneida* took the opposite schedule. At

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each port, they timed their arrival to coincide with departures via canal and railroad. Steamers arrived in Lewiston, for example, in time for passengers to connect to the railroad going to Niagara Falls and Buffalo.

1845. Lake Ontario Route. 1845.
purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/images/pnia181.jpg

The American Express and U.S. Mail lines had a similar schedule, as presumably did Canadian-based steamboats.
Discussion: Testimony to the importance of Lewiston as a crossing point on the Underground Railroad were the increasing numbers of African Americans who lived in Lewiston from 1850 to 1860. In 1850, only eight African Americans lived in the village, according to the U.S. census. All listed their birthplaces as New York State, except forty-year-old Gilbert Hardin, born in Maryland. In 1855, twenty-five African Americans were listed in the census in Lewiston (fifteen men and ten women). By 1860, the African American population had expanded to seventy-four people. Some listed their birthplaces as the free states of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Most were born, however, in Canada West or in the slave states of Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Washington, D.C., and Canada West. Two people listed their birthplaces as unknown. 316

In 1860, three of these African American residents—John and Mary Scott and Ann Davis—lived at the corner of Center and Third Streets, in the home of Joshua Fairbanks, builder and co-owner of the Frontier House. They may have worked in the Frontier House. John Scott also owned real estate worth $3,000, a considerable estate in that period. Also living with Fairbanks was his granddaughter Harriet Barton Van Cleve and grandson-in-law Captain James Van Cleve, master of Lake Ontario steamboats, artist, and historian. Harriet was the daughter of Benjamin Barton, part owner with Augustus Porter and Peter B. Porter of the portage from Lewiston to Fort Schlosser. Barton’s home Barton Hill still stands across the street from the Fairbanks House. Part of the house still standing at 350 N. Center Street was owned by African Americans Mary and Jordan Gaines (born in Virginia). 317

Locally, many sites in Lewiston have been associated with the Underground Railroad. Their story deserves to be told. Here, however, we will focus on the importance of the ferries, steamboat, and suspension bridge at Lewiston Landing as crossing points to Canada for people escaping from slavery. Although we have no way of estimating total numbers, we can assume that many more African Americans went through Lewiston to Canada West than stayed in the village. Although we do not yet have specific references to ferry crossings by fugitives, some certainly took the ferry, especially before 1851. Many more took the steamboat from Lewiston to Toronto, Kingston, or Hamilton. After 1851, others crossed on the new Suspension Bridge.

Lake Ontario steamboats generally employed African American stewards and cooks. When Sir Richard Bonnycastle described a trip on the Chief Justice Robinson in 1846, he noted, “the stewards and waiters are coloured people, clean, neat, and active; and you may give sevenpence-halfpenny or a quarter dollar to the man who cleans your boots, or an attentive waiter, if you like; if not, you can keep it, as they are well paid.” 318

In addition to hiring African Americans, certain steamboat masters were known to carry fugitives on a regular basis. Horatio N. Throop was ship carpenter and master of the Rochester from 1843-47 and of the Ontario from 1848-58. Throop laid the keel for the Ontario in Clayton in 1847. He towed it that year to Oswego, where it was completed and put into operation in July 1848, replacing the Rochester. Captain Throop and all his crew simply transferred from the old boat to the new one. 319

In 1851, one traveler, L.M. described his experience on “old Ontario,” going overnight from Oswego to Lewiston. Entering the Niagara River from Lake Ontario at daybreak, L.M. was overwhelmed with the peaceful landscape:

After a quiet and refreshing sleep, such as few if any other steamers than those of the Ontario line can afford, we arose early next morning to witness the entrance of our steamer into the Niagara River, and to view the scenery on its banks. We were just in time. As we left our state-rooms and went on deck, the boat was approaching the mouth of the River. The sun had preceded us but a few moments, and the morning was bright and beautiful – the loveliest of the season. The atmosphere, though not sultry, was warm, pure


317 “Niagara County Project Database, Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, and African American Life,” compiled by Tanya Warren. For information these buildings, see “Historic Lewiston, New York,” historiclewiston.org/pictures.html; “History of 350 N. Second Street,” typescript, found by Michelle Kratts.


and bracing. Not a breath of air was stirring, and the Lake and River was as smooth and glassy as that of a mirror. The air was vocal with the music of birds, apparently singing with each other in the devoutness and enthusiasm of their morning songs. From Fort Niagara waved the “Stars and Stripes,” as if in honor of our approach; yet all around was quiet and undisturbed. The little villages on either side of the River were wrapped in silence, and their inhabitants, with now and then an exception of some one who was watching our advance, enjoying the repose of a quiet and peaceful Sabbath morning. Our own noble steamer, even, seemed to imbibe the spirit of general quietude which prevailed; its steam-power wording apparently, with unusual steadiness, motionless, almost, was our advance, and beautiful was the prospect on every hand. 320

“The ONTARIO is a noble boat,” concluded L.M. “Capt. THROOP one of the best of Commanders, McKay a capital Clerk, Wormer the Prince of Stewards, and – but what’s the use of particularizing? Where every one is so well qualified for his position, so perfectly understands his duties, and so promptly and faithfully performs them, specifications would be useless if not invidious.” 321

On the Ontario (and presumably also on the Rochester), Captain Throop carried fugitives whenever he was asked. Based in Pultneyville, a small Lake Ontario port east of Rochester, Throop lived near his cousin Samuel C. Cuyler, a well known Underground Railroad agent. According to the 1877 History of Wayne County, Cuyler would take people escaping from slavery down to the central dock in Pultneyville. Locating Throop, he would say, “Captain Throop, I have some passengers for thee.” And Throop would reply, “My boat runs for passengers.”

The slaves would be placed on board, [noted the county history], but it is said that when they reached Charlotte [the port on Lake Ontario closest to Rochester], the only point where they could be taken from the boat, there were never any negroes in sight, as they had been secreted. How many slaves were thus helped to Canada by Mr. Cuyler and Captain Throop is not known; but, as they were both active men, we know that they were capable of caring for all that came. 322

320 L.M. to Oswego Palladium, June 24, 1851 (letter written June 15, 1851).

321 L.M. to Oswego Palladium, June 24, 1851 (letter written June 15, 1851).

322 History of Wayne County, New York (Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign, and Everts, 1877), 195.
Hugh Richardson, master of several Canadian-owned steamers, also regularly carried people from slavery to freedom. Born in London, England, in 1784, Richardson went to sea when he was only fourteen years old. In the 1820s, he constructed the *Canada*, and in 1835 purchased the *Constitution*, which he renamed the *Transit*. In 1839, he added the *Queen Victoria* to the Lewiston-Toronto route, captained by his son Hugh Richardson, Jr. From 1842 until 1850, Richardson was captain of a third boat on this line, the *Chief Justice William Robinson*, built by James Ewing at Niagara, Ontario. Equipped with an icebreaker, it could operate from Niagara and Lewiston to Toronto all year round. In 1850, Richardson became harbormaster at Toronto. Described as “a man of chivalrous temperament, officer-like bearing, and high character,” Richardson played a major role in the development of steam transportation on Lake Ontario and the growth of Toronto as a major lake port.323

James Van Cleve, who lived in Lewiston and spent his life as a steamboat captain, drew pictures of every boat active on Lake Ontario. He donated original volumes of his work to the cities of Buffalo, Oswego, and elsewhere. He noted that this boat was “peculiar” in its design, probably because of the ice-breaker on its prow.

Travel on the Chief Justice Robinson was the height of luxury. Sr. Richard Bonncastle reported in 1846, that the comfort on these boats “is very great.” On board the Chief Justice Robinson, Richardson saw “pots of the most rate and beautiful flowers, arranged very tastefully, with a piano, highly-coloured nautical paintings and portraits, and a tout ensemble, which, when the lamps were lit . . . made one quite forget we were at sea on Lake Ontario.”

Richardson was one of the most important men in the development of steam transportation on Lake Ontario, but his role in the Underground Railroad is much less well known. Three specific incidents indicate his support for people escaping from slavery. The first relates to the Solomon Moseby affair in 1837. Deputy Sheriff Alexander McLeod, as a representative of the Canadian government in Niagara, attempted to return Solomon Moseby to slavery in September 1837. When McLeod requested Richardson’s help in transporting Moseby back across the river to Lewiston, Richardson refused, saying, “no vessel commanded by him would be used to convey a man back to slavery.”

In 1848, Jacob Green escaped from slavery for the third time, eluding pursuit only by a series of narrow escapes. Hiding in cellar in Cincinnati, Ohio, he was rescued by an African American woman who worked in the household. He later told the story in his own words:

In the morning the servant girl came down into the cellar, and when I saw she was black I thought it would be best to make myself known to her, which I did, and she told me I had better remain where I was and keep quiet, and she would go and tell Mr. Nickins, one of the agents of the underground Railway. She brought me down a bowl of coffee and some bread and meat, which I relished very much, and that night she opened the cellar door gently, and called to me to come out, and introduced me to Mr. Nickins and two others, who took me to a house in Sixth street, where I remained until the next night, when they dressed me in female's clothes, and I was taken to the railway depot in a carriage--was put in the car, and sent to Cleveland, Ohio where I was placed on board a steam boat called the Indiana, and carried down Lake Erie to the city of Buffalo, New York, and the next day placed on the car for the Niagara Falls, and received by a gentleman named Jones, who took me in his carriage to a place called Lewiston, where I was placed on board a steamboat called Chief Justice

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324 James Van Cleve, book of original water color paintings presented to the City of Oswego. Buffalo owns a similar volume. Thanks to Richard Palmer for assistance with this research.


326 David Murray, Colonial Justice: Justice, Morality, and Crime in the Niagara District, 1791-1849 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 208. Thanks to Karolyn Smardz Frost for finding this source.
Robinson. I was furnished with a ticket and twelve dollars. Three hours after starting I was in Toronto, Upper Canada, where I lived for three years and sang my song of deliverance.\textsuperscript{327}

In 1853, Richardson played a key role in yet another rescue attempt, that of Ben Hockley. Hockley had escaped from slavery in Tennessee. In 1850, age 45 and a cook, he was living in Oswego, where he was buying a house from Gerrit Smith for himself, his wife Susan, and their son Henry. Pursued by slave catchers, he fled to Lewiston. Afraid to get on board the steamer, he lashed himself instead to a gate, thinking that he would simply swim across the river. The current, however, was too strong. He was washed twelve miles into Lake Ontario, where he was picked up by Captain Hugh Richardson on the \textit{Chief Justice William Robinson}.

Abolitionist newspapers in both the U.S. and Canada picked up the story. Christopher Densmore found several of these newspaper accounts, including one from the \textit{North American} of Toronto, on August 5, only two days after Hockley’s dramatic rescue, comparing Hockley’s drama to that of Eliza crossing the Ohio River on ice floes, made famous by Harriet Beecher Stowe in \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}:

\begin{quote}
A Desperate Venture for Liberty.

The leap of Mrs Stowe’s Eliza across the Ohio River to escape her pursuers has just been paralleled by an incident which occurred on the 3rd August, at the mouth of the Niagara River. The cool desperation of the man who deliberately encountered the dangers of Lake Ontario upon a miserable gate with a piece of board for a paddle transcends even, the heroism of Eliza.\textsuperscript{328}

The Niagara, Ontario, \textit{Mail}, described the story on August 10, 1853:

The steamer Chief Justice Robinson, on her way from Lewiston to Toronto yesterday morning, at about 10 o’clock, and about twelve miles from Niagara, picked up a colored man floating on a raft made of a gate. He gave his name as Ben Hockley, and stated that he had been a slave in Tennessee, from whence he made his escape. At Oswego, he heard that some men from the south were in pursuit of him, upon which he made his way to Lewiston. Arrived there, he was afraid to apply for passage on any of the steamers for fear of being detained or given up to his pursuers, but made a bold stroke for life and freedom by launching himself upon the gate, hoping by this means to make his way over to the Canada side. He found the current, however, too strong for him, and drifted out into the lake, till picked up by the “Chief Justice,” as above stated. He is a man above 50 years of age. -- Patriot, Aug. 4
\end{quote}

From 1851 to 1864, people could also cross the river via the suspension bridge at Lewiston. Designed by Edward W. Serrell, the Lewiston & Queenstown Suspension bridge opened March 20, 1851. Destroyed by a windstorm in 1864, it was replaced in 1898.\textsuperscript{329}

In January 1852, Rev. Jermain Loguen, once enslaved in Tennessee, left Syracuse to cross the Suspension Bridge at Lewiston. Loguen was an anchor of the Underground Railroad in Syracuse, often called the “king of the Underground Railroad” or the “prince of the Underground Railroad. He had been a major figure in organizing the escape of William “Jerry” Henry, in response to one of the federal government’s first attempts to test the Fugitive Slave Act. His friends and family, fearing that he would be captured and returned to slavery, tearfully begged him to go to Canada. Although their advice “shocked his manhood,” he deferred to their wishes. Sumner Fuller, a local white abolitionist,

\textsuperscript{327} J.D. Green, \textit{Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave, from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes, in 1839, 1846, and 1848} (Huddersfield, [Eng.]: Henry Fielding, Pack Horse Yard, 1864). docsouth.unc.edu/neh/greenjd/greenjd.html.

\textsuperscript{328} \textit{North American}, August 5, 1853. This account mentions that he arrived at Youngstown, not Lewiston. The St. Catharine’s \textit{Journal} carried this story on August 11, 1853; the \textit{Liberator} on August 19, 1853; and the Norwalk, Ohio, \textit{Reflector} on August 30, 1853. Christopher Densmore found all of these.

took him by horse and carriage to his mother’s home in Skaneateles, then to the home of Thomas and Mary Ann M’Clintock in Waterloo, then to Samuel D. Porter’s house in Rochester. Fuller and Porter accompanied Loguen to the steamboat landing on Lake Ontario, where Loguen “immediately took the boat for Lewiston, and passed over the bridge at sunrise on foot into Canada at Queenston.”

Samuel Ringgold Ward, who had been born in slavery in Maryland to become an abolitionist editor and orator and the first ordained African American minister of a European American church, recounted the story of another man who crossed at the suspension bridge. From Ward’s description of the local topography, this must have been the bridge at Lewiston rather than at Niagara Falls:

he cautiously approached the river’s brink, and looked up and down before borrowing a boat, there being no ferry very near, and he preferring to cross quietly and privately, in that manner: but down the river he saw a man fishing, whose appearance he did not particularly like. He hesitated. The man turned his face towards him. It was the face of his master! In an instant, he ran—almost flew—from the margin of the river, to gain the suspension bridge close at hand, and cross it. His master pursued. On he flew: he gained the bridge; so did his master. He ran for life, and liberty—the master ran for property: the former had freedom to win, the latter feared the loss of chattel. On both ran, the Negro being ahead some few "lengths," and showing a most practical disposition to keep so. The keeper of the tollgate encouraged the Negro, who, though breathless, redoubled his energies and almost multiplied his speed at every bound, until he reached the Canadian end of the bridge—when he suddenly stopped, his haste being over, the goal having been reached, the prize won. He looked his former master, who had just "arrived in time to be too late," calmly in the eye, with a smile of satisfaction and triumph overspreading his features. The two were equals: both were free. The former slave knew it right well. Hence that calm triumphant smile.

Today, Lewiston Landing is anchored by a remarkable larger than life statue, designed by Susan Geissler and erected in 2009 by the Historical Society of Lewiston. Based on Margaret Goff Clark, *Freedom Crossing* (1969), the sculpture shows five people—a father, mother, and baby who are escaping from slavery with the help of Josiah Tryon, abolitionist and probable Underground Railroad activist in Lewiston, and Laura Eastman, fictional character in Clark’s novel. This monument takes its place beside the Underground Railroad monument at Detroit, Michigan, and the monument commemorating the Jerry Rescue in Syracuse, New York, as three contemporary recognitions of the importance of local sites to the national story of the Underground Railroad.

**Hannah and John Johnson Home**
North of Sweeney Street and State Ditch
Lot 10
North Tonawanda, New York

**Significance:** John Johnson, born in Washington, D.C., and Hannah Johnson, born in Albany, lived in North Tonawanda from about 1825 until John’s death sometime before 1870 and Hannah’s death in 1883. They owned about twelve acres of land near the home of John Chadwick. John Johnson may have escaped from slavery on the Underground Railroad and both John and Hannah may have used their home as a safe house for others. After Hannah Johnson’s death, her story lived on—and continues to live on—in local oral traditions as the tale of “Black Hannah.”

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332 Historic Lewiston, New York, historiclewiston.org/freedomcrossing.html.
Description: When she died in 1883, Hannah Johnson, “Black Hannah” lived on the farm of John Chadwick, later known as the Basenberg farm and still later as “Bush's Woods.” In 1961, a woman who was a young child when Hannah Johnson was alive described this location at the end of a lane leading from Mile Line Road (later Division Street) and the New Road (later Goundry Street). Walking past the built-up areas beyond Division
Street in 1961, reported this unnamed informant, “you will go through the ‘rooms that are left, formed by the old tree and brush field boundaries, with breaks as ‘doors’ between each one. Along the southern boundary of the final ‘room’ there will be the magnificent line of elms. You will stand under the elms to hear their unfailing southing ‘Hush, hush, hush’--and then go on to Black Hannah’s Woods.”  

In 1965, Alice Hiestand described the location of “Black Hannah’s Woods” as “east of Elmwood Ave., north of Sweeney St., and part of the former Basenberg farm,” “between the woods and the State Ditch in the northeastern corner of the farm (Basenberg) later owned by Ralph Kirsch who cut it into lots and sold them.” E.A. Getman in 1975 described Black Hannah’s Woods as “on Sweeney Street, in the vicinity of Melody Drive South,” “covered with homes now.”

Going back to nineteenth sources brings us closer to a definite location for Hannah Johnson’s home. The 1875 *Atlas of Niagara and Orleans Counties, New York* clearly showed “J. Johnson,” most likely Hannah Johnson’s husband John Johnson, living in a house at the north end of Lot 10. The Johnsons probably purchased this land before 1850, since the 1850 census listed John Johnson as an owner of land. Dan Bille has described this area as “Lot 10, Town 12, Range 8,” with 12.5 acres.

We have no images of Hannah Johnson’s house, but an unnamed source, who as a young girl visited Black Hannah, remembered a log bench leaning against the outside wall, an inside cupboard, and three steps leading to a dugout storage cellar. Nearby, a sulphur well attracted visitors in search of a medicinal drink.

The home of John Chadwick, whose farm was near the Johnson home, may still stand at 338 Sweeney Street, according to an article from the North Tonawanda History Museum.

**Discussion:** Oral traditions about “Black Hannah” circulated through North Tonawanda from the late nineteenth century into the twenty-first century. In 1965, Alice R. Hiestand wrote, “As a small child between 1900 and 1910 we roamed the mysterious woods. . . Always we went there with a tiny bit of trepidation, if not fear. Something different, almost haunting, pervaded the vicinity. Was it the ghost of Black Hannah?” “Mystery or not, we loved to make an excursion to Black Hannah. The woods were darker, more lush, the flowers were different. There we found the red trilliums not found in other woods near us in North Tonawanda.”

Alice Hiestand’s essay drew heavily on a human interest story published by Elizabeth Wherry in the *Tonawanda News* on April 1, 1961. Wherry received her information, noted Hiestand, “from an aged cousin of hers (now about 90 plus) who knew Black Hannah.” This cousin, noted Hiestand, “tells that Black Hannah came from the South, and as a slave was helped here by the Underground Railway, somewhere about the Civil War time. Who brought her to N. Tonawanda, who gave her the little cabin at the woods edge, what her other name was, is lost apparently.”

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Like most oral traditions, this one does not tell the whole story, but it does contain important clues about the reality of Black Hannah’s life. In the last few years, several people (including Daniel Bille, Jr., Donna Zellner Neale, and Peter Trinkwalder) have begun to document Hannah Johnson’s story through primary sources. This essay builds on their research.

Census records from 1840 to 1880, both federal and state, suggest that Hannah Johnson was born in slavery in Albany County, New York, about 1803. She may have lived in the household of Joseph Yates, governor of New York State from 1823-24. If so, the house she may have lived in still stands at 17 Front Street in Schenectady.

Hannah’s husband John Johnson was born in Washington, D.C., about 1797. The Johnsons moved to North Tonawanda in the Town of Wheatfield about 1824 or 1825, when the Erie Canal was completed.

In 1840, the Johnsons were free people of color living in the Town of Wheatfield. One older African American (between the ages of 55 and 100) lived with them. By 1850, John Johnson [sic], age 53, listed himself as a farmer, an owner of land, illiterate, living with Hannah, age 47, and Henry Hall, age 20, born in Virginia. Living in their household was a second family, including Joseph Pally, age 38, African American, who listed his birthplace as Canada; Ann Pally, age 30, born in Ireland, who listed her color as either white or mulatto; and Stephen Smith, age 35, black, who listed no birthplace and no occupation. Were Henry Hall and Stephen Smith people who had escaped from slavery?

In 1855, the New York State census listed Hannah and John Johnson (ages 47 and 52), born in Albany County, New York, and Washington, D.C., both living in Wheatfield for 25 years. John Johnson was a farmer. Although illiterate, he owned land. Henry Hall, widowed, age 65, a farmer born Maryland (?), lived with John and Hannah Johnson. Had this Henry Hall escaped from slavery in Maryland?

According to research by Daniel Bille, the 1860 census listed John Johnson [Jonson] as 52 years old, living with Hanna Johnson, age 46. Their household also included Isaac Davis, age 61, Clarissa Davis, age 42, and Denis Colens, age 1, all listed as born in New York State.

In 1865, Hannah Johnson was listed as 57 years old, born in Albany, while John Johnson was a farmer, age 58, born in Washington, D.C., who owned real estate worth $100.

John Johnson died sometime between 1865 and 1870. His land, still occupied by his widow Hannah, became the subject of a lawsuit in the mid-1870s, as Daniel Bille’s research has revealed:
the famous Johnson-Fonner litigation, involving the title to twelve acres of land occupied by John Johnson (colored) in the rear of Mr. Finner's farm in the town of Wheatfield, and which has engaged the attention of the courts for two or three years, has been sent back from the Court of Appeals for a new trial. A bill of costs has been accrued largely in excess of the value of the entire property, and the only question now is, who will be the greater loser eventually? The case has been placed upon the calendar at Lockport.\textsuperscript{340}

By 1870, Hanna [Hannah] Johnson, age 65, was widowed. She listed her birthplace as Prussia. Most of the 1875 census for the Town of Wheatfield was illegible, so we did not find Hannah Johnson in that year, but in 1880, the census listed her as Hanna [?] Johnson, age fifty-nine, widowed, born in New York to Prussian-born parents. Frederick Bohling [or Behring], a Prussian-born laborer, age 66, divorced, lived with her.

Elizabeth Wherry’s ninety-year-old cousin (whose name we do not know) provided rich details about Black Hannah’s life, as viewed by a young girl about nine or ten years old. Known as the local babysitter, Hannah Johnson welcomed children. “You went back through the lane at will to visit her,” noted one young visitor. “A bench made of logs leaned against the cabin, and her horse was tied to a log rail. Black Hannah would see you coming and wave from the door, calling, ‘Are you hungry?’ You always were, and when you were inside, Black Hannah went to her black cupboard and gave you cupcakes loaded with maple sugar. Or she might take three steps down to her dug-out cellar, and then you would have cottage cheese she had made piled thickly on old-fashioned brittle crackers, tooped off with salt or sugar. In season, berries were on the fare.”

Nearby, a sulphur spring yielded water that visitors prized for its medicinal properties.\textsuperscript{341}

In 1961, at least two people were still alive who had known Hannah Johnson. They remembered her in quite different ways. One recalled that she was a small woman with “a dear little face.” The other remembered her as large, with impressive white teeth, and “a rather alarming habit of shaking one’s arm.” Everyone, however, noted her abilities as a fortune teller:

Tea cup reading was one of her methods. There’s the story of the Young Blade, bent on delving into his future, over whose cup Black Hannah remained silent. When pressed, she finally said only, ‘I have nothing to say to you!’ Could she possibly have foreseen that shortly after this he would ask a friend to accompany him to Buffalo? That the friend would be unable to, and that he would go alone, disappearing woutout trace?\textsuperscript{342}

Hannah Johnson’s home was on or near a farm owned by John Chadwick, who seems to have taken an interest in Hannah’s welfare. In the 1870 census, John Chadwick was listed as a 44-year-old farmer with real estate worth $8000, born in Canada. His mother Hannah Chadwick, age 77, born in England, lived with him, as did his wife or sister, also called Hannah Chadwick, age 34, born in Canada.

Hannah Johnson died June 22, 1883. Her obituary, printed in the Tonawanda Enterprise on June 23, 1883, noted:

Hannah Johnson, the old colored lady known as “Black Hannah” the fortune teller, who has occupied a house on J. Chadwick’s farm for many years—probably forty—after a few weeks illness, died yesterday morning. Her age was not positively known but she is believed to have approached ninety years. Mr. Chadwick provided medical attendance for her [W.L. Allen, according to her death certificate], and also burial. For years there was scarcely a man, woman, or child in all this section of country, that had not known or heard of “Black Hannah,” who is now to be known no more forever.\textsuperscript{343}

\textsuperscript{340} The Herald, April 18, 1878. Courtesy of Daniel Bille.

\textsuperscript{341} Elizabeth Wherry, “Spring Sends Memory Back to Black Hannah and Old Days of NT,” Tonawanda Evening News, April 1, 1961.

\textsuperscript{342} Elizabeth Wherry, “Spring Sends Memory Back to Black Hannah and Old Days of NT,” Tonawanda Evening News, April 1, 1961.

\textsuperscript{343} Tonawanda Enterprise, June 23, 1883, reprinted in “The Lumber Shover,” Newsletter of the Historical Society of the Tonawandas, February 1982; “Verified Transcript from the Registry of Death” reported that Hannah Johnson was eighty years old when she died of old age, after living in the Town of Wheatfield for fifty years.
The *Tonawanda Herald* printed a detailed obituary for Hannah Johnson on June 28, 1883:

**BLACK HANNAH GONE.** Early last Friday morning, at a few minutes past one o’clock, Hannah Johnson, familiarly known as “Black Hannah,” and “Aunt Hannah,” departed this life, aged about 82 years. She was born in bondage in this State, lived at one time in the family of Governor Yates, we are informed, and came to this county many years ago. She has lived on the farm now owned by John Chadwick for the past 49 years. Her hut or home was located on the edge of the woods in which the well known sulphur spring is, and was visited almost every week by dozens of women and young people who had great faith in her powers as a fortune teller. She and her former husband, John Johnson, lived on the farm a number of years with Dr. Locke and family. Subsequent owners attempted to eject black Hannah, but in John Chadwick the old woman found a friend who protected her interests even at high cost before the courts. He gave her life-lease of the property, and on Saturday afternoon last provided for the ancient dame a very respectful burial. The services were conducted by Rev. W.W. Browne, pastor of the Free Methodist Church, who delivered an interesting discourse at the house in the presence of a number of acquaintances of the deceased. At the Sweeney Cemetery a large gathering assembled to take a last look at the aged soothsayer, and much regret was manifested at her departure. No more will the winsome maidens repair to the old shanty near the woods to learn their fates on future Fridays, for Hannah’s work is done. She is represented as having been a very exemplary old woman, ontinually reading her well-worn Bible, and always giving good advice to those who consulted her. In her younger days she was noted as a most excellent cook, and many an old time festivity will be remembered for the part she took in making it a success. In the death of unt Hnnah the town of Wheatfield has lost an ancient landmark and one of its most widely-known characters. May her spirit rest in peace.344

Alice Hiestand noted in 1965, “Black Hannah was also supposed to have a yen for flowers and cultivated some around her cabin. Long after the cabin had disappeared, garden flowers grew wild around the cabin site and were found even as late as 30 or 40 years ago [1925-35].”345

Will Hannah Johnson’s flowers bloom once more, in remembrance of her remarkable life?

Aaron Mossell
Home, 62 Trowbridge Street
Lockport, New York

**Significance:** The Mosell family represents free people of color who migrated from Maryland along with people escaping from slavery. They went first to Canada and then returned after the Civil War to the U.S. They settled in Lockport, New York, where Aaron Mossell became a well-known brick maker, hotel owner, and community leader. The Mosell children and grandchildren became ministers, doctors, lawyers, hotel owners, and college professors.
Mossell Home, built c. 1865-75
62 Trowbridge Street
September 2011

Description: The Mossell home is a brick gable-end-to-the-street building, surrounded by open land that was once part of the family brickyard. The main entrance may have been on the side, facing the driveway, since Nathan Mossell, who grew up here, remembered three entrances and a center hallway. It was most likely built in the late 1860s or early 1870s, since Nathan Mossell, son of Aaron and Eliza Mossell, painted all of it. Nathan had been born in 1856 and would have been fourteen years old in 1870. In 1896, Nathan Mossell remembered this house as

a large two-story house near his brickyard. The house had three entrances with a hall running through the center and rooms on either side. I proudly shared in the making of our new house by painting all of it. The interior was arranged very simply with straight-back chairs and plan stern tables. The floors were covered with Brussels carpets. An organ and piano, in the living room, provided musical entertainment for the family.

A large cherry tree stood in the front yard, with huge black cherries. More fruit trees stood in the orchard behind the house. 346

From the brickyard around this house, Mossell supplied bricks for many if not most brick buildings in Lockport in the late nineteenth century.

Discussion: Aaron Mossell and Eliza Mossell were free people of color, born in Baltimore, Maryland. Aaron was born about 1825. In October 1846, he married Eliza Bowers, born in Baltimore in 1824. Aaron Mossell attended night school when he was an adult, the only formal education he received. For fifteen years, he worked for Alexander Russell in a brickyard. In 1853, in order to provide education and a better life for their children, the family moved to Hamilton, Ontario, where Aaron Mossell established a brickyard of his own. After the Civil War, the Mossell family moved to Lockport, New York, about 1865, where Aaron Mossell and his sons became noted brick makers. (The Mossell family first appeared in the census for Lockport in 1870.)

346 Nathan Mossell autobiography, copy of typescript, Mossell file, Niagara County Historian’s Office. Thanks to Craig Bacon, Deputy Historian, Niagara County, for his help with this description.
Mossell eventually owned several pieces of property throughout Lockport, on Phelps Street, South Street, Green Street, Trowbridge Street, and Walnut Street.347

Aaron Mossell’s grandfather, son of a man born in West Africa, had grown up on the eastern shore of Maryland. He purchased the family’s freedom and moved to Baltimore. Aaron and Eliza Mossell retained their hatred of slavery and their belief in racial equality all of their lives, passing it on to their children.348

The Mossells carried out their family tradition of social activism on behalf of racial justice. Nathan Mossell, born in Hamilton on July 27, 1856, remembered his childhood as influenced by his family’s “fanatical fight for their rights.” “Father was a man of few words, but very thoughtful,” he wrote. “Mother inspired us toward high aspirations by her stories of how our grandparents overcame obstacles.” His maternal grandfather “did not believe that slavery was justifiable.” He was eventually freed because he “viciously resisted his master’s attempt to bend grandfather’s will.” In the 1830s, Eliza Bowers and her family moved to Trinidad, British West Indies, before returning to Baltimore.349

Mossell’s first brickyard, purchased in 1869, was on the site of what became the North Park School. Mossell purchased this property from Windsor Trowbridge (who built the brick home at 215 Niagara Street that is now the museum of the Niagara County Historical Society). The Mossell family lived for a time at 14 High Street (across from the later location of the Union school, built in the early 1870s) before they built a new brick house at 62 Trowbridge Street.

The 1870 census listed the Mossell family as comprised of Aaron Mossell, brick maker, age 46, born in Maryland, with real estate worth $2000 and personal property worth $300, living with wife Eliza (also age 46, born in Maryland). Oldest child Mary E. (age 22, born in Maryland) did fancy needlework. Son Charles (age 20, born in Maryland) attended “University school.” Nathan, Alvarilla, and Aaron (ages 14, 12, and six) had all been born in Canada. By 1875, Charles had left home and Mary E. had become a hairdresser.

On the eight-acre brickyard surrounding their house, Aaron Mossell and his family made between one and 1.5 million red, white, and specialized high quality bricks a year. Mossell employed between fifteen and twenty people to operate the kiln, dryer, and office. Many of Lockport’s nineteenth century brick structures, including most likely the Vine Street School, were constructed of bricks from the Mossell brickyard. Mossell had an uncanny ability to figure contracts that sometimes amounted to millions of bricks. His work, noted his son Nathan, who worked with him in the brickyard from the time he was nine years old, was “systematic and accurate.”

The Mossell family earned a widespread reputation as among “the most distinguished and representative colored families of the State.” Aaron Mosell, noted Landmarks of Niagara County in 1897, was “esteemed by all who know him.” In 1899, Edward Harold Mott, author of Between the Ocean and the Lakes: the Story of Erie, described Aaron Mossell as “gifted with keen insight, untiring energy, a generous disposition, and a genial manner which is almost a fortune in itself. It need not be added that he is popular and highly esteemed,” highly respected by his workmen. His son Nathan remembered, “Father employed men of all nationalities. If he had an unusually large contract or had to fill several simultaneously, he sometimes brought brick makers in from the South.”350

Based on his brick making business, Mossell began to invest in real estate. He bought his own house on High Street and built another next door, which he sold to one of his employees, an Irishman named Tracy. On May 27, 1886, Mossell opened the “new and handsome” Commercial Hotel, with a lintel stone bearing his name.

347 William Pool, ed., Landmarks of Niagara County, New York (Syracuse: D. Mason, 1897), 161; “Mossell Deeds, Niagara County Clerk’s Office,” partial list of Mossell deeds, no author noted.

348 Nathan Mossell’s autobiography, written in 1896. Typescript copy in Mossell file, Niagara County Historian’s Office.

349 Nathan Mossell’s autobiography, written in 1896. Typescript copy in Mossell file, Niagara County Historian’s Office.

name, at the northwest corner of Walnut and Pine Streets. Operated by Mrs. Dexter and managed by her brother Dan G. Merman, the Commercial Hotel was “a most substantial, modern and every way handsome” building, noted the Lockport Daily Journal. In 1892, this hotel was valued at $35,000. Later called the Walpine Hotel, this building was demolished in 1970. The lintel stone from the Commercial Hotel is now owned by the Niagara County Historical Society. 351

Mossell was a staunch Republican and also a major supporter of Lockport’s A.M.E. Church. He donated both land and bricks for this church (as he had done for the A.M.E. Church in Hamilton, Ontario). In 1870, Mossell tried unsuccessfully to unite the two black churches in Lockport, the A.M.E. and Zion Church (perhaps A.M.E. Zion). He published a lengthy article for the Lockport Daily Journal outlining these attempts.352

Of the six Mossell children, James died about 1869-1870, when he was only sixteen years old. Charles became a minister in Baltimore and then in Lockport. He and his first wife Mary Ella Forester, went as missionaries to Haiti, and Charles later wrote a biography of Haiti’s founder, Toussaint L’Overture: the Hero of Santo Domingo, Soldier, Statesman, Martyr. A.A. Mossell became a lawyer in Philadelphia, graduating first from Lincoln University in Chester County, Pennsylvania, and then from the University of Pennsylvania Law School in 1888, the first black student to attend that institution. Nathan F. Mossell became head physician at the Frederick Douglass Memorial Hospital in Philadelphia, which he founded in 1895. Mary Elizabeth Mossell married Abram Denny. Alberetta died at a relatively young age, after serving in Haiti.353

In spite of the respect in which Lockport citizens held the Mossell family, the community was not without prejudice. Nathan Mossell remembered that

one of the earliest conscious contacts with race prejudice occurred when I was nine years old. I was sitting on the fence railing of our yard, watching the Yankee soldiers come home from the front on our street. One soldier came up to me and knocked me off the fence with the butt of his gun, shouting, “Here’s a nigger.” 354

One of the Mossell family’s most important contributions to Lockport was their advocacy for access for African American students to the public schools. African Americans in Lockport met as early as 1835 to create a school for their children. An article in the Niagara Courier noted that black citizens resolved,

Whereas the colored people of the Village of Lockport are rapidly increasing in numbers and consequently aiding in the formation of its charter, we are desirous that what influence we exert may tend to some good purpose and whereas the customs of the country do not permit us, neither indeed do we desire, to join in society with those of a different complexion; therefore resolved that we herby constitute ourselves into a society for the promotion of our children’s education and our own instruction in divine truth.

351 Lockport Daily Journal, May 27, 1886; Dennis Harrison, “Mossell Memorial Stone Ma Be Placed at His Former Home,” Lockport Union-Sun and Journal, August, 1970; “Itinerary for Dr. Alexander-Minter and Dr. Lee Mossell Family Descendants,” Mossell file in Niagara County Historian’s Office.


354 Nathan Mossell, autobiography, typescript, Niagara County Historian’s Office. If Nathan was actually nine years old at the time of this incident, this happened in 1862, three years before the Mossell family apparently moved to Lockport. For more on Nathan Mossell, see “Nathan Francis Mossell,” Journal of the National Medical Association 46:2 (March 1954), 118-130, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2617357/pdf/jnma00606-0040.pdf.
They asked the general population for their help in raising $150 to build a combination schoolhouse and church.\textsuperscript{355}

In 1840, African Americans organized the Zion M.E. Church and built a frame house of worship and school at 18 South Street on a lot donated by Quaker abolitionist and Lockport entrepreneur Lyman Spalding. By 1862, the City of Lockport had erected a school for black children on Walnut Street. When black citizens requested access to the Union School on Chestnut Street, the Board of Education refused. When the Walnut Street school burned in 1863, the Board built a new stone school specifically for black children on lots 61-63 on the north side of South Street. \textsuperscript{356}

When the Mossell family moved to Lockport, they protested these separate educational facilities. When the city built a new school on High Street, right across from the Mossell home, using bricks supplied by Aaron Mossell, the Mossell family sent their children to this school. This may have been part of a community-wide effort centered in the A.M.E. Church. On January 3, 1873, Aaron Mossell presided over a meeting at the “South Street Zion Church” at which local African Americans agreed not to send children to “colored schools.” In a concerted effort, all black children, accompanied by their parents, were to report to the district schools in their neighborhoods on Monday, January 6, to demand enrollment. If children were not admitted, their parents would use their power as taxpayers to take legal action toward school desegregation.

The Board of Education, supported by the New York State Education Department, refused admission to black students. But Aaron and Eliza Mossell—and their children, along with other African American families in Lockport—persisted. Nathan Mossell remembered that “the glee and enthusiasm with which Aaron, Alberetta, and I entered this school was soon brought to grief. The teacher refused to recognize our presence.” Nevertheless, recounted Nathan,

\begin{quote}
We continued attendance at this school for a number of weeks. When classes were called, we went forward to take place in the line—especially for spelling and reading lessons. This procedure naturally interrupted the school decorum, giving the teacher all kinds of difficulty in maintaining discipline. These incidents did not discourage us in the least. We were fired to greater effort.
\end{quote}

Recognizing that the situation was untenable, the Board of Education called a special meeting. Charles W. Mossell, eldest son of Aaron and Elizabeth Mossell and a student in the Lockport High School, appealed to the Board to let his siblings and other black children attend the High Street School. Nathan Mossell recalled many years later, “the president of the Board, who at some time previous, had become a customer of father, told the Board that the young man’s speech had convinced him that a grave injustice would be done if the school further refused to admit the children to the classes. The majority of the Board conceded and the incident was closed (so was the separate school which had been set apart for colored children). But full integration of Lockport schools apparently did not occur until 1876.\textsuperscript{357}

\textsuperscript{355} 

\textsuperscript{356} 

\textsuperscript{357} 
This account is based on Clarence O. Lewis, “Lockport Schools Long Segregated,” \textit{Niagara Falls Gazette}, May 14, 1969; Clarence Adams, “Mossel Family Made Mark by Pushing Integration of Lockport Schools,” \textit{Buffalo News}, April 11, 1999, callceu.net/family/216.html; and Nathan Mossell, autobiography, typescript in Niagara County Historian’s Office. Clarence Lewis reported that the Calvary Presbyterians bought the old stone school on South Street in 1877. In 1869, it was owned by the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church. Thanks to David Livingston, Niagara County Historian in 2003, for locating the article on the meeting in Zion Church, written by Aaron Mossell and published in the \textit{Lockport Daily Journal}, January 4, 1873. From Mossell file in the Niagara County Historian’s Office. For more on Charles Mossell, see Charles Rosenberg, “Rev. C.W. Mossell,” \textit{African American National Biography}, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), www2.oxfordaasc.com/doc/opr/t0001/e4824.
Aaron Mossell had three wives. Eliza Bowers Mossell, mother of all the Mossell children, died in 1878 and was buried in Cold Spring Cemetery (Section P, grave 116). Aaron Mossell married his second wife, Elizabeth, sometime before 1880. She died in 1884, and Aaron married a third wife about 1885. Mary E. was born in Kentucky about 1850.

Aaron Mossell moved back to Baltimore by 1906. The Lockport City Directory of that year noted that he had “removed to Baltimore.” Research by Forrester A. Lee, Jr., suggests that he lived with his wife Mary E. and son Charles in Bowie, Maryland, where their names appeared in the 1910 census. Aaron Mossell died before September 1913. After Aaron Mossell’s death, Mary E. Mossell may have moved to New York City, and the Mossell heirs relinquished all local property to the City of Lockport.  

In 2002, Lockport honored Aaron Mossell along with Quaker abolitionist Lyman Spalding as an inductee in the city’s “Walk of Fame.”

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358 Forrester A. Lee, Jr., to David Dickinson, November 9, 2002, Mossell file, Niagara County Historian’s Office.


PART III: SITES AND PROGRAMS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC RELATING TO THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD, ABOLITIONISM, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE ON THE NIAGARA FRONTIER

NIAGARA COUNTY, NEW YORK

A. Sites

1. Youngstown Ferry
2. Lewiston Ferry Landing and Sculpture

B. Programs and Exhibits

1. McClew Farm: Murphy’s Orchards
   The barn on this farmstead contains a remarkable room underneath one wall. The barn contains an informative exhibit exploring the possibility, as yet undetermined, of the McClew Farm as an Underground Railroad site. [http://www.murphyorchards.com/ur.html](http://www.murphyorchards.com/ur.html)

2. Lewiston Presbyterian Church
   303 Cayuga Street
   Lewiston


   a. PARLIAMENT OAK SCHOOL, NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE: 325 King St., Niagara-On-the-Lake, Ontario
   b. ST. JOHN’S AME CHURCH:
      917 Garden Avenue, Niagara Falls, New York
   c. FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH:
      303 Cayuga, Lewiston, New York
   d. BARKER, NY., (TOWN OF SOMERSET) IN HONOR OF DAVID BARKER: Town Park, Quaker Road.
   e. IN HONOR OF THOMAS ROOT /PEKIN, NY:
      3106 Upper Mt. Rd., Sanborn, NY 14132.
   f. YOUNG WOMEN’S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION (YWCA) OF LOCKPORT, 32 Cottage Street, Lockport, NY 14094.
   g. CASTELLANI ART MUSEUM/NIAGARA UNIVERSITY:

C. Research Facilities

1. Niagara Falls Public Library

2. Niagara County Historical Society (and Niagara County Genealogical Society)
   215 Niagara Street
   Lockport, NY 14094-2605

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361 Most of these sites were not part of our primary source research area. Further research can profitably be done on many of them. Many thanks to Kevin Cotrell, Motherland Connexions, [www.motherlandconnextions.com](http://www.motherlandconnextions.com), Karolyn Smardz, and Wilma Morrison, who shared their extensive knowledge of Underground Railroad sites on the Niagara Frontier on both sides of the border.
3. Niagara County Historian’s Office

4. Niagara County Clerk’s Office

ERIE COUNTY, NEW YORK

1. **Broderick Park.** West Ferry Street. Ferry landing where many people escaped to Fort Erie, Ontario.

2. **Black Rock.** Home of General Peter B. Porter and Letitia Grayson Porter, whose enslaved people all escaped from them across the river. Also the site of escapes across the river by ferry, one recounted by Samuel R. Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro: His Anti-slavery Labours in the United States, Canada, & England* (London: John Snow, 1855), 178-79. Another appeared in a local newspaper account: “We learn that a party of 10 colored people from Kentucky reached Buffalo on Monday morning via Lake Shore Road from some point in Pennsylvania where they had been staying a few days and were sent across the river into Fort Erie during the day. Large crowds of our colored citizens were present to see them off by the Black Rock Ferry.” *Courier*, December 1, 1858
3. **Commercial Street/Dug’s Dive/End of Erie Canal/Buffalo Creek.** The historic heart of Buffalo’s harbor (and before that of the Seneca Buffalo Creek homeland). Excellent and informative signage about the importance of this area to Buffalo’s economy and the Underground Railroad.

4. **Michigan Street Baptist Church/Daniel Nash House**  
   511 Michigan Avenue  
   Buffalo

   Built in 1845, this church counted many members who were southern-born and almost certainly had escaped from slavery. Daniel Nash was pastor of this church for many years. Home of Mary Talbert, one of the founders of the Niagara Movement, stood next door.
5. **Quaker Meetinghouse**
Collins, New York,
State Route 39

Quakers affiliated with this Meetinghouse were active both in education with Seneca Indians and in the Underground Railroad, as evidenced by this story of Lorenzo Mabbett and his wife.

A few hours since Anna G. Mabbett was seen upon one of our back roads with a horse and wagon containing besides herself a fugitive slave and his wife, all in women's attire. The slave was about to commence school on the Reservation with the Indians, when his friends learned that the base ministers of Slaveocracy were on his track and close upon him, but [their] being put upon the route to Canada— and not in this instance the right route— he is safe. . . . The people of this place and vicinity are giving such indications of their love of Liberty, that we may safely conclude the time is near, if not already at hand, when this region of Western New York will be a safe retreat for the poor panting fugitive.” *North Star*, Sept. 29, 1849.

6. **Presbyterian Church**
East Aurora

William Wells Brown noted his memoir *The Black Man*, corroborated by Alonzo D. Moore, that he spoke in this church in East Aurora.\(^{362}\)

**B. Programs and Exhibits**

**Hull House**
5976 Genesee Street
Lancaster, New York 14986

Held an “Abolition Meeting and Cookout” with Mo’ Better Buffalo.

**C. Research facilities**

**Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society**
25 Nottingham Court at Elmwood Avenue
Buffalo

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Contains many relevant books and manuscripts (including Porter Family Papers) and has compiled a bibliography of its resources relating to African American history and the Underground Railroad.

ONTARIO, CANADA


1. **Fort Erie, Freedom Park**
   On banks of the Niagara River, across from Buffalo.

   Josiah Henson, model for Uncle Tom in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, landed here from Buffalo with his family in 1830.
2. **Bertie Hall**  
   Parkway  
   Owned by Forsyth family before the Civil War. Reputed Underground Railroad stop with a tunnel from basement to the Niagara River.

3. **Coloured Cemetery.**  
   Ridgemount Road  
   Fort Erie, near place where Josiah Henson settled in “Little Africa.”
4. **B.M.E. Church, built in 1836.**
   Drummondville/Lundy's Lane.
   Peer Street, near Grey Avenue.

Many members of this church had escaped from slavery either through Buffalo (including Oliver Pernell, who swam the “upper river” pushing his trunk ahead of him) or Niagara Falls (including the parents of John Morrison, headwaiter at the Cataract House).

[Image of Map of Niagara Falls (1849)]

G.W. Johnson, *Map of Niagara Falls* (1849), showing “Drummondville or Lundy’s Lane” at bottom right.

5. **Queenston. Road to Brock Monument.** Plaque commemorating “Coloured Corps” who fought for the British in the War of 1812.
6. **Marker commemorating Chloe Cooley**

   Parkway, south of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

   Cooley’s return to slavery near Schenectady inspired Upper Canada’s first Parliament to pass landmark antislavery legislation in 1793.

7. **Niagara-on-the-Lake, Negro Burial Ground.**

   Adjacent to 494 Mississauga Street between May and John Streets.

   Many African American residents of Niagara-on-the-Lake are buried here. Established around a Baptist Church, 1830.
8. Niagara-on-the-Lake
Site of Parliament Meeting under “Parliament Oak,” 1793, with Castellani Art Museum Monument. In August 1793, the first Parliament of Upper Canada passed landmark antislavery legislation forbidding further importation of enslaved people and freeing all those currently enslaved when they reached the age of 25. It met for that session on this site.


**Site of Courthouse and Jail**
Rye and Cottage Streets

Solomon Moseby was rescued here by local African Americans with white support in 1837.
   Site of settlement of John Butler and many people once enslaved in the Mohawk Valley of New York State.

   William and Susannah Steward House
   SW corner of Butler Street and John Street

   The Stewards, who lived here until 1847, were part of a “coloured village,” a community of black Loyalists, freed people from Canada, and people who had escaped from slavery in the U.S.

14. St. Catherine’s
   Plaque for Richard Pierpont
   Centennial Gardens, Oakdale Avenue

   Born in Senegal, Pierpont was enslaved by a British officer, gained his freedom by serving with Butler’s Rangers in the American Revolution, served with the Coloured Corps during the War of 1812, petitioned unsuccessfully to return to Africa, and bought much land in St. Catherine’s.

15. St. Catherine’s
   Plaque to commemorate Anthony Burns
   Entrance to Victoria Lawn Cemetery
   Queenston Street

   Anthony Burns was captured in Boston in 1854, purchased out of slavery in 1855, attended Oberlin College, and moved to St. Catherine’s about 1860. He is buried here.

16. St. Catherine’s, B.M.E. Church attended by Harriet Tubman and her family.
PART IV: LOCAL LIBRARIES AND MUSEUMS IN ERIE COUNTY, NIAGARA COUNTY, AND NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO WITH RESOURCES RELATING TO THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AND AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

A. Erie County

Afro-American Historical Association of the Niagara Frontier
P.O. Box 63
Buffalo, NY 14207
http://www.aahanf.org/

Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society
25 Nottingham Court at Elmwood Ave.
Buffalo, New York
716-873-9644, ext. 306
http://www.bechs.org/library/index.htm
Has the Rev. Jesse Edward Nash papers; letters from Booker T. Washington; and more.

Buffalo and Erie County Public Library
Grosvenor Room
1 Lafayette Square
Buffalo, New York 14203-1887
(716) 858-8900
www.buffalolib.org

Buffalo Genealogical Society of the African Diaspora
P.O. Box 155
Buffalo, NY 14209
BGSAD@verizon.net
716-884-9146

Buffalo State College
Microfilmed records of local churches, labor unions, and other organizations, with a focus on African-American history in the Buffalo area.

**Frank E. Merriweather Library**  
William A. Miles Center for Afro-American Histor and Research  
1324 Jefferson Avenue  
Buffalo, NY 14208  
(716) 883-4418  
http://www.buffalolib.org/libraries/merriweather/index.asp  
The Merriweather Library (formerly the North Jefferson Library) a branch of B&ECPL, houses the Center for Afro-American History and Research collection, the largest resource center in Western New York for African American history.

**Karpeles Museum**  
[453 Porter Avenue  
Buffalo, NY 14201-1217

**Landmark Society of the Niagara Frontier**  
Preservation Buffalo  
Niagara Suite M108, 617 Main Street  
Buffalo, New York 14203  
Henry McCartney, Director: 716.852.3300 director@P-B-N.org  
716.852.3300  
www.preservationbuffaloniagara.org/  
info@preservationbuffaloniagara.org

**Orchard Park Historical Museum**  
4287 South Buffalo Street  
Orchard Park, NY 14201-2609

**Seneca Nation of Indians Historical Library**  
3 Thomas Indian School Drive  
Irving, New York.  
http://www.cclslib.org/snic/snic.html for hours.

**University at Buffalo**  
University Archives  
420 Capen Hall  
Buffalo, NY 14260-1674  
(716) 645-2916  
lib-archives@buffalo.edu  
http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/archives/

**B. Niagara County**

**Erie Canal Discover Center**  
24 Church St.  
Lockport NY 14094
Douglas Farley, Director
716.439.0431
CanalDiscovery@aol.com
www.NiagaraHistory.org

Niagara County Clerk
Land & Court Records from 1821
175 Hawley Street and 139 Niagara Street
P.O. Box 461
Lockport, NY 14094
716 439-7027
niagaracounty.clerk@niagaracounty.com

Niagara County Surrogate Court Clerk
Probate Records from 1821
Courthouse, 175 Hawley St.
Lockport 14095-275

Niagara Web Magazine: www.niagaracounty.org/

Niagara County Genealogical Society:

Niagara County Historian
Civil Defense Bldg., 139 Niagara St., Lockport, NY 1409
Wednesday - Friday 8:30am - 12:30pm and 1:30pm - 4:30pm
(716) 439-7324
Catherine Emerson, Historian
Craig Bacon, Deputy

Niagara County Genealogical Society
215 Niagara Street
Lockport, New York 14094-2605
(716) 433-1033
Open Thursday, Friday and Saturday between the hours of 1 pm and 5 pm.

Niagara County Historical Society
215 Niagara Street
Lockport, New York
(716) 434-743
Executive Director: Melissa Dunlap
Museum Hours: Thursday through Sunday, 1-5 pm
January to April: Wednesday through Saturday, 1-5 pm
www.niagarahistory.org

Old Fort Niagara
2 Scott Avenue
Youngstown, NY 14174
(716) 745-7611
oldfortniagara.org

Cambria: Town of Cambria Historical Society
4159 Lower Mountain Road
Lockport, New York 14094

Lewistown: Historical Association and Society of Lewiston
469 Plain Street (PO Box 43)
Lewiston, NY 14092
(716) 754-4214
Acting Curator: Dorothy Cunningham
Hours: Wed. 1-4 pm

**Niagara: Town of Niagara Historical Society**
7105 Lockport Road
Niagara Falls, NY 14304
(716) 297-1347
Hours: Sunday 2-5 pm, June to October.

**Newfane Historical Society**
2165 Lockport-Olcott Road
Burt, New York
(716) 778-7197
or P.O. Box 115
2685 West Creek Road
Newfane, New York
(716) 778-6151

**North Tonawanda Historical Society**
54 Webster Street
North Tonawanda, New York 14120
716) 213-0554
nthistorymuseum@aol.com

**Pendleton: Town of Pendleton Historical Society**
6470 Campbell Blvd.
Lockport, New York 14094

**Porter: Town of Porter Historical Society Research Museum**
Red Brick School House
240 Lockport Street
Youngstown, NY 14174
(716) 745-7203
Hours: Wednesday 2-4 pm, 7-9 pm

**Sanborn Area Historical Society**
2822 Niagara Street
Sanborn, New York
(716) 731-4708
www.sanbornhistory.org

**Somerset: Town of Somerset Historical Society**
7449 Lake Road
Barker, New York 14174
(716)795-9948

**Tonawanda Nation**
Tonawanda Indian Comm. House
372 Bloomingdale Rd. Box 64  Akron, NY 14001-0064

**Tuscarora Nation**
Joseph Jacobs Museum and Native American Museum of Art
Smokin’ Joe’s
Sanborn, New York
www.smokinjoe.com
Open Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sundays, noon to 5 p.m.

Wilson Historical Society
645 Lake Street
Wilson, New York
(716) 751-9886

C. Niagara Falls (Ontario)

Niagara Falls (Ontario) Board of Museums
http://www.niagarafallsmuseum.ca
905-358-5082
5810 Ferry Street,
Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada L2G 1S9.

Niagara Falls (Ontario) Public Library
http://www.nflibrary.ca
905-356-8080
4848 Victoria Avenue,
Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada L2E 4C5.

D. Elsewhere

Holland Land Office Museum
131 West Main Street
Batavia, New York 14020
(585) 343-4727
info@hollandlandoffice.com
www.hollandlandoffice.com

PART V: BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Secondary Sources

A. Underground Railroad: General

Aboard the Underground Railroad: A National Register Travel Itinerary. www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/underground/
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Miller, Diane. “Seeking the Underground Railroad in Indian Territory.” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 87:2 (Spring 2009), 76-93.


National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom: [www.nps.gov/history/ugrr/](http://www.nps.gov/history/ugrr/)


Williams, Edward T. *Niagara County, New York*. Chicago, 1921.

B. Underground Railroad and African American Life: Central and Western New York

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History. Buffalo, NY: [Afro-American Historical Association of the Niagara Frontier].


Severance, Frank H. *Old Trails on the Niagara Frontier.* Buffalo, 1899.


Wellman, Judith. Surveys of Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, and African American Life in New York State:

- Montgomery County. In progress.
- Onondaga County, www.pacny.net/freedom_trail
  www.visitoswegocounty.com/tr/HistoricalSites/UndergroundRailroad.aspx#intro
- Seneca County, including curriculum unit on Thomas James, barber
  www.co.seneca.ny.us/history/ugrr/discovering_ugrr.pdf
  www.co.seneca.ny.us/history/ugrr/stories_from_discovering_ugrr.pdf
  www.co.seneca.ny.us/history/ugrr/Curriculum_Unit_Thomas_James.pdf.


C. Niagara County and Niagara Frontier: Local Histories
Images of the Erie Canal, Buffalo to Spencerport. www.eriecanal.org/tour-west.html


Niagara County Historical Society's *Bicentennial Moments*. niagara2008.com/history.html. Articles of interest include Lockport Protestantism, Abby Kelley’s visit to Niagara Falls in 1852.


*Some Old City Views of Niagara Falls*. [freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~baillargeon/niagarafalls1/](http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~baillargeon/niagarafalls1/).


Williams, Edward T. *Niagara County, New York, One Hundred Of The Most Wonderful Regions In The World: A Concise Record Of Her Progress And People, 1821-1921, Published During Its Centennial Year*. Chicago: J.H. Beers, 1921.


Williams, Edward T. “Removal of Old Colonel Porter House Cuts Link to Early Falls,” *Niagara Falls Gazette*, May 18, 1935

Wilner, Merton M. *Niagara Frontier: A Narrative and Documentary History*. Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1931.


D. Gazetteers, Directories, and Encyclopedias

Lockport *City Directories*, beginning in 1856.
*Niagara Falls and Suspension Bridge Directory for 1886-87.* Newburgh, N.Y.: L.P. Waite, 1886.

E. Some useful web sites

“HeritageQuest” (http://www.heritagequest.com/).
“Genealogy.com” (http://www.genealogy.com).
“RootsWeb” (http://www.rootsweb.com/) and GenWeb (http://www.USGenWeb.org) are volunteer genealogical organizations, which work to put data for towns and counties across the nation on the web. www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nyniagar/histres.html

National Register of Historic Places, Listings for Niagara County.

“Facts About Niagara Falls”, http://www.archive.org/details/landmarksofniaga00pool
www.niagarafallslive.com/facts_about_niagara_falls.htm


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A. Underground Railroad: General

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B. Memoirs


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C. Newspapers


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Reprints from Niagara County Genealogical Society.


E. Manuscripts

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http://monroefordham.org/churches/First_Congregational.html
• Gerrit Smith Papers at Syracuse University Library (including “Account of My Distribution of Land Among Colored Men,” [1846]).
• Lyman Spalding diary, Syracuse University.
• Census records
  - New York State Census. Manuscript population schedules, 1855, 1865, 1875.
• Antislavery petitions-National Archives and Records Administration. There were at least ten antislavery petitions sent from Niagara County.

H. Illustrations

_Cataract House_, stereopticon view. Courtesy Christopher Densmore.


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Head waiter at the Cataract House and Waiter in Elmira. “1853 Pencil Sketches,” artist unknown [link active as of January 19, 2012]

_International Hotel, 1857_. Courtesy Niagara County Historian’s Office.

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_Satellite image, Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, with the Niagara River at middle right._ [link active as of January 19, 2012]


MISSION STATEMENT: NIAGARA FALLS UNDERGROUND RAILROAD COMMISSION

It is the mission of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area Commission to educate and inform the community about the rich local heritage associated with the Underground Railroad and Abolitionist movement, and to conserve and enhance the historic, cultural, economic and architectural resources of Niagara Falls.

The Commission will accomplish this by working with national, regional, state and local agencies, institutions, and organizations and with the local Niagara Falls residents, as described in this Plan.