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Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY 13820

The Freedom Journey and the Underground Railroad of the Upper Susquehanna River in Delaware and Otsego Counties, New York



by

Harry Bradshaw Matthews



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Other documents that were useful for this writing are in the privately owned Matthews Collection for the Preservation of Freedom Journey Classics, which supports the United States Colored Troops Institute for Local History and Family Research at Hartwick College.

Front Cover Illustration: “Mother Escaping with Seven Children,” *The Underground Railroad*, William Still, 1878.

Courtesy: The Matthews Collection for the Preservation of Freedom Journey Classics.

Timeline Affecting the African American Identity

- 1444 - Portugal entered slave trade
- 1517 – Spain entered slave trade
- 1542 – King Henry VIII wrote laws against “Ethiopians, who in law were Egyptians” wiping them out of the history of Scotland
- 1553— England entered the slave trade
- 1562 – Sir John Hawkins, an Englishman, transported 300 slaves from Africa to America in the slave ship *Jesus* under the pretense that they were devils fighting the angels of God
- 1815- AME, AME Zion and Delaware Colored Methodist Churches exist
- 1822 – Founding of Liberia by black inhabitants in the United States
- 1826 – John Brown Russwurm graduated from Bowdoin College
- 1827 – Slavery ended in New York
- 1827 — Prince Hall Masons disassociated with white Masons
- 1828 — First black newspaper, *Freedom Journal*, established in New York
- 1829 – Sir John Colborne, governor of York, the capital of Upper Canada, “we do not know men by their color. Should you come to us you will be entitled to all of the privileges of the rest of His Majesty’s subjects.”
- 1830—Colored Men’s Convention led by AME Bishop Richard Allen
- 1831— Nat Turner led slave revolt in Virginia
- 1833 – American Anti-Slavery Society established; members included William Lloyd Garrison, Gerrit Smith, Austin Steward, Jermain Loguen, James Matthews and Henry Highland Garnet among others
- 1834 – Black New Yorkers and Abolitionists attacked during the New York City riots of July 9-12
- 1834 — Slavery abolished in British West Indies
- 1835 – Daniel A. Payne enrolled at Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary
- 1837 – Payne ordained by Lutheran Franckean Synod; John Lawyer, president and member of the Board of Trustees of the Hartwick Seminary and Academy
- 1838 — Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery in Maryland
- 1838 – Pennsylvania Constitution Convention eliminated black voting rights
- 1839 — Henry Highland Garnet graduated from Oneida Institute, New York
- 1840 – 70 percent of Africans in America were born in the U.S.
- 1840 – Jamaica Convention, Queens, NY – called for black self-determination
- 1841— James W.C. Pennington published *A Text Book of the Origin and History of the Colored People*
- 1848 – Free Soil Convention – Utica/Bufalo became sites for uniting Liberty Party members and members of the Free Soil movement
- 1850 – Estimated that between 1810-1850 approximately 100,000 slaves escaped primarily to Canada and were worth 30 million dollars
- 1857 – Dred Scott Decision indicated that a “slave was a slave” even if relocated to a free state
- 1862 – Isaac Newton Arnold’s Resolution ended slavery in Washington, DC and the Florida Territory
- 1863 – Emancipation Proclamation; Bureau of United States Colored Troops; Four Days of Terror, New York City Riots, July 13-16
- 1864 – Isaac Newton Arnold’s Resolution proposed an amendment to end slavery in the United States
- 1865 – 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ended slavery in the United States
- 1865 – Joint Committee of Fifteen, led by Congressman Thaddeus Stevens
- 1866 – Civil Rights Acts designed to protect Freedmen; “All persons born in the United States and not subject to any foreign power, excluding Indians not taxed, are hereby declared as citizens of the United States ... with full and equal benefits of all laws”
- 1866 — The Buffalo Soldiers organized from USCT
- 1868 – 14th Amendment, certified July 28th, provided citizenship rights to Freedmen, who voted in the Presidential election
- 1870 – 15th Amendment, certified March 30th, provided voting rights to black men in the north and south
- 1896 – Plessy vs. Ferguson decision legalized segregation, pushing in the “separate but equal” doctrine in the United States
- 1898—The Buffalo Soldiers helped to end slavery in Cuba during the Spanish American War.

Categories within the Matthews Collection include:

Abraham Lincoln Profiles — The more prominent authors about the life and times of Abraham Lincoln are included among this group of books.

African American History and Perspectives— Included are numerous first editions or early editions of biographies/autobiographies of African Americans from 1837 through 1940.

Anti-Slavery and Slavery Reports— These reports from 1762 through 1850 provide valuable information about the strategies and advocacies of leaders of the anti-slavery movement.

Artifacts— Several metal tokens that were used to raise funds to support the activities of the abolitionist movement. They are inscribed with the notation, “am I not a man and a brother,” or “am I not a woman and a sister,” and are dated respectively in circa 1790s, 1833, 1836, 1838 and 1863.

Engravings and Illustrations— Abolitionist and Civil War scenes from newspapers are particularly noted in multiple *Harper’s Weekly* issues, *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War* (1866) and *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated History of the Civil War* (1894).

Glass Photographic Images— *The Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation* (by a USCT to an enslaved family) was painted by H.W. Herrick, 1864. This color glass image was made by the World Service Commission, Chicago, Illinois, date unknown. Overall 3 1/2 inches wide by 3 inches long. The second image is *Abraham Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation*, which is best remembered in a painting by Francis Bucknell Carpenter of Homer, New York. The painting now hangs in the Capitol Building in Washington, DC. This color glass image was made by the World Service Commission. Overall 3 1/2 inches by 3 inches long.

Novels — These books were used primarily to gain support for the abolitionist movement and were published between 1814 and 1856.

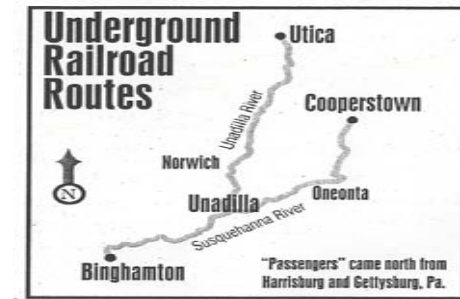
Military Publications — These include period writings about the Revolutionary War, Spanish American War, Civil War, World War I and World War II.

Photographs and Engravings— Numerous images of personalities of the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad are included within publications primarily from the 1830s through 1860.

Profiles of Achievers— Such profiles are included within books published from 1810 through 1889. The primary focus is upon African Americans activists.

Defining the Challenge

The challenge facing us today is being able to identify concrete places, people and events that will build the case for memorializing the upper Susquehanna River as a learning laboratory for students studying the Freedom Journey. It is true that as a whole the Susquehanna River is frequently identified as one of the major escape routes for runaway slaves.



The uppermost point of the Susquehanna River rests in Otsego County, New York, between Oneonta and Cooperstown. Hardly a mention of that fact, however, can be found in publications about the abolitionist movement and/or Underground Railroad. Much the same case can be made about anti-slavery advocates of the region also being mostly absent from history texts. The dilemma is not conclusive, however; it just provides an interesting challenge.

In this regard, the challenge defines the “Freedom Journey” as inclusive of people, places and events that were important parts of the story, extending from slavery to freedom for four million darker brethren. It includes, but is not limited to, the abolitionism, the Underground Railroad and anti-slavery advocacies. In fact, not even the enlistment of 200,000 black men into the Union Army during the Civil War, nor the passage of the 13th Amendment ending slavery, are considered the conclusion of the Freedom Journey. Thus, the challenge, maybe even its uniqueness, is having the Freedom Journey examined for aspects of the struggle for freedom that expand beyond the normal realm of discussion and inclusion.

There have been several topic areas explored since 1993 for the relationship of each to communities along the upper Susquehanna River. The researchers included local community historians and undergraduate research assis-

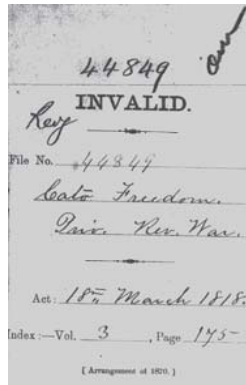
tants with the USCT Institute at Hartwick College. The topic areas included 1) anti-slavery movement; 2) Underground Railroad connection; 3) the Civil War and the United States Colored Troops; and 4) the post-Civil War connection. The effort resulted in the recovery of names, places and events in many local communities.

1. Cato Freedom and the Revolutionary War

Veteran’s Affidavit—Cato Freedom filed an affidavit in Cooperstown, Otsego County, New York in April 1818 attesting that he was a resident of Burlington Township and a former patriot of the Third Regiment of the Connecticut Line during the American Revolution, which was commanded by Colonel Samuel B. Webb and was under the command of General Ebenezer Huntington.

Freedom indicated that he served in a company for three years that was commanded first by Captain Edward Bulkley, then by Captain Sheldon and Captain Douglass; further that his enlistment lasted beyond the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown (October 19, 1781). Freedom received an honorable discharge for his service through September 2, 1783. He was at the time enlisted in the Fifth Company, Connecticut Regiment, commanded by Colonel H. Swift. The black soldier gained his freedom as a consequence of his military service. The peace treaty between the United States

and Great Britain was concluded one day later. It was fortunate that Freedom retained his honorable discharge certificate up to the date of his affidavit, which was validated by James W. Webb, as well as certified by John Russell, Judge of Otsego County Court of Pleas. In Judge Russell’s certified statement he referred to the patriot as Cato Freeman, rather than Cato Freedom, as appeared in prior legal papers filed in Cooperstown, New York.



6. Research Opportunities USCT Institute

The United States Colored Troops Institute for Local History and Family Research was established at Hartwick College in 1998 as an educational membership organization to promote and encourage research, preservation and remembrance about the United States Colored Troops, inclusive of men of African descent, Native Americans and their white officers. Since more than 80 percent of the USCT were formerly enslaved at the time of their enlistment, flight to freedom was certainly a reality for many of them. The Institute is devoted to placing the USCT within the historical realm of the Underground Railroad. The USCTI assists multiple researchers, ranging from individual families, preservation organizations, Underground Railroad sites and the media. It has been honored with proclamations from several state governments and the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust, as well as entered into the Congressional Record, for outstanding historical and genealogical research. Most significant about the USCTI is that its work is supported by the privately owned Matthews Collection for the Preservation of Freedom Journey Classics. It includes 2,500 items, including books about persons whose flight to freedom helped to energize the Underground Railroad, as well as a lithograph series by Civil War illustrator Thomas Nast. The USCTI at Hartwick College was selected in 2008 as an endorsed site of the United States Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission. In April 2011, USCTI was recognized by the National Park Service’s National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom as a “Facility,” acknowledging its verifiable association to the Underground Railroad story.



NATIONAL
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD
NETWORK TO FREEDOM

The Sidney Record.

XXVI.

SIDNEY, N.Y.

SATURDAY, JUNE 30, 1906

HE ANSWERS THE FINAL ROLL CALL



Death of William Street, one of the Best Known Colored Men of Central N.Y.

The Late William Street.

The remains of William Street were buried in Prospect Hill Cemetery on Thursday morning 18th inst., with military honors. The services at the grave were conducted by Bradford Post G.A.R., No. 177 of Sidney, N.Y., Mr. Street being a veteran of the Civil War and a member of the Post.

Thus closes the life's chapter of one who, though of the dark and trodden race, born in the bondage of slavery, revealed a remarkable individuality and became known over a wide section of the country. "Bill" during the last forty years, in his way, was a conspicuous local character. At a time when the country was in a white heat over the slave question he had the courage to break away from his master, reaching Albany in 1850 and when the war broke out he served with zeal on the Northern side.

He was always industrious; had little to say, yet he was of cheerful disposition, fond of a laugh and invariably minded his own affairs. It was this feature of Bill's character that made him generally well liked—a popular hero in ebony.

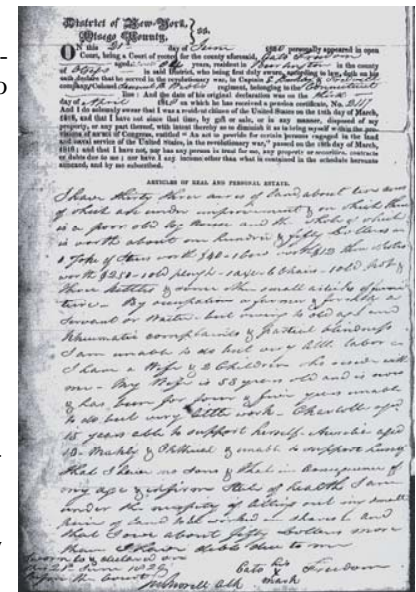
William Street was born in Hartford Co., Maryland, Sept. 15, 1830; died in Roscoe, N.Y., June 16, 1908. He is survived by two nieces and an adopted daughter. He came North in 1850, and made his home in Norwich. He enlisted at Norwich, N.Y., Nov. 23, 1863 and mustered into the U.S. service at Riker's Island, N.Y., Feb. 27, 1864, as a private of Capt. Hayes' Co. H., 26th U.S. colored troops, for three years. The regiment served in the district of Beaufort, department of the South, participating in the following battles: John's Island, S.C., July 9, 1864; Honey Hill, Dec. 7, '64; Deveau Neck Dec. 9, '64; and James Island, Feb. 10, '65. He was wounded in the neck at Deveau and confined in the hospital at Beaufort, S.C. He was honorably discharged Aug. 28, 1865.

The affectionate sympathy of numerous friends goes forth to the family in affliction.

Land Indenture—Cato Freedom and his wife, Amelia, entered into a land deal with James and Hannah Carpenter on February 10, 1816, in which the former paid \$333.33 for a tract of land from the latter, being a part of the Hannah Smith Tract bordering the land of Moses Mathers in the Groghans Patent of Burlington Township. The document, located in the Otsego County Clerk's Office, Deed Book, V302-3, is the earliest known document affirming the residence of the Freedom family in Burlington Township. (Source: Matthews, July 8, 2009.) Amelia's name appeared as Parmelia in later documents and on her tombstone.

Pension Certificate—Cato Freedom received a pension certificate on April 3, 1820. He filed the Article of Real and Personal Estate statement as sworn testimony on June 21, 1820. The statement identified his personal possessions, as well as the identities of his family members. Freedom was 84 years of age when he received the pension certificate attesting to his military service; his pension rate was \$8 per month. His real and personal estate was valued at \$214, with \$50 in debt. He owned 33 acres of land, of which ten acres was under improvement. His wife, Parmelia (Amelia), was 53 years of age at the time; his daughter Charlotte was 15 years of age and healthy. His 13-year-old daughter, Aurabia, was quite sickly. Henry Sill of Coopers-town provided additional information about Freedom in a letter sent to the Secretary of War in July 1827. He wanted to know if Freedom was still entitled to bounty land for having served in the military. Sill made known that Freedom was a man of color, an African by birth. It is not known if such land was granted to Freedom, but a later document in his pension file indicated that he died on May 18, 1829.

Matthews and two Tubman Mentors, Khadian Thomas '09 and Brittanie Kemp '11, were able to use the information from Freedom's pension file to locate his burial site, with assistance from staff at the Research Library at the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown. The Butternut Valley



Cemetery (also known as Brick Schoolhouse Cemetery) was identified as the final resting place for Freedom and his family.

Three large-size tombstones, erected side-by-side, revealed that Cato was then identified with the surname of Freeman, with a date of death inscribed as May 19, 1828 at the age of 96 years. The inscription contradicted the information within Cato's pension file, but there was no doubt that the tombstone honored him. His wife, Parmelia, had a tombstone that identified her as the colored spouse of Cato, with her date of death placed at April 19, 1838 at 73 years of age.

2. Anti-Slavery Movement and Local Personalities

A series of events in the region has been documented as a contribution to the Freedom Journey. Near the northern tip of the Susquehanna River an 1827 celebration was held at the Presbyterian Meeting House in Cooperstown, recognizing the ending of slavery in New York State. Persons of African descent in Otsego County soon after held a meeting to discuss the merits and demerits of the American Colonization Society.



Two years after the American Anti-Slavery Society was established during 1833 as a national network to advocate the ending of slavery, Rufus S. Peters led a delegation of Otsego County representatives to the organizing meeting of the New York State Anti-Slavery Society. He was joined at that event by Isaac Platt of Delaware County and Rev. Henry Snyder of Chenango County, with each of the three elected a vice president of the society.

Men and women of Butternut, Gilbertsville and South New Berlin during 1836 led the formation of the Otsego County Anti-Slavery Society. One year later, John Lawyer, a trustee of the Hartwick Lutheran Seminary and resident of Norwich, was joined by three other men in organizing the abolitionist Franckean Synod. Within a week, the four men were joined by Daniel

Later, the distinction of being the first black enlisted soldier promoted to an officer was given to Swails, when he was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant.

When the first Union regiment of black soldiers was organized in New York, the 20th USCT, Andrew E. Mather of Burlington, Otsego County, was appointed Lieutenant-Colonel, the second ranking officer of the regiment. Similarly, when the 26th USCT was organized in New York, another person from this region, William B. Guernsey of Norwich, was appointed Lieutenant-Colonel. He later advanced to the position of Colonel of the regiment before the ending of the war. Two other men of this region, Delevan Bates of Worcester and Andrew Davidson of Cooperstown, were appointed respectively Colonel and Lieutenant-Colonel of the 30th USCT organized in Maryland. Each was presented the Medal of Honor for heroics at the Battle of the Mine [Battle of the Crater].

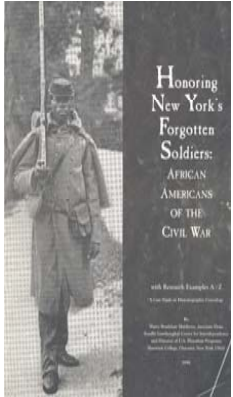


William Street—An interesting newspaper at the Sidney Historical Association Museum has an account of William Street's journey, thus providing additional evidence of the role this local area played in the Underground Railroad. His obituary notice indicated that he was born in 1830 at Hartford County, Maryland, located at the southern end of the Susquehanna River. Street escaped from slavery during 1850 and reached Albany, then Norwich. After serving in the 26th United States Colored Troops during the Civil War, Street returned to this area, specifically at Sidney, Delaware County.

George Miller Sternberg—He graduated from the academic department at Hartwick Lutheran Seminary. He served as Assistant Surgeon of the United States Army during the Civil War, serving with the Department of the Gulf. He also served as head of the U.S. General Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. As a member of the Yellow Fever Commission and the Board of Health, Sternberg was credited during the Civil War with developing the ambulance services for wounded soldiers, as well as battlefield treatment methods. The Civil War was only the beginning stage of Sternberg's contribution to the Union Army. He was appointed Surgeon-General by President Grover Cleveland in 1893. Hartwick Seminary and Academy was named in his 1915 will.

Southern Born African Americans Before the Civil War—A complete review of census records for Otsego County, 1790-1920, has confirmed that there were persons of African descent living in various locales before 1865. Some of them were born in the South, providing the probability of having been escaped Africans. The information also provides clues as to where local support of the Underground Railroad was in place. For example: Levi Howard of Maryland resided in Cherry Valley; Gango Gray of Virginia lived in Decatur; Owen Williams of Georgia lived in Oneonta; Frank Clarke of Alabama and Catherine Wells of North Carolina lived in Cooperstown; Joseph Gorn of Tennessee and John Jackson of Virginia lived in Richfield Springs; and Henry Smith of Virginia resided in Unadilla.

5. United States Colored Troops of the Civil War



Communities near the upper Susquehanna River had more than their share of distinction during the Civil War for the contributions made by the men of their region. Particular distinction came from the black soldiers and white officers of the United States Colored Troops. Approximately 100 African Americans from the upper Susquehanna River region served in the Civil War.



For purposes of illustration, Sergeant Reuben Dyer and his brother-in-law, Private Nathaniel Law, of Delhi, served with the 89th New York Volunteer Regiment almost two years before President Abraham Lincoln authorized the enlistment of northern black soldiers. Once Massachusetts was authorized to organize the first northern regiment of colored soldiers during 1863, early enlistees with the 54th included Henry Bell of Binghamton, as well as Benjamin Derrick and Stephen A. Swails of Cooperstown.

Alexander Payne, the young educated black abolitionist from the Gettysburg [PA] Lutheran Seminary.

During 1840, Henry Granger of Cooperstown was appointed the chair of the Otsego County Committee at the New York State Convention of Colored Inhabitants, which was held in Albany to address issues of discrimination faced by the darker brethren in the state. Charles Spruce of Binghamton was one of the initial sponsors of the convention and was elected as Broome County's chairman; Charles R. Ward of Petersboro was selected as Madison County committee chairman.



When the abolitionist Liberty Party merged into the Free Soil Party at the Utica Convention of 1848, Eliakim R. Ford of Oneonta was elected a District Elector. Three years later, Frederick Douglass' newspaper, *The North Star*, reported that Edwin S. Coffin, an Otsego County member of the New York State Assembly, had proposed the Slave-Hunting Law that protected runaways who had publicly and openly resided in the state for at least a year prior to 1851. Douglass' paper also identified M.B. Vail of Unadilla as an abolitionist, as well as Robert S. Cook of Oneonta as a contributor to the abolitionist Chaplin Bail Fund during 1853 that supported Underground Railroad activities in Rochester.

Eleven years later, Isaac Anderson, A. Clark and Thomas Husband were selected as delegates from Otsego County to attend the 1864 National Convention of Colored Men at Syracuse. They were joined by Aden Williams, Thomas Street and Thomas Randall of Chenango County. Less than a week after the convention, news circulated in the *Anglo-African* newspaper that William G. Wood of Delhi, Delaware County was the first of many others in that village who supported the abolitionist publication.

Clearly, for at least 38 years, between 1827 and the ending of slavery during 1865, there were persons of the upper Susquehanna region, black and white, who advocated for the freedom of the enslaved darker brethren.

3. Underground Railroad

The Susquehanna River has long been acknowledged by historians as one of the major routes by which escaped Africans found assistance from persons living in communities near the waterway. The Pennsylvania communities of Columbia, Harrisburg and Lancaster have usually been cited as the locations most active along the Susquehanna. Stories retelling the assistance provided to escaped Africans in the latter three communities have been documented and written about since 1804, 1825 and 1851, respectively. Similarly, further north in the village of Montrose, Underground Railroad activities have been documented as early as 1838 and included the AME Zion Church and the First AME Bethel Chapel as sites of refuge. In New York, however, communities near the upper Susquehanna River are only in the early stages of producing documentation of their role in helping escaped Africans reach freedom. There is little doubt, however, that such actions occurred. Slavery practically came to an end in New York during 1827. Binghamton, the first major site at which the Susquehanna flowed into the Empire State, had a black population organized around the AME Bethel Church of 1838, with yet another church organized that year as the First Colored AME Zion Chapel. The names of pastors and congregational members are known.

What remains less certain were the various roles played by communities resting between Binghamton and Cooperstown, including Oneonta. Reverend William G. Queal, the author of *The Overthrow of American Slavery*, 1885, was born in Worcester, Otsego County. In his book of poetry, he named Owego, Tioga, Chemung, Unadilla, Otego, Schenevus and Otsego as harbors of safety for escaped Africans. Local legend identified the Colliersville home of Ira Emmons, bordering Oneonta, as a station of the Underground Railroad. Further, Emmons' son-in-law, Eliakim R. Ford, purportedly used his home in Oneonta, built in 1838, as a hiding place for escaped Africans. In Hartwick, the Greenough House (now the 1819 House Restaurant) was built by Captain Clement Miller, the father-in-law of Mrs. Joseph Dottins Husbands. The Husbands family, including black servants who were freed once entering the United States, came to the Cooperstown area from Barbados. These points are now complemented by the recovery of an 1860 news article by Harry Bradshaw Matthews that places the local Oneonta folklore about the flight to freedom by a mother and her children within the realm of historical evidence.

The Oneonta Herald.

ESTABLISHED 1858

ONEONTA, OTSEGO COUNTY, N.Y.

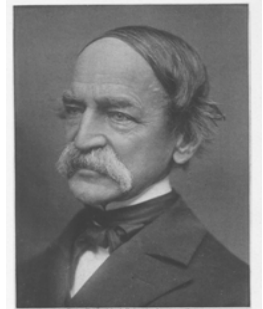
AUGUST 1, 1860

UGRR—A family of eight fugitive slaves, a mother with six children, and a half sister were passed from this place, on the underground railroad toward Canada (where, thank God, there is no slavery) on Thursday night last, by some of our philanthropist citizens. They arrived in this village, on the Saturday before, completely destitute and weary, having traveled from Virginia. We are glad we have in our vicinity persons who feel it their duty to be benevolent to all classes of humanity. — After stopping here for a few days, and being clothed up and the “*needful*” furnished, they went on their way rejoicing, and leaving their blessing on the good people of Oneonta.

What an idea! Persons escaping from a country, which boasts of freedom and free institutions, to a land ruled by a Monarch, in order that they may enjoy their freedom. Shame to America!

4. The Emancipation of Enslaved Africans

Isaac Newton Arnold—He was born in Hartwick, Otsego County, New York in 1815, the year before Hartwick Seminary and Academy was chartered by the New York Legislature. After studying at the Academy, he was later tutored in law by local Cooperstown attorneys. He passed the state bar examine in 1835, and within a year, relocated to Illinois, where he became a close and personal friend of Abraham Lincoln. The two men journeyed to Washington, DC in 1861, following their respective elections to the Presidency and Congress. Arnold's 1862 HR resulted in the ending of slavery in locales under Federal jurisdiction, e.g., Washington, DC and the Florida Territory. Following President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, effective January 1, 1863, Arnold had a second HR passed that called for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution ending slavery in the United States; it became the Thirteenth Amendment in December 1865.



Isaac N. Arnold