

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN PERINTON

Western New York was strongly involved with two mid 19th century progressive reforms, women's rights and the abolition of slavery. Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass were residents of Rochester; Elizabeth Cady Stanton lived in Seneca Falls, and Harriet Tubman in Auburn. Because of its proximity to Lake Ontario and thus to Canada, Rochester was a terminus for the eastern branch of the Underground Railroad, which ran from Baltimore and Wilmington north to Philadelphia and New York City and then to Syracuse



2187 East Whitney Road

and Rochester and finally to St Catherine's, Ontario.

While northern states were ostensibly "free," the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850, by allowing slave catchers to work in all states, for all intents and purposes extended slavery everywhere, making passage to Canada necessary to guarantee freedom.

The Underground Railroad, a term that really refers to a secret mode of travel, had its beginnings in the late 18th century with the Quakers, who did not believe that any human being could be enslaved. According to some sources, the first organized escape took place in 1804 and, by 1830, the organization of "stations" and "conductors" was developed and active with western, central, and eastern branches. It was in this decade as well that various anti-slavery societies began to agitate for change.

Frederick Douglass settled in Rochester in 1847, became active in the Underground Railroad and began to publish his paper "The North Star" in a building owned by the Talman family of Perinton. Despite the fact that aiding slaves was an offense punishable by jail and/or a \$1,000 fine, the railroad kept on operating. Stations were spaced approximately one day's walk apart and could be secret rooms, barns, caves, church belfries, root cellars, hollow trees and the like. Lighted lamps or candles often served as signals.

Because the railroad was by necessity secret, it has always been difficult to verify the existence of specific stations, but there are four confirmed sites in Perinton. The Talman house at 2187 East Whitney Road and the Ramsdell house on Mason Road still stand; however, a wood-frame house on Fishers Road and a large hollow tree at Steele and Turk Hill Roads are gone.

John Talman, whose grandfather, Isaac Talman, had built 2187 East Whitney Road in the 1820's, writes that [the farmhouse] . . . was "owned by my father, John Talman, Sr., one of the 'black Republicans' of his day, as implacable and intolerant an enemy of human slavery as the North could boast, and as sturdy, fearless, and unflinching a

defender of what he deemed as right as I ever knew.” He goes on to recount an event typical of activities on the Underground Railroad:

“I have a distinct recollection of the time when in the winter of 1859-60 a runaway slave from Georgia, his wife and half dozen little children were concealed in our house for a week or more on their way to Canada. They were quartered in the kitchen and provided with food, not only for present needs, but sufficient for several days after leaving us. I had never seen a negro [sic] child before, and no sooner had the dusky family found refuge with us than my childish curiosity aroused, my fingers were exploring the thick crop of wool that thatched the wide-eyed pickaninnies. The family remained with us until the time agreed upon by the liberators, when my father, in the dead of night, packed them in a large lumber wagon under quilts and blankets and drove them to the next station.”

A newspaper clipping signed by Elizabeth N. Shilling, who was born in Fairport in 1858, recounts several stories told to her by her brother. In one, her mother places sandwiches on a gatepost near the intersection of Steele and Turk Hill Roads, declaring that she would feed the fugitives, officials or no. The sandwiches were always gone the next day. Perhaps that gatepost was near the hollow tree. Another story tells of Samuel Williams, a conductor, arriving at their back door saying, “We have to help this man. We can’t GIVE him any money, but we can LEND him some.” Twenty years later that same brother heard a black man describe help he had gotten when he was fleeing and was sure it was the same man.

Although there are no extant stories of escaped slaves staying in the Ramsdell house on Mason Road, the Ramsdell family were Quakers, ardent abolitionists, and are known to have used their home as a station.

Despite the support for fugitive slaves in the area, there are examples of resistance to the movement. When Frederick Douglass came to speak in Egypt, he found the church doors locked, forcing him to address the crowd outdoors. The same John Talman describes Douglass: “[he]...wore a long blue broadcloth coat with brass buttons. He was tall, erect, a massive figure, his noble bronze countenance surmounted by an enormous halo of thick crinkly hair. In speaking he had a habit of accentuating each decisive utterance by slightly bending his head, shutting his jaws like steel traps, and widening his mouth in a smile of sardonic grimness.” A lecture in a Penfield church was ended when smoke from the stoves filled the room, driving the audience out. The stovepipe had been stuffed with rags.

In the end the forces for justice and dignity and conscience won. Although there is no way to definitively number those who used the Underground Railroad, this loosely organized and of necessity secret group of brave and dedicated individuals, a number of them Perinton citizens, clearly were a force in ending the scourge of slavery.