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Harriet Powell escaped slavery while visiting Syracuse

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By **The Post-Standard**

Twenty-four-year-old **Harriet Powell** lived in Mississippi, but New York is where she took her freedom and inspired one of the great human rights reformers of the 19th century.

Powell was a slave of Mr. and Mrs. Davenport and was taking care of their baby when she traveled with them to Syracuse in 1839.

Harriet was very light skinned, most likely the result of the common practice of plantation owners or "masters" raping enslaved African women, who had no protection or recourse.

The Davenports were staying at a downtown hotel when an African-American employee of the hotel, Thomas Leonard, let her know that an escape was possible. Powell took the chance to become free, even though it meant leaving her mother and sister behind in slavery, and was hidden in safe homes through Central New York.

One of those homes was that of **Gerrit and Ann Smith** in Peterboro, Madison County. While there, Harriet described her life in slavery to Gerrit's cousin **Elizabeth Cady** (later Stanton). Elizabeth would become a leader in the woman suffrage movement and a prominent Freethinker, working to restore basic civil rights to the United States.

Despite an exhaustive search and \$200 reward, Harriet was safely delivered to Cape Vincent, where she sailed to Canada and freedom.

*This story was provided by Sue Boland, historian at the **Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation** in Fayetteville. It is part of The Post-Standard's 2012 observance of **Black History Month**. This year coincides with the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. The Post-Standard observes the month with accounts of Central New York's African-Americans who lived in the Civil War era, especially those who risked their lives as **abolitionists** and those who fought for the Union.*

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Onondaga Historical Association

Wanted poster for the return of Harriett Powell after she escaped from slavery in Syracuse.

links for a sampling of related stories:

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- » **"On the Front Lines of History,"** *the story of local blacks' military service.*
- » **"Witnesses: Scars of a Southern Childhood,"** *how Syracusans who grew up in the American South experienced legal segregation before the great changes brought about by the Civil Rights movement a century after the Civil War.*

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