

THE READERS' PAGE



Dick Blume / The Post-Standard/2011

THE JERRY Rescue Monument in Syracuse's Clinton Square depicts the 1851 rescue of William "Jerry" Henry, an accused escaped slave, from the Syracuse jail in defiance of the Fugitive Slave Law. Today's commentary writer points out that Central New York's history includes abolitionists and slaveholders.

Full Disclosure

CNY was home to abolitionists and slaveholders

By Lynne Pascale

Onondaga Historical Association

Douglas R. Egerton's excellent article, "New York's Fractured Past" in Sunday's Opinion section clearly describes the state's conflicted history of slavery, abolitionism, racial intolerance and civil rights. There are some additional facts on this topic to consider regarding the history of our area. The struggles of abolitionists like those Egerton mentioned are particularly extraordinary in light of Central New York's own slaveholding past during the early 19th century when the region's most influential citizens had slaves.

The incredible land wealth of Central New York, made available for settlement through the Military Tract and other sizable parcels, brought a class of ambitious, well-connected individuals and families to this area. Moses DeWitt, John Lincklaen, Benjamin Ledyard and John Hardenberg, all elites from Downstate New York and northern New Jersey, had the capital and political connections to become land agents and community developers in Onondaga, Madison and Cayuga counties. They brought with them, or married into, a tradition of slaveholding. Other Central New York slaveholders were part of a striving professional class, their social status enhanced by having slaves in their households. Included in this group are Joshua Forman, Jasper Hopper, Thaddeus Wood and Dr. Gordon Needham.

Compared with areas Downstate, the rate of slaveholding was relatively low in Central New York, probably due to the high influx of New Englanders. However, New England immigrants to the area such as Asa Danforth, Comfort Tyler and John Ellis were not immune to becoming slaveholders. Even some of the most famous abolitionists and anti-slavery leaders, like Gerrit Smith and William Henry Seward, grew up in slaveholding households. The clerical community also had its share of slaveholders. The First Presbyterian Society, founded in 1802 in the town of Onondaga, had several founding members who owned slaves. Rev. Caleb Alexander owned one slave in 1820, and feisty preacher Dirk Lansing owned two slaves in 1810 while ministering to the congregation in Onondaga Hollow. The 1820 census for the town of Aurelius lists Lansing as the owner of a girl under 14.

As Egerton mentioned, slaveholding was legal in New York state up until 1827. The decennial censuses of 1790, 1810 and 1820 provide some clues about who were slaveholders, but it's not the whole picture. Men were listed as heads of households on the census, but oftentimes the women were the ones who brought slaves and the tradition of slaveholding with them into the marriage. Examples from this area are Cazenovia's Helen Ledyard Lincklaen and Pompey's Mary Forman Seymour.

The human chattel markets found in New York City in the 17th and 18th centuries did not exist in Central New York. Slaves were purchased or indentured through social and family networks, and women were often the unseen agents in these transactions. Some bills of sale for slaves held in Central New York do exist and show that age and gender were determinants of price.

One indication of the relative scarcity of slavery in this area is that of all the runaway notices found in early frontier papers of Central New York, those about self-emancipated slaves were the least common; apprentices, white indentured servants and wives constituted the majority.

Slave ownership was not widespread on the Central New York frontier, nor was it critical to the region's development. However, slavery was certainly noticeable among the area's settler elites.

During the post-Civil War period in Central New York, the lens of history focused on "the better angels of our nature," and was almost blinded to the region's slaveholding past and the impact that these influential slaveholders might have had upon the social and political dialogue that ensued in our community at the time.

For histories that have been left out and intentionally overlooked, it's our duty to write them back in, so that we can have a clearer picture of who we are as a community. There is no doubt that Central New York was a stronghold of abolitionism. However, we should ask ourselves what this area's entire historic legacy could teach to those who struggle against slavery today.

Lynne Pascale is director of development at the Onondaga Historical Association.