

When women's paths crossed, it was a turning point for both

Playwright explores how Powell inspired Stanton to become an abolitionist

Marnie Eisenstadt *meisenstadt@syracuse.com*

Gregg Tripoli knew there was a play somewhere in the filing cabinets and bound volumes of the Onondaga Historical Association. The stories tucked away in manila folders and metal drawers are the kind of lost treasures that suck new explorers in. The only trick was choosing the story. Five years ago, that choice made itself clear on a “ghost walk” in downtown Syracuse, Tripoli said.

A popular OHA event, actors pretend to be real people from Syracuse's past, acting out different events. As he listened to an actress tell the story of Harriet Powell, Tripoli knew this was the play OHA should do.

The story has drama, history, famous players and a great ending, Tripoli said. It takes place in and around Syracuse.

After five years in the making, “Possessing Harriet” will make its debut during the upcoming season at Syracuse Stage. The play opens Oct. 17. It was commissioned by the OHA and written by Kyle Bass, a playwright who is currently the associate artistic director of Syracuse Stage.

“It's great, and it's terrifying,” said Bass, who plans to be in the audience opening night to see how the play is received.

Harriet Powell was a 24-year-old slave owned by John Davenport, a Mississippi plantation owner. She was beautiful. She was so light-skinned she was often mistaken for white. Powell came to Syracuse in October of 1839 with the family that

owned her. The wife was the daughter of a prominent Onondaga Hill lawyer and they had come to Syracuse to visit family. They stayed in the former Syracuse House in Clinton Square.

During her stay, Powell was convinced by a Tom Leonard, a free black man who worked at the Syracuse House as a waiter, to escape to freedom in Canada.

Leonard also worked on the Underground Railroad. Powell was conflicted about leaving her mother and sister, who were owned by the same family that owned her. But eventually she decided to flee. She was disguised as a man, then taken in secret from one house to another on the route to Canada.

Powell was hidden by families in Central New York, from Marcellus to Peterboro. She was always just one step ahead of the search party. There was a \$200 ransom on her head — a fortune at the time.

At one point, she stayed with Gerrit Smith, a wealthy abolitionist and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's cousin. Cady Stanton, who was just Eliza-
SEE PLAY, T5



Elizabeth Cady Stanton and one of her seven children. A meeting with Harriet Powell, a slave who escaped when she was brought to Syracuse, turned her into an abolitionist.
Onondaga Historical Association

“If I had been sitting in that room, what would I have liked to hear between those two people?”

Kyle Bass, Syracuse Stage associate artistic director who's writing “Possessing Harriet”



Syracuse House, from which Harriet Powell escaped in 1839. *Courtesy of Onondaga Historical Association*

PLAY

FROM T4

both Cady at the time, had never met a slave. She was a well-known women's rights advocate, but not a vocal champion of freeing the slaves. Or she wasn't until she met Harriet Powell on the slave's run to freedom.

The free woman and the runaway slave had a conversation that turned Cady Stanton into an ardent abolitionist. No one knows what, exactly, the conversation was. Cady Stanton mentions the talk as a turning point in her life, but doesn't detail what was said.

That was the beauty of writing the play, Bass said. He was able to imagine that conversation, putting words into each woman's mouth.

"If I had been sitting in that room, what would I have liked to hear between those two people," Bass said.

That conversation was what he wrote — but it was about more than the two women.

"It's also about identity, and racism and fear. All the things that supported ... the lawful enslavement of people in this country," Bass said.



Gerrit Smith, a wealthy abolitionist and funder of the Underground Railroad. He lived in Peterboro, Madison County, and helped hide Harriet Powell and get her to freedom. He also introduced her to Elizabeth Cady Stanton (then Elizabeth Cady). Their conversation is credited with turning Stanton into an abolitionist. *Onondaga Historical Association*

Powell's run to freedom ended well. She made it to Kingston, Ontario. She married a musician there and had eight children. She was well-loved. Of those children, three had daughters that they named after Harriet. She was never reunited with her mother or sister.

They were sold when, a year after Harriet escaped, Davenport lost his fortune. It seemed poetic justice.

When Powell was at Gerrit Smith's home in Peterboro, Davenport got word and came to search for her. Powell had left by then, but Smith wanted to make sure she got far ahead of the hunters, so he invited Davenport in for a slow, fancy dinner.

Then, when Smith was sure Powell was safe in Canada, he published an open letter to Davenport in several papers, including the Nov. 6, 1839, edition of "The Friend of Man" newspaper.

"It would gratify Mr. Davenport to learn that Harriet was abundantly supplied with money and with winter clothing, by friends, who mingled their tears with her. I would take this method to inform him, that Harriet is in Kingston, Upper Canada," the letter reads. "He may wish to pay her wages for the services she has faithfully rendered him."

\$200 Reward

— — — — —

Left the service of the subscriber on the evening of the 7th inst. a Bright Quadroon Servant-girl, about twenty four years of age, named HARRIET. Said girl was about 5 feet high, of a full and well proportioned form, straight light brown hair, dark eyes, approaching to black, of fresh complexion, and so fair that she would generally be taken for white; a prominent mouth with depressed nostrils and receding forehead, readily betrayed to the critical observer the leading traits of the African race. Her demeanor is very quiet, and her deportment modest.

At the time of leaving she had on a black dress of figured poplin. She took with her one green Merino dress; one pink Gingham (checked) do.; one French Muslin figured do.; one Buff, and one light purple Calico do. She wore small rings (with stones) in her ears, and had three chased Gold Rings on her fingers, two of which were set with green and the other with transparent chrystal. She also took with her a plaid blanket Shawl, but left her bonnet, so that her head-dress cannot be described.

In leaving the service of the subscriber, she leaves her aged mother and a younger sister, who are devotedly attached to her, and to whom she has ever appeared much attached. It may be proper also to state, that her conduct as a servant, and her moral deportment so far as the same have come to the knowledge of the subscriber, have hitherto been irreproachable. It is believed that she has been spirited away from the service of the undersigned, by the officious and persevering efforts of certain malicious and designing persons, operating through the agency of the colored people of Syracuse, at which place he had been induced to spend a few days. The subscriber would further add, that he has refused several importunate offers of \$2,500 for said girl, for the sole reason that he would never consent to part her from the other members of her family, and it is chiefly with the hope of restoring her to her aged mother and sister, who will be plunged in sorrow at the separation, that this notice is published. The above reward of Two Hundred Dollars will be paid to any person who will deliver said girl to the proprietor Syracuse House, in Syracuse, or one hundred Dollars to anyone who will give such information as shall lead to her recovery.

J. DAVENPORT

Syracuse, October 9th, 1839

When Harriet Powell, a slave, ran away from her owners while they were staying at the Syracuse House in 1839, the reward was \$200, a fortune for that time. It spurred a massive search.

Provided by Onondaga Historical Association

How a runaway slave changed CNY suffragist's life

Page 4