



**The Anti-slavery Movement  
in the Dunkirk area: 1836 -1863**

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## **The Anti-slavery movement in Dunkirk: 1836 - 1863**

Due to an Underground Railroad connection to banker T. R. Colman and steamboat Captain Thomas Jefferson (T. J.) Titus, Dunkirk's involvement in the UGRR is legendary. Also documented as UGRR operatives in and around Dunkirk were the George A. French family, and the family of Rev. Timothy Stillman.

Yet, it was in the tiny homes, cabins, and shanties of ordinary people, especially free African Americans, where refugees were most likely sheltered. Now, with the help of the internet, primary sources regarding these people have come to light, and have been shared. Using those resources, we have been able to map more than 1100 people in Chautauqua County who defined themselves as abolitionists.

Many people who were called upon to aid refugees were African Americans whose stories have emerged during this research. Assisting in this effort have been SUNY Professor Emeritus Douglas H. Shepard of the Darwin R. Barker Museum, Chautauqua County Historian Michelle Henry, Orbitist founder Nicholas Gunner, SUNY Oswego Professor Emerita Judith Wellman, and Chautauqua County Genealogy Society founders Lois and Norwood Barris.

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Cover painting by Charles T. Webber, created for the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. The painting is housed in the Cincinnati Art Museum. Webber was born in 1825; his painting shows his friend Levi Coffin (1798 - 1877) standing on the wagon, as a new group of refugees arrives at the Levi Coffin home. Other friends of Webber who are shown in the painting are Levi's wife Catharine White Coffin (1803 - 1881) and the abolitionist Hanna Wharton Haydock (1818 - 1893). Today, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is located in Cincinnati.

## Please disregard the Old Myths, because:

- There were no tunnels, quilt signs, or rings of trees. No refugee narratives or conductor memoirs verify these rumors.
- Across the entire north, there is little evidence of hidden rooms. Instead, there was an enormous network of people, who openly sheltered refugees in their cabins, houses, shanties, and barns.

### **African Americans in Dunkirk in the 1850s**

The number of persons of color in the Dunkirk area more than doubled between 1850 and 1855, because jobs had been created due to the railroads that had just opened, connecting Dunkirk to Buffalo, to New York, and to Erie PA. However, many African Americans did not stay long in the United States, for fear of being captured as possible refugees from slavery.

Among those who stayed in and around Dunkirk for a time, several with families, were the laborers **George Morton, Edward Sanders, Fredrick Holland, and Jefferson Grisim**. Barbers included **Joseph Bowen, John Thomas, James Williams, Thomas Medley, Joseph Adams**, and the longtime and well known barber **Alonzo Wheeler**. Sailors who passed through included **Samuel Shirack, John Free, John Thomas, and John Bowen**. An African American farmer, who lived with his family on or near today's Brigham Road, was **Rodrick Waller**.

## **Underground Railroad Operatives in Dunkirk**

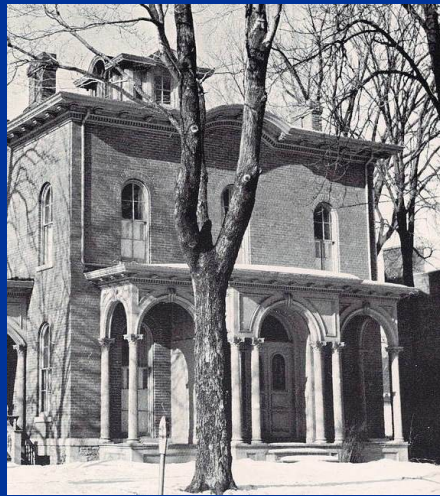
**Truman R. Colman**, founder of the Lake Shore Bank, was cited by **Eber Pettit's** *Sketches in the History of the Underground Railroad* as a stockholder in the UGRR, meaning that Colman donated funds to the cause. His brothers **Harlan R. Colman** and **Eben Shepard Colman** also settled in Dunkirk by the 1850s.

Earlier however, when the Colman brothers lived in and around Ellicottville NY, they had amassed a considerable fortune as land developers. As anti-slavery people during that period, they were in frequent contact with judge **Elial T. Foote** of Jamestown NY, who was a prominent abolitionist. In early 1845, Eben Shepard Colman wrote to Foote, requesting a presentation by Foote at an upcoming Liberty Convention in Ellicottville.

A short time later, Eben Shepard Colman, Pettit, and three other men wrote to Foote about **Joseph Norton**, a refugee whose wife and baby were still being held in slavery. The letter indicated that the five men were in the process of raising money to secure the purchase of the woman and her child.

The money was raised, the emancipation of Norton's family was accomplished, and Norton undertook several speaking engagements on the anti-slavery circuit, thereby raising enough money to reimburse his benefactors. The story, including details about Norton's original escape from slavery, is cited in Pettit's *Sketches*, and is verified by the letters in Foote's existing archives.

The Harlan R. Colman home stands today on the west side of Central Avenue, just north of Fifth Street. The Truman R. Colman home was located on West Fourth Street, and although it was still shown on the 1881 county atlas, the house and expansive gardens were removed for the development of a later subdivision. Although not yet verified at this writing, portions of the Eben Shepard Colman home may still remain on Lake Shore Drive.



**The Harlan Colman house**



Site of the  
**Loder House hotel**

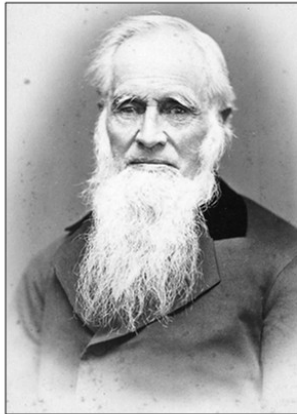
The Presbyterian minister **Timothy Stillman** and his family were active anti-slavery persons in Dunkirk, and in the church hierarchy in Buffalo. In the early 1840s, Stillman corresponded or met regularly with the abolitionist judge **Elial T. Foote** of Jamestown.

Stillman's in-laws, members of the **Mosely Wells Abell** family and the **Walter Smith** family, were also anti-slavery people. The three families joined other abolitionists, such as **Horace Pemberton** and **George A. French**, in the development of local transportation and in the creation of the Dunkirk Academy.

The hotel **Loder House** at 303 Central Avenue was built by Walter Smith and named for the president of the N.Y. & Erie Railroad. It was a meeting place for anti-slavery persons, particularly in support of the abolitionist and former California senator **John C. Fremont**, the 1856 presidential candidate of the new Republican party.

## The Eber Pettit and Darwin R. Barker home in Versailles NY

Eber  
Pettit



Darwin R.  
Barker and  
Helen Pettit  
Barker

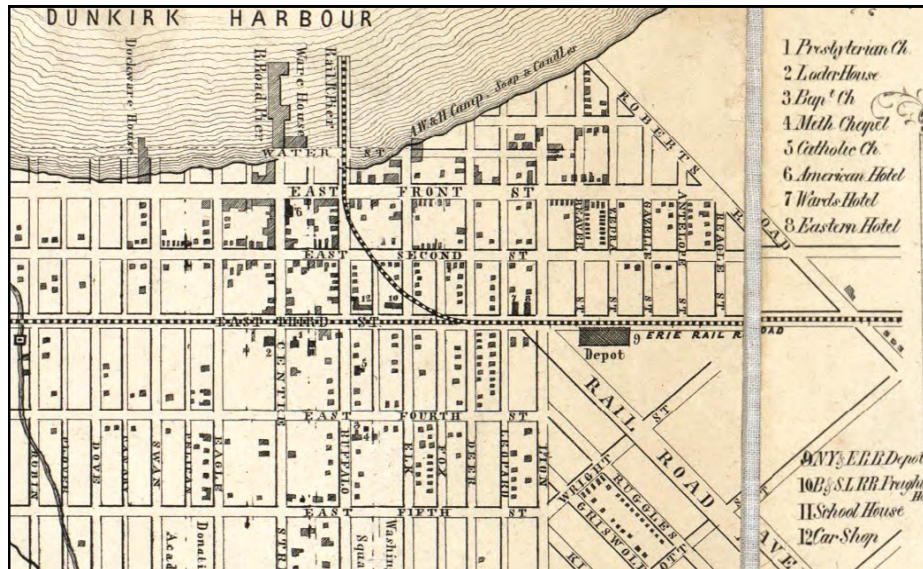


**Eber Pettit** was a self-proclaimed conductor and stationmaster for the Underground Railroad. His serialized stories about that enterprise were printed in the *Fredonia Censor* shortly after the Civil War. A dozen years later, the *Censor* office reprinted the series in a book entitled *Sketches in the History of the Underground Railroad*.

Although some aspects of the memoir are fanciful, inconsistent, or condescending toward African Americans, several of the book's stated facts can be verified by other sources. Also, several people named by Pettit as his UGRR associates can also be verified in other documents.

Pettit, his wife **Euretta Sweet**, daughter **Helen**, and son-in-law **Darwin R. Barker** operated their station in Versailles, a mill town on the banks of the Cattaraugus Creek, across the stream from the Seneca Nation lands. Pettit considered himself a doctor, and probably learned a great deal about medicine from his many friends among the Senecas. Pettit was also indebted to nearby Quakers for help with the family herb and seed business.

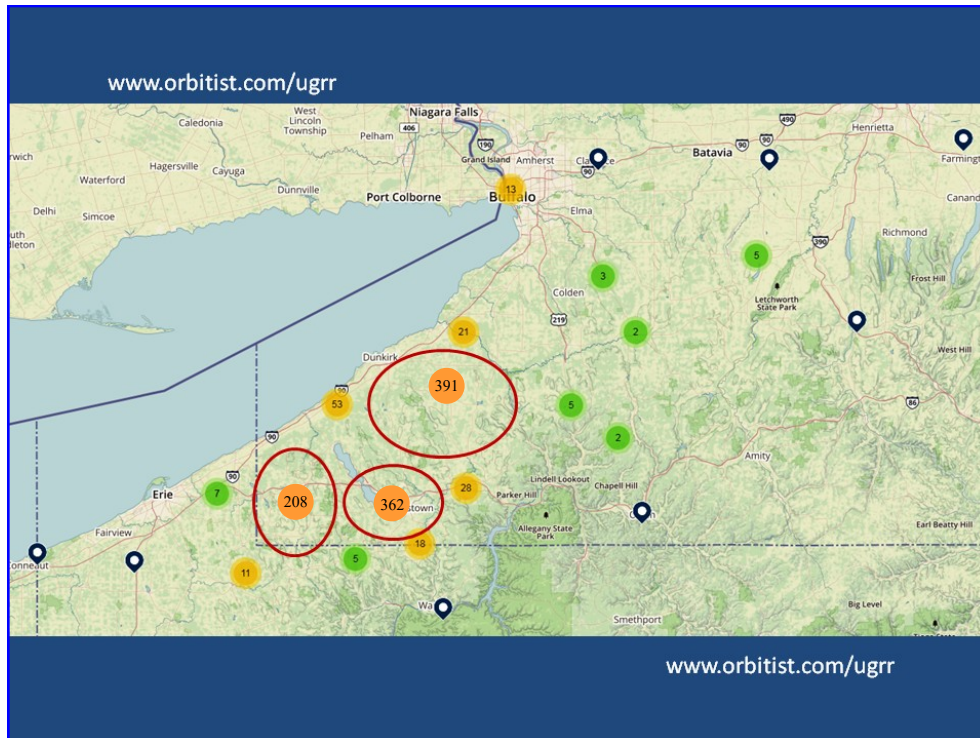
## 1854 Dunkirk



Pettit's father **Dr. James Pettit** and mother **Lucy Felt** also operated a UGRR station. Theirs was located at the intersection of today's Chestnut Street and today's Matteson Street/Van Buren Road. The mill settlement there was then known as Cordova, and Chestnut Street was alternately called Turner Road and Cordova Road.

Pettit's sister **Eleanora Delvin** lived in Dunkirk near the pier and the railroad, where her husband **James Delvin** was a freight clerk and an attorney. Eleanora and her husband were most likely co-conspirators with Captain **Thomas Jefferson (T. J.) Titus**, who was cited by Eber Pettit for carrying many refugees from Dunkirk to Ontario.

Research indicates that before Titus became involved in the UGRR, he had been shipwrecked about ten miles northeast of Dunkirk, and had been saved from drowning by an African American member of his own crew. Later, after leaving Dunkirk with refugees onboard, Titus would sail for Detroit, but upon approaching that city, would first stop for fuel at Fort Malden, Ontario. There, the refugees would disembark onto free soil.

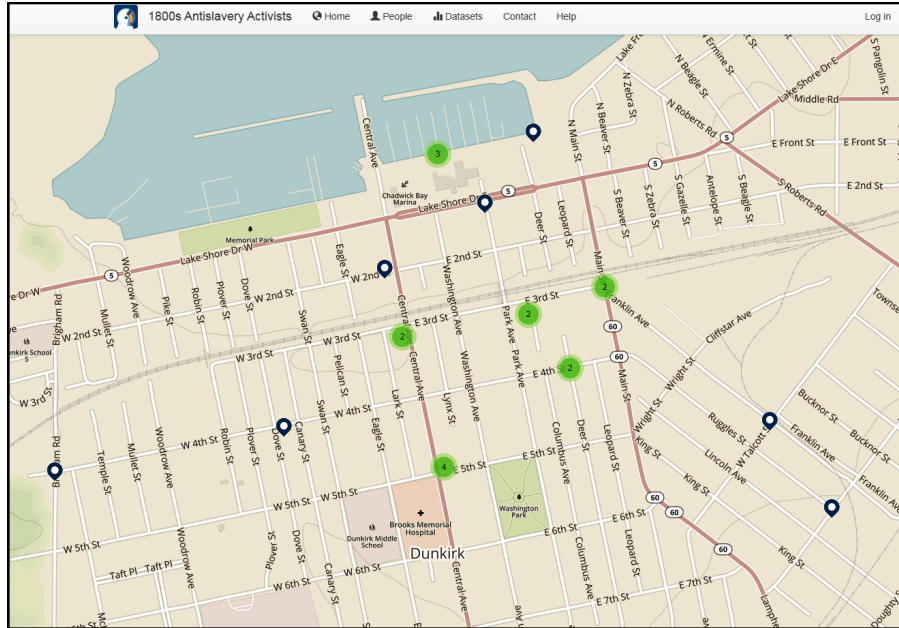


The Chautauqua County anti-slavery map at [www.orbitist.com/ugrr](http://www.orbitist.com/ugrr) shows over 1150 abolitionists and related sites. This represents research so far into the names and places recorded in primary documents.

Inside the red circles are three orange bubbles, each of which represents a cluster of individual activists, and/or groups of activists, such as particular churches. The large area including Fredonia in the North County shows 391 people or groups; the Jamestown area and the South County region show 362; the Southwest County shows 208.

Smaller clusters are shown in the green and yellow bubbles. The blue and white arrows indicate single persons or sites. Tapping on a bubble causes the map to zoom into an area, until blue and white arrows appear. Tapping an arrow gives the person's story. The map is mobile friendly.



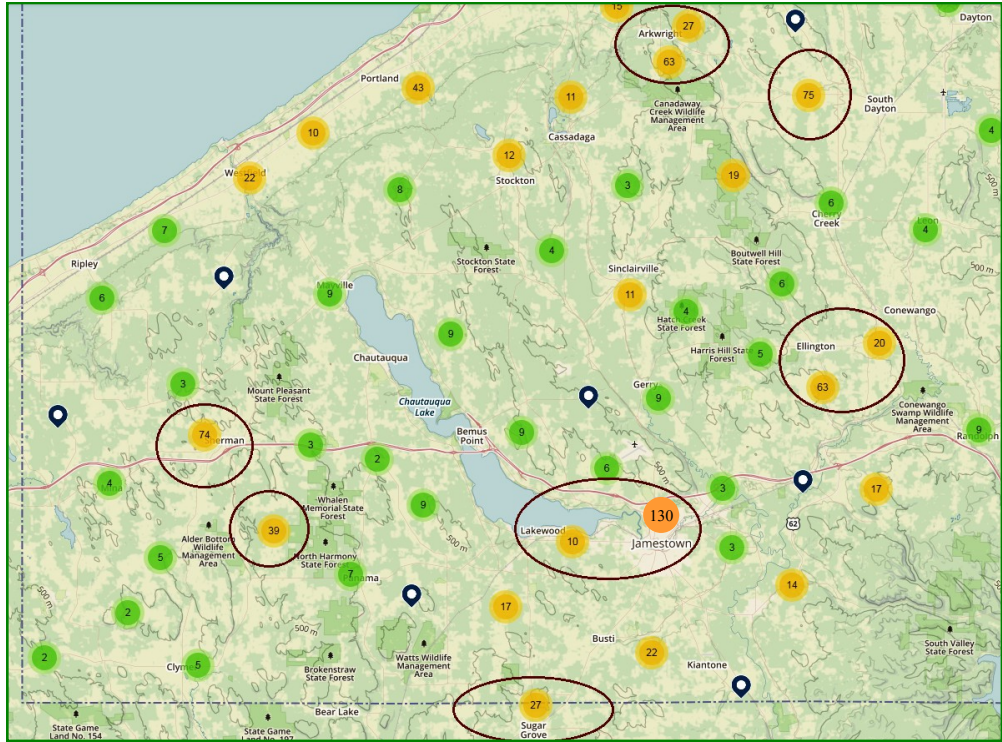


The window above is from the anti-slavery map, showing the documented UGRR operatives and abolitionists in downtown Dunkirk.

At right is one of the George and Asa French family homes. In 1851, George was one of many abolitionists who tried to rescue Harrison Williams, a young refugee who had been kidnapped from the “south county” by slave catchers. The rescue attempt was unsuccessful, and Harrison Williams was returned to slavery.



Built about 1850 by George French's son Asa.



**Seven of the large clusters of abolitionists surrounding Dunkirk.**  
*(www.orbitist.com/ugrr)*

### **Seven Anti-slavery Clusters near Dunkirk**

At the upper right, 90 people are shown in the area of Arkwright and Burnham's Hollow. These people signed anti-slavery petitions, and/or were listed in Judge Foote's anti-slavery papers. Nearby, one of the petitions was signed by women, although they acknowledged in their preamble that they could not vote.

Moving clockwise around this map, note that 75 people near Hamlet NY either signed anti-slavery petitions, or they were named in Benjamin Vincent's list of people who donated items for refugees. At least half of the people on Vincent's list were women. Several of the men on Vincent's list also signed the petitions.

Next, 83 people are shown in the Ellington and Conewango area. They either signed anti-slavery petitions, or were listed in Foote's papers, or both.

Likewise, the 140 people shown in the Jamestown area either signed the petitions, or were listed by Foote, or both.

27 people are shown in the Sugar Grove area, near the state line. In this region is the farm where the refugee Harrison Williams was captured, shortly after the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was passed. He was given a hasty trial and returned to slavery. Two members of his party were captured elsewhere, but four others escaped to Canada.

Two additional clusters shown on this map include 74 in the Sherman NY area, and 39 at Wait Corners, not far from Sherman. These people are found on anti-slavery petitions. There is no doubt that if the petitions from Westfield, Fredonia, and other Chautauqua County villages had survived, similarly large clusters would be shown in those regions as well.

Also, if the minutes of the annual meetings of Congregationalists, Wesleyans, and Free Will Baptists had survived, it is likely that the anti-slavery resolutions of those groups would have yielded more names on this map.

## The Major Sources for the Map

- The Memoirs of Eber Pettit
- The papers of Elial T. Foote
- Benjamin Vincent's good-will list in Villenova
- Anti-slavery petitions from National Archives
- The Baptists' annual, anti-slavery resolutions

## Additional Sources

- 29 Aug 1839 (published 25 Sep 1839) Minutes of the Chautauqua County Anti-slavery Society
- 1851 Published accounts of the Harrison Williams kidnapping
- 1867 Serialized memoirs of Eber M. Pettit
- 1884 *History of Erie County (PA)*, Samuel P. Bates
- 1891 Interviews and article by Palmer K. Shankland
- 1900 *Cherry Creek Illustrated*, Chas. J. Shults, ed.
- 1902 Interviews and articles by C. R. Lockwood
- 1915 *History of the Jamestown Baptist Church*, Anon.
- 1921 *History of Chautauqua County and its People*, Albert S. Price
- 1923 Busti Centennial Booklet, Emma Gourdey, et al
- 1940 "Underground Railroad in Western NY," William S. Bailey
- 1975 Carroll Sesquicentennial Booklet, June T. Richards
- 1979 French Creek 150 Years, Westley and Peterson

Notes on the five Major Sources above:

- (1) *Sketches in the History of the Underground Railroad* by Eber Pettit is available at Amazon, courtesy of Paul Leone.
- (2) The papers of Elial T. Foote are available online, courtesy of the McClurg Museum in Westfield.
- (3) Benjamin Vincent's good-will list was published in the *Fredonia Censor* in the 1930s, and is reprinted under Vincent's story on the map ([www.orbitist.com/ugrr](http://www.orbitist.com/ugrr)).
- (4) The anti-slavery petitions are transcribed at Chautauqua County Historian Michelle Henry's website at the Underground Railroad tab.
- (4) The Baptists' annual anti-slavery resolutions are available at the same location.