



The Anti-slavery Movement in the Fredonia area: 1836 - 1863

By Wendy J. W. Straight
June, 2019

The Anti-slavery movement in Fredonia: 1836 - 1863

Due to an Underground Railroad connection to Darwin R. Barker and family, rumors about Fredonia's involvement persisted for a century. As the rumors were passed along, the stories grew more and more preposterous, until just about every 19th century home in Fredonia was labeled as an Underground Railroad house.

In fact, many of those homes did not even exist prior to the Civil War. Instead, it was in the tiny homes, cabins, and shanties of ordinary people where refugees were 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 1000 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.

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.**

Examples of reasons for the erroneous rumors in Fredonia:

- (1) Some people who later built Victorian mansions had been antebellum abolitionists and “stockholders” (i.e. financial supporters) of the Underground Railroad; therefore their new houses became mistakenly associated by later generations as Underground Railroad (UGRR) homes.
- (2) Later generations assumed that the term “underground” actually meant “under the ground.” Instead, it simply meant “secret,” like the French Underground (i.e. Resistance) during World War II.
- (3) Hidden alcoves used for stashing liquor during Prohibition were jokingly called “my Underground Railroad room.” Later generations did not realize that this was simply family folklore.
- (4) The rumors of “quilts on the line” or “rings of trees” do not match the record left by conductor memoirs and refugee interviews, regarding the actual methods of operation of the UGRR.

Rev. Samuel Ringgold Ward

Ward corresponded with Judge Foote about the tiny school houses and small churches where Ward was scheduled to speak. During the late 1830s and early 1840s, Ward was invited to the area by the Chautauqua County Anti-slavery Society.

A well known orator, Ward had escaped from slavery with his parents when he was only a toddler. Part of his name may have been a reference to that of Samuel Ringgold, a member of Congress from Ward's home state of Maryland.

Ward was a Congregationalist minister. Seven of his letters to and from Judge Foote survive. Most notable in that correspondence is the fact that Ward challenged Foote to entice Chautauqua County's church people to act politically upon their abolitionist convictions.

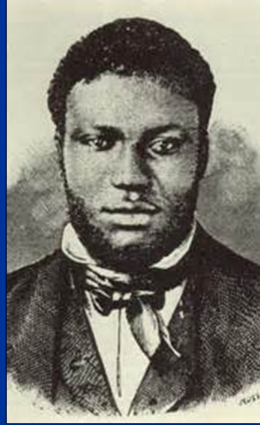
The churches and school houses

Ward and other anti-slavery orators usually spoke in small venues in the many small, rural settlements of Chautauqua County. Two of those sites that still exist are the Baptist Church in Nashville NY, and the Baptist Church in Leon NY.

Nashville Baptist Church is located on Route 39, not far from the Chautauqua/Cattaraugus county line. Following the loss of its remaining congregation in the late twentieth century, the building was purchased by its neighbors, to be preserved as long as possible.

Leon is located on Route 62, a short distance into Cattaraugus County. The tiny church is situated on a bend in the road, just south of the center of town. When it was photographed in 2010, the old building was in use as a garage.

Amazingly in both cases, the Greek Revival features of each church's architecture had so far remained intact when these images were obtained.



**Samuel
Ringgold Ward,
Popular
Speaker**



**Baptist Church in
nearby Leon NY**



**Baptist Church in
nearby Nashville NY**



**Catherine
Harris,
Stationmaster
Jamestown**

Catherine Harris

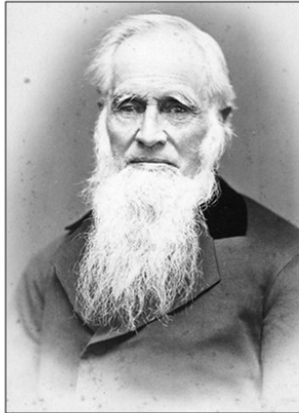
Harris was an African American seamstress, maid, and nanny in Jamestown. In 1902, at age 93, she gave an interview to the *Jamestown Evening Journal*, recalling great detail about the Underground Railroad fifty years earlier, and her part in it.

She recounted that prominent (white) abolitionists brought refugees to her, sometimes more than a dozen at a time. Harris was expected to feed, shelter, and clothe each person until he or she could be safely moved to the next station.

Although Harris did not complain or accuse, it is clear from her words that she was in great danger of being imprisoned and/or fined. It is not known if she received financial assistance from the many wealthy (white) abolitionists in Jamestown.

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 tiny 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.



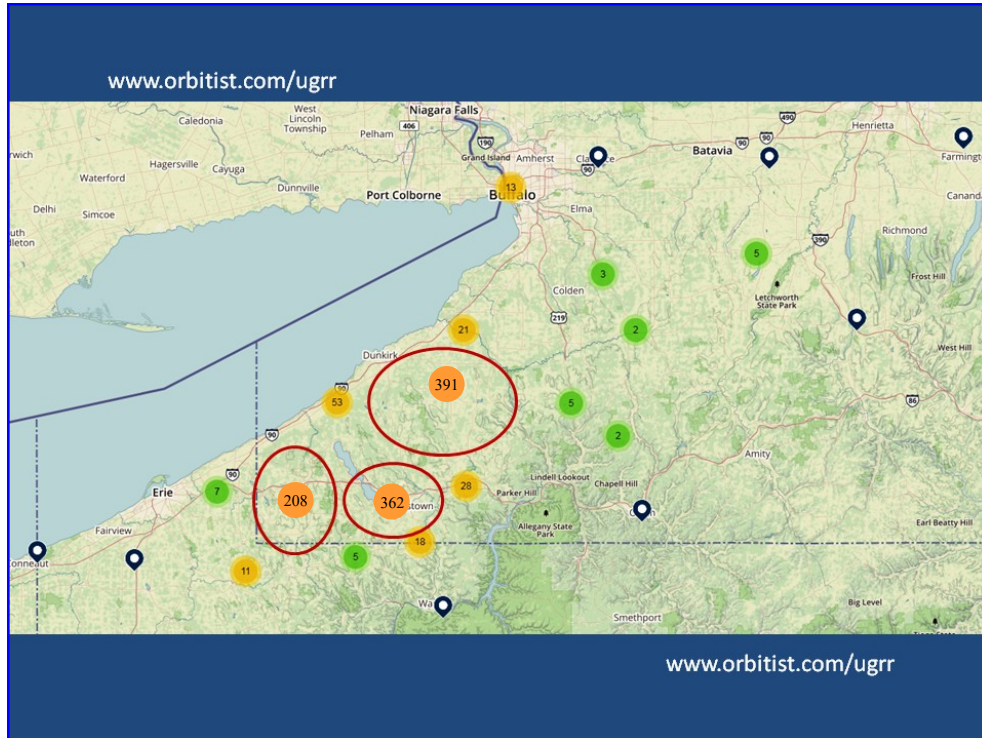
The Dr. James Pettit
and Lucy Pettit home
in Fredonia.



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.

Eber's son James served in the Civil War, then took over the family's herb and seed business in Versailles. Eber, Eurette, Darwin, and Helen moved back to Fredonia, leaving their large Greek Revival home in Versailles to James. Eber and Darwin built a large farmhouse on Central Avenue, where the main entrance to SUNY Fredonia is located today.

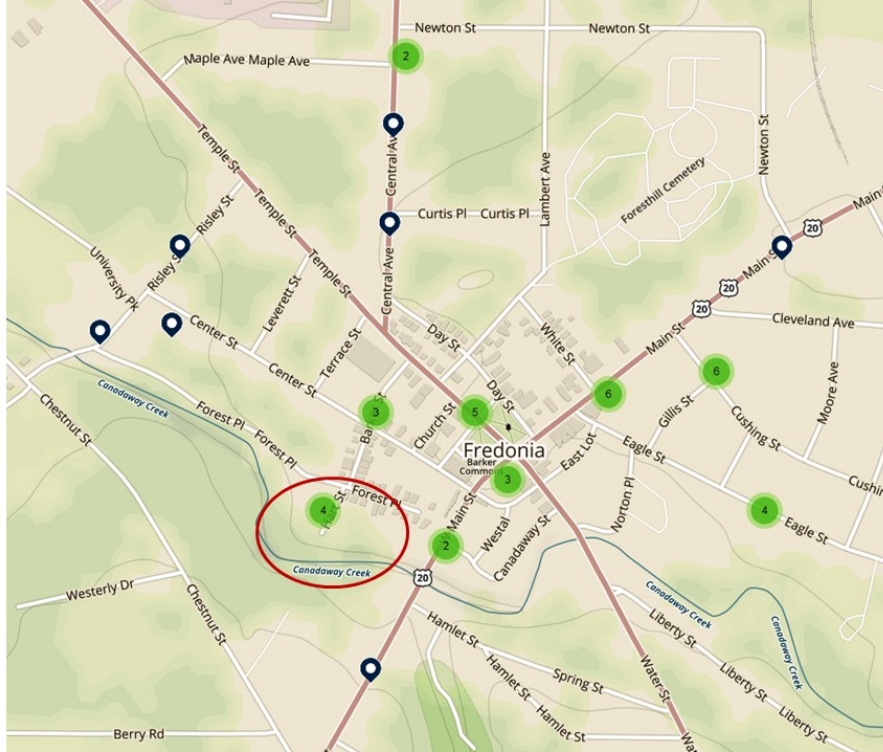
Eber's medicine office was on Central Avenue next to the home, but he built an enormous medicine factory on East Main Street, at the intersection of today's Cleveland Avenue. The factory burned before the end of the 19th century, and a gas station and some shops later occupied the site. None of the Pettit/Barker homes have survived.



The Chautauqua County anti-slavery map at 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.

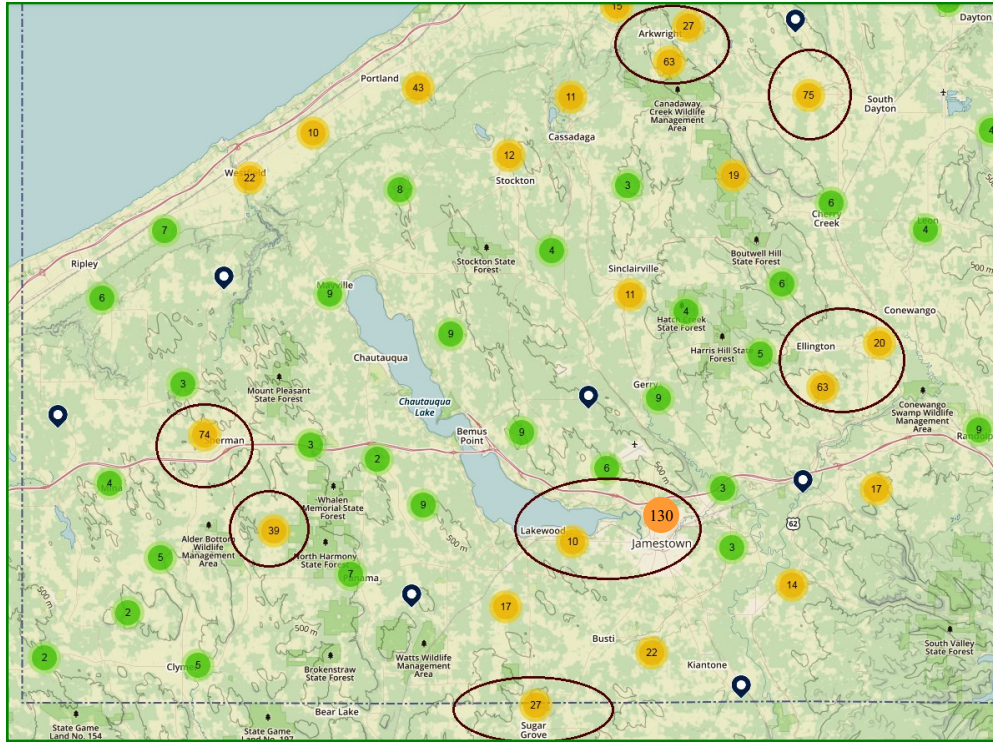


This window of the anti-slavery map zooms into Fredonia, showing 42 anti-slavery people in the downtown vicinity.

However, if refugees were housed in this area, they were most likely in one of the four shanties on today's Hart Street (circled in red), formerly known as Davis Avenue.

The street was named for the African American barber Henry Davis, who most likely would have been asked to shelter refugees in Fredonia, in the same manner in which Catherine Harris was asked to do so in Jamestown.

Davis is also known to have traded locations for a brief time with John Little, an African American conductor in Arkwright, whose UGRR involvement was documented by Pettit.



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

Seven Anti-slavery Clusters near Fredonia

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 Chaut. Co. 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).
- (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.