



Rich in HISTORY

By Richard Frost

North Star historical museum in Keeseville highlights the region's contribution to the Underground Railroad.

IT'S EASY TO LOOK AT HISTORY and think the Civil War was far away from us, both in time and in distance. Unfortunately, freedom is still not a guarantee for people everywhere in the world. Even today in the United States, new obstacles to voting seem to be developing.

On close inspection, the War Between the States had quite an impact in the North Country despite the fact there were not any major battles contested here. The number of Northerners who enlisted to fight was significant. Unfortunately, so was the casualty count. It's no surprise that so many communities put up monuments to Civil War soldiers during the decades after that fateful four years of fighting.

The Champlain Valley played a role in the events of the time well before war broke out. More than a few local residents took strong stands against slavery. John Brown had moved to the Adirondacks. It was his North Elba home that he left when he went to Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, to lead an uprising, and it was back to North Elba that his body was returned for burial.

Last year's Academy Award-winning movie for Best Picture, *Twelve Years a Slave*, focused attention on Solomon Northup, an Adirondack native who was kidnapped and sold into slavery. When he was finally released, he came north to rejoin his family in Glens Falls.

There were many less recognizable names among those who participated in the secretive attempts to free slaves that became known collectively as the Underground Railroad. Many escaped across the Ohio River; Cincinnati became perhaps the most common destination. Others, especially after passage of the Fugitive Slave Law allowed slave owners to seek escapees in northern states, began setting their sights on Canada.

The North Star Underground Railroad Museum

is located only steps away from Ausable Chasm, in a sandstone home that once housed the manager of the Ausable Horse Nail Company. Exhibits inside tell the important story of the railroad's Champlain Route. This route was one of several options for slaves who managed to reach New York City or Boston. Most slaves traveling through this area came from Virginia and Maryland.

By the 1840s, the railroad already crossed Vermont. A slave could go by train to Burlington, then proceed further north by land. Some instead chose to cross Lake Champlain to Rouses Point, where "conductors" of the Underground Railroad could help them get into Canada. There was a third option, that of taking the train through to Ogdensburg. Upon arrival there, other sympathizers would help them cross the St. Lawrence River at its narrowest point into present-day Ontario.

Alternatively, those landing in New York City might go up the Hudson River to Albany. From there, the majority followed the Mohawk Valley west to Niagara Falls, where a bridge facilitated passage to freedom in Canada. However, a significant number continued by water, traveling on the Champlain Canal, then Lake Champlain, on their way to the Canadian border. A key stop was the home of Noadiah Moore in Champlain. Moore, who owned a mill in Lacolle, Quebec, was able to provide jobs for some of the fugitives.

Research on the Champlain Route had been scarce until recent years. Further in-depth documentation still awaits discovery. It's clear, however, that a network of individuals with strong moral opposition to slavery worked to assist escaped slaves who made it to Warren, Essex, and Clinton Counties. I paid a visit to the North Star Underground Railroad Museum this summer to learn more about this largely underappreciated aspect of our local history.

Opposite: The North Star Underground Railroad Museum is located in the former Estes home, which once housed the manager of the Ausable Horse Nail Works.

Right: A wall of display panels in the museum.

Region Was a "House Divided" Over Abolition

Some might be surprised that abolitionist views were not uniformly popular in the North. More than a few people feared that such militancy would lead the nation into civil war. Others argued that each state should have the right to make its own decision on the issue. The North Country proved to be a microcosm of what happened nationally.

Churches proved vital to the Underground Railroad, but such support could split congregations. An exhibit in the former parlor of the building housing the museum details some of the schisms that affected local churches. Denominations also struggled with the same issues on a national level.

Reverend David Dobie of the Presbyterian Church in Plattsburgh called for "disownment [sic] of slave holding southern Presbyterians." Reverend Andrew Witherspoon of the Peru Methodist Church was put on trial (though acquitted) for his vehement arguments against church leaders who allowed slave owners to remain members of their congregations.

Wendell Lansing, founder of the *Essex County Republican* newspaper, was an especially fervent abolitionist. Lansing caused particular furor with the proposal that his Baptist fellowship not allow any non-abolitionist ministers to preach. He further urged the church to withhold communion from any members who sympathized with continuation of slavery. His stands actually led to his being driven from the village for a number of years.



Even the usually diplomatic Quakers ended up with opposing camps using adjacent meeting houses.

It is notable that abolitionists sometimes had trouble simply finding a place to meet. When Susan B. Anthony accompanied speakers to Keeseville on behalf of the American Anti-Slavery Society, no church or other organization would allow use of its facilities. A Quaker

meeting house in Peru finally allowed the participants to meet there. Anthony and her companions spent the night in Plattsburgh's Cumberland Hotel. Because several members of the party were black, they were initially refused service in the hotel's dining room.

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Such anecdotes are as important to understanding our local heritage as more concrete reminders, such as a leg shackle on display at the museum. The shackle was found in 1970 during the remodeling of a home on Hallock Hill.

Gerrit Smith, a wealthy landowner in central New York, somehow gets overlooked when anti-slavery heroes are lionized. He designated a large parcel of land just outside Lake Placid for any free blacks willing to develop a farm. It was this generosity that inspired John Brown's move to the Adirondacks. Brown relocated there with plans to assist these new grantees in their efforts to carve out a living on the land in North Elba.

This "community" was not, as some assume, designed as a final destination for the Underground Railroad. Indeed, Smith fully supported the clandestine missions. However, the decision to grant land was an attempt to give freed blacks eligibility for voting in New York, where ownership of \$250 worth of land was a legislated requirement for a man (remember, no women voters yet) to cast a ballot.

A highlight of the museum visit is an audiovisual presentation about John Thomas. Born a slave in Maryland in 1811, Thomas managed to escape in 1839 and begin a new life in New York City. In time, however, he also wanted the right to vote, which in New York required him to find a way to own land.

In 1846, Thomas became one of the many who accepted Smith's gracious offer of forty acres to carve out a homestead. Despite the efforts of John Brown and others to help these new arrivals succeed in an inhospitable climate, only a tiny percentage of these settlers survived the early years there. Unlike the vast majority, however, Thomas managed to thrive. In time, he sold his North Elba parcel and purchased more fertile land in nearby Bloomingdale.

In recent years, a letter surfaced in which Thomas had written Gerrit Smith in 1872 to thank him for his largesse and to underscore what the opportunity meant for him personally. That discovery led to a search for descendants

of Thomas. These later generations turned out to know nothing of his story. Now they can share their newly recognized link to this important initiative. This is when history becomes both relevant and exciting.

I also took part in a van tour of area sites. The museum offers these outings twice a month during the summer. Peter Slocum led our group of twelve, and his enthusiasm went a long way toward assuring our enjoyment. We motored along routes that were important in the 19th century, including the old Port Kent-Keeseville Road and Hallock Hill Road, which connected Keeseville with the Quaker Union in Peru.



We saw several homes thought to have been way stations for escaped slaves. This was brought to life especially by the opportunity to see a small stone-lined room in a barn behind the Stephen Keese Smith Homestead outside Peru. Here, some fugitives were hidden until they could be brought to Champlain or Rouses Point and then across the Canadian border. When you're within such a confined

space, it stops being a mere architectural artifact. Instead this becomes a haunting insight into an era.

Former church sites were additional features of the tour. Our time also included visits to several graveyards. Wendell Lansing, buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Keeseville, deserves more public recognition for his public stands and for his contributions as one of the first newspaper editors in the area. Civil War veterans are denoted by the presence of stars, and there are more of them than one might expect in a small northern village.

This nicely curated small museum helps to remind us that, even a century or two ago, rural areas in northern New York were not isolated from issues that affected the rest of the country. Decisions on critical moral issues of society ultimately involve everyone. It's reassuring to learn that our forbears in this area did not shirk their responsibility and, in fact, often asserted their beliefs at great personal risk.

"Rich in History" appears in the Lake Champlain Weekly on the first and third weeks of each month. To offer feedback or pose questions, you can contact the author at rbforiole@aol.com.

A barn behind the Keese Smith Homestead in Peru, in which slaves were hidden before being transported to freedom in Canada.

Planning Your Visit

The North Star Underground Railroad Museum is located at 1131 Mace Chasm Road, Ausable Chasm, NY. The entry drive is just north of that for Ausable Chasm. Operating hours are 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. seven days a week through the last Saturday in October. Advanced reservations are recommended for the weekend van tours by calling (518) 834-5180.