

Adirondack Underground Railroad ties

LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, February 6, 2004

An Underground Railroad route through the Adirondacks — how exciting!

Maybe you found out about this trail from Harold Weston's book, "Freedom in the Wilds," published in 1971 by the eminently respectable Adirondack Trail Improvement Society.

Or maybe you were referred to Weston's book by a footnote in the new tome, "Keene and Keene Valley: Two Adirondack Hamlets in History."

Or maybe you've delved into the work of the master himself, Alfred L. Donaldson, in his two-volume 1921 "History of the Adirondacks."

No matter what your source, you've set out on a hike up the secret path through the High Peaks once walked by slaves seeking the Canadian border and freedom.

"In 1848 John Brown settled with his family at North Elba, a hamlet not far from Lake Placid where at that time there was no settlement," Weston wrote. "North Elba was for some 10 years to be the terminus of the northernmost spur of the Underground Railroad for escaping slaves.

"Keeping away from larger settlements and centers of officialdom, such as Plattsburgh, and main routes to Canada, this branch of the underground came north by way of Schroon Lake through Chapel Pond Pass, twined west at Keene Valley up Johns Brook to the pass between Table Top and Yard mountains — which to this day is known as Railroad Notch — and then to John Brown's tract on the North Elba meadows."

Looking for more inspiration than just the majestic beauty of the Adirondack mountains themselves, you've set off from Johns Brook Lodge on the northwest trail toward South Meadow and the John Brown Farm State Historic Site, just outside Lake Placid.

And there, at the rise, you find it: Railroad Notch, named long ago to honor this trail to freedom.

There's only one problem: The story isn't true. Not about John Brown's Underground Railroad station at North Elba. Not about "Railroad Notch." Not a bit of it.

YES, RADICAL abolitionist John Brown settled in North Elba in 1848, a decade before his disastrous raid on the federal armory in Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Brown's idea was to help the free African Americans who had come there to establish a farming community, courtesy of philanthropist, land speculator and fellow abolitionist Gerrit Smith, of Peterboro.

But the North Elba Black colony,

sometimes called "Timbuctoo" by today's storytellers, was *not* an Underground Railroad stop. There were no runaway slaves among the Black settlers in North Elba; all had been born free in the North. In fact, in all the journals and correspondence describing life in the North Elba Black colony, only one runaway slave is ever recorded as having visited there, and he for just a short time.

As for "Railroad Notch," Weston



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

The Austin Bigelow house in Keeseville, also known as the Green Apple Inn, is one of the legendary North Country stations on the Underground Railroad.

seems to have taken a local legend and swallowed it whole.

The Adirondack Mountain Club's trail guide of the day sets the record partially straight: "Klondike Notch between Table Top and Slide mountains has, apparently due to a cartographer's error, also been called Railroad Notch. This latter name more rightfully belongs to the notch between Big Slide and Porter mountains where the grades are less and which years ago was surveyed for a railroad."

A later edition of the same guide, still in print, adds emphasis to the earlier disclaimer: "Contrary to legends that have even been printed in various Adirondack histories, this route was not part of the Underground Railroad for escaped slaves to reach John Brown's Farm. His farm was for freed slaves, and Canada was the only safe haven for an escaped slave."

AS FOR Donaldson, today's Adirondack historians cringe at the mention of his name. His account of the Black colony at North Elba was just one of the more offensive of the many errors he made in compiling the area's history.

"The farms allotted to the Negroes consisted of 40 acres," Donaldson wrote, "but the natural gregariousness of the race tended to defeat the purpose of these

individual holdings. The darkies began to build their shanties in one place, instead of on their separate grants. Before long about 10 families had huddled their houses together down by the brook, not far from where the White Church [a historic church building] now stands. The shanties were square, crudely built of logs, with flat roofs, out of which little stovepipes protruded at varying angles. The last touch of pure Negroism was a large but dilapidated red flag that floated above the settlement, bearing the half-humorous, half-pathetic legend 'Timbuc-too,' a name that applied to the vicinity for several years.

"Here occasionally, always overnight, new faces appeared and disappeared," Donaldson continued, "poor, hunted fugitives seeking the greater safety of the Canadian line. Those who stayed permanently were roused to spasmodic activity by Brown, who induced them to work for him or some of his scattered neighbors. But unless directed by him, they did nothing for themselves or for their own land."

This insulting account is almost completely incorrect, according to Mary MacKenzie, the late historian emeritus of Lake Placid and North Elba.

"We know the colonists settled on their own cabins and tilled their own soil diligently, some with considerable suc-

cess," MacKenzie wrote in 1994. "There is not a shred of evidence that they huddled together in slum fashion.

"Also, they were not fugitive slaves.

"How could Donaldson have concocted such a tale, so at odds with reality?" a perplexed MacKenzie wrote. She proceeded to describe one possible scenario that could have been misunderstood by Donaldson and twisted into the account related above.

"Donaldson's approach to history was sometimes appalling. He had an unfortunate penchant for accepting simple, basic accounts and then embellishing and exaggerating them beyond all resemblance to the truth. It is very clear he did so in this instance. His healthy imagination transformed three small independent farms into a crowded ghetto, and the entire Black experience in North Elba was thus distorted and trivialized.

"There are many errors and misconceptions in Donaldson's entire chapter on John Brown and the Black colony. It is a poor source for authentic information and should be avoided."

IT IS JUST such errors that the state's new Underground Railroad Heritage Trail program hopes to avoid as it provides information on New York's part in the heroic enterprise, which helped African American slaves negotiate the last leg of their journey to freedom in Canada. The UGR operated from about 1830 until the end of the Civil War.

Like the four other Heritage Trail programs set up by Heritage New York — on the Revolutionary War, Theodore Roosevelt, Women, and Labor — the Underground Railroad Heritage Trail is designed to gather and disseminate information for tourists and researchers alike on a significant aspect of our state's history.

Cordell Reaves, coordinator for the UGR Heritage Trail, came to Plattsburgh last month to talk with North Country historians about what his program had to offer. It was the ninth and last in a series of forums on the UGR Heritage Trail held throughout the state.

Right now, Reaves said, \$1 million is available to help nonprofit custodians of documented UGR sites develop their facilities to make them more accessible to visitors.



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

The barn at Grouse Ridge Farm, outside Keene hamlet, is another legendary North Country station on the Underground Railroad.

“It’s not a lot of money,” Reaves admitted, “and we have to be strategic about how we use it.”

Reaves emphasized that sites listed on the Underground Railroad Heritage Trail will have to be well-documented.

“We don’t want to develop a lot of signage and other materials, and then just have to go back and take it all down when better research comes forward,” Reaves said.

DOCUMENTATION is precisely what most North Country legends of Underground Railroad activity lack.

One might think that wouldn’t be the case for sites flagged with state historic markers, like Keeseville’s Green Apple Inn, which also served as the home of 19th century innkeeper Austin Bigelow. The former inn, now broken up into apartments, sits on the banks of the Au Sable River. Next door is the village’s former Congregational Church building, now a Masonic temple.

The state historic marker, placed in front of the former inn on North Au Sable Street, proclaims that it was once an “Underground Railroad station where Negro slaves were aided to escape to Canada.” At the bottom is a kind of signature, showing the sign’s source: “State Education Department 1950.”

Underground Railroad researcher Tom Calarco says that, “however, aside from the state marker outside, apparently based on legend, and the listing of an A. Bigelow at anti-slavery meetings, nothing else is known” about any Underground Railroad depot at the Green Apple Inn.

How could this be?

The problem is that state historic markers are not proof of historic documentation by the New York State Education Department — in fact, the only role NYSED plays today in the historic-marker program is to keep a list of them on its Web site.

“At present,” admits the NYSED Web site on state historic markers, “there is no review and approval process for historic markers if placed on private land.”

In fact, if you want to place your very own, “official” historic marker in front of your house, all you have to do is call Catskill Castings. For a total of about \$700, the Bloomville-based foundry will make you a real state historic

marker. The marker will take about six weeks to deliver, and it will say anything you want it to say.

THERE IS NO lack of local lore about Underground Railroad activity in our part of the Adirondacks, but most of those stories are little more than legends, with no more documentation to support them than that required for a state historic marker — in other words, none at all.

One such legend surfaced a couple of years ago, triggered by an article Tom Calarco wrote for Adirondack Life magazine on two reputed UGR sites around Corinth.

“I have been told that a barn on my property in Keene was part of the [Underground Railroad] network,” wrote Scott Coby in the June 2002 issue of Adirondack Life. “About 10 years ago three ladies appeared on my property and asked to paint the view behind my barn. I gave them permission, and while one was painting the scene, a woman named Ann Nye asked if I knew about the secret room under the barn. I did not, and she informed me that it was used to hide slaves making their way north to the Canadian border.”

Coby added, “At the time, I would have guessed her [Nye] to be about 90 years old. She was sharp as a tack and said she had lived in Keene all her life.”

How likely is such a story to be true?

We wrote to Coby asking for more information, but he had not responded before we went to press with this story.

Looking only at the documentation available from public records, however, the odds appear to be against Coby’s Lacy Road farm, now called Grouse Ridge, having been used as a UGR stop. From a search of the deed history for Grouse Ridge, it looks like the property was not actually settled until 1865, the year when the Civil War ended.

IN WILMINGTON, the owners of an old home have retold another legend about the Underground Railroad.

The McGrath house is located across the Haselton Road from the historic Whiteface Methodist Church and Wilmington’s original town hall, both built in the early 19th century. The McGrath family acquired their home around 1910 from the Storrs family, which had operated it as a hotel for

years before.

“The house is the oldest in Wilmington,” claimed Henry McGrath Jr. in an article he wrote for a 1984 book commemorating the Methodist church’s sesquicentennial. “The house has had quite a history. For example, for years before the Civil War there were tunnels from the cellar running to the southeast to a small church and to the southwest to the Methodist Church. They were used to aid runaway slaves. This is something that isn’t readily available in town records.”

A call to the McGraths for more information had not been answered before press time. Local stories, however, say that Sallie McGrath Langford, the current owner, claims the tunnel entrances are still visible in the cellar. Langford even has a pair of shackles, the stories say, possibly left by a runaway slave.

No tunnel entrance was found in the Methodist Church cellar, however, when renovations were completed there several years ago, said Don Morrison, church member and general handyman.

And, besides the legends, no documentation has yet been found for the existence of an Underground Railroad stop in Wilmington.

ANOTHER story about an Underground Railroad depot in Wilmington appears to be the result of a misreading of an obituary.

Newspaper editor Wendell Lansing was a well-known abolitionist. In 1839, when he was 30 years old, Lansing

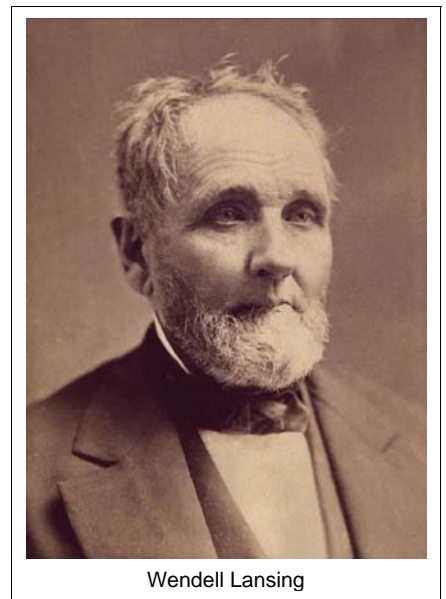




PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

Wilmington's former Storrs Hotel, now the McGrath House, was reputedly the nexus of a network of Underground Railroad tunnels that helped runaway slaves make their way to safety, unseen, from the nearby Au Sable River bed.

founded the Essex County Republican, a Whig newspaper published in Keeseville. He was forced out of the paper in 1846 when he was not allowed to use it as a platform for his staunchly abolitionist views. From 1846 to 1854 he lived in exile in Wilmington, doing odd jobs around the community, until he was called back to start a new abolitionist paper in Keeseville, which later merged with the Republican. Lansing died in 1887.

Two books on area Underground Railroad connections claim that Lansing operated a UGR depot when he lived in Wilmington. One of those books is Calarco's; the other book is by editor Rebecca Schwarz-Kopf of the Lake Champlain Weekly, in Plattsburgh. Schwarz-Kopf does not say where her story came from, but Calarco cites biographical material published about Lansing in a local newspaper immediately after his death.

"One stop that researchers are almost certain was a stop and which some believe still exists is the Wendell Lansing farm in Wilmington," Calarco wrote. "It was there, his 1887 obituary stated, that his 'homestead on the hill was one of the depots of the famous "Underground Railroad" for escaped slaves ... [and] a headquarters for colored men

and abolition lecturers.' "

This writer's suspicions about Lansing's Wilmington depot were aroused when none of the local historians he consulted could tell him anything about it — most, in fact, had never heard of Lansing, much less knew of any tales about Underground Railroad stop he had supposedly run in Wilmington. No one knew where his farm might have been located.

To check the story out, the writer visited the archives of the Essex County Historical Society. Librarian Suzy Doolittle helped the writer locate the microfilm roll containing the complete, original version of Lansing's obituary biography, published first in Lansing's own paper, the Essex County Republican, on May 26, 1887. Though the biography was not bylined, the author identified himself within the story as one of Lansing's business partners in the W. Lansing & Sons Co.

The biography began with Lansing's recruitment by Keeseville Whig officials in 1839. All of the activity described between that point and the mention of Lansing's UGR operation took place in Keeseville.

The biographer then wrote, "From our own recollection we can testify that the old homestead on the hill was one of

the depots of the famous 'Underground Railroad' for escaped slaves, fleeing to Canada for their freedom! His house was a head-quarters for colored men and abolition lecturers!"

It was not until the following paragraph that the first — and only — mention of Wilmington occurred in the biography. Nowhere in that paragraph was there any mention of the Underground Railroad.

"For six years he [Lansing] resided in Wilmington, Essex County," the biographer wrote, "first running a farm, but finally engaging in about every branch of business of which he had any knowledge: running a hotel, a store, an ore contract, a shingle job, a lumber job, a saw-mill, a coal job and a forge!"

A little research at the Adirondack Architectural Heritage office in Keeseville uncovered the location of a home occupied there by Lansing sometime before 1876. That home is no longer standing. It was located on what is now a vacant lot at the southwest corner of the intersection of Vine, Main and Kent streets — at the base of Port Kent Hill.

Whether this was Lansing's "old homestead on the hill" or not is far from certain; it's not even known whether Lansing lived there before embarking on his Wilmington adventures in 1846, or after his return to Keeseville in 1854.

Only two things appear to be sure bets regarding Wendell Lansing's involvement with the Underground Railroad:

- 1) Lansing was a UGR conductor.
- 2) Lansing's depot was at the Keeseville house in which he lived before his Wilmington exile. Lansing did not operate an Underground Railroad station in Wilmington.

THERE ARE plenty of legitimate, well-documented Underground Railroad sites to visit in the North Country — and plenty more ascribed only to local legend.

For more information on all of them, both legendary and legitimate, check out both of these books — but read them carefully, and take their accounts and any others you hear about the Underground Railroad in the Adirondacks with a hefty helping of skepticism.

► "The Underground Railroad Conductor: A Guide for Eastern New York,"



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

Whiteface Community Methodist Church, next to Wilmington's original Town Hall, is part of a legendary — but undocumented — Underground Railroad station.

by Tom Calarco. Published by Calarco's heritage tourism company, Travels Thru History, based in Schenectady. Paperback, 107 pages, illustrated with B&W photos and site maps, no index but a complete bibliography. SRP \$16; available at Bookstore Plus and With Pipe and Book, in Lake Placid.

► "The Underground Railroad in the North Country, and Early Accounts of African-American Life, Abolitionists and Newspapers in Northern New York and Vermont," by Rebecca Schwarz-Kopf. Published by Studley Printing, Plattsburgh. Paperback, 54 pages, B&W illustrations, one map, no index. SRP \$8.95; available at With Pipe and Book, in Lake Placid.

Also be on the lookout later this year for a new, much weightier volume from Calarco called "The Underground Railroad in the Adirondack Region," being published by McFarland & Co. of Jefferson, N.C. Hardback, 303 pages, 94 photographs and illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography. The book is expected to sell for \$45.