

Volume VI, No. 1

# The Freedom Seeker

Spring 2009

## *Pioneering in the “Colored Settlement” in the Town of Florence, Oneida County*

*By: Mary Ellen Urtz*

Exactly 160 years ago, “The North Star” newspaper, published by Frederick Douglass in Rochester, contained several articles regarding the attempt to create a “Settlement for Colored Men” on Lot 16 near the northwest corner of the Town of Florence. By the following year, the 1850 census listed 51 African Americans living in that area, but the population soon decreased due to fear created by the Fugitive Slave Law.

Although the wealthy landowner, Gerrit Smith of Peterboro, had deeded over 17,000 acres of his Town of Florence holdings to a few black families, to many Irish and to early Yankee settlers, the idea for the Florence Settlement did not originate with Mr. Smith. The planner and promoter of the wilderness village was Stephen Myers, a well known black abolitionist and newspaper editor from Albany.

Back in 1846, Myers was a recipient of 36 acres of the Smith land in Florence. The deed was given “in consideration of one dollar” and of Smith’s “desire to have all share in the means of subsistence and happiness, which a bountiful God had provided for all.”

Instead of accepting the land for his private use, Myers came up with the vision of creating a village where black families could become self-sufficient and escape the limitations and prejudice of city life. He drew up a village lot plan where a quarter-acre of undeveloped land would be sold for only \$3. Possession could be gained by the payment of \$1, with the remaining \$2 due

in 10 years. Those with additional funds could purchase farm acreage. Some of the villagers could provide farm labor and others could engage in trades necessary to a growing community. There



*Town Hall of Florence, Oneida County, New York, established 1839.  
From Florence in History to 1953, by Thomas M. Riley*

was abundant timber for log cabins, heat in winter, and some left over for sale.

In October 1849, the Association held a meeting at the “Emigrant House” in Florence. Reverend Daniel Peterson (who later traveled to Liberia in support of the Colonization movement) made a report of recent donations, and the press release was signed by D. MacCoy [McCoy], President; W. Hawkins, Secretary; and L. Tilmon, in behalf of the Society. Rev. Levin Tilmon and Rev. Peterson were also leading the building project that created the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Rome, around this same time. Walter Hawkins also became a minister, and later a Bishop, in the British Methodist Episcopal Church in Chatham, Ontario, Canada.

Frederick Douglass and Gerrit Smith were not enthusiastic over Myers’ project. In one issue of “The North Star” Henry Bibb charged that the settlement was a “cunning trick of an unprincipled clique, whose chief object is to build up themselves on the

*(Continued on page 4)*

### *Inside this issue*

<i>Jazz Event</i>	<b>2</b>
<i>Myers Residence Work Parties</i>	<b>3</b>
<i>Walking Tours</i>	<b>3</b>



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The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc., a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting knowledge of the 19th century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy in the Capital Region, in New York State, and in the United States. This newsletter is published three times a year. Editorial inquiries can be sent to URHPCR, P.O. Box 10851, Albany, New York 12201. Email at [info@ugrworkshop.com](mailto:info@ugrworkshop.com).

## *The UGR, Its Legacies, and Our Communities*

The 8<sup>th</sup> annual Underground Railroad Public History Conference was a smashing success! Learning, networking, celebrating our communal history and its relationship to our present and future, renewing old friendships and developing new ones, brought together a diverse, multi-age audience for an enriching weekend generously hosted by Union College in Schenectady, New York. Over 250 participants were drawn from the Capital Region, from around New York State, and from around the nation.

Norm Dann's astute analysis of the psychosocial legacy of the UGR commenced the weekend, followed on Saturday by a rich tapestry of workshops, a superb midday keynote performance by Mate Masi, and a wonderful reception hosted by Union College student residents of Golub House. Sunday's exceptional tours of Schenectady's UGR and African American heritage sites concluded this phenomenal weekend!

Plans are afoot for the 9<sup>th</sup> annual UGR Public History Conference. Save the date - February 26 - 28, 2010 - for *Gender, Class, Race, and Ethnicity in Abolitionism, on the Underground Railroad, and in the Struggle Since*. The Call for Proposals is available online at [www.ugrworkshop.com](http://www.ugrworkshop.com) or by calling 518-432-4432. See you there!

*Join us*

## Blue Coda Jazz Ensemble

featuring

Danny Mixon

*Join us*



**Sunday April 26, 2009**

**4:00 to 8:00 PM**

**Clarion Hotel (Ballroom)**

**3 Watervliet Ave Ext., Albany**

**Light Fare, Cash Bar, Silent Auction**

**Tickets \$40 (advance) \$45 (door)**

For more information and tickets call 436-0562 /  
331-5607 or visit [www.ugrworkshop.com](http://www.ugrworkshop.com)

**For your listening pleasure visit:**

[www.bluecodamusic.com/infopage.htm](http://www.bluecodamusic.com/infopage.htm)

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Join us for an afternoon of live straight ahead jazz, fun and fellowship at the annual URHPCR fundraiser

## BECOME A MEMBER

The Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc. (URHPCR) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting knowledge and understanding of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy in the Capital Region, in New York State, and in the United States. Among other goals, URHPCR promotes and encourages historical research and education on the Underground Railroad Movement and seeks to mark places of historic interest relating to the Underground Railroad Movement in the Capital Region.

### Benefits of Membership:

- ◆ Invitation to the annual UGR Public History Conference
- ◆ Subscription to *The Freedom Seeker*, published three times a year
- ◆ Invitations to URHPCR special events
- ◆ Invitation to walking tours of Capital District Underground Railroad Sites at a reduced rate
- ◆ Announcements of local, state, and national events on the Underground Railroad Movement

A limited number of subsidized individual memberships are available. Please call 518.432.4432 for more information.

### Check one:

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## News and Notes

*Donations to Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc.* are gladly accepted by donating online on the homepage of [www.ugrworkshop.com](http://www.ugrworkshop.com) or by using the form above.

*People of Courage, People of Hope, Seekers of Justice* - 2009 UGR walking tours in downtown Albany will be held on April 19, May 10, June 21, July 12, August 16, September 20, and October 11. Details available at [www.ugrworkshop.com](http://www.ugrworkshop.com) or 518-432-4432.

*Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence and UGR Campus clean-up dates* - bring your gloves, gardening tools, enthusiasm, and muscle power to 194 Livingston Avenue on May 2, June 6, July 4, August 8, September 12, and October 3, 2009. Clean ups begin at 9am and conclude by 1pm. Light refreshments are served.

*Welcome to new and renewing members*, Don Hyman, Ed Nizalowski, Bill Lithgow, Cynthia Seacord, John Olson, Robert Emery, Susan DuBois, Linda Hart, Judy Doesschate, Carol V. Lewis, Janet Walker, Lynn MacGowan, Peter Sokaris, Isabel Mills, William & Dora Lee Stanley, Beth Spokowski, Mary Ellen Lee, John Hogan, Nancy Rosenberg, Victor Artale, Beverly Ivy, Donna Lawrence,

Billie Luisi-Potts, John J. McEneny, Judy Rowe, Eleanora Collins, Lillie M. Saunders, Linda Garcia, Brea Barthel, Helen Torian, Vera Michelson, Donald Baxter, Cindy DeMarco, Dr. Mary Nell Morgan

*Volunteers needed for work of URHPCR Committees.* Can you contribute time to the Jazz Event Committee, the Conference Committee, the Finance Committee, or the Property Committee? Do you like to organize files or books? Do you like to maintain databases? Would you like to assist with fundraising? Join us in achieving the mission of URHPCR by volunteering your time and talents.

### Mark your calendars for these upcoming events -

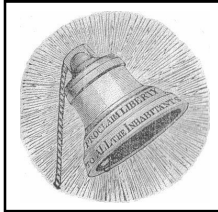
- ◆ URHPCR Board Meetings - the second Wednesday of every month, except August and December, at 6pm at Interfaith Homeless Partnership, 176 Sheridan Avenue, Albany
- ◆ Property Committee meeting - April 20 at 5:30pm at Historic Albany Foundation office, 89 Lexington Avenue, Albany
- ◆ Conference Planning Meetings - the first Monday of each month at 7pm. Call 518-465-8708 for location information.

*Welcome to new Board Members* Colwyn Allen, Pat Barrot, Bob Bullock, Alethia Jones, and Mae Saunders. See the summer newsletter for detailed introductions.

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***Pioneering in the "Colored Settlement"***

*(cont'd from p.1)*

benevolence of our anti-slavery friends."

In May 1850, the "Roman Citizen" published a detailed report by the traveling agent, Mr. Peterson. The Settlement had received donations of "Money, and Apparel, Farming Tools, Medicines, etc." Recognition was given to a long list of donors from Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut.

When soliciting donations, Rev. Peterson also gained the attention of potential settlers. This probably explains the unusual range of birthplaces on the 1850 and 1860 Florence census. Those include Mrs. Mary Brown born in Nova Scotia; Nathaniel and Arabella Lawrence of Cape Breton with four children born in Maine; Joseph Youngs from the West Indies; and others from Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Maryland.

The location of the former Lawrence and Hawkins properties is on a dirt road that is classified as "minimal maintenance." The location of the Settlement would be north, and a bit westerly, on private land through rough terrain off of the dirt road. The Settlement was on "Tug Hill" where winters are long and severe, but the remoteness offered a sense of security in a town that had a higher than usual

percentage of abolitionists.

The memoirs of Reverends Peterson, Tilmon and Hawkins are available thanks to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (docsouth). The Hawkins biography describes the Florence Settlement as follows:

"Then they built log-cabins, converted bark into money, and sent timber to the sawmills, besides keeping a large stock to burn during the cold season. So that when the wind began to proclaim the advent of the cold season, they found themselves fairly well provided for; and, as their wants were neither many nor great, they were perfectly satisfied with the common necessaries of life. Hawkins himself was far better provided for than when he was a slave in Maryland. They managed to struggle comfortably through that bitter cold winter, much better than their highest anticipations gave them warrant."

Although the Florence Settlement did not survive, its story is an example of black and white citizens from many locations working together toward a common goal.

*Mary Ellen Urtz, independent researcher, former town historian in Oneida County, publisher of more than 25 articles.*