

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**April 1, 2016**

*Oswego County Bicentennial -*

**‘History Moment’ Commemorates Underground Railroad and Abolitionist Movement**

**By Kelly Jordal, Public Information Officer  
Oswego County Department of Community Development, Tourism & Planning**

**OSWEGO COUNTY** – Oswego County continues to celebrate its bicentennial with another “History Moment” from Oswego County Legislator Shawn Doyle, District 3, and chairman of the Oswego County Bicentennial Committee. In honor of Black History Month in February, his talk at the monthly Legislature meeting highlighted local black residents and the Underground Railroad movement that swept across the county.

“Despite the initial appearance that we are, and have been, a homogenous community, we find a diversity of race and ethnicity in our settlement patterns,” said Doyle. “In January, we learned about the Dutch, French, German and Gaelic-speaking settlers who came here to make new homes and recorded their histories in family Bibles. Now, I would like to share the history of our African-American brothers and sisters who called Oswego County home or simply passed through on their way to freedom in Canada, often aided by white and black residents who were sympathetic to their plight.”

The early census records for Oneida and, after 1816, Oswego counties record the existence of only a small number of African-Americans, designated as “black” or “mulatto” by the census takers. The 1820 census lists 12,000 residents and fewer than 20 of them were African-Americans. By the 1850s, there were approximately 15 African-American families living and working in Oswego.

Though their numbers were small, their impact was great. Revolutionary War soldier Henry Bakeman purchased two mills and 100 acres of land in Fulton in the late 18th century. Members of his family still live in Central New York today. At the National Liberty Party Convention in Oswego in 1850, minister and former slave Samuel R. Ward became the first African-American nominee for Vice President of the United States. In

1878, Edward “Ned” Sherman was elected president of the village of Cleveland, possibly making him the first African-American mayor in New York State.

Charles Smith and Tudor E. Grant, both formerly enslaved in Maryland, operated barber shops in the basement of the Buckhout-Jones Building. One of Grant’s descendants, Dr. George Franklin Grant, was one of the first two African-American graduates of Harvard Dental School and practicing dentists in the U.S. He was also the first African-American faculty member at Harvard’s School of Mechanical Dentistry. There, he specialized in treating patients with congenital cleft palates and patented the oblate palate, a prosthetic device that allowed patients to speak more clearly. An avid golfer, he also invented and patented the wooden golf tee.

For all of these accomplishments, perhaps the greatest was the struggle for freedom. Slavery was set by law to be gradually abolished in the state of New York in 1799 and the full force of the law had taken effect by 1827. Then, the introduction of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 caused new uncertainty and many long-time settlers began moving to Canada in greater numbers.

Oswego County was home to many abolitionists who wanted to see the end of slavery and assisted on the Underground Railroad. One of the most influential was Starr Clark who owned a tin shop in the village of Mexico and was a member of Mexico’s Vigilance Committee. He had been active in abolitionist circles since his youth and established a working relationship with William Seward of Auburn, another steadfast abolitionist who would go on to become the Governor of New York, a U.S. Senator and the U.S. Secretary of State under President Abraham Lincoln.

Clark’s building at 3250 Main St., Mexico, was restored by community members and the Mexico Historical Society and is the present-day Starr Clark Tin Shop and Underground Railroad Museum.

Noted lecturer Asa Wing was another Mexico resident who promoted equal rights based on a biblical belief in equality. On his death in 1854, abolitionists erected a monument in the Mexico Cemetery and Frederick Douglass, a well-known African-American social reformer, abolitionist and statesman, delivered his eulogy.

In the town of Richland, the Bragdon family of Port Ontario was active in the abolition movement and their home had long been known as a way station for runaway slaves. They were influential in founding the

non-denominational Selkirk Bethel Church which would open its doors to all and was partially funded by Gerrit Smith, a prominent abolitionist from Peterboro, N.Y.

In 1855, Smith also donated the funds to erect a public library in the city of Oswego with the provision that it be open to both men and women, regardless of color. In Volney, the Bristol Hill Church was established in 1812 and both its black and white members were active abolitionists. James Watkins Seward, the son of one parishioner, was kidnapped in New Orleans in 1839 and local residents successfully lobbied for his release.

Area residents were also instrumental in the success of the famed “Jerry Rescue” in October 1851. During the anti-slavery Liberty Party Convention in Syracuse, escaped slave William “Jerry” Henry was arrested under the Fugitive Slave Act. On hearing this, several hundred abolitionists arrived at the city jail to break in and free him. He was later taken to the home of Orson Ames in Mexico and on to Oswego where he crossed over to Canada. By challenging the ability of the federal government to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, local abolitionists helped make Central New York a haven for freedom-seekers.

For more information about the Underground Railroad in Oswego County, go to <http://visitoswegocounty.com/historical-info/underground-railroad/>. For details about the Oswego County bicentennial, find Oswego County on Facebook or visit <http://visitoswegocounty.com/historical-info/bicentennial-of-oswego-county/>. For accommodations, restaurants and visitor information, go to [www.visitoswegocounty.com](http://www.visitoswegocounty.com) or call 1-800-248-4FUN.

-30-

#### **PHOTO CAPTIONS:**

**GATEWAY TO FREEDOM – Approximately 1,500 African-Americans escaped slavery each year leading up to the Civil War. While some made Oswego County and Central New York their new home, many of them crossed into Canada to find freedom. The Underground Railroad was a network of homes or “way stations” for these freedom-seekers to take refuge on their journey. This map shows some of the many sites in Oswego County related to this cause, sometimes called the “Freedom Trail.”**

-30-

**STARR CLARK TIN SHOP AND UNDERGROUND RAILROAD MUSEUM – The building which housed the Starr Clark tin shop was a central gathering place for residents and a known center of abolitionist activity in the village of Mexico. The building was restored and contains displays about the Underground Railroad in Oswego County.**