

(**Note:** This is the fifth in a series featuring the 11 Underground Railroad sites in Oswego County that have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.)

June 5, 2002

**The Edwin W. and Charlotte Clarke House is on the
National Register of Historic Places**



This brick house on the corner of East Seventh and Mohawk Streets in Oswego was completed in 1859 by Oswego abolitionists Edwin W. and Charlotte Clarke. The Clarke family was active in Oswego County's Underground Railroad activities.

Edwin W. Clarke was a well-known abolitionist in Oswego during the 1840s and 1850s. In a letter to the Oswego Palladium, Clarke wrote:

“...the principles of slavery and liberty are never dormant, never stand still. They are at constant war, each striving for its own life, and conscious that it can exist only by the annihilation of the other.”

Clarke was president of the Oswego County Anti-Slavery Society in 1842, and was active on various anti-slavery committees for many years. In 1840, he supported the Liberty party, an abolitionist third party. In that same year, he spearheaded the campaign

to free James Watkins Seward, a free African-American from Oswego County who had been captured and enslaved in Louisiana. He raised money for abolitionist literature, and signed anti-slavery petitions. Clarke became a lawyer in Oswego and was the first clerk of the Village of Oswego.

Edwin Clarke and his brother, Sidney, were credited with hiding Jerry McHenry on Sidney's farm for four days in October 1851, during the famous "Jerry Rescue" incident.

At Riverside Cemetery in Oswego, the inscription on Edwin W. Clarke's gravestone reads:

"Just fearless humane...He gave the best of his years and powers to the relief of the oppressed and to the aid and succour (sic) of slaves escaping from bondage..."

Many fugitives were sent across the lake to Canada from Oswego, but some went to Sackets Harbor and further north.

In 1859, Edwin W. and Charlotte Clarke completed work on their brick home located on the southwest corner of East Seventh and Mohawk streets in Oswego.

The house is currently owned by Frank and Ruth Sayer of Oswego.

"In the basement of the house there's an area sectioned off with brick and stone walls that you can enter not only from the basement, but from a cellar window that's hidden under the porch," said Frank Sayer. "Additionally it has a small opening probably used to hand in food. It provided two ways to get in or out. The Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation looked at it and found it quite interesting, as one of the ingenious ways that supporters of the Underground Railroad used to hide the fugitive slaves."

The home is one of several Oswego County buildings that were nominated by the Oswego County Freedom Trail Commission and named to the National Register of Historic Places in December 2001.

The Freedom Trail Commission, which was formed by the Oswego County Legislature, conducted extensive research on the sites. For more information, contact Oswego County Historian Barbara Dix, chairwoman of the Freedom Trail Commission, weekdays, phone 349-8460 or 1-800-596-3200, ext. 8460.