

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

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Home of Mexico Abolitionist Was Used in Jerry Rescue



Abolitionist Orson Ames hid fugitive slave William “Jerry” Henry at his home during Henry’s escape to Canada in 1851. The Orson Ames home on Main Street in Mexico is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

MEXICO—Orson Ames sheltered fugitive slave William “Jerry” Henry at his home located at 3339 Main St. in the village of Mexico. Henry’s famous flight to freedom directly challenged the federal government’s ability to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

Henry received shelter at several locations; however, the Orson Ames house is the only structure that remains standing today. The house is owned by Jacqueline McDonald. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in December 2001.

William “Jerry” Henry was arrested in Syracuse Oct. 1, 1851, under the Fugitive Slave Law. He was rescued by those attending a Liberty Party in Syracuse. A blacksmith removed his shackles, and he hid for four days before escaping in a meat wagon to Mexico via Route 11, known at the time as the Salt Road.

When he arrived in Mexico, Jerry was taken to the home of Orson Ames. Since the Ames house was located on Mexico’s main street, local abolitionists feared he could be easily re-captured. After one night, they moved him from the Ames house to Asa Beebe’s barn on the outskirts of town. He stayed at Beebe’s barn for two weeks before continuing to Oswego and then to Kingston, Ontario.

Orson Ames began his abolitionist career in the 1830s. He signed the first anti-slavery petition in Oswego County in 1835. In 1838, he volunteered to be part of the Vigilance Committee for the town of Mexico, to help former slaves escape to freedom. Ames was part of a large network of abolitionists in Mexico, which included Asa Beebe and Starr Clark.

Orson Ames was one of Mexico’s wealthiest abolitionists. By 1855, he had acquired a farm worth \$7,2225; a tannery worth \$2,250; and a house worth \$2,000. However, he was not known to be ostentatious. His obituary read:

“ Mr. Ames was a untiring, ever stirring man, and would his mark in any community.

Plain and practical, he was never given the least to pomp or display.”

“The Orson Ames house is modest in size and has a simple vernacular form which shows the relatively unpretentious lifestyle of many abolitionists,” said Oswego County Historian Barbara Dix. “Its central location within block of the business district reflects the visible presence of abolitionists in Mexico. The relationship of this house to other

Underground Railroad sited in the city, county, and region reinforces the local and regional importance of Mexico as a focus of abolitionist activity in Oswego County.”

Dix is chairwoman of the Oswego County Freedom Trail Commission. Formed by the Oswego County Legislature, the commission has researched and nominated several Underground Railroad sites in Oswego County to the National Register of Historic Places.

For more information, contact Dix, weekdays, 349-8460 or 1-800-596-3200, ext. 8460.