

## **Race and Prejudice in Antebellum Saratoga County**

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Relationships between the white majority and non-whites in Saratoga County were complicated during the period between the American Revolution and the Civil War. While the experience was in some ways similar to that of other communities in the northern states, Saratoga County had several unique characteristics that had an impact on these relationships.

First, Saratoga County was settled by two very different ethnic groups with different attitudes toward blacks. In the one hundred years leading up to the American Revolution, white settlement in the future county was confined to the areas to the west and north of the Hudson and Mohawk rivers. These mostly Dutch settlers continued the tradition of their downstate brethren by relying on tenants, indentured servants, and enslaved blacks to labor as farm workers and domestic servants on their large estates. In Saratoga County the Schuyler family owned a large estate along the Hudson River surrounding Fish Creek. In 1745 during a raid by the French and their Indian allies during King George's War, over 60 black slaves were captured and taken to Canada. Forty-five years later, the Schuyler family retained 14 enslaved people, the most in Saratoga County.

The northern and western sections of the County were settled at the time of the Revolution. Pioneers, principally from New England, purchased or leased farmland from the recently opened lands of the Kayaderosseras and Clifton Park Patents. A number of the prominent men of these communities brought their slaves with them. However, most families established their homesteads with their own labor, sometimes with the assistance of indentured servants. As a result, in 1790 of the 311 enslaved blacks in Saratoga County, all but 70 lived in the Dutch settlements along the rivers. These seventy were sprinkled among 34 households of larger landowners, merchants, and mill owners along the Kayaderosseras and other streams.

A second unique factor in white-black relationships in the county was the early establishment of resort communities around the springs of Ballston Spa and Saratoga Springs. Blacks inhabiting these villages may have been locally owned slaves, enslaved servants accompanying their southern owners visiting the springs, or free blacks often employed as domestic servants or waiters in the every-expanding number of hotels.

The long process of emancipation in New York State began in 1799, but slavery was not completely extinguished until 1827. During the interim, blacks were often granted manumission. Children became paupers under the control of the Overseers of the Poor. Older slaves could be freed if they were under 50 years old and healthy, so as not to be a burden to the community. Many advertisements in local papers attest to blacks being offered for sale or sought their return after running away during these years.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, blacks often experienced the same difficulties common to other people of color in the northern states. As slavery declined and finally ended in New York State in 1827, the increasing number of free blacks caused a backlash against them by the white majority. This was noticeable in legal, economic and social restrictions placed on them by the community at large.

In 1821 the State Constitutional Convention placed severe restrictions on the ability of free blacks to vote. Up until that point, voting was based on property ownership, regardless of race. During the convention, Samuel Young, a prominent legislator from Ballston, led the fight to disenfranchise blacks. In the ensuing debates a compromise was reached. While whites could henceforth vote without property restrictions, blacks were required to possess an unencumbered estate of \$250 to exercise that privilege. This effectively made it impossible for blacks to vote. In 1845, the county included 621 African Americans. Only 11 qualified as legal voters.

Segregation was another common aspect of the black experience during this period. Some area churches were known to set aside areas for black worshippers; blacks were not eligible to serve on juries; they were relegated to segregated hotels; and even obligated to use metal cups to partake of the spring waters while whites were served with glass goblets.

The roots of segregation ran deep in the community, underlined—at least in part—by the attitude that blacks were inferior to whites. No less a personage than Abraham Lincoln noted in 1858: “There must be a position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.” This may have been the prevalent attitude of the majority of white citizens of the county. Most, but not all, viewed people of color as inferior. Some saw them as naturally inferior, while others blamed their environment and treatment by the majority race, a condition that could be “rectified” over time.

One of the manifestations of this attitude was the Colonization Movement. Formed in 1816, the American Colonization Society counted among its members former presidents, governors and other prominent Americans. Their program to resettle free blacks to Liberia in Africa was based on the premise that blacks would never rise to a position of equality in the United States and they were better off settling in their own country. The local chapter of the ACS in Saratoga Springs included among its members Judge Reuben Walworth and Rev. Alexander Proudfit. At their inaugural meeting in 1835 they enthused over their efforts: “The friends of colonization left the meeting with a renewed zeal and devotedness in that great cause of benevolence and philanthropy.” Ignored was the fact that blacks themselves showed little enthusiasm to be uprooted from the only home they had ever known to be sent away to satisfy the concerns of their fellow citizens.

It was not a surprise that the ACS formed a local chapter in Saratoga Springs. The village had long been ambivalent regarding the presence of blacks in their community. Caught between

their altruistic feelings and the desire not to offend their many southern slave-holding visitors, they often equivocated. The formation of anti-slavery societies in the 1830's, the local impact of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, and the growth of the Underground Railroad all contributed to this attitude. Visiting abolitionists often noted that residents were not receptive to their message. When Gerrit Smith, a noted abolitionist, traveled to Saratoga Springs in 1845 to speak on behalf of freedom for blacks he noted this attitude. "I am to speak this evening in the Baptist Church on slavery. An anti-slavery lecture will be a strange thing in the ears of most of my hearers. The village is thought to be about as unfavorable a soil as Charleston or New Orleans for Anti-Slavery."

In contrast, the rural sections of the county were much more supportive of efforts to improve the lives of blacks by aiding their escape from slavery. The major stops on the Underground Railroad skirted the resort, running through the countryside. The western route, north from Schenectady followed Middleline Road through Greenfield toward Corinth. On the eastern side of the county safehouses were located along the Hudson River northward. Both routes were supported by local Quakers, strong opponents of slavery.

Frederick Douglass, in an 1849 speaking tour confined his visit to friendly audiences in Schuylerville, Deans Corners, and Quaker Springs. It was only in 1870 after the Civil War resulted in freedom and suffrage for blacks that he ventured into Saratoga Springs to give an address.

In Saratoga County prejudice took many forms, including economic discrimination. In 1850, John Mercer Langston, a man of mixed parentage and a graduate of Oberlin College, was denied entry in the newly-formed State and National Law School at the old Sans Souci Hotel in Ballston Spa. The president of the law school, John Fowler noted that to "take in a colored person into the school as a student would offend friends of ours and the school would be the loser." Fowler was referring to the recent visit of John C. Calhoun who was considering promoting the law school to students of his home state, South Carolina. Nevertheless, Fowler told Langston, "I will let you edge your way into the school. Take you seat off and apart from the class, ask no questions, behave yourself quietly...and in due time you will be considered for full and regular membership." Langston rejected the offer, stating that he would not accept Fowler's offer "under these terms or conditions of humiliation." Even the condemnation of Fowler's offer by local Dr. Eliphalet St. John did not help Langston, who nonetheless went on to become Dean of the Howard University Law School and serve a term in the United States Congress.

There were more subtle forms of prejudice as well. Excerpts from books and newspapers enhanced the stereotype of blacks as being "flamboyant, fun-love and simple minded." William L. Stone in his 1880 book *Reminiscences of Saratoga* told the story of Tom Camel [Campbell] who trolled after the carriage of Madam Jumel "fanning himself with a large fan, and bowing and curtsying to the large crowds who had gathered on either side." E.R. Mann in *The Bench and Bar of Saratoga County* described Maxwell's Colored Jury, twelve "sunburnt citizens" who

were convened to hear the case of Roxana Williams a “frail Ethiopian damsel.” *The Saratogian* in 1873 noted that “Sunflower,” a local bootblack, had his photograph taken while “embracing Morpheus,” fast asleep at his station.

Countering these prejudicial attitudes, there were examples of white citizens going out of their way to help their black brethren. The most notable black citizen of Saratoga County during this period was Solomon Northup. His well-known story, recounted in his book *Twelve Years a Slave*, describes his plight after being lured to Washington D.C, sold into slavery and taken south to work on a plantation in Louisiana. After twelve years he was able to communicate with his family, was rescued and returned to his wife Ann and his children in 1853. His rescuer was Henry B. Northup whose uncle, also named Henry, had owned Solomon’s father Mintus until gaining his freedom in Henry’s will in 1798. Henry B. and Solomon knew each other since childhood and this relationship was rekindled when Henry took action to rescue his childhood friend. He obtained affidavits from Solomon’s former acquaintances, secured authorization from the governor of New York to locate Solomon and traveled to Louisiana where he successfully rescued him. It was likely that Solomon would have died a slave without the intervention of his friend Henry Northup.

Race relations in Saratoga County in the ante-bellum period were indeed complicated. The attitudes of white citizens were filtered by their attitudes, experiences and beliefs. Black responses ranged from subservience to indignation, but probably most common was passive acceptance, as they navigated through their lives in a white world.