CATHARINE HARRIS AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN JAMESTOWN, NY

The following account of Catharine Harris and Underground Railroad activities in Jamestown and southern Chautauqua County is taken from a series of local history articles written by C.R. Lockwood and published in the Jamestown Evening Journal in 1902. Lockwood's articles on the African-American community in Jamestown and the Underground Railroad, appearing on May 3 and May 10, 1902, were largely based on interviews with Catharine Harris. The text given below has been edited for this web site. -- Christopher Densmore, University at Buffalo, March 21, 2000.]

CATHARINE HARRIS

[S]he was born in Meadville, Pa., on the 10th day of June, 1809, of parents, the father colored and mother white, that she was not a slave; that her father had died in Meadville when she was about seven years of age; that she married her first husband, named Butler, in Meadville, in the year 1828; and they went from Meadville to Buffalo, N.Y., where they remained a few years when her husband died, leaving one child, now Mrs. Hall and living where her mother; and then, in the year 1831, she and daughter came to Jamestown, where they have ever since made their home, except a few years when they remained in Toledo, O. That, when she came to Jamestown, no colored person was here, except herself and child, they being the first; that, meager in circumstances, she applied herself for years and years at hard work in washing, ironings, cleaning house and other servile services.

She said, the colored people soon commenced coming here, among whom were John Ackley and wife; Richard Sweezer and wife, the last being a slave; Johnson Wright and wife came, also Wade Hamilton and Harry King, both of these latter being runaway slaves and afraid of their masters, "skipped" for Canada; that, among our citizens, were spies for owners; and the black skin was simply a mark of identity by which negroes were traced and often captured whether or not slave. That, at one time, she knew about 73 colored people, most of whom resided in "Africa"; but that their coming and going was so irregular it was difficult to keep track of them; but, in 1849 and about then, there must have been near 100 in "Old Jamestown."

After being here a few years, she married John Harris, colored, her second husband; and, in the year 1835, they commenced living on the same place now occupied by her; that her second husband died in the year 1852. Said the old lady, other colored families settled near here and that section became a "depot" for colored people. In one of the early years and Abolitionist meeting was held here in the old Baptist church, standing where the present one now does; that one Avery spoke and had a large crowd; but the meeting created great commotion, enemies of freedom being quite numerous; that the speaker was mobbed and egged and terror pervaded the community, while the black person was driven from "pillar to post."

About this time someone commenced calling the place "over the hill" Africa and it has ever since retained the name; that it arose from the fact so many colored persons located there; and this was a distinguishing cognomen from all surrounding places; expressive of the old lady's meaning, "Africa" was the mark aimed at to find and capture the black man or woman.

Her labors were diversified and constant while she was able to perform them, and among the persons she worked for, she named the Barretts, Masons, Smiths, Lowry, Joneses, Cady, Hazeltines, Prices, and others; to listen to her was really the coming together of old friends and acquaintances. The remarkable feature of this interview was the clearness with which she made her statements; over 92 years old, her recollection was excellent, not having to hesitated long before emphatically and distinctly answering questions, so much better than many of us younger "fellers" who have books and papers as reminders...

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN JAMESTOWN, NEW YORK

"Old Jamestown" was a way station on the line of this road and from the early '50s it became notorious for its generous hearts and substantial help. At the time, generally posed from the outside show, as to these fleeting incidents, but not cognizant of the inside workings, we solicited information from others, among whom we recently called upon our aged friend, Mrs. Catharine Harris. From her we have been pretty thoroughly informed; and the threads of progress are so interwoven in our local fabric that we feel in duty bound to spread it before the people. Said the old lady:

"Yes, I remember the old "underground railroad;" it was here and I worked on it; this place of mine was the depot where the slaves came and were brought; Silas Shearman, Dr. Hedges, Phineas Crossman and others, friends of the slaves, used to come here; and they would bring here runaway slaves. At one time three were brought; at another time, nine came and so on; but at one particular time 17 were brought here and came, so that they were all here together; eatables were also brought here by their friends for me to cook, and feed them, which I did; others would help me.

"When the 17 were here they got scared and ran to hide; they saw some white persons coming and thought they were their masters after them, and scattered like fury; but we talked with them and told them not to be afraid, and they quieted down;
they said they had once been betrayed. I went to work and got them something to eat and they got rested and then were taken away; I don't know who took them or where they went; different ones came; Silas Shearman was one of the foremost workers; at one time he brought three here and wanted me to hurry up and get them something to eat and then he said, "They will be shipped off." This was done, but I don't know who took them.

"The slaves would talk but little; were very cautious; some of them told me that, after they started, their masters hunted for them; that they would lay down by logs in the woods and hide behind trees and see their masters go by; after they got by they would skip out and follow on, watching their masters. I can't tell how many came to my house; but this continued for several years."

Said the old lady: "I tell you, Mr. Lockwood, these were sorrowful times, and how I did pity the poor creatures!"

ADDITIONAL TESTIMONY ABOUT THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN SOUTHERN CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY

We have conversed with Mr. Crossman about this matter, and he corroborates the old lady in all essentials; he remembers aiding the runaways; that his services were mostly confined in the village. In addition to the names of helpers, he mentioned Addison A. Price and Frank VanDusen. He also said that Dr. Brown of Busti and Dr. Catlin of Sugargrove, PA, were workers and from them slaves reached Jamestown; that runaways came from different directions. Of those helping in the work, Mr. Crossman mentioned one Page, then living in Ellington, but now in Falconer, nearby. Of those who contributed to the enterprise from their pockets he named Alonzo Kent, Orsell Cook, Lewis Hall, Albert Partridge and Madison Burnwell, all of Jamestown.

As for himself, said he:

"I took as many as five from the back door of the Silas Shearman house, on the east side of Pine street; took them in the night time, acted according to understanding; I took them in covered carriages and carried them to one Nessel's in Ellington Center; I took them up to the door, would ring the bell and someone would come and open the door and I would say, "here he is," unload, turn and go away; the slaves would exhibit great fear, but keep "mum" and obey orders.

"Silas Shearman was a great man in this work; he had as many as six at one time at his house; our correspondence was verbal, not much or often, but we understood greatly from signs; that Addison Price took several at one time; this work continued for several years and Jamestown furnished a good quota of help.

Knowing our old surveyor Page, we called him in and learned as follows:

"Yes, I was interested in the "underground railroad" in 1851-2 and 3 and thereabouts; I am 73 years old; I then resided in Ellington; I took runaway slaves from there, I think five or more; at one time I carried three in a sleigh; we worked in the night time; we were suspicious of strangers in town and watched them; we thought they came in the interest of the slave-master; I took three at one time from Mr. Nessel's, my team was got ready and the slaves got in the carriage and were covered up with blankets; I drove towards Sinclairville and came to a house where I saw the designated light and drove up; I rapped on my sleigh with my whip handle and someone came to the door; said I, "here they are," and the person came out, threw off the covering and told them to get out, which they did, saying nothing, and I turned round and went back, keeping still; this was about 3 o'clock in the morning; I put the team into the barn and went home. We understood each other and knew just what to do."

[The next installment of C.R. Lockwood's history, appearing on May 17, 1902, concerned the capture of fugitive slave Harrison Williams at Busti in 1851.]