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Historic Resources Associated with the Freedom Trail in Central New York, 1820-1870

Multiple Property Nomination for Sites Associated with
the Freedom Trail, Abolitionism, and African American Life in Central New York, 1820-1870

Property Types and Criteria for Significance, Documentation, and Integrity

Summary

I. National Register Criteria

Each site nominated to the National Register under this Multiple Property Nomination must address issues both of integrity and of significance, defined by the National Register as follows:

The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

- A. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. That are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
- C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- D. That have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

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II. Criteria for Multiple Property Nomination for Sites Associated with the Freedom Trail, Abolitionism, and African American Life in Central New York, 1820-1870

Each site nominated under this MPN must also fall within one or more of the following designated areas, identified by their thematic relationship to underground railroad activities:

1. Sites directly associated with the Freedom Trail
 - a. Way stations.
 - b. Sites associated with freedom seekers who stayed in central New York.
 - c. Sites (other than way stations) related to helpers.
 - d. Transportation routes and related sites.
 - e. Landscapes.
2. Sites related to abolitionism and anti-slavery.
3. Sites associated with African American communities.

General Guidelines

Five general principles inform discussion under each of these thematic categories. First, in terms of National Register criteria, the Freedom Trail is a network rather than a single site, and it is best recognized by using multiple criteria for significance. Some sites may fit only one criterion—A, B, C, or D. Many sites, however, will fit more than one category.

Second, the same is true for specific categories listed in the MPN. In many cases, individual sites may be nominated to the National Register under more than one category. The home of an African American freedom seeker who settled in central New York and who became both an active abolitionist and a helper for other fugitives, for example, might fit every major category.

Third, all sites may be nominated under Criterion D. Standing structures may be treated as above-ground archeological sites, and all underground sites (except those to which an historic structure has been moved) may yield significant archeological details, relevant to important research questions. Such research questions may include (but not necessarily be limited to), the generalizations outlined in the statement of historic significance.

Fourth, in terms of integrity, superficial or reversible changes should not jeopardize nomination to the National Register. All of these sites deserve primary consideration as historical evidence rather than as art forms. We should make every effort to include well-documented underground railroad sites on the National Register, even when their integrity has been compromised, much as we would when we confront “intrusions” in an historic district.

Specific Property Types

1. Sites Directly Associated with the Freedom Trail

a. Way Stations

i. Description

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Freedom seekers and their journeys are central to the story of the Freedom Trail. Sites that reflect this experience include all houses, barns, workplaces, churches, outbuildings, cemetery markers, natural features (such as caves, swamps, and forests), and associated archeological sites where fugitives from slavery found refuge on their journeys. Few of these sites are physically distinguished from similar structures and places that were not part of the freedom trail. Fugitives stayed most often in attics, kitchens, cellars, bedrooms, and barns, not in spaces specially built for them. A few buildings may, however, have specific features associated in local stories with the underground railroad.

Examples of above-ground sites include Frederick Douglass's North Star office; the Asa Wing house in Mexico, New York; the James Canning Fuller house in Skaneateles; and the Starr Clark tin shop in Mexico. Examples of primarily archeological sites include the Gerrit Smith estate in Peterboro, the site of the rescue of Jerry Henry in Syracuse, and the site of Jermain Loguen's house in Syracuse.

Integrity of these resources varies from poor to excellent. In some cases (the James Canning Fuller house or the Gerrit Smith land office, for example), buildings remain almost intact from their historic period, or they have been accurately restored. In other cases, such as the Asa Wing house in Mexico and the John B. Edwards house in Oswego, exterior and interior changes reflect continuous habitation and use. Even when buildings have been altered, however, they retain enough of their integrity to be clearly identified with their original construction and use. When original structures have been destroyed, archeological remains hold clues to significant research questions.

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ii. Significance

While many freedom seekers remained in the South or made their way North with no help from northern residents, many others did find refuge for at least part of their journey with local abolitionists, both white and African American. These structures reflect the sites where fugitives stayed. At the intersection between freedom seekers and helpers, these sites are at the core of the story of the freedom trail.

All of these properties meet Criterion A, because they reflect important events and people associated with the freedom trail.

Some of these sites may fit Criterion B also, if they are associated with individuals of some renown. The Gerrit Smith estate in Peterboro is one example; the site of Jermain Loguen's house in Syracuse is another.

While some of these properties may be architecturally significant and fit Criterion C, most are vernacular buildings, more important as historical evidence than as art. The Orson Ames house and the Asa Wing house in Mexico reflect the vernacular simplicity of many of these buildings. Even when they reflect particular styles, most of these buildings suggest local and regional building patterns and the cultural and class background of their owners. Few of them were designed by known architects.

All of sites, even those with standing structures, may be nominated under Criterion D, since they yield archeological evidence relating to research questions about the experience of freedom seekers, the characteristics of people and groups who helped them, and the events associated with this movement.

iii. Registration Requirements

• Documentation. Properties determined to be eligible to the National Register within this category must be clearly documented as sites where fugitives stayed at least once. If they are standing buildings, nominated under Criterion A or B, they must also retain enough of their integrity to be evoke their original period and function. Because of the nature of this movement, both documentation and integrity pose particular problems.

In terms of documentation, oral tradition (in which "everybody knows" that a site was associated with the underground railroad, or, even better, in which one person heard an underground railroad story from a grandmother who heard it from her father, for example) often gives important clues about people, events, and sites associated with the freedom trail. Adequate documentation to support a National Register nomination must also include other kinds of sources, however. The most convincing primary evidence will be recorded close to the time of an event by someone who was actually involved in this movement. Letters and diaries from the period are strong evidence. Memoirs and oral histories recorded many years later by actual participants also are important. Wilbur H. Siebert used these sources in his classic book, The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom (New York: Russell & Russell, 1898, reprint Arno Press, 1968). Other sources include newspaper accounts (especially those that listed names of

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officers and committee members of anti-slavery societies, including vigilance committee members), signatures on anti-slavery petitions (now in the National Archives), obituaries, and gravestone inscriptions.

•**Integrity.** Structures nominated under Criteria A, B, or D will often be simple vernacular buildings, in continuous use since their original construction. Exterior changes (such as aluminum siding and picture windows) may compromise their current aesthetic integrity. These changes, however, may be viewed as part of the reason why these buildings have been preserved, since they have made it possible for people to live and work at these sites. In significant cases, public awareness and funding based on National Register nomination may be the catalyst to encourage sensitive restoration of these properties.

These buildings are most important not for their architectural design but for their value as historical evidence. They document the cultural values, economic status, and regional roots of people involved in a major national movement. Thus, as long as standing buildings retain enough of their historic features to suggest their original construction and use, they should be considered eligible for National Register nomination. If participants in the underground railroad came back today, would they recognize this building? If the answer is "yes," then the building deserves consideration for the National Register.

Historically important vernacular buildings deserve several special consideration. First, in terms of existing criteria for integrity, buildings should relate in significant ways to some or all of the following criteria:

•**Location.** Should remain at or near on the same site. Preferably, a house should remain at its historic site, but the fact that a building has been moved does not disqualify it from National Register nomination. Historically, moving small frame houses was very common. Mid-nineteenth century Syracuse city directories, for example, list several building movers. The Jermain Loguen house in Syracuse was moved to the lot next door, for example. Wings of the Elizabeth Cady Stanton house in Seneca Falls may still be standing as separate houses in the immediate neighborhood. Moving an historic structure may create two potential nominations to the National Register, one for the house and one for the original site.

•**Design.** Should reflect the basic form of the original building, even if details have been removed or changed. A New England style "settlement house," for example, should retain its basic form, even if its doorway has been changed.

•**Setting.** Ideally, its surroundings should reflect the character of period from 1830-1860. Often, however, this will not be the case. Changes in the surrounding setting alone should not jeopardize National Register nomination.

•**Materials.** Should retain many of the original materials, even if hidden under contemporary roof and siding. Original interior features are desirable but not necessary.

•**Workmanship.** Most of these buildings will not be distinguished by unusual workmanship. Their value as physical structures lies, rather, in their typicality. Evidence of typical nineteenth century construction techniques

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(post-and-beam construction, dealed walls, or cisterns, for example) is often buried beneath exterior siding. Evidence of such workmanship, if it exists, is important. Its lack of easy visibility should not, however, prevent nomination.

- Feeling. This is a subjective characteristic, made up of an accumulation of the foregoing qualities. Nominations should address this question, using evidence based on location, design, setting, materials, and workmanship.

- Association. The association of these structures with the underground railroad should be made clear beyond a reasonable doubt in the documentation. These structures must be clearly identified by documentary evidence (such as deeds, maps, assessments, mortgages, or wills) as the buildings in which fugitives stayed and helpers lived.

Second, when integrity has been compromised, a distinction should be made between reversible and irreversible changes. Examples of reversible changes include:

- replacing six-over-six paned windows with one large picture window.
- adding vinyl siding to a building that was originally clapboarded.
- turning a building around on its lot.

Third, all of these sites, whether they contain extant structures or not, may also be nominated under Criterion D, as above-ground and below-ground archeological sites that will help researchers address specific research questions.

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1-b. Sites Associated with Freedom Seekers Who Settled in Central New York

i. Description

Many freedom seekers chose not to go all the way to Canada but instead settled on the U.S. side of the border. Some of those who went to Canada returned to live in central New York. Properties associated with them include houses, barns, workplaces, churches, cemeteries, outbuildings, and associated archeological sites. Examples include the home of Nathan and Clarissa Green in Oswego; the site of Harriet Tubman's house in Auburn; Jermain Loguen's gravesite in Syracuse; the site of Jermain Loguen's house in Syracuse; the Roberts family gravesite in Paris; and the commercial building in Oswego where Charles Smith, a freedom seeker from Maryland, operated his barbershop for almost thirty years.

ii. Significance

African American communities in central New York included many fugitives from slavery. One-third of African American families in Oswego and Waterloo, for example, included probable fugitives. Most formed nuclear families and worked as waiters, barbers, laundresses, laborers, or sailors in small towns and cities. Although they often lived and worked with whites, they also formed black churches, schools, and fraternal organizations. Many of them also provided assistance to other fugitives, either individually or as organized groups. Sites associated with the experience of these freedom seekers document an important and often neglected part of the freedom trail.

All of these properties meet Criterion A, because they reflect important events and people associated with the freedom trail. Some of them may also relate to Criterion B, through association with important people. While some of these properties may be architecturally significant and fit Criterion C, most are vernacular buildings, more important as historical evidence than as art. All of sites, even those with standing structures, may be nominated under Criterion D, since they yield archeological evidence relating to research questions about the experience of freedom seekers, the characteristics of people and groups who helped them, and the events associated with this movement.

iii. Registration Requirements

Properties nominated under this section must be clearly identified as homes, workplaces, or community sites related to freedom seekers. For this purpose, "freedom seekers" are defined here fugitives from slavery, whether they were "self-emancipated" or bought their freedom.

•Documentation. Documentation for these sites is similar to documentation for way stations. In addition, however, U.S. and state censuses (particularly for 1850, 1855, 1860, and 1865) prove useful in identifying potential

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fugitives. African Americans who list their birthplaces as either a slave state or Canada may have been fugitives from slavery. (They may also have been free people of color.) City directories, deeds, mortgages, maps, and assessment records will help identify specific sites associated with this significant group.

•Integrity. Like the way stations, most of these structures, if standing, will be vernacular buildings. Integrity issues for these sites are similar to those outlined for way stations.

1-c. Sites (Other than Way Stations) Associated with Helpers on the Freedom Trail

i. Description.

These include all houses, barns, workplaces, churches, outbuildings, public buildings, cemetery markers, and associated archeological sites which are not well-documented as actual sites where fugitives stayed but which do illustrate the historic context in which known underground railroad supporters (both African American and European American) lived, worked, worshipped, or held public meetings. Examples include the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Syracuse, the Waterloo Woolen Mills in Waterloo (established by white abolitionist Richard P. Hunt as a woolen rather than a cotton mill, to avoid profits based on slavery), the Slocum Howland store in Sherwood (owned and operated by a Quaker who was active in the underground railroad), and the Edwin W. Clarke house and gravesite in Oswego.

ii. Significance

These properties fit Criterion A, because they reflect this important national movement. Often, people involved in the underground railroad network worked cooperatively to provide assistance to freedom seekers. As a safety measure, sympathizers who lived in villages or cities would frequently make arrangements to house fugitives with farmers in the countryside. Sites associated with these helpers may not, therefore, reflect actual way stations, but they were nevertheless an important part of the underground railroad network.

These sites may also fit Criterion B, because they are associated with individuals important in the underground railroad, abolitionism, or African American community organization, even when there is no direct evidence that fugitives themselves used these sites.

Sometimes, these properties may be nominated under Criterion C, if they relate to buildings of architectural as well as historical significance.

Most of these buildings will be vernacular sites, and many of them will reflect changes relevant to continued habitation and use. If structures are still standing,

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however, they must retain enough of their integrity to be clearly identified with their original construction and use.

When original structures have been destroyed, archeological remains hold clues to significant research questions. All of these sites, therefore, may also be nominated under Criterion D.

iii. Registration Requirements

Like the way stations, most of these structures, if standing, will be vernacular buildings. Issues of documentation and integrity for these sites are similar to those outlined for way stations.

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1-d. Transportation Routes and Related Sites

i. Description.

These include all roads and paths, railroads, and waterways (canals, rivers, lakes, and creeks) that fugitives used on their journeys. Examples include the old salt road (now route 11) from Syracuse to Central Square, used by Jerry Henry; the Erie Canal used by the Harris family, and the Oswego Canal used and by an unnamed young enslaved woman in 1841, and the routes used by fugitives sent through the way station kept by John Jones in Elmira.

ii. Significance.

The freedom trail was essentially a far flung network. Transportation routes linked way stations with each other and provided fugitives with essential escape avenues.

These sites may be nominated under Criterion A. In some cases, Criterion D may also be appropriate. Evidence of original plank roads, for example, remains in many places under modern road construction. Original locks for the Oswego Canal remain at Hinmanville.

iii. Registration Requirements

All sites nominated under this section must be clearly documented as routes or facilities along the routes used by fugitives for escape from slavery. Although elements of these routes may have been modified for current use, they must retain integrity of location, setting, and association. Historic materials and workmanship frequently lie underneath modern construction.

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1-e. Landscapesi. Description.

In many cases, historic landscapes provided a setting for the freedom trail network. Such landscapes included farm and village settings as well as views of rivers, lakes, valleys, and hills.

ii. Significance.

These landscapes provided an important context for the freedom trail network. From his home high on a hill near Port Ontario, for example, George and Eliza Bragdon could see in many directions for many miles, and, from far away, fugitives could also see lights in their windows. This was undoubtedly an advantage in their freedom trail work. Starr Clark's tinshop had easy access not only to the road in front but also to the river behind, allowing for more than one escape route.

iii. Registration Requirements

Historic landscapes nominated in this category must retain integrity of location, setting, feeling, and association.

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2. Sites Related to Abolitionism and Anti-slavery

i. Description.

These illustrate the people, places and events associated with organized resistance to slavery in New York State communities. Examples include the Market House in Oswego, where the National Liberty Party held its 1850 convention; the site of Corinthian Hall in Rochester, where abolitionists held many public meetings; the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Syracuse, where the *True Wesleyan* (a newspaper that supported both abolitionism and the underground railroad) was published, and the Quaker meeting house in Farmington. This category may also houses and other sites related to abolitionists who were significant in the region.

ii. Significance

While fugitives initiated their own quest for freedom, abolitionists provided an essential context not only for helping fugitives but also for publicizing the experience of fugitives. The willingness of freedom seekers to speak out to northern audiences through an abolitionist network helped convert more and more Americans to the anti-slavery cause. Rooted in religious values as well as in the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, abolitionism ultimately became one of the country's most dynamic and successful grassroots democratic movements, a movement that involved both African Americans and whites, rich and poor, men and women. Fugitives benefited from local abolitionist organizing. They also contributed to it, by speaking about their experience in cities and villages throughout central New York

Many of these sites will fit Criterion A. If they are associated with well-known figures (such as Frederick Douglass or Gerrit Smith) some of them may also fit Criterion

B.

Because many of these will be architect-designed public buildings (such as the Market House in Oswego), some of them may also be nominated under Criterion C. All of them will also fit Criterion D.

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iii. Registration Requirements

Sites nominated because they are important to the abolitionist movement must be clearly documented for their role in developing and maintaining the anti-slavery cause. Integrity issues are similar to those explored for way stations.

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3. Sites Related to African American Communities

i. Description.

These include homes of African American leaders, as well as places of work, worship, community gathering, and burial used by fugitives or helpers on the freedom trail. Examples include the AME Zion Church in Ithaca (and the Peter Feeler cemetery in Constantia?)

ii. Significance.

Existing African American communities offered a haven to fugitives, as well as potential employment, community support, and families. The experience of freedom seekers must often have been conditioned by the possibility as well as the desire of finding family members and work in northern black communities. Although we may not at this time be able to link African American community sites directly with the underground railroad, these sites certainly helped to create an environment conducive to the escape of fugitives to their long-term survival as well. By including African American community sites as a separate category in this multiple property nomination, we hope to encourage further documentation of the involvement in freedom trail activities of this very important part of the population.

Sites in this category will most often be nominated under Criterion A. Sometimes, they will fit Criterion B or C. They may also qualify under Criterion D.

iii. Registration Requirements

Sites nominated in this category must be clearly identified with the work, family, or community gathering of African Americans associated with the freedom trail in central New York.

Integrity issues for these buildings are similar to those outlined for way stations.