

By NLDestiny



The North Country's Pathway to Freedom for Enslaved People

A Network of Fugitives Escape to Canada

In 1788, Zephaniah Platt founded the North Country city of Plattsburgh. While this is a well known historical fact, what was less known was that Platt was an owner of several enslaved people. This little known story of slavery is now told through photographs, exhibits, and artifacts at the recently inaugurated North Country Underground Railroad Museum in Ausable Chasm, N.Y.

One such exhibit explores a list of enslaved people and owners such as Platt and his brother Nathaniel who owned a slave named Diah. Also on the list, William Gilliland, of Willsboro, N.Y. owned an enslaved person named Ireland.

"Most enslaved people were given only one name," Don Papson, North Country Underground Railroad Historical Association President, says. "They were considered commodities just like a cow or a horse."

Many enslaved people's bare feet tramped on the road that the historic building stands on. The road is one of the routes going through the Adirondack Mountains, crossing the St. Lawrence River, to reach freedom into Ontario, Canada as refugees. Slavery was outlawed in Canada in 1850 and they would be free there, according to Papson. Both Ireland and Diah managed to escape to Quebec— Ireland in 1771 and Diah in 1794.

Their stories echo in the rooms of the museum through flat screen TVs playing videos telling of their unrelenting will to be free of their cruel masters. Wall plaques, scrap books, a single leg iron found nearly 30 years ago in a barn in Peru, N.Y., a nail exhibit, featuring a nail torture board used to punish enslaved people for fleeing, are all on display telling of the enslaved people's misery and courage. Visitors get a glimpse of what it was like to be enslaved, constantly on the run, the selling of family members and the price of freedom. The historic building dates back to the 1860s.

"We put a lot of time into restoring the building. The town ran out of money so we had to rely on volunteers," Frank Kinnelly, North Country Underground Railroad Historical Association Second-Vice-President, says. "There was so much asbestos to be removed, and layers of paint and floor boards to be

replaced.” Kinnelly has been helping the president and their team to complete the building since the museum’s conception in the spring of 2010.

Visitors learn of the devastation enslaved people went through when escaping, only to be recaptured, tortured or killed. Some stories tell of other slaves who were fortunate that made it to freedom, but often times without family members. Starting new families in Canada was not unusual.

One museum theme explores the life of the owners and their slaves. The space gives visitors a small window into their world with artifacts that include an antique wheel barrow, hoe, hurricane lantern, fireplace, and two floor-to-ceiling murals of owners’ homesteads and the enslaved people .

Listening to the videos about the heartache and physical pain of what the slaves went through trying to escape may be difficult. Visitors also hear about local Plattsburgh people who helped slaves.

“They were putting their own lives at risk,” Papson says of these locals. “Fines of \$1,000 and up to six months in prison were imposed for helping enslaved people escape.”

One such Plattsburgh local known for helping the enslaved people in their quest for freedom was George Brown whose efforts were met with resistance. In retaliation the local slave owners hanged him in effigy, Papson says.

Helen Nerska, North Country Underground Railroad Museum Assistant, says enslaved people were beat, cut, branded, and their wives and children were sold as punishment for trying to escape from their masters. There was no limit to what would be done by the owner. The enslaved people prayed to God that they would make it to Canada.

To tell the story of the family and children, the museum dedicates a room and a children’s program, where youngsters can learn about enslaved people,” says Nerska.

There’s also a room with three miniature church replica buildings of local churches standing about 6-feet-tall. Their scaled down doors open to reveal small photos and little known facts such as the local congregations of Methodists, Quakers and Baptist churches that were in disagreement on owning enslaved people, says Neska.

“I always marvel at how much courage people had to escape. It took a lot of stamina and a lot of people along the way helping,” Nerska says.

Nerska is eager to talk about anything on display and of how enslaved people could find food and shelter from locals such as Noadiah Moore’s house in Champlain. She includes a story about John Thomas, an enslaved person from Queens Annes County, Maryland who moved to the North Country and eventually became a successful farmer. Some of his descendants remain in the area to this day.

Do you have enslaved people in your family history? Do you know your town’s history?

Sidebar:

The North Country Underground Railroad Museum in Ausable Chasm, N.Y. is open daily 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Memorial Day through Columbus Day. On other days you can see the museum, but by appointment only. Admission is free, however donations are gladly accepted. There is a gift shop with t-shirts, one of a kind photograph cards, lapel pins, mugs and yearly calendars for sale. Group tours are available. Discounts are available for large groups. Educational programs are also available. There is handicap accessible parking and a handicap restroom as well. For more information call 518.834.5180. The address is 1131 Mace Chasm Rd., Ausable Chasm, New York 12911. Email is ugr@frontier.com

Link:

www.northcountryundergroundrailroad.com

Contacts:

518.834.5180

Frank Kinnelly, North Country Underground Railroad Historical Association Second-Vice-President

Helen Nerska, North Country Underground Railroad Museum Assistant

Don Papon, North Country Underground Railroad Historical Association President