
Early Slaves and Freemen of Tompkins County

By Sydney H. Gallwey

Presented Jan. 30, 1962, Before
ITHACA COUNCIL FOR EQUALITY
At St. John's Church



7028

Donated by

Ralph Smith Collection

Date

DAWNING OF THE NEW NEGRO HISTORY

The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History was organized in Chicago, September 9, 1915. Its purposes are to collect sociological and historical data, to publish books on Negro life and history, to promote the study of the Negro through clubs and schools, and to bring about harmony between the races by interpreting the one to the other. It has directed the attention of investigators to this neglected field. It has published *The Journal of Negro History* and *The Negro History Bulletin*.

In the April, 1957, issue of *The Journal of Negro History* appeared an article on "The New Negro History." It was written by Dr. John Hope Franklin, a prominent and well-known Negro and historian. I had the privilege of pursuing two courses in Negro History with him while attending Howard University. He has taught in the Cornell University Summer School and is presently head of the History Department of Brooklyn College.

In this article, Dr. Franklin wrote the following excerpts: "In discussing the history of a people one must distinguish between what has actually happened and what those who have written the history have said has happened. So far as the actual history of the American Negro is concerned, there is nothing particularly new about it. It is an exciting story, a remarkable story. It is the story of slavery and freedom, humanity and inhumanity, democracy and its denial. It is tragedy and triumph, suffering and compassion, sadness and joy.

"Negro history is more than the overt actions of Negroes. It is America's treatment of the Negro. It is the impact of forces and events affecting the lives of Negroes in countless ways.

"The work of Dr. (Carter G.) Woodson and the Association (for the Study of Negro Life and History) in . . . (the) early years may be regarded as launching the era of The New Negro History. Dr. Woodson and his associates went about the task of exploding the myths of Negro history and of putting the Negro in his rightful place in the history of this country. . . . within the last two decades there has been a most profound and salutary change in the whole approach to the history of human relations in the United States. In the process the new Negro history has indeed come into its own. . . . for the first time in the history of the United States, there is a striking resemblance between what historians are writing and what has actually happened in the history of the American Negro.

"The new Negro history, then, is the literary and intellectual movement that seeks to achieve the same justice in history that is sought in other spheres. Moreover, it gives strength and support to the other efforts that today seek equality and freedom."

In conclusion, Dr. Franklin wrote: "No one can properly evaluate the influence of history on the minds of men. But one can say that through the ages history has been an important instrument in shaping the course of human affairs. It has given to Americans a deep appreciation for the historic foundations of democratic principles. . . . It has given to Negroes a sense of self-esteem and self-respect that has sustained them in their darkest hours.

"The future function of the new Negro history is even more important. It can and, in time, will provide all America with a lesson in the wastefulness, nay, wickedness of human exploitation and injustice that have characterized too much of this nation's past. This is a lesson that must be learned if we are to survive and if we are to win the respect and admiration of the other peoples of the world. The new Negro history also provides all America with an inspiring lesson in human potentialities and a profound basis on which to build a better America. It is to be hoped that neither this great lesson nor this great inspiration will be lost in the years that lie ahead."

EARLY NEGRO PIONEERS IN OUR COUNTY

With these thoughts in mind, let us turn back through the days of yesteryear to the early Negro pioneers in Ithaca and Tompkins County.

The first such instance on record of the entrance of Negroes into this county was in the spring of 1788, when a Revolutionary War soldier, Robert McDowell, accompanied by his eldest daughter Jane, then about seven years old, and two boys, one a Negro, returned to their rude farm at the head of Cayuga Lake, where Ithaca now stands.

One of the early examples of slavery in this area is the story of Peter Wheeler, as told by him in 1839. He came to the area in 1800 when he was eleven years old. This is his story, greatly abbreviated:

My name is Peter Wheeler. As near as I can find out, I was born the first of January, 1789, at Little Egg Harbour, a parish of Tuckertown, New Jersey. I was born a slave, and many a time, like Old Job, I've cussed the day I was born.

I started for New York State, May 9, 1800, the property of Gideon Morehouse who bought me at an auction when he bid \$110. We finally got to the end of our journey and put up at Henry Ludlow's house in Milton Township, County of Cayuga, State of New York, (later to be known as Ludlowville.)

Once young Tom Ludlow came up to me, after master was gone, and said: "Peter, why in the name of God don't you show Moorehouse the bottoms of your feet? I'd be hung before I'd stand it." "Well, Tom, I said, I want to wait until I know a little more of the world, and then I'll show him the bottoms of my feet with a greasing." Well, Tom laughed a good deal and said, "That's right, Peter."

Tom was a great friend of mine, and he tried to get me to run off for a good while. And Hen, his brother, he was a good fellow; and he tried; and Miss Sarah, their sister, she was a good soul. And every chance she got, she'd tell me to run, and Mrs. Ludlow always told me I was a fool for staying with such a brute. Every time I went to Ludlow's I used to get a piece of something good to eat that I didn't get at home. Also Mr. Humphrey's folks were all the time trying to get me to run off. "Why," they say, "do you stay there to be beat, whipped, and starved, and banged to death? Why don't you run?" The reply I used to make was, "wait till I get a little older, and I'll clear the coop for certain."

Squire Whittlesey, who lived about six miles away, where I used to go on errands, said to me one day, "Peter, can I put any confidence in you?" "Yes, sir," I said, "You needn't be afraid of me." "Well," he said, "you're free by law and I advise you to run: but wait awhile and don't run 'til you can make sure it will work, and now mind you, don't go away and tell anybody."

And finally, almost everybody said, "Run, Pete. Why don't you run?" But I think to myself, if I run and don't make out, it would be better for me not to run at all, so I'll wait. When I run, I'll run for certain. There weren't many slaves in that region, but a good many colored folks lived there, and some of them were pretty decent folks, too.

When my master threatened to kill me with a rifle, and I fought back, I made a vow: "I swore to Almighty God that the first time I got a chance, I'd clear from his reach, and I prayed to the God of Freedom to help me get free."

My life became better, but I still considered myself a slave, and that galled my feelin's. I determined I'd be free or die in the cause: for, you see, by this time I'd learned more of the rights of human nature, and I felt that I was a man!

Well, the big eclipse, as they called it, came on the 16th of June, 1806. This eclipse happened on Tuesday, and the next Sunday, I started and determined that if ever I went back to Gideon Morehouse's, I'd go a dead man.

Now I felt that I was really free, although I knew that

Morehouse was lurking around after me. After this I called no man master, but I knew how to treat my betters. I now began to feel somethin' like a man, and the dignity of a human being began to creep over me, and I enjoyed my liberty when I got it, I can tell you.

I didn't go around sneakin' and spirit-broken, as I know every man must if he's a slave; but oh! I couldn't help standin' up straight, after I was free. Oh! What a glorious feelin' that is! And Oh! How I pitied my poor brethren and sisters that were in chains.

I think it can't be a long time before all the slaves go free—there is so many thousands of Christians all prayin' for it so earnestly; and so many papers printed for the slave, so many sermons preached for him. And such a great struggle is going on for him all over creation. Why all this is God's movin', and nobody can stop God's chariot wheels.

And so it was for Peter Wheeler, slave, freeman and citizen, Tompkins County, 1806.

Peter Webb of Caroline

Now let us change the scene of this human drama to Caroline.

The first person who ever owned a slave in Caroline (then in Tioga County) was Nathan H. Jansen, who brought with him a Negro woman when migrating there in 1802. Jansen had owned slaves several years before in Ulster County. Mrs. Catherine DePuy, a daughter of General Cantine, who likewise settled here from Ulster County about the same time, brought two or more adult slaves with her, continuing to own them for a few years.

Between 1803 and 1808, four southern families from Maryland and the bordering areas of Virginia and North Carolina, the Speeds, Augustine Boyer, the Patillos and the Hydes, brought in forty slaves altogether, male and female, owned by them as slaves, and in nearly every instance continued to be owned by them until they were made free by the laws of the State of New York in 1827.

The name of Peter Webb is unknown to many residents

of this county. That he was first a slave, then a freeman and citizen who had bought his own freedom, perhaps is even less known. Nonetheless, known or unknown, he was one of the few who gained a final triumph over slavery. It was a personal victory for Peter.

And this he did before the ultimate abolition of slavery in New York State. There may have been others who pursued the same course, but as far as the county records determine, he is the only one who bought his freedom.

Young Peter, as well as other slaves who were taken north by the Speed family, did not have to travel with the added weight of chains to burden his footsteps. He was free to walk and perhaps did much of the way. There were the children and the aged who had to ride.

There was much to be done by the slaves, especially during the spring and summer months. Throughout the winter there was much less work to do, and some of them were able to hire out and earn modest wages for themselves.

They fared considerably better than they had in their former Southland, for their diet was more varied. They ate the produce of the farmlands; and because of the much colder weather, they had more and warmer clothing.

In 1809, Young Peter became of age—21 years. And he decided to do something about this idea of freedom which had never let his soul rest. His master, John James Speed, Sr., looked upon the face of this proud and determined slave. Whatever thoughts and words that passed between them are embedded in a time and place different from ours. But on that day in 1811, they reached an agreement.

Peter was to work two more years in servitude, and then be permitted to purchase his freedom for the sum of three hundred and fifty dollars plus interest. He had to be allowed to leave the plantation so that he might go where he could earn the required amount plus the interest that accumulated. After serving two years with Speed as agreed on, he went to work in Harford Mills, doing lumbering work and then as a hostler in Ithaca.

That great day came in December of 1818. There was no prouder man than Peter. When he told his master that he

wanted to be free until this day of freedom had been nine long years.

In writing of Peter Webb, Charles F. Mulks, an early historian of Caroline, stated: "These facts about old Peter Webb are all matters of well-authenticated, reliable tradition. He and his former master were always attached friends and Mr. Speed used to visit the family of his former slaves."

Some of "these facts about Old Peter Webb" of which Mulks wrote, are: "...there was an abolition and anti-slavery meeting in Cortland where Mr. Speed and Peter were by some reason of chance. Mr. Speed made some remarks in which he favored gradual abolition. He said that he had himself once been a slaveholder and had freed his own slaves. Peter arose and remarked that he had formerly been one of Mr. Speed's slaves and that Mr. Speed had given him his freedom, but not until he bought and paid for it and earned the money with his own hands. This turn in the discussion was unexpected, and Mr. Speed was real taken down by it."

To get a glimpse of the greatness and strength of character of these former slaves who became freemen and citizens, one has only to look into the face of Peter Webb's granddaughter, Mabel Webb Van Dyke, who now resides at the home of Bradford Baylor in Brooktondale. This year in May she will have reached her 92nd birthday.

No doubt she knows of the many questions that troubled Peter, his early youth and his life as a slave. She knew the early days of freedom. During her many years in our county, she has contributed much to its life and history. She has contributed more than her share to uphold that self-dignity and respect for which Peter Webb struggled in his pursuit of the goal of freedom.

And There Were More Than 1,000 Others

And so it was for Peter Webb, slave and freeman and citizen. And so is it part of the heritage that this Negro

pioneer to our county has bequeathed to us and to our posterity.

There were other contributions to this heritage which we share:

Dinah Tennbrook was born in Ulster County in 1815. She was brought to Lansing at the age of one year as a slave in the Bogardus family. A memorial to her in The Ithaca Journal of March 19, 1903, says of her: "The erect form, the winsome smile of this dear, black face, the hearty welcome, given in tones melodious and ringing, the friendly grasp of her little black hand, will not soon be forgotten. Nearly ninety years she had lived to bless four generations of friends who loved and respected her. She was a wonderful example of the possibilities of her race. Such judgment and common sense, and refinement, such justice and reserve, such intelligence, self-control and love as made that rare personality proof sufficient that in heaven she shall shine as the angels of light. Not a relative of hers was at the funeral, not one of her own race, yet, tears were on all faces, love shone in every tear-dimmed eye."

An account of Elsie Brooks said that she looked harmless and docile, but she was the most lively, most domineering, most influential woman in this county in her day (1845-1873). She had the most powerful voice in the village and a tremendous influence as a leader in prayer and otherwise among her own people. She was very familiar with everybody and anybody. She was sharp and fearless, aggressive, and robust in health and manners. Her style of exhortation is illustrated in her call upon the Lord God to come down through the church roof and never mind the damage, for she charged, "I'll pay for the shingles."

Daniel McCarthy Baylor was born a slave in Virginia, 1843. After the Civil War, he came eventually to New York State and according to Miss Winifred Baylor, his daughter, arrived in Danby at the age of 21 years. She also stated that he was two years old when President Polk was inaugurated, which would have been in 1845. According to Lyman Gallagher, Daniel Baylor "... was sold as a slave twice ... once for six hundred dollars ... and once for twelve hun-

dred dollars, in Maryland and the Deep South. A hard farm worker, he brought a good figure on the auction block. He became a large landowner in the Town of Caroline. Very religious, he memorized the Bible from hearing it read to him, being unable to read or write himself. No man who ever lived in Caroline town has a better reputation for exact justice and honesty than Daniel Baylor, white or black. I think it very unusual for an ex-slave to later acquire real estate in his own name." So wrote Lyman Gallagher.

George A. Johnson was one of the best-known residents of Ithaca when he died in February of 1919. Born March 30, 1835, in Canandaigua, New York, he came to Ithaca at the age of 11 years. At 17, he entered his father's barber-shop, learned the trade and became proprietor of a shop under the new Ithaca Hotel. He was well-informed on political, public and other questions. He was elected and served for several years as an employee of the State Senate through the influence of John H. Selkreg, editor of The Ithaca Journal. As an agent of the underground railroad, he would inform Ben Johnson, an Ithaca lawyer, that several runaway slaves had arrived during the previous night and that they must have shoes and clothing, and money for their passage toward Canada. Upon receipt of funds, he would send the runaways on to the steamboat Simeon DeWitt to be taken to Cayuga Bridge and on to Canada. He aided some 114 fugitives in this manner. He was survived by his wife, a daughter Jessie M. Johnson, and a son C. Herbert Johnson, a barber, both well-known residents of Ithaca.

Rev. Zechariah Tyler was born about 1820 in the State of Maryland, and became one of the best-known residents of Ithaca. He served for twenty years in slavery, but escaped about 1840 or 1841, leaving his master's plantation in Maryland. His master was Charles Carrol of Carrolton, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Tyler was a family servant. He learned to write and wrote passes for other slaves which assisted them to run away. His master found him out and was about to sell him south, so Tyler put his ability to work for himself by writing a pass to go to some

place several miles distant. He stole his best suit, the family saddle and bridle and went to a pasture and caught the saddle or riding horse. In time, he reached New York State, finally settling at Ithaca in 1842. He said that he had been worried about his escape but he had everything ready to start to Canada in case of an alarm from his friends who were watching for any move against him. Elder Tyler was a noble looking old gentleman and a fine representative of his race, so observed Charles Mulks who interviewed him in 1896.

Eunice Brum was born in the Town of Genoa, Cayuga County, September 24, 1803. It was said of her when she was interviewed by The Ithaca Journal in 1885, that notwithstanding her advanced age of 82 years, she still retained her mental power to a marked degree. She remembered coming to Ithaca when a girl of ten or twelve years of age. She was the chief cook who superintended the preparation of many a feast, which included celebrations of the presidential elections since the days of Thomas Jefferson. Her daughter married George A. Johnson. Mrs. Brum was the eldest of a family of fourteen children, six of whom survived her in 1895, when she died August 13 in her ninety-third year.

John Peters, a local barber in the 1830's, was a native of Martinique and spoke French as his native language. In his boyhood days, he had been a domestic in the household of the father of Josephine who married Napoleon the First. He spoke often of the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1803. Alexander A. Murdoch also wrote in a letter to The Ithaca Daily Journal that he knew Peters well and many of the stories that he told of the expedition could only have been told by one who had gone over the grounds. He stated that Peters was mentioned in Dr. Samuel Parker's Journal of his tour to the Pacific, published in the 1830's, but I have been unable to verify this in my research. One Negro with Lewis and Clark was a man named York, who was the only member of the expedition who understood French. Perhaps John Peters had changed his name. Murdoch further relates, "his mention of peculiar localities since

demonstrated leaves no doubt in my mind that he accompanied Lewis and Clark: moreover, I cannot think that the courteous old gentleman was untruthful. One of the reasons for his selections was his familiarity with French, the language being most used by the voyageurs and trappers they hoped to meet on their journey. He left Ithaca in '36 or '37, went to Dryden and from there to Syracuse. I soon after heard of his death at Syracuse."

Among the 1,000 names which I have gathered over the span of five years, there are many more who could have been mentioned. Suggestive of these are:

Daniel Jackson and his brothers Henry, William and Thomas; Rev. John Anderson, George Guinn, "Ginger" Allen, his father, the Rev. Thomas N. Allen; Jerry Blackman, James Collins, Philip and Katy Criss of Caroline; Loyd Dorsey of Trumansburg; Prince de Plessis of Danby, an ex-Revolutionary War soldier; the Rev. Joseph Gilbert, Bishop William Hillary of Caroline; Henry, Robert H. and William F. Johnson; William H. Lester of Dryden, James W. Lewis, Henry Moore, the Rev. Basil Mackall, Moses Newton, Charles E. Reed of Trumansburg, Alexander Richardson, the Smith families, Henry W. Stewart, Henry Selby, Thomas H. Thomas, the Thompson families, David Watts, George Williams, Robert Walker, Major H. H. Ross, a nationally-known preacher of the A.M.E. Zion Church who established churches in the free Negro settlements in Canada.

All have been Negro pioneers. All have contributed to the community which we now share. And this is history, the history of the Negro from out of the Ithaca past. But today it lives again, breathing the breath of a new life into the heart of a struggling people.