Bound by Pride and Prejudice:
Black Life in Frederick Douglass’s New York

by

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Curriculum Vitae

Monique Patenaude was born in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. She attended Onondaga Community College and graduated with an Associates of Arts degree in 1994. Ms. Patenaude later attended Le Moyne College from 1998 to 2001, where she graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Secondary Education. From 2001 until 2004 she attended graduate school at Cornell University, and enrolled in the History Department at the University of Rochester in 2005. Ms. Patenaude pursued her research in Nineteenth Century American and African American History under the direction of Professor Larry E. Hudson and committee members Thomas P. Slaughter and Jeffrey Allen Tucker.
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Abstract

This dissertation explores what life was like for free black families and the nascent black communities they formed in antebellum Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, New York, 1840-1860. The three sister-cities’ extraordinary physical and economic development was a direct result of the prosperity that came with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. Skilled black pioneer settlers found work in their trades, black entrepreneurs welcomed white patrons in their shops, and unskilled laborers readily found employment. The economic prosperity in the region provided many black families with the means to own real estate, to attain middling class status, and for black men to earn the rights to suffrage in the state. The great socioeconomic changes that occurred in the region also precipitated an explosion of evangelical religiosity that was especially intense in, but not exclusive to, Rochester.

Sadly, labor opportunities for black workers in Rochester shifted between 1840 and the 1850s, when they were pushed out of skilled and entrepreneurial occupations. By the early 1850s the arrival of Irish immigrants, inflation, and stagnant wages combined and had devastating results on the economic welfare for all classes of Rochester’s black community.

There is little evidence that the moral reform and social improvement activism had any tangible effect on the people who might have benefited the most from such progressive ideologies. The successes and disappointments of black residents were at the mercy of the market economy. Despite his international fame, Frederick Douglass had little influence on the lives and welfare of the black working classes. Douglass, though, did bear witness to the sudden economic decline that affected black barbers, waiters, and shopkeepers. He saw the black community weaken, and the exodus of black families. The experiences of Rochester’s black community had a major influence on Douglass. They informed his understanding of the fragility and condition of the nation’s free black population.
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Bound by Pride and Prejudice: 
Black Life in Frederick Douglass’s New York.

"In the Northern states, we are not slaves to individuals, not personal slaves, yet in many respects we are the slaves of the community."
--Frederick Douglass, 1848

The experiences of African Americans in Frederick Douglass’s New York cannot be told through a biography of Douglass himself, although he played a role.\(^1\) They cannot be summarized by a famous fugitive slave rescue, although there was one. In fact, there is no single person or event that can illustrate the diversity of the black communities and black lives in antebellum western New York. The experiences of blacks in Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse varied greatly despite the socio-economic similarities of the three Erie Canal cities.\(^2\) Scholars often describe the region, known as the Burned-over District, as a hotbed of spiritual and moral reform, and an antislavery stronghold throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Sadly, black residents were infrequent beneficiaries of the work of such local reformers as Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and William

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\(^1\) Though there were a number foreign born black residents in western New York (mostly Canadian), the vast majority were born in the United States, so I use the term “African-American” interchangeably with “black.”

\(^2\) Syracuse did not incorporate as a city until 1848. Statistical information used in this study before the incorporation was taken from data provided for the township of Salina. The town of Salina was comprised primarily of the villages of Lodi, Salina, and Syracuse, which merged to form the city of Syracuse.
Henry Seward. For a brief time, though, each city presented unique opportunities for black residents that made individual success and community stability possible.

Western New York’s black communities formed in the late 1830s. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the final abolition of slavery in the state two years later provided African Americans the social and economic freedom to improve their lot. Within a generation, the cities’ black populations grew from a handful of individuals to vibrant communities consisting of hundreds of black residents, all of whom hoped to stake their claim in the heart of the Burned-over District.

An exception to this was the Reverend Samuel J. May, whose work, along with Jermain Wesley Loguen, with the local black community in Syracuse was unparalleled by other progressive activists in the region.

New York passed its first gradual emancipation law in 1799, yet it would be nearly thirty years before slavery was abolished in the state. The 1799 “Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery,” did not actually free a single person when it was passed in the state’s legislature. The law freed the children of enslaved women born after July 4, 1799, but only after they served their mother’s master through their most productive years. Males were to serve until they turned 28 years old, and females remained enslaved until age 25. Blacks held in bondage in New York who were born before Independence Day 1799, were to remain slaves for life. Nearly a generation later, the legislature passed a second emancipation act. The 1817 law declared that every slave residing in New York State—including those born before 1799—would gain their freedom, but not until July 4th 1827, ten years from the enactment of the abolition bill. This second “emancipation” failed, yet again, to immediately release a single soul from bondage.

Onondaga County, where Syracuse is located, was the only county in this study that had a significant black population outside of the cities’ borders; few blacks chose to live in rural settings. The settlement of blacks in the town of Onondaga, which contained 31 percent of the county’s black households outside of Syracuse in 1840, existed for at least two generations before 1840.
Few adults in the region during the 1840s—black or white—were born and raised in the area.6 Overwhelmingly, they were recent arrivals, coming at some point in the twenty years after the canal was gouged through the widest section of state. This charter generation, as others before it, crafted their own societies and established the economic order and social hierarchy in each community. The booming economy, remarkable development, and seemingly insatiable need for labor created by the canal quickly transformed frontier towns into thriving urban markets. During the first half of the 1800s, nascent western New York towns were more socially fluid and accommodating to black families and European immigrants than were the long-established and over-crowded eastern port cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.

The 1840s were especially promising for black Buffalonians, Rochesterians, and Syracusans. The cities experienced exponential growth with the opening of the western territory via the Erie Canal, and were quickly transformed from frontier towns in-the-rough to vibrant urban hubs along the artificial river.7 As the cities expanded, white residents literally surrounded black neighborhoods and established

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6 The editor of the 1827 Rochester village directory noted that “it is a remarkable FACT that in a population of nearly 8,000, not one adult person is a native of the village! The oldest person now living in the village, who was born here, is not yet seventeen years of age!” See A Directory for the Village of Rochester (Rochester: Elisha Ely, 1827), 114. Emphasis in original.

7 Most of what is written about the Erie Canal has been written for children. A few scholars, though, have produced comprehensive studies of the canal and the social, cultural, and economic changes that followed. See especially Carol Sheriff, The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996); Peter Way, Common Labor: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
the possibilities for people who were not only a minority in terms of numbers, but who might also be easily marginalized because of the lingering effects of Northern slavery and the American cultural traditions of racism. But, the relaxed social hierarchy of the charter generation and rapid economic development proved to be a beneficial combination. To put it simply, they permitted skilled and entrepreneurial black men to find work in their trades and patrons in their shops.

Unskilled black laborers, too, were essential to the cities’ upward and outward expansion. The financial and population boom created by the canal and westward settlement provided great demand for labor. The skills and experience a man possessed was far more essential to the needs of the larger community than was race or ethnicity in determining his place in the socio-economic scale.  

“There is employment for all,” a visitor to Rochester noticed. The reform sensibilities of the Second Great Awakening can probably be credited for helping to ease relationships between some black individuals and at least some white residents. But, the burgeoning market economy and development in the canal cities had the biggest

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8 Although John Stauffer agrees with the assessment that the racial order in Rochester was “comparatively fluid,” he relies on the success of Frederick Douglass as evidence of the community’s liberalism. It is a mistake, however, to use Douglass as a gauge for well-being of Rochester’s black community. John Stauffer, Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln (New York: Twelve, 2008), 137.

affect on the first generation of black western New Yorkers. It was a time of great promise.

    Black pioneers to the region took advantage of the softened hierarchical boundaries and labor opportunities. Many black families attracted to the region were able to find reliable work, secure property, and achieve middling class status. An astounding 24 to 29 percent of black heads of households owned real property at mid-century. Land and home ownership was especially important in New York State, where the threshold requirement of $250 in real estate earned black men the privilege of suffrage.\textsuperscript{10} Despite a similar occupational distribution of skilled and unskilled black workers in Boston, only a scant 1.5 to 4.5 percent could make the same property ownership claims in that city.\textsuperscript{11} It is impossible to know if the enormous discrepancy of propertied blacks in the two regions was caused by a difference in wages (i.e. the perceived value of the laborer) or the availability of land, though it was likely a combination of both. Regardless, the potential of accruing durable wealth through land and home ownership was exponentially better for black families in the Burned-over District.

    The economic possibilities for African Americans in Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, sadly, faded in the second half of the nineteenth century. Black

\textsuperscript{10} The requirement of land ownership for white male suffrage was eliminated by the State Legislature in 1821.

Rochestarians were the first of the three black communities to suffer, and they were hardest hit. Labor opportunities withered between the late 1840s, when a number of skilled black workers practiced learned trades and owned businesses, and the 1850s, when they were squeezed out of skilled and entrepreneurial occupations. Unskilled men also lost higher-waged and year-round service jobs that were so important to the well being of black households.

The growing Irish population in the mid-nineteenth century took its toll on the financial stability of black Rochesterians. Blacks were especially vulnerable to the Celtic incursion, which in relative measure had a greater demographic impact there than in the other two canal cities. The massive influx of poor, hungry, unskilled white immigrants flooded the city with eager laborers, who competed with black residents for work and affordable housing. The change in the ethnic make-up of the city also led to ideological change. Rather suddenly, a man’s skill and ability no longer trumped race, and traditional group hierarchy supplanted the once more relaxed frontier social order.

In Rochester, difficulty finding and retaining jobs in almost every field became the new standard for black residents by mid-century. As a result, African American families and workers abandoned their hopes, their homes, and the city. Rochester experienced a 30 percent reduction of unskilled black workers between

1850 and 1860 (from 93 to 66 souls).\textsuperscript{13} There were 13 black cooks in 1850, but only three ten years later. One-third of the black waiters lost their jobs, and by 1860 whites replaced all of the city’s black porters in downtown hotels. At the same time, the overall proportion of black men working these bottom-rung jobs increased by five percent. Though there were fewer black workers, a growing number were relegated to unskilled jobs, and day-contract laborers.

Skilled and entrepreneurial black men suffered, too. The city lost three of its four black cartmen. The number of barbers, the quintessential skilled black professionals, fell by over one-third, and all four black grocers closed up shop within the decade. Three black masons and all three African American blacksmiths left Rochester in the 1850s, as did a wagon maker, a tanner, and a cigar maker. To witness the disappearance of so many established businesses in a town noted for its progressive tendencies surely was a signal to the minority population that the lingering sentiments of social reform, at least in terms of universal rights and equal opportunity, were dwindling dramatically.

The shrinking employment and wage earning prospects for black residents worked in tandem with Rochester’s segregated school system. A few reform-minded

\textsuperscript{13} Only the occupations of men and single or widowed women were listed in the 1850 federal census. Though many married black women worked as domestic servants, laundresses, seamstresses, and in other and mostly unskilled fields, their employment is impossible to identify consistently until the 1860 federal census. Widows and live-in domestic servants made intermittent appearances in both census and city directories, but the inconsistency leaves an incomplete and complicated trail that proves very difficult to follow.
white school board members worked in the late 1840s and early 1850s alongside black community leaders to integrate the free public schools, but without success. While some black parents and community members fought to keep their children from the trauma that forced integration of white schools would bring, none disagreed about the deplorable condition of the dark and damp church basement that the city leased to use for the “Colored School.” Together, the contracting opportunities of employment and the potential for a promising future had an overwhelming affect on black neighborhoods. They severely limited the potential of black families’ immediate survival and the possibility of continued success for the next generation.

The abrupt decrease in the black population between 1840 and 1870 in Rochester was not mirrored by African-American communities in the other two cities or experienced by any other subgroup of Rochester’s population. Buffalo’s black population grew by 41 percent, or just over 200 people, during the thirty year span. Syracuse, too, gained almost 200 black residents; since it started with a much smaller population in 1840 the 84 percent increase was remarkable. Rochester, however, counted no additional members to its black neighborhoods. In fact, by 1870 the city had five percent fewer blacks than it did 30 years earlier. A remarkable one-in-four black Rochesterians left the city during the 1850s.

14 It was not until 1857 that Rochester closed the “Colored School.” By that time, however, there were far fewer black children to enter the city’s integrated classrooms.
The city was not only losing its African American population, it also was not attracting replacements. In the three years preceding 1855, Buffalo gained thirty-eight new black households. Syracuse added eleven, which was proportional to Buffalo’s black community growth. Rochester added only three new families to its shrinking black neighborhoods. Word was apparently out that the time of opportunity and the potential for prosperity for most African Americans in Rochester was over.

Frederick Douglass arrived in Rochester just as the tides of change were washing away black households. He moved from Lynn, Massachusetts, in late 1847 to publish *The North Star*, his first of three antislavery newspapers. The importance of Rochester to Frederick Douglass should not be underestimated. He was a Rochesterian, after all, for more years than he was a slave. During the twenty-five years Douglass and his family lived in Rochester, he became one of the most prominent voices for the abolition of slavery, and the institution of universal suffrage, and equal rights. Douglass utilized his position as a newspaper editor to promote these and other social and political reform movements. The paper’s motto, “all rights for all,” was something black Rochesterians surely subscribed to. He also used the organ to counsel Northern free blacks on ways to improve their social status in white society, and insisted that economic independence was the only route to success. Besides his newspaper editorials, Douglass maintained a rigorous speaking schedule on the lyceum circuit, which kept him on the road for up to six months a
year. Nevertheless, Rochester was where he and his wife, Anna, raised their children and it was where Douglass felt “more at home . . . than anywhere else in this country.”

Scholars have struggled to gauge what influence Douglass had on Rochester’s black community and neighborhoods. His fight with Tracy Seminary School and Horatio G. Warner in 1848 over the forced isolation of his nine-year-old daughter, Rosetta, from her paler schoolmates is a much referenced exception. Douglass was prompted by the segregation of his daughter to participate in the ongoing effort by local black community leaders and sympathetic white school board members to desegregate the city’s free public schools. “I went to the people with the question and created considerable agitation,” Douglass wrote nearly a half-century later in his third and final autobiography, “and after repeated efforts with voice and pen the doors of the public schools were opened and colored children were permitted to attend them in common with others.”


18 Douglass, *Life and Times*, 269.
Douglass’s work to desegregate Rochester’s schools, though, was a rare foray into local matters for the antislavery activist. Sadly, unless a particular matter had a direct and immediate effect on him, Douglass limited his dealings with the local black community. In fact, Douglass exaggerated his leadership and participation in the desegregation of the local school. Long-time black residents and a small but zealous circle of white critics sustained a relentless campaign against the city’s “race schools.” As scholars James and Lois Horton note in their study of reformers and black Bostonians, “local leadership was not diminished” or overshadowed in black communities by the presence of famed activists; black agency did not defer its voice to figureheads.\(^\text{19}\) This was as true in Rochester as it was in Boston. Frederick Douglass, despite his international reputation and life long work against racial segregation and inequality, had little interaction and impact on the lives of his working class black neighbors. In fact, there is little evidence that suggests Douglass sustained associations, personal or professional, with other black Rochestarians despite the available connections that existed through mutual friends and shared causes.

Only within a study of western New York’s black communities, however, does it become evident that Douglass witnessed abrupt changes in the socio-economic patterns and opportunities for blacks and the emptying of black neighborhoods in

\(^{19}\) Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 64.
Attempts to identify Douglass’s influence within the region may very well be futile. That is not to say, however, that Douglass did not have a dynamic relationship with the city or its black residents. What is equally important but has not been considered by scholars is the effect Rochester’s black community had on shaping Douglass’s knowledge of the conditions and potential of the nation’s free black population.

Douglass’s visits to Rochester in the early 1840s convinced him that the city was “a center of a virtuous, intelligent, enterprising, liberal, and growing population.”20 The professional achievements of Thomas James, a former slave and an African Methodist Episcopal minister from Rochester, who relocated to Douglass’s church in Lynn, was an early example of the successful black community he would find in western New York. Noting that Rochester was not without “traces” of discrimination, the young, budding antislavery orator recognized that the developing city was not yet hardened by a heritage of racism.21

Douglass stayed with Amy and Isaac Post, Hicksite Quakers and fervent reformers, while on speaking tours in the early 1840s. The Posts’ parlor served as the physical and ideological heart of Rochester’s radical reformers. Douglass was undoubtedly introduced to their friends, including successful local black residents

20 Douglass, *Life and Times*, 269.

such as David Cleggett, a master shoemaker, and his young son, Benjamin, who would soon be the co-owner of a thriving barber salon. Ralph Francis knew the Posts as well. He, too, was a barber and an active member of the black convention movement. He worked in the same circles with Douglass as a fellow advocate for black freedom and as a representative and delegate from Rochester. Within the Post’s parlor Douglass bore witness to the city’s successful black residents at their demographic and economic peak.

By the time Douglass moved to Rochester at the end of the decade, though, racial lines had begun to solidify and the professional and economic successes the Cleggetts and Francis enjoyed had become exceedingly rare. Black laborers of all stripes were losing position and standing. Douglass was by no means exempt from the bigotry and ignorance that was at work in the destabilization of Rochester’s black neighborhoods. But, as a publisher and reform lecturer whose livelihood relied on sources outside the immediate community his economic well-being was more secure. In addition, his ties to the city’s small circle of passionate white reformers insulated him from much of the prejudice (and the resulting downfall) other black Rochesterians increasingly faced on a daily basis.

Although Douglass did not experience the same hardships confronted by black Rochesterians, that does not mean he was unaware or unmindful of it. Thinking

about his enslavement decades earlier, Douglass wrote in 1855, while at his home on South Avenue in Rochester, “the thought of only being a creature of the present and the past, troubled me, and I longed to have a future, a future with hope in it.” 23 The musings about future prospects were not simply the words of a man looking backward, but also of one who was looking out his carriage window daily at the dwindling neighborhoods and crumbling status of black residents. Their prospects, indeed, no longer looked promising.

The changes that occurred in Rochester were too extreme to go unnoticed by one of the nation’s preeminent social critics. The physical void left by the 25 percent of black families who pulled up stakes must have been striking, but the hardships suffered by those who remained, and the degeneration of their neighborhoods, was surely heartbreaking to those who recalled the not-too-distant days of gains.

Despite Douglass’s continued writings and lectures, which focused on the abolition of Southern slavery and institution of universal rights, by the early 1850s he became increasingly outspoken about the hardships faced by Northern free black workers. He wrote of the necessity for them to pull themselves out of the caste of menial and service workers. Ideals of respectability, masculinity, middle class lifestyles, and economic independence became points that Douglass continually hit

23 Douglass, My Bondage, 273.
upon in the decade leading up to the Civil War. 24 Douglass was responding to what was quickly slipping through the fingers of black Rochesterians.

James McCune Smith noticed that Douglass had only become truly aware of the plight of free black men after he started The North Star. Through his editorials Douglass demonstrated acuity in matters that had long been fodder for black intellectuals and activists, such as education, separate institutions, and labor problems. According to Smith, Douglass, who had been surrounded by white abolitionists from the beginning of his activist career, had finally become “a colored man” in Rochester. 25 Sad, it was impossible for Douglass to ignore the hardships faced by free blacks by what was occurring in city. “We are capsized and lost,“ Douglass wrote, mourning the lost economic foothold of black families. 26 The tides had changed and the future prospects for Rochester’s black community were now dismal. While it had a profound affect on black families and neighborhoods throughout the city, it also changed Frederick Douglass.


25 James McCune Smith to Gerritt Smith, 28 July 1848, in Foner, Life and Writings, 94.

26 See Douglass’s most powerful and controversial editorial on the subject, “Make your sons Mechanics and Farmers - not Waiters Porters and Barbers,” Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 18 March, 1853. Emphasis in original.
A Note on Sources and Methodology

Scholars who have written on the region often note that the exclusion of black residents is due to their absence in available sources. Black residents, as one historian explains, were “ignored by a large portion of the [white] community” and rarely appear in material generated by the dominant population. At 1.5 - 2.7 percent of the sister cities’ residents, blacks were certainly easy enough to ignore, especially in contrast to the Irish and German immigrant populations that grew to over 40 percent by 1850, and posed a much greater social and economic threat to the native-born population. This dearth of evidence is especially true for Rochester, whose black residents and their experiences rarely appeared in the local papers. Black Buffalonians and especially black Syracusans are more visible in surviving newspapers. Regardless, even when blacks can be identified in local sources, most appearances are found in the police blotter and obituary columns, which usually offer little or balanced insight to the individual or to the wider black community.

Western New York’s black communities were a fraction of the size of those in the older eastern seaport cities of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, though their overall proportion in the total population was remarkably similar. Because there

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28 In 1850 African Americans constituted 1.5% of the total population of New York City; 1.6% of Brooklyn; 1.5% of Boston; and 2.3% of Cincinnati’s residents. See Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 2.
were so few blacks in the canal region, there is little to suggest that local blacks were able to sustain organizations, associations, and clubs; their small numbers and mobility made continuous membership difficult to maintain. Many short-term groups were organized, though, especially those that rallied around events such as the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law, against which resolutions were drawn up and vigilance groups formed. Unfortunately, ad-hoc meetings and protest groups did not produce membership roles, keep minutes, or write newsletters like those in enduring black associations in larger communities. Black membership organized and sustained at least a half-dozen local churches in the three cities during the antebellum period. Sadly, even here, records and membership lists, if they exist at all, remain elusive.²⁹

Still, African Americans were far from invisible in Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse. They lived and worked in white households. Black barbers shaved and groomed the heads of white patrons. Blacks whitewashed houses, washed clothing, and doctored livestock. Blacks worked as day laborers and in workshops, on the streets, on the Erie Canal, and in private homes, taverns, and hotels. They were neighbors, fellow worshipers, business owners, coworkers, customers, and sometimes even the schoolmates of white residents. Though the documentary pickings are lean, black western New Yorkers did appear in newspapers as the winner of an annual cake

²⁹ Public libraries and historical associations in all three cities have made concerted efforts to collect and preserve material on the history of their African American communities. The collections, however, have very little material that was produced before the 1920s. See a discussion on Rochester’s church records in, Paul E. Johnson, A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 152-161.
baking contest, as a prized high school essayist, and as families mourning the tragic
deaths of their children. Moreover, the letters of concerned black residents were
occasionally printed in the local news column of the paper, or in one of the region’s
papers published by a black editor. Samuel Ringgold Ward, an African American
Presbyterian minister, published *The Impartial Citizen*, in Syracuse for several years.
Ward’s paper is an important source as it was a forum to aid the condition of *free*
blacks, and as a result, was far more locally focused than were any of Douglass’s
antislavery and reform newspapers.  

More importantly, much of what can be learned of western New York’s
antebellum black population is based on statistical information gleaned from federal
and state census records and city directories. Because this study examines change
over time the demographic information provided by over forty-years of census data is
absolutely essential. While the summarized statistics provided in the census
recapitulation tables is helpful the true value of the records come through an
examination of the complete census books: the sheets that enumerators filled with
information gathered at every home, on every individual.

The door-to-door pollsters asked a new and varying list of questions with
every census; thankfully, questions were typically added rather than removed from
the census-takers pads. The 1850 census was the first that collected data for each and

30 The largest collection of Ward’s paper can be found in the archives of the American Antiquarian
every household member, rather than relying only on the heads of household information. Between the federal and state census records (New York State censuses were taken every ten years in the middle of each decade), it is possible to determine when and where a person was born, how many times he or she wed, and, for women, the number of children she birthed. Census records also provide information on the relationships among members of households. It is possible to tell if children went to school and which adults were literate; it was often noted if a person could read, but not write. The sheets show if real estate was owner-occupied; what kind of material the home was constructed of, its value, and the worth of personal affects. As of 1850, occupations were detailed rather than selected from a limited number of stock options provided in past tallies. For the first time, hundreds of occupations were documented as described by family members themselves. These two additions, the inclusion of the demographics for every person and his or her specific occupation, allow for important comparisons and a better measure of the well-being of black residents.

I examine Rochester in relationship to African American communities in Buffalo and Syracuse. It is only by comparison that an understanding of the range of possibilities available to blacks and the changes that occurred in the Burned-over District become starkly evident. For all the sister-cities had in common, especially their reliance on the canal, they were not interchangeable, nor were the opportunities the same for black residents across the region. Differences in geographic size and location, major industries, populations and their ethnic make-up, and other aspects of
community life varied substantially, which all had an influence on the life and opportunities of local black communities.

The black families in the antebellum sister-cities came of age during a time of rapid development and shifting local ideologies. It was a period that expanded the possibilities for black residents. The gains earned were enjoyed, but suffered dearly when lost. Their plight was observed by one of the most astute social critics of the nineteenth century; their stories are bound together. Frederick Douglass’s sudden dedication to the ailing condition of free blacks at this very moment was not coincidental. Before him, he witnessed a group of upwardly mobile, proud black residents falter and be forsaken by the whims of their white neighbors. Blacks became, in his words, “slaves of the community.”31 This is, in the end, a study of people caught in the seemingly endless cycle of pride and prejudice.

31Foner, *Life and Writings*, 333.
Chapter 1
Time and Place

Before construction commenced in 1817 on the Erie Canal western New York was part of the great American frontier. Austin Steward, an enslaved Virginian who was brought to Sodus Bay on Lake Ontario by his master, Captain William Helm, at the turn of the nineteenth century described the landscape in his autobiography, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman*, as a “wild, romantic region” (Plate 11).¹ The heavily timbered land was rife with elk, deer, bears, panthers, and wolves, and there was always a looming possibility of crossing paths with a Seneca for whom this region was native territory.² The “unbroken wilderness” continued for miles in every direction. Without cleared land to farm or an adequate land route, corn and other goods were procured by sailing on Lake Ontario thirty or forty miles west from Sodus Bay to the mouth of the Genesee River. The settling of Rochester would

¹ Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman*, Graham Russell Hodges, ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 23. Hodges estimates Steward’s arrival at Sodus Bay, thirty-five miles east of Rochester on the shores Lake Ontario, was in 1801-1802.

take root on the Genesee a decade later, but then little more than a land company storehouse and tavern that doubled as a trading post interrupted the lush landscape.³ While Steward and other slaves cleared the land, a Quaker teacher visiting the Allegany Seneca noticed how sparsely populated the western half of the state was. “It is not probable these Indians will have any white settlers near them soon,” he surmised. “In all directions excepting south [into Pennsylvania], we believe none are nearer than sixty miles.”⁴

The settlements in western New York were few in number, small in size, and isolated. Buffalo, for example, was located at the end of an Indian trail that weaved through the state. Little more than a clearing, it consisted of eight buildings—most of them made of logs—which included a tavern, an “Indian store,” and a few plots of cultivated land. A decade later, however, Buffalo was a thriving village with over sixty buildings, which housed a wagon and a shoe maker, a blacksmith, a printing office, a barber, several stores and taverns, and numerous homes.⁵ Helm’s slaves, the Quakers, Seneca Indians, nor Buffalo’s frontiersmen could have imagined the forthcoming transformation of western New York with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825.

³ Steward, Twenty-Two Years, 24-25; Wallace, Death and Rebirth, 214.
⁴ As quoted in Wallace, Death and Rebirth, 215.
⁵ See “The Buffalo that was Burned in 1813, Redrawn From Juba Storrs’ Sketch of April 1813,” in possession of the author and accessible at: http://www.buffalonian.com/history/articles/1801-50/mapofburningofbuffalot.gif.
The portion of the state that lay west of the Stanwix Treaty line (just east of where Syracuse is located) underwent the greatest transformation when the Erie Canal became operational (Maps 1 & 2). Travelers noted in letters and diaries that towns seemed to grow instantly out of the wilderness along the waterway. “It would really seem that by one hand the forest had been made to disappear,” wrote Thomas Loraine McKenney, head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, on a trip to Rochester in 1826, “and with the other a city has been made to grow up in its stead.” Though an exaggeration of how quickly the canal facilitated urbanity’s usurpation of the wilderness, it would be difficult to overstate its effect on the growth of towns and cities that grew like mushrooms on its damp banks. The villages of Port Byron, Fairport, Brockport, Spencerport, Middleport, Gasport, and Lockport are revealing in name. These inland “port” towns are all located between Syracuse and Buffalo. They give evidence to the rapid settlement and the development of interlinked towns. In short, the canal was their raison d’être.

6 The Erie Canal opened in sections. The Utica-Seneca River “middle section” was the first to open in July of 1820. The Fort Stanwix Treaty line, here after referred to as the “colonial settlement line,” was negotiated with the Iroquois League in 1768, as the approximate boundary of colonial settlement, though there was certainly white encroachment into Iroquois territory by Anglo-Americans before and after the treaty. In 1789 the newly created Ontario County replaced the entirety of Iroquois land agreed to by the treaty. The region west of the colonial settlement line has historically been referred to as “western New York,” whereas today the region is considered two, central and western New York. For the sake of this study and ease of identification, “western New York” will denote the region of New York that lies west of the border of colonial settlement.

7 Thomas Loraine McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes, of the character and Customs of the Chippeway Indians, and of incidents Connected with the Treaty of Fond du Lac* (Baltimore: Fielding Lucas, Jun’r, 1827), 85.
Western New York cities are especially interesting because these were new American cities. They were not remnants of colonial inheritance. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the people who settled in the region were the ones who literally created and formed these societies. They were among the first American cities to develop in the modern era. Their character and culture, institutions and industry were built by people earnest in their labors to create and profit from everything the young nation had to offer. The hopefulness extended to African-Americans. For them, the promise of the region was compounded by the abolition of slavery in New York State, which occurred less than 20 months after the Erie Canal opened.

Though the cities shared their common existence as canal ports, the character of each was shaped by their immediate geographical resources, early industries, and the variations of their populations. The assortment of businesses in each city attracted a range of folks with an array of skills, in different proportions, all of which depended on the fluctuating needs of each city. The primary economic drivers in the sister-cities of Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse were supported by numerous related trades, ancillary businesses, and laborers. Stave makers and coopers made barrels to package Rochester’s flour and Syracuse’s salt. Hotels, taverns, and restaurants served convention attendees, travelers, and visitors to the region. Rochester and Buffalo’s investors, lawyers, and accountants managed money, businesses, and the books. And, of course, dock, warehouse workers, and canal boatmen were plentiful in all three.
Settlers took advantage of local resources and the unique geography to produce quality goods that were consumed locally, but more importantly, that could be exported to distant markets via the canal. Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, supplied the burgeoning market economy with essential commodities and services that distinguished themselves and quickly matured into inland port cities. The three are situated in a linear fashion approximately eighty miles apart. In such close proximity it was necessary that they developed distinctive industries and independent economies to prevent competition.

Syracuse, the eastern most of the sister-cities, quite literally grew around its salt industry; a necessary product for food preservation and manufacturing. A better part of the first and second wards (of four) was dominated by salt manufacturers and salt workers’ homes. A surprising runner up to salt harvesting was the city’s hospitality services, which could be measured by the numerous meeting halls and convention venues in the city. Much to the envy of the neighboring cities of Rochester and Utica, Syracuse became known as the “Convention City.” Its location in the geographic center of the state made it readily accessible to visitors who arrived from either direction on the canal, as well as for those living in the northern and southern tier. The nearest major north-south road west of Albany intersected the state at Syracuse.

The city always had a limited potential for physical and economic growth. It was hemmed in by hills, swamps, and bordering townships. It could not expand geographically as did both Buffalo and Rochester. In fact, the draining of swamps
and marshes were practically the only way the city accrued additional acreage (it also reduced the number of malaria and cholera outbreaks (as well as other water-borne diseases). The actual footprint of the city has changed very little since its incorporation in 1847. Another limiting factor for Syracuse is that it does not border any of the Great Lakes, or a major tributary as does Buffalo and Rochester, and thus it did not profit from lake trade. Nor was it perched on the precipice of a power generating waterfall, which allowed Rochester to develop a strong industrial and manufacturing base.8

Syracuse simply could not keep pace with Buffalo and Rochester, though it still underwent marked development. The physical and economic limitations of the city, naturally, also restricted the growth of Syracuse’s population. The population simply became denser as its numbers rose, filling its finite space. The limitations of square acreage, though, actually seemed to help the residents sustain personal ties to one and other. Close quarters and slow evolving urban layout helped preserve a village-like character in the working class city. Syracuse maintained its village charm well into the 1850s, much to the complaint of some city leaders who wished residents would dispose of their “village habits and ideas,” and decidedly embrace more metropolitan attitudes.9


Blacks maintained an almost identical percentage of the population in all three cities, between 1.5 - 2.7 percent over a thirty year period, 1840-1870 (Tables 1 & 2). But, as a group they had the most limited occupational opportunities in Syracuse. Obviously, the smallest of the sister-cities also had the fewest black residents, but it was also the one with the highest percentage of unskilled black workers (Table 7).\(^{10}\) As was true elsewhere, most blacks in the region were unskilled, common, or day laborers. The demand for service workers, especially porters, cooks, waiters, and hotel maids, made Syracuse an especially attractive city to unskilled black workers despite its relative smaller size. Operating as the transportation hub and meeting center in the geographic center of the state, the nascent hospitality industry provided earning opportunities to attract and foster a small, stable, and propertied black community.

Unlike black Rochestarians, some black Syracusans worked in the city’s primary manufacturing trade. The labor required to produce, pack, store, and ship over 4,200,000 bushels of salt annually provided year–round jobs for laborers.\(^{11}\) Of the seventy-four black male residents with listed occupations in the 1850 census, six, or 12 percent, worked in the salt industry. Two African-American salt makers and


\(^{11}\) By 1850 Syracuse’s four salt manufacturers produced 4,268,919 bushels of salt, which required over one million barrels annually. The total payroll to salt workers was $20,000. *Daily Journal City Register and Directory, for 1851-’52* (Syracuse: Daily Journal, 1851), 25-26.
one salt packer worked shoulder to shoulder with white laborers to get the “white gold” in barrels and off to market via the canal. Three others were skilled basket weavers; salt skimmed from 150 gallon boiling kettles was tossed into large ash splint baskets to dry.

While there were only a few black men working for one of the city’s largest industries, it is important to realize that the reliable, steady work offered in the salt yards supported the large families of these men. A total of 36 black Syracusans were supported by wages earned in salt manufacturing. The basket makers, brothers Foster and Charles Lewis, and Samuel Carter lived next to each other in three rented, single family homes near the salt yards. The Lewis brothers and their families moved to Syracuse in about 1835; the Carters arrived in the late 1840s. With 13 children, ranging in age between one and seventeen between them (not including their four adult children), there was undoubtedly a great deal of activity in and around the three households. Allen Dorsey, the salt packer, and his wife, Mary Ann, lived one house down from the basket weavers. Although the Dorseys had no children of their own living with them, they did share their home with an Irish widow and her three young-adult children; the oldest, Peter McCan, 20, worked as a teamster to support his mother and younger siblings.

12 In the early 1850s there were four salt manufacturers operating on the shores of Onondaga Lake, in the two northern wards of Syracuse.

13 1850 United States Census; 1855 New York State Census.
In addition to a presence in the salt yards, a handful of black Syracusans were business owners. Five black barbers, a couple of carpenters, grocers, and cartmen made up the larger portion of their community’s skilled tradesmen and entrepreneurs. Jermain Loguen, a fugitive slave and an African Methodist Episcopal minister, was the city’s only long-standing black professional. Loguen was an early and active member of Syracuse’s black community. He served as a mentor and as a liaison between black and white Syracusans. Like Frederick Douglass, he attracted and maintained personal and professional relationships with many of his influential white neighbors (Plate 5). Unlike Douglass, though, he was also entrenched in the local affairs of black residents and fully understood the condition and circumstances of his black friends and neighbors, as well.14

Buffalo served as the terminus city of the Erie Canal. It was a crucial link between the Atlantic seaboard and the resource-rich western territories. The meeting point of the Erie Canal to its namesake lake was a labyrinth of slips, piers, wharfs, and docks. Warehouses, grog shops, and inns crowded the waterfront in the first ward, and massive elevators filled with Midwestern grain towered over the city. Unlike Rochester’s flour trade and Syracuse’s salt industry, Buffalo did not have a major export commodity; that city’s economic strength was in shipping and

commerce. Hundreds of Great Lakes’ steamships docked in Buffalo’s lake port every year laden with natural resources from western lands. Canal boatmen, dock workers, and warehouse laborers rolled barrels on and off freight boats, transferred crates of finished goods coming in from the east, and grain, leather, furs, and lumber that hailed from the west. Raw materials were stored in warehouses and elevators until they could be transferred onto east-bound canal freight boats. Finished goods traveled the Great Lakes and canal in the opposite direction to supply the swell of settlers into the newly accessible mid-west.

The jumping off point to the western wilds, Buffalo’s waterfront maintained the character of a rugged, chaotic, and overgrown frontier town. It pulsed with thousands of sailors, boatmen, and dock workers. Limited to a seven month season before the waterways froze over, Buffalo laborers operated in a fast paced, physically demanding, and dangerous world. The town’s young laboring men were especially unsavory to a lady traveler who found them to be some of “the most conceited ignoramusses” [sic] of any place she visited on the canal. Buffalonians, though, bragged of their thirst for business rather than knowledge—a hunger (and reputation) that continued throughout the antebellum period.15 The port city was a hive of activity that was expanding and in constant motion.

The largest of the cities, Buffalo was also home to the largest black population in western New York. It was a distinct group. Nearly 60 percent of the city’s black adults were southern born; overwhelmingly from Virginia. These Southerners made up over 58 percent of the blacks who worked in skilled or entrepreneurial trades. Using property as a measuring stick, Southern blacks were also the most prosperous of Buffalo’s black families, regardless of occupation. Of the 37 propertied African American families with a recorded place of birth, 28, or over 75 percent, were born in Southern slave states (Tables 4-6).

Regardless of black Buffalonians’ Southern or Northern roots, 72 percent of all black property owners were unskilled or semi-skilled laborers. Although service workers were denounced as a lazy, servile, and emasculated class by some black leaders, in this city at mid-century, at least, the year-round employment offered in hospitality occupations were some of the most profitable jobs a black man could have in town.16 In fact, almost half of the land-owing blacks in Buffalo were service workers; cooks, waiters, and porters. Not only were these men able to buy property with their steady wages, all but one were like Thomas Gleed, a cook from Virginia. Gleed’s home, valued at $1,000 in 1850, was not uncommon for this group. Though, as important as the assessment of his property was, the political and civic right it

16 See Frederick Douglass, “Make your sons Mechanics and Farmers - not Waiters Porters and Barbers,” Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 18 March, 1853. Very few women in the 1850 census were listed as having occupations, though, many married working class women did work outside the home, hosted borders, or took in laundry to wash or mend to earn a wage. Single women and widows were more likely to have their labors recorded on the census.
gained him and others who held deed to $250 of real estate or more, mattered a great deal (Tables 12-13).\textsuperscript{17}

Surprisingly, by 1850 very few black Buffalonians appear to have worked as dock laborers, warehouse workers, or in other occupations associated with shipping and the movement of cargo. Despite the massive infrastructure of Buffalo’s ports and the manic pace of transferring goods from the canal to Lake Erie alone, none of the 185 black men with listed occupations were self-identified as working at the numerous dock, piers, or warehouses. Less than five percent of black men who lived here were sailors or boatmen at midcentury.\textsuperscript{18} Work on vessels was not only seasonal, but unhealthy; the average life expectancy of a boatman was twelve years.\textsuperscript{19} Oddly, though, few black Buffalonians are listed as “laborers” in the 1850 census; which was a heavily relied upon catch-all occupational category. While it is possible some of these workers earned their wages on the docks and moving cargo, not one identified themselves as such.

Rochesterians also took advantage of their geographic resources. Pioneer speculators spurred the city’s growth by harnessing the power of the Genesee River

\textsuperscript{17} 1850 United States Federal Census, Buffalo, passim; ward 4.

\textsuperscript{18} “Sailors” and “boatmen” made up two distinct parts of the “floating population.” Sailors worked on steam ships that traveled throughout the Great Lakes. Boatmen, on the other hand, worked on packet (passenger) boats and freighters on the canal.

\textsuperscript{19} Carol Sheriff, \textit{The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress} (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 145. Sheriff reports reformers claimed the combination of uncaring employers and the excessive use of alcohol were the reasons for boatmen’s short life expectancy. Sailors on lake ships, undoubtedly, ran even more risks due to the volatility of steam powered engines.
and its waterfalls. Numerous mills and small manufactories were quickly built along the river’s edge. Grist mills powered by the falls gorged on wheat grown in the hinterland’s rich soils. The Flour City, as Rochester came to be known, became a major milling center for Midwestern grain that was inexpensively transported eastward on canal barges. The intersection of canal and the Genesee River became the heart of Rochester’s bustling downtown. A few prosperous gentlemen millers monopolized flour production and put many smaller family-run flour mills out of business. In their stead came multi-story grist mills, wool mills, carpet mills, saw mills, and a growing array of factories and foundries. The *Flour* City became the *Flower* City as Rochester’s economy was increasingly bolstered by commercial nurseries that specialized in fruit trees and other hardy plants bred for the short northeastern growing season. By mid-century, Rochester had one of the most diversified market economies in the region.

Unfortunately, as historian Paul E. Johnson notes in his religious and social history of the city’s beginnings, few “outsiders” were able to tap into the most profitable sectors of Rochester’s financial boon. Leading entrepreneurs and speculators rose from founding families. Familial profits were secured within webs of business partnerships and marriages. Rochester’s robust economy and central businesses were “no capitalist free-for-all[s].” Instead, they were dominated by “a
federation of wealthy families and their friends.” 20 Although time and development
diluted the charter generation’s control of local businesses, Rochester remained an
attractive draw for well-heeled speculators.

A white collar town, Rochester’s elite investors provided the capital to support
the remarkable growth of both industry and population, which competed admirably
with Buffalo, for a time.  The “turbulent economic expansion,” as preeminent
historian of the Burned-over District, Whitney Cross, described the market revolution
in Rochester, was bolstered by the transition of customary production of goods by the
“household-handicraft-mill complex” of New England, to a modern system of
standardized parts and mass production.21 Cobblers, coopers, and laborers in the
building trades were some of the first to see the deskilling of their crafts.  Cobblers’
bespoken wears were replaced by shoes and boots manufactured in standardized sizes
and assembled by pieceworkers.  The barrels used to pack flour and salt did not need
to be finely crafted as did casks intended to hold liquid commodities.  Staves were
mass produced, rough in dimension, and assembled in rapid succession by coopers
who now rarely crafted complete kegs from stave to hoop.22

20 Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-


22 Barrels were so important to the region’s industries that machines for mass producing barrels were
made by two companies in Western New York, John Greenwood & Co. (Rochester, NY) and E. & B.
Holmes (Buffalo, NY).
The speedy growth also necessitated the standardization in construction, as well. The pressing demand for buildings and houses kept workers moving at a frantic pace from one structure to the next.23 Carpenters and masons usually contracted for multiple houses at a time. They produced homes of standard sizes with identical floor plans, windows, and doors. Even the colors of the homes were identical: painted bright with whitewash and trimmed in dark green. The two stories, four room homes, were “duplicated endlessly across the landscape.”24

The streets of Rochester were filled with dust and the “constant clatter of mechanics and laborers of all kinds,” as the city expanded upward and outward by the work of accomplished and calloused hands.25 Blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, grocers, hardware dealers, druggists, barbers, peddlers, saloon owners, and cartmen supplied the booming population with an ever-widening selection goods and services.

Unfortunately, no black Rochestarians are listed in the city directories or census records as working in the city’s leading industries. There is no evidence that blacks worked in the mills, as stave makers or coopers; if they did, their tenure was


24 Johnson, Shopkeeper’s Millennium, 40-41.

short and their numbers few. Nor were any listed as laborers in any of the area nurseries. But, that did not mean there was not good work to be found here. Work as a common laborer, for example, was an important job for African Americans, and the building boom provided ample work for men with strong legs and backs.

In addition to manual labor, Rochester supported a handful of black tradesmen and business owners. A larger proportion of black Rochesterians were skilled tradesmen and entrepreneurs than what Syracuse’s black neighborhoods boasted by 1850. They included three blacksmiths, two masons, a wagon maker, shoemaker, and of course, an antislavery newspaper editor (Tables 10a & 10b).

It is impossible, though, to know how many black workers in any of the cities were accomplished craftsmen who were under-employed, or resorted to manual and service work in order to take care of their families. But, at least during the first few decades of the canal’s existence, the accelerated development of the region gave skilled and unskilled African-Americans a chance to build a secure foundation for themselves as they helped build the ground floor of the rising cities.

Notwithstanding fluctuating growth rates in the Burned-over District cities, black populations remained in surprisingly similar proportion to the white population.

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26 Paul Johnson mistakenly claimed that “a significant number of blacks” were employed in manufacturing the hundreds of thousands of barrels needed annually for the city’s flour industry. The source he cites, Whitney Cross’s Master’s thesis, states that it was the Irish who had a significant presence in the barrel making trades, not blacks. See Johnson, *Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 40; Whitney Cross, “Creating a City, the history of Rochester from 1824-1834” (M.A. thesis, University of Rochester, 1936), 104.
In 1840 blacks consisted of 2.1 to 2.7 percent of the cities’ populations. By 1850, however, the percentages of local blacks were cut universally by one-third to 1.5 – 1.7 percent of the cities’ populations. Although blacks accounted for a smaller proportion of the population, their actual numbers increased in all three cities over the ten year period (Tables 1 & 2). The black population grew 22 percent in Rochester; 37 percent in Buffalo; and 57 percent in Syracuse. Buffalo boasted the largest black community by 1850 with nearly 700 people, compared to Rochester’s 549 and Syracuse’s 370 black residents.

The white communities’ growth, however, dwarfed the increases made in African-American neighborhoods. Buffalo’s white population mushroomed by 135 percent, from 17,710 to 41,586 in a decade, and the number of Syracuse’s white residents also more than doubled from 10,776 to 21,901 people. White Rochesterians’ population grew by 82 percent, a gain of over 16,000 people, from 19,698 to 35,854, and far outweighed their black neighbors’ 22 percent increase of 99 individuals.

Though fewer blacks relocated to Rochester than to Buffalo or even Syracuse in the 1840s, it was then the city gained the region’s most prominent black citizen, Frederick Douglass. Douglass moved to the city (with his family following a few months later) in late 1847 and began his career as the editor and publisher of the first of his three antislavery newspapers, The North Star. Like the Douglasses, the overwhelming majority of black settlers came in family groups. The relationship between people in any given home can be easily established from the detailed
reporting of the 1850 census enumerators. Households made up of nuclear families were the most common, but many black households included extended family members. It was not unusual to find an elderly mother residing with her son or daughter’s family, or a young adult son living at home with his new wife.

Rochester’s slower yet steady growth rate for both races was not due so much to a limitation of that city’s ability to attract settlers as it was to the early mechanization of industry. Rochester’s mills and manufactories along the Genesee River were highly industrialized, which greatly reduced the need for manpower. The twenty-five thousands bushels of wheat processed daily in the 1840s, for example, hardly needed to be touched by workers’ hands. Wheat was shoveled directly from boats onto a conveyer of buckets, which hoisted continuous loads above a series of millstones five stories high. The grain descended through numerous processes: “cleaning, grinding, cooling, bolting,” and finally back into the streaming line of buckets where the superfine flour was dumped and “pressed by the machinery” into barrels. The final step was performed by a cooper who “clapped” the heads on barrels. One traveler’s observation that the flour mills were “almost as full of machinery as the case of a watch,” could apply to many other manufacturers that lined the river and canal.27

The proportion of blacks to whites in western New York was typical of their overall presence in the state, making this study on black communities more

representative of black New Yorkers than previous studies, which almost always focused on New York City. The state’s black population average was 2.1 percent in 1840 and 1.6 percent in 1850, mirroring the Burned-over District. New York City hosted one of the largest free black communities in the country at 5.8 percent of the city’s population in 1840, but by 1850 there were fewer blacks in number and proportion, resulting in an overall drop to 3.1 percent of the total number of residents. The vibrant black community in New York City, though, produced more evidence and resources for researchers to utilize than the smaller communities in upstate making that group understandably attractive to scholars. But, antebellum New York City blacks and the extremely large community they formed were not typical of the remaining 55 percent of blacks in the state. Most resided in smaller cities and towns throughout the state, and in a proportion that was closer to those who resided in western New York’s canal cities than the boroughs of New York City.

Although few people in the Burned-over District were native to the region, the largest segment of the overall population was made up of native New Yorkers (Table 3).28 Buffalo and Rochester’s streets were stocked with 45 percent and 52 percent, respectively, of people born within the state. An additional 10 percent from New England (the region’s earliest settlers) meant that more than half the people in both cities shared similar Northeastern roots. New Englanders also made up 10 percent of

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28 Place of origin statistics are from the 1845 New York State Census.
Syracuse’s residents, but the town boasted a much larger New Yorker base with over 66 percent of its people born in the state. As a result, more than three-quarters of all Syracusans had similar Northeastern upbringings and sensibilities in common. The smallest of the canal cities must have struck visitors as terribly provincial when compared to the larger and more cosmopolitan cities of Rochester and Buffalo. All, though, maintained an American-born majority that ranged from 59 percent to the west in Buffalo, to 65 percent in Rochester, to an astounding 78 percent native-born majority in Syracuse. Buffalo’s population was an early indication of what was imminent for Rochester and Syracuse, namely that they were on the precipice of a drop in the proportion of American-born residents that would last for the remainder of the century.

Buffalo supported the largest immigrant population with 4 in 10 people hailing from foreign lands by 1845. Germans made up the largest community of expatriates, consisting of 17 percent of the city’s residents.29 If the Germans’ American-born children were counted as ethnic Germans rather than as native-born Americans, their numbers would be higher still. Since Germany did not unite as a nation until 1871, people who were identified as “German” in census records before that date were from any of over thirty German states, including Baden, Bavaria, and Prussia. The different regions were not culturally identical, though as a group the

Teutonic citizens emigrated due to political unrest, which collimated in the failed revolutions of 1848. Many who could afford to flee the tumultuous region and settle elsewhere did so.

Generally speaking, German immigrants had capital to come to the United States in family units. Many were artisans and entrepreneurial businessmen who arrived with resources, experience, and skills useful in their newly adopted urban home. Unskilled Germans who migrated often worked in the building trades and had more opportunities to pick up trade skills on the job than did African-Americans. Many German-born farmers managed to travel beyond the United States’ eastern seaboard cities and settle further inland to establish farmsteads, and provide economic stability for their families. Impoverished newcomers, such as the Irish, who made up the other leading immigrant group of the period, commonly worked for decades without gaining property, economic independence, or physical and social mobility. These two dominant immigrant groups had very different experiences as newcomers to the United States. English and Canadian migrants added to the cities’ multi-ethnic fabric, as did a few Swedes, French, Spanish, and lingering Iroquois who resisted life on the nearby Seneca and Onondaga reservations.

Like western New York’s white population, the area’s black residents were a

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diverse group. They migrated from near and far, adding to the array of sights and sounds of the expanding cities’ rich populaces (Tables 4-6). There were a number of foreign-born blacks in the region; most were Canadian, and the majority of those, children. Some, too, though, crossed the ocean to reach American shores, just as their German and Irish counterparts did. In addition to the forty-five Canadians (some who crossed the border by traversing the Niagara River by ferry), Buffalo’s black community included two Africans, three Englishmen, a Spaniard, a West Indian, and a South American. Rochester was home to nearly a score of black Canadians, and several more hailed from the Caribbean Islands of Antigua, St. Thomas, and Jamaica. Even the New Yorkers’ stronghold of Syracuse welcomed a Frenchman and Jamaican into their black community.

31 In the 1850 Federal Census there were seventy-nine black residents (29 in Buffalo; 30 in Rochester and 19 in Syracuse) whose place of birth was listed as either “unknown,” “American,” “native,” left blank, or was illegible. The majority of these were marked “unknown.” Some historians assert an “unknown” place of birth in census records is, in effect, code for “fugitive slave.” It seems more likely that a clever fugitive living covertly as a free black in western New York would have constructed a well-rehearsed narrative of their past that included such basic information as where they were from. Some self-emancipated slaves felt secure in their new home, like Jermain Loguen, were forthright about their status as fugitives and freely listed their state of birth. As some whites also have “unknown” as their place of birth, it is reasonable to assume such information given to the census taker was provided by someone other than those of questionable birth places. Some folk, undoubtedly, simply did not know where they were born.

32 The Hortons discovered that foreign born blacks typically had fewer labor skills and earned less than native-born blacks. Few had resources to migrate further west than coastal cities such as Boston, yet another similar characteristic shared with the Irish, and they struggled economically more than American born blacks. See Horton and Horton, Black Bostonians, 6-9. The foreign black population in western New York’s cities was relatively smaller than in Boston. The largest group of alien blacks were Canadian born, making their destinations in western New York a short and affordable jaunt. Without Canadians, the region’s foreign-born black population would have been miniscule, indeed.
By 1850 the black populations in the Burned-over District were comprised of fewer and further Northeasterners the further west the city was located (Table 6). New Yorkers made up 40 percent of black Buffalonians, and an additional 10 percent from other Northern states pushed Buffalo’s Northern-born blacks to make up half of the total community. Black Southerners, as mentioned earlier, occupied that city at nearly the same proportion as native black New Yorkers. Thirty-eight percent of blacks living in the Lake Erie port, or 258 of a total of 681 people, were born in the slave South. This was more than three times the number of black Southerners who lived in Rochester. The proportions are even more dramatic when children are removed from the equation and we consider only adults. New Yorkers made up only 18 percent of black adult Buffalonians, with others from Northern states raising the total to 31 percent, or 127 Northerners. Southern adults, however, dominated the community at 234 residents, amounting to 57 percent of adult blacks.

Adult African-Americans in Rochester were overwhelmingly from Northern states at 68 percent, and only 22 percent from the South. Despite the prominent position of Rev. Jermain Loguen, a Tennessean, Southern drawls were rare in Syracuse’s black circles (Plate 7). Only two percent of black adults residing in the Salt City were Southern-born. African-American Northerners counted for 90 percent of Syracuse’s adult black community; not unlike their white neighbors, almost all of those were native New Yorkers.

There is no doubt a number of Southern blacks in the sister-cities were fugitive slaves, and it is reasonable to assume their over-represented numbers in
Buffalo was due to physical proximity of the city to Canada.\textsuperscript{33} This is especially true after the 1842 Supreme Court case, Prigg v. Pennsylvania, which upheld the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act and made it unconstitutional for individual state legislatures to nullify the federal mandate by enacting so-called Liberty Laws.\textsuperscript{34} In a letter to Gerrit Smith, a white reformer and founding member of the Liberty Party, Samuel Ringgold Ward confessed that the Prigg decision caused him “alarm.” “I see no kind of legal protection for any colored man’s liberty. Everything is made as easy as possible for the kidnapper,” Ward grieved.\textsuperscript{35} Given warning, runaways could cross the Niagara River to Canada’s free soil in less than an hour’s time. But, taking residence and setting up a home in the city required more than security of the nearby border. Buffalo’s initial lure to absconders may have been its location, but it was the need for labor that maintained the black population.

\textsuperscript{33} I have chosen not to use the term “freedom seeker,” which is the current term that is used to describe fugitive slaves. A slave who chose to break free of their bonds by absconding risked their lives and broke federal law. To use a happy term such as “freedom seeker,” however, emphasizes individual desire but takes attention away from the fear and very real risks fugitives endured. It also ignores legality and the power relations of the period. Even when ostensibly “free,” runaways remained fugitives from slavery under the law and had to remain vigilant of their fragile status at all times. Fugitive slaves certainly sought freedom, but they quite literally could not turn their backs on their past for fear that someone might have been seeking them.

\textsuperscript{34} By the time the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law was enacted, many local black residents were too settled and defiant to be threatened by the fear of enforcement of the new, harsher federal law. See chapter three.

The existence of such a large group of black Southerners is even more striking when considering places of origin of the city’s native white population. Only five percent of all American-born residents in Buffalo, black and white, came from outside the Northeast (Table 3). In a city buzzing with the resonance of foreign tongues, the lilt of Southern drawls was made even more distinctive being borne from black bodies. If skin color was not enough to draw divisions within the city’s population – and Buffalo was certainly not immune to the racial sickness of the era—alien rhythm and dialectic of Southern blacks surely added to the sensory evidence of their “otherness.”

Divisions were likely felt to some degree within the black community as well. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Philadelphia’s black neighborhoods were subjected to recurrent waves of newly emancipated and fugitive slaves. According to historian Gary Nash, respectable long-established black Philadelphians sought to instruct newly free settlers of proper behavior through the gospel and moral improvement instruction. Intoxication, boisterous gatherings, cavorting, and the gaudy dress of some, they realized, might be used against the black community in

general as evidence of their race’s inherent debauchery and limited aptitude for
responsible participation in a free republican society.

During the antebellum period the intellectual capacity of slaves and their
ability for self-improvement was point of ongoing debate. The “condition debate,” as it came to be known, centered on the question of nature or nurture; were blacks in the United States impeded by the conditions of slavery and discrimination or were their perceived inadequacies racially or biologically determined? It was up to free blacks to give evidence that when provided like conditions they were as equally competent and respectable as their white neighbors.37 Local ministers and other black leaders in Philadelphia formed the Society for the Suppression of Vice and Immorality in hopes of fading the stain of degradation in newcomers caused by the conditions suffered under slavery.

Western New York’s small but promising black communities were not comparable to Philadelphia’s, which at the time boasted the nation’s largest free black population. But, respectability and moral fortitude, of course, were as equally important to the wellbeing of blacks in the reformer stronghold of the Burned-over District as they were in the City of Brotherly Love. African-Americans, regardless if

they were born free or slave, from the North or South, had to constantly negotiate the assumptions of their white neighbors.

Jermain Loguen traveled throughout the region for decades and preached the values of self-improvement and respectability. He organized meetings open to all those who were “friendly to the Religious elevation of the Colored People,” and urged them to “unite in the good work” of the moral and spiritual uplift of local blacks.38 Providing support and instruction to his brethren was a primary function for Loguen as a minister and teacher. The dedication behind his tireless work, however, was because of his own status as a fugitive slave and his desire to amend the perception of what a slave was and what a freedman was capable of becoming.39

Loguen lived what he preached and gained the respect of some of the region’s most prominent black and white residents. As an antislavery advocate he openly aided and housed hundreds of runaway slaves in his Syracuse home. His efforts depended on donations from city residents, both black and white, to fund his endeavors. Despite the common perception that the Underground Railroad was shrouded in secrecy, Syracuse newspapers ran repeated advertisements and endorsements for Loguen’s annual “donation fairs,” which were held in, of all places,

38 *Syracuse Reveille*, 27 August 1849.

City Hall. Loguen served as an elected and appointed bishop of the AME Zion church.

Loguen and others who were sensitive to the condition and treatment of free blacks might have noticed the benefits bestowed upon some long-term, “worthy” residents. Austin Steward was a resident of the Rochester area before the village even existed. Steward owned a relatively successful meat market in the growing village that admirably competed with white-owned shops despite being a repeated target of vandals.

There were several times that the black businessman was able to secure the patronage of some of the town’s most elite men. As the epicenter of evangelical revivals and spiritualism from the late 1820s through at least the 1840s, many of Rochester’s most prominent citizens were zealous supporters of moral and social reform movements. The women’s rights movement, temperance, Sabbatarianism, and antislavery activism found ardent supporters amongst the city’s leading families. The most active social reformers dedicated their energies to a number of causes. A precious few activists even advocated for local black residents as well as their enslaved Southern brethren.

40 Syracuse Journal, 4 April 1853.

41 Syracuse Journal, 1 February 1869. Loguen and Douglass were friends, and in 1869 they became family when Loguen’s daughter, Amelia married Douglass’ son, Lewis, in Loguen’s Syracuse home.

42 Steward, Twenty-two Years, 63.
Everard Peck was a prominent town leader who seems to have held a top position on nearly every board, committee, council, and association that existed in Rochester’s early years. He was a newspaper publisher, book binder and seller, and trustee of several banks as well as a board member of the University of Rochester. Peck, an evangelical reformer, was also a founding member of several reform institutions including the Rochester Orphanage Asylum and the Female Charitable Society. Peck repeatedly loaned Steward money and rallied other well-to-do businessmen to do the same. Peck loaned him $163 to purchase a piece of investment property. Steward already owned his own home, but the loan allowed the former slave to procure land as a speculator. Peck and his reformist colleagues also came up with $400 to pay the balance Steward accrued to build a black church and school in Rochester. After a failed attempt to establish a free black colony in Canada, which Peck supported with $700 cash, Steward, again, received the financial help of the editor and his friends to help him get reestablished as a grocer in Rochester. The organizers of local temperance society also helped Steward and contracted him to cater the group’s annual Fourth of July dinner, which sat over 500 people.


44 Steward, *Twenty-two Years*, xviii-xx, 144-146.
Steward’s case was not typical, partially because he received help during the height of evangelical reform in the 1820s and 30s, which was most prevalent in Rochester. He was a pious, thrifty, and honest man, and he was one of the few grocers in town who was willing to pull out of the profitable liquor trade, much to the delight of the town’s teetotaling evangelical elite. The self-emancipated, self-educated grocer was a reformer’s prodigy, and they did not want to see him fail. Just as important was that Steward was a fixture in the community; he literally had been around longer than almost every other person in the town. He benefitted because of his strong moral aptitude, but also because he was known, recognized, and vetted; he was a staple of the community. In the case of black residents, familiarity to the larger white community could be helpful.

Other blacks in the region also received support. Harriet Foster, the mother of six, lost her husband, John, a Syracuse barber, in 1851. John lived in Syracuse since at least the late 1830s. An appeal to the public was issued in a local paper to solicit help for the family shortly after Harriet was widowed. In the request to Syracusans to help build the family a small house on a lot, “which has been furnished for the purpose,” the editor assured residents that “Mrs. Foster is well and favorably known to our principal citizens.” “We can most heartily recommend her case to the community,” he concluded, “as deserving of their entire confidence and cordial
sympathy.”

The favorable reputation of the Fosters was undoubtedly due to John’s management of a successful business that served whites and his visibility in the larger community, as was Harriet’s role as President of the Ladies Mutual Aid Society.

Some black residents received support in the form of empathy, and occasionally in accolades, from their white neighbors. Two black whitewashers were accused of stealing a gold watch from the lady’s home while on the job. The lost watch was soon found in the home, and the two men were “honorably discharged from custody or suspicion.” Although the report of the alleged theft was reported in several papers, none printed that men were quickly exonerated. Noting the prolific condemnation of the black men when they were perceived as criminals, one editor finally published the conclusion of the case and insisted that “justice demands that the fact of their entire innocence of the charge should also be made public.”

Sarah Duell, “a fugitive slave,” who worked as a domestic, was given praise in the local paper for winning second place at the annual Mechanics fair for her hop yeast bread. A year later, she received the top prize for her recipe, which earned her additional

45 Syracuse Standard, 28 April 1851. John C. Foster disappeared from the city directories in 1851. In the 1855 and 1865 state census, Harriet is listed as a widow, as she is in the 1867 city directory. Inexplicably, “John C. Foster” is listed with the family in the 1860 federal census, and as a barber in the 1859-1860 City Directory.

46 Syracuse Reveille, 1 September 1849.

47 Syracuse Standard, 23 May, 1854.
praise in the newspaper. Accomplished and mannered, visible black community members who provided needed services were seen as praiseworthy and valued neighbors, but that does not necessarily mean that they were understood to be equal members of society.

John Contee, a “yellowish colored gentleman” was kindly remembered as the witty auction house crier who was “always good natured, and of a real cheerful and happy disposition.” Contee was admired for knowing his place, or at least appearing to. He was eager to run errands for other “gemmen” and responded with “quick and bright” replies, recalled a white Syracusan. Contee was most entertaining, though, when he donned his “suite of fine clothes and a white ‘top Benjamin’ hat.” His memorable “perambulation” in such finery amused residents nearly as much as the look of self-importance he flashed to onlookers as he sauntered down Salina Street. John Contee was not a threat to the established order. His forthright deference and charming manner endeared him to white residents, his exhibitions of flamboyance and grandiosity, later known as “stylin’” in the black community, were amusing

48 Syracuse Daily Record, 3.1 no.10 (1858). A Susan Bell, also noted as a fugitive slave, won first place at the fair the following year in the same category. It is probable with names that appear so similar when written by hand that Sarah Duell and Susan Bell was the same person. See Syracuse Standard, 19 February, 1859.

49 Unnamed newspaper clipping, December 1868, Syracuse, Onondaga Historical Association, in General Historical Facts—Reminiscences—General file.
rather than offensive to paternalistic whites. It helped, too, that Contee was a long-time resident of Syracuse; he was familiar, he was *their* black dandy.

Tenure alone, however, did not guarantee favorable standing in the larger community. Decency, sobriety, and industry also helped deserving black residents earn respect from others in the community. African-Americans who did not appear to conduct themselves in an acceptable manner, on the other hand, were not spared from the racists scorn. A poor, black section of Syracuse where “the most worthless and degraded” of the city’s “colored population” resided was referred to as a “nigger’s nest.” The same city paper that deemed Mrs. Foster “a worthy object,” referred to a servant who worked as a domestic for a white family on Warren Street as a “Hottentot Venus,” because she, “of course,” had a “host of darky lovers.” In actuality, it merely appears she had several suitors who fought for her attention upon her return from church one day. Although there was no mention of impropriety on her part, the young woman’s labors in taking care of a white family and her piety were dismissed because of her ease of attracting earnest admirers.

Regardless of the inconsistent assessments blacks were subjected to, western New York’s canal cities fostered the growth of small but stable, black communities.

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51 *Syracuse Standard*, 25 November 1854.

52 *Syracuse Standard*, 17 July 1855.
Community stability could be advantageous to hardworking, respectable black families. Not only was it because of its correlation with property ownership, suffrage, and middle class status, but just as importantly, it was imperative to forge relationships and productive associations with other residents, black and white. In short, stability led to familiarity, and familiarity led to opportunity. To no fault of their own, though, by midcentury the conditions that made success and mobility for black residents possible began to change. The cities’ socio-economic values matured, growth slowed, the reformer spirit waned, and the charter generation’s relaxed social hierarchy diminished.
Chapter 2
An Imagined Past

Erie Canal cities were beginning to stratify by the late 1840s, and Rochester’s black neighborhoods were the first to show the signs. There were fewer job opportunities for its black residents. In the decade leading up to the Civil War, a man’s skills no longer trumped race. Labor opportunities for black workers shifted between 1840, when a number of skilled black workers practiced learned trades, and the 1850s, when they were squeezed out of skilled and entrepreneurial occupations. As a result, Rochester’s black population suffered a decline that was nothing short of staggering. Change, too, came to black Buffalonians in the decade after the war, and to Syracuse’s black neighborhoods, as well, but to a much lesser degree.¹

Rochester’s reputation as the epicenter of the Burned-over District’s moral and social reform movements makes the matter of a faltering black community all the more puzzling. Too often scholars have assumed that because of its reputation as the center of evangelical social and moral reform, the city must have also been a virtual oasis to free and self-emancipated black settlers.² Frederick Douglass’s relocation

¹ Both Buffalo and Syracuse experienced temporary and smaller reduction of black citizens, though neither of them was ever home to fewer black residents than what they had in 1840.

there and success as a sharp witted, acerbic-tongued editor and social critic is often presented as evidence of the city’s progressive nature. The numerous fugitive slaves who came or passed through the region, often aided by people like Douglass, reinforce this hopeful, and yet contrived idea that Rochester was racially liberal and progressive. William S. McFeely romanticized Rochester and the workings of the Underground Railroad in his popular biography, *Frederick Douglass*. The Underground Railroad, “that famous conduit to freedom, so compelling to the American Imagination that it sometimes seems to dwell only in legend, was real indeed in Rochester,” he happily claimed.3 The nearby presence of other activists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who promoted universal rights, added to such promoters’ case-in-point. 4

Much of this interpretation stems from Rochester’s reform era, which needs to be reconsidered under the lens of race and race relations. Douglass did do very well in Rochester, where he published three successive antislavery newspapers and amassed thousands of dollars of real estate and investment property.5 But, his

3 McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 146.


5 Douglass kept his Alexander Street home as investment property when he bought a farm on South Avenue in 1852. In 1863 and 1865 Douglass bought lots adjacent to the farm. He also purchased property outside the city in Ogden, New York. See McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 171-172, 296.
financial security was never based on white Rochestarians’ patronage, which other
blacks in the city did rely upon. Many black pioneers, who settled in western New
York before the mid1840s, also did well. A number of those who arrived during the
boom time of the early canal years experienced economic mobility unmatched in
other eastern seaboard cities. With economic success came property ownership and
black male suffrage. Despite these successes, many of Rochester’s institutions
remained closed to its middle class black residents. Theatres, fraternal orders, clubs,
churches, and the district school system were segregated or closed to the black
population. Black equality was never on the agendas of Rochester’s early social
reformers. If anything, reformers focused on enforcing the traditional order of the
socioeconomic and racial hierarchy.

Sociologist Whitney Cross’s groundbreaking work on the Burned-over
District argued that western New Yorkers, Rochestarians in particular, were unusually
receptive to enthusiastic evangelical religion because of a unique combination of their
Calvinist heritage and the frontier sensibilities that came with being the region’s first
settlers. There is no doubt that Rochester was a “hot bed” for revivals and for
reform organizers, and it was a particularly favored city by Charles Grandison

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6 Quarles, Frederick Douglass, 88-95. David E. Swift, Black Prophets of Justice: Activist Clergy
Before the Civil War (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 82.

7 Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself (Boston: De Wolfe
and Fiske Co., 1892), 333.

8 Whitney Cross, The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic
Religion in Western New York, 1800 – 1850 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950). Also see, Judith
Wellman, “Crossing over Cross: Whitney Cross’s Burned-Over District as Social History”
Reviews in American History 17, no. 1 (March 1989):159 – 174; Ronald G. Walters, American
Finney, an itinerant evangelical minister who fanned the flames of religious enthusiasm that consumed the local sinners.\(^9\) Revivals, reformers, and movements—the assorted *isms* of spiritual and moral improvement—have been well studied by scholars including Paul E. Johnson, Nancy Hewitt, Milton Sernett, and Faye Dudden.\(^{10}\)

Moral and social reform had earnest devotees in Rochester, especially from the early 1830s through the mid-1840s. But it must be remembered that participation in camp meetings, revivals, and the activism that became unique to Northern communities was a system that followed a pattern of diminishing returns. Many more people attended revivals than converted; more converted than those who espoused perfectionist changes for themselves, and even fewer took on the task of cleansing the moral troubles of their neighbors and the social ills of society at large.

According to historian Paul Johnson, the reform movements spurred on by evangelical enthusiasm in the years sparked by Finney’s 1830-1831 revivals were devised by the city’s elite and business owners as a means to regain social control of the growing independence of the working classes. Rochester’s reform era was about control, not equality. A pious, sober, and literate workforce lent order, and made

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sense to a community that was undergoing a shift from frontier sensibilities and traditional craftsmen’s hierarchy to a modern market economy. “Whig politicians, industrial moralizers, temperance advocates, missionaries, and family reformers,” Johnson notes, “worked tirelessly to build a word that replaced force, barbarism, and unrestrained passion with Christian self-control.”11

Despite the scholarly attention local millennialists have received, there were only a small faction of these ardent crusaders in the community. Although the “spirit of missions” did extend beyond the improvement of laboring men, there were few community improvement societies that reached outside drives for church membership, temperance, Sunday closures, poverty relief, and other causes that addressed immediate and local issues. This was especially true in the decade or so after Finney set the town ablaze.12 The city’s largest and most active improvement societies focused on causes that produced measurable results. Reform organizations monitored Church attendance and they counted the number of religious tracts distributed to local residents. Trustees of the new city orphanage and house of refuge kept count of orphaned children and paupers that were in their care and safely bedded. Temperance groups sought the pledges of grocers to give up the profitable trade of alcohol, while Sabbitarianists enlisted merchants to shutter up their businesses on Sundays. For all their preaching and lecturing it was unquestionably


affirming that the acts of good deeds provided tangible outcomes. Results, after all, were essential for perfection.

Perfection was not something that could be achieved overnight. Charles Grandison Finney had concerns when his devout followers became zealous activists for benevolent causes invigorated by his evangelical teachings.13 This was especially true when it came to abolitionism. Antislavery writings should be “temperate and judicious,” he urged in Lectures on Revivals of Religion. The Church and its patrons, he advised, should not “be so absorbed” by the movement to abolish slavery that they “neglect the main question of saving souls in the midst of them.”14 In Finney’s mind, the hereafter outweighed the brutality of slavery in the here-and-now. Finney did believe that slavery was both a “national sin” and that its toleration by the Church through silence and in providing church membership to slaveholders was also evil.15 Practicing his beliefs that holding another being in bondage was a mortal sin, Finney refused to serve communion to visiting Southern slaveholders in his New York City churches just a few years after leading Rochester’s revivals. Still, those who enslaved black bodies were allowed the freedom to attend and sit in the pews of their choosing, whereas free black New Yorkers were confined to “negro pews.”16


16 Hardman, Finney, 273-275.
Segregated seating was enforced at the Manhattan’s Chatham Street Chapel and the Broadway Tabernacle when Finney was the pastor. The Tabernacle was built with theatric seating according to Finney’s specifications and funded by abolitionists Arthur and Lewis Tappan. Although he subscribed to abolition in theory, the reverend and a large majority of his evangelical congregation were firmly against social equality and interaction between the races. Racial amalgamation would not be tolerated in Finney’s churches despite the adamant protest of his generous benefactors and pressure from the black press.

A few years after Finney left New York City for Oberlin College, Lewis Tappan confided to a friend that “some of us thought that the ‘negro pew’ should be done away,” but we “were never able, though, Mr. Finney was the pastor, to abolish the distinction altogether, in seats, and allow people to sit, in fact, as they were invited to do so, wherever they chose.” As a result of Finney’s unwavering stand on restricting black church members to the galleries and the side slips of benches, Tappan, “finding nothing could be done in a matter so dear to my heart,” left the church he had helped to establish.

Finney was unwavering in his convictions that race-mixing was immoral. Though there is no direct evidence of how whites treated black Rochesterians during the 1830-31 revivals, it is unlikely that interracial mixing of any kind was welcomed much less encouraged. Austin Steward, a black Rochesterian, had little to say about

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18 Lewis Tappan to S.D. Hastings, 11 April 1841, quoted in Hardman, Finney, 274-275.
Finney’s revivals in his slave narrative that was published in 1861. “Professor”
Finney’s “faithful preaching of the gospel,” he simply recalled, brought many “to a
saving knowledge of the truth.” Reverend Thomas James, a self-emancipated New
York slave, founded a school for African American children on Favor Street in 1828
and began preaching the following year (Plate 10). In 1830, the same year Finney
arrived in Rochester, James purchased a lot on which the African Methodist
Episcopal (AME) Zion Church was built on Favor Street; he was ordained as a
minister in 1833. Despite James’s participation in the village’s religious culture, he
mentioned nothing at all about the revival period or of black participation during this
time of great religious reverie, and social and moral correction. James’s writings
speak a great deal for what he left unmentioned. The building of a black church and
school for black children makes clear that blacks were not part of the larger
community’s vision of social and moral uplift from its very beginning. Black
Rochestarians, therefore, were responsible to set their sights and establish their
pathways to success in the new city.

Among the few who desired a more egalitarian city was the Reverend Thomas
James, who was a founding member of an early interracial antislavery group in
Rochester. He, along with William C. Bloss, who cut his reformer teeth in the anti-
Masonic movement of the 1820s, and several other men began Rochester’s interracial

19 Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman*, Graham Russell Hodges, ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 72.

antislavery society in 1833. 21 A series of meetings to promote membership were held in the village courthouse that summer. The first was well attended by curiosity seekers, who, by the second gathering began to ask questions about the leanings of the society. But by the third antislavery meeting the crowd’s disapproving shouts drowned out the speakers’ pleas. The rowdy audience finally turned the lights out on the activists and closed down the meeting. The organizers relocated their meetings to the session room of the Third Presbyterian Church, where Finney’s invitation to the city originated. “But even there,” James lamented, “we were forced to lock the doors before we could hold our abolition meeting in peace.”22

James, Bloss, and others who worked for the freedom of enslaved black Americans also found resistance from local newspaper editors, as well. No paper would agree to print the new society’s constitution and by-laws. Bloss, in turn, decided to establish their own biweekly antislavery newspaper, The Rights of Man, in 1834 with the assistance of Reverend James. Though short lived, as most antislavery organs were, the newspaper was the first antislavery paper published in Rochester and was one of many reasons why Rochester has become so well known for its radicalism.

21 Rochester’s activist newspaper tradition got its start with the freemasonry movement in the mid-1820s. Thurlow Weed published the anti-Masonic newspaper, The Rochester Telegraph, from 1825-1828. In 1829 he relocated and began publication of the National Anti-Masonic Enquirer in Albany, New York; Solomon Southwick edited the Rochester Observer, which was also an organ for the freemasonry agenda.

22 James, Life of the Rev. James, 7.
Human rights issues such as abolitionism or women’s rights, which required long term commitments and provided few victories that could be accounted for, had little and intermittent support until later in the 1840s. It was just a few years shy of a generation between the Second Great Awakening’s initial effect on societal ills in the region, and the antislavery, and women’s rights movements of the late 1840s and 1850s, from which the region has gained enduring attention. There was certainly continuity between the two periods, but Rochester (and the nation) was a very different place in the 1850s than it was when Finney stocked his “anxious bench” in the early 1830s with Rochestarians who were “sweating their way into heaven.”\textsuperscript{23}

Reform came to western New York in two distinct waves. Moral reform and evangelical religious enthusiasm of the early 1830s was a reaction to the transformation of the village economy, the reorganization of labor, and the population shift to a more foreign character, as well as an endeavor to cleanse individual souls and purge societal ills that were attributed to excessive alcohol consumption.\textsuperscript{24} The second wave was perhaps more akin to a lunar tide—slow building and not as dramatic in its ability to wash over and claim residents to its causes as did the earlier evangelical tsunami. The second wave activists, those who were concerned with human rights issues and equality, gained momentum in the mid-1840s and were

\textsuperscript{23} Johnson, \textit{Shopkeeper’s Millennium}, 102.

championed by a group of people who were in many ways quite different from those spurred on by their own religious awakening a decade or two earlier.

Many of the human rights activists arrived in Rochester and western New York years after the fervor of Finney’s revivals of evangelical reforms settled and was reduced to a handful of notable causes, especially temperance and tract societies. As a part of the second wave of activists, Amy and Isaac Post came to Rochester in 1836 (Plate 12). If there was a center of Rochester’s second wave radicalism, the Posts’ home was its bulls-eye. Their house truly functioned as a “hot bed,” nurturing their small but passionate circle of friends in the ideology of not only antislavery, but also of equality and universal rights. Abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Gerrit Smith, and former slaves Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass were all close friends and welcomed guests at the Posts’ home. The couple supported a large network of international activists. While the dedication and enduring efforts of the Posts would prompt a nod of familiarity to some well-learned students of abolitionism, women’s rights, and spiritualism, secondary scholarship on their influence in all of these causes is sorely lacking.

Myron Holley, who held a powerful and fiscally rewarding post as an Erie Canal commissioner in charge of construction, settled in Rochester a year after the Posts, in 1837. Although Holley’s time in Rochester was brief, he died four years

25 Harriet Jacobs spent nearly a year with Isaac and Amy Post. She helped run the Posts’ household, “acting the Motherly part,” when Amy went on a protracted family visit to Long Island. She also maintained the Antislavery Reading Room while her brother, John Jacobs, spent much of the spring months of 1849 lecturing in nearby towns and villages; see Jean Fagen Yellin, ed., The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers, Volume 1 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 156, 149.
later in 1841, he is credited as the grandfather of the city’s enduring abolitionist legacy. Holley organized local antislavery activists, including the Posts, and tirelessly delivered lyceum lectures in the city and to surrounding towns. Together with Gerrit Smith, he was a founding member of the Liberty Party, and in 1839, Holley sold his large estate, Rose Ridge, to purchase a printing operation that he used to publish the second of the city’s short-lived but influential antislavery newspaper, The Rochester Freemen.  

Holley’s work as an antislavery lecturer, editor, and political activist was recognized by Douglass as paving the way for his successful publishing career in Rochester.

The mid-to late 1840s welcomed other reformers who are closely associated with Rochester’s acclaimed past. Susan B. Anthony’s parents and siblings relocated to the area in 1845; she followed four years later. In 1847 both Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass staked their claim as leading activists in the heart of


27 Jenny Marsh Parker, Rochester: A Story Historical (Rochester: Scrantom, Wetmore and Company, 1884), 231, 254-256; Adelaide Elizabeth Dorn, “A History of the Antislavery Movement in Rochester and Vicinity” (Master’s thesis, University of Buffalo, 1932). Douglass never met Myron Holley. Holley died in 1841 and Douglass did not visit Rochester until a speaking tour brought him through western New York in 1843. Nor did Douglass become involved with Gerrit Smith and the Liberty Party, of which Holley was a founding member, until after he settled in Rochester and began publishing The North Star in December 1847. It is not uncommon to find sources that make connections between Rochester antislavery activists that did not actually exist. Some of the problems can be traced back to Howard W. Coles, The Cradle of Freedom: A history of the Negro in Rochester, Western New York and Canada (Rochester: Oxford Press, 1941). Coles utilized rare documents and photographs that are especially attractive to historians, but he also used excerpts from published works, oral history, and reflection pieces all of which are without documentation. As a result, the text is as unreliable as it is a treasure chest and must be used with caution and much cross checking. Coles, for example has Myron Holley (who died in 1841), Joseph Bloss (confusing the son of William, who was born in 1839 and toddler at the time, with the elder), and Susan B. Anthony (who did not relocate to the area until 1849) all as part of the welcoming party to Douglass and other Garrisonians on their lecture tour through the state in 1843. See Coles, Cradle, 122-123.
the Burned-over District. These transplanted humanitarians, along with a score of local reformers, formed the area’s “fanatical” faction. Their attraction to the region, though, was not because of its reputation for evangelical revivals, churches, and its residents’ penchant for social and spiritual proselytizing as most revisionist history suggests.

In fact, almost all of those who became the most ardent of activists took issue with the hypocrisy of churches and their lukewarm stance on human rights issues and black slavery. Myron Holley made no secret of his opposition to the revelry of revivals. It was reported that Holley erupted into “vigorous protest” when the city’s “praying bands” interrupted children’s much needed schooling. The Posts, too, had issues with religious hypocrisy. They left the Hicksite sect in 1848 after repeated pressure from elders who found them too radical and far too dedicated to their antislavery activism. Frederick Douglass’s writings and speeches against the unchristian character of churches are well known. He and other antislavery speakers experienced the insincerity of Christian fellowship while on lecture tours to nearby towns and villages. It was while on the local lecture circuit that Douglass noticed that the “Anti-slavery operator… has the most abundant opportunities for measuring the pulse [of the] the malignant spirit of slavery.”

Douglass reported a misguided “moral and religious epidemic” occurring in the late 1840s that was wreaking “havoc” for itinerant antislavery lecturers in the

28 Parker, Rochester, 255.

29 Frederick Douglass, “Editorial Correspondence.” The North Star, 9 March 1849.
Unfortunately, John Jacobs, Harriet Jacobs’ brother and the proprietor of Rochester’s Antislavery Reading Room, who was also on the lyceum circuit, found that the “cause of bleeding humanity finds but few friends at protracted meetings and revivals of religion.” The late 1840s proved to be frustrating years for the lecturers in the Burned-over District. Douglass and Jacobs lectured together in the spring of 1849 and found the more “religious” the townspeople were, the less hospitable the area was to “niggers” who came to “teach white persons” about the sins of slavery and abolition. The character of revivals changed over a generation from prompting social action and moral perfection to a more self-centered form of piety. “They are all so busy in trying to save that invisible and undefined part of man called the soul,” Jacobs complained to Douglass, “that they will see his body, the image of God, trampled in the dust unheeded.” In town after town, the antislavery speakers encountered smaller and less welcoming audiences despite their adhesion to Christian churches. Within a year, Jacobs took a route that many black Rochestarians would also take in the 1850s. The one that got them out of town.

With all the local reform efforts borne from evangelical revivals, almost none questioned white supremacy. Even within the most passionate of antislavery societies few members were willing to subscribe to social mixing between blacks and whites, much less promote black parity along with their efforts to purge chattel labor from the

30 Douglass quoted in Yellin, Jacobs Family Papers, 130, 132.

31 Douglass quoted in Yellin, Jacobs Family Papers, 134.

32 John S. Jacobs to Frederick Douglass, after 7 April 1849, quoted in Yellin, Jacob Family Papers, 142.
country. Antislavery activism was not a movement for social and political equality or for universal human rights. Only the most zealous of activists denounced ideas of white superiority. In fact, just as the reestablishment of social hierarchy was an essential component of Rochester’s great revival period, where “lawyers, real-estate magnates, millers, manufacturers, and commercial tycoons led the parade of the regenerated,” traditional racial hierarchy was also reinforced.33

Historian Philip S. Foner explained that Frederick Douglass published *The North Star* in Rochester because the city “offered vast potentialities for an anti-slavery publication,” and was home to reformers including the Posts, as well as the Female Anti-Slavery Society.34 The most important and enduring benefit of Rochester’s reform era was the development of the city as a prolific printing center. Responding to a New York City newspaper charge that Rochester was a “hot-bed of isms,” Jenny Marsh Parker, the daughter of a local Millerite newspaper editor who grew up near the Douglass family, issued a corrective metaphor. Rochester, she explained, was actually “a bulletin board instead of a hot-bed … [for] the success of our isms has been rather in their publication with our exceptional facilities, than in any forcing process of the germs.”35

Besides Bloss’s *The Rights of Man* and Holley’s *Rochester Freeman*, Isaac Butts, the “impulsive” Barnburner, added the *Northern Freeman* to his publishing

33 Cross, *Burned-over*, 155.


35 Parker, *Rochester*, 245.
empire, which included a number of the city’s standard dailies and weeklies throughout the late antebellum and Civil War years. The *Voice of Truth and Glad Tidings of the Kingdom at Hand; Genesee Evangelist; Advent Harbinger;* and the *Star of Temperance* were just a few of the religious and reform sheets that kept Rochester’s presses in motion for decades through the antebellum period.

Frederick Douglass’s decision to relocate to Rochester was undoubtedly influenced by its fertile newspaper publication and the eclectic range of its banner causes. Shortly after Rev. Thomas James and Bloss published *The Rights of Man* James left the city and relocated several times to bolster AME Zion churches in black communities in New York and Massachusetts. By the early 1840s James settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts where he counted the young Douglass as one of his parishioners. Undoubtedly, James’s antislavery work and publishing experience became known to Douglass, whose fledgling career as an antislavery orator was just taking flight. For Rochestarians, when Douglass began publication of *The North Star* in December 1847, it was yet one more flyer for the city’s crowded reform bulletin board.


While Rochestarians in general were well versed in the causes held dear to local activists, religious reformers, and moral improvers—it truly was the culture of the city, which lingered for decades—they paid little attention to the economic well-being of their black neighbors. In fact, it was almost eerie how a small but very visible population of black citizens, the majority of whom lived in the third ward, went all but unacknowledged by the larger white community. Brief notations of black residents, most often of crimes committed by blacks, were published in newspapers, but there was little recognition of a black community in Rochester. And despite the fact that varying numbers of blacks lived within white households, shaved white faces, and whitewashed hundreds of the city’s homes, there is little to suggest an interconnected community of black and white Rochestarians despite the reputation of liberality that has been promoted by scholars.

A committee of the Rochester Anti-Slavery Society conducted an early survey of the city’s black community, which it published in The Rights of Man in 1834.\textsuperscript{40} The survey is the only comprehensive glimpse of black Rochestarians during the antebellum years. The article is both supportive and sympathetic to black residents, but it draws distinct lines between the “colored people” of the city and their white “friends.” Whites, it says, should “properly sustain” blacks so they might “soon rise to competency and respectability.” Surely, there were issues of class as well as race operating in this narrative, but there is nothing to suggest an underlying association or

\textsuperscript{40} This short summary is especially valuable because it is not until the 1850 and later censuses that such information was recorded and tallied. The survey allows us to compare skilled black tradesmen and school attendance, for example, with information from the 1850 census with the condition of the black community sixteen years earlier.
close relationships between these two groups of Rochestarians, even though the account was constructed by, arguably, the most progressive advocates of human rights in the region.⁴¹

At the time the inquiry was conducted in the spring of 1834, the same year Rochester gained its city status, black Rochestarians had organized several reform groups of their own including a temperance society and two antislavery associations: one was composed of men and the other of black women. Nancy Hewitt’s study of three distinct networks of women’s activist groups in Rochester mentions the “abolitionist work of [their] black female neighbors.” Hewitt writes that the activism of black women was so prolific that it may have “shamed” the white women in town into organizing their own antislavery society.⁴² Yet there is no evidence that any of the groups of women considered bridging the racial gap to unite their efforts for the cause. Unfortunately, no material from any of the black organizations appears to have survived. In fact, if not for the brief mention of Rochester’s black improvement and reform groups in the survey of Bloss’s antislavery newspaper any sense of community organizing in the antebellum period would be all but forgotten.

Sadly, though, the assessment of black life also gives evidence that the new city, fresh from its spiritual soul searching, was almost completely segregated save a score of black servants and farmhands, who boarded in white households, and through the interactions between whites and black service workers. Despite Reverend

⁴¹ The Rights of Man, 26 April 1834.

⁴² Hewitt, Women’s Activism, 81; Hewitt does not offer evidence for this assertion.
James’s association with the larger white antislavery society in the city, working class black residents, both men and women, organize themselves independently rather than join together with white reformers. It should be noted, however, that Rochester’s white antislavery advocates were by no means a cohesive group that shared a single philosophy of abolition and equal political and social rights. In fact, one early historian of the city noted that the rowdy crowd that disrupted the founding meetings of James and Bloss’s antislavery society in the village courthouse was not created by uninformed citizens. It was actually the handiwork of other abolitionist reformers who thought the inter-racial group of men was too radical in their promotion of immediate emancipation and especially of their unabashed support of equal political and social rights which were demonstrated in the formation of the group’s founding officers.43

Equality did not come to black Rochesterians. Churches, schools, and benevolent societies were either segregated or simply closed to black residents. The same applied to many theaters and other places of entertainment and recreation. There was, in fact, not an interconnected black and white Rochester; whites would not allow it. Rochester, much more than its sister cities of Buffalo and Syracuse, had an acute sensitivity to racial amalgamation. Assigning it almost disease like qualities, racial mixing was believed to have the characteristics of a contagion; once infected by the pairing of black and white residents, the sickness would spread throughout the city, its organizations, and its institutions. In his final autobiography published

43 McKelvey, Water-Power, 284-286.
twenty years after moving away from Rochester, Frederick Douglass remembered that “there were barriers erected against colored people in most other places of instruction and amusement in the city, and . . . were imposed without any apparent sense of injustice and wrong, and submitted to in silence,” when he began his publishing career. He also noted that over the second half of the nineteenth century the restrictions against black Rochestarians had “gradually been removed and colored people now enter freely, without hindrance or observation, all places of public resort.”

Douglass’s battles with the segregation of his daughter Rosetta at Tracy Seminary are well known, but the racism he met on the streets of downtown indicated, again, that Rochestarians’ often-touted progressive ideologies had distinct limits, even with Douglass. “The appearance upon the Main Street of Frederick Douglass with one of [the Griffiths sisters] on either arm seriously threatened the order of the town,” recalled Jane Marsh Parker. “Threats were openly made of what would be done if such aggressive demonstration of race-mixture were persisted in.” Douglass held his head high, and the Griffith sisters “fill[ed] the role of possible martyrs unflinchingly,” Parker remembered. Even Samuel D. Porter, who was the driving force for nearly a decade to desegregate the school system and a close friend

44 Douglass, Life and Times, 333.

45 Jane Marsh Parker, 6 April, 1985, quoted in Coles, Cradle of Freedom, 158.
of Douglass’s by the early 1850s, questioned his propriety, in addition to his public relationship and private friendship with Julia Griffiths.⁴⁶

Even as invited guests of local newspaper publishers and other gentlemen of standing to a celebration of the birthday of Benjamin Franklin in January 1848, Douglass and William C. Nell, a black Bostonian who helped publish The North Star, became the targets of racial purists. Some revelers referred to the black newspaper men as “intruders” and lamented it was “a violation of the rules of the society for colored people to associate with whites” much less to dine together in public.⁴⁷

Gaining the unabashed support of a couple of upstanding men, an “almost” unanimous vote in the end allowed the city’s two newest newspaper men to participate fully in the celebration. “Gentlemen of the Rochester Press, promoters of knowledge, lovers of liberty, foes of ignorance, despisers of prejudice,” Douglass said in an address to the gathering, “may you continue to give the world noble examples by a free and intelligent union of Black and White.”⁴⁸ It is difficult to assess how Douglass really felt about Rochester. It was not unusual for him to ladle on praise for tolerance in one breath, only to bring people to their knees in the next with a cutting assessment of their prejudices and the hypocrisy they practiced on a daily basis against their black neighbors and enslaved people.

⁴⁶ Samuel D. Porter, who helped Douglass hide fugitive slaves, wrote to Douglass about the “scandalous reports” circulating about Douglass and Julia Griffiths, Frederick Douglass to Samuel D. Porter, 12 January 1852 in Porter Family Papers, University of Rochester, Rare Books, Special Collections & Preservation.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Coles, Cradle of Freedom, 133.

⁴⁸ Frederick Douglass as quoted in Coles, Cradle of Freedom, 134.
Douglass, though, did give unqualified credit for his quarter of a century of success in Rochester to those antislavery publishers and activists who had “measurably prepared” the ground before him. He praised Holley, Bloss, the Posts, and Asa Anthony, Susan B. Anthony’s cousin and a founding member of the Western New York Antislavery Society, among others, in his last autobiography for their contributions to universal rights and their support of his efforts.49

Regardless of the encouragement Douglass received for his publishing ventures and numerous lecture series from a small circle of friends, life in Rochester, where at the end of his life he wrote that he felt “more at home…than anywhere else in this country,” was far easier for Douglass and his family than it was for less affluent black individuals and families.50 Besides having an international audience at his disposal, which was eager to read and sympathize with the injustices he recorded, Douglass did not rely on the community in which he lived for his financial livelihood, unlike every other black resident in the city. This was an immeasurable advantage, which even without considering the natural talent that set the editor apart, completely separated his experience as a black Rochestarian from the rest of the community.

Historical accounts that characterize Douglass’s success as a barometer of the racial harmony and advantages for blacks in antebellum Rochester are problematic. They mistakenly correlate the region’s reformist past to an imagined racially progressive character that simply never existed.

49 Douglass, Life and Times, 333.

50 Douglass, Life and Times, 333.
Chapter 3
Labor Woes and Good-byes

As the decade dawned, Rochester’s economy continued to grow and develop, but by the late 1850s black residents ceased to grow along with the rest of the population. In the decade before the Civil War black Rochestarians were being closed out of occupational opportunities that had allowed them to prosper for over two decades. The sudden change in their socioeconomic stability had a devastating effect on the black community. Twenty-five percent of African American residents left Rochester between 1850 and 1860 (Table 15). The black population did not recover to its antebellum numbers until 1890.1 Buffalo’s black community would experience a similar constriction in the labor market a decade later, though its effect was not as severe to the larger community in the port city. By comparison, Syracuse witnessed only a slight reduction in its black population in the 1850s, though it does not appear to have been precipitated by a restriction in the labor opportunities. Syracuse’s black community quickly recovered and grew by over one-third in the following decade.2

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1 There were 549 black Rochestarians in 1850. In 1890 the black population finally recovered its antebellum population numbers with 578 residents.

2 Syracuse’s black population did not begin to drop in the decade until after 1855. There were a number of large fires in the city in 1856 that devastated blocks of the downtown business district. It is unclear if this had an effect on working class black residents. It is also possible that the Panic of 1857 may have had an impact on all of western New York cities, as the Great Lakes region was the most affected by the economic downturn. James L. Huston, The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 262.
Professional, skilled, and entrepreneurial occupations were practiced by an average of one-third of black adults in Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse according to the 1850 census (Tables 7-10b). It is impossible to know how many skilled black craftsmen actually resided in canal cities but worked outside their field, but the percentages of those who practiced learned professions in Buffalo and Rochester, at 37 percent and 34 percent respectively, was greater than their counterparts in Boston where only 28 percent of blacks worked in the trades and in upper-level professions.

Syracuse blacks, though, closely mirrored the rate of Boston’s skilled laborers with 25 percent of workers in skilled trades. Syracuse, which stood on the western border of colonial settlement, differed from Rochester and Buffalo because it was accessible to the eastern seaboard and New England migrants before the Erie Canal fully opened the western half of the state in 1825.

Syracuse and other upstate towns that were accessible to early settlement attracted a steady stream of new residents when the canal opened, but because the towns already had a working structure they experienced slower growth and offered few opportunities for additional tradesmen, much less for black tradesmen. Boston, long established and settled, undoubtedly had few professional openings for migrant

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3 There were only a handful of occupations tallied in the 1840 census, and it is difficult to ascertain what individuals in a given household did for work or who they were as only the head-of household was listed. For black workers who lived with white families or in boarding houses and hotels with white residents it is impossible to determine who they were and what they did. In 1850 the federal census listed every person in the household and the occupations for each. The data includes only those with occupations listed in the 1850 federal census and in city directories, 1849-1851.

blacks that arrived after the Revolutionary War. Though Syracuse did not offer as many skilled jobs to black residents as Rochester and Buffalo, it was not as fixed as older eastern seaboard cities, either. After 1850 when the frontier nature of the towns had faded, the immigrant populations grew, and traditional social order began to set in, blacks in Rochester and Buffalo were squeezed out of upper-level occupations and trades. Because there were fewer blacks in these positions in Syracuse to begin with, there were fewer who suffered the loss.

Barbers made up the largest portion of skilled black workers in all three sister-cities in 1850. During the antebellum period barbering was one of the few skilled occupations opened to blacks. Blacks dominated the trade throughout many areas of the North and South. The highest percentage of barbers was in Buffalo where one in five black residents with an occupation was a barber (Table 10). As the number of black barbers suggests, their patrons were overwhelmingly white. The competition for customers meant that barbers had to constantly offer more services and products in handsomely appointed shops to meet their customers’ growing expectations. Few blacks could afford such pampering. Even if they could it may have been difficult for them to find a shop that would serve them. As race relations hardened most barbers ran segregated shops that were open only to white clientele. Even though barbers were often activists and leaders in their communities, they were able to separate their

role as boosters of racial pride from their business practices of providing services and goods to white patrons, and maintaining a profitable trade.⁶

Other skilled blacks in the region worked in a wide array of vocations; they were ministers, carpenters, blacksmiths, musicians, printers, masons, and basket makers. A cooper and a wagon maker also earned their livings there. Frederick Douglass’s work as a publisher of three antislavery and reform newspapers was far from typical, but there was entrepreneurial potential for minority residents. Nearly a dozen black grocers dealt staple goods and liquor from rented storefronts or from the front street-level room of their homes. Black peddlers hawked their wares from stands and cars on the streets, and sold goods door to door. There were also several black men who owned clothing cleaning establishments, and two saloon keepers.

It was illegal for blacks to work as cartmen in many larger cities across the South, and restricted by practice in some Northern cities, including New York City. But there were a half-score of black men in western New York cities who provided the valuable service of moving goods from canal warehouses and railroad platforms to all points throughout the cities.⁷ In larger cities cartmen often worked as an employee, but in the smaller upstate cities, cartmen owned their own horses and two wheel carts and sleighs for the winter months. The men contracted with canal boat


companies, warehouses, and store owners as independent operators. Women doing their daily shopping met cartmen at the grocers’ door as they unloaded fresh produce, oysters, barrels of crackers, sugar, bolts of fabric, and other goods on which urban dwellers came to rely. While not considered skilled worker, they were savvy business men who built a customer base from scratch and deftly drove fully loaded, well-balanced carts through a maze of streets and alleyways throughout the cities.

The majority of blacks, however, were semi or unskilled laborers who worked for a daily or weekly wage. The most fortunate of the common laborers found year-round employment as cooks in hotels, or as waiters, porters, janitors, servants and domestics. Service laborers worked throughout the year and had an advantage over canal workers, boatmen, gardeners, and whitewashers. Seasonal workers’ wage earning ability was limited by the freezing temperatures and lake effect snow that persisted up to five month of the year. A low paying position that offered a constant wage was preferable to temporary jobs that paid better, especially since there were no modern safety nets such as unemployment insurance or other aid to help the working classes.

Steady work and residential stability were important component to the success of blacks in the Burned-over District. Reliable work provided the means to settle in one place and build relationships with other residents and businessmen. Many who were not able to find regular work in a single trade became proficient in an array of fields. Frederick Douglass’s experience in New Bedford, Massachusetts as a newly

8 Service workers include cooks, porters, stewards, waiters, and barbers.
“free” man is a case in point. Douglass worked for a short period in New Bedford’s shipyards as a caulker but he was paid half of what white caulkers earned. A growing family obligated Douglass to find other means of support. He worked at numerous jobs including digging out cellars, shoveling coal, sweeping chimneys, making candles, and working nights in a brass foundry. He was lucky to find less menial and physically taxing work in what he would later characterize as the “servile” trades, as a table waiter and carriage driver. Douglass shifted between jobs for years as the seasonal labor needs in New Bedford changed. His adaptability to the community’s labor needs was typical of black workers who acquired a variety of skill sets and were eager to provide a secure home and future for their families.

John H. Brown’s occupational repertoire was not as vast as Douglass’s, but he, too, was resilient and flexible in order to make a good living for his family. Brown was listed in census records and in Rochester city directories over a remarkable thirty-year period with a number of occupations. Brown settled in Rochester in 1833 but first appeared in the 1840 Federal census as the head of household with no listed profession. He appears in records showing his various occupations over twenty more times. In 1841 he was first listed as a carman (cartman); 1844, laborer; 1845 and 1847, carman; 1849, porter; 1850 laborer; 1851, clerk; and in 1853, 1855, 1857 and again 1860 he was listed as a cartman. For the

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next nine listings from 1861 through 1871, however, he was listed as a laborer. Brown likely preferred the lucrative but physically demanding work of a cartman, but he was not able to maintain his business after 1860. Brown’s wife, Rebecca, also worked hard. She maintained their home, raised their six sons, and tended to boarders the family occasionally took-in. Brown was one of many untrained black men whose labor skills were seconded only by their tenacity to make their way.

Unfortunately we do not know why Brown stopped working as a cartman. He may have done so on his own accord. He might have been injured or simply grew too old for the demands of the job. It is also likely that he was squeezed out of the well-paying trade by the changing labor conditions in Rochester. Since two of the Brown’s working age sons worked as a steward and a waiter in a saloon, and not as cartmen, it appears their father lost his carting business to white competitors as did the rest of Rochester’s black cartmen by 1860.10

The determination of the Browns and others like them who could maintain a steady income paid off. In 1845 Brown had a homestead worth $600. The Browns moved by 1855 to 36 Glasgow Street in Rochester; their new wooden home was valued at only $600. Only five years later, though, it becomes clear that Brown was not only a savvy cartman, but he was a shrewd investor, as well. Between 1855 and 1860 he improved his property and doubled its worth to $1,200. Its value increased

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10 Service positions ceased to pay as well as they once did after the Irish took over the trades by undercutting black workers in the 1850s. Brown’s sons are listed in the 1865 New York State census. John at 26 is a Steward; Edward, 16, is a waiter; and Samuel, 22, “ran away from home and went in the army and they don’t know what regiment,” the census enumerator noted. By the 1870 census none of the Brown’s children are listed as residents of Rochester.
again to $1,400 by 1865. Whether working as a cartman, porter, waiter, or at other jobs, Brown’s work was never easy and his earnings relied upon white patrons. But, his ability to secure year round work enabled him to provide very well for his family and it earned him a place in line as a black voter in New York State.

Property records show a surprisingly high percentage of unskilled black workers who enjoyed relative stability despite the limitations of their education, training, or race (Table 12-12b).11 The percentage of black head of households, regardless of their occupation, who owned property varied between the three cities, but they far exceeded propertied blacks in almost all other cities.12 For example, only 4.5 percent of black Bostonians owned real property in 1860.13 The lowest percentage of property ownership by black head of households in the sister cities was in Rochester with 24 percent owning real property. Twenty-six percent of Buffalo’s black families lived in their own homes. Surprisingly, it was in Syracuse’s small

11 Property ownership tallies are taken from the 1850 federal census, which lists value of real estate and occupation. It is assumed that property owners that did not have an occupation listed in the census record or the city directories were common laborers, and are included in the unskilled tallies.

12 Historians have used several different formulas to calculate the percentages of real property ownership, which makes comparisons between data sets somewhat difficult. I divided the total number of black households by the number of black propertied householders. Leonard Curry, however, calculated the percentage of property owners by taking the number of property holders and dividing it by the total number of black residents. Curry used the recapitulation data provided from the federal census bureau based on the 1850 census. I calculated my statistics by tallying the 1850 questionnaire forms for each city that were filled out by the census taker who gathered the information from every household. My information for Buffalo (the only city that both Curry and I examined) varies from Curry’s by only a few tenths of a percent. See Leonard Curry, The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of a Dream (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981) 267-269.

13 Horton and Horton, Black Bostonians, 10-12.
community of black families where propertied blacks were most common at 29 percent of all black households.\textsuperscript{14}

More surprising, however, is the proportion of \emph{unskilled} workers who owned property. Syracuse and Rochester’s unskilled workers made up 75 and 66 percent of each respective city’s black work force. Despite their earnings in lower waged occupations, they comprised 50 percent of black property owners in both cities. Buffalo’s unskilled laborers, 67 percent of all black workers, made up an immense portion at 63 percent of blacks who owned real estate.\textsuperscript{15} Obviously, unskilled laborers did not own property in proportion to their numbers, but in 1850 at 50 and 63 percent of black property owners, laborers were limited less by their training and local hiring practices than by their determination.

Of the nearly two-thirds of black unskilled deed holders in Buffalo, 67 percent of those (80 of 119) worked in year-round trades. Many labored in service trades as cooks, waiters, porters, and servants. Undoubtedly, some of the twenty men who were listed as common “laborers,” like Brown in his later years, also worked all year.

\textsuperscript{14} There was one black widowed property owner in Syracuse and two in both Buffalo and Rochester in 1850. There was also a married woman in Buffalo and one in Rochester who were listed in the census as property owners. Neither of these women were listed with occupations, therefore, I used their husbands occupations in the tallies. If an occupation could be found for widowed property owners her occupation was used accordingly, if not, then she was counted as a common laborer as she likely took in borders, or worked as a laundress or seamstress. New York State passed the Women’s Property Act in 1848 which allowed women to maintain sole ownership of real or personal property she acquired before marriage or acquired during marriage. The law also protected a woman’s property against her husband’s debts. The law was expanded in 1860 to include a woman’s right to her earned wages, to sue and be sued, and to have joint custody of her children.

\textsuperscript{15} The occupations of 2 percent of Buffalo’s, 6 percent of Rochester’s, and 5 percent of Syracuse’s black property owners are unknown.
But, with no specialization it is just as likely that many were day laborers who worked as hired hands when work became available.

John H. Brown had the advantage of being a resident of Rochester his entire adult life. The contacts and relationships he forged working as a cartman certainly came in handy when he needed to find other work. The 67 percent of Buffalo’s unskilled black land owners worked in trades that offered employment year-round, indicating how vital such occupations were to the stability of black community. The whitewashers and common laborers who made up the remaining 30 percent very likely found other means of employment when inclement weather struck; no working class person could be out of work for five or six months a year, and support a family and retain property, as well. Similar to Buffalonians, 62 percent of unskilled workers in both Syracuse and Rochester worked in non-seasonal occupations. For antebellum blacks, securing a position as a cook, porter, janitor, or other year-round labor provided the means to achieve a stable, middle class existence for their families.

By the early 1850s, though, the black community in Rochester began to experience an economic downturn. The most striking evidence that something was amiss for Rochester’s black community was a surprising drop in its population in the 1850s, a decline that was not mirrored by African-American communities or any other group of the population in Rochester or in its canal sister cities of Buffalo and Syracuse. Buffalo’s black population grew by 41 percent or just over 200 people between 1840-1870. Syracuse, too, gained almost two hundred black residents; though starting with a much smaller population in 1840 the 84 percent increase was
quite remarkable. Rochester, however, lost 5 percent of its black population over the same period, losing an astonishing one in four people during the 1850s, and recovered just a handful in the following decade. Rochester was not only losing its African American population, it was not attracting them. In 1855 Buffalo gained thirty-eight black households within the previous three years. Syracuse added eleven which was on par with Buffalo proportionately. Rochester added but three.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 is often cited as the cause of a mass exodus of blacks residing in the North, including Rochester. Buffalo and Syracuse experienced fugitive slave cases shortly after the enactment of the law. Daniel Davis was arrested as a fugitive slave while he worked as a second cook on a steamer on Lake Erie. His trial was in Buffalo in August, 1851. The famous “Jerry Rescue” occurred in Syracuse in October that same year. Both self-emancipated slaves were freed: Davis by a judge, and Henry by members of the Liberty Party who broke him out of the city jail. If any western New York cities’ black residents might flee from fear, it would be from the two cities where the threat was made all too real. But

16 Many citations used by scholars lead back to an article in the New York Evening Post from March 1851. The article was copied and published in an issue of The North Star (see note 20) and in The Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, Presented at New York, May 6, 1851 (New York: William Harned, 1851), 31.


neither Buffalo nor Syracuse suffered such loses, which is partly to the credit of the public outcry against the law by many black and white residents alike. Historian Stanley Campbell’s assessment that “strong opposition to enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law in New York was confined, for the most part to the western part of the state,” is an exaggeration, but the region certainly had its share of candid opponents.19

An article in the New York Evening Post in March 1851 claimed Buffalo’s black Baptist church lost 130 members, and their Methodist church lost “a considerable number” due to blacks fleeing because of the Fugitive Slave Act. The Post also alleged “the Colored Baptist church at Rochester, which formerly numbered one hundred and fourteen communicants, has lost them all except two.”20

George Weir Jr., a grocer from Buffalo and the son of Buffalo’s first AME minister, wrote a corrective letter to the Frederick Douglass’ Paper.21 “The report” he said, was “entirely incorrect and without the least shadow of foundation.” He did not know of more than three people who fled the city, and he assured Douglass that “We are not so easily frightened as to leave our homes in consequence of any such

19 Campbell’s claim that protests against the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act was “confined” to western New York was probably influenced by the publication of two black newspapers in the district at the time, Douglass’s, The North Star, in Rochester, and Samuel Ringgold Ward’s paper, The Impartial Citizen, which was published in Syracuse. Ward was a key participant in the rescue of “Jerry” Henry. Both papers were prolific in their reports of opposition to the law, as were other local papers. There was protest across the North against the law, by both black and white residents. See Stanley Harrold, Border War: Fighting Over Slavery before the Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 138-158; Stanley W. Campbell, The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1580-1860 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 52.


21 Buffalo Daily Republic, 4 October, 1850; The North Star, 24 October, 1850.
machinations of the Devil.” Weir was the elected secretary for a number of “mass meetings of Colored citizens” that organized in opposition to the 1850 law. In fact, according to the Buffalo Baptist Association’s annual reports, the Michigan Street Baptist Church’s membership grew between 1849 and 1852 when it crested with 93 members; the church never counted 130 members in the antebellum era. Census data backs up Weir’s claim with hard numbers; folks were not leaving Buffalo for the safe haven of Canada, or for any other reason (Table 15). Black Buffalonians, though, undoubtedly took a special offence to the new law which was authorized by the signature of a former Buffalonian, President Millard Fillmore.

Horace Hawkins, the minister of Rochester’s Third Baptist Church that reportedly lost 112 of its 114 members, however, did leave the city. He returned to London, Ontario where a few years before he had married Sarah Paul. There is no membership list from the Third Baptist Church, which was organized just five years earlier, but from the five known trustees, at least three of them, along with their families, remained in the city for some years after their supposed exodus. The claim that 114 people belonged to the church, 20 percent of Rochester’s black population, is far-fetched. In addition, Rochester’s black Baptist church continued to serve the


23 Sadly, this would change a decade later when black Buffalonians suffered a loss of economic and professional opportunities not unlike what happened in Rochester in the 1850s.

community for years after its supposed collapse. There is no doubt, though, that Rochester’s black community suffered in the 1850s and a good portion of them did abandon the area. The restricted employment opportunities in Rochester was the real causes of the departure of residents rather than the fear of a sudden rash of slave hunters appearing in upstate New York.

The unprecedented growth in the 1830s and 1840s took a downturn in the 1850s. Slower growth combined with inflation, stagnant wages, and immigrant labor competition greatly affected the working classes. Blacks, who worked in the lowest wage-earning occupations, suffered the most. The wholesale price of goods including staples such as meat and dairy products increased in the early 1850s. Pork prices, for example, increased 40 percent from $12.50 per cwt. to $17.50 in just three years between 1850 and 1853. As a result, the retail price of ham rose over 69 percent from 6.5 cents per pound to 11 cents. Wages, though, did not follow the upward trend.

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25 The trustees in 1849 were Grandison Boyd, Benjamin Foster, William Moore, George Frances and Harrison Powell. See The North Star, 9 March, 1849. In 1849 or early 1850 members of the Third Baptist Church raised $850 to purchase a lot on Ford Street for the Church. The church was occasionally referred to thereafter as the Ford Street Baptist Church. See Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 17 June, 1853. The Third Baptist Church was listed in the 1869-1870 city directory, but it was sold at auction in January 1871. See Union Advertiser, 27 January 1871.

26 Rochester’s population grew between 1820-1830 by 513%; 1830-1840 by 119%; 1840-1850 by 80%; and 1850-1860 by 32%. Buffalo’s population growth dropped between 1860-1870, exactly when blacks in that city began to lose occupational and economic opportunities. See Gutman and Glasco, “The Buffalo, New York, Negro.”

The 1850s saw a resurgence of trade unions and protests in Rochester against the due-bill system, excessive work hours, and flat wages.28 Despite the fact that prices were going up and wages remained low, profits were soaring—it was clear to those at the time “that those who buy labor at old prices and sell its products at the present enhanced prices, gain precisely as much as labor loses.”29 Because of the growing divide between labor and the town’s elite business owners and nascent industrialists, at least ten new labor unions and mutual aid societies formed in the city. There were only five labor strikes in the fifteen years before 1850 in Rochester, and that number increased to seventeen from 1851 to 1860.30

Another assault on the working classes was the mechanization in the production of goods and the growth of factories. Factory work reduced the demand for labor and it also changed the workforce though utilizing the labor of women. Young, single women were often employed at a fraction of the wages men earned. Although factory work did not pay well, blacks were effectively excluded from industrial occupations. More of a threat to black workers was the increase in immigrant laborers that “dr[o]ve out large numbers from their places” of employment. “It brings no comfort to the laborer,” a sympathetic local editor lamented, to be told “‘you must hold on awhile till demand over takes supply,’ the

28 The due-bill system was a means of payment employers used to pay their workers’ wages that could only be redeemed at certain retail establishments at inflated prices.


30 The evidence is not clear if blacks were accepted as members to the Cartmen’s Mutual Association, which formed in 1849, or any other labor organization. Gleeson, Labor in Rochester, 194-196.
very thing the laborers declares his inability to do, since to cease to work is to
starve.”31

Irish immigrants who settled in cities undercut the going rate of local labor and gained an advantage by displacing unskilled workers. The influx of untrained immigrants had a negative effect on all unskilled laborers. But while some whites were common laborers, most black men occupied the ranks of the semi and unskilled work force and worked for the lowest wages. As a group, blacks were uniquely affected by the foreign incursion. Black men were pushed out of service trades, and replaced as laborers and cartmen. Black women who worked in white homes as domestics and cooks were replaced by Irish lasses.32

Blacks, however, could not simply do to the Irish as the Irish did unto them. Labor historian Noel Ignatiev points out that to a certain degree the competition between Irish and blacks for labor and housing was not racial, but was simply the market economy at work. “Thrifty Yankee” bosses were eager to hire laborers who would work for the lowest possible wage. The growing preference of Irish workers was not a method that employers used as a demonstration of racial unity, but it was adherence to the capitalist credo to get the most benefit with the least investment. In fact, Ignatiev argues that before the Civil War it was unclear as to what race the Irish belonged. Whiteness, he claims, was not so much a physical description as it was a designation of social relationships. The poverty of Irish immigrants along their

31 Rochester Daily Advertiser, 7 April 1853, quoted in Gleason, Labor in Rochester, 72n.

willingness to do the same labor as free blacks (for lower wages) and live in black neighborhoods made some natives referred to the Celts as “niggers turned inside out.”

Nevertheless, even if the racial identity of Irish immigrants was inscrutable, blacks were, if nothing else, decidedly not white. The Irish needed to create a distinction between themselves and black Americans in order to scale the socioeconomic and racial ladder—to show that they were categorically not black. They followed the practices of white workers after edging blacks out of service positions and other vocations, and claimed the rights of white superiority which included the refusal to work together with blacks. By claiming whiteness through prejudicial practices, the Irish fundamentally changed the displacement of black workers from the result of a competitive labor market to one of racial hierarchy. “And through this racial attitude,” historian Charles H. Wesley, explained, “the Negroes were excluded very gradually from many occupations,” even those that were considered black vocations such as service work and menial labor. Rochester’s black community was quite small, and thus the process of occupational exclusion and economic erosion was not gradual at all.

33 Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 41, 111.

34 Douglass experienced this on the wharves in New Bedford, Massachusetts. “I was told that every white man would leave the ship in her unfinished condition if I struck a blow at my trade upon her.” See Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), 260–261.

“The old avocations, by which colored men obtained a livelihood, are rapidly, unceasingly and inevitably passing into other hands,” noted Frederick Douglass in 1853. “Every hour sees the black man elbowed out of employment by some newly arrived emigrant, whose hunger and whose color are thought to give him a better title to the place.”

Douglass saw the “newly-arrived emigrant from the Emerald Isle… becoming house-servants, cooks, stewards, waiters, and flunkies.” The destabilization of Rochester’s black community was too abrupt to ignore.

Even though Douglass’s relationships with local blacks were quite limited, he witnessed the economic decline of residents, including Charles Joiner. Douglass lived in Joiner’s home when he first moved to Rochester in 1847, until his wife, Anna, and their children arrived several months later. Joiner, who Douglass referred to as “my dear friend,” was an entrepreneur; he owned a clothes scouring business. He had maintained a storefront a few blocks from his home as early as 1844. The city directories, however, indicate that at some time between mid-1850 and 1851 Joiner lost the storefront and the business entirely. Sadly, Charles Joiner resorted to

36 Frederick Douglass, “Learn Trades or Starve! ” Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 4 March 1853.

37 Douglass, Life and Times, 367.

38 Frederick Douglass to Martin Delany, 12 January, 1848. From The Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress, 1848 (Series: General Correspondence). http://memory.loc.gov/mss/mfd/03/03004/0001d.jpg. At the end of the letter Douglass includes a note to Joiner asking him to “let me share mystery in the art of manifold letter writing.” Manifold writing is the ability to make copies of letters while writing by inserting carbon paper or other types of transferable inks between sheets of paper.
working as a “domestic” servant. Along with his profession as an independent proprietor Joiner undoubtedly lost his pride, as well.\textsuperscript{39}

Inflation and flat wages were not unique to Rochester in the 1850s, but they worked in tandem with the city's growing manufacturing base and its Irish population that competed directly with black residents. Many white business owners, bosses, and patrons chose to support new white immigrants over black Rochestarians, some of whom lived in the city for over a generation. Together, these factors forced many blacks out of occupations that had previously fostered a strong and expanding black community. Just as white benevolence and activism did little to aid the achievements of their black neighbors, they also did little to save them.

Neither Buffalo nor Syracuse’s economies were based on the manufacturing of goods. The shift to mechanization and factory work in the mass production of commodities, then, had little immediate impact on labor in the two cities. Buffalo was home to more immigrants in both real and relative numbers than was Rochester, but Germans made up the majority of that city’s alien population. German immigrants typically arrived in the United States with money and skills and had little need to compete with blacks for labor or housing. Syracuse’s largest immigrant group was the Irish, but Rochester’s Celtic population far outnumbered Syracuse’s. As a result, black Rochestarians’ livelihood suffered more due to the combination of

\textsuperscript{39} See Rochester City Directories, 1844; 1845; 1847; 1848; and 1851. Joiner paid for a subscription to \textit{Frederick Douglass’ Paper} until at least April, 1852 and there is no indication of a son with the same first name so it is unlikely that the “domestic” is anyone but the former business owner. See \textit{Frederick Douglass’ Paper}, 15 April 1852; 20 April 1855.
inflation, declining wages, changes in labor due to industrialization and the incursion of unskilled immigrant labor.

The losses suffered in Rochester’s black community were devastating. While there was an overall decline of about one-third of unskilled black workers in Rochester from 1850 to 1860 (93 to 67 laborers), the overall proportion of black men working these jobs increased by 5 percent (Tables 10a, 14a). Even more detrimental to the livelihood of black families was that black men lost their footing in service occupations that provided year-round work. There were 13 black cooks in 1850, but only 3 were employed ten years later. Black waiters were cut by a third, and by 1860 all of the city’s black porters were replaced with white workers. The number of blacks working as whitewashers, who at best could only count on seven months of work, limited by freezing weather, snow and ice for the remaining five, though, increased by over 70 percent.

Although the masculinity and respectability of black men who held positions in the “servile” trades may have been questioned by some black leaders, the evidence that their work enabled them to lift their families into the middle class is without question. Of the 33 black property owners whose occupations are known in 1850, 9 worked in service trades (Table 12a). The city’s skilled black men suffered during the 1850s, too. The number of black tradesmen and business owners was reduced by just over 40 percent (46 to 27). The city’s black barbers alone lost over one-third of their colleagues, and all four black grocers closed up shop within the decade. The
city lost 3 of its 4 black cartmen. The one remaining cartman, John H. Brown, lost his carting business in 1861.

Buffalo, on the other hand, maintained the same number of skilled workers, though the overall black population grew. And black Syracusans added a couple more skilled men to their neighborhoods. Buffalo and Syracuse’s black citizens continued to hold their ground. But, blacks did not improve their economic status or skills to move up in the labor hierarchy in any of the sister-cities.

Even for those residents who continued to work, property ownership for black Rochesterians was slightly more difficult to attain than for black families in Buffalo and Syracuse. Devastating to the black neighborhoods of Rochester was that many of the occupations that supported the greatest proportion of land holding were the same occupations that black workers were losing. Three-quarters of the cartmen owned property in 1850, for example, as did nearly 40 percent of cooks and 25 percent of the black community’s grocers. The loss of property was not always immediate, but black parents must have been concerned about the chances their children had at maintaining the middling class standard of living they worked so hard to obtain.

They were right to be concerned. Although Rochester’s economy continued to grow and diversify, blacks were essentially closed out of opportunities to retain their economic stability during the 1850s. Those that managed to hold on to service positions did not fare well either, as those vocations that were undercut by Irish immigrants no longer paid enough to lift a family into home ownership much less to amassing any kind of wealth.
Frederick Douglass reacted swiftly to the decline of black Rochestarians. In the 1850s the antislavery champion made the plight of free Northern blacks a primary issue in his newspaper and speeches. Douglass insisted that the best remedy for what was ailing free blacks was to “Learn a trade or starve!” “Men are not valued in this country, or in any country, for what they are: they are valued for what they can do.” African Americans must learn to make things with their hands, he argued. The only way to gain respect by white society, he reasoned, was to produce goods that are of value to society.  

Black leaders supported the proposal to establish an industrial college at the National Colored Convention that was held in Rochester during the summer of 1853. Douglass wrote to Harriet Beecher Stowe to solicit financial backing for the black college. Despite the request and the publication of the letter in Douglass’s paper, Stowe refused to help.

Douglass seemed to have forgotten his experiences as a ship’s caulker in Maryland and Massachusetts. In reality, black tradesmen were not any more immune to the economic and occupational crises experienced by other black workers. In 1850 there were eleven practicing tradesmen in Rochester: three masons; three blacksmiths; two shoemakers; a wagon maker; a cigar maker; and a tanner. By 1860

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40 Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 4 March 1853.

41 Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 15 July 1853; Ripley, Black Abolitionist Papers, 293-297.

42 Frederick Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 8 March, 1853 in Proceeding of the National Colored Convention Held in Rochester, July 6th, 7th and 8th, 1853 (Rochester: Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 1853), 33-38. Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 2 December 1853.
none of them remained the city.\textsuperscript{43} Passing on the knowledge of a skilled trade did not ensure economic mobility as long as blacks relied upon white patronage. In addition, many of the trade unions of the 1850s worked to keep black laborers out of skilled trades and blocked them from membership in organized labor groups and craft guilds.\textsuperscript{44}

Statistics, charts, and tables effectively illustrate the loss of wages, jobs, skilled trades, and the property of black Rochestarians in the middle of the nineteenth century. Data, however, does little to remind us that the numbers represent real people and families who were trying to make their way. The Cleggetts were a black family that moved to Rochester during this volatile period. In many ways their experiences exemplify the changes that ravaged antebellum black Rochestarians. Though their histories are not complete, and some suppositions are made, a remarkable amount of evidence remains to piece together their stories.

David Cleggett, a black shoemaker, moved to Rochester with his wife, Mary,

\textsuperscript{43} One of the shoemakers, David Cleggett, passed away in 1852.

and their young sons in the early 1830s. There were nine shoe making establishments in the village at that time. A few of the larger shops employed up to twenty apprentice and journeymen shoemakers who worked side by side in large backrooms or above a storefront where bespoken orders were placed and less expensive ready-made shoes were available for purchase. The quiet work of a shoemaker allowed them to listen to stories read from newspapers and pamphlets while at their benches, and pass the day debating the contents. Though the days were long, the six to nine dollar a week wage kept them well enough. The smallest shops in the city employed only a master shoemaker. The sole proprietor might keep a few cottage workers to sew or cut leather pieces from time to time business was too brisk to manage on his own.

Within ten years the largest of Rochester’s shoe manufactures employed a hundred shoemakers—five times the number a decade earlier—who produced several

45 George S. Conover, Lewis Cass Aldrich, eds., The History of Ontario County, New York (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1893) pt. II, 274. The short biography of Benjamin Franklin Cleggett that appears in Conover’s history was written more than twenty years before Cleggett’s death. The details provided are so precise that its likely Benjamin wrote or dictated the entry. The parentage of Benjamin Cleggett is well established. But the relationship of James, Otis, and Alfred to David and Mary, who are very likely their parents, is not without question, though there is little doubt they are closely related—James, for instance, is buried in the family plot in Mount Hope Cemetery. David and Otis Cleggett appear for the first time together in the 1847 Rochester City Directory, where they are listed as shoemakers who reside together at 134 Mt. Hope Avenue. Alfred appears in the 1849 City Directory (there is no directory for 1848) as the proprietor of a shoemaking establishment, which was likely a family endeavor. The 1850 census indicates that Mary was twice widowed, and had nine children. Solomon, another son who was two years younger than Benjamin, only appears in the 1855 census (listed as “son”), and the 1859 and 1863 city directories.

46 Rochester was incorporated as a city in 1834.

thousand pairs of shoes for export each month. The transition from hand-crafted
goods, to mass produced, standardized wares assembled by pieceworkers in factories
was quick and devastating to skilled artisans. By 1848 there were only two more
shoe manufactures than in 1831, but in total they employed five hundred workers who
mass produced goods for the cut-rate salary of about three-dollars a week.48

Rochester’s shoemaking industry grew fast and developed mechanically even
closer. In the early1850s Singer sewing machines were modified to handle the
stitching of leather shoe uppers. A few years later dies were developed that worked
tirelessly, stamping out perfectly uniform soles by the thousands. By the start of the
Civil War shoe manufacturing in Rochester was an industrial enterprise. Output
doubled between 1855 and 1860, and then nearly tripled again, between 1860 and
1865 at an estimated value of $1,428,800. By the 1870s shoe manufacturing was the
city’s leading industry.49 Only a few craftsmen remained working at their benches
through the transition to mass manufacturing.

The Cleggetts were likely drawn to Rochester in the early 1830s because of
the labor opportunities created by growing population. The family lived in
Manchester, which was little more than a four-corner town, thirty miles southeast of

48 McKelvey estimated the five-hundred workers earned an aggregate $75,000 a year, or $3 per
employee. Of course, men were paid more than the women, and women were paid more than the

Rochester in neighboring Ontario County, where Mary grew up. Located seven miles too far south of Erie Canal to benefit from economic and population growth, the town of less than 3,000 residents offered limited work for the black shoemaker and even less hope for the his children’s future.

Unfortunately, nothing survives to give us a hint of what David did to earn a living when the family settled in Rochester in the early 1830s. Perhaps he got a foot into the local shoe trade by sewing uppers at home at piecework rates. He may have worked intermittently for a proprietor shoemaker when business demanded an extra set of well-trained hands. David might even have worked in a large shop’s back room alongside of other craftsmen. Maybe he was liked by them, or maybe the group of shoemakers felt like the carpenters in C.F. Williston’s shop who threatened to quit when a black woodworker was hired to work the lathe. We just do not know. It is also entirely possible that David was not able to find any work in his field, and instead worked as a day laborer, cook, or whitewasher, the most common jobs for black men, to support his family.

Whatever their situation was, it did not suit the Cleggetts. Because what is known is that the Cleggetts left Rochester after only a couple of years. The prospective opportunities of the large and growing population in Rochester certainly

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50 Benjamin’s birth place is listed in the 1855 New York State Census as Manchester, Ontario County in the year 1830. His short biography correctly identifies his birth year as 1828 and states he was born in Dutchess County, New York. The 1855 census also indicates that his mother, Mary, was born in Ontario County.

surpassed any potential the small town of Manchester’s could bare. David was a stranger to the community, and he was probably too late to get a secure footing into the city’s highly competitive shoe trade, especially for a black craftsman.

The Cleggetts relocated to Toronto where David worked in his trade and was relatively successful. David and Mary maintained a residence on King’s Street, where they raised their growing family, and educated their sons.\textsuperscript{52} Despite all they accomplished in Toronto, they returned to Rochester after ten years in Canada, in 1847. James, probably the oldest of the Cleggett children, did not move to Canada with the rest of the family. He settled in Rochester with his wife and children about three years before the family’s return. The three next oldest of the Cleggett’s boys, Alfred, Otis, and Benjamin, were well educated and were also taught skilled trades while were growing up in Canada.\textsuperscript{53} Schooling and vocational training must have been very important to their parents, who were both illiterate.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} John Ross Robertson, \textit{Landmarks of Toronto: A Collection of Historical Sketches of the Old Town of York from 1792 until 1833, and of Toronto from 1834 to 1898} (Toronto: self-published, 1898), 226, 263. The Cleggetts appear in the Toronto City Directories in 1843, and 1846. In both, they reside at the same address. The 1837 directory is the only one available before the 1843 issue, which may have been too early to indicate their presence. Toronto’s city directories can be accessed online at http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/digital-archive/.

\textsuperscript{53} My assertion that the Cleggett children were well educated is based on Benjamin’s participation and leadership in Rochester’s black community, including founding two debate clubs including the Union Literary Society, “an Association composed of young men and ladies of color.” See “Union Literary Society,” \textit{Frederick Douglass’ Paper}, 2 February 1855. Benjamin also gave two speeches at the August 1 celebration in 1853 entitled, “The Memory of Clarkson, Wilberforce, Benezet, Fox, O’Connell, Chatham, and Brougham,” and “Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Compatriots” for which he received “enthusiastic applause.” See \textit{Frederick Douglass’ Paper}, 5 August, 1853. Also, the 1850 census indicates that both of the school aged children in the Cleggett family, Isaac, 11, and Caroline, 9, attended school.

\textsuperscript{54} See 1850 Federal Census, New York, Monroe County, Rochester, seventh ward. The 1855 censes clarified that Mary could read but not write.
Alfred and Otis followed in their father’s footsteps as boot and shoemakers, while Benjamin, probably the youngest of the three, was an apprentice barber who began his training in Toronto. Within about a year of returning to Rochester, Alfred was the proprietor of his own shop. It is possible that David and his two sons planned to open a family-owned establishment on their return to Rochester. Or, maybe they decided soon after settling that uniting their efforts in the competitive trade was their best option. Benjamin, for his part, quickly found work at a barbershop at 9 Arcade Exchange, downtown, near the post office. As a seventeen year-old apprentice, he boarded with the shop’s owner, Edward W. Walker, a traditional arrangement for apprentices (Plate1).

Unfortunately, Alfred and Otis only appeared once in the Rochester directories. Neither stayed in Rochester long enough to be counted in the 1850 census. They are not listed in Buffalo or Syracuse’s records, nor is there any evidence that they returned to Toronto. But this is not surprising. It was more common in the nineteenth century for young families and single men to migrate over a long distance, rather than to move from town to town in hopes of finding more and more...

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55 Alfred’s home and shop was listed in the 1849 city directory, which means he was in business, at the latest, by the summer of that year. Because there was no city directory published in 1848 it is possible that Alfred was in business as early as late summer, 1847.

56 Neither Otis nor Alfred is buried in the family plot in Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester.

57 There are no Cleggetts in the Toronto City Directory for 1850 or in the next available issue, 1856, which includes a listing by profession.
better opportunities. This is true of people in the Burned-over District as well.

Precious few black residents can be traced moving from one canal city to another in western New York. The opening of the West with the Erie Canal in 1825, and the California gold rush a generation later, in 1848, provided a world of hope to young men and families.

As skilled tradesmen, Alfred and Otis may have gone to California where they would have a better chance than most black men of heading west. Of the blacks who can be traced after leaving western New York, many can be found in Oregon or California, which entered the United States as a free state in 1850, two years after the gold rush of 1848. So many blacks were moving to California that one barber in Syracuse published a notice in the newspaper with the headline, “NOT GONE TO CALIFORNIA,” to clarify that he simply moved his shop across the street not across the country! Ironically, the bill that codified California’s admission as a free state was part of the same law that included the Fugitive Slave Act. It is perhaps no

58 The exception was the relocation of people from rural to urban areas, which often remained local. See Stephan Thernstrom and Peter R. Knights, “Men in Motion: Some Data and Speculations about Urban Population Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 1, no. 1 (Autumn, 1970), 32-33.

59 Rochester barber, Jacob P. Morris went to California in early 1854; Abner Hunt Francis, his brother, and James Garrett, his partner in a clothing store in Buffalo, went to San Francisco and then to Oregon Territory in mid1851. Both Morris and Francis were very active in their respective black communities and were antislavery activists. See Abner H. Francis to Frederick Douglass in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 13 November, 1851; C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume 4, The United States, 1847-1858* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 100, n.2; 106-107, n.6. John S. Jacobs, antislavery lecturer and proprietor of the Antislavery Reading Room in Rochester, also went to California in 1850. See Jean Fagan Yellin, ed., *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers, Volume I* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) 148, 178. Benjamin Cleggett considered migrating to California in 1855. See, William Cooper Nell to Amy Post, 11 March 1855, in Post Family Papers.

60 *Impartial Citizen*, 27 June 1849.
coincidence that blacks from western New York sought out a region known for its frontier character and rapid development. These essential qualities, which so closely mimicked the conditions of the Erie Canal cities a generation earlier, provided hope for social mobility and economic growth.

The Cleggetts’ arrival in Rochester in the late 1840s was again poorly timed; the system of production in boot and shoemaking was beginning to outpace everything else, including its craftsmen. The decision of the shoemakers to establish their own shop was not unprecedented. It was a common reaction by Rochester’s black community at midcentury to create their own means by opening a business instead of waiting for whites to hire them as an employee. For fifteen years Ralph Francis, a barber by trade, constantly moved from shop to shop. Francis and Benjamin Cleggett had a shop together in 1851. That same year Francis decided to open the Steam Boat Hotel on Kelsey’s landing and left the tonsorial trade soon after. George Fuller, who worked as a hostler and a hotel porter, opened the Rialto Saloon in a basement on Buffalo Street in 1851, as well. That same year Isaac Moore, a barber, opened another saloon, the Union House. By 1853 Moore was out of the saloon business. Instead he diversified and opened a grocery store where he also kept a chair to cut hair. William Moore, a boatman by trade, opened a second-hand clothing store on Exchange Street in 1851, but by 1853 his business changed from dealing frocks and waistcoats from a storefront, to selling onions and cabbages at a
produce stand. For ten years Alfred Williams worked as a laborer, a porter, a clerk, and briefly tried his hand at carting before he decided to become a grocer in 1851.\textsuperscript{61}

While the surge of the entrepreneurial spirit in black Rochesterians could be considered encouraging, as the resourcefulness and determination of these men certainly was, they were also acts of desperation. These men and others like them were trying to survive in a labor economy that was edging out black workers. Sadly, only one of the endeavors of these men continued beyond 1853. It seems that in addition to whites not hiring blacks, they were not patronizing their businesses, either. Not only did their storefronts and saloons disappear from Rochester’s streets, but the proprietors of these businesses did as well.

David Cleggett found his niche in the Rochester boot and shoe market and did quite well despite the limited opportunity. James’s residence in the city for a few years before his family moved back may have helped them make connections and form relationships with other residents.\textsuperscript{62} The Cleggetts’ shoemaking business may not have done well enough to support three households, but after Alfred and Otis relocated, it served David and Mary’s just fine. Within two years of settling in Rochester David purchased a wooden house at 72 Jefferson Street, on the south-eastern edge of the city, which was valued at $400 in 1850. David’s business, the fact that Mary did not have to work or take in boarders and their children’s attendance

\textsuperscript{61} See Rochester City Directories, 1840-1860.

\textsuperscript{62} There is evidence that James was active in the black community. See “Anti-Colonization Meeting,” \textit{Frederick Douglass’ Paper}, 27 August, 1852.
in school provided the family with middling class status. The property also gave
David the right to cast a ballot. The Cleggetts were one of only ten black families in
the seventh ward, including the Douglasses who lived on Alexander Street, one street
north of the Cleggetts.63

Sadly, the Cleggetts’ good fortune did not last long. The close-knit family
suffered a series of devastating losses in the early 1850s. James lived in the ninth
ward with his wife, three sons, and his youngest, four-year old, Harriett. In the late
summer of 1850 James lost both his wife and daughter to consumption within weeks
of each other. Benjamin married Frances Nell, the sister of William Cooper Nell,
who was the assistant editor of The North Star, in the summer of 1849. William, their
infant son, died of chronic diarrhea in 1851. The patriarch of the family, David,
passed away as well. He died of cholera in the early fall of 1852, leaving Mary a
widow with three school aged children. Two months after her husband’s death, the
grieving widow buried their only daughter, fourteen year-old Caroline, who was
taken by consumption. Benjamin and Frances’s second baby, Louisa Laura, died in
March 1853 while Frances was in Boston visiting her brother and other family.64 A
respite to the family’s tragic losses came after James’s death of consumption in 1855.
Regardless of the high mortality rate and limited medical treatment in the nineteenth

63 The Douglasses lived near the eastern border of the city line. Their home was three-quarters of a
mile northeast of the Cleggetts, who lived within a thousand yards of the Genesee River, which cut
through the middle of the city.

64 Benjamin and Frances second child is not buried at Mt. Hope Cemetery as the funeral and burial was
held in Boston. William Cooper Nell to Amy Post, 11 March 1853, letter 978; Cooper to Post, 25
March, 1853, in Post Family Papers; The Liberator, 18 March, 1853.
century, the Cleggetts’ plot in Mount Hope Cemetery was filling up faster than what most families could bear.

With determination and the aid of her sons, Mary was able to maintain the family home on Jefferson Street after David’s death. Mary took in laundry to make ends meet. It was physically demanding work for nominal pay.\textsuperscript{65} It is difficult to determine how much schooling the two youngest brothers, Isaac and William, had after their father’s death as what little evidence that can be found about their literacy is inconclusive but it raises questions if either could write.\textsuperscript{66} Regardless of what schooling Isaac and William received in Rochester, it paled in comparison to the education and training their older brothers’ attained while the family lived in Canada. They were coming of age in a different time and a different place. Isaac and William do not appear in the city directories until they were about nineteen and sixteen years of age, respectively, indicating that they had joined the working masses. The two moved in and out of the family’s house over the years, and took work where ever they could find it. With the loss of their father, the lack of training and skills, and the deteriorating labor market for African Americans in Rochester, their lives were not easy.

\textsuperscript{65} For information about black woman’s work and as laundresses, see Jacqueline Jones, \textit{Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present} (New York: Basic Books, 1985) especially, 125-126. Black widows in western New York’s cities often worked as laundresses, seamstress, and took in boarders after their husbands’ deaths. Although no boarders are listed in the Cleggett household in the three census records following David’s death, it is likely that Mary also took in boarders.

\textsuperscript{66} The 1860 census does not indicate that William, 12, attended school in the previous year. The 1870 census marked William as unable to write, but there are no marks indicating that Isaac was illiterate. In the 1880 census, though, it is marked that Isaac was unable to write, too.
Benjamin maintained his trade as a barber in the 1850s, but he moved from shop to shop and was unable to retain partnerships with other city barbers, including Ralph Francis and Morgan Lambert, for very long (Plate 2). Francis left the trade within a year of partnering with Benjamin, and then he left the city all together. The “Cleggett & Lambert, Hair Dressers and Cutters” partnership fell apart within two years. Although we are not privy to the personal relationships between these men, the city’s barbers competed for a limited cliental. The competition for clients demanded that the best of shops were nicely furnished with sofas, stocked with reading material, and were comfortable in all seasons. They shaved and “polished” faces, and could cut hair in “improved and superior styles” that were “unsurpassed” west of New York City or Boston. In addition to services, the barbers sold tonics to cure balding, hair and whisker dyes, an assortment of collars, brushes, and other accessories to their affluent white patrons.67 Setting up shop was quite an expense for first-class barbers (Plates 1-3).

There was a great deal of volatility in the trade by the mid-1850s that went beyond the continual shifting of black barbers between shops, competitive advertising, and pleasing decors. A Rochestarian in need of a barber in 1845 had three times more black men to choose from, 11, than whites, of which there were 4

67 The few advertisements by black business owners in the city directories in the antebellum era were almost always placed by barbers.
who practiced the trade. The number of black barbers increased to 21 by 1850. But, by 1855 there were at least 19 white barbers and 2 dedicated hairstylists who saturated the market and were positioned to take over the trade. The numbers of black barbers fell from 21 to 13, down by over one-third during the 1850s. The sudden change in Rochester was noticed by Douglass, who lamented, “a few years ago...a white barber would have been a curiosity—now their poles stand on every street.”

Benjamin Cleggett was an engaged leader of the black community. He gave speeches at an anniversary celebration for British Caribbean emancipation and helped organized two “debate and mental improvement societ[ies].” The first debate club was for black men, but it later reorganized and welcomed black women, as well. Benjamin was also the secretary of a group of concerned black citizens who formally petitioned the Board of Education to dismiss a repudiated white instructor at the city’s “Colored School,” and to replace him with a qualified black teacher who had the support of black Rochesterians.

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68 There were eleven black barbers listed and only four whites in the trade according to the 1845 city directory. Dedicated stylists often worked in black barber shops, as well as in shops dedicated solely to hairstyling. Some black barbers also practiced hairstyling. There were at least three black barber shops that also offered hairstyling/hairstylists. The best stylists would make house calls to the elite women in town who could afford such luxuries. See the 1845 Rochester directory advertisements for David Ray’s Shaving and Hairdressing Saloon (Figure 3), and Edward “Walker’s Saloon” (Figure 1); Bristol, *Knights of the Razor*, 35-36.

69 *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 4 March 1853. Advertisements the specified “No colored barber need apply,” indicate the shift from black to white barbers. See “Wanted. A FIRST CLASS BARBER, of good moral character, wanted. Pay from $12 to $15 per week. No colored barber need apply. Address F. T. Angers, Canastota, N.Y.” in *Syracuse Journal*, 31 August 1869.

70 *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 5 August 1853; 3 December 1852; 2 February, 1855; 1 September 1854.
Notwithstanding his commitment in the community, Benjamin seriously considered leaving Rochester by at least 1855.\textsuperscript{71} In mid-1853 barbers in the city attempted to increase their fees. They were unsuccessful, and a local newspaper reported that with their failure, “some of the craft having ‘kinder gin eout.’”\textsuperscript{72} In 1856 Benjamin’s partnership with Lambert dissolved and both Benjamin and his wife, Frances, became somewhat withdrawn.

Benjamin’s participation in the community, if he was still active at all at this time, went unnoticed, and Frances’ isolation became a cause of concern to her brother, William Cooper Nell. Nell wrote from Boston to his good friend, Amy Post, in Rochester, several times worried about his brother-in-law and his sister after an extended period without receiving any letters from the couple. Frances was keeping close to home and was not visiting old friends from the activist “Circle” that Nell was associated with during his years in the city. Nell feared that his sister’s self-imposed isolation would lead to loneness or cause her to begin “fraternizing with some who pull her down rather than build up the Social Circle.”\textsuperscript{73} Relieved by the news that Amy met Benjamin out one day, he urged her to “call upon Frank,” as he

\textsuperscript{71} William Cooper Nell to Amy Post, 11 March 1855, in Post Family Papers.


\textsuperscript{73} William Cooper Nell to Amy Post, 7 June 1857; 22 September 1857, in Post Family Papers. William Nell indicated in his letters to Post that both Benjamin and Frances were pulling away from the activist friends he associated with while he was in Rochester with \textit{The North Star}. 

affectionately referred to Frances, so he might get news about “their children = their domestic comfort” during this trying time.

The inconsistencies of Benjamin’s work relationships, the incursion of white barbers in the city and their depressed earnings were all taking their toll on the couple, as it was with others who were in similar straits. Their neglect of social interaction and community involvement suggests that the couple was struggling, and probably suffering from a degree of depression. It may just be a coincidence, but when Benjamin’s brother, Isaac, turned eighteen in 1858 and was old enough to see after their mother, Benjamin and Frances finally left Rochester.

The decision to leave the city was not an easy one to make. With his father’s passing, and his older brothers either dead or gone, he was the patriarch of the family. So, with a young family of his own, and a widowed mother and younger brothers to watch over, he endured the erosion of the black workers and barbers in Rochester for as long as he could.

Benjamin and Frances moved forty-five miles southeast of Rochester to Geneva, New York, in Ontario County. A village on the northern shore of Seneca Lake, Geneva was no progressive utopia. Henry Bibb, an antislavery lecturer, referred to the town as “the most aristocratic pro-slavery hole I have ever visited.”74 The town’s small black population was deeply segregated from the white community. The one black school that endured into the Reconstruction era in Geneva was all but

ignored by the local school district. It provided only an elementary education to black children despite the existence of a high school in the town.\textsuperscript{75} Even if Benjamin may have had relatives in Geneva (it is in the county of his mother’s birth), the only clear attraction to the village would be what he did not have in Rochester: steady, profitable work.

We do not know of the stumbling blocks and prejudices the Cleggetts encountered in Geneva. But Benjamin’s accomplishments are clear. Cleggett became one of the most successful and esteemed black men in Geneva. To his good fortune many white Genevans preferred black barbers; the transition to all white barbers did not occur there until the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{76} Benjamin was drafted in 1863 and served in the army during the Civil War. When he returned from the war a local newspaper alerted his patrons. “Mr. Cleggett has already a host of friends, his former customers, and Mr. Jupiter [his new partner], by his excellent shaving and the taste he evinces in dressing hair, is fast gaining them. We advise all who wish a good shave or scientific hair-cut to give them a call.”\textsuperscript{77} After the war Cleggett settled into a forty-year partnership that lasted until the turn of the twentieth century. Such longevity was unimaginable for black businessmen in Rochester. Cleggett was also

\textsuperscript{75} For a comprehensive study of Geneva’s black community, including information on the Cleggetts, see Kathryn Grover, \textit{Make a Way Somehow: African-American Life in a Northern Community, 1790-1965} (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

\textsuperscript{76} Grover, \textit{Make a Way}, 132-133. Grover mistakenly claims that Benjamin’s father was also a barber in Rochester.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Geneva Gazette}, 3 November, 1865 quoted in Grover, \textit{Make a Way}, 133.
an appointed civil servant “in recognition of his merits.” He was assigned as Special Messenger for the Secretary of the Treasury, for which he earned $1,200 a year. In 1897 Benjamin was appointed to the Frederick Douglass Memorial Committee where he helped raise $10,000 for the statue of his former neighbor and its placement in Rochester.

Frances passed away in 1875; together she and Benjamin had eleven children. In 1877 Benjamin married a second time and had two more children. Benjamin Cleggett died in 1917 of a heart attack, just shy of his ninetieth birthday. His house at 236 William Street stayed in the Cleggett family until 1960. Three of his daughters, Mary, who was college educated, Fannie, and Alice, all carried on their father’s trade as beauticians.

Sadly, Benjamin’s younger brothers did not fare as well in Rochester. Isaac served in the army during the Civil War and was discharged in 1865 with a permanently disabled arm. He and his young wife, Susan, lived with his mother,

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78 Geneva Gazette, 26 May, 1882.


80 Unfortunately the circumstance in which the Cleggett house passed to new owners is heartbreaking. Cleggett’s youngest daughter, Alice, lived in the house until February, 1960. That is when she was found inside lying on the floor freezing to death without heat, electricity, or running water. A nurse at the hospital reported that the 78 years-old woman’s feet were frozen. Geneva Times, 10 February 1960.

81 Grover, Make a Way, 134-137.

82 See 1865 New York State Census Records. The 1865 NYS census included information on Civil War military service. The detailed information includes dates of service, regiment information, rank and promotions, what injuries were sustained, and if the soldier died as a result of battle.
Mary, when she fell ill and died of consumption in 1866. Isaac either sold or lost the family home just a few years later.\textsuperscript{83} He worked pretty steadily as a teamster for a few years after the war, despite his disability, and then he was a coachman until his death at about forty-five years-old in 1884. William, the youngest of the Cleggett clan, moved around the city and jumped from job to job. He worked as a hostler, a teamster, a coachman, and a whitewasher. It appears that Isaac helped his younger brother get positions as a teamster and coachman. After Isaac’s death, William only secured work as a porter, servant, waiter, driver, and as a laborer. Unfortunately, by the late nineteenth century service work was not as profitable as it had been before the Irish incursion. William never owned property other than his father’s house, which was handed down to either him or Isaac. The city directories indicate that William was a boarder for much of his adult life until his death at sixty-one years in 1906. The economic profits and social gains that were made by David Cleggett and other black Rochestarians could not maintained by the next generation. Blacks continued to struggle to recover the positions they once held in the skilled trades or entrepreneurial endeavors.

The Cleggett’s family story embodies many of the changes that occurred in Rochester’s black community during the 1850s. The decade was a fulcrum that divided the relatively opportunity-rich antebellum years from the rest of the century that quickly rescinded the means of socioeconomic gain for black residents.

\textsuperscript{83} The 1870 census shows William living with his wife and son, David, in the 12\textsuperscript{th} ward in what was very likely the family’s house at 72 Jefferson Street. David died of convulsions a year later and the Mt. Hope Cemetery’s interment records lists Jefferson Street as the child’s address. This is the last time the family is in possession of the house.
Frederick Douglass was witness to the demise of black Rochester. It had a profound effect on shaping his views of black education, training, labor, and social mobility and improvement. “To live here as we ought we must fasten ourselves to our countrymen through their everyday cardinal wants,” he reasoned. “We must not only be able to black boots, but to make them.” Douglass’s prescribed remedy to learn trades as a means of economic stability, though, ignored the evidence that played out daily. Whether blacks were waged employees or craftsmen, they were at the mercy of white’s purse strings. Blacks in Rochester benefitted from a single generation of economic opportunity and growth. In that short period there was no accumulation of wealth in the community that could sustain an array of black craftsmen or black businesses. Many families could not even retain the gains made by first generation settlers. Douglass, with a houseful of children himself, though, fully understood the worrisome prospects of the next generation of black families. “There are many respectable colored men, fathers of large families, having boys nearly grown up,” he mourned, “whose minds are tossed by day and by night with the anxious enquiry, "what shall I do with my boys?"84

84 Frederick Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1853.
Chapter 4
Families and Neighborhoods

Gaining a clear vision of what life was like inside the households and in the small sections of black neighborhoods is probably the most difficult aspect to tease out of the available sources. Statistical resources and city directories do not provide a great deal of information when trying to get a glimpse of the everyday lives of black families beyond the labor that they performed day in and day out.\footnote{The New York State Census of 1855 and 1865 lists the relationship between the head of household and all other household members. The unprecedented information in these records is the only source of its kind that provides the details of the make-up of individual households.} Blacks in western New York’s canal cities did not live and grow up in isolated ghettos, where, despite their small numbers, they might have developed an easily identifiable character or cultural essence as a group. Their numbers were too small, and the population, overall, was incredibly mobile.

Most African Americans were not surrounded by multiple households of extended family or by life-long friends as were those blacks whose families had long settled in older, east coast cities like New York City or Boston. Black residents created a sense of community with each other almost spontaneously, and it was preserved by the shared experience that was inherent with their minority status and sable-toned skin.

Like all the residents in western New York cities, blacks were not a uniform group. Instead, they were comprised of a mixed lot of people from various places...
with a range of skills, education, and life experiences. Some African American residents were born free, others were born into slavery in the state before slavery was abolished in 1827, and others still were fugitives from Southern bondage. They did have some things in common, though. The great majority of black settlers came to the region in nuclear family groups and they shared the expectation and the determination that life in their adopted cities would serve them better than from where they hailed.

The accessibility and quality of public schools was vital to the black community. The majority of black households in the sister-cities consisted of family groups with children. Census data does show that most families were headed by two parents and included several children. There were a handful of single-parent households, like Mary Cleggett’s, which was due to the death of a spouse.² It was not rare to find black households that were comprised of extended families, which included in-laws, grandmothers, aunts, and adult children with their spouses. Multigenerational households provided support to family members as well as strengthened the black community as a whole. William Anderson, for example, who worked as a laborer, a gardener, and briefly as a whitewasher, lived in Rochester’s third ward. Anderson, his wife, Catherine, their three small children, and Catherine’s widowed mother, Sophia Wood, lived together. Catherine’s mother undoubtedly took a hand in raising her grandchildren, while she gained the security of living with her

² The New York State Censuses of 1855 and 1865 included marital status, number of times married and widowed, as well as the number of children birthed by each adult woman.
daughter’s family in her elder years. Sixty-four year old James Monroe, a Rochester city scavenger, and his fifty-eight year old wife, Catherine, provided a home for their teenage niece, Harriet, who lived with them. Without family to take her in, Harriet may very well have ended up in the county poor house, or worse. Black families were made stronger by the efforts they made to care for and support one another.³

Although rare, it was not unusual to find black children in the homes of non-family members. John Vincent and his wife, Jane, took in young Johannah Howard into their Rochester home.⁴ Johannah was the daughter of Aquilla and Mary Howard. Aquilla Howard and James Vincent both worked in the service trades as porters, waiters, and cooks in the late 1840s through the early 1850s before Irish immigrants came to dominate these occupations. The Howards and the Vincents did not live near each other or even in the same ward, but they may very well have worked together in a downtown hotel or saloon.

Howard’s wife, Mary, and their youngest daughter, Georgina, vanished from the public records after 1850. Although it is not known what happened to them, the same cholera epidemic that swept through Rochester in the early 1850s and took the

³ Historian Gary B. Nash found that newly emancipated blacks in the 1700s and early 1800s, the “respectable poor,” readily combined households to bolster their economic condition. But they also took in elderly family members and orphaned or destitute children, which strengthened the black family despite the economic burden that accompanied additional dependents. Gary B. Nash, Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720-1840 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 158-165; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 94.

⁴ Johannah, as her name appears in the 1860 census, may have been named Josephine A. in the 1850 census. Enumerators’ handwriting is often difficult to discern, but the young girl listed in the two census records are the same person.
life of David Cleggett and so many other Rochestarians, may have brought mourning to the Howard household, as well. As a widower, Aquilla realized that his young daughter, who was five years old in 1850, needed better care than what he could provide as a single, working father. The Howard household broke up at some point during the decade and Johannah became part of James and Jane Vincent’s family. While life for Johannah looked brighter with her new family, her father did not fare as well. A few years later her father, Aquilla, was found dead with “wounds in the head.”

It would be a mistake to limit the definition of the black family to only those people who were related by blood or marriage. In many black communities adults took on the title and roles of “aunties” and “uncles.” The quasi-kinship between unrelated black families forged connections between unrelated folks and reinforced extended kin relationships. Despite the enduring notion that black families were inherently weak, the history of quasi-kinship linkages dates back to African customs and survived the Middle Passage to become a mainstay in transatlantic slave societies. Historians James and Lois Horton noted in their study of free black Bostonians that orphanages rarely took in black children. As a result it was up to the

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black community to care for their own, and by tradition that is exactly what their culture dictated as well.⁷ New England Protestants believed that the home was a reflection of the larger society, and if that is true, then black families and their neighborhoods in western New York were resilient, diverse, and supportive.

Despite institutional segregation, black families lived in integrated neighborhoods, although the majority of black households were concentrated in one or two wards in each of the sister cities. Clusters of several or more black households were peppered among native white and immigrant neighborhoods throughout these wards. Typical of the era, while there was plenty of moving around by black families from one residence to another, especially for those folks who did not own property, the geographic areas with the densest population of blacks remained unchanged throughout the middle decades of the nineteenth century.⁸

The only clear shift in the settlement patterns of black households occurred during the 1840s when black families moved from Buffalo’s waterfront first ward to the fourth ward that was located in the center of the city. African American neighborhoods were originally located in Buffalo’s first ward. In 1840 one-third of the city’s black residents resided in the gritty, working class ward. The ladle-shaped first ward’s long western edge bordered Lake Erie and was divided by numerous


⁸ The largest percentage of black families in 1850 lived in Buffalo’s 4th ward, Rochester’s 3rd ward, and Syracuse’s 2nd and 4th ward. City wards were divided and renumbered through the years, but the specific geographic location of black families remained relatively stable through at least the Reconstruction era.
water ways. Slips, streams, and the Buffalo harbor cut through the ward. By 1850, though, the bulk of the black population abandoned the bifurcated neighborhoods of the first ward and moved north to the fourth ward in search of economic opportunity.

In 1845, 67 percent of German Buffalonians lived in the fourth ward, with none of the other four city wards claiming more than 11 percent of the immigrant group. A number of Germans settled and opened businesses and invested in manufacturing early in Buffalo’s development. They invested in the local economy and created jobs for local workers. They also served as a support system to help bring other Germanic settlers to the city and to help them as they settled in the city. It was a benefit the struggling Irish could rarely offer or expect from their fellow countrymen in the 1840s and 1850s. The neighborhoods of the fourth ward were not only the most German of the city’s districts, but they also became home to the majority of Buffalo’s black residents. It was not coincidental that as the first ward was losing its black population it was gaining the largest concentration of Irish immigrants in the city at the very same time.

Part of the attraction of the fourth ward to black Buffalonians may have been that German immigrant community had some similarity to that of blacks. German immigrants were outsiders themselves, and they came to the United States in family

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9 David A. Gerber, *The Making of an American Pluralism: Buffalo, New York, 1825-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 17. In 1840, 189 blacks lived in the first ward. In 1850 that number dropped by over 50 percent to only 96 despite a nearly 20 percent increase in the overall black population during the same period.

10 See the 1845 New York State Census. By the 1870 federal census not a single African American resided in the first ward.
groups, unlike many of the Irish. They found support from within their native group. When the city refused to accommodate German-speaking children in the public schools, for example, Germans pulled together and raised the capital to build a bilingual school.\textsuperscript{11} Despite the regional variations of German expatriates, the development of a German neighborhood and the establishment of a school suggest these differences meant little given the circumstances of living as a minority group in a foreign land.

The interracial make-up of Buffalo’s fourth ward provided a certain level of familiarity between that city’s black and German communities. At a time when people lived near their work, it is possible that German business owners employed more than their share of black workers. But loyalty amongst members of the Germanic community suggests that any labor offered to blacks was likely the least desirable. But that was not out of the ordinary regardless of the nativity of the employer or the trade of the business where blacks found work. Unfortunately, census and city directories merely list individuals’ occupations, not their employers’. They do, however, show the interwoven character of the neighborhoods. Rather than being segregated in one section, blacks lived throughout the ward, interspersed with German immigrants and the other white residents. This interspersed pattern of black and white residents was typical in all three sister cities. Despite the relative occupational limitations of black workers, many black and German families occupied

homes of similar value and often lived in the same buildings, which were markedly better than the Irish-occupied dwellings in the first ward.12

An indication that Germans and blacks were at least amicable became evident when state Republican leaders brought a referendum for equal black suffrage to the legislature in 1860. Buffalo’s German community leaders were hesitant to support the proposal on any grounds besides that it would create consistent voting laws in the state. They did, to their credit, refrain from the racist rhetoric about the intellectual abilities and inherent rights of blacks that was common to Northern Democrats in the period. The rank and file of ethnic Germans, though, who supported the measure, did so expressly because the provision gave equal opportunity and rights to black men. Sadly, the statewide measure failed; even many moderate Republicans, who cast a ballot for Abraham Lincoln, united with Democrats against the measure. The vote earned just over 22 percent approval in Buffalo. The German ward’s support of the referendum, nonetheless, was nearly double the city average at 42 percent.13


13 In 1853 Buffalo changed its ward lines and added an additional eight wards. The original forth ward was partitioned, extended, and sections of the original ward were divided by wards four, five, six, and seven. As of 1853 blacks were concentrated in wards four, five and six, where as German’s core populations were found in wards six and seven, but were also heavily represented in the fourth and fifth wards. Though ward numbers changed, blacks remained geographically fixed in the city. Gerber, American Pluralism, 399-402.
appears in the case of German and black Buffalonians, proximity fostered respect and familiarity that was beneficial to black residents.¹⁴

Rochester’s third ward was one of the most diverse in the city. The ward was centrally located and separated from the business section to its north by the Erie Canal. The area was known as the “Ruffled Shirt” ward due to the city’s elite families who lived in Greek revival mansions on both sides of the beautiful, tree-lined Fitzhugh Street, and in other grand homes in the northeastern portion of the ward. The majority of residential buildings in the ward, however, were made up of a mix of small and medium sized homes and multi-family dwellings that were owned and rented by working class wage earners, craftsmen, and businessmen.¹⁵ Forty-five of the 808 families in the ward in 1850 were black. While black families made up only

¹⁴ According to Buffalo’s 1832 city charter, in addition to the property requirement for blacks to vote, they also had to take a different oath than what white residents took before casting their ballots. Preceding the Dred Scott decision by twenty-five years, the most notable part of the oath is blacks were not recognized as citizens of the United States, only as citizens of the state. Blacks were also required to be a state resident for three years verses one for white residents, and additional clauses were necessary to insure black landowners held at least $250 worth of property free from debt and all taxes had been paid before they were allowed to vote. All voters were required to take one of the following oaths: “You do swear (or affirm) that you are a citizen of the United States, of the age of twenty-one years; that you have been an inhabitant of this state for one year next preceding this election, and for the last six months a resident of this county, that you are now a resident of this ward, and that you have not voted at this election. If the person be a colored man, he shall, (if required asforesaid,) before he is permitted to vote, take the following oath: ”You do swear (or affirm) that you are of the age of twenty-one years, that for three years you have been a citizen of this state; that you have been an inhabitant of this state for one year next preceding this election, and during that time have been and now are seized and possessed of a freehold estate of the value of two hundred and fifty dollars, over and above all debts and incumbrances [sic] charged thereon, and have been actually rated and paid a tax thereon; that you have been for the last six months a resident of this county; that you now are a resident of this ward, and that you have not voted at this election.”

¹⁵ Paul Johnson explained that by 1834 neighborhoods within Rochester’s wards were beginning to form socioeconomic divisions. That trend surely continued through the antebellum years, though working class and middle class divisions were not always clearly distinct divisions as they were in the 1830s. See Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 48-51.
about 6 percent of the households in the ward, when compared to their overall population in the city of only 1.5 percent, the group was greatly over-represented in the third ward.

Even in areas where the black population was the densest, it was rare to find more than two or three black households listed consecutively in the censuses. Elijah Ransom, a black cook, and his wife Lydia lived next door to Isaac C. Gibbs, a black cartman, and his wife, Eleanor, and their four children. Both families owned their single family homes in Rochester’s third ward. John Brownell with his wife and three daughters, white native New Yorkers, lived on the other side of the Ransoms in their own home. There was a two-family house on the other side of the Gibbses, where two Irish families rented apartments. James Conoly, a laborer, and James Cullitan, a shoe maker, lived there with their wives and children. The census taker’s list shows that the next black households were visited about twenty houses before and twenty houses after the Ransoms and Gibbses.

Census takers, though, followed no particular pattern while going from house to house. The numbered listings of homes visited can be deceiving when trying to assess proximity. Houses that are listed twenty dwellings apart may have been blocks apart or they could have been directly across the street from each other depending on the route of the enumerator and the density of the homes. Porter Archibald Gaul Jr. and his family, for example, lived at 62 Clay Street, near High Street, at the southern tip of the triangular-shaped third ward. James Hall, a wainwright, lived with his family and several boarders at 8 Greig Street, also in the southern portion of the ward.
The census taker visited ninety houses between Gaul’s and Hall’s home. In reality, though, their houses were only two blocks apart. The families lived closer than a quarter of a mile from each other. Within a quarter-mile square area where the Gauls and Halls lived, were at least six other black families, including the barbers Ralph Francis, Morgan Lambert, and their families.

The Irish were not only the main competitors with blacks in the labor market, they also vied for affordable housing. African American neighborhoods in older Northeastern cities, which were also some of the poorest areas, were inundated in the mid-century by impoverished immigrants trying to make their way, as residents in New York City’s Five Points district, Boston’s Negro Hill, and even Buffalo’s first ward experienced. Irish newcomers targeted black laborers, because they were the group least likely to successfully retaliate against the incursion, and it helped the Irish to demonstrate a racial distinction between the two disadvantaged groups that were too often conflated by native whites. Irish and blacks performed the same labor and lived in the same neighborhoods. Hostilities between blacks and the Irish by the mid-nineteenth century were well documented and ranged from daily social transgressions and cultural clashes to all out deadly rioting.

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17 Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 143-144.
The close quarters shared by black and Irish neighbors, though, fostered friendly and even intimate relationships as well as strife. Many poor black and Irish families lived in the same tenement buildings and shared the same stairwells, porches, and alleyways. Hard working black and Irish men likely enjoyed a few jiggers of rum or whiskey at a neighborhood tavern on payday. They may have placed friendly wagers on a game of cards, or bet on black and Irish pugilists and dueling jig dancers who traveled through port cities and canal towns trying to turn a hard earned profit.18 Neighboring Irish and black women probably helped each other when their babies were born and when illness or injury struck their households. They shared neighborhood gossip while their children played together at their feet and in the street.

A handful of blacks and Irish folks even married. In 1850 there were twenty-three interracial families in the three canal cities. Six of these couples, or over a quarter of mixed race families, were formed between black men and Irish-born

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18 Newspapers printed boxing and dance challenges similar to those in an 1856 Buffalo paper. “CHALLENGE—Dundas, July 12, 1856.—I, James Brown, am prepared to make a match with Johnny Mackie, to fight him a fair stand-up fight, for $300, in eight weeks from the first deposit and the first deposit to be $50, and the next deposits may be as agreed upon; the first deposit to be made at A. Bennett’s Saloon, Dundas. P.S.—No more blowing up about this matter—the only thing is to put up the mow. James Brown,” in *Buffalo Morning Express and Daily Democracy*, July 1856. For scholarship about the cultural amalgamation of competitive Irish and African American pugilists and jig dancers see April F. Masten, “The Challenge Dance: Transatlantic Exchange in Early American Popular Culture” (Unpublished manuscript).
women. The majority of interracial couples in Boston were surprisingly similar to each other. For example, most of the marriages were between foreign-born Irish and English women to black men (as opposed to mulatto, a racial category used by the census), who made their living as seamen. The twenty-three mixed marriages in the triad cities of western New York in 1850 demonstrated no significant occupational patterns for the husbands. The men were not overwhelming black; mulattos were well represented in the group, and the

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19 In 1850 Buffalo had eight mixed race families, one of which included an Irish-born woman (one of Buffalo’s mixed households does not indicate the place of birth for the white wife). Rochester was home to thirteen mixed couples, five with Irish women, and neither of Syracuse’s two mixed households included an Irish partner. In total six of the region’s twenty three mixed couples, or 31 percent, are known to include an Irish spouse. It is possible that some of the seven women listed as born in New York were Irish American, but tracing women in census records is especially difficult due to the adoption of the husbands’ surnames at marriage. There was only one mixed race couple that was comprised of a white male—-from England---and a black woman.

20 Horton and Horton, Black Bostonians, 21-23.

21 Theoretically, a mulatto is a person with one black and one white parent. A quadroon is one-quarter black, the product of a mulatto and a white person, and an octoroon is one-eighth black, the child of a quadroon and a white. Though the language and racial classification during the antebellum period persisted both the federal and state census forms from the period simplified the racial categories as “white,” “black” and “mulatto” (“Indian” and “Chinese” were additional categories). Census takers very carefully denoted the race of biracial children as mulatto, but some children of two black parents were listed as mulatto, and some biracial children were listed as black suggesting that at least some enumerators relied on skin color rather than the terminology established by scientific racism. A few “white” children of black and/or mulatto parents can be found in the records which raise questions about the determining criteria employed by the surveyor and the qualifications used to determine race in its entirety.
majority of the white wives were native New Yorkers, with Irish-born women running a close second.

Of the five black Rochester men who were married to Irish women, three were listed as black and the other two were mulattos. Four of the five men were unskilled workers: two common laborers, one whitewasher, and a cook. The other husband, Samuel C. Perry, a twenty-seven year old Virginian, was a grocer. But it was William Jeffrey, the cook, who was the only one of the group who owned real estate. The possession of property worth a thousand dollars put the Connecticut-born black in a select group of property-owning African American men who met the requisite for a black man to cast a ballot in New York State.

It was also interesting that Jeffrey and his Irish wife, Mary, took in teenage siblings, Clara E. and William Scott in addition to raising their two young “mulatto” children, a two-year old and a one-month old infant. The Scott children were born in South Carolina and there seems to be no family connection to the couple, nor do they appear to have other relatives in the city; they are the only Scotts of color in the city. Despite Mary’s Irish heritage, she was part of a black family and she adopted the traditional practice of the black community to take care of others in the community who were in need.

The interracial couples in the city seemed to have little in common. They ranged in age from their twenties to forties. There was a substantial age difference between the husbands and wives of two of the five couples. Henry Baker was forty-five and his wife, Jane, was fifteen years his junior. Jacob Berryright was forty years
old, and his wife, Nancy was only twenty. Half of the couples had children, and the Bakers took in boarders. The interracial families in western New York, thus, appear to have little in common other than their white Irish wives. Nevertheless, that was significant.

One thing Rochester’s and other mixed race couples in the region did share was physical proximity to each other. Regardless of the city or decade the survey was conducted, biracial households are regularly found in clusters in the census records. Grocer Samuel Perry, his wife Mary and their two small children lived next door to Charles Noah, a boatman, and his wife, also named Mary. Mary Noah was a white New Yorker, not Irish as was Mary Perry, though at a mere twenty-one years old, she may have been a first generation Irish American. It seems reasonable to presume that the two young wives shared a unique sense of community and supported each other as the white spouses of black men, and even more so if they shared an Irish heritage.

As a boatman, the aptly-named Charles Noah was away from home for extended periods from spring until late fall, when canal and lake shipping ground to a halt due to upstate New York’s icy winters. Mary Noah took in boarders to help with household expenses. The practice of taking in boarders was an important aspect of building connections and strengthening black communities. It did provide families with extra income, but more importantly, it increasingly became a form of community support for black households to offer other blacks a place in their homes. By the 1850s fewer blacks were welcomed in white households as borders throughout western New York than they were in the previous decade. Like the Jeffreys, Mary
Noah also provided a home for an unrelated black child, eleven year old Marion Johnson. Johnson attended school, and was probably a great help to Noah in running the boarding house and perhaps she even helped their neighbor, Mary Perry, with her two little ones.

Three doors down from the Jeffreys lived Charles Allen, Margaret McElroy and her one year old child. Allen and McElroy do not appear to have been married, and the Irish woman’s child who shared her surname was not listed as “mulatto,” suggesting Allen was not the father. Legally married or not, Allen’s was a mixed race household and Margaret undoubtedly shared the common experiences of sidelong glances and neighborhood gossip earned by other white wives of African American men. Three houses further from Allen and McElroy lived Jacob and Nancy Berryright. Most interracial couples, regardless if the spouses were Irish, German, or American born, lived within a few steps of others who shared the common bond and the social stigma of racial amalgamation.

All of the sister-cities’ interracial families lived in sections of the towns that were densely populated by black residents. If proximity equals proof, the white wives of black men were more welcomed in black neighborhoods than their husbands and children were in predominately white sections. Although the “one drop” rule did not apply to white spouses even by association, they were clearly sullied by their marriages to black husbands, and it certainly applied to their brown babies, which census enumerators carefully marked as “M,” denoting their biracial status as
mulatto. Sadly, the protective huddling of mixed families suggests these folks did not quite fit in anywhere within the accepted social contract of the day.

Unfortunately, there are few sources available that document how interracial couples were perceived and treated within upstate New York communities, though in other Northern cities interracial couples were known victims of targeted violence.\textsuperscript{22} Frederick Douglass “seriously threatened the order of the town” by walking arm and arm down Rochester’s Main Street with two devout abolitionists, the English sisters Julia and Eliza Griffiths. The women came to Rochester to help Douglass with his new newspaper, \textit{The North Star}. “Threats were openly made” against them and despite the presence of Douglass’s wife, Anna, and their children, Douglass’s act of escorting his white female guests around the city was deemed an “aggressive demonstration of race-mixture.” One observer later commented that the Griffiths sisters risked becoming “possible martyrs” with their very public displays of social amalgamation. The “storm” caused by the friendship between Douglass and the white women eventually “died away” with no reports of reprisals other than wagging tongues and repressed outrage.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Roediger, \textit{Wages of Whiteness}, 107.

In general, it does not appear that black husbands suffered economically from their relationships with white women, regardless of their nationality, relative to the greater black community. Most men in interracial relationships had occupations listed in the census records and directories. Some were skilled workers and business owners, and a few even owned real estate. Unfortunately, because there were so few interracial marriages, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the social and economic costs the families suffered, if any, or if the ethnicity of white spouses had any bearing on how they were treated in their respective communities.

As small as the black communities were, discerning white residents did not recognize their darker neighbors as a unified group with similar habits and values. In general African Americans were divided into two groups. One portion held many attributes esteemed by New England Protestants. These folks were sober, hardworking, well mannered, and clean. Although many were relatively poor, they were responsible neighbors who led respectable, quiet, and pious lives.

James Robinson, a black laborer who lived in Rochester’s seventh ward with his family, took in a black man who arrived in town in “destitute circumstances” as a fugitive slave. Robinson, “a benevolent, Christian man,” invited the fugitive to stay in his home for a few nights and brought the young man, who had “pretentions” of being reverent, to church. Sometime during the night on Sunday, the “colored imposter” left and took with him “six dollars in cash, a pair of pantaloons and a
Robinson summoned the police and they quickly apprehended “the scamp,” whose name was Lewis Williams. Williams was sent to the penitentiary for six months for stealing from the “kindly” Mr. Robinson.  

Notwithstanding the juxtaposition of the altruism of James Robinson and the scheming ways of Lewis Williams, there was nothing that was less than admirable about how Robinson was portrayed in the Rochester newspaper. He was not taken advantage of because he was gullible or dimwitted, but because he was benevolent and had faith in his fellow human being. As a result, the police responded quickly and effectively to Robinson’s complaint. It was not unusual for city justices to assign visiting ne’er-do-wells an escort out of town in lieu of a stay in the local jail, but, by Justice Bardwell’s sentence of six months in the penitentiary, it seemed he was especially appalled that Lewis took advantage of the generosity of one of the town’s good Samaritans.

Robinson was not only a Good Samaritan, but he put himself and his family at risk. Even though the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was still in effect, there was no mention in the newspaper report that Robinson’s aid to a fugitive from bondage was illegal. According to the law, though, anyone who might “aid, abet, or assist…harbor or conceal” errant chattel, could be subjected to a fine of one thousand dollars and imprisonment for up to six months. Undoubtedly, very few working class people

24 “Another Colored Imposter,” Union Advertiser, 30 August 1858.

25 Union Advertiser, 31 August 1858.
could afford to pay such great sums and to risk imprisonment, which also meant a loss of wages.

The other group of blacks who were lumped together into was the one Lewis Williams belonged to. They were portrayed as being riddled with “indurated vice [and] habits” that were a drain on society. They were filthy drunkards, gamblers, and thieves. Their indulgences and licentious ways often earned them time in local jails and poorhouses. Local newspapers’ salacious police columns provide ample reports of the happenings in the rougher sections of town. Although black residents did not commit the majority of publicly listed offences, they were not spared from commentary that identified their race as often as it did their condition as the reasons for their troubles.

Stories of multiracial gatherings took on an especially acerbic tone in the conservative press. Catherine Nolan was a white woman who was arrested for “associating with colored prostitutes” in a home located in the same block as the Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Rochester’s third ward. Rochester officials were so aghast and concerned with the impropriety of “several other white women [who were] in the habit of associating with these abandoned colored people,” that the chief of police, no less, was “bound to put a stop to it.” It is unclear from the report exactly why Nolan and the other white women were being arrested. They were not cited for prostitution, but for their “association with colored prostitutes.” But was it their friendship with abandoned “colored” people or the fact that they were

26 Union Advertiser, 15 July 1865.
“prostitutes” that was the essential offense these women committed against Rochester society? An unnamed white woman listed in the same daily police report as Nolan was wanted on a warrant. The crime she committed was, again, not specified, but the fact that she was “found in bed,” was. She was not alone in bed; she lay with a babe in her arms. The report concluded that she had “lately become a mother—the child’s father being a black man.”

Unlike the Griffith sisters, these white women’s association with black residents, both male and female, did not frame them in the role of heroic martyrs, but instead, as criminals. They were poor, for sure, but moreover they were dishonorable. Legally, their crime was probably prostitution, but more important to keep the “order of the day,” as the report cites, was to eliminate the social and moral threat created by social and sexual miscegenation between the lowest classes in the city.

The sister cities’ black communities, though, were more dynamic than the obvious divisions of social class or the moral judgments of individuals. There were a number of social clubs, organizations, and churches for blacks in western New York. Unfortunately, scant evidence remains. Often, the only clue to indicate that many of these groups existed is in a passing reference in a newspaper or, even less often, as a listing in the city directory. Membership lists, bylaws, meeting schedules, and minutes, if any were ever recorded, no longer exist.

27 “Police Court,” Union Advertiser, 9 July 1858.
This is true of the region’s historically black churches, as well. Almost no records have survived. Some churches and religious organizations that blacks and whites established dissolved over a relatively short span of time. In fact, Buffalonians mocked the rise and fall of churches in Rochester, which since the days of Finney’s revivals in the early 1830s maintained the reputation of religious enthusiasm. The editor of Buffalo’s Commercial Advertiser was “amused” by repeated stories of Rochestarians who despite their professed Christian values “refuse to ‘fellowship’ with anybody who does not come quite up to their notions of perfection.” The slightest of disagreements caused members to “go off in little knots of people, and start little amateur churches, which, being made up of men who go in strong on their principles, are pretty sure to break up in a row at the end of the first quarter,” the Buffalo editor sneered.28

A Rochester newspaper responded to the accusations that its residents were “schismatics,” and countered that Buffalonians need not worry that such claims would be launched against them as they would never be accused of being religious folks. “The aggregate” of religiosity in that city was “too small to be susceptible of division.” Alleging that commerce was Buffalonians religion of choice, the Rochester editor explained his point in terms that the businessmen of Buffalo could relate: “piety, like revenue, must be in excess to warrant dividends.”29


29 Union Advertiser, quoted in Buffalo Commercial Advertiser, 20 January 1857.
According to Whitney Cross, Buffalonians were too consumed by commerce and business speculation to be “concerned about nonmaterial concerns before 1850.”

Buffalo city directories, on the contrary, listed dozens of churches and religious societies. The growth of evangelical religion in the early 1830s in Rochester was spurred by a call from a few local men to Charles Grandison Finney to help support Sunday closures of local shops, the mail, and to bring canal traffic to a halt in recognition of the Sabbath. Buffalo was the terminus of the Erie Canal and the main transportation hub to the western territories. Shutting down the canal, which only operated in warmer months to begin with, for religious observances, would have been suicidal for Buffalo’s economy. While it may not have been an evangelical stronghold as Rochester surely was, Buffalo was far from being an irreligious city filled with heathen speculators.

Buffalo was home to two enduring black churches, though there were probably a number of short lived churches and other religious societies in the city during the antebellum era. The Vine Street African Methodist Episcopal Church was

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30 Cross, *Burned-over*, 71-75. Cross argued that revivals were a rural phenomenon, and explained their success in Rochester and Utica by claiming the cities “reflected the rural mind, and “Syracuse did so in a limited degree.” Other scholars, including Paul E. Johnson and Leonard L Richards, however, contest Cross’s assertion of the rural nature of revivals and point to the same cities as evidence. See Johnson, *Shopkeepers Millennium*; Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).
established in 1831. Reverend George Weir Sr. was the church’s first permanent pastor. He tended to the congregation from 1838-1847. Weir resigned from the pulpit just two years before his death. The long tenure and steady presence of Rev. Weir was beneficial to the church and to black residents. The Vine Street A.M.E Church provided for its followers religious needs, and it also served the entire black population of Buffalo as a community institution. The A.M.E. church was in constant use as a venue for black organizations and celebrations, and it served as to host lecturers and speakers who passed through Buffalo on the lyceum circuit. George Weir Sr. and his son, George Weir Jr., were community activists and champions for black improvement and equal rights. They regularly filled the church with meetings that centered on matters that uniquely affected the black community, like black suffrage, universal education, and the Fugitive Slave Act. The church was also used as the “African School,” the segregated black school that was part of Buffalo’s public school system. 


Blacks established the Michigan Street Baptist Church five years after the Vine Street A.M.E. Church was formed. The black Baptist church was formed from the Washington Street Baptist Church, a white congregation that allowed blacks to worship in their church until the early 1830s, when a committee was formed to establish a church exclusively for black worshipers. It is unclear if the segregation of the Baptist church resulted from the desires of black or white parishioners, or if it was due to the appeals of both groups at the Washington Street church. After the Baptist churches split, over a dozen ministers headed the Michigan Street congregation in the 1840s and 1850s. The lack of continuity in leadership at the pulpit was balanced by a steadfast group of church officers and trustees including Payton Harris and Benjamin Young. Both men were active in a number of local black organizations and committees, including the group of black parents against segregated schools that took the Buffalo School District to court in the 1860s. The Michigan Street Church congregation, which reportedly collapsed immediately following the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, endured into the twentieth century and outgrew its small, nineteenth

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33 The Michigan Street Baptist Church was originally called the Second Baptist Church until the Michigan Street church was completed in 1849.

century brick building. The congregation celebrated its final service in the church in February 1962.35

Rochester had several black churches before the Civil War. The earliest was the African Methodist Episcopal Society, which had a church by 1823 on Ely Street, just east of where the Erie Canal aqueduct spanned the Genesee River. By the late 1820s the society dissolved, “having been hastened by internal quarrels and by dishonesty among its trustees,” according to Reverend Thomas James. James purchased a lot on Favor Street in the third ward, where he conducted a school for the village’s black children.36 James built the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and served as the pastor until 1835, when he went to start a branch of the church in Syracuse before moving on to Boston. James came back to Rochester by 1840. He was listed in the 1841 and 1844 city directories as an “African Preacher” and as a reverend.37 James left, and again, but “returned to Rochester in 1856, and took charge of the colored church in this city” until 1862.38 Parishioners of the A. M. E.

35 Fordham, “Michigan Street Baptist Church.” The building still stands today. It is located at 511 Michigan Street. In 1974 it was listed with the National Register of Historic Places.

36 Favor Street was a two-block long street running north and south between Buffalo and Troup Streets in the northwestern corner of the third ward. Spring Street divided the two blocks of Favor Street. In the early 1840s the block north of Spring Street, where James established the A.M.E. Zion Church, was renamed Stephen’s Alley. The block south of Spring Street remained Favor Street. The church served the community until at least 1965.

37 James does not mention this period in his autobiography. Thomas James, Life of Reverend Thomas James, by Himself (Rochester: Post Express Printing Co., 1886).

38 James served as the Church rector from 1856 to 1862. The two city directories published during these year indicate that the Zion Church had a pastor who fulfilled the daily spiritual duties of the parish under James’s direction. See Rochester City Directories, 1857, 1859; Life of Rev. James, 16.
Zion church enlarged and rebuilt the church building several times in the nineteenth century.39

The Zion church was the primary religious institution and community center for black Rochesterians. Frederick Douglass began publishing the *North Star* in the church’s basement, and gave numerous talks at the church. Douglass and Harriet Tubman both used the church to house fugitive slaves on their way to Canada.40 The A.M.E. Zion denomination, which prided itself as the true “Freedom Church,” was so instrumental to Tubman’s work that she bequeathed her homestead in Auburn, New York, to the church upon her death in 1913.41

There were other black religious institutions in Rochester in addition to the A.M.E. Zion church. The Methodist church with which James was originally associated, reformed as the Bethel (African) Methodist Church around 1844, and later changed its name to the First African Methodist Episcopalian Church. The church was located on the east side of the Genesee River, a few blocks north of its original Ely Street home, on the corner of Joiner and Atwater Streets. The tenure of the church was sporadic. The church was vacant for several years in the late 1840s. The congregation used a school house on Sophia Street for nearly a decade through the


40 Ripley, *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 100n.

mid-1850s, and then returned to the Joiner Street church. Although it appears there were parishioners, there was not always a minister to lead the flock in the antebellum years. The First A.M.E. church did not endure past 1860.

The Third Baptist Church, which formed in 1845, also used a public school as its first meeting place. By the early 1850s the group procured a building on Ford Street, and thereafter the church was commonly referred to by black residents as the Ford Street Baptist Church. There is not enough evidence to determine how steadily the black Baptist congregation remained intact, but it appears the congregation disbanded early in the Reconstruction years. The Ford Street building was sold at auction in January 1871.

There is little clarity about the integration of churches in Buffalo and Rochester, but at least some white churches, some of the time, allowed blacks to worship in segregated seating. Peter Stokely, a trustee of the First A.M.E. church, responded to a call from a white resident who suggested that black Rochestarians should unite under a single church. “All I have to say,” Stokely replied, “is that we are just the same as other people; colored Methodists and Baptists can no more unite in church capacity, than white.” Stokely’s claim was as true for the Baptists as it was

42 There is irony in the fact that the Rochester City School District maintained a segregated “Colored School” until 1857, and yet black church groups were allowed to use the buildings reserved for white students after the white children vacated the building at the end of the day or week.

43 Union Advertiser, 27 January 1871.

44 Union Advertiser, 5 May 1857.

45 Union Advertiser, 7 May 1857.
for his Methodist friends, black Baptists united in faith with white worshipers in Rochester’s Second Baptist Church, which was the first to allow blacks into its pews.46 There were three other white Baptist churches in Rochester that blacks may have attended when there was no independent black Baptist church in the city.

In the 1850s, religious leaders and reformers in Syracuse began a local movement to eliminate denominational factions among the Christian faithful.47 The group saw “no more reasons for distinctive church organizations, and the multiplying and maintaining of sects, now, than there was in the days of the Apostles.”48 Anything that was divisive, they argued, was inherently unchristian. Although their anti-sectarian call to unite ministers and congregations throughout the region failed, the practice of interdenominational worship was common in the Salt City.

Ministers and parishioners welcomed black Syracusans in at least five of the city’s churches.49 The Reverend Jermain Wesleyan Loguen, a fugitive slave from Tennessee, was the head of Syracuse’s African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church for


47 The call for “united Christian Brotherhood” was led by prominent activists including Gerrit Smith, Unitarian minister Rev. Samuel J. May, and Congregational ministers and antislavery newspaper editors, Rev. Samuel Ringgold Ward and Abram Pryne. *Impartial Citizen*, 5 February 1850.

48 *Impartial Citizen*, 6 March 1850.

49 A “Baptist Church” of Syracuse also had black parishioners, but it is unclear exactly which Baptist Church was referenced by a black member of the church in 1864. See letter no. H2520 in the American Missionary Association collection at the Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, Willella Highgate to Reverend George Whipple, 8 December, 1864. In the same letter, Willella also notes that she “attended [Plymouth Congregational Church] for a great many years.”
nearly thirty years until just before his death in 1872. Loguen was an outspoken and highly visible champion of black self-improvement, and civil and political rights. He was intimately involved with the daily struggles and events that affected the local black community. The reverend was also a regular participant in state and national black conventions and antislavery societies. Loguen was a key player in the fugitive slave rescue of “Jerry” Henry that occurred in Syracuse in October, 1851. He and his wife, Caroline, openly aided hundreds of fugitive slaves that passed through the city on their way to Canada.

Loguen’s A.M.E. Zion church was the only black church in Syracuse at the time. But, there were four other churches that welcomed black members to join their white parishioners. Rev. Samuel J. May led Syracuse’s Unitarian church (Plate 9). May, a radical by even Unitarian standards, stubbornly defended universal social and political rights for women, blacks, and for the poor. In the first several years after he became the pastor of Syracuse’s Unitarian church, May organized an orphan society, a hospital, a school for young boys who worked on the canal, and fostered the creation of the city’s integrated public school system. May also took part in the

50 Syracuse’s A.M.E. Zion Church was founded by Thomas James in 1835.


52 Jean M. Hoefer and Irene Baros-Johnson, May No One be a Stranger: 150 Years of Unitarian Presence in Syracuse (Syracuse: May Memorial Unitarian Society, 1988), 7-18.
“Jerry Rescue,” and he and Loguen worked closely together aiding runaway slaves, and to improve the condition of black residents.

The Wesleyan Methodist Church was founded in Utica, New York, in 1843. The sect broke away from the Methodist church because their strong antislavery sentiments were not supported by the mainstream church. Reverend Luther Lee was a founding member and started the Syracuse congregation the same year (Plate 8). He left to publish the *True Wesleyan* newspaper in New York City, but returned in 1852 and played a major role in support of the African American community and abolition before the Civil War. Although Lee and May disagreed on religious doctrine, they worked closely together in their reform efforts and welcomed black residents into their pews.\(^3\) Despite the risk of aiding fugitive slaves, Lee, like May and Loguen, did not hide his efforts to help those fleeing from bondage.

Plymouth Congregational was another church in Syracuse with a majority white fellowship that welcomed their black neighbors. Plymouth Church also formed on the basis of its abolitionist agenda in 1853. Its early pastors included the Reverends Michael Strieby and Augustus Beard. The men were staunch abolitionists. They became founding members of the American Missionary Association (AMA), which had evolved from the Christian assembly that rallied to protect the rights of a group of kidnapped Africans from the slave ship, the *Amistad*, in 1839.

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In addition to the integration of several of the major churches in the community, some of the ministers and their parishioners abided by their anti-sectarian ideology and participated in more than one church or in a single denomination. Members of the Highgate family, for example, were affiliated with a number of Syracuse’s churches through the 1850s and 1860s. The black family’s main church was the Plymouth Congregational Church. Reverend Strieby knew the Highgate “family so well.”54 The funerals of Privates Charles Highgate Jr. and William B. Drew, a white Syracusan, were held together at the Plymouth church. As eighteen-year olds the young men joined the 185th Infantry within days of each other in September, 1864. The two were killed from wounds they sustained from a battle on Quaker Road in Virginia in March, 1865.55

After the war, Charles’ sisters and his mother, Hannah, went South to teach in the Freedmen’s Bureau Schools, which were organized by the American Missionary Association. His sister, Willella, wrote to the AMA for a teaching assignment, saying that Reverend Strieby could vouch for her Christian character, though she also belonged to the city’s Baptist church.56 Edmonia Highgate, another of Charles’s sisters, received a letter affirming her Christian character and her ability to teach the freedmen from Reverend Strieby. He also confirmed that she was a member of his

54 Willella Highgate to Mr. Whiting, 31 August 1868.
55 Syracuse Journal, 20, 26 & 25 April 1865; Syracuse Standard, 24 April 1865. A complete list of Civil War rosters for New York State regiments can be accessed online at: http://nysl.nysed.gov/uh/htbin/cgiisiri/?ps=xQuu90xtrq/NYSL/322780092/503/73905
56 Willella Highgate to Reverend George Whipple, 8 December 1864.
Plymouth church congregation. He noted that the city’s Unitarian minister, Samuel J. May, was also “well acquainted with her” and could attest to her piety, as well.57

Edmonia was teaching black residents in Binghamton, New York, when she requested an assignment to teach in the South. Jermain Loguen organized Binghamton’s black school and hired Edmonia to teach at his school soon after she completed high school in Syracuse.58 Just before leaving to teach in the Freedmen’s schools, Loguen invited Edmonia to give a lecture at the Zion Church on “The Heroism of Colored Men” during the rebellion of the Southern states.59 Although there is no evidence that states Edmonia or any of the Highgates were members of the A.M.E. Zion church, the family was well acquainted and involved with the church, its leader, and its missions. Sadly, Edmonia died in 1870. Despite the family’s membership with the Plymouth Congregational church, her funeral was held at the Wesleyan Methodist Church.60 The Highgates participated in at least five of Syracuse’s integrated churches. Syracuse’s religious leaders’ antisectarianism encouraged both black and white residents to find commonalities rather than differences in their religious and spiritual lives.


58 After Edmonia Highgate left the Binghamton School, one of Loguen’s daughters moved to Binghamton to take Highgate’s position. Syracuse Journal, 7 April 1864.

59 Syracuse Journal, 19 & 21 March 1864.

60 Syracuse Journal, 18 October 1870; clipping from unnamed newspaper, 20 October 1870.
The nonreligious and leisure activities of black residents are the most difficult to recover. Unlike religious societies, literary groups, debate clubs, fraternal orders, and sports or musical groups that blacks organized and participated in were rarely listed in city directories, nor did their meetings often receive mention in the “Home Matters” columns of local newspapers. Even though so little evidence remains about how blacks organized their social time, the clubs they maintained, and the amusements they engaged in with their friends and family, the limited view that can be recovered suggests that blacks as individuals and as a community managed to eke out a rich, vibrant and socially fulfilling lives.

In a tour through western New York as an agent for the Colored American, Reverend Charles B. Ray made note of a number of clubs maintained by Buffalo’s black community for the edification of the group. “They have among them two Religious Societies, one Benevolent, and three Literary, one Female and two Male, Juvenile and Adult” associations, he wrote. Buffalo also had a Female Dorcas Society, a charitable organization of women that provided poor relief to the black community in the form of food, clothing, shelter, wood for heat, and other means of temporary relief to those in need. A Young Ladies Literary Society formed in 1837. “The males,” Ray noted as evidence to black Buffalonians “profound respectability,” “spen[t] their winter evenings in Debating Moral and Political questions.”

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61 Reverend Charles B. Ray to Samuel Cornish in the Colored American, 4 November 1837.
Rochester also had a Ladies Literary and Dorcas Society that formed in the mid-1830s. The city’s black residents maintained several reform groups including a temperance society and two antislavery associations, one that was composed of men and the other of black women. In the mid-1840s, there was a group of black citizens called the Moral and Political Antislavery Society. Benjamin Cleggett organized a debate club for men and women in the 1850s, and for a few years John S. Jacob and his sister, Harriet, ran the city’s Antislavery Reading Room. Perhaps because there was more integration in Syracuse’s institutions, it is more difficult to find evidence of black benevolent groups and reform organizations that solely served the black community, although they likely existed there as well.

Western New York black residents also made the time to relax and enjoy different forms of entertainment. While at least some white-owned saloons and dram shops welcomed blacks, there were a number of hotels and saloons that were owned and patronized by black residents. Black residents also cut loose in “negro dance halls,” and they gathered at community picnic days, as well as organizing annual celebrations of Caribbean emancipation.

Young black men established baseball teams in their neighborhoods. Charles Pond, an old “Third Warder,” recalled the summer days of his youth, when his friends

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63 Rochester Daily Democrat, 20 March 1846.

64 Union Advertiser, 5 May 1857; Union Advertiser, 18 September 1863.
gathered to watch their young black neighbors skillfully engage in competitive
games. “What glorious games of ball were played in the street by Charlie and Billy
Graham, Arch Gaul and others,” Pond recalled. The boys would play in the street in
front of the red house that was “occupied by colored people” on South Washington
Street across from the “City planing mill.” 65  Frank Stewart is credited with
organizing a black baseball team, the Unexpected, in the mid-1860s, although the
team clearly had less formally organized antecedents.66

Even though Buffalo maintained a segregated black school that was far more
expensive to maintain per student than the city’s white schools, the city paid for an
annual excursion for the children to take a steamship to Niagara Falls.67  Blacks also
attended the New York State Fair. Syracuse was selected as location for the first
State Fair in 1841. The fair was held in the sister-cities five times in its first ten
years. It was held in Rochester in 1843, and again in 1851. Buffalo hosted the fair in

Volume One (Rochester: Rochester Historical Society, 1922), 76. Pond also told of a group (or gang)
of black youths who organized around election time. “Some time after 1840, the colored people,
young men but rather hard cases, formed a club and called it the "Tantamooney Club." They had their
sway for some time and made threats what they would do, until the Cornhill boys thought they had
gone far enough. They gathered their forces one election day and were going to have it, as they said;
but it turned out differently. The boys got together, had a council of war, and said the "Tantamooney"
must go, and they went. There was one of the Tanta's called the "Bass Wood Nigger," and he was.
There was not an election in the Third Ward without a fight of some kind.” It is difficult to determine
if the Tantamooney Club was politically motivated or simply used the excitement generated by the
election cycle to fuel their own source of enjoyment. Pond, “Third Ward,” 79.

2 (Spring, 2000):7. Charles Douglass is rumored to have been a member of the Unexpected baseball
club.

67 Buffalo Express and Daily Democracy. 1 July 1857. White children also went on an annual field trip
to the falls, but they went on different days and took vessels.
1848, and it returned to Syracuse in 1849. A “Colored Boarding House” owner in Syracuse, Joseph Sanford, put an advertisement in the *Impartial Citizen* newspaper to let black visitors know he had rooms available for rent during the 1849 State Fair. He noted in the advertisement that he was already expecting a large party of black revelers on September 12.\(^6^8\)

The small glimpses of the activities and amusements that black residents engaged in living in western New York’s sister cities only hints at the entertainment they created for themselves and their families, and other local events that they participated in with other residents. While the surviving sources reveal so little, we can rest assured that there was so much more to black life in the sister cities than what can be recovered. The black community developed and organized associations, and blacks participated in activities and events along with the larger communities and neighborhoods in Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse.

There was enough strength of black families in western New York to lend to the overall wellbeing of the area’s black communities. The welfare of black nuclear families were often improved with the inclusion of extended family members. The addition of kinfolk concentrated labor and fiscal resources within households, which if divided, may not have been as successful as they were. As an older widow, Sophia Wood might have ended up in the county poor house. Instead, she was included as a valued member of her daughter and son-in-law’s household. She was provided a home, and in return helped her daughter maintain the household and cared for her

\(^6^8\) *Impartial Citizen*, 12 September 1849.
grandchildren. Unrelated black children, like the Scotts and Howard, were taken in and raised by neighbors and friends, instead of left to become the cruel victims of homelessness and poverty. It was the strength and stability that black families fostered within their own households and within the black community that laid the groundwork for the development of an array of religious societies, benevolent organizations, social clubs, sports teams, venues, and other kinds of amusements and entertainment that, in return, so greatly enriched their lives.
During the same period that black adults were fraught by shrinking wages and labor options in Rochester, their children’s education and futures were being jeopardized through a series of inadequacies in the city’s public school system and public hearings that repudiated black children as unworthy of an equal education. The Board of Education perpetuated a segregated school system that was costly to the city even though it poorly served the instructional needs and social welfare of black children in the larger community. The struggles within Rochester’s segregated school system worked in tandem with the shrinking employment options and compounded the destabilization of the black community. Together they had an overwhelming effect that limited the immediate socioeconomic stability of black families as well as the potential wellbeing of the next generation of black Rochestarians.

The organization of Buffalo’s schools was quite similar to Rochester’s school system. Both cities maintained publically funded segregated schools that were costly and provided no benefit to white residents other than to keep black children out of schools that were intended for their children. Buffalo schools were not fully integrated until 1871. Syracusans, on the other hand, organized the school district as part of their city charter as a fully integrated institution. For Syracusans, the main issue of debate was whether or not the small city could actually afford to maintain free public schools for the city’s children.
Rochester’s schools were chronically underfunded as was much of the city’s early infrastructure and publically funded institutions. The management of the water and sewer systems was a good example of the city managers’ laissez-faire approach. It took several recurrent cycles of cholera and dysentery outbreaks that sent residents packing or to the cemeteries before town officials reacted to the problems that were exacerbated by poor waste and sanitation methods. They finally realized that any financial investments they made in local businesses and production would be lost if residents continued to be consumed by disease.\(^1\) The city’s educational system also suffered from apathy, poor planning, and a self-imposed paucity of funding. Black students were especially affected by discriminatory policies that in addition to everything else provided inadequate and segregated facilities that were understaffed and inaccessible to many black youths.

The city’s original charter established Rochester’s school district in 1834. The Common Council, the municipal body that is responsible for local ordinances, budgets, taxation, and other legislative duties, had oversight of the educational system. Unfortunately, without a dedicated central authority to supervise and regulate the district schools, they hobbled along with little planning or oversight. In fact, even after five years a quarter of the “schools” were not schools at all, but were

simply rented rooms. One district conducted classes in an old cooper’s shop.² City officials rarely met to discuss the welfare and progress of the students, much less to make appropriations to improve the faltering system.

Initially, the city’s education system was only available to those whose parents could afford to pay tuition based on a rate-bill plan. Payment in money, labor, wood, and other supplies and services were required to gain admission to an education. Hence, only families with surplus resources or time could obtain schooling that was at least less expensive than one of a handful of private academies in the city, where “aristocratic distinctions” could be cultivated.³ Each classroom, however, operated independently and was maintained only as long as its collected tuition held out. When funding, supplies and a teacher were restored again, the schools reopened.

Many black children (and adults) who received any schooling in the village and young city relied on Sabbath schools. Austin Steward, who beginning in 1818, sporadically taught “the neglected children of our oppressed race,” maintained that Sabbath schools were “the noblest of all remedies” for the black community.⁴ The


³ Superintendent Isaac Mack, quoted from the Board of Education, Second Annual Report, 1844, in McKelvey, Rochester, the Water-Power City, 272.

⁴ Austin Steward, Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman, Graham Russell Hodges, ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 68, 83.
Reverend Thomas James was grateful that in 1823, at the age of nineteen, he was “taught to read by Mr. Freeman, who had opened a Sunday school of his own for colored youths, on West Main Street.” Within a few years James returned the goodwill and conducted school in the small Zion African Methodist Episcopal church he built on Favor Street in the third ward. The black community was, sadly, only able to maintain these ad hoc schools as intermittently as the city schools were ran. But, they were free, located in the third ward, where the city’s black population was the densest, and teachers often conducted classes in the evenings to accommodate laboring children and adults. Sabbath schools also exposed neighborhood youths to the leading black men of their community who, through their community activism alone, were the best examples of respectability and of social uplift.

In 1841, the city terminated the rate-pay system and established a free public school system seven years after the district was formed that allowed all children within the city limits access to schools. Funding for the district schools were raised by a general tax. Just as important as the availability of free schools for all children was the establishment of a Board of Education, a responsible and central governing body. The Board of Education consisted of two commissioners from each ward, who

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5 Thomas James, Life of Reverend Thomas James, by Himself (Rochester: Post Express Printing Co., 1886), 6-7. Zenas Freeman was the village school master who conducted a Sabbath school with the help of Austin Steward. See Blake McKelvey, “Lights and Shadows in Local Negro History,” Rochester History 21, no. 4 (October 1959): 2.

6 New York State did not abolish the rate-pay system until 1857. Rochester was the fourth city in the state to provide free schools to all the children in the district limits. McGregor, “Rochester Public Schools,” 45.
appointed the superintendent of schools. Despite the advances in the administrative side of the education system and a fiscal plan to support the expanded student body, the schools remained underfunded. In the 1847 annual report Superintendent Belden R. McAlpine made the “dubious boast” that among the eleven largest free-school cities in the state, Rochester ranked fourth in attendance and first in teacher to student ratio. Unfortunately, the city was last in teacher salaries, which made attracting and retaining qualified teachers a constant battle. Rochester schools were at the bottom, too, in the average annual investment made for each pupil at only three dollars a head. Still, the number of schools in the district slowly increased, and by the mid-1840s almost all classes were held in city owned, dedicated school buildings.⁷

One of the few things that remained constant in the city schools was the steadfast and enduring practice of racial segregation. In 1832, when the area schools were under the control of Gates and Brighton townships, a separate school for black children “aided by the munificence of their friends,” was established for the “colored scholar [who] can scarcely prosper” alongside white students. Two years earlier, thirty-two black residents (out of a community of approximately 360 people) submitted a petition that requested a school solely for their children. They complained that “their children are despised, called Negroes, and completely

discouraged by the white children.” 8 This de facto segregation of the “colored school” was continued with the city charter’s district school system.

The Board of Education established a committee to oversee the continuation of segregated schools when the city instituted the free school system in 1841. The Committee on Colored Schools secured a rented room on Spring Alley in the third ward and hired a black teacher, Mr. Rising, to conduct classes.9 There is some evidence that indicates at least a few black residents wanted keep their children in a separate school.10 But, parents who could not previously afford to provide their children with an education under the bill-rate plan undoubtedly felt relieved and fortunate that their children had the opportunity to attend school at all. For parents who were able to send their children to school for the first time, the ideological and racial issues that came with the segregation of their children were an ancillary concern.

By 1844, there were fifteen schools scattered throughout the city and one “colored school which embrace[d] the whole city,” located on the west side of the Genesee River. The school served black children who resided in an area of over six


10 Steward, Twenty-Two Years a Slave, 176; “Colored Schools,” The North Star, 17 August 1849.
square miles. In 1845 the Board of Education signed an ordinance that “prohibited the attendance of any colored child at any of the public schools other than those organized for colored children, except with the consent of the Board.” The segregation of students that was initiated fifteen years earlier because of the concerns of black parents, became a city mandate legislated by white city officials. Rochester’s racial lines were hardening. The establishment of separate schools in the early 1830s to protect black children from the insult and torment brought on by their white classmates, by the mid-1840s, had become a law that enforced white-only classrooms by prohibiting black students and thus uniquely and legally limit the educational opportunities of the majority of black youths.

The ongoing issue of the equity of their children’s education in a small, rented, and segregated classroom was compounded by the fact that there was only one Colored School in the entire city to serve the edification and eventual progress of all black Rochesterians. The school was located on the west side of the river where 60 percent of the community’s school age children lived, but it was removed from the black neighborhoods of the third ward to the first ward in 1846. It was later relocated further west to the eighth ward in 1853 (Table 16). It became increasingly difficult

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13 McKelvey, Rochester the Water-Power City, 286.
for children of the third ward to negotiate their way to school, not to mention those on
the east side of the river.

To get to the first ward school on North Washington Street, children had to
first cross over the Erie Canal, and then traverse the city’s busiest thoroughfare,
Buffalo Street (later Main Street), dodging carriages, dray carts, preoccupied
workmen, and other pedestrians. It was a dangerous task for any child to manage
once, much less multiple times a week; though with repetition the children surely
became savvier about negotiating their way. Poor sidewalks, muddy streets, rain, ice,
and snow only added to their precarious journey to arrive to the one school they were
allowed to attend. When the school was relocated to the eighth ward, third ward
children had to cross the Genesee Canal, which formed the long border between the
wards. The Genesee Canal had only two bridges that spanned the waterway. The 40
percent of black school age children who resided on the eastern side of the Genesee
River, which had only four bridges the entire length of the river in the city, had miles
added to their walk in addition to the other hazards endured by their west side
schoolmates.

Black parents had good reason to be troubled by the limited resources
available to their children. Many of the youngsters passed several district school and
private academies that they were prohibited from attending while trekking to the only
“school” that they were allowed to attend. Out of the fifty school-aged children on
the east side in 1850, only twenty attended school, or 40 percent. If we remove
Frederick Douglass’s children from the equation (they did not attend local schools at
the time), then less than 35 percent of children attended the black school on the other side of the river. Whereas, forty-five of the seventy-five west side black children, 60 percent, attended the school at least some of the time during the school year.\textsuperscript{14} Because schooling was not compulsory there was not perfect attendance at any school, but the single Colored School in the growing city failed to accommodate nearly half of the black children from attending.

Accruing knowledge was not an easy endeavor even for those children who did manage to get to the school regularly. The school was supposed to have one male teacher, who also served as the principal, and one female assistant teacher. But there is no evidence that the city maintained an assistant teacher to aid the students, and with the district’s notoriously tight budget, it is unlikely one was ever employed.\textsuperscript{15} In addition to the high student-to-teacher ratio, textbooks were not included as part of the free school budget.\textsuperscript{16} Students were responsible for purchasing the assigned books. Textbooks and spellers were frequently swapped out with competing titles in the district due to the conflicting opinions of members on the Standing Committee on Textbooks.\textsuperscript{17} Securing new books every year for every child became more difficult

\textsuperscript{14} Data taken from the 1850 Federal Census, which required any school attendance to be recorded for each school aged child in every household.

\textsuperscript{15} McGregor, “Rochester Public Schools,” 62. The board’s second annual report, 12 January 1844, lists “S. Boothby (colored)” as the principal and only teacher for the school.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Board of Education, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Annual Report}, quoted in McGregor “Rochester Public Schools,” 47.

\textsuperscript{17} McGregor “Rochester Public Schools,” 47-49.
for parents by the 1850s when the labor market bottomed out for black wage earners. A single teacher in charge of over sixty students ranging in age of five to eighteen, with equally wide spectrums of abilities, attendance, and the tools needed for learning, certainly hampered the efficacy of Rochester’s Colored School.

Rochester provided a second school room for black children five years after free schools were instituted. It was in a “plain building” owned by the Female Charitable Society on North Washington Street in the first ward. The Female Charitable Society founder, Everard Peck, was one of the city’s leading businessmen and reformers. The owners of the building abandoned it five years earlier, save for an occasional class that was conducted to teach children of the poor to sew for pennies as an “experimental” endeavor by the benevolent society. The new school for black children, however, failed to gain steady attendance and the Board of Education closed it within four months. The poor student turnout during the brief trial proved to the Board of Education that a second Colored School was not warranted to serve the city’s black youths. The reason for its failure, though, was not for lack of need. The new school was located only blocks from the original Colored School on Spring Alley, which remained in session. Clearly, the Board’s decision to open a second Colored School was a half-hearted appeasement to lull the growing

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18 Peck was also the uncle by marriage of Samuel D. Porter, one of Rochester’s leading white advocates for black social and political equality.

19 Mrs. James K. Livingston, 4 November 1844, quoted in the Rochester City Directory, 1845, 6.
objection to the substandard educational options for black children. In the end, the
Board decided to close the more centrally located Spring Alley school the following
year and instead maintained the North Washington site for the next several years.20

This was the history and culture behind Rochester’s educational system when
Frederick Douglass arrived with his family. Douglass, “deeply desiring to give [his]
daughter . . . the advantages of a good school,” enrolled Rosetta in Seward Seminary
in the late summer of 1848. There is no evidence that Douglass ever considered
sending Rosetta to one of the city’s district schools, much less the Colored School,
which was two miles walking distance from their Alexander Street home on the east
side of the Genesee River, and with good reason. Rosetta had previously attended a
private school in Albany, where she lived with the abolitionist sisters, Abigail and
Lydia Mott. Seward Seminary, the premier girls’ school, was within a block of the
Douglass’s home and promised to provide a similar didactic experience to what
Rosetta experienced in Albany.

Sadly, as was the experience of the rest of Rochester’s black children, Miss
Tracy, the school’s principle, removed Rosetta from the classroom and white students
because she was “guilty of having a skin colored not like” their own. The trustees of
the school did not want Douglass’s child to attend, but Miss Tracy thought that they
would eventually have a change of heart. So, instead of refusing to admit Rosetta,

she set the child up at a desk in a separate room. Her classmates had no objection to their new schoolmate, and, in fact, several cheerily requested that Rosetta be seated “by me, by me, by me.”\textsuperscript{21} The trustees let Rosetta’s schoolmates’ parents decide if she would be allowed to attend the school on equal grounds with their daughters. One parent, Horatio G. Warner, Esq., a lawyer and the editor of the \textit{Rochester Courier}, though, backed the trustees and objected to the inclusion of the black child in the same school that his daughter attended. As a result of Rosetta’s brief time in isolation from the other young scholars, Douglass promptly removed Rosetta from the seminary.\textsuperscript{22}

It was not the first time during the Douglasses’ short residency in Rochester that they were literally subjected to a vote to allow one of them to gain admittance and integrate a local group. Frederick Douglass had likely met Warner eight months earlier during the printers’ celebration of Benjamin Franklin’s birthday, where he and his assistant editor, William Cooper Nell, were required by the revelers to garner a sufficient number of “yeas” from the newspapermen to remain in attendance. In an open letter to Warner published in \textit{The North Star} concerning his opposition to the integration of Seward’s Seminary, Douglass charged Warner with the “blindness of

\textsuperscript{21} Frederick Douglass to Horatio G. Warner, \textit{The North Star}, 22 September 1848.

\textsuperscript{22} Horatio Gates Warner later became the president of the Bank of Rochester, and ironically, perhaps, served as regent of the State University of New York in 1869. See John R. McKivigan, ed., \textit{The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Three: Correspondence Volume 1: 1842-1852} (New Haven: Yale University Press), 323n.
prejudice.” Douglass said that the *Courier’s* editor was “in a minority of one….a despised minority…full of pride and prejudice.” “There is a sufficient amount of liberality in the public mind of Rochester to see that justice is done to all parties,” Douglass assured the editor, “and upon that liberality I rely.” 23 In truth, Rochester was not as liberal or willing to take a stand on the matter as Frederick Douglass hoped.

Douglass was a resident of Rochester for only ten months at the time he enrolled his daughter in the private seminary. He worked tirelessly on his antislavery newspaper, and maintained a speaking schedule that kept him on the road for up to seven months a year. He was also insulated from the daily realities that other black residents had to deal with by a small, tightly-knit group of Rochester’s most irrepressible activists, whom Nell called the “Circle of Choice Spirits.” 24 Douglass knew of the city’s Colored School, but he was not as likely to be aware that the segregated school had been instituted and maintained by the people of the city of “liberality” for nearly a generation before he called the city his home.

The pervasive discriminatory ideology that kept children separated also kept the first native born generation of black and white Rochestarians from forging friendships and ties through shared social experiences. The familiarity gained by the

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24 William Cooper Nell to Amy Post, 30 June 1849, Post Family Papers.
pioneer settlers who worked shoulder to shoulder at the workbench to build the city, was not passed down by them to their children by simply allowing them to sit together on the school bench. There was little that was simple about it.

Douglass hired Miss Phebe Thayer, a local Quaker woman, to tutor Rosetta and her brothers.\(^\text{25}\) Few residents, and probably no other black resident, could provide their children with private schooling or contract a private tutor to keep their children out of the segregated district schools. Douglass was able to insulate his children, like his circle of friends helped him, from the “deliberate attempt to degrade and injure a large class of persons” by denying them the same rights and opportunities provided to white Rochestarians.\(^\text{26}\)

Despite his children’s private schooling, Douglass soon gained a better understanding of the segregated public school system, albeit indirectly. A few months after the incident with his daughter, his assistant publisher, Nell, became the superintendent of the Colored School on North Washington Street.\(^\text{27}\)

\(^\text{25}\) In a letter to Thomas Auld, his former master, published by Douglass in *The North Star*, 8 September, 1848. Douglass states that his three oldest children, ages nine to six years, attended school. There is little information about Lewis and Frederick Jr.’s schooling at this time, though it is clear they were being educated. Historian Blake McKelvey noted that the boys were tutored by Thayer before they and Rosetta began attending district school number 13 in the mid-1850s, though he does not provide source notes. See, Blake McKelvey, “Lights and Shadows in Local Negro History,” *Rochester History*; XXI, 4, October, 1959, 1-27 (Rochester, Rochester Public Library), 6; McKivigan, *Douglass Correspondence, vol. 1*, 313, 317n, Frederick Douglass to Elizabeth Pease, 8 November 1849 in McKivigan, *Douglass Correspondence, vol. 1*, 404, 404n.


\(^\text{27}\) “Exhibition of the Colored School,” *The North Star*, 27 April 1849.
Rochester’s young black scholars benefitted from Nell’s vision for only a single term, he would go on to be the moral and driving force behind the desegregation of Boston’s schools. He championed *Boston v. Roberts* to the Massachusetts Supreme Court in 1855, which ruled against the use of public funding to maintain separate schools. Nell’s work with Rochester’s black children culminated in an exhibition of the students’ work at Irving Hall in April, 1849. Douglass attended and reviewed the exhibition. He applauded the young scholars and Nell’s successes. The recitations were “really excellent,” and the children’s singing “was in good taste, and tune,” Douglass reported. He added that some of the original compositions read by the children were “very much beyond both the ability and pretensions of many of their grown-up white oppressors.” Nell, like the Sabbath school teachers before him, “inspire[d] his youthful pupils with the spirit of manliness, independence, and freedom,” hailed Douglass.

Frederick Douglass could do nothing less than promote the young black scholars’ accomplishments with cheering support and public accolades. Douglass based his personal and professional objectives on the ideology that blacks have the same capacities and abilities as whites. Blacks only needed whites to respect their natural rights of equal treatment and access to opportunity. Whether free or enslaved,

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it was one’s condition that determined the successes and failures of a person, not an innate limitation that could be easily identified through racial markers.

Douglass probably exaggerated the skills demonstrated by the Colored School students in his editorial. He did not, of course, ever enroll his children in the segregated school. But, at least during the one year Nell was at the helm, the city’s black children were in caring and capable hands. Douglass feared that without Nell’s guidance the school’s efficacy would deteriorate and the losses suffered would “not easily be remedied.”

Sadly, Nell’s tenure with the Colored School was probably the last session black children were provided with an exemplary education in the segregated school. Douglass is often credited by historians for desegregating Rochester’s schools. Although some may have been stirred by the public discourse Douglass initiated over his daughter’s attendance at one of the city’s most reputable academies, black residents were active before Douglass came to Rochester. Black residents need not hear about Douglass’s troubles in order to recognize their own. It is more likely the bending of the Board to open a second school, although meaningless in its execution, and the improvements at the Colored School under Nell’s leadership, prompted another surge by black parents and white reformers to continue with their plea for equal school rights for their children.

In the face of a growing population and the increasing demands it put on the school system, the Board of Education met to discuss cost cutting measures shortly after the Colored School’s exhibition in the summer of 1849. Up for debate was a plan to create coeducational classrooms in order to reduce the district’s overall budget. There was also a proposal to finally close the Colored School and allow black youths to attend the district school closest to their residents.\(^{30}\)

As soon as the proposal to reorganize the public schools into coeducational facilities came up for a vote, the Board immediately passed the legislation. The Board recognized that the “isolation, the separating of the sexes, in the innocent and delightful pursuit of knowledge, is…fraught with more inconveniences and evils than it prevents, [and it] is an imputation upon the moral character and social standing of our community.”\(^{31}\) The same progressive views that allowed members to easily see the “evils” of separating children by sex did little to bring into focus the same evils and immorality brought on by the isolation imposed on young, black Rochestarians in their “delightful pursuit of knowledge.”

On August 6, 1849, the Committee on Colored Schools submitted its report on the feasibility of integrating the district schools to the Board of Education. The Committee considered a repeal of the ordinance that excluded black children from the

\(^{30}\) McGregor “Rochester Public Schools,” 69-72.

district schools, and evaluated the necessity of a second Colored School on the city’s east side. The Committee eloquently argued that the Colored School could not be justified “upon the ground of economy nor utility.” In addition, they asserted that the school should not be “maintained a moment longer.” It cost over fourteen dollars per pupil to educate the city’s black students “grouped together in some ‘Rented Rooms,’ in darkness and ignorance,” compared to less than five dollars per student attending the city’s “Free White Schools.” If black children were allowed to attend their local district school, each school would gain only four black students, based on the average attendance. It would not change any of the schools’ budgets, yet it would save the district the cost of operating the expensive yet substandard and poorly attended Colored School.

In addition to making fiscal sense, the Committee made a case for equal school rights based on ethical grounds. Only one of the Committee members, Samuel D. Porter, an attorney, was known to be a zealous reformer in the community. Porter and his wife Susan, in fact, left the Bethel Free Church a few years earlier even though they were founding members. The couple claimed the church had become spiritually barren, and its “striking and retrograde movement … upon the subject of slavery” led them to dissolve their affection and association with the church.32 Porter

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32 Samuel D. Porter to Pastor and Sessions of the Washington Street Presbyterian Church, 29 September 1845, Porter Family Papers.
would later help Douglass move fugitive slaves through Rochester. The other members of the Committee were Hiram F. Hatch and Hiram Smith, who were both attorneys, and Edwin Pancost, a boot and shoe dealer. They argued that the Colored School was established and maintained “solely in consequence of the ‘prejudice against color,’ and to “gratify a morbid public sentiment against the colored race…a relic” they claimed, “of the organic remains of that public opinion which a few years ago could stone and mob those who dared to assemble in a peaceful and lawful manner and speak the truth in relation to the bondage, degradation, and suffering of the colored race.”

The committee’s report further asserted that black youths “have as much natural right to enjoy the beneficent effects of our ‘Free Schools’ as those of a lighter hue.” If color was used to discriminate against children, why not make the “religious sentiments of parents a test, or the physical formation of children in other respects as well as the color of the skin,” they asked. There was no argument “worthy of the name of reason,” the Committee concluded, to continue with a segregated school system.

33 Frederick Douglass to Samuel D. Porter, September 1851, Porter Family Papers. In the letter, Douglass asked Porter to help him with three men who were at his house “in great peril.”

34 “Colored Schools,” The North Star 17 August 1849; McGregor “Rochester Public Schools,” 63-70.

35 “Colored Schools,” The North Star 17 August 1849; McGregor “Rochester Public Schools,” 63-70.
The logical and rational tone of the report and the unabashed sentiments of "natural" rights and social equality for black citizens promoted by the Committee pushed against the long tradition of segregating the races. Even the list of residents’ names remained segregated for another four years in the city directories. Upon hearing the report read by committee member Hiram Smith, Board member, John Quinn, pronounced the report “able,” but he doubted that the ideas in it originated with the committee. It is unclear who Quinn thought controlled the committee members’ findings, but he suggested they wanted the Board to betray the values dear to white residents. Quinn was also quick to point out that with the newly accepted plan to put boys and girls together in the same classrooms, there was a new social menace that the Board must be heedful to avoid. “No citizen,” he assured the committee, “would want a colored boy sitting in school beside his daughter.”

Another Board member, Alonzo K. Amsden, thought the measure would not find approval from the patrons of the Colored School or from the white district schools that were at risk of gaining a few black scholars. There were some black parents who did not want the schools to integrate. Austin Steward wrote as late as

36 The Rochester City Directory first integrated black residents without any notation of race in 1853. There is some anecdotal evidence that suggests the desegregation of the directories was due to Frederick Douglass. The directories remained integrated through the Civil War years, but inconsistently blacks with a common name shared with whites, such as “Brown,” or “Smith,” would appear at the end the listing instead of alphabetically by their first names. In 1866, 1867, and 1868 the directories again identified black residents, this time integrated but with “(col’d)” after their name.

37 “Proposition,” The North Star, 10 August 1849.
1857 about the prejudice against black children. “There is so much distinction made by prejudice, that the poor, timid colored children might about as well stay at home, as go to a school where they feel that they are looked upon as inferior, however much they may try to excel.” Amsden suggested a resolution to amend the Colored School legislation so eastside black children might be allowed to attend a district school if permission of the trustees was granted on an individual basis. Perhaps sensing the growing polarization between Board members during the gathering, the group tabled the entire matter until the next meeting.

Shortly after the Committee on Colored School made their report public, the room in the old Female Charitable Society on North Washington Street building that served as the school for several years ceased to be available. Supporters of integration applauded the loss of the venue, hoping that the lack of a classroom would aid in the abolition of the Colored School. It is unclear why the school closed. Everhard Peck, the owner of the building (and founding trustee of the University of Rochester), was also Committee member and reformer Samuel Porter’s uncle by marriage. While no evidence is provided in the Female Charitable Society Papers

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38 Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*, 176.


40 In his August editorial, Douglass mentioned the location of the Colored School on Washington Street; “Colored Schools,” *The North Star*, 17 August 1849.
about the Colored School, it is possible that the two men worked together to try and shake the city free of its “prejudice against color.”

The Board of Education was “at a lost” to secure a new location for a schoolhouse or even a rented rooms on short notice. But, instead of allowing black students to attend the district schools, classes for black students were simply not held until at least December. Black children lost half of the academic year. Frederick Douglass, though, rejoiced with the late difficulties of the Board. They were becoming “wearied out in the pursuit” to find a suitable lot or building, and they were “almost ready (from sheer necessity) to admit colored children into the District Schools,” he exclaimed, “where they have a right to be.”

As promising as the closing of the Colored School appeared to be, Douglass thought better than to stand aside and allow the issue to simply go its course. In a long editorial he raised concerns and warned that white opponents of equal school rights would put forth “strenuous efforts” to insure that segregation continued. But what troubled him even more than the town’s white supremacists was the possibility that some black residents would aid the segregationists by submitting petitions or speaking out in favor of keeping their children in racially exclusive schools. Any black vote in favor of “race schools,” Douglass feared, would be twisted into an

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41 Colored Schools,” *The North Star*, 17 August 1849.

admission by black Rochestarians of an “unfitness for equal privileges” that would be passed down to their children.43

Regardless of the fears that black parents might have had about the abuses and taunting their children would experience at white majority schools, blacks had to be “resolved to battle against all complexional distinctions among men,” according to Douglass. “Colored children will be in a much better position for improvement by sharing the advantages of the whites in the common schools, than they can be in a separate and proscribed establishment,” he reasoned. Since betterment to any segment of the community would contribute to the progress of the whole, “no appeals to prejudice and pride” should be considered to reject the recommendation to abolish colored schools.

Douglass warned that there were two potential sources of opposition to integrated schools. The “under strata of Rochester society,” made up of “a few ignorant colored men,” was one. The other was “that low vulgar herd of whites, whose chief sense of their own consequence is derived from the ability to abuse and insult with impunity those who they are pleased to term, ‘niggers.’” But, he found encouragement that many newspapers, despite their party affiliations, supported the Committee’s report, as did “the more respectable of our citizens.” In his eyes, the determining factor was which segment of society, the educated and respected citizens,

43 Colored Schools,” The North Star, 17 August 1849.
or the ignorant, low and vulgar herds, would have their way and effectively “rule the city” and “more or less the happiness of all.”

Douglass was preoccupied for most of September fending off doubts from friends and supporters, and requests to examine his records over the financial stability of *The North Star*. He also spent most of the month lecturing around the region, and for some time did not have much more to say about the Colored School crisis, not that his words would have much weight in the matter. It was heartbreaking for many that the Board of Education did not accept the recommendations of its own Colored School Committee. Instead, the Board chose to cut teachers’ salaries and trim other expenses as a “desperate effort” to maintain the status quo. In a mind boggling decision on October 1, 1849, it recommended that a second Colored School be opened, again, on the west side of the river. The decision to open another school was puzzling on its own, as the Board had been unable to secure a room for the original Colored School after it was evicted from the Female Charitable Society’s building. But, for the Board to place a second school on the same side of the river must have been exasperating to supporters of equal education.

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44 Colored Schools,” *The North Star*, 17 August 1849.

45 Frederick Douglass to Amy Post, 11 September 1849, Post Family Papers; Frederick Douglass to Isaac Post, 16 September 1849, Post Family Papers; Frederick Douglass to William Hallowell, 16 September 1849. Also see annotations to the two letters to the Posts in, McKivigan, *Correspondence*, 398, 399.

46 McKelvey, *Rochester, the Water-Power City*, 267.
With the integration of the district school system defeated and the possibility of an accessible school for black children on the eastside of the river eliminated, there seemed nothing left to rally against. But within weeks, the Board announced that its “wearied” pursuit to find a location for one of the Colored Schools was successful, and it again reignited the smoldering angst of equal school rights advocates. The trustees of the Zion African Methodist Church offered their cellar as the new home for the Colored School in exchange for the “paltry consideration of two hundred dollars” rent! While Douglass called the Board’s decision to maintain race schools in the city “cruel and disgraceful,” he directed his most virulent rant against the “recreant black men” of the Zion Church, for whose “base and cringing servility we have no language sufficiently strong to express our indignation and contempt.”

Certainly, Douglass took the actions of the “stupid” church trustees personally and as an offense to his influence as a community leader. His first office in Rochester was in the Zion Church, and over the previous two years he delivered many lectures from its pulpit. Ironically, in a letter to Gerrit Smith written a year and a half before from his office in church, Douglass expressed his views about “complexional distinctions, such as negro pews, negro berths on steamboats, negro

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cars, Sabbath or week day schools or churches, &c.” He argued that they were “direct obstacles to the progress of reform, and as the means of continuing the slave in his chains.”

The underground room was no setting for a school for “tender children.” The church was built in a low area and for several months of the year, it was surrounded by standing water and muck. The basement was “low, damp and dark,” and was previously used as an icehouse. Douglass accused the church officials of bolstering the city’s caste system and as potentially “endanger[ing] the health, and ruin[ing] the constitution of the whole generation of colored children in Rochester.” “It was to be expected that our white negro haters would seek our degradation, it is their habit to do so,” he pointed out. “But for colored men to become their willing tools is a depth of infamy scarcely to be apprehended.” Douglass portrayed the trustees as virtual slave overseers, who accepted a “bribe,” a “paltry reward,” to ensure that black children would continue to be degraded. Douglass’s tactic with the kind of argument he made and the language he used was to incite the black community into action, as well as to pull the influence of the city’s liberal white activists back into the fray.


The Black community, though, was already in motion. Three days before Douglass’s editorial attacking the “recreant black men” of the Zion Church appeared in The North Star, a meeting of black community leaders and “patrons of the colored school on the west side of the river,” was held to protest segregated schools in general, but it was organized especially to oppose the opening of one in the cellar of the Zion church. There is no evidence that Douglass took a leadership role or even attended the meeting. The newspaper report of the “colored citizens” meeting was formulaic and a typical demonstration of protest in polite democratic society. The group drew up a number of resolutions, and submitted it “To the Honorable, the Board of Education.” The deferent and respectful decree tapped into republican ideals and noted that the trustees of the Zion church were “only” appointed by the church, and were not recognized nor intended to be representatives of the black community at large. “Their attempt to act for them in this instance,” the resolutions pointed out, “is without authority, and therefore, of no binding force.”

Despite the overall decorum of the petition, the black protest committee did not pull back every punch. In granting a lease the trustees “allied themselves with the

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51 James Sharp was the Chairman of the meeting, and B.D. Pattison the secretary. Sharp was a prosperous cartman and property owner in the city as early as 1844, but his daughter, Mary Dyer, was 21 with a toddler and was 7 months pregnant during the struggle for equal school rights. It is likely that she attended the Colored School earlier as she was literate; see, Rochester City Directory, 1844; United States Census 1850, 1860. Two Pattersons appear in the 1849 directory, brothers, James D., and Zachariah D. They were barbers from Virginia, but only 18 and 22 years old in 1849, and first appeared in the directories in 1847. Neither had children nor appeared to be married; see, Rochester City Directory, 1849; United States Census 1850.

pro-slavery Irish faction in the Board of Education,” the declaration boldly stated, “and have grossly wronged the colored children in this city of their educational rights.” The committee noted that for the previous five years the black community had quietly endured the “miserable thing called (falsely) a school” that was provided for their children. “Forbearance,” it explained, had “ceased to be a virtue.”

Any reasonable citizen should have been appalled at the suggestion of sending children into the Zion church cellar for any reason at all, much less to spend hours a day trapped in the “damp, dark and badly ventilated” subterranean room. Paradoxically, in one of the first reports made by Isaac F. Mack, the first Superintendent of Rochester’s free schools, he justified the expenditures made for suitable school buildings, noting that “they should have high ceilings, to give space above the head for a free circulation of air.” He went on to explain that a constant “current fresh air” was necessary in school buildings for the “life and health” of the students. Plainly, the conditions that are ideal for an educational academy are the polar opposite of the ideal conditions that are necessary to keep blocks of ice solid for months. The building “was built in a mud hole,” and the property’s most prominent feature was the stagnant frog pond at its rear (Plate 4).


54 “Zion Church School,” The North Star, 9 November 1849.

55 Isaac F. Mack quoted in, A History of the Public Schools of Rochester, New York, 1813-1835 (Rochester: Rochester Board of Education, no date), 4-5.
Shortly after the issue of the cellar school finally ended a church that backed up to the A.M.E. Zion church was abandoned by its owners. In quick succession the building was “occupied as a carpentry shop, a boxing school and a negro dance house.” A letter to the editor in the *Union Advertiser* in 1857 sought to “call the attention to the Board of Health” to the swammy lot and the frog pond that the churches shared. The writer wanted the building to be deemed “a nuisance” by the city in order to prevent further use of the property.56

Both Douglass’s editorial and the petition that resulted from the meeting of black residents prompted a well-attended interracial meeting at the Court House. Though the gathering was not sanctioned by the Board of Education, at least several members of the board attended and spoke out publically. Samuel Porter immediately directed the meeting to the heart of the matter. After four months of parsing arguments and cutting through rhetoric since the Committee submitted its recommendations to abolish race schools to the Board, Porter, short on patience, stated the Committee’s argument in the simplest terms:

> We complain that this course is illegal, unjust, and anti-republican, and un-Christian. It is a wanton squandering of the public money,

56 “A Nuisance to be Abated and a Worse Nuisance to be Prevented,” *Union Advertiser*, 5 May, 1857. The author of the letter, signed “Colored Citizens,” appears to be written by a white resident whose ultimate goal was to keep the African Methodist Episcopal Church (not Zion A.M.E. Church) from purchasing the property. A countering letter by Peter Stokely, a church trustee, suggested the letter writer’s real issue was one of not wanting another black church in his neighborhood rather than the health and welfare of those who would occupy the building. Nevertheless, Stokely did not contest the unfit conditions of the church lot; “The Colored Church Question,” *Union Advertiser*, 7 May 1857. Also see, Rochester City Directory, 1857.
and a wanton injury to the public interests. No man of liberal mind, of dignity of soul, and of the established position in society, objects to the extension to others of the privileges which he himself enjoys.\textsuperscript{57} 

Porter then submitted a series of resolutions to be adopted and formally submitted to the Board.

Frederick Douglass made his first appearance dealing with the Colored School controversy at the meeting and spoke briefly about the innate rights of black Americans. Despite his family’s firsthand knowledge of the disparaging effects of segregated schools, Douglass, instead, constructed a case to appeal to nativists and the growing foreign population. He evoked the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 and the British oppression of the Irish as examples of tyranny that garnered American sympathies. Blacks who suffer under the injustices of American law and practices, too, he pointed out, should be comforted. “We have fought for our country,” Douglass said, “and only ask to be treated as well as those who fought against it.” By the late 1840s black Rochesterians, just as all blacks throughout the free Northern states, were fast losing unskilled labor and service jobs that had long been the mainstay of black livelihood to Irish immigrants. “We are American born,” he reminded the audience, “and only wish to enjoy the same privileges as foreigners.”\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{57} “Colored School Meeting,” \textit{The North Star}, 21 December 1849.

\textsuperscript{58} “Colored School Meeting,” \textit{The North Star}, 21 December 1849.
The attending board members were still deeply divided. Dr. Moses Long, whom Douglass deemed “the cause of all the mischief,” explained he voted to maintain the Colored School because he was led to believe it was what the black community wanted. 59 Douglass must have shaken his head at the absurdity of such altruism. Since when was it “usual for Americans to be so marvelously ready to give colored men all they ask,” he wondered. 60 Perhaps feeling the growing animosity of the mixed race gathering, Long dismissed himself and any legitimacy of the gathering noting that “holding a public meeting was not the proper way to redress these grievances.” 61

Moses Long and the rest of the board did meet privately in January 1850, to consider the list of resolutions drawn up by Samuel Porter, Reverend H. E. Peck, Jacob Morris, William Bloss, and George W. Clark from the Court House Meeting.62 In response, the board assigned another committee to, yet again, look into the

59 “Meeting Against Colored Schools,” The North Star, 21 December 1849.
61 Jacob P. Morris was a prominent black barber from Georgia; he had three school aged children and resided on the eastern side of the city where there was no school that black children could attend. He helped Douglass move fugitive slaves through the city and later became an agent for the Board of Education for the Colored School. See Milton Sernett, North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 149, 181; United States Census, 1850.  Ralph Francis was also a prominent barber in the city. He had two children aged 13 and 3 years in 1849, and resided in the third ward. He was active locally and also participated in the Black State Conventions. See Philip S. Foner, George E. Walker, eds., Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865, Volume I (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 32.
62 Isaac Post and a Mr. Newell were also appointed to the committee assigned to draw up the resolutions, but apparently their names were not on the final copy. See “Colored School Meeting,” The North Star, 21 December 1849; McGregor “Rochester Public Schools,” 63.
condition of the Colored Schools. In the end, the Board decided to maintain the Colored School on the west side of town where the majority of black students resided, but relocated it on West Spring Street instead of in the basement of the Zion Church. The city briefly opened another Colored School on the east side of the river. The school, according to Douglass, had seven or eight black children in attendance, as well as “about a dozen ragged white children” who attended because it was “convenient.” Ironically, whites could attend the Colored School with its “convenient” location, and as a result black students became a minority in their own “race school.” The school, though, was decommissioned because of sparse attendance. Finally, the Board desegregated one district school, school number 13, in the early 1850s. The school admitted only those black children who resided east of the Genesee River and who were also granted approval by district trustees.  

It is unclear if any classes for black students were conducted in the Zion Church. An annotation on the Zion Church in the Black Abolitionist Papers claims that “from 1849 to 1856, the congregation was the center of controversy because it allowed a segregated public school to use the basement for classes.” The several city directories that were published during this same period states that the school was located on West Spring Street, a few blocks east of the church in the eighth ward. The 1855 city directory even lists that William Barns served as principal in the West Spring Street Colored School, which was conducted in a rented room. See C. Peter Ripley, The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume IV, The United States, 1847-1858 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 100n.; Rochester City Directories, 1849, 1853, 1855.

“Meeting Against Colored Schools, The North Star, 21 December 1849.

Lewis, and Frederick Jr., attended the integrated school.\textsuperscript{66} The majority of Rochester’s black children, however, remained isolated in the city’s one Colored School—always housed in a rented room—for nearly a decade longer. The city finally closed the Colored School in 1857. The substandard, separate accommodations and forced isolation of these children from the larger community demonstrated that for decades Rochestarians were not only uninterested in the improvement and respectability of their black neighbors, but actively worked against their betterment. In effect, the city school system handicapped at least a generation of black children. As a result of the limited opportunities for progress of black youths, the black community as a whole suffered profoundly.

Rochester’s once promising black community was falling apart. Irish immigrants were undercutting black wage earners, and whites began to patronize new white barbers who were taking over the once black dominated trade. At the same time black parents were losing their jobs or working for reduced pay, their children were repeatedly and publically deemed unfit for universal education. What future

\textsuperscript{66} It is unclear where Charles and Annie, the Douglass’s two youngest children, went to school. Annie, the only one of the Douglass children to be born in Rochester, died a few days short of her eleventh birthday on March 1, 1860. In a December, 1859 letter to her father, Rosetta noted that Annie was attending school regularly and was a favorite scholar of her German language teacher. German, though, was not taught in Rochester’s public schools until 1872. It seems that Annie, at least, may have attended a private school in Rochester. It is also possible that the Douglasses secured a tutor to teach her German. McKelvey, “Rochester Public Schools,” 6; Rosetta Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 6 December, 1859. http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mfd&fileName=48/48001/48001page.db&recNum=6&itemLink=/ammem/doughtml/dougFolder9.html&linkText=7 (Accessed, 23 April, 2012); Annie Douglass to Frederick Douglass, 7 December, 1859. http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mfd&fileName=48/48001/48001page.db&recNum=7&itemLink=/ammem/doughtml/dougFolder9.html&linkText=7 (Accessed 23 April, 2012).
might black residents have given the opposition they faced? The black population of Rochester shrank by 25 percent during the 1850s. It is, perhaps, not coincidental that by the time all of the city’s black children were incorporated into the district schools that there were far fewer to take up seats next to white students.

Rochester was by no means alone in maintaining its “race schools.” Buffalo’s school district had much in common with its neighbor. City officials there adhered to a policy of segregated schools despite the economic cost of the system, the substandard quality of the facilities, and the poor educational outcomes for black children. In 1858, one year after Rochester integrated its schools, Buffalo spent $5 for each white student’s public school education. The expense was more than double at $10.25 per pupil to maintain the city’s black school. By the time the city finally closed the “African” school in 1880 the district was spending over $30 on each student.67

Buffalo’s black parents were quite vocal and protested against the “unfit” rooms that the city provided for their children’s school, the limited curriculum, and substandard instructors that were selected by the Board of Education to teach their children. In fact, it was not uncommon for teachers who were expelled by school principals for poor performance or other infractions from the district schools to be rehired to teach at the African School. Although protest was strong in the 1840s, it

was lulled in the 1850s by a few concessions made by the Board of Education such as a larger, but still substandard school, and a promise to no longer call dismissed teachers back to the classroom to instruct black students.68

It was not until after the Civil War and the passage of the Reconstruction era Civil Rights Act in 1866, which gave blacks citizenship and “equal benefits of all laws,” that black Buffalonians formally challenged the city’s long standing segregation policy and inadequate educational provisions. The abolition of slavery and the effective reversal of the Dred Scott decision, which ruled in 1857 that blacks were neither citizens nor did they possess any “rights which the white man was bound to respect,” bolstered blacks’ claims of equality.69 Henry Moxley, a successful barber, was the first to petition the city to allow his children access to the public school in their neighborhood. Moxley rallied other successful black property owners to work towards integrating Buffalo’s schools. They demanded the rights that were due to all citizens and tax payers.

Moxley, was soon joined by John Dallas, a church sexton, Benjamin C. Taylor, a self-professed “Quack Doctor,” and prominent black citizens, Lewis Smith, Peyton Harris, and others. The group decided to remove eighteen of their children from the African School and send them to their respective neighborhood district

68 White, “Jim Crow Education in Buffalo,” 382.

69 The court decided in Scott v. Sandford that blacks were “beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”
schools at the start of the school year in the fall of 1867, in order to test the Civil
Rights Act. Some principles of the white schools immediately received the black
children in their schools. But, school superintendent, John S. Fosdick, ordered the
children to return to the African School and after several weeks went as far as to
personally and physically remove all of the children from the white schools. Altheia
Dallas, the oldest of the student-protesters, cited the Civil Rights Act personally to the
Superintendent when she refused to leave at his command. As a result, Fosdick “took
hold of” the thirteen-year old, “and led her out of the school.”

Moxley secured the services of Albert G. Stevens, a white lawyer who offered
to take the case to desegregate the Buffalo School District based on the Civil Rights
Act to court, pro bono. Stevens argued the case of Fosdick v. Dallas before the State
Supreme Court and lost. Three State Supreme Court justices heard the case upon
appeal in May, 1868. After eleven days of deliberation, the justices issued a 2-1
majority decision. The judges declared that the local ordinance that prohibited black
children from attending white schools overruled any state or federal laws relating to
the segregation of educational facilities. Despite their initial claims to fight the case
all the way to the United States Supreme Court, Moxley and Dallas dropped the case
due to a lack of support from others in the black community.

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70 Benjamin C. Taylor listed his occupation in court records for the case, Moxley v. Dallas, as a

71 John S. Fosdick, Thirty-first Annual Report of the Superintendent of Schools for 1867 (Buffalo,
The ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, which gave black men the legal right to suffrage, brought the question of integration back into local conversations. This time, though, it was the Superintendent of Buffalo’s schools who championed the desegregation of the district. Thomas Lothrope argued that it was “imperative to afford them [blacks] every facility for their education which is demanded by the political position they have now assumed.”\textsuperscript{72} It was for the good of the community at large, he argued, that blacks gain an “unbiased” education so they can engage in “an intelligent exercise of the rights of citizenship.”\textsuperscript{73} Although it took two more years of debate amongst members of the Common Council, the bipartisan vote to integrate the schools overwhelming passed.

Like Rochestarians, when Buffalonians finally united their children in the classroom, there was only on average several black students in each of the district’s sixteen schools. The African School, though, stayed open until 1880. When the city finally closed their school, the remaining thirty-five students rejoined seventy-five of their old classmates who already attended their district schools.

Syracuse’s school district was established by an addendum to the city’s charter in 1848. Reverend Samuel J. May, a Harvard educated Unitarian minister and ardent supporter of universal education and social and political equality, was the


architect of the school system. Syracuse offered a unique advantage to its black residents. From its inception, the city’s free education system was integrated. It welcomed black children and provided them the benefits of an equal education in all of the city’s district schools. The district schools were never segregated by race or sex, and adhering to May’s Perfectionist background, only teachers with high moral standards that included piety and abstinence from tobacco and alcohol, were hired by the district. There is no record in local newspapers of opposition to the proposed policies during public hearings that were held during the planning stages of the free school system. The only issue that gave residents pause was funding the proposed free system.

Syracusans, in fact, often took great pride that their city provided an equal education to all of the city’s children. As a safeguard and to help assure success, the district also provided funding for books for “all indigent pupils.” The editors of the Syracuse Journal and the Onondaga Standard often left their own commentary at the end of stories about school segregation in other cities. When Albany finally closed its black school, the Wilberforce school, the editor of the Syracuse Journal noted that

74 May was also responsible for organizing and securing annual funding for a school for the Onondaga Indians on their reservation, which is located at the southern border of the city of Syracuse.

75 Onondaga Standard, 16 February 1848; 1 March 1848; Religious Recorder, 17 February 1848.

76 Edward Smith, A History of the Schools of Syracuse, From its Earliest Settlement to January 1, 1893 (Syracuse: C.W. Bardeen, Publisher, 1893), 48.
“this is a very proper act for the School Board of the Capital City to do.”

Syracuse maintained its small town feel and village charm throughout the antebellum period. The integrated schools probably played an important role keeping the city’s black and white communities ties close and familiarity current despite the growing population and overall maturity of the city.

During the 1860 annual meeting of the New York State Teacher’s Association held in Syracuse, Joseph A. Allen, a teacher from Massachusetts, explained that in the six years he had been associated with Syracuse’s integrated schools there was not a single complaint against the attendance of black children by parents or other community members. Samuel J. May noted that “it is not the white boys and girls at the schools that make the trouble about the attendance of the colored children, but the parents and politicians make it.” A story in a local paper titled, “An Indignant Parent,” confirmed May’s claim. A white child in one of the city schools who “became refractory” was placed “under the eye of the teacher, seated across from a colored boy,” who “enjoys the respect of his fellow pupils.” The next day the white child returned to class with a note from his father. “ef you Kan give my Boy any other place except to sett by nigger you please send him home,” requested the man. The editor of the paper pointed out, perhaps unnecessarily, that the parent was

77 Syracuse Journal, 20 March 1873.
78 Syracuse Journal, 1 August 1860.
79 Syracuse Journal, 1 August 1860.
ignorant as well as indignant. The editor thought that the teacher could make good use of the note for a grammar lesson.80

New York State did very little to regulate the segregation of black students. In 1841, the same year Rochester created its free school system, the state allowed districts to establish a separate school for black students. The law was upheld by the courts and state legislators several times, including at a hearing to repeal the ordinance in 1864. The case seeking to strike the law from the books was brought by Andrew D. White, who was not only the co-founder of Cornell and the University President, but was also an elected state senator for the Syracuse region. Samuel J. May hurriedly wrote an emotional letter to support White’s mission with hopes that the state would order school districts to provide black children with an “equal chance.”

The institution of separate schools for the children of those “who who are guilty of a skin not colored like our own” is a perpetual imputation of fault, unworthiness or inferiority, which must tend to discourage and keep them depressed. They do not deserve it, and it is mean in us white folks to put it upon them. Give them an equal chance in the race of improvement and then if we get ahead, and keep ahead of them, we may plume ourselves upon our superiority. But it is no honor to us to beat those who are chained behind us, or encumbered with clogs. Nor is it any disgrace to them to be beaten by those who have every advantage.

80 Syracuse Journal, 21 March 1873.
I am ashamed when I hear a white person assert the inferiority of the blacks.81

Unfortunately, the state continued to uphold the statute and left the decision to each municipality. The State Assembly finally repealed the law in 1900 and ordered that “no person shall be refused admission to or be excluded from any public school in the State of New York on account of race or color.”

The establishment of segregated schools could be a blessing or a curse depending on the relationship between black and white residents. Young black children, who were harassed and abused by their white schoolmates, or discriminated against and humiliated by white teachers, might very well have been better off in a “race” school. But, if separate schools also meant inferior classrooms, curriculum, and teachers, as it did at least some of the time in both Rochester and Buffalo, then it becomes more difficult to find the advantages of isolation when the limitations that came with them were so great.

Rochester’s and Buffalo’s school systems had much in common with those in almost every other city in the state. Although Buffalo lagged almost fifteen years behind Rochester’s transition to desegregate its public schools, the state of New York, it should be remembered, took another thirty years to outlaw the discriminatory practice. Syracuse’s educational policies, on the other hand, were not only

progressive or even radical, but they also promoted social ties and common bonds among residents by allowing the children of the city to be educated on equal terms together.

The significant battles over the integration of Rochester’s schools in the late 1840s and early 1850s were especially damaging to that community given the contemporaneous socioeconomic down slide that was taking its toll on the stability of black neighborhoods. A decade earlier blacks were doing quite well in Rochester. Their neighborhoods and families were growing; blacks were amassing property, and working in a wide array of skilled and unskilled jobs. Many black families, in fact, were successful in attaining middling class status. The economic downturn and the struggles for a fair education must have appeared to have hit with almost whiplash-like speeds. Sadly, when the city admitted black students to white schools, there were far fewer who could benefit from the Board of Education’s change of heart.
Conclusion

Scholarship on antebellum northern black communities has flourished since the modern Civil Rights era. Historians and other academics have written about African American agency, black organizations, institutions, and churches that were created by blacks during their struggles for social and political recognition and equality. They have focused both widely on the shared experiences of antebellum blacks across the free North, and narrowly to examine larger black communities in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Scholars have also shed light on smaller African American neighborhoods in Providence, Cincinnati, and even the rural setting of Monmouth County, New Jersey in order to better understand the range of experiences of free black residents in the first half of the nineteenth century. This study of the antebellum cities of Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, New York provides a unique opportunity to explore black communities side-by-side, quite literally, through a comparative lens.

Instead of simply adding to this wealth of post-1960s scholarship, this study focuses on the urban conditions where blacks settled and analyzes how it affected the success of their communities in conjunction with how black residents took advantage of the particular opportunities in each city.

For black residents there was little similarity between the three cities of the Burned-over District. The surprising finding of research into black life in the sister-
cities is that African Americans experienced life very differently in each city. Variations in the cities’ major industries and labor needs, immigrant populations, and education systems resulted in each city’s own unique social order, which in turn provided local blacks with a range of opportunities. The distinctive character of each city was coupled with differences within the black communities themselves to create possibilities for local blacks and varied relationships between them and the larger white communities.

Western New York saw the development of small black communities for the first time during the 1840s. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, with the abolition of slavery in the state followed two years later, gave all African Americans the freedom to move freely and to seek out the best situations for themselves and their families. Within twenty years, the three cities’ black populations grew from a handful of people to vibrant communities consisting of hundreds of black residents, all of whom hoped to stake their claim in the heart of the Burned-over District. Whites literally surrounded the black residents and dictated the possibilities for people who were not only a minority in terms of numbers, but who were also very easily marginalized because of American laws, the lingering effects of Northern slavery, and the cultural traditions of racism. Because the cities in western New York were so young, incorporating in the 1830s and 40s, the ethno-racial order of the region did not settle until later decades. Black and white settlers together shaped the social and economic boundaries for African Americans in the nascent cities and, for a time, the burgeoning market economy and persistent reform sensibilities of the
Second Great Awakening buffered the relationships between black and white residents.

This study explores what life was like for free black families, and the nascent black communities they formed in antebellum Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, New York. The three sister-cities’ extraordinary physical and economic development was a direct result of the prosperity that came with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. Skilled black pioneer settlers found work in their trades, black entrepreneurs welcomed white patrons in their shops, and unskilled black laborers found work as boatmen, general laborers, and in hotels and saloons. The economic prosperity in the region provided many western New York blacks with the means to own real estate, to attain middling class status, and for black men to earn the rights to suffrage. The great socioeconomic changes that occurred in the region also precipitated an explosion of evangelical religiosity that was especially intense in, but not exclusive to, Rochester.

Most scholarly work on the region has concentrated on the social, moral, and evangelical reform movements and activism that flourished starting with the Second Great Awakening in the 1830s. As a result of these appealing yet somewhat narrow inquiries, historians argued the Burned-over District was a spiritual “hot bed” of religious, moral, and social reform that included the ardent support for the women’s rights movement, spiritualism, temperance, and antislavery activism by white residents. According to the reigning interpretation, the progressive ideologies that were cultivated in this period were pervasive, and they bred benevolence in white
residents toward their black neighbors. It was, after all, the place Frederick Douglass chose to raise his family and publish three antislavery newspapers.

The success Frederick Douglass enjoyed as a publisher and as one of the century’s most celebrated social critics is the principal evidence on which historians have based their assumptions about the existence of a liberal view of race in antebellum western New York. It is, however, simply an assumption. In reality, Douglass’s accomplishments had no correlation with the condition or wellbeing of the other black residents in Rochester or in its sister-cities. In addition, the socioeconomic strides that many black residents made was due to the labor demands of the growing city, rather than to any liberalism endorsed by the native white population.

Although Rochester’s celebrated revival period did fuel numerous reformist movements, there was no organization that rallied for the support and improvement of northern free blacks in general or for blacks in its immediate vicinity. According to Rochester historian, Blake McKelvey, there were “perhaps as many as a dozen forthright citizens,” who were “friends of the Negro.”1 A very few of those were like Samuel D. Porter, who fought for equal educational opportunities for the city’s black children or like Amy and Isaac Post who welcomed black residents and visitors into their home. They maintained lasting friendships with former slaves including, Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Jacobs. Amy Post was also close to William

C. Nell, and to Benjamin and Frances Cleggett, but for every Samuel Porter and Amy Post, there were tens of thousands of white Rochesterians who were ambivalent, at best, about the welfare of a few hundred black Rochesterians.

There is little evidence that the moral reform and social improvement activism had any tangible effect on the people who might have benefited the most from such progressive ideologies. But, just as the temperance reformers and Sabbatarians of the 1830s were not responsible for the socioeconomic success of the first black settlers, the antislavery advocates and the champions of women’s rights in the 1850s were also not responsible for the black community’s troubles in the 1850s. The black residents’ successes and disappointments were at the mercy of the market economy and a result of the desperation of Irish immigrants. Despite his international fame, Frederick Douglass had little influence on the lives and welfare of the black working class. Douglass, though, did see the sudden economic changes that affected black barbers, waiters, and shopkeepers. He saw the black community weaken, the exodus of black families, and the emptying of black neighborhoods that resulted.

The experiences of Rochester’s black community had a significant influence on Douglass. They informed his understanding of the fragile status of the nation’s free black population. Douglass’s proposed remedy, however, to train black children in the trades in order to obtain economic independence, and therefore the respect of whites, was impractical at best. The handful of black tradesmen and entrepreneurs in Rochester was no less vulnerable than were the “waiters, porters and barbers,” who
occupied professions that Douglass insisted degraded the race. Fewer black tradesmen were practicing their craft due to white competition. Whites were less and less likely to patronize black shoemakers and carpenters, for example, over white craftsmen. It seems unlikely, then, that white craftsmen would take on black apprentices. Even if they did, apprentices would learn skills that they were unlikely practice or profit from. Reverend Jermain Loguen agreed with Douglass that such training was “the only true means of [blacks’] elevation in this country as a people.” But he also recognized that “our enemies know this,” too, “and will prevent our equality with them, as long as they can.”

Middle class values and ideas of respectability were not exclusive to whites; they were American mores. There is no reason why black Americans would not desire improved social status, material attainment, etiquette, and respectability. Oddly, Douglass’s ideas of respectability for blacks did not take into account many of the material possessions and other markers of standards of living that the black working classes were able to obtain in western New York cities. Douglass appeared to be more concerned about the image of waiters doting over white patrons, porters loitering at the packet boat landing, and idle barbers strumming guitars while they

2 While Douglass emphasized the inherent benefits of economic independence, he also noted that whites will only come to respect the black man if he can prove that he is “useful” to society. Frederick Douglass, “Make your sons Mechanics and Farmers—not Waiters Porters and Barbers,” Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 18 March 1853.

3 Jermain Loguen to Frederick Douglass, Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 25 March 1853.
waited for a customer to walk through their doors. Yet many of those same doting, loitering, and idle service workers that Douglass shunned worked hard and steadily enough to purchase their own homes, to keep their wives from working outside the home, and to allow their children to stay in school rather than to go to work at age ten or twelve.

Historian William McFeely argued that Douglass’s disdain for working class blacks, and especially those in the service trades, what Douglass called the “menial employments,” was due an association that Douglass made between enslaved labor and the labor performed by the working classes. “He despised the fact that he had been part of the enforced-labor system that slavery was,” McFeely reasoned, “and still felt somehow that to identify oneself as part of a laboring class was to perpetuate one’s inferiority.” Douglass certainly had contempt for the working classes, but his scorn seemed misplaced, since the vast majority of Americans, blacks and whites alike, occupied the strata of the working classes.

Unhappily, Douglass soon faced the bitter reality that free black workers had dealt with for generations when his sons came of working age and had to find employment other than what he provided for them at his newspaper office. None of Douglass’s sons was able to maintain steady employment as adults. Douglass was constantly plagued with requests for money from his sons, Lewis, Frederick, and Charles, as well as from his daughter Rosetta’s husband, Nathan Sprague. Just as

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4 Douglass, “Make your sons Mechanics.”

often as his sons’ asked for money, they also asked him to extend his influence to help them secure a clerk’s position or a job as a printer.  

Douglass was enraged during a speech he gave in Rochester in August 1869 when his eldest son Lewis was denied a position as a printer by the Printer’s Union because he was not a member. The Union, which denied Lewis the job, of course, had the ability to provide him with the requisite membership. Douglass said that he had “felt the iron hand of Negro hate before, but the case of this young man gave it a deeper entrance into my soul than ever before.” Black Rochesterians in the audience must have shaken their head in confusion at Douglass’s naivety, when he asked where are we when “a young man of good character is unable to find work at his trade because of color or race?”

The people who must have been shaking their heads the most were the members of the few black pioneer families that remained in the sister-cities. They experienced and they witnessed other black families prosper in unprecedented numbers in the first couple of decades after the Erie Canal opened up the western half of the state. They were more than five times as likely to own property as blacks in older eastern seaboard cities. Their speedy rise to the middle classes surely came with a new found pride in themselves and all of the other black families that were able to improve their lot in the western canal cities. Sadly, the time it took them to

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achieve and enjoy their newfound economic stability was out-paced only by how quickly it was lost.
### TABLE 1.

#### 1840 CITY POPULATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BUFFALO</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>ROCHESTER</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>SYRACUSE^</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Male</td>
<td>9,366</td>
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<td>10,045</td>
<td>49.9</td>
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<td>51.7</td>
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<td>White Female</td>
<td>8,344</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>9,644</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>5,084</td>
<td>46.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total White</td>
<td>17,710</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td>19,689</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>10,776</td>
<td>97.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black Male</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black Female</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Black</td>
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<td>2.7</td>
<td>450</td>
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<td>236</td>
<td>2.1</td>
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<td>City Total</td>
<td>18,203</td>
<td></td>
<td>20,139</td>
<td></td>
<td>11,012</td>
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</table>

^As the town of Salina.

Data source: 1840 United States Census
TABLE 2.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BUFFALO</th>
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<th>ROCHESTER</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>SYRACUSE</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>49.9</td>
<td>17,778</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>11,623</td>
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<td>48.5</td>
<td>18,076</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>10,278</td>
<td>46.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total White</td>
<td>41,586</td>
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<td>35,854</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td>21,901</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of growth since 1840</td>
<td>134.8</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Black Male</td>
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<td>.78</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>.71</td>
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<td>Blk. Female</td>
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<td>290</td>
<td>.8</td>
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<td>Total Black</td>
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<td>549</td>
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<td>% of growth since 1840</td>
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<td>36,403</td>
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Data source: 1840 & 1850 United States Census
TABLE 3.

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<th>City</th>
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<th>N.E.</th>
<th>Other States</th>
<th>Great Brit &amp; Poss.</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>U.S. Born</th>
<th>Foreign Born</th>
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<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
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<td>702</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>13,270</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>2,769</td>
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<td>19.7</td>
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<td>40.7</td>
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<td>Rochester</td>
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<td>328</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>13,254</td>
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<td>2,428</td>
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<td></td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>21.9</td>
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</table>

^As the Town of Salina
* Blacks are included in the “total population” and regions of birth.

Data source: 1845 New York State Census
TABLE 4.

Black Adults by Place of Birth, 1850

Data Source: 1850 United States Census
TABLE 5.

Percentage of Black Adults by Place of Birth, 1850

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>New York</th>
<th>Other Northern</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>Foreign</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
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<td>Buffalo</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>57</td>
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<td>Rochester</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syracuse</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data source: 1850 United States Federal Census.
TABLE 6.

Black Residents Place of Birth, 1850

Data Source: 1850 United States Federal Census.
TABLE 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATIONS BY SKILL LEVEL</th>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Clergy</th>
<th>Doctor</th>
<th>Unskilled &amp; Semiskilled</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skilled &amp; Entrepreneurial</td>
<td>Barber</td>
<td>Shoe Maker</td>
<td>Basket maker</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bone player</td>
<td>Cartman</td>
<td>Wagon Maker</td>
<td>Porter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weaver</td>
<td>Joiner</td>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>Gardener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mason</td>
<td>Cigar maker</td>
<td>Gambler</td>
<td>City crier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Blacksmith</td>
<td>Tanner</td>
<td>Teamster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peddler</td>
<td>Printer</td>
<td>Cooper</td>
<td>Hostler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Clothes cleaner</td>
<td>Salesman</td>
<td>Agent</td>
<td>Whitewasher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grocer</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Saloon keeper</td>
<td>Scavenger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Musician</td>
<td>Minstrel</td>
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<td>Waiter</td>
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TABLE 8.

Skill Level of Black Workers, 1850

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<th>City</th>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Skilled/Entrepreneurial</th>
<th>Semi/Unskilled</th>
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<td>33</td>
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Data source: 1850 United States Federal Census
TABLE 9.

Skill Level of Black Workers, 1860

Data Source: 1860 United States Federal Census
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<th>3rd Ward</th>
<th>4th Ward</th>
<th>5th Ward</th>
</tr>
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<td>Cook</td>
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<td>Waiter</td>
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<td>Gardner</td>
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<td>Sailor</td>
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<td>Carpenter</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Musician</td>
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<td>Peddler</td>
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<tr>
<td>Porter</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Saloonkeeper</td>
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<tr>
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<td>City Crier</td>
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<td>Printer</td>
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<tr>
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*2 female

Data source: 1850 United States Census and City Directories 1848-1851.
TABLE 10a.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Ward</th>
<th>2nd Ward</th>
<th>3rd Ward</th>
<th>4th Ward</th>
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<th>6th Ward</th>
<th>7th Ward</th>
<th>8th Ward</th>
<th>9th Ward</th>
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<td>Cook</td>
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<td>Boatman</td>
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<td>Clergy</td>
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<td>Porter</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Porter</td>
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<td>Tanner</td>
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<td>Sales</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Shoemaker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Musician</td>
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<td>Scavenger</td>
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<td>Teamster</td>
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<td>Waiter</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartman</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Clothes cleaner</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Mason</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Musician</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Shoemaker</td>
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Data source: 1850 United States Federal Census and City Directories 1848-1851.
TABLE 10b.

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<td>Servant 1</td>
<td>Cigar maker 1</td>
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<td>Cook 1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Grocer 1</td>
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<td>Hostler 1</td>
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<td>Weaver 1</td>
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Data source: 1850 United States Federal Census and City Directories 1848-1851.
### 1850 Occupational Skill by Place of Birth

#### Buffalo

<table>
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<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Skilled/Entrepreneurial</th>
<th>Semi/Unskilled</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>--</td>
<td>15 (8)</td>
<td>17 (9)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>--</td>
<td>7 (4)</td>
<td>8 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2 (1)</td>
<td>42 (21)</td>
<td>79 (40)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>13 (7)</td>
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#### Rochester

<table>
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<th>Semi/Unskilled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
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#### Syracuse

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*Northern states not including New York State.

Data Source: 1850 Federal Census.
### 1850 Buffalo Black Property Owners and Occupations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Profession or Occupation</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Value of Real Estate</th>
<th>Cannot Read or Write</th>
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<tr>
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<td>M</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>White Washer</td>
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*on steamboat

Data Source: 1860 Federal Census.
### TABLE 14a.

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### Women

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Data Source: 1860 Federal Census; Rochester City Directories, 1859, 1861.
TABLE 14b.

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Data Source: 1860 Federal Census.
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Data Source: 1840-1870 Federal Census.
MAP 3. Rochester, 1848.

Data Source: Courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Department.
MAP 4. Rochester, 1863.

Data Source: Courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Department.
PLATE 1. Walker's Saloon Advertisement

Data Source: Rochester City Directory, 1845. Courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Department.
PLATE 2. Cleggett & Lambert Advertisement

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Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County - City Directory Collection - 1855

DEWEY'S ROCHESTER

B. MINGES,
UNDERTAKER,

NO. 112 MAIN-ST., ROCHESTER, N.Y.

Announces to his friends and the public generally, that he is prepared to attend to all calls on funeral occasions. Will furnish Hearse and Carriages at all times according to order. A large assortment of ready made Coffins and Shrouds always on hand at reasonable prices.

THOMAS FLOYD,
PRACTICAL PLUMBER,

Force Pump and Water Closet Manufacturer.

Pumps, Hydrants, hot and cold Shower Baths, fitted up on the most approved principle.

All work warranted to give satisfaction. City and Country orders respectfully solicited, and personally attended to.

Orders left at my residence, no. 6 JACkson-street, ROCHESTER, N.Y.

CLEGGETT & LAMBERT,

HAIR DRESSERS AND CUTTERS.

In announcing to their friends and the public in general, that they have fitted up a shop where they will be happy to wait upon all those who would have their hair cut in their improved and superior styles, unsurpassed by any hair cutters west of New York or Boston, having had years of experience, they flatter themselves that they can suit the most fastidious; they cut hair entirely with reference to the shape and form of the head. To all other branches of the business the same care and attention will be paid. We would also state that we pay particular attention to the COLORING of the Hair and Whiskers, having in our possession the latest and most improved dye for Coloring the hair. We also pay particular attention to the cutting of children's hair. TOILET ARTICLES will be constantly kept on hand; Shirts, Collars, Hair, Tooth and Nail Brushes of all descriptions.

All who may favor us with a call, it shall not be our fault if they do not go away well pleased.

CLEGGETT & LAMBERT,

Mill Street, one door south of W. T. Lawrence's Dining Saloon,
Near Central R. R. Depot, Rochester, N. Y.

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Data Source: Rochester City Directory, 1855. Courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Department.
PLATE 3. David H. Ray Shaving and Hair Dressing Rooms Advertisement.

**ADVERTISEMENTS—1845-6.**

**ADAMS' PATENT WOODEN PUMP,**

Designed for either Wells or Cisterns.

This Pump has been used for five years, and is highly recommended by all those that have used it.

It lets off water by raising the handle. The lower box is drawn with a hook, as from the common pump. Manufactured by

GEO. W. WRIGHT.

PLEASANT STREET,
First street north of St. Paul's Church, ROCHESTER, N. Y.

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**ROCHESTER CITY SHAVING & HAIR DRESSING ROOMS,**

Under the Eagle Hotel Hotel and Monroe Bank,

THE subscriber having recently become the proprietor of this establishment, takes great pleasure in informing his patrons and the public that he has fitted it up in a style of elegance which can not be surpassed. None but the very best workmen are employed, and

Shaving, Hair Dressing, and Shampooing, will be performed in the highest style and most satisfactory manner. Gentlemen who are unfortunately losing their hair, are informed that the subscriber is in possession of a sure preventive; the use of which will entirely remedy the difficulty and prevent baldness.

He will attend to dressing Ladies' hair for Balls and Parties, (a branch of the profession seldom understood,) and for that purpose will be happy to attend them at their residences.

He also keeps constantly on hand a choice variety of Perfumery and Tooth, Nail, and Hair Brushes.

Rochester, August, 1845.

D. H. RAY.

Data Source: Rochester City Directory, 1845. Courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Department.
PLATE 4. Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, Rochester, NY.

Data Source: Courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Department
PLATE 5. Frederick Douglass, circa 1855.
PLATE 6. Frederick Douglass’s home at 4 Alexander Street, Rochester, NY (This photograph is believed to be from 1920-1940. Douglass’s home was razed later in the century.)

Data Source: Courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Department.
PLATE 7. Reverend Jermain Wesley Loguen.
PLATE 8. Reverend Luther Lee

Yours for the whole truth

Luther Lee.
PLATE 9. Reverend Samuel J. May

Data Source:Courtesy of Samuel J. May Antislavery Collection, Cornell University Library.

Data Source: Courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Department.
PLATE 11: Austin Steward, 1867.

Data Source: Courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Department.
PLATE 12. Amy Post.

Data Source:Courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Department.
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