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Rochester: A Transnational Community for Blacks Prior to the Civil War

by dann j. Broyld



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Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge, c. 1856. This hand-colored lithograph of the Niagara Suspension Bridge shows Niagara Falls in the background and the Maid of the Mist below in the water. Picture by Charles Parsons, Currier & Ives. From the United States Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

ROCHESTER HISTORY

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Dear *Rochester History* Reader,

In this edition of *Rochester History*, dann j. Broyld examines Rochester's place as a transition point in the transnational journey taken by many African Americans in the nineteenth century. The city's role in the abolition movement and Underground Railroad has been well-documented, but Broyld takes that a step further in this discussion of the people—real people—who lived the journey and called Rochester home for a time. Remarkably, many of the former slaves who fled to Canada returned to Rochester and put down roots here. Others counted their time in Rochester as favorable and went on to make significant contributions to their communities. Even those African Americans who never left the city or crossed the border were affected by their proximity to Canada. With this publication, *Rochester History* continues to shine light on little-known people, places, and events that shaped our city.

Patricia Uttaro, *Library Director*

About *Rochester History*

Rochester History is a scholarly journal that provides informative and entertaining articles about the history and culture of Rochester, Monroe County, and the Genesee Valley. In January 1939, Assistant City Historian Blake McKelvey published the first quarterly edition of *Rochester History*. Subjects researched and written by him and other scholars were edited, published, and distributed by McKelvey with the goal of expanding the knowledge of local history. Studying local history as a microcosm of U.S. history has brought insight and understanding to scholars and researchers around the globe.

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Rochester: A Transnational Community for Blacks Prior to the Civil War

by dann j. Broyle

In February 1860, John William Dungy debarked from the ship that had carried the runaway slave from Virginia to Philadelphia.¹ There, on the shoreline of the city, an ecstatic Dungy cried aloud, "Thank God!" He was sure that his freedom would be assured now that he



William John Dungy.

had reached the North. But Dungy would soon learn that he had not traveled far enough to escape slavery's reach. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required that runaways found in the North be returned to their owners in the South and set harsh penalties for anyone caught aiding a fugitive slave, was being enforced even in abolitionist strong holds such as Philadelphia. To preserve his freedom, Dungy would need to venture further north to British Canada, a journey that would take him through Rochester, New York.

As a slave, Dungy had been owned by an Alabama family, but he had been hired out to former Virginia Governor John Munford Gregory in Richmond. In early 1860, he learned that his absentee owners were planning to send for him. Dungy had been preparing to flee for five years and had saved \$68.15 for this purpose. He quickly determined that venturing further south was out of the question, and he set his plan in motion. Claiming to be ill, Dungy requested to visit his mother for a week. She lived miles away. The Governor granted permission and provided him with five dollars and a pass to travel. This deceit bought Dungy ample time to run away before anyone noticed.

In Philadelphia, Dungy met abolitionist William Still, who was responsible for assisting hundreds of freedom seekers. Still and others convinced Dungy of the need to cross into Canada to secure his autonomy under British law. Dungy's route brought him briefly to Rochester. During his stay, he wrote to tell the Governor "that he need put himself to no trouble in hunting him up, as he had made up his mind to visit Canada." Dungy spent four years in Canada before returning to Virginia. During a trip back to the South, he met with the Governor's daughters.

One of the young ladies told the former slave that she “prayed for him” in his absence, while the other frankly expressed that she believed that he was too “good a Christian to run away.” She also took issue with the letter Dungy had sent to her father from Rochester, explaining that it was rather “naughty.” Despite what the outspoken woman deemed as wayward misdeeds, she indicated that she felt inclined to forgive him. In subsequent years, the hardworking Dungy educated himself and became a prominent Baptist preacher.²

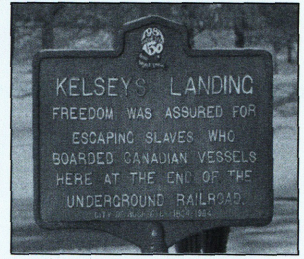
Like so many other blacks prior to the Civil War, Dungy used Rochester as a transitional point to Canada. Rochester was famous for this activity, known as a one-way stop on the Underground Railroad. However, the relationship between Rochester and Canada is actually much more complex. Black inhabitants of Rochester possessed transnational identities and strategically positioned themselves near the American-Canadian divide where immigration, movement, and interaction occurred. Yet most historians have tended to view Rochester and surrounding Monroe County either as a singular, localized entity or in the conventional context of Western New York, the “Burned-Over District,” and more recently the “North Star Country.”³ This article moves away from these traditional approaches by placing Rochester in the larger borderland framework of the Niagara frontier, a region that has long been confined to the Niagara Peninsula on the Canadian side and Erie, Niagara, and Genesee counties on the American side. Monroe County can be incorporated into this same space, not based on the physical layout *per se*, but rather based on the human connections and shared interest within this transnational intersection. This claim is rooted in the notion that regions are not permanent fixtures but rather have the ability to be constructed, destroyed, and reconfigured depending on circumstances.

Prior to the Civil War, Rochester existed within an area where the worlds of the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and the African Diaspora overlapped. While a number of blacks traveled across the American-Canadian international lines, others simply found reassurance in their geographic proximity. Life in the fluid frontier crossroads of the Niagara region provided blacks with options and a regional consciousness not found in other places throughout the United States. Direct access to a foreign land allowed blacks in Rochester the ability to negotiate the contours of the United States and the British Empire and to pit them against one another to achieve the best possible outcomes.

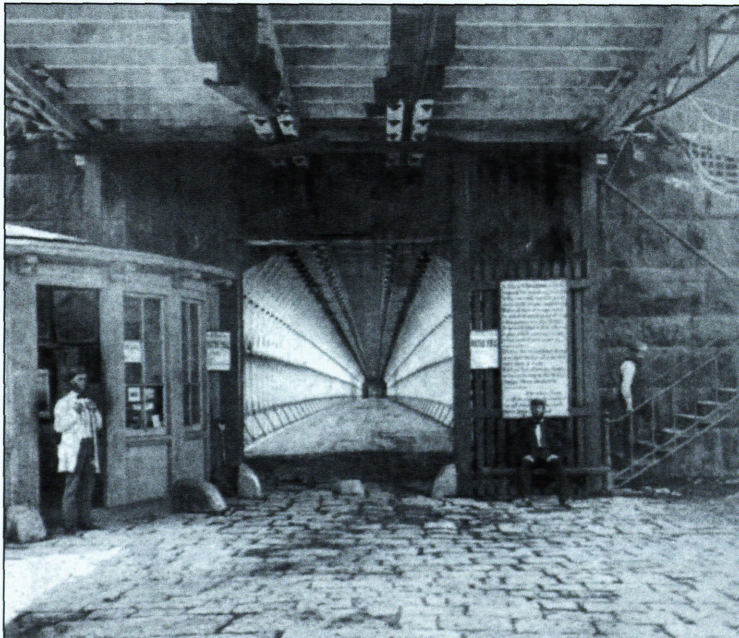
| A Transnational Community

There are a number of reasons why antebellum Rochester should be defined as a transnational community. Foremost, the city is physically connected to Canada via Lake Ontario and by some 80 miles of landmass. Settlement in the Rochester area was undeniably strategic. Blacks were aware of their proximity to the alternative political realm of British Canada and were prepared to flee northward if an emergency were to arise.

Early on, fugitives seeking Canada used westward roadways to Niagara Falls and Buffalo, as well as the Charlotte waterfront and Kelsey's Landing to the north of Rochester.⁴ The regional links between Rochester and Canada were enhanced in 1825 by the completion of the Erie Canal, which facilitated travel toward the Canadian border crossing. Construction of the Niagara Falls and Lewiston-Queenston Suspension bridges at midcentury increased the ease with which fleeing blacks could cross into Canada. The Niagara Falls international overpass, which was the most popular of the two bridges, opened to pedestrian and carriage traffic in 1848 and expanded to include railroad passage in 1855.⁵ These attributes made Rochester an ideal location as one of the last major American Underground Railroad stops on the Niagara trail, and many black fugitives and individuals seeking asylum employed the area for the potential of greater freedom under British-Canadian law.⁶

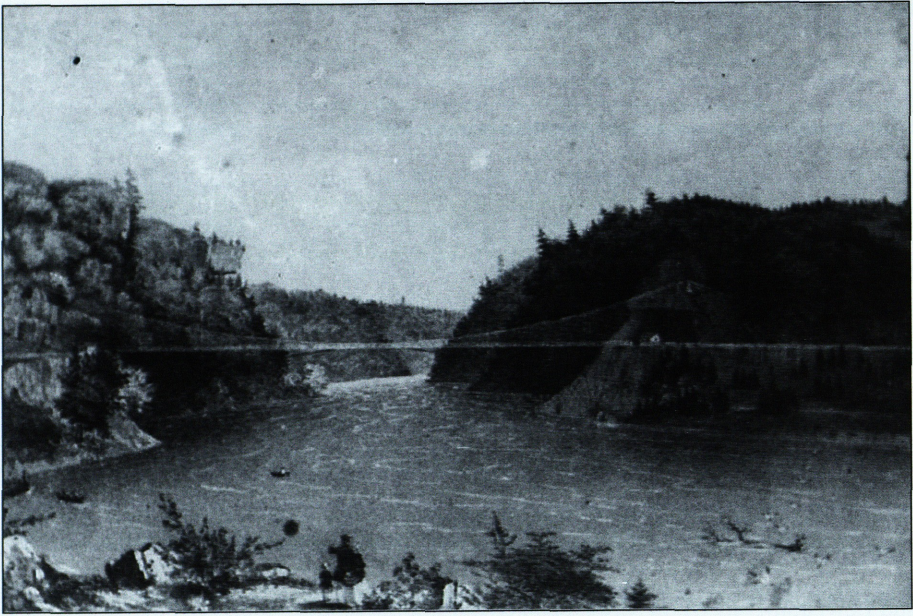


Photograph by Ve Jay Broyld, Sr.



The Niagara Suspension Bridge Toll Gate, c. 1857. Taken from the lower deck entrance of the Niagara Railway Bridge. The trusses on each side of the bridge's doorway and the tollbooth can be seen in the stereograph.

For fugitives, this could be a gateway to a new life and greater freedoms. Photograph by John P. Soule. From the Niagara Falls Public Library.



The first Lewiston-Queenston Suspension Bridge was built in 1851, facilitating the passage of fugitive slaves across the border from the U.S. into Canada. From the Niagara Falls Heritage Foundation Collection, Niagara Falls Public Library.

The geographical positioning and regional transportation in the Rochester area also yielded meaningful social intercourse back and forth across the border. Black Rochesterians and abolitionists were familiar with the antislavery activists, institutions, and publications in Canada. The Niagara frontier gave way to shared religious denominations, organizational networking, and annual celebrations, as well as kinship and friendship ties that were reinforced by border crossings. These interactions blurred the lines of the politically defined border. Blacks in the Niagara region acknowledged a common struggle that transcended the American-Canadian partition. Within the international crossroads in which Rochester was situated, blacks simply did not cut themselves off from their Canadian counterparts. They acknowledged and engaged in a transnational existence and sought to forge lasting relationships.

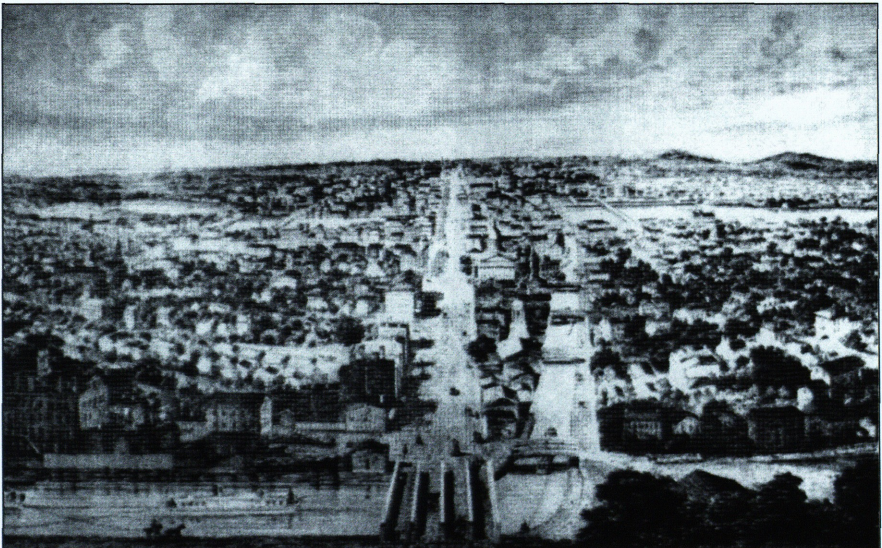
As the Civil War neared, Rochester's multinational culture and associations only strengthened. The black population and fugitive traffic increased with each passing decade. Having a modest population in its initial years, Rochester averaged 300 to 500 blacks throughout the nineteenth century.⁷ By 1850, Monroe County was home to 699 blacks, 549 of whom lived within the City of Rochester, where the lion's share of them crowded into the Third Ward, also known as Corn Hill.⁸ In addition, about 150 fugitives were funneled through Rochester *en route* to Canada each year during the 1850s. With few exceptions, the city's black residents worked

in lower-level positions as servants and laborers, lived in rented rooms, and generally did not own personal property worth more than \$100. Nonetheless, even the most downtrodden blacks in town had an awareness of neighboring Canada. This understanding, in its simplest form, gave local blacks a trans-border identity that differentiated them from others in the country.

| Rochester's Black Pioneers

Asa Dunbar

Even before the turn of the nineteenth century, blacks in Rochester utilized nearby Canada for the safety and opportunity it offered. In fact, three of the city's best-known black pioneers all ventured across the international lines at one point or another. Asa Dunbar, who is recognized as the first black in the area, came from New England in 1795 and settled in the wilderness of Irondequoit Bay with his family of six. He made a living growing fruit and gathering salt from a nearby deposit. After two years, Dunbar's search for greater opportunity led him to relocate down Irondequoit Creek where development was moving at a faster pace. The change in environment brought good fortune. Dunbar managed a large store and won the respect of his fellow citizens, becoming so highly regarded that in one instance he was selected to act as the "city attorney."⁹ Despite his efforts and those of his neighbors, the evolving community failed to prosper. Dunbar uprooted his family and moved north to live under the British flag.¹⁰ His decision to leave for Canada demonstrated Rochester's transnational position early on. In the coming decades, other blacks would follow in his footsteps.



Rochester in 1853. From the Historic Plans (Flat) Series. Issued by the Smith Brothers in the 1850's from drawings by J.W. Hill.

Austin Steward

The earliest black business owner in Rochester, Austin Steward, developed a trans-border orientation as well. The former slave came to Rochester in 1816 after securing his freedom. As a slave, he had been owned by Capt. William Helm of Virginia. When Helm relocated to Sodus Bay, and later to Bath, Steward came with him and toiled as a hired-out laborer. He escaped from bondage around 1813 but was discovered by Helm in Canandaigua. He avoided recapture by seeking assistance from the New York Manumission Society, which cleverly used a legal technicality in the state's 1799 Gradual Emancipation Law to liberate Steward. In 1816, he established himself in Rochester and soon opened a meat market and grocery store on Buffalo (now West Main) Street. The business was profitable and attracted a considerable mixed-race clientele. His entrepreneurial success made him an object of contempt among white competitors. Despite bigotry, he continued to progress. Within a few years, Steward aided schoolmaster Zenas Freeman in organizing a Sabbath School to educate the city's black youth, among whom was future community leader Thomas James. Lack of financial support, however, eventually led to the closing of the academic center.¹¹

Nonetheless, throughout the 1820s Steward's wealth and influence in the black community continued to grow. Steward had moved into a new two-story edifice on Buffalo Street, which provided space for his grocery store and home. He owned lucrative property in Brighton and Canandaigua and was involved in early forms of the area's Canadian-bound Underground Railroad. When the New York Emancipation Act was passed on July 4, 1827, freeing blacks in the state, Steward was the featured speaker at Rochester's celebration in Johnson Square.¹² His oration was published in local newspapers, as well as in the New York City-based *Freedom's Journal*, and his name became well-known within national abolitionist circles. Steward was afforded greater acknowledgement and access to leading antislavery activists after he was assigned as an agent of the *Freedom's Journal* in 1828. By 1830, his prominence in the abolitionist community reached new heights when he was appointed vice president of the first black national convention held in Philadelphia. At the meeting, participants discussed black migration from the United States to Haiti, Mexico, Canada, and other places.¹³

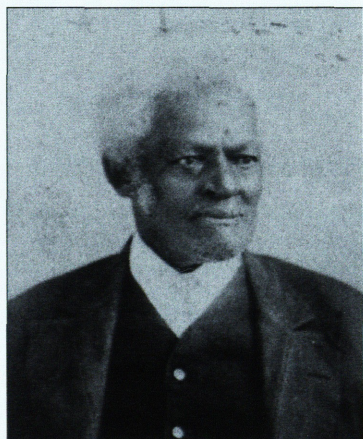


*Austin Steward. Original drawing
by James B. Murray.*

Shortly after returning to Rochester, Israel Lewis, agent and fundraiser of the newly founded Wilberforce Colony in Southwestern Ontario convinced Steward to move to Canada. Lewis emphasized to him that blacks in the settlement were undergoing extreme hardship and starvation. "I concluded to go to Canada," Steward explained, "and try to do some good; to be of some little service in the great cause of humanity."¹⁴ He sold his property, packed six wagons with possessions, and relocated his wife and two children to the British colony. Although Steward's decision might seem outlandish today, social, legal, and economic conditions of the era prompted many black Rochesterians to contemplate life outside America. For those who were serious about making a change, Canada was indisputably the most convenient option. Steward had high hopes for the 800-acre Wilberforce settlement, but its tainted leadership, including Lewis, embezzled and mishandled the colony's funds. Steward grew progressively disenchanted. Finally, in 1837, the corruption pushed him to return to Rochester. The homecoming was difficult. He had spent his entire fortune on the unsuccessful black settlement. Steward humbly asked for loans from white businessmen with whom he had associated in the past so that he could reestablish his grocery store in Rochester.¹⁵ His experience provides evidence that British Canada did not guarantee success; it only enhanced the likelihood of legal recourse and social mobility.

Rev. Thomas James

A third important black pioneer, the Rev. Thomas James, was born a slave in Montgomery County, New York. In his early teens, he escaped from bondage and fled across the Canadian border to St. Catharines. There, James supported himself by working as a digger



*Rev. Thomas James,
from the Rochester Public Library
Local History Division.*

on the Welland Canal. He called the labor "a rough lot and soon had a mind to leave."¹⁶ Risking re-enslavement, he came back to the United States after three months and made Rochester his home. James stands as an example that international fugitive traffic flowed in both directions in the Niagara frontier, depending on the prospects for social mobility. In 1823, at age 19, the illiterate James attended the black Sabbath School on Buffalo Street, where the industrious Austin Steward taught. He was employed at a freight warehouse along the Erie Canal and studied during his downtime. Thankful for his education, he returned the



*A.M.E. Zion Church,
1831-1879. From the Rochester
Public Library Local History
Division.*

benevolence to the community in 1828 by opening his own school for “colored children” on Favor Street.¹⁷

The emerging community leader held religious meetings at the new school and used it as a hub for refugees awaiting passage to Canada. He also started training to preach the gospel. By 1830, James had purchased property to build a house of worship. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, located in the Third Ward, soon materialized as a staple of the black community under his direction. In subsequent years, James was officially ordained a minister and worked with a forward-thinking Rochester group to publish the abolitionist paper *The Rights of Man*. In 1835, he left Rochester to oversee churches in Syracuse, Ithaca,

Long Island, and New Bedford, Massachusetts. In New England, James met up-and-coming abolitionist Frederick Douglass.¹⁸ Serving two years as pastor at the New Bedford congregation that Douglass attended, James was among the first people to encourage the talented orator to address issues of black bondage via the formal abolitionist platform.¹⁹ When Douglass was in search of a location to establish a newspaper, there is reason to believe that James, a former agent of an anti-slavery paper in Rochester, suggested the city. James, Dunbar, and Steward set the precedent for transnational interaction to come.

| August First Emancipation Day Celebrations

In the 1830s, while James was still living in Rochester, blacks in the city gained greater reason to praise British-Canadian law and to seek its soil. Although by 1820 Canadian bondage had virtually ceased due to a combination of legislative and judicial actions, it was not officially abolished until the British Parliament finalized the Imperial Act of 1833 on August 1, 1834.²⁰ This act freed some 50 slaves in Canada and approximately 800,000 throughout the British Empire. It started an annual phenomenon among blacks in Canada, the West Indies, the United Kingdom, and, ironically, the American North to commemorate the date black autonomy was won.²¹ “To many of us the first of August,” *Douglass’ Monthly* once explained, “is like the white man’s 4th of July—a day of freedom from ordinary restraints.”²² Acknowledged throughout the African Diaspora, August First had a special meaning in the United States. It acted as an alternative to the widely celebrated yet contradictory Independence Day and mocked the American “Free Republic.”²³

A testament to their transnational outlook, blacks in Rochester observed the British Emancipation Day, though it did not have legal authority in America. They traveled to celebrations throughout the Niagara region and even played host to their own. In August 1848, a commemoration in Rochester attracted 1,500 to 2,000 people.²⁴ They filtered in from neighboring villages, Canada, and abroad.²⁵ An advertisement prior to the event urged: "Come out and devote one day to honor holy freedom and do what he may towards advancing the cause of Emancipation in our own land."²⁶ The festivities consisted of a procession of bands and banners from the Colored Church on Ford Street to Washington Square, where the stage was set for Douglass to deliver the keynote address. In the evening, celebrants had the choice of attending a fair at Minerva Hall or a grand ball at Irving Hall.²⁷ Alongside blacks, at least half of the crowd that participated in the activities was white. Newspaper reports indicated that the entire affair was gratifying for participants and spectators alike. Regional Emancipation Day celebrations continued to be the most important dates on the calendar for blacks in Rochester into the early 1860s, demonstrating their common identity and shared political desires with those in Canada.

| Carrying on the Legacy of Canadian Relations

Frederick Douglass, a pillar of the Rochester community from the late 1840s on,



Frederick Douglass. Original drawing
by James B. Murray.

certainly carried on the black Rochester legacy of Canadian relations once he established the *North Star* within the city. However, there has been very little historical treatment of Douglass' transnational involvement with Canada. In his authoritative study *The Blacks in Canada*, historian Robin W. Winks wrote that "even so astute a Negro as Frederick Douglass thought that Canada was where 'the wild goose and the swan repaired at the end of winter' and not 'the home of man.'"²⁸ Despite the shortcomings of scholars,

Douglass was firmly aware of Rochester's critical borderland position from the onset. Each of the periodicals Douglass published had Canadian financial backers, as well as readership in the British territory. A variety of Canadian issues made the headlines, including the status of black immigrants, Detroit frontier settlements, such as Buxton, population calculations, and even the fair price of postage to the Queen's dominion.²⁹ Although the majority of Rochester blacks could

Cleveland, Ohio, on Wednesday, the sixth of September. "Come as the waves come!"

CANADA POSTAGE.—The following instructions have been received from the Postmaster General, by the Postmaster of this city:

P. O. DEPARTMENT, 1st Aug. 1848.

DEAR SIR,—Yours of June 23d has been received. You will charge for each letter brought in or sent to Canada in steamboats, if employed as mail packets by the British or Canadian authorities, 24 cts; and if brought in or taken out in private vessels, 16 cents. If sent in the United States Mail, the inland postage will be added.

Letters may be sent from your office to Canada in foreign mail packets, prepaying 24 cents; if in private vessels, 16 cents.

I am, respectfully, your obedient servant,

G. JOHNSON.

Mr. CAMPBELL, P.M., Rochester.

KEEP IT IN MIND, that private enterprise, if permitted so to do, would carry letters to Canada for one cent each: every cent charged more than that is a robbery. How much more of such foolery, Mr. Care Johnson, do you imagine people will submit to? Why is not some rational arrangement made between the two countries!

HON. DANIEL WEBSTER, the Commercial announcer, apparently by authority, will give a cordial and hearty support to the nomination of Gen. Taylor, and has never meant to do anything else.

A London journal says that the number of lawyers in London is no less than 4172 and that the amount of their costs in 1846—47, was £16,210,165.

THE MASSACHUSETTS VOLUNTEERS have been paid off and discharged. Some men received \$49 and some as much as \$140 in money. The average was \$60 each. Besides this they have 160 acres of land at the West.

North Star, August 21, 1848.

not read or write, the essential information on Canada was surely disseminated by way of oral tradition.

Douglass was opposed to mass emigration of blacks outside the United States, but the leading abolitionist acted as a central figure in transporting freedom seekers to Canada via the Underground Railroad. He urged blacks to see themselves as "Americans" instead of "Aliens" and preferred them to remain in the United States, their rightful home, to help destroy the institution of slavery.³⁰ Nonetheless, he understood that this was not always plausible and, therefore, helped pass runaways onward to Canada. Douglass described sending fugitives abroad as similar to attempting "to bail out the ocean with a teaspoon," yet he took pleasure in the thought of "*one* less slave and one more freedman."³¹ Historians estimate that he assisted some 400 fugitives while in Rochester.³² Douglass' Canadian connections did not end there. He maintained ties with key abolitionist organizations like the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada (ASSC) and with activists such as Hiram Wilson, who harbored many of the fugitives he and Rochester barber Jacob P. Morris sent to St. Catharines.³³

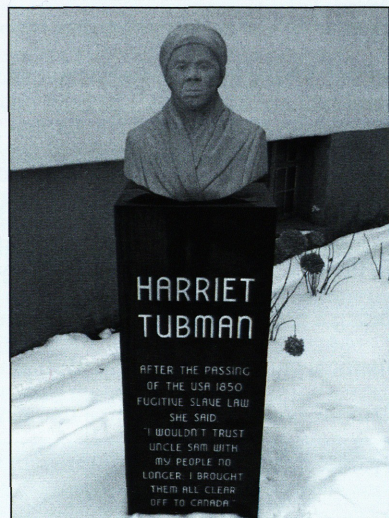
Douglass also made a number of trips to the British territory for speaking engagements. His first major speech in Canada on April 3, 1851, attracted a crowd of 1,200 people at St. Lawrence Hall in Toronto. It was part of a weeklong lecture series hosted by the newly founded ASSC, which wanted to facilitate cross-border cooperation in the wake of the American Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Douglass urged his listeners to put pressure on the United States to recognize that slavery is a "soul damning crime against man and God." Emphasizing the negative impact that American bondage had on Canada, he stated that the peculiar institution corrupted not only "the nation in which it existed" but the "nations by which it was surrounded." Douglass did not want British Canada to lose sight of the fact that it shared a continent with three million people in chains. He knew that the struggle to end slavery would take a transnational effort and hoped Canadian voices might inspire the "moral power of the world" to "strike down slavery."³⁴

Douglass made several subsequent trips to the Queen's soil, journeying to places like St. Catharines, Dawn, and Buxton to share his thoughts.

| Harriet Tubman

Perhaps no one used Rochester's geographic proximity to Canada better than Harriet Tubman. In 1849, she escaped from captivity along Maryland's Eastern Shore and settled in Philadelphia. There Tubman began her expeditions back South to rescue family and friends. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, she deemed the American North unfit for herself and those she brought above the Mason-Dixon Line and in 1851 relocated to the Canadian community of St. Catharines. She explained: "We would rather stay in our native land, if we could be as free there as we are here."³⁵ From the Niagara Peninsula, she continued her courageous work; between 1851 and 1857, Tubman made yearly spring and fall trips to Maryland.³⁶ In order to transport escapees from the slaveholding South to Canada, she utilized Rochester. Ideally located, the city was tied into a larger network of the Underground Railroad and represented the last leg of the journey to the Queen's dominion.

In Rochester, Douglass, the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society (RLASS), and the A.M.E. Zion Church all supported Tubman's endeavors to move blacks onward to Canada. Douglass once housed eleven fugitives in his home on behalf of Tubman and occasionally paid her train passage across the Niagara Suspension Bridge.³⁷ The RLASS hosted antislavery fairs and gathered food and clothing to send to Canada at the request of Tubman.³⁸ Individuals in the Society, such as Treasurer Maria G. Porter, who ran a boarding house on the Erie Canal, provided accommodations for escapees until they could rest under the paw of the British Lion.³⁹ The A.M.E Zion Church pitched in by lending its basement and pews to fugitives. Church offices understood their vital Niagara locale and willingly made use of it to move fugitives further north. Tubman led a trans-border lifestyle and utilized the fluid frontier of Rochester to execute her attack on Southern bondage.



Outside the black British Methodist Episcopal Church in St. Catharines, Ontario. Photograph by dann j. Broyld.

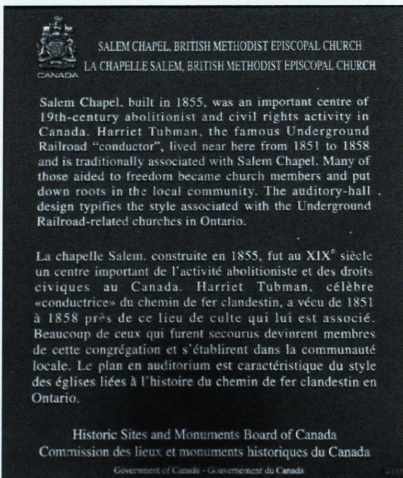
Cross-Border Movement and Interaction

Many lesser-known individuals benefited from Rochester's transnational location, as well. Alexander Hemsley, an escapee of Maryland, passed through the city in the late 1830s and used the city as a jumping-off point to migrate to Canada.

Like many freedom seekers, he boarded a British vessel on the Lake Ontario shoreline of Rochester and disembarked in Toronto. Hemsley eventually settled quite comfortably in St. Catharines and became a minister. He explained: "I am a regular Britisher. My American blood has been scourged out of me. I have lost my American tastes."⁴⁰ Former Virginia slave John Jenkins lived for sixteen years in Rochester, where he positioned himself for potential Canadian emigration. Jenkins enjoyed unusually rapid social mobility in the city. Within a matter of three years he went from being a grocer to a physician. He even managed to procure a medical student understudy, William Cowles. By 1851, Dr.

Jenkins had his own practice on bustling Buffalo Street.⁴¹

Nonetheless, after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, which made it legal to recapture blacks in the North, he took advantage of the nearby border and settled in Hamilton, Ontario.



A plaque outside Salem Chapel acknowledges the work of Harriet Tubman and the effect the Underground Railroad had on the community of St. Catharines, Ontario.

Photograph by dann j. Broyld.

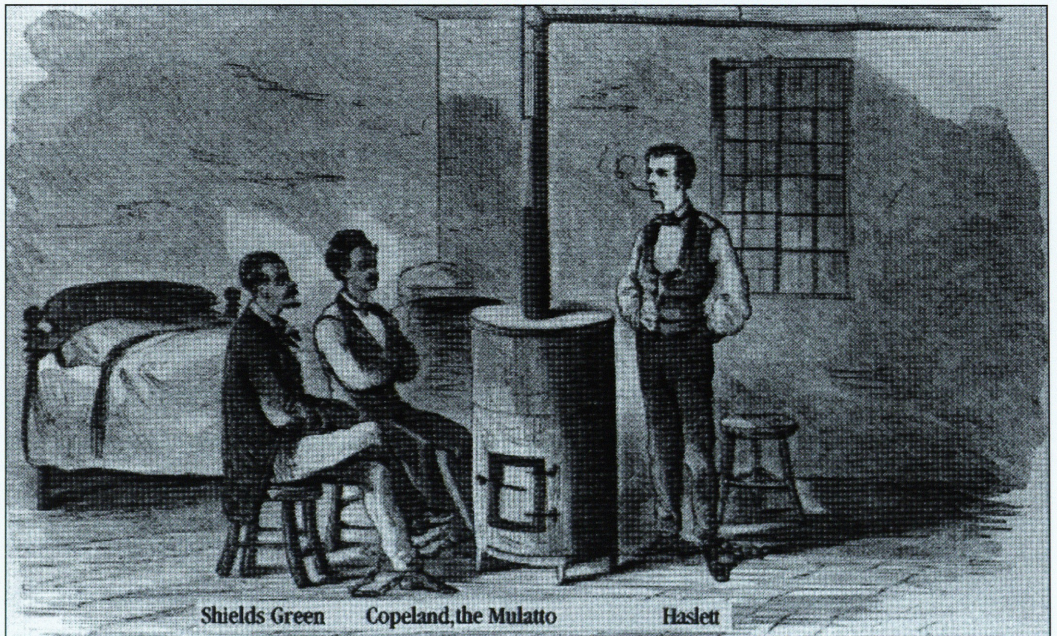


Black British Methodist Episcopal Church's "Salem Chapel" in St. Catharines, Ontario. In 1856, the Church transitioned from the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination to the British Methodist Episcopal (BME). Photograph by dann j. Broyld.

While Hemsley, Jenkins, and many others elected to permanently emigrate from Rochester to Canada, others continued to reside in Rochester while choosing to interact with those across the border. In the late 1850s, a score of black Rochesterians, along with people from Buffalo, attended a Masonic Festival and Ball in Canada. The affair was reported to be "in every respect superior to many gathering among 'white folk.'"⁴² The dinner and dress were all first-rate, but what this occurrence plainly demonstrated, like the August First celebrations, was the desire of Niagara frontier inhabitants to maintain connections beyond their borders. Other examples

existed. Throughout the 1800s, the leading black congregations in Rochester and St. Catharines were African Methodist Episcopal (AME). Reverend Richard Allen of Philadelphia founded the American-based denomination to achieve independence from indifferent white Methodists. The St. Catharines house of worship decided to remain under its discipline until 1856, when the flock adopted the British Methodist Episcopal (BME) name, partly as a result of threats of capture when conducting AME conference affairs in the United States.⁴³ The new title did not stop the church from reaching out to other congregations across the international line. Whether for business, religious, or simply social purposes, blacks in the Niagara region sought to find common ground and join together.

Frequent black movement back and forth across the politically defined transnational lines was also commonplace. In fact, the majority of blacks who entered Canada did not venture far from the American border, demonstrating a profound interest in maintaining ties with their “homeland.” For instance, enslaved in Tennessee, Reverend Jermain W. Loguen fled in his early twenties to Canada, where he settled on the Niagara Peninsula. There, he learned to read and owned a farm of 200 acres. He called the British colony “the only asylum for African freedom in North America.”⁴⁴ Yet, in 1837, Loguen came back to the States and worked at the fashionable Rochester House hotel.⁴⁵ It was the first of many ventures between the transnational

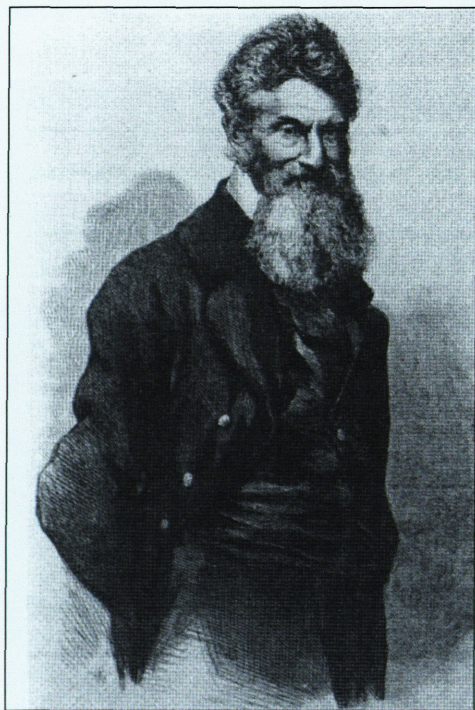


Shields “Emperor” Green participated along with John Brown
in the insurrection at Harper’s Ferry.
Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, December 10, 1859.

lines. Widely known for his underground railroad work in Syracuse, Loguen's most noteworthy retreats to Canada came after the famous "Jerry Rescue" in 1851 and during radical abolitionist John Brown's stay in St. Catharines in 1858.⁴⁶ South Carolina runaway Shields "Emperor" Green passed through Rochester in 1856 en route to Canada. In the spring of 1859, the dignified man of few broken words returned to town and opened a dry cleaning establishment on Spring Street.⁴⁷ At the home of Douglass, Green met John Brown and got word of his future attack on Harpers Ferry, Virginia.⁴⁸ With little persuasion, Green agreed to participate in the insurrection. He followed through on his commitment when the time came to mobilize. The outcome of the uprising ended tragically for the Rochester recruit; Green was executed, like Brown, for what a local newspaper called "his folly."⁴⁹

| John Brown

John Brown was a recurring visitor to Rochester, partly because of its international character. A friend of Susan B. Anthony and Douglass, he stayed at their homes while in town. In February 1858, Brown spent three weeks in Rochester at the South Avenue residence of Douglass,



where he crafted his Provisional Constitution for the Appalachian Rebel State he envisioned. It was not by chance that Brown selected borderland Rochester as the location for formulating his plans for rebellion. Similar to "self-stolen" blacks, Brown was a fugitive, having led a band of abolitionists in the killing of five pro-slavery supporters in the 1856 Pottawatomie Massacre, an episode in "Bleeding Kansas."⁵⁰ Now an outlaw, Brown went to New England to raise money to further his cause. He later returned to Missouri where he attacked two pro-slavery homesteads, confiscated eleven enslaved persons, and led them on an eighty-two-day trek to Canada.⁵¹ The events in the mid-West changed his strategy on American bondage.

As an alternative to encouraging blacks to seek Canada or remote mountains, Brown wanted to establish his own sovereign state in the South.

*John Brown. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper
Courtesy of the Office of the
City Historian, Rochester, NY.*

However, vigilantes, bounty hunters, and federal marshals were all on watch for him. Like black fugitives, the radical abolitionist felt a comfort level in Rochester and used the city for its British-Canadian access. Brown harbored such a sense of ease in town that he gave a talk at City Hall in April 1859 “to vindicate the cause pursued by himself and his friends during the late troubles in Southern Kansas.”⁵² Prior to this, Brown departed from Rochester to meet Tubman in St. Catharines and to print his Provisional Constitution, which would later be ratified at a convention held in Chatham, Ontario.⁵³ Unquestionably, Brown knew the geographical value of Rochester.

Following John Brown’s short-lived October 1859 revolt at Harpers Ferry, federal troops discovered documents in his carpetbag that implicated Frederick Douglass. In Philadelphia when he received the disturbing news, Douglass knew he was in danger of being placed under arrest. He promptly left for Rochester, where he expected to be safe from Virginia authorities—or at least would be able to obtain a fair trial. Upon arrival in his adopted hometown, Douglass was advised by close friends to “quit the country.”⁵⁴ He was pressured to take flight to Canada in the same fashion as those he had previously assisted. His departure was well-planned. Just six hours after he left Rochester, federal marshals were in town searching for the esteemed abolitionist.⁵⁵ Douglass used Rochester for what it had become known for by thousands of runaways—a gateway to Canada. Entering the British colony in the Niagara Falls area, he ventured north to the port of Quebec, where he boarded a British steamer for exile in Europe.⁵⁶ “The friends of the slave in Canada,” the *Toronto Globe* explained, “will wish him God[’s] speed wherever he goes.”⁵⁷

| Where the Journey Ends

A doorway to Canada, pre-Civil-War Rochester provided blacks a location and framework for transnational thought. More direct connections between Rochester and the British colony existed with places around the horseshoe of Lake Ontario, such as St. Catharines and Toronto, but blacks with links to the city journeyed to countless Canadian townships. William Parker, a participant in the Christiana Riot, which resulted in the death of a Maryland slaveholder looking to recapture his “property,” went through Rochester to reach Canada, eventually making his home in the black settlement of Buxton on a 50-acre lot with his wife and children.⁵⁸ Washington, D.C., escapee Francis Henderson, who ran away with sixteen other men, was listed in the 1849 Rochester City Directory as possessing a dual home and grocery store on Main Street. “I was broken up in Rochester, N.Y.,” he explained, “by the fugitive slave bill.” Crossing the border, Henderson settled among the respectable blacks of London, Ontario.

The Southwestern community, like others, presented obstacles. He emphasized, “There is much prejudice here against us.”⁵⁹ Leaving from Rochester, William John Dungy journeyed shortly to Hamilton and Toronto before learning that his old friend Stepney Brown, of Virginia, lived in Brantford, Ontario. He found the town to be “very pleasant.” There, the two men enjoyed the companionship of one another. In the early 1860s, Dungy wrote to his old friend William Still that he and Brown “often sit together at night after the labor of the day is over talking about our absent friends wishing we could see them once more.”⁶⁰ The Civil War would finally allow him this opportunity. He settled in Virginia for a time after the war, where he encountered his former owner’s daughters. He later moved to Oklahoma City and died there in 1903.⁶¹

| The Civil War and its Aftermath

As the Civil War neared, Rochester blacks maintained interactions with Canada, and a stream of freedom seekers continued to strategically use the city as an entryway to the British territory. By and large, the “Mane of the British Lion” was preferred to the “Rapacious Eagle.”⁶² But Rochester blacks were growing increasingly frustrated with the sluggish pace of emancipation. Even Douglass, a staunch anti-emigrationist, suggested that Haitian settlement might be a reasonable idea.⁶³ Within this new political atmosphere, Rochester’s black population began to decline. A number of blacks partook in a reverse migration to the South in the 1860s, forcing those left behind to cope with the fragmentation of their community. Meanwhile, the war propelled locals to actively participate in the ground-level agitation and mobilization that transformed the war from being about “Preserving the Union” to liberating blacks. The *Douglass Monthly* expressed the hope that the conflict would result in “breaking the chains of every American slave, and placing America side by side with noble old England.”⁶⁴

Overall, the purpose of this article is to set a trend in the scholarship that will move away from the traditional approaches to blacks in Rochester before the Civil War. The historical research on this period has been so fixated on the “Burned-Over District” and “North Star Country” discourse that it has lost sight of the transnational context of the “Flower City.” Rochester has been conceptualized as being well-positioned to receive escapees, harbor, and settle them. However, the process of passing these fugitives on to Canada and, moreover, the continual cross-border interactions that occurred have been overlooked. By placing Rochester into the Niagara region, a more complete picture of the fluid American-Canadian frontier can transpire. A fresh perspective is needed—one which looks outside the United States and glances over the British-Canadian line to construct meaningful connections.

Examining the past in this context can help us not only to better understand the past, but also the present. Rochester's proximity to the Canadian border continues to influence the lives of its residents—black and white. Less than a hundred miles from the international line, the Canadian border is today a relatively short drive away on the New York State Thruway. Prior to September 11, 2001, only a valid driver's license or birth certificate was needed to cross, and bargain shopping and entertainment at Niagara Falls, Ontario, and Toronto has drawn thousands of Western New Yorkers to the former British colony. The borderland position of Rochester is evident by the fairly common sight of Ontario license plate tags and the Canadian coins mixed seamlessly into the local currency. Rochester's "Fast Ferry" endeavor, which set out to link Rochester and Toronto via Lake Ontario, highlighted the unique site of the city, though it came to a disappointing end in January 2006. Moreover, since the terrorist attacks in 2001, passport requirements at the American-Canadian border have hampered the fluid nature of the Niagara frontier. Nonetheless, Rochester, as this article suggests, has long been—and continues to be—a transnational space, particularly for blacks. The legacy continues today. For instance, the annual summer Caribana Festival in Toronto and the Montreal International Jazz Festival are major dates on the calendars of Rochester's more prosperous blacks. Caribana is a carryover from August First commemorations, which memorialize the ending of slavery throughout the British Empire, while the New Orleans-born art form of Jazz in Montreal provides another reason for Rochester blacks to congregate on Canadian soil. Likewise, the Rochester International Jazz Festival features a number of Canadian musicians and surely draws cross-border traffic each summer. The transnational attributes of Rochester take on several different forms and are continual reminders of the city's close proximity to Canada and shared aspects of its heritage.



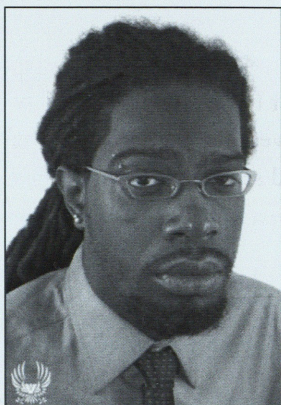
On April 27, 2004, crowds gathered at the Port of Rochester to witness the arrival of a new fast ferry, the Spirit of Ontario. The vessel provided a direct link between Rochester and Toronto via Lake Ontario, demonstrating the continued connectedness of the two cities. Its owners were plagued by financial problems, however, and the venture ceased operation less than two years after it started.
From the collection of the Rochester City Hall Photo Lab.

Endnotes

1. Dungy is variously spelled Dungee and Dunjee, depending on the source.
2. William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (1873; repr., New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1968), 541-545.
3. Since the publication of Whitney R. Cross's classic *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1950), Rochester has been associated with the central and western parts of the Empire State and the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening in the 1820s. Cross's work, however, places Rochester into an American-based context that does not take into consideration its connections to neighboring British Canada. In *North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), Milton C. Sernett locates Rochester in the same conventional geographic space as Cross does, that is west of the Catskill and Adirondack mountains. Sernett explains that Canada was "an extension of North Star Country," yet he focuses primarily on the region that Cross previously shaped and not on cross-national relationships forged by blacks in Rochester.
4. In the early nineteenth century, Charlotte and Kelsey's Landing were still outside Rochester's municipal boundaries.
5. Sernett, 190-191.
6. The chief stops on the Underground Railroad were Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, New York City, Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, and St. Catharines, Ontario. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), 190-191.
7. Ena L. Farley, "The African American Presence in the History of Western New York" in *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 14, no. 1 (Jan. 31, 1990), 10.
8. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850 Federal Census.
9. The title was honorary. Rochester did not become a village until 1817 and a city until 1834.
10. Farley, 10.
11. Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman-With an Introduction by Graham Russell Hodges* (1857; repr., Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), xii-xviii.
12. Johnson Square is known today as Washington Square.
13. Steward, xix-xxi.
14. Steward, 179-180.
15. Among those who loaned money to Steward were Everard Peck, George A. Avery, Samuel D. Porter, Levi W. Sibley, Griffith Brothers & Co., and Edwin Scrantom. See Howard W. Coles, *The Cradle of Freedom: A History of the Negro in Rochester, Western New York and Canada* (Rochester, NY: Oxford Press, 1941), 27; Steward, xxi-xxv.
16. Thomas James, *Life of Rev. Thomas James by Himself* (Rochester, NY: Post Express Printing Co., 1886), 6.
17. James, 5-7.

18. James, 8-9.
19. Victoria Sandwick Schmitt, "Rochester's Frederick Douglass, Part One" in *Rochester History* 67, no. 3 (Summer 2005), 10.
20. J.R. Kerr-Ritchie, *Rites of August First: Emancipation Day in the Black Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 1.
21. The date black autonomy was achieved is also known as August First Day, Emancipation Day, and West India Day. Kerr-Ritchie, 1.
22. "Celebration of the Twenty-First Anniversary of West India Emancipation at Geneva," *Douglass' Monthly*, August 1859.
23. "Fugitives in Canada," *North Star*, October 24, 1850.
24. "First of August Celebration," *North Star*, August 11, 1848.
25. "The Colored Celebration Yesterday," *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, August 2, 1848.
26. "The First of August," *North Star*, July 21, 1848.
27. "Celebration by the Colored People," *Rochester Democrat*, August 1, 1848.
28. Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (1971; repr., Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 238.
29. "Condition of Freed Slaves in Canada," *Douglass' Monthly*, August 1859; "The Elgin Settlement at Buxton, Canada West," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, August 25, 1854; "Statement in Regard to the Colored Population of Canada," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, August 6, 1852; "Canada Postage," *North Star*, August 21, 1848.
30. James A. Colaiaco, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 115.
32. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 190.
33. Victoria Sandwick Schmitt, "Rochester's Frederick Douglass, Part Two" in *Rochester History* 67, no. 4 (Fall 2005), 8.
34. Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 190-191.
35. *Toronto Globe*, April 5 and 10, 1851; *North Star*, April 10, 1851.
36. Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: Or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (New York: John P. Jewett and Co., 1856), 20.
37. Rochester/Monroe County Freedom Trail Commission, *Guidebook to the Underground Railroad and the Abolitionist Movement* (Rochester, NY: Division of the Department of Communications & Special Events of Monroe County, 2003), 67.
38. Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of An American Hero* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), 94.
39. Larson, 154.
40. Larson, 133, 144.
41. Benjamin Drew, *Refugees From Slavery*, 20-27.
42. Rochester City Directory, 1844, 1847 and 1851.
43. *St. Catharines Journal*, September 10, 1857.
44. Rt. Rev. Dr. Daniel D. Rupwate, "A Historical Significance of the 'Salem Chapel' with Reference to the Underground Railroad Movement and a Tribute to Harriet Tubman" (Rt. Rev. Dr. Daniel D. Rupwate: St. Catharines, Ontario, 2006), 20-24.

45. Jermain Wesley Loguen, *The Rev. J.W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman. A Narrative of Real Life* (Syracuse, NY: J.G.K. Truair & Co., 1859), 344.
46. Loguen, 341-345.
47. On October 1, 1851, William "Jerry" Henry was arrested under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 in Syracuse. The anti-slavery Liberty Party was holding a convention in town when they got word of the occurrence. Abolitionists broke Henry out of jail and sent him onward to Canada where he was safe from recapture as a result of British law. Afterward, many of the blacks involved in the rescue apprehensively fled over the international lines as well.
48. Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 228.
49. Now West Virginia.
50. "The Black Emperor," *Union and Advertiser*, October 21, 1859.
51. David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 2005), 138-178. "Bleeding Kansas" was a series of violent events roughly between 1854 and 1858 over the question of whether Kansas should enter the Union as a free or slave state.
52. Reynolds, 268-287.
53. *Union and Advertiser*, April 9, 1859.
54. *St. Catharines Journal*, November 3, 1859.
55. *Union and Advertiser*, October 25, 1859.
56. Ibid.
57. "Frederick Douglass," *Union and Advertiser*, October 27, 1859.
58. *Toronto Globe*, November 2, 1859 and November 8, 1859.
59. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 24, 1852 and February 4, 1853; Sharon A. Roger Hepburn, *Crossing the Border: A Free Black Community in Canada* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 95.
60. Drew, 108-112.
61. Letters, William John Dungy to William Still, March 3, 1860 and January 11, 1861, as cited in Still, *The Underground Railroad*, 545-547.
62. Hank Dungy, Jr., "The Dungy Family," <http://www.dungyfamilyhistory.com/johnwilliam.htm/>.
63. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, September 3, 1852.
64. *Union and Advertiser*, March 5, 1861.
65. *Douglass Monthly*, August 1861.

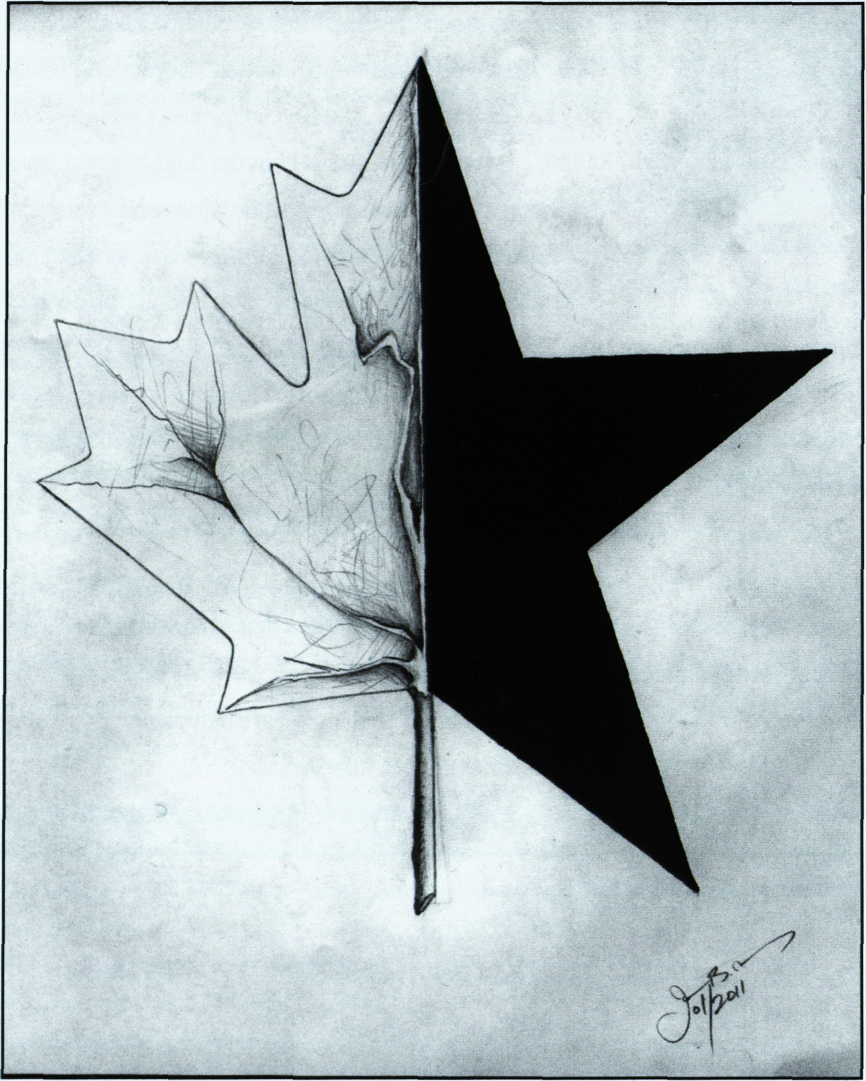


About the Author

dann j. Broyld, a native of Rochester, New York, received his a Ph.D. from Howard University in May 2011. His dissertation, entitled “Borderland Blacks: Rochester, New York and St. Catharines, Ontario, 1850-1860,” argues that blacks within the fluid Niagara frontier region possessed transnational identities and strategically positioned themselves near the American-Canadian partition where immigration, movement, and interaction occurred.

Broyld earned an Associates Degree in history from Sage Junior College of Albany (2002), a Bachelor of Arts Degree in history and Africana studies from Hofstra University (2004), and a Master’s Degree in American history from the State University of New York, College at Brockport (2005).

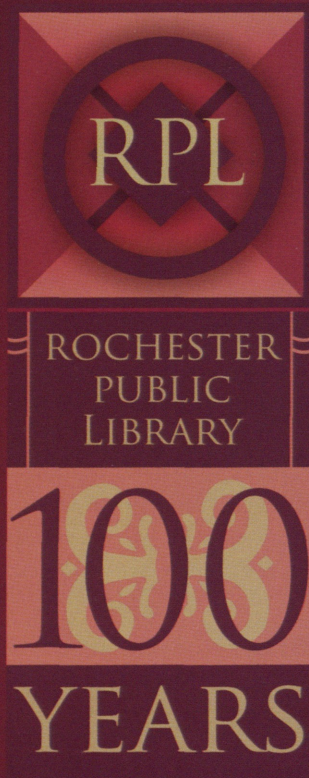
His general research interests include nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States and African Diaspora history, issues of race and class, and borderland and migration studies, as well as the function of political parties and American music forms. He has taught at Howard and as a summer instructor for the University of Rochester’s Upward Bound program. In the fall of 2011, he will begin a visiting assistant professor position in American history at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown.



Original drawing by James B. Murray.



*Frederick Douglass statue in Rochester's Highland Park.
Photograph by Ve Jay Broyld.*



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