



The Anti-Slavery Movement  
in the Jamestown area: 1836—1863

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## **The Anti-slavery movement in the Jamestown area : 1836 - 1863**

Due to the actual Underground Railroad connections of E.T. Foote, Catherine Harris, William Storum and many others, rumors about the Southern Tier's involvement persisted for a century. As the rumors were passed along, the stories grew more and more preposterous, until just about every 19th century home in southern Chautauqua County was labeled as an Underground Railroad house.

In fact, many of those homes did not even exist prior to the Civil War. Instead, it was in the tiny homes, cabins, barns, and shanties of ordinary people where refugees were sheltered. Now, with the help of the internet, primary sources regarding these people have come to light, and have been shared. Using those resources, we have been able to map more than 1000 people in Chautauqua County who defined themselves as abolitionists.

Many people who were called upon to aid refugees were African Americans whose stories have emerged during this research. This effort has been enhanced by SUNY Professor Emeritus Douglas H. Shepard, Chautauqua County Historian Michelle Henry, Orbitist founder Nicholas Gunner, SUNY Oswego Professor Emerita Judith Wellman, Jamestown Historian B. Dolores Thompson, and Chautauqua County genealogists Lois and Norwood Barris.

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**Cover painting by Charles T. Webber, created for the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. The painting is housed in the Cincinnati Art Museum. Webber was born in 1825; his painting shows his friend Levi Coffin ( 1798 - 1877) standing on the wagon, as a new group of refugees arrives at the Levi Coffin home. Other friends of Webber who are shown in the painting are Levi's wife Catharine White Coffin ( 1803 - 1881) and the abolitionist Hanna Wharton Haydock ( 1818 - 1893). Today, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is located in Cincinnati.**

## **Please disregard the Old Myths, because:**

**There were no tunnels, quilt signs, lawn jockeys, or rings of trees. No refugee narratives or conductor memoirs verify these rumors.**

**Across the entire north, there is little evidence of hidden rooms. Instead, there was an intricate network of people, who openly sheltered refugees in their cabins, houses, shanties, and barns.**

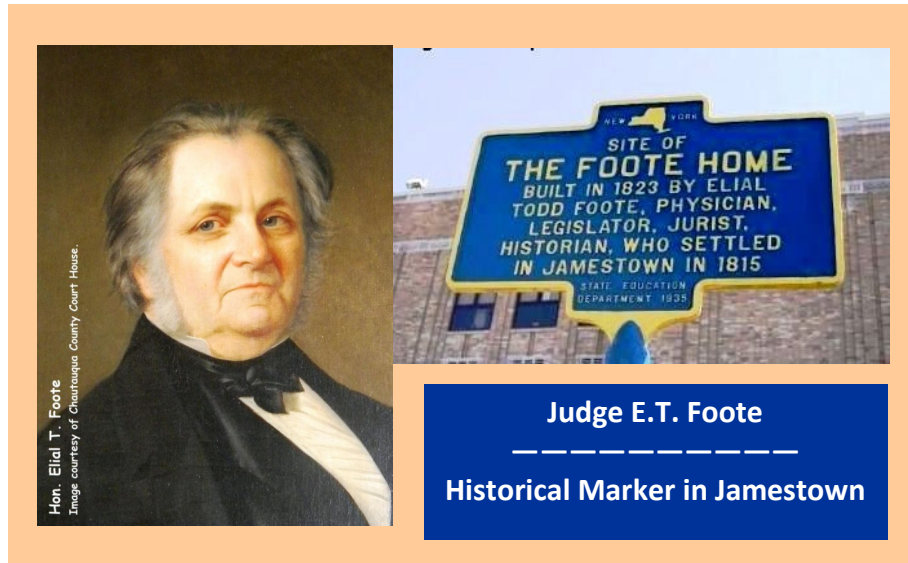
### **Examples of reasons for erroneous rumors in the Southern Tier:**

(1) Some people who later built Victorian mansions had been antebellum abolitionists and “stockholders” (i.e. financial supporters) of the Underground Railroad; therefore their new houses became mistakenly associated by later generations as Underground Railroad (UGRR) homes.

(2) Later generations assumed that the term “underground” actually meant “under the ground.” Instead, it simply meant “secret,” like the French Underground (i.e. Resistance) during World War II.

(3) Hidden alcoves used for stashing liquor during Prohibition were jokingly called “my Underground Railroad room.” Later generations did not realize that this was simply family folklore.

(4) The rumors of “quilts on the line” or “rings of trees” do not match the record left by conductor memoirs and refugee interviews, regarding the actual methods of operation of the UGRR.



### **Jamestown's Judge Elial T. Foote**

Judge Foote (1796 - 1877) compiled the largest set of historical documents, and the largest known set of anti-slavery documents, in Chautauqua County. An Associate Judge from 1818 to 1823, and a First Judge of the Common Pleas from 1824 to 1844, Foote had been licensed by the Chenango County Medical Society in 1815, and briefly practiced medicine in Jamestown.

Foote's Anti-Slavery Scrapbook was so labeled in 1893, by his son Horace, who indexed his father's papers. Among the letters and other documents is a list that Judge Foote labeled as "List in Chautauqua Co Lib men," and that Horace sub-labeled as "Liberty, Friends of, P.O. Address[es] in Chaut. Co. 1843 (underground RR agts?)" This list matches other sources regarding the service of these same men as Underground Railroad conductors or stationmasters.

Also in Foote's papers are his copies of the names on three anti-slavery petitions sent from the Jamestown area to Congress in 1844. Another list, dated 30 August 1845, sets forth at least some of the leading churchmen of the County, along with Foote's analysis of each man's respective anti-slavery position: for example, "an influential man."



**Catherine  
Harris**

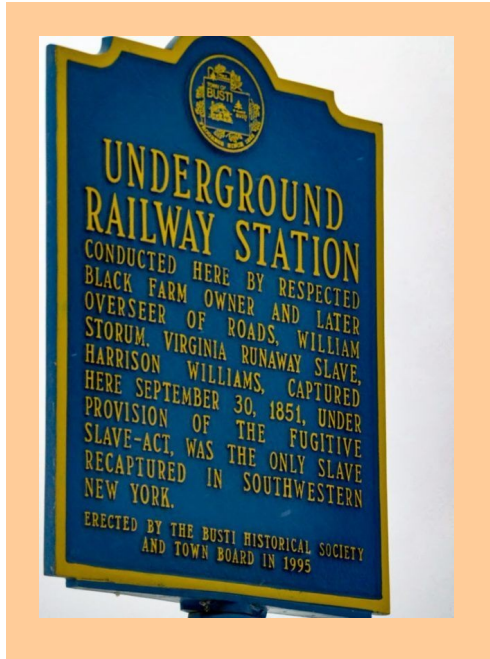
**Stationmaster in Jamestown**

### **Catherine Harris**

Harris was an African American seamstress, maid, washerwoman, and nanny in Jamestown. In 1902, at age 93, she gave an interview to the *Jamestown Evening Journal*, recalling great detail about the Underground Railroad fifty years earlier, and about her part in it.

She recounted that prominent (white) abolitionists brought freedom seekers to her, sometimes more than a dozen at a time. Harris was expected to feed, shelter, and clothe each person until he or she could be safely moved to the next station. One conductor who brought many people to her home was the white abolitionist Silas Sherman, a well known Baptist in Jamestown.

Although Harris did not complain or accuse, it is clear from her words that she was in great danger of being imprisoned and/or fined. Harris may have received some food or clothing for her guests from Jamestown's wealthy, or from the city's churches, but mostly, she was on her own.



## The Capture of Harrison Williams

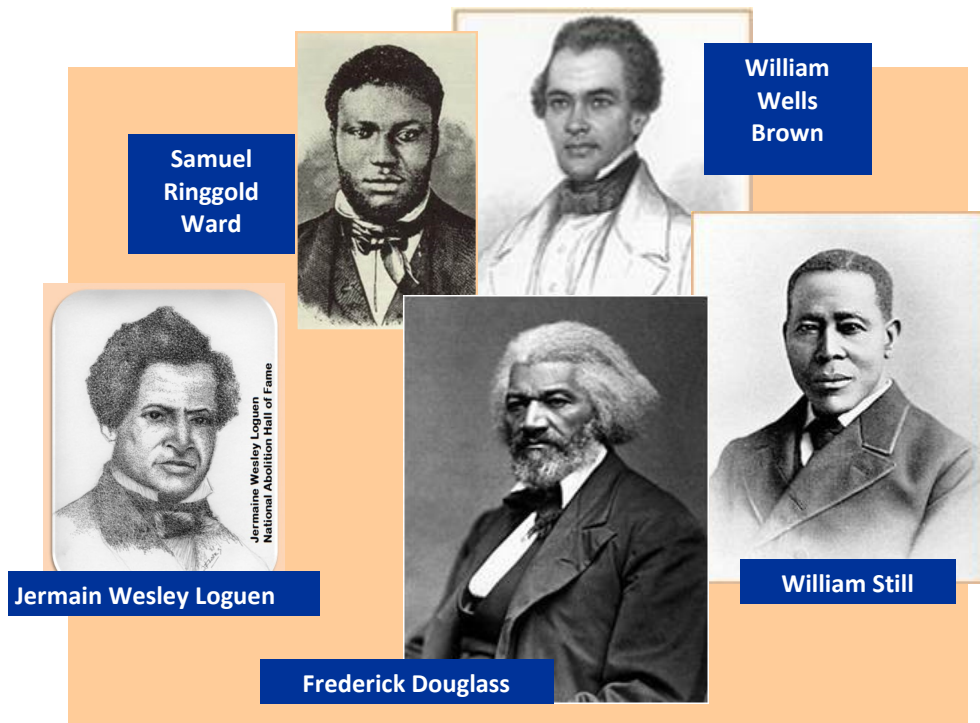
In 1850, President Millard Fillmore signed a second law that required local authorities to assist in the capture of escapees from slavery. The law also punished, with fines or jail time, those who assisted refugees.

An earlier law, signed in 1793 by President Washington, also allowed for capture of freedom seekers, but had been watered down somewhat by Missouri case law.

A test of the strict 1850 law was made along the Southern Tier in the autumn of 1851, when a carriage of men, disguised as women, pulled into the William Storum farm in the Town of Busti, and apprehended refugee Harrison Williams, sometimes known as William Harrison.

Williams and six other young men had escaped from northern Virginia, and had been working and attending school in the Jamestown area. In spite of pursuit by Storum's neighbors, who hoped to rescue Williams from the bounty hunters, Williams was hastened to Buffalo by his captors. After a brief trial, Williams was returned to slavery.

It turned out that two of Williams' party had been captured in Virginia, as they returned in an attempt to buy the freedom of their wives. The other four in William's party were quickly hidden in Jamestown's Marvin Swamp, and then hastened northwesterly toward a Lake Erie crossing to Canada. Williams' capture appeared in the *Jamestown Journal*, in the *Buffalo Daily Courier*, in the *New York Daily Tribune*, and elsewhere.

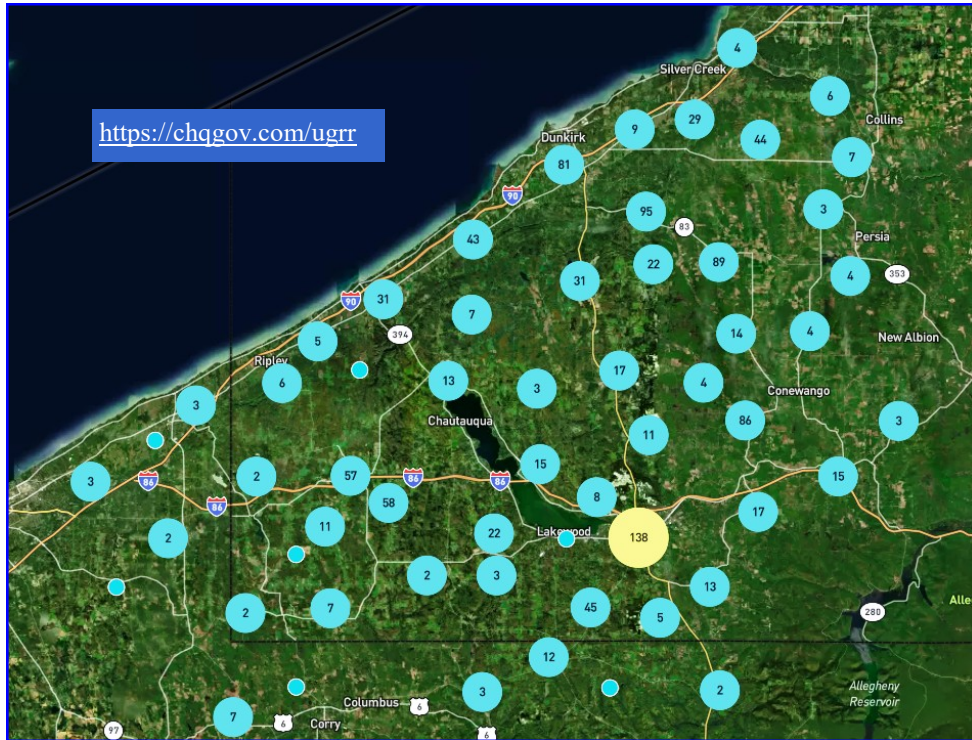


### Southern Tier speakers who had escaped slavery

Popular anti-slavery speakers in Chautauqua County included four men who had escaped enslavement. For example, during his speaking tour of the 1830s and 40s, **Rev. Samuel Ringgold Ward**, who had escaped with his parents from Maryland, wrote seven letters to Judge Foote, asking that church men vote their convictions at the ballot box.

Both **Frederick Douglass**, who had also escaped from Maryland, and **Jermain Wesley Loguen**, who had escaped from Tennessee, had extended family connections to William Storum in the Southern Tier, and they also visited the area as speakers. They were featured at an anti-slavery convention in Sugar Grove, Pennsylvania, only a few miles from the Storum farm.

**William Still**, whose parents escaped from New Jersey, kept secret records about freedom seekers who went through his Philadelphia station, so they could reunite with their families. Although Still himself was not a speaker in Chautauqua County, the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society of Ellington was encouraged by speaker **William Wells Brown**, who escaped from Missouri, to send their boxes of clothing and other donations to Still.

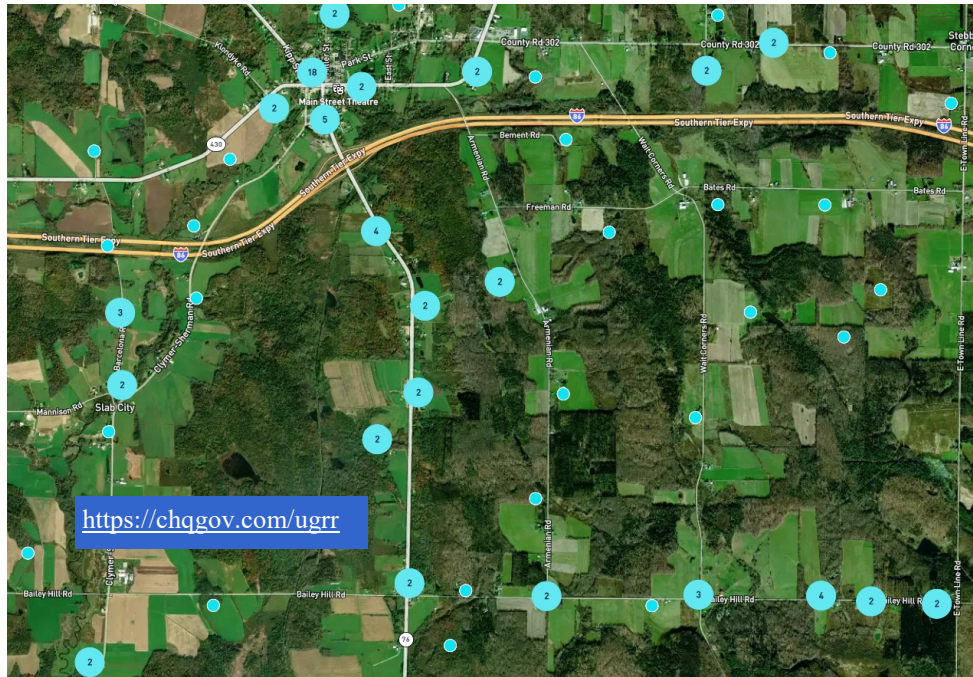


The Chautauqua County anti-slavery map at <https://chqgov.com/ugrr> shows over 1150 abolitionists and related sites. This represents research so far into the names and places recorded in several primary documents and a few secondary sources.

Large groups of anti-slavery activists seem to appear in certain areas only because documents, such as their petitions, or annual minutes of their church meetings, have survived. Areas where activity seems sparse usually indicate merely the absence of such records.

In other words, there is no evidence that Chautauqua County was geographically divided on the slavery issue. Instead, political divisions could be found between immediate neighbors: the Whig and new Republican parties were *predominantly* anti-slavery, whereas most Democrats did *not* take on the anti-slavery cause.



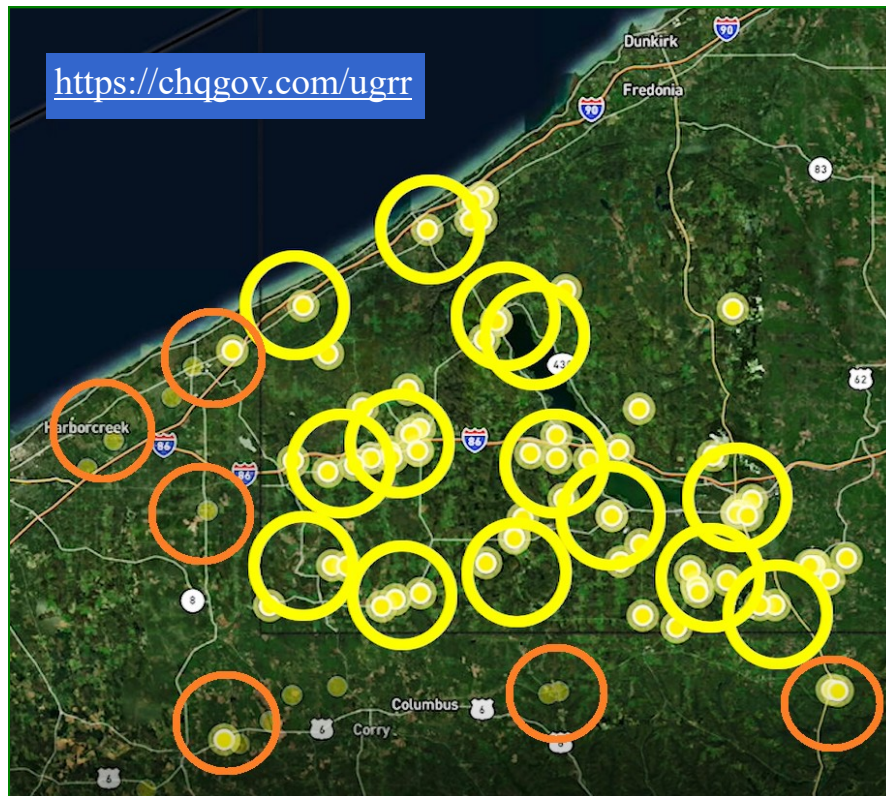


## An Anti-slavery Petition from Sherman, NY

Most of Chautauqua County's many anti-slavery petitions sent to Congress between 1840 and 1860 do not survive. However, this window of the anti-slavery map zooms into the Sherman and Waits Corners area of the Southern Tier. Here, in the early 1850s, more than 100 men signed an especially strong petition, asking for repeal of the new Fugitive Slave Law.

It began, "We the undersigned citizens of this Town ... do hereby respectfully petition your honorable body for the repeal or radical amendment of the Fugitive Slave Law passed at the last session of Congress, and adduce the following as our reasons for such a course."

The petition continued, "We believe that law to be unjust in its action, contrary to the spirit of our Constitution..., radically opposed to the feelings of humanity..., totally contradictory to those eternal principles of justice which are far above all merely human law, and lastly, in bold defiance of the express commands of the eternal God.... We therefore without distinction of party, would hereby add our might to the protest ..., in tones louder than the thunder of Niagara...."



### Churches in the Harmony Baptist Association, 1842

Congregationalists, Wesleyans, and other denominations joined in the anti-slavery cause. Chautauqua Baptists were especially vocal.

Many of the Baptists who published annual anti-slavery statements were located in the Harmony Baptist Association, which included churches in Ashville, Busti, Carroll, Clymer, Dewittville, French Creek, Harmony, Jamestown, Mayville, Mina, North Harmony, Ripley, Sherman, Westfield, and West Portland. (*Yellow circles above*)

The same Baptist association also included the following congregations in nearby northwestern Pennsylvania: Greenfield, Harbor Creek, Lottsville, North East, Oak Hill, Pine Grove, Warren, and Waynesville. (*Orange*)

In 1842, for example, they said, "Resolved, that we look upon Slavery ... as a great moral evil, and do most affectionately beseech our brethren, to put away this sin for their own good and the good of the oppressed."

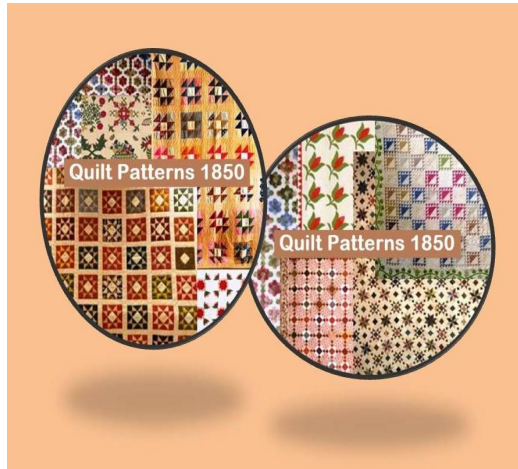
Liberty Friends & P Office addresses

Poste Heron Plumb Esq, Dea Joel Dearfooth  
Vermont Esq. Putnam, Roland Cobb  
Ellington Rev. Wm. Wether, Eli Simpson, Eld. Baldwin  
 H. N. Nible Esq. Dr. Patience  
Chace Lake Dr. Wm. Wier, Martin Smith Esq  
Jamestown Dr. W. S. Hedges, John S. Gates  
Cherry Creek Ruben Bullcock, blank Losee  
 Troth & Beardsley  
Villanova Russell O. Smith, Benjamin Vincent  
Arkwright Aaron M. Dearney  
Flewarmae Scam Livingston, Warren Clarke  
 Elder Goodenough  
Salem & Roads Col. James Thompson  
Westfield W. S. Nichols, Nichols  
Carroll Milton Ford, Adria Chapin  
Waterboro Dr. J. Foote, Sanford Holbrook  
 Baxter  
Fredonia Dr. James Pettit  
Mayville Freeman Cross  
Shridan Kelley  
Poland George L. Pitzer, Mount Ripple, E. Groil  
Harmony Dr. Vine Elletts, Saml. Bliss

Cataraugus Co. N.Y.

Randolph Wm. Shattuck, N. L. Lee  
 H. H. Sotter, Col. S. Nichols  
 Benj. Woodworth, Dr. H. Hill  
Ellicottville Co. S. Colman

**Judge E. T. Foote's  
List of  
Liberty Friends**



Although freedom seekers were escorted by conductors, and were not guided by quilts or any other signs, women in Chautauqua County did make quilts, specifically as gifts for refugees. Such evidence is seen in William Still's papers, and in the records of B.F. Vincent, whose name is also shown in Villanova on Judge Foote's list above.

## **The Major Sources for the Map\***

- The Memoirs of Eber Pettit
- The papers of Judge Elial T. Foote
- Benjamin Vincent's goodwill list in Villenova.
- Anti-slavery petitions from National Archives.
- The Baptists' annual anti-slavery resolutions.

### **Additional Sources**

- 29 Aug 1839 (pub. 25 Sep 1839) Minutes of Chaut. Co. Anti-slavery Society
- 1851 Published accounts of the Harrison Williams kidnapping
- 1884 History of Erie County (PA), Samuel P. Bates
- 1891 Interviews and article by Palmer K. Shankland
- 1900 Cherry Creek Illustrated, Chas. J. Shults, ed.
- 1902 Interviews and articles by C.R Lockwood
- 1915 History of the Jamestown Baptist Church, Anon.
- 1921 History of Chautauqua County and Its People, Albert S. Price
- 1923 Busti Centennial Booklet, Emma Gourdey, et al
- 1940 "Underground Railroad in Western NY," William S. Bailey
- 1975 Carroll Sesquicentennial Booklet, June T. Richards
- 1979 French Creek 150 Years, Wesley and Peterson

#### ***\*Notes on the five Major Sources above:***

- (1) *Sketches in the History of the Underground Railroad* by Eber Pettit is available at Amazon, courtesy of Paul Leone.
- (2) The papers of Elial T. Foote are available online, courtesy of the McClurg Museum in Westfield.
- (3) Benjamin Vincent's good-will list was published in the *Fredonia Censor* in the 1930s, and is reprinted under Vincent's story on the map <https://chqgov.com/ugrr> .
- (4) The anti-slavery petitions are transcribed at Chautauqua County Historian Michelle Henry's website at the Underground Railroad tab.
- (4) The Baptists' annual anti-slavery resolutions are available at the same location, and are filed at SUNY Fredonia.