

# The Freedom Seeker

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## Dr. Thomas Elkins - Renaissance Man

Researched and Written By: Janine Moon

**D**r. Thomas Elkins was born in New York City on February 25, 1819. His family moved to Albany, New



Dr. Thomas Elkins

York during his childhood. Elkins received his medical training from three doctors. Dr. Harmon Wynkoop taught chemistry, Dr. Charles Paine taught dentistry and Dr. Alden March taught surgery. We can find Dr. Elkins in Albany in 1831 when he worked in the apothecary of Dr. Wynkoop for about ten years. In 1842, Elkins traveled to Montreal with his former teacher Dr. Paine. Since Elkins was an Albany Vigilance Committee member, this

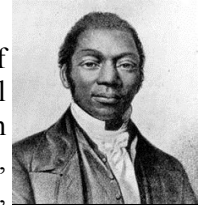
became an opportunity to strengthen Underground Railroad ties between Albany and Canadian communities. We do not know how long Elkins lived in Montreal, but, toward the end of the 1840's, the Southern Baptist Association employed Elkins to travel throughout Africa. By 1850, he had returned to Albany and opened a small drug store on North Swan Street. He later moved his office to Broadway where he was in business for 13 years.

Dr. Elkins was the secretary of the Albany Vigilance Committee in 1855, at which time he lived at 186 Lumber Street where he, along with his neighbors, aided freedom seekers. Elkins felt the ramifications of this

struggle in his career. "When the name of Dr. Thomas Elkins was brought before the society, (third district dental society) for its action, Dr. Luther T. Fox, of Cobleskill, objected placing his objection on the sole ground of the color of the candidate." Dr. Elkins was

rejected by a vote 9 to 8,  $\frac{3}{4}$  votes were needed to be accepted into the Dental Society.

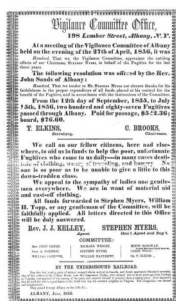
Elkins taught the next generation of African American doctors in the Capital Region. Thomas Sands Pennington, son of J.W.C. Pennington (c.1807-1870), freedom seeker, abolitionist, author, blacksmith and minister, studied with



J.W.C. Pennington

Elkins for 18 months from 1854-55. Thanks to an endorsement from Elkins, Thomas Pennington worked for H.B. Clement at the corner of Broadway and Clinton Avenue in Albany until the civil war. In 1867, at the age of 24, Thomas moved to Saratoga Springs and became a clerk for F.T. Hill & Company. In March of 1875, he became the owner. Thomas Pennington was one of two African Americans in Saratoga Springs who owned a business in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pennington commented on his career, "The character of my reception was varied. Some were curious, many were friendly, others were curt, and a few were insulting." Just as Dr. Elkins experienced discrimination in his professional life, so, too, did his student, Thomas Pennington.

After several archeological digs on the Thomas Elkins lot, it's exciting to have identified a connection between the artifacts found and the primary resource research. Toward the 1870's, there was a shift away from medicines created by an apothecary. Readymade tonics flooded the market. "Not having sufficient capital to keep abreast of the times, he discontinued the drug business and continued his attention to dentistry and minor surgery." This change is reflected in the artifacts. Several broken apothecary bottles have been found in deeper layers in the ground. Tonic bottles such as Bromo Seltzer and Louis Sauter's Sarsaparilla bottles have been found closer to the surface.



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## URHPCR Board of Directors

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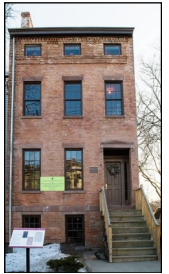
**Brenda Twigg**

The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc., a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting knowledge of the 19th century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy in the Capital Region, in NYS, in the United States, and relating that history with us today. This newsletter is published three times a year. Editorial inquiries can be sent to URHPCR, 194 Livingston Ave., Albany, NY 12210 or [info@undergroundrailroadhistory.org](mailto:info@undergroundrailroadhistory.org).

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## Why Do You Support URHP?

“I volunteer with Underground Railroad History Project because it is very exciting to witness this historic structure transform from a forgotten moment of Capital Region history into a beacon of strength for the local community. The inspiring stories of Stephen and Harriet Myers and Dr. Thomas Elkins remind us of what can happen when ordinary people come together to fight an extraordinary set of circumstances. It's always an exciting moment when students interact with the archaeology collections, getting a hands on historical experience, and discover the connection between the lives of these historical figures and their own.” *(Janine)*



“I started volunteering with URHP because it was an opportunity to use my background in archeology/interest in history while hoping to be of some kind of help. Fast-forward three years and my time with ‘the project’ has been full of interesting finds-within the dirt and among documents, great conversations and fun moments. I’m happy to give my time to such a worthwhile community project.” *(AnnMarie)*

## Mark your calendars and plan to attend!

**Jazz+@theUnderground - Getting Swanky with Stevie** We're livening things up with Albany Distilling Co. and a VIP tasting hour and the seductive Cuban rhythms of Alta Havana. It's the jazz event of the season! Visit <https://urhpjazzevent@eventbrite.com> for ticket and donation options. **(9.26.18)**



**Giving Tuesday** will be with us on November 27, 2018. We hope we can count on you to help URHP make its match. **(11.27.18)**



**Seeking Sanctuary Exhibit Grand Opening & Reception** Our nation was founded on the principle of sanctuary. It has been reiterated by our embrace of the Statue of Liberty and the engraved poem on its base. Yet, seekers and providers of sanctuary have been feared and demonized across time, from the Underground Railroad period forward. Join in a celebration of the commitment, bravery and tenacity of our past and present sanctuary seekers and providers. **(10.04.18)**

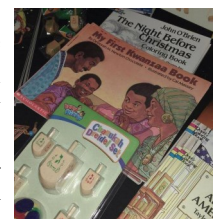
**Veteran's Day Remembers** African Americans living and passed who have represented our country in armed conflicts, from the War of Independence forward. **(10.11.18)**

**JV & the Cutters and The Heavenly Echoes - Moving Heaven and Earth** Enjoy an evening of original blues with a Memphis-meets-St. Louis style along with traditional gospel songs. Offered as a fundraiser by the musicians for URHP. **(10.20.18)**



**Caroling for the Holidays** Spread holiday cheer by caroling with friends of Underground Railroad History Project in the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence neighborhood. No experience necessary. Fun loving spirit needed. Song books are provided. Light refreshments will be served following the caroling. **(12.15.18)**

**Holiday Shoppe at The Myers Residence** Do your shopping at The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence. A large selection of gift items and holiday cards will be available **November 26 through December 29** during regular public business hours (Monday-Friday 5pm-8pm and Saturday 12pm-4pm)



*Complete details are available at 518-432-4432 and at [UndergroundRailroadHistory.org/events-calendar](http://UndergroundRailroadHistory.org/events-calendar).*

## Over the Past Months



**URHP welcomes Jazzie Gray**, VISTA Fellow through Siena College. She is immersing herself for twelve months in the lively and dynamic experience of URHP as the Capacity Building Coordinator. "I'm looking forward to working with URHP and having an exciting year!"

**Joann Skinner** brought her talents to URHP for nine weeks as a Siena Summer Service Scholar. Joann was instrumental in organizing the first URHP Membership Drive among other tasks. "I look forward to continuing to volunteer with URHP!"



**Proost!** A Brewed and Boozy History of Mid-19th Century Albany was an extraordinary success! Thanks to all who helped make it so! Stay tuned for the Chili and Clam Chowder Cook Off in 2019!



130 people joined with Congressman Paul Tonko at the 10th annual **July 4th Oration**. A recording of Congressman Tonko's presentation is forthcoming.



**YATSI Open House** brought together sponsors, family, friends and community members to celebrate the great work of our participating teens. Google <https://bit.ly/2vESUaM> to read about this event.

## News and Notes




### **Mission Statement of URHPCR:**

Underground Railroad History Project researches and preserves the local and national history of the Underground Railroad movement, its international connections, and its legacy to later struggles, engaging in public education and dialogue about this movement and its relevance to modern society.



### **Join with other volunteers in making great things happen -**

- ◆ **URHPCR Board Mtg** - 3rd Tuesday of each month, 5:45 - 7:00pm at The Myers Residence
- ◆ **Conference Planning Mtg** - 1st Monday of each month, 6:00 - 8:00pm at The Myers Residence
- ◆ **Building & Properties Mtg** - 1st Thursday of each month, 6:00 - 7:30pm at The Myers Residence
- ◆ **Collections Committee Mtg** - 2nd Thursday of each month, 6:00 - 7:00pm at The Myers Residence
- ◆ **Events Planning Committee Mtg** - 2nd Thursday of each month, 5:30 - 6:30pm at The Myers Residence

Questions? Concerns? Contributions? Interested in volunteering?  
Contact us at (518) 432-4432 or at [UndergroundRailroadHistory.org](http://UndergroundRailroadHistory.org)  
Follow us on Facebook  and Twitter  and Instagram 

## Freedom Seeker Stories



George Lewis escaped from enslavement in the south and made his way to Albany where he found safety with Lydia and Abigail Mott. The Mott sisters were Quakers and very industrious ladies who managed several business in their time while in Albany. Austin Beares, a boat captain from Boston who conducted his business along the eastern coast of the United States, had become an abolitionist through reading William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* and through observing the treatment of enslaved people when he sailed his ship into southern ports. He knew the Mott sisters and checked in with them when his ship arrived in Albany. Lydia and Abigail connected George Lewis with Austin Beares because Mr. Lewis sought to get to Boston where his daughter lived. She had previously escaped enslavement and settled there. Mr. Lewis sailed out of Albany with Mr. Beares in July 1847. Mr. Lewis found his daughter and, with her, was able to begin a new life of freedom.

(From *Reminiscences of Fugitive-Slave Law Days in Boston* by Austin Beares, published by Warren Richardson in 1880)

**Thank you to our generous donors:** Frank Wicks, Paul & Suzanne Murray, Darius Shahinfar, Beverly Harris, Ellen Mousin, Karl Barbir, Paul Nance, Worth Gretter, Steven P. O'Connor, Lynda Byrnes, Christina Cummings, Annette Johnson, Kathy Keenan, Edward Nizalowski, Kristine Tipton, Annee Borthwick, Dit Trivedi, Maud & David Easter

**Welcome and thank you to new and renewing members:** Richard Baldwin, Margaret Snowden, Harriet Alonso, David Hochfelder, Henry Bankhead, Karl Barbir, Jeffrey Bennett, Gary & Char Bivona, Joan Butcher, Robert Doherty, Donald Eberle, John & Pam Eberle, Paul Herrmann, Peter Hess, L. Huggins, Michael McNulty, Darby Penney, Paul & Katja Rehm, Paul Rosenberg, Erika Sanger & John Valsquez, Keiko Shirai, Stephen Tilly, Kenneth Baker, Geri Bell, Michael Chernoff, Gretchen & Dennis Duling, Marjorie K. Reinhart & Brenda Fisher, Patricia Hughes, Annette Johnson, Stephen Kineke, Noreen Santa Maria, Isabel Mills, Christine Connell & Michael Petryk, Robert & Barbara Strangfeld, Johanna Steper, Nell Stokes, William Suggs, Peter & Kathleen Tunny, Annee Borthwick



## Stevie Wants You



**Renew your membership - Invite someone you know to become a member - give the gift of membership - SUBSCRIPTION memberships and ONE-TIME PAYMENT options are available on the Membership Page at [UndergroundRailroadHistory.org](http://UndergroundRailroadHistory.org)**

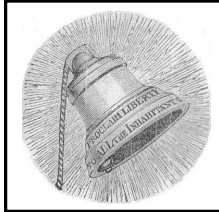
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**Dr. Thomas Elkins: Renaissance Man (cont'd)**

By examining the ceramics found during the archeological digs, we can map out the places Elkins traveled. "Dr. Thomas Elkins, the colored physician, at No. 778 Broadway, has one of the most perfect private cases of curiosities to be seen in the City. He has traveled extensively, and selected articles from Europe, Asia, Africa and all part of America. The Geological Museum, we hear, has offered \$1,500 for the assortment." Some of the ceramic artifacts found are a Staffordshire dog, Josiah Wedgewood shards, French porcelain flower, O. & E.G. Austrian Royal porcelain, Qing Dynasty porcelain and Chinese and other porcelains.



The research and artifacts being found on the Elkins lot, when combined with primary research, are shattering the stereotypes of a poor African American population prior to the Civil War. All the artifacts mentioned in this article can be seen on view in the reading/exhibition room at the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence.

1. *The Druggist Circular and Chemical Gazette*, Oil, Paint and Drug Publishing Company, New York, 1897, pg. 324.
2. *Times Union*, Dr. Thomas Elkins, October, 31, 1892.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Albany Evening Journal*, Dentists in Council, January 13, 1874, pg. 3.
5. *The Druggist Circular and Chemical Gazette*, Oil, Paint and Drug Publishing Company, New York, 1897, pg. 323.
6. *The Druggist Circular and Chemical Gazette*, Oil, Paint and Drug Publishing Company, New York, 1897, pg. 324.
7. *Daily Albany Argus*, August 11, 1873, pg. 4

Janine Moon, who volunteers as the Collections Management Specialist with Underground Railroad History Project, is an accomplished researcher, educator and curator with a background in museum studies with a Masters degree in Public History from the University at Albany.