

# The Freedom Seeker

Volume XIII, No.2

Summer - Autumn 2016

## John W. Jones and the Underground Railroad in Elmira, NY

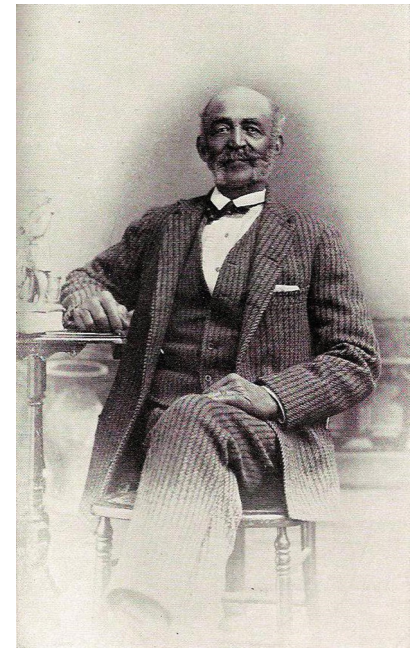
By Deborah A. Lee, Ph.D., Independent Scholar

**T**he Underground Railroad network, by its nature, attracted humanitarians of character and integrity. One little-known man who shone among them is John W. Jones, who escaped from slavery near Leesburg, Virginia, and helped more than 800 people to freedom through Elmira, New York. Because of his character, biography, and longevity, an unusual wealth of local sources document the secret network. Jones's life reveals strategy and tactics of the underground railroad in the Mid-Atlantic region and the high level of communication and organization across race, class, and other boundaries.

In Virginia, Jones enjoyed close relationships with his grandmother, mother and siblings and with the overseer, his wife and children. Jones waited until 1844, when slaveholder Sarah Ellzey was near death and his youngest brother George was eighteen before fulfilling his own and their mother's dream of escaping to the North with his two brothers. He recounted his harrowing journey later in life. His first taste of real freedom came during a meal shared with underground railroad agents Nathaniel and Sarah Smith on Independence Day.

Thanks to the welcome from such activists and the abundance of jobs in the prospering region, Jones and his four companions settled in Elmira, where he learned to read and write, found work, and joined the network to freedom.

John W. and George Jones (assumed names) collaborated with black and white antislavery activists such as Rev. Thomas K. Beecher, financiers including Jervis Langdon (later Mark Twain's father-in-law), and William Still in Philadelphia, to run a highly organized operation. Jones placed freedom seekers on the 4 a.m. train to St. Catherine's,



Canada. There, a church committee welcomed them and helped them get settled. In 1850, Jones served as a marshal in a large regional celebration commemorating freedom in the West Indies, with a parade and prominent black abolitionist speakers. In 1854, after a high-profile capture of freedom seekers in New York City, the Vigilance Committee in Philadelphia used the Elmira route whenever possible. Jones never lost a passenger.

Jones communicated with family and friends in Virginia and helped others join him. A sister and a niece lived with Jones and his wife in 1855. In 1863, after the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, another sister and her grown children moved there. Communications were easy, he told a reporter; letters

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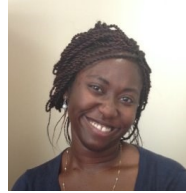
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The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc., a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting knowledge of the 19th century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy in the Capital Region, 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).

This newsletter is printed by Modern Press

## Volunteer Profiles



**Brieanna Chillious**, pursuing an M.L.I.S. in Library and Information Science degree from the State University of New York at Albany, volunteers her expertise in the URHP Library located on the second floor of The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence. With over 200 donated books and journals, organizing and cataloguing the books is essential if the resources are to be made available to the public. Along with volunteers Sharon Calhoun and Linda Dalton, Brieanna has created a listing of all the URHP Library resources on Library Thing, an online library catalogue. As well, Brieanna is ensuring that each book and journal has the proper Dewey Decimal system label and color coded category label. THANK YOU, BRIANNA!



**Janine Moon**, a graduate of the State University of New York at Albany Public History Program, donates her Monday's to develop a museum quality collections system for the more than 3,000 archeological artifacts held at The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence. Collected from five years of Archeology Camps and from archeological work required during exterior restoration, Janine's work will allow us to develop a user-friendly online database reflecting the material culture of Stephen and Harriet Myers. THANK YOU, JANINE!

## 2017 Underground Railroad Public History Conference: Americans@Risk - Race, Denial, Privilege, and Who Matters March 24-25, 2017 at Schenectady County Community College

**FRIDAY, MARCH 24, 2017**

**MARK YOUR CALENDARS! PLAN TO ATTEND!  
SPREAD THE WORD!**



Tim Wise is coming to town!  
Tim Wise? Who?

Tim Wise, whom scholar and philosopher Cornel West calls, "A vanilla brother in the tradition of (abolitionist) John Brown," is among the nation's most prominent antiracist essayists and educators.

Wise is the author of seven books, including his highly acclaimed memoir, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*, *Between Barack and a Hard Place*, and his latest, *Under the Affluence: Shaming the Poor, Praising the Rich and Sacrificing the Future of America*. Wise graduated from Tulane University in 1990 and received antiracism training from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond in New Orleans.

Learn more about Tim Wise at [timwise.org](http://timwise.org) and at [speakoutnow.org/speaker/wise-tim](http://speakoutnow.org/speaker/wise-tim)

**SATURDAY, MARCH 25, 2017**



CeLillianne Green is a woman of passion, purpose, and soul power. The fusion of her life as a poet, attorney, writer, teacher, and mediator is compelling. This fusion serves as the canvass for a woman whose writing paints pictures and tells stories. Ms. Green's observations of past and present cultural dynamics are insightful and thought provoking, rooted in a place of ancestral connection and spiritual truth. Her creative endeavors are also informed by education and experience. Her voice, her prose, and her poetry teach, encourage, and challenge people to embrace their soul power and to seek knowledge of who they are.

Published works include *That Word*, *Marching Orders and She Rose*, and *A Bridge: the Poetic Primer on African and African American Experiences*.

Learn more about CeLillianne Green at [celilliannegreen.net/](http://celilliannegreen.net/)

Roundtable discussions on current justice issues, speakers, MarketPlace, Video Arcade, Exhibition Hall, Art Gallery and more will be part of the 2017 convening. Be there!

## Over the Past Months



**Crescente**, an ensemble bringing to life the sounds of the afroska musical tradition, has paired up with URHPCR to engage the community in Musical Mondays.

Through a combination of reggae, ska, funk, and jazz, Crescente enlivens Arbor Hill and the Myers' Campus during several Monday evenings, engaging, entertaining, and educating community members and staff with exciting and danceable music, thoughtful narratives, and stage presence.

Led by trumpeter Joel Stewart, and comprised of various stellar musicians, Crescente offers an avenue through which listeners can musically engage with the past, experience that music in the present, and create the future through new combinations of sounds and audience interaction. Be on the lookout for more musical experiences at the Myers Residence Campus with Crescente!



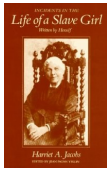
Young Abolitionist Teen Scholars' Institute 2016

Visitors to The Myers Residence



## Plan to Attend!

**URHP Reads** - the second Friday of each month. Join this casual conversation focusing on the first person accounts of abolitionists and freedom seekers from the period. (Free)



**Color and Sip** - the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month. Let your creativity soar with adult coloring sheets, relaxing conversation, networking, and plain, old fashioned fun. (\$)

**Underground Railroad Camp-In** - the last Friday and Saturday of each month. Get your jammies and sleeping bag and come on over to The Res for an unforgettable experience! (\$)



**Create and Taste - cooking class** - Experience the smells and tastes of mid-19th century America while learning to prepare and make historic foods with Executive Chef Ben Stewart and Kid Chef Kini McCalmon. Classes are held once a month. (\$)

Details and registration at 518-432-4432 and online at <http://undergroundrailroadhistory.org/events-calendar/>

## News and Notes

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

Underground Railroad History Project researches and preserves the local and national history of the anti-slavery and Underground Railroad movements, their international connections, and their legacies to later struggles; it engages in public education and dialogue about these movements and their relevance to modern society.

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

- ◆ **URHPCR Board Mtg** - 3rd Thursday of every month, 5:45 - 7:30pm at Russell Sage College, Troy
- ◆ **Conference Planning Mtg** - 1st Monday of each month, 6:00 - 8:00pm at Russell Sage College, Troy
- ◆ **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
- ◆ **Library Committee Mtg** - 4th Thursday of each month, 12:30pm 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

### **Welcome and thank you to new and renewing members:**

C.W. Allen, Tara Ross, Susan DuBois, Amy Godine, Ronald Greene, Kizzy Williams, Karla Guereri, Rosetta Crawley, Lorraine Wynne, Willie Terry, Norman Dann, Barbara Counterman, Madeline Kennedy, Daniel Butterworth, Roger O. Green, Margaret Diggs, Barbara DiTomasso, Anita Thayer & Bill Ritchie, John Hogan, Deborah A. Goss, Kate Storms, Miriam Trementozi, Mary Pliska, Mary Beitel, Margaret Lavelle, Lois Siegel, Ruth Senchyna, Henry Bankhead, Sharon Calhoun, Devorah Tarrow, David Fiske, Peter Delivoraiss, Peter Sokaris, James Knowles-Tuell.

**Invite someone you know to become a member, or give the gift of membership - details available on the Membership Page at [www.UndergroundRailroadHistory.org](http://www.UndergroundRailroadHistory.org)**

## Mark Your Calendars

**Oct. 15 - Stories from the Dirt** - International Archeology Day - 10am-4pm - Myers Residence Campus - presentations, artifact digging, cleaning, tagging, lunch - \$10/person donation requested to cover costs

**Oct. 22 - National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum Induction** - James W. C. Pennington, Beriah Green, Angelina Grimke, and John Gree Fee will be inducted. Details at [nationalabolitionhalloffameandmuseum.org](http://nationalabolitionhalloffameandmuseum.org)

**Nov. 4 - @ the Underground** - 6pm-9pm - jazz, afroska, and more - a major fundraiser for URHPCR hosted by Renaissance Albany Hotel - tickets and details coming soon

**Stay updated on URHPCR events - sign up for the URHPCR email listserv at [undergroundrailroadhistory.org/home](http://undergroundrailroadhistory.org/home)**



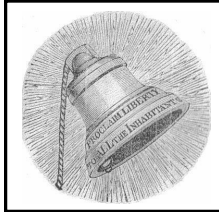
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were sent to southerners via friends in Canada. During the Civil War, Jones respectfully buried the Confederate dead from the Federal Prison Camp in Elmira, and contacted his overseer when he recognized the man's son among them. After the war, Jones visited the Ellzey farm and was welcomed as a guest.

In 1896, Susan Langdon Crane interviewed Jones for Ohio State University professor Wilbur Siebert. Jones admitted—but only after his compatriot died—there was a black man who forged freedom passes, and Elmira activists communicated with Quakers in Pennsylvania and Maryland, using horses as code. Crane told Siebert she did not understand, but likely the code was used for color and height and then the forged freedom papers were sent south, where they would be needed.

In all he did, his interviewer wrote, “Jones felt that it was his duty to put the golden rule into practice.” Another citizen wrote, “No resident of Elmira, white or colored, ever commanded greater respect and admiration.” After John W. Jones's death in 1900, locals learned that he was the one who secretly placed flowers weekly on Sarah Smith's grave—he never forgot her kindness during his freedom flight. Nor should we forget his, along with his effectiveness in the underground railroad network and the documentation he left behind.

Visit the John Jones Museum. Details are available at [johnwjonesmuseum.org](http://johnwjonesmuseum.org)

