



# The Freedom Seeker

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Autumn 2020

## Freedom Secured in Albany for Elizabeth Cunningham

Written by Don Papson

On July 31, 1829, Captain Smith steered the brig *Asaph* out of Mobile Bay, Alabama, and headed for New York City. His cargo consisted of 17,000 barrel staves, 234 bales of cotton, three trunks, one bookcase, and a woman of color concealed by the steward.

During the 19th day of the voyage, the woman was discovered.

Smith arrived at the Port of New York on August 18th, docked in the East River, and turned the *Asaph* and her runaway over to Henry A. Holmes, who would steer the vessel to Boston.

Several people from Mobile recognized the woman to be “the slave of Henry A. Hubbard.” Holmes faced a heavy fine if he did not return her, but first he had to obtain a certificate from a justice of the police. Persuading the woman to go ashore, he had her arrested.

Before Police Justices Abraham M. Valentine and James Hopson, Holmes claimed the prisoner, a mulatto named “Eliza,” was Hubbard’s property. Eliza admitted she had been a slave, but that her master had freed her. Hopson reasoned she should be released. Valentine argued she had to prove she was free. Eliza had no proof of her freedom, so Holmes was issued a certificate, and she was incarcerated in Bridewell prison until he could transport her back to Mobile.

Then, on a writ of *habeas corpus*, the keeper of Bridewell was ordered to bring Eliza before Judge Edwards,

who ordered her to be discharged.

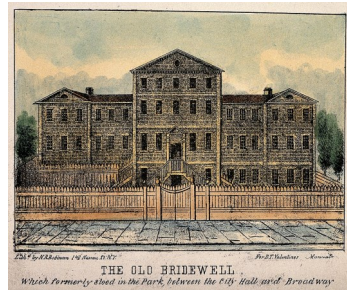
But when shown depositions from the police hearing, Edwards had Eliza returned to prison. Subsequently, Holmes confined her on the *Asaph*.

However, the Manumission Society intervened and obtained a writ requiring the Sheriff to take Eliza from Holmes back to Judge Edwards for a second hearing.

Elizabeth “Eliza” Cunningham testified that she was born in Wilmington, North Carolina, and emancipated when an adult. When the head of the white family in which she was brought up, died, everyone dispersed. As a free person, she lived with several families in North and South Carolina until she was taken by force to Mobile and put up at auction. Discovering that the title to her was not in order, her buyer reneged, and she was left with the auctioneer’s clerk, Hubbard. Fearing she would be sold to the West Indies, Elizabeth boarded the *Asaph*, bound for Boston. Six colored New York City residents swore they had known her as a free person.

Nonetheless, Elizabeth’s attorneys were made to go before the New York Supreme Court in Albany. The city’s *Daily Advertiser* reported, “very respectable colored people” with “an intense interest in the fate of the unhappy fugitive” attended the proceedings. Elizabeth could be discharged if she

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Bridewell Prison

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The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad Education Center, 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 Underground Railroad Education Center, 194 Livingston Ave., Albany, NY 12210 or urhpcr@localnet.com.

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**Freedom Seeker Corner**

The Hudson River, both on shore and in the water, was a common pathway for freedom seekers making their way north from New York City.



**BENJAMIN WILSON** passed through New York City on September 1, 1856.

Days later he arrived in Albany seeking assistance and made his way to one of the addresses he had been given by Sidney Howard Gay - 198 Lumber Street - where Stephen and Harriet Myers provided help and support.

Benjamin Wilson made his way to what is today The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence located at 194 Livingston Avenue in Albany, NY. We remember you, Benjamin Wilson, as one of the people of courage, people of hope, seekers of justice.

Recorded in *The Record of Fugitives*, the unpublished record kept by Sydney Howard Gay, NYC abolitionist, and held at Columbia University Library.

**Why I Volunteer with Underground Railroad Education Center**  
Written by Deb Abel

I became interested in African American history as a teacher in New York City. As an early childhood educator I found it difficult to find information that was comprehensive as well as on the level a young child could understand. I was dissatisfied with only having the information to discuss Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Harriet Tubman. I knew there was so much more history and that it was important for me to learn it.

I attended an Underground Railroad Education Center conference at Russell Sage College and became 'hooked' on the Underground Railroad as a topic of major importance in American history.

I started volunteering on conference weekend only but became very interested in the trials and tribulations of the acquisition of the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence. The commitment of Mary Liz and Paul to making the 'site' an integral and important part of the Capital Region's history and its relevance to today made me want to do more. I found myself 'pulled' to the history, lore, and importance of this forgotten and neglected site. When the Stewart's let me know that we were now able to get inside I jumped on the opportunity. I felt the presence of the Myers family as soon as I entered the house. The painstaking work needed to preserve this treasure became a 'part' of my being.

I became a conference planning committee member, often on the phone from Brooklyn for meetings. Over time, while some of the committee members have retired or moved on, I stayed and became a part of the work to make the conference and the Myers Residence an important piece of our history, American history. Mary Liz and Paul's knowledge, humor and dedication to a cause matches my enthusiasm and excitement for any success we are able to achieve. I use every opportunity I can to talk to people about UREC and its importance to all as we continue to tell the story for those who were unable to be remembered for the important journey they took, all for freedom, which many people take for granted today.

We are now continuing our work through *Metro Friends: 5 Boros to Freedom* in New York City. The work of the Underground Railroad is not over. . .

*Deb Abel*

## Looking Backward and Looking Forward with UREC

**Yours for the Oppressed, Harriet Myers Exhibit** - 40 people attended the grand opening on October 17. Delectable refreshments were provided by a local business owner. A gorgeous rose bouquet was brought for Harriet by a UREC board member. A beautifully redesigned exhibit room houses Harriet's letter through May 2021. Schedule your visit today.

**Tour Experiences at The Res** - following COVID protocols, tour experiences at The Myers Residence are being scheduled. Check the UREC website for details.

**Young Abolitionist Leadership Institute** - 20 teens were hosted on-site during the summer Institute investigating contemporary justice issues, their historic roots, and designing Legacy Projects to share what they learned - Legacy Projects included a blueberry garden, a Black Lives Matter mural, and a Green Spaces report; and a generous grant from the Carl E. Touhey Foundation has allowed UREC to extend YALI into a fall and spring session as an afterschool program for teens; and we are thankful for the outstanding work of Deb Vincent Evans, YALI coordinator.

**Sow We Grow** - a Community Challenge Grant from AARP was awarded to UREC. This grant will be used as the foundation of our Sow We Grow program which includes the building of a year-round greenhouse structure with accessible food gardens, benches, and lighting, and the developing of our intergenerational gardening program. Thanks to Deb Evans for her great grant writing skills.

**Communications Intern** - Victoria Kulesza, a College of St. Rose senior, is adapting adult Freedom Seeker narratives for a youth readership. Stay tuned for information about publication of these great learning tools.

**LibertyCon 2021** - will take on a new look in 2021 as a virtual series of presentations examining contemporary social justice issues and their historic roots with conversations discussing action response options to correct the injustice. Stay tuned for details.

**The Artifact Collections Room** - has a new, historically accurate interior door. Thank you, Mike Allocco, for designing and building the first new interior door for The Myers Res!

## News and Notes

### **MISSION STATEMENT of UREC**

Underground Railroad Education Center researches and preserves the local and national history of the Underground Railroad movement, its international connections, and its legacy for today's social justice issues, thereby empowering people of all ages to be agents of change toward an equitable and just society.



**Welcome to a new UREC board member, Taknika Mickey.** Taknika is the HR Director for Twin County Recovery Services, a mom, and a longstanding social justice advocate. She brings public relations skills, organizational skills, and a love of learning and helping to UREC. We

look forward to her participating in helping UREC realize its mission.

**Leave a Legacy with Underground Railroad History Project**  
Maximize your tax deductions through charitable giving by leveraging one of many planned giving opportunities. Call Mary Liz Stewart for more information - 518-621-7793.



## Stevie Wants You



**Welcome and thank you to our donors and to our new and renewing members:** AnnMarie Hess, Barbara Barthel, Brenda Twiggs, Christina Cummings, Cohoes Savings Foundation, David & Denise Goodall, David Goodrich, David Hochfelder, Diane Houslanger, Diane L. Wind, Dora Lee Stanley, Franck Lamoureux, Georgia Fishburn, Jack Hughston Waring, Keiko Shirai, Kirin Buckley, Leo Levy, Lisbeth Calandrino, Lynn P. MacGowan, M&T Bank Charitable Foundation, Maryrita Dobiell, Matt George, Maud & David Easter, Michael Barrett, Pioneer Bank Charitable Foundation, Price Chopper's Golub Foundation, Robert Ward, Senga Fittz, Sharon Calhoun, Stewart's / Dake Family Foundation, Stewart's Holiday Match, Susan DuBois, Susan McGovern, Terry V. Jackson, The Judith Fund, The Review Foundation, Thomas B. Fenlon, Times Union Hope Fund, Upstate Theater Coalition - A Fair Game, Yomika Bennett, Zakia Nizam

**DECEMBER DASH — DECEMBER DASH**  
Please see newsletter insert

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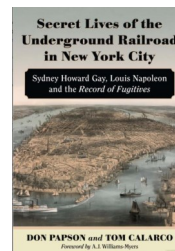
## Freedom Secured in Albany (cont'd from page 1)

paid \$100 in bail. Albany's African Baptist Church pastor Rev. Nathaniel Paul and three other men of color "instantly volunteered" to pay the security, and Elizabeth, was "set at liberty."

In 1831, a storm wrecked the *Asaph* en route to the West Indies. Of Elizabeth, nothing more is known.



Don Papson is co-founder of the North Country Underground Railroad Historical Association (<https://northcountryundergroundrailroad.com>) and North Star Underground Railroad Museum, public speaker, and author with Tom Calarco of *Secret Lives of the Underground Railroad in New York City: Sydney Howard Gay, Louis Napoleon and the Record of Fugitives* (McFarland, 2015)



*A copy of the original Daily Advertiser article and corresponding Commercial Advertiser and Evening Post articles are contained in the insert accompanying this newsletter. Thanks is extended to Don Papson who has generously shared the results of his research with UREC and the readers of this newsletter.*

## DECEMBER DASH - DECEMBER DASH—DECEMBER DASH

Dash to the finish line with UREC before December 2020 ends!