



The Freedom Seeker

Volume XIX, No.3

Winter 2022

Frank Johnson: Uncovering the Life of an Enslaved Young Man From Utica, New York

By Deirdre Sinnott

Around 1797, Frank Johnson, a baby boy of African descent was born in Oneida County. His birthdate preceded the passage of the 1799 Gradual Emancipation Act, thereby making him a “slave for life,” as he was called by Alexander Bryan Johnson, the man who owned him. Johnson was born in England in 1786 and arrived in Utica in 1801. There he became an important man, involved with business, banking, and writing.

“My father had owned him [Frank] from the boy’s infancy and we had always treated him kindly as if he had been white, and the boy was docile and kind. He was a full negro in colour, according to the custom of slaves he called himself Frank Johnson.” When Frank was ten or eleven, he was given Johnson as a birthday gift.

In the fall of 1811, Johnson took the young man to New York City where he rented rooms in a fashionable house that had an engaging view of The Battery and New York’s busy harbor.

Frank, who would have been thirteen or fourteen, bunked in the servants’ quarters. There he must have met other domestics, some free and others enslaved. A young man might learn much from his fellows.

After retreating to Utica to avoid the War of 1812, Johnson and Frank returned to New York in 1813. According to Johnson, Frank’s tasks of polishing his

“boots in the evening, attending to the fire in my room and in waiting on me at dinner,” meant that Frank had much free time. Johnson explains, “he made use of it by going into bad company, remaining out late at night and occasionally all night.”

When Johnson found out about the youth’s behavior, he became angry and “struck him on the back with a small rattan cane. ... It was the first and only time I ever struck him, and I have no belief that

I could have hurt him; but I have ever since regretted the occurrence. ... His being my slave probably induced me to strike him, though it ought to have restrained me by reason of his helplessness.”

At some point later, Frank became so ill that he “kept to his bed.” Johnson took him one mile north to New-York Hospital which was on the west side of Broadway between Duane and Anthony (now Worth) Streets. Frank was most likely admitted to a ward that served only people of color. Johnson requested that the lad receive “special attention” and assured Dr. James S. Stringham that all the expenses would be paid.

Frank was diagnosed with consumption, now called tuberculosis. In the mid-nineteenth century the death rate for Black sufferers ranged from 7% to 300% higher than Whites. It’s not known precisely what medical protocol would have been used or if Frank received any care at all. The standard treatments for Whites included: daily bleedings, attempts to raise the patient’s temperature to burn out the disease, and laxatives or mercury to induce purges.

One morning, Frank was crying. He had been “told that he must die, and that he had been very wicked.” Frank said, “he should soon get well if he were once more at home.” Johnson lodged a complaint. That night, Frank died.

(Continued on page 4)



New-York Hospital via Wikimedia Commons

<i>Inside this issue</i>	
<i>Museum Studies Teen Program</i>	P. 2
<i>Samuel Ringgold Ward</i>	P. 2
<i>Donors & Members WE THANK YOU!</i>	P. 3

 **UREC Board of Directors**

Paul Stewart, Co-founder
with **Mary Liz Stewart**, Executive Director

- | | | |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Ron Gardner
<i>President</i> | Yvonne Abunaw | Sam Fein |
| David Hochfelder
<i>Vice-President</i> | Sara E. Anderson | AnnMarie Hess |
| Matt Kirk
<i>Treasurer</i> | Brittany Beyus | Steve O'Connor |
| Kai Marion
<i>Secretary</i> | Jennifer Burns | Latisha Owens |
| | Yolanda Caldwell | Darius Shahinfar |
| | Lisbeth Calandrino | Brenda Twiggs |
| | | Ethel Walker |

Freedom Seeker Corner

Samuel Ringgold Ward was born into enslavement in 1817 on Maryland's eastern shore. In 1820 he fled as a child with his parents to New Jersey, relocating to New York City in 1826. Once settled, Ward's parents enrolled him in the African Free School where he aspired to be a teacher. As an adult he studied for the ministry and became a Congregational minister serving in churches in Western New York. He also became a lecturer for national anti-slavery groups in the US. In a violent confrontation in Syracuse, Ward's involvement in the rescue of freedom seeker William "Jerry" Henry caused Samuel R. Ward to flee to Canada. He wrote a bestselling book, "*Autobiography of A Fugitive Negro*". He finished his life as a farmer in Jamaica. One of his connections to the Albany, NY area was that he worked to transition Stephen Myers' newspaper *The Northern Star and Colored Farmer* into a merger with his [Ward's] newspaper called the *Impartial Citizen*. Samuel Ringgold Ward passed on from this world in 1866.



Follow Underground Railroad Education Center on Facebook for more Freedom Seeker Friday accounts

The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad Education Center, a non-profit corporation dedicated to researching and preserving 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.

Editorial inquiries can be sent to Underground Railroad Education Center, 194 Livingston Avenue, Albany, NY 12210 or urhpcr@localnet.com

This newsletter is printed by Modern Press www.modernpress.com

Museum Studies Teen Program on the Horizon

Recognizing that museum staff are overwhelmingly white, straight, and able-bodied, and museum leaders are overwhelmingly male, and that for centuries museums have told stories about a diversity of people, presenting these stories from the perspective of those in power and, thereby, having bolstered white supremacy, sexism, colonialism, ableism, and heteronormativity, UREC is looking to democratize storytelling in museums and help produce a more equitable distribution of power in our society through the development of a Museum Studies Teen Program.

Our youth are our future museumgoers, museum staff and museum leaders. To 'democratize storytelling' in museums, our teens, especially our teens from marginalized communities, must become active participants in the transformation of our museums. To this end, the UREC Museum Studies Teen Program (MSTP) will inspire and empower teens to become agents of change in the museum world by:

- Cultivating an appreciation of museums and their role in society,
- Developing the critical thinking skills necessary to effective museum going,
- Facilitating an understanding of why and how museums need to change,
- Exploring with them a variety of museum-related career paths and hands on experiences, and
- Preparing them for success in an undergraduate museum studies/public history program.

To achieve these goals, the MSTP will employ creative and interactive methods under the guidance of educational facilitators and museum professionals; employ critical analysis of museum pieces, museum trips, and guest speakers in order to make museums and museum studies relevant to participants and to excite their curiosity; involve program participants in the development of portions of their own curriculum; leverage the holdings of the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence, the curatorial experience and daily operation activities of UREC; explore partnerships with local and national cultural institutions and colleges with relevant undergraduate programs; and arrange for a structured mentoring component with multiple museums/cultural institutions. A program planning year will commence in 2023 with potential implementation in September 2023 or 2024, depending on funding streams. Teens will begin the program as Juniors, work together through an 8-week summer immersion experience, and continue through Senior year. Support will continue for those who choose to enter a museum studies and public history undergraduate program.

"If we're going to change the landscape in the museum field we cannot wait to be invited to the table, we need to prepare ourselves to step up and claim a seat at the table." (Mary Liz Stewart, Co-founder, UREC)

Looking Backward and Looking Forward with UREC



North Country Underground Railroad Historical Association, a longstanding friend of Underground Railroad Education Center located in Ausable Chasm, New York, is reaching out far and wide for financial support to purchase the former property of Quaker Abolitionist and

Underground Railroad Conductor Stephen Keese Smith which is on the market. From the 1840s onward, Smith spent \$1,000 to provide refuge for an estimated 400 enslaved persons. Freedom seekers stayed on his property during the last leg of their months-long journey to freedom in Canada.

Contributions will be dedicated to:

- Returning the farmhouse, barns and silos on this 32-acre farm to their original states.
- Creating an educational hub for people of all ages on the often-overlooked legacy of enslavement and those individuals who escaped it and passed through this region.
- Establishing a Community Center that welcomes local functions and conversations about our history and its storytelling.

Any donation will help. Donations can be made on the GoFundMe Page at <https://gofund.me/425cf608>



Adult Archaeology Camp, conducted on the Dr. Thomas Elkins property this past summer was a resounding success! Sponsored by Hartgen Archaeological Associates (www.hartgen.com) in collaboration with UREC, participating adults had fun, uncovered some significant artifacts, and learned a great deal about archaeology techniques. Enjoy the summer camp YouTube video at <https://youtu.be/e4CKZLUS14s>

Black in the Hudson Valley Author Book Talks will resume in 2023 as a collaboration between UREC and the Library at the A.J. Williams-Myers African Roots Center located in Kingston, NY. Book talks by published authors will be held as hybrid events once a quarter across the year. Please stay tuned for updates via Constant Contact emails and the UREC Events Calendar.

Not a Constant Contact recipient? Please sign onto UREC's email list at undergroundrailroadhistory.org/ by clicking on JOIN OUR EMAIL LIST on the website home page. It's a great way to stay updated.

News and Notes

UREC MISSION STATEMENT

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.

Leave a Legacy with UREC
Maximize your tax deductions through charitable giving by leveraging one of many planned giving opportunities. For more information call Mary Liz Stewart at 518-621-7793.



Stevie Wants You



WELCOME and THANK YOU to NEW and RENEWING MEMBERS AND DONORS: Albany Public Library, Alice M. Bell-Oneil, Angela Neal, AnnMarie Hess, Brenda Twiggs, Cynthia L. Redlo, David Hochfelder, Diane Houslanger, Dora Lee Stanley, Elizabeth Isaac, Ethel C. Walker, Greg & Maria Mansfield, Jacqueline Schmitt, Jessica Mayer, Juie D. Deo, Kaiko Shirai, Katie Meislahn, Laurel Ullyette, Lucinda Huggins, Marggie Skinner, Martha Levy, Mary Francis Porter, Mary O. Enhorning, Michael F. Connors, Paul & Katja Rehm, Paul de Lucena, Randolph McGough, Sandra Smith, Saul Rigberg, Steven & Trisha Wojcik, Susan J.W. Steele

SUBSCRIPTION DONATION and SUBSCRIPTION MEMBERSHIP and ONE-TIME DONATION and ONE-TIME MEMBERSHIP options

are available at UndergroundRailroadHistory.org/donate



“When we work for justice, no matter the outcome, the ultimate triumph lies in the fact that we made the decision to stand up.” (Barbara Smith, Author, Activist, Independent Scholar)

THANK YOU!

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD EDUCATION CENTER

194 Livingston Avenue
Albany, New York 12210

Phone: (518) 621-7793

Contact us at: undergroundrailroadhistory.org/contact/



*Learn the Past, Be the Present,
Create the Future®*

ON THE WEB AT

UNDERGROUNDRAILROADHISTORY.ORG

Follow us on Facebook  and Instagram 

Frank Johnson: Uncovering the Life of an Enslaved Young Man From Utica, New York *(cont'd. from p.1)*

After learning of his death, Johnson hurried down to the dead-house. Medical schools and students had a particular interest in dead bodies. According to Harriet A. Washington, author of *Medical Apartheid*, the use of the bodies of people of African descent was the norm rather than the exception.

Johnson found Frank's body in an open black coffin. Someone had put some wood "shavings under [Frank's] head for a pillow."

Just across Broadway there was an African Burial Ground that held the remains of both enslaved and free people. In 1991 it was rediscovered. Investigators found "...widespread evidence of grave robbing, including bodies and skulls that displayed anatomists' marks."

New York City's Municipal records of deaths indicates that Black people might have been buried there as late as Frank's death, in 1813.

Johnson "reproached" himself for "bringing him to New York." Years later, he admits that the fact that the boy was black "prevented me from seeing that he was much unwell."

For Frank, those nights, strolling anonymously around the streets in the glorious and dangerous jumble of New York City was probably the most freedom he ever experienced. By law, Frank was powerless. He might have run, but it was six years after he died that Upper Canada freed all Black people living there. And life with the free Black community in the City was difficult.

His story, though short, is a testament to the fact that slavery and oppression are never benign, no matter how kindly an owner believes himself to be.



Deirdre Sinnott is a member of the Oneida County Freedom Trail Commission and was a historical consultant on the Ft. Stanwix Underground Railroad. She has written and spoken about Oneida County's tumultuous history of slavery and abolition. Her novel, "*The Third Mrs. Galway*," is set in Utica in 1835. More about her can be found at www.Deirdresinnott.com

