



# The Freedom Seeker

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## Albany County, NY Archeology Dig Yields Treasures of Black Farmer Thomas Powell's Life and Homestead

By: Dr. Michael T. Lucas, Curator of Historical Archaeology for New York State

Many Nineteenth century farmsteads have become archaeological sites as they were abandoned for better job opportunities in cities. Countless foundations of a variety of farms buildings are now obscured by decades of overgrowth and the histories of their former occupants are waiting to be rediscovered. Avocational archaeologist Arthur Johnson first located the ruins of the Powell family farmhouse, barn, and burial ground in the Town of Colonie, New York in the 1970s. The Powell family homestead is remarkable for the fact that the below ground archaeological remnants have survived and that it represents one of only a handful of African American owner-operated farms to ever exist in the area stretching north of Albany to the Mohawk River.



The family added several more tracts to their holdings making the farm around 50 acres by 1850. It was around this time that Paul married Hannah Elizabeth Kilbourn of Troy and had two children, Thomas D. and Jenny, by the mid-1860s. It was at this time that Paul took over the primary management of the farm from his aging father. The farm was a very successful diversified business, relying on the production and sale of corn, potatoes, hay, and a variety of grains. Between 1875 and 1880, Paul shifted to milk production. Many area farmers turned to milk as a response to increased competition from western grain producers. Paul suddenly passed in 1884 just as the family was ramping up production. Thomas was still too young to take over the farming operation, and the family was forced to lease the land and dependent buildings.

Thomas D. Powell revived the family milking business at the farm in 1910, but his untimely death in 1917 cut short any plans of future expansion. Thomas's passing left Jenny the lone surviving Powell family member. Three generations of the family lived on the homestead and developed the land into a productive farm through hard work, persistence, and careful management. Neither Thomas nor Jennie ever married and, with no descendants to pass the land down to, the farm was forfeited to the county treasury in 1926 and the history of the family remained largely forgotten until recently.



The New York State Museum was granted permission by the landowner to begin exploratory excavations and survey at the Powell farm in the fall of 2021. Preliminary excavations were placed around the ruins of the house to get a better sense of when various additions were added. These excavations occurred in 2022 and 2023 with the help of many volunteers, and support from the Underground Railroad Education Center. (cont'd. on p.4)

Thomas and Elizabeth Powell were enslaved in the adjacent households of the Fonda and Lansing families of Watervliet. Both were born around 1790 and well before the Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery was passed by the New York Legislature in 1799. A romance blossomed and the couple were married in the Dutch Reformed Church in 1808. The Powell's first child Jane was born in 1810 while they were still living in the enslaver household of Douw A. Fonda. Thomas and Elizabeth had gained their

freedom by 1818 and purchased a 5-acre parcel from their former enslaver for \$300. In 1820 the family purchased an adjacent parcel to the west and welcomed their first son Paul into the world. The western property provided more opportunity for agricultural expansion, and eventually a space for the family burial plot.

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**Freedom Seeker Corner**

**Levi Carroll** (surname sometimes spelled Karl) was born around 1803 in Maryland. Carroll escaped enslavement around 15 years of age in 1808 and married Lucretia Brook in 1846.

Carroll, wife Lucretia, and their child, Charles, all appear together in the Canadian Census of 1851 in Waterloo, the Grove District of Lower Canada.

After 1871, censuses state that Levi Carroll's occupations were shingle-maker and gardener. However, historian Joanna Rickert-Hall argues that it was possible that Levi Carroll was also a landlord, since the 1861 census lists additional non-family individuals living with him.

Most of Levi Carroll's life was lived in an old schoolhouse on land granted to him by his Mennonite employer, Abraham Weber. Levi Carroll died on July 15, 1897, of old age.



Two separate obituaries were published about Carroll, suggesting he was a well-respected member of the community. When the Waterloo Public Library was contacted for more information on Levi Carroll, a Librarian added "Levi Carroll is widely known as one of the most prominent Black residents in Waterloo". Carroll seems to be a well-known figure in Waterloo, even to this day.

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  
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**Stevie Wants You to Know - Biophilic Design and CORE Living Building Challenge – WHAT?**



UREC is working to ensure that the Interpretive Center is as environmentally responsible as possible. To this end the building's design includes a geothermal HVAC system, photovoltaic cells, and an Underground Filtration Gallery to manage storm water drainage. But UREC is taking further steps by designing a building that will meet CORE Living Building Challenge standards and incorporate Biophilic Design. What are these, you might ask.

According to Elizabeth Calabrese, an architect who specializes in Biophilic Design, "... the modern built environment has encouraged degradation and separation from nature. Biophilic Design offers an ecological and ethical remedial response..." Biophilic Design addresses two questions: "What impact does the built environment where we work and live have on our health, well-being and our ability to survive?", and "How can we balance the need and desire for our comforts and conveniences, our evolving technologies and our inherent need for the elements of nature?". Rain gardens and the planting and alignment of native species around the Interpretive Center is one way that Biophilic Design will be incorporated into the Interpretive Center design.

The CORE Green Building Certification<sup>SM</sup> (CORE) is "... a simple framework that outlines the 10 best practice achievements that a building must obtain to be considered a green or sustainable building. It puts the connection to nature, equity and the need for a building to be loved on even footing with the typical water, energy and materials concerns" (International Living Future Institute). CORE's standards ensure that not only the building design but also the grounds around the building are purposefully planned to be environmentally responsible, contributing comprehensively to the health and well-being of the community in which the building is located and to be accessible by all. An example from the Interpretive Center design are the window walls that allow visitors inside the building to experience a connectedness to the exterior environment. Projects that achieve CORE certification can claim to be role models in their communities for redefining the future of the built environment.

## Looking Backward and Looking Forward with UREC

**YALI** – year 16 with UREC’s summer Young Abolitionist Leadership Institute. Teens are busy learning how to use You Tube and video and visual art and storytelling and fashion to capture and share inspiring information and stories. Collaboratively designed Legacy Projects will be showcased at the YALI Open House scheduled for Thursday, August 10 at 2pm. Everyone is invited!

**Chancellor Young** of the NYS Board of Regents visited The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence. We are looking for opportunities to collaborate and celebrate the work of our communal ancestors and their relationship with us today. Stay tuned for updates.

**WMHT-TV** - The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence was honored by a visit from the new WMHT CEO and President Anthony Hayes. Mr. Hayes was introduced to The Myers Residence and the work of UREC and engaged in a conversation on possible ways for UREC and WMHT to collaborate. Exciting times ahead!

**PASSENGERS ON THE UGRR** - Maxam Daniels, a combined BA/MA History student at SUNY Albany, has begun his research into the life stories of selected Freedom Seekers who have a relationship with the Capital Region of New York State. UREC

has very limited information of the selected Freedom Seekers so Maxam is working to expand our knowledge of these individuals so that we might elevate their presence in the American narrative. Maxam’s presentations about his research are presented as a hybrid event - in-person at The Myers Residence and via Zoom. Maxam’s upcoming presentation is scheduled for Friday, August 25 at 7pm. Visit the UREC website events page for more information and for the zoom registration link.

**OCTOBER ARCHEOLOGY** - More archaeology is expected on the Powell Farm during the month of October. If interested in ‘digging in the dirt’ with Dr. Michael Lucas, Paul Stewart, and other community members, please call Paul Stewart at 518-621-7793.

**FLORENCE FARMING AND LUMBER ASSOCIATION** - The Pomeroy sign that marked the location of the Florence Farming and Lumber Association in Florence, NY was stolen. A new sign has been purchased with the generous donations of community members. Installation will be held at the site on August 25 at 3:30pm. If interested in attending please let Mary Liz Stewart know by calling 518-621-7793.

*To receive timely updates, join the UREC email list via a link on the homepage of the UREC website.*

## 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.



A. Philip Randolph  
1889-1979

*“When we leave (Washington, DC) it will be to carry on the civil rights revolution home with us into every nook and cranny of the land, and we shall return again and again to Washington in ever growing numbers until total freedom is ours. We shall settle for nothing less, and may God grant that we may have the courage, the strength, and faith in this hour of trial by fire never to falter.” (March on Washington, 1963)*



Amy Lent, Analine Hicks, Angela Neal, Angela Suits, Anne C. Savage, AnnMarie Hess, Brenda Twiggs, Carlton Gutman, Claire M. Stahler, County of Albany, Darryl O. Freeman, David Hochfelder, Delaware County Historical Association, Diane Houslanger, Dora Lee Stanley, Elaine Benton, Excelsior University, Fr. Francis A O’Connor, Frank Eugene Wicks, Friends of the John C. Hart Memorial Library, Georgia Fishburn, Greenway Heritage Conservancy HRV, Inc., Jacqueline Schmitt, Jamila R. Ayala, Jan Pollow, Jane E. Murphy, Jeannine Laverty, Joan B. Rogers, Laura A. Lee, Lauren Masten, Legal Aid Society of NENY, Lisa McCulloch, Lisbeth Calandrino, Loudonville Christian School, Marcus Nix, Margaret Lamar King, Margaret Mary Lavelle, Margaret Snowden, Marilyn Kinnon, Mary O. Enhorning, Michael Lee Goldston, Montessori Magnet School, N. Trabma, Paige Hassall, Paul D. Tonko, Phyllis McLaughlin, Retiree Council 10 NYSUT, Rosemary M. Wallinger, Sara Anderson, Saul Rigberg, Senga Fitz, Siena College, St. Peter’s Presbyterian Church, Steven B. Cornell, Steven P. O’Connor, The John, Marie and Joseph Whalen Foundation, The Saratoga Independent School, Thomas Ellis, Troy Area United Ministries, Inc., Voorheesville Central School District, Voorheesville Public Library, Woodland Hill Montessori, Yvonne B. Abunaw

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## Treasures of Black Farmer Thomas Powell's Life and Homestead *(cont'd from p.1)*

We have now uncovered many pieces of information about the Powell family through the architecture of their house and the changes they made through time.

The original Powell house was a modest wood-framed structure measuring approximately 16 by 16 feet, with a south facing door and gable end chimney. Thomas secured the structure with a substantial stone foundation set in the underlying clay subsoil. A few artifacts associated with the early history of the family have been found thus far, including a Chinese porcelain tea saucer, two thimbles, a two-tined fork, and small fragments of earthenware dishes. Eventually, the Powell family added another 16 by 16-foot dwelling to the west of the first house. Archaeologists believe that this second house was probably constructed sometime before 1860, perhaps for Paul and Hannah. Many artifacts dating to the latter half of the nineteenth century were uncovered around the foundation including ceramics, medicinal bottles, and a silver spoon with the initials "H.E.K" for Hannah Elizabeth Kilbourne engraved on the handle.

A third major addition was a large 20 by 32-foot cellar connecting the two earlier houses. Archaeological and historical information suggest that this cellar was constructed sometime during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, perhaps in conjunction with the expansion of the milking operation. Future excavations in the yard areas are planned to identify possible trash pits containing household refuse from different time periods.

The Powell house and farm was an anchor for the African American community centered around the Dutch Reformed Church in rural Watervliet. Marriages and likely other community gatherings took place at the farm. Yet, in the end, the Powell family, like so many other African American farming families, was unable to hold on to and pass along their real property to the next generation. Further research into the lives of New York's African American farming communities is ongoing.

