



This Interview has been conducted and digitized as part of the second installment of the Underground Railroad Center's Black Experience Exhibit Series, *Crossing the Line*.

I: This is Rose Iorio for the Underground Railroad Education Center at 194 Livingston Avenue, interviewing Katherine Sheehan on March 20th, 2026. So first off, Ms. Sheehan, would you like to introduce yourself?

Sure. I'm Kathy Sheehan, or Katherine Sheehan. I am the Executive Director of the Hart-Cluet Museum over in Troy, and I'm also the Rensselaer County and Troy City Historian.

I: Thank you very much. And to start off, right, I'd like to ask you why Troy, right? What about Troy had made it such a significant place kind of in New York at this time in this year, the 19th century?

Well, I think it's really interesting because Troy, I think geographically, I think that's what we have to look at Troy first, its location. And Troy is at the headwaters of the Hudson River, which is navigable all the way up to Troy. The tide actually changes there. And we are also the eastern terminus of the Erie and Champlain canals and it was the waterways that were so responsible for the movement of freedom seekers coming up into New York State, and so Troy is already perched to be there. There also was a lot of diversity in Troy very early on and of course, the Dutch had settled there, but we had a lot of Germans that had come in who had worked there, were stationed there during the Revolution, I think in the Battle of Bennington. It was, you know, we're just Albany's neighbor, or Albany's neighbors to the north. We're only eight miles northeast of the city of Albany, which, of course, is 100 years older than Troy. And so you kind of have this combination of people, you know, like the Dutch, who, well, yes, they held slaves and stuff too,

but they also were, they tended to kind of work with all sorts of different kinds of people, you know. And we had, you had a free, we already had a substantial free Black community that was here in Troy early on. There were about 80 people, so that were considered free, free Black, according to the census. And I think they are some of the people who were impetuses to helping the freedom seekers as the city grew from a village in 1789. So I think it was, those are some of the things that may have just meant Troy. But I think geographically, that probably was one of the most important.

I: And on the topic of the free Black communities in Troy, what were those communities? What was the bedrock of those communities? Who made up those communities? What was it like for

the everyday person in that kind of community?

Most of the free black communities here were merchants. Samuel Baltimore, whose son, Peter Baltimore, and his grandson, were integral partners in the Underground Railroad movement. Samuel ran an oyster, an oyster shop at the head of Liberty Street.

He came here after the American Revolution, coming down from the Boston area.

You had most, most of these were working, a lot of people working as stevedores on the docks. And Troy, again, Troy was a, really a shipping port. It's hard to think of an inland shipping port, but they really were. A lot of the, you know, produce and things that were coming from Western Massachusetts, Western Vermont, and eastern Rensselaer County, which was really the fertile lands, all came into Troy before they either went down the river to New York City, or eventually after 1824, out the canal, out the Erie and Champlain canals. So, they were, they were involved in those, those early businesses.

I: And speaking of those early businesses and the free black community in Troy, would it be accurate to say that this free black community kind of gave rise to the later abolitionist movement in Troy?

I think that's a fair statement. Yeah.

I: And with that, do you think that the waterways, as they were significant in the development of Troy as a city, were significant in the abolitionist movement in the city as well?

Oh, absolutely. You had somebody like Pliny Moore, who ran a grain elevator, and right at the foot between Liberty and Washington streets, and all the, all the packet boats and canal boats that came up from New York City, or came down, you know, down south from the, or south from the canals into Troy, they were unloading all those grain. They also were bringing, particularly ones that were coming up from New York, bringing freedom seekers. Pliny Moore was secretary of the treasurer of the Eastern New York Anti-Slavery Society, as it turned out. And so, he would help, he would direct these people to go to Peter Baltimore's barbershop, which was only about four blocks away. Again, only one block in from the river. And it was there that Peter and William Rich, another person who came into town with Lafayette, actually, they would, they would assist, they needed to write letters and things. And then, right next door from Peter's barbershop was the Athenaeum building. And the Athenaeum building held the offices of the Mental and Moral Improvement Society that was run by, by the, by the kind of the Black, free Black community that was in Troy and, um, they were, again, helping to write letters. Also in that building was the offices of the Troy Female African Benevolent Society. They also, we were doing the real, the gut work, clothes, food, helping to, again, also write letters for the person, the next, the freedom seeker to go to the next spot. "What do you want to do? Are you wanting to

continue on your way up to Canada?" Or people felt safe in Troy and they would find them jobs in Troy, whether it was, um, as, as domestic help, um, for a lot of women who were doing that, or for men, a lot of them working on the docks, maybe with plenty more. Um, you had all these warehouses that were just a block away. So a lot of, a lot of people were, were working in those kind of, a lot of the black community that was coming in there were working on, in those particular jobs.

I: And you talk about these, uh, local organizations in Troy, these local, uh, free African-American organizations. How significant were those, not only in the development of the underground realm of the abolitionist movement, but also just in the everyday life of the Black community in Troy at this time?

Oh, I think they were, they were, they were very significant, um, because they, and they had, when you look through and we have these records that we found in the Troy Savings Bank, um, it's what they deposited, um, which were thousands of dollars.

So, you know, they were successful. They were, um, there were people that are integrated through the churches, whether it was the, you know, what ultimately became Liberty Street Presbyterian Church, um, the AME Zion Church, uh, that was there. But they also, again, their connections with, um, with the White community, uh, is, is, can't be dismissed by any, by any means because they were working with the lawyers and the bankers. I mean, the Troy Savings Bank is in that same building in this, this Atheneum building was just this, you know, it's just amazing things going on in here. You have this bank. And when you look at all those bank records, they're, they, the, the Troy Female African Benevolent Society, the Mental and Moral Improvement Society, all have their bank accounts in this Troy Savings Bank.

And later, as the different other immigrant groups that also settled in Troy, they also put their money in, in there. So these fraternal organizations. So the Troy Savings Bank really is this kind of catalyst. Now, you have to think about the people who were in charge of that, um, were, were all White men. But they were also going next door to Peter Baltimore's barbershop. You know, he was the one who's shaving them and taking care of them. I mean, a lot of businesses settled over the chair. Martin Ingram Townsend, who was a huge, uh, he was this White lawyer, but he was helping, um, he was, he was part of the abolitionist community. He was a good friend of Peter's, um, Peter Baltimore's, and, um, you know, he is, is working through the community. So, um, they had these connections between the white and, and the Black community that was in Troy.

I: Tell me a bit more about Peter Baltimore, you know, his kind of story, his, his involvement with the abolitionist movement, all of that.

Yeah. So Peter's really is an interesting man. Um, again, his, he, he's born here.

His father was from, uh, from Boston and he came into Troy as this oyster cellar, uh, as I said, on Liberty Street. Uh, Peter is born and, uh, becomes the, he starts as a, what they call a tensorial parlor because you had, um, where you're working on, uh, you're shaving, you know, as a, as a barber. Um, but barbers also did dental work too, by the way.

And, um, and he has this, this small barbershop, um, and he gets very much involved in the, in the Underground Railroad movement. As a young man, he meets, um, Reverend Henry Highland Garnett, who is the black minister, who was brought in by Reverend Nathan Beeman, who was the minister of the First Presbyterian Church. And, uh, he goes to New York City with him.

As a matter of fact, we have this wonderful portrait, uh, of Peter Baltimore as a young man that was probably done in New York City when he was down, um, with, um, with, um, uh, Henry Highland Garnett. And so he gets very much involved in, in this, in this movement.

And he's really integral in April of 1860 when, um, the rescue of Charles Nalle, the rescue of Charles Nalle event is, is going on.

I: Please tell me more about Charles Nalle.

Okay, so, so you have, so Charles Nall is a, is a, um, a freedom seeker who had escaped, I'm sorry, had escaped on the, um, uh, through the, through the network. Charles Nalle is originally out in, in Averill Park in the town of Sand Lake, and he's working for a man by the name of Horace Averill. And, um, I don't know how many years he was out there for a while, but at some point I think he realized that because of the Fugitive Slave Act laws, I think that he was not feeling safe. Um, and as it turned out, even though he denied it, it was pretty much Horace Averill is probably the one who turned him in to bounty hunters. So he leaves Horace Averill, comes to Troy, and, um, gets a job with Uri Gilbert. You know, Uri Gilbert was a mayor of Troy, and he also ran this coach manufacturer, um, a very large coach manufacturing firm.

Um, and so he basically was Mrs. Gilbert's coachman. One morning, uh, he goes out to go get his bread, and he's captured under the, uh, under the Fugitive Slave Act by these bounty hunters. And he's literally, um, he, they, um, he's, he's, um, cuffed and, um, ankle shackled at the ankles and the wrists, and they drag him up 2nd Street from, uh, from, from, from, from Washington Street. And so about six blocks up to this district office where the, you know, the circuit judge was coming in on State, on the corner of State and 1st Street. Within 15 minutes, there were church bells ringing, um, a crowd of 1,000 people had gathered outside. They said "they've captured Charles!" And Peter Baltimore's barbershop was just around the corner from where this, where this judge and where they had Peter holed up upstairs on the third floor of this building. And Peter couldn't get through the crowd. And so he goes out through the alley in the back of the barbershop, and who does he run into but Martin Townsend. And he says, Martin, he says, I have \$200 in my hand, Martin says, I have \$200 in my hand. We should be able to raise, because, you know, it was \$650, I think, raise the other money with the, with the people who are gathered here in the corner, and we can free Charles. So the two of them make their way up to

the third floor, where poor, poor Charles now is, is desperate. At one point, he tries to jump out the window. And again, remember, he's shackled, and they drag him in. So at this point, now they've broken his wrist in that point, dragging him back into the building. And, um, who is also in town visiting a cousin, and probably helping people, is Harriet Tubman and she works her way up into, um, up to the third floor as well. And so, you know, there's a couple of kind of different accounts, a little bit, depending which paper you're reading, is that when they came downstairs, um, you know, they, they tried to get a writ of habeas corpus, Martin Townsend, and that didn't happen.

And so, you know, they're, they're holding Peter up, or holding Charles up, I'm sorry, as an example. You know, you're not going to get the way, and they raised the bounty to, I think, like \$1,000 or some crazy amount of money like that. So they're bringing him downstairs, they're going to be sending him back, um, with these bounty hunters. And they, there's one point, they said, Harriet took her petticoat, you know, threw it over one of the guards' heads, and they were able, however it happened, they were able to release Charles. And this huge swarm of people, he started, started running down First Street, uh, with the area past where now is Russell Sage College. They get to the foot of Washington Street. Again, you're right near Pliny Morris Grain Elevator. There's a ferry boat there. He's put on a ferry. Um, and by now, people on the other side of the river, what is, what is Watervliet now, is of course, Troy at that time. And, uh, he's captured briefly again on the west side of the river and they were able to, the other crowd is able to release him. They get him on, you know, coaches and things out to the Niskayuna area here, where then it, you know, through safe houses and then he's probably put on a canal boat. And, you know, until a few years ago, we weren't ever really sure, did he actually ever get to Canada? And in fact, um, according to Frederick Douglass's paper, um, he did make it to St. Catharines and there was a safe house that, um, Harry Tubman owned just over the border in St. Catharines. And he did stay there for a while until he came back. And then the citizens of Troy raised the rest of the money and he stayed here in Troy until after the Civil War. Uh, and then he went back down to, um, down to Virginia and never spoke a word about it again.

I: And, you know, you, you mentioned the, the amount of characters in this story, the amount of people coming out to help Charles, the amount of people who are not named, but are still helping him out in these crowds. What was this community? Was it a vibrant community in Troy? Was it close-knit?

It was a vibrant community. I, I, you know, I, I really, I think that, I mean, Troy is a, Troy is an interesting city because while it's kind of spread up, it spread out north to south, it's, it, the narrow focus, especially in the kind of downtown area, if you want to call it that today, is pretty narrow. I mean, you know, you're only about five blocks before you start hitting the hills of Troy. So, you know, it's pretty compact and, and a lot of the areas, uh, where a lot of the, um, uh, Black families lived, tended to be around the churches, the Amesian church and the, and the Liberty

street church. Um, so over on fifth Avenue and seventh Avenue state street, and then on, I guess on the, on Liberty street. But there were also other churches and the, and the other, um, people that were involved in helping, um, the, um, freedom seekers as they were coming through and helping in this, in this abolitionist movement where people like Father Havermans, Father Peter Havermans was a, was a, was a, was a, was a white, um, priest. He came from Belgium, naturally, and he came here in Troy in like the 1820s. Um, and he basically built, um, all the Catholic churches in Detroit. So each of these immigrant groups had, there was an Irish church, there was a French church, there was a German church. Um, and so he was integral to all those. Um, but he was also very heavily involved in, in, in the Abolitionist Movement. He knew Peter, uh, Baltimore very well and like, you know, he, he knew, um, he knew his father, he knew Samuel before he had died. Uh, so, and he knew Martin Townsend, so, you know, and Peter himself is trying to build these communities So he knew who to go to for, for money and for, you know, buildings and, and, and to get people involved. As a matter of fact, during the Draft Riots in 1863, he literally put himself in front of the door of the Liberty Street Presbyterian Church and said, you're going to have to go through me. If you're going to burn this church down, you're going to kill me first. That was, he was, he was, he was that, he was that kind of a guy.

I: The draft riots are more commonly known for what occurred in New York City. But Troy had the second largest draft riot in the nation. And why do you think that's kind of gone under the radar historically for many people?

Yeah, it has, um, it has gone under the radar and it's, it's really kind of fascinating when you, when you think about it. I mean, you have, um, again, you have this diverse, uh, you have all these different immigrant groups. And, and, uh, I was trying to explain this to a fourth grader one day to, like, we were, we were, we were talking about this. And I said, I said, okay, you're putting yourself into their, what their situation was. You, we have a huge wave of potato famine Irish that came in after 1848. And, um, they had largely settled into South Troy, uh, working the ironworks and things. They, they, they came off the boat in New York, came up a boat and came in Troy.

Never been any place else. They weren't invested in the Civil War. Really? Um, it all escalated, of course, after, uh, Lincoln enacted the draft. You could buy your way out of the draft with \$300 as many wealthy men did. Um, but you know, that's like more than a year's salary for, you know, most, most workers there. So, so what they're seeing over this course of three years, and I think this is what I think is so fascinating about, all of the story and just kind of jump back a little bit is you have these people who were all helping to free Charles. And there were, there was, you know, there was Irish, there were Germans, there were, you know, um, you know, the, the Black community. There was all these, all this mix of people standing out there trying to free Charles. And then three short years later, probably 50% of those same people were wanting to, you know, destroy anything they had to do with the African-American community that was in Troy.

And anybody that was supporting, um, you know, supporting this, this draft. And so they came up on Moss and it was, it was predominantly Irish workers. Uh, they came up from South Troy and, um, they started destroying, uh, many of the buildings. They destroyed the Troy, they tried, they, the Troy Daily Times, which was an abolitionist friendly newspaper. They took the presses and threw them into the Hudson River. Martin Townsend, that white abolitionist lawyer told, they looted his house and destroyed, tried to destroy it. They almost burned it down, but they didn't, um, but they looted his house. They went to the Liberty Street Presbyterian, the name of, the name of the official church is Liberty Street Presbyterian Church for Colored People.

That was the name of the church. They were going to burn it. And that's where Father Havermans literally stood in front of it and said, you're not going to do this.

And now they've called out the national, or well, they've called out the militia from the Watervliet Arsenal, which was just across the river. You have to, you have to disperse because you don't have to worry about dying on the battlefields. You're going to get shot now. And so he was able to disperse this. In the midst of all this, because this went on for a couple of, this went on for two or three days, riots of the city. The Black community escaped. Peter Baltimore and his family, um, with their son Garnett Douglass Baltimore, um, they ended up over hiding out in Waterford.

Um, many other went out to the country. They were trying to just escape, but they have, there was this one man, his name was Charles Gidney. And Charles Gidney, um, was here in Troy. Um, he was over, over near 5th, 5th, um, it's called North 2nd Street. Now it's called 5th Avenue. And, um, we have a letter in our collection that he describes what's going on, um, to the, to Mayor Van Alstyne. And, uh, it wasn't a letter saying, oh my God, if somebody destroys my house, you're going to pay for it. Which was a lot of the other letters that we have in the collection. This was, "I'm a Black man who can't go out and get their daily bread, I have Irish clubs, kids, little Irish kids with clubs in their hands saying, you know, to, to, to kill us." I don't know, say that. But, um, uh," I can't go out and my wife can't go out. I need you to forthwith, please stop these, these, these riots. So that we colored people can live in peace in Troy."

Um, and it's just, it's such an amazing letter. Um, and as it turns out, he also was this incredible mathematician who was working at the Troy University, which we didn't know that until about 10 years ago. We didn't even have the letter until about 15 years ago when we uncovered it.

When you tell a lot of these stories, there's actually a high degree of movement that I think would surprise many people.

I: Um, many people think that people, you know, the 19th century didn't move around, especially, uh, free, the free Black community may not have been moving around for a whole host of reasons. But that doesn't seem to be very true in these stories. Why? Do you think that's a misconception historically?

I don't, yeah, I think it's just a misconception historically.

We think people didn't move, but, um, and certainly in Troy, again, location, location, location, you know, you have. You have the ability to move around because of the river. Um, you also have within houses, people move like every year, you know, sometimes they would have a house here. They would go over here. They would have, we have a lot of, um, you can call them flats, um, where we have, um, you know, three story family houses. You have, um, and, um, a lot of, um, a lot of the Black community that was in Troy, if they were working as coachmen and things like that, sometimes even had apartments over the carriage house, um, that, that would, that would be, that would be their space. Um, but other, other people had, you know, different, different flats. So they did move around. It was like every year, there was this May day, moving day, everybody moved. And, uh, and sometimes it was always probably for a better situation. You know, maybe if you've, as you've settled in and made a little bit more money, you can get a little bit more, more space. You get a little bit better housing. You can get, you know, you don't need to have a place on the alley side, up over a carriage house. Now you've moved, moved up and, and, uh, you know, things like that. So people did move around a lot. Yeah.

I: And on the topic of geography. You know, when we think of these stories of abolition or of enslavement, we sometimes think of these kind of grandiose national pictures, or maybe we settle on, you know, this kind of geographic divide between North and South. What makes Upstate New York specifically and studying our local area important in understanding this larger national question and history?

Well, certainly I think the Erie Canal is, is the, it's, it's the catalyst, um, because you did have access to, to, to the point where you could get to Canada because so many people wanted to, to, to get there until they realized, like coming to Troy, they went, wait, we feel safe here. Um, there's, there's a good, there's a good community that's going to help who's got our back. Uh, and I think that was for the most part, pretty true. Uh, and so that, I think we're just one example. And then there's other, I mean, Utica, Syracuse, you know, certainly Albany here. Uh, and, and they worked together. I mean, a lot of people, a lot of abolitionists that were in Albany were also, you know, back and forth with Troy and, and, you know, the, the Vigilance Committees and, and, um, you know, speakers that were coming in and people that were supporting that. And we're, we're supporting over here as well on the, on the west side of the river as, as much as on the east side. So I think it's, it's, and, and there are newspapers and, and, um, communication was better than what you would think it would be. So I know we think of everything so instantaneous, but the fact that, you know, you had, Troy had something like, at his height, something like 15 newspapers in the, in the mid 19th century. I'm sure Albany even had more, um, you know, and there was, you, you had the, the Clarion, um, Henry Highland Garnett's paper. You had the, um, oh gosh, I can't think what the other papers were. Um, the, the, the other Black newspapers that were, were out at the same time. So, um, it, there's, there's a lot of information out there and it's out there. And that was the other thing is I think when people

coming in and saying, wow, you're like talking, they're reporting about, you know, William Rich and, and, and, and the vigilance, there's a lot of Vigilance Committees that are in the Troy Daily Times. They're in the regular newspaper that everybody could read and you could see how many people were here and you could see that Frederick Douglass was coming to Troy.

And this was a big deal. Um, people came from all over to hear him and, uh, ads in the paper from like a young woman by the name of Peggy Williams who had a boarding house a block away from the Liberty Street Presbyterian Church advertising in the papers, you're coming up to Troy. You're going to go up to Saratoga. Um, you know, stay here at my, stay here at my boarding house. It's not, it's very above ground and very, um, productive.

I: And do you think part of that productivity was kind of the, the fact that the black community in Troy was flourishing?

Yes, absolutely. And, and what way were they flourishing relative to other similar communities throughout the country? Well, you had, we had, there was, there's Black doctors, there's, there, uh, Black businesses. You have, um, you know, Peter, they weren't the only, um, barbershop around. There was, there were several, they had, um, bakeries. They had, they, they're, you know, think of all the things in general you need. There were stores or businesses.

There was, um, a towboat company that actually came out of Albany, but there were Troy connections with that. Um, the tug, tugboat companies, uh, Schuyler,, um, that was, that was a Black man Uh, so there was, you know, there, there regular, you know, businesses and things are going on. So like everybody else. Yeah.

I: And as a final topic of conversation, what are some of the, you know, in all your years of working with history, what are some of the myths that you found? Um, whether in regards to local history, African American history, the Underground Railroad abolition, whatever it may be, what are the kind of myths that you've had to encounter and research into?

Um, that everybody had tunnels. Anybody that was anywhere near a body of water, including waterfalls, said that their house was on the Underground Railroad, even though the houses were built after the Civil War was finished, just some of them. Uh, so, you know, it's just like, if you, if you had a tunnel that it was going to be perpetually underwater, that's always, that's always, that's always one of them. Um, there, I've had a few people say, well, how come there's no, how come there's no more paper evidence about, um, where all the safe houses work?

And I was like, well, that was part, that was part of the, you know, especially after the, once, if you were caught aiding and abetting, once the Fugitive Slave Act were passed really, then you really did have to be kind of underground. So you didn't have a lot of, um, they didn't survive those, those letters that were written by the women in the Troy Female African Benevolent Society to send out. Uh, but there are a couple that do exist. We know there was a path going out

through Hoosick Street up in the Marbletown area and then over to Vermont. That was one other, um, avenue out. And there actually is a couple of letters, um, that are, that are along there coming back into, back into Troy.

I: So some of those things just don't physically, um, survive. Yeah. And despite the fact they don't physically survive, there's, there's sometimes circumstantial evidence of their existence, right? Like there's not a lot of, um, uh, direct evidence of women working in museum, but they did, correct?

Yeah, but we actually, now we, we, we have evidence of that. Like the Troy Female African Benevolent Society, we know their names because they had to be signature, signatories on the, um, on the account book that Detroit Savings Bank had. So we know about Phoebe Van Rensselaer, we know about Peggy Williams, we know about, um, you know, um, uh, Mary Lane Baltimore, uh, there, because they are the, they, they had their signatures in the bank underneath the, the heading of the Troy Female African Benevolent Society. So that's very exciting. That's, I mean, this kind of new research in the last 10 years, as these archives are uncovering other reasons why we collect it. And then you find out that you have this wonderful involvement.

I: And you think, do you think it's important to mention the involvement of women, but also to have this record?

Oh, absolutely. Well, you know, the women always do all the work. Just kidding. But they do do a lot of that work and they did do a lot of that work. So it's great. It's great for them to be able to get their just due and to be, you know, to, to understand how, how important they were. And they raised, there's, I think they have something over \$30,000. That's a lot of money in 1830, uh, to have raised, to be able to, and that is the nuts and bolts of helping Freedom Seekers. You know, think about it. You're coming up from, you know, Georgia, Mississippi, you know, South Carolina, and the temperature up here is very different than what you have down there. They were not, they needed clothing. You need boots. You need, you know, warm things and food and, and, uh, you know, and shelter. So those basic needs were met by these women.

I: Thank you so much.

You're very welcome.

I: I think of this, I think of the fact that all of this, this movement was enabled, not by, you know, a few notable people, but by everyday people. Right, Who are working together. And, uh, I thank you so much because your interview has really shown some light on that.

Oh, thank you. Thank you for asking me. I appreciate it.