



The Freedom Seeker

Volume XXI, No.2

Autumn 2024

Exploring the History of the Black Hudson River Schuylers (Pt.1)

Researched and written by Tashae Smith and Mark Peckham

Originally published in Pilot Log 2018 - Reprinted courtesy of Hudson River Maritime Museum

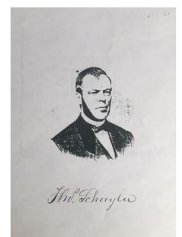
A remarkable family of African American river men participated in the transition from working sail to steam during America's Industrial Revolution. Sometimes referred to as the Black Schuylers, the family began with one or more sloops early in the nineteenth century and seized the opportunity to acquire steamboats early in the 1840s. The Schuyler Steam Tow Boat Line figured prominently in the operation of steam tows on the Hudson River and by 1888 reportedly employed eighteen boats in Albany in the towing of canal boats on the river. The family acquired real estate in Albany's south end between Pearl Street and the river, traded grain and coal, issued stock, and invested in railroading. Their wealth placed them in Albany's elite business and charitable circles and their esteemed status led to their burial in Albany's prestigious Albany Rural Cemetery alongside Albany's other business and political leaders. That so little is known of this family and its accomplishments may be more a reflection of their race than of their accomplishments. The family's identity as Black, while not a barrier to their early success in business, may have played a discriminatory role in their lack of prominence in the historical record. Ironically, the lighter skin of later generations may also have played a role in their lack of visibility in more recent Black History scholarship. While incomplete, it is hoped that this account may spur further research into the life and contributions of this Hudson River family.

Until the second half of the nineteenth century, Albany's commerce and financial opportunities were almost entirely dependent upon the city's position at the head of ship navigation on the Hudson River. The river served as New York's "Main Street" well into the nineteenth century and Albany was strategically situated near the confluence of the upper Hudson River and the Mohawk River. Although Albany received larger ships, much of the freight

and passengers coming in or out of Albany before the 1807 advent of steamboats was carried by single and double-masted sloops and schooners of 100 tons capacity or less. These sailing vessels continued to carry freight into the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, even as steamboats soon attracted much of the passenger business. Captain Samuel Schuyler, the progenitor of the Black Schuylers, began and sustained his career with these boats and raised his sons Thomas and Samuel on them.

Albany grew rapidly in the 1820s and 1830s as a direct result of the surge in freight handling brought about by the much heralded completion of the Champlain and Erie canals in 1823 and 1825 respectively. Both canals terminated in Albany. Freight moving east and south from Canada, Vermont, the Great Lakes region and the interior of New York was shipped on narrow, animal-towed canalboats with limited capacity. In 1831, 15,000 such boats were unloaded at Albany. These cargoes needed to be stockpiled and transferred to larger sloops and schooners for trips to New York City and other Hudson River towns. Over time, steamboats became more efficient and reliable, especially after the Livingston-Fulton monopoly on steamboats in New York was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1824.

One innovation with implications for canal freight was steam towing which presented an economical alternative to "breaking-bulk," the laborious process of unloading and transferring cargoes at canal terminals. Steam-powered sidewheel towboats appear to have been introduced on the Hudson River in the 1840s and could tow long strings of loaded canalboats directly to their destinations without unloading. Captain Schuyler's sons capitalized on this concept and transitioned from carrying freight on sloops to towing rafts of canalboats and other craft behind powerful steamboats. They were at the right place at the right time and had the experience and extensive business connections to make the most of this innovation.



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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

Freedom Seekers and Their Allies



James W.C. (JWC) Pennington (1808-1870) was born into slavery in Maryland; and although he was trained as a carpenter and blacksmith, he was not taught to read or write. At the age of nineteen he escaped from slavery in an eight-day ordeal during which he was twice captured and twice escaped. He finally found his way to the home of a Quaker just across the Pennsylvania border who took him in and began his education. Moving on to another Quaker home nearer to Philadelphia and then to Brooklyn, he found work as a carriage man for a wealthy merchant in a city where educational opportunities were available. Taking advantage of night schools and using his wages to pay for tutors, Pennington progressed so rapidly that in just five years he was hired to teach in a school for black children in Newtown, Long Island.

To read more about JWC Pennington, scan this QR Code with your cellphone camera or search for National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum on the web.



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THANK YOU!

THANK YOU!

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"The time is always right to do what is right." - Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Around the Residence



ARIAS IN THE AFTERNOON - a celebration on 9/29 of UREC's 20th anniversary and a fundraiser for the Interpretive Center. Join us for this unparalleled musical event! Tickets, auction, and details are available at undergroundrailroadhistory.org/ or by scanning this QR code.



FREEDOMCON 2024 continues on the 4th Saturday of each month via zoom. Harambee will be featured in the September presentation and the Reparations Debate will be featured in the October presentation. Details are accessible through the UREC website homepage (www.undergroundrailroadhistory.org)

INTERN JONATHAN NEAL has finished his research into the 1840 and 1851 Colored Men's Conventions held in Albany. **INTERN TAZMIRA SULTANA** is researching the similarities between 1850's conflicts on the India subcontinent with Great Britain and the conflicts at the same time occurring in the United States. Publication of their research is coming soon.

TOUR EXPERIENCES at The Myers Residence continue to attract local residents and visitors from around New York State, the nation, and from international locations. Sharing the voices and experiences of Black abolitionists and freedom seekers is changing the UGRR paradigm. Pay a visit when in town! "Having stood in the same house that was used by good people in pursuit of a noble cause touches my heart and soul." (TF)



UREC'S EXTENSIVE GARDENS honoring our abolitionists are being moved out of the construction zone to safe havens in the backyard of The Myers Residence, to the homes of our Master Gardeners, and being given to neighbors. A challenging project to be sure. Interested in helping? Call Paul at 518-621-7793.

An INSTITUTE FOR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY SERVICES GRANT was received by UREC in support of the development of the Museum Studies Teen Program, a new initiative being designed by Lacey Wilson who joined UREC in February. Consultants include local museum and historic site personnel and the Rochester Institute of Technology Undergraduate Museum Studies Program Director.

News and Notes



Stevie Wants You to Know



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 to 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.



TIMBER SPONSORSHIPS for the Interpretive Center start at \$250. Can your family, your church, your reading group become a sponsor? Information can be accessed via the UREC website homepage or by calling Mary Liz Stewart at 518-621-7793.



"History has shown us that courage can be contagious, and hope can take on a life of its own."

Michelle Obama, first Black First Lady of the United States (b.1964)

HARRIET TUBMAN UNDERGROUND RAILROAD CORRIDOR is an initiative of Underground Railroad Consortium of NYS to honor the justice work of our communal ancestors in the Underground Railroad movement and to highlight those vetted spaces, places and sites where their work is preserved and celebrated. Visit <https://www.urnys.org/corridor> for more information.



STRIKE FOR FREEDOM is an incredible resource about Black antislavery activists who took their cause to Scotland, the UK, and Ireland. Information, interactive maps, and more populate the website pages you can access via this link <https://digital.nls.uk/learning/struggles-for-liberty/> or via this QR code.



NYS WAS A HOTBED OF UNDERGROUND RAILROAD ACTIVITY - to learn more about New York States UGRR history in your backyard, visit Underground Railroad Consortium of NYS at <https://www.urnys.org/> Many places and spaces around NYS have been and are being preserved to honor the courage and fortitude of the enslaved and free freedom fighters of the past, encouraging us to continue the fight today.

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD EDUCATION CENTER

194 Livingston Avenue
Albany, New York 12210
518-621-7793
www.UndergroundRailroadHistory.org

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Exploring the History of the Black Hudson River Schuylers *(cont'd from p.1)*

Captain Samuel Schuyler (1781-1841 or 1842) was one of Albany's first African American businessmen. His origins in Albany are obscure but his surname suggests that he was enslaved by the Dutch-American Schuylers who were among Albany's wealthiest and politically most prominent families. Philip Schuyler (1733-1804), known for his role in the American Revolution and early advocacy for canals, held slaves in Albany and at his other properties. Slavery was practiced extensively in Albany County until gradually abandoned in the early nineteenth century.

Albany County manumission records report that a slave named Sam purchased his freedom in 1804 for \$200 from Derek Schuyler. It is possible, but by no means certain, that Sam is the same man later referred to as Captain Samuel Schuyler. The fact that Samuel married in 1805 so soon after this date lends further credence to this possibility.

Samuel Schuyler is described as a "Blackman" in the Albany tax roll of 1809 and a "skipper" and free person of color in the Albany directory of 1813. He was involved in the Hudson River sloop trade and owned property in the area of the waterfront which appears to have included docks and warehouses at the river and a home on South Pearl Street. He married "a mulatto woman" named Mary Martin or Morton (1780-1847 or 1848) and had eight or more children with her including Richard (1806-1835), Thomas (1811-1866) and Samuel (1813-1894). Richard was baptized in Albany's Dutch church on North Pearl Street. Captain Schuyler came to own a flour and feed store as well as a coal yard at or near the waterfront. His sons joined the business which was known as Samuel Schuyler & Company in the 1830s. *(To be cont'd in Vol.21 #3 issue of The Freedom Seeker)*

Thomas Schuyler portrait - Portrait of Thomas Schuyler featured in "Memorial Address on the Life and Character of Capt. Thomas Schuyler delivered on the occasion of his funeral in the Ash Grove M.E. Church at Albany, Sept. 29, 1866, by Rev. W. Penn Abbott"

SOURCES: Stefan Bielinski, The Colonial Albany Social History Project; The People of Colonial Albany, website hosted by the New York State Museum, exhibitions.nysm.nysed.gov

- Howell & Tenney, History of the County of Albany, W.W. Munsell & Co., New York 1886.

- Abbott, Reverend W. Penn, Life and Character of Capt. Thomas Schuyler, Charles Van Benthuyzen & Sons, Albany, 1867.

- Albany County Hall of Records, Manumission Register