

The Utica Freedom Trail Walking Tour:  
A Proposed Tour of Abolitionist and Underground Railroad Sites



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The 1830s was the beginning of a particularly important period of the Underground Railroad in Oneida County, New York. A dedicated abolitionist (Beriah Green) arrived to lead the nation's first fully integrated college (The Oneida Institute of Science and Industry in 1833); the County's first anti-slavery societies began (1832); the New York State Antislavery Society was formed and then attacked by a mob, (1835); two freedom seekers were violently rescued from slave-catchers (1836); the County's first Abolitionist newspaper began publishing (The Friend of Man, 1833), thousands of names were signed onto anti-slavery petitions to the US Congress from all over the County, and the annual meetings of the New York State Anti-Slavery Society were held here (1837-1840). During the 1830s the County's first Underground Railroad "stations" began to rescue escaping slaves. This Walking Tour will acquaint residents and visitors alike with many of the sites associated with these historic events.

The Abolition Movement demanded the immediate emancipation of all slavery in America. Many whites thought it was extremist and even traitorous; many others were indifferent. But by the 1830s the Abolition Movement had exploded from one end of the state to the other, and Oneida County was in the middle of it all. The Underground Railroad emerged from the Abolition Movement. "Stationmasters" would shelter escaping slaves and provide safe passage to other "stations." However, slave-catchers searched the region for runaways, and many whites would gladly collect a reward for betraying a runaway. Federal law strictly prohibited anybody from assisting fugitives, so the Underground Railroad usually operated in secrecy.

## **Oneida County**

The Revolutionary War left the Mohawk Valley virtually depopulated of Europeans, but after the War, with the power of the Iroquois eliminated, millions of acres of land became available to thousands of land-hungry New Englanders.

By 1830 about 72,000 people lived in Oneida County, more than double the 1810 population of 34,000 and continuing the population surge that had characterized the County since the end of the Revolution. Attracted by plentiful land, and accessible by the Mohawk River, the Erie Canal, and a modern road system, Oneida offered many attractions to settlers from New England. Large tracts of land were awarded to veterans of the Revolutionary War. General Floyd and Baron Von Steuben eventually settled on their Oneida County estates. Scattered across the county's 18 towns were dozens of villages and 2 emerging cities, Utica and Rome.

In 1830, about half of the County's 462 blacks lived in Utica and Rome. These were free people of color, since slavery had been abolished by now in New York State. Black Oneidans would play significant roles in the Underground Railroad.

In 1830 subsistence farming dominated the County's economy, but the Erie Canal made agriculture increasingly commercial: wheat and sheep at first, and later dairy products, hops, beans, and potatoes. Scattered across the County's many rivers and streams were dozens, perhaps hundreds, of water-powered industries such as gristmills, textile factories, tanneries, sawmills, and bleacheries. In another decade or so, steam-powered factories would dominate the regional economy, but in 1830 there were no steam engines anywhere around.

Oneida County's rapid growth and economic development brought new ideas and philosophies. In the 1820s the Mohawk Valley earned the title of The Burnt Over District because of the feverish Christian revivalism that swept the region. Beginning in 1830, powerful anti-slavery sentiments emerged as well. The region became a stronghold of the Abolition Movement. There were 17 town societies by 1835, including Hamilton College, Oneida Castle, Sherburne, Vienna, Sherburne Ladies, Utica Juvenile Male and Juvenile Female. There were 5 anti-slavery societies in Utica. Many were ready to join the Underground Railroad.

## Utica

By 1830 Utica was the undisputed population and economic center of the county. It had about 9,000 people; 1 out of every 8 people in the County lived here. By the time it received its city charter in 1832, it was alive with commercial activity: more than 100 specialty shops, including banks, taverns, blacksmiths, inns, stable, provisions (especially for westward-bound travelers on the Erie Canal), insurance companies, and law offices. Most white workers were craftsmen (46%) and merchants (17%). About 85% of black Uticans were unskilled laborers, such as hotel porters and day laborers. Most blacks lived on post Street.

New York's Genesee Road began its trek west from its starting point where the highway met Main Street in Utica. With John Street, Genesee and Main Streets formed Bagg's Square, named for the



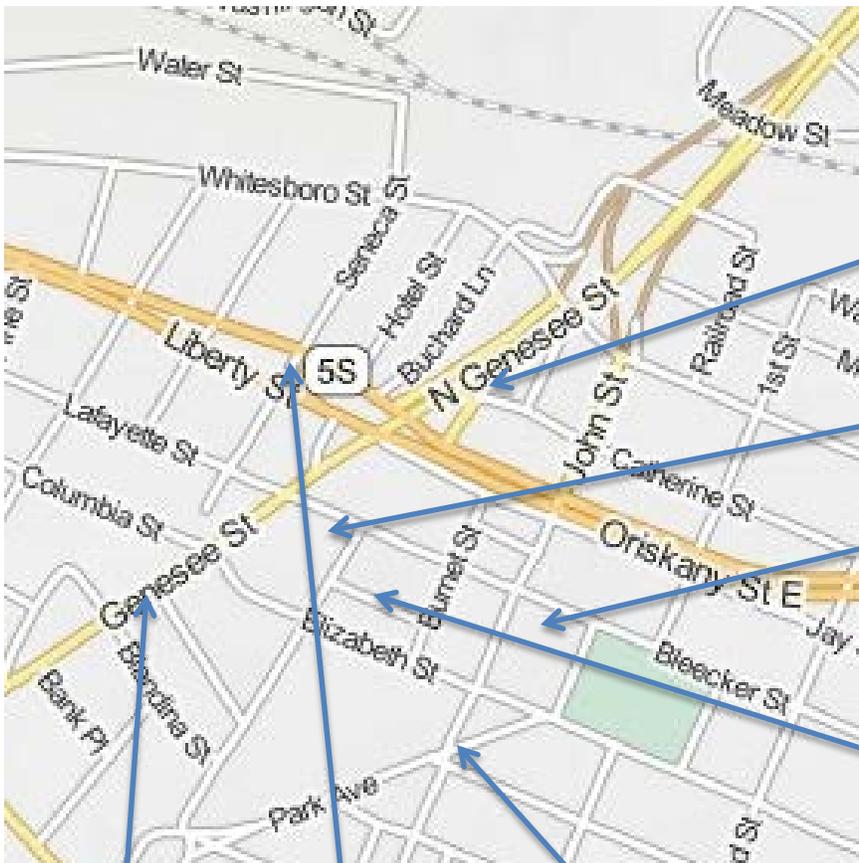
enterprising Moses Bagg. Bagg had built a stable and a hotel here, as well as the new brick professional office buildings (built in 1833 and now on the National Historic Register) that lined Genesee Street, where judges, lawyers, and merchants ran their businesses. The Erie Canal ran just a few blocks south of Bagg's Square, and as a result a steady stream of travelers stimulated such trades as wagon building, wheel repair, and general provisioning. Bagg's Square is now a National Historic District. This is where we begin our walking tour of the Underground Railroad in Utica.

The events of the Utica Rescue at Judge Hayden's Office took place in Utica's nationally recognized Gateway Historic District, Bagg's Square West. These buildings are the oldest contiguous structures in Utica. Recently several new businesses have taken root near the Hayden Building: The Utica Coffee Roasting Company, Master Pizza, and The Tailor and Cook Restaurant.

# 1. 96-98 Genesee Street: The Utica Rescue at Judge Hayden's Office



On December 29, 1836, Oneida County constables brought two Virginia fugitive slaves, Harry Bird and George, before Oneida County Superior Court Judge Chester Hayden, at his private law office located in this building. Hayden was about to turn the fugitives over to two slave-catchers when Spencer Kellogg, whose dry goods store was a few doors down the street, intervened. Kellogg demanded a trial for the two men. Nearby Abolitionist lawyer Alvan Stewart soon joined them and offered to defend the men. Hayden put the fugitives and slave-catchers in a back room until he could return from his duties at the County Courthouse. While he was away, a crowd of black residents broke into the office building, overpowered the slave-catchers, and rescued the fugitives.



- 1. Hayden Building
- 2. Kellogg's Store
- 3. Stewart's Law Office

- 9. 2<sup>nd</sup> Presbyterian Church

- 5. 1836 Site of Oneida County Courthouse

- 4. Post Street

- 7. Blaikie's Drugstore

- 6. Mechanics Hall

- 8. James DeLong's Home



This is The Hayden Building: 96-98 Genesee Street, the building where the Utica Rescue at Judge Hayden's Office took place. The National Park Service now officially recognizes this site as a national Underground Railroad site. This allows us to display the NPS logo



## 2. 110 Genesee Street: Spencer Kellogg's Dry Goods Store



This was the site of Spencer Kellogg's dry goods store, just few doors south from the Hayden Building. The site of his store is now occupied by the Genesee Tower Apartments.

This overall structure of 6 contiguous brick buildings is now on the National Registry of Historic Buildings. It is the oldest row of contiguous buildings in the city of Utica.



A charter member of the New York State Antis-Slavery Society, Spencer Kellogg was a dedicated Abolitionist. When Judge Hayden was ready to turn the fugitives over to the Virginia slave-catchers, Kellogg insisted that Harry Bird and George were free men of color and deserved a legal hearing.



Spencer Kellogg was a merchant and prominent citizen. He served on the Utica school board, and in 1840 was elected the city's mayor. He was Treasurer of the New York State Anti-Slavery Society when it was first organized (and disrupted), and for several years thereafter. He was also President of its Executive Committee. Some of the members of the Utica Mob even threatened to torch his home. Kellogg observed Harry Bird and George from outside his store at 110 Genesee, a few doors away from Hayden's office. The Genesee Towers Apartments now occupies the site.

### 3. 120 Genesee Street: Alvan Stewart's Law Office.





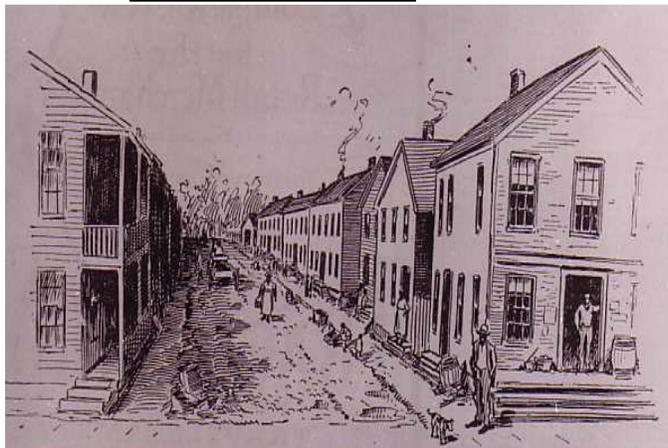
Alvan Stewart's law office was located in the building that is now Great Rentals. Stewart played a central role in the Utica Rescue at Judge Hayden's Office. Spencer Kellogg summoned Stewart to Judge Hayden's law office to represent the 2 captured freedom seekers. Stewart argued that the two captives were in fact free men of color, and he was prepared to defend their interests. Judge Hayden decided to resolve the issue later after work at the Oneida County Courthouse. That day-long delay permitted rescuers to break into Hayden's building, and rescue the runaways.

Alvan Stewart was a well-known Abolitionist lawyer. His office was located in what is now the Great Rentals building, 30 yards south from the Hayden Building. Its corner-stone inscription, "1833," helped identify the Hayden Building. Stewart was born to farm parents in moderate circumstances in 1790 in Washington County, New York. He practiced law in Cherry Valley, New York, for 16 years, where he was elected as mayor. In September 1835 he issued a call for the formation of a state anti-slavery society, which led to the formation of the New York Anti-Slavery Society. He was also a gubernatorial candidate of the Liberty Party, which advocated for the abolition of slavery.

#### 4. Post Street



Post Street Circa 1840



Post Street Today



In 1836, most of Utica's 240 black residents lived on Post Street, just a few blocks away from the Hayden. Post Street then was home to boarding houses and taverns. Since slavery had ended in New York only 9 years earlier, its residents understood what bondage meant. Indeed, some had probably been enslaved themselves. This is where Harry Bird and George were probably living when they were arrested. Word of their arrest spread quickly; newspaper accounts say that a crowd of black men lingered all day around Hayden's building. At nightfall they stormed into the room where the

fugitives and slave-catchers waited, overwhelmed the Virginia captors, and released the freedom seekers. By freeing the fugitives, they broke federal law. None, however, were ever punished.

Post Street's African Americans were active in the Underground Railroad. For instance, in 1846 William Johnson, a black barber living on Post Street, worked with white abolitionist William Blaikie to spirit 2 fugitives out of Utica. In 1855 a local newspaper noted that a family of freedom seekers had passed through Post Street on their way to Canada. Johnson was one of many black Oneidans who were involved in the Negro Convention Movement of the 1840s.

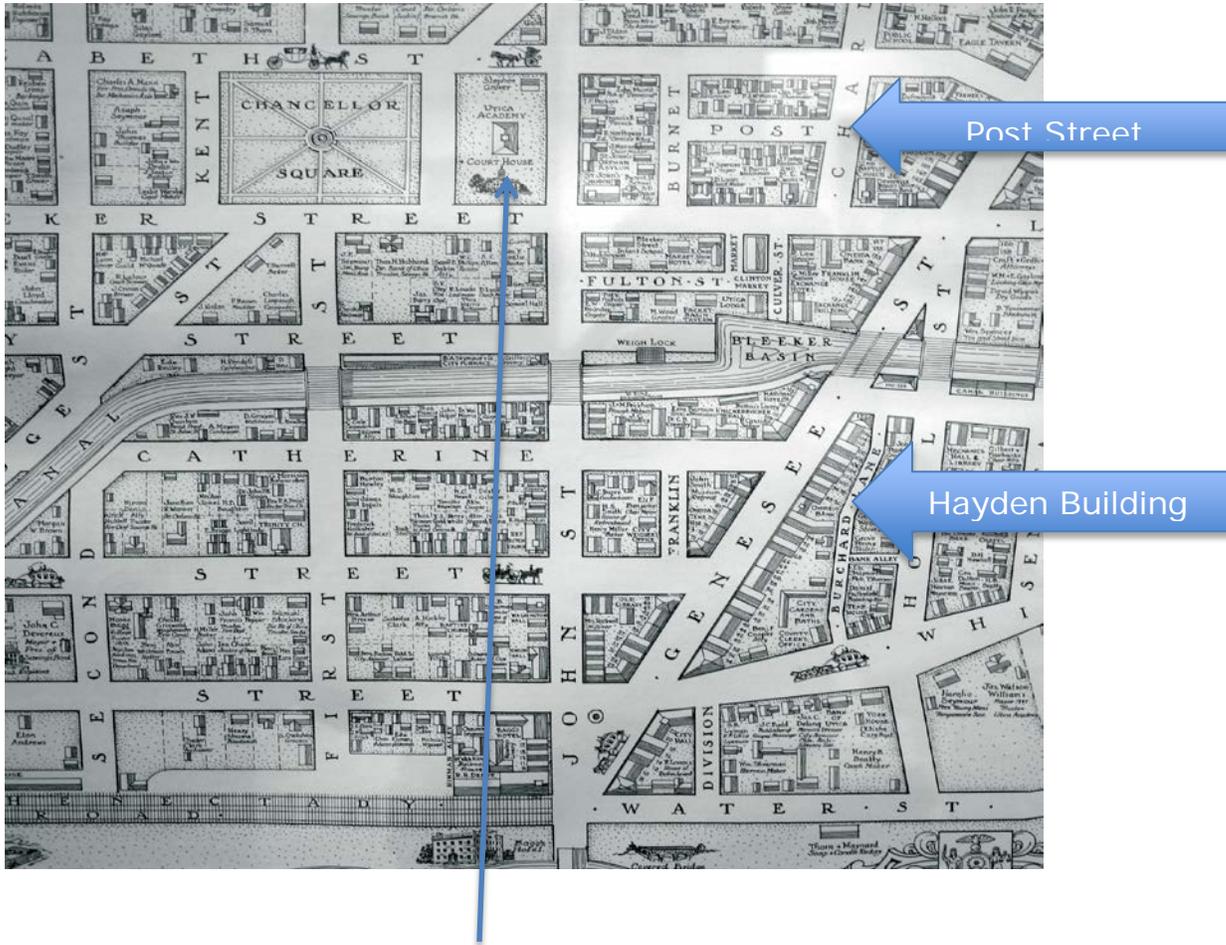
**FUGITIVE SLAVES IN UTICA.**—A fine looking negro, aged about 40 years, with his wife and several of his children, spent yesterday at the residence of a colored friend on Post-street. They arrived in this city by the "Underground" on Saturday night. The Committee of Safety visited them during the day. They were to have been sent to Canada to-day. This family were recently sold in Kentucky to go farther south, but seem to have preferred a more northern country. Nobody feels very sorry that this family are "redeemed, regenerated and disenthralled," but if the "Committee of Safety" would occasionally appropriate some of their funds for the purpose of feeding, clothing, and educating the wretched niggers, white and black, of Post-street, they would do a much needed work. Charity used to begin at home.—*Utica Telegraph.*

**The New York Times**

Published: August 30, 1855

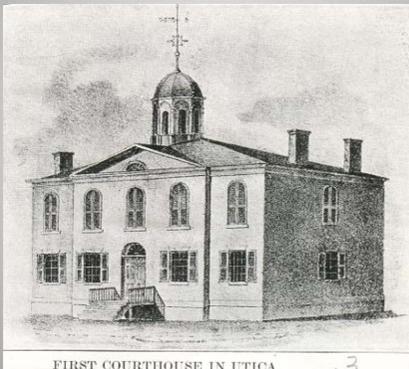
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## 5. Oneida County Courthouse



### The Oneida County Courthouse in 1836

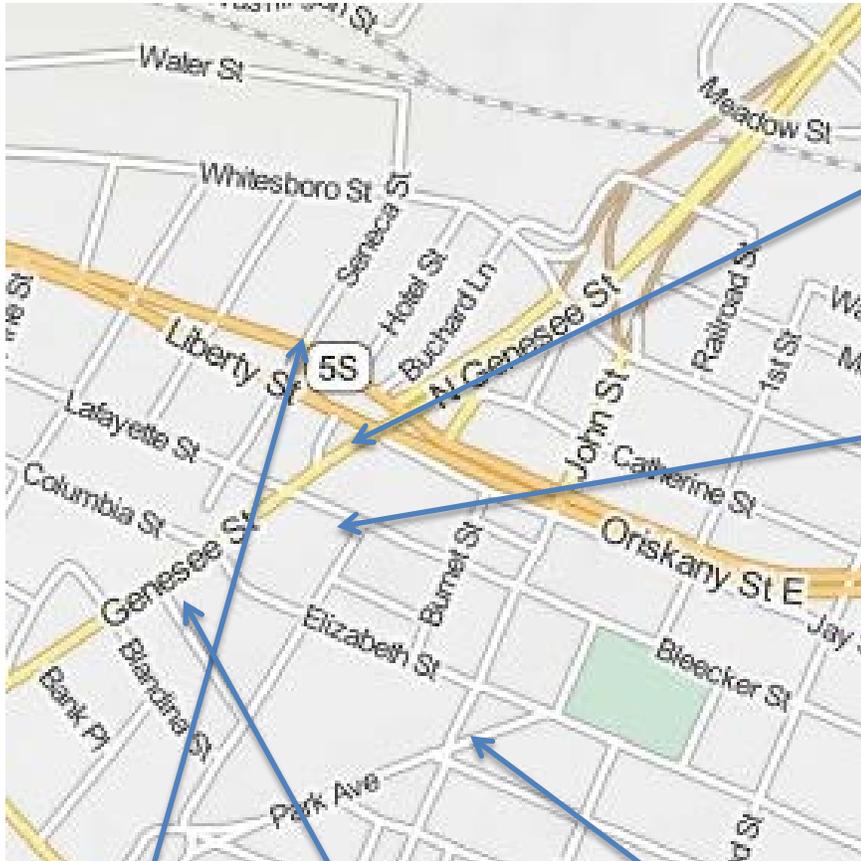
Judge Hayden spent the day here while Harry Bird and George awaited his return.



FIRST COURTHOUSE IN UTICA



Chancellor Square Park Today



10. Devereaux Block

9. 2<sup>nd</sup> Presbyterian Church

11. Gerrit Smith's Plaque

6. Mechanics Hall

7. Blaikie's Drugstore

8. James DeLong's Home

## 6. Mechanics Hall, Liberty Street



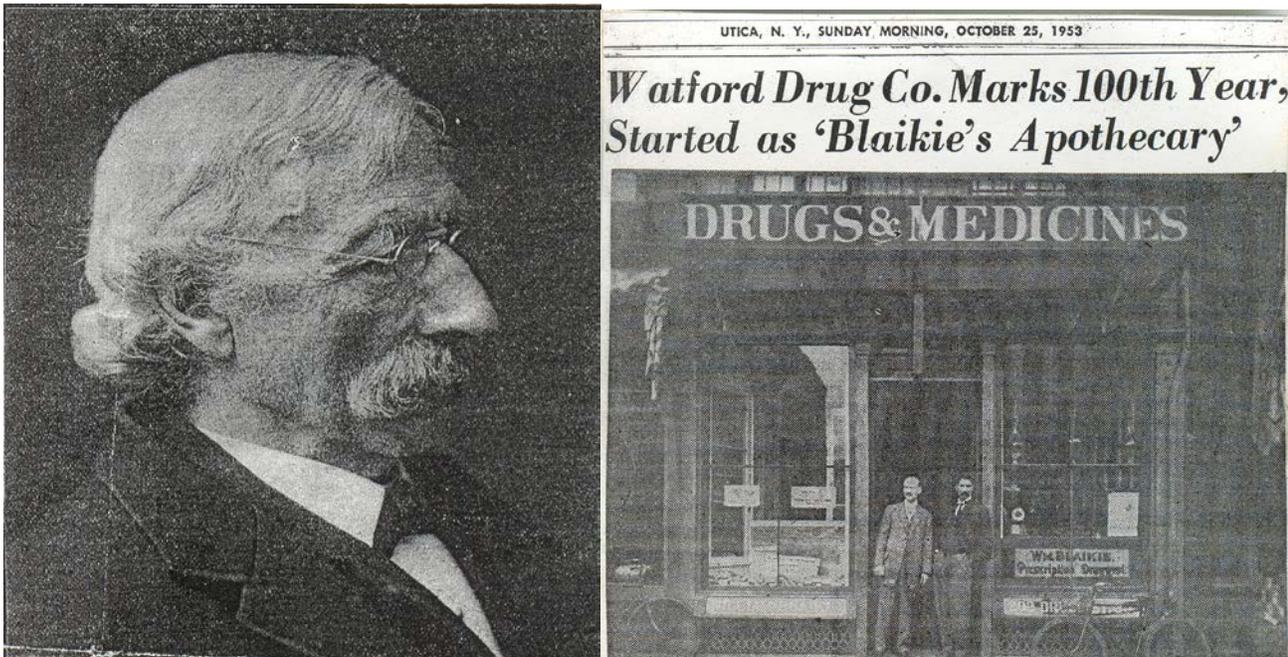
Civil War Draft at Mechanic's Hall, 1863

Mechanics Hall was built in 1837 and is one of Utica's oldest structures. Abolitionists sometimes lectured here, some of whom were former slaves. The Civil War draft for the City of Utica was held at Mechanics Hall on August 28, 1863. In December 1924, fire completely destroyed the upper part of the building with an estimated damage of upwards of \$100,000. It was thereafter repaired.

## Mechanic's Hall Today



### 7. 2203 Genesee Street, William Blaikie's Apothecary



William Blaikie owned an Apothecary, later Watford's Drug Company, on Genesee Street. Threats were made against the Blaikie family and at times they were compelled to leave their residence on this account. Blaikie frequently sheltered runaway slaves here and at his home in the outskirts of the city.

## 8. 101 John Street: Site of James B. DeLong's Home

James DeLong was a delegate to the New York State Anti-Slavery Convention (interrupted by a mob Led by Chester Hayden) in Utica in 1835. He became an active conductor in the Underground Railroad. His home on upper John Street was one of the stations and he often secreted runaway slaves in the Bleecker Street Methodist Church, of which he was a founder. His home was located on the triangle of land bordered by John, Blandina Park Avenue, where the former home of the Oneida County Historical Society once was located. DeLong owned a leather factory on Water Street.



Site of DeLong's home today

## 9. Second Presbyterian Church

On October 21, 1835, 600 delegates met in the Bleecker Street Presbyterian Church to organize the New York State Anti-Slavery Society. A large crowd of anti-abolitionist protesters disrupted the proceedings. Among the prominent protesters was Judge Chester Hayden who read their demands; he figured prominently in the Utica Rescue. The meeting adjourned without conducting its business. However, Gerrit Smith invited the delegates to re-assemble at his Peterboro estate in Madison County, estate, about 30 miles away. There the New York State Anti-Slavery Society was founded, with many Oneidans in the lead.



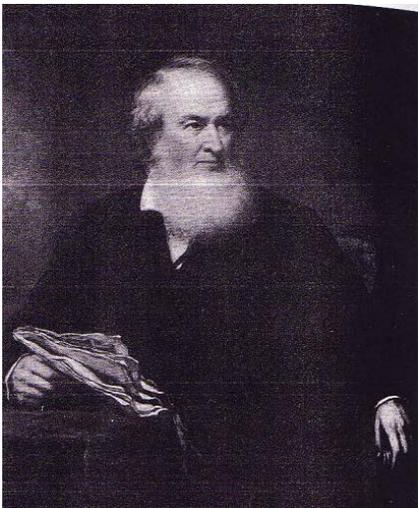
Site of 2<sup>nd</sup> Presbyterian Church today

#### **10. Devereaux Block: Wesley Bailey Publisher**

Wesley Bailey was the publisher and proprietor of the abolitionist Liberty Press. He harbored John Thomas and one other freedom seeker in 1844. Bailey directed them to Jesse Thompson, on Paris Hill, where a fugitive community prospered.

#### **11. 600 Broad Street: Gerrit Smith Birthplace**

Gerrit Smith was an important abolitionist. He was a delegate to Utica's 1835 New York State Anti-Slavery Convention. He donated enormous sums of money to the Abolitionist cause after witnessing the "outrageous" behavior of the Anti-Abolitionist rioters. The disrupted convention re-convened at Smith's Peterboro estate in Nearby Madison County. Peterboro became a well-known Underground Railroad Station as well. It is now the home of the National Abolitionist Hall of Fame.



Gerrit Smith



### About the Author

Jan DeAmicis is an historical sociologist with interests in the experience of race and ethnicity. His recent research is reflected in the Underground Railroad project in which he utilizes historical and archaeological data to analyze this important institution in the history of upstate New York.