

# Trails

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## Chautauqua County Ho

By PAT HOLCOMBE

**B**ecause of a teacher, a monthlong study of the achievements of African Americans is being held in February.

**Black History Month**, started by Carter G. Woodson in 1926 and originally called "Negro History Week," has expanded to the point where it includes lectures, presentations, classroom projects and exhibits on African American culture and contributions.

The very first non-Indian, dark-skinned man, woman or child to set foot in Chautauqua County will probably never be known. According to historians, priceless documents that would prove most of the early history of the African in America have been lost, were never written or remain deliberately concealed.

Early Chautauqua County history is equally limited. Based on available information, most of the county's early stories deal with abolitionists' illegal civil disobedience.

Other than fur-trader Joseph "Black Joe" Hodge(s), who is said to have traveled through the area in 1792, the first known black settlers, William and Rachel Harris, lived in the county in about 1814. Records show Harris had to prove he was a "free" man and, once he did, court action was noted as "dismissed."

The William Storum family, said to be "tinged with black blood," owned a 140-acre farm near Busti, which is now on Sandbury Road.

Richard Sweezer lived in the county bringing his wife, Ann, from the Prendergast family before the remaining Prendergast slaves, Nan, Susan, Marie, Johas and

of the Chautauqua County stretch of the Underground Railroad.

The railroad began to roll in earnest after the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law enacted a \$1,000 fine for aiding and abetting runaway slaves. Though human beings had not been "owned" in New York state since 1827, they'd used the "railroad" since the 1830s to escape and "follow the North Star" to sure freedom in Canada.

With federal lawmakers now forcing states to respect another state's "stolen property," slave-hunters came to New York regularly, armed with the new law.

Church congregations took a stand against the law and slavery, holding organizational meetings despite threats of violence and the arrests of their leaders.

According to the sketchy records, sites all over the county served the three main routes of the Underground Railroad.

From Busti, the imaginary rail ran through Jamestown, Falconer, Ellington and Sinclairville or Cherry Creek and Leon. The second route hit Mina, Sherman, Chautauqua, Stockton, Pomfret, Sheridan and Hanover. The main route followed the Lake Erie shore from all other points south and met the other two routes at Silver Creek. The goal was a ferry at Barcelona or Buffalo's Black Rock section, and passage to freedom on the Niagara River to Canada.

Slaves ran for their lives through every imaginable path in Pennsylvania, arriving in Chautauqua County through Erie, Corry or Warren, scared, scared and determined. People were hidden in hay mows, under floors, behind false walls and in any available covered area on a farm or in town.

Movement was restricted to the nighttime. Before dawn, the people found hiding spots like Silas Shearman's hay barn at the rear of Stiller's Alley in Jamestown or in the interior concealed room of Squire Alvin Plumb's house at the Pine Ridge in Busti.

Children of the abolitionists recalled strange

people at their kitchen tables at all hours of the night and secret trips

HERE STOOD A STATION OF  
UNDERGROUND R.R.