

Fenton Program Focuses On Underground Railroad

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By JOHN WHITTAKER

A federal commission mapping the routes of the Underground Railroad should include the town of Versailles, said Paul Leone, historian at the Fenton Historical Center, during a Black History Month presentation Saturday.

Leone told a group of about 20 people that the small town, located nine miles south of Lake Erie in Cattaraugus County, played a key role as a conduit into Canada for slaves traveling along the Underground Railroad. He said the main

source is a series of letters written by Eber Pettit, an abolitionist who moved to Versailles in 1840.

"This is a spot that deserves to be recognized on the National Underground Railroad Map," Leone said. "There is a federal effort to design a National Underground Railroad Park where people would be able to trace a route and see how things worked. However, documentation is rare and that makes Eber's book even more important."

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Paul Leone discusses the Underground Railroad during a presentation Saturday at the Fenton History Center.

P-J photo by John Whittaker

Railroad: Book Details Four Routes In Area For Slaves To Follow

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Dr. James Pettit, Eber's father, moved to Fredonia in 1839 and immediately became part of the Underground Railroad. Eber moved to Versailles at about the same time, establishing a leg from Fredonia to Versailles. Once in Versailles, slaves would be sent on Cattaraugus Creek, toward freedom in Canada.

The group at Saturday's presentation weren't the only people surprised by what they heard.

"I thought I was well acquainted with the Underground Railroad, but I certainly had never seen anything like this before," Leone said, talking about his research. "I was astounded the way the material in the remembrance is presented, though it is a problem with serious historians. Eber gives them personalities and dialogues so the book turns out to be a narrative as well as documentation."

While Eber Pettit gave the characters personalities, he also

identified the role Chautauqua County residents played in the Underground Railroad. He wrote there were four main lines for the railroad in the county. While not specifically identified, Leone said he was able to discern three of the four.

The first was a line running along the Lake Erie shoreline with another near Lake Ontario and accessed by crossing the Niagara River.

A third line extended from Virginia and Tennessee to Pennsylvania through the Sugar Grove area and then on to Jamestown, Leon, Perrysburg and Versailles. The final trail went from eastern Virginia to Philadelphia.

Excerpts from Eber Pettit's letters also give readers a glimpse into the way the railroad operated. For example, his letters show an extensive organization with a definite head in

Albany with agents placed through the Northern United States.

Not only was there an extensive organization throughout the railroad, but members used tricks to throw slave catchers off the trail. In one case, a man visiting his brother in Fredonia ran into a slave catcher who asked for information. The doctor sent the slave catcher to Dr. James Pettit, who promptly steered the slave catcher in the wrong direction.

Though he discussed only a few ways Chautauqua County residents influenced the Underground Railroad, Leone said books such as Eber Pettit's show the spirit of the Railroad.

"I've found corroboration for Eber's work in other places," Leone said. "You get a piece of information here, a piece of information there. That's the story of the Underground Railroad."