



THROUGH UPSTATE NEW YORK ON THE

# Underground Railroad

BY MARY MOORE MASON

As we sat in a darkened hotel reception room in Rochester, New York, four African-American ghosts drifted in. One by one they told the courageous and often tragic stories of their travels on the Underground Railroad. Not a railroad as we might know it, but the series of secret transportation links and safe houses that they served as 'conductors' and 'station masters', enabling hundreds of 19th-century American slaves to escape to freedom across the Canadian border.

**ROCHESTER RESIDENT FREDERICK DOUGLASS** was a famous author, orator and, later, America's first African-American foreign diplomat; Harriet Tubman became known as 'Mother Moses' after she arranged, over a period of 11 years, for safe passage to the 'Promised Land' for at least 70 slaves; Sojourner Truth was an outstanding orator and organiser for both the abolition of slavery and women's rights; and Shields Green reacted to a cruel plantation owner wrenching away his wife and child by fleeing north and joining abolitionist firebrand John Brown's famous raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia).

**MAIN PHOTO** Site manager Heidi Hill (centre) leads an Underground Railroad tour through Albany's Schuyler Mansion;  
**INSERT** Dr David Anderson, founder of Akwaaba Tours and the author at Rochester's *Let's Have Tea* statue

Akwaaba Tours, the local heritage group that provided the actors for this dramatic introduction to a crucial aspect of African-American history, then guided us around various Underground Railroad sites in the handsome upstate New York city, which is strategically sited across Lake Ontario from Canada.

We visited the grave of Douglass, the home of Susan B Anthony, his friend and famous women's rights and abolitionist leader – it's fronted by a small park, graced by a statue of the two of them having tea – and the state's largest Underground Railroad exhibition. Housed in the impressive

Rochester Museum and Science Center, it most memorably includes a re-creation of the claustrophobic crawl space where escaped slave Harriet Jacobs hid for years, emerging to inspire the book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Later, we took a cruise along the picturesque Erie Canal; as the link with Canada through the Great Lakes, it served as a conduit for escaping slaves. Many of them had lived freely in New York State, which outlawed slavery in 1827, only needing to escape north of the border upon the federal government's enactment of the iniquitous US Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. It allowed bounty hunters to come north, reclaim slaves and return them to their masters. Anyone who resisted the law, including many Quakers and freed African-Americans, could be charged with treason and imprisoned. In some cases, slaves who had bought their freedom had



their legal papers publicly destroyed before being dragged back into servitude.

Our journey along the Underground Railroad trail had begun 70 miles to the west in the city of Buffalo. By coincidence, we arrived in the middle of poignant waterfront September 11 commemorations. As the American flag was lowered, a choir sang and a lone piper played a lament, we could not help but mourn, not only for the victims of the 9/11 tragedy, but also for the lives of the slaves who struggled to the nearby shores of the Niagara River in hopes of escaping to freedom.

### MANHATTAN'S TRIBUTE TO ITS ENSLAVED PEOPLE

However, for the purposes of this article, we will begin our journey in New York City, the gateway to the state for most British visitors and also, surprisingly, a place where slavery thrived for two centuries. The first slaves were brought to the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Underground Railroad 'conductor' Harriet Tubman; Actor Robert Djed Snead as escaped slave Shields Green; Figures and coffins in Manhattan's African Burial Ground National Monument's museum; Clifford Oliver portraying 'Prince' and a portrait of his master, Philip J Schuyler; Abolitionist William Seward's Auburn mansion





Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, today's Lower Manhattan, in 1626 and by the time New York became a British colony in 1664, about a quarter of its labour force was enslaved.

Over the years, their 6.6-acre burial ground in Lower Manhattan was built over and virtually forgotten and then – in 1991 – something remarkable happened. While excavating for a new federal office building at 290 Broadway, the remains of 419 slaves, many of them children, were unearthed. Outraged by plans to unceremoniously re-inter them elsewhere, prominent African-Americans and others, including then-mayor David Dinkins and acclaimed author and Civil Rights spokesperson Maya Angelou, insisted on something more suitable. Traditional mahogany coffins were carved in Ghana, a funeral procession and six-day ceremony were held in 2003, the remains were reburied under seven grassy mounds, and on February 27, 2006, by Presidential Proclamation, the site became the African Burial Ground National Monument.

An impressive adjacent structure, reminiscent of the prow of a slave ship with a channel of water running through it, leads to the Circle of the Diaspora, which includes in its design symbols of the various African cultures and countries from which the slaves came. And there's a small but impressive museum on the ground floor of the adjacent Ted Weiss Federal Building.

Other slavery-related New York City sites include Manhattan's Gramercy Park Quaker Meeting House (now the Brotherhood Synagogue) and St Augustine Church, which still has a slaves gallery; Brooklyn's Weeksville community, established by freed slaves; and Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, whose pastor was committed abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

## While excavating FOR A NEW FEDERAL OFFICE BUILDING AT 290 BROADWAY, THE REMAINS OF 419 SLAVES, MANY OF THEM CHILDREN, WERE UNEARTHED

first alerted many Americans to the horrors of slavery.

Among those leading an African-American insurrection in 1741 was a slave named Cuffee, who burned down the warehouse of the nephew of powerful plantation owner Adolph Philipse. He and other slaves were tried, convicted and burned at the stake.

To discover his plantation roots, we headed up Route 9, paralleling the Hudson River, past Yonkers in the Bronx, the base of the Philipses' family's 52,000-acre family empire (ironically, now home to a major slavery exhibition) and on to their working plantation headquarters at Philipsburg Manor.

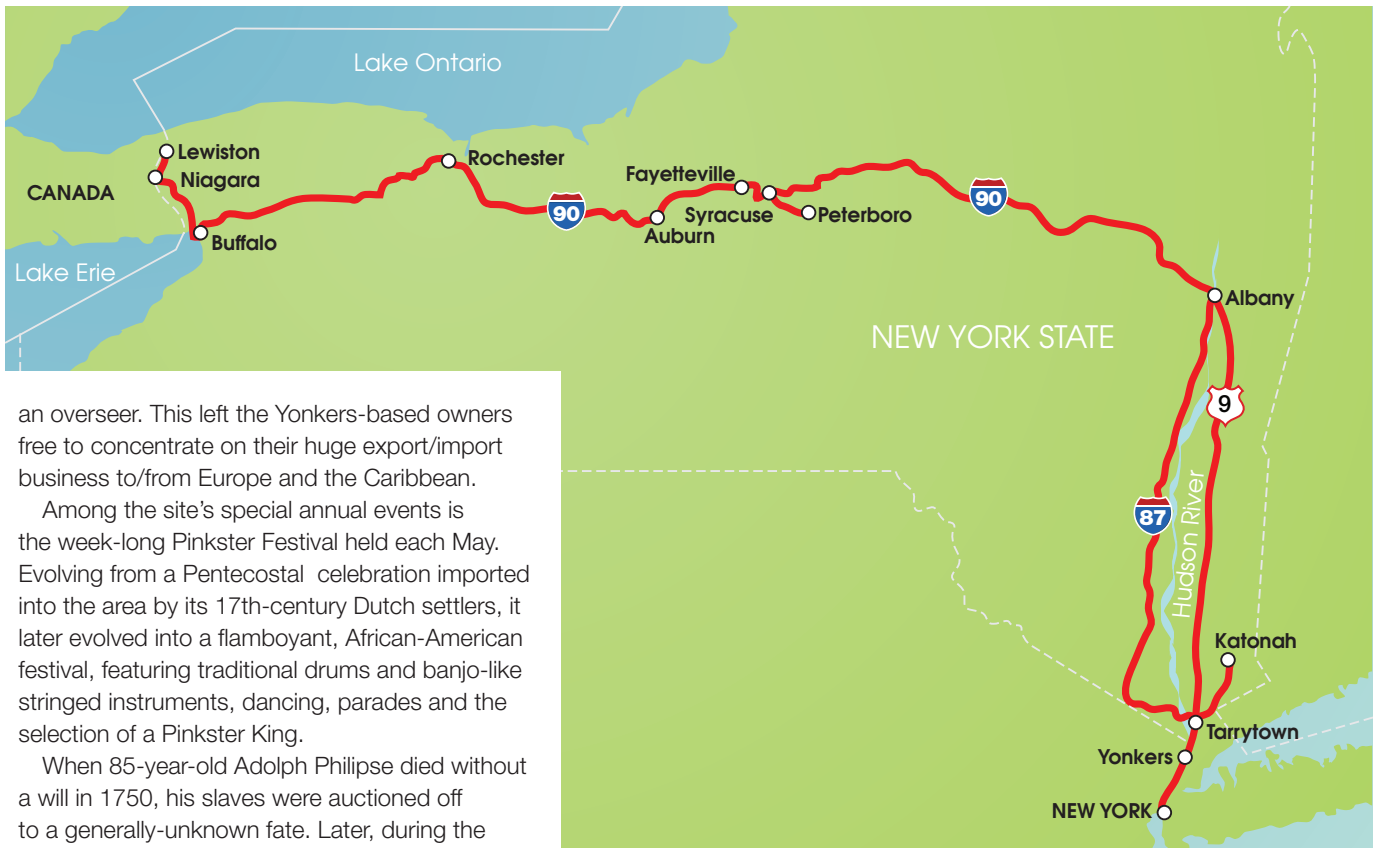
### PLANTATION LIFE IN SLEEPY HOLLOW

Sited in the community of Sleepy Hollow – which is best known for the tales of author Washington Irving, who lived in nearby Tarrytown – the whitewashed, fieldstone manor house is part of a cluster of buildings picturesquely set beside a mill pond fed by the Ponantico River. As we toured the 18th-century, period-furnished manor, the adjacent grist mill, the huge Dutch Barn and the slaves' garden – admiring sheep, oxen and other farm animals along the way – a guide explained that the site was virtually run by skilled slaves such as miller Caesar, boatman Diamond and housekeeper Sue under the supervision of



LEFT TOP AND BOTTOM Components of Manhattan's African Burial Ground National Monument;

RIGHT Motherland Connexions tour leader Kevin Cottrell by a Buffalo waterfront map



ABOVE A map of an Underground Railroad route through upstate New York;

BELOW A sign next to a Buffalo site on the Underground Railroad

an overseer. This left the Yonkers-based owners free to concentrate on their huge export/import business to/from Europe and the Caribbean.

Among the site's special annual events is the week-long Pinkster Festival held each May. Evolving from a Pentecostal celebration imported into the area by its 17th-century Dutch settlers, it later evolved into a flamboyant, African-American festival, featuring traditional drums and banjo-like stringed instruments, dancing, parades and the selection of a Pinkster King.

When 85-year-old Adolph Philipse died without a will in 1750, his slaves were auctioned off to a generally-unknown fate. Later, during the American Revolution, the last of his dynasty, Loyalist Philipses, their estates confiscated, fled back to England.

Continuing north-east to Katonah's John Jay Homestead, we learned about the challenging and contradictory life of slave owner John Jay, governor of New York State, president of the 18th-century Continental Congress, first chief justice of the US Supreme Court, father of a number of abolitionist children, and a strong advocate of the end of slavery. And yet, as one who believed in the gradual, but not immediate demise of slavery, he remained the owner, renter, buyer and seller of slaves throughout his life.

Travelling northwards through the beautiful Hudson Valley, we reached the state capital, Albany, best known for its majestic, chateausque State Capitol and the modern structures on the surrounding Empire State Plaza. Entering the elegant hall of the 18th-century Schuyler Mansion, we were greeted by Prince, a dignified, middle-aged 'slave' in period costume, who told us of the important role he played as the manservant to his owner, Philip J Schuyler, renowned Revolutionary War general, US senator, entrepreneur and host to the likes of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington.

Then, we visited the renovation of the semi-derelict home of African-Americans





Stephen and Harriet Myers, a major stop on the Underground Railroad and the office for the Albany Vigilance Committee, which protected runaways from being re-enslaved.

Following Interstate 90 west toward Syracuse, we diverted south to the small town of Peterboro. There, the National Abolitionist Hall of Fame is housed in the former church that hosted the first meeting of the New York State Anti-Slavery Society, and the handsome Gerrit Smith Estate was home to one of the influential ‘Secret Six’ anti-slavery supporters of John Brown’s controversial and ill-starred Harpers Ferry raid. Today, it hosts such events as Emancipation Day and a Civil War weekend.

### ON TO CANADA AND FREEDOM

Next, we stopped in Fayetteville to have tea at another Underground Railroad ‘station’, the Matilda Joslyn Gage Center, located in the white-columned home of its prominent namesake abolitionist and women’s rights leader. First, we listened to an African-American actress tell the harrowing story of a slave attempting to escape with her husband and baby along the Erie Canal


CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Guide Dorothy Willsey at Peterboro’s National Abolitionist Hall of Fame; Sleepy Hollow’s Philipsburg Manor; Lewiston’s Freedom Crossing statue; Majestic Niagara Falls on the US/Canadian border

and then – rather disconcertingly – a white woman dressed in hoop skirts, entered the room and began belting out *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. We discovered later that was because Mrs Gage was the mother-in-law and literary mentor for Frank Baum who wrote the Oz books.

Syracuse itself is home to the Onondaga Historical Association Museum, where we sat in a circle in a darkened room as spotlights lit up various figures, including Tubman and Douglass, and a recording recounted their stories. Then, we moved on to the pretty, leafy city of Auburn, where Tubman lived for many years. Although her home is now being renovated, we were able to visit the adjacent buildings, which had served as refuges for needy former slaves. Her grave is in nearby Fort Hills Cemetery.

Also in Auburn is the handsome mansion of Tubman’s friend and benefactor, William Seward, a State and later US senator, but best known as





*Sleepy Hollow's*  
PHILIPSBURG MANOR  
WAS VIRTUALLY RUN BY  
SKILLED SLAVES SUCH  
AS MILLER CAESAR,  
BOATMAN DIAMOND  
AND HOUSEKEEPER SUE

Secretary of State to both President Abraham Lincoln and his successor, Andrew Johnson, during which time he purchased Alaska, then known as 'Seward's Folly'.

A guide told how Seward's wife, Frances, harboured escaping slaves in the basement, while he narrowly escaped death – he was attacked by an assassin in his Washington, DC home the same night that Lincoln was assassinated in DC's Ford's Theatre.

Bypassing Rochester, which we have already covered, we returned to Buffalo and the historic African-American Michigan Street Baptist Church, presided over by an octogenarian, white custodian, Bishop William H Henderson. As he showed us a narrow entrance to the basement enclosure where slaves were hidden, we couldn't help but notice the bishop's traditional Jewish skullcap and the Star of David medallion that adorned his black robes. He explained that his mother had been an eastern European Jew, adding, with a twinkle in his eyes, that, in any case, there would no Christians without the Jews.

Following Route I-190 to the rather-unimpressive town of Niagara, we stopped at the suspension bridge where Tubman crossed the river to Canada (it's now a major border entry point with an Underground Railroad Visitor Center being developed nearby).

And, of course, we couldn't resist a ride on *The Maid of the Mist* past awesome Niagara Falls before continuing along the increasingly-less-turbulent Niagara River to Lewiston, one of America's final Underground Railroad stops. As we viewed its waterside *Freedom Crossing* statue, depicting a 'conductor' and local 'station master' placing an escaping slave family in a boat, we tried to imagine their harrowing journey to get to this point and the life that awaited them across the river in Canada.



## TRAVEL NOTES

**GETTING THERE:** Continental Airlines, now affiliated with United Airlines ([www.continental.com](http://www.continental.com), 0845 8444 777), offers daily service from London Heathrow to New York City's Newark Liberty

International Airport.

**GETTING AROUND:** Although there are flights from New York City's airports to a number of cities mentioned in this article, as well as Amtrak rail service to Albany and other destinations ([www.Amtrak.com](http://www.Amtrak.com)), a fly/drive rental car is the best option for exploring the area.

**TOURS FROM THE UK:** UK niche market tour operator Arena Travel ([www.arenatravel.com](http://www.arenatravel.com), 01473 660800) has scheduled a May 5-17 inclusive tour of many of the sites mentioned in this article, including Philipsburg Manor Hall's colourful African-American Pinkster Festival. From £2,495 per person sharing accommodation; £3,145, single accommodation.

**LOCAL TOUR PROGRAMMES:** Niagara Falls-based Motherland Connexions, led by Kevin Cottrell, runs Underground Railroad Tours of both the USA and Canada ([www.motherlandconnexions.com](http://www.motherlandconnexions.com), 001 (866) 726 0864). Rochester-based Akwaaba Tours ([www.akwaabaTours.org](http://www.akwaabaTours.org), 001 (585) 482 5192) can arrange walking tours for groups or families on one to two days' notice; for the full theatre performance, you must book one to two weeks ahead. St Catharines, Ontario-based Niagara Bound Tours

([www.niagaraboundtours.com](http://www.niagaraboundtours.com), 001 (905) 685 5375), is a particularly good source for the Canadian side of the story.

**HOTELS:** The following are the hotels that hosted us along the route: **Tarrytown:** Doubletree by Hilton ([www.tarrytown.doubletree.com](http://www.tarrytown.doubletree.com), 001 (914) 631 5700), **Albany:** Crowne Plaza ([www.cpalbany.com](http://www.cpalbany.com), 001 (518) 462 6611); **Rochester:** Homewood Suites ([www.rochestergreece.homewoodsuites.com](http://www.rochestergreece.homewoodsuites.com), 001 (585) 865 8534); and **Buffalo:** Comfort Inn and Suites ([www.choicehotels.com/hotel/ny200](http://www.choicehotels.com/hotel/ny200), 001 (716) 854 5500).

**RESTAURANTS:** Restaurants we particularly enjoyed were the CH Evans Brewing Company at the **Albany** Pump Station ([www.evansale.com](http://www.evansale.com), 001 (518) 447 9000); the Springside Inn in **Auburn** ([www.springsideinn.com](http://www.springsideinn.com), 001 (315) 252 7247); the New York Wine and Culinary Center (<http://nywcc.com>, 001 (585) 394 7070) in **Canandaigua** on its namesake Finger Lake between Auburn and Rochester; and – for waterfront views – **Rochester's** Pier 45 ([www.pier45attheport.com](http://www.pier45attheport.com), 001 (585) 865 4500), **Buffalo's** Templeton Landing ([www.templetonlanding.com](http://www.templetonlanding.com), 001 (716) 852 7337), and **Lewiston's** Water Street Landing, ([www.waterstreetlanding.com](http://www.waterstreetlanding.com), 001 (716) 754 9200).

**FURTHER INFORMATION:** Visit [www.rmssc.org](http://www.rmssc.org), the site of the Underground Railroad Heritage Trail – Upstate New York, or the New York State site, [nylovesu.co.uk](http://nylovesu.co.uk), or contact New York State Division of Tourism's UK office, 020 7644 6121.