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Historian shares abolitionist-movement research

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD:

Thompson discusses county's role

By [MARTHA ELLEN](#)

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FRIDAY, JANUARY 22, 2010

CANTON — DeKalb Historian Bryan S. Thompson was trying to prove a house in Richville was a stop on the Underground Railroad when he started his research into the abolitionist movement in St. Lawrence County.

Mr. Thompson's work led him to believe the house long reputed as a safe stop for escaped slaves wasn't part of the network after all, but it pointed him on a journey that digs deep into the social leanings of thousands of past county residents who signed petitions and sent them to Congress urging an end to slavery.

"Rather than look at funny rooms in the house, you need to look at the people. You wouldn't have the Underground Railroad without the abolitionists," Mr. Thompson told more than 100 people Thursday gathered for his presentation at the St. Lawrence County Historical Association. "It's been romanticized as tunnels and secret rooms. When you think about the Underground Railroad, it was probably more about opening up your house."

St. Lawrence County was an important link from both the South and East because it was at the headwaters of the Long Sault rapids and was a gateway to Great Lakes navigation. Slaves headed north into Canada because the British empire abolished slavery in 1834.

"Canada became a safe haven," Mr. Thompson said.

Abolitionism grew in the smallest of communities, such as Bucks Bridge and Buckton, while larger towns with merchants who had dealings with Southern commerce stayed clear for fear of offense, Mr. Thompson said.

PHOTOS



JASON HUNTER / WATERTOWN DAILY TIMES
Bryan S. Thompson, DeKalb, fields questions from a crowd gathered for his lecture on the Underground Railroad on Thursday at the St. Lawrence County Historical Association, 3 E. Main St., Canton.

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In 1826, Charles Finney, an evangelist from Jefferson County, began leading revivals in communities such as Gouverneur, DeKalb and Rossie. He preached that getting into heaven required people to do good works.

"Things started to heat up as we get into the 1830s," Mr. Thompson said.

Mr. Finney and another minister active in the county, Luther Lee, soon were to be national champions of abolitionism. John W. Lewis, a black man, was a minister in DeKalb and Pierrepont for a while, and wrote a column on the Underground Railroad in Frederick Douglass's newspaper.

The Rev. Charles Bowles II, a man of mixed race, was a minister in Hopkinton. His father, also a minister, retired to Hopkinton and organized a meeting of the abolitionist-leaning Free Will Baptist Church.

In 1837, two men in Potsdam formed the St. Lawrence County Anti-Slavery Society.

Martin Mitchell, a pioneer settler of the town of Fowler who became a national speaker, started an abolitionist newspaper, The Laborer, later called the St. Lawrence Free Press, which was quoted often by Frederick Douglass.

"These people were really on the cutting edge," Mr. Thompson said.

Much of his research was found in abolitionist and New York City newspapers, and in the national archives. There was rarely a mention in the local press.

"To be an abolitionist was something dirty," Mr. Thompson said.

The Myron Cushman house on Rock Island Street in Gouverneur is probably the most documented stop on the Underground Railroad in the county because his family wrote about it.

"Most people weren't that proud," Mr. Thompson said. "It wasn't generally made that public."

Helping escaped slaves was a felony.

Among other houses that Mr. Thompson found had links to the abolitionist movement were the Red Brick Tavern in Gouverneur, which was later demolished; the Noah Webster house in South Hammond; the Calvin Hulburd house in Brasher; Liberty Knowles house in Potsdam, which was torn down for a Kaplan's department store; the Wesleyan Methodist parsonage in Morley, and churches in West Potsdam and Bucks Bridge. The abolitionist society met in both of the churches.

For those interested in the history of their own homes, Mr. Thompson advised finding out who

owned it during the heyday of the Underground Railroad before assuming a root cellar or odd closet was a stowaway site.

"This is such a vast topic and I've only looked at a small piece of St. Lawrence County," he said.

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