

## [Underground Railroad in Edwards](#)



### [St. Lawrence News](#)

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EDWARDS, NY - Did you know that the abolitionist movement in St. Lawrence County was one of the most active in the state? How about the fact that the county had the fourth highest subscription rate to the *National E.R.A.*, the national abolitionist newspaper? Bryan Thompson, De Kalb Town Historian, undoubtedly does. With thirty years of research into local history, particularly on the town of De Kalb, and family roots dating back to 1805, Mr. Thompson certainly has proven himself to be a local authority on the subject. He intends to share his knowledge on the subject April 8th at 7:00 P.M. at the Hepburn Library on Main Street, Edwards. This occasion will be open to the public.

The event, a presentation on the Underground Railroad and abolitionist movement in St. Lawrence County, was coordinated by the De Kalb Historical and Edwards Historical Society's in conjunction with the Hepburn Library. In addition to Mr. Thompson's presentation, there will be an Underground Railroad quilt, loaned by Chris Backus and made by Margerie Dier and Laverne Freeman of Edwards, on display. The quilt was raffled off several years ago, and Mrs. Backus often generously loans it to the Edwards-Knox Central School for use in abolitionist and Underground Railroad presentations and classroom work in the abolitionist movement. Light refreshments will also be provided.

Bryan Thompson's presentation will focus on Underground Railroad locations that meet the National Park standards, meaning that the sites must be proven to meet a certain set of criteria. First and foremost there must be period accounts of the site itself, first-hand information gleaned from documents such as diaries, newspapers and letters. Second, the supposed site must be corroborated by abolitionist activity, such as home or land owners or members of the public that participated in or were attributed to the stealthy smuggling of escaped slaves. This is sometimes proven by signed petitions, or confirmed by other period accounts. The last two criteria, though important, are not considered as reliable as first hand accounts—are family legend or "house" legend. This refers to stories passed down through the generations of specific local family conductors or tales that traveled via word of mouth, through place and time, about sites believed to be active in the Underground Railroad. Mr. Thompson's reasons for presenting sites that meet these standards are simple; his desire to separate fact from fiction, verity from supposition. These rigid standards and guidelines have enabled him to positively identify numerous sites around the North Country, more recently a certain St. Lawrence County church that, unknown to the general public of the time, aided freed or escaped slaves by secreting them away in hidden rooms and cupboards.

Not only will Mr. Thompson discuss his studies of Underground Railroad sites, but the people involved in abolitionist activity in the North Country. Well documented conductors like Myron Cushman of Gouverneur, who helped move slaves through his home located near Gouverneur High School, or Potsdam's Liberty Knowles, elected Chairman of the first Anti-Slavery Committee in the North Country. The area known as "Four Towns," where Rossi, Antwerp, Fowler and Gouverneur meet, yielded some of the most active and persistent of abolitionists. The area was one of the highest concentrations of abolitionist activists in St. Lawrence County, as detailed in several letters—written to show that the movement was not just limited to the Fowler area—now kept at the Potsdam Museum. Our humble North Country was the home of such people as Preston King and Martin Mitchell, who helped spearhead New York's campaign for the freedom of slaves. Mitchell, farm and mill owner of Shingle Creek Road—off of what is now California Road—was the Chairman of a New York third party known as the Liberty Party, and Mr. Mitchell ran for Congress. While his supporters were spirited and

tenacious, their numbers were not great enough to ensure him a seat. He also initiated the publication of "The Laborer," which later became the "St. Lawrence County Free Press," a popular abolitionist newspaper founded in 1852. A man that dedicated his life to ending slavery, Mitchell's work was influential and important to the abolitionists in St. Lawrence County, and it was that very work that dominated his life. So much so that Mitchell passed away and into an unmarked grave next to his wife, as his money had been utterly spent on the movement and his newspaper. His legacy, however, has clearly lived on.

Mr. Thompson's work is not limited to the study of the Underground Railroad and figureheads like Martin Mitchell. He has also studied and assembled a display on one room schoolhouses throughout the area, recording the close of the one room schoolhouse era as modern school districts began to merge and emerge. Armed with 17 years as a teacher, his 30 as an amateur historian, and a Baccalaureate of Science in Rural Sociology, Mr. Thompson is well equipped for his position as De Kalb historian. If you'd like to learn more about the history of De Kalb, you can find many of his articles, as well as others, at <http://www.dekalbnyhistorian.org>. This aesthetically pleasing and easy to navigate website features dozens of articles, photographs and information on the history of De Kalb and the surrounding areas, such as Gouverneur, Kendrew Corners and Richville.

Of course this event was not of Mr. Thompson's effort alone, but with the Edwards Historical Society and the Hepburn Library. The Edwards Historical Society's website, <http://www.edwardshistory.org>, also has many great articles and details on the chronology of the area, including figureheads and events that shaped these small, but historic, North Country towns and villages. The Edwards Historical Society is led by LaVerne H. Freeman, who also investigates local genealogy and is been a very active member of the community. You can contact LaVerne at (315)-562-3500 for information on this and other upcoming events.

The Hepburn Library is maintained by librarian Elaine Archer, as it has been for many years. The library offers copy, fax, CD writing and scanning services, has three public access computers and a notary service in addition to the great collection of books and publications held there. For more information on the Hepburn Library in Edwards you can visit the website at <http://www.herd.org/edwards/library/>, or call the library during business hours at (315)-562-3521.

To learn about St. Lawrence County's fascinating involvement in the abolitionist movement during the 1800's, as well as enjoy great company and refreshments, remember to mark April 8th, 2009—at 7:00 P.M.—on your calendar. Thanks are already in order for the information LaVerne Freeman and Bryan Thompson provided this article.

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