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## The Underground Railroad and Anti-Slavery Movement in Schenectady: A Guide for Further Research

### Underground Railroad Routes Through Schenectady

According to William J. Switala in his book *Underground Railroad in New York and New Jersey*, freedom seekers came through Schenectady primarily via Albany and traveled westward to Utica, Syracuse, and Buffalo. Others traveled northward to Ballston Spa, then on to Constable. Many accounts of freedom seekers' journeys tell of people traveling on the Erie Canal to western New York. Several people involved in anti-slavery activity operated businesses along the canal, including John Beckley, tailor; Francis Dana, barber; Philip Furman, watchmaker; Richard P.G. Wright, barber.

### Figures with proven or probable involvement with UGRR in Schenectady

#### **Francis Dana** (ca. 1811–d. ca. 1875?)

Francis Dana was born in the British West Indies sometime between 1808 and 1811. There is a Francis Dana listed as a passenger on the ship *George*, which arrived in New York City from Frederickstaat, St. Croix, in 1826. Dana applied for naturalization in Schenectady in 1840. He is listed in the 1841 city directory as a barber working out of 146 State Street, on the canal. In 1842, Dana was listed as one of Stephen Myers' North Star Association agents for the distribution of the *Northern Star and Freeman's Advocate*. He continued to live and work in Schenectady until about 1865. Francis Dana last appeared in the 1870 Federal census in Saratoga Springs, Saratoga County, and in Oriskany Falls, Oneida County.

#### **Isaac Groot Duryee** (1810–1866)

Duryee (sometimes spelled Duryea) was born in Glenville. He earned his undergraduate degree from Union College in 1838 and graduated from the Andover Theological Seminary in 1841. Duryee was a co-founder in 1836 of the Anti-Slavery Society at Union College and of the Anti-Slavery Society of the City of Schenectady in 1838. He also helped to found the first African-American church in Schenectady, known as the African Church (now the Duryee Memorial AME Zion Church), in 1837. He served as the first pastor of the Second Reformed Dutch Church from 1852 to 1858. He then went on to serve a congregation in Montgomery County. From 1862–1865, he served as a chaplain to the 81st New York State Volunteers during the Civil War. He died in 1866 and is buried in Vale Cemetery. His granddaughter, Ruth M. Duryee, wrote in 1937 for a Union College alumni record that Duryee “helped with

‘underground railways’ and drove many an escaping negro from Schenectady to the next stop, with the negro lying flat under hay in the back of the wagon.”

**John Wendell** (ca. 1801-d. 1875)

John Wendell (sometimes spelled Wendall, Wandell, or Wandle) was a barber. He was active in the Duryee Memorial AME Zion Church, serving as one of the church’s first trustees. He served as the first president of a local African-American temperance society in 1836. He was chosen to serve as secretary at a meeting of African-American citizens about the elective process (See *The Colored American* 28 December 1840). Articles in *The Cabinet* on March 18, 1845 and June 13, 1848 mention Wendell applying to the Common Council for aid to the school for African-American children in the city. Wendell died in 1875.

**Richard P.G. Wright** (ca. 1778–1847)

Wright is perhaps the best known and most well-documented person in Schenectady connected to Underground Railroad and anti-slavery activity. He was born in Swansea, Massachusetts, and lived in Rhode Island for several years. In earlier years, he went by the name “Prince G. Wright.” By around 1811, Wright had moved to Schenectady, where he would continue to live until his death in 1847. Wright was a barber and both his business at 2 Canal Street and his home at 84 Ferry Street were close by the Erie Canal. Wright was deeply involved with local and regional anti-slavery activities; he was an early member of the American Anti-Slavery Society and a founding member of the Anti-Slavery Society of the City of Schenectady in 1838, and attended many anti-slavery conventions and gatherings in the region. Along with his son, the abolitionist and pastor Theodore Sedgwick Wright, he was a member of the New York Vigilance Committee. Wright and his son were also the only African-American members of the St. George’s Masonic Lodge in Schenectady. An Eastern New York Anti-Slavery Society 1843 annual report mentions 3 freedom seekers and notes that the agent who helped them “gave letter to Emp. Wright and Ellis Clizbe [of Montgomery County].” According to an article in the *Emancipator and Weekly Chronicle* (Boston) 16 April 1845, Wright assisted Charles Nelson in escaping slavery to freedom in Canada. Wright died in 1847; he is buried at Vale Cemetery in Schenectady.

Freedom seekers known or thought to have traveled through or to Schenectady

William and Catherine Harris	Charles Nelson
Henry Lewis	Jo Norton
Charles Nalle	Moses Viney

Names of people involved in Anti-Slavery Society of the City of Schenectady

Names extracted from newspaper articles, 1838-1839:

Charles Anderson	Stephen Carter	Sidney Ross
Joel C. Bailey	F.N. Clute	Nelson Service
John P. Beckley	Isaac G. Duryea	H.V. Teall
Julius Bolles	James Fuller	David G. Van Zandt
Albert Brown	Philip H. Furman	Jabez Ward
William Cameron	Rev. John Nott	Richard P.G. Wright

Names associated with Union College Anti-Slavery Society, 1836

Names extracted from the First Annual Report of the Union College Anti-Slavery Society. This document has been digitized as part of the Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Collection at Cornell University. A scan of the document can be found here:

[http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/mayantislavery/browse\\_U.html](http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/mayantislavery/browse_U.html)

L.D. Baldwin	Phineas D. Gurley	George L. LeRow
E.F. Cushman	Meeker Hull	H.H. Loomis
William Erwin	George I. King	P. Snyder

Other names, communities, and events associated with anti-slavery movement and/or sentiment in the Schenectady area

**People:**

Dr. Alonzo Potter, 1800-1865. Professor and trustee of Union College.

Rev. Jonathan Edwards, 1745-1801. Congregationalist minister, theologian, and president of Union College.

Gerrit Smith in Schenectady – Sermon at Presbyterian Church on 4 May 1837 and meeting of African-American temperance organization, 1 May 1836

Notable local African-Americans involved in social justice and reform movements during the time period, including Francis Thompson, Thomas Jackson, Richard Sampson, Moses Vanlear, Jacob Dow.

**Events:**

“Union Meeting of the Colored People of Albany, Troy, and Vicinity.” See *Friend of Man* 12 April 1837.

Anti-Slavery convention held in Albany, February 28-March 2, 1838 at Presbyterian Church.

National Negro Convention held in Schenectady, 16 September 1844.

**Communities and organizations:**

Quaker communities – Quaker Street and Charleston Four Corners

African Church – now Duryee Memorial AME Zion Church

Liberty Party

Eastern New York Anti-Slavery Society

Temperance societies

Underground Railroad and Anti-Slavery Resources at the Grems-Doolittle Library

Clipping files – topics related to Underground Railroad, slavery, churches, organizations, etc.

City directories – 1841, 1857-1858, 1860-1968

Church histories and records (births/baptisms, marriages, and deaths)

City maps

New York State Census and Federal Census records on microfilm for Schenectady County

Biographical information

Family files

Historic manuscripts (wills, deeds, correspondence, legal matters, etc.)

Extracted marriage and death notices from local newspapers

Local histories

Cemetery records

Schenectady newspapers on microfilm, 1795-1869