

Chapter Fifteen

Too Often Forgotten: Female Slaves and Poor Women in Genesee County

Introduction

Until well into the 1950s, a typical historical treatment of the United States usually excluded about half of the population, which was, of course, women. The very “invisibility” of women in many historical works, as the historian Howard Zinn once pointed out, was “a sign of their submerged status.” (1) To counter this, contemporary scholars ask questions about the past relevant to the lives of women. As a result, they discovered evidence – diaries, public documents, letters, and a host of other materials – that historians for generations overlooked. One example of this effort is the portrayal of the most invisible of women – African-American slave women and poor white women. Both shared common traits – little power and few economic resources. It is to them that we turn in this chapter, and we start with slave women in the county in the decades prior to the Civil War.

Slave Women in Genesee County

Sympathizing with his slave, Nicholas purchased Mingo’s wife, Nancy, and all her children and brought them with Mingo to New York.

“Slavery in the Genesee Country (also known as Ontario County) 1789 to 1827,” in Afro-Americans in New York Life and History, 1 January 1998

Contrary to popular belief, the dichotomy between a free North and a slave South is one that is not as pronounced as is usually depicted in a standard textbook. The end of slavery in the northern states is far more complex than is typically assumed. For example, the 1860 census counted 451,021 slaves in states and territories constituting the Union throughout the Civil War. New York – and specifically, Genesee County is part of this complex picture. In 1790, the Federal Census revealed that there were 21,193 slaves in New York. Ten years later the number stood at 20,903. 15,017 slaves were found in New York by 1810, while

the number continued to decline, to 10,088 by 1820. Seventy-five slaves were recorded by 1830, while only four remained by 1840. None were recorded in New York by 1850.

The number of slaves in New York decreased in part due to a gradual emancipation bill enacted by the New York State Legislature in 1799. In part, the law set forth that all African-American children born subsequent to July 4 in 1799 would be free. However, just as importantly – in contrast to the South – slavery had never become as entrenched in the North due to the existence of relatively small farms, in contrast to large plantations dependent upon greater numbers of laborers.

In any event, the Federal Census of 1820 reveals something about the number of female slaves in Genesee County. While the data does not reveal the names of the female slaves in Genesee County, it does tell us of their location – and the names of the owners. We also discover the ages of the women involved. Issac Bennett, listed as living in Ridgeway, owned a female slave below the age of fourteen. George Bishop of Perry owned a female slave of forty-five or more years old. Peter Brown of Caledonia owned a young girl not yet fourteen, and another somewhere between the ages of twenty-six and forty-five.

The census list goes on for Genesee County in 1830. John Crats of Batavia owned a female somewhere between the ages of fourteen and twenty-six. Nathan Follett, also of Batavia, owned a female not yet fourteen. So too did Azel Ensworth, listed as living in Gages. William Keys of Batavia owned a young girl under fourteen years of age, and two women aged between twenty-six and forty-five, as did Hineman Holden, who owned one female of that age – also in Batavia. David A. Miller, listed as residing in Mt. Morris, owned a woman between the ages of fourteen and twenty-six. Nathan Rochester, whom the census records as living in Gates in 1820, owned two female slaves – one under fourteen years of age, the other at least forty-five years of age. All told, the 1820 census reveals that fourteen female slaves lived in Genesee County. Unfortunately, the Federal Census data does not indicate how those fourteen – and others before and after them – may have been treated. For that, we must turn to other sources.

One of these sources is the 1867 publication of Austin Steward, entitled *Twenty-Two years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman*. (2) In it we discover that even before the formation of Genesee County, in the area known before 1802 as the “Genesee Country,” William Held, a southern planter, decided to go north in May of 1796 in order to avail himself of the rich soil of Western New York – along with the superior quality of timber. Both a soil that was not exhausted and vast

amounts of timber stood in stark contrast to what was available in Virginia and Maryland. Hence leaving his wife and children in the south, he took his slaves, an overseer by the name of Barsly Taylor, and another white man described only as “Davis” on the journey north. Only the white people rode in the party’s wagon along with all of the food and supplies. Male and female slaves simply walked. The treatment of men and women in equally harsh ways was a continuation of the practices of the southern plantation. Steward recalled that it “was customary for men and women to work side by side on our plantation; and

in many kinds of work, the women were compelled to do as much as the men. Capt. H. employed an overseer, whose business it was to look after each slave in the field, and see that he performed his task. The overseer always went around with a whip, about nine feet long, made of the toughest kind of cowhide, the but-end of which was loaded with lead . . . (3)

Making their way along the Northumberland Road to New York, slaves were obligated to answer to a roll call each morning. Failure to respond resulted in a lashing. After eating breakfast, the journey to what became Genesee County continued at an average rate of twenty miles per day. When the party camped at night, the slaves slept in tents.

Upon arrival, the slaves – without the benefit of horses, cleared the land. The slaves were weak from hunger. Provisions at this point were scarce – there was little corn left and, of course, there was none to purchase. Owners did not give slaves permission to hunt or fish.

Consequently, the slaves were close to starvation. Slaves were described gathering old bones, grinding them, and boiling them for food as a broth. Horrific conditions first in evidence on the trek northwards did not necessarily subside once a farm was established, as a January 1810 advertisement regarding a runaway female slave suggests:

Ran away . . . A likely Negro girl named Linda Moody, 18 years old, about 5 feet 6 inches high. Two of her fingers on the right hand are considerably burnt. She took a variety of

clothing with her. Any person who will return said girl shall receive a liberal reward.

D.B. Ferguson Phelps
January 16, 1810 (4)

Just as tellingly, the violence experienced by slave women owned by Held while still in Virginia continued unchecked in what became Genesee County. Steward remembers seeing his sister cruelly beaten:

One pleasant Sabbath morning, as I was passing the house where she lived, on my way to the Presbyterian church, where I was sent to ring the bell as usual, I heard the most piteous cries and earnest pleadings issuing from the dwelling. (5)

Steward goes on:

To my horror and the astonishment of those with me, my poor sister made her appearance, weeping bitterly, and followed by her inhuman master, who was polluting the air of that clear Sabbath morning, with the most horrid imprecations and threatenings, and at the same time flourishing a large raw-hide. (6)

He concluded this terrible story about his sister with this:

Very soon his bottled wrath burst forth, and the blows, aimed with all his strength, descended upon the unprotected head, shoulders and back of the helpless woman, until she was literally cut to pieces. She writhed in his powerful grasp, while shriek after shriek cried away in heart-

rending moanings; and yet the inhuman demon continued to beat her, though her pleading cries had ceased, until obliged to desist from the exhaustion of his own strength. (7)

The graphic and chilling description of his beating of an African-American slave woman produced a narrative in which Steward reveals the trauma of a brother compelled to stand by and do nothing despite the pleas for help of his sister. “What a spectacle was that,” he said, “for the sight of a brother.” “The God of heaven only knows the conflict of feeling I then endured,” Steward added. (9) Elaborating, he then said this:

He alone witnessed the tumult of my heart,
at this outrage of manhood and kindred
affection. God knows that my will was
good enough to have wrung his neck . . .
And yet I was obliged to turn a deaf ear to
Her cries for assistance . . . (10)

Steward was of course obliged to “turn a deaf ear” because of the obvious. He reminded the reader that “he is a freeman,” and has not

from his infancy been taught to cower
beneath the white man’s frown, and
bow at his bidding, or suffer all the
rigor of the slave laws. (11)

Through the story of his sister’s beating, Steward reminds us that slaves – both male and female – found themselves in a world in which total obedience was the norm. Owners such as Helm possessed the power of life and death over their charges. Death could result from a beating or from the emotional trauma of seeing loved ones taken away at a moment’s notice. Helm at one point

sold my aunt Betsy Bristol to a distinguished
lawyer in the village, retaining her husband,
Aaron Bristol, in his own employ; and two of
her children he sold to another legal gentleman

named Cager. (12)

When Betsy's husband Aaron failed to appear for work as a result of the despair he felt over the loss of his family, that failure was as much as anything else a form of resistance. Aaron paid dearly for this act of retaliation. He was beaten so badly by Helm with a "stout limb" that his "face, covered with blood, was so swollen that he could hardly see for some time . . ." (13)

Slaves were dominated emotionally through such reminders – sales, beatings, etc. – that owners and overseers enjoyed absolute power over them. This emotional domination was also exercised through the emotional effect of a slave's realization that there was a limitless future ahead for both the slave and his or her descendants. Planning for the future under these conditions remained pointless. Slaves viewed a wider New York, indeed a wider Genesee County, which bore no real relation to them. Their only life was the life of a slave. Family life was always temporary at best. Indeed, one's own life remained temporary at best. For those slaves who even for an instance dared to hope, there were reminders of powerlessness played out in the lives of other slaves – such as Ellen.

At about the time of Batavia's ascendancy as the seat of governmental power in Genesee County "the village was thrown into a state of excitement by the arrest of a colored woman named Ellen . . ." (14) Ellen was charged with escape from "service due to a Mr. D., south of (the) Mason and Dixon's line." (15) Other slaves witnessed her forced removal from Genesee County to the South. Steward describes her as a "wounded spirit," in which every "earthly hope of liberty" was driven from her. (16) Skin color was the visible marker of the slave woman. Even escape to a land appearing to have more freedom did not change that. That skin color marked her as unfree and poor – but what of white women in Genesee County who were also vulnerable and poor? In other words, while poverty among slave women is self-evident – as an inherent condition of bondage – it appears in many cases to be harder to explain among free women. These women, found throughout Genesee County, are most visible in the history of the Genesee County Alms House.

Poor White Women in Genesee County

An examination of the available evidence for the years 1827 until the year the renamed County Home closed, illustrates a number of factors shedding light on the reasons for finding women there. Their presence placed them a world apart

from women in the county occupying a public presence exuding economic resources and lofty status.

One factor discernible in the evidence; one that is suggestive of a reason for their poverty, is the intemperance of their husbands. In a set of guidelines promulgated by the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism as early as 1818, one of the causes of poverty among married women was

Intemperance in Drinking. This most prolific source of mischief and misery drags in its train almost every species of suffering which afflicts the poor. This evil, in relation to poverty and vice, may be emphatically styled the *cause of causes* . . . (17)

Another cause of female poverty severe enough to permit entry into the Genesee County Poor House was the condition of mothers in need of assistance due to the absence of a husband and father. An examination of the *Annual Report of the Superintendents of the County of Genesee to the Secretary of State, 1857*, reminds us that the County Home contained ten females and eight males who had not yet reached the age of sixteen. (18) In that same year, three children were born to mothers in the County Home. The records of the County Home illustrate that the admission of children with their mothers was common. For instance, look at the situation of Mary Starr of Attica. In cases such as this, the admission of children preceded that of the impoverished mother, who was desperate for help. In Mary's case, her youngest child, a two-year old named Busheba, entered the Home on September 15, 1838. Her brother George followed on December 13 at the age of six. Angoline was admitted the following month. Their brother, William, aged nine, also entered the County Home on February 1, 1839. By March 6 of 1839 Mary Starr was, at the age of thirty-two, admitted. The following day she gave birth to a child, who died that same day (March 7, 1839) (19)

So chronic alcoholism and mothers lacking the financial means to take care of children were two factors helping to explain the worst poverty affecting women in Genesee County. There was yet a third factor discernible in the evidence that helps to explain the female poverty at work in the County Home. In the nineteenth century, the reference to psychological issues at work was described as "lunacy." A century later less severe terms were used, but they are still

suggestive of an inability to adequately cope with one's environment. For example, we see in the records of the *State Board of Social Welfare's Annual Inspection of the County Home in 1931-1932* this comment about a female resident:

There have been no disciplinary cases since the last inspection. (Miss X), blind, age 22, is a mischief-maker. For her own good she should be transferred to an institution where she can be trained. She was dismissed from the School for the Blind at Batavia when she was twelve years old. (20)

The environments many women found themselves in, be it poverty or slavery, were harsh and unforgiving. In the case of African-American women before the Civil War, it was a terrible combination of both poverty and slavery. The effects of both poverty and slavery continued for African-American women subsequent to the end of slavery, and this continuation of oppressive conditions is revealed in the historical evidence.

Records of the Genesee County Poor House for the years 1836 and 1837 illustrate the lives of such unfortunates as Looina Williams. She entered the Poor House on December 5, 1836, at the age of sixty-five. (21) We discover that she was born in Africa. Dying seven years later, her condition was described as follows: "a colored lady and very decrepit." (22)

Looina was not the only manumitted female slave to end her life in a crisis in Genesee County. Like poor white women and their children who were admitted to the County Poor House, Dina Brown too found herself and her children dependent upon the charity of the county. Dina was accepted into the Poor House on September 4, 1840, at the age of thirty-six. (23) At the same time, so were her children. They included fourteen-year-old Alimina and her sister, ten-year-old Eliza Ann. (24) Eight-year-old brother David was also admitted. So too was another sister, Minima, only four years old. (25) On September 20, 1840, Dina gave birth to another child, son Edward, who only lived for twenty-four days. The entire family was categorized as born in Africa. (26) It is not clear from the records if this was literally true. This suggests that at least some of the family may have been smuggled into New York subsequent to the closing of the slave trade by Congress in January of 1808. If not smuggled into the United States, it could be that the designation "Africa" was shorthand for what would be termed today

“African-American.” In any event, the entire family was released from the County Poor House on May 25, 1841. (27) The last recorded entry about them is their listing as “paupers” in the care of the residents of Perry, New York. (28)

Conclusion

In his memoir, Austin Steward pondered the meaning of emancipation from slavery. He did so in a way that included all poor people, such as the impoverished white women of Genesee County. He said that

I know not why, but mankind of every age, nation, and complexion have had lower classes; and, as a distinction, they have chosen to arrange themselves in the grand spectacle of human life, like seats in a theater – rank above rank, with intervals between them. (29)

Despite his own enslavement, Steward expressed views pertaining to the poor that were ultimately not preoccupied with skin color. Throughout his memoir, he repeatedly returns to a compassion for the poor that is largely oblivious to race. This perspective is discoverable in not only the testimonies of African-American slave women, and those eventually freed from slavery, but also from poor white women as well. The struggle for existence and the perennial fight to acquire basic material needs transcended the racial divide among the poor. Living together in the same circumstances in the County Poor House – not to mention the circumstances bringing them there in the first place – softened the racial divide between poor African-American women and their fellow white residents. It was this link, along economic lines, that Steward stressed at one point in his memoir.

Runaway slaves Rosa and her husband were making their way from Virginia to New York. Moving only at night, famished and weary, they came upon a white family. Barely able to continue, Joe cautiously knocked on the door of a home clearly inhabited by a poor family deep in the woods. The reader then was told that the

man of the house opened it, and as soon as he saw him, he said “you are a fugitive slave, but

be not alarmed, come in; no harm shall befall you here; I shall not inquire from whence you came; it is enough for me to know that you are a human being.” (30)

Rosa and Joe received food and clothing to take with them as they continued their journey northward. When Rosa rejoiced, she did not see skin color – only a family willing to share what little they had with other human beings in need. When we are able to uncover what the poor said; as their voices are not as loud as those who are better off, the theme that being poor transcends race is one commonly repeated. As we listen, it should be remembered that poor whites in Genesee County, particularly those in the County Home, merit the same compassion and attention poor African-American slaves have received. There was clear oppression and denigration in both cases. The only difference is that the oppression of each took different forms. There is no denying that slavery was a horrendous and brutal system. However, so too was the harshness of unemployment and a lack of economic resources for even those employed – a harshness felt as much by women as by men.

Like slaves, the poor in Genesee County tended to remain poor beyond one generation. There were many reasons for this, and I have only hinted at a few in this chapter. Nevertheless, along with family disarray and intemperance, there was also the specter of a prejudice against poor people – especially poor women – that translated into an excuse for continued exploitation and neglect. This brings us to a final thought, one with contemporary implications. The color line between African-Americans and whites inherently kept poor African-Americans in the spotlight. However, poor whites remained largely invisible, be they inside, or outside, of an institution such as the Genesee County Poor House.

Chapter Fifteen. Too Often Forgotten: Female Slaves and Poor Women in Genesee County

- (1) Howard Zinn, “The Intimately Oppressed,” in *A People’s History of the United States, 1492 – Present* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2005), p. 103.
- (2) Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Fifty Years a Freeman* (Canandaigua, New York: Austin Steward, 1867).

(3) Ibid., p. 14.

(4) Ibid., "Journey to Our Home in New York," pp. 52-53. Also, see E. Anne Schaetzke, "Slavery in the Genesee Country (also known as Ontario County), 1789 to 1827," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, 1 January 1998, p. 23.

(5) Steward, "Hired Out To a New Master," p. 96.

(6) Ibid.

(7) Ibid., pp. 96-97.

(8) Ibid., p. 97.

(9) Ibid.

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ibid., pp. 97-98.

(12) Ibid., p. 99.

(13) Ibid., pp. 99-100.

(14) Steward, "Incidents in Rochester and Vicinity," p. 139.

(15) Ibid.

(16) Ibid., p. 140.

(17) Quoted in David M. Schneider, *The History of Public Welfare in New York State, 1609-1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1938), p. 213.

(18) *Annual Report of the Poor of the County of Genesee to the Secretary of State, 1857*, housed in the Genesee County History Archives, p. 1.

(19) See “Mary Starr,” in the *Genesee County Home Index, S – T, 1827 – 1974*, housed in the Genesee County History Archives, p. 26, and p. 1,164.

(20) Cited in Craig A. Duncan’s *A Historical Perspective of the Genesee County Nursing Home, 1826-1977*, 12 December 1977, housed in the Genesee County History Archives, p. 94.

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 32.

(22) *Ibid.*, p. 33.

(23) *Ibid.*

(24) *Ibid.*

(25) *Ibid.*

(26) *Ibid.*

(27) *Ibid.*

(28) *Ibid.*

(29) Steward, “Oration – Termination of Slavery,” p. 156.

(30) Steward, “Narrative of Two Fugitives from Virginia,” p. 206.

