

The Voice

Freedom Seekers And The Underground Railroad

Lynn Houghton travelled to New York to visit the sites of the Underground Railroad

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HISTORY: a slave family

PINKIE WAS the name of the slave girl being auctioned at the Plymouth Church in the borough of Brooklyn. The date was February 5, 1860 and this daughter of a white father and African mother stood quietly as the auctioneer, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, took the bids.

But this was an auction with a difference, as the money was being raised to purchase this young girl's freedom. Many abolitionists chose acts of defiance such as these in reaction to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and to draw attention to the plight of the enslaved African people in the South. Abraham Lincoln worshipped here and Martin Luther King spoke here in 1963 and this church is still open and operating today.

Over the week of 9/11, I travelled to New York State on Arena Travel's escorted tour to visit the sites of the Underground Railroad, a name depicting the secret routes that fugitive slaves followed to freedom in Canada. The start of our Railroad tour was at the western most part of the state of New York, Buffalo, and would, over the next five days, follow the 363-mile long Erie Canal through to the Hudson River and down to New York City.

Buffalo became an economic powerhouse in the 19th century beginning with the completion of the Erie Canal (opened October 26, 1825, mainly built by immigrant Irish and Chinese labour) which meant that its grain could be transported by water along the state and, ultimately, to the Atlantic to be exported.

The Erie Canal Harbour is now drawing visitor numbers in the thousands to experience water sports, fishing and excellent restaurants on the shores of the lake.

But for our purposes, this city was unique because of the existence of the Michigan Street Baptist Church still occupying its original location. Many fugitives were reportedly harboured here before moving across to Canada also known to slaves as Canaan or The Promised Land- just the other side of Lake Erie.



Tourist spot: the Smithfield Community Center

Though in 1827 slavery was made illegal in New York, the South's rural economy still depended on enslaved labour and many fugitives, rather than stay in the US and risk being returned into slavery, escaped to Canada.

Our host, Kevin, of Motherland Connexions, took us to this famous church and also Broderick Park, which was a popular crossing on the Niagara River.

It was then on to Lewiston, to have lunch at the scenic Water Street Landing before visiting Niagara Falls and getting to see the suspension bridge that Harriet Tubman, and others, crossed to Canada. It was soon time to board The Maid in the Mist vessel, which – remarkably - has been in continuous operation since the 1840s, for a rather wet ride under the falls.

We travelled on to Rochester that evening for an exceptional meal at Pier 45 at Port of Rochester which included oysters and homemade crisps; a sumptuous end to a fascinating day.

Akwaaba (meaning 'welcome' in Ghanaian) was much of the focus of our tour today. Dr Anderson and his wife Ruth run AKWABA and organise re-enactments that take place at the Radisson Hotel, where once the dry goods store of Austin Steward, one of the first black businessmen, was formerly located.

Rochester is where Frederick Douglass, who famously came to England to rally abolitionists and raise funds, had set up base as editor of the North Star newspaper. Frederick Douglass is buried here in the Mount Hope Cemetery and there is an impressive monument to him in the city's Highland Park.



African American community: an area of Weeksville in Brooklyn, New York

This is also the birthplace of Susan B. Anthony, a ferocious Women's Rights campaigner, who lived and worked here all her life. A friend of Douglass, she was also an avid abolitionist. We visited her home (now a museum called the Susan B. Anthony House).

The Utah Mormons were one of her big supporters and a beautiful black silk dress, given by them, is on display here. Later that afternoon we were off to the New York State Culinary Wine Centre, located on Lake Canandaigua, offering guests the opportunity to sample the state's extensive wines.

Executive chef, Carlos Peretti, created a unique meal for our group based on regional specialties: butternut squash bisque, cornbread and finishing with a grape tart with peanut butter short crust and concord sorbet, all matched with different varieties of Finger Lakes wines. Divine.

On the third day of our trip we visited Auburn and the home of the famous Harriet Tubman. This was an important day as Tubman's status as an abolitionist is legendary. Tubman had a traumatic childhood with regular beatings starting at the age of six. This began her desire to escape from her cruel masters. After gaining her own freedom, she went back to the South frequently to save others and further, went on to become a spy in the Civil War. This property in Cayuga County was sold to her by William H. Seward, Governor of New York and Secretary of State under Abraham Lincoln, and it is where she built her house and a convalescent home. In 1897, Queen Victoria sent her a Silver Jubilee medal and a silk shawl after reading her biography. Afterwards, we enjoyed a relaxing lunch at the historic and beautiful Springside Inn, built in 1851 on Lake Owasco.



Worth a visit: the Schuyler Mansion state historic site

The Matilda Joslyn Gage Home in Fayetteville is a delightfully different project intent on breaking all the rules, an anti-museum if you will; where children and guests are encouraged to write questions on the wall and there are goodies to eat in every room of the house.

Here we saw a disturbingly real enactment by a local actress reliving the story of an escape where a fugitive slave tries to slit his throat after being told his master is on their trail, at the same time his wife jumps into the canal with her baby and the infant drowns.

Interestingly, Matilda Joslyn Gage was Frank L Baum's (the creator of the Wizard of Oz and the character of Dorothy) mother-in-law. After a visit to Peterboro to see the Gerrit Smith property (famous philanthropist and social reformer) and a quick walk across to the National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum, it is time to move on to Albany, where we try out on-site brewed beers at the Albany Pump Station.

The early American colony of New York was also inhabited by the Dutch and, the ornate First Church in Albany (Reformed) which is still in use, celebrates Dutch culture.

I particularly enjoyed the visit to the refurbished Schuyler Mansion which gave me an insight into how people lived in the Revolutionary War era.



Abolitionist: the former home of Gerrit Smith

The John Jay Homestead in Rye where the Jays moved in 1745 was the next fascinating stop on our way to the Hudson Valley particularly as William Jay became a respected abolitionist. The Upper Mills at Philipsburg Manor in Sleepy Hollow was a colonial operation fully run by African slaves. The farm, animals and mill are all operating today which makes for an engaging interactive experience. I was moved to hear of the plight of Kofe and Caesar, workers who became embroiled in the 1741 slave uprising that resulted in their executions.

Our final day is Brooklyn and New York City where we travel downtown to see the African Burial Ground in Manhattan. This was one of my favourite experiences as local people were successful in getting the City and Federal Government to create a monument in honour of slaves buried here from 1690 to 1794. It is the shape of a ship, to represent the way slaves would have been first transported to the New World, with flowing water on each side to represent the ocean.

Recently, there has been a focus of the western world on New York City for the 9/11 anniversary and the remembrance of the tragic incident on that day. But many other stories are emerging about the struggles of our American cousins. This is a tour well worth taking if you are interested in these stories.