

SLAVERY IN CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY AS IT EXISTED OYER 80 YEARS AGO

The following- paper was prepared and read by Abner Hazeltine before the Chautauqua County Society of History and Natural Science at the annual meeting at Mayville today:

There are remaining few who remember that negroes were once held in slavery within this county and fewer still if any survive who saw a slave in bondage within its bounds owned by a resident, it is possible that none are living who saw in the first quarter of the preceding century, a slave in the county toiling for a master. Yet it is a well authenticated fact that negroes were once held in bondage within the county. Hon. Obed Edson, the acknowledged historian of the county, writes in the Centennial History of the County, the latest and most complete of all that has been written, upon page 166, of the first volume, that: "In 1817 eight slaves and their masters were residing in Chautauqua county, and not until 1827 were the slaves all freed in New York state." Dr. Taylor, the accurate and careful writer of *Historical Sketches of the Town of Portland*, published in 1873, writes upon page 223, the same statement.

Neither of these historical writers gives any authority that at the date of the passage of the act of the legislature abolishing slavery in the state of New York by a gradual method there were eight slaves within the county, actual property of their masters, and to declare the number. Yet both cite from actual legal records existing in the proper office indisputable evidence that slavery then existed here. From the office of the town clerk of the town of Chautauqua, they both cite the existence of certificates that were properly filed under the laws of the state, requiring the filing of such certificates that clearly establish the facts. These certificates are as follows:

"Chautauqua, April 14, 1814.

"To Whom It May Concern: This may certify that William Harris of the town and county above mentioned, aged 47 years, about five feet seven Inches high, of black complexion, born in the state of Rhode Island, town of Scituate, of free parents, hath made before me such

proof of his freedom that I am fully convinced of his freedom as to the pretense of any person to the contrary notwithstanding. "Given under my hand,

Matthew Prendergast

"One of the judges of the Court of Common pleas in said county, "John Dexter, Town Clerk."

Judge Prendergast also caused to be recorded in the same town clerk's office, which was the town of his residence, the following:

"I, Matthew Prendergast, one of the judges in and for the county of Chautauqua, do certify that on the 16th day of February last past, there was born unto me a black boy slave by the name of Jonas,

"This 22d day of Sept., 1816.

" John Dexter, Town Clerk."

The making and filing of these certificates was provided for by law. The first by a statute enacted April 9, 1811, afforded protection from slavery to freemen of color but was passed primarily to distinguish between slaves and free blacks in the exercise of the right of suffrage. It provided that all colored men producing such a certificate properly authenticated, should not be prevented from voting. The second was filed in compliance with chapter 62 of the acts of the legislature of 1799, which provided under a penalty, that all masters of slaves should file a certificates(sic) of the birth of a slave, in the office of the town clerk of their residence, containing the name of the master, and name, age and sex of every slave born to them. This was the first great act passed by the legislature of New York for the gradual abolition of slavery within the state. It was followed by others, until the final act of 1817, chapter 137 of the session laws of that year, which enacted "That every negro, mullato or mustee within the state, born before the fourth day of July, 1799 shall after the 4th day of July, 1827, be free." The peculiar language of this enactment was necessary because of the provisions in the previous act of 1799, "That any child born of a slave mother within this state after the fourth of July next, shall be deemed and adjudged to be born free, provided nevertheless, that said child shall be the servant of the legal proprietor of his or her mother until such servant, if a male, shall

arrive at the age of twenty-eight years, and if a female at the age of twenty-five years." This provision was re-enacted by chapter 188 of the laws of 1801.

Although Dr. Taylor and Mr. Edson cite no authority for their respective statements of the number of slaves within the county at the date of the passage of the principal and final act of the legislature abolishing slavery within the state, they had the authority of the following passage in the earliest written history of the county; that of the Hon. Emery F. Warren, a distinguished citizen who settled in the county in 1819 and filled most acceptably the office of surrogate and county Judge. He writes in his sketches of the History of Chautauqua County, published in 1846: "When that benign law, so consonant to the spirit of philanthropy, was enacted in 1817, providing for the gradual emancipation of all persons held in slavery in this state, and for their entire freedom thereafter within its limits, it found eight persons in bondage in this county, whose masters resided here." Judge Warren gives no authority for his statement. His history is a very carefully written production. It is authority of itself for all that it contains. No citations of authority were needed to verify any statements he made. No question has been made at any time, either at its publication or since of its entire accuracy. He was the acquaintance and associate of all the early settlers of the county and no fact or event could have occurred of so great importance with which he was not himself familiar, and any error or misstatement, that he might have made would surely have been challenged by his associates, who were living when his publication appeared. It was wholly unnecessary that he should cite authority. But as to the fact that slavery once existed in the county, both Dr. Taylor and Mr. Edson cite the highest authority, the public records; the certificates made and filed by Judge Prendergast, above quoted. Judge Warren stands alone as the authority that the number of slaves in 1817 was eight. It will afford a better understanding of the subject to inquire briefly by what right slavery existed in the county and state. It was not introduced by the act of any government of any country or colony. It had not at the beginning the authority of any law, but subsequently it had the sanction and protection of colonial and state legislative

enactment. It was introduced in 1626 into the city of New York, then known as New Amsterdam, while the territory was claimed and held by the Dutch, by the Honorable West India Company, a Dutch speculative organization, to supply the pressing necessity of domestic laborers. The same company had seven years before introduced negro slaves into Virginia. Some historians assert that the Dutch West India company practically forced slavery on the people. Slavery had existed under the Dutch in New York for thirty-eight years, when in 1666 the English took possession and established the colony under the charter of the king of England to his brother, the Duke of York. The English colonists found slavery well established. They were not ignorant of its existence, nor innocent of its wrong. While there was no authority in law, enacted by either Holland or England for the introduction and holding of slaves, neither government approved it, but simply suffered it. Neither abolished it, nor prevented the introduction of more slaves. There was formed under the English flag and English protection, the Royal African Company to engage in the slave trade. The notorious but brave Englishman, Sir John Hawkins, made voyages to the coast of Guinea as a slave trader. Royalty itself openly engaged in the traffic. The Duke of York, for whom the colony was named, on the grant, to him by his brother, the King of England, and who afterward ascended the throne as King James II, openly engaged in the slave trade and was president of the Royal African Company. The condition of the slaves, under the English, was not much changed from what it was under the Dutch. It may have become somewhat more rigorous, in the more than a century that intervened before the Declaration of Independence. Judge Northrop, in his *History of Slavery in New York*, naively remarks: "The English authorities, unlike the Dutch, mingled a little piety with their slave trade and slave holding. But the piety did not so much mitigate the evils of the system, as give opportunity for exploiting religion in a harmless and ineffectual way". King James II, after he ascended the throne, seems to have partially repented of his act as Duke of York, in introducing slavery into the colony, for In 1686, the instructions sent to Governor Dougan, then provincial governor, by his majesty's direct command, contained the following memorable language: "You shall pass a law for the restraining of

inhuman severity, which by all masters or overseers may be used toward their Christian servants or slaves, wherein provision is to be made that the willful killing of Indians and negroes may be punished with death, and that a fit penalty be imposed for the maiming of them." The population, including slaves, was frequently enumerated during the time the colony was under the English government, the numbers reported are set forth in the documents relating to the colonial history of the state, from which it is ascertained that at the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the population was, 169,148 whites and 21,992 blacks. The blacks constituting about 18 per cent of the whole. Slavery had at that time spread into all of the original counties such is a glimpse into slavery as it came to the people of New York by inheritance when they came to statehood. They were intolerant of it, and a series of legislative enactments began in 1799 and completed in 1817 entirely extinguished it in 1827. The quoted historical statement awakened a desire to know more of a subject so briefly and tersely stated, not in doubt of their accuracy, but to know who were the masters of the eight slaves, who brought them into the county, and what became of the slaves themselves, upon which matters the historians are silent. The inquiry involved an examination of the original returns of the enumerators who took the federal census of the counties of Genesee and Chautauqua in the census years 1810, 1820 and 1830, which can only be found in the bureau of the census at Washington, D. C.; the published reports of the census in the Library of Congress; the census reports of the several censuses taken by the authority of the state of New York which it was hoped could be found in the New York State library at Albany; an examination of the bound volumes of the early newspapers printed in the county which proved disappointing and fruitless, and conversations and correspondence with the septuagenarians and octogenarians, natives of the county, whether now resident or not. The reports of the census enumerators also proved disappointing for from this source was expected exact information. There are no returns of the federal census of 1810, if one was taken in this county, to be found in Washington. Those of the census of 1820 show that Dr. Jedediah Prendergast of the town of Chautauqua was then the master of two female slaves,

and that his brother Thomas Prendergast of Ripley, was the master of one male slave. These were all the slaves in the county as shown by any federal census. Inquiry at the State library revealed that the returns of the state census of 1814 are incomplete and that the returns from Chautauqua County for that year are among the missing ones. There is found, however, in the report of Dr. Franklin B. Hough, superintendent of the state census of 1855, on page 11, the statement that there were five slaves in Chautauqua county in 1814 and three in 1820, and none at any later date. These official reports cast a doubt upon the positive and unchallenged statement of Judge Warren, as pains taking and careful a writer as he is known to have been, that in 1817 there were "eight persons in bondage in the county, whose masters resided here." He wrote at a time when there were many persons living who knew the precise facts, if they were not known to himself and it is not to be believed he made that statement without investigation. Did Judge Warren mean to be understood that there had been eight persons in bondage before 1817, or was the taking of the census in that day imperfect and unreliable? His statement is positive and no other interpretation can be put upon it than that there were in 1817 eight slaves in the county. Some doubt on the other hand, may be charged upon the accuracy and conclusiveness of the evidence of the number of slaves in the county as shown by the census reports for they contain no mention of any slaves of Judge Matthew Prendergast also of the town of Chautauqua, but the town records show, as we have seen, that under the requirements of law, he filed a certificate that there was born to him a black boy slave, of the name of Jonas, in 1816, of whose mother he must have been the owner and master. Inquiry of the descendants of William Prendergast discloses the facts as to the introduction of slaves by him and his sons. He brought with him Tom, when the family first appeared in the county seeking a place to make their home. Afterwards the Prendergasts brought Jack and Maria, brother and sister, and Maria's son Jonas was born, slaves of Judge Matthew Prendergast; and Nan and Ann, slaves of Dr. Jedediah Prendergast, and Sue, slave of Thomas Prendergast, a total number of six persons in bondage to the Prendergasts. Further Inquiry made of the descendants of Elisha

Devereaux, who came to this county in 1814, and of others acquainted with the facts, discloses that he brought with him two slaves that he sold to the Holland Land Company for the land upon which he settled on the headwaters of Stillwater creek, in the town of Busti, where he built a saw mill. Diligent and long continued search and inquiry fails to show that any other slaves were brought into our county. These may have been the eight slaves referred to by Judge Warren. They may have all been in the county in 1817 and not in 1820 to be enumerated in the census of that year.

The slaves brought in by Mr. Devereaux did not long remain in the county. When and where they were removed by their purchaser cannot now be ascertained. Their names are not remembered. All of the slaves in the county would have become free on the fourth day of July, 1827, under the operation of the act of 1817, save Jonas, who was born after the fourth day of July, 1799, who, under the act of that year, above cited, was required to serve his master until twenty-eight years of age, which would not be attained until 1842; and save Sue, who was required for a like reason to serve her master until twenty-five years of age. But the slaves of the Prendergasts were manumitted before the period of their bondage expired under the law.

Although manumitted, they for the most part remained with the several families to which they had been attached until they died and were provided a burial upon the estate where they sleep not remote from those they were glad in life to serve. Dr. Prendergast's daughter, Catherine, married a Mr. Merritte, a distinguished citizen of Canada. In her correspondence with her mother the following passage occurs: "You don't say whether you intend bringing Nan. I would be loath to sell her without it is her choice. Let her know every circumstance that will attend her coming here." Ann, after attaining her freedom, married a colored man, Richard Sweezer, and lived at Jamestown. She lived to great age and was well and favorably known by the citizens of that city. She married and lived at Westfield. Some of her descendants survived her, but what became of all of them is not known. Some of them died at an early age. It is not known that there is now a single descendant of either of these people in the county.

There can no reproach attached to the holding of these people in bondage. They were considered rather in the light of servants and were kindly treated as an integral part of the family, sharing in prosperity and adversity. They were held as such persons had been held for more than a century in this state and in the particular locality where they were born and reared in accordance with the custom of the age, and the common practice of the more enlightened people of the period. There was a firm reciprocal bond of sympathetic attachment between master and servant that continued after freedom came to the servants, and until death occurred. Many were the kind acts of care and helpful assistance that were extended to them, which were appreciated. It is related of Sue, who because of her attainments and skill, was sometimes employed as chief cook at one of the principal hotels of the county, that one day some relatives of her former master went there for dinner. The fact of their coming being made known to her, she made an inspection of the dining room and its appointments, and imperiously commanded one of the servants under her authority: "You take them glasses right back to the kitchen and make 'em shine, them is some of my folks'.