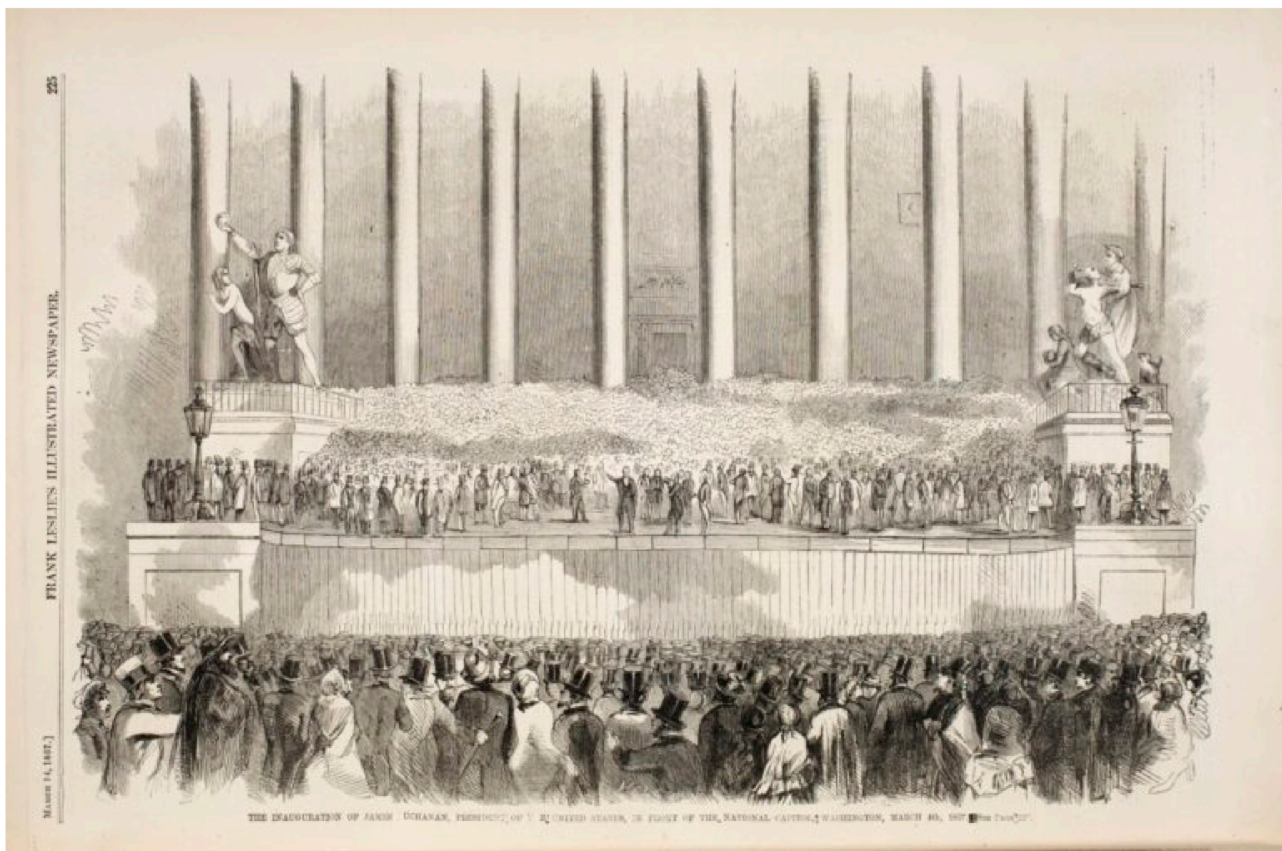
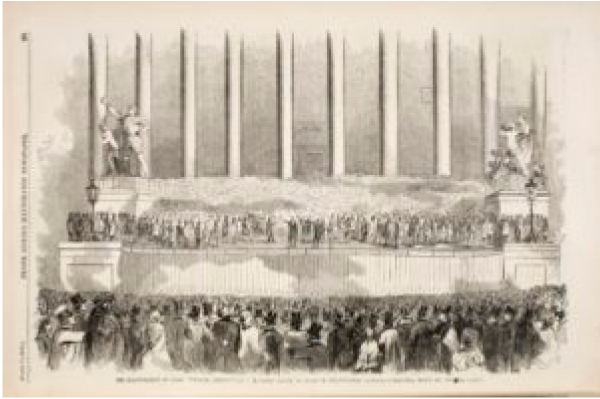
Jane Clark: A Newly Available Slave Narrative



Deep in the archive of the Cayuga Museum and Case Research Lab in Auburn, New York, sits an obscure twelve-page manuscript written in a neat hand. It is titled simply “Jane Clark.” Penned in 1897 by Julia C. Ferris, a white teacher and local educational leader, the manuscript narrates portions of the life of Jane Clark, an enslaved woman who escaped to Auburn in 1859.[1] This narrative, rich with information about the Underground Railroad, has never been available to scholars, teachers, and lay readers—until now.


“The Inauguration of James Buchanan, President of the United States, in front of the National Capitol, Washington,” from the March 14, 1857, issue of *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, p. 225. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

According to the narrative, Jane Clark was born under slavery in Maryland in about 1822 and raised by her grandmother until the age of seven or eight. After that time, she was “taken in payment of a debt by William Compton,” a wealthy and powerful plantation owner. When Compton died, Clark (who then went by the name Charlotte Harris) was hired out to people who mistreated her. Later, when William Compton’s son Barnes turned twenty-one, Clark returned to his plantation in Port Tobacco, Maryland, and was further abused.[2] After surviving five floggings, she “determined to escape or die in the attempt.” In about 1856, with assistance from her brother William Lemon, his wife Sophie, his enslaved friend Brother Garner, and a number of white sympathizers, Clark escaped to a cabin in Maryland, where she hid for at least eleven months. Then, in 1857, she and her brother obtained forged passes to travel to Washington, D.C., to witness the presidential inauguration of James Buchanan. Once in Washington, Clark lacked an opportunity to travel further, so she remained there for two years, passing as a free woman. Meanwhile, her brother escaped to Auburn, New York, in 1857. In 1859, Clark succeeded in securing train tickets to Baltimore and then New York, finally arriving in Auburn. In 1863, she married Henry Clark, an official in Auburn’s A.M.E. Zion Church (she previously had a husband in Maryland; the narrative demurely sidesteps questions of whether the two husbands were the same person).

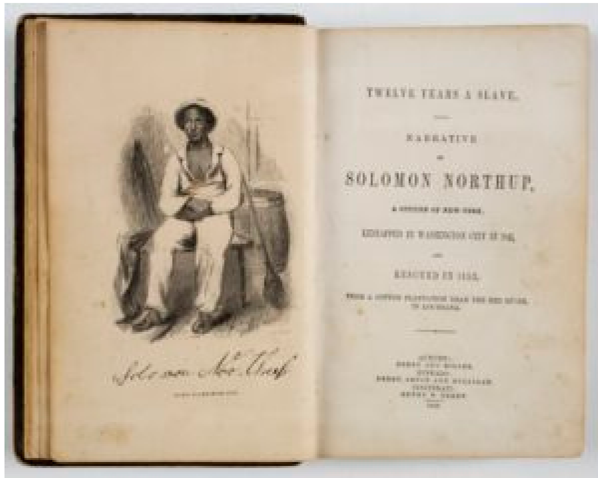
Context

Several contexts are useful for understanding Jane Clark’s narrative: other slave narratives penned by white amanuenses, other accounts of escape, and other texts that establish the significance of Auburn, New York, to freedom-seekers.

Julia Ferris’s apparent decision to interview Clark and then to write her

narrative could be understood as a precursor to the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (later the Works Projects Administration), in which white writers conducted 2,300 interviews of formerly enslaved people from 1936-1938. These interviews provide extensive information about slavery in the United States, but that information is often tainted by white interviewers' and editors' racism, condescension, and manipulation. Ferris's prose, too, is marred by condescension and the occasional mockery of her subject. And like many of the WPA interviewers four decades later, Ferris represented Clark's speech as almost illegible dialect. Unlike most of the WPA interviewers, however, Ferris makes her subject's agency the primary object of inquiry; she depicts Clark as bold, resourceful, and tenacious. In this way, one might view Ferris's narrative less as predecessor to the WPA interviews and more as a successor to well-known, amanuensis-penned narratives such as *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* by Olive Gilbert (1850) and *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* by Sarah H. Bradford (1869; expanded and republished in 1886 as *Harriet: The Moses of Her People*).

The details of Jane Clark's escape find echoes in many other slave narratives. For example, Whitsunday, a holiday observed on the seventh Sunday after Easter, provided Clark with an opportunity to slip away from the Compton plantation. The strategy of taking advantage of relaxed rules during a holiday was common; Christmas provided especially good cover because enslaved people often received several consecutive days' rest during which limited travel was permitted. Henry Bibb and Ellen and William Craft escaped during Christmastime, and Harriet Tubman helped her three brothers to do the same. In another point of comparison, Jane Clark endured lengthy delays in the course of escape: first, she hid in a cabin in Maryland for at least eleven months until she obtained a forged pass to Washington, D.C., and after she arrived in that city, she was unable to travel farther for two more years. Such delays appear in many slave narratives, most famously that of Harriet Jacobs, who hid for seven years in her grandmother's attic. Readers may identify many other points of connection and similarity, including the violence Clark endured, the importance and hazards of forged passes, the use of a train as a vehicle of escape, and the separation of family members.


TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE.

NARRATIVE

SOLOMON NORTHUP,

Title page and frontispiece portrait, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York* (Auburn, N.Y., 1853). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Jane Clark's destination, Auburn, is best known as the site of the Auburn State Prison, which innovated the infamous "Auburn System" of incarceration in which convicts labored in for-profit factories while enduring total, violently enforced silence. Ironically, this technology of unfreedom developed in a city that fostered significant abolitionist activity. Located at the crossroads among major Underground Railroad sites including New York City and Elmira to the south, Syracuse to the northeast, Albany to the east, and Rochester to the west, Auburn was home to famous freedom workers such as Harriet Tubman (who lived in Auburn with her extended family for more than five decades) and William Henry Seward, as well as many almost-forgotten figures who harbored fugitives and spoke out against slavery. Auburn was especially important to the history of abolitionist publishing: Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) were both originally published in Auburn; Sarah Bradford's *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869) was also first published in Auburn—and with the support of subscribers who were, with only two exceptions, residents of Auburn. Judith Wellman's superb "Uncovering the Freedom Trail in Auburn and Cayuga County, New York" documents the extensive organized and unorganized resistance to slavery that incubated in Auburn throughout the nineteenth century. Although contemporary scholars of the Underground Railroad generally emphasize the cities surrounding Auburn, nineteenth-century sources (especially Bradford's two volumes on Tubman) testify abundantly to the importance of Auburn to the Underground Railroad and to abolition more broadly. Jane Clark's narrative, in the context of these other sources, helps bring Auburn to the foreground of this history.

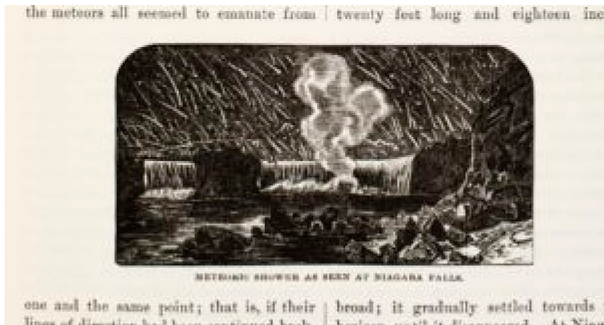
“Remarkable Meteoric Display on the Mississippi,” in *Our First Century: Being a Popular Descriptive Portraiture of the One Hundred Great and Memorable Events of Perpetual Interest,* by Richard Miller Devens (Springfield, Mass.), p. 334. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Corroboration

Clark witnessed two historical events that provide clear chronological markers for the narrative. One, the inauguration of James Buchanan, dates the arrival of Clark and her brother in Washington, D.C., within a window of a few days. The other, earlier, historical event is the mighty Leonids meteor shower of 1833, known popularly as the night the “stars fell.” This event inspired responses ranging from terror to awe in diverse North Americans, but it held special significance for African Americans, some of whom viewed the celestial event as an augur of great upheaval, including, potentially, the end of slavery. The brilliant African American quilter Harriet Powers (1837-1910) devoted one panel of a pictorial quilt to the event, Harriet Tubman repeatedly recounted witnessing the meteor shower,[3] and Frederick Douglass described it in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself:*

> I went to St. Michaels to live in March, 1833. I know the year, because it was the one succeeding the first cholera in Baltimore, and was also the year of that strange phenomenon when the heavens seemed about to part with their starry train. I witnessed this gorgeous spectacle, and was awe-struck. The air seemed filled with bright descending messengers from the sky. It was about daybreak when I saw this sublime scene. I was not without the suggestion, at the moment, that it might be the harbinger of the coming of the Son of Man; and in my then state of mind I was prepared to hail Him as my friend and deliverer. I had read that the “stars shall fall from heaven,” and they were now falling. I was suffering very much in my mind. It did seem that every time the young tendrils of my affection became attached they were

> rudely broken by some unnatural outside power; and I was looking away to heaven for the rest denied me on earth.



“Meteoric Shower as Seen at Niagara Falls,” in *Our First Century: Being a Popular Descriptive Portraiture of the One Hundred Great and Memorable Events of Perpetual Interest*, by Richard Miller Devens (Springfield, Mass.), p. 331. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Clark’s witnessing of the Leonids constitutes one of the most moving passages in the narrative. As an enslaved child, Clark was forced to carry water “a long distance from a spring for culinary purposes for all on the plantation” (“Jane Clark,” p. 4). With two other children, she made seven trips each day, including two trips that started at 4 o’clock each morning. The water weighed heavily on the children: “The hair was worn off their heads by the water pails which the children carried on them” (4). But on November 12, 1833, the painful trip became a scene of extraordinary beauty:

> It was on one of these early morning excursions that she saw the “stars fall.” This scene is vivid in her memory. The children were on their way to the spring. They were not old enough to be alarmed by the unusual sight but ran along trying to catch the stars as they fell. (3-4)

Frontispiece portrait of William Still from *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia, 1872). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Other evidence further corroborates and expands upon Clark's narrative. The earliest known sliver of printed evidence potentially to confirm details of Clark's narrative is a letter of May 4, 1857, from L.D. Mansfield, of Auburn, to William Still, an African American abolitionist known as the "Father of the Underground Railroad."[4] This letter to Still describes a "Henry Lemmon" whose sister is in the midst of escaping slavery with the goal of reaching Auburn. The letter reads:

> AUBURN, NEW YORK, MAY 4TH, 1857.
>
> DEAR BR. STILL:—Henry Lemmon wishes me to write to you in reply to your kind letter, conveying the intelligence of the death of your fugitive guest, Geo. Weems. He was deeply affected at the intelligence, for he was most devotedly attached to him and had been for many years. Mr. Lemmon now expects his sister to come on, and wishes you to aid her in any way in your power—as he knows you will. He wishes you to send the coat and cap of Weems by his sister when she comes. And when you write out the history of Weems' escape, and it is published, that you would send him a copy of the papers. He has not been very successful in getting work yet.[5]

The timing of this letter aligns perfectly with Clark's narrative. Clark's brother William Lemon escaped Washington shortly after Buchanan's inauguration in early March 1857. In May 1857, when this letter was written, Lemon had just

arrived in Auburn; he would have assumed that his sister was on her way and if she traveled through Philadelphia she might need Still's assistance. Lemon had no way of knowing that Clark was stuck in Washington, D.C., and would remain there for two years. Despite the discrepancy between "Henry Lemmon" and "William Lemon," then, the timing and content of the letter to Still suggest strongly that the two are the same person and that the sister described in this letter is Jane Clark.[6]

"The Bank of Auburn," image opposite page 148 in Joel H. Monroe's *Historical Records of a Hundred and Twenty Years* (Geneva, N.Y., 1913). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Soon after Clark arrived in Auburn in 1859, she became a live-in domestic worker for Charles G. Briggs, a cashier at the Auburn City National Bank who served as mayor of Auburn in 1864. Clark lived with and worked for Briggs from at least 1861 to 1865.[7] The 1865 New York State Census lists Jane Clark as "servant" to Briggs and notes that she is African American, 43 years old, born in Maryland, and married once (which may suggest that Henry Clark and her Maryland husband were the same person, or may reflect the fact that her Maryland marriage was extralegal). In the column indicating whether a person was "Over 21, and not able to read and write," the census-taker scrawled a possible "R," which could suggest that Jane Clark could read but not write. The 1880 census makes a similar suggestion: that year's census-taker checked the column indicating that Clark could not write but left unchecked a column that would have indicated Clark could not read. In the narrative itself, Clark describes herself as able to read the Bible.

New York state census, 1865 (Ancestry.com, 2014). Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., Provo, Utah. In this detail, we can see that Julia Ferris lived with the Briggs as a boarder at age 21, and Jane Clark, listed as “B” for black, simultaneously lived and worked there as a servant.

In the line above Clark’s in the 1865 state census, another familiar name appears: Julia Ferris. Ferris, age 21, boarded with the Briggses while she worked as a teacher. Thirty-two years later, she became the amanuensis of the formerly enslaved woman who lived and worked in the same household. The narrative of Jane Clark, then, should be read as the result of a long relationship and perhaps a deep familiarity between two women—another notable contrast with the WPA interviews, which were usually conducted between strangers.

The 1865 New York State Census shows that although Jane and Henry Clark were married in 1863, they lived separately in 1865; five years later, the husband and wife lived together in property valued at $1,500. The 1870s census locates them in Auburn’s seventh ward; Henry is listed as a farm laborer, Jane as a housekeeper. Both are listed as having been born in Maryland. They appear together again in the New York State Census of 1875, which lists Henry as a farmer and specifies that he owns the land on which they live.

By 1877, however, Jane was again working as a live-in domestic and Henry lived separately, at 17 Division Street, while working as a laborer.[8] By 1880 the couple again lived under one roof, according to the Federal Census. The 1892 New York State Census lists them again as cohabitating.

The final possible references I have found to Jane or Henry Clark are in the 1900 and 1905 Auburn city directories. The 1900 edition lists Henry as working as a white-washer and living at 25 Division Street (the names of wives typically did not appear in this directory, so the absence of Jane’s name indicates nothing). And the 1905 edition lists a Henry Clark working as a watchman and living at 9 Throop Avenue, while Jane Clark lives at The Home, 46 Grant Avenue.[9] Their dates of death are currently unknown.

Broader Connections

Before this publication in *Common-Place*, the narrative of Jane Clark received spotty attention in three places, all focused on the local history of Auburn, New York. “Uncovering the Freedom Trail in Auburn and Cayuga County, New York”

(and the equally excellent supporting database, "African Americans in Cayuga County, New York, 1820-1870," compiled by Tanya Warren), mentions Jane Clark several times and states that her narrative is archived at the Cayuga Museum; it was on the basis of this lead that I sought out the narrative at that archive. Eileen McHugh, executive director of the Cayuga Museum and Case Research Lab, alerted me to a summary of Jane Clark's narrative that was published in 1993 in a local volume celebrating the bicentennial of the founding of Auburn. And finally, late in the process of preparing this piece for publication, I discovered that a transcription of Jane Clark's narrative, containing many small errors, appeared online in 2009 in a blog devoted to Auburn's history.[10] All of these sources address readers who are already interested in Auburn's local history. None aims to connect Jane Clark's narrative to a broader audience, and none has had that effect.

That connection is the goal of this piece in *Common-Place*. An accurate transcription, with context and corroboration, makes Jane Clark's narrative available to and usable by scholars, teachers, and laypeople who are interested in African American history.[11] One of thousands who liberated herself from slavery and forged a new life in the North, Jane Clark was both ordinary and extraordinary. Her story deserves to be known.

The Narrative

Jane Clark
by
Julia C. Ferris

Read at the banquet of the Cayuga County His. Soc.[12] Feb 22, 1897. [End of unpaginated title page]

Jane Clark.

The underground railway was like other railways in one particular only—by its aid passengers were transported. The termini of this railroad were The South and The North. The route was from Bondage through Suffering to Freedom or Capture. Its lines were laid regardless of heavy grades or obstructing waterways. Trips over it were made in but one direction. It had no time tables, no regular stations. Its trainsmen might be color blind to any hue but sable. Its known agents suffered death. No fares were collected. Stopovers were allowed as the passenger's safety seemed to require. Its completion was not celebrated by silver spike-driving or other ceremonial. No one knows aught of its beginning save that it had its inception in sympathetic human hearts. Its functions ceased as the result of a few pen strokes January 1, 1863. [End of p. 1]

Jane Clark is a colored woman about 75 years of age who resides in this city [Auburn, New York].[13] She was born a slave. Her speech,[14] though not always "twisted threads of gold and steel,"[15] generally leaves no one in doubt as to her meaning. One knows exactly the idea intended when she says "I can't read anythin' but de Bible: bu Ise can read ev'ry word in dat from Genesee to Revolution.["][16] Even the words in the Scriptures which would appall any one but a Seminary Professor have no terrors for her.[17]

The word patrollers is defined by her to be "a lot of men on horses who go roarin' roun' to fine runaways. I suppose dey is called rollers because they roams aroun' de country. I don't know why pat."

Judging from her own statement she is an expert genealogist for she declares with much earnestness "I knows all my ole b[l]ack parentses names." [End of p. 2]

The Thompson Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (or A.M.E. Zion Church), where Henry Clark was an official and where Harriet Tubman worshiped, 49 Parker Street in Auburn, N.Y. This church was built and dedicated in 1891 (the congregation had worshiped since 1838 in a church on Washington Street in Auburn). Photograph by Robin Bernstein.

Her original name was Charlotte Harris. She reached this city and Freedom in 1859 by way of the underground railroad. She then took the name of Jane Lemon the surname being the one adopted by her brother who came by the same route two years earlier. In 1863 she married Henry Clark an official in the A.M.E. Zion church who according to his wife's words "is goin' to heaben han' over fist."[18]

Her mother died when she was an infant. Her maternal grandmother, practically a free woman, readily obtained permission to “bring the child up.” When six or seven years of age she was taken in payment of a debt by William Compton and was the first of many slaves he owned. At the age of eight she was hired out to the owner of a small plantation. Her daily food here consisted of a pint of corn meal which was seasoned with salt, mixed with water and baked in the ashes. Her principal duty [End of p. 3] was, in company with two other children, to bring water a long distance from a spring for culinary purposes for all on the plantation. These three children would start out about four o’clock in the morning make two trips before breakfast four before dinner and one before supper. The hair was worn off their heads by the water pails which the children carried on them.

It was on one of these early morning excursions that she saw the “stars fall.”[19] This scene is vivid in her memory. The children were on their way to the spring. They were not old enough to be alarmed by the unusual sight but ran along trying to catch the stars as they fell.

After two years of this service she was taken home by her master. Here she was well treated and had plenty to eat.

When her master died the slaves were hired out until [End of p. 4] his son, Barnes, should be of age. Most of those to whom she was hired ill treated her.

When Barnes Compton attained his majority he returned home and recalled his slaves.[20] Three years from this time Charlotte’s troubles began, the cause of which she attributes to jealousy on the part of her cousin Mary, some years older than herself whom she had superseded in culinary affairs and the interference of an aunt of her master’s who had come to live with him.[21]

She tells of the first whipping she received. She had performed her early morning task of feeding the cows and returned to the house to make the fire and prepare breakfast for the family. The fire did not burn readily, and the hour for breakfast had passed when her master appeared in the kitchen. He began to whip her because breakfast was late and took that opportunity to settle many old [End of p. 5] scores accusing her of saying and doing things which she stoutly denied. This whipping she classes as a severe one and says “I didn’t feel it. Seems like as if I was trustin’ in God. Wishes I could trust him so now.” She received in all five floggings, three from her new master, and two from the overseer.

She became accustomed to scenes of severity differing only in detail from those we read about. [22] She determined to escape or die in the attempt.

She felt that her hope of escape lay in her brother William who lived more than thirty miles away. A white man, one of the “white trash,” wrote to her brother addressing it, not to William, but to another “poor white” who lived about two miles from William’s master. A long time had elapsed. No answer from William

had been received, and Charlotte wondered if one would ever come.

On Whitsunday[23]—which was observed as a holiday—early in [End of p. 6] the morning one of the black children came into the house and told Charlotte that somebody wanted to see her at the quarters. Embracing the first opportunity to go there she was told that Br. Garner wanted to see her in the pines. When she reached the woods she was to hum a particular tune that Br. Garner might know she was coming. She had heard of Br. Garner and knew that he came from William. What should she do? Her duties at these required her immediate attention. Her anxiety to hear from her brother urged her to go to the pines at once. For a few minutes the conflict lasted which she discreetly settled by returning to her house duties. To these she gave her undivided attention. She prepared for dinner, arranged to leave the house for a short time and hastened to the pines. She hummed the designated tune and Br. Garner issued from his place of concealment. This interview was brief, but long enough to enable them to arrange that Charlotte should [End of p. 7] start on her journey as soon after dark as she could and joining Br. Garner on the way. She knew nothing about the plans for her future. It was enough for her to know that William had sent for her. She returned to the house and performed her usual duties, selecting at intervals such things as she could take with her and putting them in two pillow-cases. Br. Garner's presence is accounted for by the fact that slaves in this part of the country during any holiday season were permitted to visit neighboring plantations without special permission. No attention was paid to the absence of a slave at such a time as it was presumed that when the time of festivity had expired he would return. She had told no one of her intended flight but her husband[24] and the black woman by whom Br. Garner had sent word to her. His [sic] husband's home was some miles from Charlotte's. He had taken advantage of the holiday privilege to visit his wife but returned to his [End of p. 8] plantation early such that he might not be suspected of having had anything to do with her escape. While the family were at tea she dropped her bundles out of the window which was only a short distance from the ground and soon after began her journey carrying both bundles on her head. After going about two miles she was joined by Br. Garner who took one of her bundles. They met her husband a few miles farther on and he walked with them an hour.[25] Br. Garner and Charlotte walked all night and met William just before daylight. The sun was just rising when they reached an old log cabin the property of the white man through whom Charlotte's letter had reached William. She describes this cabin as being neither "water tight nor wind tight". It had been the intention to secrete Charlotte on board a boat which made regular trips northward; but another captain had taken the place of the trusted one and the plan was not now deemed safe. [End of p. 9] She had for her companion an old woman who had been there two years. They were careful not to be seen about during the day. They were supplied with food by the poor white family.

Charlotte made frequent visits to her brother's home. He had a wife, Sophie, and five children and seems to have occupied a responsible position on his master's plantation though not an overseer. It was during one of these visits, in the winter, that she was nearly apprehended as a fugitive. On this visit

when everything seemed propitious, she issued from the hiding-place in the loft and joined Sophie and her five children in the room below. Suddenly, without warning, the door was thrown open and the patrol entered. They were not strangers to Sophie nor she to them. They were surprised to see so many children. Sophie claimed them all as hers pointing out Charlotte,—now more than thirty years old,—as the oldest. They discredited [End of p. 10] this statement and went up to the great house to investigate. Charlotte did not wait for him to return but fled to the old cabin barefooted. For some unexplained reason the patrol did not return. The cabin was her home until March 1857.[26] Then these friendly whites gave her, her brother and another colored man forged passes granting them permission to go to Washington to see Buchanan inaugurated. There these started about ten o'clock Saturday, walked[27] constantly except when they stopped to kneel in prayer and reached Washington about eleven o'clock Sunday morning. The journey had been a very hard one for Charlotte. Her feet were sore, her legs were stiff and gave out utterly at the door of the friendly black into whose house she had to be carried. Here she remained no longer than was necessary. The family was very poor and was also suspected of harboring fugitives. She hired out as a servant passing as a free woman. When circumstances seemed to indicate [End of p. 11] the probability of her being apprehended as a runaway, she would find another place, change her name and stay as long as that seemed the best course to pursue. William and his companion remained in Washington until night. William reached Auburn in due time. The companion died on the way.[28]

Charlotte's stay in Washington was a prolonged one, no favorable opportunity offering for her to leave the city until May 1859. She had saved money enough to pay her fare. It was not easy in those days for a known free colored person to travel in safety, else Charlotte might have left Washington long before she did. May 1859 found her in the service of a family who spent the summer months in the north. To these ladies[29] she expressed a desire to go to Auburn to see her brother but did not like to undertake the journey alone and asked to be allowed to go with them. They made an attempt to purchase a through ticket from Washington for Charlotte: but through tickets for colored persons from that point could not be purchased. A [End of p. 12] ticket was procured for Baltimore. When they reached this city the ladies requested an acquaintance, a resident of Baltimore who happened to be on the train to purchase a ticket for their servant. This service he was very glad to render, but soon came back without a ticket and said, "The agent wants to see the girl." "Come Caroline" said one of the ladies,—this was her then assumed name,—"you will have to go with this gentleman to get your ticket." Charlotte was well aware of the risk she now ran. She was weak, yet strong. Weak in view of the worst, strong with that strength given when one knows that to exhibit weakness is to fail. She rose at once and followed her guide to the agent who said to him "What is her name?" The gentleman was as ignorant of that as the agent and Charlotte appreciating the situation said promptly "Caroline Butler, sir." "Is she free?" Again as lack of knowledge, again another prompt reply from Charlotte. "Certainly, sir". "Are you a resident here?" "Yes," said the [End of p. 13] gentleman, "that gentleman sitting there knows me" and that gentleman looked up

from his paper and said, “Certainly I do. That is M. __________.” The interview was satisfactory to the agent, the ticket was purchased and Charlotte returned to her seat in the car with a heart much lighter than when she left. She expresses herself thus: “When I got that ticket in this yer han’ seems like as if stones was lifted off my head and shoulders. I had prayed ev’ry step of de way from Washington to Baltimo’ an I thanked God ev’ry step of de way from Baltimo’ to New York. ‘Twas a miracle an I a[-]answerin’ for myself, I tell you I allus foun frens.” Her journey from New York where she left the ladies was without incident.

Once since the war she visited her old home. She met her former master on the street in Port Tobacco.[30] He did not recognize her at first. She rode out to the plantation with him and spent some days. “Mars Barnes,” said she to him one day, “why didn’t yo [End of p. 14] advertise me?” “Why Charlotte,” he said “I knew ‘twould be of no use to look for you.”

A few years ago a lady of wealth and social position was called to mourn the loss of a loved one by death. By chance[31] she met Jane Clark and some conversation ensued concerning her recent affliction. In relating the incident the lady said:—”I have had conversations with many of my friends and with my pastor: but not one of these has given me the consolation and the comfort afforded by the words of that poor, uneducated old black woman.”

Jane Clark has waited at this station where she came in ‘59 more than half her life-time. Soon a messenger from her Elder Brother will arrive to guide her on that journey whose route lies through Great Freedom and whose desired terminus is Eternal Happiness. [End of narrative]

Acknowledgments

I thank Eileen McHugh, executive director of the Cayuga Museum and Case Research Lab in Auburn, New York, for making Jane Clark’s narrative available to me and for generously permitting *Common-Place* to publish this important resource. I also thank Kirsten Wise, curator of the Cayuga Museum, for her knowledge and support as I conducted research at the museum. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, Anna Mae Duane, Ellen Gruber Garvey, Marah Gubar, Brian Herrera, Dana Luciano, Manisha Sinha, and Mary Jo Watts contributed ideas and encouragement for this project, and Bradley Craig assisted with the images. I thank them all.

Further Reading

“Barnes Compton (1830-1898),” Archives of Maryland (Biographical Series), MSA SC 3520-1545 and especially Compton’s “Extended Biography.”

Michael J. Cuddy Jr., “Jane Clark: Fugitive Slave,” chap. in *Bicentennial*

Portraits: Noteworthy Sons and Daughters of Auburn, New York. Published on the Occasion of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the City (Auburn, New York, 1993): 38-40. Cuddy summarizes the narrative and quotes from it selectively.

Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York, 2015),

Milton C. Sernett, *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* (Durham, N.C., 2007), 177-179, 262-266.

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[1] The subject of this narrative used several names: Charlotte Harris, Caroline Butler, Jane Lemon, and Jane Clark. For simplicity of reading, I refer to the subject simply as "Clark" or, when distinguishing her from her husband, Henry Clark, "Jane." Julia C. Ferris, Jane Clark's amanuensis, was born to Jane Ferris and Charles Thatcher Ferris in July of either 1844 or 1845. The oldest of four sisters, she never married or had children. She graduated from Albany State Normal College in 1861 and then taught school in Auburn for most of her life (*An Historical Sketch of the State Normal College at Albany, New York and a History of its Graduates for Fifty Years, 1844-1894* [Albany: Brandow Printing Company, n.d. {1894?}], p. 28 [149 in digitized version] and 185 [301 in digitized version]. Ancestry.com. *U.S., School Catalogs, 1765-1935* [database online]. Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.). The *History of Cayuga County, New York, Compiled from Papers in the Archives of the Cayuga County Historical Society, With Special Chapters by Local Authors from 1775 to 1908* (Auburn, 1908) lists Julia C. Ferris as a teacher in the Auburn Academic High School from 1878-1879 (p. 169). She appears in the New York State Censuses for 1855, 1865, 1875, 1892, 1915, and 1925 and the Federal Census for 1860, 1880, 1910, and 1920, as well as Lamey's 1900 Auburn, NY Directory (Auburn: Alonzo P. Lamey, 1900). Toward the end of her life, she lived with other non-married women of a similar age. Active in education until very late in life, she was commissioner of the Board of Education in Auburn in 1926-1927 (Ancestry.com. *U.S., School Yearbooks, 1880-2012* [database online]. Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010). Julia Ferris died on February 16, 1928, and is buried in the Forest Lawn Section of the Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn.

[2] Barnes Compton (1830-1898) served in Congress from 1885-1895 and in the Maryland state Senate from 1867-1873 (he was president of the Senate from 1868-1871). When he turned 21 years old—an event Jane Clark reports caused her to return to the Compton plantation—he assumed an inheritance that made him the "second largest slaveholder in Charles County," Maryland. In 1860, he enslaved 105 people—a number that does not include Jane Clark, who by that year had escaped to Auburn.

[3] Jean McMahon Humez speculates that Tubman may have interpreted the meteor shower as "a message of oncoming judgment on the unjust." Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003): 180.

[4] L. Delos Mansfield was a white abolitionist who was involved in the underground railroad in Auburn during the 1850s. See Judith Wellman, "Uncovering the Freedom Trail in Auburn and Cayuga County, New York" (2005), p. 108. On William Still, see Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Norton, 2015), 151-165 passim.

[5] William Still, The Underground Railroad (Philadelphia, 1872), pp. 516-517. See also. Like Clark and her brother, Weems did escape from Maryland—which makes it more likely William Lemon would have known Weems "for many years," which in turn supports the inference that Henry Lemmon and William Lemon were the same person.

[6] To complicate matters, a William C. Lemmon lived in Auburn, New York, in the 1850s, and he was African American, born in about 1825, and worked as a painter. Because of these similarities, several historians have assumed William C. Lemmon and William Lemon to be the same person. However, William C. Lemmon was listed in the 1855 New York State Census—but Clark's brother William Lemon did not arrive in Auburn until after James Buchanan's inauguration in March 1857. Therefore William C. Lemmon and William Lemon must have been different people. It is of course possible that William C. Lemmon, the painter, and Henry Lemmon, who asked Still to assist his sister, are the same person—but the dates and details of the escape align precisely with what is known about William Lemon, therefore supporting the suggestion that "Henry Lemmon" is William Lemon, not William C. Lemmon or some other person. There are also, of course, Charlotte Harrises and Jane Clarks who are not the subject of this narrative. For example, Eric Foner refers to a Charlotte Harris who fled slavery through Wilmington, Delaware, with her nine-year-old son in July 1853; this date and the presence of a child suggest that this Charlotte Harris is not the one who would later become Jane Clark. Foner 164-165.

[7] On Charles G. Briggs, see Joel H. Monroe, *Historical Records of a Hundred and Twenty Years, Auburn, N.Y.* (Geneva, NY: W.F. Humphrey, Printer, 1913), pp. 155, 180. Martha Wright mentions Jane Clark as Briggs's employee in a letter to Ellen Wright, 27 January 1861, Garrison Papers, Smith College. Cited in Tanya Warren, compiler, "Freedom Seekers, Abolitionists, and Underground Railroad Helpers, Cayuga County, New York," p. 15. According to this same database, Clark also lived and presumably worked in the household of George Underwood (year unknown); and, in 1860, in the household of Dr. Joseph Cleary.

[8] Alonzo P. Lamey, *The Auburn 1877-1878 City Directory, Containing the Names of its Citizens, A Compendium of its Government and of its Public and Private Institutions, Also Important Information concerning Railroad Villages*

in its Vicinity (Auburn: K. Vail & Co., 1877), p. 78.

[9] *Auburn Directory, Containing a General Directory of the Citizens, Classified Business Directory, House Directory by Streets, City Government, Institutions and Societies, and Lists of Property Owners* (Auburn: Jas. W. Burroughs, Publishers, 1905), p. 18. Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* (database online). Provo,: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

[10] Because this blog is devoted to the history of Auburn, one would serendipitously discover Jane Clark's narrative here only if one sought to learn about Auburn—and not, say, slavery or the Underground Railroad. The only other way to discover this blog post is if one is already familiar with Clark's narrative: I found it when I searched the Internet under "Jane Clark" and "Charlotte Harris" simultaneously. For these reasons, the blog post has not made Jane Clark's narrative available to scholars and students of African American history.

[11] The transcription published by *Common-Place* has been checked multiple times against the original. Errors in the original, including many absent commas, have generally been reproduced. When necessary for comprehension, corrections have been inserted and marked with brackets.

[12] The Cayuga County Historical Society was incorporated in 1878 and published regular reports through 1908. Julia Ferris was listed as a "resident" member of the society from at least 1887-1891 (she was evidently active beyond those years). The society provided a forum for many members to present biographical sketches, most of which were not published. The Cayuga Museum holds many of these unpublished manuscripts, including Julia Ferris's account of Jane Clark.

[13] Ferris, writing in 1897, estimates Jane Clark's date of birth at about 1822. The 1865 New York State census lists Clark's age at 43, which corroborates Ferris's claim.

[14] Ferris's rendering of Clark's speech as dialect is typical of white (and some African American) writers in 1897. Joel Chandler Harris, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and many other dialect writers were active in this moment. Since Ferris wrote the narrative of Jane Clark for the purpose of reading it aloud at the banquet of the Cayuga County Historical Society, we must imagine Ferris performing her perception of Clark's dialect—a form of corkless blackface.

[15] I have been unable to identify this allusion. The phrase "twisted threads" was associated with the goddess Minerva, and the combination of gold and steel suggests Georgian filigree. It is possible that Ferris aimed to evoke either or both of these general references. I thank Mary Jo Watts and Brian Herrera for suggesting these respective possibilities.

[16] Ferris presents Clark's assertion that she "can't read anythin' but de Bible: bu Ise can read ev'ry word in dat from Genesee to Revolution[“] as a humorous error. But it could be read as an eloquent statement on Auburn's anti-slavery activity. Genesee Street, in the nineteenth century and today, is the central east-west thoroughfare and also the center of business in Auburn. Julia Ferris ran a private school on Genesee Street (Joel H. Monroe, *Historical Records of a Hundred and Twenty Years, Auburn, N.Y.* [Geneva, NY: W.F. Humphrey, Printer, 1913]: 39). Frederick Douglass's publisher was at 107 Genesee Street; the A.M.E Zion Church was half a block from Genesee Street; and many influential abolitionists including Abijah Fitch and David and Martha Coffin Wright lived on Genesee Street. "From Genesee to Revolution" evokes the revolutionary work of freedom seekers such as Jane Clark who reached Auburn.

[17] The Auburn Theological Seminary, established 1818, was among the most prominent institutions in Auburn at the time Julia Ferris wrote these words. Ferris may have known seminary professors, and may even have been referring obliquely to an individual. L.D. Mansfield, who wrote to William Still on behalf of Henry Lemmon, was a professor at Auburn Theological Seminary (although there is no evidence that Ferris knew Mansfield).

[18] The A.M.E. Zion Church on Washington Street was a center of African American life in Auburn. Incorporated in 1838 and dismantled sometime after 1905, its community of worshippers included Harriet Tubman. In 1891, the church built a new building on Parker Street and transferred to that location. See also Sernett, 177-179, 262-266.

[19] The Leonid meteor shower started early in the morning on November 12, 1833. Jane Clark, born circa 1822, was about eleven when the "stars fell."

[20] Barnes Compton turned 21 and took possession of his inheritance in 1851.

[21] Presumably 1854. The narrative later suggests that Clark fled in 1856, after two years of "troubles."

[22] Ferris reveals herself here to be a reader of slave narratives, such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, that contain what Saidiya Hartman has famously called "scenes of subjection." Ferris's use of "we" suggests, further, that she assumes her audience at the banquet of the Cayuga County Historical Society is similarly familiar with the conventions of slave narratives.

[23] Whitsunday, or Whitsun, is Pentecost, or the seventh Sunday after Easter.

Detail, 1870 U.S. Census, Auburn Ward 7, Cayuga, New York; roll M593_910, page 216B, image 105026, Family History Library Film 552409 (Ancestry.com, 2009). Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., Provo, Utah. Images reproduced by FamilySearch.

[24] Ferris casually drops the information that Clark had a husband in Maryland. It is unclear whether this husband is the same as Henry Clark, whom Clark marries in 1863 in Auburn. It is possible that the two are the same, particularly since the 1870 and 1880 Federal Censuses list Henry Clark as having been born in Maryland. On the other hand, if the two husbands are the same man, it is unclear why Clark would re-marry him in 1863, after she had been in Auburn for four years. Ferris avoids naming Clark’s husband in Maryland, which suggests that Ferris may have been politely diverting attention from the fact that her subject had two husbands.

[25] This is the last mention of Clark’s husband in Maryland. The implication is that this hour-long walk constituted their final time together (unless the man she married in Auburn in 1863 was the same as her husband in Maryland).

[26] If Clark started her escape on Whitsunday of 1856, which fell in May that year, she therefore stayed in the cabin for approximately eleven months. It is possible that Clark escaped on Whitsunday of 1855, in which case she was delayed in her escape from Maryland by almost two years.

[27] It is unclear exactly where in Maryland Clark hid before proceeding to Washington, D.C. The Compton family owned several plantations, and it seems that Clark hid close to one of them. Later in the text Clark returns to Port Tobacco, which is identified as her “old home.” We might therefore infer that Clark, her brother, and their companion started their journey by walking from Port Tobacco to Washington, D.C.-—a distance of over 35 miles.

[28] In the letter to William Still, Henry Lemmon/William Lemon refers to a George Weems who died during an escape from Maryland. However, Clark’s “companion [who] died on the way” could not have been George Weems, because Weems’s escape, as described at length by Still, does not align with the one in Clark’s narrative.

[29] A “family” of “ladies” helped Clark escape. Ferris is silent as to whether these ladies were related by blood or other ties.

[30] Barnes Compton did own property in Port Tobacco, among other locations. The accurate names of people and places affirm the credibility of this narrative.

[31] This line could be read as a reference to Julia Ferris, but Ferris did not meet Clark “by chance”; the two had known each other for at least thirty-two years at the time that Ferris penned the narrative.

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