

ROCHESTER HISTORY

Edited by Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck
City Historian

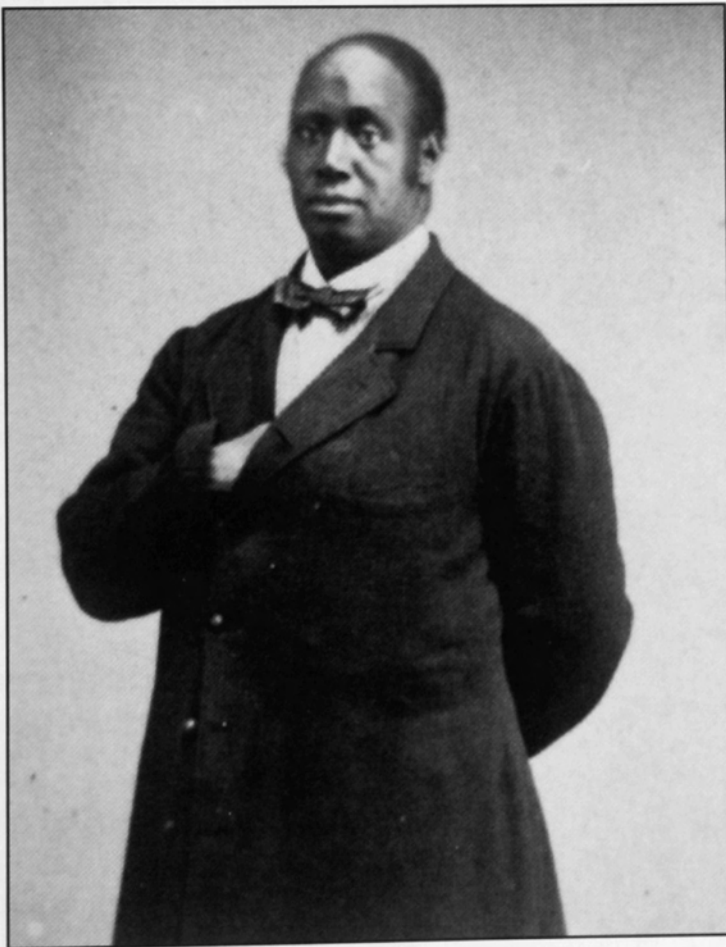
Vol. LXVI

Fall, 2004

No. 4

LIBERIAN DREAMS, WEST AFRICAN NIGHTMARE:
THE LIFE OF HENRY W. JOHNSON
PART ONE

by Preston E. Pierce





*Home, print shop and book store of James D. Bemis in Canandaigua. On this site the Bemis Block was built. Here Henry Johnson worked when he first came to town.
Ontario County Historical Society.*

*Cover: The only known photograph of Henry W. Johnson circa 1865 taken at a Canandaigua studio across the street from Johnson's shop.
Ontario County Historical Society.*

ROCHESTER HISTORY, published quarterly by The Office of the City Historian.
Address correspondence to City Historian, Rochester Public Library, 115 South Avenue,
Rochester, NY 14604.

www.libraryweb.org

Subscriptions to the quarterly Rochester History are \$8.00 per year by mail. Foreign
subscriptions \$12.00 per year, \$4.00 per copy back issue.

Rochester History is funded in part from the Frances Kenyon Publication Fund, estab-
lished in memory of her sister, Florence Taber Kenyon and her friend Thelma Jeffries.
PRESSTEK-2

©OFFICE OF THE CITY HISTORIAN 2004

"Although a colored girl..."

On Wednesday afternoon, July 5, 1916, the readers of the *Ontario County Times* could hardly miss the human-interest stories of "Fifty Years Ago." Prominently displayed at the top, right, center of page one, they served as brief reminders of the pace of change. Perhaps, they also served as evidence that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The second paragraph reminded local readers of a family that had dropped from sight when those readers' parents were in their youth. In those "Jim Crow" days, it may also have been a reminder of the reason Henry W. Johnson's family had vanished from the local scene half a century earlier.

The article said, in part, "Among the graduates of Lima seminary this year are Miss Patience C. Johnson, a daughter of Henry W. Johnson, formerly of this village [Canandaigua], and now [1866] a prominent citizen of Liberia, Africa. Miss Johnson was awarded the third of the three highest honors of her class. Although a colored girl, she is an excellent scholar."¹

Unfortunately, Patience Johnson, then 19, was never able to apply her skills to the needs of Liberia as her father hoped. She died of tuberculosis not quite a year after her graduation.² The Johnsons' two older sons may have been barbers like their father. One may have been the subject of a common, but racist, reference in a Rochester newspaper in 1885.³ However, after the family emigrated to Liberia in 1865, they virtually disappeared from the papers and the public mind.

For any woman, a college education was unusual in 1866. For a "colored girl," it was truly remarkable.⁴ In 1916, however, older local residents should not have been surprised that Patience Johnson had distinguished herself.

Origins of the Johnson Family

Like many Americans born in the early 1800's, Henry W. Johnson's ancestry is vague. Records which would substantiate clear statements of fact are almost non-existent. Born about 1822, Johnson's birthplace was listed as Steuben County, NY, in the state census of 1855. That document also reported that he had lived in Canandaigua for 20 years. The federal census of 1860, however, gave Johnson's birthplace as Vermont. His parents were not listed since he was already the head of his own household by 1855.⁵ Earlier enumerations are no greater help. Contemporary newspaper accounts conclusively point to Vermont, how-

ever, as Johnson's birthplace. A report of his death which appeared in the *Ontario Repository and Messenger* flatly stated that Henry Johnson was born in Vermont, March 22, 1822.⁶

In the spring of 1865, the *Ontario County Times* reported on Henry Johnson's preparations for his move to Liberia.⁷ Included in the article was a letter from Benjamin Labaree, President of Middlebury College. Labaree praised Johnson for speeches he and Martin Freeman had given at Middlebury the previous November. Labaree concluded by stating that, "Freeman, the scholar, and Johnson, the orator will add not a little to the agencies for civilization in Liberia--the former from Rutland County and the latter from Addison." Middlebury is the seat of Addison County so it is likely that Johnson's origin was widely known there.

The *Vermont Chronicle* corroborated president Labaree's statement. At the conclusion of an article praising Johnson's speech to the Vermont Colonization Society, the paper reported that Johnson was "a native of Vermont—born in Ferrisburg, in 1822."⁸ The paper further stated that Johnson moved to Canandaigua at age 14, after the death of his father. Johnson, himself, must have been the source of that information, or it was well known in the state. It also supports the statement in the 1855 New York census that Johnson had lived in Canandaigua for 20 years. Johnson was most likely born into a free family.

In 1890, the well-known chronicler of local history, and legendary principal of Canandaigua Academy, Noah T. Clarke, stated that Patience C. Johnson, Henry's wife, was born into the Colbert family.⁹ Johnson's marriage to Patience Colbert was reported in the *Ontario Messenger*, January 19, 1842.¹⁰ The 1855 state census reported that she was born into a family of mixed race in Allegany County, NY. At the time of the state census, 31-year-old Patience was listed as a lifelong resident of Canandaigua. The 1860 federal census simply stated that Patience was born in New York.¹¹ Both documents agree on her age. However, census reports frequently relied on the reporting of other family members and neighbors. Consequently, there is always the possibility of error.

Based upon the census information, it would appear that Patience Colbert was born in 1824. An intriguing possibility is that her birth occurred in Canandaigua on June 4, 1825. That date would be close enough to 1824 to account for the general statements in the censuses. The journal of "Obstetric Cases" kept by Dr. Pliny Hayes, Jr, records the birth of a black female child to Mrs. Jonathan Colbert on that date.¹² She was Mrs. Colbert's second child, however, keeping open the possibility that, if "Mrs. Jonathan Colbert" was the correct mother, the birth of Patience could still have been in 1824. Unfortunately, there are wide gaps in Dr. Hayes' journal prior to July 1824.

Rise of an Entrepreneur

In January 1953, former Canandaigua Mayor, George McGill Hayes, published a biographical sketch of Henry W. Johnson.¹³ Drawing heavily on a series of articles published by Noah T. Clarke in 1890, Hayes recounted Johnson's rise to leadership in the area.¹⁴ Hayes' sketch of Johnson's life is important. It was only the second time that an account of Johnson's accomplishments had been published. Hayes' essay also became the standard version of the story, repeated in other articles throughout the last half of the 20th Century.¹⁵ However, unlike Clarke's, Hayes' essay appears to have been written, in part, to elicit sympathy for Henry Johnson. It also reflects a half-century of condescension and stereotyping.

Henry Johnson's life was a constant struggle, a struggle in which Johnson frequently triumphed. In many ways, he was a typical American of the 19th Century (white or black). His story reflects the trials and tribulations most of his neighbors faced. Yet, Johnson's story is more than that. He was an African-American in the antebellum North, and a man possessed of unusual personal qualities working in an environment which was both hospitable and threatening. Highly motivated, Johnson strove to better himself and his people. However, he represented one point of view that was controversial in his day and largely repudiated in later years. George Hayes' essay makes all that clear, but sometimes in ways he probably did not intend.

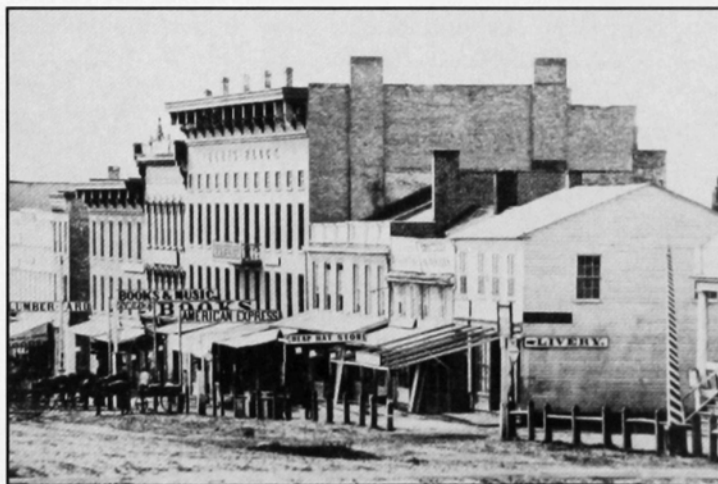


*Site of Henry Johnson's barber shop (center) as it looked in 2002. It is believed to be the same building, though modified. The low modern building [center-right] is the site of the old Baptist church
Author's collection.*

*The year 1852 was memorable for Henry W. Johnson, Hayes told his readers at the mid-point of the 20th Century. Johnson was a son of poverty-stricken slave parents. He had known only misery and hard knocks but now he had a real job-his first. He went to work in a bookstore as janitor and errand boy...His employer was James D. Bemis...Under the guidance and influence of Mr. Bemis, Henry learned habits of thrift, industry and faithfulness which greatly aided him later in life...When he came of age, and his employer died suddenly, Henry was forced to look for another job. There were four trades open to him at that time. He could be a hotel waiter, a sawyer, a whitewasher or a barber. He chose barbering....*¹⁶

By contrast, a half-century earlier, Noah T. Clarke told his readers a much simpler and probably more accurate story.

*When a boy [Johnson] worked for Mr. James D. Bemis, and under the influence of that noble man came to have habits of industry and faithfulness which greatly aided him in subsequent life. As he came of age and had to settle the question of a life calling, there seemed to be but two or three open to him, and those were waiting at a hotel, whitewashing, wood sawing, and barbering. He wisely chose the latter....*¹⁷



*Bemis Block circa 1855. Named for James D. Bemis and built by his son, the Bemis Block [center] was erected in the 1840s on the site of the Bemis print shop and store. Here speakers like Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass held public meetings.
Ontario County Historical Society*

Without question, few trades were open to African-Americans even in the antebellum North. As the experiences of Frederick Douglass and Austin Steward show, there were a few more opportunities for African-Americans in the Northeast; but only a few. Certainly, Henry Johnson took up the barber's trade. However, it is not clear when that happened.

What is clear is that Henry W. Johnson did not wait until 1852 to take his first job. Johnson was 30 years old that year. He was married with six children. The 1850 census reported that he owned real estate valued as \$2500.¹⁸ By then he was already a noted orator, an accomplished speech writer, and a man of affairs in his community. In 1844, Henry Johnson twice used chattel mortgages filed with the Ontario County Clerk. They reveal that Johnson owned substantial business and personal property by then.¹⁹



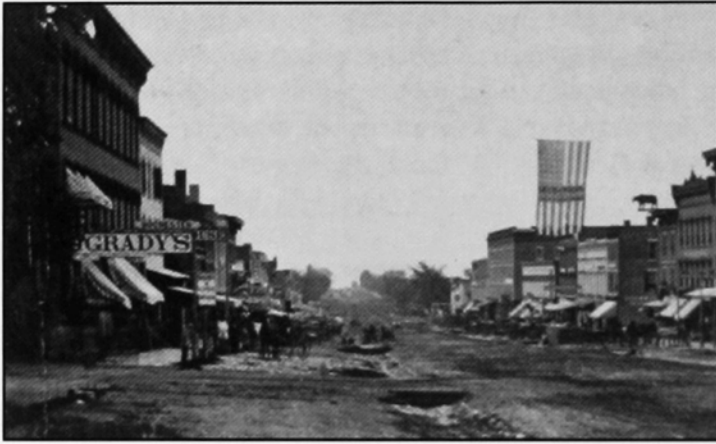
The Bemis Block as it looked in 2003. Author's collection.

If Johnson worked for the Bemis bookstore and publishing company, it was well before 1852. Bemis was well known for his training and support of apprentices, many of whom went into business in western New York. Bemis took an avid interest in what biographer, Madeleine Stern, called "nearly every movement of the day for promoting the prosperity of Western New York, from its turnpikes and canals to its literary and benevolent institutions...for many years there were from forty to sixty workers dependent in various ways on Bemis' 'old establishment'." Bemis was a man who probably would have been inclined to hire an ambitious African-American boy. By 1834, however James D. Bemis' health was faltering and Johnson may never have met him. Most likely, Johnson was hired by Bemis' son.

If Henry W. Johnson was, indeed, a janitor and errand boy for the Bemis press, it was most likely in the 1830's. While those jobs had a

different status in the 19th century, making them more desirable to an older man, Bemis had already been admitted to the Vermont Asylum for the Insane in 1850. He died in 1857 without returning to Canandaigua for any length of time, but satisfied that he "had put a goodly number of young men into active and successful business."²⁰ One of them was undoubtedly Henry W. Johnson.

Why did Hayes say that Henry Johnson got his first job in 1852?



Main Street, Canandaigua, as it looked at the time of the 1868 presidential election. The façade of Johnson's building is seen at left center, second building down. The Bemis Block shows along the right edge of the photograph. Ontario County Historical Society.

Most likely, Hayes wanted to tie his writing to a neatly defined anniversary. He was writing just a century after the date he chose for the start of his story. Whatever the reason, it made Johnson a pitiful character from the start. That image is hardly appropriate for that time in Johnson's life.

Johnson undoubtedly chose to be a barber because it was an occupation open to African-Americans, and it provided opportunities for entrepreneurship and status. A barber could have a shop, control the flow of his business, and work among the Main Street businessmen. The earliest photographs [1859] of Main Street, Canandaigua, clearly show Johnson's barbershop, with a prominent pole by the street, almost across from the impressive Bemis Block in the heart of downtown.

Johnson probably learned to read and write early in life. Canandaigua was a town where African-American children regularly attended public school. However, it was also a town which demonstrated the tensions of the era and opened a separate segregated school in

1848 in the district most heavily populated by African-Americans. Schools for the entire village were segregated in 1852 when permission was granted by a new state law.²¹ As a youth, Henry Johnson may have attended a district school in the village of Canandaigua. While it would be possible to learn many things working at the Bemis store, a totally illiterate person would have been useless in a bookstore and print shop.

Johnson had a grand opportunity, and appears to have been deeply motivated. He was certainly not the first young man to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a printing office. On January 23, 1850, (p. 2) the *Ontario Messenger* published a short article with the title "The Poor Boy's College." It provided a summary of what must, certainly, have been Henry W. Johnson's road to success. The contents of Johnson's later speeches were obviously more than the product of a common school education.

The printing office, says the New York Globe, has indeed proved a better college to many a poor boy-has graduated more useful and conspicuous members of society-has matured more intellect, and turned it into practical, useful channels; awakened more mind, generated more active and elevated thought-than any literary college of the country...There is something [in the] very atmosphere of a printing office calculated to awaken the mind and inspire a thirst of knowledge. A boy who commences in such a school will have his talents brought out....

Like other Americans, Henry Johnson tried to use his talents to build his fortune. He was an ambitious man, a trait reflected in his land transactions. They were substantial for any man of his time, black or white. Unfortunately, Johnson's later financial problems caused him to lose his property. Since the state required free African-Americans to have property in order to vote, Johnson was doubly hurt by that misfortune.

The area around the east end of Granger Street, where Johnson lived, was part of Canandaigua's African-American neighborhood in the antebellum period. Caroline Cowles Richards, a minister's daughter living in the home of her grandfather, a prominent banker, told of visiting that neighborhood. She went there to deliver a dinner invitation from her grandmother to Chloe, a servant.

Grandmother sent Anna and me up to Butcher [now Granger] Street after school to-day to invite Chloe to come to dinner. I never saw so many black people as there are up there. We saw old Lloyd [Colbert] and black Jonathan and Dick Valentine and Jerusha and Chloe and

Nackie... I think Chloe was surprised, but she said she would be ready, to-morrow...when the carriage came for her.? 22

Henry Johnson purchased a home at what is now 72 Granger Street in 1846. He paid \$512.50 for the house and lot.²³ In that neighborhood he found a kindred spirit in Alfred Haley, a local clothier and dry cleaner. There were also probable relatives of his wife, the Colberts, living there. To secure the house Johnson had to take out a mortgage. When he could not make the required payments in 1851, the \$300 mortgage holder, Henrietta Gibbs, foreclosed. (She waited until 1854 to sell the property.) The property was resold to local attorney, S.V.R. Mallory. However, Johnson continued to live there and paid taxes on the property even after his emigration to Liberia.²⁴

In 1849 Johnson paid \$3000 for a parcel on Main Street, Canandaigua. It was described as a "brick tenement" business block, just north of the Baptist church.²⁵ He sold that property in 1851, leasing back his basement barber shop on favorable terms.²⁶ The 1859 panoramic photograph of Main Street clearly shows the substantial two-and-a-half story building in the heart of the business district, one block from the railroad station and the Bemis block, next to the Baptist church.

Henry Johnson also purchased land in Geneva. A lot listed as "part of lot number sixteen in Seth Reed's location" was sold to John S. King of Geneva in 1851. The selling price was \$350.²⁷ Johnson was busy with many projects at the time, had mortgage problems, and, no doubt, needed the money.

An Eloquent Orator

Throughout the 19th Century, particularly from 1834 through the 1850's, African-Americans held annual celebrations in honor of the "First of August" (1834) emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies. They were frequently the occasion for speech making, parades, picnics and banquets. For a time, Henry Johnson was a featured speaker at several of the "First of August" celebrations in the Rochester area. As they did throughout the antebellum North, a great many whites attended these events.²⁸

We do not know when Johnson's oratorical skills were first recognized. However, by the "First of August," 1847, his reputation was such that he was sharing the rostrum with Frederick Douglass. The newspaper accounts of that day show its importance to the African-American population and Johnson's personal stature:

At about ten o'clock, a large number assembled in the Academy grove, where a temporary platform had been prepared for the speakers. The exercises were opened by a prayer from Rev. Mr. WARD, a colored minister, which was followed by an ode, sung by the colored choir of Geneva and Music from Baron and Holloway's Band.—HENRY JOHNSON of this place [Canandaigua], read the Act of Emancipation, after which FRED'K DOUGLASS arose, and delivered a highly interesting and able address... Mr. Douglass was followed by Messrs. Garnett, Ward, Remond²⁹ and others. After the speeches, a long procession was formed which marched to the Canandaigua Hotel. The remainder of the day was devoted to feasting and hilarity, closing with a ball at the Franklin House... The number present at the grove was about four thousand, about one third of whom were colored persons.³⁰



Upper Main Street, Canandaigua. The "Academy grove" clearly shows at the left in this undated photograph. Emancipation Day processions frequently walked down this street toward the business district in the distance. Ontario County Historical Society

Four days later, the editor of the *Repository* gave center, front page, coverage to the "First of August" celebration just past. While complimenting the speakers and the crowd, the local paper registered disagreement with the sentiments of many of the speakers. Drawing a clear distinction between antislavery sentiment and abolitionism (without naming them) the editor condemned the latter.

That all persons as well professors as others, should oppose slavery, we concede; but hold, that their efforts should neither contravene the command 'to submit to the powers that be,' no absorb every other benev-

*olent effort. The course, which these ultraists would appear to expect of Christians, would be like a whole army in the field of battle directing its powers against a single individual.... The sin of Slavery although grievous, unfortunately for our race, is not the only one, and that minister of the gospel or professing Christian, who should expend all his energies upon that alone, would find it difficult to satisfy the demands of an exacting conscience.*³¹

Douglass, who had been touring upstate New York just months after his sojourn in England, certainly disagreed. There is no doubt where Henry Johnson stood.

On August first, 1848, Henry W. Johnson was again at the center of a large Emancipation Day celebration. This time it was located in Rochester. In the morning, a large crowd, many from out-of-town, gathered at the Baptist church on Ford Street. There, a procession formed and walked across the Genesee River to Washington Square. The featured speakers were Frederick Douglass, C. L. Remond [a noted black abolitionist], and Henry W. Johnson. In addition to the speeches, there were prayers, music, and the reading of the British and French Emancipation Acts. In the evening, a fair was held at Minerva Hall, with a Grand Ball at Irving Hall.³²

Frederick Douglass' paper, *The North Star*, devoted a great deal of print space to coverage of the 1848 Emancipation Day celebration in Rochester. "Good feeling and courtesy were manifested by our citizens," Douglass reported. Between two and three thousand people gathered at Washington Square. He was careful to note that "...H. W. Johnson of Canandaigua, then delivered an eloquent oration..."³³

On August 21, 1848, Douglass devoted most of the front page of *The North Star* to the text of Henry Johnson's speech. Sounding a bit like Lincoln at Gettysburg, Johnson began by saying,

I do not expect to be heard with any degree of patience, after the able and eloquent address to which all have listened with so much admiration; and perhaps it is the highest degree of vanity in me to claim your attention for one moment, especially while there are others upon this platform who can occupy the time allotted to me to a much better advantage.

Recent events [the European revolutions of 1848] proclaim that the march of liberty is onward; that the mighty struggle which for ages has been going on between freedom and slavery, must result in the ultimate triumph of the former; that however faint the prospect—however dark and gloomy may be the clouds that for a while obscure the golden hues of the rainbow of home, the friends of liberty need not despair.

Johnson went on to recount the progress made on the road to liberty, tying the struggle of African-Americans to the struggles of West Indians, Europeans, and white Americans of the Revolutionary era. It was a speech filled with hope.³⁴



Canandaigua Academy, a private preparatory school for boys, as it looked in this undated photograph in the late 19th Century. The "grove," where Emancipation Day celebrations were held, was really the shaded front and side lawns. The Academy was located on upper North Main Street two blocks from Henry Johnson's neighborhood. Stephen A. Douglas studied here prior to moving to Illinois about 1833. In 1907, this building was demolished to make way for a new public high school. That building still stands on the site, now used for apartments. Ontario County Historical Society.

In later years, Henry W. Johnson continued to deliver speeches close to home. However, he no longer appeared with Douglass or the abolitionists of national stature who sometimes came to Ontario County. Parker Pillsbury, Wendell Phillips and Susan B. Anthony spoke in Canandaigua, less than a block from Johnson's business, but he was little mentioned by the press. In 1859 Douglass spoke at Bemis Hall, across the street from Johnson's shop, on the subject of "self made men," but there was no mention of Henry Johnson.³⁵

Nevertheless, Johnson continued to be a respected black leader within the Canandaigua community. Whenever there was an important issue relevant to African-Americans, Henry Johnson was often among the leaders who dealt with it. When abolition activist, Abel Brown, died in Canandaigua (1844) Johnson was one of a committee of three asked to write Brown's obituary and forward the tribute to the Albany papers. In 1850, and again in 1852, Johnson delivered forceful speeches at the Ontario County Court House opposing slavery and the Fugitive Slave

Law and supporting colonization. The speeches were lauded in the press by sympathetic white leaders including many attorneys and politicians. A Union Council, encompassing Ontario, Yates, Seneca, Cayuga, Wayne and Chemung Counties was formed by a convention of African-Americans held in Geneva in 1853. The purpose of the local council was to support the national and state conventions of "colored" men in achieving their political and social goals. One of the state delegates elected in Geneva was Henry W. Johnson.³⁶

Johnson's concern with more immediate and pressing matters like the Fugitive Slave Law undoubtedly curbed his budding career as a traveling orator. His speaking engagements were closer to home in the 1850's. His speech at Farmington, condemning the fugitive law, on April 13, 1851 is a good example. The *Messenger* reported:

...a large meeting of citizens opposed to the Fugitive Slave Bill, and [Johnson] added one star more to his already well deserved reputation as an able public speaker. Mr. J. treated the subject in a different light from those we had before heard upon the subject. He alluded to the principles of the common law existing before the Statute, that its intention might be more clearly understood, and in connection examined the established principles of law and justice....³⁷

By the early 1850's Johnson was focusing on the study of the law, and how it applied to African-Americans in particular. He was clearly disturbed by the Fugitive Slave law. But his focus was now shifting to despair of ever achieving real freedom in America. If there is any one point where we may presume that Johnson parted ways with Frederick Douglass, and most of the political abolitionists, it is with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. From that point on, Henry W. Johnson focused on reading law and a new life in Liberia.

Frederick Douglass rejected emigration. He despised the whole "colonization" effort in West Africa, wryly asking why there was no sympathy for Haiti. In 1849 he gave a series of speeches in Philadelphia which made that perfectly clear.³⁸ To the end of his life Douglass maintained that "All this native land talk is nonsense. The native land of the American Negro is America. His bones, his muscles, his sinews, are all American. His ancestors for two hundred and seventy years have lived, and labored, and died on American soil, and millions of his posterity have inherited Caucasian blood."³⁹

Henry Johnson embraced the concept of emigration early in the 1850's. He was suffering financial setbacks. He was probably frightened. His close friend, Alfred Haley, was rumored to be among the sev-

eral fugitive slaves in town. Johnson still had personal goals, and he was increasingly convinced he could fulfill them only in West Africa. He knew what he wanted, but his focus would prove too narrow.

Admitted to the Bar

Henry W. Johnson began reading law in the late 1850's. Contemporary newspapers reported that he studied with Henry O. Chesebro, one of the most respected local attorneys of that time. Chesebro was born into a controversial political family, the same year (1822) as Henry Johnson. Educated at Canandaigua Academy, Chesebro graduated from Union College and read law with local attorney Alvah Worden with whom he went into partnership. Chesebro was admitted to practice law in 1846.⁴⁰ Worden served in the state legislature on several occasions. Chesebro served on the 1867 commission which recommended changes in the state constitution. During the Civil War, Henry Chesebro, by then in his 40's, served as the local militia commander, though never in active service.⁴¹

As the legal mentor for Henry W. Johnson, Chesebro had an interesting background. Canandaigua was centered in an area that was sympathetic to the free soil movement. The Whigs, Free Soilers, and the new Republican Party, found many converts in the area. The *Ontario County Times*, which reported so much information on Henry Johnson, was

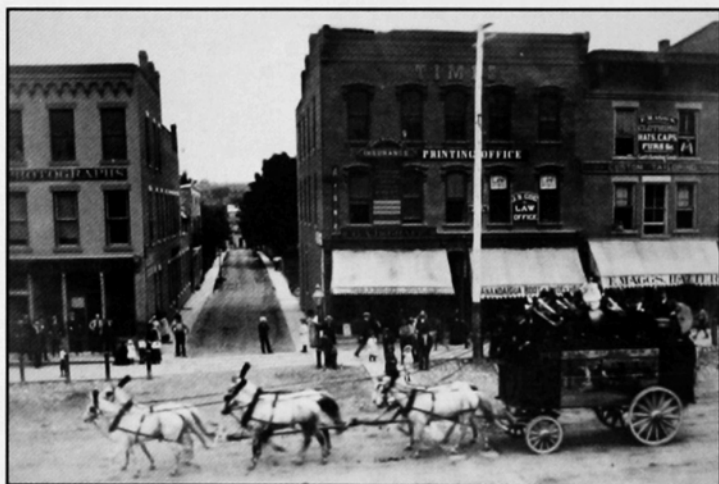


*Hon. Henry O. Chesebro, Canandaigua attorney, militia commander,
and sometime legislator in whose office Henry Johnson read law.
Ontario County Historical Society.*

founded as the *Ontario County Republican Times*, an unabashed party organ. Yet attorney Chesebro was born into a family of Jackson Democrats. His father, Nicholas Chesebro, was the convicted principal

conspirator in the Morgan kidnapping (1827) which precipitated the Anti-Masonic Party and spawned the careers of many later Radical Republicans. During the period 1840-1860, Nicholas was still living in Canandaigua; still holding offices, including that of president of the village (1836-1840, 1841-1844), postmaster (1853-1858), and director of what would become the Northern Central Railroad.⁴² He was also well-known as a gruff litigious character living in Henry's household according to the 1850 census. It was not a family whose members would be expected to take a radical stand like allowing a black man to read law.

Yet, Henry Chesebro and his wife certainly harbored some sympathy for the anti-slavery ideal and the plight of African-Americans. Henry's father, Nicholas, led a faction of local Democrats opposed to the extension of slavery as early as 1849.⁴³ Some insight into the Chesebros' sympathies can be found in the diary of Caroline Cowles Richards. On May 30, 1856, she wrote: "Last week Jennie Howell invited us to go up



Chesebro Street [now Coy Street] where Henry Johnson read law in Henry Chesebro's office. The Bemis Block is just out of view to the right in this undated photograph. Ontario County Historical Society.

to Black Point Cabin with her...There was a little colored girl there who waits on the table and can row the boats too...She said Mrs. Henry Chesebro taught her to read." Mrs. Chesebro was the daughter of Alvah Worden, Chesebro's mentor and partner. Of more significance is the fact that William H. Seward was her uncle and a close associate of her husband as a young man in Auburn. In a manuscript apparently written late in her life, she confessed to participation in the Underground Railroad and revealed that she had known fugitive slaves living in Canandaigua⁴⁴

On February 22, 1862, Caroline Cowles Richards wrote that she "...sat next to Spencer F. Lincoln, a young man from Naples who is

studying law in Mr. Henry Chesebro's office." That summer, Spencer Lincoln became an officer in the 126th regiment raised in the area. Killed in the fighting around Petersburg, Spencer Lincoln was certainly sympathetic to the cause of the Lincoln Republicans.⁴⁵ By 1862, Henry W. Johnson was reading law in Chesebro's office, just a block from his barber shop; an office which nurtured several supporters of the Lincoln administration.

Johnson took his bar examination in company with 19 others. The *Rochester Union and Advertiser* reported that "He passed a very good examination..." and was admitted to practice in all of the courts of the state by the General Term of the State Supreme Court. The editor, like others around the state, took pains to point out that Johnson was "a colored man...This is the first instance...of a colored man applying for admission to the Bar in the [7th Judicial] District." In reporting the same story, the *Rochester Democrat* pointed out Johnson's long-known intention to emigrate to Liberia and practice there.⁴⁶

The editor of the *Troy Daily Times*, perhaps shedding some light on Johnson's early employment and training, was quoted as saying:

*[He] knew Mr. Johnson well in boyhood. Possessed of a keen intellect, of an unquenchable desire for the acquirement of knowledge, of a laudable ambition to attain the honors of scholarship, he devoted every leisure moment he could spare from his humble occupation, to reading and study. He has succeeded! As a speaker he has few superiors; as a scholar, very few who have enjoyed college advantages are his equals. Overcoming all obstacles,--prejudice, poverty, and the claims of his family,--he has worked his way to his present honorable position; and, in his new field of usefulness if life and health are spared him, we have no doubt we shall hear of other and higher honors achieved by Henry W. Johnson.*⁴⁷

At the time of his admission to the bar, Henry W. Johnson was less than a year from his emigration to Liberia. No legal documents have yet been found to show that Johnson actually practiced in the local courts. It appears he continued his barbering, and devoted his intellectual efforts to promoting emancipation and the cause of African-Americans generally. His desire to move to Liberia was well-known, even to white children.

In December, 1860, Caroline Richards wrote in her diary:

I went with the girls to the lake to skate this afternoon. Mr. Johnson, the colored barber, is the best skater in town. He can skate forward and backwards and cut all sorts of curlicues, although he is such a heavy

man. He is going to Liberia and there his skates won't do him any good. I wish he would give them to me and also his skill to use them.⁴⁸

Continued in Part Two

Preston Pierce is Ontario County Historian

Acknowledgements

Without the help of all of these organizations and individuals it would not have been possible to bring the accomplishments of Henry W. Johnson to light a century and a half after his emigration from Canandaigua to Liberia:

The Ontario County Historical Society, Canandaigua, N.Y. for permission to use the period photographs.

The staff of the Ontario County Records Center assisted in identifying and retrieving source material.

The staff and volunteers of the Ontario County Historical Society in identifying sources and digitizing images.

Endnotes

¹ "Fifty Years Ago." *Ontario County Times*. July 5, 1916. p. 1.

² United States. Census of the Population. Ontario County, Canandaigua, NY. 1860. p. 105. Patience, one of seven children of Henry W. and Patience Johnson, was 13 years old in 1860. The Johnsons evidently valued formal education since the five children under 16 were listed as "in school." In a letter to an unidentified friend, dated Oct. 30, 1867, Henry Johnson revealed the circumstances of his daughter's death. See: "Letter from Mr. H. W. Johnson, Jr." *The African Repository*. XLIV. Washington. American Colonization Soc. Feb. 1868. pp. 58-59. [Reprint: New York. Kraus Reprint Corp. 1967.]

³ "Barber Johnson Deserts His Wife." *Rochester Union and Advertiser*. Aug. 15, 1885. p. 2. This article related that Henry G. Johnson, a "colored" barber from Rochester, left "with a white woman" for St. Catherines, Ontario, after deserting his wife and five children. His initials match those of Henry W. Johnson's son, born in 1846. The Henry G. Johnson cited in the article, like Henry W, also followed the barbering trade. However, evidence that the subject was the son of Henry W.

Johnson is circumstantial at best. Johnson's oldest son, Charles James, was already listed as a barber in the 1860 US Census. Barbering was a common trade for African-Americans.

⁴ United States. Dept. of Commerce. Bureau of the Census. Historical Statistics of the United States. Colonial Times to 1970. I. Washington, DC. Government Printing Office. 1970. pp. 369-370, 386.

⁵ United States. Census of the Population. Ontario County. Canandaigua, NY. 1860. p. 105; New York State. Census. Ontario County. Canandaigua. 1855. p. 23.

⁶ "Killed in Liberia." *Ontario Repository and Messenger*. Sep. 18, 1884. p. 3. This paper was published in Johnson's hometown (Canandaigua) and appears to be based upon information from Johnson's son, Henry G., who lived in Rochester at the time.

⁷ "For the Ontario County Times. Bound for Liberia." *Ontario County Times*. Apr. 12, 1865. p. 3.

⁸ "Vermont Colonization Society." *Vermont Chronicle*. Nov. 5, 1864. p. 1. In his study of Vermont's Anti-Slavery and Underground Railroad Record, Wilbur H. Seibert described Ferrisburg as having a high percentage of Quakers in its population and strong support for the anti-slavery cause. Johnson was raised, then, in a community which undoubtedly influenced his later goals and attitudes.

⁹ N.T.C. [Noah T. Clarke] "Canandaigua Sixty Years Ago. XXII. More of Old-Time Negroes." *Ontario County Times*. Aug. 13, 1890. p. 2. Speaking of Henry W. Johnson, Clarke said, "Of his parentage I know nothing." The 1850 Census (p. 32) showed the family of Cloe and Jonathan Colbert living near the Johnsons.

¹⁰ *Ontario Messenger*. Jan. 19, 1842. p. 3.

¹¹ New York State. Census. Ontario County. Canandaigua. 1855. p. 23; United States. Census of the Population. Ontario County. Canandaigua. 1860. p. 105.

¹² Hayes, Pliny Jr. M.D. "Obstetric Cases." *Journal* Apr. 26, 1813 to Nov. 9, 1828. Ontario County Historical Soc., Canandaigua, NY. Entry #151.

¹³ Hayes, George McG. "Canandaigua's Henry Johnson Fought for Negro Betterment." *Ontario County Times-Journal*. Jan. 1, 1953. pp. 1, 8.

¹⁴ N.T.C. [Noah T. Clarke] "Canandaigua Sixty Years Ago. XXII. More of Old-Time Negroes." *Ontario County Times*. Aug. 13, 1890. p. 2. Clarke was a teacher and Principal of Canandaigua Academy for nearly half a century. His local history essays are still highly respected. Clark's son, John, became an official of the NY State Museum.

¹⁵ See examples: Ellis, Herbert J. "James D. Bemis, 'Father of Western New York Press,' Settled Here." *Daily Messenger*. Apr. 28, 1972. II. P. 6. Mr. Ellis, noted for his accurate reporting, cited Hayes' essay, rather than Noah T. Clark's work. Herbert Ellis' articles are frequently the foundation for local history research projects. Another example: Jamison, C. A. "Two historical figures grew up in Canandaigua." *Daily Messenger*. Jun. 29, 1990. p. 6. Reporter Jamison cited Hayes' article specifically.

¹⁶ Hayes. George McG. "Canandaigua's Henry Johnson Fought for Negro Betterment." p. 1.

¹⁷ N.T.C. "Canandaigua Sixty Years Ago." p. 2.

¹⁸ United States. Census of Population 1860. Ontario County. Canandaigua, NY. p. 105; New York State. Census. Ontario County. Canandaigua. p. 23; United States. Census of Population 1850. Ontario County. Canandaigua, NY. p. 81.

¹⁹ Henry W. Johnson. Chattel Mortgages. Nov. 26, 1844; Dec. 23, 1844. Chattel Mortgage files. Ontario County Archive and Records Center.

²⁰ Stern, Madeleine B. "James D. Bemis: Country Printer." *New York History*. Winter, 1949. pp. 407, 409. 423, 424.

²¹ McIntosh, [William]. *History of Ontario County, New York*. Philadelphia. Everts, Ensign and Everts. 1876. p. 110; [Editorial] "The Colored School." *Ontario Messenger*. May 31, 1848. p. 3; "School for Colored Children." *Ontario County Times*. May 27, 1852. p. 2; [Advertisement] "Village of Canandaigua. Public Notice." *Ontario Messenger*. Jul. 27, 1859. p. 2. It is interesting to note that the decade-

long experiment with segregation died on the vine. When the Village of Canandaigua established a new cemetery in 1841 its trustees resolved that no persons of color would be buried there. That, too, was rescinded in 1855; just in time to become the final resting place of Austin Steward and other African-Americans. Oddly, the Pioneer Cemetery, across the street, had been the scene of African-American burials for decades. The 1860 federal census reported that four of Henry Johnson's children were "in school."

²² Richards, Caroline Cowles. *Village Life in America: 1852-1872*. Williamstown, Ma. Corner House Pub. 1972. p. 25. Chloe was probably Chloe Colbert who was living in that area according to the 1850 census. A manuscript (labeled as "Class M, no. 152, Case D") from the collection of the Ontario County Historical Society states that "Neckie" and "Jonathan" were children of Phebe Holland and James Colbert, once slaves of Daniel Dorsey. They were related to the Valentines since Phebe Holland took George Valentine as her third husband. Dorsey brought his slaves from 40 miles west of Baltimore to Geneva, NY.

²³ Ontario County. Land Records. *Liber* 81. p. 428.

²⁴ Ontario County. Mortgage Records. *Liber* 43. p. 335; Ontario County. Mortgage Records. *Liber* 51. p. 686; Ontario County. Land Records. *Liber* 150. p. 160-161; Town of Canandaigua. Assessment Roll. 1865-1867. pp. 31 [p. 0035], p. 29 [p. 0032], p. 30 [p. 0033].

²⁵ Ontario County. Land Records. *Liber* 87. p. 324.

²⁶ Ontario County. Land Records. *Liber* 94. p. 412.

²⁷ Ontario County. Land Records. *Liber* 97. p. 227-228.

²⁸ Katchun, Mitch. *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915*. Amherst, MA. Univ. of Massachusetts Press. 2003. pp. 7, 10, 60. Katchun points out that these celebrations evolved from slave festivals, the celebration of the 1827 emancipation of New York slaves, and the exclusion of African Americans from white dominated 4th of July celebrations. Katchun cites the oratory of Henry Johnson, and celebrations in Canandaigua, Geneva, and Rochester several times in his book.

²⁹ Charles L. Remond was a free-born Negro abolitionist. Samuel R.

Ward spoke often at abolition rallies throughout the Northeast, sometimes with Douglass. Oddly enough, Henry H. Garnet, a former Maryland slave and Presbyterian minister, would serve as US minister to Liberia for six weeks beginning on Dec. 23, 1881. See: Padgett, James A. "Ministers to Liberia and Their Diplomacy." *Journal of Negro History*. Jan. 1937. pp. 68; Fulkerson, Raymond Gerald. *Frederick Douglass and the Anti-Slavery Crusade: His Career and Speeches, 1817-1861*. PhD. Univ. of Illinois. 1971. I. pp. 59, 65, 156.

³⁰ "The celebration of the First of August..." *Ontario Repository*. Aug. 3, 1847. p. 2

³¹ "The celebration..." *Ontario Repository*. Aug. 7, 1847. p. 1.

³² "Celebration by the Colored People." [Rochester, NY] *Daily Democrat*. Aug. 1, 1848. p. 2.

³³ [No heading] "We have not room..." *The North Star*. Aug. 4, 1848. p. 2.

³⁴ "Selections. Address of H. W. Johnson." *The North Star*. Aug. 21, 1848. p. 1.

³⁵ "Lecture of Wendell Phillips." *Ontario Messenger*. Feb. 25, 1857. p. 3; "Local Record. It will be seen..." *Ontario Messenger*. Mar. 7, 1860. p. 2; "The Irrepressible Conflict." *Ontario Repository*. Mar. 7, 1860. p. 2; "The Lecture Season Closed." *Ontario Repository*. Mar. 7, 1860. p. 2.

³⁶ "Death of Abel Brown." *Ontario Messenger*. Nov. 13, 1844. p. 3; "The Fugitive Slave Law Mass Meeting." *Ontario Messenger*. Oct. 30, 1850. p. 3; "Speech of H. W. Johnson." *Ontario Messenger*. Nov. 20, 1850. p. 1-3; "Speech of H. W. Johnson." *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. Apr. 15, 1852. p. 1; "Nominations for Members of State Council." *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. Oct. 28, 1853. p. 2; "Convention at Geneva." *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. Dec. 16, 1853. p. 3.

³⁷ "Johnson at Farmington." *Ontario Messenger*. Apr. 16, 1851. p. 2.

³⁸ Fulkerson, Raymond Gerald. I. pp. 174-175.

³⁹ McFeely, William S. *Frederick Douglass*. New York. W. W. Norton.

1991. p. 380. McFeely quotes Douglass' words from his speech, "The Lessons of the Hour" delivered in Washington, DC, Jan. 9, 1894.

⁴⁰ Conover, George S. (ed) *History of Ontario County*, New York. Syracuse, NY. D. Mason and Co. 1893. p. 173 (first section).

⁴¹ "Notice," "Organization of Militia." *Ontario County Times*. Jul. 20, 1864. pp. 2, 3.

⁴² Koberg, Emma G. *Collected Postal History Notes of Ontario County, New York State*. [Location unknown] Empire State Postal Hist. Soc. 1978. p.47; Clark, Louis M. *A Book of Facts About the City of Canandaigua. Ontario County. New York. 1789-1991*. Canandaigua, NY. Ontario County Hist. Soc. 1991. p. 19.

⁴³ "Canandaigua." *Ontario Messenger*. Aug. 8, 1849. p. 3.

⁴⁴ Frances Worden Chesebro manuscript. Folder A.C52 1:5 "Chesebro (Robert H.) Family Papers." "Rare Books and Manuscripts. Rush Rhees Library. University of Rochester.

⁴⁵ Richards, Caroline Cowles. *Village Life in America: 1852-1872*. Williamstown, Ma. Corner House Pub. 1972. pp. 69, 172, 173. The daughter of a local clergyman, and granddaughter of a prominent banker, Richards kept a diary which has since been published.

⁴⁶ "Admitted to Practice." *Rochester Union and Advertiser*. Jun. 9, 1864. p. 2; "A Colored Man Admitted to the Bar." *Ontario County Times*. Jun. 22, 1864. p. 3.

⁴⁷ "A Colored Man Admitted to the Bar." *Ontario County Times*. Jun. 22, 1864. p. 3. The first black lawyer admitted to the New York bar (1847) was George Vashon of Syracuse. A short useful biography of Vashon can be found on the Internet at:
<http://www.pacny.net/freedom_trail/Vashon.htm>

⁴⁸ Richards, Caroline Cowles. *Village Life in America: 1852-1872*. Williamstown, Ma. Corner House Pub. 1972. p. 127.



*Lloyd Colbert, a resident of Henry Johnson's neighborhood in the 1850s, and probably his father-in-law. Colbert was a slave owned by Judge Nathaniel W. Howell in 1814. Lloyd Colbert died May 26, 1866. Henry Johnson's marriage to Patience Colbert was reported in the Ontario Messenger on January 19, 1842.
Ontario County Historical Society.*