

Joseph, Mary, and James **Norton**: an escape from slavery in the 1840s
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2014

Joseph (Jo) **Norton** was a refugee from slavery in the mid-1840s. He lived, worked, and studied in various places in New York State. A group of abolitionists in Chautauqua County and Cattaraugus County were instrumental in helping **Norton** to purchase the freedom of his wife and child, who had unfortunately remained in slavery for more than a year after his escape. One of **Norton's** benefactors in both counties was Eber M. **Pettit** (1802 - 1885), who ran an Underground Railroad (UGRR) station in Versailles (Cattaraugus County) NY, and whose father ran a UGRR station in Fredonia (Chautauqua County) NY. Many years after the events occurred, **Pettit** wrote about **Norton's** escape for a series of 1867 articles in the Fredonia (NY) *Censor*, which were published in an 1879 book. Correspondence found in the anti-slavery papers of Judge Elial T. **Foote** (1796 - 1877) verifies most of **Pettit's** account of the purchase of freedom for **Norton's** wife Mary and son James.

The escape

Pettit said that the escape from the District of Columbia included **Norton**, two other men, and two women. The details were given in **Pettit's** 1867 *Censor* articles, and later in a chapter of **Pettit's** *Sketches in the History of the Underground Railroad* (W. **McKinstry** & Son, Fredonia NY, 1879). According to **Pettit**, the original story of the escape appeared in "one of the morning papers in the city of Washington [DC], on Saturday morning of the last week in October, 1839, from which I copy as closely as I can from memory, not having time to look up the paper." Although the year was most likely 1843 instead of 1839, **Pettit** used his memory of the D.C. article to establish that the nation's capital was where the term "Underground Railroad" first appeared. The DC article reputedly said that under torture a young slave named Jim **Jones** had confessed that he was to have been taken to freedom on a railroad that "went underground all the way to Boston." According to **Pettit**, the DC article went on to complain that because of the UGRR, "our citizens are losing all their best servants." The example given was "Colonel **Hardy**, a tobacco planter residing in the District, about five miles from the city, [who] lost five more slaves last Sunday evening."

According to **Pettit's** memory of the DC article, the Colonel's initial search for his slaves was abandoned, because within two days of their escape, the Colonel received a copy of the *Liberty Press* of Albany NY, containing an article which read as follows: "Arrived, this morning by our fast line, three men and two women. They were claimed as slaves by Colonel H., of the District of Columbia, but became dissatisfied with the Colonel's ways, and left the old fellow's premises last Sunday evening, arriving at our station by the quickest passage on record."

Again according to **Pettit's** memory of the DC article, the Albany article contained personal accounts which convinced the Colonel that it must all be true. **Pettit** explained that, in reality, personal details that only the refugees would have known had been mailed in haste to Albany, in time to be included in an issue of an anti-slavery newspaper there. Meanwhile, the five escapees were still hiding in the DC vicinity.

The evidence

Attempts to verify **Pettit's** sources expose some additional confusion besides dates in his story. Also, although further details about this same escape and its aftermath were provided by Homer Uri **Johnson** in his *From Dixie to Canada: Romances and Realities of the Underground Railroad* (H. U. **Johnson**, Orwell OH, 1894), **Johnson's** account unfortunately adds to the confusion.

Johnson was a writer and lecturer, who had purportedly done extensive research into the activities of the UGRR. In a brief preface, **Johnson** gave as some of his sources "the writings of **Coffin**, **Pettit**, the **Clarkes** and others." It may at first appear that **Johnson** had filled out details in **Pettit's** story, because **Johnson** presented, for example, the text of a letter dated "Versailles, N.Y. Dec. 1, 1840," from **Pettit** to Gen. Wm. L. **Chaplain** [*sic*], Washington, D.C." **Johnson** then offered a response supposedly received a week later.

However, these letters contain inconsistent and incorrect dates and were therefore most likely to have been **Johnson's** inventions. As noted by R. W. **Winks** in *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1997), "Some [UGRR collections], such as Homer Uri **Johnson's** ..., are presented as factual, when they were in truth a pastiche of tales."

At least the skeleton of **Pettit's** story is corroborated by the following five letters from 1845, which are found in [the Foote papers](#), and which pertain to **Norton**. First, on 25 January 1845, **Pettit** wrote to **Foote**, as follows: *Dear Sir, Having recd another letter from Mr. Chaplin stating that a written contract is made with the master of Josefs wife that he will take \$300 if paid by the 14th inst we are making an extra effort & Joseph & myself will continue to labor to procure the necessary funds the same as tho this arrangement were not made & in fact without knowing that it is made & I have no doubt the funds will be raised to meet the payt soon if not within the 30 ds, Yours truly, E. M. Pettit.*

Second, on the same sheet of paper in the same handwriting is the following note, purportedly from **Norton** to **Foote**: *Hon. E. T. Foote, Dear Sir, should I fail to collect all the money necessary to pay for Mary & our boy I will work it out at the end of my fingers & I shall feel much obliged if you can aid me at this time.*

Third, on 6 February 1845, **Pettit** was one of five men who signed a letter to **Foote** regarding efforts underway to buy freedom for **Norton's** wife and child. The text of the letter follows: *Ellicottville Feb. 6. 1845, To Elial T. Foote Dear Sir We have concluded to make an effort to raise the balance of the money necessary for the purchase of the wife and child of Joseph Norton. Mr. Pettit has now in his hands \$100. We will raise \$100 here, & if you will undertake to raise \$100 in your section. The proposition is for you & some of your friends to write to Mr. Tyler to advance the money to Mr. Chaplin, with an assurance that it shall be reimbursed in 30 days. The amount on hand will be paid over, -- we will be responsible for \$100, more, & you must risk the balance. He is to continue the effort to raise the money, to pay the amount advanced, and we think it can be very nearly collected within the time above mentioned, so that we may not be called upon. Yours respectfully, B. Chamberlain, W.P. Angel, H. Colman, E. M. Pettit, E. S. Colman P.S. Should you prefer to have us write to Mr. Tyler, we will do so, upon receiving the assurance from you to raise \$100 –Yours, Angel*

Fourth, **Pettit** was also named in **Foote's** copy of his response, transcribed as follows: *Jamestown Feby 8th 1845 Messrs B Chamberlain, W. P. Angel, H. Colman, E. M. Pettit, & E. S. Colman Gentlemen, yours of the 6th Inst in reference to the raising funds for the purchase of Joseph Nortons wife, to Emancipate her out of Slavery is before us. We will do the same for this county, as you pledge yourself to do for your county in all respects, and you are authorized to go*

forward without delay and arrange with Hon A. Tyler according to your proposition. Very Respectfully Yours &c E. T. Foote, N. A. Lowry

On 25 April 1845, **Pettit** sent the following letter to **Foote**: Versailles, April 25, 1845, Hon. E. T. **Foot** [sic], My Dear Sir, Your favor of the 3rd inst is just put into my hands, (9 O.C.P.M.)and as the mail leaves here tomorrow morning I have but little time to write. I recd a letter March 17, from brother **Chaplin**, saying that he, with Mary & the boy would be in Utica the 13th & before I had finished reading it Joseph [**Norton**] who had been on a trip into Erie, Wyoming & Genesee Cos arrived having traveled on foot from Buffalo. He was overjoyed to hear the glad news & as he had collected all he could in this country it was thot best by the friends here that he should go & meet his wife & try to obtain the bal in Oneida & Madison Cos. He paid into my hands sufficient to cancel his debt for the loan less \$37.35. Tired & foot-sore as he was he started that evening for Buffalo on foot intending to take the cars the next day for Utica where he arrived in safety & found his wife & boy well & happy, as you will see by the Liberty Press I send you, you will also see that he is at work. I have the fullest confidence in Joseph & shall expect to see him here as soon as he can obtain the bal of the money, his wife's expenses from Washington to Utica, he will have to raise also. I am happy to learn that our good cause is gaining ground in Chaut which is true also of this Co & I believe generally thro the country, **Goodells** Constitutional argument is doing wonders. It upsets the strong men. The press as you justly observe is the great engine with which this great moral battle is mostly to be fought, & I heartily wish all our friends took the same view of the matter that you do. What a preposterous idea that the fathers of the Revolution should have made a compromise in the Constitution, with the intent to perpetuate the abominable system of Slavery. It is a base slander nothing of the kind is to be found in that document, if it were so, instead of holding an annual jubilee & glorifying the heroes of the Revolution, it were better to teach our children to trample on their ashes & spit upon their tombstones. No, no! the scorn & contempt of the world shall yet be felt by those [who] would gladly shuffle off their own responsibility upon the heads of the Pa[t]riots of former days. I hope we shall have the pleasure of seeing you here before long. We can get up a meeting any time & you can do much good in this region by giving us a few lectures, present our kindest regards to your family. Very Respectfully, your Brother in the Lord & the cause of truth, E. M. **Pettit**.

Norton's life according to Pettit

Thus we have a record of the period and some confirmation of the Joseph **Norton** saga. However, the following summary of **Norton's** life as we know it comes primarily from **Pettit's** own recollection.

If **Pettit's** dates are corrected to those found in [the Foote papers](#), **Norton** was born into slavery about 1820, and when old enough, worked in the tobacco fields of his owner "Col. **Hardy**." The plantation was about five miles from the center of DC. When **Norton** was sixteen, **Hardy** "hired" him out to work as a waiter in a DC hotel each winter. **Pettit** said that in later years **Norton** was proud to describe how he had waited on Daniel **Webster** at that hotel. Living in DC was the **Judson** family with at least one slave named Mary, said **Pettit**. According to **Pettit**, **Judson's** father had told Mary that according to his will she would be given her freedom upon his death. She too worked part time in a DC hotel as a chambermaid. **Hardy** had permitted **Norton** to go to a Methodist church, and **Norton** and Mary were soon married. **Pettit**

said that **Norton** was then permitted to see his wife on Sunday every other week, and that they had a son James.

Norton had been considering an escape from slavery for some time, **Pettit** said, and especially now that **Norton** had a son as well as a wife. According to **Pettit**, **Norton** happened to have a conversation with a stranger on the way home from church. The man's northern accent, and probably some comments he made, led **Norton** to trust him enough to reveal his desire for freedom. A meeting was arranged to take place in two weeks. At the meeting, it was decided that **Norton** should prepare to leave three weeks from that day.

Pettit said, "It was arranged that Mary and the little boy should remain a while longer," which suggests that James was a very young child. **Pettit** also indicated that Mary was pregnant at the time of the escape, and that **Norton** was told that his wife and their little boy would come on by a route "better suited to their condition."

Pettit's details about the escape

By careful prearrangement, **Pettit** said, **Norton** slipped away as it began to get dark one October evening. He carefully made his way to "the old cemetery by the turnpike, near the bounds of [DC]," where he hid. In fact, the public cemetery may be seen in the northeast corner of DC near the Baltimore turnpike on the 1850 map entitled, "City of Washington, published by **Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co.** Philadelphia."

When a signal was given, **Norton** slowly stood up and to his surprise discovered four others standing there as well. They were all **Hardy's** slaves, who had been "hired out" in DC. Although each knew there would be others making an escape, none knew who those others would be, **Pettit** said. It is illustrative of the secrecy with which the UGRR operated that the guide who met them in the cemetery was new to them "but having exchanged signals they confided in him." In fact, the planning and the intricate arrangements that unfolded must have taken some time to work out, which explains the five-week delay from the time **Norton** met the first northerner. Also, between the lines of **Pettit's** account there seems to be an indication that **Hardy** had been particularly targeted by one or more abolitionists working with the UGRR.

Back in the cemetery, **Norton's** new conductor explained that **Norton** and his party were to follow the turnpike until they neared an actual railway line. At that point, **Pettit** said, they were to then begin following the railway tracks. They were to move off the tracks into the woods each time they neared a railway station, then return to the railway and continue until they came to a man standing in the middle of the track.

Pettit said that if the man in the center of the track called out "Ben," **Norton** and his party were to "go to him and do as he tells you." The conductor in the cemetery appointed **Norton's** uncle Harry as their temporary conductor, who was to use the north star as his guide when they were not on the tracks. But **Norton** and his party were told to hurry, because "they had thirty miles to go." **Pettit** later mentions a similar feat in his account of **Norton's** walking from Buffalo to Versailles, and then 27 miles back in time to catch the train the next morning, so it is possible that **Pettit** exaggerated speed and distance.

Following the turnpike, **Norton** and his party reached Ben, a free African American who rented a corn field close by the railway about six miles from Baltimore. "He had been supplied with money to rent this field," **Pettit** recounted. The men and women of **Norton's** party were hidden in a stack of cornstalks, and they were given a hearty meal and allowed to sleep, probably during the day. As soon as it was fully dark again, another conductor appeared and "took [the two

women of the party] Kate and Nancy away.” He led them along the railway to a cross road, then along that road to “a coach driven by a Negro,” **Pettit** said, which carried them on to Baltimore where they were kept out of sight.

In the meantime **Norton**, Robert, and Harry remained hidden in the corn field, waiting for their pursuers to give up the chase. It was at this point in the narrative that **Pettit** described the trick about the letter sent to the Albany newspaper. Apparently this trick was used many times. **Pettit** said, “The plan adopted by the enterprising managers of the UGRR to mislead the owners of the fugitives, and induce them to give up the chase, was kept secret a long time, and great numbers escaped thereby without capture or accident between the Capitol city of the Nation to that of our own State.”

Once the pursuit had been abandoned, the trek began again. The three men, led by a conductor **Pettit** described as a “a sharp colored boy, not more than thirteen years old” made their way on foot through Baltimore, stopping along the way to buy apples and peanuts and talking loudly about the religious meeting they had just attended. Since **Norton** and Harry were both ardent Methodists, they had no trouble sounding genuine, **Pettit** said. Finally they reached Baltimore’s outskirts and met Kate and Nancy, who had been led to the rendezvous by yet another guide. He gave them their instructions for the next leg of their journey, and they once again began their passage north.

Pettit said that by traveling on foot at night and “stopping through the day at farm houses with Quakers,” **Norton** and his party reached Philadelphia. From there, they were taken by fishing boat to Bordentown NJ, and from there by an actual railway to New York City. For that part of the passage, **Pettit** explained, the three men were hidden in one of the freight cars while the two women were fitted out with veils and fancy clothes. “A gentleman, assuming the air of a Southerner, walked between them, pushing aside a man at the door, whose business it was to detect runaway slaves; they stepped in just as the car started.” Once they had arrived in New York City, they were quickly moved on to Albany.

It was about then, **Pettit** said, that **Norton** learned that his wife and child would not be joining him. He had understood they were being brought north by a different route. Somehow, **Judson** had learned or suspected that Mary was attempting to escape, and had thrown her into prison until she could be sold “to be sent into the rice swamps, the worst punishment that could be inflicted upon a slave,” **Pettit** commented. Although Mary lost her second child while she was in prison, **Judson** relented in time to save Mary’s own life, and she was released back to his custody.

Norton’s work to free his wife and son

Pettit’s account said that **Norton** left Albany just a year from the day he had left the **Hardy** plantation, looking for a place where he could work for his board and go to school. **Pettit** said that **Norton**, “having saved a few dollars by his industry, left his friends in Albany, and started west under instructions.” **Pettit** seems to mean that **Norton** was to find more “friends,” with whom he could be safe as he made his way west.

Norton then arrived in westernmost New York State, in the village of Versailles, the location of **Pettit’s** home and UGRR station. **Pettit** remarked that he “chanced to meet” **Norton** in “this village” and agreed to take him on to do chores in exchange for room and board. During this period, **Pettit** said, **Norton** was allowed to attend the local school and “began to learn the alphabet at twenty-five years of age.”

The next key figure in the **Norton** story seems to have been William Lawrence **Chaplin**, also known as General **Chaplin**. Born in 1796 in Massachusetts, **Chaplin** was a lawyer and an ardent abolitionist. In 1836 the American Anti-Slavery Society sponsored him as a lecturer, and from 1837 through 1841, he was their General Agent for the State of New York. In that post, he traveled extensively, lecturing and expanding the abolitionists' network. There are references in [the Foote papers](#) and also in the *Fredonia Censor* that locate **Chaplin's** speaking engagements in the Chautauqua County and Cattaraugus County communities of Lodi, Perrysburg, Pomfret, Portland, Sinclairville, Stockton, Versailles, and Westfield as early as 1844.

When the eastern New York Anti-Slavery Society's executive committee met on 7 November 1844, they determined to enlarge their newspaper, the *Albany Patriot*, and they hired **Chaplin** to be the paper's correspondent in DC. Although **Pettit** may have had the date and newspaper wrong, he wrote, "Soon after Congress met in December, 1840, I learned that General **Chaplin** was in Washington reporting for his paper, the aforesaid *Liberty Press*, of which he was one of the editors, and I proposed to **Norton** to ask him to enquire after Mary, to which he assented, though with but little hope of success."

According to **Pettit**, **Chaplin** replied "in eight or ten days." He had found Mary "living with Mr. **Judson**, her old master." After some discussion, **Judson** had agreed to give up Mary and her four-year old son James for \$350 if it was paid by March 4th." It was agreed, **Pettit** wrote, that **Norton** would "undertake to raise the money himself by holding meetings in school-houses in country districts, tell his own story, relate incidents in plantation life, &c., and take up collections." This **Norton** did, reported **Pettit**, for several weeks.

Then **Pettit** arranged for **Norton** to meet him in Ellicottville NY. In fact, there was a Liberty Party convention at Ellicottville on 6-8 February 1845, which probably accounts for the presence of more significant players in this story. For example, E. T. **Foote** was invited to that convention by a letter from E. S. **Colman** dated 21 January 1845 and preserved in [the Foote papers](#).

On 25 January, **Pettit** said, he had received another letter from **Chaplin** "containing an offer from **Judson** to take \$50 less than the first offer, provided the \$300 should be paid him by the first day of February." So far **Norton** had raised only \$100, according to [the Foote papers](#).

Matters were now urgent. **Pettit** said that the meeting in Ellicottville was to be at the office of "Esquire H." with about ten men present, among them Judge **Chamberlain**.

According to [the Foote papers](#), it was **Chamberlain** who suggested a joint note for \$200 to add to **Norton's** \$100. **Pettit** said that one of the signers of the note was T. R. **Colman**, who actually advanced the money and "drove to Buffalo, fifty miles, in a terrible storm, bought a draft and mailed it in time to reach Washington by the date specified, so that the free papers were secured for Mary and her boy."

Technically, **Judson** would not have been selling Mary and James. Instead, he accepted \$300 for which he signed papers freeing them. **Pettit** indicated that **Norton** was next obligated to continue his efforts to raise the money to pay back the ten signers.

Further discrepancies

Comparing **Pettit's** 1867 and 1879 recollections to the 1845 correspondence in [the Foote papers](#) reveals a few more discrepancies. We find in [the Foote papers](#) an undated letter from **Pettit** to **Foote** reporting the arrival of the letter from **Chaplin**, and that the price was now \$300 if delivered by "the 14th inst," not February 1st as **Pettit** later remembered it. Also, [the Foote papers](#) indicate that there were five men agreeing to raise \$100, not ten men signing a note for \$300.

Finally, [the Foote papers](#) indicate three times that “Mr. **Tyler**” in DC was to be asked to advance the money to **Chaplin**, to be paid to **Judson**. If **Pettit** was correct that T. R. **Colman** did indeed make a mad rush through a snowstorm to Buffalo, **Colman** may have been doing so to pay back Asher **Tyler**, his friend, colleague, and fellow abolitionist. Hence, **Pettit’s** statement about **Colman** and the snowstorm may not present another discrepancy. Like T. R. **Colman**, **Tyler** was connected to the Devereaux Land Company. **Tyler** had been elected to Congress on the Whig Party and was serving from March 1843 through March 1845. As [the Foote papers](#) indicate, **Tyler** was the right man in the right place at the right time, and it was most likely **Tyler’s** money that was to be repaid.

The happy ending

Pettit concluded with **Norton’s** “lecturing tour,” to raise the money to repay his benefactors. In a somewhat confusing sentence **Pettit** wrote, “It was agreed that Jo should send money as fast as collected to Mr. E. Shepard **Colman** [brother of T. R. **Colman**] of Ellicottville, and if there was not enough to pay the note, he was to collect the balance from the signers and pay it.” What followed was more clear. Jo arrived back from his speaking tour at **Pettit’s** house “on the 10th day of March,” and **Pettit** noted, “I had just received a letter from Mr. **Chaplin**, saying that he had brought Mary and her boy to Utica, and Jo must come without delay.”

It is that letter from **Chaplin** that **Pettit** was reporting to **Foote** in **Pettit’s** own letter of 25 April 1845, in which he said, “I recd a letter March 17, from brother **Chaplin**.” As may be imagined, **Norton** wasted no time in getting to Utica. **Pettit** reported that, although **Norton** had just walked 27 miles from Buffalo to **Pettit’s** home, “he started for Utica about sunset.”

After he was united with his wife and son, **Norton’s** subsequent life was summed up by **Pettit** in rather brisk fashion. According to **Pettit**, **Norton** settled in Syracuse, built a house and did a thriving business until the advent of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. In October 1851, **Norton** became involved in what was called the “Jerry Rescue.”

As **Pettit** told it, a fugitive slave called Jerry had been captured. At the same time, an anti-slavery convention had just begun in Syracuse, with **Pettit** in attendance. Those at the meeting were informed of the capture and ran from the hall, hoping to free Jerry as he was being carried off. **Pettit** said that **Norton** organized a team which broke into the courthouse where Jerry had been taken.

In the melee, **Pettit** said, **Norton** struck a marshal with a crow bar, breaking his arm. At that point, **Norton** decided that he and his family would be safer in Canada. **Pettit’s** last words about **Norton** were, “He settled in Toronto, where he was respected as a citizen, and took a great interest in the education of his family, and in promoting the best interests of fugitives who were constantly arriving there.”

Paul **Leone** republished **Pettit’s** memoirs in 1999. In thorough endnotes, **Leone** added, “In 1924, the [Onondaga Historical] association published a detailed account of the [Jerry] rescue. Jo **Norton’s** name is not mentioned, although it is noted that Deputy Marshal **Fitch** of Rochester received a broken arm.”