

A Page from the County's Anti-slavery Society Journal, 1839.
By Douglas H. Shepard and Wendy Straight, 2014

In the late twentieth century, a typed document was donated by Esther Fay **Frost Pelton** to the D. R. **Barker** Museum in Fredonia, NY. The typewritten note at the top of the document said, "This being a page from the Journal of the Annual Meeting of the Chautauqua Anti-Slavery Society, held September 25, 1839." However, the rest of the document consists of minutes of the meeting, which were published almost verbatim in the *Jamestown Weekly Journal* of 25 September, 1839. The actual meeting was on August 29, 1839. Also, a note in the Museum states that the document came from (or is a copy of an item in) the scrapbook of "Mrs. Jesse **Frost Case**," who turns out to be Fay Irma **Frost Case** (Mrs. Jesse **Case**).

Although it would be helpful to know whether the typewritten item donated by Ms. **Pelton** (1914 – 2002) came from a newspaper clipping in a scrapbook, or from an actual journal of the anti-slavery society, such information may never be known. Still, it is interesting to consider Ms. **Pelton's** family connections to the anti-slavery society of 1839. First of all, Ms. **Pelton** had grown up at today's 245 Chestnut Street, the home of her parents, Fred Fay **Frost** (1883 - 1953) and May **Frost** (1879 - 1964). Ms. **Pelton** later lived next door at today's 237 Chestnut Street, in the house formerly owned by her grandparents, Edwin **Frost** (1847 – 1933) and Clara Mathilda **Bunce Frost** (1848 – 1918).

Ms. **Pelton's** aunt Fay Irma **Frost Case** (1873 – 1930) inherited the house at 237 Chestnut Street. As she passed along the house to Ms. **Pelton**, Ms. **Case** also passed along the document now in the museum. How, though, did Ms. **Case** acquire the document? The following reconstruction, although conjectural, seems too obvious to be ignored. Ms. **Case** probably acquired the scrapbook item or journal through her husband, Jesse Melancthon **Case** (1876 – 1929), who had inherited it from his parents, Frederick Worden **Case** (1857 – 1927) and Lucy **Pettit Case** (1854 – 1877). They had probably inherited the newspaper clipping or journal from Lucy's parents, Melancthon Smith **Pettit** (1818 – 1878) and Sarah **Hancox Pettit** (1825 – 1886), who lived in the home which once stood at today's 104 Matteson Street.

They, in turn, had probably inherited the clipping or journal from Melancthon's parents, Dr. James **Pettit** (1767 – 1849) and Lucy **Felt Pettit** (1768 – 1859), who had operated an Underground Railroad station at the home and farm which once stood at today's 467 Chestnut Street. Dr. **Pettit** was the president of the Chautauqua County Anti-Slavery Society in 1839, and was so named in the 1839 minutes. Additionally, the minutes named twenty-two of the more than seventy people present at the 1839 meeting. Those minutes, as they appeared in the balance of the Museum's document, are transcribed as follows, with differences from the newspaper's account shown in brackets:

*The [This] Society met at Fredonia, August 29, 1839, agreeable [agreeably] to adjournment. The President, Dr. James **Pettit** took the chair, and the meeting was opened with prayer by the Rev. A. P. **Hawley**.*

*The secretary being absent, the Rev. E. **Parmlee** [**Parmely**] was appointed secretary pro tem.*

*On motion of Mr. **Johnson**: Resolved, That a committee of three be appointed by the chair, as a committee of nomination.*

*Messrs. A. **Hawley**, H. C. **Frisbee**, and N. **Gray** were that committee.*

*Rev. Nathaniel **West** of North East, Pa. then offered the following resolution which he sustained in a happy and very interesting speech.*

Resolved, That Slavery, as an institution is contrary to true Democracy; that as such it must be destroyed, or our democratic form of government must cease.

*The Rev. Mr. **Orton** of Ripley then moved the second resolution, which he supported by some forcible remarks. It [which] was adopted.*

Resolved: That the influence of slavery in preventing the access of the gospel to the slaves, is sufficient in itself to array the church of God against its continuance in any part of our common country.

*Committee of nominations [nomination] reported as follows: - Dr. James **Pettit [Pettet]** President, - C. O. **Matthews**, John **Crane**, Thomas **Danforth**, and Havens B. **Brigham**, Vice Presidents; Wm. R. **Rogers**, Recording Secretary; F. A. **Reddington**, Corresponding [corresponding, sic] Secretary; John H. [R.] **Walker**, Treasurer; R. P. **Johnson**, A. F. **Taylor**, Samuel **Foote**, Jr., Executive Committee.*

An invitation being given by the President to the congregation to become members of this society, seventy-four persons gave [in] their names as members.

*Resolved; That when we adjourn, it be to meet at Jamestown, on the last week [of] August [Aug.] next; and that Messrs. A. **Hazeltine**, Rufus **Jones**, Wm. **Breed**, G. C. **Delamatter** and P. **Palmiter**, Jr. be a committee of arrangement for the next anniversary. After prayer, adjourned.*

It may next be wondered how upwards of seventy people could have heard about an anti-slavery meeting before the days of rapid communication. One answer to that question may be seen in newspaper notices that occasionally appeared about such meetings.

For example, a year earlier, the *Fredonia Censor* reported on 8 August 1838, "The Chautauque County Antislavery Society will hold their annual meeting at Westfield, on Wednesday the 29th inst. at 2 o'clock, P.M. Abolitionists are respectfully invited to attend, and all who feel an interest in this glorious cause. The meeting will be held in the Presbyterian church. It is expected the meeting will be attended by several gentlemen from abroad. Rufus **Jones**, Sec'y., Jamestown, Aug. 8, 1838."

Yet, the anti-slavery meetings were not only announced in 1838, but were also held in conjunction with the meetings of other groups. For example, the *Censor* of 8 August 1838 also reported, "Notice is hereby given, that the Chautauque County Sunday School Union, Bible, Anti-Slavery, and Temperance Societies, will hold their respective Anniversaries at Westfield, in the Presbyterian Church, on the 29th and 30th of August next. There will be three public meetings during each day, commencing with the Sabbath School Anniversary on Wednesday at 9 o'clock, A.M. Town directors of Sabbath Schools, are requested to prepare full statistical reports; and if possible, to present them in their own proper persons; or to forward them by some friend of the cause. Speakers have been secured within the county and from abroad to address the different Societies; and arrangements are made to entertain friends, and they are earnestly solicited to attend, and partake with us, of what is confidently expected to be a good intellectual and religious feast. By Ex. Com., David D. Gregory, Ch'n. Westfield."

Finally, the anti-slavery meetings in 1838, like the meetings the following year, warranted even further attention from the press. The following appeared in the *Censor* of 5 September 1838:

"To the Editor of the *Censor*: Sir,—Having been a gratified spectator of the proceedings at the anniversary meetings held at Westfield last week, I feel unwilling they should be suffered to pass off entirely without notice.

"The first meeting was that of the Chautauque County Sunday School Union, Rev. Washington **Winsor**, President. The reports from the different towns exhibited an encouraging prospect of the success of these primary seminaries for forming good citizens and good society, and the speeches of several individuals present were well calculated to prompt to further exertion and more ardent zeal in so good a cause.

“The Chautauque County Bible Society—Hon. Elial T. **Foote**, President—next held their meeting. The resolution adopted some two or three years ago by the society to furnish every family in the county with a Bible, it was discovered had involved the society in a debt of between seven and eight hundred dollars; and the great anxiety of the friends and supporters of the society was that this debt should be immediately cancelled; and the spirit manifested on the occasion, and the measures proposed by the preserving [*sic*] president, and adopted, gave earnest that such would soon be the desirable result.

“The Chautauque County Anti-Slavery Society—R. P. **Johnson**, Esq. President—next presented their claims to the community. Comparatively little has been done in this county in this cause of philanthropy and right; but the resolutions introduced and ably sustained by several individuals gave assurance that it was henceforth to take rank with the most benevolent institutions of this reforming age.

“The Chautauque County Temperance Society—Joseph **Waite**, Esq. President—next claimed attention. This society it was apparent had done much good in lessening the evils of intemperance and abolishing the hitherto almost universal custom of using ardent spirits in the domestic and social circle; but it was apparent that much remained yet to be done to gain a complete victory over this monster vice. The absurdity of the license system was brought under especial notice, and a resolution adopted to use all laudable means to have amended or done away a law granting a *bounty* for the sale of ardent spirits—a law that would disgrace even the dark ages.

“The several objects of these different societies having been passed upon during the day and evening of Wednesday, on Thursday an interesting exhibition of the scholars and teachers of the Sabbath Schools of Westfield and those in its immediate vicinity took place; an exhibition well arranged and executed, with the single fault (and a fault altogether too common) of keeping the children, after marching, in a standing position for an hour or more to hear addresses.

“The ceremonies were closed by a discourse in the evening upon the subject of anti-slavery, by the Rev. Mr. **West**, of North East, Pa. a gentleman who had done much to give interest to the several topics discussed, having taken part in each of the discussions. To show that this subject is beginning to receive the attention its importance demands, we have only to state that the house was more completely filled upon this occasion than any other with an attentive audience. And this is one great point gained in this cause—the days of mobism are in a measure over—people are now willing to hear upon this as well as upon other subjects—are willing to *discuss* it, which is more than half in achieving a victory over oppression. The subject of the speaker was the sin of *neutrality* in this cause of benevolence which he illustrated and enforced by bible arguments, in a manner which I doubt not produced no very agreeable sensations among some of his reverend and moral professing brethren present; several of whom though acknowledging the great evil and sin of slavery, and *professing* a great desire for its being done away, are too deeply imbued with what one has aptly termed an “irredeemable shinplaster morality” to stem the popular opinion and act in accordance with their better feelings and sense of duty.

“The good people of Westfield are deserving of much credit for their hospitality to strangers, and their exertions to give satisfaction to all. An Observer.”

Finally, it is helpful to understand that national, state, and local anti-slavery societies were quite new. Even though abolitionists had been active at the informal level for decades, the American Anti-Slavery Society had not been formed until 1833, the New York State Anti-Slavery Society had only been formed in 1835, and local societies had only been formed in 1836, many with some difficulty.

For example, the *Fredonia Censor* reported in 1836, "Anti-Slavery Society . --Certain of our good neighbors at Dunkirk had some trouble last week, in forming themselves in an anti-slavery society. A notice was given requesting those in "favor" of such a measure to meet at a place appointed. It appearing, however, from various demonstrations, there would be a goodly number present who were not in favor of the measure, those friendly to the subject formed themselves into an anti-slavery society at another place, and then proceeded to _____ first designated place, where they in fact found a well filled room – officers appointed to their hands, and all things ready to proceed to business. After a great number of speeches were made and resolutions offered, (all those offered by the Abolitionists were voted down,) things were brought to a crisis, _____ a resolution offered and carried by the opposition, that one of the Abolitionists should be reprimanded by the chair, for offering an amendment that was deemed derogatory to the meeting. The _____ stepped out upon the floor to receive the reprimand, which placed the chairman in rather a quandary, and the reprimand was suffered to go by default. The meeting soon after broke up, both sides considering that they had carried their points. We understand the anti-Abolitionists are to have their proceedings published in the *Dunkirk Beacon!* , the *Albany Argus!!*, and *Washington Globe!!!* – whether the other side are to be honored with any further notoriety than we here give them, we know not."

However, in spite of the problems in Dunkirk in 1836, Ms. **Pelton's** document as well as the newspaper accounts of the meetings in 1838 and 1839 tell us that a countywide anti-slavery society was operating without a great deal of protest by the end of that decade. In fact, by 1843, the *Censor* reported, "Notice – An Anti-slavery County Convention will be held at Sinclairville on Thursday the 19th inst. at 10 o'clock A.M. to nominate suitable candidates for the Elective offices of the County at the ensuing election. Patriots – Friends of the equal rights of *all men*, rally in your strength from every town in the county to this gathering of Liberty-men. Many voters."