

The Telegraph and the Underground Railroad  
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2013

Was the telegraph used by the Underground Railroad (UGRR) in Chautauqua County? An examination of one well documented incident, one well documented UGRR conductor, and one well documented telegraph operator suggests the possibility.

In September 1851 a runaway slave called Harrison (also known as Harrison **Williams**) was kidnapped in Busti NY by slave-catchers from Virginia. The ensuing chase and trial were a dramatic episode in the history of the Underground Railroad in Chautauqua County, retold many times through the years. One of those retellings was a long article by Palmer K. **Shankland** in the 18 July 1891 *Saturday Times* of Jamestown. **Shankland's** account was based on extensive interviews with older residents of Busti who still had vivid memories of the events at a time when it was no longer dangerous to name names.

What **Shankland's** sources told him was that two men brought the news of the kidnapping to Jamestown, and that Jamestown resident and UGRR conductor Silas **Shearman** first thought of obtaining a writ of *habeas corpus*, but realizing the time was too short, went instead "to Frank **Palmer's** newspaper office, where the only telegraph operator in the village was located and sent a message to George A. **French** of Dunkirk. . . . He knew that George A. **French** would arouse the friends of anti-slavery in the vicinity of Dunkirk, who would give him every possible assistance."

This event took place after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which was only six years after the advent of the telegraph. On 1 May 1844 the Whigs had held their national convention in Baltimore, nominating Henry **Clay**. The news was hand-carried to Annapolis Junction, where it was wired to the Capitol and became the first news dispatch to use the electric telegraph. In the rest of 1844 and into 1845, lines were established between major eastern cities: Washington and Baltimore, Washington and New York, Boston and New York, Boston and Springfield, Springfield and Buffalo, Buffalo and Lockport, and so on.

In early 1846 Philadelphia was connected to Harrisburg, and on 8 September 1846 the *Censor* of Fredonia, NY announced the following: *We learn from the Buffalo Commercial, that the "Atlantic Lake and Mississippi Telegraph Company" have in contemplation the construction and continuation of the Telegraph from Buffalo around the south side of Lake Erie to Detroit.* The article added that the line between Albany and Buffalo had been in operation for a short time. The *Censor* of 23 March 1847 noted that there was now "a branch from Cleveland to Pittsburgh." A representative of that company had already visited Fredonia "with the view of locating a telegraphic station here." The *Censor* editor added, "We earnestly hope the requisite sum to secure a station at Fredonia will be pledged." That his wishes were not met is apparent from the issue of 12 October 1847, which urged, "Let us have some action here, and that immediately."

By 19 January 1848, the posts to carry the wires through the village were up. The line running along the south side of Main Street was in place, and the first dispatch was carried from Cleveland to Buffalo. Finally, on 29 February 1848, the *Censor* was able to announce that "a station has been located here." In the issue of 7 March 1848 the editor was able to thank "the courteous operators here" for providing "communications *by lightning*. . . between this village and Buffalo on Saturday last." The operators were "Messrs. **Cornell** and **Cobb**."

**Cornell** was a representative of the telegraph company, while young Emory **Cobb** was the one who actually remained in the village, staffing the telegraph office for several years before

moving on. It was the issue of 14 March 1848 that specified where the office was located: “over E. **Risley & Co.**’s Store, where those wishing business transacted, will find the gentlemanly and accommodating operator (Mr. **Cobb**) always on hand.” That was approximately 32 West Main Street, but the building no longer stands. A retrospective piece in the *Censor* of 1 January 1890 located the office “in a room over **Starr’s** grocery, and a young man name of **Cobb**, now a prominent man in Chicago, placed in charge.”

The next stage in the expansion of telegraph links was the proposal to use the NY and Erie RR line as the corridor for a telegraph line from NY City “to intersect the Erie & Michigan [telegraph] line at Fredonia.” The 13 March 1849 *Censor* noted that “**Pew’s** Erie & Alleghany Telegraph line is now in operation from this place to Sinclearville and Warren, and doing considerable business. The wires on the N.Y. & Erie line are strung hence to New York, and it is believed that the line will be put in operation in less than two weeks.”

By the end of April 1849 the NY & Erie telegraph line was up and running. The *Buffalo Commercial*, quoted in the *Censor* of 24 April 1849, reported that the line “extends from New York to Fredonia, along the line of the Erie railroad where it intersects the Erie & Michigan line. . . . The intermediate places, where the line passes through and where offices are already opened, are Sinclairville, Nunda, Dansville, Jefferson, Ithaca, Owego, Binghamton, Middletown, Montrose, Goshen and Newburg.” The *Censor* editor corrected that list, noting that Sinclairville was on a different line, that no offices had yet been opened at Montrose and Pike, and that there was an office at Honesdale PA.

In April 1849 the NY & Erie line and the Alleghany & Erie line were added to the Fredonia telegraph office connections. To assist with the increased traffic, George French **Brigham** was added to the staff. Emory **Cobb**, who had been managing the Erie & Michigan line continued at the 32 West Main Street office as well. In May 1849 a Fredonia & Pittsburgh line was under construction and by December 1849 was about completed. The route for that line included Warren PA, Youngsville, Columbus, Waterford, and the Erie Extension Canal line which came from Pittsburgh. The *Censor* of 18 December 1849 also reported that **O’Reilly’s** Atlantic, Lake & Mississippi line was now connected to a Fredonia office “in the rear of the Post office.” The postmaster, at that point, was L. L. **Pratt**, appointed in May 1849 under the aegis of the new Whig administration of **Taylor** and **Fillmore**.

A serious fire in February 1850 almost destroyed the *Censor* office. However, by October a new building was up in Center Street, and by late December the **O’Reilly** telegraph office had been moved there. The 1850 Census shows George French **Brigham**, working at the telegraph office but still living at the home of his parents, James and Fanny (**Risley**) **Brigham**. He then relocated to Dunkirk and was, according to an item in the *Censor* of 15 April 1914, “the first telegraph operator in Dunkirk, at the opening of the Erie Railroad in [15 May] 1851.”

That being the case, it seems clear that when Silas **Shearman** in September 1851 sent a telegraph message intended for Dunkirk’s George **French**, an ardent abolitionist whose first wife was George French **Brigham’s** aunt Sophia **Risley**, **Shearman** must have felt safe in entrusting its transmittal to the young telegraph operator in Dunkirk, George French **Brigham**. Unfortunately, **Shearman’s** message to **Brigham** and **French** did not arrive in time to intercept the kidnapping party on its way to Buffalo, where a U. S. magistrate was waiting to send the refugee Harrison back into slavery. From this example of the telegraph’s use among Chautauqua County’s abolitionists, however, it seems plausible that the UGRR may have utilized the telegraph on other occasions.