

White, Cravath, and Gilbert

The Anti-slavery Activists George L. **White** (1838 – 1895), Oren **Cravath** (1803 – 1874), and Dr. John **Gilbert** (1803 – 1889): their connections to the Jubilee Singers and Chautauqua County

By Douglas H. Shepard, 2014

The *Fredonia Censor* was a newspaper in Chautauqua County for most of the nineteenth century. When searching the back issues for articles about anti-slavery activists, one finds the following “personal” announcement, which appeared on 3 January 1883: “Mrs. B. [Betsy] N. [Northway] **Cravath** [1810 – 1888] of St. Charles, Minn., has spent the holiday season with her son-in-law Mr. Geo. L. **White** on Mechanic St. [today’s Forest Place]. Her husband, the late Mr. Oren **Cravath**, formerly a resident of Cortland County in this State, was an active co-worker with Gerrit[t] **Smith**, Thurlow **Weed** and other pioneers in the early days of the great Anti-Slavery and Anti-Masonic movements. Mrs. **Cravath** will leave this week to visit friends at their old home in Cortland County.”

George Leonard **White** was an invalid living in Fredonia, the home town of his second wife, the daughter of Fredonia’s Dr. John **Gilbert**. It is interesting to take a look at the **Whites**, the **Cravaths**, the **Gilberts**, and their respective ties to the anti-slavery movement. In doing so, one also finds a connection to the famous Jubilee Singers of Fisk University. A group of African American musicians, the Jubilee Singers performed in Chautauqua County on several occasions after the Civil War.

George L. **White** and his family

George Leonard **White** was born in the little hamlet of Cadiz NY in Cattaraugus County. George’s father, William B. **White** (1808 - 1888) was a blacksmith. William was also very musical, a trait that his son George inherited and used to full effect when he became the founder and director of the Jubilee Singers. George married Oren **Cravath**’s daughter Laura (1840 - 1874), and they had three children (Leonard, born in 1868; William, born in 1870; and Georgia, born in 1872).

George’s father William B. **White** had been just as active in the anti-slavery movement in Cattaraugus County as the **Cravaths** had been in Cortland County. William married Nancy **Leonard** in Springfield MA in 1833 and soon afterward set up his blacksmith shop in Cadiz NY. “He was a zealous Baptist, an active temperance man, and an abolitionist, when the name was a term of reproach,” said William’s obituary. According to “The Amazing George **Leonard White**” by Maggie **Fredrickson** (Ischua Valley Historical Society), there were several Underground Railroad activists in Cadiz as well, including families by the names of **Mead**, **Burlingame**, and **Searle**.

Fredrickson reported that George was listed in the attendance records of School No. 3 in Cadiz during the 1840s. When his family moved to Hinsdale NY, George set off for Ohio, where he

became a school teacher in Chillicothe. “He dressed in clerical black, and always carried a rifle and Bible,” said **Fredrickson**. “His height was estimated between 6'5" and 6'7. He wore a black beard, had coarse black hair and blue-gray eyes. He established a school for freed black children....”

George joined the 73rd Infantry from Ohio and valiantly fought at Chancellorsville, Gettysburg and Lookout Mountain. “He became seriously ill with consumption and was hospitalized for several months,” **Fredrickson** said. “This condition would affect him for the remainder of his life. Unable to rejoin the 73rd, he was made a regimental band director when they realized that he was a musical genius.... After George was discharged, he went to Nashville, Tennessee where he was hired at Fisk University....”

Well known as one of the HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), Fisk’s first classes began on 9 January 1866 and were made up of African Americans of all ages, many of them former slaves. The school was sponsored by the American Missionary Association and was named for the general who allowed use of the former Union Army barracks in Nashville. Music teacher George L. **White** was eventually named as treasurer of the fledgling school, and he used his own earnings to help support it. He and his most promising pupils established the Jubilee Singers, and to help the University financially, the group began touring on 6 October 1871.

The first tour reputedly followed a route that had been part of the Underground Railroad through Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York. **Fredrickson** said. “[The group] overcame incredible obstacles. They were often denied hotel rooms and were banned in some places from using restaurant dining rooms. They were jeered and threatened by the Ku Klux Klan. In one city the female choir members were forced to sleep in a woodshed. They did not have proper clothing for inclement weather and George borrowed money to buy coats. One of the women was traveling wearing only cloth slippers.” **Fredrickson’s** tales of the group’s hardships are corroborated by *Dark Midnight When I Rise: the Story of the Jubilee Singers, who introduced the World to the Music of Black America* by Andrew **Ward** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY, 2000).

There is evidence that the group came through Chautauqua County at least three times: during or prior to 1873, again in 1878, and again in 1881. In 1878, for example, the *Fredonia Censor* reported that the Jubilee Singers were in Fredonia and staying at the **Taylor** House inn, which was located on the site of today’s 1 Park Place. This would indicate that at least in Fredonia, the group had become welcome by that time. However, as was noted in the *Peoria Journal* in 1881 and by Zora Neale **Hurston** in *The Sanctified Church* in 1938, it was a great tragedy that in order to be accepted in white communities, the singers were forced to take on a “glee club” persona and abandon much of the African musical tradition that had been secretly preserved by generations of slaves.

Oren **Cravath** and his family

As the *Censor* reported, the **Cravaths** came from Cortland County. They later moved to Ohio, where their children attended Oberlin College. While George L. **White** was raising money with the Jubilee Singers, Erastus M. **Cravath** (1833 - 1900) had become the president of Fisk University in July 1875. Milton C. **Sernett’s** *North Star Country* (Syracuse University Press,

Syracuse, NY 2002) noted that a house on Cold Brook Road in Cortland County was labeled by a roadside marker, which read, “Used before the Civil War as an ‘Underground Station’ where Oren **Cravath** sheltered and aided fugitive slaves on way to Canada.” **Sernett** added, “**Cravath’s** son remembered that his father sent fugitives on to Syracuse and to the home of Horace **White**, a director of the New York Central Railroad, who provided them with tickets to take trains to Canada.”

Robert T. **Swaine’s** *The Cravath Firm and its predecessors, 1819 – 1947* (Ad Press, New York, NY 1946 [1948]) noted that Oren **Cravath** in Homer NY “kept the village stirred up with his ideas on slavery.... Deacon Oren and Betsey lost patience with the Homer people because they were not interested enough in the abolition of slavery. When Frederick **Douglass**, the great Negro orator, made a speech in Homer, and the meeting was broken up by a shower of rotten eggs, Oren, in disgust, resigned as deacon of the Congregational Church, sold his farm, and in 1851 moved to Oberlin, Ohio. He went there to find pronounced abolitionist sympathizers and, more important, a liberal college for his children.” In addition to Erastus and Laura, the other **Cravath** children who attended Oberlin were Oren, Jr. (also known as Oren Birney) and Samuel (also known as Lewellyn Samuel).

In 1844, Oren **Cravath** had distributed the *Liberty Herald*, an abolitionist paper in Cortland County, and he was a friend of Rev. Samuel Ringgold **Ward**, an African American newspaper editor who was also a popular speaker on the abolition circuit. **Swaine** suggested in *The Cravath Firm* that in the atmosphere of this home, Erastus “learned to have great sympathy for slaves and, during the years they found protection in his father’s house at Homer, he resolved that his life must be devoted to helping the Negro.”

Dr. John **Gilbert** and the Fredonia connection

To further aid the funds of Fisk University, the Jubilee Singers followed their successful 1871 tour of the north with a trip to Europe two years later. During their European tour, George L. **White’s** wife Laura **Cravath White** died tragically. According to an inscription on her tombstone, she “was one of the pioneer missionary teachers of the freed men, aided in the founding of Fisk University, January 1866, and died in its service while assisting in the first campaign of the Jubilee Singers in Great Britain to secure funds to complete the building of Jubilee Hall.”

Included in the touring group was the “Matron,” *i.e.* chaperone, Miss Susan **Gilbert** (1836 – 1908), daughter of Dr. John **Gilbert** of Fredonia. Susan had worked for the American Missionary Association, but was born in Fredonia, where she also taught school for many years. Her mother was Susan Howard **Ames Gilbert** (1805 – 1892), daughter of John and Deborah **Ames** of northeastern Massachusetts. John **Gilbert** was born in Brandon VT to Richard **Gilbert** and Lois **Moss Gilbert**.

John and Susan **Gilbert** became members of the Fredonia Presbyterian Church on 3 January 1834, and John served there as an elder, a moderator, and a frequent committee member. A number of the members of this church were also members of the Chautauqua County Anti-slavery Society.

John **Gilbert** was politically active as a Whig. His name was also included by the *Censor* of 30 July 1856 in a long list of participants in a “Mass Meeting” in support of John C. **Fremont’s** candidacy for President of the United States. “The People of Pomfret and the neighboring Towns in favor of Free Speech, Free Labor, Free Kansas, and Fremont are requested to meet at Concert Hall in Fredonia,” the *Censor* said.

George L. **White** married Susan **Gilbert** four years after Laura’s death. Although they were recorded as living in St. Charles MN with George’s parents at the time of the 1880 census, George actually continued touring with the Jubilee Singers until 1881. They were performing at Chautauqua Institute when George fell from the platform of the auditorium and was badly injured.

George and Susan then bought a home on Forest Place in Fredonia, where they lived for several years while George was treated for his illness and injuries by Susan’s father. That was the period when Betsy **Cravath** visited them from St. Charles MN. When George died from a stroke, he was buried in Fredonia, and Susan was later buried with him. Their graves may be found in Forest Hill Cemetery, as are those of Susan’s parents.

Oren and Betsy **Cravath** had moved to St. Charles before the Civil War, so they were buried there, as was their daughter Laura. Following their life in Cadiz, William and Nancy **White** spent several years in Hinsdale NY, where William’s brother John C. **White** (1805 – 1857) was also a blacksmith. In 1869, ultimately uniting the senior **Whites** and the senior **Cravaths** in the same community, William and Nancy moved to St. Charles MN and lived with their daughters, the milliners Mercelia and Martha **White**.