



Among the items on display at an SU exhibition highlighting Central New York's role in the antislavery movement were a portrait of the Reverend Jermain W. Loguen and a letter from Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith.

In the mid-19th century, the Syracuse home of the Reverend Jermain W. Loguen was a welcoming refuge for fugitive slaves. Loguen, who escaped from slavery in Tennessee in 1834 and later settled in Syracuse, openly advertised his residence as a station for slaves on the run, providing them with shelter and Underground Railroad connections leading them to Canada and freedom. With the support of local abolitionists, Loguen reportedly helped as many as 1,500 slaves. “During much of this period, he was at risk himself,” says curator William T. La Moy of the SU Library Special Collections Research Center. “For him to publicize his home so openly was a very daring act.”

It became an even more courageous undertaking with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which demanded the capture and return of escaped slaves to the South. At that time, Central New York—with its access to the Erie Canal and other established travel routes, and its proximity to Canada—was well known as a crossroads to freedom for runaway slaves and as the home of such radical abolitionists as Samuel J. May, a founder of Syracuse’s Fugitive Slave Society; Frederick Douglass, publisher of the antislavery newspaper *North Star*; and Gerrit Smith, a well-connected social reformer and philanthropist.

The work of Central New York abolitionists and Syracuse’s role in the antislavery movement were the focus of “*That laboratory of abolitionism, libel, and treason*”: *Syracuse and the Underground Railroad*, an exhibition by SU Library’s Special Collections Research Center (library.syr.edu/digital/exhibits/u/undergroundrr/index.html). The exhibition’s title drew on a quotation from Secretary of State Daniel Webster, the Fugitive Slave Law’s chief enforcer, whom Smith deemed “satanic.”

Syracuse lived up to Webster’s description, too. On October 1, 1851, several months after Webster delivered an antagonistic speech in the city, abolitionists and other residents staged a rebellion to free fugitive slave William “Jerry” Henry from the custody of federal marshals. In turn, the “Jerry Rescue” became a potent symbol of the antislavery movement.

The exhibition explored the Jerry Rescue and other key antislavery events in Syracuse history through artifacts and documents that La Moy gathered in collaboration with the Howard University Gallery of Art, the historical associations of Onondaga and Madison counties, and the Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation. Among the artifacts was a reward poster for Harriet Powell, a Mississippi slave who was spirited away to Canada from a downtown Syracuse hotel in 1839 by local abolitionists. There were numerous abolitionist letters (including several that showed how they worked on Powell’s behalf); the autobiographies of Douglass and Loguen; and other literature demonstrating how abolitionists relied on skillful oratory and the power of the printed word to spread their message. The letters chronicle Underground Railroad activities, reveal links among the era’s social reformers, and divulge a spectrum of sentiments from pacifism to blood-spilling rage among the antislavery activists. “This is powerful content,” La Moy says. “The documents speak for themselves.”

At the center of much of the correspondence was the influential Smith, whose papers are held by SU’s Special Collections. In one letter, Harriet Beecher Stowe asks Smith to provide facts to support her claims about slavery in her book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. “In the end, this is all very important documentation for this region,” La Moy says. “This is our cultural heritage.”

—Jay Cox