Site of the Cataract House
Main Street on the banks of the Niagara River
Niagara Falls

Significance: Operated by Parkhurst Whitney from 1825-45 and by his son Solon Whitney and sons-in-law James Trott and Dexter Jerauld from 1845 until the late 19th century, the Cataract House was one of the two largest hotels in Niagara Falls, a magnet both for southern slave-holding families and for African American waiters, many of them southern-born. As a nexus of slavery and freedom, the Cataract House became the focus of many escapes from slavery, as African American waiters (under head waiter John Morrison and others) helped enslaved people escape to freedom. Famous cases included a failed rescue attempt in 1847 and the successful escapes of Cecilia Jane Reynolds (1847), a woman named Martha (1853), and waiter Patrick Snead (1853). In 1850, more than eighty percent of African Americans working at the Cataract listed their birthplaces as a southern state or unknown/unlisted.

Cataract Hotel, 1842


Description: The Cataract House stood on a site that is now partly the small Heritage Park, across from the Red Coach Inn and the Turtle museum. It extended across the road to the banks of the Niagara River, overlooking the rapids.
This hotel was built in 1825 as a three-story stone building. Parkhurst Whitney purchased it in 1831 to use for overflow guests from his Eagle Hotel, located just north of the Cataract on Falls Street. In 1835, Whitney sold the Eagle to Benjamin Rathbun and built a stone four-story addition, 40 x 56 feet, to the Cataract. He added another stone addition, 40 x 54 feet, in 1842-43. At the same time, he purchased lots on the river, connecting buildings at the river’s edge with the hotel (perhaps those seen to the right of the main hotel and the original three-story building with balconies in the stereopticon view from Goat Island, above.) The Lewiston and Lockport railroad dropped passengers off directly in front of the hotel. This is the building, with the two stone additions to the 1825 structure that J.H. Orr pictured in his *Pictorial Guide to the Falls of Niagara* in 1842.²

The frame building to the right of the 1842 image was the office and residence of S. Hooker. He had lived in Niagara Falls since 1816, and he and his two sons operated the only regular guide service in the village.

The Cataract Hotel itself was 150 feet wide and ninety feet deep, with colonnades and piazzas on the front and rear of the original section at the south end of complex. (Judging from the later stereopticon views, the 1842 drawing is somewhat distorted, since the stone additions seem actually to have been built at an angle to the original hotel.) “The internal arrangements of this hotel,” noted Orr, “combine every advantage of quiet, comfort, and convenience; and the rooms, among which are two extensive dining halls, are tastefully and even richly furnished.” Standing directly on the banks of the Niagara River, visitors could thrill to the “roll and foam” of the rapids as they stood on the hotel balconies. “Bathing apartments,” “viands that delight both the eye and palate,” and “liquors and wines, pure in quality and mellowed by age” offered the latest in comfort to as many as two hundred visitors at a time (twice the number that the Eagle Hotel next door could accommodate.)

But General Whitney was not yet done. In 1845, he added another stone addition, this one five stories high, 42 x 133 feet, containing a new dining room (perhaps the large wing on the left of the stereopticon view of the hotel from the river), along with a new two-story stone kitchen, 25 x 30 (perhaps the two-story building on the river’s bank). At some point, he or his son and sons-in-law also added a cupola as a visual anchor for this sprawling complex. Much of this work was supervised by Walter Williams, master builder. Born about 1824 in England, Williams lived with his English-born wife Susan and their five children in Lockport in 1850. In August 1842, the Niagara Courier reported, this spacious Hotel has received the last finishing touch and is now complete in all its details, and we refer to it at this time at the request of Whitney & Jerauld, who, in justice to Walter Williams, their Master Builder, desire to signify publicly the high estimation of him as a man and master workman. We have had an opportunity to examine personally the exterior, improving the originals, and details of which have been directed by Mr. Williams to completion, and we consider the compliment to him which Mssrs. Whitney and Jerauld have been promoted to offer, as more than a just tribute to personal merit and professional superiority.


4 Frederick Clifton Pierce, Descendants of John Whitney, Who Came from London, England, to Watertown, Massachusetts, in 1635, by (Chicago: 1895), 235-
All these additions kept the feel of the earliest Federal building, with simple exteriors, broad sides to the street, and twelve-over-six (or twelve-over-twelve) window sashes. The style was consistent with that of its owner, who had a reputation as “a staunch republican, and a true patriot; frank, hearty, and familiar in his manners, plain in appearance, and upright in all his transactions.”

In early 1846, Whitney sold the entire Cataract Hotel to his son Solon Whitney and his sons-in-law Dexter R. Jerauld (who married daughter Angelina) and James F. Trott (who married Celinda Eliza at the Cataract House on September 9, 1844). Whitney, Jerauld, and Trott operated the hotel under the name of Whitney, Jerauld, and Company, with their sons eventually working with them. Trott seems to have been in charge of supplying agricultural produce for the dining room, most likely from the farm he and Celinda shared with the Whitneys at the corner of Chilton Avenue and Main Street. (See description.)

By 1848, one local newspaper referred to the Cataract House as “the immense pile of stone and mortar,” which ranked “with the best class of Hotels in the Union.” Whitney, Jerauld, and Company were not yet finished with their expansion, however. In 1853, they added a ballroom. Their new drawing room included a “magnificent piazza,” with “a superb view of the rapids.” In 1868, they added “the massive stone additions” on Main Street, and in 1881, they added electric light to the veranda, giving “a most magnificent view.”

Cataract House, 1879
Courtesy Niagara Falls Public Library

When the hotel opened for the season in May 1883, the Niagara Falls Gazette noted, “no material change has been made in the building or its appointments during the past winter, none being needed, as they are as nearly perfect as can be.” The traveling public wants “order and cleanliness— and these two virtues are never found lacking at the Cataract.” The north wing was especially adapted for families, where rooms were “carpeted with velvet, furnished alike and so connected that any two, or the whole number, can be used en suite,” with marble fireplaces to help take the chill off cool evenings. The Gazette reserved its highest praise for the parlor, with broad verandas on three sides that gave


5 Orr, 57.


7 William Pool, Landmarks of Niagara County (Syracuse: D. Mason, 1897), 422; Niagara Democrat, June 1, 1848.
guests a view of the rapids, falls, and river. The air was “always cool and pure,” no fly had ever been seen in that room. It adjoined the ballroom, where guests enjoyed “promenade concerts.”

One of the Cataract’s attractions, “unsurpassed anywhere in the world,” was, perhaps ironically, its sewage system. All wastes were carried “far out into the river and over the falls.” “A strain of pure water” constantly flowed through baths in both the main hotel and an adjacent bath building.

When the State of New York created the reservation and park in 1885, they bought part of the Cataract property and removed both the ballroom and drawing room.

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8 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, May 23, 1883.

9 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, May 23, 1883.
Hotel Corporation. The hotel continued to serve the people of Niagara Falls and the world until it burned to “a water soaked mass of ruins” in October 1945. The fire destroyed the “irreplaceable antiques” which had furnished the building, including “a huge pewter chandelier sent from France by the Marquis de Lafayette” to thank Parkhurst Whitney for his hospitality at the Eagle Hotel.” Plans to rebuild the hotel were never carried out.10

Development of the Cataract Hotel: Whitney Family

Along with the Porter family, the Whitney family was one of the two most important families in the early development of Niagara Falls. While Augustus Porter and Peter B. Porter invested in land, transportation, and industry, Parkhurst Whitney, Celinda Cowing Whitney, and their son and sons-in-law were practical entrepreneurs, builders, and consummate hosts. They developed the Cataract Hotel as one of the two premier hotels (the other was the International House, built on the site of Whitney’s old Eagle Hotel) in Niagara Falls, a magnet for visitors from around the nation and the world, including wealthy families from the southern U.S. Through its African American waiters, the Cataract House also became a major center of Underground Railroad work in Niagara Falls. Parkhurst Whitney (September 25, 1784-April 26, 1862), Celinda Cowing Whitney (1783-1860), and their five children (Angeline Parkhurst; Asenath Beecher (1809-); Myron Holley, 1810-1815; Solon Miron Napoleon (1815-); and Celinda Eliza (1817-1892) all played major roles in the development of Niagara Falls, the growth of the Cataract Hotel, and the hiring of African Americans as hotel waiters and cooks.

Parkhurst Whitney was born on September 25, 1784, in Conway, Massachusetts, of Esther Parkhurst and Jonathan Whitney, who had been a militia captain during the Revolutionary War. In 1789, Jonathan Whitney purchased land in the Phelps and Gorham Purchase in Ontario County, New York. Before his death in 1792, he moved his whole family to this wilderness, including his youngest son Parkhurst, only six years old. On October 10, 1805, Parkhurst Whitney married Celinda Cowing (1783-1860). They lived in Geneva, New York, while Parkhurst worked as a surveyor for the Holland Land Company, and their oldest daughter Asenath was born there in 1809. In 1810, they moved to a farm about four miles up river from what became the village of Niagara Falls. In 1812, just in time for the war, the Whitney family moved to Niagara Falls, where he rented first Peter B. Porter’s sawmill and then, in 1814, the Eagle Hotel, a one-room log structure, twenty-four feet square, located approximately where the Comfort Inn parking lot now stands. (See description for International Hotel.) There the Whitneys had five more children, of whom only four (Asenath, Angelina, Solon, born October 7, 1815, and Celinda Eliza, born July 12, 1817) survived childhood.11

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10 “Famed Cataract House Turned Into Mass of Charred Ruins,” and “Historic Hotel to be Rebuilt,” Niagara Falls Gazette, October 1945;

The War of 1812 had a major impact on the Whitney family. The British destroyed the entire village, including the Eagle Hotel. Along with the rest of the residents of Niagara Falls, the Whitneys were forced to flee their homes. As militia captain, Whitney was briefly captured by the British. He later became colonel and, in 1826, major general. After the war, in 1817, Whitney bought the rebuilt Eagle Hotel from Augustus Porter and Peter Barton, built a frame addition to it, and celebrated with a dinner in the new building on July 4, 1820. The renowned gold eagle that once graced the roof of this hotel (and was later moved to the Cataract House) now stands in the Niagara Falls Public Library.

Before 1825, most visitors to Niagara Falls stayed on the Canadian side. Completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 vastly expanded public access to Niagara Falls from the U.S. side. Parkhurst Whitney himself entertained the Marquis de Lafayette at the Eagle Hotel on his triumphant tour of the U.S. and 1825 and personally escorted him to Lockport, to celebrate the opening of the Erie Canal.

One result of new public interest in Niagara Falls was construction of the Cataract House in 1825. In 1831, Whitney purchased the Cataract House, as an adjunct to the Eagle, and initiated a decade of growth and change for himself and his family. After he added his first addition to the Cataract in 1835, he sold the Eagle to Benjamin Rathburn, who would become his main competitor until he ended up in prison in the early 1840s. After unsuccessfully leasing the Cataract to Milton Hawley in 1836 (perhaps a casualty of the Depression that began in 1837), Whitney took charge of it once more in 1838 with his son Solon Whitney and son-in-law Dexter Jerauld.

Whitney did not limit his entrepreneurial impulse to his hotels. He was a man of “enterprise and public spirit,” noted J.H. Orr in 1842. For the pleasure of tourists and to enhance his own business, he worked with Augustus Porter to establish the first ferry across the Niagara River below Niagara Falls, with the first staircase down the steep bank. He surveyed Goat Island and also built the Terrapin bridge and the first bridge to Iris Island.

U.S. census reports suggest that the Whitney family almost certainly lived in the Cataract House before Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney retired in 1846. James and Celinda Whitney Trott lived in the hotel for some time afterwards. In 1830, before Parkhurst Whitney purchased the Cataract Hotel, thirteen free white persons and three people of color were listed as living in the Whitney household. With their four children (Asenath, Angeline, Solon, and Celinda), the immediate Whitney family accounted for six of those free white persons. Seven of them were most likely employees, along with the three people of color.

In 1840, when they operated the Cataract House, thirty-four free white persons (and no African Americans) lived in the Whitney household, including twenty-two people aged 20-49. Eight of these (including daughter Asenath Whitney Kowalewski, her husband, and new-born daughter) were probably members of the immediate family. The remaining twenty-six were most likely hotel workers.

Although the Whitney family most likely lived in their hotel, they did not neglect family for business. Their lives seem to have been not only busy and productive but family-centered and loving as well. The three daughters, Asenath, Angeline, and Celinda, found lasting fame when they were the first women of European American ancestry to visit what became known as the Three Sisters islands.

J.H. Orr described Whitney in 1842 as “a staunch republican and a true patriot; frank, hearty, and familiar in his manners, plain in appearance, and upright in all his transaction.” He was also highly intelligent, and he and Celinda raised children who were well educated and remarkably talented. The oldest child Asenath, noted one family historian, was “a remarkably brilliant woman,” “a very fine scholar and linguist, speaking French, Italian and German fluently,” “a great reader,” “possessed of brilliant conversational powers,” “an exceptionally good musician.” Parkhurst Whitney brought the first piano to Niagara Falls, most likely for Asenath. We can imagine her entertaining hotel guests with music and good conversation when a young Polish nobleman, Pierre (also recorded as Pioe) de Kowalewski, visited the Cataract House in 1836 with friends, “all officers and men of fine presence and courtly manners.” He had been an officer in the Tenth Lithuanian Lancers but had lost his post and all his lands to the Russian government. He spoke ten languages, so he made his way to America as a linguist and language teacher. Perhaps he taught visitors who stayed, often for weeks at a time, at the Cataract House. Asenath must have been enthralled to find someone who matched her own interests so well. They were married in 1837 and had their first child, Olympia, on March 20, 1839. All their children shared the intellectual gifts of their parents. Olympia became a musician. Helena, born in 1842, became a German scholar and organist. Frederic Whitney, born in 1843, was “a lad of the brightest promise.” Linda, born in 1849, was the only child to live past 1865. She studied the Polish language, and in 1890, she published a translation of The Jew, a historical novel. Pierre died in Cuba in 1854, and all the children except Linda followed him in the 1860s. Frederic died in 1861, Helena in 1864, and Olympia in 1865.

Celinda, the second daughter of Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney who survived infancy, married Dexter R. Jerauld on November 6, 1836. Angeline died in 1857. (See discussion of Jerauld House.)

Parkhurst Whitney
buffalooh.com/surveys/chilt/chilt.html
Solon Parkhurst married Frances E. Drake on May 12, 1840. In 1849, Solon and Frances Whitney built a Greek Revival house on Buffalo Street. (See discussion of Solon and Frances Whitney house.)

Youngest daughter Celinda Eliza married James Fullerton Trott at the Cataract House on September 9, 1844. Trott had been born in Boston on March 25, 1815, a descendent of Puritans. He was well educated in grammar and high schools in Boston and lived in New York City for several years before coming to Niagara Falls as a scenic photographer in 1841. After their marriage, Celinda and James moved briefly to Galena, Illinois, and then to Bellevue, Iowa, before they returned home in the fall of 1845, at the request of Parkhurst Whitney.

In 1846, Whitney retired. In a personal memoir, Parkhurst Whitney summed up his career, remembering that he had “changed my circumstances from making my own fires, being ostler, tending bar, waiting on the table, my wife doing the cooking, with, all together, four or five servants, to the employment of one hundred servants, and giving up the establishment to the children and returning to my old calling, farming.” Parkhurst Whitney left the hotel to son Solon Whitney and sons-in-law Dexter Jerauld and James Fullerton Trott. They operated the hotel under the name of Whitney, Jerauld, and Company until 1889.  

James and Celinda Trott lived at the Cataract House during the main tourist season. In 1849, they moved two miles north of the Cataract to join Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney at their farm at 1139 Main Street (corner of Chilton Avenue). They continued to live at least part of the time in the Cataract House, however, since the 1850 census listed 27 African Americans, all cooks or waiters and all but two of them men, living in their household. It is unlikely that so many people would have commuted two miles each way every day.

In 1855, Parkhurst Whitney and Celinda Cowing Whitney celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary at the Cataract House. The event was the culmination of a successful life, but it did not last. The decade of the 1860s was to bring tragedy to the whole family. On February 17, 1860, their house and all its contents, including their extensive library and Whitney’s collection of military artifacts, burned. On June 12, 1860, Celinda Whitney died. She was eulogized for “her kind and hospitable disposition, . . . in whom the kindly graces of Christian meekness and charity predominated.” Although the family rebuilt the house on the same site in 1861, loss of family members continued. Frederic Whitney Kowalewski, Asenath’s son, died on December 22, 1861. Parkhurst Whitney himself followed on April 26, 1862. His funeral, held in the Cataract Hotel, attracted 3000 people. Two more grandchildren died within three years: Helena Kowalewski died in September 1864, and her sister Olympia died in May 1865.

By the 1880s, the Cataract House was a national institution. Its popularity, noted the *Niagara Falls Gazette* in 1883, was largely due to the “long continued management under one head. For nearly seventy years the name of Whitney has been prominent in the hotel interest of our village . . . . Year after year, the same guests come, bringing with them their families.” Dexter Jerauld, with the assistance of James W. Trott, son of James F. and Celinda Trott, focused on buying “the best the market affords” for the hotel, while James Fullerton Trott himself was the chief financial officer. Solon Whitney, Jr., and P.W. Jerauld, sons of the owners, worked in the office.

James Trott continued to work as proprietor of the Cataract House until his retirement in 1886. He had been its main proprietor and business agent for forty years. “He not only kept up the reputation which General Whitney had established,” noted family historian Frederick Clifton Pierce, “but added to it, so the hotel became famous.” Trott was also “one of the most public-spirited and upright men in Niagara Falls.” For forty-five years, he was a trustee for the public schools of Niagara Falls, with special responsibilities for the library. So important was he to the development of schools and libraries in Niagara Falls that he earned the nickname “Father of Niagara Falls schools.” James Trott retired in 1886, and after Dexter Jerauld’s death in 1889, Solon Whitney sold the Cataract Hotel to Peter A. Porter, son of Colonel Peter A. Porter.

Parkhurst and Celinda Whitney, followed by their children and grandchildren (especially Solon and Frances Whitney, James W. and Celinda Trott, and Dexter Jerauld) developed the Cataract into the largest hotel in Niagara Falls. Only the International Hotel, built in 1853, challenged the Cataract in size and quality. By hiring African American waiters, porters, and cooks—many of them born in slavery—the Whitney family also created a major node of Underground Railroad activism.

*Cataract Hotel Visitors*

Clientele at the Cataract House included “princes, dukes, marquises, counts, and lords,” noted J. H. Orr in 1842. Famous politicians and public figures from the U.S. also patronized the Cataract Hotel, including Andrew Jackson

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14 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, May 23, 1883.
and lady, who signed the guest book on June 25, 1827, and Abraham Lincoln, who visited with his family in July 1857. Guests enjoyed the fine air and extensive social life, with dances, dinners, concerts, a library with the latest newspapers from all over the country, and lessons in music and foreign languages for their children.15

Life at the Cataract was seasonal. The hotel generally opened in April and served visitors until the end of November. In the winters of 1854 and 1855, the Cataract remained open all year round, but it lost money and reverted to its summer schedule the following year.16

Visitors would be greeted at the railroad depot with cries of “Baggage for the Cataract House!” Accompanied by a porter, they would be escorted to the hotel lobby, where they registered in large books, still extant in the Niagara Falls Public Library. Rooms were furnished with velvet drapes and marble fireplaces, to take the chill off cool evenings. A stroll out to the verandah overlooking the rapids was most likely one of the first things guests would do. Beginning in 1881, electric lights highlighted the rapids, Falls, and Canadian shore.17

Fine dining was also a major attraction. In 1855, breakfast was served at 7:15 a.m., dinner at 3:00 p.m., and tea at 7:00 p.m. Menus changed daily, but included soup, fish, boiled meat, roasts, special entrees, vegetables, pastries (which included puddings and pies), desserts, and all kinds of wines. Always, the food was “the choicest the markets afford,” and the wine cellar was stocked with all kinds of foreign and domestic brands. Music played during the dinner hour. Not all visitors appreciated the musical selections. One described the “wretched band,” which “only served to set our teeth on edge!” Many of the cooks and all of the waiters were African Americans.18

Guests so loved the Cataract Hotel that many of them returned year after year, bringing their families. By the 1880s, a second and third generation of visitors patronized the hotel, pleased to find that Solon Whitney, their childhood friend, was now the proprietor. An article in the Rochester Union, written in the 1870s, narrated the story of an elderly


16 Niagara Times, December 22, 1856.

17 Niagara Falls Gazette, May 17, 1883.

18 Cataract Hotel menu from michele-dogslife.blogspot.com/2010/08/resturant-and-hotel-menus-from-1850s.html; M’Makin’s Model American Courier, July 8, 1854.
man who visited the Cataract and asked permission to look at the register from 1825 to 1830. He found his on name, written fifty years ago, along with that of his wife, as they took their wedding tour."

Popular assumption is that large numbers of southern white elite families came to the Cataract House and stayed for weeks each summer and early fall. A report in the Niagara Falls Gazette in 1883 noted, “it was the custom of wealthy planters from the South to visit Niagara Falls each season and bring with them from one to three body servants. Some of these servants were quite gaily dressed.” As a way to test this accepted wisdom, we took small samples from the registers of the Cataract Hotel for July 6 and August 16 in both 1841 and 1855. While these registers do not indicate the length of time the guests stayed (and only rarely note that some were accompanied by “servants”), they do list places of residence. We counted the numbers of individuals and families who listed their residence as a slave state (or, in the case of two people, the West Indies). The proportion of southern visitors varied from 9.5 percent on August 16, 1841 (when four of the 42 guests who registered were from the South) to 20.2 percent on August 16, 1855, when 21 of the 104 individuals and families who registered that day lived in the South. In both 1841 and 1855, southern guests on July 6 formed 18.4 percent and 18.9 percent, respectively, of the clientele. Additionally, we checked the list of guests registered at the Cataract and listed in the *Niagara Falls Gazette* on August 4, 1859. Of the 125 people listed, 31.2 percent were from southern states (including one from Maryland, ten from Louisiana, two from Alabama, eleven from Kentucky, five from Delaware, six from Washington, three from Georgia, and one from North Carolina). Such a small sample is suggestive but not definitive. It would be well worth doing this kind of research in more detail, looking closely at changes over time, regions from which visitors came, and sex of visitors. Tentatively, however, we can suggest that about twenty percent of guests at the Cataract Hotel lived in a southern state.

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<th>Date</th>
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<td>July 6, 1841:</td>
<td>7/38 = 18.4 percent</td>
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<td>August 16, 1841:</td>
<td>4/42=9.5 percent</td>
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<td>July 6, 1855:</td>
<td>7/37=18.9 percent</td>
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<td>August 16, 1855:</td>
<td>21/104=20.2 percent</td>
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We know from anecdotal evidence that many of these visitors brought enslaved people with them, often as ladies' maids or valets. The presence of southern white families and enslaved “servants” in the same hotel with a large and highly organized system of African American waiters (as well as some cooks and porters), all within easy access to Canada, combined to create a dramatic and often volatile conflict over slavery and freedom, centered on local crossing points and hotels, especially the Cataract House.

**African American Waiters and Cooks**

At least by the early 1840s, Whitney hired a wait staff dominated by black men, many of them born in the South. The presence of so many organized African American men, many of whom had most likely escaped from slavery themselves, created an uneasy tension underlying the smooth operations of this hotel. These African American waiters became the nexus of a struggle between freedom and slavery, as they helped many enslaved people escape to freedom across the nearby Niagara River.

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19 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, May 17, 1883; *Rochester Union*, c. 1875-80.

20 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, August 25, 1883; *Niagara Falls Gazette*, August 4, 1859; Cataract House guest registers, Niagara Falls Public Library. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for help with this research. Local lore also suggests that the Cataract House included chains and tunnels in its basement, designed to restrain African Americans brought to the hotel in slavery. These stories do not seem to have emerged until the 1950s. In 1953, for example, Niagara County historian Clarence O. Lewis reported that a woman reported to him that her father, who used to work in the Cataract, had told her that “there were iron rings with chain attached in the basement walls and indications of tunnels, etc.” Marjory Williams, Niagara Falls city historian, explained, “There were rooms in the basement which were said to have been used for the slaves of Southerners who came here in great numbers to stay the summers. The story goes that Niagara Falls was so near Canada, and so many slaves escaped to its shores, that large iron rings were fastened in the walls to which the slaves were chained. Several of these rings were found there, but whether used for this purpose or not, it is hard to say.” *Niagara Falls Gazette*, July 16, 1953. No primary source reference has been found to substantiate either the existence of these chains or their use for such a purpose. Given the Underground Railroad activism of African American waiters at the Cataract and the willingness of Whitney, Jerauld, and Company to hire African Americans born in slavery, it seems extremely unlikely that chains in the basement were ever used for such a purpose.
In 1840, the census did not list any African Americans in the Whitney household. At least by the early 1840s, however, Whitney had begun to hire black waiters. In 1844, Frederick von Raumer, a German visitor, described the work of African American waiters in the Cataract dining room:

In the hotel six long tables were set, full of guests, and served by thirty-six black waiters, among whom the division of labor was carried so far, that each had his department—of bread, knives and forks, spoons, &c.—assigned to him. These solo performers marched with regular steps to villainous table-music, and did all their work in measured time. Thus they came, thus the went; and thus each brought in his hand two dishes, which he deposited on the table as directed by two musical fermate.21

An employment notice in 1845 in the Liberator (an abolitionist newspaper edited by William Lloyd Garrison), added a footnote to von Raumer’s account:

A most worthy, intelligent and faithful colored man, who has had the superintendence of the Cataract House at Niagara as head waiter for the last four or five years, being desirous of spending the winter in Boston, wishes to obtain a situation in some private family, or public establishment. Application made by made to the Editor of the Liberator, 25 Cornhill.22

This advertisement offers several clues about waiters at the Cataract House. First, black waiters worked at the Cataract House at least by the early 1840s, since this “worthy, intelligent and faithful colored man” had been working there for four or five years. Second, waiters at the Cataract House were organized hierarchically, since this man was not simply a waiter but a headwaiter. Third, at least some of these waiters had abolitionist sympathies and abolitionist connections. Otherwise, why would this note appear in such a nationally known abolitionist newspaper, and why would William Lloyd Garrison be willing to take job applications for him?

Parkhurst Whitney’s decision to hire black waiters at the Cataract House, beginning in the early 1840s, doubtless had two roots. The first was New York State’s passage of a personal liberty law in 1841. Since slavery ended in New York State in 1827, New York State had allowed enslavers to bring people into New York State for up to nine months at a time, without threatening their legal status. In 1841, however, the New York State legislature received more than fifty petitions asking for the repeal of this nine months law. On May 25, 1841 (while Peter B. Porter, Augustus Porter’s son, was the presiding officer), the legislature passed a personal liberty law, mandating that any enslaved person brought into New York State would be immediately free. Responding to widespread popular support, both Whigs and Democrats voted for this law, and Governor William Henry Seward signed it on the same day. Abolitionists across the state took personal delight in finding enslaved people, often traveling with their “owners,” to tell them they were now legally free. The following year, in Prigg v. Pennsylvania, a federal judge struck down these state personal liberty laws but also made it clear that the federal government had no authority to force states to support the recapture of people who had escaped from slavery. So abolitionists in New York State and elsewhere took this as permission to treat escaped people as free. 33

The second was the increasing tendency of major hotels to hire African American waiters. Beginning in the late 1820s, house work in general and hotel work in particular became increasingly professionalized, and African Americans developed professional standards for black waiters and servants, ensuring increased job opportunities. In 1827, Robert Roberts published the first guide book for African American domestic servants, The House Servant’s Directory (Boston and New York, 1827). In 1848, Tunis G. Campbell published the influential Hotel Keepers, Head Waiters, and Housekeeper’s Guide (Boston: Coolidge and Wiley, 1848). Major hotels in New York, Boston, and elsewhere adopted these standards. The Cataract House was one of these.

In this climate, Parkhurst Whitney decided to hire African American waiters, almost exclusively, without regard to whether they had been born slave or free. It was his own version of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” and it worked to benefit everyone—his employees (who earned good money, especially through tips), his hotel guests (who received excellent service from well-trained people), and, of course, himself and his family, who created one of America’s preeminent

21 Frederick Von Raumer, America and the American People (New York: J. & H. G. Lngley, 1844), 456. Thanks to Pen Bogart, Filson Club, Kentucky, and Christopher Densmore for finding this.

22 “Wants a Situation,” Liberator, November 7, 1845. Thanks to Christopher Densmore for finding this.

The Cataract House appears to have been the first—and for a time the only—hotel in Niagara Falls to hire African American waiters. The 1850 census listed twenty-eight African American hotel workers, all but one of them associated with the Cataract House. The exception was Samuel T. Patterson, a thirty-five-year-old tavern keeper, born in Virginia, who owned property worth $3000 and who kept his own hotel, the Free Soil Hotel. (See separate description.)

Of the remaining twenty-seven hotel workers in 1850, two were women. Catherine Polk, age twenty-eight, listed her birthplace as Pennsylvania. (By 1880, however, Mrs. Polk would list her birthplace as Delaware. Had she escaped from slavery? We do not know whether Catherine Polk, pastry cook at the Cataract from at least 1850 to 1883, had escaped from slavery in Delaware. Nor do we know whether she helped others cross the border to freedom. If so, however, she would have been typical of African American employees of the Cataract House.) A twenty-year-old woman named Hamilton listed her birthplace as New York. She was most likely the wife of Lewis Henry Fatigue Hamilton, born in Washington, D.C., in 1824 and a waiter at the Cataract House. Of the twenty-five men, three were cooks and twenty-two were waiters. All—men and women—were listed as living “in home of James Trott, Innkeeper of "Cateract [sic] Home." It is likely that Trott, like his parents-in-law before him, kept an apartment in the Cataract, and that the waiters stayed somewhere in or near the Cataract House, so that the census taker counted them as part of Trott’s household.

Of the twenty-five male cooks and waiters, most were working age adults from twenty to thirty-nine years old. One was 19 years old, ten were 20-29, eleven were 30-39, and three were in their early forties.

Using place of birth as a rough surrogate for possible status as a formerly enslaved person, it is clear that Parkhurst Whitney and his son and sons-in-law hired many men and women who had escaped from slavery. Census records in 1850 suggest that only twenty percent of the twenty-five Cataract House male waiters and cooks in 1850 had been born in free states (one each in Connecticut, Ohio, and Wisconsin, New York, and Pennsylvania). The majority (64 percent) had been born in slave states. Of these, all came from the upper South (Washington, D.C. 2; Maryland, 8; and Virginia, 6). Three people listed no birthplace and one person listed unknown (for a total of sixteen percent). If we add southern-born people to those who listed their birthplaces as unknown or with no listing, then eighty percent of Cataract House waiters and cooks may have had origins in slave states. (In comparison, of the total number of forty-four African American residents of the Town of Niagara in 1850, fifty percent had been born in slave states, eleven percent listed their birthplace as unknown or none, and three percent had been born in Canada, for a total of sixty-eight percent born outside free states.) Some of these may have been legally free people of color. Almost certainly, however, many had escaped from slavery on the Underground Railroad.

The census in 1850 was taken in early September. All African American residents of Niagara Falls and northern states in general, whether born free or enslaved, lived under the threat of deportation to slavery as a result of the Fugitive Slave Law passed on September 18, 1850. Knowing fugitive slave legislation was imminent, how accurately did people report their places of birth? If you had escaped from slavery, would you tell a federal census taker where you had been born? Perhaps not. So our count of people born in slave states is most likely an undercount.
By 1860, the black population in Niagara Falls had expanded dramatically, from 44 in 1850 to 145 in 1855 to 244 in 1860. Judging by census records, both the Cataract House and the International Hotel now used African American waiters almost exclusively (although there were a very few European Americans who worked as waiters, also).

In 1860, of the 123 black hotel workers in Niagara Falls, only ten were women, five of whom listed their birthplaces as Canada, one as Maryland, one as New York State, and three as Pennsylvania. Nine of the women were listed as servants, but Catherine Polk, thirty-four years old, born in Pennsylvania, was a cook. Catherine Polk remained at the Cataract House at least from 1850 to 1883. Assuming that the household number for Catherine Polk in 1850 referred to the Cataract House, all of the women except two lived at the Cataract. The exceptions were Mary Markee and Margaret Truss. Mary Markee was fifteen years old, born in New York, and she worked for James Patterson, African American hotel owner. Margaret Truss (24 years old and the only one who listed her birthplace as Maryland) worked in the household of Dexter R. Jerauld, part owner of the Cataract House, who lived in the next block east of the hotel.

Of the 123 black hotel workers in 1860, both men and women, all but ten of them lived and worked at either the Cataract House or the International Hotel. The Cataract House employed sixty African Americans, including one baker, five cooks, forty-four hotel waiters, one porter, and nine servants (all but two of them female). The International Hotel employed fifty-two African Americans, including a steward (Daniel R. Crosby, age 43, born in Canada) and fifty-one waiters. All were male.

Black workers at the Cataract House in 1860 listed their birthplaces as Africa (1), Baden (Germany? 2), Canada (16), Connecticut (2), Washington, D.C. (2), Kentucky (2), Maine (1), Maryland (5), Massachusetts (1), Michigan (1), New York (6), Ohio (1), Pennsylvania (14), Tennessee (1), Vermont (2), and Virginia (3).

In 1860, a total of 53.3 percent of African Americans who worked at the Cataract House (down from eighty percent in 1850) had been born either in the South or foreign country. Of these, thirteen (21.6 percent) had been born in slave states, twenty-eight (46.7 percent) in free states, nineteen (31.7 percent) in foreign countries.
The pattern of employing African Americans born in slave states continued after the Civil War. While the 1870 census appears to be inaccurate in its count of hotel workers, the 1880 census listed twenty-two African Americans employed at the Cataract. They included a laundress (Henrietta Berry, age 33, born in Maryland), five cooks (Anna Joyce, age 34, born in Maryland; Charles K. Jackson, age 32, born in Virginia; C.H. Jackson, age 38, born in Maryland; and Robert Payne, age 56, born in New York of parents who had immigrated from Washington, D.C.; and Louis Robinson, age 30, born in Virginia). Either Charles K. Jackson or C.H. Jackson may have been the “Jackson” noted in an 1883 list of workers: “Jackson, the popular chef of many years, will prepare the more substantial foods for the table.” The remaining fifteen African Americans worked as waiters. (In 1880, Charles Kersey Jackson married Luvisa Patterson, daughter of the owners of the Free Soil/Falls Hotel. He later opened his own establishment, the Robinson House, on Prospect Street. See separate descriptions).

Many of these black waiters were relatively transient, suggesting the possibility that they used the Cataract House as a way to earn money on their way to freedom in Canada. Others, however, worked at the Cataract for decades. Catharine Polk, for example, had been at the Cataract since at least 1850. In earlier census years, she had listed her birthplace as Pennsylvania. In 1880, when she was 61 years old, however, she told the census taker that she, as well as her parents, had been born in Delaware. She was by then a well-loved fixture at the Cataract House. The Niagara Gazette noted in 1883 that “Mrs. Polk—‘Auntie’ as she is familiarly called—who for thirty-three years has had charge of the department where many of the luxuries for the table in the way of pastry, etc., are prepared returns looking as smiling as

24 Niagara Falls Gazette, May 23, 1883.
Some waiters and cooks worked in various years for the Cataract House and in other years for other area hotels. Madison Freeman appeared in the 1850 as a thirty-year-old cook at the Cataract House, born in Maryland. By 1865, he was listed as head cook at the International House, born in Canada.

Hotel work was seasonal, usually from April through November. Where did these waiters go during the wintertime? Some of them certainly kept families in Ontario, perhaps right across the river in Drummondville, and returned there once the hotels closed. John A. Bolden, for example, was born in Maryland and worked as a waiter at the Cataract House at least from 1860 to 1880. His wife Catherine was also born in Maryland, but all their children were born in Canada, beginning in 1860. The 1860 census listed John as living alone in Niagara Falls, but by 1875 and 1880, the census listed the whole family together in Niagara Falls. Joseph Hemsley/Hensley appeared in the 1850 census as a twenty-five-year-old waiter at the Cataract House, born in Connecticut. In 1855, however, he and his wife Mary lived in Lockport. They listed their birthplaces as Pennsylvania, but their son Leonard was born in Canada. In 1865, Joseph was listed as a laborer, with all children except Lydia the youngest born in Canada. After the Civil War (and perhaps before), many of these waiters had regular jobs at hotels in other parts of the country. Some may have been students and teachers during the winter, following the pattern in Newport and Saratoga in the late nineteenth century.

These waiters highly trained skilled workers, not unskilled laborers. We know from Frederick von Raumer’s description of waiters in the Cataract dining room in 1844 that they performed their jobs with military precision. This was not an accident. By the 1840s, waiters and domestic servants in major hotels adhered to professional standards.

It is very likely that waiters at the Cataract followed guidelines similar to those recommended in 1848 by Tunis G. Campbell, himself a waiter in New York City and Boston, who outlined the most up-to-date guidelines in *Hotel Keepers, Head Waiters, and Housekeepers’ Guide*. Campbell had first learned of this idea in New York City in 1837, he noted, and had implemented at the Howard Hotel in 1840 and then again at the Adams House in Boston. This book, noted the introduction to the digital edition at Michigan State University, was “the second major Black-authored culinary work in America [after Robert Roberts, *House Servant’s Directory*, 1827] . . . , one of the earliest manuals written by any American on the supervision and management of first-class restaurants and hotel dining rooms.” Promoting the highest standards of service met the expectations of an increasingly sophisticated national and international clientele. It also, argued Campbell, promoted the best interests both of the waiters and their employers.

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25 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, May 23, 1883.

26 Myra B. Young Armstead, 93.

A professional wait staff, advised Campbell, was well-trained, well-dressed, and well-respected. In terms of training, they each had individual duties. Campbell listed these in detail. The headwaiter, for example, should post the regulations of the dining room in the pantry, where everyone could see them, and he should see that all rules were “strictly enforced.” He should hire all his men and keep an account of their time (including the fines they owed if they were absent without leave). The second waiter will divide up the work, send meals to rooms, and account for the table linen and tea table. The third waiter was responsible for cheese, cake, and milk, the fourth for desserts, the fifth for castors, the sixth for bread, napkins, cups, and saucers—and so forth.

At each meal, they performed their work in specific order with military precision. Campbell’s discussion of “Regulations for General and Squad Drills” described these in detail. Here is a sample:

Select men of good appearance, as near of a height as possible. Let the tallest be placed on the right. When they are formed in a line, divide them at every fifth man [and choose lieutenants or file leaders]. Then make all mark the time, by bringing the left foot to the right heel. At the word “mark time,” each man will begin; and at the “halt,” each will stop at once. Then make them divide into squads, by the file-leader placing himself by the side of the last man of his squad, the first man standing fast, and marching round until he comes in front of the last man, who faces to the front also, which will form the men into an open column, four deep. . . . then bring them to the table, give each man his station, and make him fall back one pace from his chair.

Using a small bell, the headwaiter then gave signals to indicate each new phase of serving, all done in synchronized time. Under the supervision of the headwaiter, they trained daily (except Saturday, a day for general cleaning, and Sunday, when waiters were advised to go to church), with an emphasis on “attentive, obliging, and gentlemanly” behavior. Campbell included ten drawings to show how and where waiters should be trained to stand and march. The order of drill could be changed to suit the establishment.

Using this method, Campbell asserted, novices could be trained to be good waiters in two weeks. Weekly reports and quarterly reports, given both in person and in writing, held each waiter to the highest standards. Every six months, “premiums” were given to those who worked best. Under this system, Campbell noted, “waiting becomes what it ought to be—a science, which every many who seeks employment in must first study, the same as any other profession.”

Reflecting their reputations as professionals, waiters dressed in neat and often elegant attire. They generally wore white jackets (although jackets could be of any standard color for each hotel) and aprons. Campbell recommended a white pocket handkerchief as well, all to be washed by the hotel. “See that each man has his clothes perfectly clean at every meal, with boots or shoes well blacked,” admonished Campbell. “Each man should also have a clean napkin or

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28 Campbell, “Division of Work,” 23-26; 34-40, 58. Waiters in the Saratoga hotels seem to have worked under a similar system. See Myra B. Young Armstead, Lord, Please Don’t Take Me in August: African Americans in Newport and Saratoga Springs, 1870-1900 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999),
towel at every meal; and at breakfast and tea their trays should be examined by the officers of the squad to see if they are clean.” Patrick Sneed, a waiter at the Cataract House in 1852 and 1853, noted that he was carrying his jacket and wearing a shirt, vest, and “new silk cravat” wrapped twice around his neck when marshals captured him.29

“If this is a photo of John Morrison, headwaiter at the Cataract House by 1856, the notation that he was a full blooded Indian is incorrect. He is wearing a jacket and cravat, much like that described by Patrick Sneed in 1853. The waiter at the Haight House, Elmira, is dressed in attire, including white apron and jacket, described by Tunis G. Campbell as appropriate for waiters.


Living conditions for the wait staff and chambermaids at the Cataract House were most likely reasonably comfortable. Campbell urged that proprietors occasionally put on a dinner for their servants. It will not cost much, suggested Campbell, “and the advantage arising from it would repay him double.” Moreover, “servants should be conciliated with kindness, as nothing can be gained by harsh treatment.” Establish clear rules for everyone, and “enforce them firmly, but calmly. Every one will then feel that if he breaks these rules there is not escape for him; and in the end will not only endeavor to keep them, but watch that others do not violate them.”

This conciliatory attitude extended to servants brought by guests. Campbell advised that the proprietor himself should always be sure that servants who visited the hotel receive whatever they needed, both in lodging and food, to make them comfortable. “Such little attentions are more highly thought of by them that money in many instances,” he noted.

Following the rules meant that waiters could insist that guests do the same. In 1847, for example, a young southern man “acted the ninny,” reported the Rochester Democrat. When he tried to seat himself and “his ladies” at breakfast in chairs assigned to others, the waiter offered them other seats. The southerner drew his knife, intending to stab the waiter, but “after a few minutes of disturbance,” he was convinced to pay his bill and leave—in pouring rain—to find another hotel.

How much money did these waiters make? We have no specific evidence from Niagara Falls, but we do have evidence from Rochester. From 1837-39, Jermain Loguen, a freedom seeker from Tennessee, worked in the fashionable Rochester Hotel. Arriving as a young man of twenty-four, without resources or friends, he became a porter and “confidential servant” in the hotel. He was, according to his autobiography, “of gigantic strength, temperate, moral, patient, and attentive to boarders and guests; and being economical in his receipts, he laid up from three to five and six dollars a day, and at the end of two years became possessed of a small estate.” It is reasonable to assume that waiters at the Cataract did at least as well as Loguen had done, particularly in the economically prosperous times of the late 1840s and early 1850s. Commonly, European American male workers about 1850 might earn $10.00 per week in wages, while women might earn one-third to one-half of that. Earnings of three to six dollars per day would therefore have been a lucrative income for any working person, whether African American or European American.

30 Campbell, 48.

31 Campbell, 61.


The result of implementing the science of hotel management—outlined by Tunis Campbell and almost certainly implemented at the Cataract House—was an operation designed to impress guests with the hotel’s efficient and courteous service. Everything needs a system, argued Campbell. “If everyone has his work, and is held responsible for it, you can depend upon having it well done.” “By adopting the rules which I have here laid down,” wrote Campbell, every guest in the house is made perfectly easy,—first by the cordiality with which he is received, and then the politeness of all the servants, combined with cleanliness and order everywhere apparent.  

*Cataract Hotel and the Underground Railroad*

African American waiters at the Cataract House were the key group in promoting and carrying out Underground Railroad work in Niagara Falls. Unlike smaller rural communities, in which both European Americans and African Americans often worked together to help house and transport people escaping from slavery, Niagara Falls relied on a disciplined, committed, and well-organized cadre of waiters as the front line of assistance for fugitives. As many as eighty percent of them may have escaped from slavery themselves. And seemingly almost all of them were involved in helping others escape from slavery. Working together as a well-organized group, they were ready to act at a moment’s notice to help people cross the river to freedom, even to the point of street action to stop slave-catchers physically.  

We have excellent primary source documentation—from letters, memoirs, and newspaper accounts—for several cases associated with the Cataract House and the adjoining International Hotel. All of these cases feature hotel waiters, usually unnamed. Two waiters at the Cataract House stand out as leaders and organizers: John Morrison, head waiter at the Cataract House, and Lewis L.F. Hamilton, a local entrepreneur.  

John Morrison was listed in the 1850 census as age 40, a waiter at the Cataract House with no birthplace listed. By 1856, he was head waiter at the Cataract, according to an article in the *Niagara Falls Gazette*, August 5, 1856. In 1860, Morrison appeared as a hotel waiter, age 44, born in Vermont.  

In 1859, he described his experience over several years in ferrying people across the Niagara River to Canada. (See below.) Hints about his importance to the Underground Railroad came in 1856, when his friends presented a gold-headed cane to him at their annual celebration of British West Indian emancipation (August 1, 1834) in a meeting at Union Hall. The *Niagara Falls Gazette* noted, “The anniversary of the emancipation of slavery in the British West Indies is usually celebrated by our colored people, than whom there is not a more orderly and respectable class of colored citizens in any of our villages. The recipient of the cane is worthy of such a mark of respect from his associates.”  

*The colored people of this village and a number from abroad held a meeting in Union Hall, on Friday afternoon, when an address was delivered by Gen. Gaines, a somewhat noted personage of Lewiston, and a beautiful gold-headed cane, valued at about $10, was presented to Mr. John Morrison, head waiter at the Cataract House, by his friends. The presentation was made by Mr. L. H. P. Hamilton. The anniversary of the emancipation of slavery in the British West Indies is usually celebrated by our colored people, than whom there is not a more orderly and respectable class of colored citizens in any of our villages. The recipient of the cane is worthy of such a mark of respect from his associates.*  

*Niagara Falls Gazette*, August 5, 1856.  
Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding this.

34 Campbell, 49, 53.  

Lewis Henry Fettigue Hamilton officially presented the cane to Morrison. Born October 2, 1824, in Washington, D.C., he married his wife Clarissa at Geneva, New York, in 1845 and began his career in Niagara Falls as a waiter at the Cataract in May 1847. In 1850, the census listed him as living at the Cataract with his wife, age 20, born in New York. 36

Hamilton was at heart an entrepreneur, and by 1855 he had formed the first of several businesses, including a cleaning business (in the rear of Dr. Davis’s office on Main Street) and an employment agency (on Main Street across from the Cataract). His employment agency matched servants with potential employers, suggesting organized efforts to help his fellow African Americans, including those escaping from slavery. In September 1855, the Niagara Falls Gazette endorsed his efforts as “a service to the community.” Hamilton advertised “Hamilton’s General Agency” in the Gazette in July 1856:

Hamilton’s General Agency and Intelligence Office,
Nearly opposite the Cataract House, Niagara Falls.
I would most respectfully inform all whom it may concern that on and after September 6th I shall open books for the convenience of all persons who may wish good servants, and for the convenience of those who may want situations and for persons wishing to buy or sell articles of every description, new or second-hand. Servants supplied places, or persons applied with house servants or laborers. Articles bought or sold for parties with dispatch.
This agency will be found convenient for all, as business will be rendered promptly. Don’t forget Hamilton, Main St. 37

An advertisement in 1856 suggested that Hamilton himself either owned Union Hall, site of the emancipation celebration, or managed it. “Union Hall corner Falls and Mechanic streets, having been put in complete order will be let for Concerts, Exhibitions, Political Gatherings, Etc. Apply to L.H.F. Hamilton, on the premises or address Box 271, Post Office, Niagara Falls, May 31, 1856.”38

36 “Well Known Residents of Niagara Falls,” History of Niagara Falls with Illustrations (1878), 316.

37 Niagara Falls Gazette, July 11, 1855; September 5, 1855; July 30, 1856. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding these.

38 Niagara Times, December 20, 1856.
The Union Hall would have stood as part of the building noted here as the Falls Hotel, Corner Falls and Mechanic Street. This hotel burned in 1861, and the hotel owned on Main Street (approximately where lot 57 is marked here) by James Patterson, another African American entrepreneur, took over the Falls Hotel name. Samuel Geil, *Map of the Vicinity of Niagara Falls* (Philadelphia, 1853).

By 1860, the U.S. census listed L.H.P. Hamilton as a tailor, living in his own house with his wife Clarissa (now listed as born in Connecticut) and three children: thirteen-year-old Catharine, eleven-year-old Lewis, and eight-year-old Henry, all born in New York State.

By 1870, Hamilton had become a railroad sleeping car conductor. By the late 1870s, he had opened his own restaurant and dining hall at 17 Falls Street, advertising “Hamilton's Dining Hall. First-Class! Popular Prices! This ladies and gentlemen’s lunch room is on the COOL SIDE of FALLS STREET, AT NO. 17, Second block below New York Central Depot. Table d'hote from 12 to 4. Confectionary Ice Cream Soda Water Etc.” By the late 1880s, L.H.P. Hamilton was operating from the Prospect Park House Block on Falls Street, once the home of Peter B. Porter. 39

U.S. census records listed no property value for Hamilton, but New York State census records suggested that he owned property worth $1000 in 1865 and $4000 in 1875.

Lewis and Clarissa's son Henry F. Hamilton, born about 1853, became a photographer by 1880, with his studio located next to the Falls Hotel on Main Street (a building most likely owned by fellow African American and Underground Railroad activist James Patterson). Henry and wife Jennie A. lived with Lewis and Clarissa in 1880. 40

The Hamilton family lived in Niagara Falls until their deaths. Both Lewis and Clarissa were buried in Oakwood Cemetery, Lewis on May 14, 1903, at age 79 and Clarissa on January 6, 1915, age 90. Jeanne O. Hamilton died May 27, 1920, and Harry (most likely Henry) Hamilton died October 21, 1931. 41

We have the names of other local African American waiters and entrepreneurs who were also likely players in the Underground Railroad. John Murphy worked at the Cataract House from the 1840s on. In 1850, John was thirty-six years old, born in Maryland, and single. He may have lived regularly in Canada, working seasonally at the Cataract House, since he was not listed in the 1860 census for Niagara Falls. By 1865, he, his Maryland-born wife Josephine, and their two children, both born in Canada, lived in Niagara Falls. Murphy listed no occupation in 1865, but he owned real estate worth $1800.00. The 1870 census listed John Murphy as "head waiter" at the Cataract, where he supervised forty-six people. His daughter Sarah had married James Sydney (a waiter born in Canada) and his mother Eliza, (described as "part-Indian), born in Virginia, all lived with John and Josephine Murphy near the Suspension Bridge. Murphy died tragically in 1880 in an elevator accident. 42

39 Niagara Falls Business Directory, 1878; Niagara Falls Gazette, August 23, 1881; Niagara Falls Gazette?, 1886-89, note from L.H.P. Hamilton about selling “two large photographers’ skylights” and other furniture. Thanks to Michelle Kratts for finding these references.

40 Thanks to Michelle Kratts for locating these graves.

41 Information on John Murphy from Louisville Courier-Journal, July 18, 1870, and Niagara Falls Journal, May 15, 1880. Thanks to Christopher Densmore for sharing these. The Journal reported in 1880: “John H. Murphy, a hotel waiter at the Cataract House, for over 35 years was instantly killed in a remarkable manner on Wednesday evening last. As the elevator was passing down by floor 3 Murphy’s lifeless body was thrown into it with his skull crushed. It is supposed that curiosity caused the unfortunate man to put his head into the opening and that looking down instead of up he was
Daniel Crosby worked first at the Cataract House and later became headwaiter at the International Hotel. John Anderson, grocer, Alexander Shamite, and James and Charles Patterson were also active Underground Railroad supporters. Their names appeared in the National Anti-Slavery Standard in 1846 and 1847 as part of organized abolitionist work. John Anderson, age 35, born in Canada, was listed in the 1850 census in Lockport as a boatman. Sandy Shamite was listed in the 1850 census as Alexander Shamite, a waiter at the Cataract House, age 30, born in Virginia. In the 1840s, James Patterson was a porter for the Cataract House, using a two-wheeled cart to haul baggage. He earned enough money to purchase in 1850 a small building on the site of the later Falls Hotel, which he opened as the Free Soil Hotel. Samuel Patterson, probably the same man as James, appeared in the 1850 census as a tavern keeper, with property worth $3500, born in Virginia. James Patterson appeared in the census in 1860 as a 48-year-old hotelkeeper, with property worth $8000, born in Virginia. He continued to be listed in the census for Niagara Falls until 1880, as a carriage driver and whitewasher, always with a Virginia birthplace. No Charles Patterson was listed, but (For more on the Pattersons, see description of Free Soil Hotel.)

Karolyn Smardz Frost has documented the case of Cecelia Reynolds, who escaped from slavery at the Cataract House in May 1847. At age twenty-one, Cecelia Reynolds came to Niagara Falls from Louisville, Kentucky, as the personal maid of Frances Ann Thruston, or Fanny. The two girls had grown up together, but—much as they liked and respected each other—their status as enslaver and enslaved did not change. Motivated in part by the sale of her own father to enslavers farther South, Cecelia well knew what could happen to someone in her position, even someone as well-loved as she apparently was. Without a word to Fanny (or to Fanny’s father Charles Thruston), Cecelia disappeared one night, eventually moving to Toronto, where she carried on a lengthy correspondence with her former mistress.

On Saturday, July 10, 1847, two months after Cecelia’s escape, an event occurred that almost certainly deepened the bond among abolitionist waiters and sharpened their commitment to helping people escape from slavery. Christopher Densmore thoroughly researched this story and found distinctly different versions. All agree that the unsuccessful attempt to rescue a young enslaved woman led to riots—first when “colored people” tried to rescue her and then later that evening when whites attacked and burned African American homes. Some versions suggest that the hotel in question was the Cataract, but most report it as the Eagle. Some accounts suggest that the girl did not wish to be rescued and that she left with her enslaver voluntarily. An account in 1883 noted that she was “urged to cross the line and forsake her mistress and become free, but she refused. She chose slavery rather than freedom, because she loved her mistress.” One abolitionist observer, however, recounted that the young woman approached one of the “vast number of colored waiters,” confessed that she was “wretched beyond description” and asked for help in escaping to Canada. The waiter agreed to help, but her master, an Alabama man named Stephens, aided by Hollis White, the hotelkeeper, kept her so carefully guarded that escape was impossible. When the time came to leave, Stephenson and the young woman boarded the Lockport and Niagara Falls Railroad. The girl (in one version “heart-broken” to be taken back into slavery) was forced to sit on the train next to the window, with her owner in the aisle seat. Twenty or thirty African Americans, dressed in “white aprons,” emerged from both the Eagle and Cataract Hotels, with a few from the Falls Hotel, crying “Kidnapping! Kidnapping!” They placed “obstructions” on the track and rushed the train, uncoupling one of the cars, determined to rescue her if she desired or to hear directly from her that she did not wish to be rescued. George Bristol, the engineer; conductor Alva Hill (who was once a clerk at the Cataract House, who would soon be sheriff of Niagara County); John McLellan, “with his brawny arm and a stone in his hand,” and others (including, in some accounts, the local constable), “beat them severely.” The girl was “frightened almost to death.” Conductor Alva Hill reportedly told her to leave if she wished, since she was in a free state, “but she had no desire whatever to leave her mistress who no doubt was kind, and to her the slave woman seemed like a mother.”

struck as stated. Coroner Cornell investigated and exonerated the proprietors and the person who ran the elevator from all blame.”

43 National Anti-Slavery Standard, September 24, 1846; July 22, 29, 1847; Niagara Falls Gazette, May 3, 1910; U.S. census records.

44 Karolyn Smardz Frost has a book in progress on Cecelia Reynold’s life. Many thanks to her for sharing this information.

45 This incident was widely reported in the press, and this account is a distillation of information from newspaper articles collected by Christopher Densmore and others. In chronological order, they are: Buffalo Commercial Advertiser, July 12, 1847; Buffalo Republic, July 12, 1847; Albany Evening Journal, July 14, 1847; National Anti-Slavery Standard, July 22, 1847; Pennsylvania Freeman, July 22, 1847; National Anti-Slavery Standard, July 29, 1847; Lorenzo Mabbett, Buffalo Democrat and Courier, July 30, 1847; Liberator, August 6, 1847; The Globe (Toronto), August 7, 1847; True Wesleyan, August 14, 1847; Niagara Falls Gazette, August 25, 1883.
After the altercation in Niagara Falls, the train left for Lewiston, with the slaveholding Stephens family and enslaved young woman, where they took a steamboat for Ogdensburg and Montreal. Although master and mistress returned to Niagara Falls the following year, they “brought no servants.”

The “riot” in Niagara Falls, however, was not yet over. That evening about 11 p.m., “several wicked boys began to fire off pistols, without balls.” Rumors abounded that blacks had fired upon whites, “a statement utterly false,” noted the writer for the *True Wesleyan*, “as I saw the whole transaction from beginning to end.” Other accounts suggested that whites believed two fugitives to be harbored in a local home. They threatened its inhabitants, who responded by firing guns without bullets. One account said that “a few drunken Irishmen” and “several wicked young lads” destroyed “the little shanties of the poor blacks,” because local blacks sold “root beer instead of brandy” and took away business from grog dealers. On Sunday, July 11, public notices appeared “ordering all the blacks to clear out in twenty-four hours.” No one left, however. Newspaper reports disagreed about details, but the general consensus was that this whole event was “a very unpleasant and disgraceful circumstance,” “which disturbed the whole village.” 46

Who were the people who tried to rescue this young woman? Three “very respectable coloured persons of Manchester [once the name of Niagara Falls]” sent an eyewitness account to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, an abolitionist newspaper edited in New York City by Lydia Maria Child, naming names. They reported that John Morrison, John M. Anderson, Charles and James Patterson, and Sandy Shamate were all severely injured. John M. Anderson’s grocery store was also torn down that night, and his goods were destroyed and his furniture broken up. The mob did further damage to one of the Pattersons. 47

All of these men seem to have been part of an organized abolitionist movement. As early as 1845, Charles Patterson sent a donation to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* from Niagara Falls. In 1846, Patterson, Morrison, and Anderson all sent donations, suggesting that all had been in Niagara Falls since 1846 or before. Patterson, Morrison, and Anderson may, in fact, have been the three “respectable coloured persons” who sent the letter to the *Standard* in 1847.

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46 *True Wesleyan*, August 14, 1847.

Three of these men were associated with the Cataract House. John Morrison and Sandy Shamite both appeared in census records as waiters at the Cataract. James Patterson was a baggage porter at the Cataract and later owner of the Free Soil hotel. No Charles Patterson appeared in census records. John Anderson, owner of a grocery store in 1847, did not appear in Niagara Falls in later census records, but a John Anderson, born in Canada, was listed as a boatman in Lockport in 1850.

Three main points stand out in this story. First, this was an organized effort by African Americans in Niagara Falls, dominated by waiters at the main hotels. This was perhaps the first such effort, but it certainly would not be the last. Second, these waiters were part of a national abolitionist movement, as evidenced by their contributions in 1846 to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and their letter to the *Standard* reporting on the incident in 1847. Third, these waiters—although involved in a public altercation which newspapers labeled a “riot”—did not lose their jobs. In fact, many of them continued to work at the Cataract House for several years, most notably John Morrison, who remained at the Cataract—and continued his work on the Underground Railroad—at least until the early 1860s.

In 1853, waiters at the Cataract House were involved in another Underground Railroad event. This one captured national attention. Patrick Sneed was red-haired and freckled, a cooper by training, with a mixture of African American, Jewish, and Native American ancestry. He had escaped from slavery in 1849, most likely from Washington, D.C., where he been taken by Edwin Deleon, the master of Sneed’s half-brother Adam Mendenhall. Sneed had been working at the Cataract Hotel as a waiter, using the name Joseph Watson. Suddenly, on Sunday afternoon, August 27, 1853, about 4:00 p.m., two police officers—J.K. Tyler and Boyington—arrived with a warrant for Sneed’s arrest. Sneed was not charged with escaping from slavery but with the murder in July 1849 of James W. Jones in Savannah.

Three substantial rewards awaited the person who captured his murderer, one for $1500, another for $1000, and a third for $300.
Earlier in the season, an unnamed “citizen of Savannah” had recognized Patrick Sneed as one of the waiters in the Cataract Hotel. This Savannah citizen then travelled to Saratoga Springs, where he supposedly met A.E. Jones, brother of the murdered man. Jones then wrote a letter to Deputy Marshall Joseph K. Tyler, containing copies of arrest warrants and reward notices.

What happened next is best told through Patrick Sneed’s own recollections, augmented by the Buffalo Commercial Advertiser and the Buffalo Republic, who cited Officer Tyler as their direct source. Many other newspapers also carried details of the story. When Tyler, Pierce, and Boyington appeared at the Cataract House, its proprietors (by this time Solon Whitney, Dexter Jerauld, and James F. Trott) asserted that they had no wish to obstruct justice, but they declined to help the marshals arrest Watson/Sneed. The officers then resorted to a ruse: they called Sneed out of the dining room, using the pretext that they wished to tip him for service at dinner. Immediately, Boyington clapped handcuffs on one of Sneed’s wrists, but Sneed “shouted lustily for assistance,” and estimates of sixty to a hundred waiters poured out of the dining room to help him. They dragged Sneed back into the dining hall, tore him from the

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48 Buffalo Daily Courier, August 30, 1853.
hands of the officers (in the process ripping “nearly every vestige of his clothing” from him), shut and barred the doors at the end of the hall, and stood guard, preventing the officers from following.  

Sneed told his own account to Benjamin Drew three years later:

Then a constable of Buffalo came in, on Sunday after dinner, and sent the barkeeper into the dining-room for me. I went into the hall, and met the constable—I had my jacket in my hand, and was going to put it up. He stepped up to me. "Here, Watson," (this was the name I assumed on escaping,) "you waited on me, and I'll give you some change." His fingers were then in his pocket, and he dropped a quarter dollar on the floor. I told him, "I have not waited on you—you must be mistaken in the man, and I don't want another waiter's money." He approached,—I suspected, and stepped back toward the dining-room door. By that time he made a grab at me, caught me by the collar of my shirt and vest,—then four more constables, he had brought with him, sprung on me,—they dragged me to the street door—there was a jam—I hung on by the doorway. The head constable shackled my left hand. I had on a new silk cravat twice round my neck; he hung on to this, twisting it till my tongue lolled out of my mouth, but he could not start me through the door. By this time the waiters pushed through the crowd,—there were three hundred visitors there at the time,—and Smith and Grave, colored waiters, caught me by the hands,—then the others came on, and dragged me from the officers by main force.

One gentleman in the hotel shouted for the gathering crowd to help the officers, but “none appeared anxious to interfere.” An African American man then attacked the “gentleman” with a hatchet, who defended himself with a chair, shouting for his pistol. Boyington, meanwhile, drew his revolver and fired at a man’s head. Only a misfire in the pistol saved the man’s life, but the shot created a stampede, in the middle of which the officers forced the door.

Too late. As Sneed described the ensuing chase, waiters “dragged me over chairs and every thing, down to the ferry way. I got into the cars [the inclined railway had been built in 1845], and the waiters were lowering me down, when the constables came and stopped them, saying, "Stop that murderer!"—they called me a murderer! Then I was dragged down the steps by the waiters, and flung into the ferry boat.” He made it within fifty feet of the Canadian shore before the ferryman discovered that he was carrying an accused murderer. Instead of taking Sneed to Canada, he brought him to the American shore. “They could not land me at the usual place because of the waiters,” Sneed recounted, so they took him to the Maid of the Mist landing, just south of the Suspension Bridge.

The chase was not yet over. As Tyler and Boyington ran to the dock, they were followed by “troops of negroes,” about 250 to three hundred of them, with waiters from the Cataract augmented by waiters from other hotels and throughout the village, “all the black population of the place,” “armed.” They met the ferryboat at the Maid of the Mist landing. The two officers recruited “a band of Irish laborers,” about two to three hundred in number, living in the village. In the resulting fracas, “long and severe,” blacks yielded to Irish assailants, and officers Tyler and Boyington shackled Sneed, bundled him into a carriage and took him to the Lockport Railroad, where they boarded the train to Buffalo. During the ride, Tyler questioned Sneed, who admitted that he had been enslaved by Mr. Dillon but who had never met Jones.

Even at the time of Sneed’s arrest, many people considered the charges to be fraudulent, an attempt to get him back into slavery rather than an honest accusation. Nevertheless, Sneed was committed to jail by police justice Isaac P. Vanderpoel at 10:00 p.m. that evening. Sneed immediately asked to see a lawyer. Sneed does not name this man in his 1856 account, but he was Eli Cook, who served him well throughout the hearing. The constables were “astonished” to

49 Buffalo Daily Courier, August 30, 1853; Niagara Courier, August 31, 1853; Utica Daily Gazette, August 31, 1853; The Buffalo Courier found the conflict between Irish and African Americans funny; Syracuse Daily Standard, August 31, 1853, copied from the Buffalo Republic.

50 Patrick Sneed in Benjamin Drew, A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refuge: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves (Boston: J.P. Jewett, 1856), 102-03. No waiter named Grave appeared in the 1850 or 1860 census. Several waiters named Smith were present, however: George Smith, age 21 in 1860, was born in Canada. Henry Smith was 35 in 1860, born in Washington, D.C. James Smith, age 30 in 1860, reported his birthplace as Michigan.

51 Buffalo Daily Courier, August 30, 1853; Niagara Courier, August 31, 1853; Utica Daily Gazette, August 31, 1853;

52 Buffalo Daily Courier, August 30, 1853; Niagara Courier, August 31, 1853; Utica Daily Gazette, August 31, 1853.
see that he had hired “one of the best lawyers in the place.” Sneed told them that "as scared as they thought I was, I wanted them to know that I had my senses about me.”

The trial opened ten days later, and it was over on day eleven. New information came to light, including a letter from Alfred E. Jones (supposed brother of the murdered man) to Joseph K. Tyler, offering him $300 in cash for the delivery of Sneed. “If he is convicted I will make it an advantageous job for you,” Tyler added.

The court required a proper affidavit, and Jones assured Marshal Tyler that he would have it within two weeks. “You have the right man,” he wrote on August 31, “and you can swear to the fact, as I had him spotted there, and the person that saw him the day before you arrested him, knew him well, and recognized him as the man. . . . Do not let him escape, as I shall not fail to put you in possession of the right paper.” Tyler heard nothing more from Jones.

More details about Sneed’s background came out in testimony at the hearing. Sneed’s half-brother Adam Mendenhall was owned by an editor named DeLeon. Both brothers escaped and went to Newark, Ohio. The District Attorney in that county reported that he had received several letters—full of contradictions—from Sneed’s owner, David Dillon, who asserted sometimes that they were fugitives from justice, other times that they were fugitive slaves, and still other time that they were neither. Warrants came to Newark, Ohio, for both men. The charge was murder. Patrick escaped, but Adam was returned South. He was never tried, however, only sent back to his original owner. “We are very confident,” reported Samuel B. Sherwood, a Newark banker, “that the charge was only a pretext to get them back into slavery.” J.M. Byers wrote, “there is no doubt at all of the innocence of Sneed of the charge of murder. He is the slave of David R. Dillon, who takes that means to get him back.”

Savannah witnesses also wrote, declaring both Adam Mendenhall and Patrick Sneed to be fugitives from slavery but innocent of murder. Judge Mordecai Sheftall wrote from Savannah,

”Such a rumor, that either Adam Mendenhall, or his brother Patrick, knew anything or was in any way concerned in the perpetration of the act, never prevailed in Savannah, and does not now prevail. I state to you sir, positively, that no affidavit was ever made by any person or persons against Adam or his brother Patrick, charging them with the murder of Jones, nor have any warrants founded on affidavits been issued against them. The design of Mr. David R. Dillon in moving in this business, is to obtain the possession of his slave Patrick. . . . He well knows they are not guilty of Jones’ murder, but it is the only plan he could devise, they being in a free State, to obtain the possession of his slave.”

Toward the end of the hearing, Charles Follett, District Attorney of Licking County, Ohio, doubtless must have made the audience gasp when he testified that he thought letters written by Alfred E. Jones were in the same hand as those written by David R. Dillon. Sneed’s counsel, Eli Cook, took two hours to sum up his argument, in a “most thorough, fair, and beautiful manner,” reported the Albany Evening Journal, and “the intentions in regard to Sneed are as clear as the dawn.” Judge Sheldon thought so, too. On day eleven, court opened at 9:00 a.m. and the judge released Sneed by 10:00 a.m. Sneed immediately left for Canada. Most likely, he crossed the river at Black Rock.

The verdict of innocent received confirmation when Judge Sheldon received a letter from a slaveholder in Savannah. His words are worth quoting, as a remarkable example of white elite members of Savannah society standing up for Patrick Sneed. “I have conversed with several gentlemen on this subject,” wrote the author,

and there is but one opinion about the matter, and that is, that you acted perfectly right in discharging the man. The whole matter was fraud from beginning to end... and everyone here was very indignant that Dillon should try to impose upon the officers and Court at Buffalo in such a manner. Mr. Alfred E. Jones and David R. Dillon are one and the same man, as you suspected, and no one here believes


54 Albany Evening Journal, September 9, 1853.

55 Samuel Sherwood to Eli Cook, August 21 [?], 1853; J.M. Byers to Eli Cook, September 1, 1853, reported in Albany Evening Journal, September 9, 1853.

56 Mordecai Sheftall [Sheftall] to O.A. Blair, February 12, 1854, reported in Albany Evening Journal, September 9, 1853.

57 Reported in Albany Evening Journal, September 9, 1853; Benjamin Drew, North Side View of Slavery (1856), 104. When Sneed reached Canada, he reported, he walked thirty miles to the Clifton House. His lucrative work as a waiter was disrupted, and he was still paying his lawyer three years later.
that Patrick is the murderer of James W. Jones, and Dillon does not believe it. It was by fraud that he
got him arrested, and it was by fraud that he obtained the requisition from Gov. Cobb. The persons I
have these facts from are all slaveholders, and some of them lawyers, and all are respectable, and I
assure you that the people of Savannah justify you in the course you pursued.

Three years later, Sneed was still in Canada, still missing his lucrative job as a waiter at the Cataract House and
having “hardly got over” the cost of paying his lawyer. 58

One well-documented escape story involved a waiter in Niagara Falls in the mid-1850s. Nancy Berry was born in
St. Louis to Polly Berry Wash, an enslaved women who had become free by living in Illinois. She was then returned to
slavery in St. Louis. Sale of her husband farther South led her to vow never to subject her daughters Nancy and Lucy
Ann to the same fate. When Nancy’s mistress, Mary Berry married H.S. Cox from Philadelphia, they brought Nancy
Berry with them to Niagara Falls on their honeymoon. Following her mother’s instructions, Nancy Berry took her first
opportunity to flee. Nancy told the story in her on words to her sister Lucy Ann:

In the morning, Mr. and Mrs. Cox went for a drive, telling me that I could have the day to do as I
pleased. The shores of Canada had been tantalizing my longing gaze for some days, and I was bound
to reach there long before my mistress returned. So I locked up Mrs. Cox’s trunk and put the key
under the pillow, where I was sure she would find it, and I made a strike for freedom! A servant in the
hotel gave me all necessary information and even assisted me in getting away. Some kind of a festival
was going on, and a large crowd was marching from the rink to the river, headed by a band of music.
In such a motley throng I was unnoticed, but was trembling with fear of being detected. It seemed an
age before the ferry boat arrived, which at last appeared, enveloped in a gigantic wreath of black
smoke. Hastily I embarked, and as the boat stole away into the misty twilight and among crushing
fields of ice, though the air was chill and gloomy, I felt the warmth of freedom as I neared the Canada
shore. I landed, without question, and found my mother’s friend with but little difficulty, who assisted
me to get work and support myself. Not long afterwards, I married a prosperous farmer, who
provided me with a happy home, where I brought my children into the world without the sin of
slavery to strive against. 59

Nancy Berry did not record the hotel in which she stayed with the Cox family. Almost certainly, however, it was
either the Cataract or the International.

On October 11, 1859, Rachel Smith, a young Quaker woman from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, checked
into the Cataract House with two friends, Elenor Smith and P.B. Preston. Headwaiter John Morrison noticed her name
in the book and introduced himself, asking if she knew a man named Joseph Smith. Yes, she said, he is my father. Well,
he said, “I would like to tell you about the poor fugitives I ferry across the river. Many of them tell me that the first place
they came to in Pennsylvania was Joseph Smith’s. I frequently see them when I visit my parents at Lundy’s Lane. Many
of them have nice little homes and are doing well.” During two of the nights that Rachel Smith stayed at the Cataract
House, Morrison “ferried some across the river.” 60

58 Schenectady Cabinet, November 22, 1853, copied from the Buffalo Express; Northern Christian Advocate, November 23,
1853, copied from the Buffalo Republic.

59 Lucy Ann Delaney, From the Darkness Cometh the Light or Struggles for Freedom (St. Louis, Missouri: J.T. Smith, 1891?), 17-
18. www.docsouth.edu. In 1840, Polly Berry Wash sued for her own freedom and won. In 1844, she sued for the
freedom of her daughter Lucy Ann and won that case, too. See Polly Wash vs. Joseph M. Magehan, November 1839,
Case No. 167, Circuit Court Case Files, Office of the Circuit Clerk, City of St. Louis, Missouri, http:
stlcourtreCORDS.wustL.edu.

60 Robert C. Smedley, History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania (1883), 231.
Although this study does not deal with Niagara Falls in the later nineteenth century, it is likely that the practice of hiring black waiters in Niagara Falls declined precipitously by 1900, as it did elsewhere. Lorenzo Greene and Carter G. Woodson suggested that, throughout the North and West, “most of the best hotels and restaurants replaced their Negro waiters with whites” between 1890 and 1917. During World War I, many such establishments also replaced male waiters with female waitresses, filling in for the shortage of men during the war. 61

**Conclusion:** The Cataract House, under the director of Parkhurst Whitney and his successors (son Solon Whitney, sons-in-law Dexter Jerauld, James Trott) was a world class hotel with an international reputation. The Cataract House

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was also the center of Underground Railroad activism in Niagara Falls, one of the most important Underground Railroad nodes in the entire nation.

The national and international importance of Niagara Falls was due to two main factors:

1) It was located at the convergence of road and rail lines that reached all over the U.S. and Canada, bringing people to one of the narrowest international crossing point in the entire Great Lakes region. Like the narrow end of a funnel, Niagara Falls attracted people escaping from slavery throughout the South, from Maryland to Louisiana, channeling them directly to Canada on the ferry at the base of the Falls or, after 1855, on the Suspension Bridge.

2) African American waiters, with at least the tacit support of the Whitney family, formed a well-organized, long-term, and proactive network of Underground Railroad supporters, with wide contacts on both sides of the border.

The importance of the Cataract House as an Underground Railroad node cannot be over-estimated. Waiters who worked as Underground Railroad agents made this site one of the most important fugitive destinations in the whole Underground Railroad network.