

Solon and Frances Drake Whitney House¹

355 Buffalo Avenue
Niagara Falls, New York
National Register, 1974

Significance: Solon Myron Napoleon Whitney, son of Parkhurst Whitney, owned the Cataract Hotel, with his brothers-in-law Dexter Jerauld and James Trott. All of them hired African Americans as waiters. Many of these waiters had born in the South and had likely escaped from slavery.



Solon and Frances Whitney House, looking south toward river
August 2011



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¹ Site description from *Survey of Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, and African American Life in Niagara Falls and Surrounding Area, 1820-1880*, by Judith Wellman, Ph.D., April 2012, pp. 133-136. Prepared by New York Historical Research Associates for edr Companies and the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area Commission. The complete historic resources survey report is available at www.niagarafallsundergroundrailroad.org.

Historic American Buildings Survey photo

www.livingplaces.com/NY/Niagara_County/Niagara_Falls_City/Whitney_Mansion.html

Description: Solon H.M. Whitney, son of Parkhurst Whitney, bought the land on which this house stands, lots 60 and 61 of the Mile Strip, in 1837. The only other house on the river side of Buffalo Avenue at that time was Augustus Porter's 1818 mansion. The Depression of 1837 and the Patriot's War delayed construction, and the house was not built until 1849. It is a textbook example of the Greek Revival style. With limestone exterior walls, this house has three bays in its main block. Four Ionic columns grace the front of the building, with a full pediment. The west wing is a later addition. Most likely added in the 1860s, it incorporated new features, such as the bay window and sharply pitched dormer window with Palladian windows.²

After Solon Whitney died on February 9, 1907, the house went to his son Drake Whitney and then to Edwin Whitney, who sold it to A.H. Zimmerman of Moore Business Forms. Edward E. Franchot bought the house and sold it to Carborundum Company in 1953. They used it first as a guesthouse and then as a home for their president, Clinton Robinson. In 1962, the University Club purchased the house.³

The house is architecturally significant, associated with both tourism and industrial development in Niagara Falls, and also related to the strong presence of African Americans and the Underground Railroad.

Discussion: Solon Whitney was in Niagara Falls on October 7, 1815, to Celinda and Parkhurst Whitney, proprietors first of the Eagle Hotel and then of the Cataract House. Educated in the Lewiston Academy and Canandaigua Academy, Whitney returned to Niagara Falls to help his parents manage the Cataract House. In 1846, Parkhurst Whitney passed active management of the Cataract House to son Solon Whitney and sons-in-law James Trott and Dexter Jerauld. Solon Whitney continued as manager until 1883. After Dexter Jerauld's death in 1889, Peter A. Porter purchased the Cataract House.⁴

During the Patriot War in 1837, Whitney served as quartermaster and aide-de-camp, with the title of Major Whitney, which he used for the rest of his life. Whitney was active in civic affairs outside the Cataract House, as well. First a Whig and then a Republican in politics, he was warden of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, president of the Niagara Falls Gas Company, director of the Cataract Bank, president of the village in 1892, Mason, and ardent supporter of local volunteer fire companies.⁵

Although there is no documented sources linking Solon Whitney with either abolitionist or the Underground Railroad, his supervision of the Cataract House with a predominantly African American wait staff, suggests that he was one of the most important employers in the whole region for people who had escaped from slavery.

² Gombach Group, adaptation of National Register nomination, Solon Whitney--
www.livingplaces.com/NY/Niagara_County/Niagara_Falls_City/Whitney_Mansion.html; *Niagara Falls Gazette*,
February 14, 1883.

³ "University Club Taking Over Historic Buffalo Avenue Home for New Quarters," *Niagara Falls Gazette*, August 14, 1962; E.T. Williams, "March of Time Brings Many Changes to Old Niagara," *Niagara Falls Gazette*, December 31, 1937; "The Major Solon M.N. Whitney Mansion," 1960, typewritten notes, Niagara Falls Public Library; Gombach Group, adaptation of National Register nomination, Solon Whitney--
www.livingplaces.com/NY/Niagara_County/Niagara_Falls_City/Whitney_Mansion.html

⁴ "Oldest Native Resident Died Last Evening," *Niagara Falls Gazette*, February 20, 1907.

⁵ "Oldest Native Resident Died Last Evening," *Niagara Falls Gazette*, February 20, 1907.



Solon Whitney
Edward Williams collection, Niagara Falls Public Library

On May 12, 1840, Solon Whitney married Frances Drake from Saratoga Springs, New York. She was born August 17, 1822. Her father owned the famous United State Hotel and Congress Hall in that village, so she was used to serving a wide clientele in the hotel business. Saratoga Springs, with its medicinal springs, rivaled Niagara Falls as a summer destination for elite white slave-owning families. When her father moved to Albany as proprietor of the American Hotel, he placed his daughter in a nearby convent school. In 1832, the family moved to New Orleans and then to Louisville, Kentucky, where her father became the first proprietor of the Louisville Hotel (perhaps the Galt House, which opened in 1834). There, Frances finished her education at Bardstown, Kentucky.

While in Kentucky, Frances Drake visited the home of General Breckenridge in Frankfort, Kentucky, where she met Breckenridge's niece, Elizabeth Porter from Niagara Falls. Their friendship "grew stronger during the many years they afterwards were neighbors" in Niagara Falls. Undoubtedly, it was through Elizabeth Porter that Frances Drake met her future husband, Solon Whitney. When Frances' father died in Kentucky, the family returned to Saratoga Springs, where Frances Drake married Solon Whitney at Waterford, New York, in May 1840.

From the time of their marriage to the completion of their new house in 1851, Solon and Frances Whitney lived in an apartment in the Cataract House. The Drakes had four children: Solon Whitney, born in 1841, drowned in 1845; Drake Whitney; Solon Whitney 2nd; and Parkhurst Whitney, born in 1855, who died in 1856. Frances Whitney's mother lived with the family and survived her daughter.

Beginning in 1846, Solon and Frances Whitney became part owners of the Cataract (with sisters and brothers-in-law, James and Celinda Trott and Dexter and Angeline Jerauld). In this capacity, they were certainly involved in hiring African American waiters and certainly aware that many of them had escaped from slavery. Frances Drake's friendship with abolitionist neighbor Elizabeth Porter may also have influenced the family's sympathy toward African Americans who escaped on the Underground Railroad. As a member of St. Peter's Church, Frances Drake was also known for taking a prominent role in charitable work, "being ready in all ways, and at all times," noted her obituary, "to lend her assistance, and many a person whom she has cheered and aided will miss her quite charity in their hours of need."⁶

When Frances Drake Whitney died in February 1883, her pallbearers were her brothers-in-law and nephews: J.F. Trott, W.J. Trott, J.P. Trott, Edward Phillips, D.R. Jerauld, and P.W. Jerauld.

Solon Whitney lived to become the oldest resident of the city. When he died on February 9, 1907, he was buried in Oakwood Cemetery.

⁶ *Niagara Falls Gazette*, February 14, 1883.