

Site of the Ferry Landing at Youngstown¹

Youngstown

Town of Porter

Near junction of Niagara River with Lake Ontario

Significance: The ferry across the Niagara River here at Youngstown was an important crossing point for freedom seekers, particularly before completion of the Suspension Bridges at Niagara Falls in 1848 and Lewiston in 1851. It remained an alternative even when these other crossing points were patrolled by slave catchers.



[After William H. Bartlett. "The Outlet of Niagara River."](#)(New York: Currier & Ives, 1857).
purple.niagara.edu/cam/Niagara/images/pnia310.jpg



The Falls of Niagara being a complete guide to all the points of interest around and in the immediate neighbourhood of the great cataract

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. 177-181. 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.

with views taken from sketches by Washington Friend, Esq. (T. Nelson & Sons, ...1859).
www.nflibrary.ca/nfplindex/show.asp?id=90414&cb=1;
alls.wolfcrews.com/part1/niagara_river_looking_towards_lake_ontario.jpg

Description: We have not yet located historic images of the Youngstown ferry landing.

Discussion: There are at least three specific references to freedom seekers who escaped to Canada across the Youngstown Ferry. The earliest was Thomas James, who escaped from slavery near Canajoharie and Fort Plain, New York, in June 1821. When he was seventeen years old, James was traded to a new master, George Hess, for “a yoke of steers, a colt and some additional property,” he wrote in his autobiography. Hess worked him hard, but a threatened whipping was more than James was willing to tolerate. Following the “newly staked line of the Erie canal,” he walked westward for about a week, sleeping in barns and begging for food at local houses along the route, until he reached Lockport. There “a colored man showed me the way to the Canadian border. I crossed the Niagara at Youngstown on the ferry boat, and was free!” In Canada, James worked for three months at Deep Cut on the Welland Canal. When he crossed back to the U.S. of the river, a farmer named Rich, living near Youngstown, hired him to chop wood. He worked there for several months before settling in Rochester, where he became a teacher and minister with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.²

In 1883, when James was eighty years old, he returned to Youngstown to preach to a full house in the Presbyterian Church. The local newspaper, the *Niagara County News*, noted that Olaf Hathaway had ferried James across the river. After his death, local residents heralded Hathaway, of Quaker background, as

a noted man in many respects, especially in seeking to relieve the distress of others. He often jeopardized his life in his efforts to save others. In several instances when small boats were icebound on the Niagara River and the ice was carrying them into the lake to certain destruction, he would, at the risk of his own life, make his way out to them on the floating ice and rescue them. It was a pleasure to him to aid suffering humanity. In all the relations of life he was an exemplary man, and the community in which he lived will long regret his death.³

On January 11, 1853, abolitionist orator, editor, and minister Samuel Ringgold Ward, who had escaped from slavery with his parents when he was three years old, traveled across the river to Canada on the Youngstown ferry. On the Canadian side, he met a fugitive from slavery, “old and weak,” wearing rags for clothes, huddling around the stove in the ferry house to keep out the cold. But “he was free! that was youth, health, rest, strength, all things.”⁴

2 *Life of Rev. Thomas James, by Himself* (Rochester: Post Express, 1886), 5-6,
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jamesth/jamesth.html>.

3 *Niagara County News*, September 21, 1883, <http://newsfeed.rootsweb.com/th/read/NYNIAGAR/2001-09/1000862274>: “Rev. Thos. James (colored) of Rochester preached in the Presbyterian church Sunday evening to a full house, comprising the congregations of that church and the M. E. Church. Rev. James is an old man, being now in his 80th year, and was one of the first anti-slavery lecturers of the country, for which he was mobbed at Le Roy and other places. He was born in slavery, but fled from his captors when quite a young man, and crossed the river in his flight sixty-three years ago at this place. Olaf Hathaway, an old resident of this place long since dead, ferried him across. He afterward returned and resided several months in this locality. At the close of the service a collection was taken up for his benefit and about \$7 realized. He lectured in the Presbyterian church at Lewiston Tuesday evening.” Information about Hathaway appeared in William Pool, ed., *Landmarks of Niagara County, New York* (Syracuse: D. Mason, 1897), 30.

4 Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro: His Anti-Slavery Labours in the United States, Canada, & England* (Toronto, London: John Snow, 1855), 172-75.



“Crossing the river,” wrote Ward, “it was so cold that icicles were formed upon my clothes, as the waves dashed the water into the ferry boat.” The fugitive had crossed on the ferry “with nothing upon his person but cotton clothing, and an oilcloth topcoat.” He sat not at the stove, “but all around” it, covering it “with his shivering legs and arms and trunk.” And everyone waiting with him was perfectly happy to yield their share of the scarce heat to this man.⁵

The ferryman was “a bit of a wag—a noble, generous Yankee.” Ward enjoyed some humorous banter with him:

Upon asking the fare of the ferry, I was told it was a shilling. Said I, "Must I pay now, or when I get on the other side?"

"Now, I guess, if you please."

"But suppose I go to the bottom, I lose the value of my shilling," I expostulated.

"So shall I lose mine, if you go to the bottom without paying in advance," was his cool reply.

I submitted, of course.⁶

Further discussion revealed the ferryman to have a sense of compassion as well as a sense of humor. When they were partly across, he asked Ward,

"Stranger, you saw that 'ere black man near the stove in the office, didn't you?"

"Yes, I saw him, very near it, all around it--all over it, for that matter."

"Wall, if you can do anything for him, I would thank you, for he is really in need. He is a fugitive. I just now brought him across. I am sure he has nothing, for he had but fourpence to pay his ferry."

"But you charged me a shilling, and made me pay in advance."

"Yes, but I tell you what; when a darky comes to this ferry from slavery, I guess he'll get across, shilling or no shilling, money or no money."⁷

Knowing as I did that a Yankee's--a good Yankee's-- guess is equal to any other man's oath, I could but believe him. He further told me, that sometimes, when they had money, fugitives would give him

⁵ Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*, 174.

⁶ Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*, 174.

⁷ Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*, 174-75.

five shillings for putting them across the ferry which divided what they call Egypt from Canaan. In one case a fugitive insisted upon his taking twenty-four times the regular fare. Upon the ferryman's refusing, the Negro conquered by saying, "Keep it, then, as a fund to pay the ferriage of fugitives who cannot pay for themselves."⁸

On February 16, 1855, John P. Van Deusen of Palmyra, New York, recorded in his diary another example of using the Youngstown ferry as an alternative to the Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls. "This P.M.," he noted,

Mr. Culver came from the lower to the upper room in the church [Congregational Church in Palmyra, New York], called Mr. Shumway and me aside and introduced a Negro boy about 16 or 18 years old, a fugitive slave - bringing a line to Mr. Shumway from R.L. Adams, Editor, Wayne County Whig commending him to us for money and to be forwarded via Suspension Bridge to Canada. Their master was Wm Anderson who he said owned 200 slaves. The Father's name is Daniel, and the boy's James. Mr. S. Culver gave him \$1, Mr. Shumway 4/, Mr. A.F. Cressy 4/, and I 4/, 2 other gentlemen \$1 each and gave him written directions to go to Lockport and then to Youngstown to Mr. Pardee, a Hardwar Merchant there, and a Bro. of R. G. Pardee, both originally citizens of Palmyra and good men. We hope he will go along safely and would have been glad could they have stopped here, but it is not safe and they would feel unsafe.⁹

Still a fourth example identifying the Youngstown ferry as a major crossing point is revealed in the story of Cassey. In early 1861, "Col. P" (most likely Colonel Peter A. Porter) helped Cassey to escape through Lockport. At the same time, he diverted attention from her trip to Lockport by leading slave-catcher Cathcart on a wild horse race from Niagara Falls to Youngstown and back.¹⁰(For more on this story, see description of home of Peter A., Elizabeth, and Josephine Porter.)

⁸ Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*, 174-75.

⁹ John P. Van Deusen, Diary, February 16, 1855, from Robert Hoeltzel, *History of Park Presbyterian Church*, 51. Many thanks to Marjory Allen Perez for sharing this.

¹⁰ Eber M. Pettit, *Sketches in the History of the Underground R.R.* (Fredonia: W. McKinstry, 1879), 113-121.