

THE INVISIBLE ROAD TO FREEDOM

- The History and Story of the Underground Railroad in Sand Lake and Eastern Rensselaer County, Including John Brown's Connection to Rensselaer County

A Presentation by Mrs Judy Rowe

On June 13, 1995 for the Sand Lake Historical Society

My grandfather had a picture of this negro in amongst this whole group of Baptist people, and I would ask him who he was. It was "James." Well who was "James?" Well his father's name was "Charles." I never really got an answer out of him, and then I found out that the Baptist Church in Petersburg was part of the "Underground Railroad." I also found out that the mountains of Grafton, the Taconic and Berkshires hid a great number of slaves. I didn't do anything about it; it was something that I grew up with.

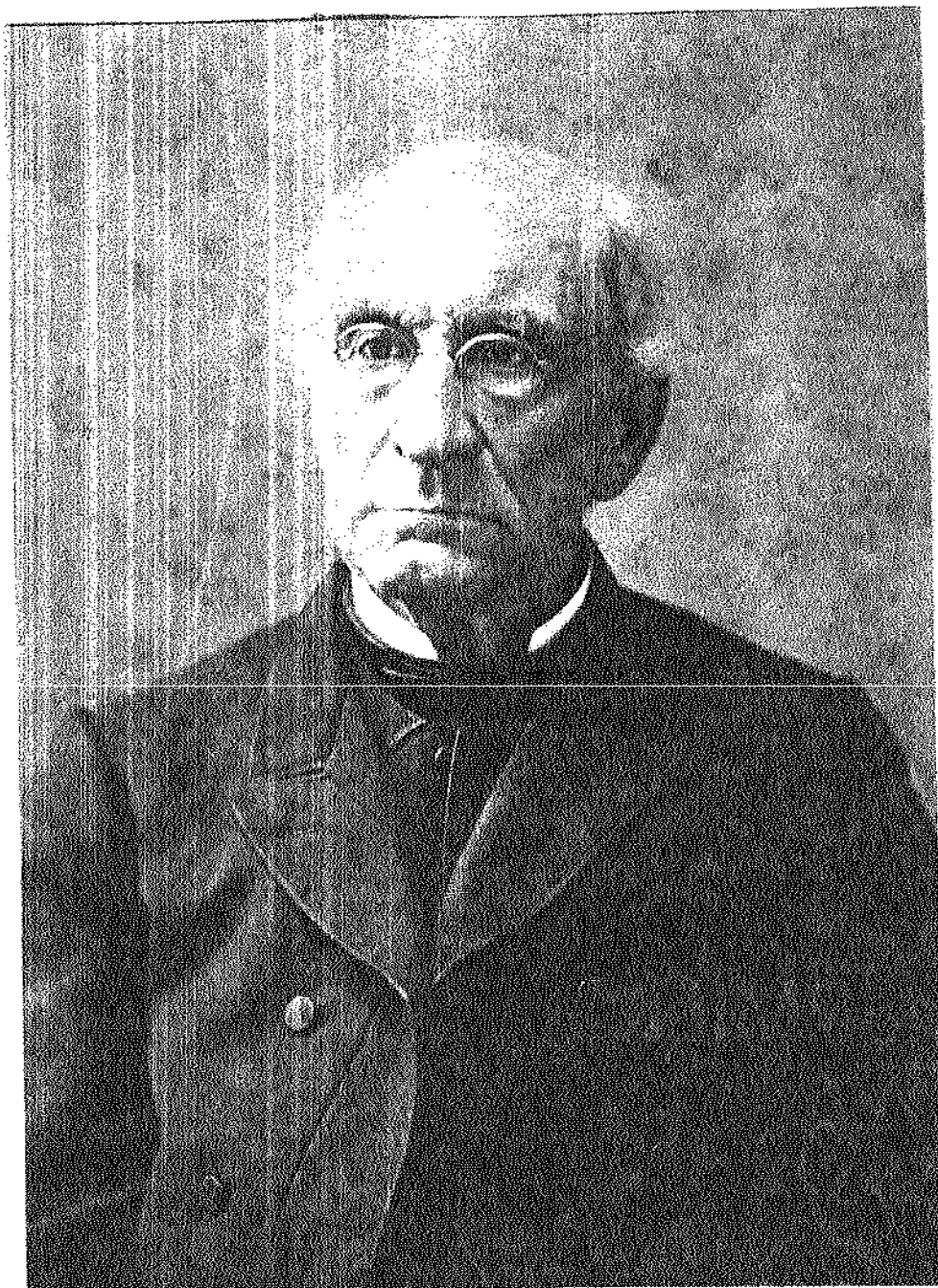
When I started researching the Glass Factory, I would come across a hint here and a hint there, and I just kept putting it away and putting it away in a folder. When I talked with the Fox family, they let me have a letter - let me read it:

"Isaac Fox told one of his sons, Albert, that the peas had increased greatly, and clothing was hard to come by for the weather."

At that time I thought it was something about the Glass Factory, until I found out that "peas" as far as the underground railroad was concerned were passengers, and they had a very hard time getting them clothes because they came up with just cotton clothes from the South. So that was the first part of it that really linked it up, and then slowly over the years, when I worked in Berkshire County, when I worked in Durhamville, when I was in New York at the New York Historical Society, I would come just a little piece of this. Finally, it fell into place for me, absolute paper-proof that I was right. As far as the government is concerned, the only places the underground railroad went were up the Hudson River, up to Canada, and where Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglas were very active. It took a lot of convincing because they didn't believe me that the underground railroad went through Rensselaer County, which was the obvious choice. They would have to go all across the State of New York to get here, and all they would have to do was go through Rensselaer County and Columbia County, and any of these counties down through into the mountains, and they were free because Connecticut and Massachusetts were free states, and Vermont. Vermont was the earliest one in 1777 to free slaves up there. So, it all came into place very nicely when Robert Van Alstyne knocked on my door and handed me a copy of this and the rest of the Van Alstyne papers. This is Rev. Nicholas Van Alstyne, and this is the church that stood where the drug store stands in West Sand Lake. And this is the house where he notes his code name in

Rev. Nicholas Van Alstine

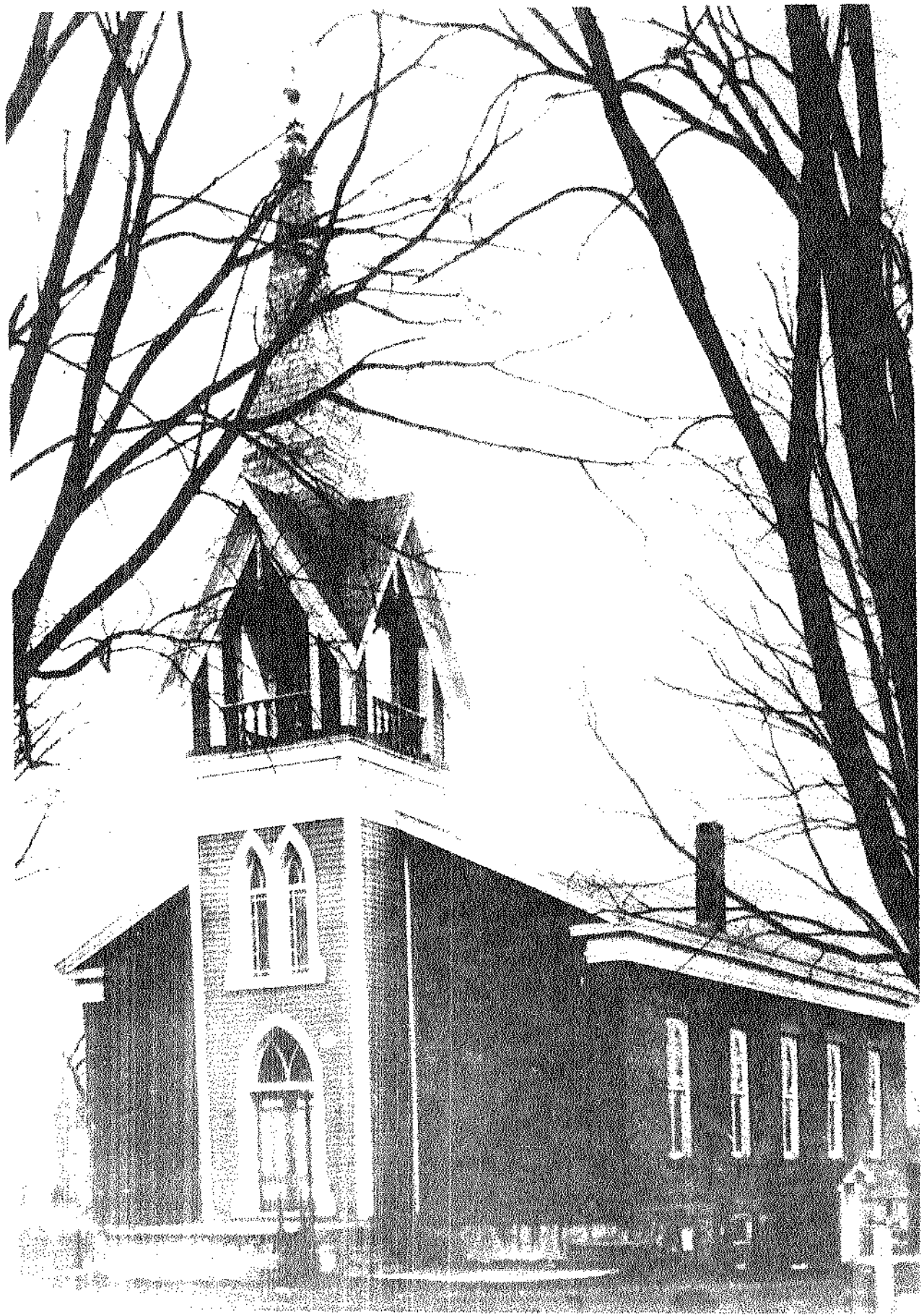
"From his home in Sand Lake during the his term as minster. His home was one of the stations on the underground Railroad. His code name was PAUL.

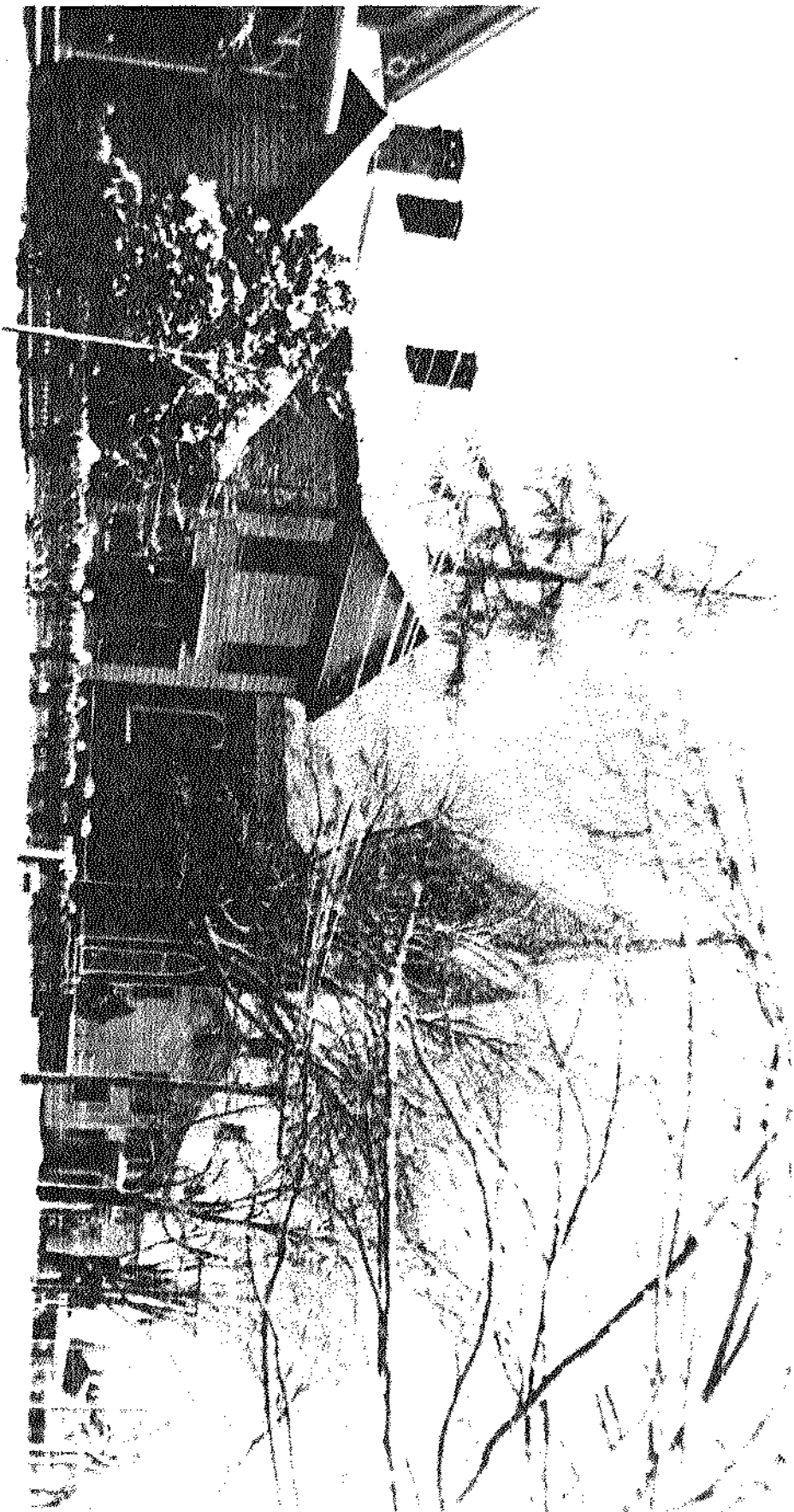


BRANCH OF SERVICE

NAME

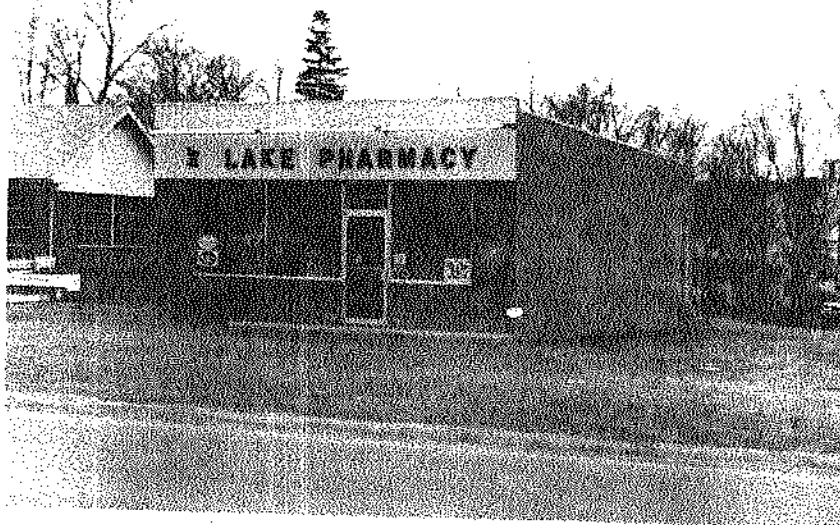
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WEST SAND LAKE WINTER SCENE

Left to right. Burton Thomas house, Second Lutheran Church and Parsonage.

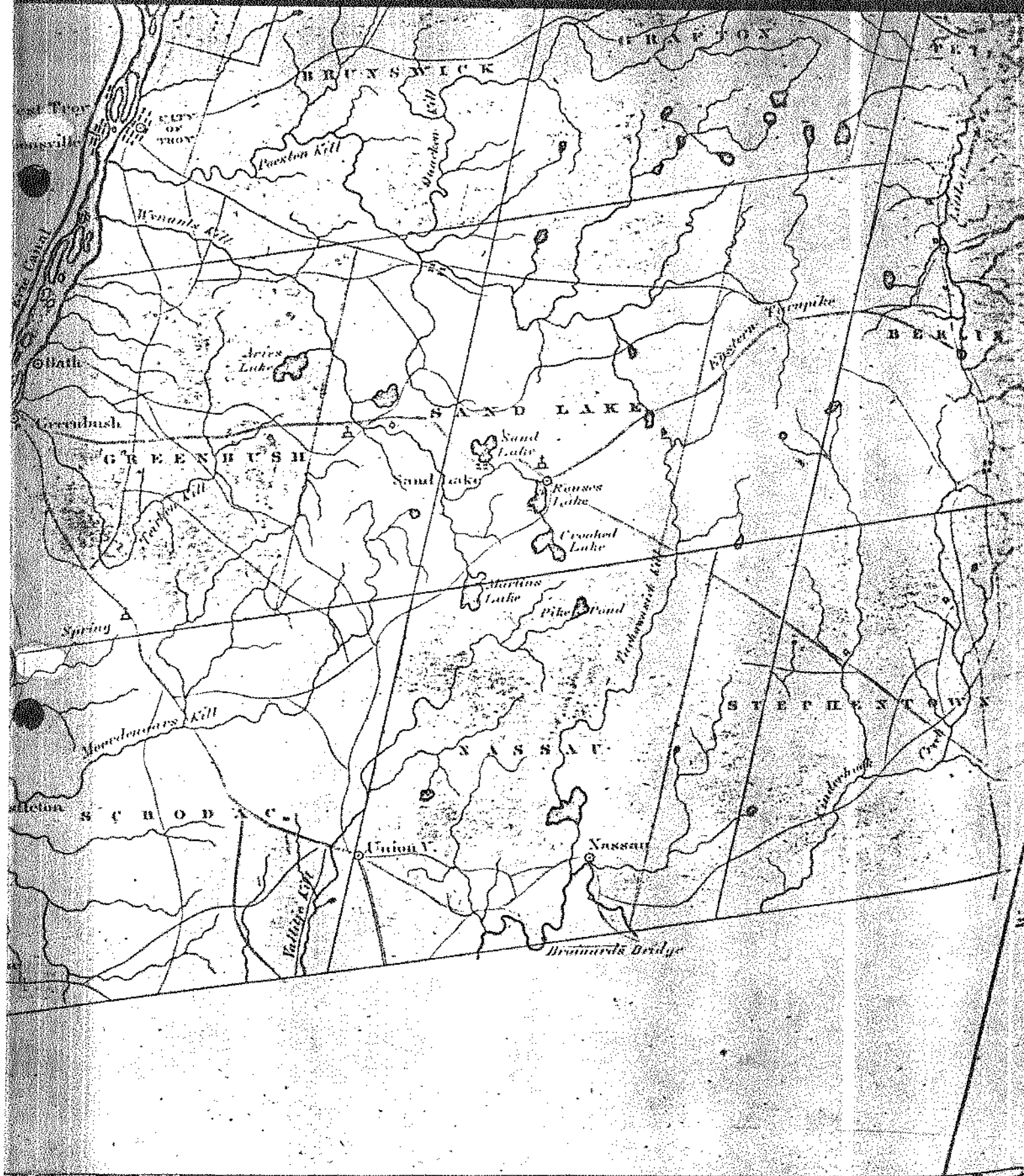


The new Lake Pharmacy now occupies the old church site.

THE 2ND LUTHERAN CHURCH Left

Dedicated October 5, 1839. In 1926 it ceased operations as an active church. After World War II it served as Lt. Perry Williams V. F. W. post. It is no longer standing.

The Parsonage of the 2nd Lutheran Church (white building to right of present Lake Pharmacy 1975) was built in 1840-41 and enlarged in 1870 at a cost of \$1,600. Rev. H. L. Dox was the first pastor to live in it.



Drawn by David H. Burr of the State of New York

1829 map

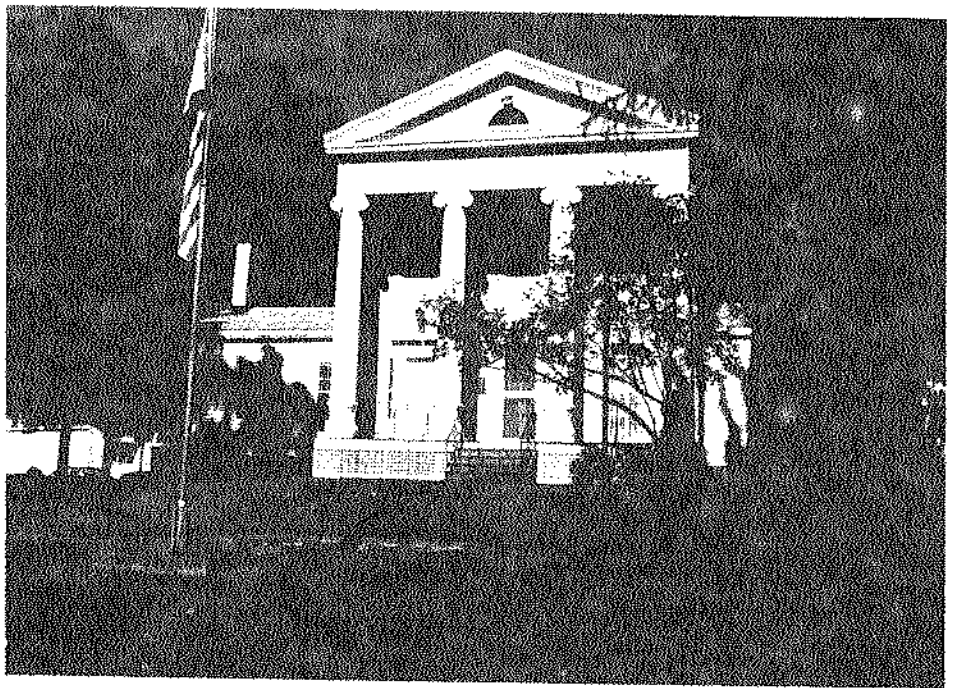
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the underground railroad is "Paul." This is the map, and as you can see, this is a little bit old, but we have the Glass Factory route noted besides the Lebanon route, where the Shakers used. It turns out that there is another route over the mountain through Green Hallow to Williamstown, and we have the doctor's name and the route as it went through Massachusetts; and so they gave me that.

All I had to start with was the story of the Glass Factory and the Glass Factory owners. Dalmar Tifft, Myra Wehnau, and a lot of other people shared their information with me, and it is to their credit that it was saved. So now I'm going to tell you about the Underground Railroad.

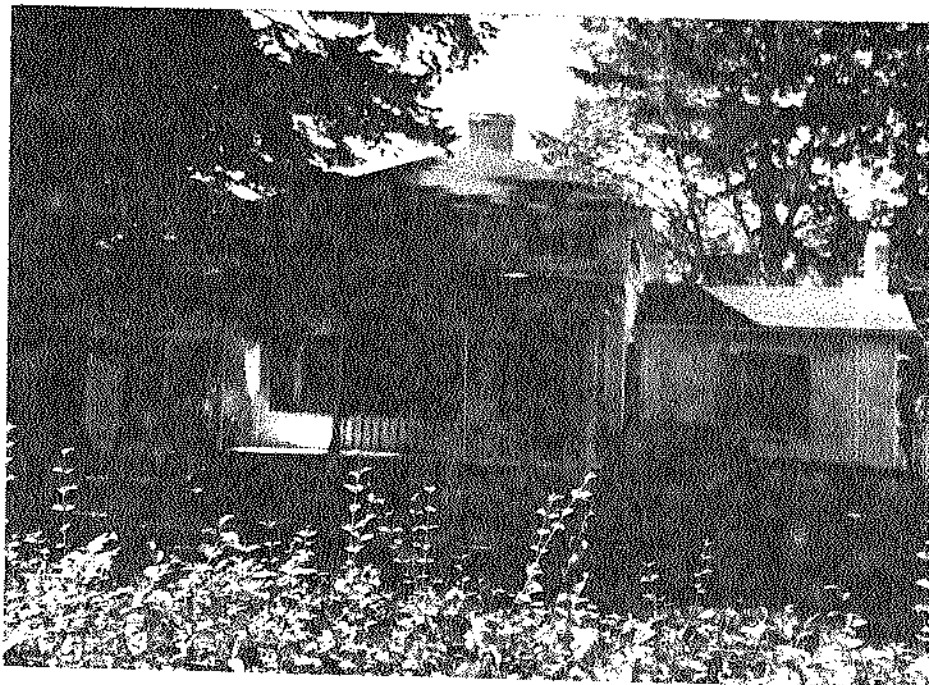
Nicholas Van Alstyne wrote "Nay, verily, we have drawn the sword of truth, kissed its clean blade, and it shall not be sheathed until slavery is dead." And this was your minister from West Sand Lake. He was one of the best known anti-slavers going.

The Dutch brought slaves into New York State in the 1600's. They were treated much better than slaves in the South. Most of them were either house slaves or they were trained as tradesmen. But, if you stop and think, if you read the Bible, the Bible mentions slavery many, many times. So it was nothing new, and the Dutch had half ~~gay~~ people - half slavery; in other words they were half free, half slaves; they only wanted them to work when they needed them. Some of them were on their own as far as housing and everything like that was concerned. The Dutch felt they had to pay 300 guilders for a slave; they had to pay 280 guilders for a free man to do the work, and if they bought one slave, they owned him the rest of his life. They were very wise and penny-pinching, so that's how slavery came to New York State. The Dutch would recognize and intermarriage with Negroes when nobody else did. They were against Jewish people for some reason. Jewish people couldn't own property. In the beginning, a Negro could, and it just didn't make sense. They freed many of their Negroes early on; and they kept them. If you read Maria Van Rensselaer's papers, she had Negroes working for that she had freed. They trained them as shoemakers, blacksmiths, whatever. Women were seamstresses, and they would put them out to work, and they would have a nice little business from each little slave that they owned. They came up the River, a lot of them with the boats, and then when the cotton gin was invented, and with increased cotton trade in the South, they were running away from that. Then we had the increased cotton trade up here, cotton coming from the South to the mills in the North. And you would find the Connecticut River was the same way. At a certain time in history, it pushed the slaves out, and they were headed our way. One route that is very well known was Route 7. It goes up Route 7, Gilead Lutheran Church had something to do with it, the Rose Farm had something to do with it, Willard Ives tree farm (that was one of the stops on the Underground Railroad.) When we start from the Hudson River, we go through Dickinson's Tavern in Troy, we go to several houses in Lansingburgh, they had the tunnels underneath the streets, we go to the Beers Mansion, which is now the Masonic Hall on Brunswick Road. We go out to South Lake



4 BRUNSWICK ROAD

Beers Mansion



South Lake Ave.



KINGS GRANT FARM

Avenue to that very old federal house, and on out to Whiteview to King's Grant Farm. Between King's Grant Farm and the Minnock Tavern. Between those two spots, there were haystacks. Now what they had done, they had built wooden boxes and braided straw to go around them very tightly, so if anybody shoved a pitchfork into that box, it wouldn't "thunk." They hid the slaves in there until they could pick them up again. They traveled at night. Eleanor Gentry told me about the Minnock Tavern. She told me they had a large group of slaves come in, and the room was full. They had two children. They got word that the Federal Marshalls were coming, and she wasn't quite sure what to do with the children. She went upstairs and put on her biggest petticoat, and her biggest skirts. The rocker was by the fire. The children had been given paregoric and were asleep under the rocker. She picked up her knitting and calmly knitted while the Marshall made his inspection and inquiries.

In 1640 there were penalties for helping the slaves that went up a thousand dollars towards the end of the Underground Railroad. In New York State in 1777, all but a third of the Legislature was willing to free the slaves. In 1777 Massa freed their slaves. Rhode Island was 1784, as was Connecticut. If a slave served in Revolution, he was automatically freed. Slaves, if caught, could still be shipped back to their owners. If you go on State St. between the Cadwell Apts and the old Mutual Bank in Troy, there's a plaque; they caught him, and he was working Sand Lake. They were going to ship him back to his owners, but the people in Sand Lake got together and they edged him towards the window. They picked him up, chains and all, and bodily tossed him out the window. A waiting carriage took him down to the River front. They rowed him across, where another carriage took him the Shakers in Watervliet, where he could buy his freedom and his wife's freedom.

Now we start back to Troy again. Of course, the Shakers were in to freeing the slaves much earlier than anybody else.

Both Harmony and Kennedy Halls were abolitionist halls. When I was beginning to read on the Underground Railroad, there was one name in the book that was very familiar, and he was with John Brown, and John Brown was a frequent visitor to Troy. Henry Garratt was a negro; he had a school in Troy in 1828, and he was the pastor of the presbyterian church down there. He was with John Brown alot, and I started thinking back. Albany, Rensselaer and Syracuse were responsible for raising alot of the funds that John Brown used. Garratt went back forth a lot.

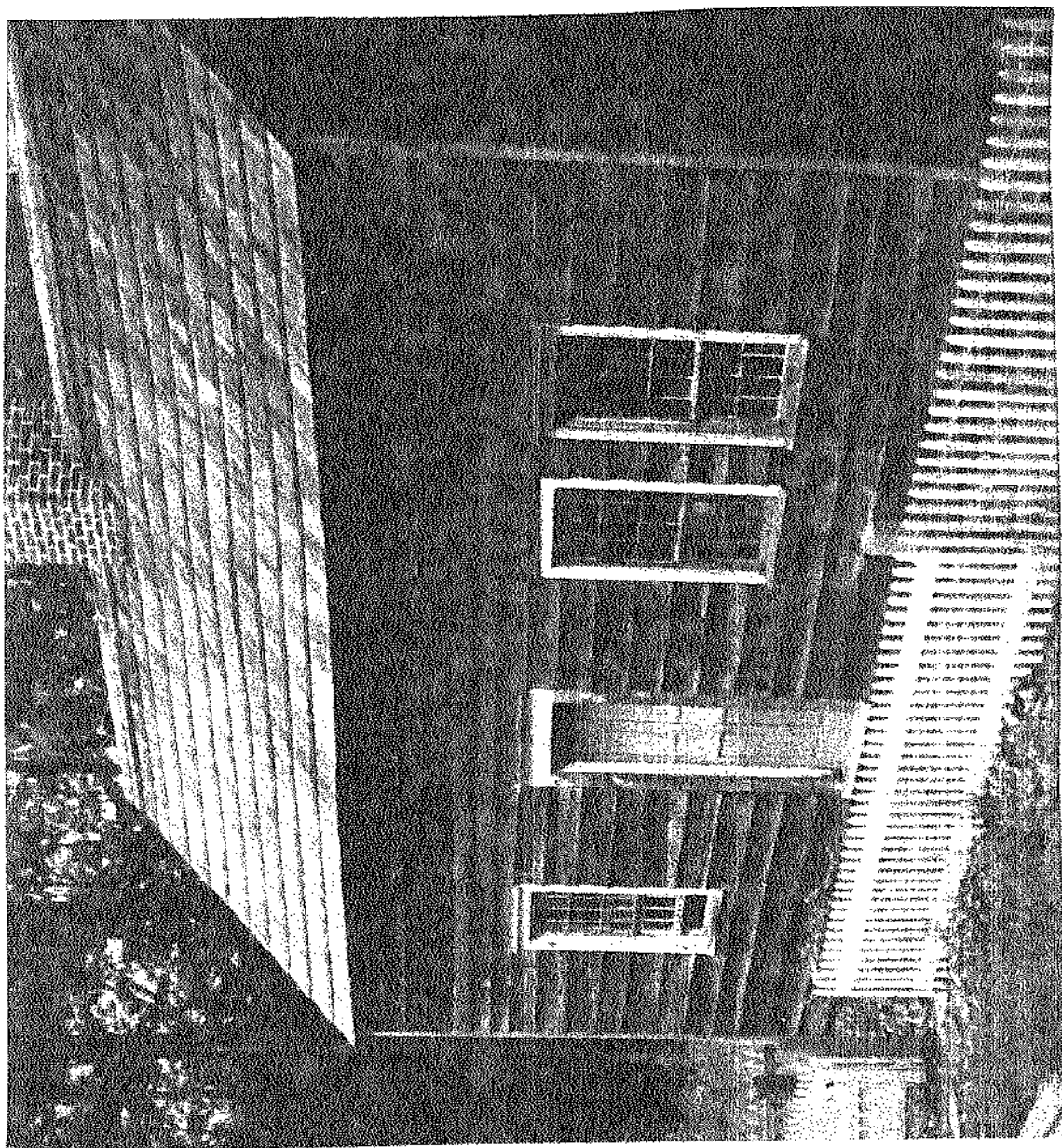
I knew there had to be a route.

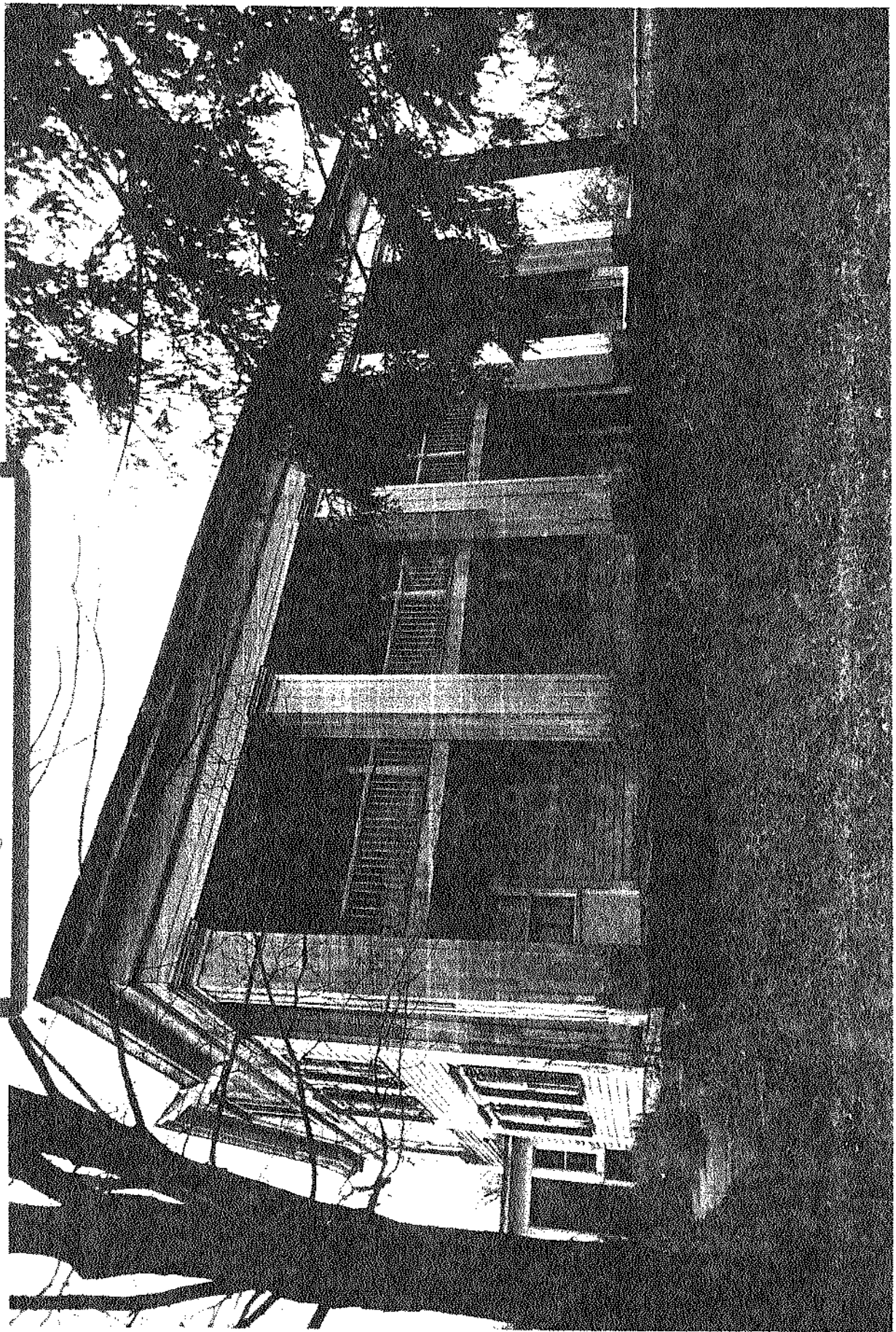
I had heard the story about the Glass Factory wagons carrying



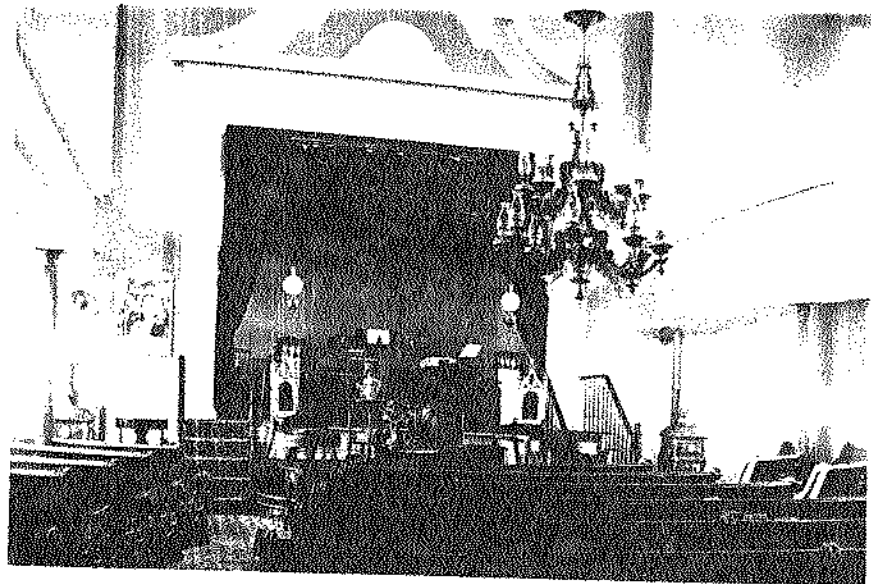
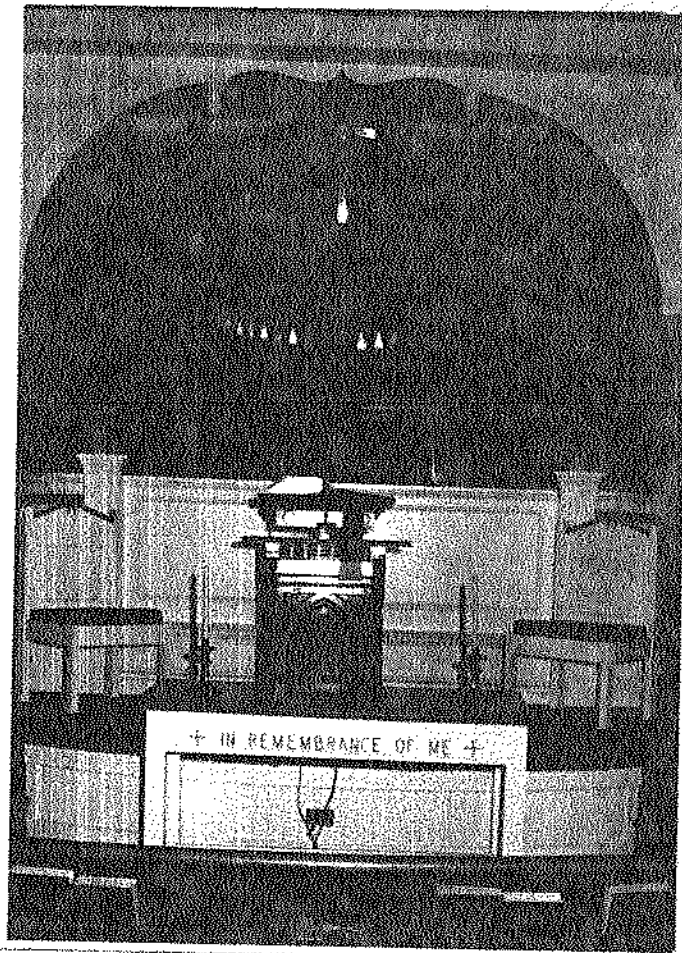
slaves to Massachusetts. I started out with one little clipping, and I went over to the Wainsborough Historian, and I asked her if there was any way that she had anything about it (and this was in 1978). She said, "There is nothing." A little over two years later, I walked in again to pick up pictures. She handed me the clippings that showed the Todd House, part of the URR was exactly where the Glass Lake Glass Factory was, and they were moving the slaves from the Todd House to the Quakers in Massachusetts. I had two area linked up - Mass. and Sand Lake. Now I had to find everything else in between. I came across the Beers Mansion photo, the South Lake Avenue House, I came across the story of King's Grant Farm. Eleanor Gentner had told me about the Minnock Tavern. Someone came into the store one day and inquired about the Fox House, and she was from Denver, CO. Well we couldn't get her into the Albert Fox House, but we could get her into the Neitzel home. She came back later for coffee, and she was telling us stories about the tunnel in the Fox House. Now we had heard stories about it, but we had no proof. She had played in this house when she was a child. When Chet Kelley redid the Knowlson House, on Schumann Road, he took a wall out and found chains, so they were part of it. Don Carpentier told me that this house is now in Eastfield Village, and there was a shed on the back, and slaves were hidden there. The Sand Lake Baptist Church was formed in 1805, to serve the Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists. A few years ago Dorothy Leitgieb said, "Did you know the Methodist Church was involved?" She played in the old Methodist Church parsonage, and they used to pull a panel out. Behind that panel were rooms, and her grandmother had told her that that was part of the URR, but I don't have proof of that. And you go to Scramm's Inst. next to Fox's home, his brother-in-law's school, that was another place they could hide slaves. So slowly coming out from Troy, hip-hopping, I came across houses. The houses you are hearing about tonight, I have proof. Some of them are just not true. But they brought the slaves to the Glass House. One day Walt Teale walked into the store and said, "Don't you know what they had in the back of those wagons. They didn't rattle." And he walked out of the store. He came back next week. "Did you find out why they didn't rattle?" He shook his head and walked out of the store again. After waiting three weeks, I called Walt up asked him why the wagons didn't rattle. "Dumby, they had the slaves in them - the ones you were looking for." "Where did you hear this," I asked, and he replied, "from some of the glass cutters." And he was around the Alps Tavern when he was a young man. The Alps Tavern was at a junction. The Cole farm that Madolyn Carpenter's family owned. She told me of one of her aunts going to a dance there, and she went too close to a cabin there, and she was warned away with a shotgun, because it was thought to be a part of the URR.

McCelland
Homestead





106 I 11 8



Sand Lake Baptist
Church

glass cutters. And he was around the Alps Tavern when he was a young man. The Alps Tavern was at a junction. The Cole farm that Madolyn Carpenter's family owned. She told me of one of her aunts going to a dance there, and she went too close to a cabin there, and she was warned away with a shotgun, because it was thought to be a part of the URR. Plus, the Tavern had hidden rooms. So you could send slaves over Glass Factory route over Potter Mt., or you could send them down to Rt. 20 from that junction. That was where I think they divided the slaves up. I have no proof of it, but common sense tells me that other homes on 20 were part of it. Betty McClave and I went through house after house trying to find the place in Stephentown or Garfield. We know there were houses there. It didn't have to be a house, it could be a barn or a chicken coop, a church; it could be anything that would hide these people - the caves in Berlin.

Our area is really fantastic in history because we have so many people come out of it. When you stop and think that these people from the Glass Factory risked everything they had moving these slaves over to Massachusetts. People from the Taborton are, the Poestenkill area were moving them over the mountains, and that's a new route that has just opened up, from Vly Hollow to Green Hollow to Williams College. We found one line in one book at Williams College that said the Abolitionist Society of Williams College was meeting on such and such a date. So we have our proof there.

All of a sudden more houses started turning up - the Jandrow House in Berlin, and Earl Hewitt's. There is a hollow, and there was a road there at one time. And the slaves could have been sent over that road. Not all slaves were conducted. Sometimes they just put them on paths, with food and instructions, and the trail was blazed, and they would make their way to the next station. A lot of young men were involved; with carriages and horses they would carry slaves from one pace to another, moving them out overnight, to the next station.

I also found out two weeks ago why slavery was such a secret in New York State. I always thought it was because it was the last state to declare the slaves free. It wasn't that. In Mass. you can find out a lot about it, but over here there were a lot of "copperheads" (a term meaning against abolitionists). That is why the Sand Lake Church split. This church was part of the First Lutheran Church in West Sand Lake. Sylvester's history of Sand Lake will tell you that they had a disagreement, and that was about the abolitionist movement. Rev. Van Alstyne was a greater, and there were several books and sermons that came out of WSL.

I have been told a story about the "twelve apostles." I couldn't find any proof. I thought "John" was a Fox from SL Baptist Church. I thought "Luke" was a Gregory, and I had

a "Paul" who was the head of the URR in the SL area. I could find nothing on him, until Robt. Van Alstyne handed me his obituary, where it was noted that his code name was "Paul." So this was my three-triangle proof that that had existed. Harriet Tubman was "Moses." John Brown was "David." They used them, and I was told that they could get up in the pulpit of the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church and quote from Paul, John, Luke, Timothy, and a man would know from the chapter and verse and the code word in that chapter where he was supposed to pick up the slaves. Thus they did it right out in the open. Myra Wehnau was one of the ones who told me part of it. A friend of Mig Cipperley's was another one. And I got one from out of state, and they all matched, practically verbatim, but I couldn't prove it, so I had to sit on it for twenty years. Robert Van Alstyne gave me the proof that I needed. Sand Lake was not just part of the URR, it was one of the main roads into Mass. Once they got into the mountains - the other way they had to go all the way across NYS or all the way up through the Adirondacks. Once they got into the Taconic or Berkshire Mountains they were safe. So Hancock, Lanesborro, Potter Mt. were all part of this.

John Brown worked as a wool sorter in Springfield, Mass., and I kept finding him over there. When I was working in NYC, I picked up a book, and it noted that John Brown wrote to his wife from his prison cell in Virginia, asking her not to come to be there when he was hung. But she went anyway. Then he proceeded to write to the manager of the American House in Troy, a friend. He asked him to go to the station in Troy and make sure that his wife rested and had food. They displayed him for so many days, and they changed his casket in NYC, to a better one. The newspaper notes that ~~the manager~~ and Mrs. Brown was greeted by many people, including the mayor, and the manager of the RR gave her a lifelong pass. After that the train proceeded on to Petersburg Junction and up the Vermont side, where they crossed over on a ferry to Alba. I thought that that was the end of it until I started running into other things about John Brown and the abolitionist halls, where they were raising money at rallies. Then I realized who they were raising the money for - John Brown. I realized that Troy was really a hotbed of abolitionists. Harriet Beecher Stowe's play "Uncle Tom's Cabin" had its first performance in Troy. It was a benefit performance for people who worked on the Underground Railroad.

Another tie to Rensselaer County was Fredrick Douglas. His second wife was from Pittstown, NY. That appeared in the New England genealogy. Pittstown is named after father, William Pitt. One of the first anti-slavery conventions was held in Troy. Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists seem to have been the backbone of this. Another name started popping up - Martin Townsend. He defended

Charles _____, the first black minister of the
presbyterian church. Henry Hyland Garnet, Benjamin London,
William Garrison, Garrett Van Hosen - he was the _____
at Union Church at Hoosick, NY., Mrs. West, Van Rankin.
Fredrick Douglas was here. William Lloyd Harrison was here.
Wendell Phillips was here. I went to Mass. and they weren't
over there, so they had to come to Renss. County for one
reason; they were organizing one of the biggest URR. They
were pushing them through Columbia and Rensselaer Counties,
and not until I received a telephone call from San Francisco
two weeks ago was it verified. And they flew in on a
Thursday morning, and they interviewed me, and it was right.
You'll find that William March and Stephen Douglas that went
for the presidency were from Sand Lake.

Well, you are here, and your ancestors were very busy..