Underground Railroad, Underpublicized Hero

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It never ceases to astonish me when passing the Rite Aid at East Genesee and Pine streets that this site is so much more than a drugstore. It is one of the most significant historic spots in the struggle for basic human and civil rights for African Americans and for all Americans.

During the 1850s, one of the most successful stations nationwide of the underground railroad operated on that site. It was the home of Jermain and Caroline Loguen and their family. Its doors were always open to abolitionist activists and, more importantly, to runaway slaves.

During this Black History Month, we can surely declare that Loguen was the greatest black man ever to call Syracuse his home. But, really, he was the single greatest individual in this city's long history. More than any politician or industrialist, the life and legacy of Loguen was emphatically important in his own time and continues to resonate for us today.

The values of dignity and freedom that he stood for, and his willingness to confront authority and unite community in their pursuit continue to challenge and inspire us. Yet one must search hard for local recognition of his stature. No street names or organizations are named for him, and no marker or monument outside of Oakwood Cemetery, still his remarkable resting place.

Jermain Loguen was great in almost all that he did: in his escape from Tennessee slavery in 1834; in his rapid educational and economic advancement as a young man; in his eloquence as a minister and preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; in his fearlesslessness as an anti-slavery speaker and activist; and in his talents as a radical organizer and master of the most public underground railroad stations in the state and, perhaps, in the country.

Together with Frederick Douglass of Rochester and Harriet Tubman, who first settled in Auburn in 1837, Loguen created, and in some ways epitomized, African-American identity in the pre-Civil War era. Like Douglass and Tubman, Loguen was an escaped slave who never forgot his slavery and never took freedom for granted.

Unlike Tubman and Douglass, who struck the national stage, Loguen's actions were local, though they had national ramifications. For 20 years his LOGUEON HELPED find jobs here

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LOGUEON HELPED. FROM PAGE D-1

nearly every action was dedicated to undermining and overthrowing slavery, or offering succor to those who had escaped its grip.

Before the Civil War, Syracuse was a center of abolitionist activity and an important hub of the underground railroad. Only one marker in the city — the fine monument to the Jeremi Rescue at Clinton Square — clearly commemorates this important past. Other sites throughout the region, though mostly still neglected, also link us to this critical period in our local and national history.

The prime example is the site of Loguen’s former home, which also served as the most active and most public underground railroad station in the state, if not the country. Indeed, when fugitives reached Loguen and Syracuse, the “railroad” came into plain view. Loguen had such confidence in the support of the local community that he would often advertise in the local newspaper for help when supplies ran low or other help was needed for runaway slaves.

Loguen, himself a fugitive, was such a persuasive advocate for the rights and freedom of runaway slaves, that through his words and actions for a decade before the Jerry Rescue, he set the stage for that heroic community action. For the decade after

Jermain Loguen

His name: Loguen took the surname of his father, a white Tennessee slave owner. Loguen made it his own by adding a final "n" and changing the pronunciation to “Logun.” His mother was a slave.

Born: into slavery in Tennessee, 1814.

Early life: After fleeing, at about the age of 21, to freedom in Ontario, Canada; he later moved to Rochester and received his religious education in Whitesboro. Eventually, he became bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

Underground Railroad: After settling in Syracuse, he started what reportedly was one of the country’s most-openly operated stations for aiding runaway slaves. Loguen made no secret of the station in his family home at East Genesee and Pine streets in Syracuse. He even published calls for monetary assistance in Syracuse newspapers. Sources: New York History Net, Samuel Gruber

ward, he sustained the energy and resolve that the Rescue exemplified. In nearly 20 years as stationmaster on the underground railroad, Loguen is believed to have helped about 1,500 runaway slaves pass through Syracuse, most of whom also passed through his house and the care of his family.

Many of these men, women and children went on to Canada, where they helped found a vibrant black community in Ontario, one that gave refuge to Loguen himself when he had to flee there for a period after the Jerry Rescue.

Many former slaves were encouraged by Loguen and others to settle in Syracuse and Oneida, Oswego and Madison counties, where Loguen often helped them obtain jobs and educations. Loguen and his comrades — blacks and whites — gained security in Oneida County and surrounding areas for many former slaves who chose to remain in the region rather than continue their flight to freedom in Canada. Slavery had ended in New York in 1827, but even afterward it was not always safe for African Americans in the state, whether free or slave.

Loguen is represented on the Jerry Rescue monument, along with John Brown and, of course, "Jerry" Henry. His finest moment, moments, and one which should be remembered, took place a year before, when Loguen spoke at a local assembly gathered in reaction to the newly passed federal Fugitive Slave Act. Loguen helped lead Syracuse to a clear stand against the infamous 1850 law. His speech, delivered on Oct. 4, 1850, in Syracuse’s Market Hall, where City Hall now stands, remains one of the most stirring American declarations. A year after, the dramatic and uncertain victory of the Jerry Rescue, Loguen’s defiance effectively ended the work of slave catchers in this region.

It would be a service to Jermain Loguen and a lesson to us all if we could post the Market Hall speech permanently at our City Hall. It is a moral charge toalarm and convince that government is meant to serve the rights of citizens, not abuse them.

Samuel Gruber serves on the boards of the Preservation Association of Central New York. He adapted this article from a recent speech he delivered at the Jermain Loguen Church to benefit the near East Side Community Development Corp.