

Lazette Miller Worden House, 1856
2 Frederick Street
Auburn, New York

Significance: Home of Abolitionist and Underground Railroad Activist



Looking southeast, July 2005



Looking northwest
Photo by Tanya Warren, March 23, 2005

Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, African American Life
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Worden House, c. 1860s
 Frances Seward, Lazette Worden, and Mrs. Perry
 Courtesy of Seward House, Auburn, New York



Lazette Miller Worden
 Courtesy Seward House

Descriptions: The Worden House is a classic Gothic Revival house. Its original bargeboards with gingerbread trim have been lost, but vestiges of its nineteenth century character remain in the stuccoed siding and the tracery in the Gothic window in the west gable.

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Significance: The Lazette Worden House, known as Pisgah, after the biblical reference to the mountain ascended by Moses before the Israelites entered the Promised Land (Deut. 3: 17, 27) illustrates the importance of a women’s Underground Railroad network in Auburn. This network incorporated two daughters of Elijah Miller—Lazette Miller Worden and France Miller Seward (whose grandmother was a Quaker), Quaker-born Martha Wright, Harriet Tubman, and perhaps several other women, as well. Lazette Worden, Frances Seward, and Martha Wright were close friends, and all three had all been influenced by Quaker ideals. While they were in Auburn, they formed a mutually supportive friendship that strengthened their radical abolitionist and woman’s rights views. It may have been this group, connected to Philadelphia abolitionists through Martha Wright’s sister, Lucretia Mott, that encouraged Harriet Tubman to come to Auburn in the late 1850s. Certainly, all three of them used their homes as safe houses on the Underground Railroad.

Lazette Maria Miller (November 1, 1803-October 3, 1875) was a daughter of Elijah P. Miller, judge in Auburn. With her sister, Frances, she grew up in the family home on South Street. Both Frances and Lazette attended a Quaker school in Aurora in 1817. Lazette Miller married Alvah Worden, and for much of her married life, she lived in Canandaigua. She spent many weeks of every year, however, visiting her sister and brother-in-law, William Henry Seward, in Auburn. In 1856, she returned to Auburn and built this house at 2 Frederick Street, on land inherited from her father.

In Auburn, her closest friends were Frances Seward and Martha Wright. The Wrights lived on Genesee Street, around the corner from the Swards. Martha’s husband, David, was a lawyer who had worked in 1846 as a partner with William Henry Seward on one of his most famous cases, defending William Freeman, an African American accused of murder, on a plea of insanity. Beginning in 1827, Martha Wright, raised a Quaker, taught at the Aurora school attended earlier by Frances Seward and Lazette Worden, and the three women shared a strong commitment to abolitionism and women’s rights.

Lazette Worden’s abolitionist and Underground Railroad sympathies extended throughout her life. Clearly, she was the radical abolitionist in her household, although he husband supported her efforts. As their daughter, Frances Worden Chesbro, remembered, Alvah Worden was “law abiding citizen and not an Abolitionist” but he was “a just man and one that favored God.” When he served in the New York State legislature in 1841, he supported two bills that his brother-in-law, William Henry Seward, then Governor, also supported, one giving African American me the right to vote and a second giving freedom to anyone brought in slavery from another state into New York State.¹

After her death, Lazette Worden’s daughter, Frances Worden Chesbro, wrote a 27-page handwritten reminiscence about her mother’s Underground Railroad activity. This included reminiscences of several specific freedom seekers affiliated in some way with the Worden household. In Auburn, “The first passenger by “The Underground Railroad” with whom I made acquaintance was a middle aged Negro named Jacob, she recalled, “a most respectable appearing individual and as subsequent events proved a very woeful one.”

¹ [Frances Worden Chesbro], untitled manuscript, 12-13, Seward Collection, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester. Thanks to Kate Clifford Larson for finding this.

He drifted into my mother's kitchen when we lived on East Genesee Street in Auburn as a "Fugitive Slave" and at an opportune time when my mother's household was undergoing a succession of changes incident to the marriage of Harriet⁶ Hays to Nicholas Bogart [c. 1838]. . . "Fugitive Slave" had an uncanny sound in my childish ears, and I remained in great awe of Jacob until his gentle ways and excellent cooking convinced me he was not dangerous. I do not know as he ever told our family his history or his claim he "had run away from slavery." My after experience with Southern Negroes inclines [?] me to think he must have been a favorite house servant for he had good manners, was neat and orderly, and I thought [?] could read for he would always sit when his work was done with a book in his hand. He left us after a few months "to go on still further," he said and I do not remember we ever heard of him after.²

The second person she wrote about was Richard Valentine, whom she knew in Canandaigua. Valentine married a Seneca Indian woman, Mrs. Valentine David, as she was called, who worked in the Worden household. Richard Valentine had been enslaved in New York State, so he escaped before 1827, and he worked in the Canandaigua hotel. Lazette Worden's daughter thought that

he was one of the worse specimens of his race but a man of more than ordinary intelligence and faithful to those he liked.

Richard had been a slave to Mr deZeng of Geneva [New York] but so utterly lawless as to cause his master great trouble. By the connivance of Mrs. deZeng he was made a passenger on the "Underground Railroad" one night and eventually drifted into Canandaigua where he became useful [?] man to Colonel Blossom landlord of the hotel. In his latter days he became a politician and made public speeches on divers [sic] subjects taking "Squire Worden" as his model, all to the great annoyance and mortification of his wife and daughters. Both Richard and his wife are now at rest in my cemetery lot near those she served so faithfully and the one he studied as a model.³

In 1842, her father cooperated with her mother in helping a woman and her two children, escaping from slavery, who were staying with the Valentine family.

It was a bitter cold morning, [she remembered], when Richard Valentine appeared in our kitchen looking for everything he considered necessary to the comfort of a fugitive and her two children, my Father, Mother, our faithful Elsie and I eagerly listening. Elsie from the kitchen stoves soon supplied sufficient to satisfy the hunger of a trio that seemed to have dropped from the clouds in the night and during the day my mother shaped out innumerable garments and though I was but a child I was kept sewing far into the night to furnish warm clothing for this family. Before Spring I heard Richard tell my Father the woman had heard her Master was in pursuit and the order given to procure conveyance and take the family to Farmington, a Quaker settlement north of us in the direct road of

² [Frances Worden Chesbro], untitled manuscript, 4-6, Seward Collection, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

³ [Frances Worden Chesbro], untitled manuscript, 7-8, Seward Collection, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

“The Underground Railroad” leading into Canada. By the time the Master reached Canandaigua the good Quakers had his prey safe over “the line.”⁴

After the death of Alvah Worden, Frances Worden returned to Auburn from Canandaigua and built a new house at 2 Frederick Street, a brick (probably stuccoed) Gothic Revival cottage that faced a large farm, on land inherited from her father, Elijah Miller. Her house was not far from one purchased the next year on Miller Street, along the Owasco outlet, by Harriet Day Bogart, Lizaette Worden’s former household servant, and her husband, Nicholas Bogart, who were still employed by William and Frances Seward.

The impact of Lazette Worden and Frances Seward extended beyond Auburn to Washington, D.C., where they continued to espouse their antislavery sympathies, becoming friends with Charles Sumner, abolitionist senator from Massachusetts. Frances Chesbro herself hired a freedom seeker, Jane Thompson, whom she had first met in Washington, D.C., and who later escaped from the employ of Mr. Meredith, Secretary of the Treasury under Zachary Taylor. Frances Chesbro also helped at least one other person escape on the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, an Army officer named Captain George Williams (111th Regiment) brought a young boy to her from the South called Sam, who remained part of her circle throughout her life.⁵

In Auburn after 1856, Lazette Worden continued to spend a great deal of time with her sister and brother-in-law, Frances and William Henry Seward. She also met regularly for tea and social occasions with Martha Wright. It was this group who offered sustenance to Harriet Tubman, after she purchased land from William Henry Seward in 1857 and began gradually to move her family to Auburn, beginning in 1859.

In 1861, Tubman brought Margaret Stewart, most likely a niece but possibly her own daughter, to Auburn, to live with Lazette Worden. As Martha Wright reported in May, “Mrs. Worden was just here—she has taken a contraband 10 yrs. old to live with her, a niece of Harriet Tubman.” Lazette Worden stayed for long periods at the Seward home, and she brought Margaret Stewart with her there to live, where Frances Seward helped raise her.⁶

Emily Howland, who wrote a history of Friends in Cayuga County, recalled that

those whose privilege, it was to know these noble sisters, in their life at the Capital, can realize how unique and powerful a force they were; interested in the reforms proposed and agitated by the advanced minds of the time, they moved on the troubled sea of Washington life, during eighteen years of the darkest and most eventful period of the Nation's history. Mrs. Worden, with a wit keen as a Damascus blade, would pierce the sophistries of the enemies of human freedom, charming while she demolished. Severely plain in their dress, one delighted by her brilliant conversational power, the other refreshed by a beautiful and

⁴ [Frances Worden Chesbro], untitled manuscript, 14-15.

⁵ [Frances Worden Chesbro], untitled manuscript, 16-21.

⁶ Martha Wright to Francis Wright, May 28, 1862, Garrison Family Papers. Smith College, quoted in Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine, 2004), 196, and Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman The Life and the Life Stories* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 367.

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saintly presence, and an ever ready sympathy. Thoroughly conversant with the politics of the day, they cheered a wearied Sumner, whose principles closed other homes to him, or discussed the cause of Woman with a distinguished foreign guest,--welcomed and gladdened a lonely teacher, or listened to the appeal of some poor Rachel grieving for children enslaved. Even animals basked in the glow of their kindness and love.⁷

After the death of her sister, Frances, in 1865, Lazette Worden often acted as hostess for her brother-in-law, William Henry Seward, both in Auburn and Washington.

The census of 1870 listed her as living alone in Auburn, aged 65 years old, with real estate valued at \$6000 and a personal estate valued at \$10,000. In 1872, she was at William Henry Seward's side when he died after a brief illness.⁸

Lazette Worden died October 3, 1875 and was buried in Fort Hill Cemetery, Auburn.⁹

⁷ Emily Howland, "Early History of Friends in Cayuga County, N.Y., Read before the Cayuga County Historical Society, April 8, 1880," *Collections of Cayuga County Historical Society* 2 (1882), 49-90; Emails from Sheila Edmunds, Aurora Village Historian, January 17 and 31, 2005.

⁸ Sherry Penney and James Livingston, *A Very Dangerous Woman: Martha Wright and Women's Rights* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

⁹ Fort Hill Cemetery Internment Roster, <http://www.cayuganet.org/forthill/roster/w.html>. Lazette Worden's will is on file in the Cayuga County Surrogate's Office, NY-6-Y-272.