

**William Hosmer House**  
**29 Washington Street**  
**Auburn, New York**

**Significance: Home of Abolitionist Editor, Author, and Underground Railroad Supporter**



William Hosmer House  
 Looking west, May 2005

Influenced by ideals of Christian perfectionism and believing that it was both possible and necessary to implement God's laws on earth, William Hosmer was a nationally important figure, both as editor and author. Hosmer was also part of the tightly-knit abolitionist and Underground Railroad network in Auburn, centered around the Seward-Wright-Underwood-Fitch families.

As editor of the *Northern Christian Advocate*, published at 16 Clark Street, Auburn, Hosmer believed that "holiness or moral purity is one of the most essential principles of the gospel, but slavery is a violation of that right." His radical abolitionist views alienated leaders of the Methodist General Conference and led him to establish, with the help of a sympathetic Methodist publication committee, a new abolitionist newspaper, the *Northern Independent*, published at 113 Genesee Street from 1856-65. Its motto was "No compromise with sin, no silent submission to wrong in church or state, a bold advocacy of all the moral issues of the age and especially of an uncompromising Christianity." In 1859, it had a circulation of 10,000. Copies of both of these papers are located in the Cayuga County Historian's Office.<sup>1</sup>

Hosmer's book, *The Higher Law in Its Relations of Civil Government, with Particular References to Slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1852), was dedicated to William Henry Seward. Hosmer was not alone in advocating adherence to a higher law. (William Lloyd Garrison, in Boston, burned the U.S. Constitution because he thought it was a proslavery document, "an agreement with death and a covenant with hell.") As an Auburn resident, however, Hosmer may have had a particular influence on his neighbor, William Henry Seward, who gave a famous speech on the "higher law" in 1850, in opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act. In a second book, *Slavery and the Church* (Freeport, New York, 1853), Hosmer explored the connection between slavery and religion. He also edited the *Autobiography of*

<sup>1</sup> *Newspapers of Cayuga County*. [Check]

*Rev. Alvin Torry, First Missionary to the Six Nations and the Northwestern Tribes of British North America* (Auburn, 1864).

Both William Hosmer and his wife were interested in temperance and women's education, as well as antislavery. Mrs. Hosmer helped form a Martha Washington Society in Auburn in the 1840s, promoting the teetotal principle of temperance, i.e. abstinence from all forms of alcoholic consumption. William Hosmer was involved in trying to form a female college in Auburn.<sup>2</sup>

In February 1861, Martha Wright, who lived on Genesee Street not far from the Hosmers, wrote a letter to her sister, Lucretia Mott, clearly indicating that William Hosmer was part of the local abolitionist-Underground Railroad network that included the Wright, Seward, and Tubman families:

I called at Mrs. Seward's on my way home, [wrote Martha Wright]. D. [David Wright, her husband]...lent me a letter to shew them, enquiring after Harriet Tubman written by Chas. Mills of Syracuse, saying that she left Canistota en route to Auburn, & that a slaveholder was there the day before enquiring as to the possibility of retaking slaves here—Mr. Mills sd. they cd. learn nothing about Harriet & wished to know if she was here—He also sent a word of caution to fugitives here. D. sent the letter to Mr. Hosmer, & he read it [to] Harriets folks—She has not been heard from, but I told one of her slaves that I tho't most likely Mr. Smith had sent her to Canada.<sup>3</sup>

In 1877, Elliott Storke summed up William Hosmer's career in an article for the Cayuga County Historical Society. "His convictions were earnest and sincere," wrote Storke, "and at all times plainly expressed. He was an 'agitator and reformer' of no mean ability and as such always stood in the front ranks--boldly confronting the opponents of his opinions, and challenging their admiration by the firmness and consistency of his course. Slavery and intemperance were especially obnoxious to him, and no one ever contended against them with greater zeal and energy."<sup>4</sup>

Hosmer's unwavering commitment to equality and a higher spiritual law strengthened abolitionist sentiment not only among Methodists but also for his fellow townsman, William Henry Seward. Through Seward, this doctrine of a higher law became a powerful influence in national politics in the years immediately before the Civil War.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hall, 158, 287.

<sup>3</sup>Chas. Mills was Charles C.D.B. Mills, a Syracuse abolitionist. Martha Wright to Lucretia Mott, [February 1861], Garrison Papers, Smith College. From Seward and African Americans.

<sup>4</sup> Elliott G. Storke, "History of the Press of Cayuga County from 1798 to 1877," *Collections of Cayuga County Historical Society* Vol. 6-7: 269-70.

<sup>5</sup> Research by Joni Lincoln, Sheila Tucker, and Tanya Warren.

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