

THESIS

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF  
AUNT ELSIE BROOKS:  
OR, A SEMI-FICTIONAL NARRATIVE  
PLAYSCRIPT, IN THE TRADITION OF  
THE AMERICAN SLAVE NARRATIVE, OF  
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A FEMALE  
EX-SLAVE WRITTEN, NOT BY HERSELF,  
BUT INSTEAD, BY ONE WHO  
RESEARCHED THE INCIDENTS OF HER  
LIFE IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY AND  
FOLKLORE OF ITHACA, NEW YORK

YVONNE SINGH

1990

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A Thesis

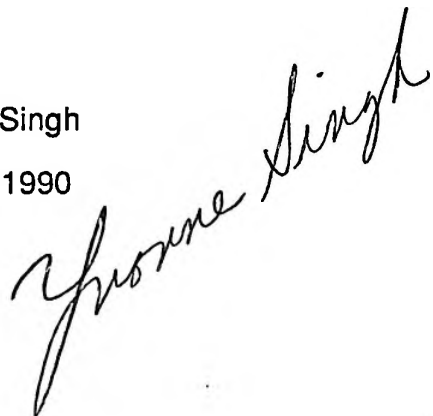
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Cornell University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Professional Studies  
African and Afro-American Studies

by

Yvonne Singh

August 1990

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Yvonne Singh". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the right of the printed name and date.

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## ABSTRACT

The lengthy title of this thesis is an allusion to the titles which nineteenth-century African-American authors often gave their works. This title also serves to encapsulate, in a mere ten lines, the scope, components and methodology of my Master's thesis.

In the attempt to combine certain historical, literary and theatrical interests, I set out to write a narrative playscript in which the subject of local Ithaca folklore, Elsie Brooks, would tell the story of her life and times. This thesis documents the research, discoveries and choices made in the achievement of this end. I have divided this text to indicate the three main components of this project - the researching, writing and performing of the script. Section One presents the research on both the character and the historical context of her life. Section Two discusses the literary research and its applications in my writing of the script. In my conclusion, I elaborate on the performance of the script as an educational tool for elementary, middle, and high school students.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Yvonne Marie Singh was born to Mary Carmen Singh (nee Miranda) and Simeon Deryck Benson Singh on May 31, 1961 in the Bronx, New York. She attended St. John Vianney Cure of Ars grammar school and the Bronx High School of Science. She received a Bachelor of Arts with a double major in English and Fine Arts from Georgetown University in 1982 and a Master of Fine Arts degree in Theatre with a concentration in Acting from Brooklyn College in 1985. Upon completion of the Master of Professional Studies she will enter the doctoral program at Cornell University in the field of Theatre Arts.

Ms. Singh married Ciarán Máire Ó Faoláin on September 1, 1985, and moved to Ithaca in January 1987 with her husband and daughter, Sian Miranda Singh Ó Faoláin. Her son, Cian Gabriel Singh Ó Faoláin was born in Ithaca on May 9, 1989.

For Abuelita  
Evangelina Miranda  
1901-1990

## Acknowledgments

For his enthusiasm from the very beginning which enabled this project to become a reality, and for his fine example as teacher and scholar, I would like to thank William Cross. My special committee members Robert Harris, Henry Louis Gates and Harryette Mullen gave precious time, encouragement and insightful comments. My professors, Anne Adams, Missy Kubitschek, Gloria Naylor, Hortense Spillers and Margaret Washington have shown me, by their dedication and scholarship, the power of literature as history (herstory); My professors Biodun Jeyifo, John O'Neal, Wole Soyinka have given me insights as to the power of drama. Lawrence Holder and Carol Kammen shared their original work in historical drama. Marilyn Rivchin gave her time and expertise to document the performance on videotape.

This project required much original research which would not have been so fruitful without Gretchen Sachse. Her expertise, enthusiasm and willingness to share with me the resources at the Dewitt Historical Society of Tompkins County is greatly appreciated.

The faculty and staff at the Africana Studies and Research Center were always willing to lend assistance; a special word of thanks to Abdul Nanji, Eric Acree, Daisy Rowe, Caroline Wells, Sheila Towner, Tom Weissinger and David Elliott. My friends and colleagues lent support in immeasurable ways. Corine Samwell's and Dave Johnson's friendship kept me sane.

Ciaran O'Faolain's love, patience, comments, suggestions and typing skills were indispensable to the completion of this manuscript.

A special thank you to my parents and sisters and brother.

Sian and Cian lived with me and Elsie for a long time and thus the final word of thanks is reserved for them.

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## PREFACE:

*. . . If I want you all to understand, I guess I have to start from what some folks might call the beginning . . .*

While the creation of a dramatic script is perhaps the central focus of my master's thesis project, it is my intention that the present written account should not only document the evolution of the script but also offer an exploration into the theoretical concerns I have sought to put into practice by researching, writing, and performing the script.

This project has resulted from my attempt to discover points of intersection among a set of historical, literary and theatrical interests. As concerns the history of African Americans during the nineteenth century, an underlying presupposition of my work here is that the life of a single 'ordinary' citizen might illuminate something of the complexities of the historical period - especially if that person is of a race, class, and gender traditionally excluded from written historical accounts of that period. I was curious about the types of historical documentation available and the type of information that could be garnered from the sources I would find. These have included the African-American literature of this period, namely slave narratives and autobiographies, which attempt to address comparable historical exclusions. Common features observable in this body of literature, and pertinent to my project, include the structuring of the narrative around a paradigm of ascent from slavery to freedom and the creation of a construct in which the personal history of the narrating subject has a direct relation to a broader view of historical events. Further, that similar features are evident in texts transcribed from oral interviews, such as those contained in several compilations,

indicates that oral traditions might be a precursor to certain literary traditions. Theatre seemed an appropriate medium in which to fuse and re-present the historical information, drawn in part from literary sources. The choice of a one-character narrative monologue for the script allows the features of orality to take precedence.

I considered the subject for this project, Elsie Brooks, fascinating from historical, literary, and theatrical perspectives. Historically, she is significant in that her life spans the periods of slavery, abolition activity, and post-emancipation. That she was born into slavery in the South and came North to New York State as a slave allows for some comparative exploration of slavery in the two regions. In terms of local history, her arrival and stay in Ithaca coincide with the building of the St. James African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the first church founded by African-Americans in the area. Also significant in terms of local history is the fact that she lived next door to the church on Wheat Street (now Cleveland Avenue) on the south side of town, an area which would develop into the heart of Ithaca's African-American community.

Ironically, my interest in Elsie Brooks from a literary perspective was sparked by her illiteracy. The fact that she was not able to leave any written legacy led me to consider, in structuring and writing the script, the effects her illiteracy would have had on her life and on the stories she would have told of that life. I sought to explore the relation between her story and those written and told by other ex-slaves.

From a theatrical perspective, the two factors most significant to my choice of Elsie Brooks as the subject of this project were that primary source materials give certain clear indications concerning her character and the effect

she had on members of the Ithaca community, and that the combined effects of Elsie Brooks' age and experience would sustain a lengthy one-character autobiographical monologue.

My approach to research was determined by the concerns of this project. Historical records and texts were consulted for information pertinent to the time period and issues concerned in general as well as for information specific to Elsie Brooks' life and experience. My research included fictional and autobiographical texts as well as critiques of these.

The primary objective of the decision to include the performance of the script as part of the project was to test the script on an audience. Subsequent objectives, concerning the practical applications of my work on this project, developed as a direct result of preparing and touring the play in the Ithaca District schools.

## INTRODUCTION TO SECTION ONE: THE RESEARCH

*. . . Since I was born a slave I can't tell you exactly when I was born so folks just have to be guessing at how old I am from how I look and I suppose that's how come folks be talking bout how old Aunt Elsie is near bout a hundred. But I don't think that's so cause Catherine, that's my daughter, told me that if I'm a hundred and this here is 1875 then I had to have been born in 1775 and if that were so I'd have to be pretty foolish not to recollect that big old war they had for white folks independence from England and since I don't recollect that war and I ain't foolish I don't believe I'm no one hundred years old - but that's not what I was saying. I was saying how since I was born a slave I can't tell you exactly when I was born but I do know where I was born, I was born in the state of Maryland on the Furniss plantation cause that was the name of the people what owned me . . .*

The main premise of this project is that there is an interrelationship between the areas of history, fiction, and drama that can be exploited in the process of researching history, creating fiction and, by extension, writing

drama. In this first section I will discuss the research aspects of this project. The interrelationship between history and fiction will be discussed in terms of how primary and secondary source material was found and interpreted and how the need to research the broader context led to the use of fiction as source material.

A chronology of pertinent historical events, the results of my historical research for this project, is included in the Appendix.<sup>1</sup> The following account of my research on the project is intended to explain how the information in the chronology was arrived at. The presentation of the primary and secondary source materials used, together with details of how these were interpreted, will serve to illuminate the extent to which the research process was affected by the ultimate goal of producing a narrative script.

The manner in which I researched Elsie Brooks reflects my purpose in undertaking the project in the first place, namely to produce a narrative script that would present a historical character not in isolation but in historical and cultural context. I sought specific names, dates and places related to Elsie Brooks in order to define this context. My approach consisted at first in trying to uncover as much information as possible on the life of my subject - where she was born, where she lived, and so on. The methodology here was obviously not unlike that which would shape genealogical research: I consulted census records for the period in question, and made efforts to uncover certificates of

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix A.



birth, marriage and death, as well as, in this case, of manumission. Even at the early stages of my research, I knew that I would have to supplement my findings with 'source material' from other quarters by way of providing a picture not only of the life of a single individual, but of the world around her. It was not until my research was well underway, however, that I was to realize the extent to which I would have to 'fill out' the many gaps in the life of my subject by relying on such 'sources' as historical accounts and folklore of the period, and slave narratives and testimonies.

The first chapter of this section is devoted to the discussion of my research of particular information pertaining to the life of Elsie Brooks. The second chapter discusses the research of the historical context of her life and the relevance of researched fact and fiction with respect to their interpretation for use in this project.



**Illustration 1** Aunt Elsie Brooks photographed by Jefferson Beardsley circa 1871. Dewitt Historical Society, Ithaca New York.

## Chapter I

### On Elsie Brooks:

. . .Of the Life and Times of a Female Ex-Slave . . .

I first encountered Elsie Brooks in Testimony for Black Voices: A Local Resurrection, a reader's theatre piece by local historian Carol Kammen, which I had been asked to direct for the 1988 Ithaca Festival. Throughout the thirty-minute script, an array of local characters from Ithaca's past delivered first-person narratives directly to the audience. Somewhere in the middle of the piece an actress begins, "In 1875 I died." When the laughter of the audience subsides she continues,

My name was Elsie Brooks, called Aunt Elsie by one and all.

At my funeral, which was held at the Zion church, there was so great a crowd in attendance that the floor of the church began to settle. Quickly, some of the strongest men rushed to the basement and put posts under the floor to brace it up--so no great damage was done.<sup>2</sup>

This 'testimonial' and a photograph of Aunt Elsie taken by local photographer Jefferson Beardsley sometime during the late 1800's were the first two clues I had concerning the figure that would eventually become the subject of my

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<sup>2</sup>Carol Kammen, Testimony for Black Voices: A Local Resurrection. (an unpublished script, 1988)<sup>12</sup>.

master's thesis.

In directing the staged presentation of Kammen's play, I sought to supplement the reader's theatre script with slides of photographs and historical documents which I had projected behind the seated performers as they read from the script. Among these slides, made from material taken from the collection at the Dewitt Historical Society, was Beardsley's photograph of Elsie Brooks.

I began my research on Elsie Brooks with Carol Kammen, and Gretchen Sachse of the Dewitt Historical Society. The two historians had provided the text and photograph, respectively. Kammen told me that her information on Elsie Brooks was limited to the short account of her funeral that appeared in one of the local papers. Sachse was able to provide a xerox of the 1850 census page showing Elsie Brooks, a 50-year-old black woman born in Maryland listed as the head of household and as living with a Catherine Brooks, aged 20, who was born in New York. The Society's obituary files contained an entry showing that Elsie Brooks died on March 9, 1875. Sachse advised me to search other census records and issues of the Directory of the Village of Ithaca.

The most complete collection of the Directory of the Village of Ithaca available, from 1864 to the present, is also housed at the Dewitt Historical Society. Volumes for 1865, 1866 and 1871 are not available. Elsie Brooks is

listed in several of the annual directories: "Brooks, Elsy Mrs., Washerwoman, H Wheat, N Plain" (1864); "Brooks Mrs. Elsie, H 24 Wheat" (1869-70); "Brooks, Elsie (col'd) widow John, H 24 Wheat" (1872 and 1873-74).<sup>3</sup> She was not listed in three of the available directories: 1867-68; 1868-69; and 1875-76. The omission of her name from this last volume can be explained by the fact that she died in March of 1875; I have been unable to determine the reasons for her omission from the first two volumes. Entries such as these provide a consistent place of residence, Elsie's occupation and her husband's name. The different spellings of her name were something I would encounter repeatedly. They are perhaps attributable to the fact that she was illiterate. It would seem that her husband died in 1872 - the date she is first mentioned as a widow in the directory - and that her husband's name was John. However, this first assumption is contradicted by information from the census, while the latter is contradicted by her obituary.

Sachse also provided from her 'Black Box' an as-yet-uncataloged collection of clippings and documents pertaining to local black history, an article from the Centennial Number<sup>4</sup> of the Ithaca Journal (1915). The only photograph of a black woman included in this retrospective was another by Beardsley of Elsie Brooks. This photograph is not the one I used in the slide presentation accompanying Kammen's script but was most probably taken during the same sitting.<sup>5</sup> An excerpt from the article reads as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> "H" stands for home, "N" for near, and "col'd" for colored.

<sup>4</sup>See Illustration 2.

A Thrill will be inspired by our picture of old "Aunt" Elsie Brooks. She looks harmless and docile, but she was the most lively, most domineering, most influential woman in this county in her day (1845-1873). As she sits here "aunt" Elsie is, it is claimed and not disputed, more than 100 years of age. She had the most powerful voice in the village and a tremendous influence as a leader in prayer and in other ways among her own colored people. She was familiar with everybody and anybody; sharp, and fearless, aggressive, and robust in health and manners, and short and weighty in body. . . "Aunt Elsie" has friends to spare. She was really popular except among hoodlums and she enjoyed giving them her celebrated tongue thrashings. She was a runaway slave and a personality too unique to picture in words. In this picture the old and generous sized basket on her arm was her traveling companion and always filled, as a natural thing, "as a matter of course," with good things by store keepers and friends wherever she happened to *stray*. She was a slave plantation product, *but* she possessed wit, and intellect and spirit and used them freely everywhere. . . .<sup>6</sup> (emphasis

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<sup>5</sup>See Illustration 3.

<sup>6</sup> T.W. Burns, "Historical Reference to Some of the Old Pictures", Ithaca Journal, Centennial Number 28 Aug. 1915: 12.

added).

I would find other accounts in keeping with this description of Elsie's powerful voice, her influential character, and her poverty. I have found nothing to support the assertion that Elsie was a "runaway slave". The author of this article, T.W. Burns, seems to have some knowledge of local folklore yet, the obviously patronizing tone of this commentary supports the assumption that perhaps his observations are those of one who did not know Elsie well or personally. His implication that she would "stray" as she went about begging for handouts and that she had positive attributes *even though* she was a "slave plantation product" suggests some of the common stereotypes of African Americans popular in 1915. Was Elsie "aggressive" and "domineering" or is Burns invoking the "Mammy" stereotype of his day? Did she carry a basket because she was a washerwoman by trade or because she was content to beg rather than work for sustenance? For Burns and his contemporaries why was it extraordinary for a "slave plantation product" to possess "wit, intellect and spirit"? While it seems that Burn's intends this as a positive testimonial, its tone and language have negative implications.

I consulted with Kammen again who read the text of the Ithaca Herald obituary to me over the phone. It was clear that she had included all of the pertinent information contained in the brief obituary in her sketch of Elsie Brooks quoted previously. This would conclude the information that would be handed to me. The rest would have to be searched for and of course all this

would have to be verified.

Armed with the date of Elsie's death, I began the search for other newspaper accounts of her funeral in the Ithaca Journal. The Journal's coverage was infinitely more illuminating than I had ever hoped. In the March 10, 1875 issue, an obituary, written by an "S.P.S.", provided the following information:

March 9th, 1875. Elsey Brooks, Familiarly called "Aunt Elsey." She was, in the earlier period of her life, a slave in the South. She came to Danby in 1810, and was then said to be 30 years old, which, according to the best means of ascertaining, would make her about 95 years old at her death. She was, perhaps, the only person in Tompkins county who remembers seeing the "Father of our Country," George Washington. *And perhaps, no person in our town was better known personally and by reputation than "Aunt Elsey," or more generally respected. For many years she has been accustomed to go around amongst her friends with her basket on her arm, to receive bits of kindness always freely given, and thankfully and gratefully received.* Her familiar face will be seen no more on earth. Neither shall we hear her melodious voice, singing the songs of praise to her Redeemer. We loved to hear her sing, "They Look



Like Men of War." When the writer called on her a few days before her death, he found her calm and submissive, and when he asked if the good Master was loosing the bars to let the old caged spirit out, she replied:

"Yes, bless the Lord; I shall soon take my flight to mansions in the skies and occupy that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." And after further expressing her love to Jesus for his great mercy and saving grace, she said she was now realizing what she had so often sung:

"Jesus can make a dying bed  
Feel soft as downy pillows are,  
While on his breast I lean my head,  
And breathe my life out sweetly there."

She has been a consistent, faithful member of Zion's church for about forty-five years, and a professed Christian for about eighty years, and always attended all the stated and regular meetings of her church, except when detained by sickness. She always bore her humble part in sustaining the Gospel, paying her due proportion with religious punctuality, thus bearing the burdens, as well as enjoying the glorious privileges, of the child of God in the church of the Redeemer. She has now gone to the place

prepared for all Christ's redeemed children. We shall see her no more on earth, but hope to meet her in Heaven. Her many friends among the business men have shown their appreciation of her worth and consistent Christian life, by giving her a highly respectful burial, and her church<sup>7</sup> has shown a becoming respect and appreciation of her valued life, in attending her through her sickness, as well as doing their utmost in respect to her burial. S.P.S.(Emphasis added).

In tone, this account differs from Burns' published in 1915 in the reverence accorded the elderly religious woman. "S.P.S" provides a similar account in the italicized section. Yet, the context of these remarks suggests that she gave to the community as much as she received. Before relying on the historical accuracy of this information I thought it necessary to ascertain the identity of its author. Assuming it had to be someone who knew Elsie Brooks fairly well, I tried to identify S.P.S. as a pastor at St. James in the pages of Vincent W. Howell's, History of the St. James A.M.E. Zion Church Ithaca, N.Y. When this failed, Sachse suggested perhaps the mysterious author may have been a doctor. I consulted the 1869-70 Directory of the Village of Ithaca; under "S", I found a "Sackett S.P. physician, h 19 E. Seneca" who most likely treated Elsie

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<sup>7</sup>St. James African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, Ithaca, New York. Also referred to as "Zion's church".

Brooks and wrote her obituary.

An editor's note to Sackett's obituary contained a wealth of information, perhaps supplied by hearsay and folklore, which would therefore require further verification. The commentary below appeared in brackets following Sackett's obituary in the Ithaca Journal:

[There is quite a difference of opinion in regard to the age of "Aunt Elsie." Some say that she was brought to Danby from Maryland by a man named Furness, sometime during the war of 1812, and that she was then a little girl ten or twelve years of age. This would not make her over 75 or 80. There seems to be little doubt that she was brought here by Mr. Furness about the time mentioned, but it is impossible to tell what age she was then. It is said she used to go to the "clearing" with Mr. Furness and chop and fell trees, doing a full hand's work. She must, therefore, have been a full grown woman. The most common opinion is that this aged colored woman was at least 100 years of age at her death; and some claim that she was from 105 to 115. Her maiden name was Furness, or rather, this being the name of her master, it was assumed by her. She married a man named Jacob Brooks, who has been dead some forty years, as nearly as can be recollected. She was a woman of remarkably vigorous constitution, and was scarcely ever known to be sick.

Her last illness, which lasted some five weeks, was mainly caused by old age, although she had contracted a severe cold while zealously attending the recent revival in her church. The funeral is to be held tomorrow (Thursday) at 2 p.m., from Zion's church. -EDS.]

The names, dates and places provided in this commentary would prove helpful in the search for information to map out the life of my subject. Most importantly, it remains the only definitive mention I could uncover linking Elsie Brooks with the "Furness" family, Danby, New York, and "Jacob" Brooks. It seems that the "man named Furness" who according to the editors of the Journal brought Elsie to Danby was in fact a woman named Amy Furniss, a widow living with her brother Henry Cluff and her son George in Danby.

The language of the obituary and editor's note suggests the enigmatic quality of some of the details of Elsie's life. Each author admits his reliance on hearsay, conjecture and folklore in arriving at these details. Many of the details which were unclear to these writers in 1875 remain obscured to this writer in 1990. Nevertheless, what these accounts do provide, in addition to leads for the researcher in the form of names, dates and places, is a sense of the high regard accorded to my subject by her contemporaries.

The following account of Elsie Brooks' funeral was included in the editorial pages of the March 12, 1875 issue of the Ithaca Journal <sup>8</sup>:

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<sup>8</sup>No author is indicated.

The funeral of Elsey Brooks, universally known in the community as "Aunt Elsey," held yesterday afternoon at Zion's church, was a most beautiful and impressive ceremony. The church was thronged with the rich as well as the poor, who came to pay a last tribute of respect to the good old woman, and drop a tear over her bier. She was a poor, illiterate old colored woman, but her Christian zeal and deep religious principle, won her friends on every hand. It is safe to say that she had not an enemy, and that the many moist eyes in the large assemblage were caused by truly sorrowful hearts. What would not many a great man give to know that he would be so universally respected and mourned at death as was Aunt Elsey: What are not such a christian life and death as hers worth to a community! The remains laid in state in the church from 9 o'clock in the morning until 2 in the afternoon, when the funeral was held. The casket was a very fine one, silver mounted, and was strewn with beautiful flowers. The services were commenced with singing by the choir, followed by reading Scripture and singing again. The following "Last Request" of deceased was then read:[text of request].

After the reading of the Request, the Rev. John Thomas, of Binghamton, an old friend of the deceased, preached her funeral

sermon. It was her request that the sermon should be preached by him. At its close another hymn was sung, and between three and four o'clock the coffin was closed and the remains of Elsey Brooks were conveyed to their last resting place, in the plot of Zion's church in the cemetery. The procession, a very large one, passed along Plain, State, Geneva, Mill<sup>9</sup> and University streets. At the grave, the hymn "Shall we meet beyond the river," was sung, and the scene was truly affecting.

During the services in the church, quite a little excitement was caused by the floor settling several inches, owing to the great strain upon it. The plastering fell off the ceiling in the basement making a great racket, and for a moment it was thought the floor was going through. A panic in the audience was prevented, however, and the floor was strengthened by some posts which materially allayed the fears of a disaster. The number of persons in the church at the time, we are informed by one who counted them, was 883.

The St. James AMEZ church as it stands today would have a hard time trying to accommodate 883 people. This account of Elsie Brooks' funeral emphasized for me the extent of her popularity as suggested by Kammen's

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<sup>9</sup> Mill Street is now named Court Street.

script and the 1915 Ithaca Journal retrospective. With the facts concerning her funeral procession, I tried in vain to locate her grave in the city cemetery at University Avenue. No one at the church, the Historical Society, or City Hall knew anything about the "plot of Zion's church in the cemetery."

I searched both federal and state census records for mention of Brooks, Furnisses and later Cluffs in the Danby and Ithaca areas. Each time I would uncover some new lead in the form of a name or date, I would return to the census records again and again. Records are housed locally in three areas: the county clerk's office, the Dewitt Historical Society, and Olin Library at Cornell. Some records are also to be found at the local Church of Latter Day Saints research facility. Some records are on microfilm while others were available in printed volumes. The following chronological account of information taken from census records is the result of many different investigations.

The first federal census was taken in 1790. At that time there were no Brooks, Furnesses, or Cluffs in the Danby or Ithaca area. This seems to be in keeping with the information given in the obituary concerning the arrival of the Furnesses. Nor does the next census, taken in 1800, show any Furnesses in Danby. Without a specific county or town in Maryland it is virtually impossible to utilize census records to establish the whereabouts of this particular Furness family before their move to New York State. Also, Amy would not have been listed in these early censuses while her husband was still alive.

Indexes to the federal census are available by state for each census year since 1790. Not a single Furness (any spelling) or Cluff is listed in New York State. Significant too is the fact that many Cluffs and Furnesses are listed under various spellings in many areas of Maryland and Connecticut, the two states listed as the place of birth Amy Furness.<sup>10</sup>

In the federal census of 1810 an "Ama Furnace" appears as head of household in Danby, New York, in the County of Tioga. Living in the household were: two males under ten years of age, one male between the age of 26 and 45, one female under ten, one female between 26 and 45, and one slave. Only the "number of slaves" is noted so neither the sex nor the age of the slave is determinable. The "number of slaves" might refer to slaves among or in addition to those listed in the other columns. If the former is true, then Elsie would either be under ten years of age or slightly older than twenty-six when she was brought to Danby.

The 1820 Federal census shows no Furness (or any other spelling of the name) in Danby. Rather, Henry Cluff is listed as the head of a household

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<sup>10</sup>Records housed at the Church of Latter Day Saints research facility show several heads of household with the surnames Furnace, Furness, Furnis, Furniss and Cluff. In Maryland, these names appear exclusively in only two counties - Sommerset and Worcester. Since it is possible that George Furniss was named after his father, I will include the following here as mere speculation. A "George Furniss" living in Somerset County was listed in the 1800 Federal census. The household included one free white male between 26 and 45; one free white female between 16 and 26; one free white female over 45 years of age; and 15 slaves. Also, several Cluffs are listed as living in these same counties in 1800, 1810 and 1820 but none with the first name Henry.



in Danby which includes: one free white male under 16; one free white male between 18 and 26; one free white female under 10; one free white female older than 45; and one female slave between 26 and 45. Cluff was Amy Furniss's brother. He appears consistently as a member of the Furniss household. Any number of explanations can be offered as to why he was listed as the head of the household this particular year. Significant, however, is that this is most likely the same household previously and subsequently listed as Furniss's and that the female slave could be Elsie.

1825 marks the first year that a census was taken in New York State. "Mrs. Amy Furnas" is listed as the head of a household in Danby. The state census asked for information different from that requested by the federal; the following can be determined from the listing. The household included three males; three females; two males between 18 and 45 who were subject to militia duty; two men who could vote; one married female under 45, and one colored person not taxed. The property of the household included 80 acres of land; 16 neat cattle; 5 horses; 68 sheep; and 22 hogs. Also, 23 yards of fulled cloth, 50 yards of flannel and wool, and 90 yards of cotton fabric were manufactured on the premises.

The federal census of 1830 shows that Amy Furnace's household includes one free colored person between 24 and 36. This was the first census taken after Slavery had been abolished in New York State in 1827. It

seems that the same slave now remains in the household as a free person.

The 1835 state census shows one person of color not taxed living in the household of Amy Furnace in Danby. Some changes during the previous ten years are evident in the business of the household: 100 acres are owned, 24 cattle, 7 horses, 12 sheep, and 12 hogs. 40 yards of fulled cloth, 16 yards of flannel and other woollen cloth, and zero yards of linen or cotton cloth were manufactured on the premises.

The 1840 federal census marks the first time Elsie Brooks, in Ithaca, Tompkins County, is listed as head of household as "Mrs. Brooks." Her household consists of one male, 55-100; one female 24-36; and one female 36-55. There is some confusion concerning the Furniss family. Neither Amy Furniss nor Henry Cluff is listed in the federal census index for 1840. However, an "Anna Furniss" does appear and has a household consisting of six members, among them a free white male between 60 and 70, possibly Henry Cluff, and a white woman between 60 and 70, perhaps Amy herself. Only one free colored person is listed in this household, a female between 10 and 24. If indeed a census-taker's error caused Amy to be listed as "Anna", which is likely considering the fact that in 1810 she was listed as "Ama", then this listing verifies that the slave/freewoman listed as part of the household since 1810 is no longer with them in 1840, since the "colored person" listed in 1840 is too young to be Elsie. This suggests that the "colored person" listed from 1810 on may have indeed been Elsie Brooks, who, sometime between

the census of 1830 and that of 1840, left the Furniss household and established her own in Ithaca. The age range of the colored woman listed in 1830 (24-36) and the one listed in 1840 (10-24) suggests that during this time, a younger colored female joined the Furniss household.

No census listings were available at any of the above-mentioned three sites for the state census taken in 1845. Only totals were available at the County Clerk's office, and they were of no use to me here.

The 1850 federal census is significant for several reasons. This is the first year that the names of all members of a given household are listed as well as the place of birth of each. "Elsy Brooks" appears as a head of household. She is 50 years old, a black female born in Maryland. Living with her is Catherine Brooks, a 20-year-old black female born in New York. Two others are listed as part of her household: Elvira Foster, a female 25 years of age born in Vermont, and John Marsham, a four-year-old male born in New York. No race is indicated for either, indicating that they may be white. Again, Amy Furniss does not appear in the census directory. Henry Cluff is listed; however, on the actual census page he is not the head of a household but is listed as part of a household headed by "Anna Forrest", a 73-year-old white woman, born in Connecticut and owning property valued at \$9,740. Perhaps an error similar to that which had occurred in 1840 caused Amy Furniss's name to be listed as the similar-sounding "Anna Forrest". The error in the listing of her first name is in keeping with the "Anna Furniss" listing of 1840.

Similarly, the listing of her birthplace as Connecticut is in keeping with her listing in the 1860 census. The names of the neighbors, as well as the ages given for Anna Furniss of 1840, Anna Forrest of 1850, and Amy Furnace of 1860 are consistent, strongly suggesting that they may all refer to the same person. Henry Cluff is listed as a 77-year-old white male laborer born in Maryland. The 1850 listing shows no black members of the household.

The state census for 1855 is not available (it was destroyed by fire) and Elsie Brooks is not listed in the 1860 federal census (that she does appear in the 1864 village directory suggests that she did not move from the area). The name Catherine Brooks does appear, however, as part of William Steel's household. Reverend Steel is a 33-year-old black Methodist Clergyman<sup>11</sup> born in Virginia and living with a wife and two young sons aged one and three. Catherine Brooks, a 26-year-old black female born in New York is listed as their servant. Amy Furnace, an 82-year-old white female born in Connecticut, is living in Danby. There are three others listed as part of her household. Neither George nor Henry Cluff appears. Both are probably deceased by this time.

Elsie Brooks, a 69-year-old black female born in Maryland, is listed in the 1865 state census. Other information garnered from this listing indicates that she was once married but is now widowed, lives in a house valued at one

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<sup>11</sup> Steel most likely pastored at St. James AMEZ, the only Methodist church in Ithaca.

hundred dollars (while those of several of her neighbors are valued at around five hundred dollars), is a colored person not taxed, is over twenty-one and is unable to read or write.

The 1870 federal census is the last in which Elsie Brooks appears. She is 85 years of age, lives alone, and her place of birth is given as Virginia.

Inconsistencies surrounding the ages and places of birth listed in the various censuses are perhaps the result of carelessness on the part of the census takers or the faulty memories of the individuals interviewed. I have suggested some possible interpretations; nevertheless, the reliability of information taken from the censuses remains questionable.

Deeds showing the sale and purchase of land by the Furnisses provided some limited information. Amy bought land in 1812, 1813, and 1814. George bought parcels of land in 1831 and 1838. Amy sold land in 1858 and 1859; the deeds of sale provide documentation of Amy Furniss's illiteracy. The language of the document indicates that she makes "her mark". The "X" she signed for her name serves as a reminder that during the early nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for propertied women, as well as slaves, to be illiterate. Another interpretation is that Amy was not necessarily illiterate but that she was around eighty years old at the time she sold the land and failing eyesight or health made it impossible for her to write. I attempted in vain to uncover other documents which would have proven either her literacy or illiteracy.

I had hoped to find Amy Furniss's will, perhaps mentioning Elsie, to firmly verify the link between the two women that was mentioned in the Ithaca Journal. I uncovered only the will made by Amy's son George, dated March 20, 1840.<sup>12</sup> The will explains the omission of a white male of George's age from the 1840 census listing for Anna Furniss's household. A record from the Dewitt Historical Society's obituary file indicates that George Furniss died in Danby at age 33 on July 17, 1840 (the same year Elsie appears for the first time in the census as head of household in Ithaca). This places the year of his birth at 1807. George's handwritten and signed will gives his spelling of the family name as "Furniss," and mentions his "beloved mother Mrs. Amy Furniss" and his "uncle Henry Cluff." Census records show Amy Furniss in Danby as head of household in 1810, living with two males, who from their ages could be a brother and son, and one slave who might well be Elsie. It seems from the census records, that Amy, George and Henry were living together since their arrival in New York State some time between 1800 and 1810. In 1820, Cluff was listed for some reason as the head of the household while for every other year Amy was listed indicating that Amy owned the property.<sup>13</sup>

Establishing a definite link between Elsie Brooks and the Furnisses was problematic owing to the nature of the information given in the census.

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<sup>12</sup>See Illustration 4.

<sup>13</sup>Also, George and Amy Furniss buy and sell land while Cluff does not.

Names of the members of a given household were not given until 1850, when Elsie was no longer living in Danby. Thus the information given by the editors of the Ithaca Journal, the only definitive mention of the link between Elsie and the Furnisses, can be only partially verified.

Published in 1879, the dense History of Tioga, Chemung, Tompkins and Schuyler Counties<sup>14</sup>, provides further evidence of the probable link between Elsie Brooks and the Furnisses. The section, "Slavery in Tioga" provides the following:

Under the laws of New York, regulating the system, persons bringing slaves into the State were required to make affidavit that they had owned the chattels for one year previous to bringing them into the State, and that they had not bought them for the express purpose of bringing them in, and that it was the intention of the owner of such slaves to reside permanently in the State. Among the persons filing such affidavits in the clerk's office were the following:

. . . Amy Furniss, 1811, 1 slave girl . . . (87).

A verbatim copy of one of the affidavits on file at the County Clerk's office indicates that such a document would include the slave's name, age and the state of origin of both master and slave. This document would have also provided proof of Amy's literacy. Unfortunately, on trips to the County Clerk's

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<sup>14</sup>History of Tioga, Chemung, Tompkins and Schuyler Counties. New York (Philadelphia: Everts and Ensign, 1879)87. See also Illustration 5.

office in Owego, I could find neither Furniss's nor any of the other affidavits mentioned. Consultation with the county historian and the local historical society proved futile.

When considered together, the sources suggest that Elsie was born in Maryland sometime during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and travelled North with Amy and George Furniss. The census listings of Amy's place of birth suggest that perhaps they moved to Connecticut (where Amy may have had family) before eventually settling in Danby, New York by the year 1810. The following year, Amy Furniss filed an affidavit with the county clerk's office stating that she had owned her "slave girl" before coming to New York. This suggests that the one female slave/freeperson listed as part of the household from 1810 to 1835 was the same person. It can be inferred from the 1875 editors' note that this person was Elsie Brooks. Census records further indicate that this free colored person left the household sometime between 1835 and 1840. Information from the state census in particular suggests that the other members of the household and the colored person probably worked on the Furniss farm tending animals and producing cloth. Elsie Brooks' first appearance in the census as head of a household in Ithaca in 1840, and not before, offers further support that she could have been the person listed with the Furniss household previously. This would place Elsie's move to Ithaca somewhere between 1835 and 1840. The editors of the Ithaca



Journal state that Elsie's name was changed from Elsie Furniss to Elsie Brooks when she married Jacob Brooks. This marriage most likely took place sometime between 1835 and 1840. The breakdown of Elsie Brooks' household as listed in the 1840 and 1850 census suggests that Jacob was an older man with a daughter named Catherine is suggested by . These two census records also indicate that Elsie's husband died between 1840 and 1850 and that his daughter Catherine remained in Elsie's household. Catherine left Elsie's household sometime before 1860 when she lived with and worked as a servant for William Steel's family. According to Elsie's "Last Request," sometime between 1860 and 1875 Catherine married and Catherine has a sister. This sister does not appear as part of Elsie's household -- she may have been older than Catherine, or she may have been married before the 1850 census.

I tried, without success, to find further verification of Catherine's marriage, the identity of her husband mentioned in Elsie's "Last Request," and a marriage certificate or other documentation of Elsie and Jacob Brooks' marriage.

The identity of Elsie's husband must ultimately remain uncertain without this further documentation. The Village Directories list her as a widow of a John Brooks, while the editors of the Ithaca Journal give her husband's name as Jacob Brooks. Neither name appears in census records because in 1840 Elsie was the head of Household and by 1850, when each member of the

household was listed by name, her husband had already died. Additional sources would also render the link between Elsie and Jacob less tenuous.

I remembered mention of a Jacob Brooks from Carol Kammen's script - although she did not link him in any way with Elsie - in a section of Testimony for Black Voices..., which discusses the formation of the first black church in Ithaca, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Saint James:

Finally, in 1836, David Nelson, Jonathan Dever and Jacob Brooks were named Trustees of a colored Methodist Episcopal Church of Ithaca. We three bought lot 76 in block No. 118 in the Village and we set about to build ourselves a church. From that time onward, there were few colored people who attended services in the uptown churches, we having our own, where we were mightily comfortable (Kammen, 7).

Although Kammen herself indicated that the script was not a "historical document," again the information it provided helped to guide my research process. Kammen's information was taken from a notice published in the Ithaca Herald . For seven consecutive issues of the small paper, published once a week on Wednesdays, the notice asked "persons having subscription money for building our church and school room, to pay Henry Johnson<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> I have not been able to find any other source which mentions David Nelson, Jonathan Dever and Jacob Brooks in connection with the church. The deed of sale, found at the County Clerk's office, shows that on August 15, 1836 Richard Varick DeWitt, son of Simeon DeWitt and executor of his last will and testament, sold the parcel of land for five dollars to

[the first pastor of the church] and Charles A. Boyd, his assistant agent, their subscriptions . . ." After stating the whereabouts and dimensions of the plot of land, the trustees, Nelson, Dever and Brooks continue their appeal to the public:

We have obtained our Lot, and being deprived of a regular place to worship, and to use for school together, we have commenced to build a house for that purpose, and we are under the necessity of calling on all the publick to aid us by their contributions in so laudable an object . . .<sup>16</sup>

Elsie's devotion to the AMEZ church, as it is portrayed in her obituary and in the account of her funeral, leads us to suspect that she must have known these men. If, as the census indicates, Elsie moved to Ithaca between 1835 and 1840, and if, as Sackett claims in 1875, "She has been a consistent, faithful member of Zion's church for about forty-five years", without a doubt Elsie would have at least known the trustee, Jacob Brooks. Further, the New Topographical Atlas of Tompkins County (1866), shows that the home of "Elsie Brooks" occupies the western plot of land next door to the church building.<sup>17</sup> If Elsie and Jabob did indeed marry, it would also follow that he

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"the Colored Methodist Episcopal Zion Church of the Village of Ithaca established by Rev. Henry Johnson." The deed makes no mention of any other person in connection with the church.

<sup>16</sup>Ithaca Herald (vol 1, No. 6) Wed. October 5, 1836; also see Illustration 6.

<sup>17</sup>See Illustration 7.

would be in a position to secure the land next door to the church for their house.

From the onset of the project, I knew that there would be many gaps in the information I would be able to uncover concerning Elsie's life. My original goals included researching the local historical context as well. The location of Elsie's house and the newspaper accounts indicate her close connection to the AMEZ church. Her arrival in New York State coincides with some of the most significant legislation pertaining to the gradual abolition of slavery in the state; her arrival in Ithaca coincides with the building of the first African American church in the area. The years of her stay in Ithaca are also those of the the most fervent Underground Railroad activity. She lived through the time of the Emancipation and the preceding and subsequent periods of racial unrest. The following chapter offers an account of my research of the historical context of Elsie Brooks' life.

# The Journal Centennial Number

*The Great Historic Souvenir  
that all Ithaca has been  
waiting for*

## Will be Out Next Saturday.

44 Pages of Illustrations and Historical Matter and  
250 fine pictures of Old and New Ithaca  
and the surrounding country.

### *Ithaca in the "Old Days"*

The older inhabitants will be delighted to see again in pictures, scenes that will carry them back to childhood. A wonderful collection. The younger inhabitants will get a vision of the "old days" that fathers and mothers love to talk about.

### *Scenic Ithaca*

Some pictures that will send a thrill of pride through the hearts of both old and young, and perhaps give them a better conception of the beauties of which Nature has so generously bestowed upon this city.

No expense has been spared to make The Journal Centennial Number worthy of the community it represents and the anniversary it commemorates. It is an appropriate souvenir of a great occasion.

*Extra copies may be obtained now at 10 cents the copy  
by mail 15 cents.*

## THE ITHACA JOURNAL

The newspaper that for 100 years has stood for the best in  
everything in the community it serves.

Illustration 2 Announcement for the Centennial Number. Ithaca Journal  
Thursday, 26 August 1915:9.

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**Illustration 3** Aunt Elsie Brooks. Ithaca Journal Centennial Number, 28

August 1915:9

In the Name of God Amen  
 I George F. Furniss of the Town of Danby in the  
 County of Tompkins being through meagre in the  
 possession of a sound mind yet admonished by the  
 attacks of disease that it is prudent for me to  
 prepare for that great change which is the lot  
 of our nature, do make this my last will and testament  
 by the first place I do give and bequeath all the estate  
 both real and personal which may belong to me at  
 the time of my decease to my dearly beloved Mother Mrs  
 Anne Furniss as a small return for that tender  
 love and affection which she has ever manifested  
 towards me; subject to the legacy herein after  
 mentioned —

In the second place knowing that my honorable  
 Mother had made provision in her last will  
 and testament for the comfortable maintenance of  
 my uncle Henry Cluff and confident that she will extend  
 at the same suitable provision for his support during  
 her life which she has provided for after her decease  
 I do hereby give and bequeath to him the said  
 Henry Cluff the sum of twenty five dollars to be  
 paid to him by my Executors herein after named within  
 twelve months from and after my decease during  
 his as a token of my regard for him —

In the last place I do hereby appoint my friends  
 Albert Hudson, and Dana Trueborn German Executors of  
 this my last will and testament —

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set  
 my hand and seal at Danby this Twentieth day  
 of March the year of our Lord one thousand eight  
 hundred and forty —

signed and sealed and acknowledged  
 and declared to be his last will and  
 testament of George F. Furniss and  
 published as such in his presence  
 and in the presence of us who have  
 subscribed our names as witnesses

George F. Furniss

Joseph Hudson  
 William Clark

Illustration 4 Last Will and Testament of George Furniss. Tompkins  
 County Clerk, Ithaca, New York.

## SLAVERY IN TIOGA.

It sounds strangely to hear one speak of the "peculiar institution" having existed in the borders of this old county, yet it is nevertheless the fact that bondmen and bondwomen whose faces were black were owned by the early settlers who came in from the south of Mason and Dixon's line. In 1810 there were 17 of these human chattels returned by the census marshal, and in 1820\* there were 104, and 32 free colored persons. Under the laws of New York, regulating the system, persons bringing slaves into the State were required to make affidavit that they had owned the chattels for one year previous to bringing them into the State, and that they had not bought them for the express purpose of bringing them in, and that it was the intention of the owner of such slaves to reside permanently in the State. Among the persons filing such affidavits in the clerk's office were the following:

John James Speed, 1805, had 3 slaves; Dr. William T. Pattito, in 1806, had a family of 5; H. Speed, in 1808, had a family of 7; Amy Furniss, 1811, 1 slave girl; John F. Pattito, 1805, 1 slave, Peter; Joseph Speed, 1805, had a family of 7; Samuel Westbrook, 1806, a mother and 2 children; Robert Hyde, 1807, had a family of 11; Augustus Boyer and his wife, in 1806, owned 4 slaves.

The following is a verbatim copy of one of the affidavits now on file in the County Clerk's office:

"Personally appeared before me, Isaac Swartwood, one of the justices of the peace for the county of Tioga and State of New York and the township of Spencer, Samuel Westbrook, formerly a *sittion* of the State of New Jersey, now an *inhabitant* of the county, State, and town aforesaid, brought with him from the State of New Jersey one negro wench, named Beth, one negro boy, named Charles, one negro girl, named Pegs [Peggy], he being *duly* sworn on the holy *evangelia* of *almighty* god, and saith the above-named black ones was his slaves and property one *twelf* month and more before he moved into the State, when he lived in the State of New Jersey. Oct. 25, 1806."

Michael Pfoutz, on the 1st of July, 1808, manumitted his negro slave, Nancy Bakeman, of Newtown. David Banderle gave the following certificate of freedom to his slave:

"CATHARINETOWN, Jan. 30, 1811.

"This is to certify that Cato, a negro man, is free, and is ought to act for himself, and that I have no further demands on him."

\* In 1786 the law for the manumission of slaves by individuals was passed, and in 1799 an act was passed for the gradual abolition of slavery. The slaves were all free before 1830.

Illustration 5 "Slavery in Tioga," History of Tioga, Chemung, Tompkins, and Schuyler Counties, New York (Philadelphia:Everts and Ensign, 1879)



## NOTICE.

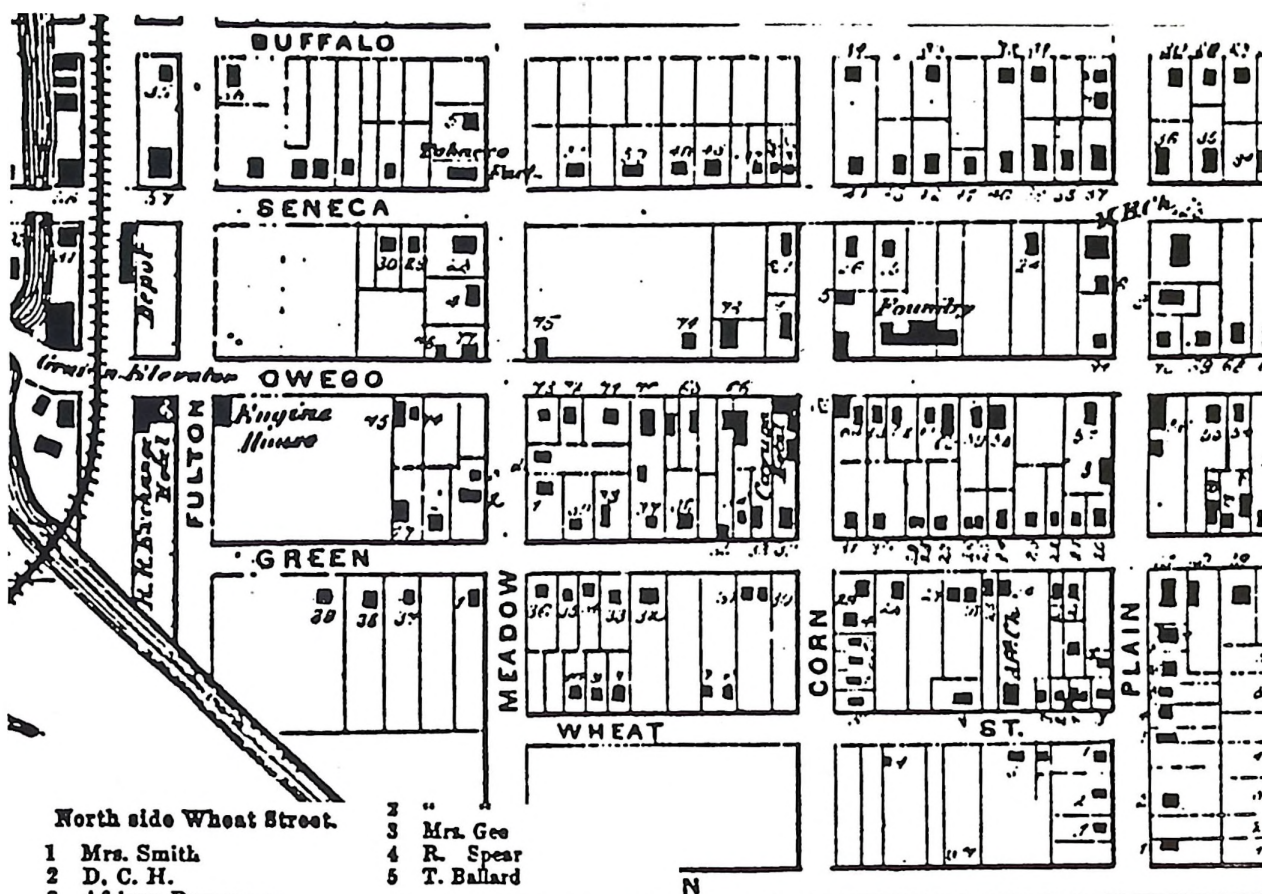
THIS is to Certify that the undersign, Trustees of the colored Methodist Episcopal Church, in Ithaca, request persons having subscription money for building our church and school room, to pay to Henry Johnson and Charles A. Boyd, his assistant agent, their subscriptions, they being our Agents. We having obtained all that certain piece or parcel of land being the west part of lot No. 76, in block No. 118 in the village of Ithaca, bounded on the north by the south ends of lot No. 43 and the east half of lot No. 43 : on the south by Wheat street, on the west by the west half of lot No. 43, and on the east by a continuation to the south of the east line of lot No. 42, being 99 feet on Wheat street, and 66 feet deep.

We having obtained our Lot, and being deprived of a regular place to worship, and to use for school together, we have commenced to build a house for that purpose, and we are under the necessity of calling on all the publick to aid us by their contributions in so laudable an object, as they must be well aware of the necessity of our appeal ; and such contributions as the publick may see fit to bestow, for all which we shall be very thankful.

And we also invite the generous publick to aid us by their contributions in so laudible an object, as they must be well aware of the necessity of our appeal.

DAVID NELSON;  
 JONATHAN DEVER, } Trustees.  
 JACOB BROOKS.

Ithaca, Sept. 14. 1836.



- North side Wheat Street.
- 1 Mrs. Smith
  - 2 D. C. H.
  - 3 African Parsonage
  - 4 Mrs. Brooks
  - 5 W. H.
  - 6 W. Allen
  - 7 Babcock
  - 8 J. Mack
  - 9 B. C. H.
  - 10 P. Hews
- North side of Junction st.
- 1 Sawyer & Glensier
  - 2 Blacksmith Shop
  - 3 Mrs. Letts
  - 4 Mrs. C. Letts
- West side of Goose Alley.
- 1 J. Kendall
  - 2 W. Allen
  - 3 J. C. Burritt
  - 4 F. Randolph
- 3 "
- 3 Mrs. Gee
- 4 R. Spear
- 5 T. Ballard
- South side Wheat street.
- 1 T. Jackson
  - 2 W. H. Elson
  - 3 "
  - 4 W. M. Sims
- South side of Junction st.
- 1 Ware House
  - 2 "
  - 3 Shop
  - 4 Blacksmith Shop
- East side of Goose Alley.
- 1 G. Devenport
  - 2 H. Smith
  - 3 E. Mackey
  - 4 G. Carpenter
- East side of First street.
- 1 H. Mack

Illustration 7 Location of Elsie Brooks' House on Wheat Street (now Cleveland Avenue). Detail of map and key, New Topographical Atlas of Tompkins County (Philadelphia: Stone and Stewart, 1866).

## Chapter II

### On The Historical Context:

. . .Incidents of Her Life in Conjunction with the African American History and  
Folklore of Ithaca, New York . . .

The choice of Elsie Brooks, an illiterate ex-slave and washerwoman, as the subject of this project was made with the idea that what was significant about her was not so much the facts of her life in particular but rather the historical context of those facts.

The process of researching the particular facts of Elsie Brooks' life also provided a wealth of information about the times in which she lived. Also, the historical context would inform the possible interpretations of the particular facts of her life. In this second chapter, I will discuss the research pertaining to the historical context of Elsie Brooks' life which spans the first three quarters of the nineteenth century. I will begin with a brief discussion of the information garnered from previously mentioned primary source material. This will be followed by a discussion of the use of other historical sources, including works of fiction, biography and autobiography. In particular, I will discuss works pertaining to local African American history and folklore.

The information which can be garnered from the census includes indications of the lifestyles of the area's early inhabitants. Professions listed

**Illustration 7** Location of Elsie Brooks' House on Wheat Street (now Cleveland Avenue). Detail of map and key, New Topographical Atlas of Tompkins County (Philadelphia: Stone and Stewart, 1866).

for Ithaca residents in the federal census beginning in 1850 show that a large number of both Blacks and Whites worked as "laborers." Other professions listed for Black residents include clergyman, barber, servant, tanner, painter and carpenter. The census also tells us that while some blacks boarded in the homes of white families, many black families also had boarders some of whom were white. Census listings were ordered by neighborhood with inhabitants of the same block listed consecutively. The listings show that while many blacks lived around the AMEZ church - the area now referred to as the "southside" - this section was not exclusively black. Other blacks were scattered throughout the town; some owned homes, others boarded as servants. Family sizes varied. Many blacks were born in southern states. In addition to these, my own cursory observations, I have made use of other historians' interpretations of census information in their discussions of the early population of Ithaca.

Elsie Brooks' popularity and her importance and value to her community are emphasized in newspaper accounts. These accounts also hint at the folklore surrounding her life and character: recall Sackett's claim that, "She was, perhaps, the only person in Tompkins county who remembers seeing the 'Father of our Country,' George Washington." Attesting to her physical strength, the editors of the newspaper note, "It is said she used to go to the 'clearing' with Mr. Furness and chop and fell trees, doing a full hand's work." Perhaps the most frequently cited testimonial to Elsie's character is the

statement from the Ithaca Journal retrospective:

Her style of exhortation is illustrated in her call upon the Lord God to come down through the church roof and never mind the damage for, she shrieked, "I'll pay for de shingles."

Similarly, some evidence of the historical, social and economic context is provided by the notice placed in the Ithaca Herald in 1836. The language of the notice asking the "publick" for donations to help build the church and school clearly indicates that these trustees were most likely literate. The notice also serves as an indication of the economic condition of the African American congregation. The notice appeared in seven consecutive issues of the weekly paper during September and October of 1836. On the same page as the notice which appeared in the October 5th issue, is a letter "To The Publick" from a William P. Skipworth. His purpose in writing and publishing this letter is expounded in the following excerpt from the lengthy letter:

Being about to close my business in this village and become a resident, God willing, in a far distant land, I cannot think of retiring without expressing my gratitude for favors conferred on me, and assigning my reasons for relinquishing them. . . I shall shortly quit this land - and it is my intention to proceed immediately to Liberia. [full text of letter appears as Appendix B]

While a number of the African American population struggled to build a church

and school of their own in the village of Ithaca, Skipworth (perhaps along with other Ithaca residents), was relocating to Liberia. Skipworth's language indicates that he was literate and educated to some degree. Skipworth's exploration into the 'race question,' his decidedly afrocentric orientation, his discussion of racial uplift and the misrepresentation of African history indicate that some of the issues taken up in the early Black newspapers of the northern states must have occupied some space in the local discourse. The editorial pages of the Ithaca Herald demonstrate a decidedly anti-abolitionist viewpoint. In the same issue in which appears Skipworth's letter and Jacob Brooks' notice, the editors include a 'disclaimer' on the preceding page lest Skipworth's sentiments be construed as their own. Anti-abolitionist sentiments can be observed in other editorial comments on this same page.<sup>18</sup>

"Some of the Sturdy Old Citizenship of Tompkins County", the 1915 article in which Elsie's photograph appears, mentions other Black residents as well. "A pen sketch of the old roundhouse and machine shop of the Ithaca & Owego Railroad" shows John Peterson, a "giant ex-slave," sawing wood. A photograph of the Speed mansion in Caroline is supplemented by text about the area's most well-known 'ex-slave family' - that of Peter Webb and his descendants. The slave past of the area, suggested by the inclusion of the two figures, is elaborated further in works of local historians.

The fact that the life of Elsie Brooks began in slavery is supported by

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<sup>18</sup>See Illustration 8.

the several newspaper accounts and by the fact that she was born in Maryland before emancipation. Her arrival in Danby before 1810 also preceded emancipation in New York State. In my research I discovered no mention of her family before Jacob and Catherine. The difficulty in uncovering information concerning Elsie's parentage and early life as a slave is compounded by the fact that Amy Furniss cannot be traced in Maryland because there are many Furnisses scattered throughout the state and her husband's first name is unknown. It would seem that Elsie lived her early life entirely with Furniss. The only indication that this may not be so is the fact that the 1870 census lists her birthplace as Virginia suggesting that perhaps she was born in that state before being sold to Furniss.

In the attempt to reconstruct what Elsie's experience with slavery may have been like, I have looked to texts on slavery in both the South and the North. Texts such as Genovese's Roll Jordan Roll,<sup>19</sup> Gutman's The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom,<sup>20</sup> and Webber's Deep Like the River<sup>21</sup> provide a general overview of the effects of the institution of slavery on African Americans in the South and of the transmission of certain cultural values within the slave community. Narratives of slaves, in particular those of Frederick Douglass<sup>22</sup> and Harriet Jacobs<sup>23</sup> - both runaway slaves - provide

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<sup>19</sup>Eugene Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll: the World the Slaves Made (New York:Pantheon-Random House,1974).

<sup>20</sup>Herbert G. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom (New York: Vintage,1983).

<sup>21</sup>Thomas L. Webber, Deep Like the River (New York:Norton,1978).

<sup>22</sup>Frederick Douglass Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave

a more personal account of the effects of slavery. Compilations of slaves' narratives such as those edited by Rawick<sup>24</sup> and Blassingame<sup>25</sup>, supply varying accounts of slaves' experiences with and attitudes towards slavery. I found that there was no single standard experience, but that a variety of interpretations was possible given the facts of Elsie's life.

Evidence of how the laws of New York State would have affected Elsie's life is provided in the History of Tioga, Chemung, Tompkins and Schuyler Counties, previously cited in chapter one.<sup>26</sup> Amy Furniss was required by law to file an affidavit that she had owned her one slave girl for at least one year and that she did not buy her just to bring her into the state (and perhaps sell her). This was most likely in accordance with two early New York State laws. A law passed in 1785 prohibited the importation of slaves and called for a 100 pound fine for the importer and freedom for the slave. This law only applied to slaves brought into the state for sale, and not to those brought in as property. It was probably in accordance with the terms of this law that Amy Furniss was required to file her affidavit. Another state law of 1788

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Written by Himself (1845) ( New York: Signet, 1968).

<sup>23</sup>Harriet Jacobs Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself(1861) ed.L. Maria Child; ed. with an introduction by Jean Fagin Yellin (Cambridge:Harvard UP,1987).

<sup>24</sup>George P. Rawick ed. The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, vol. 16 Kansas,Kentucky,Maryland,Ohio, Virginia,Tennessee Narratives, (Westport:Greenwood P,1972).

<sup>25</sup>John Blassingame ed. Slave Testimony (Baton Rouge:Louisiana State UP,1977).

<sup>26</sup>See Illustration 5.



provided that slaves exported or attempted to be exported for sale would be legally freed. This law further served to strengthen the law of 1785 providing that if a master sells a slave brought in to the state for his own use, the sale would operate to free the slave<sup>27</sup>. Of the early slave laws, most pertinent were the laws of 1799 and 1817, which provided for the gradual emancipation of all slaves in the State by July 4, 1827. The 1799 law freed all children born to slave women after July 4, 1799; the male children would become free at 28 (in 1827) and the female children at 25 (in 1824).<sup>28</sup> Other laws were passed in order that the 1799 law be enforced such as the law of 1801 which held that no one could leave the state with a slave purchased less than one year previously. In 1807, the law was changed stating that no one could leave the state with a slave purchased less than ten years previously.<sup>29</sup> The law of 1817 provided for the complete emancipation of all slaves in New York State by providing that every slave born before July 4, 1799 was free as of July 4, 1827.<sup>30</sup> The complexities of the slave system in New York State is suggested by the provisions of these laws which are detailed in the accounts of slavery in New York State provided by Edgar McManus's A History of Negro Slavery in New York and Leon Litwack's North of Slavery.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Edgar J-McManus, A History of Negro Slavery in New York (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1966) 166.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p.174.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p.177.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p.178.

For information on personal experiences with slavery in N.Y., I consulted works of fiction, biography and autobiography. Harriet Wilson's Our Nig<sup>32</sup> provides a fictionalized account of an African American servant's experience in a white household in New York. A biography of Sojourner Truth<sup>33</sup> also emphasizes the cruel treatment of slaves and servants by their mistresses; more significant, however, is the discussion of Truth's political activities. The published narratives of runaway slaves that I have consulted most often deal with New York as the endpoint of their journey to freedom, as is the case with the autobiographical works of Douglass, Jacobs, and J.W. Loguen;<sup>34</sup> these provide a comparison of Southern and Northern situations.

The sources consulted pertaining to aspects of African American history in the Ithaca area have been integral to this project in two ways. First, they collectively provide a factual basis for many of my interpretations of the events and characters in my treatment of Elsie Brook's life. Second, they share a certain reliance on oral history as documentation; the tradition of oral history found in this material would be incorporated in the language and structure of the script. Both points can best be elaborated in a discussion of this source

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<sup>31</sup>Leon F. Litwack, North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860 (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries P, 1971).

<sup>32</sup>Harriet E. Wilson, Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black. . . (Boston: Rand and Avery, 1859; New York: Vintage, 1983).

<sup>33</sup>Olive Gilbert, Narrative of Sojourner Truth . . . (1850) (Chicago: Johnson P, 1970).

<sup>34</sup>Jermain Wesley Loguen, The Rev. J.W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman: a Narrative of Real Life (1859) (New York: Negro Universities P, 1968).

material arranged chronologically by date of publication.

The earliest treatment of local African American history can be found in the Cornell doctoral dissertation submitted by Emma Corinne Brown Galvin in 1943. In the preface to The Lore of the Negro in Central New York State,<sup>35</sup> Galvin writes:

*For literary and social studies the folk and their lore are always vital and essential. Much has been written about the folk-Negro in the South, often to the neglect of his lore in other sections. Such previous neglect may justify a treatment of the lore of the Negro in Central New York State. Three main divisions will be used.*

The first has grown from the idea that folk characters have made a definite contribution to the lore of a people. . . In view of this fact, the general heading for Part One is Three Folk Characters. The sub-heads are designated as chapters: one devoted to Harriet Tubman, the second to Sojourner Truth, and the third to the Rev. J.W. Loguen. . . No one of these persons is fictitious. *However, we can not ignore the "fact-fiction" element which usually surrounds a romantic figure.*

Our study of these characters brought a recognition that *the*

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<sup>35</sup>Emma Corinne Brown Galvin, The Lore of the Negro in Central New York State, diss. Cornell U, 1943.

*underground railroad made possible the majority of Negro lore in Central New York.* Part One revealed the location of prominent stations in places like Syracuse, Rochester, Auburn, and Peterboro, but there were few printed references definitely concerned with Ithaca and its immediate vicinity. *Yet, general leads left us certain that the system operated here.* Personal investigation is responsible for Part Two: The Underground Railroad in Tompkins County: Facts and Traditions.

Recognizing the gradual disappearance of Negro folk-characters and the waning memories of the anti-slavery underground railroad, we were interested to know the types of lore still current among Negro folk in this section. Finally then, Part Three presents: Folklore Collected from Negroes Now living in Ithaca New York (emphasis added) (Galvin, 1-2).

In Galvin's first section, information drawn primarily from the previously mentioned biographical works on Tubman, Truth and Loguen is interspersed with documentation and elaboration from other sources. Most relevant to this project are the direct references to Ithaca as in the following opening passage of Galvin's first chapter. The individual quoted is a Mrs. Elmira Brown, a resident of Cleveland Avenue (formerly Wheat St.) who was "about 83 years old" at the time of the interview:

'Of course I knew Aunt Harriet. I shall never forget the first time I

saw her; we spent the whole time singing, praying and talking about her experiences most of which I forgot long ago. I do remember we had the best time ever; Aunt Harriet got so happy she jumped so high [indicating about three feet from the floor]. I can't get together the things she told me; I just know she was a truly wonderful woman.'

Unfortunately, authentic information about this remarkable person is limited. Present first-hand acquaintance is represented by the above interview. . . *Those who knew her best left no detailed account of her life and work; she herself could neither read nor write* and found it inadvisable to have other persons keep a record for her; the secrecy which necessarily surrounded her activities was not conducive to the written or spoken word (3).

I drew upon Brown's recollection and reference to "Aunt" Harriet in the creation of Elsie's fictionalized relationship with Tubman. Galvin's conclusion concerning the limitations of historiography became one of the main themes of my script.

Galvin adds folklore garnered from personal interviews to information provided in Loguen's biography to establish his link to Ithaca:

I have learned from Miss Jessie M. Johnson, 326 South Cayuga Street, that he was known in Ithaca as Bishop Loguen, that he

was not here regularly but was 'in and out,' that during his visitations here he preached at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church on Cleveland Avenue. *These facts came to Miss Johnson through her grandmother, Mrs. Titus Brum, who, she believes, was a 'distant cousin of Bishop Loguen' (97).*

According to Howell's History of St. James . . ., Loguen was pastor of the St. James AMEZ Church from 1846 to 1848. Accounts such as these suggest the rich oral history passed from 'grandmothers' and other elders in the community to their children which was a main premise in the creation of my script. Galvin's account of Loguen's travelling around the area to raise funds to build his church in Bath, New York (94-95) was a source for my creation of the character of Jacob Brooks.

The second part of Galvin's thesis draws upon oral sources - personal interviews and those collected at the Dewitt Historical Society - as well as newspaper articles, to prove that "Ithaca and neighboring places became 'stop off' stations or 'lay overs' for the fugitives enroute[sic] to Canada" (139). Galvin cites evidence in support of the existence of at least two different hiding places in Ithaca, one behind Brooks Drug Store and another in the home of Titus Brum:

I am told by John G. Brooks (former owner of the Brooks Drug Store, 126 East State Street, Ithaca; now President of the Dewitt

Historical Society of Tompkins County) that behind the store is a trench eight to ten feet long and six feet wide and deep, which he believes served as a shelter for fleeing slaves. Mr. Brooks further tells me that when Dr. H.P. Denniston, a Practicing physician here, who lives at 113 East Seneca Street, remodeled his home, a ground floor was taken up under which was found a stairway leading to an underground shelter (139).

That these were used for hiding slaves is confirmed by certain interviews, compiled by the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration of New York State, March 18, 1935, as cited by Galvin:

'Interview with Harry Greene. 113 Cleveland Avenue:

Mr. Greene . . . was born in Ithaca, 1870, on Cleveland Avenue then known as Wheat Street. The name was changed 20 years ago. *His mother used to tell about the underground railways. She mentioned where Dr. Denniston lives on East Seneca Street (113) and Miss Johnson's home, 326 South Cayuga Street, then known as the Titus Brum home'* [Brum is Miss Johnson's grandfather].

Another Interview found at the Dewitt Historical Society is:

'Interview with Miss Jessie Johnson, 326 South Cayuga. This property was originally bought in 1824 from Francis Bloodgood. In the attic of his house was a hide-out for the runaway slaves.

Miss Johnson did not know it was there until the house was torn down in 1927. The room was boarded up and furniture was found' (139-140).

Gavin reports her personal interview with "Bert" Johnson, brother of Jessie:

*'All I know is that we are now living on the same site where our grandparents had an underground station. We tore down the old house and built this house in the same place. All I know about the underground railroad I got from my grandmother, and I can't remember much of that. All I remember is my grandmother telling me about hiding the slaves in her big oven' (141).*

A printed account of another story in the realm of 'oral history' not only suggests that the Underground Railroad passed through Ithaca but also provides details of how it operated and of the people involved. Quoting from Thomas W. Burns' Initial Ithacans,<sup>36</sup> Galvin presents the following account of Ben Johnson - Fourth President of the Village of Ithaca:

For burning satire upon the Christian Church, the political party in power, and the legal profession of his day, the following story of Ben Johnson, is a masterpiece and a reflection of his own nature. George A. Johnson [father of Jessie and "Bert" Johnson], a well-known Ithacan of the present day (now deceased), relates

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<sup>36</sup>Thomas W. Burns, Initial Ithacans (Ithaca: Press of the Ithaca Journal, 1904). This is the same T.W. Burns who wrote the 1915 Ithaca Journal retrospective on Elsie Brooks.



it: 'My father's barber-shop adjoined the building on North Aurora street in which Ben Johnson had his law office . . . Occasionally I visited Mr. Johnson in his office and informed him that several runaway slaves had arrived during the previous night by the way of the underground route, and that they must have shoes and clothing and money for their passage toward Canada. He answered that he 'was a Christian, and a member of the church, and a lawyer, and a Democrat and therefore a law abiding citizen; that he could not consistently assist in depriving men of their property. No, he could not do such an unlawful act.' But he would hand me a five or ten dollar note, and tell me to take it and buy tickets, and send the runaway slaves back to their masters. He knew that the terror-stricken runaways would be aided on their way by being secreted during the night in the Steamboat Simeon DeWitt and taken to Cayuga Bridge and on toward the North Star' (146).

This "story" not only further documents the involvement of the Johnson family in underground railroad activity, but also indicates something of the routes and methods of transport.

Some personal interviews conducted by Galvin with residents of Cleveland Avenue tell of Elsie's neighbors. Galvin reports the following interview with Mr. Fred Smith of 210 Cleveland Avenue:

'My father came here through the underground railroad from Georgia on his way to Canada, but he never got no farther than right here, he just stayed. It had been such a long time to get here, he just didn't want to go no farther. I've heard him tell about that trip and all he knew about the underground railway a thousand times or more, I guess, but land sakes! for the life of me I couldn't repeat it to save my life; no, not even none of it. It's left me' (142).

Elmira Brown, the interviewee mentioned earlier, provided Galvin with names of early neighbors who came to Ithaca via the underground railroad:

Mr. Jerry Jones.

Mr. Jasper Woodson. In giving this name Mrs. Brown said, 'I knew his second wife well but can't think of her first name. We were real good friends too.'

Tom Allen. Here Mrs. Brown told me that she bought the house she is living in from 'that very Tom Allen.'

Miss Hattie\_\_\_\_\_. Mrs. Brown could not remember Miss Hattie's last name but could 'see her in my mind just as plain. She used to live on Green Street.'

Then Mrs. Brown said:

'There were other different ones I can't remember now. Anyway,

they're all dead. *Some of these and those I can't place I believe -- I'm not sure, and I don't know which ones -- Aunt Harriet brought up.* You know we all called Harriet Tubman Aunt Harriet' (143).

Later work of other historians and myself would uncover something of the identity of some of these. The fact that they were indeed Elsie's neighbors is supported by their listings in the census and directory, and their placement in the topographical atlas.

Galvin closes her section on the Underground Railroad<sup>37</sup> with the following account of her personal interview with a Mrs. VanDyke of Caroline Center:

Mrs. VanDyke assured me that her own home at Caroline Center was never, as I had been incorrectly informed, a station. She said:

'This was an old slave house -- the old Speed Place. Speed brought my grandfather here as a slave. He worked for his freedom, for which he paid \$385' (152).

The slave was Peter Webb - the founder of the AMEZ in Ithaca. A later historian, Sydney Gallwey, gives more details of Webb's story, calling him the only documented slave of Tompkins County to buy his freedom from his

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<sup>37</sup>Although I did not use any of the actual folk-tales, folk-beliefs or folk-songs Galvin included in her final section, they did inspire, in part, the creation of the Mama Bett character in the script.

master. Gallwey's account refers to the relationship between Webb and his master John J. Speed.<sup>38</sup> It indicates some of the complexities of master-slave relationships in the area. Galwey reports:

' . . .there was an abolition and anti-slavery meeting in Cortland where Mr. Speed and Peter were by some reason of chance. Mr. Speed made some remarks in which he favored gradual abolition. He said that he had himself once been a slaveholder and had freed his own slaves. Peter arose and remarked that he had formerly been one of Mr. Speed's slaves and that Mr. Speed had given him his freedom, but not until he bought and paid for it and earned the money with his own hands. This turn in the discussion was unexpected, and Mr. Speed was real taken down by it.'<sup>39</sup>

Galvin's efforts to write down the oral histories are important. Her work has allowed later historians to elaborate further on the details of the underground railroad operation. Sydney Gallwey was the next historian to expand and document the rich folklore. In a paper titled, "Early Slaves and Freemen of Tompkins County" , Gallwey indicates his use of newspaper

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<sup>38</sup>For a record of John J. Speed, of Virginia, as slaveholder, see Illustration 5.

<sup>39</sup> Sydney, H.Gallwey, "Early Slaves and Freemen of Tompkins County," a paper presented 30 Jan. 1962, before the Ithaca Council for Equality at St. John's Church (Xerox of text found at the Dewitt Historical Society)<sup>7</sup>. Here Gallwey quotes a certain Charles F. Mulks "an early historian of Caroline" but does not cite the source.

articles in the text but for the most part he provides very little documentation for his facts. The work does provide several sketches of folk characters, among them is Peter Webb. Another, which inspired some of my choices in the script, is that of Peter Wheeler:

One of the early examples of slavery in this area is the story of Peter Wheeler, as told by him in 1839 [Wheeler authored a narrative published 1838]. He came to the area in 1800 when he was eleven years old. This is his story, greatly abbreviated:

. . .I started for New York State [from New Jersey], May 9, 1800, the property of Gideon Morehouse. . .We finally got to the end of our journey and put up at Henry Ludlow's house in. . .County of Cayuga. . .(1)

The three Ludlow children and several neighbors were constantly encouraging Peter to run away:

Squire Whittlesay, who lived about six miles away, where I used to go on errands, said to me one day, "Peter, can I put any confidence in you?" "Yes sir," I said, "You needn't be afraid of me." "Well," he said, "you're free by law and I advise you to run: but wait awhile and don't run 'til you can make sure it will work, and now mind you, don't go away and tell anybody." (2)

This exchange would inspire Elsie's fictional meeting with the unnamed abolitionist in Owego before she decides to leave Amy Furness's household.

Gallwey's transcription of Wheeler's account continues:

And finally, almost everybody said, "Run, Pete. Why don't you run?" But I think to myself, if I run and don't make out, it would be better for me not to run at all, so I'll wait. When I run, I'll run for certain. There weren't many slaves in that region, but a good many colored folks lived there, and some of them were pretty decent folks, too.

Many narratives of Southern slaves express similar sentiments: that the uncertainties of freedom prevented slaves from running sooner or at all. That Wheeler, in the North, feels this way suggested a possible approach to interpreting why Elsie remains with the Furniss family so long after she is free.

In 1963, Gallwey wrote and published Underground Railroad In Tompkins County.<sup>40</sup> Gallwey cites several of Galvin's sources in asserting that Ithaca was indeed a 'station' on the Underground Railroad. Also in support of this, Gallwey cites census records:

From 1800 to 1875, there were in Tompkins County 105 heads of Negro families: 53 were born in southern slavery and came to the North by way of the Underground Railroad; 52 were born in New York State before it abolished slavery on July 4, 1827. The records of the census from 1825 to 1860, which was just before

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<sup>40</sup>Sydney H. Gallwey, Underground Railroad in Tompkins County (Ithaca: Dewitt Historical Society, 1963).

the outbreak of the Civil War, seem to indicate that those who had registered in those records as having a southern birthplace had reached the North by the Underground (1)

Gallwey contends:

Quakers in eastern Pennsylvania were the guiding spirit that nurtured the Underground Railroad. Western New York received the passengers on this Railroad from them. The ministers and members of the Zion Church in Ithaca always held open arms for the fleeing slave and, if the slave chose to stay, they gave him whatever they could offer in the way of adjustment to a new life in a new community (3).

Gallwey cites Galvin's 'George A. Johnson story' in support of his assertion that the church and its members aided and harbored escaped slaves. Gallwey uses details from the story to suggest possible routes from the South through Ithaca to Canada. The Quakers and the members of the church become the primary Underground workers in my script. Among those who appear in the script is Daniel Jackson, whose story is perhaps the most irrefutable piece of evidence that Ithaca was a 'stop' and that runaways did come to Ithaca and stay. Gallwey wrote, in 1964:

In the City Cemetery of Ithaca [where Elsie is also buried], there is a tombstone which was placed there seventy-five years ago [now one hundred and one years] as a reminder of what a man

can achieve in a lifetime. The inscription has withstood the years and still tells the same inspiring message: '1814-1889; Faithful Daniel Jackson; Born a slave, He followed the North Star to Freedom; He returned to bring his aged mother and tenderly care for her as long as he lived. They were not parted for she survived him but five days. Daniel was 75 and his mother was 103 years of age. This tribute belongs of right to faithfulness and filial affection' (11) [Added to original text].

As was the case with Elsie, a letter from a friend, E.S. Esty, Jackson's employer who supplied the inscription, provides significant details. As cited by Gallwey, on July 6, 1889 the Ithaca Journal published the following letter:

To the Editor:

Few of our citizens are aware that at one time, Ithaca was an important station on a great thoroughfare known as the Underground Railway. The efficient agent of this organization was the pastor of the Zion's Church. Every few days, he would come to my office and say that he had one, two or three or four. He would ask me if I would give something to help them towards the North Star.

The expenses and assessments were light and mainly came from colored people. One day, he came to see me and said



that he had three. I wanted to know if they were good and stout. He replied that they were real likely fellows. When I told him to send them over to the tannery, the Elder said that this might not do as the three had hurt somebody in their escape. I told him that I would take care of that if they proved to be good workmen. On the next day, Daniel Jackson began work as a driver of the bark cart. He filled this position faithfully for nearly a third of a century (11--12).

We can conclude from the dates given here that Jackson came to Ithaca circa 1856. Daniel Jackson, appears in the 1860 census, and in the Ithaca directory of 1864. In 1860 he is listed as part of the household headed by a "Thomas Jackson", a 40 year old gardener from Maryland whose property is valued at \$400. Daniel Jackson is listed as a 53 year old tanner also from Maryland. It appears that the two may be related. Living with them is a William Simon, an 18 year old tanner from Maryland. It seems that Simon and Daniel Jackson are two of the three runaway slaves that Esty employs in his tannery. By the census of 1870, Daniel is the head of his own household. Daniel Jackson is listed as a 40 year old tanner from Virginia whose property is valued at \$900. I cannot account for the discrepancy between his age as listed in the two census reports. Daniel's household includes a wife, Martha Jackson, a 40 year old born in New York; two children, three-year-old William and two-year-old Mary, also born in New York; and Amy Jackson, an 80 year-old woman

from Virginia. The continuation of Esty's letter supports the conclusion that Amy Jackson must be Daniel's mother:

'At the close of the Civil War, Daniel came to my office and said he needed fifty dollars. When I wanted to know from him the reason for his wanting the money, he replied that he has heard his mother was still alive. He desired to bring her to live with him. I told him that I thought it was a needless expense for him to go, and suggested that I correspond with the Freedman's Bureau who could send her to Ithaca for little money.

I also told him that his mother must be quite old now. Perhaps she would be feeble and infirm and be quite a burden for him to carry. She might be comfortable and well where she was. In this case, I thought it would be better for her to remain there and for Daniel to send her money when he could. After I had said these things to him, I shall never forget how the tears ran down his cheeks. Through tears, he said that she was his mother and he must have her with him.'<sup>41</sup>

Esty's letter goes on to detail how Daniel, at the end of the Civil War, went to Harpers Ferry and Point of Rocks, Virginia to get his mother. That these locations are close to the border of Maryland and Virginia could explain how both states could be listed as Daniel's birthplace in the 1860 and 1870

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

census; perhaps after his reunion with his mother he was informed by her that his birthplace was Virginia rather than Maryland. Esty's letter supplies a significant connection between Jackson and the pastor previously mentioned as "the efficient agent" of the Underground Railroad who found Daniel Jackson and his fellow runaways their jobs at Esty's tannery :

And now his mother, who nursed the pastor of Zion church when he was a baby, still survives. The pastor of Zion church is now[in 1889] 84. She does not know her age, but more than a century has gone since she was born. She may be seen hale and fairly well at the residence of her faithful son (12).

This would mean that the pastor of St. James, the Underground Railroad 'conductor', knew Daniel Jackson before the latter's arrival in Ithaca. Evidence indicates that this pastor was the Rev. Henry Johnson, first pastor of St. James AMEZ. Johnson is listed in the 1850 census as a 60-year-old minister from Maryland whose property is valued at \$1000. His wife, Elizabeth was also born in Maryland and was illiterate. He had two sons, both born in Maryland. Given the high rate of discrepancies in ages as listed in the census, it is possible that his is the unnamed pastor to whom Esty's letter refers. Recall also that Jackson's place of birth was listed as Maryland indicating that perhaps the Jacksons and the Johnsons knew each other there. This provides an interesting view of the Underground Railroad system as it operated in

Ithaca. According to census records, many Black residents came from Maryland and Virginia. It is possible that the Rev. Henry Johnson and other Ithaca residents were helping many of their own friends and family members to freedom. Perhaps the most comprehensive account of Underground Railroad activity, combining both documented fact and folklore, is Tendai Mutunhu's "Tompkins County: An Underground Railroad Transit in Central New York."<sup>42</sup> Mutunhu, formerly a faculty member at the Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University, provides much of the detail on which my account of Elsie's trip to Ithaca is based:

It should be pointed out that a number of runaway slaves came to Ithaca by way of Owego after leaving Binghamton. From Owego, the runaways travelled directly to Ithaca by train or by stage coach on the Owego Turnpike which passed through the town of Danby. Some of the runaway slaves stopped in Danby at the 300 acre farm of Doctor-Judge-Preacher Louis Beers. Beers had moved to Danby in 1797 from Stratford, Connecticut. He was actively involved with the Underground Railroad during the 1830s and 1840s until his death in 1849 (21-22).

In my script Elsie travels the route outlined by Mutunhu from Danby to Ithaca and is mistaken by Daniel Jackson for a runaway slave. Census listings show

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<sup>42</sup>Tendai Mutunhu, "Tompkins County: An Underground Railroad Transit in Central New York," Afro-Americans in New York Life and History 3.22 (1979) 15-33.

that Jacob Beers was a neighbor of Amy Furniss's. While Elsie had to have known Jacob Beers, we have no evidence as to the nature of their relationship. I had Jacob Beers in mind for the abolitionist but did not have enough facts to actually use his name as the person (preacher and abolitionist) who, in the script, knows Jacob Brooks and indirectly influences Elsie to leave Furniss.

The problematic relation between documented fact and oral history is exemplified in the works of Galvin, Gallwey, and Mutunhu. Names, dates, birthplaces and relationships indicated in documents such as the many census records are supported by oral accounts. But at one point, Mutunhu states Galvin's folklore as fact:

Some of the persons brought to Ithaca by Tubman included Jerry Jones, Tom Allen, Jasper Woodson, and a certain Miss Hattie (21).

Indeed such an assertion can be made but it must be kept in mind that the source of this information was the sometimes vivid sometimes vague memory of Mrs. Elmira Brown.<sup>43</sup>

Many of the distinctions between folklore and fact have been obscured. It is not uncommon, in the folklore of present-day Ithaca, to hear that runaway slaves were hidden at the AMEZ church. Although the original structure of the church has been added to over the years, one can observe the original stone

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<sup>43</sup>as quotes earlier on p. 53 of my thesis.

foundation and the now unused side door which once served as the main entrance. No hidden compartments have been uncovered within this original structure. Although it is possible that the linoleum flooring may cover underground vaults, there is no tangible evidence that human beings could be hidden anywhere in this original room.

Other sources support the conclusion that the church building and congregation played an active role in abolition activity. The church, founded by ex-slaves, was visited by Frederick Douglass. In a "Letter from the Editor" published in Frederick Douglass' Paper in 1852,<sup>44</sup> Douglass wrote:

I am to speak to my colored friends to-night in Zion Church, and, as much interest is felt, a large meeting is expected.

July 22nd - . . .the meeting at Zion Church was contrary to my expectation, and partly to my wishes, largely composed of white persons. . . I found the meeting-house just the cleanest and neatest colored meeting-house into which I ever stepped. I remark on this fact purposely; for I have been in many colored churches which were a disgrace to the colored people, and this for want of a little *taste* and industry. . . The meeting-house at Ithaca is kept in creditable order, and is a place into which colored people of that village need not be ashamed to invite

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<sup>44</sup>Philip S. Foner, ed., The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Vol5, 1844-1860 (New York:International Publishers, 1975), pp.237-241.

anybody (237-238).

Douglass adds, amid this praise, some chastisement of Elsie Brooks' contemporaries:

. . . I was sorry to find in Ithaca that the colored people had, like those in other places, adopted the miserable habit of coming into meeting much later than other people (238).

Douglass' visit to Ithaca in 1852 was in conjunction with the County Anti-Slavery Convention. His remarks make reference to the political climate in Ithaca of 1852, he reports a change in the pro-slavery sentiments of ten years before:

July 23rd - The County Anti-Slavery Convention held here yesterday, in the Town Hall, was in numbers, spirit, zeal and determination highly gratifying, and fitted to cheer the hearts of all who would see this guilty nation repent, and the poor slave redeemed from his chains. The whole affair showed a pleasing change in the public opinion of the place, since it was my privilege to visit Ithaca ten years ago. At that time the community seemed sunk to the most hopeless depths of pro-slavery. Anti-slavery was bitterly and intensely hated. The advocates of liberty were subject to brutal persecution, and colored people were held in contempt and scorn. The public halls and the meeting houses in the place were shut against the anti-slavery lecturer.

At that time I was compelled, if I spoke at all, to speak in the open air, but not even there was I protected, for I spoke amid insults and jeers from a menacing mob. The hotels would hardly shelter an abolitionist; and there were no kind friends to invite the lecturer home (238).

Douglass credits the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 as having caused the change from pro-slavery sentiments. The building of the AMEZ Church, which also served as a public meeting-house enabled the black population to organize more efficiently than ten years before. J.W.Loguen, a former pastor of St. James, and Professor William Allen, the first black college professor in the United States<sup>45</sup> were among the speakers at the 1852 Convention.

Douglass' remarks verify that the church had a religious, political and social function within the Ithaca community:

I have spent part of to-day in visiting among the colored people here, with brother Loguen; and was happy to find them "very well-to-do" in the world. I found them as neat in their homes, as at the nice little church of which I have spoken (241).

Attendance records of the Black State Conventions indicate the involvement

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<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*,p.529. Foner provides the following in a note: William Allen, a graduate of Oneida Institute, was the first black college professor in the United States. After studying law in Boston, becoming co-editor of The National Watchman, a newspaper published in Troy, New York, he taught Greek and German at Central College in McGrawville New York, until 1853.



of Zion Church members in broader social and political affairs. In 1851, William F. Johnson, a trustee of the church and later an agent for the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn<sup>46</sup>, attended the Negro State Convention in Albany. The Ithaca representative (noted in the minutes as being blind) took part in a "spirited discussion" and sang during one of the intermissions.<sup>47</sup> Ithaca's two representatives at the 1855 convention held in Troy New York, James Collins and James Lewis, were also trustees of St. James. Frederick Douglass and Jermain Loguen also attended.<sup>48</sup>

Information presented on several broadsides found at the Dewitt Historical Society places the AMEZ church, its pastors and members at the center of local anti-Black and anti-Abolitionist sentiment. One broadside<sup>49</sup> begins, "Celebration of Our National Independence! 4th of July, 1863, at Ithaca. Order of Arrangement. One Gun at Day-Break (representing the breaking up of our Union, caused by the Abolitionists.) The people will form in procession in front of the first-cut African Church." The "Order of Exercises" lists, as fifth on the program, "A few remarks by Elsey Brooks."

A second broadside announces the "Loyal League Funeral at

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<sup>46</sup>Ithaca Directory 1872.

<sup>47</sup> Philip S. Foner and George Walker, eds. Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865, vol 1: New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1979) 57.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p.88.

<sup>49</sup>See Illustration 9.

Ithaca."<sup>50</sup> Although no year is listed, specific references place it subsequent to the Civil War. According to the broadside, the funeral "procession" will form at the "African Church" and includes, among others, "The Reverend, the Blood Hounds of Zion," "Returned Refugees from Canada," "Niggers, Mulattos and Half Breeds," "Persons of African Descent," "White Trash," and "The Freedmen's Aid Society." At the bottom of the broadside is the notice, "For Sale! 1 Large Freedman's Bureau."

"Order of Exercises! for the Colored Celebration !! On the 8th of July," begins the Third broadside.<sup>51</sup> This one is also not dated and it contains more specific references to the Black churches and individuals, such as, "At sunrise, the ringing of the Bells of the Wheat St. and Wesleyan Churches." Among the "Marshals of the Day" is the pastor of the Wesleyan Church, William Allen who was also a barber.<sup>52</sup> The pastor is listed as, "Prof. Wm. Barberous Lightfoot Allen." This reference seems to be also directed at Professor William Allen who spoke at the 1852 Anti-Slavery Convention.<sup>53</sup> The procession which will form at the "Wheat-Street Mount-Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church" includes: "9thly. Citizens, Strangers, Abolitionists, and Gerrit Smith Voters." The procession will then "'Hoof it" to the Park, to the Music of "Happy are we darkeys so free." Third in the "Order of

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<sup>50</sup>See Illustration 10.

<sup>51</sup>See Illustration 11.

<sup>52</sup> village directory.

<sup>53</sup> Philip S. Foner, ed., The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Vol5, 1844-1860 (New York:International Publishers, 1975)240.

Exercises" is a prayer by "Rev. John Wesley Bunyon Spurgeon Thomas." This reference is to the same Rev. John Thomas who returns from Binghamton to preach the funeral sermon at Elsie's funeral. One source indicates that he was pastor of St. James during the years of 1857 and 1858.<sup>54</sup> Sixth in the "Order of Exercises" is an "Oration, by the Great Horse Maine Frederick Augustus Don Kyser de Baboon Roderic [indiscernible] Douglass." Ninth on the program is a "Malediction, by the Rev. Henry Goggle-Eye Johnson," a reference to the first pastor of St. James.

The individual or group who authored these broadsides is unknown. Also unknown is the number of these printed and where they were displayed. Nevertheless, the racist and anti-Black sentiments expressed in these were part of the social context of Elsie Brooks' life. That she and the other individuals and groups were singled out and ridiculed suggests their importance in relation to abolitionist activity in this area.

The source material mentioned in this section is significant for the documented factual evidence of the historical, social and economic climate of early Ithaca. The preceding discussion is not intended to be exhaustive, instead it suggests the uses of this information in interpreting the facts of Elsie's life and times. The works of the local historians - Galvin, Gallwey, and Mutunhu- shows that much of the African American history of this early period

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<sup>54</sup>Industrial Edition of the Ithaca Daily News 1895 p.4 "The A.M.E.Zion Church" clipping found at Dewitt historical Society.

in Ithaca, however plausible, nevertheless extends largely from folklore. Thus, both folklore and fact provided the basis for the fictional elements of my script.

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The extensive circulation of the 'Herald,' and which is constantly increasing: offers a medium for advertisements which is possessed by no other paper in the county. If our friends and the public would recollect this, patronage to us would be amply repaid by the benefit to themselves.

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For whatever squinting Mr. Skipworths address may have towards abolition, that gentleman and not ourselves are responsible. It is inserted as an advertisement and is to be paid for as such. Indeed we would much rather that the slaves should be clothed fed and provided for as they are at present, than that their masters should be murdered; but yet, we trust we may insert the farewell from one black to another without any fears of Judge Lynch.

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A bellowing abolitionist of this village, on reading the proposition of old Harrison to sell white men into slavery, exclaimed:—"He is right, perfectly right, the blacks have been slaves long enough, and it is time that the whites should take their turn." Will nothing but a broom handle, bring this thick-witted disciple of Tappan to reason.

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Illustration 8 Editors' 'Disclaimer.' Ithaca Herald (Vol.1, No.6) 5 Oct.

1836.

# CELEBRATION OF OUR NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE!

4th of July, 1863, at Ithaca.

## Order of Arrangement.

One Gun at Day-break (representing the breaking up of our Union, caused by the Abolitionists.)

The people will form in procession in front of the first-cut African Church, at 10 A. M.  
IN THE FOLLOWING ORDER

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Rag Muffins, - - - Capt. John Smith.        | 4. U. S. Office Holders, Capt. Longfret Curran. |
| 2. Loyal League, - - - " A. Spear.             | 5. Carriages, with the Clergy.                  |
| 3. Women's Loyal League, " Mrs. S. Loreington. | 6. Fanatics generally.                          |

The procession will march to the Gas Works under the Marshal of the Day.

Hon. WESLEY HOOKER, mounted on a Jackass, (representing the Higher Circle Hooker moves in)

## Order of Exercises.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. MUSIC. . . . . by Prof. Richardson's Tin Band.                                   | 3. READING OLD ABE'S PROCLAMATION. . . Tyler. |
| 2. PRAYER. . . . . Brother Kellogg.   | 4. ORATION. . . . . Perry Cooper.             |
| 5. A few remarks by Elsey Brooks and Mrs. Loreington, (Ann S. Dickinson declining.) |   |

DINNER. Gas Sou . . . . . Schuyler's Restorative Pills.

Wide-a-Wakes, marching through the South-Hooker taking a Big Drink of Chain Lightning, afterwards, 4 Boxes Lee's Pills, closing with the great scene, entitled the

# BIG SCARE,

On the JOURNAL OFFICE in the hands of the Mayor, showing Hooker shining Stars and Selkregg's immense mouth wide open, spitting fire.

A. LYNCHCOMBE,  
JOHN KENDALL,  
JOHN SMITH,  
JOHN LEWIS,  
GEORGE WASHINGTON JONES,

Committee of Arrangements.

Illustration 9 Broadside "Celebration of Our National Independence"

Dewitt Historical Society, Ithaca New York.

# LOYAL LEAGUE

## FUNERAL,

AT ITHACA,

On Friday, at 2 30, A. M.

### THE PROCESSION

Will form with the right on the African Church, and the left on the top of the Lower Methodist, and will move in the following Order:

The Porter of the First National Bank.

The *Cherwellian* Band.

The Reverend, the Blood Hounds of Zion.

Past Grand Officers of the League.

Shoddy Contractors.

Bounty Jumpers.

Deserters.

Returned Refugees from Canada.

First Grand Division of the Loyal League.

The Daughters of Zephaniah.

Niggers, Mulattos, and Half Breeds.

Yellow Niggers.

Ladies of Color with White Babies

Ladies of Color, with Black Babies with Green Hacks.

Colored Persons.

Persons of African Descent.

White Trash.

Defeated Candidates at Charter Election.

#### HEARSESES.

Old Wide Awakes.

Second Grand Division of the League.

The Freedmen's Aid Society.

Yellow Girls.

White Women with Black Babies.

White Women with Babies of Uncertain and Mixed Color.

The Amalgamation Society.

Free Love Organizations.

Funatics, Idiots, Fools and Lunatics.

Persons of Unsound Mind.

Defeated Candidates at Town Meeting. (*in mourning.*)

#### HEARSESES.

The Mutual Admiration Society.

"DEAD DUCKS."

UNITED STATES OFFICIALS.

CHANTING—"And are we wretches yet alive."

N. B.—The relatives and friends of the deceased, together with the "Higher Circle," are requested to meet at the office of the United States Deputy Collector, at 1 o'clock, A. M.

By Order of the Committee.

BIG TALK, Chairman.

SPLIT LOG, }  
YA-YAH, } Secretaries.

FOR SALE!

1 Large Freedmen's Bureau.

Illustration 10 Broadside "Loyal League Funeral" Dewitt Historical Society, Ithaca New York.

# ORDER OF EXERCISES!

FOR THE  
**Colored Celebration!!**  
On the 8th of July.

At daybreak every "Moke" shall sneak from his couch, and annoit his scrumps with Chloride of Lime.

At sunrise, the ringing of the Bells of the Wheat St. and Wesleyan Churches.

## MARSHALS OF THE DAY.

LEVI JOSEPH MORMON SMITH,  
Prof. WM. BARBEROUS LIGHTFOOT, ALEN,  
ALEXANDER BERGULLIAN BRAUSMUS JOLLYDINGS RICHARDSON.

The Procession will form at 9 o'clock and 60 minutes, at the Wheat Street Mount-Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, in the following order, namely, to-wit: as follows; viz. that is to say, as it were, &c.--

- 1stly. Grand Marshal and Staff;
- 2dly. Marshal Major: 1 Fife, 2 Clarionets, 31 Brass Drums;
- 3dly. President and Vice President, in a Milk Wagon;
- 4thly. Orator and Readers in a Carriage, and in Liquor;
- 5thly. Rev. Clergy, "in Them New Clothes;"
- 6thly. Revolutionary Veterans from bondage, in Pompey Johnson's Swill Wagon, with Trippe Extract of Skunk's Grease and Syrup of Ram Cats;
- 7thly. Benevolent Societies;
- 8thly. Committee of Arrangements in Carriages and in Ice;
- 9thly. Citizens, Strangers, Abolitionists, and Gerrit Smith Voters.

The Procession will "Hoof it" to the Park, to the Music of "Happy are we Narkkeys so free." On arriving there the Order of Exercises will be the following:

- 1st. Music by the Band: Air—"John Brown's Soul," etc.
- 2d. The Great African Timbuctoo Calithuopian Rio Janeiro Glee Club will sing "Indigent Aged Edward."
- 3d. Prayer by the Rev. John Wesley Benson Spurgeon Thomas
- 4th. Reading of the Broad-Axe Emancipation Denunciation and Abominations of the Devotion spoken of by Daniel the Prophet, A. B. C. C. C. Smith and another Nig.
- 5th. Opening Address by Z. Wendell Contraband George Washington Greeley Elephant Liberia Tyler.
- 6th. Oration, by the Great Horse Maine Frederick Augustus Don Kyser de Baboon Roderic DeB Douglas.
- 7th. Music, by the Band, "Blue Tail Fly."
- 8th. Song by the Glee Club:

I would not be a Barber, and shave men all my life;  
I'd rather be a gentleman, and marry a white wife.  
I would not pick a Beech, it is no deuced law,  
But I would have a deuced Ring, my wife a Piss-oe!

- 9th. Benediction, by the Rev. Henry Goggles-Eye Johnson.
- The Procession will form and darken the streets to the Hotel, into the shouts of the Boys, the barking of Dogs and the universal holding of noses, where they will proceed to "sling Beef" and "Jerk" small Beer.
- It concludes the termination of the day, there will be a

## GRAND ENTERTAINMENT AT THE TOWN HALL!!

At early daylight, by Prof. Pollywog Ding Bat Johnson, who will appear in his great imitations of Shakspeare's "Old Fellow" and Hamlet Princes of Denmark, Ferguson's "What is it?" Commodore Nutts and Horace Greeley!  
The Fiasco used on this occasion is kindly loaned from the princely residences of Alex. Richardson, Esq.

CARDS OF ADMISSION: 3 5-Cent Pieces.

Illustration 11 Broadside "Order of Exercises" Dewitt Historical Society, Ithaca, New York.



## INTRODUCTION TO SECTION TWO: THE SCRIPT

*. . . That's just what I mean! When you can't write for yourself you at they mercy! You just be talking and talking and who knows what they write down or just leave out! Naw, you got to tell and write your stories yourself! That's when you get to the real truth of things . . .*

This second section, focusing on the writing phase of this project, seeks to elaborate something of the objectives and techniques used in interpreting the information discussed in the preceding section which detailed the first or research phase of this project. The first chapter in this section, Chapter Three, deals with the precursors to my work - the slave narratives. Here I discuss some general observations pertaining to the genre with specific reference to structure. This discussion includes both published slave narratives written by the contemporaries of Elsie Brooks and transcribed oral narratives. Chapter Four deals more specifically with my objectives in writing the script. The final chapter of this section, Chapter Five, presents the text of the script, The Life and Times of Aunt Elsie Brooks.

## Chapter III

### The Precursors:

...In The Tradition of the American Slave Narrative. . .

...*They was all of them used to be slaves too, like me . . .*

The American Slave's narrative has been documented and consistently re-examined as a root and source of African American literature. Many volumes have been devoted to proving assertions such as the following:

...the undeniable fact is that the Afro-American literary tradition takes its start, in theme certainly but also often in content and form from the slave narratives.<sup>55</sup>

My script, by virtue of its objectives, was also patterned after this African American literary tradition; mine was a deliberate incorporation of themes and forms drawn from the slave narrative genre. My script can also be placed within the relatively contemporary trend which points to a resurgence of concern with slavery in fiction which has emerged in the past two decades.<sup>56</sup> In those works of fiction which slavery, either directly or

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<sup>55</sup>James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," The Slave's Narrative eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 168.

<sup>56</sup>Deborah E. McDowell makes a similar observation in her article, "Negotiating between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery after Freedom - *Dessa Rose*" which appears in Slavery and the

indirectly, there exists an apparent concern with history, retelling, learning from ancestors and with refigurations of the African American past.<sup>57</sup> The objectives of this second phase of my project is also in keeping with these. My script is intended, in part, as an exploration into a specific period of the African American past, yet equally significant is my incorporation of a literary as well as a historical past.

The preceding section mentions that published narratives and biographies of Elsie Brooks' contemporaries provided some historical information of relevance to my project. The historical significance for my project of the autobiographical narratives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Jermain Wesley Loguen, lies in the relation of each of these subjects to Elsie Brooks. All three subjects escaped from slavery and ended up in New York State. Both Loguen and Douglass bear a direct relation to Elsie Brooks; both also came from Maryland and they are both persons whom she most likely knew in Ithaca. Although Harriet Jacobs was a slave in North Carolina, her account views Southern slavery and Northern freedom from a woman's perspective. These sources can be examined in terms of their

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Literary Imagination, eds. McDowell and Rampersad (Johns Hopkins UP: Baltimore, 1989). She cites Margaret Walker's Jubilee (1966) as something as a catalyst for the "neoslave narrative" p.144.

<sup>57</sup>Gloria Naylor's Mama Day (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988); Octavia Butler's Kindred (New York: Pocket Books, 1981); David Bradley's Chaneysville Incident (New York: Harper and Row, 1981); and Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon (New York: Knopf, 1977) exemplify this group.

similarities in voice, theme and structure in order to demonstrate the extent to which these sources, and criticisms of these, were drawn upon in the creation of the script.

Within the genre of slave narrative each of these exemplifies distinct types of narrative acts. Douglass's work has been the most frequently examined as a standard in characterizing the genre. Jacobs work offers a deviation from the standard form by virtue of its gender specific subject matter and its incorporation of the form and themes of the sentimental novels of her day. Loguen's work exemplifies the problematic relation between authorship and authenticity as it relates to works of the slave narrative genre. There has been quite an unresolved debate as to how Loguen's work should be read - as biography or autobiography.<sup>58</sup> Loguen's work raises the issue of

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<sup>58</sup>The Rev. J.W. Loguen as a Slave and a Freeman(1859) has been a perplexing and controversial title for bibliographers of Afro-American writing. In her pioneering study The Slave Narrative, Marion Wilson Starling calls the book a biography of Loguen. In his equally important edition of Slave Testimony, John Blassingame argues that the book is Loguen's autobiography. The issue, no doubt, will be impossible to settle authoritatively. There is reason to conclude that while the book represents a reliable account of Loguen's life as a slave and his early years of freedom, Loguen himself did not write it. The book is prefaced by a statement from an anonymous "Editor" who states that he is writing "the Biography" of Loguen. Loguen's role is central, the biographer insists, for "we took the features from him and filed up the picture." But the biographer has not limited himself to Loguen's story; he has supplied "facts, circumstances, and discourse" that were "not connected with Mr. Loguen's experiences with slavery" in order "to connect the real facts of his life" and to "furnish variety for the reader." (cited from Andrews To Tell A Free Story: the First Century of Afro-American Autobiography (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1986)347.

authenticity, a prominent concern of the genre.

These works sought to witness firsthand the evils of slavery thereby furthering the cause of abolition. The means of publication were almost exclusively in conjunction with abolitionists and their organizations. That the story be 'authentic' was a necessary factor in the ability of the work to achieve its purpose. Included in the published volumes were letters by whites attesting to authorship, documents verifying aspects of the story, and photographs, often signed by the author, as proof of the subject's very existence as well as of his or her literacy. These verifications of authenticity have rendered these works historic documents. On the other hand, the objective of authenticity serves to raise some important questions concerning the constructed identity of the writing subject. Because the subjects speak in the first person and because they "present their narratives from the point of view of participants looking backwards,"<sup>59</sup> slave narratives will share some features with fiction. Namely the creation of a narrating subject. The selective memory of the narrating/writing subject creates the story. The facts are true but the process of selecting and ordering the events may, as autobiography must, incorporate fictive techniques. To argue that, "Although autobiography uses fictive techniques, it is not false; it is fictive not faithless,"<sup>60</sup> is to acknowledge the

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<sup>59</sup> Lillie Butler Jugurtha, "Points of View in the Afro-American Slave Narratives: A Study of Narratives by Douglass and Pennington" in The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory eds. John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner (Western Illinois U, 1982)119.

<sup>60</sup>Annette Niemtzwow, "The Problematic of Self in Autobiography: The Example of the

semi-fictional quality of narratives of this genre. In the act of writing the subject constructs him/herself as the hero(ine) in a quest to read, write and be free. The subject recounts his/her quest for literacy and freedom<sup>61</sup> in retrospect, while simultaneously declaring the evils of slavery. In doing so, the subject connects him/herself to the reality of slavery and to the audience.<sup>62</sup> This suggests that the common experience of slavery and the common audience,

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Slave Narrative" in The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory eds. John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner (Western Illinois U, 1982)107.

<sup>61</sup>Taken from the paradigm presented by Robert Stepto in From Behind the Veil (Urbana:U of Illinois P,1979)167: "The classic ascent narrative launches an 'enslaved' and semi-literate figure on a ritualized journey to a symbolic North; that journey is charted through spatial expressions of social structure, invariably systems of signs that the questing figure must read in order to be both increasingly literate and increasingly free. The ascent narrative conventionally ends with the questing figure situated in the least oppressive social structure afforded by the world of the narrative, and free in the sense that he or she has gained sufficient literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate survivor. As the phrase "articulate survivor" suggests, the hero or heroine of an ascent narrative must be willing to forsake familial or communal postures in the narrative's most oppressive social structure for a new posture in the least oppressive environment - at best one of solitude; at worst, one of alienation."

<sup>62</sup>" . . .The slave becomes hero-protagonist who does not only declares the evils of the system that holds him prisoner, but challenges the values of a system that he knows may ultimately destroy him. In this manner voice molds the structure to connect the narrator to audience, to history,to the reality out of which he speaks, focusing on self as subject of his own experience and as a metaphor for the black experience" Martha Cobb, "The Slave Narrative and the Black Literary Tradition" in The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory eds. John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner (Western Illinois U, 1982)36-37.

usually of Northern abolitionists, may occasion certain similarities in the authorial voice of these written narratives. The similarity of experience and purpose is reflected in certain similarities of theme and structure.

James Olney<sup>63</sup> provides one of the best (for its almost humorous clarity) reductions of the conventions of the slave narratives.<sup>64</sup> The first two points in his "master outline" read as follows:

A. An engraved portrait, signed by the narrator.<sup>65</sup>

B. A title page that includes the claim, as an integral part of the title, 'Written by Himself'<sup>66</sup> (or some variant: 'Written from a statement of Facts by Himself'; or 'Written by a Friend, as related to him by Brother Jones'; etc) (Olney, 152).

Once the narratives have established, at a glance, some measure of authenticity, the following, according to Olney, must be included in the "actual narrative" structured accordingly:

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<sup>63</sup> James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," The Slave's Narrative eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 148-175.

<sup>64</sup> Approaching this "master outline" as a sort of checklist in support of the authenticity of my own script, references to the script are detailed in subsequent footnotes.

<sup>65</sup> Previously mentioned as one of my earliest sources, I include Beardsley's photograph of Elsie Brooks upon which someone had written "aunt Elsie Brooks", as Illustration 1 in this volume.

<sup>66</sup> The title of this thesis project is intended as an allusion to the elaborate titles of standard works of this genre.

E. The actual narrative:

1. a first sentence beginning, "I was born . . ." then specifying a place but not a date of birth<sup>67</sup>;
2. a sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father<sup>68</sup>;
3. description of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently the victims<sup>69</sup>;
4. an account of one extraordinarily strong, hardworking slave - often "pure African" - who, because there is no reason for it, refuses to be whipped<sup>70</sup>;
5. record of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write<sup>71</sup>;

6 . . .

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<sup>67</sup>After the narrative frame has been established, Elsie begins her 'story' thus. I draw on this convention, in part, to make up for the lack of specific information.

<sup>68</sup>Elsie does not remember her "blood family" who were sold away when she was young.

<sup>69</sup>Miz Amy's sale of slaves, particularly Elsie's family and Mama Bett, is the extent of her described cruelty. Accounts of whippings were deliberately not included to make the point that "cruelty" need not be physical.

<sup>70</sup>This is my Mama Bett character, the "pure African proud and tall" who refused to move North with the family and was consequently sold.

<sup>71</sup>Once the point is made that slaves, Elsie, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth are illiterate, I add that Miz Amy, a propertied white woman, is also illiterate.



7. description of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of a day, a week, a year<sup>72</sup>;

8. account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven South<sup>73</sup>;

9. description of patrols, of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs<sup>74</sup>;

10. description of successful attempt(s) to escape<sup>75</sup>, lying by during the day, travelling by night guided by the North Star, reception in a free state by Quakers who offer a lavish breakfast and much genial thee/thou conversation<sup>76</sup>;

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<sup>72</sup>In the script I provide descriptions of the divisions of labor and Mama Bett's "little cabin" on the Furniss plantation primarily to show that things weren't necessarily too different for Elsie in Danby. The main difference is that in Danby she has no other slaves living with her.

<sup>73</sup>This is suggested in the sale of Elsie's parents, the subsequent sale of "all the slaves on the place," and Mama Bett's sale.

<sup>74</sup>This element does not appear in the script. I wanted to problematize Elsie's decision not to leave, she stays with the Furniss's not because she is afraid to leave but because she does not see leaving as an option.

<sup>75</sup>It is the memory of the woman escaping with her bundle that provides the final motivation for Elsie to leave Danby.

<sup>76</sup>The Quaker's usual role in aiding runaways is the source of Daniel Jackson's mistaking Elsie for a runaway. The actual agents in the achievement of her 'freedom' are herself and the African Americans in the Ithaca community.

11. taking of new last name (frequently one suggested by a white abolitionist) to accord with new social identity as a free man, but with retention of first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity<sup>77</sup>;

12. reflections on slavery<sup>78</sup>

The narrative is incomplete without further documentation of its authenticity:

F. An appendix or appendices composed of documentary material - bills of sale, details of purchase from slavery, newspaper items<sup>79</sup> . . (Olney, 153-154).

The elements of Olney's "Master Plan for Slave Narratives" evolve from the purpose of the writings of this genre. Although some inherent fictive space is allowed the author, Olney, among others, argues that the purpose of such narratives, together with the requirement of authenticity, renders their very structure as limiting, metaphorically speaking, as slavery itself. The narrative must follow the 'master's' (white abolitionist's) plan:

About this "Master Plan for Slave Narratives" (the irony of the phrasing being neither unintentional nor insignificant) . . what is

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<sup>77</sup>The subject of the script is "Aunt Elsie Brooks", the constructed identity of the former slave Elsie Furniss. The name "Brooks" represents her chosen familial bond and the title "aunt" indicates her place in the community.

<sup>78</sup>Given the current historical context, the purpose of my narrative is not to dwell on the evils of slavery. Thus Elsie's reflections on slavery differ from those usually presented.

<sup>79</sup>Again, for the sake of authenticity, documentary material is included as illustrations. The first section of this thesis serves a similar purpose.

being recounted . . . is nearly always the realities of the institution of slavery, almost never the intellectual, emotional, moral growth of the narrator (Olney, 152).

I would add that usually the subject's quest for and attainment of literacy is the extent of the focus on the subject's intellectual growth. Often in recounting how the author learned to read and write, the emphasis is on slavery - the cruel system which denied slaves the acquisition of literacy. Olney continues:

The lives in the narratives are never, or almost never, there for themselves and their own intrinsic, unique interest but nearly always in their capacity as illustrations of what slavery is really like. Thus in one sense the narrative lives of the ex-slaves were as much possessed and used by the abolitionists as their actual lives had been by slaveholders (Olney, 152-154).

Certainly the purpose and readers' expectations of the published slave narratives limited their focus. While the writing subject may present an 'authentic' account of his/her life, the work will also contain certain gaps and fictive elements. Both the authentic information and the gaps are of relevance to my project. In the creation of a narrative voice, in theme, and in structure, my development of the script follows the plan of its precursors to a conscious extent. My work is at variance with its precursors in its attempt to use fictive space and technique to present the life and the times of Elsie Brooks for "their own intrinsic, unique interest" rather than as an illustration of what slavery

was really like.

Oral narratives, such as those transcribed by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration of various states,<sup>80</sup> bear remarkable similarities in structure to the published written narratives -- although, to use Olney's phraseology, "the lives" in these oral narratives were indeed "there for themselves and their own unique interest." Of the several that I examined in relation to this project, paying particular interest to those from Maryland, many adhered to Olney's "master plan." The "I was born . . ." beginning, the account of parentage, the description of the master, and of the food, clothing, and accommodations given to the slaves -- usual elements, according to Olney, of the written narrative -- are contained in these oral narratives. Added to these are the accounts of emancipation and comparisons between conditions of slavery and of freedom. As many of these oral narratives were structured by the interviewer from the responses to questions given in an interview session, it would seem that the interviewer rather than the interviewee was responsible for the order and structure of the printed material. Any similarities in structure that these bear to the written slave narratives, or to any other autobiography for that matter, is then the

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<sup>80</sup>George P. Rawick ed., The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography (Westport : Greenwood P, 1972) Volumes 2-17 consist of transcriptions of narratives prepared by the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-38, and deposited in the Library of Congress, where they were assembled under the title: Slave Narratives, a folk history of Slavery in the United States from interviews with former slaves.

probable result of interviewers' mediation. This feature of mediation renders problematic any conclusions, based on this material, as to the extent that oral narrative structure influenced written structure. Nevertheless, the way that the interviewees expressed themselves -- the themes and metaphors employed in their speech, the first hand observations and the folklore -- was helpful in the structuring of my 'written' oral narrative.

## Chapter Four

### The Creation of the Script:

. . .Written Not by Herself . . .

*. . .A whole lot of memory went into these here stitches . . .*

That the creation of the script attempted to draw upon historical fact, even in its fictive elements, and to borrow from the structure of the slave narrative genre requires some further elaboration. In the first section of this thesis on the research phase of the project, I presented primary and secondary source material and suggested some interpretations of these in reference to their use in my script. The preceding chapter outlined some of the elements of the standard form used by authors of published slave narratives. Emphasized was the relation of these elements of structure to the overall objectives of such narratives, namely to convince the reader of the evils of slavery, of the humanity of the African American writing subject, and of the need to abolish the cursed institution. I have suggested previously that although my script incorporates certain of these standards in its structure, the difference in purpose accounts for most of my deviations from the standard form.

The objective of my script, simply put, is to present the life and the

context of the life of its subject as a matter of historical interest. The choice of the first person narrative form carries with it the added objective of creating an authentic voice for my subject.

One main difference between Elsie Brooks and her contemporaries, the subjects of published slave narratives, is that she was illiterate. Thus the very act of giving her a text lies in the realm of the fictive. Inherent in this act is the refiguring of her story and placing it within the historical context of her African American community.

I have presented several accounts of Elsie's life and character as written by her contemporaries. I read into these a certain patronizing reverence perhaps attributable to the differences of gender, race, class, and age which existed between subject and writer. The treatment reminded me of the attempts to raise a mammy monument in the nation's capital.<sup>81</sup> By

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<sup>81</sup>In Their Place: White America Defines Her Minorities, 1850-1950, Lewis A. Carlson and George A. Colburn. On p. 80, the authors provide,

Nowhere is covert racism more evident than when white Americans talk patronizingly about Negroes whom they have deeply loved, and the 'black mammy' has long produced such nostalgic reminiscences . . . In 1923 a bill that met with favorable response in the Senate would have empowered the Army engineers to select a suitable site in the capital on which they would erect a statue to 'The Black Mammy of the South.' The response from blacks was quick and generally negative.

The text of a letter written to the Baltimore Sun in response to criticism of the plan by the board of directors of Phyllis Wheatly Y.W.C.A. of D.C. concluded with the following:

We have a notion that, could she [mammy] speak to these resolutions, she would give her learned and superior grandchildren a sharp piece of her very sharp mind. She did not have much book learning, but she could be as scornful as the most

1915<sup>82</sup>, the revered old woman is characterized as an extraordinary "slave plantation product" who unlike others, possessed wit and intellect with which she kept her fellow townspeople amused as she "strayed" scouting for food to fill her basket.<sup>83</sup> It is no great surprise that as we move closer in time to the 1925 march down State Street, Ithaca New York of the Ku Klux Klan certain stereotypical characterizations grace Elsie's testimonials. Her devout religiosity becomes the source of amusement. My frustrations with the distortions of Elsie's character in the thirty years between her 883-person-in-attendance-funeral and the article of 1915 were intensified by her illiteracy which, for my purposes, leaves a void in the historical space her voice should occupy.

Like other illiterate and revered old African American women of Elsie's day - namely, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth<sup>84</sup> - a benevolent and

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scornful to persons who 'put on airs' in her vicinity, and she wouldn't stand any nonsense from any person of color, free or slave. She never put herself in the latter class. She considered herself a member of the family in which she found herself, and in refinement, good breeding and good manners was a model whom few of her descendants of to-day can approach . . . She has been immortalized already in Southern literature . . .(81).

<sup>82</sup>1915 is also the year that D.W. Griffith's Birth of A Nation, with its stereotypical black mammy played by a white man in blackface, was released.

<sup>83</sup> These references are to the 1915 article "Historical Reference to Some of the Old Pictures" Ithaca Journal by T.W. Burns quoted previously in my chapter one. Burns is also the author Initial Ithacans the source of the 'George Johnson story' about the under ground railroad operations.



sympathetic person, removed by race, class and gender from his subject, has left an account of Elsie's voice. Ensnared amid the account of her funeral is the text of the "Last Request" of Elsie Brooks.

As an historical document, the Request includes some pertinent information such as evidence of Elsie's relationship to Catherine<sup>85</sup>, and the existence of Catherine's sister and husband<sup>86</sup>. This "Last Request" exemplifies the problematic relation between subject and voice. The voice is clearly not Elsie's but instead that of its author which is further problematized by the self-consciously religious tone of this quasi-legal document. Nevertheless, the text provides an opportunity to read between the lines to imagine both, the nature of the relation between its subject and its author, and what was said by its subject to its author at the time of its writing. The text of the "Last Request" reads as follows:

Ithaca, Tompkins County,

N. Y., Feb., 17, 1875.

[Rev. John Thomas please read in the church.]

This is the testimony of our aged mother, Elsey Brooks, to the

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<sup>84</sup>To these names can be added those many others whose stories were transcribed as part of oral history projects.

<sup>85</sup>Although Catherine Brooks appears as part of Elsie's household in the 1850 census, the Request provides the only mention that although Elsie regards her as a daughter, they are not blood relations. Catherine's last name, as listed in the census, suggests she may have been Jacob's child from a previous marriage.

<sup>86</sup> I could find no further information than this on either of these persons.

public; I have lived in the fear of God. He has been my helper and my guide for many years. I will give you my convictions in the commencement of my faith in God. These are the words of my version, which brought me to Christ, the 25th chapter of Matthew, commencing at the 40-41 verses:

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

Glory to God, I have lived and grown in the love of God until this hour; I am brought down to my bed by that God which has been my protector this many years. Glory be to his holy name.; he is still with me and I am clothed in my right mind. Blessed be God.

"Yes, though I walk through the valley and shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me." "Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord; yea, saith the spirit, they rest from their labors, and their works do follow them." "I have fought a good fight; I have finished my work; I have kept the faith." Now, Lord, receive my spirit.

To the young converts: Prove faithful to God and live with an eye single to His glory. Although I am gone down to my narrow house, my soul is at rest down around my Father's throne. I shall look for each one of you to meet me on the sunny banks of glory, where you shall receive the welcome approbation, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." O, children, prove faithful to the end, and you shall wear a crown of glory.

Now, a word to my daughter: You have been a dutiful child to me. Although you were not my own, you have acted the part of a dear child to its own dear mother. I remember what your sister asked you what you would do with me when I got to be old and could do nothing. You said you would take care of me; you have kept your word; you have stayed by me to the end. God bless you, my child, keep your faith in the Lord. I shall look for you in the kingdom. Catharine, strive to bring your dear husband with you.

These are the words of your dear, sleeping mother. Let your light shine around. I want this hymn sung over my grave, by the church members and friends:

"Shall we meet beyond the river,  
Where the surges cease to roll."

My request, Elsey Brooks.

This "Last Request", or rather the fact that it contains apparently dictated ideas written down by someone else and tells precious little about its subject other than her religious commitment, provided the basis for what would become the narrative frame for my script.

In structuring the script certain practical concerns of dramaturgy figured prominently. I sought to create a situation in which Elsie could logically and realistically reminisce and talk about her life in retrospect. I wanted to create a dramatic space which would by its nature limit the amount of detail and documented fact possible in the given circumstances in order to make the gaps in my research less distracting and thus less compromising to the authenticity of the information I was indeed able to uncover. Yet, having opted for a one-character-monologue form, I needed Elsie to emerge from this space as my storyteller or griot -- the keeper and transmitter of an oral history.

The play is set during an unspecified time between the writing of the 'Request' on February 17th and Elsie's death on March 9th. At this point she has accepted the fact that she will die soon and from this perspective reviews the events of her life. Alone in her house, next door to the AMEZ church, Elsie, a woman of great physical stamina and strength of character, leaves her sick-

bed in order to prepare the 'special dress' that she wishes to be buried in. In her search for the dress, she happens upon the "Last Testimony" which she couldn't write for herself but wishes to read before she dies. The dress triggers memories and the "Testimony" reminds her, in this vulnerable moment, of her only regret - that she never learned to read or write. She concludes that the "Testimony", written by someone else, is limited in its capacity to express her voice and life accurately.

The narrative frame inherent in this scenario serves both the theatrical and literary objectives of the script. It is logical enough to draw the audience in while also providing a space for the introduction of two main issues: the omission of the illiterate African American from written history, and the problematic of authenticity within third person historical perspectives. The narrative frame allows for this latter issue of authenticity to be explored on three levels. First is the basic level in which Elsie speaks of the problems associated with accounts of one's life as written by others. The contents of Elsie's "Last Testimony," like those of the transcribed oral narratives, are mediated. Yet the effect of authenticity is produced by virtue of Elsie's signalling that she will now tell the real story -- the parts left out of the written testimony. Throughout the narrative, another level presents itself as Elsie attempts to fill in the gaps left in the written "Testimony" with her oral account. This second level is complicated by the fact that as the subject, the selectivity of Elsie's memory must result in omissions. Yet, the given situation -- her age

and the fact that she is near death -- lends authenticity to what she does remember and tells. On a third level, the authenticity of third person representations is problematized by the very fact that Elsie's voice is created by my third person perspective. Yet the effect of authenticity is created by my insertions of researched facts, dates, names and places. It is my objective that the authenticity of the narrative voice be constantly challenged; the reader or audience member should never be secure in the fact that he or she is getting the whole story or the complete or accurate 'truth'.

From the narrative frame, Elsie begins the actual narrative of her life and times. The explanation as to why she can't account for her age prefaces the standard, "I was born. . ." beginning. This explanation emphasizes the point that certain aspects of Elsie's self-knowledge are dependent upon exterior broader historical events interpreted in conjunction with information from others.

The two basic operatives within the structure of the script are the created narrative frame and the standard structure of the published slave narrative. My use of refigurations of the structural standards of this form have been previously discussed. Here, I would like to address certain constructs within the fictive space allowed by this structure.

I have mentioned earlier that the structure of the script allows for certain omissions of historical fact to appear nevertheless logical to the reader or audience member. I might add that the same is true concerning the omission

of alternative perspectives. Any historical information is presented from Elsie's point of view and perspective. The structure allows for any opinions, observations, or interpretations to be regarded simply as Elsie's truth not necessarily the only truth. This feature in itself allows for a certain amount of fictive space.

In the act of speaking her story, Elsie creates herself as heroine. Within the fictive space, I attempt to extend this metaphorically. Her dress becomes a symbol of her created self; her weaving and creating it is a trope for her weaving and creating the story of her life. Her present action of restoring the dress tropes the narrative act of reclaiming her story. Similarly, the building of the AMEZ church symbolizes both the building of the African American community in Ithaca and the creation of Elsie Furniss's identity of "Aunt Elsie Brooks".

The fictive space allows for the creation of characters within Elsie's story. All names, with the exception of Mama Bett's, are those of actual persons whose characterizations are based either on documented fact or folklore. Daniel Jackson's story, for example, is used although he would not have been in Ithaca when Elsie arrived prior to 1840. The characterizations of Jacob Brooks, Mama Bett and the unnamed characters are composites drawn from written and oral narratives as well as from works of fiction. The story of the slave woman who escapes with her 'bundle' is also a composite drawn

from several such stories which appear in narratives.

The story of the stones for the church's foundation was supplied, in part, by local folklore. When I asked her if she knew anything of how the church was built, Mrs. Hazel Love of the St. James AMEZ Church told me that it was believed that people donated money, time and materials. As proof, she said that there was a house on Green Street that had the same stones in its foundation. The story Elsie tells is a fictionalization of folklore.

Elsie's use of the baskets is, I suppose, my response to T.W. Burns.

Finally, certain tropes were developed from the language of the "Last Request" of Elsie Brooks. This text becomes a "Last Testimony" in the script -- her action is not to request but to testify! Elsie's words to Catherine, "Let your light shine around" become a trope for Elsie's involvement in building and sustaining her community in Ithaca. One passage which appears at the end of The script is the only one quoted directly from the "Request". Most significant is the affirmation inherent in the first three words, which are taken directly from the original source, that Elsie struggles to read from her "Last Testimony" -- "I have lived."



## Chapter V

### The Script:

#### The Life and Times of Aunt Elsie Brooks

*(The set represents the main room of Elsie's house. Center stage, there is an old chair with a large wash tub on its seat. An Apron is draped across the back post of the chair. At the SL side of the table is a large basket with wash things - scrub board, soap, scrub-brush etc. DR is a rocking chair and another large basket placed UL of it. This basket contains, among various pieces of fabric and articles of clothing, Elsie's 'special dress', a two-piece skirt and bodice outfit. Both are stained and have a worn appearance. DR of the rocking chair is a large sewing or picnic type basket with a lid. Preset in the basket is a 'spool' of thread (white thread wrapped around a piece of burlap cloth) a threaded needle is stuck in the thread. On the cover of the basket is the folded piece of paper upon which the "Last Testimony" is written. DL is a 'stove' (table) with two pots or kettles of water on it. Around the stove are two buckets. Water to fill the wash basin is preset in the bucket and kettle. The props, set pieces, and articles of clothing should suggest poverty during a period circa 1875.)*

*[An approaching voice is heard offstage singing, "I don't feel no ways tired." Elsie Brooks enters the stage area from UL. She wears a lace nightcap*

*which shows her white hair underneath, an antique-white eyelet ('poor-man's lace') night gown, and is barefoot. Still singing, she crosses to UL of the basket near the rocking chair. She stops singing, regards the audience, then blows her nose loudly. She speaks directly to the audience when not lost in reverie or caught up in her activity.]*

I expect to be dead any minute now! But don't feel sad, I'm the oldest person I know! I sure have lived a long life and it ain't no secret I'm gonna die. My daughter Catherine told me to keep still but I can't. If I don't fix up my meeting clothes and I die, they liable to lay me out at the funeral in some ol' handed down suit of clothes won't nobody even recognize me in!  
*[She searches basket then pulls out the dress]*

Now let me just say, I don't take no stock in finery but this here dress has a lot of memory in it. 'T aint no ordinary dress now. I made this dress myself, but the making of this dress was the most important making of a dress I'd ever done before or since.

Now look at it! I washed peoples clothes in this town of Ithaca close to forty years and look here, my own dress just full of mildew, water-stains and the like. *[As she examines and caresses it, her mood changes]*

I was always paying more attention to what other folks needed and what they needed done, than to my own self. Naw but I don't suppose I would have changed any of that though. You do your best by other folks and somehow you and yours get taken care of. Yes, that's what I believe.

*[She notices the folded paper and picks it up]*

But some things should have been different. I asked the Reverend to leave this here paper with me. When I fell sick some weeks ago, he come by. Now I already done told you, ain't no secret I'm gonna die. Well he asked me if I had any words of the spirit to share, anything I wanted for him to write down as a 'last testimony' he called it, to share with the congregation after my passing. Now you can tell he's a new pastor because anyone who knows me for any length of time knows I always got plenty to say and being dead ain't hardly enough to stop me from sharing words of the spirit! I didn't let him in on how it felt to be lying there sick and dying after so many long years; I seen and felt so much of life and then I have to have somebody else to write it down for me.

*[Elsie sits in rocking chair and puts paper back on the sewing basket.]*

See, I spent my whole life not knowing to read or write and I ain't so different from most people in that respect, but still it pained my heart not to be capable of writing down my feelings myself. Oh I can't say I didn't try to learn myself to do some reading but Lord, when you wait too long to do a thing its hard to grab up the chance again.

I asked the Rev. to leave this here piece of paper with my words on it with me. It ain't nothing but the bits of feeling I saw fit to share with the Rev. at the time but I was kind of hoping that perhaps the Lord would see fit to clear

my head so's I could at least read it for myself even if I couldn't write it all down.

*[she picks up the paper, unfolding it to read]*

"I have lived . . ."

*[she struggles through a bit then puts it down in the clothes basket.]*

Lord, it don't even sound like me! Well. . .

*[she picks up the dress and begins her preparations to wash out the stained areas. During the following, Elsie puts on her apron, fills the basin with water from the bucket, takes the scrub board, bar of laundry soap and scrub brush out of the basket near the basin.]*

My life sure would have been different if I had mastered that reading and writing. It ain't that I done kept no secrets from the Reverend but when you feeling thoughtful and you can think and then write and then cross it out and start again if you feel the need, the story come out different. There's more of the truth in it. When you don't have to worry bout what someone else is thinking bout what you saying when you saying it, the whole truth bout your story can come out for folks to think on.

Take that young man what come through here a few times, just using his words to excite people up bout slavery and freedom and voting. Yes, that young Mr. Fred Douglass could sure use some words. Yes, he talked real pretty, and not like some of those folks what separate the meaning from the feeling so's you don't really know what they talking bout or why they saying it

in the first place. Naw, he could talk with the meaning and the feeling just as clear so's you would know he was saying the truth of things.

Well they say he wrote his whole story down in a book for everybody to read and think on. Our ol Reverend Mr. Jermain Wesley Loguen, bless his heart, wrote down his story too, yes put it all in a book, talks about our town and our church, the Saint James African Methodist Episcopal Zion church of Ithaca , so's everybody could know. They was both of them used to be slaves like me.

And that young girl what they call 'Aunt' Harriet, she got a book. Now 'Aunt' Harriet ain't nowheres near as old as old 'Aunt' Elsie but to the younguns we's all 'Aunt-so-and-so' - out of respect. But now I know her so's I can tell you sure as I'm standing here, that Harriet Tubman is sure some kind of brave woman! And sister Sojourner, she another one, she got a book too. The two of them, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, is sure some special women. They was all of them used to be slaves too - like me.

But unlike the Rev. Mr. Loguen and the young Fred Douglass, neither one of these women could write. So's somebody else had to write down they stories for them. And that just might explain how come nary one of those books bout those women say nothing about Ithaca or ol' Aunt Elsie -so I'm told.

*[She crosses to drape shawl over the back of the rocker during the following.]*

And that's just what I mean. When you can't write for yourself you at

they mercy, you just be talking and talking and who knows what they write down or just leave out! But when you can tell and write your stories yourself, that's when you get to the real truth of things! have mercy.

*[She crosses to basin and begins to scrub the stains in the skirt.]*

Lord, if I could write, I would sure tell the story behind this here dress. Yes, that is one story I would sure put right in that 'last testimony'.

See, I guess you could say that this was my first real dress. Now I did make all my clothes of course but as I sat making this one, I knew when it was finished that this dress would be the real beginning.

Well now I'm getting ahead of myself. If I want you all to understand I have to start from what some folks might call the beginning. Now since I was born a slave, I can't tell you exactly when I was born, so folks just have to guess at my age from how I look and I suppose that's why folks be talking bout how ol Aunt Elsie is near bout 100 but I don't think that's right cause Catherine, that's my daughter, told me that if I was 100 and this here is 1875 then I must have been born in 1775 and if that were so I'd have to be pretty foolish not to recollect that big ol' war for white folks independence from England and since I don't and I ain't foolish I don't believe I'm no 100 years old - but that's not what I'm talking about. I was saying how I don't know when I was born because I was born a slave. But I do know I was born in the state of Maryland and I lived on the Furniss plantation cause that was the name of the

people what owned me.

I don't recollect too much about that time in Maryland. See, I was told that round the time I was born, Mr. Furniss started having troubles and he fell sick. My parents, 2 brothers and 2 sisters were sold along with a bunch of other slaves, to clear his debts. I don't really know why they kept me- that all happened while I was so young - but knowing them though, they probably didn't sell me cause they couldn't fetch a high enough price for a little child. What ever it was it couldn't have been kindness that made them keep me cause they didn't think twice about leaving me with no family.

I don't really remember nothing bout my blood family - I was too young. All I do remember is Mama Bett. Now she was something. She was probably the real reason they didn't sell me too. I think the master and especially his wife Mrs. Amy was scared of her something awful. We ended up being the only two they didn't sell. See, while the older slaves had to go out and work in the fields, the younger ones would stay with Mama Bett. She would do the cooking and washing and the weaving and sewing and give us little ones chores to do once we was big enough. I remember being real little and thinking she was my mama. She was a pure African, proud and tall. She wasn't no blood relation to my own mama but she said my mother was a pure African too.

Well, after a while, things on the Furniss plantation got so bad that they ended up selling every slave on the place except me, Mama Bett and two

field hands. They tried like that for a while 'til they sold those field hands cause the master had died and we was moving north to where Miz Amy's brother lived. Miz Amy was always proud of the care her husband took in providing for her. With the sale of the land and the other property, which included the two field hands, she had a nice bit of money to start over with. That was in 1807, I know because they did record the birth of Miz Amy's first and only child, a little boy named George. Born the same year his daddy died.

It was the following year we all left with Miz Amy's brother Henry Cluff for the North - well him, her , me and the baby left but Mama Bett said she wasn't going! See, Mama Bett delivered the baby, Miz Amy was about thirty years old when she had that boy, she'd been praying that somehow she and that dying husband of hers might have a child and I remember hearing her talk about it with Mama Bett. Now I don't claim to know any of the particulars about what Mama told Miz Amy or gave her to drink, but I believe that Miz Amy somehow believed that Mama had something to do with getting that baby born - so when Mama Bett said she was too old to travel anyplace Miz Amy respected that - she sold her to a woman there in town rather than give her her freedom. She said she would have, but a widow with a child got to try and make due - she couldn't afford to give Mama her freedom. The woman who bought Mama was about as old as she was and as soon as Mama was paid for, the woman turned right around and gave Mama her freedom. You should have seen the look on Miz Amy's face!



Now Mama Bett always seemed to me a powerful woman. She was what they called a 'healer'. She could doctor up any kind of folks. Of course it was her nature to use what all she knew to help folks but because she was so good at it everyone just knew that she sure could 'fix' someone what rubbed her the wrong way if she ever set her mind to it. Yes, folks was just waiting for something awful to happen to Miz Amy or her little baby George on account of how badly they done poor Mama Bett. But nothing ever happened. She told me she didn't hold nothing against Miz Amy. She felt sorry for her. She told me to trust in God because even though Miz Amy had the power to separate us, there was a higher power what could get me to freedom in the North.

Whenever I got to crying and moaning bout being separated from her, she'd talk to me about freedom. She would say, "Child, when you get up North just let your light shine around."

Lord, I suppose in a little bit I'll be seeing Mama Bett. She told me freedom was waiting for me in the North, no matter how I got there, but I don't suppose I was really thinking about that. I had been separated from the only Mama I knew and I could look at her and see that she wasn't going to be in this world much longer.

We moved to Connecticut and when the boy was three, we moved to Danby, a place in New York in the county of Tioga, not too far from here. Now I remember distinctly about those names because the next year, 1811 it was,

we made a trip to the county seat in Owego. It was me, Miz Amy and her brother Henry Cluff. Now Henry had to come along cause it was a long trip and then Miz Amy couldn't read nor write neither and we was going to the courthouse because at the time there was a law that nobody could bring a slave into the state unless they had owned them more than ten years before. So here was Mr. Cluff verifying that I was Miz Amy's slave from back in Maryland all my life and I was clearly more than ten years old because hadn't I just been helping them to clear trees and such so that was that. Miz Amy put a X on a paper and we headed home - with me her legal slave.

I don't know if I was even ten at all! But it was many years after that that a man, called hisself a abolitionist, told me that if my story was true, I should have *been* free because that same law said that that paper should have been filed at the courthouse within six months of our coming to New York State but how was I supposed to know that? Then there was a law that freed all slaves in New York in the year of 1827.

*[Leaving the skirt to soak in the basin, she picks up bodice. Throughout the following, Elsie examines the bodice and notices a rip. She crosses to rocker and sits.]*

Now, I ain't no fool, you got to understand, but for a long time I didn't see nor speak to nobody but the few folks they hired - with pay- to work along with me. There were no neighbors to speak of and though I'm told some colored folks were living out in Danby at the time I ain't never seen none. So

what was I supposed to do with this thing called freedom?

I just kept on there with miz Amy and them working and collecting pay now. But in my mind I wasn't free. Nothing was really different.

*[During the following , she prepares to sew. She takes a needle and thread from the sewing basket DR of the rocker.]*

I was in Owego, loading some purchases onto Miz Amy's cart, when a white man dressed all gentlemanly, came up to me. Called hisself a abolitionist. He was talking to me bout Free folks and white folks had to work together to end slavery.

I was standing there amazed and thinking bout what he was saying, when a Colored man walked up to him and shook his hand. They were still patting backs when he introduced me to Jacob Brooks. The abolitionist man said that Jacob was in town from a place called Ithaca to talk to some people about organizing a African Methodist Episcopal Zion church in Owego because they had one, a congregation anyway, in Ithaca since 1825 and it was expanding and there was talk of them building a church building for themselves cause they didn't have a building yet. But at the time, I didn't really have room to be giving that stuff much thought. I didn't have no answers to their questions about what I was going to do with my freedom.

But I can tell you, it was a different person that climbed into that wagon with Mr. Cluff. I didn't say nothing to nobody for the rest of that day. I thought of

Mama Bett that night and that's when I started on making this dress.

*[By now she is seated in the rocker sewing the ripped bodice.]*

Yes a whole lot of memories went into these here stitches. I reviewed every memory of my life as a slave with Mama Bett and alone in Danby trying to figure out where it would lead me. I had no family, no friends to speak of. I weaved the fabric the way Mama Bett taught me, the same as I had done many times before but this time was different. Then I cut it out and when no answers came to me, I thought of Mama Bett.

I spent many tears over my dress, working at night mostly cause I still had to work in the house for miz Amy and out in the farm with George who was a grown man by this time. See at the time, I didn't have no religion or anything, but what I was doing was praying like Mama Bett showed me. I knew about God from Mama Bett. When she couldn't give me no more answers, I called on God.

It was then that a memory came to me. A memory from a long time ago, back in Maryland with Mama Bett. It was evening time and after they sold off my family, I slept in a little cabin with Mama Bett. It was late at night and quiet. I was sleeping but Mama was still awake. A knock on the door woke me up. I heard a woman's voice. By then I was sitting up in my bed there in the one room we had. Mama opened the door and in come this woman. She was carrying a bundle, it was all wrapped and tied like a bundle of clothes or something. I remembered how her eyes were so grateful when she looked at

Mama whispering, "I won't bring no trouble in here...if they catch me they'll kill me, I'm running North." Then once she knew she was safe she started untying the bundle. She saw the look in my eyes, the eyes of a child watching her untie a piece of cloth from around the baby's mouth and then take a wad of cloth from inside the baby's mouth. Lord, I thought that baby would be dead for sure. Well, she saw me looking at her and she started crying, "She ain't going to be no slave, not her." Lord, when I think about how that woman could have choked that baby dead trying to get North. Me and Mama never talked about it, she never explained. The woman and her baby left way before dawn. But Mama would hush me when I tried to ask her. So I stopped asking: Why was she going like that? Where was she going? What was she going to?

*[A deliberate pause]*

The railroad between Owego and Ithaca was just finished. A horse would pull a coach along miles and miles of track back then. It passed right through Danby where I lived, when my dress was finished, I put it on under my coat, collected up the things I had been sewing in a basket and got on the coach headed for Ithaca.

Now I know it might seem like I was looking for that Colored man I met that day in Owego but I wasn't, not really. True enough I saw him but a few minutes that day but he sure was engraved on my memory. Sounds funny to me now, I mean I did eventually marry the man, but at the time it wasn't him I remembered so much as what he was saying. That stuff about a church and

colored folks. Made it sound like there was a real community of colored folks somewhere in that place called Ithaca. Here I was musta been bout 40 years old and never really been round none of my own people besides Mama Bett. The Furnisses were my only family. "Elsie Furniss" - that was me. Their history in Maryland and Danby was my history. Now I know that wasn't really true but that's how I had come to feel.

*[She bites thread to break it. Her sewing is finished.]*

I can say now that it was sure the hand of God that led me to Ithaca. And what a place it was! It was near about dinner time when I arrived.

*[She puts the needle and thread back in the basket , leaving the bodice on the rocker, she rises, holding the basket on her arm and proceeds to 'act out' her arrival in Ithaca.]*

I had bought some food with me, wrapped up nice in my basket with my clothes and money at the bottom. I figured I would just find myself a quiet spot under a tree somewheres and figure out what I was going to do next. Well, I stepped out of the coach and sort of moved away from the others. I was feeling lost and found at the same time, it was exciting and scary. I looked around at all the others being greeted and welcomed by friends and family and getting into wagons- most of them driven by the only colored folks I could see around there. I didn't have a soul to welcome me. I started walking though, trying to make myself believe it didn't matter none to me.

*[She crosses to front of wash basin. During the following, she acts out her role as well as that of the man.]*

I looked up and saw a colored man standing near a cart with a few bunches of flowers in the back. Now even I could see the sense in trying to sell flowers for folks to give to the travelling and arriving folk, but something just didn't seem quite right. For one thing, the man was singing the happiest sounding song I had heard in a long time and too he was looking straight at me like he knew me from somewhere or something. First he was just humming but when I gets closer to where he was standing he started putting words to the hum:

"Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus,

Steal away, steal away home, I ain't got long to stay here"

There was definitely something strange about the man, but something real friendly too. But seeings how I sure didn't know the man I wasn't about to return his stare, no sir I just kept on walking. I was just about to pass him and his cart when he stopped his song and said, "Long ride from Philadelphia ain't it?"

"Yes", I said, "sure was a mighty long ride from Philadelphia" I figured I'd play along, I didn't want to make no noise in front of all them white folks and draw attention to myself and the fact that I didn't know this man or where in God's name I was going for that matter.

"Long way to come to visit with your old friends."

"Yes, well when your old friends call you don't count the miles" I thought that would shut him up and I started to walk by again.

"Brooks sure be happy to see you" I had to stop. "Said to give you a ride if I happen to see his old friend."

I looked at his face closely, no I was sure I ain't never seen him before and he never did ask my name or nothing he just seemed to know me and he did say "Brooks", and that was the name of the only person I knew in the town of Ithaca. He started humming again and motioned like he wanted to help me into his cart.

Well, I figured I had gotten this far alright and he was just puny enough for me to shove him right out the seat if he turned out to really be crazy. So I got in.

*[Elsie sits on the back of the chair centerstage as though sitting in the cart.]*

He commenced to humming his song again and we took off. Now I hadn't forgotten about my food neither and with the basket there on my lap to remind me even with all this strange stuff going on. I unwrapped a cake and offered him some. He looked kind of surprised at it. "It sure is good" I said, "a friend made it for me, go on and try some". And it was true, somewhere between Ithaca and Danby I did start to think of miz Amy as an old friend, but one I wasn't too interested in seeing again. Anyway he took a piece without too much more coaxing.

"Sure is good, those Philadelphia Friends are sure fine folks."



I looked at him. "How come you know I know Brooks but you don't know I ain't from no Philadelphia?"

"I know you ain't from Philadelphia, you got the South all over you, but you never can tell who is listening in so you got to be careful, even here. It's just best to say you're from Philadelphia if people ask, ain't they told you that? You never know, I don't want to scare you any more than you already are but they got some folks around here that wouldn't think twice about taking you back if they thought they could make some money at it"

"Take me back? When I left I meant to stay gone ain't nobody taking me back nowhere"

He just laughed, " Of course not, it's just that we running a smooth operation here and the slightest hint could get all of them folks what helped you into some hot trouble."

*[She crosses to place the basket back DS of the rocker. During the following , Elsie picks up the bodice and crosses to basin to wash it.]*

Now maybe I been in Danby a little too long but it wasn't until we got to this house and these nice people showed me to a fine bedroom and we was all sitting down eating that I realized what was going on and we all had to laugh. See when he saw me come out of that train coach, ol' Daniel Jackson mistook me for a different kind of passenger. He thought I was coming in on what they called the Underground railroad. all of that singing and double talk

was codes and I was playing right along without even knowing it. But he did say "Brooks" and I sure knew a man named Jacob Brooks. Well he had a story for that one too.

See there was many folks white and black named Brooks so if somebody did overhear him they would think that I was either some friend or family of a black Brooks or somebody come to work for a white Brooks. Now I was just amazed! specially when I found out that ol' Daniel Jackson was a runaway slave from the South himself from Virginia near Maryland. He was planning to go on to Canada but a "conductor" (that's what they called the people who ran this under the ground railroad) he helped get him a job right here and Daniel wanted to stay because he didn't want to go too far North if he didn't have to because he wanted to go back and get his mother and eventually he did too! That conductor was the Reverend Mr. Henry Johnson.

*[She crosses to kettle to get 'hot water' for the basin, pours it in, and puts it back on the 'stove' as she speaks.]*

Daniel Jackson and him was like brothers. When old Mama Amy Jackson finally did get up here to Ithaca, you would have thought the Reverend was welcoming his very own Mama judging from the scene at the station. See Mama Amy had nursed the Reverend from way back so of course he was going to do everything he could to get Daniel and then Mama Amy to being free in Ithaca.

Now at the time Daniel Jackson's story was sad but I had to laugh when

he kept talking about how he was helped along the way by the Friends. See the people of the Quaker religion called themselves Friends and they would help the runaways and give them fresh clothes and food and such. So no wonder, when he took a look at my dress and my basket with the food wrapped all nice he just knew that I must have met up with some of these Friends.

The whole thing was too strange for words. But here were all these people, didn't know who I was and where I came from and they were helping me and welcoming me just like we were all old friends. Daniel Jackson and me had been slaves but all the rest of us had something in common. Some folks were from Maryland and Virginia and some wasn't. But I knew I could trust them, not just from their words but from their deeds and they knew they could trust me too with their under the ground railroad secrets. As days passed I told them all about my self and found out a whole lot about them too. There were many houses where they would bring the runaways. Daniel had brought me to the Reverend Mr Henry Johnson's house over on Geneva and Green Street.

*[Holding bodice to her body.]*

He said it was on account of my fine dress. I wouldn't look at all suspicious going into the Reverend's house round eating time.

When I look back on it now, I can sure say those were exciting times. It

was like my whole life started over. So much was happening. At first I boarded with a family, a colored family, which was nothing like living with Miz Amy I can tell you. I had a reputation for doing good work so it wasn't too hard getting jobs. I was a seamstress mainly, but I would clean houses and wash clothes more regularly. I would pay my keep and save the rest along with the other money in my basket I came to Ithaca with.

See, it wasn't too long before Jacob Brooks himself was courting me. His wife was dead, bless her soul, and he had a little girl, that was Catherine. He was trying to take care of her by himself, trying to be both mother and father to that girl and not doing a bad job either. I think that's what I loved most about him. Here was a colored man who didn't take no stock in what folks said could or couldn't be done, he'd just decide he would do something and then just do it. Like caring for his daughter and getting our church building built. Lord, those were the two things that made me love him the most.

*[She begins to wash the bodice throughout the following. She applies soap, scrubs with the brush, scrubs against the board. Then she lets the bodice soak while resuming her work on the skirt. Her activity punctuates her words.]*

Everybody knew he was a man who could get things done and that's why he was one of the board of trustees at St. James. They knew that if anybody could get that church built, it was Jacob. It was his idea to put a notice in the newspaper asking for donations. I put up the money for it too right out of my basket money because it was such a good idea. And it was too

because we were able to start building right away.

That was 1836, and in just four years it was pretty near finished and just beautiful. Even though years after there was always more to do to get it fixed up just right. Jacob only lived one year after that, but his funeral was held right there in that church he worked so hard to get built and I know he was pleased. Putting that notice in the paper wasn't all he done neither.

He would go around talking to white and black folks and get them to contribute whatever they could: time, labor, money, tools, lumber whatever. He was the kind of person that made people want to give something. First of all, when they bought that land for five dollars from a Mr. Dewitt, that land was worth a whole lot more. I can tell you because when me and Jacob bought the plot of land right next to it for this little house we sure didn't pay no five dollars! See, Jacob was the one that convinced Mr. Dewitt that the colored people of this town needed a church building of their own.

See, at the time most colored folks would go to churches in the village where they had to sit way in the back in the 'colored people pews' and then if that wasn't unChristian enough, they could go to the church but no colored minister could ever preach at any of them! Now why would somebody want to go to a church like that? So they organized the St. James AMEZ Church and would meet in the Rev. Mr. Henry Johnson's house.

Well being a Christian and a rich man who owned most of the town, Mr. Dewitt offered to sell a plot of land way over on the south side for just five

dollars if that land was used for a church building and a parsonage. If the land was used for anything else, meaning if folks tried to make money off it, the Dewitt family could take the land right back. They put all that in the deed and our Rev. Mr. Johnson agreed and signed it.

But that was just the beginning. We still had to build a building. That's when Jacob had his hardest work to do. First he had to convince folks to donate their labor because there wasn't no money to pay nobody. Then they had to build with something [*She laughs at the memory*] Jacob convinced a man to donate the stones for the foundation. This man lived over on Green Street and was a bit put out about all the singing and praying going on at Rev Johnson's house every Sunday. He was more than happy to donate the same kind of stones he was using to enlarge his own house if it meant he could have some peace on Sundays.

Jacob was so good at persuading, he got some stones for our little house too for just a little portion of my basket money. So at the same time they laid the foundation for the church, they worked on a smaller foundation for this here house for me, Jacob and Catherine.

Jacob fussed with me about it but whenever I could, I'd be right out there swinging my hammer with the rest of them to get that church finished. I had to! We were going to have the first wedding once the church was built, me and Jaco. But it took a long time of people working after their real jobs to get

the thing built so once the foundation was laid and there was a little wall all the way round, we stepped right into it and was married right there with no roof, just Rev Johnson and the whole congregation there to witness.

Our house next door to the church was the resting place for the workers. I used my basket money to feed them all! Little Catherine would help me in the kitchen just like I used to help Mama Bett. I shared all my stories and taught her everything I knew. She was like my very own precious child. Lord, Lord. I knew how it felt to lose a mother and we both loved Jacob and could see that he was getting older and sicker and all that hard work on the church was making it worse - but you just couldn't stop him.

Well, folks spent so much time here on Wheat Street that as soon as anyone had enough money saved to buy a plot of land to build on, there was no question but that the colored folks would live and build their houses right around the church. The south side became our part of town. Sure white folks lived here and some boarded in the homes of colored families but those were different kind of white people from those others who couldn't stand the idea of a colored person sitting next to them in church and then call themselves Christians!

Around that time too we had a few of our own folks talking bout going back to Africa, a place called Liberia. Now here we were trying to build something of our own here in Ithaca, I mean none of us were born here but we were free and we were trying to build ourselves a home. Of course white folks

wanted us as far away as possible, some anyway that's why they were trying to convince as many free colored folks as possible to go leave here and go to some Liberia. We had one William P. Skipworth who went too, and we ain't never heard from him again. I guess he weren't too different from me. I know how it feels to know you don't belong somewhere. Least I can understand how folks need something to really call they own. See, when you a slave, living on somebody else's land, eating they food, you don't own nothing not even yourself. Unless like old Peter Webb you work so you can buy yourself for yourself from somebody who ain't made you and don't really own you in the first place. But even as a slave you want your own home, everybody does don't they? And sometimes, and I don't mean to be blaspheming, you just can't wait for your home in heaven to be the only home you'll ever have. Now this William Skipworth, he knew his peoples come from somewhere in Africa and he needed to be with Africans, to know about them and live with them. I suppose that's not too different from why I came to Ithaca.

Now in 1840, when the church was just about finished and me Jacob and Catherine had our little house right next to it, the biggest thrill was when the census man came to count us. Jacob was sick in bed most of that year, slowly dying, so the census man put my name as 'head of household' he called it. Me, Jacob, and Catherine were listed. Lord, it was the first time I had ever been listed as some head of my own household. I didn't realize how good the sound of my name could sound to me.



"Elsie Brooks" I told the census man, "Folks round here call me "Aunt Elsie" but you can just write 'Elsie Brooks.'"It was glorious! not to be a part of Miz Amy Furniss household for the first time in my life. It was writ right there in the census-taker's book - I weren't no slave but the head of a household! I had my own family - my husband Jacob, my daughter Catherine and it was official right there in his book! I couldn't read it but I saw him put it there just the same!

It was a year after that that Jacob passed and if it wasn't for Catherine and the congregation and my neighbors, my heart would have just broke to pieces. But we kept on going. There was a lot of work to be done still and by then I had taken Mama Bett's words, "Child, let your light shine all around" to mean that I should do all that I could to help. See, there was a steady growing population of colored folks here in Ithaca and a lot of that had to do with the devil's institution called slavery and that glorious under ground railroad.

Now I already done told you how when I first come into Ithaca they had already established this here system where they would pass runaway slaves on through to Canada and freedom and how some folks would stay right here. Well that was really only the beginning stages of the operation. Later on, after our church was built and more and more colored folks were staying in Ithaca, the whole thing got even more complicated. Most of us colored people had reputations for ourselves, we found work and had decent relations with all our neighbors. But still this whole operation had to be kept secret. Slavery had

been abolished in New York state, I already told you that, and Fred Douglass had escaped from slavery and the Liberty Party was organized and all over the country people were talking about ending slavery altogether.

By the time the census man came around again in 1850, a lot had changed. It was just me and Catherine living together with our white boarders, but I was still "the head of household"! That crazy Harriet Tubman had escaped from slavery herself and now was going back down there bringing other folks back with her! She never did get caught either. But it was that same year, 1850, that they passed a Fugitive Slave law saying that any body who helped a slave escape was guilty of a crime. It said that folks were obliged to return slaves to their masters. Well I can tell you a whole lot of folks were upset over that. It meant that Douglass, Tubman, and a whole lot of the folks now living in Ithaca could be taken back to slavery by law! Well we just wasn't going to have it!

Now Moses, that's what we called Aunt Harriet, was bringing folks in regular and we did our best to hide them and pass them on. Most of the time they was hid right out in the open. But sometimes they hid in my house, the church and in many other places around Ithaca. See, living next door to the church meant that I could keep a close watch on things. I could get fresh food and clothes to the runaways too. Everybody helped. Little George Johnson was the one we always picked to go to the rich folks for money though. He was a barber, like his daddy and since they cut everybody's hair they knew

just who to go to. One time George went right to the president of the town for some money to send the runaways on - he got it too - but then you couldn't stop George from going right back there for more money after that.

Now I wasn't no barber, but I did what I could.

*[She leaves her washing to pick up the basket left of the basin to demonstrate.]*

See, everybody knew Aunt Elsie. I washed clothes for all the white folks, well the ones that didn't rub me the wrong way anyway. Everybody knew Aunt Elsie always travelled with her basket but not many people knew all what was in it though! . There was some good white folks who helped us too. I would go into their homes or stores supposed to be collecting or delivering their washing and depending on what I needed them to do I would sing a different song. So even if there was a roomful of people there I could get clothes or food, even have a wagon waiting at a certain place or let them know they would be having some out-of-town visitors that night - just by the song.

*[She 'enters a store' with her basket under her arm and sings her made up song]*

"I got a brother going to Canaanland if his feet don't give out "

That meant my runaway brother needed himself a pair of shoes to get on to Canada with!

*[She laughs and puts basket back SL of the basin. She then makes her way*

*back to her washing.]*

We had us a smooth operation! I had me a whole repertory of songs. And when I didn't have one to fit the need I would just make one up or sing one of them that sister Harriet showed me. Sister Harriet Tubman was never one for public speaking. She would come to our church services when she was in town and pray and sing with us though. She'd sit with me after, right here in this house, and we would talk and sing way into the night.

Now Fred Douglass was different, he always had a lot to say out loud and public. The first time he came here to Ithaca to speak some young white ruffians heckled him so bad but he just kept right on talking. He still came back a few times after that time. I remember the first time he came to our church. It was after they passed that Fugitive Slave Law I was talking about. Well he sure had a whole lot to say about that. And as soon as he come into the church, he went on and on about how clean and neat it was and how good it made him feel. Now I just smiled when he said that because he didn't really know me then. Now how could I be living right next door to the church and it not be clean and tidy? Yes, I believe that if you want the Lord to come down into your meeting-house you got to give him a clean place to sit. You can't be having no dirty meeting house, and Fred Douglass he knew it. I don't know what kind of places they keep in Rochester and places like that where I ain't never been but our church is always clean. Especially when we having visitors, I knew Fred was coming, and our Rev. Loguen was coming back that

day too for the Anti-Slavery Convention right here in Ithaca.

There was a lot going on. There were state conventions that the colored people all over New York had organized and everybody would send representatives to places like Albany and Troy - only men of course- but we sent good men from our church. James Collins and James Lewis went and sat up there with Douglass and J.W. Loguen, Henry Highland Garnett and all them others. Yes our church and our town was sure a part of things trying to make some changes in how colored folks was treated.

By the time the census man came round in 1860, I was here by myself. Catherine was boarding and working for our Reverend William Steel. He was sure busy. He was a family man with a pretty young wife from Virginia and two little boys Catherine helped take care of. He was real busy with the church round then because we were adding a second story to the building. Course I was too old to swing a hammer this time around but I still fed the workers when I could and tried to keep everyone's spirits up. On September 10, 1861 it was finished and dedicated.

*[Elsie begins to wring out her wash. The twisting and wringing physicalize her agitation as she speaks the following. Then she wraps soap in its cloth, wipes board, shakes out brush and replaces these in the basket.]*

But those were still some troubling times cause the Civil War had started and had everybody nervous. They said they were fighting over slavery and some brave men from right here in Ithaca, colored men and white men

together, went to fight for the Union. Things were tense between white and black folks round then. It was as if they were blaming us for the war. They were riots in different parts of the country, doing some horrible things to colored folks, but here in Ithaca we didn't have nothing like that. Now I can't read and write but even I know that ain't no time before or since white folks went to war and killed themselves cause of no negroes. There had to be more in it than that, even I knew it. The only time white folks commence to killing each other got to be over money. And that was it too. Slaves weren't Africans or colored 'people' they were 'money' to the Southern folk.

Well by the time the war was over and they done shot Mr. Lincoln things were still tense. In the South they had the Ku Klux Klan talking bout how colored folks needed to be killed to be put in their place. None of that happened here but you still had some fools blaming colored folks for the war and their own problems.

We had an emancipation celebration here in 1863 and don't you know some folks put up posters making fun of the whole thing and insulting the colored people and white people that took part in it. We had us a good time though, I didn't care how they tried to ruin it. They asked me, Elsie Brooks, to lead all the folks in prayer and I sang too. I sang, "Let your Light Shine Around."

*[As she speaks she drapes the bodice over the chair back and spreads the*

*skirt over the top of her basin to dry.]*

Yes, we made some gains anyway. They changed up the Constitution to say that slavery was illegal and then they changed it again to say that Negroes were full citizens in this country. We were happy but of course there was still a lot to be done in the name of freedom. All through the 1860's there were riots and fighting against Blacks and Blacks couldn't even vote everywhere until 1870 and then some still couldn't. There was still a lot for the African newspapers and organizations to do. Here in Ithaca our church was founded in the spirit of struggle, to bring folks together in Christian fellowship so as a group we could survive and we continued to do just that even throughout these troubling times.

But this here house, next door to the St James African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, here on Wheat St, in Ithaca is my first real home. And Ithaca, while it wasn't where a lot of us were born is still our own now and it will belong to Catherine and all the rest of our children and our children's children.

*[She removes apron and places it in the basket , and crosses to rocker for her shawl as she speaks the following.]*

Lord, speaking of children, Catherine should be back any minute now to check on me. Catherine will know what to do with this dress. I guess I better go on back to bed.

'Yes, bless the Lord, I shall soon take my flight to mansions in the skies

and occupy that house not made with hands.'

*[At the rocker, she notices the "Last Testimony" in the basket of clothes. She picks up the paper.]*

I asked for our old Rev. John Thomas come back from Binghamton to read this testimony at my funeral service.

*[She regards paper then places the folded "Testimony" in its original spot on the sewing basket cover.]*

I wonder if they'll know, it's sure only just a part of it.

*[She dons her shawl, and exits to 'her bedroom' UL as she hums.]*



## CONCLUSION: THE PERFORMANCE TOUR

*. . .Child, when you get up North, let your light shine 'round .*

The final phase of this thesis project was the performance of the script. The tour of The Life and Times of Elsie Brooks in the Ithaca City School District afforded an opportunity to test and document the effectiveness of the script. The submitted proposal outlines the scope of the project and suggests a potential appropriateness for fourth and seventh grade students which perhaps needs some elaboration here.<sup>87</sup>

The fourth and seventh grade Social Studies curriculum includes aspects of local and black history. This school year, 1989-1990, special focus was given in both grades to the research of primary sources. Discoveries I had made and new information concerning Elsie Brooks I had uncovered in conjunction with this project were utilized by Gretchen Sachse of the Dewitt Historical Society for use in several outreach projects within the schools. The outreach programs sponsored by the Historical Society included a presentation on the two-hundredth anniversary of the Federal Census during April of 1990, "Federal Census Month". Elsie Brooks was presented to

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<sup>87</sup>see Appendix C.

demonstrate how Federal Census records could be used as primary source material. Sachse was able to add my new discoveries linking Elsie Brooks to Amy Furniss and tracing her move and her stay in Ithaca to information already available at the DeWitt. Other primary source material on Elsie Brooks, in addition to the census, was shared with classes in the district school in association with other projects as well. For example, the seventh grade at the Dewitt Middle School taught by Ms. Andrea Thomas developed local biographies based on their original research utilizing sources similar to my own. These were presented at the Annual History Fair at the Dewitt Historical Society. Because of the similar nature of my work, I was selected as a judge of this division in the fair and can attest to the fine quality of the projects as a whole. The winner was a presentation on Jessie Johnson, the first black student to graduate from Ithaca High School.

As a result of Gretchen Sachse's work in the schools, the students were, on some level, familiar with Elsie Brooks and had some knowledge of the type of research I had to do in creating the script. Another result of Sachse's work was the modification of the original performance schedule to include a performance for Heather Tallman's High School class which had done a considerable amount of work on Elsie and the use of Census records as primary source material.

It would seem that the performance was enriching for classes at various grade levels for distinct reasons associated with a particular teacher's

objectives. That the project has an appeal which transcends the fourth and seventh grade social studies curriculum is exemplified by the response at the Alternative Community School (ACS), where I performed for the entire school population of grades seven through twelve. Although some of the students in this group had not benefitted from the same preparation as students from other school groups, the ACS students were able to give their attention to the performance and asked some intricate questions concerning the research process as well as the production choices.

Although the tour dates had been set before the script's completion, I tried to create the script with a broader audience in mind. While acknowledging that the potential audience of the play would include young adults, I tried to avoid choices which would render the script as being particularly or solely for such an audience. In keeping with this approach, I sent the same note to all teachers, regardless of grade level, suggesting a similar preparation for their classes.<sup>88</sup> Considering that the students might view Elsie Brooks as 'the other', a woman whose life and times were radically different from their own, my suggested preparation focused on getting the students to 'personalize' some of the issues, elements and incidents of the script. It was my intention that the discussion questions provided would foster an empathetic yet critically distant framework for a discussion of problematic issues concerning the interpretations of history.

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<sup>88</sup> see appendix D.

Practical restraints dictated that the original script for the school tour be edited and abridged. The text needed to be shortened since the time allotted for each performance varied slightly in each school situation. Material had to be cut, but in such a way that the flow and sense of the narrative would not be disrupted too drastically. Also, in keeping with the objectives of the school tour, I thought it more valuable to include a question-and-answer period than to present the script in its entirety. Despite my original intention to work with a director, for these performances all directorial and production choices were my own. Staging and use of props indicated in the complete script (Chapter Five) were derived from the rehearsal and performance process for the school tour.

The positive response to the performance tour suggests some possible applications of this type of research project. In conclusion, however, I might add that this script is only one of many possible applications of the research material. It was with a particular audience and a limited budget in mind that I made the choices that most significantly shaped the final product - include among these the structuring of the script, the one-character monologue as a form of story-telling, and the concern with the authenticity of information. Having to work within these confines actually gave a certain focus to the project and demonstrated that even an uncomplicated presentation of the life and times of an ex-slave has the potential to transmit significant and useful historical lessons.

## Appendix A CHRONOLOGY

- 1778 Amy Furniss born
- 1785 N.Y. Manumission Society founded John Jay first president.  
N.Y. Law prohibits importation of slaves (fine of \$100 and freedom for slave) applies only to slaves brought in for sale not those brought in as property.
- 1788 N.Y. Law slaves exported or attempted to be exported would be free.
- 1789-97 G.Washington president
- 1794 Richard Allen et al organize the Bethel AME church
- 1796 Zion Methodist Church organized, NYC.
- 1797 Sojourner Truth born Hurley NY
- 1797-1801 John Adams president
- 1799 NY State Law (signed by gov. John Jay) frees all slave children born after July 4, 1799, males become free at 28, females at 25.
- 1800 John Brown born  
Nat Turner born
- 1801 NY State Law: no one can enter the state with a slave purchased less than one year previously.
- 1801-9 T. Jefferson president

- 1807 George Furniss born  
Law of 1801 changed to less than 10 years previously
- 1809-17 James Madison president
- 1810 Amy Furniss and Elsie in Danby  
17 slaves in Tioga Co.
- 1811 Amy files affidavit of ownership of one "slave girl"  
Peter Webb makes bargain to buy his freedom from Speed
- 1812-14 War of 1812 with England
- 1815 Henry Highland Garnet born a slave in Kent Co. Md. 12/23
- 1816 American Colonization Society formed 12/28 H of Reps.
- 1817 NY State law, every slave born before July 4, 1799 was free as  
of July 4, 1827.  
Frederick Douglass born in Md.  
Tompkins County founded 4/4  
Samuel Ringgold Ward born Md.  
S.P. Sackett (physician and author of Elsie's obit) born
- 1817-25 James Monroe president
- 1818 Webb buys freedom from Speed
- 1820 Elsie listed as part of Henry Cluff's household in Fed'l census  
her age is given as 26-45.  
(104 slaves and 32 free colored persons in Tioga County)  
Missouri Compromise 3/15

- 1821 AMEZ church formally organized at meeting in NYC 6/21
- 1824 Francis Bloodgood sells house (326 S. Cayuga) to Titus Brum
- 1825 Elsie as part of Amy Furniss's household (1 colored person not taxed)  
Ithaca AMEZ, members meet corner of Geneva & Green  
(Rev. Henry Johnson's house)
- 1825-37 Andrew Jackson president
- 1827 Slavery abolished July 4 in NY State  
July 5, celebration of freedom in Ithaca  
First black newspaper Freedom's Journal pub. NYC 3/16
- 1828 Construction of railroad between Ithaca and Owego begins (is completed 1834)
- 1829 Walker's Appeal
- 1830 Elsie in Danby with Amy Furniss 1 "free colored person 24-36"  
Jacob Brooks a free colored person in Palmyra, Wayne Co. NY ?
- 1831 Wm. Lloyd Garrison prints first issue of The Liberator Jan 1.  
Nat Turner's revolt, capture and hanging.  
George Furniss buys 21 acres
- 1833 St. James AMEZ established in Ithaca 12/16
- 1834-35 AMEZ meets at 1st pastor Rev. Johnson's house
- 1834 Ithaca-Owego RR complete (Horse power for 6 yrs, 1840- steam)

- Slavery abolished in British Empire Aug. 1
- 1835 Elsie in Amy's household in Danby
- 1836 AMEZ church building on Wheat Street:  
August 15, lot purchased from Richard Varick DeWitt for \$5  
Sept. 14- Oct. 26 notice in Ithaca Herald asking for  
subscription money (Jacob Brooks among 3 trustees named)
- 1837-41 Martin Van Buren president
- 1838 Fred Douglass escapes 9/3  
George Furniss buys 34 acres
- 1839 Liberty party ( 1st anti-slavery political party) organized, Ward  
and Garnet supporters.  
1st abolition society formed in Tioga Co. (1st prayer meeting  
1836; 1st abolition meeting 1837)
- 1840 Elsie as head of household in Ithaca  
George Furniss writes Will dated March 20  
George Furniss dies July 17 at 33 yrs old
- 1841 NY State nine month clause repealed  
F. Douglass hired as lecturer by Mass. anti-slavery society Aug.
- 1841 Wm. Harrison president
- 1841-45 John Tyler president
- 1842 Douglass speaks in Ithaca
- 1843 Sojourner Truth begins work as an abolitionist 6/1



- Nat'l Conv of Col'd men in Buffalo, H. H. Garnet's speech 8/22  
 Liberty party convention Buffalo 8/30
- 1845 (No record of census listings avail.)  
 Blacks in Ithaca - 155 not taxed; 8 taxed; 5 can vote  
 Douglass's autobiography published
- 1845-49 James K. Polk president
- 1846-48 Mexican War  
 Rev. J.W. Loguen, pastor at St. James AMEZ
- 1847 Dred Scott case begins  
 First North Star 12/3
- 1849 Harriet Tubman escapes from Md.  
 Gold Rush
- 1849-50 Z. Taylor president
- 1850 Elsie and Catherine in Ithaca (poss. a white woman and boy live  
 with her)  
 Fugitive Slave Law passed (thousands flee to Canada)
- 1850-53 M. Filmore president
- 1851 18th Annual meeting of American Anti-slavery society  
 during which Douglass breaks with Garrison over the issue of  
 moral force v. political participation 5/7-9  
 NY State convention of colored people in Albany, July 22-24  
 Wm. F. Johnson (board of trustees St. James) attends.

"Jerry Rescue" Syracuse

- 1852 Uncle Tom's Cabin published  
Douglass speaks in Ithaca at AMEZ and at Anti-Slavery Convention Town Hall. J.W. Loguen and Prof. Wm. Allen also attend.
- 1853-57 Franklin Pierce president
- 1855 (no census avail)  
Colored Men's State Convention Troy NY 9/4, James Collins and James Lewis (trustees of St. James) attend (also Loguen and Douglas)
- 1857 Major flood in Ithaca June 17  
Dred Scott decision 3/6 denied citizenship to Amer. Negro
- 1857-61 James Buchanon president
- 1858 Amy Furniss sells 1/2 acre
- 1859 John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, Va.  
Amy Furniss sells 88 acres (Amy makes "her mark"; Illiterate?)  
JW Loguen's (auto)biography published
- 1860 Catherine works as live-in servant for Wm. Steel (Elsie not listed)  
Amy Furniss listed as 82 yrs old
- 1861 Confederates attack Fort Sumter 4/12 - Civil War begins('61-65)  
2nd floor added to St. James, dedicated Sept. 10

- 1861-65 A. Lincoln president
- 1863 Broadside with Elsie's name appears  
Emancipation Proclamation takes effect Jan. 1st in areas held  
by Union army
- 1864 Elsie in Ithaca Directory, washerwoman, h plain and Wheat ST
- 1865 Elsie 69 (house valued \$100) over 21 not able to read and write  
Lincoln assassinated  
13th Amendment to Const. 12/18 (ends slavery)
- 1865-69 Andrew Johnson president
- 1866 Cornell library (public) opens Tioga and Seneca Sts.  
Race riots Memphis Tenn. New Orleans  
Elsie lives next door (West) of church (Top. Atlas of T.Co.)
- 1867 Suffrage to Negroes in DC  
Douglass and delegation see pres. Johnson to urge ballot for  
ex-slaves 2/7  
1st Nat'l meeting of KKK  
Knights of White Camellias founded La.  
Howard U. opens
- 1868 14th amendment (citizenship)  
Cornell U. formally opens 10/7  
race riots New Orleans
- 1869 Scenes in the Life of H. Tubman published

- 1869-70 Ithaca Village Directory says AMEZ church "will seat about 400".
- 1869-77 U.S. Grant president
- 1870 15th amendment (vote)  
Elsie in Ithaca (lives alone)
- 1871 Major fire destroys Ithaca Hotel and other property
- 1874 Charles Sumner dies  
Ezra Cornell dies  
More race riots
- 1875 Feb. 17, Elsie's "Last Request" dictated  
March 9, Elsie Brooks dies  
March 11, funeral at Zion Church; 883 attend

Appendix B Text of Letter "To the Publick" by William Skipworth. Ithaca Herald (vol.1, No. 6) 5 Oct. 1836.

TO THE PUBLICK.

Being about to close my business in this village and become a resident, God willing, in a far distant land, I cannot think of retiring without expressing my gratitude for favours conferred on me, and assigning my reasons for relinquishing them. From the full heart the mouth speaketh, and thanks and blessings from a coloured man, even if unacceptable, will not wither the community to whom they are addressed. My language may not be apt or scholar-like, and my expressions far from pure or classical, yet affection and respect beat strongly under the homely garb in which they are presented. While an inhabitant here, I have received kindness, assistance and protection; and to these friends I cannot but proffer my warmest wishes for their temporal and eternal welfare; and for the village generally, my aspirations are the same, if not so sensitive. "Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces." Freely would I bestow all good things on my departure, and I trust I leave not a single enemy behind me.

Duty, as I conceive, calls me to another hemisphere, and my path will shortly be upon the trackless ocean. Inclination, however reluctant at first, now follows duty, though I leave relatives behind me dear to my heart as the blood which now visits it in sadness. Parents who have been to me the kindest and the best, and whose very admonitions were goodness—parents whom I can never repay for their guardianship and care, and whom I have little prospect of again beholding. To these parents, descendants of Africa though they be, I am indebted for many comforts; and, what is above all price, the knowledge of my Lord and Saviour. Ye that are mothers, and whose office it more particularly is to instil into the minds of your offspring an habitual reverence

## Appendix B (Continued)

for God, and a knowledge of the truths of the Gospel,—be earnest in your endeavours to fulfil the duties which Providence has assigned to you, and which your tenderness, your affection, and the constant recurrence of favourable opportunities so admirably fit you to discharge. Consecrate them to God in early youth; and remember that the child of many prayers is in possession of a richer treasure than the heir of the amplest honours and the highest dignities; for the child of many prayers can never perish, so long as prayer is availing. To faith all things are possible, and the promise stands firm, “I will pour my Spirit upon their seed, and my blessings upon thine offspring.” Isa. xlv. 3. Pray then for them, and with them. There is an efficacy in the bended knee, in the outstretched hands, in the

uplifted heart, in the accents of prayer issuing from the lips of a mother supplicating God to bless her child, which faith may interpret for its encouragement, and the future shall one day realize: There is also a solemnity in the act itself, peculiarly calculated to elicit all the best feelings of the heart, and to quicken it in the diligent use of the means best adapted through Divine mercy, to ensure the blessing. Discouragements may arise—impressions that once excited hope, may vanish—the fruit may not be apparent; yet, in after times, under circumstances of the most unpromising nature—amid scenes, perhaps, of folly, vice and dissipation—or in the more sober moments of sickness and sorrow—the remembrance of a praying mother may present itself with overwhelming emotions to the heart. The events of early days may rise up in quick succession before the mind until the long-lost wanderer, recovered from his slumber of death and sin, may live to be a monument of the pardoning mercy of God, and his last accents be those of gratitude and praise for a pious mother. And oh, if by these remarks, these excitements to duty, one prodigal should become reclaimed and restored, it would give me more joy than any worldly riches could bestow, and in some measure acquit me of my obligations to the village of Ithaca.

## Appendix B (Continued)

As has been stated, I shall shortly quit this land—and it is my intention to proceed immediately to Liberia. The feelings of nature, and the ties of habit and education, attach me here; but I have been persuaded that my services would be of great benefit, (and redound more to the profit of my fellow-creatures there than elsewhere. The demands of a kindred race, and the claims of common heritage, call upon me with a voice I cannot resist, and beckon me with a hand I dare not disobey. To the oppressed of my own colour here, I can afford but little assistance; the laws of slavery deny to them all knowledge, and the first rudiments of cultivation; and where those laws are silent, the fury of licentiousness awards scourges & mutilation to him who would pity or relieve.

O, Africa! bleeding home of my ancestors! what an accumulation of misery and wrong has fallen to thy portion! Which of the sands of thy deserts has not been steeped in tears, wrung out by the pangs of separation from kindred and country? What wind has passed over thy plains without catching up the sighs of crushed or broken hearts! and in what part of the world have not thy children been wasted

by labours, and degraded by oppression? And yet, will it be believed, that my contemptible race can, as to intellect and genius, exhibit a brighter ancestry than any other? That they are the *offshoots*, wild and untrained it is true; but still the offshoots of a stem which was once proudly luxuriant in the fruits of learning and taste, whilst that from which the Goths, their calumniators, have sprung, remained hard, and knotted, and barren. For Africa is not without her heraldry of science and of fame. The only probable account which can be given of the negro tribes is, that as Africa was peopled through Egypt by three of the descendants of Ham, they are the offspring of Cush, Mizraim and Put. They found Egypt a morass, and converted it into the most fertile country in the world; they reared its pyramids, invented its hieroglyphicks, gave letters to Greece and Rome, and through them to every other nation. The everlasting architecture of Africa still exists, though in ruins.—And can it for one moment be supposed, that similar effects would not result from similar causes? Nature and experience both speak in

## Appendix B (Continued)

a language different from this. Lift the coloured man from his bondage; let him once feel the ethereal spirit of Freedom, and you will make him a new creature. Give him the light of knowledge, and let him cultivate the energies of his nature, and he would, like others, be vast in attainments and honourable in character. What nation, in a state of slavery, ever was great or good? What has Greece—once the ornament and still the wonder of the world—what has she done since pressed to the earth by the foot of a Turkish despot? And Rome—what recruit or accession to fame after despotism overshadowed the hills of her Tiber?

Prolix and tedious as I may have been, I cannot conclude without a parting word to the descendants of Africa—my neighbours, friends and brethren, whom I leave behind:—

"O, my fellow sinners, erring, though still beloved, whilst my grasp is yet on your hand, and before adieu is said forever, let me beseech you to "seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him whilst he is near." Let his presence solace you in all your afflictions, stay every unruly passion, and be your "very present help in time of need." "In my Father's house are many mansions;" and to you, weary and afflicted followers in the footsteps of your Lord, to you there shall be mansions of happiness and rest.

And you, Ministers of Jesus Christ, my Brethren in the Lord, pastors of a despised flock!—receive my prayers and my praise. Your toil has been arduous, but well have you sustained it, and the blessings of the Almighty have gathered around you. You have rejoiced, and oh, may you still rejoice in the fruits of your labours—still lead your flocks to the green pastures—still guide them by your counsels, and direct them by your wisdom.—"Finally, brethren, FAREWELL! Be perfect; be of good comfort; be of one mind; live in peace—and the God of love and peace shall be with you."

WILLIAM P. SKIPWORTH.  
Ithaca, October 5, 1836.



**Appendix C Proposal for school tour**

54-B Hasbrouck Apts.,  
Ithaca, NY, 14850

August 15, 1989

Patrick Saggese  
Assistant Superintendent  
Ithaca City School District  
P.O. Box 549  
Ithaca, N.Y. 14851

Dear Pat:

The following is a proposal for a tour in the district schools of my one-woman show, tentatively entitled, "The Life and Times of Aunt Elsie Brooks."

**THE SCRIPT:**

The script is based primarily on the life of a single character, Elsie Brooks, a one-time slave and a resident of Ithaca who is mentioned briefly in Carol Kammen's historical play, "Testimony for Black Voices." (As you know, that play was performed in district schools, under my direction, this past February.) Brooks died in Ithaca in 1875. Her 'life and times' include her birth into slavery in Maryland, and her journey northward with the underground railroad

to freedom in Ithaca. Although "Aunt Elsie" was a washerwoman by trade, she was known and respected by both blacks and whites in the Ithaca community by virtue of her forthright personality and her activities in the abolition movement.

An article titled "Some of the Sturdy Old Citizenship of Tompkins County" was published in the Ithaca Journal in 1915 to commemorate the centennial of Tompkins County. The only photograph of a black woman included in this retrospective was that of Elsie Brooks. Part of the article reads as follows:

*A Thrill will be inspired by our picture of old "Aunt" Elsie Brooks. She looks harmless and docile, but she was the most lively, most domineering, most influential woman in this county in her day (1845-1873). As she sits here "Aunt" Elsie is, it is claimed and not disputed, more than 100 years of age. She had the most powerful voice in the village and a tremendous influence as a leader in prayer and in other ways among her own colored people. She was familiar with everybody and anybody; sharp, and fearless, aggressive, and robust in health and manners, and*

PROPERTY OF  
DEWITT HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
TOMPKINS COUNTY, N. Y.

*short and weighty in body. . .She was a slave plantation product, but she possessed wit, and intellect and spirit and used them freely everywhere. . . .*

This article, along with an obituary and an account of her well-attended funeral in 1875, is all I have been able to uncover in my research of newspaper accounts thus far. Elsie Brooks' name appears in the 1850 Census as a "Free Inhabitant" and in the Ithaca Directory from 1864 to 1874. These combined sources begin to tell the story of a woman who fled north from slavery in Maryland and, as many others have done, settled in the Ithaca area most likely before the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. She maintained a residence at 24 Wheat St. (now Cleveland Ave.), was married to John, gave birth to a daughter, Catherine, in N.Y. and worked as a washerwoman. She was a member of Ithaca's first black church, St. James AME Zion (1863), which is known to have played a key role as part of the Underground Railroad. From dates I have uncovered so far, she would have been a contemporary of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglas. She is known (mainly from information preserved on broadsides) to have taken part in Emancipation Celebrations as a singer and orator.

Bringing this character to life would present opportunities to explore local and American history in an enlightening and entertaining context. The life Elsie Brooks lived and the people she most likely knew can offer students

a glimpse into a past otherwise confined to history textbooks.

**AUDIENCE:**

The educational capacity of theatre, and specifically the educational potential afforded by the merging of intellectual, emotional, physical and verbal experience and contradictions that is unique to theatre, have been long-standing interests of mine. Within the cultures of the African diaspora, theatre, like literature and other visual and expressive arts, is rooted in an oral tradition. From this tradition also stems the storyteller, or *griot*, who figures prominently in literature (and other genres) as the 'keeper of history.' My choice of form - historical, narrative monologue - is based on the educational and theatrical potential of this oral tradition.

Since the play deals with elements of local Afro-American history, the most appropriate audience would likely be fourth- and seventh-grade students who are studying local and Black history as part of their Social Studies curriculum. Nevertheless, the play would be interesting and informative for all audiences.

**SCHEDULING:**

Because of the play's subject matter, February 1990 (Black History Month)

would be an excellent time during which to schedule performances. Arrangements similar to those made for the tour of "Testimony for Black Voices" - seven performances or so for combined schools - might well suit this project.

### **COSTS:**

Production costs are minimal. As I would be producing, writing, directing and performing the piece, I would ask \$300 per performance for myself (all production expenses such as costume, set pieces, props, transportation, etc., would be taken out of this figure). Since I will be both performing and directing, I would also ask a single \$100 fee for a Second Director to come in and look at the piece in its final stages. For a stage manager/technical person who would be at each show, there would be a fee of \$50 per performance.

In addition to performing the piece, I would be willing to share information and materials concerning my research and the development of the script with teachers so that they may prepare their classes prior to the performance.

Although you yourself know me personally and have seen some of my work (in "Testimony"), I realize that some members of the decision-making board may not be familiar with me or my work. For this reason I am enclosing

a copy of my theatrical resume; a review of, and program from, another one-woman show that I have toured in the area; and a biography of sorts.

Since I am still in the process of developing this project, I trust that the brief outline provided in this proposal, along with the enclosed information about myself and my work, will suffice for the moment.

Sincerely yours,

Yvonne Singh

**Appendix D Letter to Ithaca City School District Teachers concerning preparation for the performance.**

Dear Teacher:

I am looking forward to performing my one-character play, The Life and Times of Aunt Elsie Brooks, for your class. I'd like to take this opportunity to share some information about the play with you.

The script deals with a character, Elsie Brooks, who is mentioned briefly in Carol Kammen's play, Testimony for Black Voices (which was performed in district schools under my direction in February 1989). Her 'life and times' span from her birth into slavery in Maryland to her death as a freewoman in Ithaca in 1875. Her exact age was unknown. Although 'Aunt Elsie' was a washerwoman by trade, she was known and respected by both blacks and whites in the Ithaca community by virtue of her forthright personality and wit.

An article titled, "Some of the Sturdy Old Citizenship of Tompkins County" was published in the Ithaca Journal in 1915. The only photograph of a black woman included in this retrospective was that of Elsie Brooks. Part of the article reads as follows:

*A Thrill will be inspired by our picture of old "Aunt" Elsie*

*Brooks. She looks harmless and docile, but she was the most lively, most domineering, most influential woman in this county in her day (1845-1873). As she sits here aunt" Elsie is, it is claimed and not disputed, more than 100 years of age. She had the most powerful voice in the village and a tremendous influence as a leader in prayer and in other ways among her own colored people. She was familiar with everybody and anybody; sharp, and fearless, aggressive, and robust in health and manners, and short and weighty in body. . . She was a slave plantation product, but she possessed wit, and intellect and spirit and used them freely everywhere. . .*

This article, uncovered at the Dewitt Historical Society, and Carol Kammen's mention of Elsie's well-attended funeral were the beginning sparks of this project. Newspaper accounts of her obituary and funeral; information derived from state and federal census records; accounts of the histories of Ithaca, the St. James AME Zion Church, the Underground Railroad; and sundry articles, papers, clippings and broadsides have since been drawn upon in the creation of the script.

Nevertheless, the script, for the most part, is a work of 'historical' fiction which attempts to bring the character, as well as local and American history, to life in an enlightening and entertaining context. The life Elsie Brooks lived



and the people she most likely knew (such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass) can offer students an immediate experience of a past otherwise confined to textbooks.

The educational capacity of theatre, specifically the educational potential afforded by the merging of intellectual, emotional, physical and verbal experience and contradictions that is unique to theatre, has been a long standing interest of mine. Within the cultures of the African diaspora, theatre, like literature and other visual and expressive arts, is rooted in an oral tradition. From this oral tradition emerges the storyteller or griot which figures prominently in literature (as well as other genres) as the keeper of history. My choice of form - narrative monologue - is based on the educational and theatrical potential of this oral tradition. The form, however, is inherently problematic to the extent that it demands careful listening from the audience.

Perhaps the simplest, and most effective, way of preparing students for the performance is to get them to think about and personalize key issues presented in the play through such questions as:

- How would you feel if you were a slave? What would your life be like?
- Why did some slaves run away while others didn't?
- How would you feel to discover that by law you were free?
- What were some reasons why some people were involved in the

underground railroad and others weren't?

-What would it be like to live in Ithaca during the 1800's?

-How would it feel to be illiterate? How would your illiteracy affect your life?

-What makes people important or memorable in their community?

-What is special and valuable about the older citizens of our community?

-What kinds of stories do your grandparents tell? What can you learn from them?

Since elementary, middle and high school classes have been selected to experience the performance, the above is intended as a general preparation for all audience members. Should you require more specific information about the script or my research, I urge you to contact me (257-0887) prior to the performance. I am also eager to make such information available for post-performance discussion.

Thank you in advance for considering this rather lengthy note and for the time spent in preparing your class for my visit.

Sincerely,

Yvonne Singh-Ofaolain

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