

# Safe Haven

*Any assessment of Syracuse, New York, should include the city's 19th-century humanitarian and progressive legacy — highlighted by seven faces carved in the walls of a tunnel beneath a former downtown church.*

After New York abolished slavery in 1827, many fugitive slaves traveled through the state from the South, heading to freedom in Canada. Syracuse's location, at the crossroads of the state, made it an ideal stop on the Underground Railroad. Syracuse in the 19th century was a wellspring of progressive thought — much like Oneida to the east, Seneca Falls to the west, and other Central New York locales.

According to Maxwell School anthropologist Douglas Armstrong, Syracuse played a nationally prominent role in efforts to free enslaved African Americans beginning with the roots of the abolitionist movement in the 1830s. The physical evidence of those efforts is dotted throughout the community, comprising what's known as the Central New York Freedom Trail. Prominent sites include numerous stops on the Underground Railroad — the homes of abolitionists Jermaine Loguen and Matilda Joslin Gage, the site of the Jerry Rescue (downtown, near City Hall), and perhaps most notably the former Wesleyan Methodist Church, on Syracuse's Columbus Circle.

This is the oldest church building still standing in Syracuse (oddly, now home to a Mexican restaurant) and its members and leadership were well-documented supporters of abolitionism and the Underground Railroad. The building includes a tunnel where seven bas relief faces were carved in the clay walls, believed to have been created by fugitive slaves hiding there.

In the late 1990s, Armstrong, past president of both the Society for Historical Archaeology and the Preservation Association of Central New York, led what became a community-wide effort to preserve and retain this artwork within the Syracuse community, a project that reignited awareness of the importance of the abolitionist movement in the region.

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“The Wesleyan Methodist Church had once been a place for social change and the artwork on the wall points towards this fact,” says Armstrong. “Monuments such as these help us put things in perspective and give us rare insights into what people of that era were thinking and doing.”

The seven clay faces excavated from the site by Armstrong and a team of archaeologists are now housed at the Onondaga Historical Association museum in Syracuse.

Wesleyan Methodist Church (foreground); one of the excavated faces (top)

— Renée Gearhart Levy