



Essay About the Erie Canal The Freeman Family

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Who worked on the Erie Canal? Where did they live? What do we know about them? Unearthing the lives of everyday people is one of the most difficult tasks for historians. The people who dug the canal and worked on its boats did not amass a great deal of property or leave a large number of family papers.

As a result, they are not easily found in historical records. Many of them were immigrants or members of ethnic or racial minorities whose histories until recently were not preserved in archives and museums. How, then, do we learn about the ordinary people who helped build this nation?

One valuable source that assists historians in finding information about working men and women is the census. The practice of officially counting each U.S. citizen began with the first federal census of 1790. The Constitution requires that the federal census be taken every 10 years to determine the number of representatives that each state is permitted in the House.

The census also provides a portrait of the country: where people live, the backgrounds from which they come, whether or not they attend school, and what they do for a living. Some state governments, such as New York, eager to find out specific information about their citizens, also conducted state census counts in off years.

The data in the New York State census of 1855 provides answers to some questions about workers on the Erie Canal but leaves other questions shrouded in mystery. Take, for example, the 1855 census record from Fort Plain, New York.

Abram Freeman lived in this small town along the canal with his wife, Nancy, and his two sons, Abram, Jr., and Hiram, ages 19 and 17, respectively. Abram's occupation was listed as boatman, a common trade for those living along the canal's route.

The family lived in a modest home compared with those of their neighbors. Constructed of wood, the house was valued at only \$60. Other families on the same block lived in homes valued at \$300 or sometimes much more.

What makes the Freeman family particularly unusual is that they were black. Indeed, they were the only African American family listed in this neighborhood of middle-class artisans and farmers. In 1855, the entire Montgomery County town of Minden, of which Fort Plain is a part, included 4,671 residents; only 53 were African American.

Slavery had been ended officially in New York State more than 25 years earlier. Slavery's scars — prejudice, exclusion from education, and segregation by custom — remained deeply ingrained in American life. Most African Americans in upstate communities clustered together in small enclaves, where they offered one another support and kinship.

Abram and Nancy Freeman were longtime residents of Fort Plain, having lived there 20 years. Both were born in Montgomery County, so it is probable that they had resided in this community all their lives. The existence of slavery in the state was surely within their memories.

Their last name, Freeman, was probably an indication of how much they or their ancestors valued their status as free people. They might have been former slaves themselves or the descendants of slaves. Or they might have had a long family history of freedom dating from the 17th century. We cannot learn this from the census data.

Abram's sons, Abram and Hiram, were barbers, which also indicates that the family was middle-class. More affluent members of the African American community often took up barbering. Until the Civil War, it was the only well-paying service that white Americans would accept from black Americans. A good barber could make a nice living coifing and shaving white townsmen.

Barbers also sold collars, cravats, and hair pomades to their customers for additional revenue. The census does not tell us whether the two brothers owned their own shop. However, it is likely that as teenagers they were working as apprentices in the shop of an experienced barber.

The census tells us that Nancy had no occupation, an indication that she stayed at home and kept house. This was a rare occurrence. African American women often needed to take in laundry or work as domestics to help make ends meet. Abram and his sons made enough money to enable her to be a homemaker, another indication of the family's middle-class status.

Abram was a boatman — one who steered a canal boat. That was a skilled occupation with some authority. It was unusual for African Americans to be hired to fill such jobs. Boatmen were paid more than drivers, who walked or rode a horse or mule along the towpath.

Similarly, the boatman earned more than the bowsman, whose job was to watch for obstacles ahead and shout warnings to passengers and crew, as described in the popular song lyric "Low bridge, everybody down." Although it was unusual that Freeman was a boatman, that fact suggests that his neighbors knew him to be a reliable and probably likable man who could handle responsibility and supervise others.

The Freeman family also stands out in their literate, middle-class neighborhood because Abram was illiterate and Nancy does not appear to have been able to read, although she could write. (It was not uncommon for people to learn to write their names while remaining essentially illiterate.)

Because the Freeman sons were under 21, the census does not reveal whether or not they were literate. The Freemans' lack of literacy may be attributable to slavery and the difficulties faced by free blacks seeking an education in this era.

However, Abram and Nancy were children in the 1810s and 1820s. This was prior to Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia, which precipitated many laws restricting education of slaves and free blacks. It was also a time when fewer people (regardless of race) received a formal education, especially women.

The Freeman family's neighbors included several clerks, a lawyer, a merchant, and craftsmen — men whose occupations required a high level of literacy. They may not be representative of adult literacy in New York in 1855.

Finally, none of the members of the Freeman family were listed as voters, but all were identified as "persons of color not taxed." Although they were free inhabitants of New York, the Freeman family was in a legal limbo rather like that of Native Americans. They were neither defined nor excluded as citizens of the United States under the U.S. Constitution.

Free black men were entitled to vote under the New York Constitution of 1777, provided that they met certain property requirements. The state constitution of 1822 liberalized property requirements for white men while making them more restrictive for free black men. Because Abram Freeman's \$60 home did not meet the \$250 property requirement and he was not taxed, he could not vote.

New York voters defeated three statewide referenda on whether black men should have the same voting rights as white men in 1846, 1860, and 1869. The second-class citizenship of free blacks in the United States was not remedied until the adoption of the 14th and 15th amendments, which clarified their citizenship and granted men over the age of 21 the right to vote regardless of race. However, because states have wide discretion in the conduct of elections, discriminatory state practices persisted, perpetuating the disenfranchisement of black citizens.

http://www.archives.nysed.gov/projects/eriecanal/essays/ec_sorin.shtml