

Walking in her Footsteps - Ep2

[00:00:00] **Courtney Rae Kasper:** There's an author that spoke not too long here in Auburn, Phil Hesser, and he likened it to a vortex and that you can still kind of feel that energy where these titans of change were here and they were doing things for the good of others. And I am a true believer that you can still feel that energy here in Auburn.

[00:00:29] **Beonca Louis:** One of the most powerful things about Harriet Tubman's life and legacy is the way she put community at the center of everything she did. She believed in the power of the collective and had a deep enduring love for her people. Harriet poured into the community of Auburn. And in return, the community poured into her.

[00:00:53] **Beonca Louis:** Welcome to Walk in Her Footsteps, Harriet Tubman's Life in Auburn, New York, a series exploring Harriet Tubman's [00:01:00] life after slavery in her chosen home in the North. I'm Beonca Louis, an entrepreneur and ambassador for Cayuga Tourism here in Auburn. In this episode, we'll dive into the people and places that shaped Harriet's life in Auburn.

[00:01:15] **Beonca Louis:** Starting at 180 south street, the home Harriet Tubman lived in with her family until her death in 1913. Today, the Tubman home is a modest two story brick house. It's about 1200 square feet. Just a bit smaller than the average home in the United States today. It's surrounded by a halo of tall lush trees with a wooden barn at the rear.

[00:01:38] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet Tubman bought the home and the acres of land surrounding it in 1859 from the wife of Senator William H Seward, Francis Seward.

[00:01:49] **Jeff Ludwig:** So I first came to know the Swards really by reading their mail, which sounds voyeuristic. Uh, but this is what historians do.

[00:01:55] **Beonca Louis:** That's Dr. Jeff Ludwig, Director of Education at the Seward [00:02:00] House Museum in Auburn.

[00:02:01] **Beonca Louis:** The Swards were Harriet's neighbors and today their home is a museum and educational center. They lived just a mile from Harriet in a large two story brick house with four symmetrical windows on each side of the main door, typical of the Federalist style homes of the time. Jeff says

that Harriet and the Searwards probably connected to one another through the networks of the abolitionist movement in which they were active participants.

[00:02:30] **Jeff Ludwig:** So best estimate I think is that they became aware of each other, William Seward, Francis Seward and Harriet Tubman first by reputation, probably mid 1850s, sort of the heyday, the peak of Harriet Tubman's time as a conductor on the underground railroad. She's making all these perilous journeys, 13 in total from her native Eastern shore of Maryland and an enslaved state through the north and across into Canada.

[00:02:56] **Beonca Louis:** This is the part of Harriet Tubman's life and story that most [00:03:00] people know, and these journeys weren't just dangerous. They were also really, really expensive.

[00:03:06] **Jeff Ludwig:** You're feeding for, you're arranging transportation for your clothing. You're sometimes getting medicines and supplies for people from all walks of life.

[00:03:13] **Jeff Ludwig:** Very young, very old, and not just healthy young people.

[00:03:17] **Beonca Louis:** So how exactly did Harriet foot the bill?

[00:03:21] **Jeff Ludwig:** She would make money by going on the abolitionist speaking circuit.

[00:03:25] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet was only about 5ft 2 with a debilitating head injury from childhood. And she would get up in front of these big audiences of abolitionist elites to recount stories from her time on the underground railroad, the horrors of slavery and whatever else was on her mind. She spoke truth to power and didn't minimize how brutal and violent the institution of slavery was. But still, she made people laugh. She was charming, witty, and a one of a kind orator. She used that power to push her [00:04:00] audiences to action, urging them to donate generously to fund her liberation work.

[00:04:05] **Beonca Louis:** And it was really effective. After hearing her powerful moving lectures, people wanted to support her and her work. And two of those people were the Searwards.

[00:04:15] **Jeff Ludwig:** It's probably that William Seward came to know of her as she's giving radical lectures. He's also swimming in those waters. He and his

wife both, she more than he, the abolitionist, but they have acquaintances and friends in common.

[00:04:26] **Jeff Ludwig:** So they're never really more than one degree of separation apart. The question then is when does that one degree break down and there's a direct contact, direct connection. I have been trying to answer that question for the better part of five years. There's a lot of inferring, a lot of reading between the lines, a lot of trying to, to disentangle myth and lore from truth and reality.

[00:04:47] **Jeff Ludwig:** So there's no sort of hard and fast source. In fact, to scour the Seward papers, references to Harriet Tubman, you're not gonna come up empty, but you're only gonna come up with a handful and they're not laden [00:05:00] with long descriptions or, or analysis or anecdotes. It's almost a business like quality to them which is strange.

[00:05:08] **Beonca Louis:** Even though historians like Jeff, can't say for sure when Harriet's Tubman met the Swards, what's certain is that the two families quickly became important figures in each other's lives.

[00:05:19] **Beonca Louis:** Over time, William and Francis became Harriet's allies in Auburn and a part of her growing community of black and white Auburnians committed to liberation and justice.

[00:05:33] **Beonca Louis:** William Seward was a prominent politician. He served in the New York state Senate and was the state's governor. He then became a US Senator and eventually would be appointed president Abraham Lincoln's, secretary of state. Francis on the other hand was the daughter of a well established Cayuga county judge, an active participant in the woman's suffrage movement and a dedicated abolitionist.

[00:05:57] **Beonca Louis:** When Francis's father passed away, [00:06:00] Francis and her sister inherited his estate. And what does Francis decide to do with it?

[00:06:05] **Jeff Ludwig:** She sees, uh, passed in New York in 1848, a property rights bill that allows married women to own property within a marriage.

[00:06:12] **Beonca Louis:** The married woman's property act.

[00:06:15] **Jeff Ludwig:** Before that law, any woman who got married, surrendered all her property, a lot of her legal identity and agency to her

husband who would control. It after 1848, Francis is able to inherit her father's vast estate, which would include a seven acre farm later purchased for \$25 down by Harriet Tubman.

[00:06:33] **Jeff Ludwig:** She didn't need anybody's permission to do this. She's an activist. She's grass roots.

[00:06:40] **Beonca Louis:** At this point, Harriet is growing more and more concerned for the wellbeing of her aging parents, Benjamin Ross and Harriet Green, who she called Ben and Rit. She had managed to get them to safety in St. Catherine's Canada, where they were living in a community of other emancipated, black folks, many who were also [00:07:00] from the Eastern shore of Maryland. But even still, the harsh Canadian winter

[00:07:04] **Beonca Louis:** wasn't ideal for Ben and Rit. So Harriet set out to secure a home for them back in the states, in a community where she knows that they will be supported and feel some semblance of safety.

[00:07:16] **Jeff Ludwig:** So when Harriet Tubman is looking for a forever home after the war a little bit further south than Canada, Auburn is amenable because the Swards are here.

[00:07:24] **Jeff Ludwig:** Yes. But there are also people from her part of the Eastern shore of Maryland. Many of these families migrate here because there's land available for sale. The Seward family would do business on good terms with working class immigrant and African American communities in Auburn. So these connections just keep rippling out.

[00:07:43] **Beonca Louis:** There were familiar faces there. Of course, Harriet knew Auburn wasn't perfect, no place was. But at least here she knew she had a circle of friends and comrades, black and white who supported her and could also support her family. [00:08:00] In spring of 1859, the Swards sold Harriet Tubman a house, barn, and seven acres of tillable farmland right down the street from their own home.

[00:08:10] **Beonca Louis:** They sold it to her for \$1,200, which would be almost \$43,000 today. The terms of the mortgage were flexible, allowing Harriet to put down \$25 for the home, about \$900 in today's currency with \$10 payments, that would be about \$350 today, due every quarter.

[00:08:36] **Beonca Louis:** At first, it was only Harriet's parents and her brother, John, who had been caring for their parents, living in the home. Harriet wouldn't

live in the home full time until after the end of the civil war. But once she did start living there, the home was never empty. It grew fuller and fuller with Tubman's extended family and others that Harriet took in.

[00:08:56] **Jeff Ludwig:** She takes people in, borders those who are in need, mostly [00:09:00] people of color. Eventually she'll basically almost bankrupt herself trying to pay for a home for the agent and the infirm she takes in maybe distant relations. And she cares for everybody. And she makes it her mission to exhaust herself, traveling Auburn, to fundraise much as she had once done throughout new England to pay for everything she needs to care for this large, collected family of her choosing.

[00:09:25] **Beonca Louis:** This is the place that would become Harriet's home base.

[00:09:28] **Beonca Louis:** The place where she would meet and fall in love with her second husband, Nelson Davis, a long time resident who stayed in the Tubman home for three years. This home would also be the place where Harriet and Nelson would raise their adopted daughter, Girdy, and so much more. Harriet's home was a safe place for her, her family and loved ones to heal, rest and exist.

[00:09:56] **Beonca Louis:** Aside from providing Harriet and the black community in Auburn [00:10:00] at large, with the resources to build homes, churches, and community spaces in the city, Francis opened up the Seward home as a stop on the underground railroad. The home was a place of temporary refuge, safety and comfort for black people seeking liberation.

[00:10:17] **Jeff Ludwig:** Francis had connections. She had a friend and a servant named Harriet Bogart, her husband, Nicholas was a driver for the Seward family and it at least the legend and again, hard to separate legend from lore is that Harriet Bogart was sort of Francis's person on the inside of Auburn's lived black community in the 1850s, who would perhaps know, would receive intelligence or reports or whispers of when to expect arrivals in the underground railroad. Francis probably would've received intelligence

[00:10:45] **Jeff Ludwig:** from women like harriet Bogart when to expect arrivals or often not. Just a knock at the end of night as darkness was falling and then the sun was rising. There could be passengers who traveled through rugged and dangerous terrain, perhaps pursued by bounty hunters or [00:11:00] others. They would hide by day here, be fed, be given supplies, provisions they would need.

[00:11:05] **Jeff Ludwig:** And then when the coast was clear back on the road, Going ever further north, this was very dangerous. It was in violation of federal law. The family could have been imprisoned, heavily fined for sure. It could have doomed Seward's own political career in Washington.

[00:11:21] **Beonca Louis:** Jeff says passengers on the underground railroad who stopped at the Seward home

[00:11:25] **Beonca Louis:** would've stayed in the family's basement, which was formally a kitchen and dining area.

[00:11:31] **Jeff Ludwig:** It's kind of sacred space. It's very hollow down there. And to walk down there today is to get a sense of what it'd been like back then, the hearth, the beehive oven, there's still bars in the wall from the pioneer era.

[00:11:43] **Jeff Ludwig:** It looks, it feels, it smells like it did back then.

[00:11:48] **Beonca Louis:** Black people heading North would've hid and rested in the basement kitchen until it was safe to continue. By this point, William Seward is elected to the US Senate and traveling often to Washington DC.

[00:12:00] And other states in the country would've likely been Francis and her daughter Fannie who received the passengers and provided them with food supplies and shelter. While Francis and Fannie supported Harriet's work with the underground railroad by taking in passengers, William Seward supported her work in another way, financially. Even at the end of the civil war, when Harriet's journeys on the underground railroad came to an end, she was still always in need of money to fund her community work.

[00:12:30] **Jeff Ludwig:** So it was a great story of Seward. In these later years, when Tubman came to him for money, this wasn't uncommon. She was taking care of so many people who could not take care of themselves that sewer said, of course, I'll give you money, but I'm really, I insist that you keep some of this for yourself. You keep spending it on others, always helping others.

[00:12:52] **Beonca Louis:** Whether it was guiding black folks to refuge on the underground railroad or providing care for her elderly, sick and homeless [00:13:00] neighbors, through the Harriet Tubman home for the aged and indigent Negroes, Harriet Tubman never stopped helping others. This was her life's work and she contributed so much of her own money to keep it running. Harriet's relationship with the Searwards, be it with Francis or William,

[00:13:17] **Beonca Louis:** provided her with access to the resources she desperately needed in order to provide for others in this way. The relationship between the Swards and the Tubmans was deep and layered.

[00:13:29] **Jeff Ludwig:** Here's maybe my favorite way to try to get at what these two families meant to each other. And it's the story of Margaret Stewart. Stewart was a young African American girl, about 10, 11, 12 years old, whom Harriet Tubman brings back with her on her final journey to the south before she becomes actively involved in the civil war. Margaret is someone whose genealogy is today still a bit of a mystery people in the national parks talk about how she could have been a secret biological daughter. There's reason to think that [00:14:00] Tubman never believed slavery was really going to be over.

[00:14:02] **Jeff Ludwig:** So to protect the child, she would never reveal her maternity. She was technically still through the civil war years, an enslaved person, because she had illegally self liberated.

[00:14:15] **Beonca Louis:** Some historians say that Margaret may have been a niece of Harriet Tubmans or an acquaintance's daughter and Margaret's own daughter would later write that her mom was aunt Harriet's favorite niece. No one really knows for sure. But regardless of the exact relation, she was a young black girl whose care and wellbeing was entrusted to Harriet Tubman.

[00:14:38] **Jeff Ludwig:** Tubman brought her to Auburn. She brings her here in the spring of 1862 and deposits her with the Seward family, initially with Francis's older sister Lizette who lives in Auburn. And then Lizette brings her here where she and Francis raise her together during the war years. They give her use of the carriage.

[00:14:55] **Jeff Ludwig:** She's treated like a part of the family. There's a warmth I think you can feel when you [00:15:00] walk both houses and touch these places where they resided.

[00:15:03] **Beonca Louis:** The relationship between Harriet Tubman and Francis Seward is one that's defined by actions more than words. By the very real ways that these two women work together for liberation and justice.

[00:15:16] **Beonca Louis:** And in some ways it has to be, because although Francis wrote a ton of letters, filled with details about her day to day life and firsthand accounts of what life was like in 19th century America, there isn't too much specifically about her relationship with Harriet Tubman available in the archives. And Jeff says that part is simply because of timing.

[00:15:39] **Jeff Ludwig:** Sadly Francis dies just about two months after the end of the civil war. So a time when she might have reflected openly, safely, she's not breaking federal law anymore. There's no more need for underground railroad. Slavery has ended. We don't get that access to her. Same with Fannie Seward. She dies the following year.

[00:15:54] **Jeff Ludwig:** So these two women who've been side by side as Harriet Tubman becomes a part of this community might've told [00:16:00] us all about that aren't around to give us their insights.

[00:16:06] **Beonca Louis:** But even still, there's no doubt that the Swards played an important part in the community that Harriet built here in Auburn. In the 50 plus years that Harriet Tubman lived in the city, she nurtured so many connections and was a crucial pillar of strength in the community. This is a legacy that many Auburnians can reach back and connect themselves to.

[00:16:27] **Jeff Ludwig:** Our current mayor told stories about how his grandparents' children would go to Tubman's farm. She was still alive and she would tell stories. I think she was famous in Auburn for her hospitality, adventures of her bravery on the underground railroad. So there's not quite living memory, but we're not that far removed from it. Cause she died in 1913 of Harriet Tubman being a fixture in this community.

[00:16:47] **Jeff Ludwig:** She'd lived here for 50 years and enough families can sort of touch onto that.

[00:16:55] **Beonca Louis:** There's another place where you can feel Harriet's presence. The New York State [00:17:00] Equal Rights Heritage Center. About a mile north of Harriet's home and right next door to the Swards' home.

[00:17:08] **Courtney Rae Kasper:** The first thing that will greet you when you walk into our courtyard is a beautiful bronze statue of Harriet Tubman.

[00:17:15] **Courtney Rae Kasper:** And that is really the centerpiece, she's overlooking downtown Auburn. And then when you walk into the visitor's center, you're greeted by the opening to our exhibit.

[00:17:26] **Beonca Louis:** Courtney Rae Kasper is the visitor experience manager at the New York state equal rights heritage center.

[00:17:33] **Courtney Rae Kasper:** It's not in chronological order, it's devised by content and they broke that into color coding.

[00:17:39] **Courtney Rae Kasper:** So obviously green would be abolition. Purple is women's rights. Blue is human rights. So as you're moving through this beautiful, very modern architecture building, and you have these large glass windows that frame all of our surrounding historic sites, like the Seward House Museum. Westminster Presbyterian church, [00:18:00] almost like portraits so that you want to go out and experience that.

[00:18:03] **Courtney Rae Kasper:** And so the one thing I do really love about our exhibit is it's a mix of static exhibits, but also interactive. So there are actually historic speeches that you can listen to, songs that you can listen to, that we have video timelines. So it's a very interactive exhibit. And then you're also surrounded in this extremely beautiful piece of architecture that was created by architects, out of Brooklyn.

[00:18:29] **Beonca Louis:** Auburn, wasn't just a hub for abolitionist organizing.

[00:18:32] **Beonca Louis:** It was also a place where folks were active in the women's rights movement and human rights movements at large. What many Americans don't know is that Harriet was just as much a part of these organizations as she was the abolitionist movement.

[00:18:47] **Courtney Rae Kasper:** So it's just an interesting place I think, where there was this convergence of free thought and free thinking and people who really were bold and wanted to do what was [00:19:00] right.

[00:19:00] **Courtney Rae Kasper:** And I am a true believer that you can still feel that energy here in Auburn. There's an author that spoke not too long here in Auburn, Phil Hesser, and he likened it to a vortex. And that you can still kind of feel that energy where these Titans of change were here and they were doing things for the good of others.

[00:19:25] **Beonca Louis:** Do you see a parallel to the, what was going on back in the day to now in Auburn, New York, do you see those connections and collaborations happening in the community?

[00:19:33] **Courtney Rae Kasper:** Yeah,

[00:19:33] **Courtney Rae Kasper:** absolutely. It's really interesting because before this building was built, which was in 2018, there had never really been a pride celebration.

[00:19:42] **Courtney Rae Kasper:** This has allowed us to bring that kind of community gathering and programming into the downtown core, which has been really important and special, not only for visitors, but predominantly for our own locals and our [00:20:00] community.

[00:20:02] **Beonca Louis:** Auburn's 2019 pride celebration, drew hundreds to the New York state equal rights heritage center to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising.

[00:20:13] **Beonca Louis:** An event that lots of people considered to be a watershed moment for LGBTQIA+ rights in America. There was rainbow themed food, drinks, vendors, the whole nine yards. And even outside of the pride celebration, the center continues to be a space for Auburnians to ground themselves in the history of the city that they call home and the role that figures like Harriet Tubman, along with Francis and William Seward played in it.

[00:20:47] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet built a beautiful life for herself and so many others in Auburn. One that was rooted in justice, liberation and love. But of course, that didn't protect her from the harsh realities of the anti-black [00:21:00] world that surrounded her. Day in and day out, her life was full of trials. Even in Auburn, the place she chose to call home and the surrounding areas in the Northeast.

[00:21:11] **Jeff Ludwig:** And I don't wanna whitewash it too much. I don't think it was easy. I don't think it was perfect. Harriet Tubman had to hustle. Harriet Tubman had to work really hard until her old age to just make ends meet. I'm sure she was met with more than her share of opposition. This was no utopia, but there was a presence of a sort of critical core and nucleus of Auburnians who opened up their minds, their homes, their hearts, and that continued outward through several generations of Auburn, sort of supporting her.

[00:21:43] **Beonca Louis:** This is the part of Harriet Tubman's story that is really difficult to sit with. And it feels like it's one that we see over and over in the lives of black women in America, past and present. Even Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her people, [00:22:00] a woman that so many people respected and looked up to still struggled to make ends meet and had to work really, really hard, even in old age.

[00:22:11] **Beonca Louis:** But despite this, she found a way to make things work.

[00:22:14] **Justin Harris:** She was always helping people out.

[00:22:16] **Justin Harris:** She was always giving money. She was this little petite woman and no one thought much of her, but she made such a big impact.

[00:22:25] **Beonca Louis:** Justin Harris is a tour guide here in Auburn. He gives tours of Harriet Tubman's life and legacy in the city.

[00:22:31] **Beonca Louis:** When Justin was training to become a tour guide, he heard a story about Harriet Tubman that would stick with him.

[00:22:38] **Justin Harris:** She had a toothache and this is relevant, I promise. And it was really bad and it was so bad, it gave her a headache and eventually she just took a rock and busted the tooth right out of her mouth, like off of a whim.

[00:22:51] **Justin Harris:** She was headstrong. She was one of the toughest roughest people. She has so many stories and [00:23:00] anecdotes and I guess tales cuz some of them aren't very true. And you'll find out she has a lot of fairy tales told about her, but the ones that are true still sound like fairy tales.

[00:23:11] **Beonca Louis:** Justin's tours take folks deeper into the life of Harriet Tubman, zig zagging around Auburn to tell the story of what the city meant to Harriet and the role the city played in the fight for black freedom.

[00:23:23] **Beonca Louis:** As I'm sure you can imagine, it's a lot to cover. But Justin wants people to walk away with one thing after his tours.

[00:23:33] **Justin Harris:** I want them to it sounds counterproductive, but I want them to be lost in a sort of way. I want to break a stigma or stereotype or something in them so that they know that there's more out there that they could get because Harriet, she grew up with chains around her neck.

[00:23:55] **Justin Harris:** She grew up in bondage being whipped, being beaten and people [00:24:00] telling her that she was nothing.. And then she escaped that and she looked back and said, I gotta go back for other people. She didn't sit down and say, I'm too tired to do anything else with my life. I'm just gonna hide and be little old Harriet.

[00:24:14] **Justin Harris:** No, she saw there was more and she took more and more and more until she couldn't take anymore.

[00:24:20] **Justin Harris:** And I want people to feel that.

[00:24:27] **Viola Davis:** In my mind, I see a line. And over that line, I see green fields and lovely flowers and beautiful white women with their arms stretched out to me over that line. But I can't seem to get there nohow. I can't seem to get over that line. That was Harriet Tubman in the 1800s.

[00:24:56] **Beonca Louis:** That was Viola Davis, giving a powerful acceptance speech [00:25:00] at the 2015 Emmy awards.

[00:25:06] **Beonca Louis:** On the next Walk in her Footsteps, we'll be talking to descendants of Harriet and hear the stories that were passed down from generation to generation. I would like to thank my guest, Jeff Ludwig, director of education at the Seward house, Courtney Rae Kasper, visitor experience manager at the New York State Equal Rights Heritage Center, and Justin Harris, Auburn tour guide.

[00:25:31] **Beonca Louis:** You can tour the Seward House Museum, including the basement kitchen, where passengers on the underground railroad would've stayed by visiting SewardHouse.org and booking a guided tour. Walk in her Footsteps is produced by Whetstone Media in partnership with Tour Cayuga. Thank you to the Walk in her Footsteps team, lead producer Tonina Saputo, managing producer, Marvin Yueh,

[00:25:55] **Beonca Louis:** audio editor, Martinho Cardoso, and associate producer [00:26:00] Danya AbdelHameid. Tour Cayuga would like to thank the Auburn community who carries on Harriet Tubman's legacy. For more information on Harriet Tubman's life in New York state, visit TourCayuga.com. I'd also like to thank Whetstone founder, Stephen Satterfield, Whetstone radio collective head of podcast, Celine Glasier, sound engineer. Max Kotelchuck, music director, Catherine Yang, associate producer, Quentin Lebeau, production coordinator, Shabnam Ferdowsi and sound intern, Simon Lavender. Cover art created by Whetstone art director, Alexandra Bowman. You can learn more about all things happening at Whetstone at WhetstoneMagazine.com.

[00:26:46] **Beonca Louis:** I'm Beonca Louis and thank you for listening.