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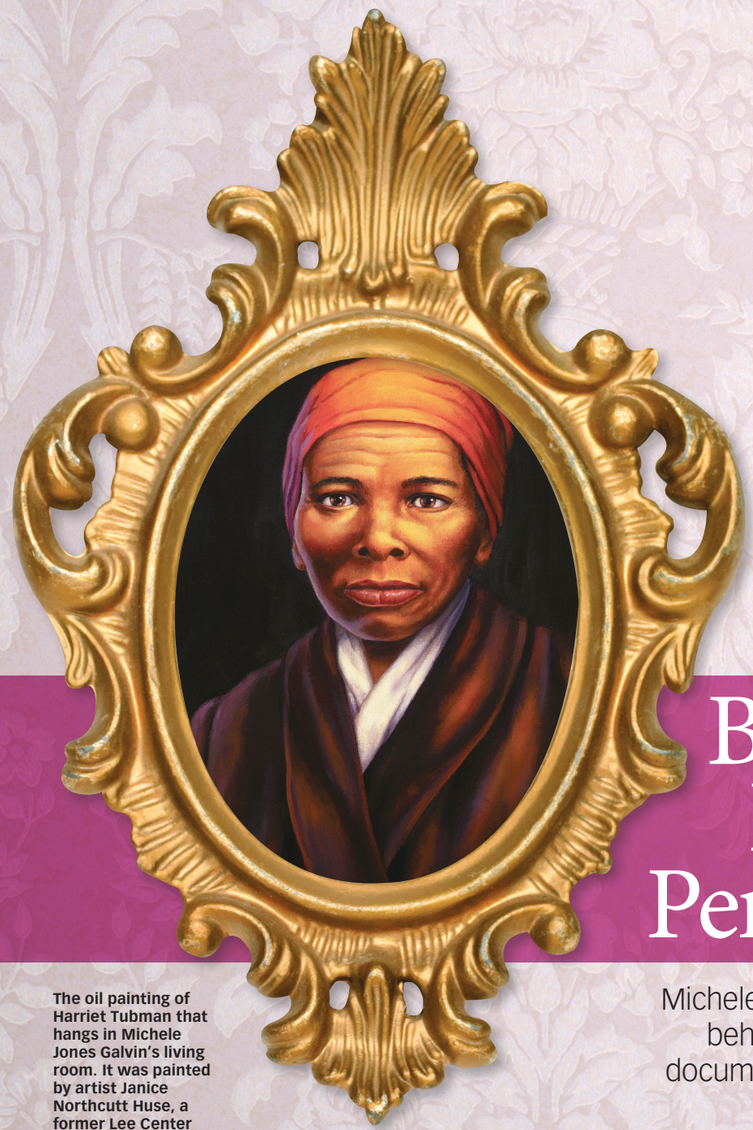


BY **COURTNEY RAE KASPER**

Beyond the Portrait of Perseverance

Michele Jones Galvin reveals the story behind her 13-year labor of love to document her family's historic legacy.

The oil painting of Harriet Tubman that hangs in Michele Jones Galvin's living room. It was painted by artist Janice Northcutt Huse, a former Lee Center resident now based in Port Charlotte, Fla.

Celebrated Civil Rights era literary figure James Baldwin famously said, "Know from whence you came. If you know whence you came, there are absolutely no limitations to where you can go."

Michele Jones Galvin carries the air of a dignified woman who knows exactly from where she came. And lining the walls of her 1930s Syracuse home are testaments to this pride — African folk art paintings, prints of Buffalo Soldiers, a framed Harlem Renaissance poster, among other cultural pieces. But the most striking glimpse into her heritage hangs in the back corner of her living room. It is a portrait of a wise black woman, cloaked in a coffee-colored shawl and iconic head scarf. Many know this woman as Harriet Tubman, the conductor of the Underground Railroad. But to Galvin, she is simply "Aunt Harriet."

"Every time I look at that picture I see my grandmother. The resemblance is uncanny," said the great-great grandniece of the legendary abolitionist. While Galvin has known about her relationship to the historical heroine since she was a little girl, the full significance of the connection did not impact her until she and her mother, Joyce Elliott Jones, began coauthoring a novel about their family's lineage. "I became almost obsessed with Aunt Harriet

and really wanted to make sure that everything my mom wanted to be told in the book really came forward, which is to give readers a more personal sense of Harriet, like I had grown to learn," Galvin said.

The idea for a book began in the 1970s, after Jones produced a Black History Month segment on the family's famous roots for WCNY. Jones knew how she was related to Tubman; her quest was to discover how her blood tie was connected and to learn about all the ancestors along the line. For the next 20 years, she spent every free moment extensively researching, collecting notes and recording passed down family accounts. Galvin joined her mother in 1999 as editor to help compile Jones' work into a manuscript format. "I've always fallen in line behind my mom because it's her dream to have the book published. My role has been to assist her in getting this done," Galvin said.

And she remembers the exact moment she typed those two little words every author anticipates. "It was 2:20 p.m. on July 15, 2010. I was on the veranda of the summer place where my husband and I stay in Martha's Vineyard. I'm sitting there and I finally say, 'The End,'" she recalled. "To know that the journey that my mother and I have been on for such a long time was finally complete and ready to share was an exuberant, very emotional feeling."

Now at 294 pages, *Beyond the Underground: Harriet Tubman, A Heroine* is in the waiting game of finding a publisher with the help of Skaneateles-based literary agent, Laura Ponticello of Big Bridge Connections. What makes this book so unique from other historical novels is the fusing of creative literature and facts with family memories (recollected by Jones) and flashbacks coming forward (told through the eyes of Galvin's maternal great grandmother and grandmother, who both knew Harriet) to paint a more humanized picture of Tubman.

"What makes this book very different is that it's written by a relative and it gives a family context to Aunt Harriet, as opposed to simply being a historical figure," Galvin said. "She had the same challenges, the same loves and life experiences that all women have. Our story allows readers to see her as a woman in love, who is rejected in love, who finds love for a second time. It shows her being a person who outside of her heroic deeds really went through the same kinds of things that women today deal with emotionally."

Galvin and her mother, Joyce Elliott Jones, at the two-story brick Harriet Tubman home on South Street in Auburn. Built circa 1880, it is the home where Tubman lived with her second husband, Nelson Davis, after their marriage in 1869.

PHOTO BY KIMBERLY COOK

> "To know that the journey that my mother and I have been on for such a long time was finally complete and ready to share was an exuberant, very emotional feeling."

Harriet Tubman (center, white shawl and dress) at the John Brown Home for the Aged circa 1912. She is surrounded by the matrons and members of the Board of Managers. Tubman's grandniece, Mary Elliott Gaskin, Galvin's maternal great grandmother, stands first to the left in the back row.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHELE JONES GALVIN

Although the process was more time consuming than Galvin had originally thought, the opportunity to delve deeper into her roots was rewarding in itself. The challenging part was uncovering partial documentation, because the lives of many slaves and African Americans were not well recorded or photographed. "The fact that we did enough research to find when people died but couldn't find out where they were buried was really trying. People could live whole lives and almost not be accounted for," Galvin said. But their intensive genealogical study did lead them to unearth many interesting and unknown tidbits about their family.

Take for instance the puzzling case of where her maternal great-great grandfather, Thomas Elliott, was buried. Galvin and her mother knew that the escaped slave had spent most of his life in Auburn, where he met and married Ann Marie Stewart, Galvin's great-great grandmother and Tubman's niece — the cornerstone of their connection to Harriet. So they were shocked to find a document that read that his death certificate was ordered in Willard. Further research led to the discovery that Elliott had in fact spent the last two years of his life in the Willard Asylum for the Insane.

On Oct. 9, 2010, 126 years after his death, Galvin and her family held a memorial service in his honor. "We sat around his gravesite in lawn chairs and all said something about him. It was a day of celebrating his life," Galvin said. "Initially, we knew the coordinates, but there wasn't a headstone, just a little metal marker. Now sits a foot stone engraved with his name, birth and death years and 'Freedom Fighter.'"

The experience also allowed Galvin to connect the thread of common family values dating back to Tubman. "It may not be unlike what other families believe in but clearly faith and taking care of one another is what we have found not only through our work and Aunt Harriet but just understanding generation to generation how things have been passed down; not artifacts but feelings, values and helping your neighbor whenever and however you can," Galvin said.

She translates this into her own life through her volunteer work and following the path that has lead her to a fulfilling career in helping others. Galvin has been instrumental in paving the way for the most needy in the Syracuse community to receive

During the Civil War,

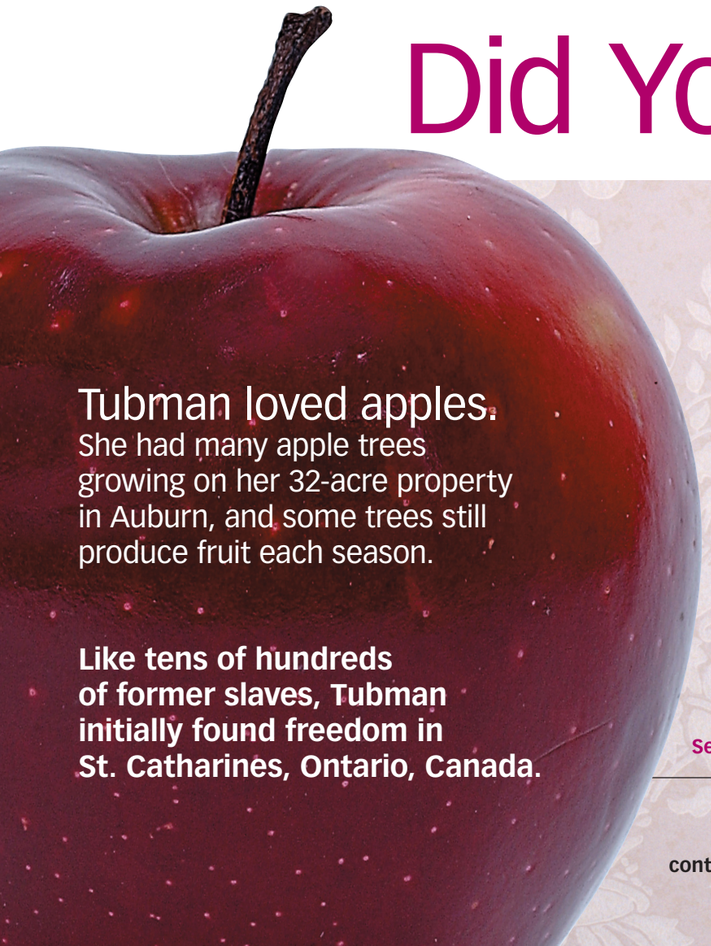
Tubman served as a spy for the Union Army and was the first woman in American history to lead a military expedition. She also made gingerbread cakes for the Union soldiers.

Members of Tubman's family that escaped slavery took the last name Stewart. The original family name was Ross. When Tubman escaped, she had already married her first husband, John Tubman, so she kept her married name. She wed a second time to Nelson Davis, and in her later years, she was known as Harriet Tubman Davis.

Clarence Morgan Stokes,

Galvin's maternal grandfather, who was raised in Auburn in the 1890s, was a renown horseman. As a teen, he drove Tubman by horse and buggy to do errands and visit relatives and friends.

Did You Know?



Tubman loved apples.

She had many apple trees growing on her 32-acre property in Auburn, and some trees still produce fruit each season.

Like tens of hundreds of former slaves, Tubman initially found freedom in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada.

1913

The year Harriet Tubman died. Before her passing, she received a medal for her heroism from the Queen of England. Through extensive research, Michele Jones Galvin and her mother, Joyce Elliott Jones, were able to uncover its current whereabouts, which is revealed in their novel.

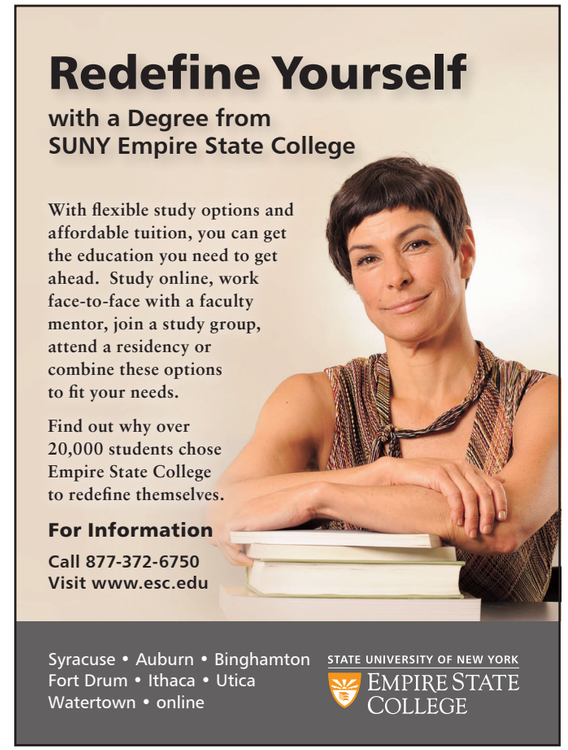
Tubman bought her property on South Street Road on the Auburn-Fleming line from Secretary of State, William H. Seward. Seward served under President Abraham Lincoln.

For more information about Beyond the Underground: Harriet Tubman, A Heroine, **contact Galvin at mjgalvin@mosesofherpeople.com.**

PHOTO BY KIMBERLY COOK

Galvin at the Barnes-Hiscock Mansion on James Street in Syracuse. Built in 1853, the house is recognized as a national stop along the Onondaga Freedom Trail.

healthcare and support services as the Director of Community Initiatives for the Onondaga County Department of Social Services. She also sits on the board of directors for community-based efforts like the George and Rebecca Barnes Foundation, Loretto Nursing Home, Syracuse Corinthian Club, Central New York Health Systems Agency and Health Advancement Collaborative of CNY.

While Galvin and her mother hope that their novel will be read by everyone and most importantly, picked up by educational institutions around the globe to inspire young minds, this doesn't mean that they don't have dreams for their manuscript beyond the print world.

"The book is the big dream, but we've had people say to us that if it's what we're claiming, then it sounds like a slave epic [film]. That's certainly something we would like to see happen," Galvin said. "Although we haven't figured out who we'd like to play what person yet, we'd like to see Maya Angelou, Denzel Washington, Meryl Streep, Glenn Close — the best of the best to play characters from slaves to masters to mistresses to Aunt Harriet to Thomas Elliott to my great grandmother. It would just be incredible." Spoken like a woman who sees no limitations when it comes to carrying on the story of her family's legacy. ■