

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Class Status

"Most people thought Ithaca meant Cayuga Heights. Cayuga Heights was *university*. They didn't know about the *real* Ithaca in the West End."¹

The Real Ithaca

The War of 1812 brought immigrant boatbuilders into Ithaca.² They settled around the Cayuga Lake Inlet, and for years the "West End" was considered the seediest part of town. Its inhabitants were immigrants known as "Rhiners," because supposedly some of them called the Inlet "The Rhine" in remembrance of the river back in Germany.

"I'll tell you people had absolutely nothing to live on," says a seventy-five-year-old Ithaca nurse and retired minister who frequented the area when births, deaths, "sometimes stabbing" required her services. "A lot of townspeople wouldn't have slept nights if they knew what was going on."

German, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Italian, Slavic, and Irish peoples lived there. "They'd go to the dump and pick up all

kinds of tin and scraps" to make their homes, Nurse Ruth Adams continues. Utensils hung outside the shacks for lack of space inside. Seven people often shared one room, and all slept on the floor; "many people just had straw." The Rhiners scavenged wood for heat and bought day-old food at half price. The men mowed lawns, shoveled sidewalks, "got acquainted with people who gave them stuff." And the women Rhiners stayed home. "They were definitely the underdogs," this nurse tells us, "but you know, you wouldn't trust any of the men – but you would trust a woman."

Antagonism between the Rhiners and the townspeople was quick to flare and was often intense. The area was considered a blotch on the "better" sections of town. Around the 1930s, though, new generations of Rhiners had acquired wealth and status, returned to their shabby homes, and rebuilt them. "Of course, the West End is a respectable part of town now," our nurse concludes.

The Contrast

Each of the towns surrounding Ithaca had its more or less moneyed residents; generally immigrants ranked low on the status scale, and people with local – and wealthy – ancestry ranked the highest. The land in Trumansburg was especially desirable, and so many affluent families settled there. Industry in Groton made for a distinct separation of classes. But in Ithaca, the difference was perhaps most dramatic; Cornell professors lived in majestic splendor, while a mere two miles away, the West End squatted in squalor.



Scenic view along the Cayuga Lake Inlet, c. 1900.

Ethnic Origins

An authentic American melting pot, this region was settled by groups of Dutch, Irish, English, Swedes, Finns, Czechs, and Greeks. Women were strong figures in most of these cultures.

Dutch Treat

In Holland, the social order was based on total family participation instead of the efforts of a single breadwinner. Dutch women have traditionally been active in business and activities outside the home.

The Dutch settlers comprised a major part of the population of New York State during its first two hundred years. In those early days, female Dutch traders figured in a healthy portion of the Indian fur trading business. One such trader was described in 1679:

This is a truly worldly woman, proud and conceited, and sharp in trading . . . She has a husband who is her second one. He remains at home quietly while she travels over the country to carry on her trading. . . . she is one of the Dutch female traders who understands the business so well.¹

Dutch women were equal to their husbands before traditional Dutch law; they had property rights, inherited equally with their siblings, and voted at their pleasure.²

The English, Au Contraire

The English woman was raised to be a totally different kind of female. She was not expected to handle complicated

matters such as money and business, to the point that anything she earned went immediately to her husband. She herself was the property of her husband; this was English common law for centuries.³

Historically, there has been tension between the English and Dutch. Two cultures so blankly different could never really see eye-to-eye. This English-American, not one to mince words, wrote in 1787:

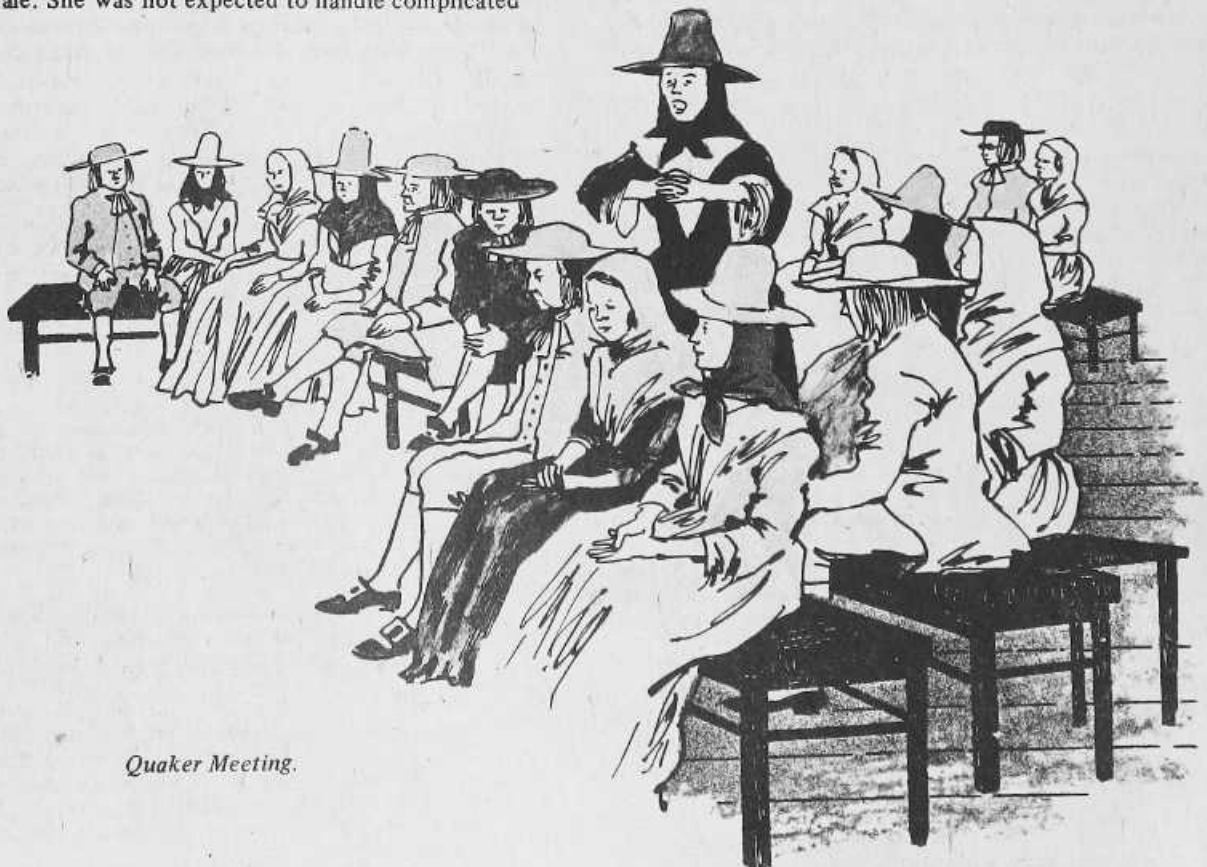
Sooner than marry any woman on earth that has Dutch blood in her veins, either for Love or Money or both united, I would ravish my grandmother, live a beggar, & die of famine in a ditch.⁴

After the Revolutionary War, the status of women took a nose dive as the English value system rose to acceptance. The Dutch culture began to die out, and it became fashionable for Dutch women to imitate the "ladylike" behavior and attitudes imported from England.⁵ In 1777, New York became the first state to explicitly disenfranchise all women, that is, to revoke their voting privileges.⁶

Pioneers started sifting into Tompkins County in the early 1800s, after all this activity was past. The female vote was gone, and America was English to the teeth. But the Dutch settlers who came here formed isolated communities, and with the pockets of Dutch habitation already established throughout the state, kept their culture glimmering. There were settlements in the Slaterville Springs area and in Newfield.

The Quaker Way

A large number of women's rights advocates emerged from Quaker homes. Susan B. Anthony was a Quaker. Louisa Lord Riley, founder of Ithaca's first suffrage club, was a Quaker. Even Ezra Cornell, practically the only person



Quaker Meeting.



"Aunt Elsie" Brooks.

in town initially in favor of women entering his⁷ university, came from a Quaker background.

A religious culture, the Quaker lifestyle was and is unique. Woman's place has often been the home and so it was the for Quaker woman, but homemaking was a respected vocation and the Quaker woman enjoyed equality in all community matters. In religion, she was considered just as capable of reflecting the "inner light" as a man. In the Quaker Meeting, women had as much social and political authority as the men. This Meeting was unlike any other spiritual gathering; it involved no service except silence, broken only when someone felt moved to speak. Women also had an equal chance at education; a mind was not considered any the less for belonging to a female.⁸

turned rooms in their homes into compartments of the "underground railroad." Ithaca was an important station on that great thoroughfare.²

Some of the women and men who came here as slaves made warm places for themselves in the heart of the community. Dinah Tenbrook was brought to Lansing at the age of one year to be a slave, and continued as one even after slavery was abolished. "She died, as was her wish, while in the harness."³ Dinah's eulogy in the *Ithaca Daily Journal* of March 19, 1903, couldn't say enough in praise of her.

The erect form, the winsome smile of this deaf, black face, the hearty welcome, given in tones melodious and winning, the friendly grasp of her little black hand, will not soon be forgotten.

And it goes on:

She was a wonderful example of the possibilities of her race. Such judgement and common sense, and refinement, such justice and reserve, such intelligence, self-control and love as made that rare personality proof sufficient that in heaven she shall shine as the angels of light. Not a relative of hers was at the funeral, not one of her own race, yet, tears were on all faces, love shone in every tear-dimmed eye.

Elsie Brooks was another personality. She "looked harmless and docile" enough, but was "the most lively, most domineering, most influential woman in the county in her day (1845-73)."⁴

She had the most powerful voice in the village and a tremendous influence as a leader in prayer and otherwise among her own people. She was very familiar with everybody and anybody. She was sharp and fearless, aggressive, and robust in health and manners.⁵

Black Women

Slaves

Slavery was not limited to the land south of the Mason-Dixon line. The first slave, a young boy, stepped inside Tompkins County borders in 1798, and others soon followed. Between 1805 and 1808 a "considerable and very respectable colony of Southerners" came into Caroline and brought with them some forty slaves.¹ Meanwhile, there were others in the county of a different philosophy; they quietly

That same zeal had given her strength to run away from her plantation home many years before. Once, in a religious exhortation, she called upon the Lord to come down through the church roof, by gosh, and never mind the damage, for she exclaimed, "I'll pay for the shingles!"⁶

A New Era

Slavery was abolished in New York in 1827 and all slaves in the state became free (the Emancipation Proclamation, which abolished slavery throughout the United States, was ratified in 1865). But the new citizens were faced with another problem — how to make it in an alien and hostile world. It was hard enough to be the first woman to enter an institution or arena, but to be black as well was a double weight. The first black woman at Cornell — Jennie Fauset, class of 1905 — was constantly guarded by a "strong phalanx of girls" who "surrounded her, walked with her to classes, and shielded her in every way."⁸

There was sufficient reason for caution. Black women simply were not safe. In February 1894, Cornell sophomores — in the spirit of "fun" — decided to prevent the freshman banquet from taking place. They filtered chlorine gas into the kitchen to suffocate the cooks so that they could not prepare the food. Little thought was given to the possible danger to those working women. Henrietta Jackson, a black worker, died from the poisonous fumes. In his law class, Professor Charles Collin of Cornell declared the act "murder."⁹ When taken to court, Judge Forbes of the State Supreme Court ruled that it was merely a "thoughtless" student prank, and the court must not "condemn them for their innocent amusements."¹⁰ The alleged leader of the action was the only one penalized; he refused to answer questions, was held in contempt and jailed. But he was released within a few months by a decision of the Court of Appeals. The *Ithaca Democrat* commented, "It is probable that the mental punishment of those who were engaged in the folly has been fully sufficient."¹¹

ITHACA, TOMPKINS COUNTY, N. Y., FEBRUARY 22, 1894

STUDENTS' FOLLY.

A COLORED WOMAN SUFFOCATED, HER DAUGHTER MADE SERIOUSLY ILL, AND SEVERAL STUDENTS MADE INSENSIBLE BY CHLORINE GAS.

A Coroner's Jury Called.

Again death has been caused by the foolish pranks of Cornell University students. It was thought some years ago, when in a spirit of fun, Cornell students caused the death of one of their number by dropping him from a high cliff while initiating him into a secret society, that a salutary lesson had been taught, but among a class of people where we should expect dignity and good sense, it had for years been strangely wanting and foolishness has ever held its sway, notwithstanding that President, faculty and trustees have done their best to abolish all forms of college hazing, which has tarnished the fair escutcheon of Cornell. The occasion of a Freshman or Sophomore banquet has nearly always resulted in some serious offense against law and decency, and acts have been committed that would have landed any other than a college student behind prison bars. Still fresh in the minds of indignant citizens of Ithaca is the scene of a banquet held in Clinton Hall, in front of which a mob gathered and broke windows, smeared the walls with stale eggs, and made the building a disgusting spectacle, which was visited and looked upon by multitudes of people who visited our city from

miles around.

The riotous proceedings of a year ago on East Hill, in which lawless students injured private property, invaded a room where a woman was on a serious bed of sickness, and when some students received broken limbs, are still remembered by our citizens. The President and faculty have threatened, begged, intreated that these things should be stopped but this has been of little or no avail. College boys must disgrace themselves, their college, and the city in which they are stopping for a while, and even become criminal, breaking laws and causing death of citizens, for so-called college fun — fun as we have said that would not have been tolerated by boys raised and brought up in our city and fun too, that in this case must come under the head of manslaughter. It is true that only a few of the students of Cornell were participants in this last act of fatal folly, but the odium, in a measure falls as a consequence on the fair fame of the University, which can only be a sufferer from these lawless acts.

For nearly a fortnight there has been a more or less friendly or bitter contest between the Freshman and Sophomore classes and the usual students' foolishness of forcing milk and vile compounds down one another's throats, has been in progress. Even students quietly riding on street cars have been pulled off, rolled in the snow and forced the drink vile mixtures.

The Freshman banquet came off on Tuesday evening at the old Masonic

Hall, and this was a signal for a general pandemonium, and while the Freshmen banqueted there was riotous proceedings without, in which eggs and other missiles were freely used. The Freshman banquet was about half through when a curious odor pervaded the banquet room, and a strange stupor began to fall upon the banqueting Freshmen. "For some time," says the Cornell Sun, "no one was able to discover its source. The waiters and several of the students were thrown into agony by its noxious effects and were forced to leave the room. Finally it was discovered that the gas was entering the caterer's room through a glass pipe carefully fitted into a hole bored in the floor. Upon immediate investigation it was found that this glass pipe was connected by rubber tubes with jars of poisonous chlorine gas placed in the room below, and it was removed."

But it was not removed until many students were prostrated, and several had to be carried out. Had the hole been bored into the main room instead of the caterer's room, the most fatal results would have ensued. As it was, Mrs. Jackson, a colored woman, was so suffocated with the poisonous gas that she died, and her daughter for a time was thought to be past recovery, and several students were so seriously poisoned that it was at first supposed they could not recover. On Wednesday morning Coroner Brown summoned a jury which viewed the body and the inquest was adjourned for further investigation.

The Southside Community Center

In 1922, the Francis Harper Woman's Club, an area black women's organization, determined to help uplift local blacks. Central to that goal, they realized, was a building of their own. Vera Irvin, then president, recalled:

At that time, the Negro youth of Ithaca had no central place for their activities. Realizing that the success of our group in meeting the responsibilities of citizenship was dependent on the training of our people, we raised the question, "Why not provide a center in which this objective can be worked out?"¹²

Raising the question was one thing; raising the building was another.

There were 135 members of the Francis Harper Woman's Club when the question was raised, but before it was answered, all but about 50 dropped out. They said such attempts had been made before and failed, and they saw no particular reason why this one should succeed.¹³

Nevertheless, the fifty brave spirits who remained decided to embark on the project. Fund-raising was first on the agenda; a house-to-house canvas netted \$229, and they were encouraged.

One thing led to another. First they rented a house at 221 South Plain Street, which became known as "The Southside Community Center" in 1930. Then a house was pur-



chased at 305 South Plain Street in 1932. The adjoining property was condemned and razed by the city, and the Center then purchased that site, constructed its own building in 1936, and started the present structure on the combined plots.

As far as paying for this ambitious project, a small committee "labored long and hard"¹⁴ to make the project eligible for both city and Works Progress Administration (WPA) sponsorship. Those two sources of funding, in conjunction with \$17,000 of personal pledges, covered building costs.

It was intended that recreational programs, job training, and educational training on health matters would be ongoing programs at the new project center, along with one designed expressly "to train Negro girls for homemaking and fit them for jobs as cooks and waitresses." A special "demonstration kitchen" was built for the latter program.¹⁵

By 1938, the building was nearly completed. But a \$15,000 mortgage still had to be repaid. The Community Center staff approached the local Community Chest — predecessor of today's "United Way" — and asked them to adopt the cause of liquidating this mortgage for their annual drive. Chest officials decided the cause was a good one, and in 1938 ran the drive and successfully raised the money.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt came to Ithaca in February of 1938 to dedicate the opening of the Southside Community Center. She called it "a dream come true."¹⁶ And so it was, but the dream came true because behind the wishful thinking was the hard work and staunch devotion of those original fifty women back in 1922.



Ravine above Lucifer Falls, Enfield.