



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE CORTLAND RURAL CEMETERY

SPRING 2022

About the abolitionist, William L. Chaplin

COMPILED & EDITED BY JOHN HOESCHELE, TRUSTEE

In 2020, outrage over recent instances of police brutality against African Americans elsewhere in the United States found expression right here in Cortland, when members of our community organized the first Black Lives Matter protest. Judging by editorials in the local paper and commentary on Facebook at the time, reactions to that protest ranged — as one might expect — from heartfelt expressions of empathy to indifference, to outright defiance.

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and later act upon
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Wherever present-day citizens stand on the subject of equality, there is no doubt that — for at least one person interred in the Cortland Rural Cemetery in the year 1871 — black lives mattered a great deal. His name was William Lawrence Chaplin.

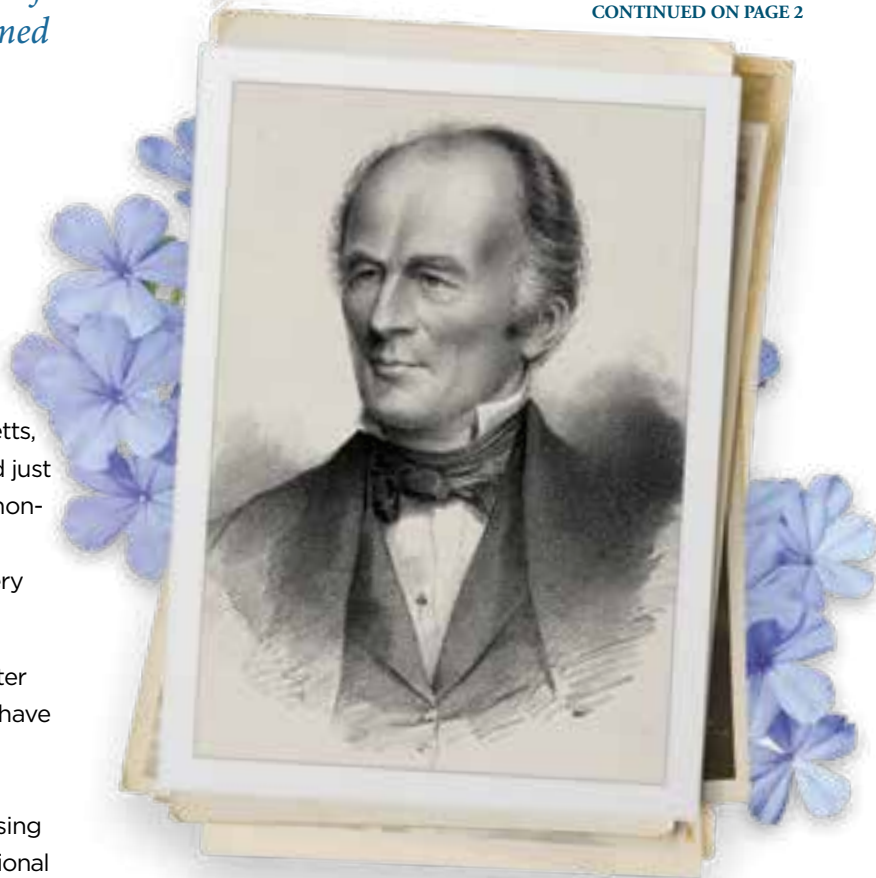
Early & formative years

Chaplin was born on October 27, 1796 in Groton, Massachusetts, then a modest town of approximately 1,800 citizens located just over 40 miles northwest of Boston. Raised within the commonwealth and within the still puritanical sphere of Boston — Chaplin would adopt and later act upon a fervent anti-slavery belief system doubtlessly informed by both parents.

On one hand, William's father — Daniel Chaplin — was minister of the Congregationalist church in Groton, where he would have preached, lived by, and raised his children to believe the doctrines of that faith. Since that church's founding in 16th century England, these would have included an ever-increasing emphasis on individual freedoms; in America, the Congregational church would indeed become important in many American social reform movements such as abolitionism, temperance, and women's suffrage.

On the other hand, his mother was Susanna Prescott Chaplin, whose father was Colonel William Prescott, the freedom-embracing commander at the Battle of Bunker Hill long credited with telling his revolutionary troops not to fire on British Red Coats “until you see the whites of their eyes.” Notably, Col. Prescott never owned slaves, spoke publicly against the institution, actively advocated for Massachusetts's ban on the practice (enacted in 1783), and made a point of praising the African-American soldier, Salem Poor, who'd fought valiantly beside him at Bunker Hill.

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WILLIAM L. CHAPLIN;
HERO OF MANY AMERICAN SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS
SUCH AS ABOLITIONISM AND TEMPERANCE.





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the Cortland Rural Cemetery
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Thank you for your support!*



William L. Chaplin... CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

Beginning in 1804, William was educated at Andover Academy, attended Harvard College for four years starting in 1819, and was eventually admitted to the bar in 1829, thereafter practicing law in Groton and Easton, MA. An active advocate of temperance as early as 1819, Chaplin later became an abolitionist when, in 1833, he joined the newly formed American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS). Leaving his Massachusetts law practice to focus on abolition, he moved to Utica, NY in 1837 where he became a general agent of the New York Anti-Slavery Society.



From advocacy to action

Now based in New York, Chaplin became known as "General Chaplin" among his abolitionist peers — editing two anti-slavery newspapers (the New York-based American Citizen and the Albany Patriot). In 1840, he helped branch off from the AASS to form the Liberty Party, known for its more radical abolitionist politics, even running as its candidate for New York's lieutenant governor (1846) and governor (1850).

In 1846, Chaplin went to Washington, DC, where he became an agent for the Underground Railroad and, with a free black man named Daniel Bell, helped organize and fund the attempted escape of 77 slaves known as the Pearl incident (1848). After having negotiated payments to free the Mary and Elizabeth Edmonson, who were among the fugitives in the otherwise failed escape attempt, Chaplin advocated for still bolder action a full 10 years before John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, VA (1859) — suggesting abolitionists "*storm the castle of tyranny and rescue from its cruel grasp its bruised and peeled victims.*"

Walking that talk, 1850 saw Chaplin personally attempt to free two slaves owned by southern congressmen Alexander Hamilton Stephens and Robert Toombs. With a \$500 reward set for the runaways, Chaplin's northward-speeding carriage was ambushed in Maryland by a six-man posse amid gunshots and blows from clubs. The first slave, named "Allen" was recaptured. The other, named Garland White, escaped, turned himself in, and escaped again later, eventually serving as chaplain for the 28th regiment, U.S. Colored Troops in the Civil War. Chaplin himself was beaten and then jailed, first in DC, then in Maryland, for a total of 19 weeks before he was released on bail for \$25,000 through funds raised by fellow abolitionists like Gerrit Smith. (That was the equivalent of just under \$1 million in today's dollars!) Skipping bail and returning to New York, Chaplin began delivering anti-slavery lectures in order to recompense those who'd funded his bail.

As it happens, he had another reason to return Upstate New York besides presumably being rattled by his dangerous endeavor.



IN AUGUST, 1850, THE FUGITIVE SLAVE CONVENTION WAS HELD IN CAZENOVIA, NY, ORGANIZED BY FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND GERRIT SMITH TO PROTEST CONGRESSIONAL DEBATE OF THE PROPOSED FUGITIVE SLAVE ACT OF 1850. THE EVENT WAS ATTENDED BY 2,000, INCLUDING MORE THAN 50 FUGITIVE SLAVES. THIS DAGUERRETYPE WAS INTENDED TO BE SENT TO CHAPLIN, WHO WAS IN PRISON IN WASHINGTON, D.C. FOR AIDING FUGITIVE SLAVES. CHAPLIN'S THEN FIANCÉ, THEODOSIA GILBERT, ATTENDED IN CHAPLIN'S STEAD; SHE IS SHOWN SEATED AT CENTER WITH FREDERICK DOUGLASS TO HER RIGHT AND RENOWNED ABOLITIONIST GERRIT SMITH STANDING BEHIND.



William L. Chaplin... CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

Settling down, in Glen Haven

On August 12, 1851, Chaplin married his fiancé and active supporter of her future husband's abolitionism, one Theodosia Gilbert of Glen Haven, NY. The ceremony was held at the Glen Haven Water Cure spa, a facility the couple thereafter operated for a time. (Water cures, or "hydropathy," were a form of 19th-century alternative medicine centered around the use water to cleanse the body of impurities.) Offering what its brochure described as "natural advantages and facilities for curing the sick," the spa was located on the southern tip of Skaneateles Lake, seemingly providing the Chaplins both income and a means of transitioning from curing society's ills to curing the ills of individuals.

Sadly, Theodosia died on April 11, 1855 after the birth of their second child. The water spa was destroyed by fire sometime later. And Chaplin — who seems to have been shaken by his very physical brush with southern slaveholders' laws — appears to have turned most of his attention in later years to the less dangerous temperance movement. Some 16 years after his wife's demise, he too passed away on April 28, 1871, at the age of 76 — the Cortland County Standard saying in its obituary that "His life was devoted to the amelioration and elevation of his fellow man." Chaplin, his wife, and one of their two daughters, Harriet (who died at the age of 9), rest in our cemetery's Section C.

Sources: *Wikipedia.org*; *Oxford African American Studies Center*; *David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library*; *Historical Marker Database* (*hmdb.org*); *Findagrave.com*; *Cortland County Standard*, 1871; *Encyclopedia of African American History Vol 2* (Paul Finkelman, Editor)



AFTER HIS ACTIVE PERIOD AS AN ABOLITIONIST, WILLIAM L. CHAPLIN WAS PROPRIETOR OF THE GLEN HAVEN WATER CURE, LOCATED AT THE SOUTHERN TIP OF SKANEATELES LAKE. LIKE OTHER INSTITUTIONS OF ITS DAY, THE FACILITY PROMISED HYDROPATHIC RELIEF FOR INDIVIDUALS SUFFERING FROM A WIDE VARIETY OF AILMENT.



Difficult Days Ahead & Behind

At the CRC, winters are often our "slow season" — as lawn mowing and burials cease, giving way to equipment repairs, inside maintenance, plowing walkways, and reduced staff. This last winter proved an exception, at least financially speaking — as the furnace in the Gibson Memorial Chapel failed, requiring a \$4,000 replacement. While, up on the hill, one of our enormous, 100-year-old trees came down in a windstorm, knocking over monuments, tearing up the nearby grounds, and resulting in a whopping \$7,500 bill for its removal. Combined, these two unforeseen expenses consumed approximately 50% of the funds we rely on to get us through the winter.

Sadly, the coming season is expected to present challenges of its own — as fuel prices spike (making it difficult to refill our mowers and string-trimmers); hourly wages again increase due to NYS mandates; and we struggle, like so many other businesses, to attract and retain willing workers.

If you value the important work we do and have the means, please consider making a larger-than-usual donation to our cemetery. With your help and support, we can succeed in the face of recent and forthcoming adversity!



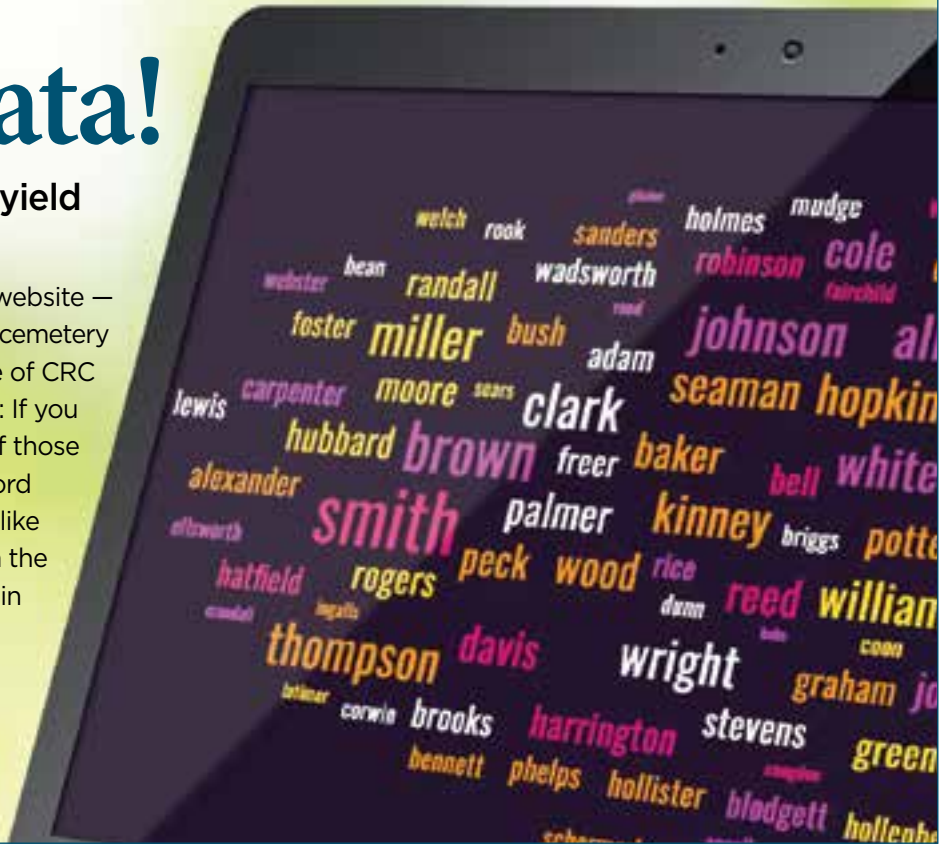
WITH YOUR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT, WE CAN LESSEN THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS TO THE CRC BUDGET FROM UNFORESEEN CATASTROPHIES AND EXPENSES.



Insights Await In Our Data!

Crunching our burial data can yield some interesting things...

(Note: You can find it, in PDF form, on our website — thanks to the digitization efforts of previous cemetery administrators and the continuing diligence of CRC Trustee, Karen Halstead.) Just one example: If you sort the column containing the surnames of those buried at the CRC, and then generate a “word cloud” from it, you wind up with a graphic like the one shown here. The larger the name in the word cloud, the more folks we have buried in our cemetery by that name: There are 269 Smiths, 158 Kinneys, 117 Browns, and so on. Take a look and do your own data dive, sometime: It’s interesting!



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CORTLAND RURAL CEMETERY

Cortland Rural Cemetery
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