

## Extraordinary Ordinary Lives (Part 2)

by Jim Wood, Wayne Action for Racial Equality

We often forget that slavery was legal and widespread in New York State until 1827. The research of former Wayne County Historian, Marjory Perez, identifies 300 slaves and 175 enslavers in the Finger Lakes Region between 1790 and 1820. From Austin Steward's memoir, *Twenty-two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman* we learn about his Aunt Betsy Bristol's family who, like Mr. Steward, was enslaved by Captain William Helm, primarily in Bath, NY. According to Steward:

The captain sold my aunt Betsy Bristol to a distinguished lawyer in the village, retaining her husband, Aaron Bristol, in his own employ; and two of her children he sold to another legal gentleman named Cruger.

According to Steward, Helm then beat Aaron Bristol with a branch until Mr. Bristol's face was so swollen, he could hardly see. We can only imagine the family rancor as these atrocities grew at the same time the state was shedding slavery. The "word on the street" was that it was becoming increasingly possible to run away and melt into the surrounding countryside by working for a kind person or family that opposed slavery. Escaping was still dangerous because bounty hunters from the South were kidnapping Black people under the guise of the Federal Fugitive Slave Act even while the gradual New York State Emancipation Act was emboldening enslaved New Yorkers to escape bondage. As Ms. Perez' research reveals, Betsy Bristol gathered her family, intolerably separated by Captain Helm's sale, to become one of the first in the area to escape to freedom. With Aaron and at least two of their children (Lucy and Robert) she made her way to Palmyra from Bath, New York sometime between 1807 and 1810.

We know that the next decade was tough. When Aaron applied for the newly created Revolutionary War Veterans' Support Funds in 1818 and again in 1820, the family listed their meager assets as one small building on  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an acre on which they owed \$100 coupled with total additional assets of \$13 (two barrels, two tables, four chairs, one hog & four piglets, two kettles, one frying pan, an old axe and a hoe). However, following Aaron's death in 1821,

Betsy managed to raise her four children alone without applying for benefits again until the 1840s. We see her resourcefulness grow alongside her courage. In fact, upon her death in 1851, her will and probate file indicated that Betsy was able to divide a small inheritance that included the deed to her property among her four living children – Lucy, Robert, Jemima and Betsey.



