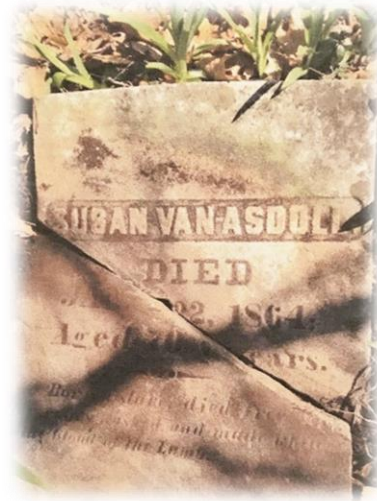


## Historic Legacy: Susan Van-Asdoll

By Martha O. Evans

It laid there broken in two pieces and covered with weeds. Down a knoll and on the far side of the cemetery, Elmira College students and their professor, Dr. Heidi Deirckx, working on documenting all stones in the Burdett Presbyterian Cemetery in May 2013, brushed dirt off the stone and stepped back. There it was, staring back at them, the words, "Susan Van-Asdoll, died Jan. 22, 1864, age 70, born a slave: died free." Below that, a biblical inscription, "Her robes washed and made white in the Hand of the Lamb." The Burdett Presbyterian Church took notice. Lay pastor Richard Evans, my husband, and I wanted to know more about Susan. We also wondered if the Oldest House in Burdett, just a block away and documented as used on the Underground Railroad, might have been part of the story that ends with the tombstone inscription.



1855 NYS census information located at the Schuyler County Historical Society, placed Susan Vanosdoll (aka Van-Asdoll) in the Burdett household of William Harrison Reynolds in September. Her age is given as 50, born in Maryland. Her occupation is listed as "servant." The mystery still hung in the back of my mind. Her age was off, compared to the age on her tombstone.

Historical Burett records were researched, specifically about the Reynolds family and the Carsons, the first family connected with the Oldest House in Burdett, also known locally as the Underground Railroad House. The records show a web of family and friends with abolitionist leanings across central New York and in several states dedicated to helping escaping slaves.

The 1860 US census had a listing of Susan Vanosdoll as a "nurse" with the Raplee family of Burdett. The agricultural section of the census also lists her as a farmer in the Town of Hector. My later review of deeds in the Schuyler County Clerk's Office showed that she bought a quarter-acre of land from William Himrod on July 20, 1851, for \$250. The deed shows she was from the Town of Catharine, at that time in Chemung County, but all attempts to find her in any earlier census either in New York or Maryland, plus a nationwide search of the 1850 census records, came up with nothing. What did ring as more than a coincidence is the fact that one of the Underground Railroad routes from Elmira would come over the Catharine-Hector Turnpike, part of today's Ridge Road, and pass through Burdett. From there the trail went cold.



The Oldest House in Burdett, was built about 1810 by Joseph Carson, one of the first early settlers in what is now Burdett. Over the past 80 years, there have been numerous articles written about the historic evidence in this house. An Aug. 28, 1938, Sunday Telegram newspaper article states Miss Mary Pratt, Carson's great-granddaughter, 10 years earlier peeled off wallpaper on a fireplace cover and found intriguing symbols of the Underground Railroad. In front of the fireplace mantel was a trap door that opened to a deep pit. This type of fireplace pit was an

early American house design to get rid of fireplace ashes, but during the time of the Underground Railroad these hidden spaces were sometimes used as a hiding place for escaped slaves.

Notes written in 1976 by Bob Bale a former Burdett historian, led me to the Oldest House where I saw evidence of the back of a door to a hidden stairway. At the bottom of the door, appearing to have been traced in wet varnish, are the words "S. Frazier, Grainer, 1855." The current owners also informed me there is a tunnel in the basement that is boarded up, but at one time went to a barn, no longer standing. In 1815, the home was owned by Herman Ingersol. The barn sat on property owned by Robert Wilson, who sold it to Silas Colegrove in 1861. Why was there a tunnel connecting the Oldest House with Robert Wilson's barn? The mysteries are riveting.

Researching stories about Harriet Tubman brought some clarity to this time in history. Her biography says she escaped her plantation in Dorchester County, Md., in 1849. She made 11 documented trips back to that area between 1850-1860 to bring more than 70 friends and family out of slavery. Friendly houses willing to help escaping slaves were the Underground Railroad stations, passing the freedom-seekers from site to site. Tubman lost no one to the slave hunters empowered by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. In 1857, Tubman bought land from William Seward, President Abraham Lincoln's secretary of state, and eventually built a home in Auburn, N.Y. No complete list exists of slaves she helped escape. Tubman continued to lead emancipated slaves north out of the south and spying for the Union, during the Civil War.

Coming back to the inscription "S. Frazier" traced on the back of the door in the Oldest House. I took a giant leap, I asked Jean Gardner, a trustee of the Schuyler County Historical Society and someone equally committed to Burdett history, to help me check the 1850 US census records for a "Susan Frazier," about age 60, and possibly a slave in

Dorchester County, Md. To our total surprise, a Susan Frazier, born about 1790, was living in the same Dorchester County area as Harriet Tubman, and yes, Susan Frazier was listed as a slave. She was living in a house with many other people, including an Elizabeth Frazier, age 79. Except for Susan, they are all listed as white. Going by Susan Van-Asdoll's Burdett tombstone, the ages match. Was Susan Frazier a runaway slave also known as Susan Van-Asdoll? Had Susan Frazier been living at the Oldest House in 1855? Evidence was starting to build.

Harriet Tubman used to tell escaping slaves, change your name, change your age. Sneak away on a Saturday because they won't realize you are gone until Monday. Travel at night. Leave in the fall and winter when daylight hours are shorter, and nights are longer. Be prepared to defend yourself and most importantly, never turn back. Canada was the destination of most escaped slaves.

A visit to the Dorchester County Historical Society in Maryland revealed the slave named Susan Frazier was never freed. In their Book of Manumissions of Maryland, a list of slaves certified as free or released from slavery, Susan Frazier was not listed. Another Susan Frazier listed in the 1850 census, but she is about 10 years younger and is white and her parents, Levin and Elizabeth, owned slaves. In the 1850 U.S. census, Susan Frazier, slave, appears on the list with a white Elizabeth Frazier" age 79. After 1850 Susan disappears from all Maryland records, including death records. Slaves usually only had a first name, and some occasionally used the last name of their owners.

The mystery of the inscription on the door, was still intriguing. The word "grainer," according to the dictionary, can be a railroad car that hauls grain. Did Susan escape in a grain-hulling railroad car? What about the date 1855? Susan Van-Asdoll buys land in 1851 and is not listed as a farmer until 1860. Was Susan living at the Oldest House until 1855, when she went to the William Harrison Reynolds household to help Martha Reynolds with the upcoming birth of daughter Ella?

Joseph Carson, the builder of the oldest house, had two daughters, Eliza and Mary. Eliza married Gen. William B. Wood. They lived for a short time in Burdett but later moved to Auburn. William was politically and socially active in the Whig Party, which by 1856 was deeply divided over slavery and its own candidate, Millard Fillmore. Gen. Wood owned the Americana Hotel and the Western Exchange Hotel in Auburn. The 1855 census records 16 people living at the Wood hotel, with most being classified as "boarders" or "servants." A "John Frazier," age 22, is listed as a boarder. No race is given. Were John and Susan related?

William Harrison Reynolds, according to the 1855 census, is living in the Town of Hector 3 miles from Burdett on a farm with his second wife, three children, Susan Van-Asdoll and a male laborer. His family are well-known anti-slavery supporters, especially his sister, Permelia Story and her husband Rev. Asa Story.

Of interest is the fact that William Harrison Reynolds probated Susan Van-Asdoll's will after her death on Jan. 22, 1864. The will was recorded on March 21, 1864. Six beneficiaries are listed. Ella Reynolds, age 9, was born about the time Susan was living with the Reynolds family, and represented by her mother Martha M. Reynolds. The will is also addressed to Henrietta, also known as Harriet, Wilson was the wife of Robert Wilson, and in the probate records is listed by the Schuyler County Clerk as "colored." Isaac Mason of Burdett, also listed as "colored." Susan Demond of Romulus, who the 1860 U.S. census listed as "mulatto." Clara Middleton, who in the 1860 U.S. census is listed as "black." And Emily Smith of Burdett, wife of O.T. Smith. The will claimed Susan had no relatives.

The biggest surprise to me is that Harriett was "colored" and married to Robert Wilson, an immigrant from Scotland and whose barn was connected by a tunnel to the Oldest House. In no censuses is she listed as "colored." The 1855 census listed both Harriett and Robert Wilson as "white" and having three children. Harriett died in Canada in January 1865, just nine months after the reading of Susan's will and four months before the end of the American Civil War. She was brought back and buried in the Burdett Presbyterian Church Cemetery. Whether Harriett was a conductor on the Underground Railroad or a person who had to flee as the tension during the Civil War escalated, it's clear that her family wanted her buried at home.

Isaac Mason is listed in the 1860 census as a "black" day laborer and living with his wife, Jane Mason, also "black." After the 1860 census they disappear from records.

The Carson, Wood, Colegrove and Nivison families, all at one time lived in the Oldest House, and they all are related to the Reynolds family. Is it a coincidence that families in Burdett have immediate family in Auburn, the very place that is home to strong anti-slavery and abolitionist sentiment? Is this story just a long list of coincidences or are these families, plus the Wilsons, true abolitionists who were dedicated to helping people of color find freedom in the politically charged time prior to and during the Civil War? Records from this time period are scarce. Runaway slaves did not want to be found. Uncovering the past means making the most of what evidence we have.

Ironically, President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on Jan. 1, 1863, one year before Susan died. But Lincoln did not include the state of Maryland in the Emancipation Proclamation. Maryland did not emancipate its slaves until November 1864, but because Susan was living in Burdett, New York, she died *free*.

In 2013, Burdett Presbyterian Church repaired Susan's stone. Rest in Peace Susan.

*Editor's Note: The Oldest House in Burdett was purchased in 2018 by Adam and Dana Tischler. They have complete historical records and newspaper articles, passed down from one owner to the next. What a wonderful legacy to keep with the house.*