For at least two decades preceding the Civil War, a secret signal was given at the old tavern at the top of West Hill in Fredonia. The former inn, now an apartment building, was located at the northeast corner of the intersection of today’s Main Road (U.S. Route 20) with today’s Chestnut Street. Fredonia is located in western New York, in the Chautauqua County township of Pomfret. The whispered message was given to Underground Railroad (UGRR) conductor Eber M. Pettit (lifespan 1802 - 1885), who would have just arrived from Pennsylvania or Ohio with his hidden passenger and a wagon full of shoes, boots, leather garments, and patent medicines manufactured by his family.

According to his memoirs, Pettit’s usual goal was to reach Black Rock in Buffalo, so that his passengers could safely cross the Niagara River to Canada. Somehow, he was informed at the inn on West Hill whether it was less dangerous to travel a mile northwest along Chestnut Street to his father’s safe-house at a small community called Cordova (formerly known as Crosbyville and known today as the intersection of Chestnut Street and Matteson Street in Fredonia), or less dangerous to travel by an alternate route either through or around Fredonia. Sometimes it was preferable to continue another seventeen miles, all the way to the edge of the Cattaraugus Reservation of the Seneca Nation, where Pettit’s family operated a safe-house among his friends and relatives in the Cattaraugus County community of Versailles in the township of Perrysburg.

Western New York was not opened for development until 1804, but only four years later, a small congregation of Baptists appeared in the area which was to become incorporated in 1829 as the village of Fredonia. In the mid-1830s, Pettit and several members of his family arrived in Fredonia from the Pompey area of central New York. They immediately joined the congregation today known as the Fredonia Baptist Church, where several early records can be found. A few years later, while Pettit’s parents and some siblings remained in the Fredonia area, Pettit and other family members moved to Versailles, where they were active in the First Baptist Church of Perrysburg. The Baptists met in the small Methodist Meeting House in Versailles, around the corner from the little Methodist church of today. The Baptist congregation in Perrysburg owned land just west Versailles, but never had a building of its own, and although the congregation no longer exists, a few of its early records are found in the archives of the Fredonia Baptist Church.
Shortly after the Civil War, beginning on February 26, 1868, Pettit’s memoirs were serialized in the Fredonia Censor newspaper. The editor, Willard McKinstry (1815 – 1899), whose wife was also from central New York, said that the publication of Pettit’s story was accomplished through McKinstry’s own urging. It was done, McKinstry said, “with a view to the perpetuation of the personal recollections of a period in our history which, thanks to the Proclamation of our martyred President, can never in the history of this country be repeated.” In 1879, McKinstry re-issued Pettit’s memoirs in a book entitled, Sketches in the History of the Underground Railroad. The book was dedicated to African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and a first edition was placed in the records of the Fredonia Baptist Church. Twelve decades later, another copy of the book was discovered at the Fenton Historical Society in Jamestown, NY, and then re-issued by Paul Leone at the Chautauqua Region Press (Westfield, NY, 1999).

In the decade since Leone’s publication, the records of the Fredonia Baptist Church have been transcribed by Marsia Painter and others, and uploaded to the internet by Nathan Towne, courtesy of Jay Priest at Chautauqua Gen Web. The records of Fredonia’s Forest Hill and Pioneer cemeteries have been transcribed by Lois and Norwood Barris, Audrey Smoyer, Tina Holtz, Jim Boltz, and others. Their findings were also uploaded by Nathan Towne and Jay Priest. Ongoing research about Pettit and his neighbors has been conducted by Douglas H. Shepard of the Darwin R. Barker Museum in Fredonia. Vince Martonis and other collectors of antique bottles have discovered many of the Pettit family’s medicine vials in the old dumping grounds of nineteenth century farms. Emerging from this joint effort of historical investigation is a dynamic portrait of Pettit’s life in Cordova, Versailles, and Fredonia.

The cemetery records consist of bound ledgers, and some of the church papers are similarly bound. However, additional church records are single sheets, cloth-bound books, and a fragile album of photos. Along with the leather-bound records, the cache of carefully folded letters and tiny record books were under the exceptional care of Almond Z. Madison (1803 - 1892). He was the church clerk for four decades, from 1848 until his death. In the twentieth century, the church records were consolidated by Edith Lewis Morse (1885 – 1953). She served as the church clerk for two decades, from 1934 until her death. She was instrumental in preserving the photo album of church members, which had been given in 1869 to the departing pastor, Howard Jones (1834 – 1903).
When the pastor’s son, Minneapolis architect Harry Wild Jones (1859 - 1935), returned to Fredonia in the early twentieth century to design new interiors and a Sunday school for the church, he brought along the album for identification and labeling. Harry Wild Jones and his family were held in high esteem by the Fredonia Baptists, not only because of the architect’s reputation, but also because (1) his father had helped the congregation recover from the trauma of the Civil War, and (2) the architect’s maternal grandfather had written the lyric to America (My country ’tis of Thee, sweet land of liberty...). The Harry Wild Jones wing was designed according to the Akron Plan for Sunday schools, but sadly, it was radically altered and then replaced before its fiftieth birthday. However, the architect’s sanctuary design and photo album survive, and the album contains a labeled image of Deacon Eber M. Pettit. Three years before the architect’s death, Harry Wild Jones re-gifted the album to the church.

The Centennial History of the Fredonia Baptist Church was compiled by church members and published in 1908 by the Matthews-Northrup Works, Buffalo, NY. A History of the Fredonia Baptist Church was written by Rev. C. Allyn Russell in 1955 and published by McClenathan Printery, Inc., Dunkirk, NY. In both books, the church’s connection to the UGRR was discussed, and modern research indicates that Pettit’s work in the UGRR was part of a vast network. An underground system for conveying slaves to freedom had been operated by Quakers in Philadelphia and New England for about twenty-five years by the mid-1830s when Pettit’s family arrived in Fredonia. According to his memoirs, “The first well established line of the UGRR had its southern terminus in Washington, D.C., and extended in a pretty direct route to Albany, thence radiating in all directions to all the New England States, and to many parts of this State.”

Pettit spent his childhood and young adulthood in central New York’s “burned-over district,” a seat of religious fervor and abolitionism. In 1835, only two years after the establishment of the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia, the New York Anti-Slavery Society was formed in Peterboro, NY, only twenty miles from Pettit’s hometown. Thereafter, the state’s abolitionist sentiment grew by leaps and bounds. According to the Fredonia Censor of February 10, 1836, an anti-slavery society had just been formed in Dunkirk, three miles from Fredonia. In 1840, the Censor reported an anti-slavery convention in Fredonia itself. An organization called “Friends of the Slave” existed in Fredonia by 1842. Eber Pettit stated that his UGRR station in Versailles was at the junction of “six laterals,” which were likely to have been the routes from at least six other safe-houses in nearby communities.
FAMILY BACKGROUND

According to *Genealogy of Pettit Families in America* by Katherine Louise Van Wyck (South Pasadena, CA, 1936), the Pettit family in the Fredonia area included Eber M. Pettit’s wife Euretta Sweet Pettit (1804 – 1873), his parents Dr. James Pettit (1777 – 1849) and Lucy Felt (Phelt) Pettit (1777 – 1849), his in-laws Graphen Sweet (1774 – 1841) and Elizabeth Havens Sweet (1784 – 1868), his sister Harriet Pettit Handy (1810 – 1878) and brother-in-law Harley H. Handy (1813 – 1896), his brother Melancthon S. Pettit (1818 – 1878) and sister-in-law Sarah Hancox Pettit, his brother Charles Pettit (1815 – 1868), and his sister Eleanora (Elnora) Pettit Delvin (1808 – 1886) and her husband James Delvin (1812 – 1890). One of Eleanora’s daughters, Mercy E. Delvin (1833 – 1901), married into the Sweet family, and Graphen Sweet’s sister Deborah Sweet (1784 – 1850) also joined the Fredonia group.

The Graphen Sweet family was large, the birth years of its offspring spanning two decades. Sons in Fredonia included B. K. Sweet (1826 – 1859), David G. Sweet (1820 – 1884), Hiram H. Sweet (1829 – 1854). Especially active in the Fredonia Baptist Church were Graphen’s sons Joseph C. Sweet (1813 – 1880) and Thomas B. Sweet (1816 – 1888), who served the church for fifty years alongside two generations of its key members. They were later joined in their church work by their brother David. Thomas B. Crosby’s wife Jane Crosby Sweet died in 1847, and his son Crosby G. Sweet was a musician in the Civil War, later active in the church. The daughters of Graphen Sweet included Mary E. Van Scoter, whose family later inherited the Sweet farm in Cordova and became prominent Baptists in twentieth-century Fredonia.

Harley H. Handy was also a central New York native, but his parents lived in nearby Cassadaga. Located elsewhere between central New York and southern Ohio were other siblings of Eber M. Pettit, including Samantha Pettit Cogswell (1798 – 1871), Sophronia Pettit Marsh (1800 – 1855), William Harrison Pettit (1813 – 1865), and James Jacob Pettit (1804 – 1877), a lawyer who was an outspoken opponent of slavery. Eber M. Pettit also had three other siblings who did not reach adulthood: Lucy Maria Pettit, who died in 1812 at age six; Samuel, who died as an infant in 1812, and another Lucy Pettit, who died as an infant (year unknown).

The 1936 Pettit genealogy included research by Rose Pettit Crandall (1870 – 1953), daughter of Melancthon S. Pettit. Her findings indicated that Eber M. Pettit and most of his siblings were born in Fabius, NY. Another native of that region was Eber’s daughter Helen E. Pettit (1825 – 1880), who married Darwin R. Barker (1820 – 1885), a grandson of Fredonia’s early pioneer Hezekiah Barker. Eber M. Pettit’s son James M. Pettit (1833 – 1818) married Sarah E. Hall (1841 – 1927), and they raised children in Versailles. Another son of Eber M. Pettit, Frederick W. Pettit (1835 – 1857), died in Versailles but was later reinterred at Forest Hill Cemetery upon the burial of Eber’s granddaughter Dora Barker (1851 – 1869). Another daughter of Eber and Euretta Pettit was Harriet E. Pettit, who died at age six in 1837.

Eber M. Pettit’s father Dr. James Pettit reportedly studied medicine in Hamilton, NY, and practiced in Fabius. He was commissioned as a surgeon in the War of 1812, and may have spent time during the war in Chautauqua and Cattaraugus.
Eber M. Pettit, the Underground Railroad, and the Fredonia Baptist Church

counties. Back in central New York, he practiced from 1816 to 1828 in Delphi, and from 1829 to 1835 in Cazenovia. He was the eldest of the eleven children of the tanner and shoemaker Jonathan Pettit (1752 – 1833) and Agnes Riddle or Riddel (1755 – 1833), who both died at their daughter Agnes Pettit Sinnott’s home in Cazenovia shortly before Dr. James Pettit moved his family to western New York.

Among the many indications of the strong anti-slavery sentiment in the Pettit family were the names of Eber M. Pettit’s uncle and brother, Melancthon Smith Pettit. Eber’s uncle was born in 1788 and died in 1817. Eber’s brother was born in 1818 and died in 1878. In choosing these names, the family was most likely aware that, Major Melancthon Smith (1744 – 1798) had been (1) a member of the New York militia during the Revolution, (2) a delegate to the Continental Congress, and (3) an original member of the anti-slavery Manumission Society of New York. Later, Colonel Melancthon Smith, a son of Major Melancthon Smith, was an Army officer in the War of 1812. Still later, Rear Admiral Melancthon Smith, a grandson of Major Melancthon Smith, was linked to Fredonia’s Naval hero William B. Cushing through their respective engagements toward the crippling and eventual destruction of the CSS Albermarle during the Civil War.

Eber M. Pettit’s uncle Melancthon Smith Pettit was a physician and surgeon who served in the War of 1812 and later published two newspapers, The Ohio Republican in Dayton and the Spirit of the West in Cincinnati. Other prominent uncles of Eber M. Pettit included George Pettit (1780 – 1866), Jonathan Pettit (1782 – 1811), and David Pettit (1784 – 1856). The uncle George Pettit was a member of the New York Assembly between 1821 and 1837, and then became a well-known judge in Fabius, where he owned over a thousand acres of land. The uncle Jonathan Pettit was a lawyer in Sherburne, NY, and was a co-publisher of The Republican Messenger. The uncle David Pettit was a writer and teacher in several locations in Ohio. Another uncle John Riddell Pettit (1793 – 1856) seems to have remained in central New York. There were also aunts or uncles whom Eber M. Pettit never knew, because they had died as infants in 1778, 1786, and 1795, respectively. There had also been an uncle Eber M. Pettit, who had died at age three in 1793. Unnamed here but adding to the extensive family scattered throughout the western frontier were the relatives of Eber M. Pettit’s paternal grandmother.

Dr. James Pettit obtained his 25-acre farm at Chestnut and Matteson Streets from Stephen May and Lucy May in 1835 (Liber 17 of Deeds at Page 74). The address today would be about 467 Chestnut Street, but the modest, Pettit house no longer exists. In surviving photos, a small kitchen wing can be seen, with a windowless extension beyond the hearth’s chimney. Eventually, Eber’s brother Melancthon Smith Pettit built a home slightly east of their mother’s house, and Eber’s sister Harriet Handy inherited the Dr. James Pettit house. The family had reputedly attempted to establish a silk industry in Cordova, but met with little success. Their patent medicines, on the other hand, were successfully marketed for more than a half-century.
EARLY CHURCH RECORDS

In 1833, Deborah Sweet, Elizabeth Sweet, Graphen Sweet, Pamela Sweet, and Thomas Sweet were accepted to the Fredonia Baptist Church “by letter,” meaning that they had received commendations and traveling letters from their previous church in Delphi. Graphen Sweet seems to have carried one of his “pew receipts” as documentation of his good standing in the Delphi church. One of the trustees who had signed the receipt was [Dr.] James Pettit, and the receipt itself survives. The next year, Sally Sweet and Joseph Sweet joined the Fredonia church by letter, and Benjamin Sweet by baptism. In 1835, James and Lucy Pettit were received in Fredonia by letter. The next year Eber Pettit and his family were accepted by letter, and in 1837, Helen Pettit, Mary Sweet, and David Sweet were baptized into membership.

Shortly after the Pettits arrived, Graphen Sweet was appointed by the church to help review a prospective minister for ordination, and Dr. James Pettit was appointed to a fundraising committee for the construction of a parsonage. Soon Dr. James Pettit was placed on committees to investigate charges of immorality or unchristian conduct, and on other committees to help resolve disputes among church members. For example, Dr. James Pettit was appointed to question a church member who had been charged with profanity. Eber M. Pettit was listed as “second laborer,” and charged that the accused had acted unethically in accounts with a lady. The case resulted in the “withdrawal of the hand of fellowship” from the accused. In other words, he was “excluded” and excommunicated.

In spite of their secret work with the UGRR, Eber M. Pettit and his father did not seem to fear retribution on the part of church members whose cases the Pettits had reviewed. Nor did the Pettits seem to worry about conflicts of interest. In 1837, Dr. James Pettit was appointed to a committee to resolve a long-term dispute between Stephen May (1780 – 1872) and another landowner, Alford Stoddard (born about 1798). May had been an innkeeper in the Chautauqua County township of Charlotte, and later owned a tavern in Fredonia. Even though Dr. James Pettit had purchased his own farm from Stephen May, the senior Pettit was also named to yet another committee, to resolve yet another dispute, between May and Providence L. Sheppard (1788 – 1860), yet another landowner along Chestnut Street. In both cases, May was charged with disturbing the peace and unchristian deportment. By the end of the year, May and Sheppard had agreed to a settlement suggested by the church, but May was also reprimanded for “harsh epithets and language.” In fact, May would continue his off-and-on quarrels with the church for the next half-century, but his grave can be found near that of Dr. James Pettit, among the many Baptists in the Pioneer Cemetery.
In early 1838, Graphen Sweet served on another committee to investigate ethics violations, and Joseph Sweet was named a delegate to Chautauqua County’s new Bible Society. The Bible Society had been co-founded by David Barrell, who had also arrived at the church in the mid-1830s, and who had immediately become church clerk. Also in 1838, Eber M. Pettit and his family were dismissed by letter to relocate at Versailles, their home for the next quarter century. Meanwhile, his father continued to live in Fredonia, where the next church member under investigation had been charged with having “practiced dishonestly in his deal among neighbors.” Since the accused had “gone away in a clandestine manner,” Dr. James Pettit was placed on another review committee, and during the summer, he was asked to visit a new member who had “greatly erred.” The mistake turned out to be “ardent spirits” and “profane swearing,” so the hand of fellowship was withdrawn.

By autumn that year, Dr. James Pettit was placed on the preparations committee for a meeting of the Chautauqua Baptist Association. Among his assignments was the care of visiting delegates and their horses. The same month, Dr. James Pettit was asked to visit another Baptist who would become well known across Chautauqua and Cattaraugus counties throughout the nineteenth century; when Dr. James Pettit visited him, Bliss Willoughby (1807 – 1906) had been accused of absenteeism. Instead of being reprimanded, Willoughby was excused and forgiven, due to his “poor health and remote distance.” Further assignments that fall for Dr. James Pettit included more visitations and the revision of the church’s “articles of faith and practice and covenant.”

Graphen Sweet was appointed to help resolve a lengthy case involving the landowners J.Z. Saxton (1791 – 1872) and Alford Stoddard, but this case was quickly overshadowed by sudden accusations against the current minister. The plaintiff, coincidentally, was John Z. Saxton, and he was hastily reprimanded for making “statements to the prejudice of the moral character of our pastor.” David Barrell stepped up to defend Saxton, and Barrell himself re-issued the grievance against the minister. Throughout the next year, the rippling series of events sent shock waves through the community. Lewis B. Grant and his wife, the former Fredonian Julia Forbes Grant, arrived from Forestville, and by July, L. B. Grant was the new church clerk. While the Fredonia Baptists were lending their support to the neighboring hamlets of Laona and Sheridan for the establishment of their respective congregations, the Fredonia affair ensued, with reports showing up from time to time in the local press.
To bolster his case, David Barrell requested information from previous churches in which the minister had served, and Barrell met privately with several of his Fredonia Baptist brethren to reveal the responses to these inquiries. Eventually, thirty of Barrell’s colleagues joined in the grievance, and it was reported to the church by Dr. James Pettit. Other members of the church, upset that a pastor would be so questioned, called in Baptist representatives from the Chautauqua County villages of Sinclairville, Portland, Cassadaga, and Stockton. The pastor had been accused of (1) visiting a suspicious house, (2) lying about a venereal disease, (3) having faced similar accusations at previous churches, and (4) being “very fond of women.” Several of the plaintiffs, charged with slander, were excommunicated, and David Barrell was “solemnly admonished and warned to hear the church.” He and several others were placed on a “delinquent” list for possible excommunication.

By October of 1839, Dr. James Pettit was also on the delinquency list, but for absenteeism. He pleaded that he was called away to visit a sick person one Sabbath, that he was ill on another, and that it was “rainy” on another. He also said that he needed to speak with “a certain brother.” Meanwhile, several women of the church had spoken up to say that they were not satisfied with the minister’s trial. In November and December, joint letters were presented from Dr. James Pettit, John Saxton, David Barrell and Elias Johnson. Excommunicated as a result were Johnson and Barrell, but Lewis B. Grant was appointed to visit each gentleman to seek resolution. Barrell, Johnson, Pettit, and Saxton called upon neighboring churches to intervene, and those who defended the minister did the same. The “aggrieved” church members (i.e. Barrell’s group) called for representatives from Pavillion, LeRoy, Gerry, Charlotte, Mayville, Jamestown, and Aurora. The church (i.e. the minister’s group) called for representatives from LaGrange, Cassadaga, Clymer, Ashville, Busti, and Perry.

In February of 1840, the minister suddenly submitted a resignation, perhaps part of a plea deal, because the “aggrieved” were just as suddenly restored to church membership. However, David Barrell and Dr. James Pettit did not feel comfortable giving the minister a letter of travel and commendation. The pastor then withdrew his resignation, and Barrell was back in hot water. Bethel Willoughby and other representatives from nearby Forestville had intervened, issuing their own opinion of the matter, saying that the aggrieved had been “corrupt in practice” for trying the pastor without testimony. The visitors from Forestville also said that the church had violated...
For most of the next seven years, the two halves of the congregation worshipped separately, across the street from one another. The minister’s group, still calling themselves by the church’s original name, the First Baptist Church of Pomfret, met within the frame “meeting house” which had been built by Nathaniel Crosby in 1822. That little church stood on the site of today’s brick building. During the years of the split, David Barrell’s half of the congregation, calling themselves the Fredonia Baptist Church, met at the Fredonia Academy, which stood on the site of today’s Village Hall and Opera House. When the two opposing factions of the church finally agreed to reunite in 1848, they regrettably decided to destroy their respective record books from the intervening period. Hence, there is a seven-year gap in the church archives. Another unfortunate decision in 1848 was to list all the members of the reunited church as having been baptized in 1848, even though most of them had actually been baptized or otherwise accepted as members many years before. James and Lucy Pettit, for example, were listed as having been accepted “by letter” in the 1830s and again “by baptism” in 1848. They were also listed by David Barrell as members of his faction during the seven-year split.

THE VERSAILLES YEARS

Eber M. Pettit and his family were not listed as members in either group in 1848, because they had already been active in the Perrysburg and Versailles area for a decade. However, he had represented the First Baptist Church of Perrysburg in 1848 at the first anniversary of the Erie Baptist Association, a group whose meeting was held in Forestville that year. The published minutes of the Association stated, “...we deeply deplore the connection of any part of the Christian world, and especially the Baptist denomination, with the sin of slavery, and we recommend to the ministers and churches composing this body, that by every instrumentality which the Gospel furnishes wherewith to combat sin, they labor for its extinction.” The Erie and Chautauqua Baptists made similar statements at each annual convention from 1848 until the Emancipation Proclamation, and Eber M. Pettit continued to serve as a Perrysburg delegate.
There are many other signs of the Pettits and Barkers in Versailles. Now a fishing haven, the community was not established until the early 1830s, when, according to the *History of Cattaraugus County* (L.H. Evarts, Philadelphia, 1879), “General [Leverett] Barker of Fredonia built a tannery near the creek, which was torn down and enlarged by Rosell(e) Green(e), and steam power substituted.” General Barker was Darwin R. Barker’s father, and Roselle Greene (1815 – 1859) had been an apprentice and later a partner in the family tannery. About 1837, Roselle Greene married Darwin R. Barker’s sister S. Eliza Barker (1814 – 1877). The Barker and Green(e) tannery was destroyed by fire the year after Roselle Greene died. Before Eliza died, she had lost at least five of her children, but nonetheless, the Greene family was profoundly influential in nineteenth-century Fredonia and Versailles.

Versailles is located on the southwest side of the Seneca Nation’s territory, and the village of Evans is located on the northeast. In Evans, the Pettits had Baptist friends through the family of Reverend A.C. Barrell, a younger, half-brother of Fredonia’s David Barrell. The UGRR links between Versailles and Fredonia were most visible in the 1850s. For example, the 1856 Map of Cattaraugus County showed the home of D. R. Barker in Versailles (no longer existing), and the map’s Business Directory listed “E.M. Pettit, M.D.” In the 1855 Census, Eber M. Pettit’s “American Eye Salve Co.” was listed in Versailles. His father, Dr. James Pettit, had died in 1849, but his mother, Lucy Felt Pettit, had remained with Harriet Pettit Handy at the homestead in Cordova. It may be reasonably speculated that the family still operated a safe-house there, but just before the Civil War, UGRR conductor Luther Webster (1825 – 1893) had also arrived in Fredonia from the nearby township of Charlotte. He lived at today’s 22 Spring Street, and his business was the manufacture and peddling of shoes, boots, and other leather products.

Webster’s later partner was the tanner, Alexander Hamilton Barker (1812 – 1881), who had arrived in Fredonia from Versailles. Also known as Hamilton Barker, as Hamilton A. Barker, or simply as A. H. Barker, Alexander Hamilton Barker was a brother of Darwin R. Barker. It was A. H. Barker who was listed in the *History of Cattaraugus County* as the first postmaster of Versailles. According to *The Postal History of Western New York* by Pitt Petri (Buffalo, NY, 1960), the Versailles post office opened in 1837, and Alexander H. Barker was indeed the postmaster. On December 17, 1850, he was replaced by his brother Darwin R. Barker, who held the position for three years. In the 1850 Census, Alexander H. Barker was listed as a 38-year-old tanner living in Perrysburg with his wife and son, but by the 1860 Census, he was listed as Hamilton Barker, a clerk in a leather store, living in Fredonia with his wife and son. Consequently, it may be assumed that Luther Webster and/or Alexander Hamilton Barker were operating safe-houses in Fredonia by the mid-1850s, taking some of the burden from the Pettit family and their aging matriarch. A. H. Barker was buried in Fredonia’s Pioneer Cemetery. Luther Webster’s son Charles, a civil engineer who married the niece of Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), became Clemens’ business partner in Buffalo for a time. His survey maps of the Fredonia Baptist Church appear in the archives.
In March, 1863, only two months after the effective date of the Emancipation Proclamation, Eber M. Pettit and family took a letter from the First Baptist Church of Perrysburg, so that they could relocate. Within a year, they were re-admitted to the Fredonia Baptist Church. Meanwhile, Pettit’s son James was a Union soldier, whose letters home have miraculously survived. Many are located at the Brooklyn College Library, and two others were donated to the Dunkirk Historical Society by David Serrone in 2006. The latter correspondence may have been separated from the rest because they were written during the contemplated move of the soldier’s family back to Fredonia. According to Lois Barris, Norwood Barris, and Douglas Shepard, “Alone, these two letters are a treasure. Together with the collection at Brooklyn College, we have a description of life in the camps, and at home, and in the mind of this Army officer. We learn he studied law and valued relationships….”

For example, while recuperating at an Army hospital, James Pettit was fortunate to be attended by his cousin Chauncey Handy. Sadly, Chauncey died shortly after James’ release from the hospital. Upon his discharge from the Army, James Pettit continued his recuperation at the Harley and Harriet Handy home in Cordova, became a substitute son to them, managed their vineyards, and cared for them as they aged. Although it appears that the young soldier had hoped for later success in the Pennsylvania oil fields, he operated the Darwin R. Barker family’s herb and seed business along with other enterprises in Versailles. According to the History of Cattaraugus County, the Versailles Botanic Mills “were established … for the purpose of preparing barks, roots, and herbs for medicinal uses, large quantities being put up annually. They were subsequently owned by Starr & Pettit, and at present by D. R. Barker, under the management of J. M. Pettit.”

The former soldier also served as Perrysburg’s town supervisor during this period. He was listed as postmaster in 1880, and as proprietor of a dry goods, grocery, and drug store. In summarizing the fifty years of the Barker and Pettit collaboration in Versailles, the History of Cattaraugus County stated that Hamilton and Darwin Barker “were early storekeepers in the house now owned by Julius Horton …. James Pettit has a store in the Sellew building.” When his children had grown, Eber M. Pettit’s son James Pettit moved to a small house in Fredonia. He spent his last few years in the Columbia Hotel on the Barker Common, a park which had been donated to Fredonia by General Barker’s father-in-law, Hezekiah Barker.

ANTEBELLUM FREDONIA

In the late 1840s, as anti-slavery sentiment continued to grow, pro-slavery forces also mounted. The two factions of Fredonia’s abolitionist Baptists needed each other, and they agreed to re-unite. Almond Z. Madison, a childhood friend and later business partner of David Barrell, had just arrived in Fredonia, and it was agreed that he would be the new clerk of the reunited church. On February 26, 1848, Lewis B. Grant handed Madison the names of the 125 members of the First Baptist Church of Pomfret, which, with Grant as the clerk, had held its weekly services in the church building. Simultaneously, David Barrell handed Madison the names of the 90 members of the Fredonia Baptist Church, which, with Barrell as clerk, had met weekly since 1841 at the Fredonia Academy across the street.
Included on Barrell’s list were the familiar names of Dr. James Pettit and Lucy Pettit, Eleanora Pettit Delvin, Charles Pettit, Elias Johnson and his wife, several members of the Sweet family, Reverend A. C. Barrell (David’s younger half-brother), Almond Z. Madison and his wife, several members of the Handy family, and George W. Lewis and wife. Included on Grant’s list were the equally familiar Bethel Willoughby (formerly of the Forestville delegation), Reverend Bliss Willoughby and his wife, Stephen and Lucy May, Alford Stoddard, and Lewis B. and Julia Grant.

The reunified congregation agreed to call themselves the First Baptist Church of Pomfret, keeping the old, original name. Nominated by Dr. James Pettit and seconded by L.B. Grant were several deacons. It would be another ten years before women participated in weekly business meetings, so it was the large group of united brethren who adopted the following resolution: “Whereas …their separation [has been] a matter of universal grief and embarrassment…therefore resolved from and hereafter [to leave] the painful past as it is, and never call it up.” They also agreed to begin a new record book, and to retain both of their respective pastors until a new one could be obtained. Stephen May was one of the few who objected to the reunification and asked for dismissal, but within two months, he was back and allowed to join the flock.

From then on, probably due to ill health, Dr. James Pettit no longer appeared in the record. Thomas B. Sweet was instead the most active participant from the Pettit/Sweet clan. He and Joseph C. Sweet, who was named not quite as often, were seen as delegates to annual and semi-annual meetings of the Erie Baptist Association, as delegates to ordinations, and as committee members in cases of moral discipline. Celebrating their reunification, the congregation hired Greek Revival architect John Jones to build the brick church which stands today. Apparently no relation to the later architect Harry Wild Jones, the architect John Jones had designed homes and other churches in Fredonia, but then died from a fall during the construction of the Baptist church in 1852. The building was finished by one of the architect’s sons. In July of 1853, Joseph C. Sweet was named to the entertainment committee for the dedication of the new building.
During that year and others, Eleanora Pettit Delvin’s name appeared on lists of contributors to various mission funds, and it may be reasonably speculated that at least some of these monies were used to provide food, shelter, and clothing to fugitives along the UGRR. Others on the list included David Sweet, Hiram H. Sweet, Elizabeth B. Sweet, George W. Lewis, and Stephen May. In 1854, however, Charles Pettit was excommunicated for “disorderly walk,” and an ethics case began in regard to a dispute between Stephen May and another landowner, Caleb Roberts. Because May also issued unusual, doctrinal diatribes over the next two years, he was finally excommunicated and joined another Baptist congregation in the nearby town of Sheridan. Charles Pettit was back in the fold in time to be excluded again in 1856 for “violation of covenant obligations and neglect of the church.” Also about that time, the Fredonia Baptists complained to the Sheridan Baptists for admitting Stephen May, and the Fredonia Baptists even threatened to leave the Erie Baptist Association over its lack of support in the dispute with Sheridan.

However, the conflict between the Fredonia Baptists and their regional association seems to have blown over by the late 1850s, when conflicts between North and South were heating up. At that time Richard Van Scoter married into the Sweet family and transferred his membership from Presbyterian to Baptist, Mercy Delvin Sweet became a new member, and David G. Sweet returned from Illinois. Thomas B. Sweet had left in 1856 to join his son Crosby Sweet out of state, but by early 1860, they were back in Fredonia, and named as delegates to the Erie Baptist Association. Probably celebrating its first decade of reunification, the church officially renamed itself the Fredonia Baptist Church, and David Barrell was unanimously elected as a deacon. On August 30, 1860, Almond Z. Madison was designated to write a history of the church for presentation to the Erie Baptist Association. Also at this time, Fredonia’s protestant churches were meeting together “for a day of prayer in view of the distracted condition of the United States regarding Southern bondage and the war apparently about to ensue between the North and South….”

Thomas B. Sweet continued as a frequent delegate or case reviewer. Strangely enough, Eleanora Pettit Delvin was put on a list of discipline cases, but hers was “laid over” and eventually dismissed, with no detail given in the record. About this time, women became listed as participants in business meetings at the church, although they would not be named as deacons or trustees for another 125 years. Among those listed in 1861 were Almond Z. Madison’s wife, Maria T. Vary Madison (1814—1871), and Harriet Walker (1833—1923), who would become known by the early twentieth century by the nickname of “Pants-y” for her “masculine” attire. Also at this time, the temperance movement had become a frequent subject of discussion at the regular business meetings of the church. Throughout the Civil War, Thomas B. Sweet and Joseph C. Sweet continued as active participants in church business.

Pant-sy’s sister, Elizabeth Walker Barker (1843—1923). In defense of her marital separation, Deacon Eber M. Pettit said, “In some cases, it would be right.”
In April of 1863, Reverend Howard M. Jones appeared as pastor. Later that month, President Lincoln proclaimed a national day of fasting and prayer. Several members of the church were losing sons or relatives to the war, yet they stoically continued their support of the Union cause. On Reverend Jones’ one-year anniversary of appointment, Jennie Sweet and Harriet Sweet were received as candidates for baptism, and Eber Pettit’s family was received into membership by letter. One purpose of his return to Fredonia was to provide the opportunity for his granddaughter Dora Barker to attend the Fredonia Academy. Another reason for his return, as he explained in his memoirs, was the greatly anticipated end of the UGRR.

POST-WAR FREDONIA

For the last twenty years of his life, Eber M. Pettit continued his patent medicine business in Fredonia with son-in-law Darwin R. Barker. Pettit’s daughter Helen Barker remained active in the Fredonia Baptist Church, even through her daughter Dora’s untimely death at age 18. Helen was also instrumental in Fredonia’s temperance movement, which began in mid-century and peaked in a famous marching campaign later commemorated by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. Eber M. Pettit had scarcely time to settle into his new duties at the church when Stephen May was back, requesting a letter of commendation and asking that his excommunication be rescinded. According to the record, May, who had outlived at least two of his wives, made “general remarks [on] his nearness to the close of life and going home.” In particular, he wanted to visit Newport, Rhode Island, and was given a letter which was valid for one year. May presented a farewell speech in his inimitable style, but by the end of that year, he was back in Fredonia and active in the church. In the interim, a former Mrs. May, evidently long separated from her husband and using her maiden name, approached the church for her own letter of commendation. She, too, had been excommunicated in 1856, and now needed a letter to join the Washington Street Baptist Church in Buffalo. Although A.Z. Madison showed no sympathy, saying, “We thought you were dead,” Deacon Pettit took pity on the woman, and her request was granted.

Pettit was appointed a deacon in the Fredonia Baptist Church in 1866 and continued his service on committees and delegations, often serving with one or more of his brothers-in-law, Thomas B. Sweet, Joseph C. Sweet, or David G. Sweet. Others of his regular group of comrades were his close friends Almond Z. Madison, David Barrell, George W. Lewis (1816 – 1885), and Lewis B. Grant. A frequent visitor was Reverend A. C. Barrell. Also, by this time, women were often present at business meetings of the church. During a financial crisis, for example, Madison recorded the pertinent comments of several women, including those of Jennie Sweet. Madison also recorded motions made by women, and he noted that women were delegates to the annual conventions of the Chautauqua Baptist Association. Deacon Pettit demonstrated a progressive attitude toward women’s rights as well. Regarding Pants-y’s sister, who had split from her husband, Pettit explained that “in some cases, [separation] would be right,” and on the basis of his testimony, the church opted to give her a letter of commendation.
At right: the seating chart of 1877, showing Deacon Pettit’s family at pew (or slip) numbers 61 and 65.

Below: a sample of Deacon Pettit’s charity.

In 1868, the church mourned the death of Lucinda Barker (1794-1868), who had been the first person baptized when the church began sixty years earlier. Then, as Pettit inadvertently became a famous person in Fredonia, his compassionate demeanor was recorded by Madison on numerous occasions. When Dr. Elias Johnson asked to be readmitted to the church in 1869, younger members of the congregation asked for the circumstances of his earlier exclusion. Barrell excused himself from the discussion, Lewis favored the restoration of Johnson’s membership, and Madison advised against bringing up details about the church’s split back in the 1840s. Still, as Madison recorded, there was “much talk, talk, talk, and some clamor,” until Grant and Pettit suggested an adjournment so that something reasonable could be worked out.

Pettit further demonstrated his courtesy in serious matters. In a case against their own friend Lewis in 1879, Madison wrote that Deacon Pettit spoke “of his opinion formed when young as to the Baptist usage of excluding members when no crime, no immorality was charged against them, [saying that] he preferred a letter of dismission” as opposed to an exclusion. Equally eloquent was Pettit’s statement later that year regarding a pastor’s wish to resign. The minister had been immensely popular, and Pettit had been on the search committee to secure his services six years earlier. Madison wrote, “Brother E. M. Pettit arose and spoke feelings of regard to our pastor and family, [but] he thought best in this, as in all similar cases, when a resignation had been offered by the one who knew best the reasons for it, to accept it.”

Pettit and Barrell spoke in one voice on several occasions. For example, citing their advanced years and their unworthiness, they jointly attempted in October of 1874 to resign their respective positions as deacons. The issue was discussed at several business meetings, and repeatedly tabled. Finally, in April of 1875, Grant proposed that they be named Honorary Deacons, “though freed from onerous and regular duties.” Pettit and Barrell thus retained their titles until they died, Deacon Pettit in 1885, and Deacon Barrell three years later. Yet, the two deacons did not accept a release from their duties. For example, Pettit was instrumental in the solicitation of funds and clothing for the poor of western New York, and likewise, his daughter was a lightning rod for the collection of funds and clothing for African American schools in the southern states. Pettit’s leadership at regular meetings was evident through 1880. Barrell, like his friend Grant, became increasingly deaf, but Madison frequently listed Barrell as the leader of church meetings. Moreover, Barrell was named as a delegate to Baptist conventions through 1886, sometimes traveling to Buffalo or Chicago.
Deacon Pettit and Deacon Barrell both outlived their wives and most of their children. When four stained glass windows were installed in the church in 1881, Pettit donated one of them in honor of his wife Euretta Sweet Pettit and his daughter Helen Pettit Barker, whose names and life spans appear in the glass. Others memorialized in those four windows are Barrell (1803 - 1888) and his wife Clarinda (1803 - 1881), Grant (1809 - 1884) and his wife Julia Forbes Grant (1815 - 1887), and Louisa Taylor (1835 - 1880), the wife of carriage maker and oil man Hascal Taylor (1830 - 1894).

Today’s Fredonia is still rumored to have been replete with UGRR safe-houses, but in addition to food, shelter, and clothing, Pettit and his colleagues also needed money. His memoirs spoke of his need to call upon the UGRR’s “stockholders,” wealthy acquaintances who provided financial assistance. “Often it became necessary to obtain, on a sudden emergency, a considerable amount of funds,” Pettit wrote, “in order to place large parties of fugitives beyond the power of slave hunters.” It may be speculated that at least some his church brethren, and especially those who were relatively wealthy merchants, were Pettit’s financial backers in the underground effort. In his introduction to the serialized version of his memoirs, however, Pettit stated that he would not name his collaborators, because, “there are several persons within ‘a Sabbath Day’s Journey’ of Fredonia and who I doubt not are readers of your paper…."

A GOOD LIFE

In Pettit’s obituary, published by the Fredonia Censor on May 20, 1885, and clipped and saved by church clerk Almond Z. Madison, Pettit’s nature was described as “a liberality that recognized the image of the Master under all circumstances, in all walks of life, without regard to creed or denominational name.” With respect to his friend Lewis, Pettit was once again able to demonstrate his open-mindedness. Lewis was the grandfather of twentieth century clerk Edith Lewis Morse. He was a highly respected member of the village, and he was an active church member in the antebellum era and beyond. In the late 1870s, he broke with the Baptists over doctrinal matters. In his most controversial endeavor, Lewis formed his own congregation of Disciples, and they met in a large building
across the street and around the block from the Fredonia Baptist Church. Still, in the record are indications that Lewis remained on friendly terms with Deacon Pettit, who spoke on Lewis’ behalf on more than one occasion. Lewis was consequently enough revered by the Baptists and the rest of Fredonia’s clergymen that they paid tribute to him at his funeral in the Disciples’ church.

About the Pettit family’s business endeavors, Deacon Pettit’s obituary reported, “Dr. James Pettit, the father, had compounded an eye salve which proved an excellent remedy for sore eyes and local inflammations, and which the son manufactured. It was found so meritorious that it finally sustained a world-wide reputation.” Of Eber Pettit’s work with the UGRR, the obituary said, “More than sixty years ago, he became a prominent agent and conductor on the Underground Railroad. Many a fleeing fugitive from slavery has found an asylum and safe conduct to liberty through his instrumentality. On the one of the four principal lines with which he was connected, many fugitives were aided on their way to Canada, numbering on all lines in the thousands. His position was often attended with peril. The fugitive slave law of 1850 imposed a fine of $1,000 for selling or giving away a meal of victuals to one of these fugitives. Some of the noblest and purest men in the country suffered these severe penalties, though he has often said that if the law had been enforced against him, he would have been made bankrupt many times over.”

Of Eber Pettit’s philanthropy, the obituary stated, “He also took a deep interest in the welfare of the Indians, on the border of whose reservation he resided for many years. He was their trusted counselor and friend, and aided to procure the necessary legislation for the protection of the reservation and the preservation of their rights. He was the projector of the Reservation school and the Superintendent for over twenty years. He chose for teachers those who took an interest in their welfare and progress. In the Thomas Asylum, organized for the care and education of the Indian orphans of the State, he took a deep interest. He was one of the originators of the Institution and a trustee and treasurer for twenty-nine years from its commencement. He served faithfully and without pay, and was regarded by all the beneficiaries with almost filial affection.

“In every work of philanthropy when he had the opportunity, his heart and hand were engaged with heartfelt earnestness. In this he was no respecter of persons. In his benevolent work, his best services were rendered without regard to distinctions of race or color. His kind heart and hand were ever open to the needs of humanity. No one, we venture to say, in the large circle of acquaintances, ever knew of a nobler or more unselfish man. In his unostentatious charities to the poor, he was most exemplary. Very often the recipients were unaware who was the giver.”
Acknowledgements and References

- Marsia Painter / Fredonia Baptist Church Records Project.
- Lois and Norwood Barris / Chautauqua County Genealogical Society.
- Audrey Smoyer / Forest Hill Cemetery / Town of Pomfret.
- Nathan Towne, James Boltz, Tina Holtz / Forest Hill Cemetery Data Project.
- Jody Shaw / Town of Perrysburg Museum.
- Jay Priest / Chautauqua Gen Web.
- Mardon Erbland / JustUs.ca

Topics for further research

The names Cordova and Versailles are unusual for the region and the period. One speculation is that they derive from their respective uses by the UGRR, but an anecdote to the contrary was told by Rose Pettit Crandall.

Although in the early 1850s Levi Pratt published the *Fredonia Advertiser*, a pro-slavery paper, its banner featured a drawing by M. S. Pettit, and Pratt had been a close friend and co-worker of Willard McKinstry, publisher of the *Fredonia Censor*, an abolitionist paper. Pratt and McKinstry even vacationed together in the Thousand Islands after the Civil War.

The extent of Native American involvement in the Pettits’ medicine business may have been profound, and the Native American involvement in the UGRR may have also been extensive. In Collins, on the northeast edge of the Seneca Nation, strong Quaker participation in the UGRR suggests collaboration among the Seneca, the Quakers, and the Pettits.

There was a James Pettit on Maple Avenue in Cassadaga on the county atlases of 1867 and 1881. He was shown with a house on the north side of the road just west of the Cassadaga Lake outlet on the *1867 County Atlas*. He does not seem to have been an uncle, first cousin, or second cousin of Eber M. Pettit, but he did live in a Baptist neighborhood, and Cassadaga Baptists were professed abolitionists.