

## An Underground Railroad safe house in Brewer was destroyed for a road

by [Emily Burnham](#) 8.08.2023

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In a 1997 file photo, the Joshua L. Chamberlain commemorative statue is unveiled at Freedom Park in Brewer. Credit: Susan Latham / BDN

There's a statue of Joshua Chamberlain, hero of the Battle of Gettysburg during the Civil War and former Maine governor, standing watch over the Brewer side of the bridge that connects State Street with Oak Street in Bangor.

But [Chamberlain Freedom Park](#), the tiny park near the Penobscot River in which the statue stands, has a history that stretches beyond the Civil War and connects the city to one of the most important parts of 19th-century American history: the Underground Railroad.

A historic home once stood on that site that historians believe was a stop on the Underground Railroad, the vast network of anti-slavery safe houses that between the 1790s and 1860s helped slaves escape bondage in southern states for the freedom of Canada. A stone tunnel built to allow slaves to get into the house undetected was reputed to exist, and clothing believed to have been worn by former slaves was found inside the house.

# The Holyoke house: was it a stop on the underground railroad?

By Richard R. Shaw  
Of the NEWS Staff

If Harriet Tubman were alive today, she would probably roll her head back and chuckle over the mystery that surrounds 294 North Main St., reputed to have been Brewer's very own "station" on the underground railroad before the Civil War.

Better yet, she could fold her tired old bones into the seat of a 727 and fly to Maine, where she might inspect the 160-year-old brick house whose 19th-century owner is rumored to have dug a 300-yard-long tunnel to sneak escaped slaves through from the river to his cellar.

Tubman, of course, was the most celebrated "conductor" on the underground railroad, a loosely formed network operated by northern abolitionists to help slaves flee to Canada.

In 1849 Tubman, born a slave around 1820, fled north, returning south many times before the outbreak of the Civil War to coax more than 300 slaves into freedom, often at the point of a loaded pistol.

The landmark at North Main and State streets, now the home of Town and Country Brokers Inc., might be only a footnote in Brewer history, lost in a world of traffic lights and video outlets, if not for the events of a summer day some 30 years ago.

Josephine Christmas, who, with her husband, Philip, bought the house in 1954, heard cries of help emanating from her backyard.

After the earth had opened up and swallowed the boy who was mowing her lawn, Mrs. Christmas probed a long pole into the hole but couldn't touch bottom.

"The opening was as tall as a room," she told the NEWS in 1978, "and was embellished with beautiful rock work."

"I thought nothing more about it until two years later," she said, "when my daughter came home one day and excitedly asked when her fourth grade class could come and tour the underground railroad tunnel."

The students said they had found a printed reference to the secret passageway of John Holyoke, a Brewer shipbuilder whose father constructed the house in the 1820s.

After further research, Mrs. Christmas concluded that Holyoke, a self-proclaimed abolitionist, or foe of slavery, during a time when it was neither sale nor fashionable, dug the tunnel from the Penobscot River to a summer kitchen near the main house.

Once at the end of the passageway, she theorized,



THE HOLYOKE HOUSE, located at the corner of North Main and State Streets in Brewer, has long been rumored to have been a station on the 'underground railroad' that led slaves from the South

to Canada before and during the 1850s. The existence of a tunnel from the house to the river is the strongest evidence. This photo was taken in the mid-1880s. (Photo courtesy of Howard Kenney)

the fugitives crawled through a trap door in a wooden ell, into the summer kitchen, then upstairs for a brief rest before continuing on their journey.

After that, said Edward O. Schriever, who teaches Maine history at the University of Maine, the slaves would theoretically go around the corner to Route 9, or the "Airline," and travel 100 miles to freedom in New Brunswick.

"Certainly the underground railroad was active in Maine prior to 1850 (the year the Fugitive Slave Act was enacted)," said Schriever, "but only on a spe-

radic basis, as it was needed.

"I've never researched the house," said Schriever, "although it's possible that it was a stop on the underground railroad. But unless they've found some chains or other evidence, it's awfully hard to prove anything."

The evidence, although circumstantial, is compelling. Few doubt the existence of a tunnel, which begs the question: Why?

Why go to the expense and trouble — and peril of penalty after 1850 — of digging a tunnel to help the

relatively few slaves who fled to Canada through Maine?

The only logical answer is that John Holyoke's conscience told him it was worth it. Holyoke, whose grandfather, John, participated in the Boston Tea Party, and whose father, also named John, built the large brick house, was a devout Christian who loathed slavery.

When he died in 1855, the Bangor Whig and Courier noted that Holyoke had been a deacon in the First Congregational Church in Brewer since 1838, and "added liberally in erecting churches in Brewer and neighboring towns, and is endowing the Theological Seminary in Bangor."

Holyoke's last will and testament bequeathed \$100 to the American Missionary Association "to be appropriated for the education of the freedmen and their women and children."

"He identified himself with the anti-slavery movement when it was exceedingly unpopular," reported the Whig and Courier.

James B. Vickery, Bangor's foremost historian and a former Brewer schoolteacher, agreed that Maine was never strongly anti-slavery.

"Maine sea captains carried cotton around the world on their ships," he said.

For that reason, he argued, abolitionists in Penobscot County were few and far between.

Although Holyoke was engaged in the papers as one of the few shipbuilders on the Penobscot who eschewed "ardent spirits," Vickery believes liquor, not slaves, was smuggled through the tunnel. The few slaves escaped up the Penobscot to make any other explanation logical, he said.

"It makes sense that the tunnel was on the Brewer side," said Vickery, "because after Neal Dow's anti-liquor law of 1855 there was much stricter enforcement in Bangor than in Brewer, which was a small town then."

Parn Hodges, who bought the Holyoke house in 1987 and made it the headquarters of Town and Country Brokers Inc., said that until someone tells her differently, she's sticking to the story told on a nearby plaque, placed by the Maine and Brewer Bicentennial Commissions. It states flatly that the house contained an "underground railway."

"It's pretty hard to prove the underground railroad connection," said Hodges, "but until someone tells us differently, we're assuming that the plaque is accurate: that slaves were smuggled through here as one of the final spots on the underground railroad network."

Bangor Daily News clipping from June 29, 1989.

The house was built in the 1820s by the Holyoke family, shipbuilders who also owned one of the first brickyards in Brewer. John Holyoke, born in 1804, was not just a successful businessman, but was also an ardent abolitionist who publicly donated to anti-slavery causes before the war, and helped recently freed men and women access education afterward.

There were upwards of 75 Underground Railroad sites in Maine, most prominently the Abyssinian Meeting House in Portland, the nation's third-oldest Black church, built in 1831 and where former slaves would arrive after escaping on ships arriving from points south. Others can be found in towns including Brunswick, Topsham, Auburn and Fort Kent.

Since Underground Railroad sites were meant to be kept secret, written documentation of the Brewer site was nonexistent — but stories about Holyoke's safe house remained a part of the local oral history. Stories hold that slaves would enter the house by the tunnel, rest for a night, and then carry on down the Airline, now known as Route 9, which at the time was little more than a dirt path that ran east to Calais. From there, it was just a quick hop over the Canadian border to freedom.

Holyoke died in 1885, more than 20 years after the Emancipation Proclamation that set most of the country's slaves free. Over the next century, the Holyoke house had a number of different owners, including the Christmas family, who bought it in 1954, and Town and Country Realtors, which bought it in 1987. The Christmas family often told the story of how a boy mowing their lawn during the summer of 1956 fell through a hole in the ground into a stone-lined chamber. Though the hole was filled in, the story lived on.



# Shaft full of untold tales

## Brewer site linked to Underground Railroad

By Andrew Kekacs  
Of the NEWS Staff

BREWER — Construction workers discovered a mysterious shaft Tuesday on the site of a recently demolished house that was rumored to harbor escaping slaves in the decades before the Civil War.

The find elated local historians, who have long maintained that slaves reached the house through a secret tunnel that began on the banks of the Penobscot River.

"This shaft could be other things, but it's right where we said it was," said Brian Higgins, president of the Brewer Historical Society and avid booster of plans to turn the site into a park honoring Civil War hero Joshua Chamberlain.

Work on the park is part of a larger project to build a new bridge linking Bangor and Brewer.

According to local legend, wealthy Brewer businessman and ardent abolitionist John Holyoke built a tunnel to bring escaping slaves in secret to his home at the corner of North Main and State streets. In recent years the building was known as the Christmas House, but it was built by the Holyoke family sometime between 1807 and the late 1820s.

The precise history of the clan and its business enterprises is murky. The Holyokes came to prominence in the early years of the 1800s, but few sources document the rise. Several men in the family have been named John, which adds to the confusion.

It appears certain, however, that John Holyoke the abolitionist was born in 1804. He had both the wealth and the inclination to help the slaves. The family owned a large brick yard on the banks of the Penobscot River below their home- stead and later was involved in shipbuilding.

Upon his death in 1885, John Holyoke was described by the Bangor Industrial Journal as a prominent shipbuilder who "identified himself with the anti-slavery cause when it was exceedingly unpopular [to do so]." At the time, Maine



Rep. Richard Campbell (left), R-Holden, watches as Brian Higgins of Brewer lowers a video camera into a 37-foot deep rock-lined shaft at the corner of North Main and State streets in Brewer where the Christmas House once stood. (NEWS Photo by Scott Haskell)

ships were carrying southern cotton all over the world and few seafaring men supported the abolition of slavery.

Further evidence is found in Holyoke's will. He left most of the estate to his heirs, but bequeathed \$100 to the American Missionary

Association for "the education of the Freedmen and their women and children."

The late Brewer history buff Howard Kenney claimed that slaves entered a tunnel on the banks of the Penobscot and

See Shaft, A3, Col. 1

Bangor Daily News clipping from  
May 30, 1996

In 1990, however, the Maine Department of Transportation announced it was preparing to replace the 90-year-old iron bridge that spanned the Penobscot River and terminated a few hundred feet from where the Holyoke house stood. It took more than five years for the project to actually happen, and involved extensive reshaping of the landscape and traffic flow around the area.

The biggest controversy in the bridge project was the plan by the Maine DOT and some members of the Brewer City Council to demolish the Holyoke house, which stood directly in the path of the proposed widened entryway to the new bridge. For several years, the Brewer Historical Society and a number of other Brewer residents fought to save the Holyoke house, while pro-bridge advocates played down the house's connection to the Underground Railroad.

In the end, the MDOT's bridge project won out, and the house was demolished in late 1995. The following spring, however, construction workers prepping the site found a 37-foot deep shaft almost exactly where the Christmas family said it would be. And just before the demolition, workers cleaning out the house found a "slave-style" shirt tucked into the eaves of the building. According to Maine historian Harriet Price, the discovery of the shirt [wasn't made public until after demolition.](#)



James Varner, president of the Maine Human Rights Coalition, stands and smiles next to the statue of a slave at the Chamberlain Freedom Park following a celebrating of Juneteenth in Brewer, June 18, 2021. Credit: Sawyer Loftus / The Penobscot Times

Preservation advocates turned their attention at that point to creating a park on the site of the former house to commemorate not just the city's connection to the Underground Railroad, but also Brewer's most famous son: Joshua Chamberlain, the great hero of Gettysburg, whose brave actions on that day helped turn the tide for the Union. On Veteran's Day in 1997, the statue of Chamberlain was unveiled at the new Chamberlain Freedom Park — just a few hundred feet down the street from the house where Chamberlain himself grew up.

Five years later, another bronze statue was unveiled at the park: ["North to Freedom,"](#) which depicts a man recently escaped from slavery, hoisting himself out of an underground tunnel and looking north to freedom.

Though the tunnel and home that helped human beings escape bondage was destroyed to make way for a road, each year, Juneteenth celebrations are held at the park to commemorate the end of slavery. And every day, motorists pass by the two statues, which serve as reminders of the brutality of slavery, and the moral issue at the core of what the Civil War was fought for.

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A house in 1995 and a highway in 2023 share similarities:

While I don't claim the I-395 connector displaces any historic facility that I am aware of, I submit that in the end, the MaineDOT made the Brewer Council an offer they could not refuse; I have to wonder if this is what happened with the Holyoke safe house's demise. Unaware of the Holyoke house controversy, I had wondered why the park was established without evidence of a structure.

Both projects suffered from the lack of documentation, even though other evidence existed only to be ignored and summarily dismissed by the MaineDOT. The Holyoke safe house was razed because "written documentation of the Brewer site was nonexistent". The connector was "green-lighted" even though surrounding areas at the intersection of I-395/1A were clearly designated "I-395 PROTECTED WETLANDS" on the project's [official mapping](#) on the MaineDOT's own official website (see below). I contend that this area was the environmental mitigation from the I-395 extension commissioned in November 1986. When we questioned this map in 2012 and the viability of the 2B-2 alternative because of the designated protected wetlands, we were told that documentation could not be found in property deeds to substantiate the map; the 2B-2 alternative had been originally removed from contention because it was believed that the area was considered "out of bounds" following the I-395 extension in 1986. 2B-2 was removed again from contention in April 2009 when it only satisfied 20% (1 in 5) of the project's five Purpose and Needs.

**What better proof can one possibly have than an official state map? This "PROTECTED WETLANDS" designation was added to a State of Maine official map, at an unknown date, by an unknown person presumably with the legal right to do so granted from the State of Maine, only to be ignored and dismissed by the MaineDOT, yet still exists in August of 2023.**



Brewer residents and their elected leaders did not support the DOT's preferred alternative, and several resolutions of non-support were unanimously adopted by the City Council only to be ignored and dismissed by the DOT.

The MaineDOT has never and will never define "I-395 PROTECTED WETLANDS" and I contend that the MaineDOT summarily dismissed the map and the environmental designation simply because the map did not promote the DOT's selection of 2B-2 as their preferred alternative. Did they intentionally ignore this "other" evidence as in 1995?

