



Site of the Utica Rescue, Utica, New York, from the series "Underground Railroad"

Date

2003–4 (printed 2007)

Primary Maker

William E. Williams

Medium

Gelatin silver print

Description

William E. Williams, Class of 1973, is a photographer who probes history through his practice. In the 1980s, he began a series of photographs of Gettysburg Battlefield, which led, in turn, to a larger body of work documenting historical places in the Caribbean and North America “where Americans black and white determined the meaning of freedom.” The series includes images of plantations and slave quarters; of sites of Civil War battles in

which Black troops participated; of beaches on which slave ships landed; and of other places and spaces defined by slavery, including stations of the Underground Railroad—the grassroots system of resistance that aided escaped slaves on their way to and through the free states. Site of the Utica Rescue depicts the building that now stands on the site of the so-called Utica Rescue of 1836. Under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 (the first of two passed by Congress before the Civil War), a former slave, even if he or she were living in a state that did not recognize slavery, could still be extradited back to captivity. On December 29, 1836, a slave owner’s representative filed charges at Judge Chester Hayden’s office in Utica, New York, against two Black men who were currently living in the town, Harry Bird and George, known only by his first name. During the trial that followed, citizens of Utica—of both races—rioted and broke into the proceedings to abscond with the two escaped slaves, setting them free. Judge Hayden’s office is no longer extant; in its place, at 96-98 Genesee Street, Williams captured a newer building flying a tattered American flag, which had been hung in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The artist gave this photograph to the Emerson Gallery after the 2008 exhibition *Uncovering the Path to Freedom* (curated by Katerina Adair, Class of 2010; Ilana Carlin, Class of 2009; Sophia Franck, Class of 2008; Associate Professor of Art History Deborah Pokinski; and Associate Director and Curator Susanna White), which included Williams’s photographs of Underground Railroad sites along with archival materials related to the abolitionist movement in central New York. The artist continues to add to this body of work today. (SOURCE: Alcauskas, *INNOVATIVE APPROACHES, HONORED TRADITIONS*, 2017)

Dimensions

Composition: 7 9/16 × 7 1/2 in. (19.2 × 19.1 cm) Image: 7 3/8 × 7 3/8 in. (18.7 × 18.7 cm) Sheet: 10 × 7 15/16 in. (25.4 × 20.2 cm)