

Famous New Yorker Albro Lyons

Albro Lyons sheltered many escapees from slavery before the Civil War and nearly paid with his life during the war, but he survived to continue the struggle for racial equality in peacetime.

Lyons' grandfather had been a slave. When he married a Native American woman, their children, including Albro's father, were considered free from birth. Born in Fishkill-on-the-Hudson, Dutchess County on February 10, 1814, Albro attended New York City's African Free School, a progressive institution for black youth. As an adult, while working as a cigar maker, he promoted black education and mutual aid for the city's black community. As a member of the New York Vigilance Committee, he defended blacks from kidnappers who claimed them as slaves.

In 1851, Lyons took over an American Seamen's Friend Society boardinghouse for black sailors. He also operated a sailor's outfitting store. Both places had a double purpose. Since it wasn't unusual to see strangers going in and out of them, they made ideal stations for the Underground Railroad that helped southern blacks escape slavery. Lyons estimated that he aided 1,000 escapees from slavery over time.

Lyons' prominence in the antislavery movement made him a target for racist violence. When a military draft was introduced during the Civil War, many white New Yorkers opposed it. Working class men found it unfair that wealthy men could pay their way out of military service. In the aftermath of the Emancipation Proclamation, many also resented the idea of risking their lives to free slaves. The war hadn't started with that purpose, but some whites now blamed blacks for the whole conflict.

In July 1863, protests against the draft in New York City led to one of the worst riots in American history. Albro Lyons' home and businesses were repeatedly attacked by white rioters. While his wife took shelter in the home of a German immigrant neighbor, Lyons fought off rioters before having to flee. With no hope of starting over in New York, he sent his children to Massachusetts and eventually moved his entire family to Providence RI, where he became an ice cream maker and a justice of the peace.

Slavery ended with the Civil War, but the fight for equality continued. Albro Lyons had to sue the state of Rhode Island to get his daughter Maritcha admitted to a Providence high school. His efforts, and Maritcha's eloquent testimony on her own behalf, helped open Rhode Island high schools to black students. In 1869, Maritcha became the state's first black high school graduate.

In later life, Albro Lyons moved to Plainfield NJ, where he served as the sexton for a white church. He wanted to write an autobiography but never got past the title, *The Gentleman in Black*. Before his death in January 1896, he asked Maritcha, by then a successful educator and activist back in New York, to tell his story. Her memoirs, recounting Albro Lyons' work against slavery and his escape from the draft riots, weren't published in her lifetime. The story of his life is now recognized as an important account of the black antislavery movement in New York and has helped secure Albro Lyons' place in American history.



Fishkill derives its name from two Dutch words, vis (fish) and kil (stream or creek) and is located about 13 miles south of Poughkeepsie.



Source: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "Albro Lyons, Sr." The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1860

For more information about the Draft Riots of 1863 go to <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/draft-riots>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA News Media Literacy/NIE Program. All rights reserved 2019.

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