

Follow the Drinking Gourd:
Walking Tour of Mercer's Historic Under-
ground Railroad and Abolitionist Era Sites



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Deuteronomy 23: 16 & 17

You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has taken refuge from him with you. Let him live with you wherever he chooses, in any one of your communities that pleases him. Do not molest him.

**The Freeman.
Mercer, Pa., Jan. 16 (?), 1854**
News of the Week.

The great length of the Governor's Mes-
(a)ge occupies the inside of our paper, to
(t)he exclusion of our usual variety; and
(le)aves us barely room to give a passing
(n)otice of the news of the week.

The speech of Mr. Giddings, on our
(fi)rst page, we commend to the attention
of (o)ur readers. It is important for the
peo-(p)le of this county to know the facts
con-(n)ected with the *Amistad* case, that
they (m)ay be able to comprehend the
deep dis-(g)race that is attempted to be
inflicted up(o)n it, by the payment of
\$50,000 to Ruez (a)nd Montez, as a re-
ward their piracy. (O)ne would suppose
that the slave power (m)ight spare us this
sacrifice upon its altar; (b)ut, like the
grave, it is never satisfied . . .

Thanks to Mae Beringer for this article. It is a single article and the left margin is trimmed too close—thus the missing letters. It is MCHS accession number 2002.45.

**A MATTER FOR THE CONSID-
ERATION OF THE FREE MEN
OF COLOR IN ALL PARTS OF
AMERICA.**

As it is likely, a war will break out between Mexico and the United States—Mexico on her part in defense of her rights, which have been invaded by the United States for the express purpose of perpetrating and extending slavery upon our race. The question then or our consideration is, what is our duty in such a case? Which seems to me not to be hard for us to decide. When we take into view a sentence which was contained by the Mexican President's Proclamation

some few years since, to the effect that he would not be at peace with the Texan pirates until he revenged the African blood upon them. His reason for that quotation from a speech of the Hon. John Quincy Adams delivered in the United States' House of Representatives' on that subject. Mr. Adams addressed the Chair as follows:--

“ Sir, think you that Great Britain will stand by peaceably and see you establish slavery where it has been abolished five-and-twenty years? And that contiguous to a part of her possessions for when she has expended so much of her treasure to banish the accursed evil. No sir” said he, “ the result will be a war, a war of breeds, a war or races, a war of colours, and as an inevitable consequence, a war of extermination.”

Now then, it seems to me our plain duty is to declare on the side of Mexico, as with one voice, and render to her all the assistance we can. But how we are to do this is another question. Seeing we are looked upon by our enemies as a poor insignificant people. Why we can furnish men by volunteering ourselves to the Mexican service. Let there be a call for a general convention, to be held in some eligible place; and let there be a general attendance of our brethren from all parts of American as possible; and there take measures for furnishing Mexico with as large an army as possible of coloured men. I think 100,000 can, be raised. Hundreds of our brethren have been praying and wishing that an opportunity would present itself, and that they might render some assistance in behalf of their oppressed race in that hypocritical United States, as well as elsewhere. Now then, brethren, is your time, you may not only be gratified in your desired, but Mexico will pay you for your services with her gold and silver and rich lands. Now then, brethren come forward, and call meetings preparatory to a general convention. A good deal may be expected from the West Indies. The coloured people of the United States are disfranchised, therefore the U.S. have no claim on their service; they have a right to go where they please; But, again let no my brethren in Canada be indifferent about this matter: the United States desire to get her grasping paw upon Canada. Yea. I say unto you, as Mordecai said to Queen Esther, if the United States succeeds in her grasping designs, you need not think to leap her infernal iron rod of slavery. Everyone must know that has any knowledge of the



Follow the Drinking Gourd
Mercer Underground Railroad Walking Tour

Prior to the Civil War, slaves escaped from southern plantations and cities, making their way along the “Underground Railroad” by following the Big Dipper (the drinking gourd) and the North Star. Enslaved blacks throughout the ante-bellum South sang this song, its origins unclear. The words provided coded instructions how to go northward to freedom. As the song implies, many fugitive slaves escaped and traveled at night.

The Drinking Gourd

When the sun come back
And the quail calls,
Follow the drinking gourd.
For the old man a-waiting to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

The riverbank makes a very good road.
The dead trees will show you the way.
Left feet, right feet, travel on,
Follow the drinking gourd.
The river ends between two hills,
Follow the drinking gourd.

There's another river on the other side,
Follow the drinking gourd.
When the great river meets the little river,
Follow the drinking gourd.

The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was neither underground nor a railroad, but a secret network of escape routes and safe houses, known as stations, maintained to help slaves flee bondage. There was no railroad that transported escaped slaves via tracks on tunnels beneath the ground, but there was a system organized by abolitionists to assist, feed, and conduct fugitive slaves to Canada.

After 1850, the runaway slaves' most common destination was Canada, but some also found their way to Europe and other parts of the world. Some slaves made their way to the North through their own perseverance, while agents associated with the Underground Railroad aided others.

The agents, or conductors, provided directions for—or guided—runaways to stations. The operators of these stations--such as those in Mercer--provided food, shelter, medical care, and sometimes clothing.

The Fugitive Slave Act

A noted historian once remarked that the Underground Railroad was operated in large part by law-abiding citizens in defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act. The amended *Fugitive Slave Act of 1850*, signed by President Millard Fillmore, imposed severe fines and imprisonment on United States marshals and citizens who helped, or failed to apprehend runaway slaves. When philosophical essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson heard about the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, he cried out, “I will not obey it, by God!”

Almost certainly, there were always people ready to help fugitive slaves as early as they began to flee from their masters. However, by the end of the American Revolution there were indications of the existence of organized clandestine anti-slavery operations.

The origin of the “Underground Railroad” is said to have begun

in Columbia, Pennsylvania. In 1787, Samuel Wright laid out Columbia, and set aside the northeastern section of the town for African Americans. Hundreds of manumitted slaves from Maryland and Virginia migrated there and built homes.

Columbia's African American neighborhood became a good hiding place for escaped slaves. In Columbia, a slave would be so thoroughly lost to a pursuer that the slave hunter, in perfect astonishment, would frequently exclaim, "There must be an underground railroad somewhere!"

Almost all Underground Railroad lines began on plantations in the South and ran in vague routes up rivers, down valleys, and across mountains. East of the Allegheny Mountains there were no major physical barriers barring the way. However, west of the mountains the Underground Railroad ran to points on the Ohio River and the upper Mississippi. The slaves who chose the route that reached the Ohio and Mississippi often needed more help than their brethren on the eastern side of the mountains.

Slaves who fled did so with the realization that the trek to freedom was fraught with danger. There was always a risk of being captured, which could result only in being returned to their masters and punishment. Despite the peril, many successfully made their way north. Governor Quitman of Mississippi once estimated that between 1810 and 1850 the South lost 100,000 slaves valued at \$30,000,000. Harsh punishments were inflicted on recaptured slaves. An example of these slaves' treatment is the case of a woman called Auntie Strange. A resident of Liberia, she fled her southern master, and upon being recaptured her fingers were amputated as punishment.

Richard Travis, a free African-American, purchased from Steven

**\$100
REWARD**

Ran away from the subscriber, living near the Anacostia Bridge, on or about the 17th November, negro girl ELIZA. She calls herself Eliza Coursy. She is of the ordinary size, from 18 to 20 years old, of a chestnut or copper color. Eliza has some scars about her face, has been hired in Washinton, and has acquaintances in Geortown.

I will give fifty dollars if taken in the District or Maryland, and one hundred dollars if taken in any free State; but in either case she must be secured in jails so that I get her again.

John P. Waring.

Nov. 28, 1857.

This recreation of a historic poster is an example of one way slave masters attempted to track down runaways.

Mercer Borough Underground Railroad Walking Tour

Barlow and Henry Baldwin land on the south shore of Sandy Lake. In 1825, this became the site of a settlement of runaway slaves known as Liberia.

With the passage of the amended Fugitive Slave Act, most of Liberia's inhabitants fled to Canada. All that remains of the settlement is a small cemetery located on an acre of land that was donated by a Dr. Brown of Stoneboro.

The Underground Railroad in Mercer

Despite the secrecy of the Underground Railroad, the "conductors" and "station masters" risked a great deal to help runaway slaves. Listed below are some of the stations on the trail toward freedom, but some—and maybe many—people and sights are possibly missing from this pamphlet and lost to history. In smaller communities like Mercer the stations and conductors must have been an open secret. There is no evidence, however, that anyone in Mercer County connected to the Underground Railroad was ever disclosed to the authorities.

The most frequently used Underground Railroad route through Mercer County, Pennsylvania, was present-day U.S. Route 19. Then it was just a dirt road—a path from Ohio to Greenville and Jamestown through the foothills from Franklin, in Venango County, to Stoneboro, and from New Castle to Indian Run, via Mercer and on to Sheakleyville.

A tap on a window at night, or a rap on a door of a house that served as a station, galvanized the Underground Railroad conductor and his or her family into action. This signaled that runaway slaves were being delivered. Elizabeth Kilgore Breckinridge recalled that "a certain number of knocks" in a specific pattern on the cellar door of her childhood home "would let my father [know] that a runaway slave was there. He would take them in, and feed them, and let them rest until the next night, when they would travel on to the next station, giving them minute instructions."

Walking Tour Sites

Site of the Former Zahniser & Company: (located on South Pitt Street where the Mercer County Historical Society's Anderson House is today)

Elizabeth Kilgore Breckinridge recalled that the Zahniser brothers, Michael¹ and William, “had a store where Dr. Buchanan's dentist parlors are now, a wooden building painted bright red, and they dealt in goods manufactured by free labor.”

According to Breckinridge, abolitionists who “did not want to buy goods made by slave labor” frequented Zahniser & Co., the brothers' general store. She identified some of those abolitionists as “Newton and Sarah Pew's father, William Smith, Rev. George Gordon, Rev. D. R. Barker, Mr. A. S. Burwell, Mr. Hanna, Wm. M. Stevenson, Jonas Gillette, Grandfather Stewart and others. ...They were like the old patriots of 1776, who wouldn't drink tea because of the unjust tax.”

Robert Stewart, a veteran of the War of 1812, was a successful merchant and a leading member of First Presbyterian Church in Mercer. He and his wife, the former Maria Young, had ten children, including Elizabeth Stewart Kilgore. Elizabeth was born in 1808, married James Kilgore, and helped him with his Underground Railroad activities. She died in 1876 and is buried beside her husband in Old Mercer Graveyard.

Magoffin House: located on South Pitt Street, now part of the Mercer County Historical Society

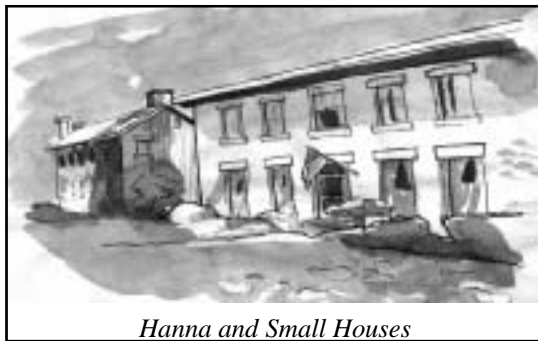
The former home of Dr. James Magoffin, Jr., it was occupied by his descendants until Henrietta “Goodie” Magoffin, his great-granddaughter, donated it in 1951 to the Mercer County Historical Society to serve as its headquarters.

Dr. Magoffin, a native of Newry, Ireland, emigrated to Mercer in 1821 and became a successful physician and leading citizen. Local historian Kenneth R. Martin identifies the Magoffins' home as a site of Underground Railroad activity. Magoffin was identified as a “copperhead” (peace Democrat) during the Civil War.

Small House: located beside Hanna House on South Pitt Street

The Reverend Edward Small, a native of Washington County, New York, and a graduate of Union College, was ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1837. Before accepting the pastorate of the Presbyterian congregations in Rocky Springs and Springfield in Mercer County in 1838, he served as a missionary in various parts of Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Canada. Shortly after arriving in Mercer, Small moved next door to the Hannas.

In 1840 he married Robert Hanna's daughter, Mary. Both abolitionists, they opened up their home to serve as a station on the Underground Railroad.

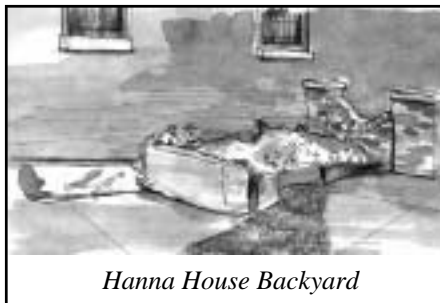


Hanna and Small Houses

Hanna House: located at the corner of South Pitt and East Beaver Streets

Hanna House, now a local landmark, was built in 1839 by Robert Hanna, a wealthy businessman and an ardent abolitionist. In the stone foundation in the rear of Hanna House, there is a tiny passageway, just large enough for a man's body to pass through. It is believed that this was a secret room where runaway slaves were hidden. Because the opening to this subterranean compartment was concealed with a large flat stone, for many years no one knew it was there.

According to an incident recorded by local historian Kenneth R. Martin, Hanna's wife, Mary, escorted a young slave girl, heavily veiled and disguised as her maid, via stagecoach to Erie, Pennsylvania. The pair shared the long ride with the pursuing slave owner himself, who was evidently trying to reach Erie before his fugitive slave did. Incredibly, he never uttered a word of suspicion about Mrs. Hanna's slave. When the stagecoach reached Erie, the



Hanna House Backyard

young African-American woman was able to slip safely away.

Charles Whistler, Robert Hanna's contemporary, once described him as “a man of wealth and culture, who wore a silk hat, broadcloth, a gold lob chain, and a cane of golden head, with much love for the colored man whom he claimed for his ‘brotha.’”

Kilgore House: located at the corner of South Erie and Beaver streets

James Kilgore, a blacksmith, operated a station at this two-story white clapboard house. Elizabeth Breckinridge, Kilgore's daughter, vividly recalled the occasion her mother's uncle, John Young,² delivered thirteen runaway slaves in a hay wagon, and unloaded them under the cloak of darkness.

Young, his brother David, and their neighbors harbored fugitive slaves on their farms at Indian Run, an area about six miles from Mercer where East Lackawannock and Springfield townships converge.

James Crouse operated an Underground Railroad station in the cellar of his home. He then transferred the fugitive slaves to another station in Ashtabula, Ohio. “I can just imagine I see them again, lying on the cellar kitchen floor with straw pillows. As they came in



Kilgore House

the night, they were taken at three o'clock in the morning. Mr. Joseph Sykes³ had a big wagon and took them to Mr. Crouse's next station in Georgetown--now Sheakleyville,” Breckinridge once said.

Breckinridge also remembered a young runaway slave who could read a little, and her mother trying to teach him to write his name. Mrs. Kilgore was a courageous woman; teaching a slave to read and write was illegal. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass recounted that it was forbidden to help slaves to learn to read and write. Slave owners feared that they would get ideas out of books and begin

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to think of a way to become emancipated.

When Kilgore died in 1882, a local newspaper eulogized him, saying, “He was an earnest abolitionist when to avow such opinions was to invite ridicule and censure, and he helped many a fleeing slave over the ‘Underground Railroad’ to safety and to freedom.”

The Original County Building: This wooden structure had a courtroom on the first floor and a jail on the second and was located on the corner of North Erie and North Diamond streets, the location of present-day Mellon Bank

In November 1838, a slave-catcher arrived in Mercer before darkness gathered, with three runaway slaves he had recovered near Liberia, with intentions of returning them to their master in Virginia. One of the slaves, a man, was tied to the back seat of his wagon, but the other two—both women—were not secured.

Just outside of town, the women freed the man, who then fled into the nearby woods. By then darkness had fallen and the slave-catcher returned to Mercer, placed the two African-American women in the county jail, and paid bounty hunters to help him search for the escaped male slave.

The next morning the Rev. Samuel Tait, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, went to hitch up a wagon to take his family to church for the Sunday worship service. He found the missing slave hiding in his barn. Tait, a member of the Mercer County Anti-Slavery Society, disguised the runaway slave with his own wig, hat and cloak and directed him to his house, where his family fed and protected the frightened, hungry man.⁴

Site of the Former Nickum House: located on North Erie Street on the northern end of what today is Country Fair's parking lot

Local historian Robert Lark identifies Nickum House as a station on the Underground Railroad. Thomas J. Nickum, Sr. was born in Emmitsburg, Maryland, a son of John and Elizabeth Weaver Nickum. He came to Mercer in 1842 and worked as a clerk in his Uncle Lewis Weaver's store until 1851, when he began learning the printer's trade in the *Mercer County Whig's* office.

Nickum, with J.H. Robinson, purchased the Mercer County *Whig*,

an anti-slavery newspaper, in 1854 and published it until 1866. He served in a number of public service capacities, including as a United States accessory for Division 5 of the 20th District, a Mercer County jury commissioner, and a constable.

Site of the Former First Presbyterian Church: located where Shannon's Kandy Kitchen is today

Reverend Dr. Nathaniel West, a visiting clergyman, delivered a sermon supporting abolition in the First Presbyterian Church, resulting in the formation of the Mercer County Anti-Slavery Society. West was born in 1794 in Ulster and pursued theological studies in Edinburgh, Scotland. At one time he served as a chaplain in the British Army, but entered the ministry in 1820.

West immigrated to the United States in 1834, bearing with him letters from many of the distinguished ministers of Scotland, among them Rev. Thomas Chalmers⁵. In September 1844, West came to Meadville, Pennsylvania. He advocated an end to slavery during a discourse at the church on June 15, 1835. Following his call for the abolition of slavery in the United States, a meeting was held on July 4 at the Mercer County Courthouse to organize the Mercer County Anti-Slavery Society.



The first officers chosen by the new society were John Hoge, president, William F. Junkin and William McElhaney, vice presidents, John Keck, recording secretary, and Rev. A. W. Black, corresponding secretary, all leading citizens of Mercer. Unfortunately, the Mercer United Presbyterian Church was destroyed by a fire caused by an overheated furnace on New Year's Day, 1928.

Old Mercer Graveyard: located at the corner of North Erie and East North streets

Some of Mercer's abolitionists and Underground Railroad conductors, including James Kilgore, are buried here. It was established in 1805 by the members of the former First Presbyterian Church.

Bethany Presbyterian Church: located on West Venango Street

The Reverend William Taggart McAdam was called to the pulpit of the Second United Presbyterian Church (now Bethany Presbyterian Church) in 1847 and served in that capacity until 1853. During



Bethany

his seven-year tenure, he left an indelible mark upon not only his parishioners, but also Mercer.

Just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, McAdam delivered a lecture at the Mercer County Courthouse on “Our National Troubles,” which was later published in the *Mercer County Whig*. In his address McAdam insisted that there had been “nothing in the legislation and administration of the general government which caused the secession movement in the south” and those in rebellion against the government must be subdued “cost what it

will.” McAdam's remarks were not acceptable to many in the community, and those who disagreed with him organized an opposition, or Union meeting. However, as the Civil War progressed, the majority of Mercerites rallied in support of the federal government and “the boys at the front.”

Sites of the Former Stephenson Houses: located on North Pitt Street where the Mercer Borough Building and the Mercer County Area Agency on Aging, Inc. are today

An 1835 map of Mercer shows William M. Stephenson as owning property at both of these locations. Stephenson, an attorney, educator, and outspoken abolitionist, was born in Worth Township, Mercer County, Pennsylvania, in 1808, to John and Jane Mortimer Stephenson. Stephenson served a term as Mercer County's registrar and recorder, and was a member of the Mercer County Bar Association. He married Hannah Foster, a daughter of prominent attorney Samuel B. Foster, in 1836.

Stephenson founded the Mercer Dispatch in 1857, so there would be a vehicle to represent anti-slavery sentiment. He furnished his son,

Samuel, William F. Clark, and two other young men with the finances to carry out the endeavor.

The Former Site of Hackney Hotel: located on the corner of North Pitt and North Diamond streets, where Showtime Video and Penn Northwest Development Corporation are today

General Lafayette, the great Revolutionary War hero, was invited by Congress to visit these shores in 1824-25 as a guest of the nation.

Lafayette, a native of France, was a founder of the Society of Friends of Negroes⁶ and a member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. He publicly lauded the valor of black soldiers in the American Revolution and credited an African-American spy, James Armistead, with having helped to save his forces from defeat by British General Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown on October 19, 1781, ending the American Revolution.

During his 13-month tour, Lafayette made visits to hundreds of towns and cities across the country, including Mercer. He arrived in Mercer on June 1, 1825, was the guest at a reception and dinner attended by local dignitaries at the Hackney Hotel, and stayed there overnight before continuing his journey.

The Mercer County Courthouse and the Civil War Monument: located on the Diamond

Following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 African-American freedmen filed certificates of freedom with the clerk at what was the second Mercer County Courthouse. It was located at the site occupied by the third—and present-day—courthouse.

The Civil War Monument was dedicated on Nov. 10, 1897 as a tribute to the county's sons who served in the Civil War, 1861-1865.



Bingham House: located on South Diamond Street, now the Mercer County Republican Committee Headquarters

John Armour Bingham was born in a handsome two-story red-

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brick edifice on South Diamond Street, directly opposite the Mercer County Courthouse, on January 21, 1815, a son of Hugh and Esther Bailey Bingham. Bingham's father and uncle, Thomas, both carpenters, built the Bingham House in 1812. He learned abolitionism at his mothers knee. She died when he was twelve years old.

John Armour Bingham

"The Madison of the Fourteenth Amendment"

Bingham received his early education and excelled in declamation at Mercer Academy. He was active in a local debating society, which included gifted speakers William Stewart, John J. Pearson, and Rev. James Galloway. This provided invaluable training to the man who would one day be known as the "Silver Tongued Orator."

He spent two years employed as a printer at the *Mercer Luminary*, an early newspaper published in Mercer. Disliking the printer's trade, the young man confided in John J. Pearson, a prominent attorney, his aspiration to enter the legal profession. Pearson advised him that he needed more education.

Bingham enrolled Franklin College in New Athens, Ohio, and spent several sessions. Returning to Mercer, he entered the law office of Pearson and William Stewart. He soon relocated to Cadiz, Ohio, where he became a community leader and entered the political arena.

He served as a U.S. Congressman, the special judge advocate in the trial of the conspirators in the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, the solicitor of the court of claims, a manager in the House of Representatives in the impeachment proceedings against President Andrew Johnson and West H. Humphreys, the U.S. judge for several districts in Tennessee, and the first U.S. Minister to Japan.

Bingham was known as "The Madison of the Fourteenth Amendment" because of the instrumental role he played in securing its adoption. The Fourteenth Amendment, the so-called "Civil Rights Amendment," states that no state has the right to abridge the rights of any citizen of the United States, or "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of the law," or deny any person the equal protection of the laws.

The intent of the Fourteenth Amendment to make sure that black citizens would have the same rights as white citizens. It was adopted

Carpenter Almost Falls Into Long-Lost Passage 60-Ft. Pit May Be Old Slave Shelter

A near fatal accident to a carpenter working on Atty. D. W. Patterson's back porch yesterday at noon (Wednesday) may have uncovered another of Mercer's underground passages.

Norman Richard King, North Otter St., employee of Contractor H. H. McMillen, who is replacing the porch but managed to catch two "two-by-fours."

Looking below he discovered a stone-walled pit about eight feet in diameter and believed to be at least 60 feet deep, resembling a well but containing no water.

A flare of lighted papers thrown in to the mystery chasm revealed another passageway to the northeast at the bottom, which may have another opening at some unknown point, since air could be felt coming up.

No mention of such a passage is found in the early history of the town, although several "underground" passages were located in Mercer for the temporary shelter of runaway slaves en route to Canada, but, for the most part these have been hidden cellar rooms.

The contract'r extension ladders failed to reach the bottom of the passage and Atty. Patterson contacted Albion Bindley, new president of the Mercer County Historical Society, who evinced interest in an early exploration of the tantalizing mystery.

The above article appeared in the Mercer Dispatch on May 26, 1955, page 1, column 8.

as part of the constitution in July 1868. He died in Cadiz, Ohio, in 1900. He was inducted into the Mercer High School Academic Hall of Fame in 2001.

The Underground Tunnels: said to exist beneath certain areas of Mercer

The prevailing assumption is that these tunnels were associated with the activities of the Underground Railroad. There are no known documents related to the construction of tunnels beneath Mercer in connection with the Underground Railroad, or for any other purpose. As far as it can be determined, no attempt has been undertaken to verify the existence of such subterranean passageways. If tunnels were found to have existed, as recounted in local folklore, it would not necessarily prove they were associated with the Underground Railroad operation in Mercer, but neither would it disprove it.

Perhaps in the future someone will utilize modern technology to determine if, in fact, tunnels existed. Should modern technology make a verification, it would certainly be a tantalizing discovery.

Appendix I

The African-American Community in Mercer

An undated clipping from the Mercer Dispatch and Republican recounts how around 1830, Fountain Reed, a young African-American man, a barber by trade, came on foot from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to Mercer looking for a location to set up shop. He walked up Erie Street on a summer evening and observed an open door at First Presbyterian Church, where a service was about to begin.

It occurred to Reed to stop and at least look in. As he did, King

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Caldwell, one of the pillars of the congregation, met him. Caldwell warmly welcomed the young African-American, telling him the church “had a particular place assigned for people of color.” Caldwell escorted Reed to the section reserved for African-Americans, and there he met “the Adams family, one of the colored people of Mercer, who were in attendance upon the service. They took him home with them that night, and becoming acquainted with Miss Cynthia Adams, a young lady of the family, he married her and spent the remainder of his life in Mercer.”

For the First Presbyterian Church in 1830 to have “a particular place” for African-Americans to sit during worship services implies there must have been enough African-Americans in the community to warrant the congregation's elders to make such a provision.

Cynthia Adams Reed was born in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, and was brought to Mercer by her parents in 1808, when she was about one year old. That they remained in the little community implies that they were accepted and that Mr. Adams found a way to support his wife and children. John S. Duncan, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, recalled in an article appearing in the *Mercer Dispatch and Republican* Aug. 11, 1928 that Fountain Reed opened a barber shop, Mercer's first, located on South Diamond Street. The building would later become Thomas W. McClain's print shop.

When Cynthia Adams Reed died in 1882, aged 75, the *Mercer Dispatch and Republican* eulogized her, saying, “No one who knew her questioned her piety. The funeral took place from the M.E. Church on Sunday afternoon with the service attended by our leading citizens.”

The couple had six children they brought up in an attractive home on West Butler Street. They worshipped as a family at the Methodist Episcopal Church, now Mercer United Methodist Church on East Butler Street.

Pictures of their sons and daughters featured over the generations with the graduating classes in Mercer High School's yearbooks is evidence that the Reeds and other members of the African-American community valued education. From the summaries provided of their high school careers, these young people participated in many activities, including sports and choral programs.

Appendix II

Indian Run and Pandenarium

Charles Everett, a wealthy plantation owner and physician living near Charlottesville, in Albemarle County, Virginia, made arrangements in his last will and testament for his slaves to be liberated on his demise. Following his death in 1854, thirty-nine men, women, and children who had only known bondage, found themselves free. Dr. Everett's former slaves were transported to Pandenarium, a settlement created for them on land purchased from John Young at Indian Run. Each family was provided with "a legacy" that included a furnished cabin, clothing, tools, seeds, and a plot of land to cultivate.

At first Dr. Everett's newly freed slaves were contented in their new home. But when winter arrived, they found themselves dealing with freezing weather, an experience they weren't prepared for. Within two years, many of Pandenarium's inhabitants came down with tuberculosis, and for months, it seemed the disease would completely wipe out the settlement. Two families relocated to Tennessee, while others returned to the South. Five families moved to Mercer, occupying a row of homes on what is now West Butler Street.

Appendix III

Cooper Chapel A.M.E. Church

In the 1880's there was an African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Known as Cooper Chapel, it was located on South Otter Street. Jerry Johnson recollected that Cooper Chapel was a rather large edifice, with a parsonage situated beside it. Cooper Chapel was disbanded in the 1950's, after a long struggle by the small congregation to keep it open, and the property was sold.

Appendix IV

African-Americans and the Underground Railroad

There is no known documentation regarding the help the members of Mercer's African-American community might have provided the white conductors in aiding runaway slaves, but there was a connection between James Kilgore and the Travis family of Liberia.

The Travis family served as conductors on the Underground Railroad in what is now the Stoneboro area. The 1860 census record

shows that a Lucinda Travis was living at that time with the James Kilgore household in Mercer.

Liberia was built on the site of present-day Stoneboro in 1825 by abolitionists and existed until the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. It consisted of a row of clapboard cabins located near the shores of Sandy Lake. Today all that remains of the little settlement is a small cemetery.

Runaway slaves were brought to the settlement from Franklin, Venango County, Pennsylvania, an important station on the Underground Railroad. Following the passage of the amended Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, most of the inhabitants of Liberia packed up and fled to Canada.

Appendix V

***Comforter of Slaves Bound For Freedom* (edited)**

2 women unraveled the code in quilts

By Karen S. Peterson

USA TODAY (undated 1999 article in MCHS files)

Jacqueline Tobin, a teacher of writing and women's studies at the University of Denver . . . was more receptive than most would be to an aging woman, a quilter who entreated her in 1994 to preserve a tale told in her family for generations, but never written down.

The story from Ozella McDaniel Williams related how quilts



*Drunkard's
Path:
Never travel in
strait lines—
avoid capture.*

made by slaves were encoded with secret messages and hung in plain view to be used as guides by black fugitives.

Tobin was prepared to believe a black woman . . . to preserve an endangered piece of black American history. . . .

The book that resulted is out today: *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railway* (Doubleday, \$27.50).

Tobin first met Williams in the Old Market Building in Charleston, S.C., a center of commerce since 1841.

. . . As Tobin prowled the quilting section, Williams showed off her own handmade quilts and then stopped Tobin with this question: "Did you know that quilts were used by slaves to communicate on the

Underground Railroad?” Williams was referring to the cooperative system that developed among antislavery activists who helped spirit fugitive slaves northward from about 1830 to 1865. . . (Three years later) Williams was ready to talk: She was terminally ill. And she had no children to inherit her message. . . .”

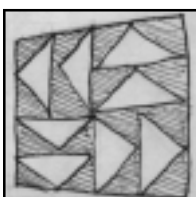
The “code” Williams passed along included a number of quilting patterns, accompanied by a terse, enigmatic proverb assigned to each.

Ten quilts were set out in succession, Williams said, beginning with a “monkey wrench” design indicating it was time for the slaves to gather their tools. When the “wagon wheel” appeared, it was time to pack for the dangerous journey.

Colors, designs and the types of knots used were all significant, Williams said. Blue and white was a protective combination, a blessing for a long trip. . . . The spacing of knots might indicate a grid with a suggestion of distances. . . .

He (Raymond Dobard) cautions that their interpretation of Williams’ story, buttressed by their research from Africa and the southern USA, does not result in “some type of Rand McNally map” used by fugitives. And he suspects it will be challenged by scholars who are “doubting Thomases.”

He is satisfied the two have an accurate understanding of Williams’ references to the monkey wrench and to the bear’s paw trail, which exhorted escapees to follow the track a bear would take on a journey north.

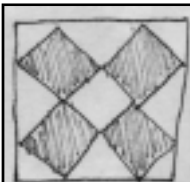


*Flying Geese:
Follow honkers
north.*

Dobard is less sure about other instructions in the code, such as the need to “exchange double wedding rings.” He believes that might refer to breaking both the mental and physical bonds of slavery. . . .

Other experts who have written forewords for the book agree there will be opposition. “The oral testimony of this woman is going to generate a great deal of controversy because it is the custom of scholars to look askance at oral tradition, at anything that can’t be proved by the written word,” says St. Louis quilt historian Cuesta Benberry. . . .

Dobard hopes it will show that the image of the passive slave “has no place in reality. From the time ropes were first tied to the



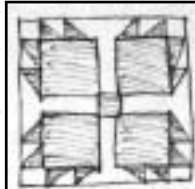
*Crossroads:
Cleveland is
good to cross to
Canada.*

Mercer Borough Underground Railroad Walking Tour

hands of Africans, they were trying to be free.”

The last time Tobin saw Ozella Williams was two weeks before her death on May 17, 1998. “It is extremely important for me to have honored her story and to have honored Ozella,” she says. “I want to make her live.”

Editor: There is no reason to believe that only slaves were involved in these passive messages to runaways. Oral tradition suggests that similar quilts existed in the north—as warnings, giving distances, or showing safe routes. The runaway slave was in unfamiliar territory and often illiterate. They would need “road maps” from sympathetic Northerners. Some people may have been unwilling or unable to render active assistance—opting rather for lending the passive assistance of putting out “road signs.” Examples of these quilts can be found in many local historical societies—the question is: were these quilts “road maps,” popular patterns, or a combination of both? Thanks to Bob Disko for the above story. WCP.



*Bear Paw:
Follow animal
trails through
the mountains.*

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Endnotes

¹ Information on Michael Zahniser provided by the Steeley G. Mudd Library of Princeton University, Princeton, N.J. (Communication dated Aug. 19, 1999). Michael Zahniser graduated from Princeton University in 1849.

² John Young and James Minnick, original members of White Chapel United Methodist Church, operated an active Underground Railroad station at Indian Run. Young was the uncle of Breckinridge's mother, Elizabeth Stewart Kilgore.

³ Joseph Sykes naturalization record is located at the Mercer County Courthouse. (Note: the courthouse indexes the English-born abolitionist as Joseph Sikes, rather than Sykes.) Sykes was born in 1807, a son of Sarah Barton, in Norton, Darby, England, and came to the

United States in 1829, settling in Mercer. He became an American citizen in 1835.

⁴ This story was found in the Mercer County Historical Society archives.

⁵ Chalmers was a central figure in the Scottish church in the nineteenth century. He was ordained a minister in the Church of Scotland in 1803, but his outlook dramatically changed after his conversion experience in 1811 and he became an apostle of social justice. While pastoring the Tron and St. John's congregations in Glasgow from 1815 to 1829, Chalmers insisted the traditional parish system could deal with the problems of a growing industrial city. He revived the office of deacon and was supported by a large group of laymen dedicated to improving the quality of life among the urban disenfranchised. Under Chalmers' leadership, the deacons ventured into every neighborhood encompassed by the parish, establishing day and Sunday schools. If the urban poor could be equipped with an education, they reasoned, they would be more employable in an increasing complex, literate world. In 1823 Chalmers became a professor of moral philosophy and political economy at St. Andrews University in Glasgow. Five years later he became a professor of divinity at Edinburgh University in Edinburgh. As chairman of the church extension committee of the Church of Scotland in the 1830's, he raised enough money to build 200 new churches. Chalmers believed the church had a mission to all people and was an ardent supporter of foreign missions

⁶ The Society of the Friends of the Negro was founded in France in 1788. Leading French liberals, including the Comte de Mirabeau, Jean-Pierre Brissot, and Etienne Claviere, were members. The abolition of slavery was one of the issues raised during the French Revolution. C.B.A. Behrens notes in The Ancient Regime (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967, p. 147), that since the middle of the seventeenth century the British and the French both valued the Caribbean islands because of the sugar they produced for sale in Europe. The production of the sugar, however, depended on a regular supply of slaves, over which the two colonial powers disputed in West Africa.

Frequently Asked Questions

Did Harriet Tubman ever come to Mercer?

Harriet Tubman, one of the best-known conductors on the Underground Railroad, was known as "the Moses of her people." She was born Harriet Ross about 1820 on a plantation near Bucktown, Maryland, one of eleven children of a slave couple. She married John Tubman, a free black, in 1844. Her marriage, however, did not change her legal status and she remained a slave. Fearing that she would be sold further south she escaped in 1849. Traveling at night, aided by the Underground Railroad, she reached Pennsylvania and gained her freedom.

She worked as a maid in hotels and clubs in Philadelphia and Cape May, New Jersey, and by December 1850, she saved enough money to make the first of nineteen perilous journeys back into the South to lead other slaves to the North.

None of the Underground Railroad routes that Tubman used would have brought her through Mercer. Though she traveled widely as a lecturer for the abolitionist movement and women's rights, there is no known documentation that she ever came here to speak.

Were there slaves in Mercer County?

There were slaves in Mercer County, but never very many. Evidence of the institution of human bondage is found in Mercer County in 1804 when John Calvin of Salem Township bequeathed his wife a young mulatto girl. That same year John Sheakley left Gettysburg and settled in Sandy Creek Township with four slaves.

According to the federal census, in Beaver, Erie, Butler, Crawford, Jefferson, McKean, Mercer, and Venango counties, there were thirty-two slaves in 1810; seven in 1820, and fifteen in 1830.

The small number of slaves was due to several reasons, including a lack of economic advantage in owning slaves in this part of the state, the pressure of anti-slavery groups, and Pennsylvania's gradual abolition law that did not permit persons of color beyond the age of 28 to be held in bondage. (Pennsylvania Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1780: Ended forever the idea of slavery for life in PA—first emancipation act in America. All slaves born after March

1, 1780, would be freed after their twenty-eighth birthday, their children would be born free, all continuing slaves must be registered, and—after an amendment—slave parents could not be separated from their children.)

When the fugitive slaves reached Canada, where did they go?

Many of the fugitive slaves who lived in or passed through this area via the Underground Railroad settled in the vicinity of St. William in Ontario, as well as other parts of Canada. Some of their descendants have visited the Mercer County Historical Society, seeking information about their progenitors who lived in Mercer County, including at Liberia, the colony of runaway slaves that formerly existed in Stoneboro.

African-American soldiers serving in the War of 1812 became aware of Canadian society's opposition to slavery. They carried word to their enslaved brethren that if they could reach Canada, they could gain their freedom.

Following the passage of the amended Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, most of Liberia's inhabitants fled to Canada.

All that remains of Liberia is a tiny cemetery located on Route 62—Freedom Road—opposite the entrance to the Stoneboro Fairgrounds. Two black Civil War veterans, Jacob Roberts and Isaac Anderson, are buried there.

Were the abolitionists in Mercer a cohesive group?

There were differing persuasions among abolitionists in this country regarding how to conduct the struggle against slavery.

William Lloyd Garrison helped to organize the New England Anti-Slavery Society in January 1832. The next year, following a trip to England, where he enlisted the aid of fellow abolitionists, he played an instrumental role in establishing the American Anti-Slavery Society, a national organization of which he served as president from 1843 to 1865.

The Mercer County Anti-Slavery Society was an affiliate of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Militant in the struggle against slavery, the leaders of the American Anti-Slavery Society were regarded as fanatics in the South, and

members of the society were denounced.

In 1839, the American Anti-Slavery Society split into two main groups, the radicals and the gradualists. The division was the result of disagreements concerning policy and tactics.

The radicals, whose ranks included Garrison, called for an immediate end to slavery.

The gradualists, who included James G. Birney, believed that slavery could be eliminated legally through moral and political pressure.

In 1839, a group of abolitionists led by Birney left the American Anti-Slavery Society and founded the Liberty Party, the first anti-slavery political party in the United States.

A central committee consisting of Robert Stewart, William H. Scott, Robert Hanna, John Young, Joseph McDonald, Joseph Sykes, Joseph L. McQuillan, and James Kilgore, all community leaders and ardent abolitionists, organized the Liberty Party in Mercer County in 1843.

By nature a secretive movement, the Underground Railroad had many supporters and friends. Few written documents exist from the days of the runaway, but some stories come to us from the period after the Civil War. Many—perhaps most—of the stories have been lost to history.

Were there penalties for people caught trying to free slaves via the Underground Railroad?

As in the story of Auntie Strange, slaves could suffer harsh penalties for fleeing slavery—amputations, beatings, and torture, even to the point of death—but many slaves felt the need for freedom

Conductors on the Underground Railroad also faced stiff penalties—starting with the Constitution of the United States through the Gradual Emancipation Act of 1780 and intensifying under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850—yet they felt the need to help runaway slaves for a number of reasons. All of the conductors—by their actions—pledged their “. . . Lives, . . . Fortunes, and . . . sacred Honor.”

There is a “chicken or the egg” controversy over the Underground Railroad, but without two groups of people—slaves and conductors—this story would not need to be told.

LAWS OF PENNSYLVANIA, OF THE SESSION OF 1855. (edited)

No. 324. AN ACT

To authorize and empower the Court of Common Pleas of Mercer county to legitimate certain persons who were emancipated by the last will and testament of Dr. C. D. Everett, late of Albemarle county, Virginia

WHEREAS, Dr. C. D. Everett, late of Albemarle county, state of Virginia, by his last will and testament provided for the manumission of his slaves, and for their maintenance and support: And whereas, The executor of said decedent, under the powers of said will, purchased certain real and personal estate to and for the use of his said slaves, situate in the county of Mercer, and this Commonwealth:

And whereas, Doubts may arise as to the legitimacy of . . . manumitted slaves, . . . children; therefore,

Section 1. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in General Assembly met, . . . court of common please said county of Mercer, are hereby . . . authorized to entertain, on petition of one or more of the following persons . . . Joe Duke, Lucy Myers, George W. Duke, Nancy Bell, Winsor Duke, Letitia Robertson, Rose Allen, James Duke, John Allen, George W. Lewis, children of Joe Duke; Tom Bell, Lucy Jane Bell, Milly Bell, Nelly Bell, Rachel Bell, Susan Bell, Sally Watson, Margaret Watson, Hannah Watson, Amanda Watson, Frank Robertson, Joe Robertson, Louisa Robertson, Alexander Robertson, Richmond Robertson, children of Letitia Robertson; Fancis Allen, John Allen, Ann Allen, Children of Rose Allen; William C. Rives, Edward Watson, Henry Myers, Susan Myers, Children of Lucy Myers; Nick Myers, Lucy A. Myers, Children of Susan Myers; Henrietta Bell, Daughter of Rachel Bell; Samuel J. Duke, son of James Duke; Willis Lewis and Mary J. Lewis, grand-children of Lucy Myers; manumitted slaves or descendants of manumitted slaves, . . . legitimate any of all of said persons . . . enjoy such rights and privileges, for the enjoyment, transmission and inheritance of property from their parents or reputed parents, or other relatives, as in the sound judgment and discretion of said court shall seem just and proper; whereupon such decree . . . legitimacy of any or all of said persons, and as if the descendants . . . or other relationships so ascertained . . .

Henry K. Strong, Speaker of the House of Representatives WM. M. Hiester, Speaker of the Senate.

Approved—The twenty-sixth day of April, Anno Domini one thousand eight hundred and fifty-five

Another Slave Case—

A widow lady accompanied by her nephew and four slaves, two young men, a woman and a lad, came up the river on Tuesday. Some efforts were made to induce the slaves to leave their mistress, which they had a right to do under the new law—having been brought into the State by their owner. We understand that the lady offered to give free papers to all of them who wished to leave her. One of the young men left, preferring freedom to slavery. The other left for awhile, followed his mistress, after she had left the city. The woman and her lad would not leave their mistress. A large crowd collected while the parties were going on to the Brownsville boat, and some trouble was anticipated, but nothing occurred save the knocking down of a colored man who manifested a disposition to seize the youngest slave. This was done by the nephew.—*Pitt Telegraph*

Mercer County Whig, April 12, 1847, page 3, column 1

From the *Lancaster Express* of April, 28

Death of Last Pennsylvania Slave

We sometime since noticed that there was but one slave left in this county of the number manumitted under the act abolishing slavery in Pennsylvania. That the last relic of the “civilized barbarism” of our fathers is now no more. . . . His name was Abram Kirk and he was the slave of Stephen Porter . . . he was manumitted. His exact age is not known . . . It has been ascertained . . . that Kirk was over 103 years old . . . He was in many respects a remarkable negro. His manner and . . . faculties were surprisingly sound to the last . . . He could reminisce of . . . the Revolution . . . services rendered by Lafayette . . . he assisted in moving that general . . . across the Susquehanna River . . . was often heard to relate an incident . . . The boat . . . accidentally run on the rocks . . . Lafayette called out to those in charge of the boat, “Do not drown any of my noble men: I expect to have need of them all at Yorktown.”

This old slave had as a sercoulous regard for honesty and the truth . . .

This old African’s funeral was largely attended, while living he had been highly respected in the neighborhood, as an honest and inoffensive man . . .

The last slave: that solitary figure under the heat of “slave,” which we find in the census of Lancaster county for 1850, will disappear from the new census.

Mercer County Whig, May 10, 1858, page 2, column 7



Mercer County Historical Society

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