

THE CONDUCTOR



JUNE 2001

FIRST EVER PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY GATHERING

On March 23, at Prince George's County Community College, NPS convened the first Underground Railroad (UGRR) Gathering ever in Prince George's County. Fifty enthusiasts from diverse backgrounds turned out to discuss UGRR. The press paid attention too -- *Prince George's Gazette*, *Prince George's Journal*, and Bowie Cable TV. Although the public knew of the history of slavery, county residents were not aware of freedom seekers or home grown heroes like Thomas Smallwood (DC conductor), John Thompson (runaway turned whaler), or Henry Vinton Plummer (runaway who enlisted in the Navy). Packets of information on NPS's UGRR program, Maryland grants, and county research sources were given out to all attending. On display was a fat notebook full of information assembled on slavery and freedom seeking in the county, despite only the most preliminary research.

Gail Thomas, historian for the Black History Program, Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), spoke about the county's Black History Programs. Her division sponsors annual Black History exhibits -- this year, "Seasoned to Taste," on foodways, and in the past cooperated with a school program to create a beautiful historically inspired quilt. The county does not yet have a museum for permanent exhibits, but North Brentwood, represented at the meeting by its mayor, is planning a museum. Ms. Thomas stressed the need for careful documentation of UGRR sites, events, and personalities, and for placing UGRR within the broader picture of American history. UGRR was more than sites from which runaway slaves left, and African American history is more than the history of slavery. UGRR, however, can be seen as the precursor of the 20th century civil rights struggle and, thus, as a link to a broader history.

During brainstorming participants suggested the need to make the public aware of work already being done to promote UGRR by NPS and Anacostia Trails Heritage Area (ATHA) and the need to coordinate a statewide workshop to facilitate cross-county sharing and mapmaking. In PG County, sharing could be facilitated by a newsletter posted on a website, a consortium of researchers and organizations without physical sites, checking with genealogical societies about projects and sources, and planning for the new North Brentwood Black History Museum. The result could contribute to the collection of the Sojourner Truth Room (Oxon Hill Library), and create a compendium of events, sites, and heroes (including maps). Volunteers are needed to help transcribe and analyze sources at PG County sites to make it possible to interpret more African American history. Support was requested for Tell-a-Story, a program of videotaping oral histories in order to put together a multicultural history of PG County.

NATIONAL SCENE

The First Network to Freedom Members

January 15, 2001, was the deadline for the first round of applications to the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, mandated by 1998 legislation. On April 4, applications were formally reviewed by all NPS UGRR regional coordinators at a public meeting at the University of the District of Columbia. As a result, there is now a first group of sites, programs, and facilities accepted into the network, eligible to display the logo on signs, plaques, and interpretive materials. The regional coordinators approved 10 sites, 10 programs, and 5 facilities. Included are two NPS properties (Fort Pulaski, Georgia, and the Wayside, part of Minute Man, Massachusetts) and one NPS program ("An Impressive Lesson for My Children", at the Wayside). Are you familiar with Rokeby, Milton House, Homestead, Fork in the Road Terminus, or the John Parker House? How about Mary Ellen Pleasant? You will be if check the information about new members soon to appear soon on our website www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr.

Filling out Network applications is a learning process, both for applicants and coordinators. The program's goal is to work with all willing participants. The most time-consuming step is documenting verifiable association with the Underground Railroad. Driving the program and the application process is the overall mission to identify, document, interpret, and protect Underground Railroad resources. The first round was difficult, as there were no sample applications, no precedents, and a short turnaround time for applicants.

Applicants may receive advice on their applications by calling Jenny Masur (202-690-5166) or contacting her at jenny_masur@nps.gov. The next application deadline is July 15. Park programs and sites, as well as park partners and neighbors, are invited to apply.

BOOKS

Of the many books on the Underground Railroad for children, here are two for ages 9-12, both carefully researched:

- n Stealing Freedom by Elisa Carbone (Knopf, NY, 1998) – a local author's recreation of the anguish of family separation and then escape to freedom of Maryland teenager Ann Maria Weems who was helped by the Underground Railroad to reach Philadelphia and then Canada. Ann Maria Weem's story is documented in William Still's Underground Railroad.
- n Running for Our Lives by Glennette Tilley Turner -- by a member of the original advisory board to the National Park Service Special Resource Study on the Underground Railroad. The fictional character, a boy in Missouri, escapes slavery in Missouri, crossing the Mississippi River and eventually arriving in Canada, after meeting John Brown and Frederick Douglass and surviving sickness and other terrors of the journey.

HOME FRONT

From the New Arlington Slave Cabin Exhibit Brochure

The Civil War forever altered the Arlington landscape as well as the lives of those who lived there. On April 20, 1861, Robert E. Lee resigned his commission in the U.S. Army and shortly thereafter entered into Confederate military service. The rest of the Lee family abandoned Arlington in May of 1861, and by the end of the month Union troops occupied the estate. In 1864 Mrs. Lee lost her home for failing to comply with a wartime law about paying real estate taxes in person. The Federal government purchased Arlington at a public auction for \$26,800. That same year, 200 acres of the estate were set aside for a cemetery for war dead.

In 1863, the Arlington estate became home to thousands of emancipated slaves who had fled to Washington for their safety and in search of work. Freedmen's Village, a camp for former slaves, often called "contrabands," was established south of the mansion. At first, the village at Arlington was administered by the American Missionary Association and the Chief Quartermaster of the Department of Washington. In 1865, Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (known as the Freedmen's Bureau) to administer all such camps of former slaves. The ultimate authority for the village rested with the War Department.

Freedmen's Village was intended to be a place of temporary refuge in which the residents would receive Federal assistance, learn trades by which they could support themselves, and attend school. After a brief period of employment in the village, residents were expected to seek jobs elsewhere to free up space for new arrivals. The freedmen worked as farmers, blacksmiths, carpenters, and seamstresses. Workers received \$10 monthly, half of which went to a general fund to maintain the village. A hospital, school, churches, and a home for the "indigent" provided for the residents' needs. The freedmen received a rudimentary education and religious instruction from numerous missionaries from several denominations.

Over the years, many freedmen, including some of the former Custis slaves, established permanent homes in Freedmen's Village. Few ex-slaves wanted to return to the plantations of their

former owners to work as agricultural laborers. As time passed, tensions in the village escalated as the government increased rents and labor requirements. Over the years, Federal officials made several attempts to evict the residents and close the village. By the 1890s, the property was considered highly desirable for development. While the government and many county residents viewed the village as an outdated, expensive, temporary solution to a problem, it represented a cherished community to those who lived there. By 1900, public opinion had turned against Freedmen's Village once and for all, resulting in closure. Many of the former residents established new communities in the county not far from the Arlington estate, where their descendants still live today.

For more information check the following websites: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP./ARLINGTON/text.html> and www.arlington.k12.va.us/schools/woodlawn/staff/schildtb/fv/docu.htm.

ON A HISTORICAL NOTE

Slaves seeking freedom did not always have to seek out "stations" on the Underground Railroad which were houses, farm buildings, or churches providing refuge. In addition to those like Frederick Douglass or William and Ellen Craft who used disguises, there were many who used water transportation.

NCR is an area of creeks and rivers, close to the Chesapeake Bay. Many 18th and 19th century residents, enslaved and free, had water skills. Lawsuits and runaway ads indicate enslaved seamen hired out on seagoing ships seized opportunities to flee. For example, James Perry, a Baltimore slave hired out to a Hamburg-bound vessel in 1808, never returned, and runaway Moses was expected by his Petersburg master to try to pass as free and get work as a ship's cook. Others stowed away, such as Henny who hid on a steamship from Baltimore to Philadelphia in 1834, and Sam who stowed away on a steam ship chartered to take those attending a camp meeting in Somerset County back to Baltimore in 1859.

FERRY HILL HISTORIC RESOURCES STUDY

For documentation, under a cooperate agreement, Max Grivno, graduate student at University of Maryland (College Park), has been working on a Historic Resources Study (HRS) for the NPS-owned estate along the C&O Canal, called Ferry Hill. Until now, the historic site has been identified in the public mind as the home of Colonel Henry Kyd Douglas, the author of Civil War period memoirs, and the home of Colonel John Blackford whose journal for 1838-39 has been published. Grivno's objective has been to place what is known in a broader historic and geographic context, to include local newspapers and recently available sources, and to include as much information as possible on the Blackford and Douglas family slaves.

Although only master of 18 slaves at his death in 1839, Colonel John Blackford's Ferry Hill boasted a handsome mansion, Ferry Hill Place. During his tenure (1800-1839), he used a mix of slave, white, and free black labor as recounted in family journals. Blackford's Ferry transported produce and livestock across the Potomac between Maryland and Virginia. Barges passed by which could transport locally produced flour from Blackford's farm to Alexandria or Georgetown for eventual sale. Blackford

turned Ferry House into a tavern and boarding house for travelers.

Not only free travellers and slave masters took advantage of Ferry Hill's location near the Potomac River and near a ferry. In 1829 John Blackford caught a runaway woman (sent to the Hagerstown Jail for return to her owner, Malone, a slave trader), and, in return for a reward, in 1839 Franklin Blackford returned 5 runaways hidden near the C&O Canal to the Hagerstown Jail and from there to their owner. In Washington County flight to Ohio, Pennsylvania, or New York was an option indicated by runaway ads in the Hagerstown newspaper.

Grivno's study, as a whole, shows that slavery in the Upper Potomac Valley was not like that in one crop areas, say the Eastern Shore of Maryland, where tobacco dominated. Unlike other areas of the Chesapeake, Washington County households with enslaved workers had five or less on the average between 1790 to 1860. The area enjoyed a diversified economy based on mixed agriculture, livestock, timbering, iron smelting, and gristmills. Canals, turnpikes, and railroads fostered trade. Farms tended to be small, family-run, and progressive in agricultural methods. Investment in slaves took capital away from investment in agricultural machinery or fertilizer and took away from flexibility in the use of paid labor. At Ferry Hill, grains (rye, corn, wheat) and fodder (hay, clover) were grown, as well as potatoes and vegetables.

RECENT EVENTS

NCR PARTICIPATES IN BLACK HISTORIC PRESERVATION COURSE

This spring Cultural Resources Training Initiative money from NPS subsidized a first-ever graduate historic preservation course at a Historically Black University, Delaware State in Dover. The theme has been the Underground Railroad. The course is intended to serve as a model for other HBCUs. Participants could register by semester or individual session, and financial aid was available for commuting students from outside Dover. Organized by Dr. Bradley Skelcher, the course featured speakers such as UGRR national coordinator Diane Miller, Keeper of the National Register Carol Shull, Richard Hughes of the Maryland Historical Trust, and Jenny Masur, NCR coordinator. A follow-up course with the Underground Railroad theme will be offered in the fall covering interpretation and heritage tourism. For more information, contact bskelchere@dsc.edu or Hazel Showell, of the university's Continuing Education Office, (302) 857-6820 or hshowell@dsc.edu.

HILARY RUSSELL'S STUDY OF DC ALMOST COMPLETE

On May 31, Hilary Russell, a retired senior historian for ParksCanada, presented the findings from her almost completed study of the Underground Railroad in DC. With her annotated bibliography, profiles of community leaders, charts of court cases, and identification of important events and personalities, she is laying the groundwork for future work on preservation and interpretation of UGRR resources. In her rescheduled lecture at the Historical Society of Washington, Russell pointed out that DC was betwixt and between. Antislavery supporters signed petitions, provided support for the biracial network of conductors, and provided a readership for the *National Era* newspaper (the first publisher of Uncle Tom's Cabin). Pro-slavery adherents incited mobs to riot after the Crandall indictment

and the Pearl Affair, owned and hired local slaves, and made sure that strict laws were passed to restrain free and enslaved blacks. As Russell pointed out, in a city like DC it was ironical to find hired slaves serving abolitionists in a boardinghouse like Mrs. Spriggs' (from which slaves are known to have escaped). Nor should it be surprising that the three best known DC runaways were not ment, but the Edmonson Sisters and Ann Maria Weems. Contact Gary Scott, Regional Historian, in the next few months to find out when the study is complete.

DC HERITAGE DAY

Thanks to cooperation between NPS and partners, DC Heritage Day on June 2 included UGRR components. The Muncaster Challenge Program again re-enacted the unsuccessful Pearl Escape with bike riding, sailing in a student-built boat from the 7th Street Wharf, and camping at Accokeek. Georgetown featured a re-enactment of a slave escape, as well as tours of the Mt. Zion cemetery and the opportunity to meet church historian Carter Bowman.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The National Capital Region Underground Railroad Committee proudly presents this electronic newsletter. This newsletter has three purposes: 1) to pique curiosity, 2) to educate, and 3) to build commitment to accurate portrayal of the Underground Railroad. *Make this newsletter a forum by directing your comments and contributions to:* Jenny Masur (jenny_masur@nps.gov).



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