



The mission of the Kennett Underground Railroad Center is to preserve the heritage and engage the public about the historic abolitionists and freedom-seekers of this area and beyond.

We do so by offering bus and automotive tours, public presentations, published work in a variety of formats, occasional re-enactments of related historic events, and lectures on current UGRR research. We invite you to take advantage of these public events:

- Sign up for our 2018 tours (see schedule on right);
- Request a KURC presenter for your organization;
- Attend a re-enactment or lecture (announcements about these will be on our website and Facebook page. See p. 6 for pictures of past re-enactments.

In the near future we expect to have a learning center in the Kennett Square area, which people will be able visit on scheduled days.

If our work is of sufficient interest to you, you might wish to consider volunteering for our activities. We have a small board of committed members, but we also have a number of volunteers who help in various ways.

We are also interested in expanding the KURC Board and would be happy to discuss with interested individuals what board duties entail.

Upcoming Events

On Sunday, March 4, 2018, from 2-4:00 pm, we will be holding an Open House at (venue TBD). All recipients of this newsletter are welcome, as are any guests whom you wish to bring. We will introduce ourselves as Board members and volunteers and explain what projects we are working on, both as a group and individually. We will make some brief presentations on current research, tell a few stories of the UGRR in Chester and nearby counties, and be ready to answer any questions from our visitors.

There will be coffee, tea, and light refreshments. We encourage you to attend. If you think you will, please let us know by Thursday, March 1, so that we may set up properly.

Scheduled Bus Tours for 2018

These take place on Sundays of each month. In some months we will give two tours. They begin at the Brandywine Valley Tourist Bureau on Greenwood Ave, outside Longwood Gardens. They commence at 2:30 and last 1 1/2 to 2 hours.

April 22	May 20
June 17 & 24	July 16 & 22
August 19 & 26	September 23
October 21	

To sign up for one of these tours, contact us by phone or email. Our tour busses take a maximum of 23 passengers. Private tours can also be arranged.

This is our first effort at a KURC publication to share with those who, over the years, have expressed interest in our work. Our intention is to keep everyone abreast of our activities, our research, and our hopes for the future. There is no charge, of course, for this publication. We hope you enjoy it. If you have any questions or comments, please contact us in the ways indicated below.

- info@kennettundergroundrr.org
- 484-544-5070
- P. O. Box 202, Kennett Square, PA 19348
- Look for us also on Facebook.

The Christiana Resistance of Sept 11, 1851 Commemorated

On Saturday, September 9, 2017, the Christiana Historical Society of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, held its third annual commemoration of what is called the “Christiana Resistance,” which occurred 166 years ago on September 11, 1851. Many consider this event to be the opening skirmish of the Civil War.

In this small battle between slave-owners and federal marshals on the one hand, and free and fugitive African-Americans on the other, the pro-slavery side was repelled and defeated, but the winning side faced terrible consequences: a charge of treason leveled against 38 Americans and the necessity of some participants fleeing the United States itself. [See accompanying article on the Resistance itself on the following pages]

Michele Sullivan and John O’Neal of the Kennett Underground Railroad Center attended this event last year, and thinking it was a good thing to sustain the connections they established with the Christiana Historical Society, this writer drove through the lovely rural countryside of Rt. 41 and found the little borough of Christiana and Zercher’s Hotel, (above) home of CHS and site of the



commemoration.

First I met and talked with Nancy Plumley, a long-time member of CHS and a good friend of Mary Dugan, the late beloved leader of KURC. Nancy and Mary had done research on the UGRR together, and back in 2009 Plumley had shared with Mary an account of the so-called “Riot,” written by Phebe Earle Gibbons, granddaughter of the UGRR agents Daniel and Hannah Gibbons. We spoke of the possibility of CHS and KURC working on projects together. Nancy then introduced me to Joseph Becton [above right], head of the Third Infantry Regiment of the United States Colored Troops (USCT), a set of Civil War re-enactors begun in 1990. He gave me a flyer that explained: “Living history programs, re-enactments, parades, color guard and hosting duties are among the varied activities in which the regiment participates throughout the Philadelphia area and beyond.” We discussed the possibility of re-enactments with KURC



members. In our discussion I mentioned Chris Densmore, and Becton exuberantly exclaimed, “Chris Densmore! Why, he’s across the street at the Masonic Lodge, listen-

ing to Philip Merrill [see below], unless he’s already left.” I excused myself to see if Densmore, curator of Swarthmore’s Friends Historical Library, one of great scholars of this area’s history and of the UGRR, and a former KURC colleague, was still there.

Entering the Masonic Lodge, I saw Chris was part of an audience of several dozen listeners, giving rapt attention to Philip Merrill’s explanation of his exhibit “Hidden in the Shadows of Slavery,” a collection of artifacts he has gleaned for his business, Nanny Jack & Co. He showed old photographs of former slaves, such as James “General” Jackson, who lived to 100 years; and free Blacks, like Thomas Stokes, the 1st Black constable of Williamsport; and Samuel Green, whose story was told by William Still in his epic *The Underground Railroad*. Green had the misfortune to live in pre-Civil War Virginia, where, when he was discovered to have a copy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, he was arrested and sentenced to jail for that “crime.”

These photos and snippets of African-American history, Merrill indicated, are starting points for fleshing out individual



Black lives and Black culture in American history.

Nanny Jack & Company, created by Merrill in 1994, is “an archives and consulting agency specializing in creating projects that illuminate the African American experience through memorabilia, oral history and research...[with] over 30,000 artifacts, including photographs, rare books, folk art, documents, music, dolls, furniture, and quilts.” Through Nanny Jack, Merrill (above) has developed educational programs for schools and television. For example, “In 2006, Merrill ... developed the ‘Know History, Know Self’ program, which used artifacts to teach African American students about their family, community and school history.” He also created a category of Black Memorabilia for the Antiques Road Show, for which he was an appraiser for five years. (Quotes taken from the website <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/appraisers/philip-merrill/>)

At the end of Merrill’s fascinating presentation, Densmore rose to make the point that, as Merrill and Nanny Jack prove, history is unfinished. It is to be found not only in books and libraries but in the search for small details and artifacts that can then be developed into greater understanding of a time, a place, a people, and a set of ideas. (See Densmore’s reprinted article on p. 5)

Back across the street in Zercher’s Hotel, Joe Becton was discussing the formation of the USCT regiment he has helped re-create and its accomplishments during the Civil War. He spoke also of the flags used by the regiments. A copy of the 3rd USCT regimental flag waved over a collection of memorabilia that had been used by Union troops.

Inside the Hotel, in the CHS’s museum, an elegantly



dressed woman, Lydia Hamilton Smith (actually, historian Darlene Colon, President of the Christiana Historical Society) discussed details of the Resistance being commemorated. The original Lydia Hamilton Smith was both the housekeeper and the business partner of Thaddeus Stevens, a Republican leader of the House of Representatives made even more famous by his portrayal by Tommy Lee Jones in Spielberg’s masterpiece *Lincoln*. After Stevens had been elected to Congress following a very successful

law career, Smith increasingly handled Stevens’s business affairs, and became quite an entrepreneur herself. She owned multiple properties and several boarding houses in Lancaster and Washington, a remarkable achievement for any woman of that time, no less an African-American woman. She was also highly philanthropic during the Civil War, raising money and spending much of her own on care for wounded soldiers of both sides.

Colon herself has pursued history and genealogy since she was quite young, and includes among her ancestors Ezekiel Thompson, one of the 38 persons charged with treason because of the Christiana Resistance. However, because of the able defense, led by Thaddeus Stevens, Thompson and the others were exonerated. Thompson’s two sons fought in USCT regiments during the Civil War, and Colon’s entire heritage has been linked to the search for justice and freedom.

According to Colon, “Lydia Hamilton Smith” has given many contemporary talks and made school visits in this area. She enjoys talking about, among other things, the ways in which women can overcome the barriers that have been set up over the years to hinder them.

Kennett Underground Railroad Center

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Events at Christiana: Prelude, Confrontation, and Trial



For much of the perspectives and details included here, the writer is indebted to *Treason at Christiana: September 11, 1851*, by L. D. “Bud” Rettow, late of the Christiana Historical Society, written 2006. This brief work is highly recommended and available from CHS, as is the brief account by Phebe Earle Gibbons.

Background. Resistance in Lancaster County—the resistance of former slaves, free Blacks, and abolition-minded whites against those trying to capture fugitive slaves—did not begin on Sept. 11, 1851. Agents of the Underground Railroad, both Black and white, had been assisting runaways for decades.

Those pursuing fugitives often made no distinction between former slaves and freeborn Blacks. A group of white thugs known as the Gap Gang, named for the nearby town of Gap and led by Amos Clemson, spread terror throughout the region on free and fugitive alike, never using the law to support them but breaking down doors at night and capturing anyone whom they pleased. Those taken ended up back with their former masters, on the auction block in Baltimore, or simply dead.

Matters became worse with the Compromise of 1850, which included the Fugitive Slave Law of September, 1850. It gave slave masters greater latitude in recovering their escaped “property.” Among other features, it required local law enforcement agents to assist slave catchers and owners and also empowered U.S. marshals accompanying owners to deputize local persons. “Should a person refuse to obey the orders of a marshal with the necessary government-issued papers and aid in the capture of a runaway slave, that person was...subject to a fine of \$1000,” (Rettow, p. 7).

This intensification of slave-recovery efforts was

countered in Lancaster county by a coalition of free and formerly unfree Blacks under the leadership of William Parker. Himself a fugitive, Parker was a man of great physical and mental strength and remarkable courage and determination. He lived in a tenant dwelling on the farm of Quaker Levi Pownall, outside the little town of Christiana. In defiance of local white hostility to Blacks, and in particular slave catchers like the Gap Gang, he organized a self-help group of Black agricultural workers whom he imbued with his fierce determination to fight back. On several occasions in the late 1840s and early 1850s, Parker and his friends not only helped fugitives coming from nearby Maryland but also pursued, ambushed, and waylaid slave-catchers, often rescuing those captured and returning them to freedom. Gibbons’s account of the event cites Quaker James Jackson’s reference to having seen the group “‘training’ on a public road,” as if they were a military unit.

Himself a fugitive, William Parker was a man of great physical and mental strength and remarkable courage and determination.

Edward Gorsuch. In our current day it is difficult to consider 19th C. slave-owners as worthy of respect, considering that they were perfectly content to live on the toil of others, their “property,” giving almost nothing in return. That said, in any subset of persons there will gradations of quality. If so, Edward Gorsuch might be considered among the best of a bad lot. He inherited a number of slaves and a farm in nearby Maryland from his uncle, along with a will stating that his slaves were to be freed after 28 years of service to either him or his nephew. Some had already been freed, and many believed he would honor the rest of that will, and his “kindness to his slaves was well known.” (Rettow, p. 26).

Nonetheless, four of those slaves were apparently unwilling to wait for manumission and escaped from his Retreat Farm in November, 1849. Gorsuch received word a year later that the four were on a farm outside Christiana. Gorsuch went through all the legal channels, received proper papers from federal authorities in Philadelphia, acquired the services of a U.S. marshal, Henry Kline, and along with his son and nephew went to Christiana to recapture them.

Resistance Itself. Once there, in front of Parker’s house, where they were apparently staying, he called out that he would “forgive their transgressions and treat them kindly,” but he intended to regain his “property.” Parker, meanwhile, had received advance warning that Gorsuch, his son, and other whites were coming. He denied any fugitives were in his house.

From that house Parker's wife sounded a "fish horn," a signal for the resistance group to assemble, and rapidly they did so with scythes, knives, corn cutters, and some guns. Accounts of the numbers of those assembled varies from many dozen to 150, but it was clearly a formidable group. Several white farmers, sympathetic with the cause of the fugitives, appeared on the scene, including Castner Hanway, Joseph Scarlett, and Elijah Lewis. Marshal Kline insisted that they join the effort to recapture the fugitives, but they refused. At some point fighting broke out, shots were fired, Marshal Kline fled to nearby woods, Edward Gorsuch's son Dickinson was badly wounded, and Edward himself was killed: a very brief and small skirmish, but with powerful and national repercussions.

(The print below is from William Still's *The Underground Railroad*, 1872, and was not intended to be a precise depiction of what happened.)

Trial. The legal details are too complex for this



short essay, but here are some important points.

- Large numbers of law enforcement officers and even U.S. Marines descended on little Christiana and arrested dozens of supposed participants.

- 38 persons, including the three above-mentioned whites, were indicted not with murder but rather with *treason*, essentially, making war on the U.S. government or supporting its enemies--for which the punishment was hanging. The prisoners were brought to Moyamensing Prison in Philadelphia for trial.

- The trial received considerable national attention, and the prosecution began by trying Caster Hanway,

Dickinson Gorsuch and his family were deeply grateful to the Pownalls and remained close friends even after the Civil War.

on the assumption that he was the most obviously guilty. Many assumed that such a resistance had to have been led by a white man. (Obviously the prosecutors knew little of the determination and courage of William Parker.) The defense was led by Thaddeus Stevens, the Representative to Congress from that part of Pennsylvania. Stevens and the other defense lawyers proved beyond doubt that U.S. Marshal Kline was a liar as well as a coward, and having undermined the prosecution's main witness, the case against Hanway fell apart.

- The prosecution, having failed in what they thought was the easiest part of their job, abandoned prosecution of the others, all of whom went free.

Aftermath. Parker, along with three other African-American participants and with the help of prominent Chester County UGRR agents, fled to Canada, where he remained until after the Civil War. Dickinson Gorsuch was taken to the home of Quaker abolitionist Levi Pownall, where he was over many weeks nursed back to health by the Pownall family. Though they were strenuously against the Fugitive Slave Act and slavery, they treated Gorsuch as a human being in need of care and kindness. Dickinson Gorsuch and his family were deeply grateful to the Pownalls and remained close friends even after the Civil War.

If only the example of the Pownalls and the Gorsuch family were the legacy of the Christiana Resistance, but instead the ill will engendered only intensified sectional animosity and hastened

the coming of the Civil War.

The word "resistance" ... was not always used to describe this event. It was called "The Christiana Riot" or "The Christiana Tragedy" or other terms. In recent decades, however, historians have felt that *resistance* is the word that best describes this assertion by people whose freedom had only recently and tentatively been achieved, and who were **not** about to lose it. In 2017 we hear that word being used often, in a *somewhat* different context--but not altogether different.



On occasion members of KURC and friends re-enact events involving the Underground Railroad in Chester County. Here are glimpses of some of us channeling our inner 19th C. Quaker UGRR agent. Seen here are (L-R) John O’Neal, Terry Maguire, Richard Bernard, (descended from a number of real UGRR agents), Michele Sullivan, and former colleague Chris Densmore, whose article appears below.

How Do You Know That? Telling the Underground Railroad Story in Chester County

Chris Densmore, Curator, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College (originally printed in 2014)

How do you learn all this history? Many people didn’t particularly like history in school. Most people don’t read the “academic” books and scholarly articles produced by history professors. An “academic” book by an “academic press” may be read by a very limited number of specialists.

But people have a voracious appetite for learning about history. Their sources? Some historical sites like the Liberty Bell Pavilion and Independence Hall in Philadelphia and Gettysburg draw millions of visitors each year. People plan vacations around visiting these sites, and they learn about history from park rangers, historical re-enactors, visitor centers, and roadside markers. Far larger numbers absorb history through movies, television programs, and novels. For children, there is the “American Girl” series. For adults, the choice of reading material on slavery and the Underground Railroad range from Tracy Chevalier’s *The Last Runaway* to the racks of historical novels, westerns, spy novels and romance novels available at the local supermarket. Next time you pass by the display of current romance novel titles, note how many of them have historical themes. Novels they are, but often authors are very interested total accuracy of the background even if the story line might seem a little heated.

A lot of people seem to think that every historical topic has been covered. Interested in Abraham Lincoln? Just go to the Bayard Taylor Library and read about Lincoln and borrow movies and recorded books

about Lincoln. No problem. But the Underground Railroad in Chester County is another matter. Yes, there are books by Robert Smedley, William Kashatus and Frances Taylor, but they only tell parts of the story. Where is the rest? Waiting to be discovered in old newspapers, diaries, and official records by people like the late Mary Dugan and the Kennett Underground Railroad Center. Historical fiction is all very well, but right here in Chester County we have thrilling accounts of people escaping from slavery and people like the Barnards, Darlington, Fussells and others, at great risk, standing up to slave catchers and kidnappers.

And how do we tell these stories? Many of these stories that are just now being rediscovered deserve to be in the history books, but they will reach the most people as stories told through the Underground Railroad Tours of the Kennett Underground Railroad, as part of local festivals, and as talks for the Hadley Foundation. And, after we’ve told of some interesting incident, we can say that this story is so much better than all those novels because our stories are real, about real people, and these people were our neighbors, and then we can point to the Longwood Progressive Friends Meetinghouse, to the Cox House, to the Fussell House and numerous other sites. And, in the sense of local pride, that our area is unique in having so many sites that can be directly and accurately connected to the “Trackless Trail” to freedom.