

Historian Nancy Webster Explains the Geography of the Underground Railroad in SE Pennsylvania

“The Space Between”: The Second in KURC-Hadley Speaker Series

Most histories and stories of the Underground Railroad, according to historian Nancy Webster, focus on the places and the people that offered freedom-seekers safety and hospitality, as well as the conductors who led them to those havens.

In a compelling talk of just over an hour, delivered on January 12 at the New Garden UAME church in Kennett Square, Webster detailed the ways in which those freedom-seekers made use of “the space between,” and why the landscape of SE Pennsylvania lent itself to successful escape and evasion of recapture. At the same time, she enhanced the image of the freedom-seekers as persons who made intelligent and informed decisions in securing their salvation.

KURC Board member Chris Densmore, the recently retired Curator of the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore, introduced Webster with deference and an amusing visual metaphor. Holding up a palm-sized Shaker pantry box, he compared its capacity to his own knowledge of the UGRR, gained over decades of scholarly pursuit. “But so many times when people came... and asked me questions

about local history, abolition, UGRR, American Revolution,...the go-to person always was and has been Nancy Webster.” He then lifted a considerably more capacious box of the same style, and said, “You can see the difference.” This is one reason that she is the Clerk of the Curatorial Committee of the Friends Historical Association.

Webster is descended from UGRR agents on both sides of her family, her mother’s people coming from upstate New York and her father’s family here in Chester County. She states that the UGRR was “multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-ethnic,” and that there is much we will never know because most people, understandably, did not commit their law-breaking efforts onto paper. However, in her ability to “read land fast,” coming from her profession as a regional planner, Webster believes we can learn much about the escape efforts from what does not change: landscape.

She argues that most successful flights to freedom came from the slave lands near free lands: from Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, heading for Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York. Waterways were a great aid to freedom-seekers, either somehow boarding ships that traveled north or following the streams of this piedmont area that run mostly north-south. For those new to and unfamiliar with an area, traveling upstream is fairly easy.

But streams must sometimes be forded, yes? Webster makes the point that 85% of American industry was located in this piedmont area in the early 19th C, and much of it was run by waterpower. “Where they had dams to create the mills, they had natural fording places.” She also points to the fact that canals, newly built and often running north were easy to follow; and in the case of the Griscom family, Quaker abolitionists who built and operated the Schuylkill Canal for decades, freedom-seekers may well have had a great ally.

Webster credits William Penn with being the area’s first regional planner, and his dictates on land use, dating back to the late 17th/early 18th century, also helped create a landscape that was easier for freedom-seekers to elude capture. Land was sold so that all farmers would have access to creek water, with flood plain for grazing, higher land for farming, and ridges where roads would be placed, away from the chance of flooding. Given the terrain of small hills and Penn’s dictum of leaving every fifth acre

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of property as woodland (for firewood, lumber, fencing), generally around the roads, those in flight had natural cover and north-south roads to walk along, or at least to keep in sight if hiding was necessary. Clear direction and cover for flight: a useful combination.

Another advantage to this area, Webster points out, was the fact that it had and still has all sorts of flora that provides natural forage: nut trees, berries, edible greens. In addition, early settlers had developed the custom of planting apple trees along the roads they built as mile-markers. These were maintained, presumably, not for the sake of those fleeing slavery, but were just as handy for them as for others. Freedom seekers were also accustomed to supplementing their meager slave rations with food from the woods.

The woods often had what Webster says were known as “witness trees,” memorably old and large trees that served as markers or meeting places for the fugitives. They were told of certain trees that marked the entrance of a farm family likely to provide refuge.

Webster made a point that many of us acquainted with the UGRR did not know: that most attempts at escape were during the winter. In some ways that is counter-intuitive for long-term flight, but she pointed out a number of advantages. First, there are much longer times of darkness than in other seasons. Also, “there were holidays in the South where [slaves] were frequently given a pass to go to another plantation if [they] had family there.” Freedom-seekers might have a two-three day head start before the “owners” realized they were not intending to come back. Another advantage was that the forests through which fugitives were fleeing lacked leaves and could be seen through. Why is that an advantage? Those fleeing were less likely to get lost and disoriented, as some fugitives did.

Other Sources of Help for the Freedom-Seekers

Though Webster spoke at length about the landscape and

how it lent itself to escape, she also delved into other factors that made successful flight possible. In urban areas, many of the watermen--fishermen, oystermen, deck hands, stevedores--were black and were often apparently ready to help escapees, providing transportation as well as temporary shelter. In city streets and marketplaces, vendors for all sorts of goods--fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, cooked food and soup, firewood, even laundry!-- were African Americans, and giving and receiving help from those workers was a source of safety and slight income for fugitives. John Vickers and Edwin Brosius, successful potters, transported their good in wagons stuffed with straw for cushioning--and often with freedom seekers. Vickers also employed African Americans to cut firewood and create charcoal for his kilns. Some were there only temporarily. Others, both black and white, were accustomed to moving around at all times of the day and night--doctors, ministers, surveyors, midwives--and often those persons transported fugitives and would not be stopped by suspicious law enforcement agents.

Though many experts on the UGRR are skeptical about the legends of secret rooms and tunnels, Webster is convinced there were some, and gave very convincing evidence regarding dwellings around Cheyney University, Avondale, Kennett Square, and elsewhere. This matter is apparently a source of amiable friction with her friend Chris Densmore.

Webster’s presentation hit on many points not covered here. This publication has limited space. As Densmore stated in his introduction, Webster possesses a vast quantity of facts and great depth of understanding regarding the Underground Railroad and related matters. She claimed that, perhaps by the time she is 90, she will *really* know something. Those of us who listened to her on January 12 must respectfully disagree. Nancy Webster knows a lot, right now--and shared it entertainingly.

Scheduled KURC Heritage Bus Tours for 2019

These two-hour bus tours take place (generally) on the third Sunday of each month. They begin at the Brandywine Valley Tourism office on 300 Greenwood Road, outside Longwood Gardens.

April 28

May 19

June 16

July 21

August 18

September 15

October 23

For more tour information and to register using Eventbrite, please visit the Events Section of our Facebook page or website. Registration can also be made via email or voicemail.

Private tours may also be arranged.

Contact us by phone (484)-544-5070, or email info@kennettundergroundrr.org.

“Why the Underground Railroad Matters Today”:

Professor thames-taylor Draws Parallels between 20th C. Civil Rights Movement and UGRR



West Chester University Associate Professor tonya thames-taylor (who prefers lower case) likes to begin presentations remembering some of her most pleasant and formative experiences as a youngster: front-porch conversations at her grandmother’s home.

thames-taylor grew up in Gulfport, Mississippi and learned a great deal from her grandmother, Elmyrtis McCune Thames. One of the main themes of that teaching was about independence, and it was that theme that informed much of thames-taylor’s presentation at Kennett Friends Meeting on Saturday, February 9.

According to thames-taylor, African Americans in the UGRR demonstrated a much greater degree of self-determination and agency than has generally been ascribed to them. Too often the image projected of freedom-seekers has been that of poor, hapless victims aided by benevolent whites, without whom there would have been little if any success. She feels the same is true of the struggles against segregation and Jim Crow in the late 19th-20th C.

thames-taylor points to the great irony of Thomas Jefferson, primary author of the Declaration of Independence, being at the time of the drafting and for the rest of his life, *dependent* on the labor of his slaves. That said, the words Jefferson wrote have been seen by African Americans as applying to them.

She asserts that the first American abolitionists were the first freedom-seekers themselves, those first African

American who departed from their supposed “owners.” To head toward possible freedom despite all the dangers and difficulties was to assert that you rejected the very concept of slavery.

An instance of standing up for themselves occurred when, at the first Colored Convention of 1830 in Philadelphia, the great religious leader Bishop Richard Allen, abolitionist and agent of the UGRR, cited the Declaration of Independence as applying to African Americans and urged African Americans around the country to organize and assert their independence.

Another fine example is the ingenuity, determination, and persistence of Harriet Tubman. She transformed herself, helped many dozens to freedom, and helped shape the conscience of the North-- and indeed, helped shape the American experience.

thames-taylor asked her husband, Anthony Taylor, to read a passage from the work of another Taylor: Frances Cloud Taylor, recently deceased historian and a former member of Kennett Friends Meeting. She was also a co-founder of KURC. The passage was from *The Trackless Trail Leads On*, describing a large caravan of 35 freedom-seekers passing through Chester County on their way to Ercildoun and eventually to Canada. R.C. Smedley in his *History of the UGRR in Chester County...*, the source of F.C. Taylor’s version, wrote, “*The fugitives were armed with pistols, axes, knives, corn cutters, and old scythes, evidently intending that if forced by pursuers to turn their faces to the South, it would be a bloody combat for liberty.*” The group may have been guided by Quaker Mahlon Brosius’s two sons, but it was the party itself that was asserting and guaranteeing their freedom.

Our speaker might also have used an example that many listeners heard from Nancy Webster a month earlier, about a group of freedom-seekers traveling up what is now Rt 13 in 1856 in Delaware. They had a pitched battle in which two thousand rounds were fired, until their successful escape was achieved. Both were great examples of freedom-seekers demonstrating agency and self-reliance.

In a less violent manner, Frederick Douglass, perhaps the most famous freedom-seeker of all, demonstrated his independence not just in flight but in his break with his one-time mentor William Lloyd Garrison. According to thames-taylor, Douglass grew tired of what he regarded as condescension and paternalism on the part of the Boston abolitionist--and indeed, of many other whites who pitied blacks but also disapproved of their culture. She quoted

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this famous passage from one of Douglass's essays:

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

thames-taylor equated these examples of independent black struggle for freedom in the 19th C to the Civil Rights era and perhaps most of all Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous letter from Birmingham Prison from April 1963. In the middle of that extraordinary document, King echoed the ideas of Douglass from many decades earlier.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

One of thames-taylor's most powerful assertions is that, despite the frequent quotation of the Declaration of Independence by advocates of African American inalienable rights, the real source of the belief in equality and independence is not even that great document. Rather, that belief is intrinsic within each person, and is reinforced by a religion that tells each person, "You are God's children." In furthering his cause, King was empowered by his knowledge of American law but even more motivated by his profound religious faith, one shared by Allen, Tubman, Douglass, and many others.

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★ Help Wanted! ★

The Kennett Underground Railroad Center has

- A. interesting activities that demand lots of hours each year, and
- B. dedicated Board members and volunteers to take on those tasks; *however,*

***we are at a point where
A is greater than B***

We need persons who, with guidance and training, can

- help give UGRR heritage tours that occur once a month from April through October;
- make 40-60 minute presentation to school groups, retirement communities, historical societies, social organizations, and so on;

and, in general, fulfill the mission of the Kennett Underground Railroad Center

to preserve the heritage and engage the public about the historic abolitionists and freedom-seekers of this area and beyond.

If interested, use contact information below, or email tmaguire@wilmingtonfriends.org.

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Dr. Tera Hunter Discusses 19th C. African American Marriage at Delaware Historical Society

by Darleen Amobi

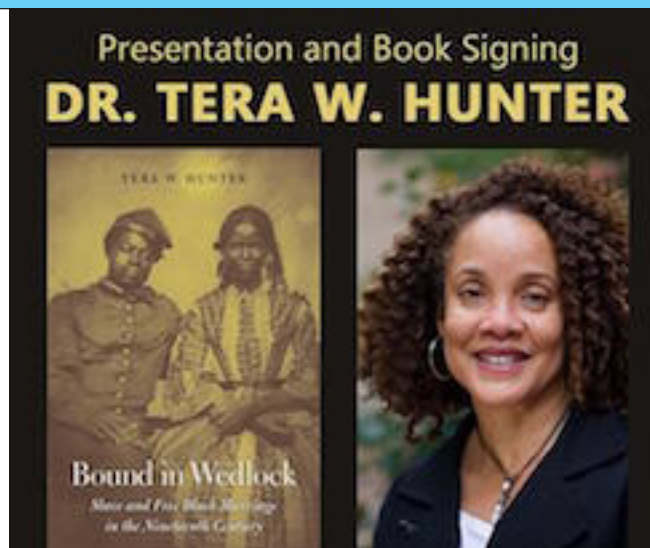
This article is in honor of Black History Month

February is Valentine's Day, and every year there is a nationwide celebration based on how much we love our significant others. On the evening of February 4, at the Delaware History Museum, I listened to an excellent and informative lecture on the subject of African American marriage in and out of slavery. The lecturer, Dr. Tera W. Hunter, Edwards Professor of American History at Princeton University, discussed her book *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Harvard University Press, 2017). Copies of her work were available for sale and signing. For this book Dr. Hunter won the 2018 Mary Nickless Prize (of the Organization of American Historians); the Stone Book Award (of the Museum of African American History), and numerous other honors. She has written several other prize-winning books on the subject of women, labor and marriage. *Bound in Wedlock* does **not** illustrate a Valentine's Day theme.

Dr. Hunter researched the subject of African Americans and marriage with several narrative resources--the WPA narratives, archival Freedmen's Bureau Records, and military records. She researched Civil War record archives that spanned over 100 years. Dr. Hunter said that, unlike many other historical topics, there was no shortage of interesting resources to support her ideas.

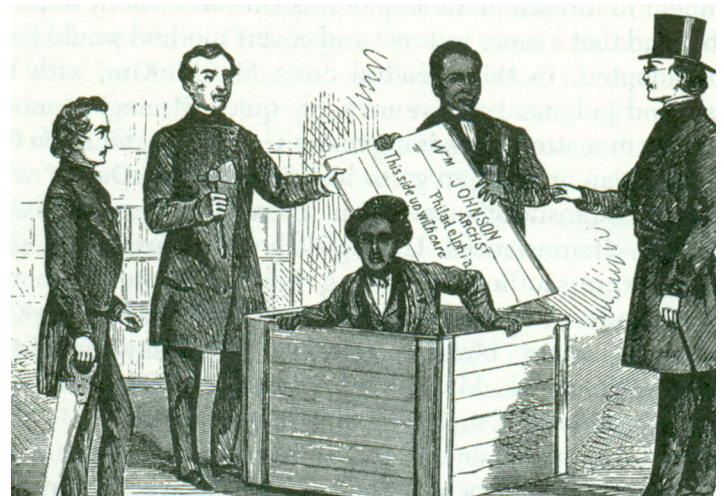
What exactly was marriage among American slaves? Unfortunately, female slaves were often violated by the slave owners to increase the numbers of chattel slaves and property on the owner's plantation. Slaves were separated and sold to the highest bidder and usually sent farther South, to states such as Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama.

Dr. Hunter attests that slave marriages did not fit the standard norm of "till death do us part." At least the benefits of marriage among whites were different for enslaved persons. Usually "owners" performed the marriage ceremony. Enslaved people got married by "jumped the broom." Marriage was not legally binding. Slave marriages were usually called "marriage in the heart." The committed relationships among the blacks during slavery days was different than those of whites. The Christian Bible defines



marriage as between a husband and wife. During the time of slavery there could be three people involved at one time. The slave owner was the third person in the marriage, and there was nothing the husband could do about it. He could not protect his family, especially his wife, as white husbands could--at least until after the Civil War when slaves became free and wives became independent and free.

Henry "Box" Brown of Richmond, Virginia, provides a good example of an aggrieved but helpless enslaved husband. He cried when his wife and children were sold to plantation owners and sent down South, and he was determined not to see this happen again. Soon afterward, with the help of a friend who was a black railway worker, he had himself boxed up and shipped to Philadelphia with only several biscuits and a bladder of water. He arrived at the office of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery some-



thing over a day later, and was released in a famous event illustrated in William Still's *The Underground Railroad*, the first book on the UGRR (1872).

After the Civil War African Americans leaped at the chance to marry legally. For instance, on February 29, 1896, in Hockessin, Delaware, eight couples were married at the same time and day in the Odd Fellows' Hall, according to the *Middletown Transcript* newspaper. Reverend Jason performed the ceremony.

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Image: Loewentheil Collection of African-American Photographs, Cornell University Library

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NEXT LECTURE

HARRIET TUBMAN

by Kate Clifford Larson

Saturday March 23, 2019, 2 pm

Harriet Tubman is one of the giants of American history—a fearless visionary who led scores of other enslaved people to freedom via the Underground Railroad and who battled courageously behind enemy lines during the Civil War. Born into slavery on Maryland's Eastern Shore, as a young woman Tubman embarked on a perilous journey of self-liberation, and then returned to liberate family and friends. Tubman's life and work remain an inspiration to all who value freedom. Learn the truth behind the myth and hear about Kate Clifford Larson's remarkable research to unearth Tubman's real life story.

Kennett Friends Meeting • 125 W. Sickie St., Kennett Square, PA
Free parking on the street and in E. Linden St. garage

REMAINING LECTURES

APRIL 6, 2019

Emma Lapsansky-Wornor

The Other Side: Feminism, Publishing, and Law
in the 19th-Century Abolitionist Struggle
London Grove Friends Meeting

MAY 4, 2019

Denise Burgher

Frederick Douglass, Heroic Slave and Madison
Washington: The Embodied Divine
Kendal at Longwood

MAY 18, 2019

Robin Krawitz

19th-Century Delaware Law for African Americans
New Garden UAME Church

JUNE 8, 2019

Dr. Bradley Skelcher

African American Education in the 19th Century
Kennett Friends Meeting

Schedule subject to change
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