

“Finding the North Star Today”: Dr. C. James Trotman Launches Dr. Clifford E. DeBaptiste Frederick Douglass Institute Lecture at WCU



Professor Emeritus Jim Trotman (center) after October 13 talks with several colleagues from West Chester.

The inaugural talk by James Trotman on Frederick Douglass, scheduled to be delivered around the statue of the great man on the DeBaptiste Plaza on the afternoon of October 13, was moved indoors due to the threat of inclement weather. The beautiful, wood-paneled Philips Autograph Room on the Second Floor of Memorial Library was filled well beyond capacity. All were there to celebrate not only Douglass but also the men and women of the university and town of West Chester who have kept alive the intellectual and spiritual heritage of Douglass and his connection to West Chester University.

C. James Trotman, professor emeritus of West Chester University, was the perfect scholar for this occasion. The Founding Director of the Frederick Douglass Institute at West Chester, he helped establish the system of FD Institutes that spread to all fourteen campuses of Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education. Among his many publications is a biography of Douglass. He has been honored in ways too numerous to mention but include a Fulbright fellowship to teach in Ghana and Visiting Fellowship at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Trotman was introduced by numerous distinguished members of the West Chester community. His talk dealt with many topics, but focused on two major strains: 1.) the influence of Douglass on American history and culture; and 2.) his connection to West Chester University itself.

As for the *influence*, Trotman enumerated five broad contributions. First, as a *writer*, including three autobiographies, Douglass was in essence the originator of the

To Give Some Context...

In this the 200th anniversary of the birth of Frederick Douglass, this towering figure of 19th C. America is getting a lot of media attention.

In mid-October Yale Professor David Blight published a massive new biography, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, an 888 pp. work that met with exceptional reviews. And on this election day, Nov. 6, the central *New York Times* Op-Ed page was an analysis by Blight of Douglass's exhortation to achieve freedom. "At this moment in our history, we too are tested by the question Douglass posed about bad men and government. And the only weapons most of us have are those Douglass named: our voice, our pen, and our vote." Blight suggests strongly that many currently in power are attempting to neutralize all three "weapons" for African Americans and other minorities.

Adam Gopnik, one of the *New Yorker* magazine's finest writers, possessing an incredible range of intellectual curiosity and perception, reviewed Blight's book in mid-October. With characteristic energy he also reread all of Douglass's writing and many earlier biographies. He opened his essay stating that Douglass "has been called the greatest American of the nineteenth century." After surveying the man's achievements and ways in which he evolved over his long life, Gopnik concludes, "*In his legacy as prophetic radical and political pragmatist, in the almost unimaginable bravery of his early journey and the resilience of his later career, in his achievements as a writer, activist, crusader, intellectual, father, and man, the claim that he was **the greatest figure that America has ever produced seems hard to challenge.***" [boldface by this writer]

Shortly before Blight's publication and Gopnik's review Jim Trotman gave the talk discussed on the left.

civil rights movement in America. Elizabeth Cady Stanton called him "majestic in his wrath," moving millions of readers for a century and a half to understand the horrors and abysmal injustice of slavery. In his writings, Trotman stated, Douglass created a "template for democracy."

Next, Douglass was a highly original *thinker*, helping readers and audiences to understand what it means to have freedom--and what it means to be deprived of it. As a *journalist*, Douglass reached vast numbers through his publication *North Star*, later known as *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, and was a promoter of the concept of Black pride; in fact, he was one of those most responsible for the formation of the much celebrated Massachusetts 54th Regiment

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“North Star,” continued from p. 1

of the USCT, made even more famous by the movie *Glory* (1988).

Douglass was also a *feminist*. He was the only African American to attend the famous Seneca Falls Conference of 1848; and he was one who strongly supported the idea of women’s right to vote as part of its concluding “Dec-



laration of Sentiments,” a document that marked “the beginning of the women’s rights movement,” according to Stanton. With characteristic conciseness, Douglass wrote, “Right is of no sex; truth is of no color.”

Finally, Douglass was a *public ser-*

vant in numerous positions after the Civil War, including ambassador to Haiti. After having been, for most of his life, one who challenged the prevailing order, Douglass evolved into a pragmatist who tried to effect change within the system. He was a constant presence in America until his death and was, as Trotman said, the most photographed American of the 19th C., more so even than Abraham Lincoln. Then again, was there ever a more leonine, majestic figure in American history?

Trotman also emphasized the ties between West Chester and Douglass. He gave orations in Chester County in every decade from the 1840s to the 1890s. His final public address occurred on the campus what was to become WCU on February 1, 1895; George Morris Philips, in whose Memorial Hall Trotman delivered this lecture, convinced Douglass to come one more time to give his 1895 speech. From its association with the great man, WCU developed the concept of the Frederick Douglass Institutes that have spread throughout the state; and while James Trotman may have been the most influential figure of this effort, he told his audience that many West Chester University professors over the decades have been shaped and uplifted by the idea of Douglass and his presence at WCU. Trotman closed with a passage from Robert Hayden’s sonnet, “Frederick Douglass,” quoted in full to the right. *****

Dr. DeBaptiste Honored



Dr. Clifford E. DeBaptiste has been a pillar of West Chester society for close to half a century. The founder and owner of DeBaptiste Funeral Homes, mayor of West Chester for two terms, recipient of numerous awards, including the West Chester Chamber of Commerce Outstanding Citizen of the Year. He has also served many boards of professional, religious, educational, and business organizations.

Five years ago he commissioned the Clifford E. & Inez DeBaptiste Plaza outside Philips Memorial Hall, the centerpiece of which is sculptor Richard Blake’s statue of Douglass (see left); and in 2018 he funded the Frederick Douglass Institute Lectures, the first of which is explained here. Dr. DeBaptiste sat quietly and proudly in the first row as Jim Trotman and many other friends sang his praises.

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty,
 this beautiful
 and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
 usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
 when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
 reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
 than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
 this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
 beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
 where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
 this man, superb in love and logic, this man
 shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues’ rhetoric,
 not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze
 alone,
 but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
 fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

Robert Hayden--1913-1980

Chester County Author Bruce Mowday Gives Initial Talk of the Hadley-KURC Speaker Series on Abolitionist J. Howard Wert

Bruce Mowday spoke to a crowded auditorium at Kendall at Longwood on November 3, 2018. The Kennett Underground Railroad Center, from electronic registration, had estimated that we might have an audience of over fifty; instead over a hundred people showed up to listen to author Mowday discuss the man central to his latest book, *J. Howard Wert*.

A life-long resident of Chester County, Mowday (seen to the right) worked for 27 years as a reporter and editor for the West Chester *Daily Local News*. Since he has retired, he has produced over 20 books, ranging from an account of the Battle of the Brandywine, September 11, 1777 to a biography of 1950s Phillies star Richie Ashburn. His most recent book, *J. Howard Wert's Gettysburg: A Collection of Relics from the Civil War Battle*, is the biography of an interesting man much involved in the great historical events of SE Pennsylvania. The book also celebrates Wert's passion for collecting artifacts that capture the spirit of the times, particularly of the great Battle of Gettysburg in 1863.

For the purpose of the KURC-Hadley lecture series, *Enslaved, Freedom-Seeking and Free: 19th C. African American Life in the Mid-Atlantic Region*, Mowday focused first on Wert and his family's involvement in abolition causes and active support of the Underground Railroad. Adams County and Gettysburg were very comparable to Chester County and Kennett Square, both close to the Maryland border, both "hot-beds of abolition." Wert's parents were among the founders of the Adams County abolition society of



1836. There were conflicts between pro-slavery and anti-slavery citizens in Adams County. Wert's mother Catherine was a shareholder of a local bank and used that influence to exert pressure regarding loans made to pro-slavery farmers. At times pro-slavery mobs would break up meetings of their abolition society.

Two friends of the Wert family figured powerfully in the struggle against slavery during the Civil War. Thaddeus Stevens, the Republican leader within the U. S. House of Representatives who led the effort to secure passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery, owned the nearby Caledonian Iron Works. Edward McPherson, another family friend, was the Clerk of the House of Representatives, and he recorded the votes by which the vote for that amendment was passed.

Later in his life Wert wrote about a terrifying night in 1848, when he was still a young boy, in which his family was aiding freedom-seekers. Slave-catchers were in strong pursuit, as close as 200 yards away, when he helped his father guide the fugitives to a friends' house. The local UGRR agents used a nearby stone mill owned by the McAllister family, friends

"Mowday," continued on p. 4



Craig Caba, Owner and Manager of the J. Howard Wert Collection of Historical Artifacts

“Mowday,” continued from p. 3.

of the Werts, where as many as ten fugitives could be hidden in the cogpit of the mill. The Wert family and others also used nearby caves as a place to shelter freedom-seekers on their way to Canada.

J. H. Wert attended Gettysburg College, graduating in 1861 to become a teacher; but while in college he was a member of a fraternity that helped freedom-seekers on their way north. Two summers later, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, under Robert E. Lee, invaded Pennsylvania. Wert, a member of a local militia, served as a guide to elements of the Union army and saw action at some of the most critical moments and places of the three-day battle, including Little Round Top and Pickett’s Charge at Cemetery Ridge in July 1863.

Beginning at that time, Wert became an avid and ambitious collector of artifacts and memorabilia relating to the times and the Battle of Gettysburg. The collection, now owned and managed by G. Craig Caba, is the largest of its kind in the United States. It includes, among its many treasure, the podium from which Abraham Lincoln delivered his “Gettysburg Address.” Caba joined Mowday for the presentation on November 3rd, bringing with him a number of the more portable items, and he took the last ten minutes of the presentation, inviting audience members to come up afterward and examine many of the items.

Mowday brought a number of his books for purchase, including the handsome and elegantly illustrated Wert book, published by Schiffer Press of Atglen, Chester County.

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.

Donate to KURC

Many of you receiving this publication have donated in past years to the Kennett Underground Railroad Center, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. We hope you and our other readers will consider making a donation this year, mailing them to the address below.

Contact information:

- info@kennettundergroundrr.org
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The next speaker of the KURC-Hadley Series will be **Robin Krawitz**, professor at Delaware State University and President of the Delaware Underground Railroad Coalition (see below). Her topic will be “19th-C Delaware Law for African Americans.” The lecture will be held on **Dec. 8** at 2 pm at **London Grove Friends Meeting**, 500 W. Street Rd., Kennett Square, PA. RSVP requested. For series details and to register, visit us on Facebook or call (484) 544-5070. **Summary of the Krawitz Presentation:**



After conviction in a Delaware court for “Assisting Fugitives to Escape from their Masters,” Samuel D. Burris wrote a letter later published in *The Liberator*. In it he spoke about

the fate he feared awaited him. Samuel D. Burris, an African American UGRR conductor, wrote that he feared sale out of state and into slavery. Conviction under the law in Delaware seemed equitable for both races, but it was not. In pre-Civil War Delaware, a person convicted for a crime could be sold at auction for a period of years to cover court costs if they could not be paid otherwise. But for free people of color, the stakes were much higher. Sale risked enslavement. In 1837, a law was passed in Delaware making it a crime to assist “fugitives from labor.” This talk will focus on the fates of the individuals prosecuted and convicted under this law from 1837 to 1865.

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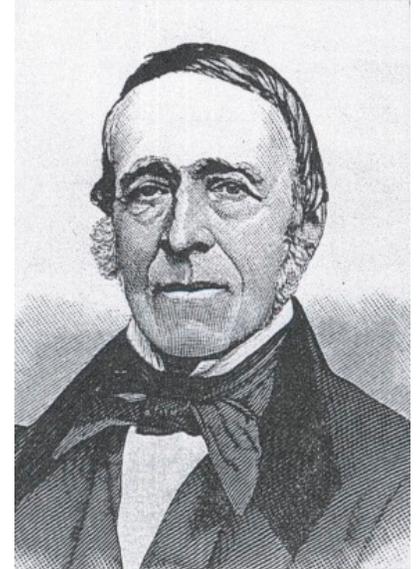
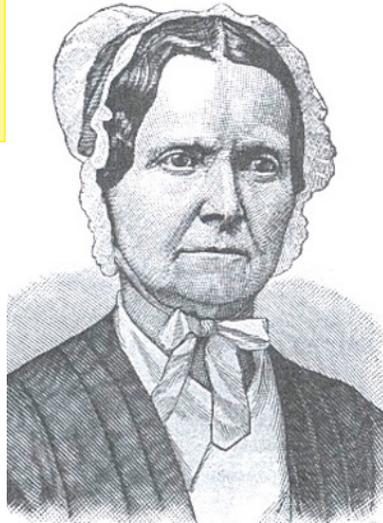
Long Overdue but Finally Achieved: an Historical Marker for Isaac and Dinah Mendenhall

Carol Luzak, Robyn Young, and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Preside over Dedication on Kennett Pike on Nov. 10, 2018

Two of the most faithful and committed supporters of the Underground Railroad in Chester County were the husband and wife team of Dinah and Isaac Mendenhall. Often the first station in Chester County for the UGRR, with freedom-seekers sent by their in-law Thomas Garrett of Wilmington, their work was much celebrated in Robert Smedley's *History of the Underground Railroad In Chester and Neighboring Counties* (1883) and in subsequent publications by historians Frances Cloud Taylor (1976), James McGowan (1977), Bill Kashatus (2002), and others.

However, there was no official commemoration by the state of Pennsylvania of their noble efforts-- until this fall. The effort to remedy this situation was led by Carol Luzak (below right), a descendant of the Mendenhall family and author Robyn Young (below left), who used her considerable experience at applying for and shepherding efforts to plant historical markers in the appropriate places.

On a cold Saturday afternoon, Nov. 10, they spoke, along with Bill Lewis, a representative from



the PA Historical & Museum Commission, of the importance of this remarkable couple in the struggle for freedom over 160 years ago. Other members of the Mendenhall family attended, along with members of organizations that had contributed financially to this project. The Kennett Underground Railroad Center, which made a contribution, was represented by Board members John O'Neal and Sandy Reber and KURC volunteer Loraine Lucas, the latter two of whom provided photographs of the event. Light refreshments and socializing followed the dedication ceremony

The historical marker, shown on p. 6, stands at the corner of Rt. 52 and Hillendale Road, near the two homes, Oakdale and Springdale Farms, at which the Mendenhalls, for over three decades, welcomed hundreds of freedom seekers who sought their help. Their work was not appreciated by many of their neighbors, even some of their Quaker friends, who, while they loathed the concept of slavery, disapproved of involvement in the UGRR.

On p. 6 is a sampling of some of the Mendenhalls' efforts during the decades before the Civil War, based on the writings of Robert Smedley and others.



Isaac and Dinah Mendenhall's Anti-Slavery and UGRR Activities

Once the Mendenhalls were visited by a group of fourteen freedom-seekers who arrived on a Saturday evening. These people were brought to secluded quarters in the spring house and the barns; unfortunately, the Mendenhalls were going to have guests from their Kennett Friends Meeting the next day, after meeting for worship, and some of them were opposed to UGRR activity. Isaac and Dinah had to tend to the needs of this fugitive crowd first, impress on them the need to quiet and secrecy, and then the next day host many who genuinely disapproved of what the Mendenhalls were doing. The following Tuesday, Isaac and a friend led the freedom-seekers on to another UGRR station farther north. (Smedley, pp. 249-250).

On September 11, 1851, the armed resistance by fugitives in nearby Lancaster County, known as the Christiana Riot, or Tragedy, resulted in a slave owner being killed and several others wounded while trying they were trying to reclaim their "property." The four leaders of the resistance, led by former slave William Parker, had to flee for their lives, being pursued by U.S. marshals and even troops. They arrived at the home of Isaac and Dinah, who were thereby placed in a very dangerous situation. The fugitives stayed for a few days and then had to move on, eventually to Canada until after the Civil War.

Dinah Mendenhall told Smedley about this situation in the following words: "These men were not only fugitives but participants in the tragedy, and harboring them subjected us to heavy fine and imprisonment. But we had always said we would never



submit to carry out that accursed Fugitive Slave Law, come what might. But that night when they started [to bring the fugitives to the next station], the poor quivering flesh was weak and I had scarce strength to get into the house. But I held my faith in the Overruling Providence, and we came through it safely....These were the times that tried men's souls, and women's too." (Smedley, pp 251-252).

The Mendenhalls' Quaker meeting, in what is now known as Old Kennett Friends Meeting, was unhappy with anti-slavery activists such as Dinah and Isaac and John and Hannah Cox, and the unhappiness went both ways. When Isaac and others combined in 1852 to form the new Longwood Progressive Meeting for Friends, open to free discussion of abolition, women's suffrage, temperance, and other progressive concepts, Kennett Friends Meeting "disowned" Isaac and others, though, curiously, not Dinah.

Nonetheless, Dinah was among the six Friends (most of them from the LPMF) who went to visit Abraham Lincoln in June, 1862. There they presented a "memorial" (a petition) for Lincoln to use his war powers to set free all the slaves throughout the states, both loyal and seceded. While polite and genial, Lincoln declined to offer them encouragement; yet he soon afterward presented to his cabinet the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Dinah Mendenhall, and her husband Isaac, richly deserve to be remembered and honored, as they were on November 10, 2018.

