

Tubman Biographer Kate Larson Enlightens, Impresses KURC-Hadley Audience



Kate Larson on right with friend and historian Chris Densmore of KURC, who introduced her to a crowd of over 100 (see below) at Kennett Friends Meeting and co-authored this article.

Kate Clifford Larson, Harriet Tubman authority, spoke in Kennett Square on March 23, 2019, as part of the lecture series organized by the Kennett Underground Railroad Center with the support of the Hadley Fund.

Harriet Tubman is the best known “conductor” on the Underground Railroad, but it was not until 2004 that Larson produced the first truly scholarly book on Tubman, *Bound for the Promised Land: Portrait of an American Hero*. Tubman’s daring escapes are part of a local story. She was aided by her friend Thomas Garrett of Wilmington, Delaware, and others in the networks to freedom through Chester County.

Larson presented in a clear, loud voice, with many illustrations but not relying too much on them. She explained that many researchers have believed it almost impossible to trace enslaved African Americans before the Civil War. However, she told the audience about finding new information in probate records, wills, newspapers, tax records, and other overlooked sources--and she continues to research further material. She showed the remarkable photo of a relatively young Tubman only recently discovered. Larson told the audience about the Ashanti people of east Africa, who were expert timber workers, and employed those skills during times of enslavement. Ben Ross, Harriet’s father, was a timberman greatly valued by his white owners. Ross told Harriet that she was descended from the Ashanti, which makes sense. So carefully did Larson research Tubman’s owners’ records that she believes she has found the date she was born--because a midwife was hired and paid to help Tubman’s mother.

Another great source of information was the fact that, in addition to large numbers of enslaved persons, the area of Dorchester County was home to a large number of manumitted black families, all intertwined with the en-

slaved persons. She detailed the traumatic separation and mistreatment experienced from the age of six by Araminta (Tubman’s original name) as she was hired out to inhumane temporary masters and mistresses. What clearly emerges from those experiences was Minty’s devotion to family, a powerful motivation her for the rest of her life. According to Larson, for Harriet, “Freedom was hollow without the ones she loved....Between 1850-1860, we know that she returned 13 times and rescued 70 family and friends....You risk your life for the people you love.”

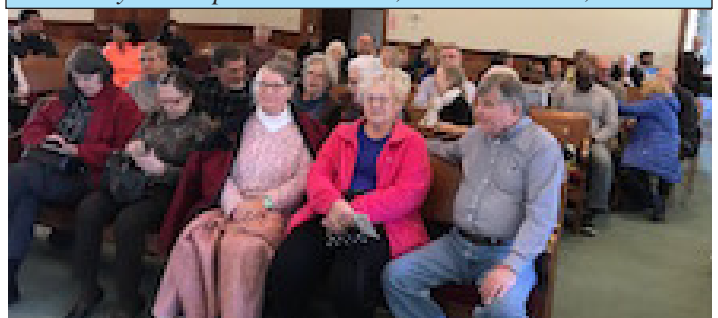
Larson has also researched the Tubman family in Auburn, New York, and Harriet’s struggles to support her various family members and others there. “For the rest of her life her home was a refuge for people in need, who didn’t have anything, who were disabled or sick or poor.” Tubman’s work with the freed people continued until her death in 1914. Larson makes a very strong case for Tubman as a person devoted to the cause of women’s rights, despite

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Why is the Kennett area important to the story of the UGRR?

Near the borders of slave states Delaware and Maryland, Kennett was a hotbed of Underground Railroad activity in the decades before the Civil War. Many of its residents were Quakers, who were anti-slavery, and it had a smaller but active and welcoming African American population. It was tied into anti-slavery networks including that of William Still, UGRR stationmaster from Philadelphia. Kennett area involvement is well documented in the accounts of Still, R.M. Smedley, and fugitive slave narratives. Finally, a number of documented houses and landscapes remain in good condition--Quaker meetinghouses, Longwood Meetinghouse, the homes of Underground Railroad agents, and Hosannah Chapel near Lincoln University.

by Christopher Densmore, Board Member, KURC



Professor Emma Lapsansky-Werner Addresses KURC-Hadley Audience at London Grove

Poses the question: “And what next? Quakers, Race, and Drama in Chester County, PA.”

Professor Emeritus Emma Lapsansky-Werner of Haverford College spoke to the well-packed meeting house of London Grove on April 4th.

She began talking about the trees of Chester County, and the history and drama that they have witnessed. How appropriate that was, considering that the London Grove Meeting takes great pride in the white oak that stands near the end of the parking area, planted around the time of the Meeting’s founding about 300 years ago.

Lapsansky’s presentation, the fifth of the Hadley-KURC speaker series, began with the story of the Christiana Riot, or Resistance, which occurred on Sept. 11, 1851, in the little hamlet about 15 miles from London Grove. She recounted the skirmish between black farm workers, both free and self-emancipated, and slave catchers, which resulted in the death of slave owner Edward Gorsuch. Gorsuch had come with other family members and a federal marshal to reclaim his “property,” two young men who escaped from his Maryland plantation and had settled into the African American community that clustered around Christiana.

Lapsansky said she wanted “to use the Christiana incident to set a stage for an important transition in both the way freedom-seekers thought of their own lives and possibilities after the game-changing Compromise of 1850, which—on the one hand—hardened the business of slave chasing/slave catching, and on the other hand made more clear to freedom seekers, both black and white, that they would need to make serious plans for their own future—that they could not count on change coming from within the existing American structures.”

The “Riot” resulted in a federal trial in which 37 African Americans and white spectators of the melee were charged with “treason,” punishable by death, for having gone against the laws of the U.S. government. The case against the first man charged, white Quaker Caster Hanway, fell apart quickly. The jury took only 15 minutes to deliver a not guilty verdict, and the charges against others were therefore dropped.

According to Lapsansky, not only did the Christiana incident incite Southern rage against the North (for the acquittal) but the fact that white Northerners could be charged with treason for *not helping* slave owners amplified Northern resentment. In the North “several states passed laws to protect their citizens from being prosecuted for conscience-driven acts.” As Lapsansky expressed it, “the Compromise



of 1850 brought many white Americans to recognize that No One is ‘free’ until Everyone is free.”

Our speaker then shifted to the issue of “What’s next—after slavery?” As Americans were facing the escalating tension that pointed toward the Civil War, they sought answers to the question of how, if at all, could Black and white Americans co-exist. She showed slides of the Longwood Progressive Meeting for Friends, whose members attempted to move beyond the simple idea that slavery should end to the concept of regarding African Americans as equal citizens.

Another example Lapsansky discussed was the Shadd family, originally of Wilmington, Delaware. The patriarch of the family, Abraham, was the grandson of a wounded Hessian mercenary from the French and Indian War of the 1750s and the black daughter of a family who cared for him. Abraham was a businessman in Delaware but also a supporter of the UGRR; eventually he moved his family into West Chester in order to make that support easier. Shadd had once taken a strong public stand against the African American recolonization elsewhere, but with the escalating tension following the Compromise of 1850, he recanted and moved his family to North Buxton, Ontario. Shadd held office in Ontario, “becoming the first black to win an elected office in the British North American Provinces.” Shadd was one of a number of African Americans for whom the answer to “What’s next” after slavery was

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U. of DE's Denise Burgher Shares Insights about a Neglected Portion of American History: the Colored Conventions Movement, 1830-90 & Beyond

by Michele Sullivan

Most people know about the Underground Railroad.

Almost no one knows about a much more significant effort during that time made by black leaders who sought equal rights for all blacks in the US. The larger historical context of the UGRR was the Colored Conventions.

On May 4, 2019, Denise Burgher, doctoral candidate at the University of Delaware, described the Colored Conventions Movement (CCM) and the efforts made by thousands of African American leaders to address the conditions facing both free and recently arrived persons in the north.

Typical understanding of the UGRR is that once fugitives arrived in Pennsylvania, a "free state", the cruelty and limitations of slavery were behind them. Entering Pennsylvania, some freedom seekers found work with farmers in Chester County (many of them Quakers). Other fugitives travelled to Philadelphia, which had a large African American community and where they hoped to become literate, learn a trade, find work, be part of a community and church that could raise up and support them.

Some freedom seekers in Philadelphia increasingly became literate and found at least menial work. For many others, these steps seemed nearly impossible. In the meantime, life in Philadelphia and many other places in the North was rife with racism, discrimination, homelessness and poverty. Newspapers perpetuated stereotypes with cartoons of exaggerated, foolish, incompetent, and incapable people. News articles reported the "pseudo-science," "proving" the natural inferiority of blacks along all dimensions.

Many whites felt threatened by already successful black business people, such as James Forten, Reverend Richard Allen, William Whipper, Robert Purvis, and others. Moreover, many whites were threatened by the perceived "horde" of black "immigrants" who might replace whites in their jobs. Anti-black mobs rioted and attacked blacks on the street or leaders of the community. They burned African American churches.

It must be noted that there was indeed support from African American churches. Support was provided by locals and groups organized within the community. However, the number of conditions encountered by blacks, free and fugitive, created the need for a coordinated effort to redress them. Bishop Richard Allen, founder of the first all African American Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, called upon ministers, parishioners, newspaper men, educators, politicians, and other activists along the East Coast to meet at the first Colored Convention in Philadelphia, on

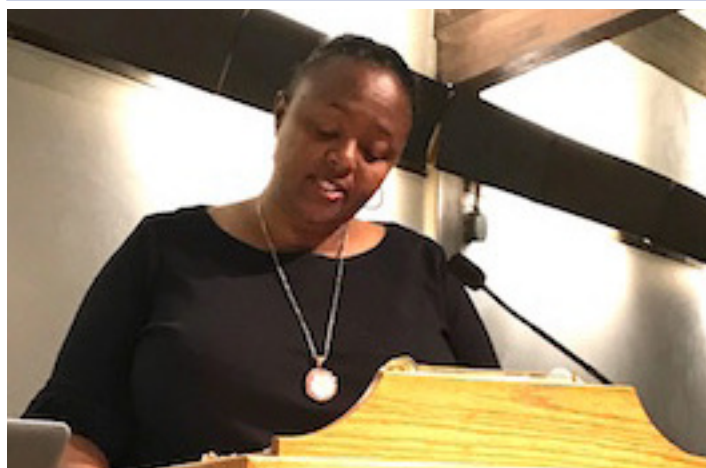
September 20, 1830.

The purpose of this gathering and the many that followed was multi-dimensional, initially to express opposition to the Colonization Society and other white efforts to "solve the race problem" by sending African Americans to Liberia and other locations.

The first five meetings were in Philadelphia where sometimes as many as 1,000 participants attended at one time. During the Conventions, people were elected to committees from which, as convention notes have shown, recommendations for action emerged. Plans were made at the Conventions to actively petition politicians for police and fire protection, schools for literacy, training for jobs and apprenticeships, and the right to use public transport. Representatives to the Conventions carried plans back to their own communities and provided crucial news for black and abolitionist newspapers. It is interesting to note that Conventions continued over 60 years, even post-Civil War.

Burgher called attention to the reality that there is a long and unbroken tradition of African American intellectual organizing throughout black history. The abolition of slavery was not the apogee of work accomplished on behalf of African Americans. Conventions addressed a great many issues that affected blacks. If contemporary students are not familiar with Colored Conventions and the people and work that was done, they cannot know the historically crucial work accomplished by African Americans themselves, the breadth and depth of their leadership in seeking the vote, citizenship, legal protection and civil rights. Black leadership at Conventions was crucial in the attempt to

See "*Colored Conventions*," p. 5



Denise Burgher at Kendal at Longwood on May 4

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simple: "that black people in America could never have equality unless they constituted a majority of the population." Lapsansky also discussed Martin R. Delany, who considered relocation to Central and South America and the Niger Valley of West Africa.

Abraham's daughter Mary Ann Shadd Cary, brought up in Chester County and educated in a Quaker School there, was even more determined to find a place in at least North America for persons of African heritage, and in particular black women. "She traveled around Canada and the United States advocating for full racial integration through education and self-reliance." An advocate for Canadian emigration, a newspaper publisher, one of the first black women to earn a law degree, she joined the National Woman Suffrage Association, working for women's rights. Lapsansky said that Cary was eventually determined that African Americans would find their place in this country.

And that led to the final example of Lapsansky's talk, another Chester County native, Bayard Rustin. Like Cary, Rustin was strongly influenced by Quaker background, in his case of his grandmother, a member of the Longwood Progressive Meeting of Friends. Rustin became a Quaker

himself in 1935. A powerful force for organization of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s-1960s (he was considered the primary architect of the March on Washington in 1963), he had a great influence on Martin Luther King, conveying to him Gandhi's principles of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience. Rustin's early interest in the Communist Party (later abandoned) and his status as a gay man (especially 60-70 years ago) made full appreciation of Rustin's gifts and contributions difficult. However, as Lapsansky pointed out, his posthumous award of the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Barack Obama in 2012 finally brought Bayard Rustin the recognition he richly deserved, a quarter century after his death.

Like biographer Kate Larson in March, Lapsansky closed with an exhortation to the audience. As Larson urged us to hold up Tubman as a model, Lapsansky urged us to use the examples she had cited: the resisters in Christiana, the members of the Longwood Progressive Meeting, the Shadd family, and Bayard Rustin as models to rise to our current moral challenges: rising white nationalism, persecution of contemporary "freedom seekers" across our borders, burgeoning intolerance. "We are made for this time," she

quoted an unnamed philosopher and suggested that we are, as a nation, up to the task.



On April 27, 2019, Dr. Sam Lemon (above), a member of Providence Friends Meeting in Media, PA, presided over a celebration entitled,

"Spirit of Our Ancestors: Honoring Our History."

To a crowd that filled virtually every possible seat and standing space, Lemon related the tales of his ancestors' arrival in this area, escaping from slavery --Martha Jane Parham from life as a breeding slave on a Southern plantation, and Cornelius Ridley, the light-skinned son of his Virginia master, whose escape was made easier by passing as white. They received refuge from the Smedley family of Providence Friends Meeting after their flight in the 1860s. Dr. Lemon and

others that day drew strong parallels between the freedom seekers of the days of slavery, and the people seeking refuge in this country today

The afternoon had a wonderful alternation of presentations: rousing and harmonious musical selections performed by the Lincoln

University Concert Choir, under the direction of Dr. Camilla Horne, interspersed among the talks; the excellent story-telling of historian Nancy Webster, proud of her descent from two families of UGRR stationmasters and of the heritage of welcoming hospitality for freedom seekers in Delaware County; and a reenactment of stationmaster Thomas Garrett and the great conductor Harriet Tubman (portrayed by Bob Seeley and Rita Clark).

Between the stories and music were messages and blessings from elders of Providence Friends Meeting and pastors from a number of other local churches. The event was a truly ecumenical celebration of ancestry, freedom, and fellowship.

from "Colored Conventions," p. 4

achieve social and political equity.

The Colored Conventions Project (CCP) at the University of Delaware is a digital humanities project which collects, curates and makes available (on its site) the minutes and associated records of over 200 Conventions. This work, which started with sixty-six known conventions and has grown to well over two hundred and counting, is undertaken by a collective of professors, librarians, graduate and undergraduate students, national teaching partners with their students and "volunpeers" (people who volunteer their time to work with the group to identify and transcribe the CCM documents). The CCP is dedicated to locating, uploading, and including as many Colored Conventions as can be identified. This information is accessible for the general public, students and researchers everywhere. The records of the CCM offer a unimaginally rich and hitherto



Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, site of the first Colored Convention in September 1830

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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 this address: P. O. Box 202, Kennett Square, PA 19348.

Thank you.

largely unknown record of African American initiative and self-advocacy. More research will continue to reveal more about the lives, social networks, institutions, and legacies of African Americans, including women leaders and the contributions they made.

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the rejection of that idea by some leaders of the early 20th century suffrage movement.

Larson ended her talk with an impassioned plea for her audience to find the truth and to represent the true heroes of American democracy, not the false ones for whom statues were made in the late 19th century. "Don't let anyone get away with this [pointing to images of Charlottesville in 2017] because if she persisted, we can too." Larson closed to enthusiastic --and persistent!-- applause.

The story of Harriet Tubman should be better known, and that means an intersection of careful research and public history, told though the Tubman Museum and the Tubman Byway. Kate Larson has been an advisor and consultant to these and other projects. This enjoyable lecture was also an invitation to continue the work of uncovering even more about Tubman and those who assisted her, in Chester County as well as on the Eastern Shore. We hope that someday soon Larson will find a way to publish an updated version of *Bound for the Promised Land*.

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, at 2:30 P.M.

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 our website (kennettundergroundrr.org). 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.



HONORING THE HISTORY, HUMAN DIGNITY
& HERITAGE OF THE KENNETT AREA

Saturday, June 15th 2019

Kennett Library · 216 E. State Street

11 AM – 3 PM · **UNDERGROUND RAILROAD: THE WILLIAM STILL STORY**
This hour long movie will be playing on continuous loop

300 Block of E. Linden Street

12 – 4 PM · **DR. CHERYL GOOCH & THE 54th MASS. SOLDIERS**
· **BUCKTOE CEMETERY & THE LAND CONSERVANCY OF SOUTHERN CHESTER COUNTY**
· **STUDY BUDDIES & ACOLA COMMUNITY ACTIVITY**
OUR ROOTS – NUESTRAS RAÍCES
Who We Are, Where We're From – Interactive Mapping Activity

New Garden Memorial UAME Church · 309 E. Linden Street

12 – 3 PM · **KENNETT UNDERGROUND RAILROAD POP UP MUSEUM**
Held in the Lower Level

12:30 PM · **DR. CHERYL GOOCH PRESENTATION**
Author of Hinsonville Heroes & On Africa's Lands

1 PM · **ONI LASANA**
Performs Always Free! A Juneteenth Celebration

2 PM · **TWIN POETS**
Spoken Word Poetry Performance

Our Event Partners & Hosts:

- Bethel A.M.E. Church
- HADLEY Presents
- Kennett Library
- Martin Luther King COMMUNITY of Greater Kennett Area
- Carter CDC – Study Buddies Program
- Historic Kennett Square
- Kennett Underground Railroad Center
- New Garden Memorial UAME
- ACOLA-ADVISORY COMMISSION on Latino Affairs

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