

Lincoln University Introduces African American Cultural Heritage Project

At the invitation of Brenda A. Allen, President of Lincoln University, a large group of people interested in the African-American heritage of the southwest area of Chester County gathered at Lincoln University on November 15 for an introduction to a project designed to increase nationally the awareness of the long history of African-Americans in our area. Partners in the project are Lincoln University, Longwood Gardens, Square Roots Collective, CultureShift Creative, and Voices Underground. The Kennett Underground Railroad Center (KURC) had several members in attendance.

Dr. Greg Thompson, VP of CultureShift Creative and Director of Voices Underground, presented an overview of the Project, the historical significance of the region, the growth of cultural tourism nationally, and a proposal for a public monument to represent the project likely to be placed at Lincoln University. Dominique Hawkins, of Preservation Design Partnership, recapped the significance of Lincoln University in the area. President Allen outlined a vision for the Research Project which could include

- the histories of African-American Communities (enslaved, freedom-seeking, free) in the Mid-Atlantic Region,
- the history and development of the Underground Railroad in the region, and
- the history and impact of Lincoln University in the region.

KURC's Role in This Initiative

The Kennett Underground Railroad Center has done much research on Chester County underground railroad sites and the persons associated with those sites and their activities. KURC also has significant experience in presenting that information to the public through driving tours, public presentations by noted researchers, and publications.

Most recently, in 2018-19, with support from the Hadley Fund, KURC sponsored an eight-part speaker series: "Enslaved, Freedom-Seeking, and Free: 19th C. African American Life in the Mid-Atlantic Region," with distinguished historians such as Kate Clifford Larson, Emma Lapsansky-Werner and Nancy Webster.

In addition, Michele Sullivan, KURC Board member, has done considerable research on black abolitionists in SE Pennsylvania. She hopes to publish the results in 2020. (see a portion on p. 2) In brief, KURC is well suited to be an active participant in the Lincoln University project.



Former Board member Cheryl Gooch, KURC President John O'Neal, and KURC volunteer Lynn Powell at the Lincoln University gathering in November.

Excerpts from Greg Thompson's message:

As a foundational part of this project, we are seeking to establish a strong research initiative at Lincoln University related to the history of the Underground Railroad in this region. And in this, we are looking to you and to others to partner with us. We want to tell a true story, and we know that we cannot do so without your wisdom and care. Because of this, I'd like to ask you for two things:

First, please be on the lookout for an email from me detailing another convening, likely to take place in February of next year. In this, we would like to work together to identify what you all believe to be the key persons, key themes, and key stories that need to be told as a part of this Underground Railroad initiative.

Second, please email me and let me know if there are others in your orbit who should be included in this project. We know that there are many others who can and should speak into this project, and we'd like to ask you to help us gather them in.



Why Were African Americans Seldom Included in the Early Histories of the Underground Railroad?

The following is an excerpt from the work on African American abolitionists and UGRR agents of Chester County by KURC Board member Michele Sullivan.

African Americans were overlooked in the traditional scholarship on the Underground Railroad, written by white historians, in large part because the original chroniclers tended to focus on the activities of their friends and families and were probably unaware of the work of African American agents who were not connected to Quakers. Also, some chroniclers doubted that African Americans were capable of the organization to help fugitives effectively.

Another reason we know little about the role of African Americans in the Underground Railroad is that African Americans were reluctant to record their involvement. While slavery was still legal, it was extremely dangerous for African Americans to describe the illegal aid they had given to freedom-seekers.¹

The historical emphasis on Quaker involvement is partially attributable to the abundance of Quaker records and journals. The African American agent William Still recorded details about the fugitives who passed through his office, but he was an exception; few other such records survive. Either African Americans did not participate in many "white" abolitionist societies or their presence was not recorded at the meetings or events they attended. Research currently being conducted at the University of Delaware on what were known as the Colored Conventions of the 19th C. will likely reveal more evidence and documentation.

We know that many African Americans and Quakers worked together to aid fugitives, though discussions of the Underground Railroad have generally relegated African American agents to the role of "helpers," focusing on those with demonstrated links to prominent white, Quaker agents. The help Quakers provided to former slaves is an essential element of the story of the Underground Railroad. Quakers offered fugitives a place to rest and gave them food, shelter, clothing, and often transport to the next station. Some allowed fugitives to stay and work to earn money for their continued flight north. Many of the free blacks who lived and worked in white households were also actively involved in helping fugitives. As R. C. Smedley points out in his nineteenth-century *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania*, interracial collaboration was often the key to a successful passage along the Underground Railroad. He describes, for example, the efforts

of John Vickers of Lionville, Pennsylvania, who provided a house in the woods on his property to an African American couple, Joshua Robinson and his wife. When freedom seekers arrived, Vickers often sent them to the Robinsons for food, clothing, and shelter. Vickers would reimburse the Robinsons for the cost of this aid. Smedley says that similar arrangements were probably common but not necessarily reported by early historians.² Interracial collaboration to help fugitives was important but it is only a part of the larger history of the Underground Railroad.

Modern scholars such Cheryl LaRoche and Eric Foner have found evidence that documents the significant role of black churches, congregants, and communities in helping freedom seekers escape north, but none of these references is specific about a small area like Kennett Square and New Garden. They discuss the history of the Underground Railroad only in major cities and focus on well-known, national figures such as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth. That is only part of the story. To understand how the Underground Railroad actually operated, we must study local history.

1. Williams, William H. *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware, 1639-1865*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996, pp. 166-67. Williams recounts the trials of Thomas Garrett, John Hunn, and Samuel Burris, all of whom worked on the Underground Railroad. While the first two (white) men were fined (and had to declare bankruptcy), Burris (a legally free black) was to be enslaved. In the end, a Quaker named Isaac Flint purchased Burris at auction and freed him. In 2015, Burris was officially pardoned by the governor of Delaware.

2. Smedley, R. C. *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania*. 1883. Reprint, Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2005. pp. 157, 162.

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Heroism, Dedication of UGRR's Harriet Tubman Displayed in Major Motion Picture

by KURC Board member Chris Densmore



On October 30, two days before it opened nationwide, the movie *Harriet* was previewed to students, faculty, administration, and visitors at Lincoln University. The movie was directed by Kasi Lemmons, who also was one of the screenwriters, and it stars British actress Cynthia Erivo (*see right*) as Tubman and Leslie Odom, Jr., as the famed Philadelphia stationmaster and historian William Still.

The incredible thing about Harriet Tubman's story is that it is true. Harriet escaped from her enslavement in Dorchester County on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1849 and reached the relative safety of Pennsylvania some eighty miles north. Her likely route connected with Thomas Garrett in Wilmington, Delaware, through the UGRR network in Chester County, and then to William Still's station in Philadelphia. In the movie, Still constantly tells Tubman that it was far too dangerous to attempt another rescue, yet she kept returning with another group of freedom seekers.

Tubman described crossing the line between the "slave state" of Delaware into the relatively "free state" of Pennsylvania. "When I found I had crossed that line I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven." She probably crossed at or very close to the spot where today's Route 52 crosses the state line near Centreville.

The institution of slavery divided families. Some of Tubman's family had already been sold, never to be seen again. Having successfully escaped from slavery, Harriet Tubman repeatedly made trips to the South to free relatives. She never lost a passenger. She became a legend, but many aspects of the Tubman legends are true. She did use spirituals and hymns to let people know that she was in the area and whether it was safe to join her. She was a woman of faith who prayed for guidance from God and had visions to show her the way to freedom. Some of her co-workers may have doubted her visions or interpreted them as the result of a severe head injury she suffered as a young girl.

The movie *Harriet* contains some invented characters and incidents. One is Gideon Brodess, representing the interests of the Brodess family, the supposed owners of Tubman. There is also a free black woman who runs a boarding house in Philadelphia, and somewhat controversially, two African American slave hunters. One of this pair is re-

deemed by Tubman and assists her in her work.

Harriet provides a very good and very accurate account of Harriet Tubman, a real American hero. I hope many people will be inspired to go further. There are a number of primary and secondary sources available: Kate Clifford Larson and Catharine Clinton's biographies, the two biographies by Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869) and *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People* (1886) and William Still's *The Underground Railroad* (1872). The Wikipedia article on Tubman is very thorough and provides an excellent summary of her life.

History is local. There remain gaps in the record of Tubman's life. Are there papers in private hands from the Mendenhall, Cox, Fussell and other families that can fill in the gaps? What about African Americans? There was a significant African American population in southern parts of Chester County. An African American community once known as Timbuktu existed on the boundary between Delaware and Pennsylvania. There were the African American boatmen, the "Black Jacks," who took their boats up and down the Delaware and Chesapeake Bays, who could have helped.

We need to know more about these people and their connection with the Underground Railroad. How can we learn more about them? What about the African American slave catchers? There is evidence that some African Americans were willing to inform on runaways, but did any behave as the two shown in the movie? How can we learn more?

As a country, we are beginning to recognize Tubman for her bravery and accomplishment. There is a proposal to place Harriet Tubman on the twenty-dollar bill. She would replace President Andrew Jackson, who was a slave owner and an advocate for the forced migration of the Cherokee and other American Indians west of the Mississippi. Sounds like a reasonable swap.

Harriet is a good movie. See it.

Heroes of the UGRR Around Washington, D.C.

by Jenny Masur

*In each **Lantern**, we hope to review a current work that deals with the issues and historical time period that is the focus of the Kennett Underground Railroad Center. This is the second.*

Masur's book (2019, Charleston, S.C., The History Press) is a slender volume (189 pp.) but informative, well-arranged, and attractive. I found a copy at the Library of Congress gift shop and was curious about its contents. For some years now, I have been immersed in the stories and principal characters of the Underground Railroad in Chester County, Philadelphia, Delaware, and the Eastern Shore, but I know little of the comparable history of the nearby nation's capital. This book is a good introduction to that topic and also to the basic issues of slavery in America and the UGRR.

Masur was born in Washington, and for the last 17 years has been the National Capital Regional Manager of the National UGRR Network to Freedom. She gives a 3 pp. chronology of events relevant to slavery in America and this history in particular. In a 20 pp. chapter called "Background," she summarizes the stories of slavery and the anti-slavery movement in the United States, going back as far as mid-18th C. and ending with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.

We who spend time sharing the experience of the UGRR locally know the value of individual stories, as does Masur. Part I of her book, "Escaping from Slavery," focuses on four stories of freedom-seekers, the first being Mary and Arthur Cooper; the setting, surprisingly, is Nantucket Island in the 1820s! This couple had managed to escape from the D.C. area to that bastion of whale-hunting and independence. The tale is a heart-warming one, telling of the defense of this couple by free blacks and white Quakers against the slave catchers who had found the couple, but had to return empty-handed and frustrated by legal and physical harassment. The other individual escape stories also deal with their destinations as well as the D.C. area, including Canada, where the best-known of these freedom-seekers, Ann Maria Weems (who fled dressed as a man), eventually ended up. These tales give the reader fascinating glimpses of the elaborate networks and dedicated abolitionists who facilitated these escapes, as well as the ingenuity and perseverance of the freedom-seekers.

Though Washington was a city in which slavery was legal until 1864 and surrounded by counties of the slave states Virginia and Maryland, it had some important contrasts with those areas. First, it had a large number of free African Americans, often former slaves who, once freed, were not permitted to linger in those slave states. In addition, because it was inhabited by many from Northern free states, the District was a place where abolitionists existed

(and published) with far greater freedom than in most Southern states. Thus, places like Mrs. Sprigg's Boardinghouse, or "Abolition House," "as it came to be known, could flourish. Known abolition lobbyists such as Theodore Weld and Joshua Giddings of Ohio lived there, and, as Masur puts it, "Not coincidentally, the boardinghouse became the location of strange disappearances," of enslaved persons (p. 107).

In retelling stories, sometimes of 12 pp., sometimes in less than two, Masur is balanced in sharing the heartening occasions of successful escapes and the sad tales of recaptures. She gives brief glimpses of complete lives, such as that of Garland Smith, an enslaved man who after numerous attempts, escaped to Canada, became a minister and journalist, and then returned to the United States to help with enlistment of U.S. Colored Troops. He became a chaplain in the USCT and later an advocate for Negro rights. After his death in 1894, he was interred at Arlington Cemetery. Another glimpsed life--a briefer one--is that of lawyer John Dean, who in the 1860s, despite serious financial difficulties, spent his energy and time in resisting the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. His efforts aided dozens of enslaved person from being returned to slave-owners in Maryland. He died in October, 1863, and was recognized for his dedication to the cause of freedom by African Americans of his time and with a marker by the National UGRR Network to Freedom.

Masur encourages future researchers to delve more deeply into these brief stories. She concludes with a five-page list of sites, programs, and facilities (with addresses) of the National UGRR Network to Freedom Program, National Capital Region, as well as a 15 pp. bibliography. Her book is a fine introduction to this topic, and a good springboard for the further work she is encouraging.

