

Quakers and the Underground Railroad in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

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Disclaimer

The Underground Railroad was a network, or more properly consisted of multiple networks. This talk is to explore the place of Quakers within those networks. Much of what I am going to say is based on research centered in southeastern Pennsylvania. How applicable these observations are to other regions, I am not prepared to say. I am also coming at this from the perspective of a Quaker historian and archivist.

There is no last word in Underground Railroad research. There is still much to be learned. Given the nature of the sources, much research is going on at the local level. We each have portions of the story, and a major task before us is to link those stories. I can't understand fully what was going on in Chester County, Pennsylvania, without knowing where people were coming from and where they were going to.

The Quaker in the Underground Railroad Story

Quakers are part of Underground Railroad mythology. Some people seem to think that any house once owned by a Quaker must have been a stop on the Underground Railroad. But if a myth, then one of long lineage. Consider the following statement by Moses Grandy, a former slave, writing in 1843 about escaping slaves:

if they can meet with a man in a broad-

brimmed hat and Quaker coat, they speak to him without fear-- relying on him as a friend. At each place the escaped slave inquires for an abolitionist or a Quaker, and these friends of the coloured man help them on their journey northwards, until they are out of the reach of danger.

Or the recollections of William Wells Brown:

Instinct seemed to tell the negro that a drab coat and a broad-brimmed hat covered a benevolent heart, and we have no record of his ever having been deceived. It is possible that the few Friends scattered over the slave States, and the fact that they were never known to own a slave, gave the blacks a favorable impression of this sect, before the victim of oppression left his sunny birth-place.

More than forty years ago, historian Larry Gara wrote a book entitled *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (1961). Gara claimed that the story of the Underground Railroad, as told in the mid 20th century, focused almost exclusively in the assistance given freedom seekers by whites, particularly Quakers, and ignored the larger story of African-Americans liberating themselves and the role of African-American institutions and communities in assisting the fugitive. I suspect that much of that twentieth century mythology was, perhaps unconsciously, a matter of white Americans trying

to convince themselves that in the times of slavery, they had been on the side of freedom. One must be suspicious of “feel good history” that suggests that all of our ancestors did the right thing.

Incidentally, Larry Gara is a Quaker.

Clearly, some of the self-emancipated not only freed themselves but made their way to the north and even to Canada with little or no aid. Others came though largely or exclusively African-American, and likely African-Canadian, networks, sometimes outside the knowledge of white abolitionists and white Underground Railroad workers.

My reading of the writings of the people who were actively engaged in the Underground Railroad—as self-emancipators or as helpers—that they clearly understood that it was the fugitives themselves who were the center of the story. It was the fugitive who took the initiative and the major part of the risk. But in re-centering the story on the freedom seeker, and on African-American communities of support, at times we seem to have forgotten the multi-racial aspects of the Underground Railroad. Must we remember Harriet Tubman only to forget Thomas Garrett?

What interests me at this point are areas where networks connect across racial lines. When I look at the dynamics of the Underground Railroad in Chester and Lancaster Counties in Pennsylvania, the story is almost exclusively Quaker and African-American. The two groups lived in the same communities. In the same counties there are many townships without either Quakers or African-Americans and also little or no evidence of Underground Railroad activity. I caution here that because this seems to be the dynamic in one part of Pennsylvania doesn't mean that this was the way systems worked elsewhere. It may well be that in some other region the

Quakers sat on their hands and it was the Free Will Baptists, or Wesleyan Methodists or Congregationalists or some other body that were the principle communities of support for the self emancipated.

Anti-Slavery Testimony – A Work of Moral Imagination

Quakers arrived in North America three hundred and fifty years ago—in 1656. Slavery was already planted in the American colonies, and although there were Quaker voices raised against the practice from the 1670s onward, and Quaker meetings condemned the slave trade, it took almost a century for Quakers to absolutely condemn slavery in whatever form. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting issued a length statement on slavery in 1754:

To live in ease and plenty by the toil of those whom violence and cruelty have put in our power, is neither consistent with Christianity nor common justice... Let us make their case our own, and consider what we should think, and how we should feel, were we in their circumstances. Remember our blessed Redeemer's positive command, 'to do unto others as we should have them do unto us'... PYM, 1754

The first work of Quaker emancipation, from the 1750s to the 1780s, was “laboring with” fellow Quakers to free their own slaves and finally, if they would not listen to repeated entreaties to free their slaves, to disown those people from the Society of Friends. After the 1780s, the Society of Friends was virtually free of slave owning—if you hear of a Quaker slave-owner after this period, you are probably hearing of someone who had been thrown

out of the Society of Friends.

For a time in the later 1700s, it seemed as if Methodists and Baptists and perhaps others were prepared to follow a similar path as the Society of Friends, but Quakers were the only major denomination in North America to maintain a strict anti-slavery position.

Quaker Approaches to Abolitionism

The transition from slavery to freedom, particularly within a society where slavery is both legal and normative, raises questions about the position of the newly freed. Since in North America, slavery became almost exclusively connected with race, and people of African descent were therefore considered by many of the 18th and 19th century as “other” what was to be the status of freed people? Where they citizens? Could they vote? Did they have the same rights, including access to the legal system, as whites? Where did they fit in the economy?

Quaker abolition therefore included a strong commitment to the welfare of the freed people. Some Quakers who had owned slaves paid retrospective wages. Quaker meetings organized schools for the education of people of African descent, both children and adult. Quakers in Philadelphia organized the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1775—twelve years before a similar society was organized in Britain—and Quakers in New York organized the Manumission Society in 1784.

A major function of these Quaker-based abolition society, particularly after some of the northern states began emancipating slaves, was to protect freed people from kidnappers. If someone claimed a person in Philadelphia as a slave, the Abolition Society would step in to require proof and if no proof was forthcoming, to initiate prosecution for

kidnapping. In practice, there was a very fuzzy line between the legal protection of people who were free by law and protection of people who were, under the laws, actual fugitives. Laws that protected freed people could be used to slow down or deter recapture of fugitives. In one case in Pennsylvania a fugitive was freed when his claimants could not immediately provide legal documentation showing that slavery was legal in Maryland.

Elias Hicks was one of those Friends who labored with his fellow Quakers in the 1770s to convince them that slavery was wrong. Years later he remembered how difficult it sometimes was. Had there not been good men in the past that nevertheless had owned slaves? How should we think that we are better than they? To this Hicks replied, that each generation has its job to do, and we should not ill judge those who have gone before but keep close to the light and do what is before us. Slavery was wrong, but the Quaker approach was not to tell slaveholders that they were evil men, but to tell slaveholders that slavery itself was wrong. Quakers of Hicks’ generation had seen the effect of moral suasion among themselves and in the emancipation movement in the northern states.

In the United States, slavery was ultimately extinguished by blood—the Civil War. There does seem to be an attitude that anyone really serious about abolishing slavery would eventually have to do as John Brown and pick up the carnal sword. This also became a problem for Quakers, whose peace testimony predated its anti-slavery testimony. Quakers like Lucretia Mott embraced the American Anti-Slavery Society while equally sincere Friends like William Jackson and Samuel M. Janney feared that the tactics of those abolitionists were divisive and would lead to conflict rather than resolution.

Moral Accountability and Slavery

Human slavery was not merely wrong, it was incompatible with moral and natural law. According to Jonathan Dymond, an English Quaker:

any human being who has not forfeited his liberty by his crimes, has a right to be free—and that whosoever forcibly withhold liberty from an innocent man, robs him of his rights and violates the Moral Law...

Quakers had a problem. They had determined that slavery was absolutely wrong, but lived in the United States within a society and under a government that held that people could be property. The Bible said, “render, therefore, unto Caesar, the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are of God.” (Matthew 22:21 KJV). What if God and Caesar demanded different things? The Bible also stated, “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them...” (Hebrews 13:3) and “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do you so even unto them: for this is the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7: 12). For Quakers, when religious duty came into conflict with the law of the land, it was the duty of the Christian to suffer rather than obey. Chester County Quaker William Jackson made this point in an 1846 pamphlet titled *An Essay on the Rights of Government*:

And if at any time the government should require of the citizen that which it has no natural right to demand, he is under no moral obligation to comply with such requisition. Of these rights which belong to every individual alike,

one of them most important is, that of obeying God rather than man, in all cases. We have a clear right, and it is our duty to obey our Creator in all things.... No one is under any moral obligation to lend himself as a tool to others for the commission of a crime, even when commanded by his government to do the wrong ...

Quakers had a history of going to jail for their beliefs—for not paying church tithes, for refusing to swear oaths, for refusing to bear arms. In the seventeenth century in England, thousands of Quakers spent time in prison—in some cases for years when they could easily have won their freedom by paying fines or swearing oaths. Civil disobedience did not begin with Gandhi or Martin Luther King.

After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting reminded its members of the implications of the Quaker testimony against slavery:

It is evident that the Yearly Meeting does not recognize the institution of Slavery... and that under this conviction *its members cannot assist in carrying out such laws* as may be enacted to perpetuate its existence, without violating our testimonies...

We would recommend our members firmly to adhere to the principle of acting conscientiously and uprightly according to the light received, and to decline on such grounds to be made the instruments of a law which requires them to assist in returning a human being into a bondage...

Some of you may be called into suffering on this account...

The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting statement in 1850 tells that Quakers could obey the government and betray the fugitive. It falls short of an endorsement of aiding the fugitive. Individual Quakers were left to interpret their beliefs accordingly. Were all Quakers involved in the Underground Railroad, or willing to be involved? Probably not. Did any Quaker ever betray a fugitive? William Wells Brown says not, and I have never heard of any such case. My considered judgment is that if a fugitive made contact with a Quaker, it is likely that he either received direct assistance or was directed to someone who could help.

Finding a Refuge from Slavery

In the mythology of the Underground Railroad, fugitives follow the North Star to Canada. I have recently become interested in the case of one Thomas Mitchell who was recaptured in 1849 in Chester County, Pennsylvania, where he had been living for a decade and in the years following his escape had married and was raising a family. Though his captors could have attempted to recover him by the law, he was living among Quaker abolitionists who would take up his cause in the courts. When Mitchell was recaptured, he was less than eighteen miles from the place where he had been enslaved. In other words, he could have journeyed from slavery to freedom in the space of one night, from the slave state of Maryland to the free state of Pennsylvania.

But as long as he was in the United States, he was legally still considered property and the United States Constitution itself, not to mention the Federal Fugitive Slave Law mandated his return to enslavement. He lived in an area of extensive, and well organ-

ized Underground Railroad activity. He had ten years to get on board the Underground Railroad but did not do so. He may have stayed near the border because of family members left behind in Maryland but in the final analysis likely stayed because he felt safe.

He was also living among people of African descent. The townships in that section of Chester County, Pennsylvania, were from ten to almost thirty percent African-American in 1850, a far higher proportion of people of color than Philadelphia. There were five African-American churches within ten miles of his home. This African-American population was much poorer than most of their white neighbors and many, like Thomas Mitchell, worked for Quaker farmers and lived in rented houses. This population had less access to the courts than their more prosperous neighbors. It is also clear that there were forms of organized resistance among the resident African-Americans to protect against kidnappers and slave catchers and were willing to fight.

Mitchell was kidnapped in the middle of the night, and whatever opportunities local African-American resisters had of freeing Mitchell vanished when his abductors crossed into Maryland. Any black person from Pennsylvania crossing that boundary risked severe fines at the least and possible enslavement. Quakers chased the abductors to Baltimore where they attempted to free Mitchell through the court system. When it became obvious that Mitchell was in fact a fugitive and his captors could prove it, Mitchell was purchased though funds raised by his Chester County neighbors.

Research Implications

In Underground Railroad we look for patterns. If one might expect a freedom seeker to look for assistance, short or long term, from people of his own color, then where did people of color live? And why there?

We are beginning to see good research about older, often rural, African-American communities. These are communities that have often been overlooked in the standard local histories—perhaps in some cases because of prejudice, but also, perhaps, because they are less visible. I mentioned that there were five African-American churches in the area where Mitchell was captured. Four of these older buildings are gone, and the locations marked only by a few stones, not visible from nearby roads, and perhaps a bit of stone foundation. Another, a simple utilitarian structure, is now a private house with nothing to identify its former function.

Quakers are sometimes almost as invisible. Quaker meetings tend to be built in rural areas, outside of population centers. My Quaker mental map of Ontario has Yonge Street, Pelham, Black Creek, Lobo, Norwich and Sparta as major points of interest.

Recent studies of African-American communities with Quaker connections range from Hinsonville (Lincoln University) in Chester County and “Yellow Hill” in Adams County, both in Pennsylvania, Waterford in Loudoun County, Virginia, Sandy Spring in Maryland, “The Hills” in Westchester County, New York.

Networks: Case of Samuel M. Janney

What one could do about slavery depended on location. A Quaker in Pennsylvania

lived, after 1780, in a state that had determined that slavery was inconsistent with the political ideals of Americans. A Quaker in Virginia lived in a society and under a government where the correctness of slavery was rarely questioned and, particularly after 1831, that treated even mild questioning of slavery as subversive. Virginia passed a law in 1836 forbidding anyone to write or circulate any book denying the right of masters to property in their slaves. If a black person did so, the penalty was whipping and transportation outside the state; for whites, two to five years in prison.

When Virginia Quaker Samuel M. Janney published a small book, *Conversations on Religious Subjects, Between a Father and His Two Sons* in 1835, and included a discussion of the Bible and slavery, concluding that anyone who follows the Bible’s injunctions about loving their neighbors and “doing unto others” could not possibly “compel his fellow-creatures to work for him against their consent, nor without giving them full compensation for their labour.” In 1850, Janney was taken to court for his anti-slavery writings and narrowly escaped prison.

It is significant that Janney sets the issue as compensation for labor. While basic Quaker arguments against slavery were moral and religious, they also made the argument that slavery was economically inefficient. There were free black communities near some of the Quaker settlements in Virginia and Maryland. One such community was (and is) Sandy Spring, Maryland. In 1850, a young Methodist circuit rider, an individual who had been brought up to believe that slavery was the best system for both black and white, found himself intrigued by the Quaker farms near Sandy Spring and asked one of the Quaker elders why those farms seemed so

much more productive than non-Quaker farms nearby. Was it because the soil was better? Was it because Quakers were harder workers? He was shocked when the elder suggest that maybe it was because they paid their workers. Within two years, the pro-slavery Methodist was a thorough abolitionist.

What does this have to do with the Underground Railroad? We are looking for communities of support. Economically viable free African-American communities in the south are prime suspects. We are looking for connections between regions and between races. When Samuel M. Janney was traveling in the ministry in 1845, he was visiting Quakers in western Pennsylvania and was interested to encounter, living in the same localities though going to their own churches, some of his old African-American neighbors from Loudoun County, Virginia. Were these free people who had given up on Virginia or the self-emancipated? Janney does not make this clear and perhaps it doesn't matter. It cannot be an accident that white Quakers and African-Americans traveled almost two hundred miles from Loudoun County, Virginia, and ended up in the same neighborhood in rural Pennsylvania. John W. Jones, the African-American Underground Railroad "station master" in Elmira, New York, who assisted hundreds traveling to Canada in the 1840s was also from Loudoun County, Virginia. Whether or not he specifically knew Janney in Virginia, I don't know, but I do know that Jones was part of a network that included a number of Pennsylvania Quakers well known to Janney.

As a southerner, Janney was interested in convincing his neighbors of the wrongness of slavery and as a Quaker concerned to maintain the peace testimony. He was concerned in

the 1840s that some of the northern abolitionists were making slavery an issue of division between the sections and distanced himself from both the Garrisonian branch of the anti-slavery movement and the political abolitionists of the Liberty Party. But he did not distance himself from individuals. He corresponded on anti-slavery strategy with Isaac T. Hopper, a fellow Quaker, in New York City, and James Miller McKim in Philadelphia. He discussed ways of smuggling anti-slavery literature into Virginia.

Quaker Networks

Quakers of the 18th and 19th century were set apart from the world's people by dress, speech and by behavior, and tended avoid involvements with other religions and with political activities. A Quaker in rural Virginia was likely more aware of what was going on among Quakers in Pennsylvania or New York that she might be with the doings of her Methodist neighbors a few miles away. Traveling ministers like Samuel M. Janney or Lucretia Mott traveled widely, from Canada to the Carolinas. Quaker weeklies, printed in Philadelphia circulated among the most remote Quaker meetings. Regional meetings—monthly, quarterly and yearly—brought Friends together. Genesee Yearly Meeting, which in this period held its annual sessions in Farmington, New York, included central and western New York State, Ontario and Michigan. The size and extent of the Yearly Meeting had much more to do with migration patterns than political boundaries.

Overlaying this religious network were ties of family, business connections and ideological connections. I know when Thomas Mitchell was kidnapped in Pennsylvania, one of the first things that his rescuers did was

to contact one Edward Needles, a Quaker, in Baltimore on the assumption that the kidnapers were heading in this direction. Needles was known for his assistance to the kidnapped. Did the Chester County Quakers learn of his existence from Quaker networks, from family connections—a number of Baltimore Quakers had moved their from Philadelphia—from business connections or because they were known to one another from anti-slavery organizations? Probably it is impossible to separate the strands.

Networks: Case of Lucretia Mott in 1848

Lucretia Mott (1793-1880), a Quaker minister from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, had a very busy summer in 1848. In May, she and her husband traveled to New York City to attend the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society where she gave the opening address and the convention passed a resolution asserting the right of slaves to escape from bondage and the positive duty of all to offer fugitives assistance, no matter what the consequences. Returning to Philadelphia, she was appointed part of a Quaker delegation to visit the Cattaraugus Seneca Indians in western New York State to assess the condition of the Quaker school on the Reservation. In June she participated in the annual sessions of Genesee Yearly Meeting held at Farmington, New York. Genesee Yearly Meeting included all of the Hicksite Quaker meetings in Western New York, Ontario and Michigan. From there she and her husband James traveled to Cattaraugus where they spent several days with the Seneca, then to Buffalo and Detroit where they conferred with some of their “colored friends” about the location and condition of communities of free people in Canada. Then on to Sandwich.

There they were recognized by William Robinson, someone who had met them earlier in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Then to Dawn, as guests of George Cary, then on to visit free people in London, Hamilton and Toronto.

Returning to New York State in July, Mott joined several other women, mostly Quakers but also including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, to organize and hold the First Woman’s Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York. Another key person in the success of that convention was the editor of the *North Star*, Frederick Douglass. This was followed by a second Woman’s Rights Convention at Rochester, New York, on August 2nd. While I have no direct evidence, the date was possibly chosen to follow the Emancipation Day celebration on August 1st.

For most historians, the beginning of the woman’s rights movement is the most significant aspect of Mott’s summer tour. Lucretia Mott’s own description of her activities focused on the conditions among the “self-emancipated slaves” (her words) and colored settlers of Canada West and of the Seneca Indians. She mentions the two conventions “called to consider the relative position of women in society” almost as an afterthought. To understand Mott and the radical abolitionists, we need to consider that they saw no strict dividing lines among reforms. At the Rochester Woman’s Rights Convention, Lucretia Mott “compared the condition of women with that of the free colored population, and dwelt upon the progress they had made... urging imitation of their opposition and perseverance through opposition and prejudice.”

We see here the networks. Mott, an approved minister in the Society of Friends, was well known to Friends from below the

Mason-Dixon line to Canada. While not all Friends approved of joining with “the world’s people” even in the laudable work of abolition, Mott and other radical Quakers were deeply imbedded in the anti-slavery networks. Lucretia and James Mott had in fact been founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. The connections crossed racial lines—Frederick Douglass, George Cary, Father Henson.

What are we to make of the casual reference to meeting William Robinson at Chatham? James Mott wrote that they had met him earlier at the home of Thomas Whitson in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Whitson, a Quaker, had also been a founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society and well known for his participation on the Underground Railroad. He was at this time a near neighbor of William Parker, who would be famous three years later as the leader of the Christiana Resistance in 1851. The area where Whitson, and evidently Robinson, lived in Pennsylvania was only a few miles north of the slave state of Maryland, but nevertheless had a significant population of black people, both free and “self emancipated.” Was this Thomas Robinson one of the free people who had decided that he could find better employment in Canada or did he emigrate in part for fear of the kidnappers or did he a “fugitive from labor” desire to move further away from danger? When William Parker and others escaped from Christiana in 1851, traveling on known Underground Railroad routes, they were not fleeing into the unknown north but were traveling via long established networks.

Dillwyn Parrish to Niagara Falls, 1860

In 1860, two Philadelphia Quakers, Dillwyn Parrish and Edward Hopper had some

business to attend to in Ohio, and decided to make a side trip with their wives to Niagara Falls. While viewing the Falls, Dillwyn was approached by a “colored man” who inquired whether he lived in Loudon County, Virginia. Parrish said he did not. The man then apologized and said he thought that Parrish resembled Samuel Janney. This was interesting. Though Philadelphia and Loudoun County, Virginia, are some distance from one another, they were part of the same Quaker world and Parrish knew Samuel Janney quite well. The colored man was named Amos Norris and he and his wife’s family had lived with various members of the Janney family. Norris—apparently, though I don’t know this for a fact—a free man immigrated to Canada in 1850. Norris took Parrish and Hopper to visit another Drummonville resident, Daniel Dangerfield, who had been arrested as a fugitive slave in Pennsylvania two years previously. Edward Hopper, who, by the way, was the son of a notorious Underground Railroad agent, Isaac T. Hopper and a son-in-law of Lucretia Mott, had been involved in the legal defense of Dangerfield in 1858.

Amos Norris’ intent in approaching Dillwyn Parrish was to try to find a way to communicate with his sister-in-law who was still living in Virginia. I know of this case from a letter written by Dillwyn Parrish to Samuel Janney that followed the encounter at Niagara Falls which attempted to facilitate, though Janney, this communication.

Dillwyn Parrish and Samuel Janney were roughly the same age, and both dressed in the plain clothes of a Quaker, but I don’t think one would have been readily mistaken for the other. My suspicion is that Amos Norris didn’t actually mistake Parrish for one of the Janney family, but having identified Parrish as a Quaker by his dress and likely by his

speech, was establishing connections—in this case, mutual connections on both sides with the Janney family.

Conclusions

Not everything is already written. Work needs to be done. Let us look at what is around us with new eyes. It is a fascinating story, and perhaps even a story in the end of redemption.

Modern Quakers tend to be critical about their ancestors. Mention the work of Levi Coffin or Isaac T. Hopper or Lucretia Mott on the Underground Railroad and you are likely to be told that not all Quakers were as active and some were conflicted over the methods of the abolition movement and anyway Quakers came far short of the racial egalitarian ideals of later generations. While these are valid points, they must be set against the testimony of freedom seeker William Wells Brown when he testified that no fugitive was ever deceived by a Quaker or Moses Grandy that fugitives could rely on Quakers for assistance.

We need to share our research findings. Knowing that freedom seekers passed through Chester County, Pennsylvania, or found a haven in Buxton, Ontario, are only parts of much larger stories. Where did those people come from and where did they go?

I am finding ample evidence of connected African-American and Quaker communities at several places in the Mid-Atlantic region. In most, whites owned the larger farms and black people worked as hired men, tenant farmers or were owners of small farms. They were people like Thomas Mitchell – born enslaved, became free on the first instance because he claimed himself, became free a second time with the aid of his neighbors. He

didn't become a rich man, but he did have a family, his children learned to read and write, and he died a free man owning his own home and a piece of property.

I will close with the words of Elias Hicks, “so without our primitive Friends, they did their day's work faithfully; but how far short did they come! ... every generation has work to do, in addition to the previous one. If we do nothing more, we spend our lives in vain.”