

“And So Thee Still Thinks of Going to Canada Eliza?”

Understanding the Underground Railroad as a Network Crossing Boundaries of Nation, Race and Religion.

Presentation to the Canadian Friends Historical Association,
Yonge Street Meetinghouse, Newmarket, Ontario, Saturday, April 5, 2008.

*Christopher Densmore, Curator
Friends Historical Library*

Introduction: Puzzles and Stories

I am very much looking forward to our discussions today. I like historical research because I like puzzles and I like stories. Some of the stories about the Underground Railroad can be found in books, but far more of the stories still need to be pieced together from scattered bits of evidence. There is work enough for us all.

I go to conferences to learn things, either new information or new ways of looking at information. This conference, and others like it, exploring what is loosely called the Underground Railroad and often a much broader story of how people of African descent in America became free, are particularly exciting. They are an opportunity to compare stories, and so often, our stories are interconnected.

Stories, Myths and History

I have been using the word “stories” rather than history to suggest that there is a connection in the work of the novelist and the work of the historian. Historians take bits of evidence, and make evaluations and assemble that evidence into a way that seems to have sense in meaning.

The Underground Railroad has been, since the end of the American Civil War, a subject of myth. It was something “serious” historians tended to keep away from, both because of the highly improbable myths that became associated with the Underground Railroad -- one of my personal favorites is that there was a tunnel running under the Niagara River from Buffalo to Fort Erie -- but also because it was frequently assumed that the documentation was too fragmentary, too vague, and too contradictory to be useful.

We have to be realistic about the importance of the Underground Railroad, which is only a small part of the story of slavery and how slavery was

ended in the United States. In 1850, the enslaved population of the United States was 3,204,313. That same year, the census reported that 1,011 people had escaped slavery during the year by flight. During that same period, the enslaved population was growing at more than 60,000 per year though birth.

The importance of the Underground Railroad was largely symbolic—it provided the forces of anti-slavery concrete evidence that not all slaves were happy and content by unleashing the considerable talents of speakers like Frederick Douglass and writers like William Wells Brown to testify to their own experiences. It also greatly irritated Southern slave owners to find that there were Northerners who had no respect for their property rights.

The Underground Railroad story is also “myth” in a sense of being a story invested with great significance and purpose. The American historian, Ira Berlin, is credited with making the observation that “history is a way of talking about race.” I have spoken frequently on the Underground Railroad and related topics, and almost always the audiences are racially mixed, a good portion of the people have a sense of personal connection and involvement with the past and often are very mindful of what our collective past might say about how we are doing on race relations.

We care about how the story of the Underground Railroad is told, and often that story is connected with a particular mythology. I will note here a recent trend among historians to write about historical memory. History is not only “what happened” but how we remember, how we commemorate and how we interpret past events. I was at a conference recently in Rochester, NY, where a number of very able and engaged speakers talked

about the Underground Railroad. Their message was racial uplift — if Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman could rise above their enslavement, lift others to freedom, personal and political, so could the school children of today.

So, in my perspective, we are in the business of telling stories, but our stories should be the better stories because we are talking about real people, real events, and real places. And when we talk about the Underground Railroad, we are involved in stories that carry significant meanings that very directly impact how we view ourselves and our societies. This, I believe, places us under considerable obligation to be sure our stories are driven by solid evidence, are not just “feel good stories” told to convince ourselves of our own righteousness.

New Avenues of Research

The outlook for true stories has never been better. We are now seeing substantial new research, particularly on local communities. We have gotten away from a very narrow approach of looking for an organized Underground Railroad with routes,

agents, conductors and station masters to looking at the process of escape. Where and what were the communities of support that facilitated and supported this transition? We owe much of our new understanding to a renewed interest in the history of peoples of African descent. My assumption here is that people escaping enslavement were headed, or would be directed, to places where they could find at least relative safety from recapture, but perhaps even more importantly, social and economic support networks.

So the first question in Underground Railroad research is not where are the tunnels, but where did people of African descent live, where did they work, and where did they go to church? By the way, I am not a great believer in stories about tunnels and quilts.

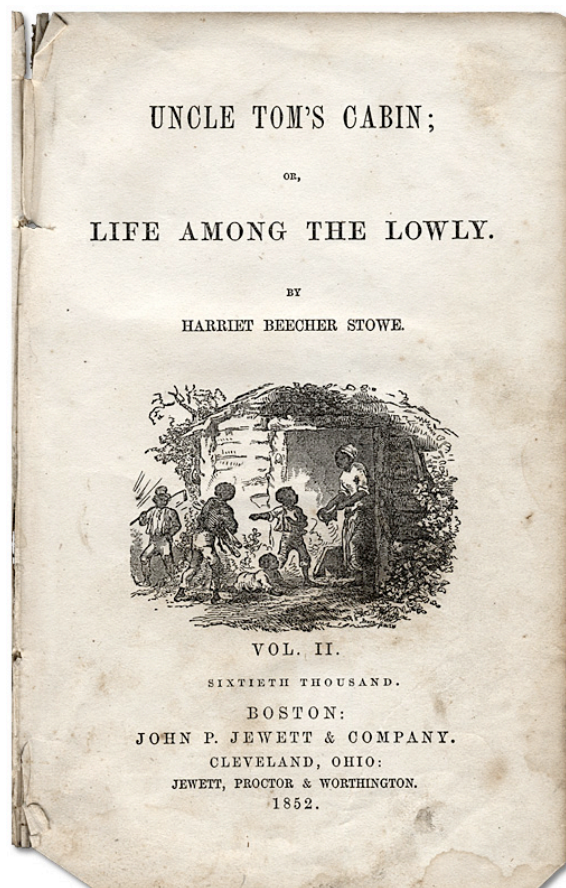
Networks of Support: Crossing Racial Boundaries

I am going to start with a novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. In the book, the fugitive Eliza Harris and her child crossed the Ohio River on the ice and found refuge in “The Quaker Settlement.” In a domestic scene, Rachel Halliday, Stowe's model Quaker asks, “And so thee still thinks of going to Canada, Eliza?” Eliza says she must go. Rachel asks what she will do when she gets to Canada. The Rachel tells Eliza, “Thee knows thee can stay here as long as thee pleases... [t]he Lord hath ordered it so that never hath a fugitive been stolen from our village.”

The Underground Railroad was not about getting to Canada. It was about getting to a place of relative safety and security. The Black Abolitionist Samuel R. War described the escape of his parents from the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Harriet Tubman's place of origin, in 1820:

To reach a Free State, and to live among Quakers, were among the highest ideas of these fugitives...

[T]hey safely arrived at Greenwich, Cumberland County, early in the year 1820. They found, as they had been told, that at Springtown, and Bridgetown, and other places, there were numerous coloured people; that the Quakers in that region were truly, practically



friendly... [W]hen slave-catchers came prowling about the Quakers threw all manner of *peaceful* obstacles in their way, while the Negroes made it a little too *hot* for their comfort.

I was at Greenwich Meeting a couple of years ago to talk about Quaker research, and was totally unaware of their local history. The meeting is in rural southern New Jersey, at a place that can't even be described as "a wide place in the road." I mentioned my interest in biracial communities and how often there seemed to be an African-American church or community within a short distance of a Quaker meeting. Several people simply pointed and said, "over there." Sure enough, down the road was the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

William Wells Brown, who had freed himself from enslavement by escape and later worked on the Underground Railroad also testifies that the reputation of Quakers for anti-slavery was well known among the enslaved in the south. No fugitive, Brown wrote, was ever betrayed by a Quaker. Brown first took up residence in Farmington, New York, a Quaker settlement that was also where the annual sessions of Genesee Yearly Meeting were held in the big meetinghouse. He later moved to Buffalo, NY, and worked on the lake boats, and used that job to assist freedom seekers to go to Canada.

My current area of interest is in southeastern Pennsylvania, specifically Chester and Lancaster Counties. These counties border Maryland, a slave state. There is ample evidence of a Quaker and African-American Underground Railroad network that assisted freedom seekers on their way north, often by way of Philadelphia. What I didn't expect of find was that there were a substantial number of fugitive slaves who crossed into Pennsylvania and stayed.

I am currently working on a case of a man named Thomas Mitchell, a fugitive slave, recaptured in Chester County, Pennsylvania in 1849. He had escaped twelve years earlier from Maryland. When he was captured, he was living near Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, eight miles north of the Mason-Dixon Line and within eighteen miles of the place where he had lived as a slave in Maryland. What was he thinking? He left no narrative and I don't have his explanation for his actions, but here is where

history becomes local. I drew a circle encompassing five miles around where he was living — it seemed a reasonable approximation of his neighborhood — and within that circle were no less than seven Quaker meetinghouses and five African Union or African Methodist Episcopal Churches (and one Presbyterian church). Black people made up about fifteen percent of the population. Pretty much everyone in his neighborhood was Quaker, Quaker-related or of African descent. He would have been safer in Canada, but why move another four hundred and fifty miles to go there?

Rural Demographics

What I am seeing, or what I think I am seeing, are many bi-racial communities, including a fair number of Quaker examples. Many of these are small, rural communities and are just beginning to be studied, often by local, independent historians. There is Yellow Hill in Adams County, Pennsylvania, a few miles north of Gettysburg, and less than ten miles from the Mason-Dixon Line; Christiana, Pennsylvania (a community with ties with Buxton); The Hills in Westchester County, New York, Jericho on Long Island. New Bedford, Massachusetts, a much larger city, also seems to share some of these attributes. Documentation is a problem — some of these rural African populations have left little written record, and of the five African churches surrounding Thomas Mitchell, four have disappeared (except for a few grave stones) and one is now a private residence, with no marker to reveal its original function.

The research required to document these rural communities, or the story of the Underground Railroad in general, does not require a doctorate, a university position or a research laboratory. Much of the important work going on today is being conducted by independent scholars with the drive to know and the patience to systematically read through local newspapers, census reports, deeds and such similar records to uncover the story.

Limits of Racial Cooperation

In her chapter on "The Quaker Settlement" Harriet Beecher Stowe presents an idealized view of race relations. Quaker Rachel Halliday addresses Eliza Harris as "daughter" and the black freedom

seekers and the white Quakers eat at the same table. However, in looking at what I am identifying as biracial Quaker-African communities, I see economic, religious and social distinction. In Chester County, Quakers were the landowning farmers, people of African descent were the hired men and hired women working for those farmers. They usually did not own either property or homes, but lived, as did Thomas Mitchell, in houses owned by Quakers. On Sunday, those of African descent went to the African Union Methodist Church, while Quakers went to their meetinghouses. People of African descent were buried in Quaker burial grounds, but usually off to one side.

Eating at the family dinner table was a mark of social equality. The Gibbons family of Bird-in-Hand, in Lancaster County, ate with their hired men, most of whom were Black. The reason I know this is that it seemed worthy of remark, which suggests that this was not a usual practice.

How do we interpret this? I get asked the question of why there were (and are) not more Quakers of African descent. I was asked that question at Buxton a couple of years ago, and a member of the audience (a person of color) rose in defense of Quakers saying that he had been to a Quaker meeting and knew why the Quaker form of worship might not be appealing to Black people. Sojourner Truth once said she would have become a Quaker if Quakers allowed singing in their meetings. I'm not sure I have an answer, but then I don't know why everyone is not a Quaker. To be candid, I certainly don't rule out racial prejudice, conscious or unacknowledged, as a factor.

But I see connections. When the preacher at the African Union Church in East Fallowfield, Chester County, Pennsylvania (a man who was himself a fugitive slave) was killed in road accident in January 1841, the local Quakers from Fallowfield Meeting turned out for the funeral, which was addressed by prominent Quaker minister Jesse Kersey, followed by the singing of some of John Wesley's hymns. I doubt many Quakers of this time would have entered a white Methodist church or participated in hymn singing. White Quakers and African-Americans may have been divided by economic class and religious affiliation, but they were working on the same farms, living in the same neighborhoods, some of them cooperating on the Under-

ground Railroad and attending the same funerals. There was a connection.

Making the Quaker Connection

A major purpose of this particular conference is to make the Quaker connections. I should be very clear that Quakers are not the whole story—much of the work of abolition and emancipation was done by other hands with little or no Quaker involvement, and there were Quakers, a fair number of them, who felt that their religious witness against slavery was sufficient and it was improper to become involved with the tumults of the world's people, and they thus stood aside from "active measures" to address slavery in the political and secular world. On the other hand, Quakers do crop up in large numbers at significant times—the founders and the people that did the work of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, organized in 1775, and the New York Manumission Society, organized in 1784, for example. When Thomas Clarkson, John Wesley and William Wilberforce became interested in the issues of slavery and emancipation in the 1770s, they drew much of their ideas from the writings of Quakers John Woolman and Anthony Benezet as well as more tangible support from British Quakers.

Quakers were virtually the only religious body to bear a fully realized anti-slavery testimony. But that testimony took years to develop. Quakers came to British North America in 1656. Despite some Quaker voices raised against slavery from the 1670s onward, it was not until the mid 1700s that Quakers became united in the belief that slavery was totally inconsistent with their beliefs. In 1775, New York Yearly Meeting, along with the other meetings in North America, required that all Quakers free their slaves or be disowned from membership in the Society of Friends.

When Quakers came into Upper Canada in the late 1780s and 1790s, they formed a distant part of Philadelphia and New York Yearly Meetings. In 1810, all of the meetings in what is now Ontario and adjacent Quebec became part of Canada Half Yearly Meeting that was a constituent part of New York Yearly Meeting. The ties among Quakers were close — Quakers from Yonge Street might go to the annual sessions of New York Yearly Meeting and there brush shoulders with other Quakers; they might send their children to be educated at Nine

Partners Boarding School in New York State or Westtown in Pennsylvania; they could expect frequent visits from Friends traveling in the ministry from as far away as England and Ireland. Quakers were sectarians, and generally had little to do with other religious bodies and were supposed to marry fellow Quakers. A Friend living in at Yonge Street or Norwich or Adolphustown might be more aware of the news from Farmington, New York than from Toronto or even of the goings on of his Methodist and Anglican neighbors a mile distant.

Quaker Approaches to Abolitionism

The Discipline of New York Yearly Meeting, the one in use in Upper Canada in the first half of the 19th century was very clear that Quakers opposed slavery. "Friends were to avoid any act by which the right of slavery is acknowledged."

But transition from slavery to freedom, particularly within a society where slavery is both legal and normative, also 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? Were 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? What about education?

It is much easier to document this concern in those few urban areas where Quakers had a significant population, like Philadelphia and New York City, where there were Quaker supported schools and orphanages.

Quakers were by definition anti-slavery, but differed on their attitudes toward the organized anti-slavery movement, either from thinking that their tactics were too confrontational or from a reluctance to become too much involved with the "world's people." Sunderland P. Gardner, a well known Genesee Yearly Meeting Friend from Farmington, New York, wrote that "wrong may be wrongfully opposed, and war opposed in a warlike spirit." Other Friends fully embraced the Garrisonian anti-slavery movement.

Canadian Connections

What about Canadian connections? I heard a

talk at Buxton a couple of years ago on early Afro-Canadian burial grounds in Ontario. When asked about identifying burial grounds by race, the speaker mentioned some common names of early Afro-Canadians, beginning with Kersey. Is this the same individual who was mentioned earlier as being in attendance at a funeral at an African Union Church in Fallowfield, Pennsylvania. This individual had also been directly involved with helping people of African descent, both free and self emancipated to resettle in Pennsylvania. Is there a connection? I don't know.

Looking at the minutes of the Trustees of the Lindley Murray Fund of New York Yearly Meeting in 1836, I find recorded a request coming via a Friend in Scipio, New York, for \$100 to be used for "the colony of colored persons at Wilberforce in Upper Canada." The Trustees sent the money to Frederick Stover at Norwich, with instructions to report back and with the intention of continuing support for the school at Wilberforce. The money in the Murray Fund original came from an English Quaker.

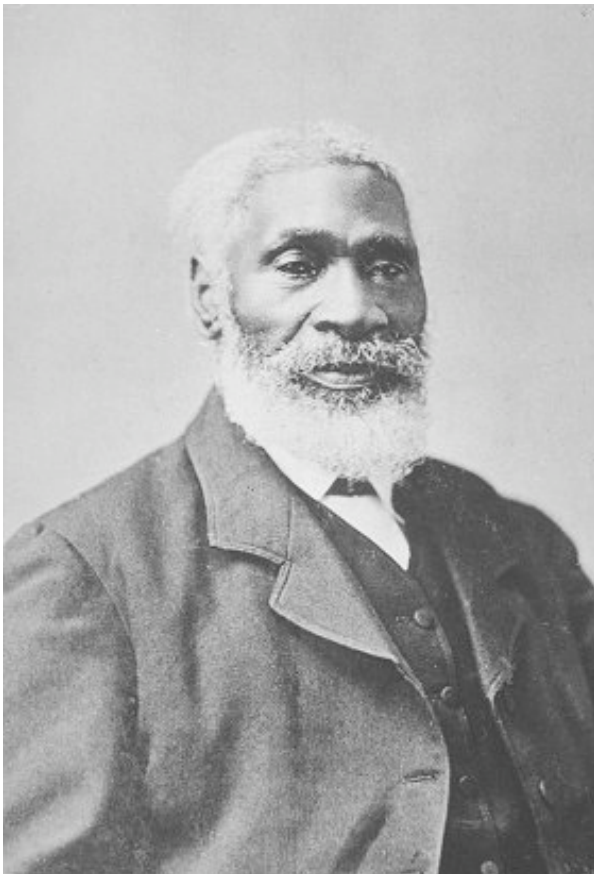
When James and Lucretia Mott, well known Quakers from Philadelphia, and founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society visited their "colored friends" in Canada in 1848, they ran into a man named William Robinson at Sandwich, a person they had met earlier at the home of Thomas Whitson, another Quaker founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

Another Chester County family of African (and German) descent with long established Quaker connections were the Shadds. Mary Ann Shadd, educated at a Quaker school in West Chester, Pennsylvania, was editor of the *Provincial Freeman*.

In 1851, a group of both free and self-emancipated Africans in Christiana, Pennsylvania, confronted United States marshals attempting to recapture fugitives from Maryland. Shots were exchanged and at the end of the affair, the slave owner was dead and his son grievously wounded. The battle took place in the home of William Parker, a house rented from a Quaker family. Parker and the other leaders of the resistance escaped to Canada, using Quaker networks through Chester County to Quakertown in Bucks County, to Montrose in Susquehanna County and then on to New



*Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site in Dresden, ON, commemorates the life of Reverend Josiah Henson. Recognized for his contributions to the abolition movement and for his work in the Underground Railroad, he rose to international fame after Harriet Beecher Stowe acknowledged his memoirs as a source for her 1852 anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was Henson's life experiences that inspired Ms. Stowe's creation of the character Uncle Tom in her 1852 outcry against slavery.*



York State.

There is a saying that if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. I know a fair amount about Quakers, and pay particular attention when Quakers show up in the documentation. I see a lot of Quaker nails. However, the level of significance of Quaker associations and connections is a matter of interpretation. Is there a connection between Afro-Canadian Kerseys and white Quaker Kerseys? I don't know; this is merely speculation on a possible connection. Did William Robinson travel from Pennsylvania to Canada using Quaker networks? I don't know, but I do know of networks, involving both Quakers and non-Quakers that might have facilitated the trip. Was Quaker support significant for the Wilberforce Colony and was Frederick Stover important in that story? Seems like a topic of further research, or possibly a story that someone has already researched.

This is why this conference, and similar efforts are so important. I have some pieces of a puzzle, you have some pieces of the puzzle, and if we put them all together maybe we have enough pieces to put together the big picture.

Patterns of Underground Railroad

In my current research, primarily focused at this time on Chester and Lancaster counties in southeastern Pennsylvania, I do see patterns, and I think those patterns may have relevance for other regions, and just possibly may be relevant to the Canadian experience. I mentioned the case of Thomas Mitchell earlier, the self-emancipated man who was living within a day's walk of his place of enslavement. Why didn't he go to Canada? Here are the factors as I see them.

[1] The presence of a significant free African-American population. Significant does not mean large or necessarily visible to outsiders. This might only be three or four families scattered over several miles of country roads.

[2] The existence of independent African-American institutions, particularly churches. In my region, this is often difficult to document. For some reason, those wonderful books of local history written in the 19th century general failed to notice African-Americans. I can readily map the Quaker presence in Chester County as there are ample records and most of the meetinghouses not only

stand, but are still in use by Friends. With one exception, all of the pre Civil War African Union Methodist and African Methodist Episcopal church buildings have gone. Most of the sites are marked, if at all, only by small burial grounds. There are successor churches to many of these congregations, but they have mostly moved to urban areas – Coatesville and West Chester and Kennett Square, sometimes miles from the rural locations most of these churches originally occupied.

[3] Supportive social networks. As with the Quaker networks, ties of both family and religion seem significant. Many of the local churches here were part of the African Union Methodist denomination founded by Peter Spencer in Wilmington, Delaware. This body had churches scattered through rural southern Pennsylvania and New Jersey as well as the slave states of Delaware and Maryland. Quarterly meetings and other gatherings at these churches were occasions for socializing as well as prayer. I don't know if Thomas Mitchell left family or other loved ones in Elkton, Maryland, and if so whether he maintained contact with them. I do know that if he wanted to get in touch with them, the already existing network of African Union churches might have been a handy way to pass messages back and forth across the Mason-Dixon Line.

[4] A significant portion of white population ideological (politically or religiously) anti-slavery. This is often a minority. In Chester County, the anti-slavery movement was largely a Quaker concern. In Delaware, Chester and Lancaster Counties, the areas of greatest reported Underground Railroad activity had both a significant African-American and a significant Quaker presence. In other areas of those same counties there were few or no African-Americans, few or no Quakers, and little or no evidence of Underground Railroad activity.

[5] Access to legal protection by freedom seekers, African-Americans and their allies, often via sympathetic Euro-Americans. We had that here. As an aside, it is very important in the United States to understand state law. Likewise in Canada, it is important to understand why Canada was a haven for freedom seekers.

[6] Sources of employment. Freedom seekers needed to support themselves. My impression is

that those Quakers often worked on a “don't ask, don't tell” policy about whether the man who showed up looking for work on the farm was or was not a fugitive. Coupled with employment is access to education.

[7] The possibility of racial interaction. This does not mean that there was a racial equality or integration of institutions. While I see multiple examples of biracial communities with (white) Quakers and African-Americans, they were also communities where on Sunday (First-Day) Quakers went off to their meetinghouses and Black people to their (African) Methodist churches, where white people owned the farms, and where Black people worked as paid laborers, where Black people were educated in local schools, but rarely had opportunities to go beyond the primary grades.

Overlapping Networks of Religion, Family and Ideology

I have been talking about Quakers, but when we get down to the individual level, to the people who actually did the work, it is difficult to untangle the multiple relationships and motivating factors. When Thomas Garrett, a Quaker in Wilmington, Delaware, forwarded freedom seekers north into Chester County, were his Underground Railroad connections based on shared religious sentiment, or shared ideological commitment to anti-slavery, or family ties, or business connections? Did those connections arise from associations at Quaker meeting, at anti-slavery meetings, or around the family dinner table? Often the associations were multiple and overlapping and the Quaker identity of one of Garrett's co-workers may have been far less important than a family relationship.

Mary Ann Shadd, later editor of the *Provincial Freeman*, was educated in a Quaker-run school in West Chester, may have taught at the Quaker-run African School in Wilmington, and associated with numerous Quakers, such as Thomas Garrett and Lucretia Mott in the anti-slavery movement. When Mary Ann received financial support from Lucretia Mott and others for the publication of the *Provincial Freeman* did she see this as the support of Quakers as a class, or of individuals who happened to be Quakers? When Lucretia Mott gave her support, was she doing as so as Quaker, motivated by Friends' testimonies, or as a committed abolitionist,

or as a personal friend of the Shadd family? The point is not to choose one factor of a relationship but to recognize that relationships are often built on multiple and overlapping factors. Quakerism is a factor, and I believe a major factor, but it is one among others.

Summary: Points to Remember

We have to guard against the attractions of “feel good history.” In some of the older popular history, one gets the impression that everyone north of the Mason-Dixon Line was anti-slavery and that aiding fugitives was a popular activity. In effect we are saying that we don’t have to feel uneasy about the history of slavery because our ancestors helped the fugitives. Just look at all the tunnels. Increasingly, the story of the Underground Railroad is being placed back into its primary context of African-American history. Where Levi Coffin, a white Quaker, was at one time seen as the great figure in the story, we are now more likely to begin by talking about Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. I’m afraid that we may be replacing some of the old “white people feel good” history where white people were the heroes with a new mythology where every African-American was an Underground Railroad agent and every AME Church was a station. Perhaps, but we need proof, not just assumptions and wishful thinking. We very much need more research into African-American involvement as agents and station masters on the Underground Railroad.

Did all Quakers participate in the Underground Railroad? There is no official statement from a Quaker body that this was expected. But Quakers rejected the legitimacy of slavery—it was not simply wrong, it was illegitimate and no Federal law could make it right. My judgment in the matter is that any fugitive who had crossed the Mason-Dixon Line and appealed to a Quaker for assistance was either aided or directed to someone who could supply that assistance.

We often treat the story of the Underground Railroad as a story for children—particularly popular in our grade schools during Black History Month. We tend to focus on the heroism of those who broke the law to do the right thing. However, the decision, particularly in a democratic society, to break the law is not something to be taken lightly. I

am comfortable with the assertion that there are times when manifest religious duty requires people to follow the law of God rather than the law of men. I am certainly not comfortable with what some other people might claim as right based on their interpretation of God’s will.

Some Quakers participated in loosely organized Underground Railroad networks. A few made the Underground Railroad their life’s work. Others may have been willing to aid a fugitive, but the opportunity to do so seldom or never arose. Some abolitionists, including some Quaker abolitionists, felt as a matter of tactics that efforts to end slavery as a system, freeing millions, was better than providing assistance to the handful of people who freed themselves by escape. These too were likely to aid the individual escaping, but remained apart from the Underground Railroad system.

Quaker networks of meeting, family and sometimes business, connected Quakers across North America, from the Carolinas to Canada.

Not all Quakers, and probably a minority of Quakers, participated in the organized anti-slavery movement. Some feared that too much association with the “world’s people” would compromise Quaker testimonies; others felt that the tactics of some in the anti-slavery movement hindered rather than aided the work of emancipation. This is true. It is equally true that Quakers were represented in the organized anti-slavery movement far in excess of their proportion of the population at large.

But whatever Quakers did for the anti-slavery movement and the Underground Railroad they did not do it alone. In the Underground Railroad, it was the enslaved, the freedom seekers, who took the initiative and took most of the risk. There was far more assistance to freedom seekers in African-American communities of support than has generally been acknowledged. We need to see the Underground Railroad not as safe houses and tunnels, but as support networks of people. Those networks cut across regions, across religious and across races.