

The Underground Railroad in Lancaster County

The Underground Railroad characterized heroism, bravery, and unity. There were routes throughout the nation which led slaves to freedom north of the Mason-Dixon line, and ultimately, to Canada. Pennsylvania is a key state regarding the slavery issue; it was the buffer state between the North and the South. The rural lands of southern Pennsylvania and Philadelphia (one of the most important cities in America) enabled the success of the Underground Railroad. The success must also be credited to the Quakers, many of whom operated the stations throughout Lancaster County.¹ There were many abolitionists aiding the slaves' pursuit of freedom. Lancaster and Chester Counties proved to be the most active with the Underground Railroad.²

The Underground Railroad began in the early nineteenth century.³ The earliest record of activity in Lancaster County was from 1804.⁴ There are three common routes through Lancaster, all leading to the town of Christiana.⁵ William Wright lived in what is now Columbia.⁶ His home marks the first stop of the Lancaster operation.⁷ The Columbia to Christiana route was one of the most popular and successful.⁸ From Columbia the refugee slaves were sent to Daniel Gibbons' home in Bird-in-Hand.⁹ Gibbons assisted with the Underground Railroad for nearly sixty years. It has been estimated he housed nearly one-thousand refugee slaves.¹⁰ The next stop along the Columbia-Christiana route was Dr. J. K. Eshleman's Strasburg residence.¹¹ The final station before Christiana was Thomas Whitson's home in Bart.¹² Whitson and Eshleman were known associates.¹³ This route through Lancaster County ended in Christiana at the home of Jeremiah Moore.¹⁴ The slaves would then be sent across county lines into Chester County.¹⁵

A second route began on the banks of the Susquehanna River.¹⁶ Slaves escaping from or through Baltimore followed the river to Peach Bottom.¹⁷ Joseph Smith's house, not far from Liberty Square, was the first destination within Lancaster.¹⁸ The slaves then took one of two routes to Christiana.¹⁹ The first was a direct route to Christiana via Whitson's or Lindley Coates' home.²⁰ The second sent the slaves to John Russell, in Unicorn, and from there to Bart.²¹ In Bart, Caleb Hood and Henry Bushong held the slaves before sending them to Chester County via Christiana.²² The third most common route was via the Susquehanna River and the Octorara Creek.²³ Many of these slaves came from Delaware and used the Lancaster County line to travel

¹ John D. Spotts, "The Pilgrim's Pathway: The Underground Railroad in Lancaster County," *Community Historians Annual* 5, no. 4 (Dec. 1966): 26.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

north.²⁴ This route also stopped in Christiana.²⁵ Each route was typically followed to make the trips efficient and safe.²⁶

The trustworthiness and devotion of the homeowners who created the Underground Railroad in Lancaster enabled tremendous success. Their character also enabled successful action during emergency situations. It was common for a dire situation to require an alternate route. Alternate routes included other less-known abolitionists' homes, and perhaps stations still unknown today. Elizabethtown could be included in this assumption. It is important to note John D. Spotts confirms there were only seventeen known Lancaster stations at the time of his writing.²⁷ It is assumed nearly fifteen more could exist throughout the county.²⁸ Elizabethtown could have acted as a more westward or roundabout route, or perhaps there were willing homeowners who housed the occasional slave who passed through. Its location within Lancaster would not include it in any primary or high-trafficked alternate routes, though the discovery of more stations could change this assumption. William J. Switala suggests in Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania a possible route existed from Middletown to Harrisburg or Columbia, though this too is not the most direct path northward.²⁹ The possibility of refugee slave travel from any point within Lancaster to Harrisburg could also include Elizabethtown as a station.

The possibility of Elizabethtown acting as a station along the Underground Railroad is unclear. There is no available evidence supporting the notions or assumptions made, however the Underground Railroad's rich history in Lancaster County does provide rationale for a possible Elizabethtown station. Lancaster and Chester Counties were key regions providing success for the railroad. They were the gateway to freedom due to their location in the southernmost regions of the North. Lancaster County was not only significant in terms of its location on the Underground Railroad, but also as a result of the events occurring along its routes. One such event, which took place in Christiana, Pennsylvania in September 1851, had far-reaching impacts on the Underground Railroad's operation and the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act.³⁰

Christiana was heavily populated by Quakers, who welcomed free African Americans and escaped slaves alike to live among them.³¹ As a result, Christiana was often searched by southern slave hunters looking to catch escaped slaves or take any freeman they came across close enough to the description of their target under the Fugitive Slave Act.³² One slave owner who headed to Christiana in search of his escaped slaves was Edward Gorsuch, who took a large slave hunting party consisting of his son Dickenson, his nephew, and several others from Baltimore County, Maryland.³³ Gorsuch employed the help of Henry H. Kline from Philadelphia, who was a constable well-known for slave-catching.³⁴ Abolitionist groups in Christiana were warned of the group ahead of time, and the freemen there decided to put up a fight rather than escape.³⁵ Gorsuch and the group went to the home of William Parker, a colored man and leader of a secret black militia which "mobilized on short notice to fend off slave-hunters, and recovered kidnap[ped] victims, by force if necessary."³⁶ The slave-hunters were able to enter the first floor of the house, but were unable to reach the second floor, where Parker, his wife Eliza, two of Gorsuch's escaped slaves, and several other armed men were barricaded.³⁷ Gorsuch fired two shots, although no one was injured in the attack.³⁸ Meanwhile, Eliza Parker blew a horn to

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 26.

²⁷ Ibid., 27.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ William J. Switala, Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001), 124.

³⁰ William Still, The Underground Railroad (1871; repr., Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company Inc, 1970), 360-381; Fergus M. Bordewich, Bound for Canaan (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2005), 325-340.

³¹ Still, 364; Bordewich, 326.

³² Still, 364; Bordewich, 326.

³³ Still, 362; Bordewich, 325-326.

³⁴ Still, 362; Bordewich, 326.

³⁵ Still, 361; Bordewich, 327.

³⁶ Still, 362; Bordewich, 327.

³⁷ Still, 362; Bordewich, 327-328.

³⁸ Still, 362; Bordewich 329.

summon the militia.³⁹ Afterwards, the slave catchers stood outside of the house and negotiated with Parker and the others from the second floor for nearly an hour and a half.⁴⁰ Tension grew as both parties quoted different Bible verses and Parker declared they would rather die than be taken into slavery.⁴¹

While the parley went on, the freemen from the surrounding area gathered around the house with their weapons — “guns, axes, corn-cutters, or clubs” — ultimately numbering in the range of thirty to fifty blacks against the nine slave catchers.⁴² In addition, two white Quaker men, Elijah Lewis and Castner Hanway, arrived on the scene and attempted to convince the slave catchers to leave before there was bloodshed, although only Kline heeded their warning and left.⁴³ Eventually, Gorsuch shot at Parker and missed, but the battle began.⁴⁴ Parker’s brother-in-law shot Dickenson, who fell.⁴⁵ The black militia which had gathered earlier rushed forward, attacking the slave hunters, who were beaten before running away.⁴⁶ When the dust settled, Edward Gorsuch was dead and his son was gravely injured, but most of the African-Americans were not seriously injured.⁴⁷ Parker and the two Quaker men protected Dickenson from further harm and helped him to a neighboring home where he eventually recovered.⁴⁸

Following the incident, Parker escaped on the Underground Railroad into Chester County, eventually making his way to Rochester, New York and from there to safety in Canada.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, any and all African-American men, and even some women, in the region were captured and jailed, regardless of their involvement in the incident, as well as the white Quaker men who were present at the event.⁵⁰ They were charged with “levying war against the United States,” with the pro-slavery side arguing resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act constituted treason.⁵¹ Thaddeus Stevens, an abolitionist lawyer and member of Congress in the House of Representatives, led their defense in court.⁵² One official involved in making the arrests, the US Marshal, A. E. Roberts, was an abolitionist and their ally.⁵³ Upon discovering two of the prisoners were actual fugitive slaves, he helped them escape before the trial took place.⁵⁴

The first person to be tried for the events at Christiana was Castner Hanway, one of the two white Quaker men.⁵⁵ The trial lasted nearly two weeks.⁵⁶ During the trial, the charge of treason was “utterly demolished,” and the ruling did not offer any assurance to slave catchers of more safety when hunting fugitive slaves.⁵⁷ The verdict given to Hanway was a strong “not guilty,” and in addition, the public perception of the matter had shifted to sympathize with the so-called traitors rather than the slave hunting party.⁵⁸ As a result, the prosecution dropped the charges against the rest of the men and women upon realizing future trials would have similar results.⁵⁹

The effect of the events in Christiana and the trials which followed was to embolden the Underground Railroad’s operations to take more people out of the South and to Canada.⁶⁰ Without the certainty escaped

³⁹ Still, 362; Bordewich, 329.

⁴⁰ Still, 362; Bordewich, 328.

⁴¹ Still, 362; Bordewich, 328-329.

⁴² Still, 362; Bordewich, 329.

⁴³ Still, 362-363, 365; Bordewich, 329.

⁴⁴ Still, 364; Bordewich, 330.

⁴⁵ Still, 364; Bordewich, 330.

⁴⁶ Still, 364; Bordewich, 330.

⁴⁷ Still, 364; Bordewich, 330.

⁴⁸ Still, 364; Bordewich, 330.

⁴⁹ Still, 370; Bordewich, 331.

⁵⁰ Still, 365, 368.

⁵¹ Bordewich, 340; Still, 368.

⁵² Still, 368; Bordewich, 340.

⁵³ Still 370.

⁵⁴ Still, 370.

⁵⁵ Still, 380-381; Bordewich, 340.

⁵⁶ Still, 380-381; Bordewich, 340.

⁵⁷ Still, 380; Bordewich, 340.

⁵⁸ Still, 381; Bordewich, 341.

⁵⁹ Still, 381; Bordewich, 341.

⁶⁰ Still, 381.

slaves who retaliated with violence when hunted down would be charged with treason and hung, slave masters were dissuaded from going after many runaway slaves.⁶¹

⁶¹ Still, 381.