

An exhibit about the Underground Railroad:

A Journey to Freedom

By Mudiwa Pettus

Composed of neither trains nor tracks, the Underground Railroad was the network of people—black, white, and Native American, wealthy and poor, men and women—who assisted African Americans escape the institution of slavery in the nineteenth century. By helping enslaved blacks find safe passage to the Northeast, the Midwest, and to Canada, these individuals participated in a dangerous but important act of civil disobedience. Thus, the existence of the Underground Railroad was enabled by both the courageousness of the slaves who risked their lives to find freedom and the selflessness of the men and women who helped them complete their difficult journeys.

Unfortunately, due to the need to often conceal the names of people and locations affiliated with its loosely organized system, the aspect of human nature that influences people to “stretch the truth,” and the passing of time, the legacy of the Underground Railroad is often imbued with mythic elements. However, this exhibit, while respecting the folkloric transmission of history, reflects an attempt to offer an accurate account of the important place the Underground Railroad occupies in American history and in the local history of Bellefonte, more specifically.

Blurred Origins: The Formation and Operation of the Underground Railroad

Representative of the railroad’s translucent history, scholars have found it difficult to determine the exact year the Underground Railroad was formed; however, its origins are most commonly traced to the dawning of the nineteenth-century, with the network seeing its highest volume of activity from the 1830s through the start of the Civil War. Furthermore, a definitive estimate of how many slaves escaped using the Underground Railroad is similarly unrecoverable, yet conservative reports suggest that between 1,000 and 5,000 enslaved people fled annually during the network’s most active years. Of this group of fugitive slaves, young men composed the largest percentage, with escape proving more challenging, and, therefore, more dangerous for the old, the sick, and the young. However, as a testament to the importance enslaved peoples placed on familial bonds, many of these men, after safely settling in their desired destinations of escape, returned to rescue the relatives they left behind.

Building upon the metaphor of the train and reflecting the coded language often used by participants in Underground Railroad activities, the people and locations affiliated with the network were regularly identified using railroad terminology. Collaborators who provided shelter to fugitive slaves were called “stationmasters” and their homes, businesses, or churches, where enslaved people hid, were referred to as “stations.” “Conductors” were the men and women responsible for leading escaped slaves between stations, and, the term “agents” was used to refer to anyone, including stationmasters and conductors, who facilitated escape missions.

While early historians of American slavery often suggested that whites composed the majority of Underground Railroad agents, more contemporary historiographical projects have revealed that blacks provided the most support to escaped slaves during their treks to freedom.

Moreover, since it was highly dangerous for agents to be active in Southern states, where slavery was the most fiercely protected, African Americans often had to make it to the North without any assistance before they were able to benefit from the resources of the Underground Railroad.

Illuminating the risks African Americans accepted by escaping from their slave owners, captured fugitive slaves were often tortured, disfigured, or sold to plantation owners in the “Deep South,” where the conditions of slavery were often the most brutal and where escape proved to be the most difficult. Additionally, while many agents sincerely hoped to help enslaved people become liberated, others worked as double-agents, betraying escaped slaves to receive reward money or simply out of spite.

Underground Railroad agents, overall, proved to be invaluable resources for many African Americans in the nineteenth century, and they faced legal action, financial ruin, and, even, mob violence, if they were caught aiding or sheltering slaves who had escaped from their plantations. Furthermore, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 only exacerbated the work of Underground Railroad agents, as the law facilitated the pursuit of escaped slaves across state lines, elicited the federal government to help return slaves to their owners, and required citizens to report any known fugitive slaves to law enforcement agencies.

The Presence of the Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania and Bellefonte

Although Pennsylvania is often considered to be one of America’s sanctuaries of liberty, the menacing shadow of slavery looms over the state’s history. For example, legislation that established gradual abolition was introduced in the state in 1780; however, the institution of human bondage continued in Pennsylvania well into the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Pennsylvania’s relatively large free black population, particularly its black middle class, and the several anti-slavery organizations that were maintained within its borders helped make the state a hub for Underground Railroad activity. In particular, Philadelphia, where prominent black abolitionists and Underground Railroad agents, including William Still, Robert Purvis, and Harriet Tubman were located, was a hotbed of abolitionary organization, and it is the city that is spotlighted the most in conversations concerning collective and individual resistance to slavery in Pennsylvania. Although Philadelphia is afforded concentrated scholarly attention, Pennsylvania’s smaller towns, including Bellefonte, were also notable sites in the protest against the institution of slavery.

Historian and bibliophile Charles Blockson, a native Pennsylvanian who has spent years documenting the history of the Underground Railroad in the state, highlights that, in the nineteenth century, Centre County had a rich history of black political engagement that contributed to drawing escaped slaves to the area. Furthermore, the small, but prominent presence of Quaker families in Bellefonte, including the Thomas family, helped to provide a seemingly hospitable environment for fugitive slaves, and, although many African Americans did not permanently make Bellefonte their home, families such as the Mills stayed in town and developed important ties to both Bellefonte’s black and white communities.

The Linn House and the Rediscovery of the Secret Room

Built in 1810 and often referred to as the Linn House in local histories, the building that currently houses the Bellefonte Art Museum for Centre County was once a residential property, serving as a home to several prominent residents in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During those many years of domesticity, the house acquired a rich history, one that includes a connection to the Underground Railroad.

Both Mary Benner Wilson, who lived in the home during the 1840s, and Jacob Valentine Thomas, who occupied the residence from 1850 to 1858 and who was the son of the anti-slavery advocate William Ashbridge Thomas, are believed to have been active in the Underground Railroad during the years they resided in the Linn home. Adding credence to such claims is the existence of a hidden crawl space located on the building's third floor, a compartment that purportedly concealed escaped slaves who were en route to Canada.

Representative of how Bellefonte's history has largely been kept alive by local residents, museum volunteers learned of the compartment during a conversation with a Bellefonte native. Intrigued by this revelation, they studied the house's blueprints and discovered that plans drawn for a 20th century renovation contained a drawing of a "secret room," confirming the resident's assertion.

Although we likely will never know the names of the African Americans who found refuge in this "secret room," the brutalities carried out on the plantations from which they fled and the difficulties they faced while escaping those sites of terror are thoroughly documented. Consequently, after learning of the room's existence, the museum staff thought that it was only appropriate to welcome the Bellefonte community to stand witness to the fortitude of the individuals who endured the unimaginable to find freedom for themselves and for their loved ones.

A Place of Refuge: Bellefonte's St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church

Hoping to provide African Americans refuge from the discriminatory treatment they experienced in predominately white Methodist churches, Richard Allen, a black minister and activist, founded the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in 1816. Since its formation, this denomination has played an important role in fostering black political engagement, and several A.M.E. churches served as stations along the Underground Railroad, offering shelter to escaped slaves as they waited to travel to their next destination. In fact, Bellefonte's own St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church operated as such a site.

According to William Hutchinson Mills' "A Brief History of the Origin of and Organization of the A.M.E. Church of Bellefonte," published in 1909, St. Paul was formed after the town's Bethelites split with the Wesleyans and, subsequently, created an African Methodist Episcopal society that would become St. Paul A.M.E. The first location of the newly formed church was the home of Ephraim Caten, a black resident who lived on West Lamb Street; however, due to a consistent growth in membership, the congregation eventually relocated to a building on South Thomas Street. In 1859, after continuing to experience an increase in new

members, the church organized a committee to manage another relocation, eliciting financial support from local iron-master William Ashbridge Thomas. Thomas, who was sympathetic to the plight of African Americans, along with his wife Eliza, ultimately gave the congregation the deed to the lot on which the church stands today.

As a focal point of Bellefonte's black community, St. Paul was an important site of refuge for enslaved blacks traveling through town on their quest for freedom, and the church continues to be a monument in the Bellefonte community. Efforts continue to ensure that its doors remain open and that its rich history is kept alive among younger generations. Furthermore, a testament to Richard Allen's long-reaching impact, the African Methodist Episcopal Church will reach its bicentennial this year.

Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People

Harriet Tubman, née Araminta Moss, was the Underground Railroad's most prominent African-American conductor, and she continues to be remembered as one of America's most fearless fighters for universal freedom. Therefore, any discussion of the Underground Railroad would seemingly be incomplete without mention of her heroic endeavors.

Born in Dorchester County, Maryland around 1820, Tubman led approximately seventy enslaved African Americans¹ to freedom in the Northeastern United States and in Canada and provided another fifty or more slaves with instructions for how to escape when she was unable to guide them personally. Due to her rescue efforts, she earned the nickname "Moses," a reference to the biblical character credited with liberating the Hebrews from the exploitive rule of the Egyptians; however, before assisting other African Americans escape from the cruel clutches of slavery, Tubman, first, set herself free.

As a slave in Maryland's Eastern Shore, Harriet was subjected to grueling labor and degrading living conditions. Representative of both the brutality of the institution of slavery and her refusal to be complicit in its operation, as a young woman, Tubman was struck in the head with a two-pound weight after refusing to help an overseer punish another slave, and, as a result of this act of violence, she sustained a head injury that caused her to experience headaches, seizures, and spontaneous sleeping spells for the rest of her life. These side effects would ultimately make her approximately thirteen trips to and from the South to free enslaved blacks even more dangerous, as she was known to fall asleep without notice in the middle of escape missions, leaving her charges to simply wait for her awakening.

Deciding that it was the right time for escape, after an initial failed attempt with her brothers, Tubman successfully fled Maryland in the fall of 1849 with the intent of reaching Pennsylvania, a known free state. Planning to return for her family after making a home in the North, Tubman undertook the 100-mile trip alone, following the North Star and hiding in marshlands and other concealing topographies. Fortunately, she also received help from both

¹ Historians have long estimated that Harriet Tubman led 300 people from slavery, but recent scholarship has challenged that number.

blacks and whites willing to facilitate her travel, including the well-known abolitionist Thomas Garrett, who would become one of her longtime collaborators on the Underground Railroad.

After settling in Philadelphia and establishing connections with individuals affiliated with the abolition movement and the Underground Railroad, Tubman made her first return trip to the South in the winter of 1850, journeying to Maryland to rescue her niece, Kessiah, and her niece's children before they were to be sold and potentially separated. Following this first rescue excursion, from 1850 to 1860, Tubman would continue to operate as an Underground Railroad conductor, guiding strangers, friends, and family members, including her parents and siblings, to relative safety in the North.

Due to her effectiveness (no one was ever captured on any of her missions) and the anxiety she and other Underground Railroad agents caused amongst individuals invested in continuing slavery, Tubman developed an international reputation, but, unfortunately, this renown came with a cost: she was publicly threatened with imprisonment, torture, and, even, death. Afraid for her safety, friends and family members ultimately convinced her to end her trips South. However, refusing to sit idly while others suffered in bondage, Tubman continued speaking at abolition gatherings and pursued a career in the United States military, working as a nurse, spy, and soldier for the Union army. Representative of her pioneering military service, she made history by becoming the first woman to lead a military expedition in an American War.

In 1865, near the Civil War's end, Harriet Tubman settled in Auburn, New York, where she would remain with her family until her death. However, due to her disinterest in making a profit off her work as an Underground Railroad conductor and the decades it took for her to receive a military pension, Tubman was largely required to sustain herself through the charity of friends. Fortunately, after the many years she spent risking her life on the behalf of others, when she needed her community to similarly extend a helping hand to her, they returned the favor.

On March 10, 1913, amongst friends and family members, Harriet Tubman, after living a long and eventful life, died and was subsequently buried with military honors.

Instruments of Freedom

One of the most debated aspects of the history of the Underground Railroad is the type of strategies enslaved peoples used to escape their plantations and to find their way to freedom. Although countless stories about slaves and Underground Railroad agents using secret codes, songs with double meanings, decorative quilts, and other instruments of freedom to facilitate their escape missions are commonly circulated in popular culture, scholars are in disagreement about the veracity of many of these accounts, often suggesting that these tales are only loosely based on facts or are altogether false. Nonetheless, among both academics and the general public alike, one of the most widely accepted tools of escape is the spiritual, a religious song that includes a reflection on past or current hardships and/or a rumination on relief that is yet to come.

Reflecting the role that religion played in the institution of slavery, if slaves were allowed to read at all, the bible was often the only text to which they were given access. Consequently,

biblical references and allusions became an important reference point for enslaved peoples. Even slaves who were illiterate often had an impressive knowledge of the bible. Furthermore, even though plantation owners often used biblical verses to attempt to justify slavery, enslaved peoples were able to recognize this trickery and often turned to religion as proof of slavery's evil.

Slave owners and overseers commonly viewed the singing of spirituals as the sign of a content plantation labor force, however, slaves used these religious songs to express their discontent with the institution of slavery and their hopes that they, along with their friends and family members, would one day experience freedom. Because slave masters and overseers underestimated the significance of spirituals, these songs became imbued with double and hidden meanings that allowed slaves to use their shared intimate knowledge of the bible and their proximity to each other during working and rest hours to develop systems of coded meaning for the purposes of community-building and even escape.

Although scholars agree that spirituals were commonly used by slaves to build morale on plantations, evidence also suggests that the singing of spirituals was incorporated into Underground Railroad missions. Specifically, signal songs were spirituals that were purported to inform slaves that an escape was about to occur or to communicate another related event, while map songs are spirituals that were sang to communicate information about astronomical or geographical land markers, Underground Railroad stops, or other pertinent information that was intended to help slaves find their way to freedom.

William Hutchinson Mills: A Local Hero

William Hutchinson Mills was the embodiment of what many African Americans hoped to obtain by escaping slavery: a brighter future for generations to come.

Reputed to be the descendant of escaped slaves who settled in Pennsylvania in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Mills was born in Bellefonte in 1847 and spent the bulk of his life within the town's borders. From a young age, he was tapped into the center of Bellefonte society, living in the home of Jacob Thomas during a period of his adolescence, and, due to his business acumen and interest in matters of public affairs, he became a pillar in the Bellefonte community, amongst both blacks and whites.

As a young man, Mills learned the trade of barbering from Meshick Graham, one of Bellefonte's prominent African American residents who settled in Bellefonte after escaping from his Virginia slave owner, and after finishing his apprenticeship with Graham, Mills opened his own barbershop in 1871. Ultimately, the business would become one of Bellefonte's most important cultural hubs, staying open for six decades and even being patronized by the abolitionist Frederick Douglass who was visiting the area to deliver a lecture in 1872. Reportedly, this interaction with Douglass was a catalyst for Mills to become more involved in politics.

Moreover, in addition to being an entrepreneur, Mills became an active member of the St. Paul A.M.E. Church, where he served as a trustee for several years before becoming a minister.

Representative of his ties to the church, in 1909, he wrote a history of St. Paul that was designed to raise funds for the congregation and to document how the house of worship was an important thread in the fabric of the Bellefonte community. Furthermore, Mills helped found the local African American Masonic lodge, and, in 1885, he, along with three other black residents, successfully petitioned the Bellefonte school board to desegregate the district.

Mills lived a life that inscribed him into the record of Bellefonte history, and, as the grandfather of the men who formed the internationally known singing group, The Mills Brothers, hopefully, his legacy will be introduced to and kept alive by members outside of the Bellefonte community as well. William Hutchinson Mills died in 1931.

“An Unquestionable Friend to the Negro Race: William Ashbridge Thomas, an Underground Railroad Agent

William Ashbridge Thomas, a member of the Religious Society of Friends, an organization also known as the Quakers, is one of Bellefonte’s best-documented Underground Railroad agents. Born in West Whiteland, Pennsylvania in 1795, Thomas moved to Bellefonte in 1815 with plans to practice his religious faith more intently and to enter into the town’s iron industry.

Proving to be an adept businessman, Thomas eventually became a prominent figure in Bellefonte, starting a family that cultivated deep roots in the town and developing an extended network of friends that included members of Bellefonte’s black community. Reflecting his cross-racial friendships, Thomas became a trusted Underground Railroad agent and opened up his family’s home, the Wren’s Nest, to serve as a safe haven for escaped slaves. Writing of Thomas’s altruism in his history of the St. Paul A.M.E. Church, William Hutchinson Mills credits the iron-master with being “an unquestionable friend to the Negro race,” recalling the gift of land that Thomas bestowed upon the church and the iron-master’s dedication to helping men, women, and children escape the “the cruel hand of slavery.”

One of the most noted instances of Thomas’s commitment to helping enslaved peoples find freedom is his assistance of Tom Pennington, a Virginian slave who fled his plantation so that he could rescue his wife and child from being separated from him through sale. Fortunately, with Thomas’ help, the escape mission proved successful, and Pennington was reunited with his family.

As it was often the case, participation in the Underground Railroad was collaborative and generational in the Thomas family. Thomas’s wife, Eliza, was also an active Underground Railroad agent, and, as aforementioned, Jacob continued his father’s legacy by harboring escaped slaves in the Linn House. Therefore, dying in 1866, Thomas left behind an indelible mark on the Bellefonte community, with his host of good works producing fruit long after his death.

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