

FINDING SANCTUARY AT MONTROSE

William C. Kashatus



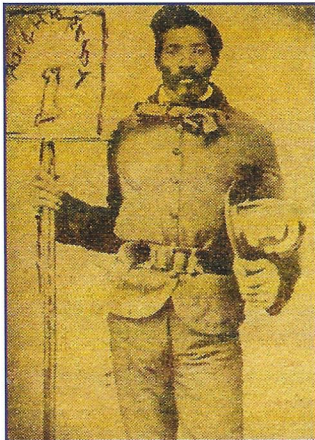
On Friday afternoon, April 9, 1842, William Smith, a slave owned by a Maryland widow, sought shelter in her manor house from the teeming rain. He was drenched after having toiled all morning in the inclement weather. As he stood drying by the stove, one of the widow's young sons berated him.

"What are you doing in here," snapped the youngster. "You stand there happy as a lord. You don't belong here. Get out!"

The boy's audacity stunned Smith. "If there is a just God," he pondered silently, "why should I have no privileges?"

It was at that moment he decided to run away.

Feigning illness, Smith was excused from his chores the next day. He secretly packed his belongings that night, tearfully bade farewell to his sister, and set out for the Pennsylvania border.



SUSQUEHANNA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

John Stout (above) and William Smith (top) escaped slavery with help from abolitionist William C. Gildersleeve of Wilkes-Barre, portrayed with granddaughter (facing page). Isaac Post (facing page, top right) found work for Stout at a Montrose fire company, and William Post (bottom) employed Smith before the former slave became a preacher.

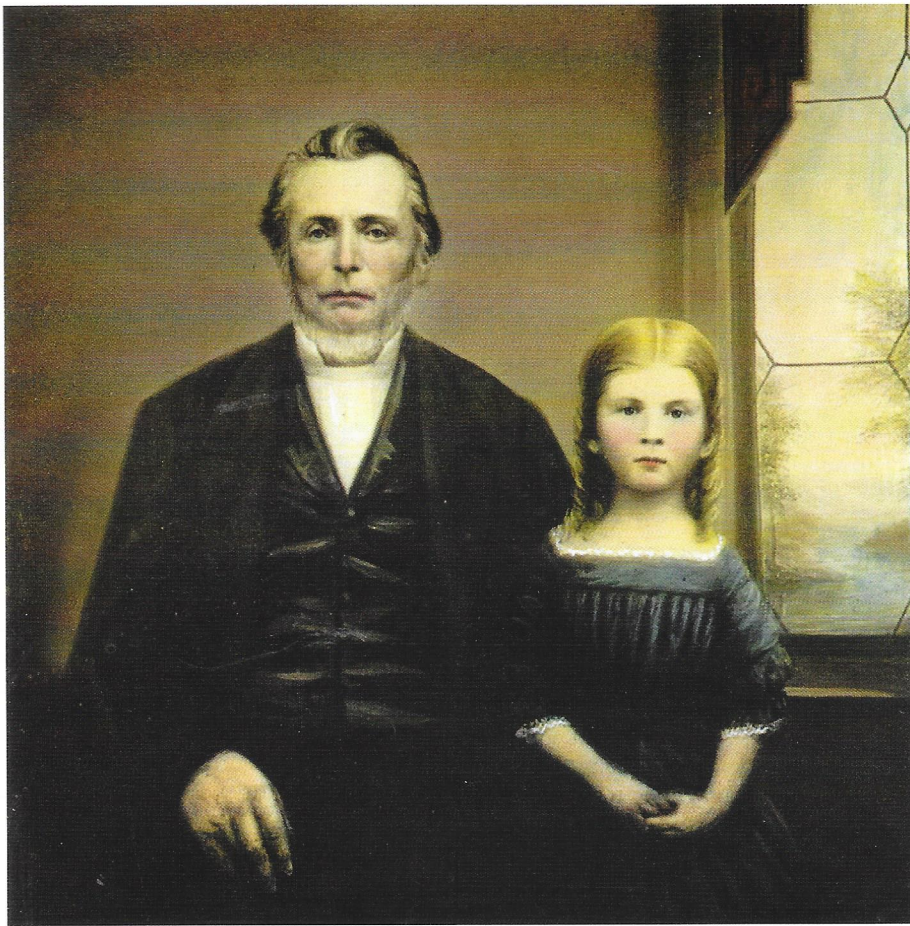
Along the route Smith joined another fugitive, John Stout. Whenever stopped and questioned by curious whites, the pair identified themselves as freemen returning home after a week's work as canal boatmen. The ploy worked and they continued on their way.

After Smith and Stout crossed into the Keystone State, they met six fugitives armed with rifles. Realizing that strength lay in numbers, Smith and Stout joined the others and the group continued the arduous trek northward. By dusk, they heard bloodhounds baying in the distance—the widow's older sons had followed them. On the outskirts of Gettysburg, Adams County, a farmer who claimed to be sympathetic offered refuge to the small band of

runaways. He gave them food and shelter in his barn and urged them to stay until their safety could be assured.

Through the night, the fugitives took turns keeping guard. About two o'clock in the morning they were awakened by "many persons whispering around the barn." Desperate, they readied their rifles and prepared to fight to the death. Miraculously, they again eluded capture and set off along the banks of the Susquehanna River headed for Williamsport, Lycoming County, high in the mountains of northcentral Pennsylvania.

A diminutive individual called "John the Baptist" greeted them at Lisbon Forge (present-day Lisburn in Cumberland County) and helped them traverse the Susquehanna River in a small boat.



LUZERNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The journey proved perilous. The river was swift and high, carrying logs, fallen trees, and debris.

Currents rocked the boat wildly and, at one point, Stout panicked, nearly upsetting it. Regaining control of the craft, the party made its way to Wilkes-Barre, Luzerne County, where William Gildersleeve, a local station master on the Underground Railroad, sent the pair on to Montrose, Susquehanna County, where

the Posts, a prominent Presbyterian family, took them under their wings.

FROM CENTENNIAL HISTORY OF SUSQUEHANNA COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA (1887)



William Post, a merchant, employed Smith who, not long after settling in

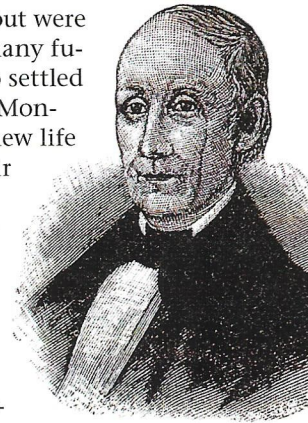
Montrose, met and married Elizabeth Lusk and began a family that eventually grew to ten children. Smith helped establish the local African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Zion Church, for which he served as a preacher for thirty-four years. Through the intercession of Isaac Post, Stout found employment as a porter for the

Rough and Ready Fire Company and resided in Montrose for five decades, until his death in 1893.

Smith and Stout were but two of the many fugitive slaves who settled permanently in Montrose to forge a new life in freedom. Their experience not only reflects the courage and ingenuity of escaping slaves in their flight to freedom, but also the commitment of a small integrated northern community to wrestle with and resolve the same ideological conflicts over slavery that were dividing the nation during the antebellum period.

Susquehanna County emerged as the most active abolitionist area in the Keystone State's Endless Mountains. As early as 1792, Printz Perkins, a former Connecticut slave, established a small black settlement in Brooklyn Township. Perkins and his descendants welcomed fugitive slaves to their community, which, by 1820, numbered fifty-one residents, half of one percent of the county's population of 9,958. The black population continued to grow in the 1830s after Robert Hutchinson Rose, a Philadelphia physician and reformer, established a colony for black farmers at Silver Lake Township. By 1850, the county's black community had increased to 162 residents, about .56 percent of the total population of 28,688, many of them former slaves living in or near Montrose.

The heart of the black community was the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The earliest and most active congregations in Susquehanna County, located in Montrose, were Bethel A.M.E., formed in 1840, and A.M.E.

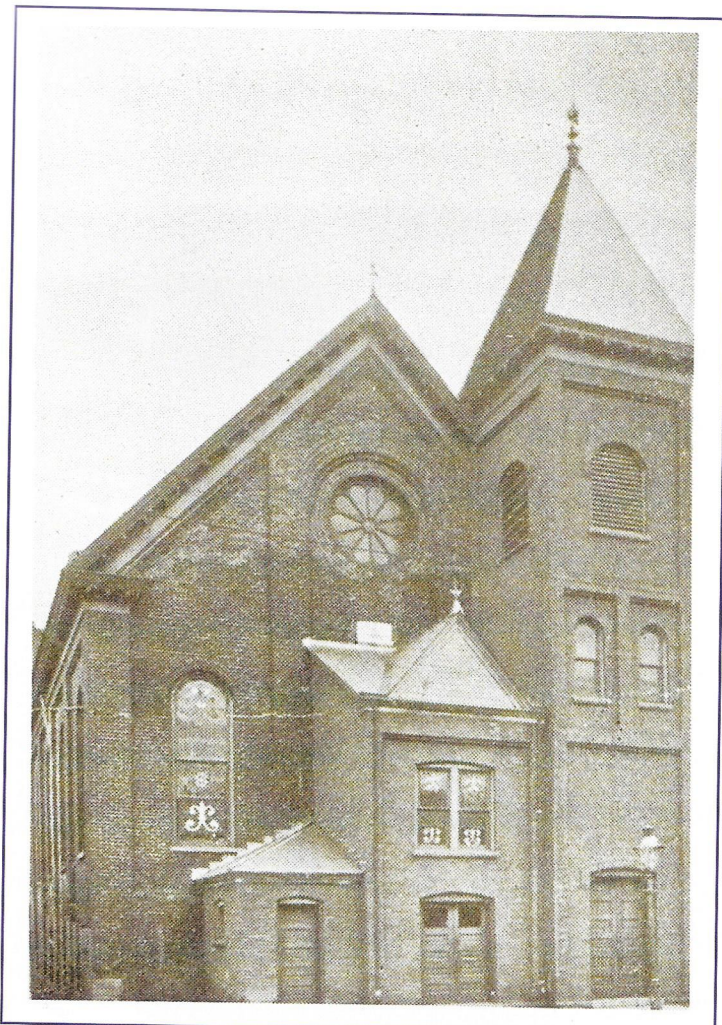


Zion Reformed A.M.E. (right). William Jessup (below), fervent abolitionist. Robert H. Rose (facing page, top) attempted to establish a colony of black farmers. Davis Dimock (facing page, bottom) promoted repatriation of blacks to Africa. Advertisement for Edwin "Ned" Bacon's popular store and restaurant.

Zion, established four years later. Like A.M.E. churches throughout the country, both Bethel and Zion guided the moral discipline of the local black community. They provided important educational and social opportunities, as well as counseling for members, many of whom were former slaves trying to adjust to a new way of life. Robert Booe, an escapee from a Maryland plantation, settled in Montrose in the early 1840s, worked as a laborer, and married another runaway, Mary Blake. He became a popular preacher at the

A.M.E. Zion Church. Saving his earnings, Booe purchased a house, raised two children, and became the patriarch of one of Montrose's most prominent black families. Other congregants who had been born free also grew prosperous. A grocer, Edwin Bacon, husbanded his money and purchased several parcels of land, which he sold at a profit. By the time he reached his forties, Bacon had become affluent and, with his wife Maranda, opened a successful restaurant on Montrose's South Main Street.

"When Ned Bacon kept the restaurant and Fair Store, down near the Exchange Hotel," recalled George Allen, of Heart Lake, located several miles northeast of Montrose, "I never came to town without going there for a nice dish of oysters and a dish of pickled cabbage that Mrs. Bacon made, and it was fine." Allen remembered that Bacon "kept all kinds of fancy dishes, and when the majolica ware first came out he got a large box of it and I hap-



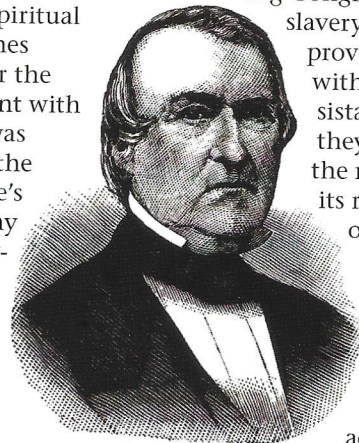
LUZERNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

pened to go in there as he was taking it from the box, and among other things he took out a bread plate that struck my fancy, so I asked the price and he said two dollars. I gave him the money—that was nearly fifty years ago. I have the plate yet and have been offered eight dollars for it." Allen's reminiscences appeared in the *Montrose Democrat* in 1920.

The strong communal and spiritual bonds created by A.M.E. churches were only one of the reasons for the success of Montrose's experiment with integration. Just as important was the close relationship between the black community and Montrose's influential white citizenry. Many white families provided employment for black residents and helped them establish their own homes and churches. Isaac Post assisted the Bethel A.M.E. congregation in getting the property legally deeded for its first church building. Former slave

Gabriel Chappell worked as a groom, gardener, and carpenter for Judge William Jessup, one of the community's wealthiest residents and an ardent anti-slavery advocate, and later purchased land for a house from William Post. Runaway slave Hamilton Young was employed at various times as a servant by Joseph Drinker, an affluent Quaker merchant (listed in the 1860 census as a "gentleman") and as a laborer by Henry Searle, a white farmer in nearby Bridgewater Township, before joining the 54th Massachusetts Colored Regiment in the Civil War. The relationships that black residents maintained with established white community were even more indispensable to the anti-slavery cause in Susquehanna County.

Although Montrose had a history of attracting runaway slaves, local abolitionists were divided over the methods and extent of their involvement in the anti-slavery cause. Some believed in gradual emancipation and that, once freed, blacks should be relocated to Africa. Others promoted immediate emancipation by joining anti-slavery societies, petitioning Congress, holding anti-slavery conventions, and providing runaways with financial assistance and land so they could settle in the region and farm its rich soil. Still other abolitionists violated federal law by participating in the Underground Railroad. At the same time, these activities were not always mutually



FROM CENTENNIAL HISTORY OF SUSQUEHANNA COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA (1887)

A NEW FIRM
AT
THE OLD STAND.

The Undersigned would respectfully announce to the citizens of Montrose and Vicinity that they have adhered to their establishment a first-class

BAKERY DEPARTMENT

under the direction of J. GEO. BRIDENBEKER, of New York City. We will keep constantly on hand

FRESH BREAD, BISCUIT, RUSK, CAKES, COOKIES, PIES, ETC.,

At Wholesale or Retail.
Parties Supplied Reasonably.

—o—
ALSO—a large and attractive assortment of

CONFECTIONERY, NUTS, FRUITS,
Etc., Etc., as usual.

—o—
TOYS } Call and See } FUN
TOYS } Call and See } FUN

—o—
SPLENDID OYSTER DINING ROOMS
Up Stairs.
Most Respectfully,
E. BACON & SON,
Montrose, Sept. 15, 1875-1f.

PHMC BUREAU OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

exclusive.

Between 1834 and 1850, Susquehanna County witnessed an evolution in anti-slavery ideology. For many of the region's abolitionists, what had begun as a fierce commitment to colonization evolved into an immediatist approach and, for a few, an illegal involvement on the Underground Railroad. While this evolution of thought is most prevalent among the county's white abolitionists, blacks adopted a more aggressive approach to emancipation by volunteering to fight in the Union Army during the Civil War.

Abolitionists established Susquehanna County's earliest anti-slavery organization, the Susquehanna Colonization Society, in Montrose on February 25, 1834. Hoping to avoid racial tensions over labor competition and residential settlement patterns, the society promoted the resettlement of

freed slaves to homelands outside of the United States, preferably in Africa. Society officers were Joshua W. Raynsford, president, Davis Dimock and Samuel Warner, vice presidents, and William Foster, treasurer.

Members included Henry Drinker, B.G. Grover, Franklin Lusk, Benjamin Sayre, John Street, Moses Tyler, Christopher Ward, and Albert, Isaac, and Norman Post. Society members were white, middleclass males in their thirties and forties, representing varied occupations and religions.

Colonization was essentially a conservative approach to abolitionism. While these abolitionists were progressive enough to challenge the moral conventions of an antebellum society that condoned slavery, they tended to keep a social distance from the free blacks residing in the county. Fear of assimilation or, worse, miscegenation prevented a closer relationship. The inability of the colonizationists to transcend the racism of the antebellum North ultimately defined them as products of that society. Their skepticism over the ability of blacks to successfully assimilate into white society may have been caused by the failure of the experiment conducted by Robert H. Rose.

In 1809, Dr. Rose purchased one hundred thousand acres of land on which he planned to establish an agricultural college. Advertising in newspapers throughout the United States and in Europe, he attracted several small religious and ethnic groups to Silver Lake Township. By 1838, he had established a farming community of runaway slave families, to which he gave free land and equipment in exchange for labor



SUSQUEHANNA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

and shares. After working the land for some years, four of the farmers, John Thomas, Thomas Belt, David Johnston, and Thomas Davis, began to equate the arrangement to slavery. Fearing that

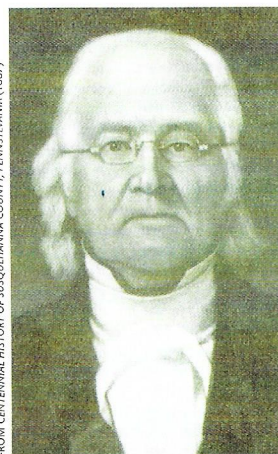
they might retaliate, Rose attempted to break up the colony and separate them on different farms. The farmers took their case to Judge William Jessup, complaining that Rose was "trying to drive off all the colored people."

In a series of letters to Jessup, Rose admitted "supposing that the colored people would do well collectively and that they could manage their [own] affairs." Instead, he discovered that there was "a great want of economy among them" and that by providing them with land, money, and equipment he had "spoiled them." While Rose insisted he remained "very desirous to assist the colored people and to defend their rights," he believed they "would do better working on separate farms under the direction of a [white] owner." The local colonizationists most likely arrived at a similar conclusion. Like Rose, they assumed blacks did not

possess the personal discipline or financial acumen needed to succeed on their own.

Johnston continued to publicly complain and found a receptive audience in the Susquehanna County Anti-Slavery and Free Discussion Society. Established on April 18, 1836, just two years after the Susquehanna Colonization Society, the Susquehanna County Anti-Slavery and Free Discussion Society reflected the relative speed with which abolitionist thought was changing. Unlike the Susquehanna Colonization Society,

the Anti-Slavery Society supported the immediate abolition of slavery through "moral suasion, debate and the dissemination of anti-slavery message through the written word." John Mann served as president of the organization,



FROM CENTENNIAL HISTORY OF SUSQUEHANNA COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA (1887)

but the more interesting members included Samuel Warner, William Foster, and Albert Post. Two years earlier, the three had not only belonged to the Susquehanna Colonization Society but also held the offices of vice president, treasurer, and secretary, respectively. The most prominent defector, however, was Albert Post's father, Isaac Post.

Initially, Isaac Post was so firmly wedded to the cause of colonization that he considered the measures of the Anti-Slavery Society "visionary, if not incendiary" and assiduously familiarized himself with its literature so he could "find defects in their principles and argue against the course of immediate abolition that they were pursuing." Ironically, the more he read the "more [he] became embarrassed by [his] own views." Post began attending the Susquehanna County Anti-Slavery and Free Discussion Society's lectures, ultimately becoming "convinced of the truth of their principles." He joined the organization in 1837 and began to actively promote its call for the immediate abolition of slavery, much to the dismay of many congregants of his church.

On April 15, 1837, Post presented a resolution to the members of the Bridgewater Baptist Church. "The merchandise of human flesh as it is now practiced in the United States is a sin," his resolution began. "It ought to be abolished and it is the duty and privilege of every Christian and Church to bear testimony against slavery, publicly and privately." The resolution passed, but it created a schism within the church. Some members believed the church "did not have a duty to take measures against slavery" and declared their intention "to separate" from those who felt otherwise. Led by Elder Davis Dimock, the so-called "anti-abolitionists" totaled forty-six congregants who formed their own church on August 27, 1839. In the meantime, Albert Post had taken up the cause of Silver Lake's black farmers.

A founder of the Susquehanna County Anti-Slavery and Free Discussion Society, Albert Post was an

attorney who had studied under Judge Jessup. He was also the editor of the *Spectator and Freeman's Journal*, a weekly anti-slavery newspaper that favored the Whig Party, free speech, and immediate emancipation. Post, ordained a Baptist

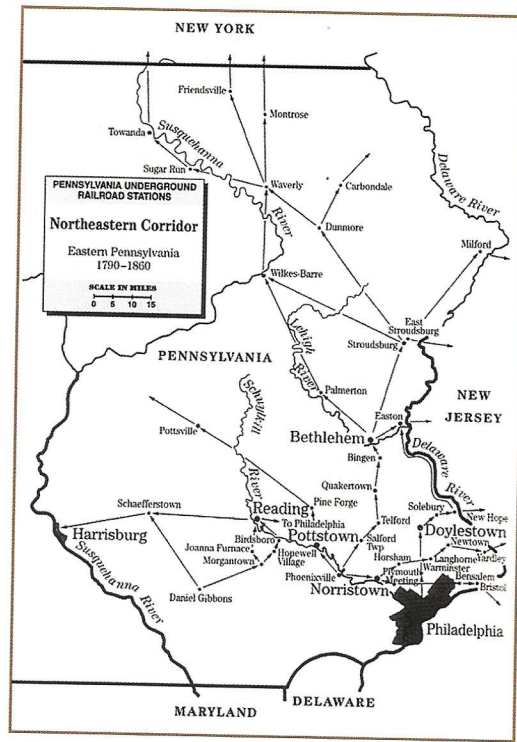
minister in 1841, listened carefully to Johnston's complaint about Rose and his venture in Silver Lake Township.

Although historians and researchers have not uncovered correspondence from Post to Rose, the abolitionist lawyer apparently queried the physician on the matter. In a letter dated March 20, 1838, Rose informed Post that he "cannot promote the welfare of the colored people at Silver Lake by encouraging the idle as well as the industrious—the bad as well as the good." Rose insisted that Johnston was one of the "idle" and that he needed to be "separated from the industrious" or "no good could be done for the race."

The situation rapidly deteriorated. Eight days later, in his final known letter to Post, Rose reported that he had "never experienced from any persons such ingratitude as from the colored people" at Silver Lake. He complained that they "appear to be entirely without regard

for each other" and that "almost all expect me to feed and cloth them" and "they will not work for payment." He attributed "much of the difficulty and misconduct to Henry Johnson, their preacher."

Whether Henry Johnson, an itinerant preacher who traveled through the region during the late 1830s, encouraged unruliness or greater self-sufficiency among the farmers is uncertain. What is known is that Rose's trial colony lasted only two years and provoked anti-abolitionist sentiment among Susquehanna County's Democrats, some of whom were colonizationists, including Henry Drinker, Franklin



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FROM HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS OF THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA (1843)

Lusk, Moses Tyler, and Christopher Ward.

During the spring of 1836, Democrats in the county charged the abolitionists—and by association, their Whig opponents—with fanaticism. Determined to “vindicate the character of the county from the imputations of moral treason and blind fanaticism,” anti-abolitionist Democrats drafted a presentment charging that the Susquehanna County Anti-Slavery and Free Discussion Society was an “unlawful assembly” and its members “disturbers of the peace.” Only a small number of the county’s Whigs were abolitionists, but the anti-abolitionist rhetoric was cleverly designed to scare voters to the Democrats’ side. If anything, the presentment appeared to make the anti-slavery cause even more popular.

More than one hundred members of the Susquehanna County Anti-Slavery and Free Discussion Society attended its first annual meeting in 1836. Within a year, membership had grown to about two hundred and seventy-five. By 1839, the county had become home to four anti-slavery societies: the original Society founded at Montrose in 1836, a second at New Milford, organized in 1837, the Rush Anti-Slavery Society, formed in 1838, and the Dundaff Anti-Slavery Society, established in 1839. The Susquehanna County Anti-Slavery and Free Discussion Society was clearly the leader in northeastern Pennsylvania.

In February 1839, the organization sponsored a two-day convention for abolitionists from Bradford, Luzerne, Susquehanna, and Wayne Counties. Held at Montrose’s First Presbyterian Church and attended by nearly five hundred individuals, the event raised \$123—more than \$2,100 today—for the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. Participants agreed that “political action was important” to the cause and encouraged members to continue lobbying Congress to put an end to slavery. However, convention attendees believed “moral action” was more important to the abolitionist cause, specifically creating educational op-

portunities for the public to debate the issue of slavery as well as the expression of their anti-slavery views in the press. Once again, the abolitionists had provoked their Democratic opponents.

Two abolitionist addresses scheduled for June 1839 never occurred because of anti-abolitionist agitation. Both addresses were to be delivered by Albert Post and R.B. Little, the first at the Middletown Baptist Church, a village northwest of Montrose, on the afternoon of June 14 and the second that evening at a schoolhouse in Rush, several miles southwest of the county seat. When Post and Little arrived at Middletown and found the church doors padlocked, they proceeded to Rush, where they discovered the schoolhouse doors also locked. A sign mocked their presentation.

BOBOLITION MEETIN’

Will commence at dis place dis afternoon at posisly 6 O-clock quarter past half after and by seben no how a genel tendens of de fare sex most anxus digested by de proper time. Gemen from Montroas deliber de lecturer. Song is “Nigger go free.”

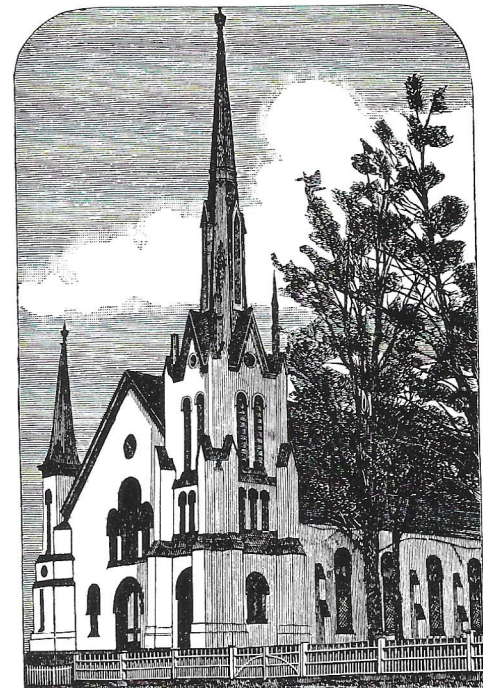
Since forty people had gathered to hear them, the two began their program outside. Anti-abolitionist Democrats soon gathered and “rode one of their own number on a board” to give the abolitionists and their adherents an “understanding of what they might do to them.” Post later admitted that he found the display “both laughable and humiliating.”

Despite the periodic protests, Susquehanna’s abolitionist societies continued to host public lectures hoping that “those opposed to anti-slavery principles [would] attend and set forth their reasons” for debate. The more

Map of eastern Pennsylvania’s Underground Railroad (facing page). Robert H. Rose’s property in Silver Lake Township (facing page, bottom) totaled nearly one hundred thousand acres. Montrose’s First Presbyterian Church (below), site of 1839 abolitionist convention.

they were challenged by the anti-abolitionists, the bolder they became.

During the 1840s, the anti-slavery ideology prevailing in Susquehanna County took a decidedly radical turn. Abolitionists no longer content to limit their involvement to lectures and debates began helping slaves escape on the Underground Railroad. Of the eighty-two individuals identified as Underground Railroad agents, twenty-one came from Susquehanna County. Of those, all but one, David Nelson, were white and held membership in the Susquehanna Anti-Slavery Society and four, William Foster, Albert Post, Isaac Post, and Samuel Warner, originally belonged to the Susquehanna Colonization Society. Fifteen of the twenty lived in Montrose. Eleven were forty-one years of age or older. Nine were farmers of middling income and nine were related to one another. Es-



FROM CENTENNIAL HISTORY OF SUSQUEHANNA COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA (1887)

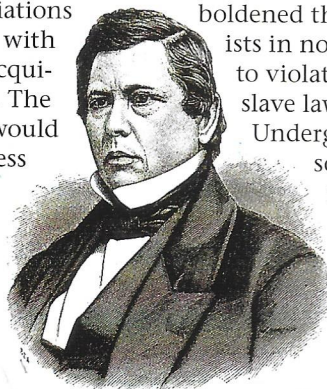
Zion A.M.E. Church (right). Congressman David Wilmot (below) tried to ban slavery in new United States territories. *Harper's Weekly* featured an illustration in 1863 (facing page) that depicted black soldiers in trenches before the assault on Fort Wagner.

entially, Susquehanna County's Underground Railroad agents formed a close-knit network tethered by ties of wealth, kinship, and age. Their decision to participate in the illegal route to freedom was probably conditioned, in part, by the federal government's effort to extend slavery into new territories acquired by the Union. This was an especially sensitive issue in northeastern Pennsylvania, considering the political influence wielded by one of its native sons, U.S. Representative David Wilmot (1814–1868), of Towanda, Bradford County.

Wilmot, a dissident Democrat, became a lightning rod for controversy when he attempted to attach an amendment to an appropriations bill to pay for negotiations with Mexico over the possible acquisition of Mexican territory. The so-called Wilmot Proviso would have denied the funds unless "as an express and fundamental condition" of any agreement, "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in any part of the territory." Wilmot's amendment passed the House twice, in 1846 and 1847, but was defeated in the Senate. Disillusioned by the outcome, Wilmot left the Democratic



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Party and joined the new Free Soil Party. His proviso not only helped to polarize national opinion on the question of slavery's extension, but also emboldened the most radical abolitionists in northeastern Pennsylvania to violate the federal fugitive slave law by participating in the Underground Railroad. Their resolve became even firmer in 1850 when the federal government enacted a new measure that strengthened the previous fugitive slave law subjecting those who assisted runaways to severe fines and imprisonment.

On December 10, 1850, a committee of Susquehanna County's Underground Railroad agents, chaired by William

Foster, issued a public appeal to assist the "thousands [who] have been added to the number of refugees from American oppression by force of the recent Fugitive Slave Bill." Insisting that many of the fugitives were "in exceedingly destitute and suffering circumstances," the committee appointed Albert Post to "receive and transport all moneys and goods which the philanthropic are disposed to contribute to their cause." Susquehanna County, in general, and Montrose, in particular, became an even more popular destination for many fleeing former slaves.

Among the earliest fugitives to settle in Montrose were twin brothers Andrew and Hamilton Young, John Stout; and David Nelson. Nelson was the only documented black Underground Railroad agent in Susquehanna County, where he

guided fugitives between his station and the New York border. He joined the United States Colored Troops when offered the opportunity to fight in the Civil War.

By 1850, Susquehanna County's black community numbered 162 residents, most of who lived in or near Montrose. Having no place to worship, they appointed William Smith to raise funds for a church. While accounts differ as to the date of completion, the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church had been erected by 1859.

Although Nelson has been the only African American in the county identified as an Underground Railroad agent, individuals associated with the local A.M.E. churches most likely assisted fugitives. With the churches as the epicenters of anti-slavery activity, the



A. The Signal Station on Cragg Hill. B. Signal Station. C. Fort Johnson. D. Signal Station. E. Fort Johnson. F. Signal Station. G. Signal Station. H. Signal Station. I. Signal Station. J. Signal Station. K. Signal Station. L. Signal Station. M. Signal Station. N. Signal Station. O. Signal Station. P. Signal Station. Q. Signal Station. R. Signal Station. S. Signal Station. T. Signal Station. U. Signal Station. V. Signal Station. W. Signal Station. X. Signal Station. Y. Signal Station. Z. Signal Station. [SEE PAGE 551.]

FROM HARPER'S WEEKLY (AUGUST 29, 1863)

networks radiating from them were diverse, made up of former slaves, fugitives, free blacks, and family members unified by bonds of mutual obligation as well as shared disadvantages. Most participants recognized a dual identity as both Americans and Africans. While they enjoyed the advantages of freedom, they were tied by a common culture to their brethren in slavery. African Methodist Episcopal Church members were more aggressive in their abolitionist activities than their white neighbors. The involvement of blacks is generally absent from the primary sources documenting the Underground Railroad because of the danger of incriminating other members of their community, as well as the African American preference for oral tradition rather than written history.

The black struggle for emancipation is best documented in the muster roles

of the Union Army during the Civil War. Of northeastern Pennsylvania's African American soldiers, the black men of Susquehanna County played an important role in the United States Colored Troops and in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the first and most heralded black regiment in the nation's military history.

On February 13, 1863, one month after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, U.S. Senator Charles Sumner (1811–1874), of Massachusetts, presented a bill in Congress proposing the “enlistment of 300,000 colored troops.” Although the bill was defeated, Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew (1818–1867) requested and received authorization from Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton to organize “a colored regiment of volunteers” to serve for three years. In Massachusetts, only one hundred men

volunteered during the first six weeks of recruitment, its black population insulted because the regiment would be led by only white officers and that black soldiers would be paid less than white soldiers. Disillusioned by such a meager response, Andrew organized a committee of prominent citizens and black leaders to supervise the recruitment of black troops. Within two months, the committee collected five thousand dollars and established a line of recruiting posts from Boston to St. Louis. The quota was soon raised, and one thousand freedmen and former slaves from throughout the Union became part of the regiment under the command of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the twenty-five-year-old son of a wealthy and socially prominent Boston abolitionist.

Of the seventeen men from northeastern Pennsylvania who enlisted in

the 54th Massachusetts, fourteen were from Susquehanna County, George Baker, William T. Barks, Stephen Ennis, John W. Green, Peter Green, Henry Johnson, Samuel Johnson, William Johnson, Benjamin Naylor, Daniel Nelson, George Price, Charles A. Smith, George A. Thomp-



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Seventeen northeastern Pennsylvania blacks enlisted in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry (left), despite Confederate threat to execute, if captured, "any Negro" or their "white commissioned officer." African American soldiers returned to Montrose in 1865 (below).

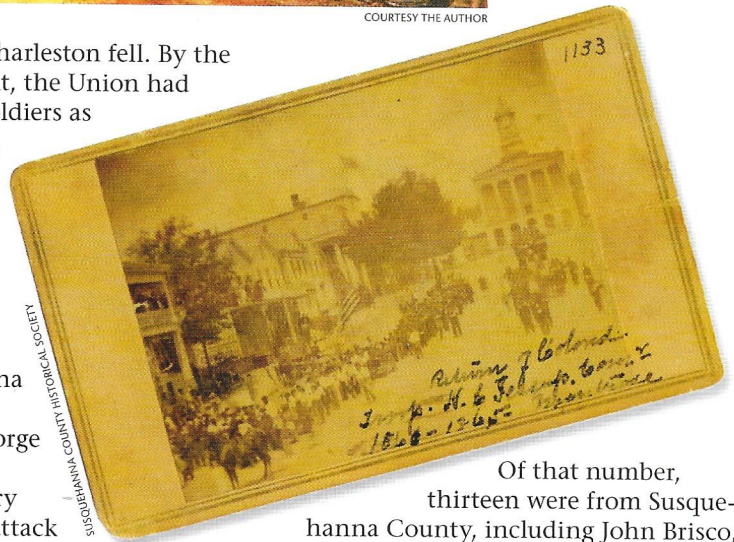
son, and Hamilton Young. Of these fourteen, six were farmers, four laborers, two mechanics, one a barber, and one a musician. The average age was twenty-three. Some of these men were already living in northeastern Pennsylvania before going off to Boston to enlist in the 54th Massachusetts, including William Barks, Stephen Ennis, John Green, Samuel Johnson, and Charles Smith. Others were born in slavery and fled to Susquehanna County before the war, among them Henry Johnson, George Thompson, and Hamilton Young.

The individuals understood the severe consequences of enlisting. Shortly after the 54th was mustered into service, the Confederate Congress passed an act to "put to death," if captured, "any Negro" as well as "white commissioned officer [who] shall command, prepare or aide Negroes in arms against the Confederate States." Nevertheless, the black soldiers served with distinction, earning the respect of the white Union soldiers after a valiant assault on Fort Wagner on July 18, 1863. On that day, the 54th spearheaded a three-pronged attack aimed at capturing the necklace of heavily fortified islands that dotted the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. If Fort Wagner could be taken, the Union Army could launch a major assault further south on Fort Sumter, which controlled access to the harbor. From there, it would only be a matter

of time before Charleston fell. By the end of the assault, the Union had counted 1,515 soldiers as killed, wounded, or missing, of which 256 were black soldiers from the 54th Massachusetts. Two of the casualties were from Susquehanna County, Samuel Johnson and George Price.

From a military standpoint, the attack on Fort Wagner was a costly failure, but it proved to be a turning point for blacks, serving to lessen lingering skepticism among whites about the combat readiness of African Americans. The 54th's valor also opened the ranks of the Union Army to more than 180,000 African Americans who would infuse a new spirit into the war-wearied North.

Between June 17, 1863, and July 19, 1865, Camp William Penn near Philadelphia, the first and largest training facility of United States Colored Troops, drilled nearly sixteen thousand soldiers for eleven regiments. It was at Camp William Penn that many of the sixty-eight additional northeastern Pennsylvanians who volunteered for the U.S. Colored Troops after the 54th's daring assault prepared for battle.



Of that number, thirteen were from Susquehanna County, including John Brisco, Emanuel Dade, Charles Davidson, William Gilmore, George W. Jackson, David Nelson, Josiah Nelson, Peter Norris, Henry Parker, James A. Thompson, J.B. Thompson, Joshua Wheatley, and Isaac Young. Like their comrades in the 54th Massachusetts, most were farmers or laborers who had settled in Susquehanna County before the war; however, their average age was slightly older at twenty-seven years. Also like the Susquehanna natives who served in the 54th they returned to the county after the end of the Civil War.

Antebellum Montrose's experience with abolitionism suggests that a range of opinion on the issue of slavery existed in northeastern Pennsylvania. While the majority of residents were largely indifferent to the issue because it had no direct influence on their

travel tips

lives, there were others who objected to abolitionism on political grounds. Still others were in the minority adopting the abolitionist cause, and their particular approach to emancipation may have ranged from colonization to fighting for the Union Army to violating federal law by participating in the Underground Railroad.

Regardless of their position, each and every resident in Montrose—like each and every resident of northeastern Pennsylvania—was confronted with a moral decision in regards to the anti-slavery issue, specifically to determine what, if any, responsibility they had to combat social injustice. Montrose's widely mixed response reflected the uncertainty, resolve, and passion that divided the rest of the nation as it struggled to come to terms with a changing definition of freedom.



William C. Kashatus, Paoli, is a regular contributor to Pennsylvania Heritage.

FOR FURTHER READING

Adleman, Debra. Waiting for the Lord: Nineteenth Century Black Communities in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania. Camden, Maine: Picton Press, 1997.

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Pennsylvania—the first state to abolish slavery—played a key role on the Underground Railroad.

In the Susquehanna County seat of Montrose, the **Center for Anti-Slavery Studies** (CASS) researches and interprets regional Underground Railroad history. Established in 1996, the organization is headquartered in the former Silver Lake Bank building, added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. Ardent abolitionist Robert Hutchinson Rose erected the building in 1816 to house the bank, the first located in northeastern Pennsylvania. After the financial institution lost its charter in 1829, the building was used as a residence. PHMC awarded CASS, in partnership with Keystone College, La Plume, a 2004–2005 local history grant of \$15,000 to support research and development of “The Place I Call Home: Northeastern Pennsylvania’s Underground Railroad History.” The center sponsors a variety of exhibits, educational programs, special events, and tours of historic sites associated with the Underground Railroad. Visit CASS on the Web at <http://www.antislaverystudies.org>.

Bethel Harambee Historical Services offers a guided tour, “Living the Underground Railroad,” through the Lancaster Bethel A.M.E. Church in Lancaster. In addition to brief presentations about Africans, the Underground Railroad, churches, and the first African school, the public can visit the first African American gravesite in Lancaster. A thematic tour entitled “Freedom of Religion” highlights eight historic churches established between 1730 and 1850. For more information, visit www.livingtheundergroundrailroad.com on the Web.

Opened in 2001, Harrisburg’s **National Civil War Museum** presents both Union and Confederate perspectives. With its collection of 24,000 objects, the museum incorporates multi-media maps, film, video, and artifacts interpreting the American Civil War. Rare artifacts showcased in an exhibit segment, “The Peculiar Institution: American Slavery” are displayed against a dramatic depiction of a nineteenth-century slave auction, with lifelike mannequins and audio storytelling. For more information, visit www.nationalcivilwarmuseum.org on the Web.

The **Richard Allen Museum** at Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia interprets history through tours of the church, organized in 1816, and with selections from its museum collection. Information is on the Web at www.motherbethel.org/museum.

The **Civil War and Underground Railroad Museum of Philadelphia** interprets the epic struggle for freedom, equality, and national unity in nineteenth-century America. Nine galleries and an extensive collection of objects, artifacts, photographs, and works of art chronicle the Civil War. An exhibition area discusses the life and military career of George Gordon Meade (see “Profile” in this issue). Learn more by visiting www.cwurmuseum.org on the Web.

While in Philadelphia, why not visit a venerated national symbol of freedom at **Independence National Historical Park**? As a result of American Anti-Slavery Society efforts in the 1840s, this symbol was renamed the Liberty Bell. Information is available on the Web at www.nps.gov/archive/inde/liberty-bell.html.

From Thursday through Saturday, April 12–14, 2007, Lincoln University in Chester County will host the PHMC’s thirtieth annual **Conference on Black History in Pennsylvania**. Visit www.phmc.state.pa.us on the Web to learn more