

The path of freedom

Area abolitionists, black and white, helped slaves escape bondage

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS
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Beginning in the early 19th century, a clandestine movement known as the Underground Railroad helped black slaves escape to freedom in the North.

Adopting the vocabulary of the railroad, this secret or "underground" passage to freedom consisted of a loosely organized network of abolitionists in the Southern border states and in the North who assisted fugitives.

"Station masters" fed and sheltered runaways in their homes, or "stations," while "conductors" guided fugitives between stations.

Because the Underground Railroad was outlawed by federal fugitive slave laws, first in 1793 and again in 1850, it had to operate in secrecy. Many basic facts about its history are unknown, and the history that does exist is shrouded in more than 150 years of mythology based on daring rescues, ingenious hiding places and great escapes.

Several accounts were written years after the fact by white abolitionists, who tended to emphasize their own heroics and omit the contributions of others. Often these accounts were further embellished

and replicated in subsequent novels, plays and histories.

The result was an overemphasis on white abolitionist involvement and an oversimplification of a complex historical phenomenon whose success also depended on the free black community and fugitives themselves. Wilkes-Barre's Underground Railroad serves as a fine example of this point.

Wilkes-Barre's free black community, which consisted of 34 members in 1800, grew to more than 200 by 1860. Lured by the opportunity for employment in the anthracite coal mines of the Wyoming Valley, these free black families formed their own African Methodist Episcopal congregation and met in private homes until 1848, when they established Bethel A.M.E. on South State Street.

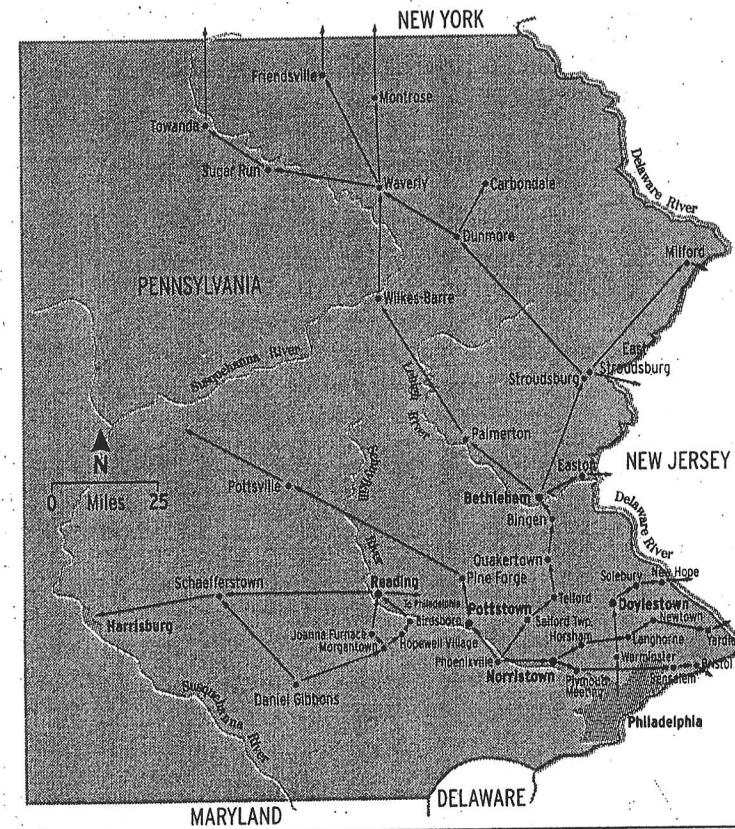
Bethel, which is now located on South Franklin Street, became the hub of Underground Railroad activity in the town.

The church performed the usual religious ritual functions and guarded the moral discipline of the community. It also formed a close-knit network with Southern brethren in bondage.

The members of Bethel's congregation knew freedom and did everything in their power to assist

The Underground Railroad

Here are Pennsylvania's underground railroad stations for the Eastern Corridor between 1790-1860.



TIMES LEADER MAP/TED KRISA

Wilkes-Barre was one of the main stations along the Underground Railroad. Runaway slaves often stopped here en route to upstate New York.

fugitives in obtaining it. Runaways knew they could rely on the church to find shelter and sustenance on their flight to freedom in the North.

William Still, a black station master and clerk of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia, sent many fugitives on to Wilkes-Barre, which was part of the Underground Railroad's Northeastern corridor. Still credited the free black community as well as the fugitives themselves for the success of the clandestine enterprise.

"As a general rule," he wrote in his 1872 book, "the passengers of the Underground Railroad were physically and intellectually above the average order of slaves and were determined to have liberty even at the cost of life."

Among those runaways were the parents of Jonathan Jasper Wright, the first black man licensed to practice law in Pennsylvania.

Many of those runaways who passed through Wilkes-Barre began their flight to freedom near Philadelphia. Through a loosely connected network of Underground Railroad stations they would make their way north to Bethlehem and then on to Wilkes-Barre via Palmerton.

Other fugitives traveled the Pechoquealin Path, also called the Lower Road, which cut through the Pocono Mountains from Stroudsburg. From Wilkes-Barre, conductors such as Charles Bailey, Leonard Batchelor, and John O. Fell would guide the runaways northward to Montrose, Towanda and Friendsville and eventually into upstate New York.

In addition to Bethel A.M.E. Church, there was at least one other Underground Railroad station in Wilkes-Barre — the home of William C. Gildersleeve. This short, heavy-set, white abolitionist was known to hide runaways in his kitchen until nightfall when he shuttled them to nearby stations at Scranton or Abington. He once assisted 14 fugitives on the same night.

According to his daughter, Mary Sayre, the shrewd abolitionist "loaded the fugitives onto a large wagon, covered them with hay" and "about 11 o'clock at night" drove off to the next station at Abington.

On another occasion, the outspoken Gildersleeve was summoned to appear in a Philadelphia court for having harbored a group of runaways in violation of the fugitive slave law. When the prosecution could produce no evidence against him, Gildersleeve proceeded to incriminate himself.

"I plead guilty to having helped runaway slaves get to Canada," he admitted. When the judge asked why, the Wilkes-Barre abolitionist replied, "I felt that I had to obey a higher law than those of the government." Fortunately, the judge still released him.

Gildersleeve also endured personal attacks and risked injury for the anti-slavery cause. Once a mob drove him from his house, soaked his body with black dye and paraded him downtown before an approving public.

Had it not been for the intervention of two sympathetic neighbors who dispersed the crowd by firing their pistols, the incident might have turned deadly.

Although it is not known how many runaways traveled through Wilkes-Barre, historians estimate the total number who escaped on the Underground Railroad nationally was 100,000.

Although that might not seem like much when compared to the 4 million in bondage in the 19th century, the movement still continues to fascinate people today.

At a time when our nation is looking to the past for examples of cooperation between black and white people to inform a much-needed dialogue on race relations, the Underground Railroad reminds us blacks and whites played important roles in the ongoing struggle for social justice in this country.

Regardless of skin color, we all have the power to shape a common history, and the responsibility to do so for our children. Ultimately, they will become the beneficiaries or victims of our examples.

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