The Underground Railroad As Deliverer of Peace

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Many regard the Underground Railroad as the noblest quest for peace and justice in United States history. In this quest, Frederick County played its part well.

The Underground Railroad existed from 1585 when enslaved people from Africa first arrived in the New World at Saint Augustine, Florida, to the end of the Civil War in 1865. Though it would not have a name for another 250 years, the Underground Railroad began when some enslaved person first escaped from Saint Augustine and was aided by any other person, most likely a Native American.

Beginning with Mennonites in 1688 and Quakers in 1754 and then wholesale in the 1780s, Protestant denominations one after another condemned slavery. After the Revolutionary War, northern states rapidly abolished slavery with nine doing so between 1780 and 1786. The next decades saw wholesale formation of anti-slavery societies and vigilance committees which began actively aiding fugitives from slavery.

This mounting opposition to slavery—the abolitionist movement—lent hope to enslaved people resulting in more and more of the most daring breaking for freedom to northern states and Canada in a rising wave of Underground Railroad travel beginning about 1800.

The Underground Railroad's moral quest was international. A signal event of the Underground Railroad was Canada's abolishing slavery in 1831 and the rest of British Commonwealth doing so by 1833 with Canada and British Caribbean islands becoming magnets for American freedom seekers. After the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act required United States citizens anywhere to assist in apprehending runaways, Canada became the true safe haven through the end of the Civil War. As early as the 1830s, Canada took open pride in her Underground Railroad roles by refusing to extradite Lucie and Thornton Blackburn and then others back to the United States. Those who made it to Canada did not suffer the century-long indignities of Jim Crow endured by Americans freed at the end of the Civil War and their descendants. Canada remains enormously proud of her Underground Railroad role.

For 280 years, every American—black, white, Native American—knew of slavery, that every enslaved person longed for freedom, that some would risk life and limb to try to attain it, and that certain free people would risk all to aid freedom seekers. Every American and Canadian was acutely aware of these things which formed a deeply rooted part of the very consciousness of the two nations and a tightly woven part of the fabric of daily life. Thus, the long contest between freedom and slavery, between good and evil in North America, was, as author Fergus Bordewich has put it, the war for the soul of America. Indeed it was. It took a very, very long time to win this struggle, but won it was. The moral certitude, perseverance and courage of Underground Railroad agents, but most especially of freedom seekers themselves, delivered the continent from its moral darkness and to today's long-sought peace on the issue of slavery.

Frederick County, Maryland, played its part in the Underground Railroad, and played it well.

Travel on the Underground Railroad occurred as far west as the Great Plains but most Underground Railroad activity was concentrated into two bundles of routes on either side of the Appalachians. Frederick County sits directly amidst a fifty-mile funnel of routes between southern

Maryland to the east which had strong pro-slavery views and the Appalachians to the west where terrain made flights to freedom more difficult.

Routes here are not well documented until one gets north of the Mason-Dixon Line to Pennsylvania, the first free state which freedom seekers encountered until November, 1864, when Maryland abolished slavery. Frederick County, a border county in a border state, had distinctly split sympathies regarding slavery with the predictable result of virtually all of its Underground Railroad safe-houses and routes being clandestine at the time and therefore remaining shrouded until recent research.

With renewed local interest, Frederick County Underground Railroad stories now surface more often and the list of possible sites grows. Sixty-one confirmed or suspected Underground Railroad sites have been identified in Frederick County, beginning to flesh out what the Underground Railroad there looked and felt like in its time. As it was in its day, we can't be certain whether some sites said to have been involved in the Underground Railroad actually were, but this very ambiguity reflects the nature of the Underground Railroad in its time.

What we can be certain of is that people of conscience in Frederick County, in their quest for peace and justice for all, did not shrink from risk and terrible penalties of the Underground Railroad to deliver freedom to others when they could. This noble rediscovered legacy of the courageous fostering of peace is one in which Frederick Countians today should take much pride.