



## The African-American Experience in Southwestern PA



1754 to 1860

*Bakers Alley – Uniontown*

The history of African-Americans in southwestern Pennsylvania is full of interesting and intriguing stories many of them untold. Here they lived, worked and traveled. Below are vignettes of their story related to the Great Meadows and the National Road.

### "A charming field"

On April 20, 1755, George Washington sent letters to Carter Burwell and John Robinson two powerful members of Virginia's House of Burgess. He was requesting reimbursement for losses of personal property at the Great Meadows in 1754. To Burwell he wrote, "... for beside the loss of many valuable Paper's, a valuable Servant (who died a few days after of his Wounds) ... ." and to Robinson, "... for I had, unfortunately, got my baggage from Wills Creek but a few days before the Engagemt in wch I

also had a valuable Servt Wounded, who died soon after."

Although Washington refers to him as a servant he was a slave, Washington's property. This nameless soul tackled the 1754 campaign only to be wounded in the battle. But unlike the thirty British dead remembered on the battlefield, this individual along with other wounded suffered along the retreat route to later die and perhaps be buried in a dark and lonely forest.

### Part of an Immense Army

General Edward Braddock arrived in 1755 and attempted to force the French from the Ohio River valley. Much is made of the general, his staff and soldiers, but little is told of the camp followers.

Among this group is Samuel Jenkins a slave owned by a British officer. Jenkins attained a job as a wagon driver on the expedition. His responsibilities for the care of the horses, wagon and supplies were important to the overall success of the campaign. For his extra duties beyond servitude he was paid.

As part of Col. Dunbar's column Jenkins never took part in the frightful July 9<sup>th</sup> battle. He saw the results though, as his wagon and others were put to use hauling the wounded.



### Moving West

In 1802, the Jonathan Clark family of Virginia decided to move to Kentucky for a better life. Jonathan asked his younger brother William to help move his property. On January 19, 1802 a group of thirty to thirty-five slaves entrusted to William began their journey from Spotsylvania County, Virginia.

By February 3, they were at the Great Meadows traveling the Braddock Road. That day's walk began at Great Crossing of the Youghiogheny River and would finish in the village of Woodstock [Hopwood, PA], 21miles away. The following day they arrived at Redstone Landing [Brownsville, PA].

Writing his brother, William bemoaned the bad state of the roads, towns and weather slowing his progress. Having reached the Monongahela River they continued their trip by water to Louisville, arriving safely February 23.

A year later Clark's friend, Meriwether Lewis, travelled this route to join William at Louisville and continue their famous exploration.

## Seeking Freedom along the National Road

In 1806, President Thomas Jefferson laid plans for the National Road. Construction of the road began in 1811 in Cumberland, Maryland. By the 1830s, construction of the road came to an end in Vandalia, Illinois, but the popularity of the road never ceased. In fact, the National Road even has its ties to the Underground Railroad.

The National Road served several purposes in history, first as a major route of commerce between the east and west linking towns and communities and opening a new era of communication. Lastly, the National Road served as an important escape route for slaves seeking freedom. Following the North Star led them to this significant road which could either enhance or hinder them towards their ultimate goal.

### Stations

The National Road was one of several escape routes used by the slaves on the Underground Railroad. Some slaves escaped northwest from Maryland over the National Road into Uniontown. Slaves made use of Indian paths and old roads as they made their way to freedom. Baker's Alley located off the National Road in Uniontown was a famous haven for slaves finding shelter, help and directions. Turkey's Nest section of the National Road, located on the western slope of Chestnut Ridge, was also a noted safe haven.

According to Fayette county historian Buzz Storey there were twenty-four stations in Fayette, Greene, Washington and Westmoreland counties. Authors Switala and Swetnam declare the National Road served as an important artery for fleeing slaves whom once they reached Uniontown from the Morgantown area then traversed the road to Brownsville and Washington.

### A Conductor's Account

Several people gave accounts of slaves using the National Road. One of the best known is Howard Wallace's account. Wallace speaks of the slaves getting help from people living along the National Road with a list of area "conductors" on the Underground Railroad. Two he mentions are Curry and John Payne of Uniontown. Equally, he mentions area people willing to catch slaves for a price. Here is an excerpt of Wallace's account.

*When they left Brownsville in company with Lloyd Demas and others, they would generally go up river to where the Diamond*

*Coal Works are now situated, thence up through Denbo, at which time was a dense forest, but there piloted by the old pioneers, until they reached the Old National Pike coming out between C.I. Dorsey's residence and Malden, thence up the Pike to where the gate now stands on the farm, owned by William Pepper, thence to Pike Run Road, then across the field to William Wallace's the house now occupied by Lewis Deems. It was considered about the best stopping place on the route.*

Another well known helper of slaves on the road was William Willey. Willey lived in Somerfield and assisted runaways with food and directions. In his book on the National Road, Philip Jordan writes, "Abolitionists knew the National Road as the thoroughfare for runaway slaves. They lurked along its edges, crept for shelter under its S bridges and burrowed in hay lofts of stage barns." Thomas Searight in his book also relates about slaves seeking freedom along the road and the unfortunate episodes of those caught. It was not uncommon to see slaves being transported over the National Road in leg irons and encounter along the same mile a free African American drover or wagoner.

