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# THE CONDUCTOR

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FEBRUARY 2001

## Regional Directors Meet in Omaha

On January 31, NPS Regional Directors planned to meet with Underground Railroad coordinators in the Midwest Region, the lead region for the Underground Railroad Program. The goal of the meeting was to set guidelines for the program for FY 2001. Because of snow in Omaha, some Regional Directors (RDs) were unable to come, sending representatives instead.

Cal Calabrese, Associate Regional Director (MWR), offered kudos for the smooth and effective teamwork of the regional and national coordinators. Midwest Regional Director Bill Schenk assured the group that any concerns are not insurmountable; he lauded the great progress made. The program is, after all, only a couple years old.

A vital issue raised was funding. Under the 1998 enabling legislation there is \$500,000 for the program, currently divided among regions for salaries for a coordinator per region and a national coordinator. Regional coordinators also receive whatever financial support regional directors are willing to provide for travel, events, and publications for the public. Requested increases would pay a webmaster to manage the new web site and pay for clerical assistance. Grassroots organizations are desperate for grants such as the \$2.5 million recently authorized but not yet appropriated, for the program. A memo will go out quickly under the signature of all RDs to get the UGRR request into the Green Book.

Staffing is an issue. A critical problem has arisen -- making coordinator positions permanent at consistent grade levels, rather than term or detail positions. With a limited staff, the UGRR program needs to retain coordinators in order to provide continuity. Because positions are not permanent, the parks from which two coordinators have been borrowed have not been able to fill in behind them. A third coordinator has had to leave, seeking a permanent position.

With a new agency director on the horizon, it was decided expedient to prepare a briefing sheet

for the director as well as the NPS Advisory Board. The latter would help the program to emphasize education more.

## NATIONAL SCENE

### The First Network to Freedom Applications

January 15, 2001, was the deadline for the first round of applications to the National Network to Freedom. Six NCR applications arrived in time out of a total of about 30 nationwide. A newsletter with more information is being sent to those on the UGRR mailing list. The following programs and facilities in the NCR region applied: the Catoctin Center for Regional Studies, the International Network to Freedom, Maryland State Archives, Menare Foundation, Muncaster Academy, and Smith Center. Applications will be formally reviewed in early April by all regional coordinators at a public meeting in Washington, D.C. Meanwhile current and future applicants may receive advice on their applications. The next application deadline is July 15. Park programs and sites are eligible to apply.

### Gatherings Outside NCR

The **Southeast Region** proudly held its first Underground Gathering, "Gullah Traces," on January 19-20, Saint Helena Island, South Carolina. The Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition, Inc., was a co-sponsor. Featured speakers display the range of Underground Railroad activities in the South: Jerry Gore of UGRR Museum, Maysville, KY; Kathe Hambric of River Road African American Museum & Gallery, Gonzales, LA; C. M. Boxley, Great River Foundation, Natchez, MS; Alicetyne Turley Adams of Yesteryear Research Unlimited; Elaine Turner, Heritage Tours, Slave Haven House Museum, Memphis; and Queen Quet Marquette Goodwine of Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition.

February 7 was another first, this time in the **Pacific West Region** with "The Quest for Freedom Moves West Network to Freedom Launch Event." The host for the luncheon in Sacramento was Kevin Starr, the California State Librarian. The program was full, including a model for teacher education presented by Cheryl Brown (The Black Voice News), a perspective on California slavery by Clarence Caesar (state SHPO), and a closing offering by the State Librarian on the role of the state library and archives in validating Underground Railroad stories. The program opened and closed with a poem. The following is one of the poems written and read by Charles Curtis Blackwell:

*Mississippi Years, Years Later, 2000*

*Here where the tarnished  
Blood-stained mud  
Lies silky to the touch  
Arises a hope  
That was there all along*

*Dust near the creek's shore  
Reflects a refined Love  
All the roots of passion  
Are here too, and Abel arises  
In the form of gentle ghost  
Wooing  
Banished and/precarious  
Questions for a people who never knew their name  
To gain answers,  
In regards to who I am  
Cane and Korinthia in Mississippi swamplands  
And under the Starry moon  
God speaks through these pine trees  
Where magnolia birds celebrate a sense of reunion  
Families and bitterness  
Plowed under  
where mud is conjured up.*

## VIDEOS & BOOKS

**From Slavery to Salvation: The Autobiography of Rev. Thomas W. Henry of the A.M.E. Church**, edited by Jean Libby (Univ. of Mississippi, Jackson, 1994), is the 1872 account of a man born into slavery who, once free, became an itinerant minister and leader in the rural black communities of western Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. The narrative sheds light on an enslaved ironworking community and the 1818 trial of a white Methodist, Rev. Jacob Gruber, accused of preaching insurrection to slaves. The Rev. Henry himself was accused of criminal association with John Brown, as well as helping runaways and abolitionist activities. Because of the era, location, and ministry described, the Rev. Thomas' account is comparable to The Fugitive Blacksmith by James W.C. Pennington.

## HOME FRONT

Forging Freedom: James W.C. Pennington

Jim Pembroke decided that Sunday, October 28, 1827, would be his last day in Washington County, Maryland. A slave for all of his 21 years, Pembroke had made up his mind to escape and had already hidden a bundle of clothes the night before in a nearby cave.

Yet, as he sat alone in one of the plantation's outbuildings that morning, awaiting the most opportune moment to leave, he hesitated, and considered the difficulties of his decision. First and foremost, he was worried about his family. He would be leaving behind on the plantation not only his mother and his father, but also ten siblings, plus a beloved older brother nearby. What would become of them? Pembroke was well aware that it was a custom to sell families of runaways to the Deep South, before they had a chance to follow their kinsman. What, on the other hand, would happen to him if he failed? The consequences would no doubt be severe. Finally, of more immediate concern, he wasn't exactly sure how to get to Pennsylvania and freedom – he could only guess at the distance from his plantation to the state border, and he had little sense of direction, save for following the North Star. Years later, Pembroke wrote of his mental anguish that day:

**How the impression came to be upon my mind I cannot tell; but there was a strange and horrifying belief that, if I did not meet the crisis that day, I should be self-doomed - that my ear would be nailed to the door post forever. The emotions of that moment I cannot fully depict. Hope, fear, dread, terror, love, sorrow, and deep melancholy were mingled in my mind together; my mental state was one of most painful distraction....But...the hour was now come, and the man must act and be free, or remain a slave forever. [Yuval Taylor, editor, *I Was Born a Slave*, volume II, p.120]**

Pembroke put a piece of bread in his pocket, looked around his slave quarters one last time, and left behind Washington County and slavery forever.

Jim Pembroke's story is one of the great slave narratives of American history. Pembroke changed his name to James William Charles Pennington after his escape, and against all odds, became one of the most distinguished and respected of all African American leaders of the nineteenth century. Pennington eventually became a minister in Presbyterian churches in New York and Hartford, was elected a delegate to several international abolition conventions, founded the American Missionary Association, wrote one of the first histories of Africans in America (1841), lectured widely, led the struggle to desegregate New York City's public transit system, fought for the right of blacks to vote, and remained active in the Underground Railroad. In 1849, the University of Heidelberg awarded Pennington a Doctor of Divinity degree in honor of his achievements. His autobiography, *The Fugitive Blacksmith, Or Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington*, also first published in 1849, has been called one of the ten most important slave narratives, and went through three editions in 11 months, selling over 6,000 copies.

Even though Pennington's autobiography narrates his days as a slave and his escape from the region, most studies of Pennington have focused on his life after his years as a slave, when he became a teacher, minister, and abolitionist. The Catoctin Center for Regional Studies (301-624-2773), a program of Frederick Community College in Frederick, Maryland, is currently researching Pennington's earlier life, however. Research is examining: the life Pennington left behind in Maryland; the influence this period had on his later life; the context of slavery in Mid-Maryland; and aspects of the cultural world of the antebellum white planter class in this region.

*Dean Herrin, Catoctin Center for Regional Studies*

A BULLETIN FROM CLARA BARTON NHS

As a young woman, Clara Barton had little exposure to the struggles of African-Americans and no personal experience with slavery. Through the beliefs of the Universalist Church, she acquired knowledge of the abolitionist movement. Her mother signed several antislavery petitions that were sent to the US House of Representatives. The Civil War brought Clara Barton face to face with the issues of slavery.

During the Civil War, Clara Barton was based in Washington, D.C., but worked throughout Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina. She grew increasingly aware of the conditions faced by former slaves and those newly freed. Thousands of former slaves arrived in Washington. Without an education or skills, they had trouble finding work and caring for themselves and their families. While working in South Carolina, Barton spent her spare time teaching former slaves reading. In Washington, she attended meetings of the Freedman's Bureau. When several African-American churches formed the Freedman's Commission for the relief of the US Colored Troops, they asked Barton "to manage the reception and disbursement of supplies and also the oversight of nurses and assistants." Barton found employment for former slaves as nurses and recommended them for hospital duty whenever possible.

Clara Barton also provided relief to US Colored Troops in the field. She witnessed the attack on Battery Wagner, South Carolina, involving the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts. She recalled:

**I can never forget the patient bravery with which they endured their wounds received in the cruel assault upon Wagner, as hour after hour they lay in the wet sands, just back of the growling guns waiting their turn for the knife or the splint and bandage...**

Clara Barton's interest in the welfare of former slaves was strengthened while she worked to identify Union soldiers buried in Andersonville, Georgia. She learned that following the death of President Lincoln many former masters told their freed slaves that they were not free. One morning she noted that "over 100 colored people have been to me for counsel." She stated, "they would travel twenty miles in the night, after their day's work was done, and I would find them standing in front of my tent in the morning." She told them "that they were free as I was," and did her best to advise them. On February 21, 1866, Clara Barton testified in the US House of Representatives before the 39<sup>th</sup> Congress, providing documentation of post-Civil War conditions that some Africans-Americans faced.

## RECENT EVENTS

### NCR PARTICIPATES IN CHAMBERSBURG LINCOLN SEMINAR

For ten years, ANTI historian Ted Alexander has organized Lincoln Seminars for the Greater Chambersburg Chamber of Commerce. This year, the February 2-3 event included the UGRR in a presentation by Craig Caba and a panel including Frank Faragasso (NACE).

### LINCOLN/DOUGLASS DIALOGUE

On the afternoon of February 12, Lincoln and Douglass' birthdays were honored equally at Ford's Theater by a discussion between Professors David Blight (Amherst) and Edward Smith (American University) exploring the relationship between Lincoln and Douglass. Although they met only three times, there was great mutual respect, and had Lincoln lived longer, there could have been a role for Douglass as his advisor. For those familiar with

Douglass' speeches, there are echoes of Douglass in the Gettysburg Address' metaphors of national rebirth. Make no mistake, however; in the speech dedicating the statue in Lincoln Park in 1876, in front of President Grant and his cabinet, Douglass pronounced African Americans the "stepchildren" of Lincoln.

## HOW CONTROVERSIAL IS THE INTERPRETATION OF SLAVERY?

Docents and staff from Maryland museums and parks gathered on February 16 at Newton White Mansion to learn to handle controversial aspects of slavery. Sponsored by the Prince George's County History Consortium, Rose McAphee (Colonial Williamsburg) and Diane Swann-Wright (Monticello) spoke. In the morning, McAphee considered the greatest fears an interpreter faces in taking on controversy -- offending a visitor, creating discomfort, disruption of a tour, and dealing with emotion and stereotypes. Acting professionally, trying to continue constructively, and deftly identifying the sensitive points are strategies to pursue. She recommended being armed with as much documentation and awareness of contrary views as possible, and avoiding fear of criticism or a little discomfort. Use of dignity and respect can change minds.

Dianne Swann-Wright, who researched descendants of those enslaved at Monticello, provided historical guidelines. Help visitors acknowledge the humanity of the enslaved through use of specifics on diet, work hours, and medical care from the site. There was no one experience of slavery, no one form of resistance. There are a variety of sources like censuses, slave narratives, archeology, Freedman's Bureau records, and oral traditions. Monticello has now identified 8 photos of former slaves!

***THANKS ARE DUE: Sean Tull, NPS, for putting the newsletter onto the NCR Web Site; Kim Ross, VIP, for helping organize the upcoming March 23 Underground Railroad Gathering***

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The National Capital Region Underground Railroad Committee is proud to present this electronic newsletter. This newsletter has three purposes: 1) to pique curiosity, 2) to educate, and 3) to build commitment to accurate portrayal of the Underground Railroad. ***Make this newsletter a forum by directing your comments and contributions to:*** Jenny Masur ([jenny\\_masur@nps.gov](mailto:jenny_masur@nps.gov)).

**CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS**

- **March 10 First Annual Harriet Tubman Day in Maryland. Call (410) 228-0401.**
- **March 23, 4-7 p.m. Gathering at Prince George's Community College.**
- **April 3-5 UGRR Committee, DC, Public Review of Network to Freedom applications.**
- **April 20-21, Annapolis, Maryland Preservation and Revitalization Conference. Call (410) 514-7617.**
- **April 10, 7-8:30 p.m., John Vlach, "Slave Housing in Maryland," Riversdale House Museum. Call (301) 864-0420.**



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