



Network to Freedom



Follow the Drinking Gourd: A Cultural History

By Joel Bresler, joel.br@verizon.net

The American folksong *Follow the Drinking Gourd* was first published by H.B. Parks in 1928. The *Drinking Gourd* song was supposedly used by an Underground Railroad operative to encode escape instructions and a map. These directions then enabled fleeing slaves to make their way north from Mobile, Alabama to the Ohio River and freedom. Taken at face value, the “drinking gourd” refers to the hollowed out gourd used by slaves (and other rural Americans) as a water dipper. But here it is used as a code name for the Big Dipper star formation, which points to Polaris, the Pole Star, and North.

In the ensuing 80 years, the *Drinking Gourd* played an important role in the Civil Rights and folk revival movements of the 1950s and 1960s, and in contemporary elementary school education. Much of the *Drinking Gourd*'s enduring appeal derives from its perceived status as a unique, historical remnant harkening back to the pre-Civil War South – no other such map songs survive.

I spent three years researching the song, and published my research



on www.followthedrinkinggourd.org. I am constantly asked whether the *Drinking Gourd* is “authentic.” Re-examining the *Drinking Gourd* song as history rather than folklore raises many questions. So I’ve learned not to answer immediately; since authenticity can be defined in many different ways, this is actually several distinct questions rolled into one.

Could the song as it appears on most of its 200 recordings and in three well-known children’s books have been sung by escaping slaves?

No, because the lyrics and chorus were written by Lee Hays of The Weavers and first published in 1947, nearly 80 years after the end of the Civil War. The signature line in the chorus, “for the old man is awaitin’ for to carry you to freedom,” could not possibly have been sung by escaping slaves.

Could thousands of slaves have used the Drinking Gourd route to escape?

Based on our knowledge of slave escapes from the Deep South, I view the chances as vanishingly small.

Was Peg Leg Joe an actual person?

Perhaps. But even if there was a *Drinking Gourd* song “in the field,” that does not prove that there really was a Peg Leg Joe. There are many songs based on real people, there are many songs based on composite characters, and there are many song based on fictional characters. For the record, I reviewed two decades’ worth of minutes from the New England Anti-Slavery Society along with various Society ledger books. Sadly, there’s no trace of a peg-legged sailor.

Did the song collectors hear what they say they heard?

I am inclined to believe that H.B. Parks, the first to publish the song, heard it where, when and as he relates in his account. This was a man with tremendous powers of observation.

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Freedom Trails at the Crossroads Conference

Indianapolis, Indiana

September 16-19, 2009

To register for the conference and for more information:

www.indianafreedomtrails.org

Conference Highlights

Special events:

- *Pre-Conference Northern Route Underground Tour*

This tour will include visits to historic Underground Railroad sites and other points of interest in Northeastern Indiana, including Levi and Catherine Coffin's Home in Fountain City (Newport), Indiana, the Union Literary Institute and James Clemens Farmstead, remnants of rural African American communities in Randolph County Indiana and Darke County Ohio.

- *Dinner Theater by Freetown Village "A Matter of Justice"*

Set in 1870, Freetown Village school teacher Matilda Addison, invites a friend to assist her with a presentation to her students. Matilda wants to educate her students about the Indiana judicial system and its relationship to African Americans.

- *Experience Indianapolis- Indianapolis Downtown Walking Tour*

Walking along the Central Canal and nearby Indiana Avenue, participants will see significant buildings and sites relating to the early history of African Americans in Indianapolis, ranging from the late 1830s to 1930s.

- *Post-Conference Southern Route Underground Railroad Tour*

Step back in time to discover Southern Indiana's Underground Railroad heritage by visiting Eleutherian College in Lancaster and Georgetown District, Madison Indiana.



Keynote Speakers:

- Dr. Keith Griffler, SUNY, Buffalo "Escaping the Land of the Free: History, Myth, and the Meaning of the Underground Railroad"
- Dr. Margaret Washington, Cornell University, "Sojourner Truth and Freedom Pathways"

Special Sessions:

- *Myths and Realities of the Underground Railroad: Evaluating and Re-Evaluating Definitions and Histories of the Underground Railroad*
- Moderator: Dr. Keith Griffler, Panelists include: Mr. Tom Calarco, **Dr. Larry Gara** (Professor Emiritus-Wilmington College), Dr. Kate Clifford Larson, and Ms. Susan Cook Soderberg
- *The Atlantic Slave Trade Database (Limited Seating)*

Dr. David Eltis will provide a workshop on using the web version of "The Transatlantic Slave Trade" database. The database comprising 35,000 slave trade voy-

ages between 1526 and 1866 allows the construction of a revised 350-year profile of the slave trade. Participants must pre-register for this session as seating is limited and must provide their own laptop with wireless internet capabilities.

- *Historical Re-Enactor Workshop (Limited Seating)*

Historical re-enactments are becoming increasingly vital to the preservation and dissemination of the history of the Underground Railroad. Schools, museums, historic sites, tourist attractions and others utilize the skills of historical re-enactors to make the past come alive. This workshop consists of two interactive professional development sessions. Participants must pre-register for this workshop as seating is limited.

- *Session 1 The Business of Living History*
- *Session 2 History Comes Alive*

Concurrent Sessions:

- *America's Historic Sacred Places: Centers for Freedom and Economic Justice*
- *Hoosier Women and the Fight for Freedom*
- *Community Partnerships and Telling the Story of the Underground Railroad at a Crossroads of the Ohio Valley*
- *Indiana Quakers, Black Migration to the Midwest, Race, and Law to 1865*
- *Documenting Legal and Geographical Routes to Freedom*
- *Rebellion, Revolt, and Insurrection: Violence in the Service of Freedom*
- *Digging for Freedom: Archaeology and the Underground Railroad*
- *Education, Religion, and the Underground Railroad*

New Exhibit at the Byron Museum

By Jessica McCanse, Executive Director

The Byron Museum is pleased to announce the opening of a new exhibit, *From Shackles to Freedom: The Underground Railroad*, permanently located in the Lucius Read home, which shines a spotlight on Byron's participation in the Underground Railroad. "Many people do not realize that the Underground Railroad came right through this community," said Jessica McCanse, the museum's executive director. "In fact, there were three Underground Railroad safe houses right here in Byron, although the Lucius Read house is the only one that is still in existence." The Lucius Read house, which is a part of the Byron Museum, is a recognized site on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, an honor bestowed on only 12 sites in the state of Illinois.

From Shackles to Freedom traces the story of the Underground Railroad, from its development in the deep south to its active branches right here in northern Illinois. A

new series of storyboards were written just for children, and the exhibit also features interactive elements such as an audiobox that plays a song about escaping to freedom, and a wooden box that people can climb into. "The wooden box was definitely the 'big hit' of the exhibit for school tours," said Jessica McCanse. "Recently we hosted the Byron 4th grade class for tours of the exhibit and all the students made sure that they got a turn in the box." Henry "Box" Brown was a Virginia slave who achieved notoriety in the 1800's by arranging to have himself shipped in a crate to Pennsylvania in order to be free. He spent 27 dark, cold, wet hours inside the crate before the Pennsylvania abolitionists opened the crate in surprise.

The museum is located at 110 N Union Street, Byron, Illinois.. Museum hours are from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, and 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. on Saturdays. Admission is always free. We encourage groups to schedule



From Shackles to Freedom exhibit.

tours in advance so we can arrange for a docent or tour guide. Please call the Byron Museum at 815.234.5031 with any questions. More information can also be found on our website at www.byronmuseum.org.



Mrs. Crull's class examines the exhibit.

The Christiana Riot Tour


By Mary Dugan

You won't want to miss the Christiana Historical Society's driving tour on Saturday September 12, 2009. Your self-driving tour will begin at Christiana Borough Hall - 10 West Slokom Ave., Christiana Pa., where you will purchase your ticket for the tour and view the newly released forty minute documentary of the Christiana Riot. Then move on at your own pace to

9 other stops at the sites associated with the infamous, Christiana Riot also known as The Christiana Resistance.

The Christiana Riot Driving Tour is shaping up to be a phenomenal family and group event with speakers, re-enactors, a display of artifacts, book signing, museum tour, etc. Scheduled for Saturday September 12, 2009, tickets will be

available at 9 AM and displays will be open until 4 PM. The cost is \$10 a person, and students (K to 12) are free.

View the short  video commercial invitation by clicking on: The Christiana Riot Tour or go to youtube.com and search: The Christiana Riot Tour. Please pass this information along to others who would enjoy this tour.

Lear Green Honored in Elmira, New York

By Carole Knowlton

Elmira, NY was very prominent in the Underground Railroad. There are five sites in Elmira that are listed in the Network to Freedom Program.

One of the main conductors of the Underground Railroad was John W. Jones, a freedom seeker from Virginia. He helped over 800 other freedom seekers escape from slavery. No doubt, he probably assisted Lear Green in her escape. He is also known for burying nearly 3,000 Confederate Prisoners of War who died at the Elmira Prison Camp. They are buried in Woodlawn Cemetery which is one of five Elmira sites in the Network to Freedom Program.

Elizabeth Adams, known as Lear Green, lived the last three years of her life in freedom here in Elmira and she is also buried in Woodlawn Cemetery. This is her story:

"\$150 REWARD. Run away from the subscriber, on Sunday night, 27th inst., my NEGRO GIRL, Lear Green, about 18 years of age, black complexion, round-featured, good-looking and ordinary size; she had on and with her when she left, a tan-colored silk bonnet, a dark plaid silk dress, a light moulin delaine, also one watered silk cape and one tan colored cape. I have reason to be confident that she was persuaded off by a negro man named Wm. Adams, black, quick spoken, 5 feet 10 inches high, a large scar on one side of his face, running down in a ridge by the corner of his mouth, about 4 inches long, barber by trade, but works mostly about taverns, opening oysters, &c. He has been missing about a week; he has been heard to say he was going to marry this above girl and ship to New York, where it is said his mother resides. The above reward will be paid if said girl is

taken out of the State of Maryland and delivered to me; or fifty dollars if taken in the State of Maryland. James Noble

153 Broadway, Baltimore"

James Noble, the owner of Lear Green, published this reward in the Baltimore Sun. William Adams and Lear Green contacted William's mother to help them out with their plans of escape. Both William and his mother were free persons of color from New York State. Mrs. Adams came to Baltimore and they decided to ship Lear to Philadelphia on a steamer. An old sailor's chest was used for the trip. They packed a quilt, a small pillow, some clothing, some food and a bottle of water in the chest along with Lear. Mrs. Adams would go along as a passenger on the ship. The rules of the shipping company would not allow a person of color to have a room so Mrs. Adams was assigned to stay on the deck with the chest. This was fine with her as she could open the chest during the night to check on Lear to make sure she was fine.

After 18 hours, the ship reached Philadelphia and the chest was delivered to a house on Barley Street. Friends of Mrs. Adams lived in the house. Then the chest and Lear were moved to the home of William Still in Philadelphia. She remained with the Still family for several days and then was sent on to Elmira. I imagine that she was probably sent to John W. Jones.

William and Lear were married and they lived in a home on the corner of East Third and Baldwin Street in Elmira. On the 1860 fed-

eral census, the listing shows Wm. H. Adams, age 23, black, profession was barber, born in Maryland.

The listing for Lear is Eliza J., age 19, black, born in Maryland. They had a child listed Elizabeth, age 2, born in New York.

William and Lear's happiness only lasted a short time. Lear Green died on November 30, 1860 of consumption. She is buried in Woodlawn Cemetery under the name of Elizabeth Adams. She is buried in the "free section", (charity case), and there is no marker.

This year the local Elmira Juneteenth Committee honored Lear Green. The committee has undertaken a project to provide an appropriate historical marker for her grave. A fund drive has been started for this project. To donate to this fund drive, send a check to EOP c/o Juneteenth, 650 Baldwin Street, Elmira, NY 14901. Indicate that the donation is to benefit the Lear Green Fund.

Next year, 2010, will mark the 150th anniversary of her death. We would like to honor her with a marker on this occasion.



Vicie Rolling of Elmira, NY, in her June 12, 2009 portrayal of Lear Green. Photo: Lynn Dates

Follow the Drinking Gourd?

(Continued from page 1)

Lee Hays reported hearing a version of the song from his Aunt Laura. Randy Sparks (of The New Christy Minstrels) collected a version by a black singer, a tantalizing variant and possible third source for the song.

I believe that versions of the *Drinking Gourd* song were sung by black Americans dating back to at least the early 20th century, and likely earlier than that.

Did the collectors interpret the song properly?

I have more questions than answers on the Parks account. His interpretation was based in turn on information relayed to him by a “Negro at College Station” and his great-uncle. I do not believe Parks was able to confirm the account with a great-uncle. If I am right, this throws into doubt exactly who confirmed the interpretation and provided key additional details. If not a great-uncle, was it another relative, or anyone else? Absent this confirmation, could the black informant have misinterpreted parts of the song? What about the details supposedly supplied by the great-uncle, such as the region where Peg Leg Joe operated? Is it at all possible the route actually started in another locale and refers to other rivers— leading to a more welcoming territory than the hostile southern Illinois end point of the route as we know it?

I believe Lee Hays overstated the amount of information conveyed in the song. Hays thought it began as a camp revival song – I have not

been able to separately confirm this provenance.

So what are we left with? A song that played a rich role in the folk revival and civil rights movement, and that continues to be widely performed and recorded today. A song taught to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of schoolchildren owing to three award-winning children’s books and a firm place in today’s multi-cultural curriculum.

Towards a New Theory

Previous explanations of the *Drinking Gourd* song – whatever their accuracy – at least had the virtue of being internally consistent and neatly compelling! According to the received wisdom, *Follow the Drinking Gourd* was taught to slaves in the Mobile, Alabama region by a real person, an itinerant abolitionist who also marked the encoded route given in the song. This route was then used by slaves to escape northward to freedom, crossing the Ohio River at Paducah, Kentucky. This version hinged on H.B. Parks’s assertion that a great-uncle who had been active in the Underground Railroad confirmed the particulars based on primary records.

My research has shown there are serious questions on many of these points. If we believe the *Drinking Gourd* was an actual folksong, but discount some or all of this explanation, we are then left with the most critical question of all: how to explain it?

Here is a preliminary theory about the song and how it evolved. If the song predated the Civil War, it

served principally as an inspiration to escaping slaves. The song would have contained limited or no map information. The geographic verses were added after the war, either by creating new verses, or by combining the *Drinking Gourd* verses with those from another song. (Traditional songs are so often combined “in the field” that ethnomusicologists have several terms of art for it, including “amalgamation” and the unfortunate sounding “contamination.”)

It is also possible the song as we know it from the Parks account emerged in its entirety **after** the Civil War. Whether it arose before or after the war, we needn’t argue about the historical authenticity of the song including the entire route, or the route ending in southern Illinois, or many other historical points **because we can now evaluate the song as folklore, not as history.** Perhaps Peg Leg Joe was an actual abolitionist, or a composite character, working in the South. Perhaps the song actually traces the route of one or several intrepid freedom seekers and grew in popularity by celebrating their exploits. According to this theory, the collectors could have heard the songs in the field and the “Negro at College Station” could have correctly interpreted its meaning (as **folklore.**) But Parks did not confirm the story separately with a family member and there was **no** *Drinking Gourd* song complete with map information sung in the antebellum South.

I welcome your questions and comments.

Designers Wrap up First Stage of Tubman Park Design Public Survey to Inform Exhibit Concepts

By Anne Kyle

A design team headed by Baltimore-based architectural firm GWWO, Inc., has completed a conceptual plan for the proposed **Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park**. The 17-acre park is located in Dorchester County, Maryland, near Cambridge, where Tubman spent her childhood and young adult years. The park is adjacent to Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge whose landscapes are evocative of scenes from Tubman's life on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

The facility would include a visitor center, memorial garden, exhibits, trails and picnic pavilions. It is being developed by the Maryland Departments of Natural Resources and Business and Economic Development, along with Dorchester County.

Officials at the Maryland Tourism Office expect the visitor center to open by 2013 – possibly in spring 2012 – coinciding with the state's plans to honor Tubman's life on the 100-year anniversary of her death. The Tourism Office is gathering public input on the park and exhibits through a survey and focus groups this summer.

Federal legislation was introduced in 2008 to create Harriet Tubman National Historical Parks in Mary-

land and Auburn, New York – where Tubman spent the second half of her life. The bill enables the federal government to include the Tubman state park in the proposed national park, allowing the National Park Service to co-manage it with the state of Maryland.

Tubman was born in Dorchester County. She was enslaved there during the first 29 years of her life. After she escaped, she returned to the region to ferry enslaved people out of Maryland during the years leading up to the Civil War.

To participate in the 10-minute online Tubman survey, go to www.visitmaryland.org/tubman.aspx. The results will be used by the park's exhibit designers to plan exhibits and other park interpretive media. Through the survey, names and contact information will be collected from those interested in participating in an optional focus group, where participants can provide feedback on exhibit concepts. The focus groups will be held on Maryland's Eastern Shore in late summer.



Blackwater Wildlife Refuge. Photo: Ceres Bainbridge



Harriet Tubman. Photo: Library of Congress

Stories from da Dirt—A Historical Drama Sheds Light on the African American Experience At Fort Donelson

By Nancy J. Dawson, PhD

For several years, Nancy J. Dawson, a professor of African American



The play, set in the summer of 1864, focuses on the lives of enslaved Africans who were enlisted at the Fort and others who lived in the area. Dawson, both the writer and director, uses monologues, music and dance to depict the often chaotic and troublesome lives of the slaves.

Daniel Sholar's descendant, George Sholar is ecstatic about the project. "I think this whole project is inspiring," George Sholar said. "Hopefully, this production will open the doors to more documen-



Studies has been researching African Americans in the Civil War in Middle Tennessee and Western Kentucky. Her research has led her to pension records located at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and to



conduct hundreds of hours of interviews with elderly community members.

Through a grant from the Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, support from Fort Donelson National Battlefield and the African American Studies program at Western Kentucky University (WKU), Dawson is kicking up dirt.

On April 4, 2009, *Stories From Da Dirt* premiered at Fort Donelson.



Nancy Dawson, Broadway actor Charles Holt, and cast perform dances from "Stories from da Dirt".

The character, Young Daniel Sholar, played by WKU student Gary Taylor, is based on the life of Daniel Sholar, a runaway slave from Trigg County, Kentucky who comes to Fort Donelson with both his father and brother. Dawson documented some of this information thru pension records. The Sholar family was recruited into Heavy Eighth United States Colored Troops.

tation of the African American experience in this area," he said.

Another character, Hiram Kendall, (played by Broadway actor and Tennessee native Charles Holt) was a body servant from Paris, Tennessee--which is

about 25 miles from Fort Donelson. Dawson found a picture of Kendall in a book while conducting research. She immediately went to her beautician Rita Kendall, who is married to Lonnie Kendall. Lonnie and Hiram had such a strong resemblance, Dawson knew there had to be a tie and there was, Hiram was Lonnie's great, great uncle. The Kendall family attended the premier in April.

"The play was so real," said Lonnie Kendall. "It put a begin-

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Network to Freedom Grant Supports Performance of “Stories from da Dirt”

(Continued from page 7)

ning to the history of our family.” We didn’t know anything about Hiram Kendall, but now we can share this story with our grandchildren,” he said.

Although seldom discussed, women of African descent played a significant role in the Civil War; they cooked, washed clothes and attended to the sick. Dawson played the role of, Nancy McGee, (a midwife and former slave from Trigg County) who was actually married to Daniel Sholar in slavery as well as another soldier Jordan McGee, who was in the 101st United States Colored Troops. McGee’s character is an ancestor that returns from the dirt to narrate the play. Akousa Gyeaboa of Indianapolis portrays the character Susan Tinsley, who was from Western Kentucky, the Tinsley character is symbolic of the hardship that many enslaved African women endured. The character explains how her children were sold and how she was dashed in the head with a pair of scissors at 12 years old because she wouldn’t deliver a baby. This aspect of the character was based on Dawson’s from great-grandmother, Elizabeth Thompson, an enslaved African who escaped to Quindaro, Kansas.

Another character, Jack Simon, portrayed by the production’s choreographer Rossi Turner, was a soldier in the Heavy Eighth United States Colored Troops, who had a half dollar placed in his forehead to cover a cracked skull. Simon’s character was used to explain some



Western Kentucky students and Dr. Nancy Dawson perform at Fort Donelson.

of the dances that enslaved Africans performed during corn shucking festivals and other dances such as the *Pigeon Wing* and *Buck Dance*.

Dawson used students in her *African American Dance: History, Culture, Theory and Performance (AFAM 221)* to play various roles. As a result of the collaboration between WKU and the National Park Service, students not only fine tuned their performance skills, but students learned a lot about African American history and culture.

“On a personal note, I think the performance served as a way of putting one’s self in the shoes of a slave and helping you to inherit some faith and perseverance just to keep going till you have reached that goal,” said WKU student Jameisha Joyner who portrayed a slave dancer. “Fort Donelson was a very good experience for me. It really opened up my eyes to how

these people were treated and their passion just to be free.” Joyner said.

Candidates for Eighteenth Round

The following candidates are being considered for inclusion in the Network to Freedom in the eighteenth round of applications on August 26, 2009, at the Balch Library, 208 W. Market Street, Leesburg, Virginia. The public is invited to attend. For further information, please contact Jenny Masur at 202-619-7136, or at jenny_masur@nps.gov. To comment on the applications, please contact Diane Miller at 402-661-1588 or diane_miller@nps.gov.

Arkansas

- Freedom Park [site]

California

- Old Tuolumne County Courthouse [site]

Indiana

- Hannah Toliver Historical Marker [site]

Iowa

- Mason House Inn [site]

Kentucky

- Abraham Lincoln and the Underground Railroad in Kentucky [program]
- Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad: The Art of Mark Priest [program]

Massachusetts

- Dorsey-Jones House [site]
- David Ruggles Center [facility]

Pennsylvania

- Grave of Acheson Ritchey, Fairview Cemetery [site]
- Grave of Henry Watson, Mount Vernon Cemetery [site]
- Routes of the Underground Railroad, Gettysburg NMP [program]

New Jersey

- Primary Source Seminar, Morristown NHP [program]
- William Still meets Peter Gist [program]

New York

- Many Roads to Freedom, Rochester Public Library [program]
- Mount Hope Cemetery [site]
- Rouses Point Pier [site]

Tennessee

- Shiloh National Military Park [site]
- Stories from Da Dirt, Music Is Spirit [program]

Virginia

- African Americans: From Slavery to Emancipation, Museum of the Confederacy [program]
- Alexandria Special Collections [facility]
- Fairfax Courthouse [facility]
- Rippon Lodge [site]
- Virginia Historical Society [facility]

Congratulations to the New Network Listings

The spring 2009 public review meeting for Network to Freedom applications was held in Natchez, Mississippi. The regional program manager committee accepted the following 18 listings into the Network, bringing the total to 391.

DC

- Old City Hall, DC Courthouse, Washington, DC [site]

Florida

- Fort Mose [site]

Indiana

- Oswell Wright Historic Marker [site]
- Union Literary Institute [site]

Kansas

- Owens House [site]

Louisiana

- Cammie G. Henry Research Center at Northwestern State University of Louisiana [facility]

Maryland

- Mount Calvert [site]

Massachusetts

- Massachusetts Historical Society [facility]

Michigan

- Isaac Bailey Gravesite, Oak Hill Cemetery [site]

New York

- Utica Rescue at Judge Hayden's Law Office [site]

Ohio

- Howard Family Farm [site]

Pennsylvania

- Atwater Kent Museum, Quest for Freedom: Friday Afternoon [program]
- Atwater Kent Museum, Quest for Freedom: School & After-school Students [program]
- Atwater Kent Museum, Quest for Freedom: Teacher Workshops [program]
- F. Julius LeMoyne House [site]
- Riverview Farm [site]

Virginia

- Aquia Landing [site]

Wisconsin

- Samuel Brown Farm Site [site]

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www.indianafreedomtrails.org (See page 2 for more details)

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Please forward notices,
items of interest, articles, or
topic suggestions for consid-
eration to Diane Miller at
NPS, 601 Riverfront Dr.,
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at diane_miller@nps.gov.

Comments on the newsletter
are also welcome.
Deadlines are January 15 and
July 15.