



Published Quarterly By The Montgomery County Historical Society

# The Montgomery County Story

Vol. 49, No. 1

February 2006

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## THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY RECENT FINDS AND REVELATIONS

By Anthony M. Cohen

In 1994 the Montgomery County Historical Society published *The Underground Railroad In Montgomery County: A History and Driving Guide*. Never before had any research been published on the local workings of the Underground Railroad, or of the role that Montgomery County, MD, a former slaveholding district in a slaveholding state, may have played in the escape of fugitive slaves. The publication was the first such look at the story in our region.

Central to the success in documenting the system was the use of local court records, newspaper articles, personal diaries and family histories. Slave narratives found at the Library of Congress contributed first-hand accounts of fugitive slaves. In the interim decade a plethora of documentation has come to light providing more answers as well as begging more questions. While initial documentation appeared at times to be random or anecdotal in nature, more recent discoveries reveal two locations: Sandy Spring and Rockville, MD as unique centers of Underground Railroad (UGRR) activity.

Pivotal to documenting Rockville's role was William Still's *The Underground Railroad*. Published in 1872, the book chronicled the activities of the Vigilance Committee of The Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in harboring and transporting fugitives through Philadelphia during the 1850's. First-hand accounts of its passengers, financiers and methodologies are meticulously detailed by William Still, who in his role as its chief operational manager recorded the details of hundreds of slaves he assisted. At first glance the book identifies several fugitives from Montgomery County, including five from Rockville, who accessed Still's clandestine network. [1]

Of particular interest is the story of Ann Maria Weems, a teenaged girl who fled from the county seat in August 1855. The property of local slave trader Charles Price,

Ann won fame in anti-slavery circles after she made her escape disguised as a boy; a lithograph of her donning her coachman's uniform is captured in Still's thrilling account. [2]

THE UNDERGROUND RAIL ROAD



MARIA WEEMS ESCAPING IN MALE ATTIRE

Illustration of Ann Maria Weems from *The Underground Rail Road* by William Stills

Key to Ann's escape was the intervention of Jacob Bigelow, a Washington lawyer and agent of William Still's, who forwarded slaves from the Capitol to Philadelphia in the early to mid-1850s. Having learned of Ann's plight from freed members of her family, Bigelow succeeded in smuggling her into Washington City and stowing her away until safe transport north could be arranged. According to Still's book, Bigelow employed the assistance of a Pennsylvanian dubbed "Dr. H" who had been sent to Washington to pick up Ann. Still's book reveals little about this man's identity, other than to note that he was aligned with Still's abolitionist network, and that on Thanksgiving Day, 1855 he successfully delivered Ann Weems to freedom. [3]

In 1998 young adult book author, and Montgomery County resident, Elisa Carbone published *Stealing Freedom*, a work of historical fiction about Ann Maria Weems and her daring underground escape. Within a year of its publication it came under the notice of Lynn Murray, another young adult book writer, who had purchased a copy of the novel at an Arizona writer's retreat. Murray was then working on a book of her own on frontier medicine when she recognized "Dr. H" as Dr. Ellwood Harvey, a faculty member mentioned in the records of the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania in which she was researching. Murray's sources revealed that in 1855 Dr. Harvey, desiring to purchase an anatomical mannequin on which his the students could study, agreed to go to Washington and rescue a young girl from slavery. In lieu of \$300, the cost of the mannequin, Harvey slipped below Mason & Dixon's line and extracting a young girl "dressed in boys clothing" successfully carried her north to Philadelphia. [4]

While the records Murray uncovered seemed to detail Ann's escape in precise detail, they never mentioned Ann's name specifically as the girl rescued by Harvey, thus leaving a critical gap in corroborating evidence between the unearthed records and William Still's account. However, in October of 2005, Steve Harvey, a descendant of Dr. Ellwood Harvey, contacted Elisa Carbone after coming across Ann's story immortalized in *Stealing Freedom*. In his possession was an article from The Philadelphia Inquirer, November 6, 1938 titled *How A Doctor Risked His Life For A Mannequin*, featuring a photo reenactment of "Ann Week's" (sic) escape with Dr. Harvey masterminding the plot.

In 1938 someone knew of, or believed that, Dr. Harvey had commandeered Ann's escape; thus casting the obscure physician as chief protagonist of the amazing slave rescue. The Inquirer pictorial, which featured reenactors from Harrisburg's Fort Hunter Museum, includes the ghastly likeness of the actual mannequin that launched the now notorious Harvey/Weems *underground* escape. [5]

While such finds seem more the realm of providence or luck, a great degree of detective work must still be done to verify such stories. And in the world of Underground Railroad documentation, locating primary source materials is still the Holy Grail for researchers. Discoveries like these have increased with frequency in recent years as the Internet, with its powerful keyword searches, has proven critical in locating rare items in



Dr. Harvey's mannequin, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 6, 1938

obscure collections as well as other scholars conducting similar research. Of course before 1994, when the *The Underground Railroad In Montgomery County: A History and Driving Guide* was being researched, the Internet had not yet come into widespread use and traditional methods of detective research had to be conducted. Consulting the classic slave narratives, abolitionist biographies, newspapers and pamphlets was essential to learning the key people, places and events in one of history's most well-constructed and well-guarded of secrets.

Among the first sources for Underground Railroad history were several publications by Wilbur Siebert, an historian at Ohio State University who, in the early 1890's, began compiling documentation and testimonials on the operations of the Underground Railroad nationwide. In 1896 his seminal *The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom* was published, providing the first comprehensive look at how the system operated as a national movement. [6] For over 40 years Siebert corresponded with people who had participated in the Anti-slavery movement to learn the details of their clandestine and often illegal activities. In all, Siebert amassed a primary collection of over 70 bound volumes of letters and notes from \_\_\_\_ states, including one box of correspondence labeled "Southern States" including Maryland, DC and Delaware.

In 1998 while visiting the Ohio Historical Society, where the Siebert Collection currently resides, I found in this box letters critical to understanding the activities of what could be termed as William Still's "Rockville Line." [7] An 1896 letter to Siebert, from W. B. Williams of Charlotte, MI, the nephew of Jacob Bigelow, identified Bigelow as "The General Manager" of the UGRR from Washington to Philadelphia. Williams relates an illuminating account of one of several methods employed by him for forwarding slaves from the Washington, DC area:

*"His mode of procedure was this: he would first give the fugitive careful directions. He was to fill his pockets with crackers or other provisions enough to last him two or three days. At a definite hour in the evening of a particular day he was to go to a certain street where he would see a man with a white hat and a silk handkerchief in his hand and was to ask him if he was the Sexton of--- church if he said he was, the fugitive was to do whatever he bid him do. If there were several the man in the white hat would station one upon one street corner and another at a different corner, and so on with the instruction that when he passed by them they were to follow on some distance behind him, thus he would pick up two or three when he came to forks in the road they would get a glimpse (sic) of his white hat, when that was not to be seen they were to press on with diligence. If he met any one he would whistle and call his dog and they were to jump over the fence of hide in the bushes, until the traveler had passed but they had to take their chances of pursuit from the rear. Before daybreak he would send them in the bushes or elsewhere, and leave them in hiding through the day, and at night would appear again. His face they never saw and in two or three days they were delivered to friends in Philadelphia. For this perilous service I think the conductor rec[eived] \$40. per head from each fugitive or his friend."* [8]

It was Jacob Bigelow who coordinated Ann's escape from Rockville and, with Still, her flight north with the goodly "Dr. H." While no specific modes of escape are detailed for each of the remaining Rockville slaves who accessed Still's network, several plans for conveyance, including walking slaves overland, were nonetheless described by Bigelow in the Still account. [9]

In addition to this, the "Southern States" file furnished three more informative letters, this time regarding Sandy Spring, MD, the second local center of documented *underground* activity. Each letter, the testimony of Sandy Spring residents who had lived in the rural Quaker village during slavery, details some direct or indirect knowledge of the workings of the mysterious network there. The first two letters relate to "Bloomfield," the old Quaker homestead that first inspired my research in 1993, and appears to confirm its role as the central station of the Underground Railroad in Sandy Spring [10]:

*January 25, 1896*

*My young days were spent in the midst of Slavery, as I lived in a Quaker Community in Montgomery Co. Maryland and everyone outside our neighborhood held slaves and in one [d]istrict at least 1000 human beings in bondage in one great farm. I remember one moonlight night, A negro crossed our lawn with his bundle on his shoulder, and begged my father to tell him which was the north star, which information was given, and another time, I heard fearful screams and turning to the road I saw a cart in which were two women tied who were imploring help as they were sold away from home and children to go farther south and when Lucretia Mott came to visit us some of the slave holders sent word that she must leave or be mobbed, and my father Richard T. Bentley, quietly replied that he had always been considered a remarkably good shot so the mob did not arrive. All these things made a vivid impression on my childish mind, but we were never actually engaged in helping Slaves off. We never could have lived there if we had. [M]y grandfather John Needles of Baltimore had much to do and caused many slaves to regain their freedom who were unjustly held, but this was through process of law, he lived in Baltimore and the dealers in flesh and blood would allow him to go in their slave pens as they were called and talk with the pen creatures, he suffered many losses in business and otherwise from his abolition principles. His house was set on fire or destroyed- six times; in consequences of it- those times seem so remote now and the present generation knew nothing of the sorrow, and misery of them and "Slavery" is only a name, and often a picturesque name to them.*

*Very Sincerely Mrs. Jos. L. Moore*

Mrs. Joseph T. Moore (Eliza Bentley) was Richard T. Bentley's eldest daughter, and recalled the "assist" given to the slave passing in the night with vivid clarity. [11] The second comes years later from Allen Farquhar, a member of a prominent Quaker family and neighbor to the Bentley family:

November 13, 1935

*...Although very young at the time of the Civil war, I well remember my father speaking of the "Underground Railroad", and the practice of slaves keeping hid in the house of their friends during the day and traveling towards the North Star at night. One such haven was in sight of our house, owned (or rented) by a colored woman, Harriet Smallwood, and it is still standing though much changed and has had many different occupants. I do not recall any other place where slaves were harbored, nor if there was any systematic forwarding done, but I know that as Sandy Spring was mostly settled by Quakers or Friends there was much sympathy for the fugitives. The free negroes were as a rule too fearful of their position to give open aid.*

*- Allan Farquhar*

A third letter appears as a wild card of sorts, having been sent to Siebert on behalf of a very old woman who some 70 years after the end of slavery was unsure of which story to tell:

*Dec. 23<sup>rd</sup> 1935*

*On November 27<sup>th</sup> you(r) wrote Miss Harriet I. Lea at Sandy Spring, asking her for information about the "Underground Railway". She has asked me to answer the letter for her.*

*I was with her a long time yesterday morning trying to get her to remember back to those trying times, but without much success. Her childhood home was in a rather out of the way section of the Sandy Spring neighborhood, and as you know roads and other modes for visiting were worse than poor. After trying every angle of approach that I could think of to get the information, she said tell him "I am an old lady in her 90<sup>th</sup> year, and too laid-up to remember anything."*

*Later on she told me she thought "three Friends' families had helped in this work," but of that she was not sure. Again she said: "I think no one around this neighborhood assisted, as all their best freinds [sic] were slave-holders, and I do not think they expended their efforts in that direction." You can judge by these quotations which are so at variance with each other that had she given you any information it would not have been historically useable.*

*In behalf of Miss Lea,*

*I am Very truly yours*

*Estill T. Moore Jr.*

At first glance these letters appear both puzzling and contradictory as each gives differing accounts of *underground* activity in the same small village. [12]

Allan Farquhar confirmed that the UGRR had operated there, a fact that he learned from his father William Henry Farquhar, the town historian. However, his revelation that a local black woman was harboring fugitive slaves, seems to undercut his other assertion that Negroes were “too fearful” of offering such aid. Harriet Smallwood, whom Farquhar mentions as living at one underground railroad “haven,” did indeed exist, and appears in the 1850 and 1860 Maryland censuses for Sandy Spring, and at one instant resides on land between the Farquhar and Bentley properties, perhaps in tenant quarters at or near “Bloomfield” itself. [13]

Eliza Bentley Moore, the star witness of the first of the letters, who lived at “Bloomfield” in the 1850s, indicating the family’s relationship with Lucretia Mott, the radical Quaker abolitionist and Underground Railroad agent. Still, Eliza Bentley Moore claims her family were never “actually engaged in helping slaves off.” By this she meant the abduction, sheltering and transport of fugitive slaves that during her lifetime came to symbolize the calling card of the Underground Railroad and its operators. This is likely true as harboring slaves was the riskiest of endeavors in slaveholding territory. Yet the “assist” given to the slave as she describes was a mainstay of the network’s operations in the South, while other forms of aid, such as clothing, feeding and financing runaways, were other key components of a successful *underground* journey.

While the fugitive made the most dangerous part of the journey through the South with only tenuous help, upon reaching the North the *railroad* quickly broke ground and open aid was more vigorously offered. The fact that the slave knew to go to the Bentleys for direction indicates the likely existence of a loose or organized network beginning at or running through Sandy Spring’s Hicksite Quaker and Free black settlements.

While the Siebert letters told differing stories each confirms, one way or another, that the UGRR operated in Sandy Spring and was known to those who were either actively involved or passive yet sympathetic bystanders. Harriet Lea, in her “90<sup>th</sup> year” gives a common response of a person attempting to recall details of many decades past, and said both yea and nay to local *underground* activity due largely to the effects of her dwindling faculties, or perhaps from her isolation from the place where such activities had taken place. On a lucid day she recalled “three families” involved in the work while in her listlessness she remembered no *railroad* at all. Yet, had a single one of these letters survived without the others, one can only imagine what history might have recorded.

Despite their miraculous appearance the three letters were not long to stand alone, being supported by a fourth I later found describing “Bloomfield” yet again through the memory of one of its occupants:

*"Bloomfield" besides being an underground station was a refugee station as well. Once a family of Suttons fleeing northern Va. stopped at Grandfather's; they also had eight children and for one night at least there were sixteen children and four parents bedded down for the night. This family settled in Southern Pa. and I still see members of it at each Yearly Meeting and they retell experiences of that exciting time.*

*- Mary Bentley Thomas*

This letter I recovered from the files of The Montgomery County Historical Society in research notes compiled by Roger Brooke Farquhar for his landmark *Historic Homes of Montgomery County*; the first source in which I saw the Bentley "north star" tale recounted. Farquhar had interviewed Mary Bentley Thomas, one of Richard Bentley's granddaughters; making the half-typed, half-script slip of paper the second account from a Bentley family member. Mary Thomas' keen memory recalled "Bloomfield" not only as a station, but as a depot as well for refugees fleeing Virginia during the Civil War. [14]

Ironically the letters give insight to the system, not only as it existed in Sandy Spring, but also as to how it may have operated and have been aided beyond its borders. While disclaiming "Bloomfield" as a safehouse sanctuary, Eliza Bentley Thomas made two important revelations, in that Lucretia Mott, notorious abolitionist and underground agent, was known to her family and was hosted in their home. Mott's mere presence clearly painted the Bentley family as abolition radicals in the minds of their slaveholding neighbors, possibly prompting hushed discussions among aspiring runaways that the Bentleys and others were indeed friends among Friends.

John Needles of Baltimore, the maternal grandfather Eliza Bentley mentions, was one such person known in anti-slavery circles for his work with William Lloyd Garrison and Benjamin Lundy among others. This family connection placed the Bentleys and their village on a direct link with Baltimore underground network, which stretched north into southern Pennsylvania, culminating at William Still's underground terminal. It was therefore no surprise to discover in the original 1871 edition of William Still's book, a portrait of John Needles on the final page above the intriguing yet unexplained caption "Earnest in The Cause."



JOHN NEEDLES.

No portrait of a person appears in Still's book who wasn't an active agent or passenger on the Underground Railroad, yet Needles' image is the only one without a biography or explanation of his connection. [15] Perhaps Needles, still living in Baltimore after slavery, was deemed by William Still too much at risk to print his story; as hostilities to the war and its Northern victors would have remained high in a town prone to mob violence.

Despite this, the appearance of Needles' portrait in Still's book, among the likes of William Lloyd Garrison and Lucretia Mott, makes a powerful suggestion that he was actively involved with some of the nation's most radical *underground* leaders and networks. Perhaps William Still, as the factor linking both Rockville and Sandy Spring to Philadelphia's Underground network, will serve as inspiration for future scholarship and interpretation into the connections these two towns may have had with one another in Underground Railroad activity. Perhaps, before another decade passes the records of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (Historical Society of Pennsylvania), the Friends Historical Library (Swarthmore College), the Library of Congress, or the diaries of descendants, will reveal additional chapters of Montgomery County's ever-deepening Underground Railroad story.

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## Notes

1. Still, William. *The Underground Rail Road* (1872). Chicago: Johnson Pub. Co. (1970), pp. 174-184, 403-405, 483-434, 487-488.
2. Ibid. pp 174-184.
3. Ibid. pp. 180-183
4. Murray, Lynn to Elisa Carbone. Letter. (November 24, 1999). Carbone personal papers.  
Marshall, Clara. *The Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: P. Blakiston, Son & Co., 1897, pg. 13.
5. "A Drama of Slavery Days: How a Doctor Risked His Life For A Mannequin." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. (November 6, 1938).
6. Siebert, Wilbur H. *The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Arno Press, 1968.
7. Wilbur H. Siebert Collection Microfilm Edition, MIC 192, the Ohio Historical Society Archives/Library.
8. Ibid. Williams, W.B. To Wilbur Siebert. Letter. (March 30, 1896).
9. Still. pp. 186-187.

10. Farquhar, Roger. B. *Old Homes and History of Montgomery County, Maryland*. (1952). Brookeville, MD: American History Research Associates. (1981) pg 103. Farquhar writes:

*Bloomfield was undoubtedly a station of the "Underground Railroad" before Emancipation Day. One evening while sitting near a window, a black face appeared over the sill- a man Friend Bentley knew- and asked: "Mr. Bentley, can you please point out to me the North Star?" On another occasion a bonnet and shawl were borrowed the day before a party of fugitive slaves started their long trek to Canada. These garments were never returned.*

11. Montgomery County Historical Society. Bentley family file. Eliza Needles Bentley Moore ancestor chart, Richard T. Bentley family group chart. Compiled by Jane Sween.
12. Farquhar, Allan to Wilbur Siebert. Siebert Collection. Ohio Historical Society. Letter. (November 12, 1935). It is likely that Siebert came to know of Sandy Spring's Free black and Quaker community through the publication of William Taylor Thom's *The Negroes of Sandy Spring, Maryland: a social study*. [Washington? 1901]: a copy of which was in the Southern State's file when I viewed the collection in 1998.
13. Hurley, William N. Jr., *Montgomery County, Maryland 1860 Census*. Bowie Maryland: Heritage Books Inc., 1998. "The Cedars" and "Bloomfield" a roughly ¼ mile distant. Harriet Smallwood's residence was enumerated in the 1860 census wedged between the Farquhar and Bentley homes. This would have likely placed it in the general vicinity of where the Sandy Spring Post Office and shops are today.

Farquhar, William. Henry. (Ed.). *Annals of Sandy Spring. 1884* (Vol. 1.). Cottonport: Polyanthos, Inc. (1971).

Martenet, Simon. Martenet and Bond's Map of Montgomery County, Maryland. (1865). Montgomery County Historical Society, 1985.

14. Montgomery County Historical Society. Farquhar Papers. "Bloomfield" file. Transcribed note from interview. Jane Sween Library Archives.

Another document referenced in the Sandy Spring Museum's Underground Railroad file is a typewritten note describing yet another version of the Bentley North Star incident:

*"Richard T. Bentley Sr, heard a knock about 11pm—away back in the 40's or 50's—Found a colored man, who asked him if he would show him the North Star—which he did—About this time a Col. Woman came to Frances [Stabler, at "Sharon,"] and asked her to write a letter for her—which she said 'the package will arrive on -day - Another woman went to Aunt Margaret Farquar, and begged her to give her a bonnet & shawl—Soon after this all the Mannakee slaves went by underground railroad, to Canada."*

It appears to link both the Bentley and Farquhar families to Underground Railroad activity. Margaret Farquhar was the mother of Allen Farquhar who was listed as age 6 in the 1860 Maryland census and living at "The Cedars" in Sandy Spring. This house and residence of the Farquhars was situated roughly one-quarter mile from Bloomfield, the Bentley estate. The location and identification of the original document and its author could not be found in the by the time this story went to press. The Mannakees mentioned could possibly refer to the family of Elizabeth Mannakee enumerated on the 1860 census as living in the vicinity of Sandy Spring.

15. Still, William *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, & C., Narrating The Hardships, Hair-Breadth Escapes And Death Struggles of the Slaves in Their Efforts For Freedom, As Related By Themselves And Others, Or Witnessed By The Author.* (1871). Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872, P. 780. Image of Needles is from The Project Gutenberg on line version, E-book #15263, HTML iso-8859-1 zip 1.48 M main site mirror sites P2P. This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at [www.gutenberg.net](http://www.gutenberg.net).

Wright, Edward Needles, ed. "John Needles (1786-1878): An Autobiography." *Quaker History: The Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*. Vol. 58, No. 1, Spring 1969.

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*The Montgomery County Story* is sponsored by the Chevy Chase Land Company of Montgomery County, established in 1890.

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