

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 18, 2017

The Railroad to Freedom: This was not actually a railroad at all and was much better known as the Underground Railroad. It was very active in this area from the early 1840s until the start of the Civil War in 1861. Many sites and local people were involved in helping runaway slaves move secretly north to freedom.

It was easier to be an abolitionist in New England, far from the southern farms and plantations that existed on and exploited the enslavement of black people. It was not so easy to hold to this philosophy in this area, where abolitionists and slaveholders lived side-by-side, at least in southern Delaware. Members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) were in the forefront of the Underground Railroad, and several Quaker Meetinghouses were "stations" where former slaves could be hidden until it was safe to move on. Bounty hunters abounded who would capture these helpless runaways and return them to their former masters in return for handsome financial profit. The "conductors" on the Underground Railroad had to keep ahead of these bounty hunters. However, people on both sides were frequently tipped off, and in a few cases, bounty hunters even looked the other way.

The most prominent of all the conductors was Thomas Garrett of Wilmington, a successful Quaker manufacturer. He owned several buildings near the Christina River in Wilmington that served as hiding places for runaway slaves until they could move on. Harriet Tubman was an intelligent escaped slave from the Eastern Shore of Maryland who helped many of her family and friends escape as she directed them to the many stations on their journey north. She was captured at least once, and Garrett was heavily fined for his anti-slavery efforts. The Tubman-Garrett Riverside Park in Wilmington is named for them. It should be the Garrett-Tubman Park, as she had everything to gain and he had everything to lose from their involvement with the Underground Railroad.

Once the escapees got to Philadelphia, they were relatively safe as they moved on north with help from a majority of the population. However, from the Mason-Dixon Line to Philadelphia was a different story. Camden Friends Meeting south of Dover, Delaware, hid slaves in its Meetinghouse. At another place in Kent County (DE), they were hidden inside haystacks. The tiny Appoquinimink Meetinghouse in Odessa had a narrow balcony with hidden rooms behind. New Castle (DE) had safe havens. Conductors would move groups of slaves at night up to and across the Christina River at Wilmington, where they could hide in Garrett's several buildings.

In lower Wilmington, crude tunnels had been dug under the streets to connect havens along the river to the basement of the Quaker Meetinghouse at 4th and West Streets and from there to the Friends School across the street. In Hockessin, a historic house dating from Revolutionary times, and still in use today, was one of the "stations." Longwood Meetinghouse, near the entrance to Longwood Gardens, was another, with tunnels of entry and escape connected to the basement. Some of these tunnels were discovered after Pierre S. du Pont bought Pierce's Park in 1906 and began the construction of the famous gardens. I attended the OLD Wilmington Friends School at 4th and West from 1930 until it closed in 1937. Although it was supposed to be off limits, we boys often explored and climbed through the old tunnel to the Meetinghouse, which was then filled with electrical wires on knob-and-tube insulators.

Several historians of my generation (and earlier) researched and wrote about the Underground Railroad. Notable among these is Frances Cloud Taylor, now, at age 96, a resident of Crosslands Retirement Community near Kennett Square. Frances was known for her illustrated talks on the Underground Railroad. When Thomas Garrett died in 1871, his was the largest funeral Wilmington had ever witnessed. According to Quaker tradition of that time, the service was held at his home near 2nd and Shipley Streets, with the burial following in the Quaker Cemetery at 4th and West, about five blocks away and steeply uphill. As the casket was being loaded on the horse-drawn hearse, a group of black men stepped forward and insisted that they wanted to carry his casket on their shoulders the five blocks to the cemetery, which they did.