Bedford's Abolitionists - the Struggle Against Slavery

Not much is known about Bedford's role in the underground railroad. While some older houses in the area reveal well-trodden steps to secret hiding places or rarely used exits, recording any activities to assist runaway slaves would have been too risky to the safety of both the slaves and those helping them.

But the struggle against slavery and the work of prominent Bedford abolitionists is well documented. John Jay, later our nation's first Chief Justice, was advocating for the abolition of slavery in 1774 before we declared our independence from England. He was President and Founder of the New York Manumission Society. On February 27, 1792 he stated, "Every man of every color and description has a natural right to freedom."

His views were shared by both his son, Judge William Jay, and his grandson, the lawyer John Jay, both of whom lectured, wrote and published extensively to abolish slavery. In fact, the younger John Jay delivered an address entitled The Rise and Fall of the Pro Slavery Democracy and the Rise and Duties of the Republican Party to the citizens of Westchester County, New York at the Bedford Court House on the eve of the Presidential election of November 5, 1860 when Abraham Lincoln was elected President.

Below is an article by writer, historian and editor Fergus M. Bordewich about the Underground Railroad. He has kindly given us permission to share this information but the photos have been added by the Historical Society.

We have further information at The Bedford Store. Please stop in Monday through Friday from 9am to 4pm if you'd like to check out our resources. Your support makes all we do possible - if you'd like to renew, become a member or make a donation, we welcome your support!
The Jay family included some of the most important, if underappreciated heroes of the abolitionist movement.

New York was once home to the largest number of slaves of any state in the North—more than Georgia, until the late 18th century. The heaviest concentration was on plantations in the Hudson Valley, many owned by the prominent Livingston family. At times, slaves had made up as much as 10% of the population. Slavery was cruel here as it was anywhere in the South. Slaves were branded with irons, and notched in the ears, like cattle. Sometimes they were punished with castration.

WE KNOW the Hudson Valley was one of the main arteries of the Underground Railroad. We know that large numbers of fugitives were sent from Philadelphia to New York City, and up through the valley to Albany and Troy. Between 1842 and 1843—fugitives—virtually all, probably, from New York City. Most of them were sent onward to Central New York, Vermont, or Massachusetts. But there is almost no record of how they traveled—the absence of records is deeply puzzling.

PROFILE OF THE VALLEY AND SLAVERY

In the early 19th century, there were about 2,000 slaves in Dutchess County—in some areas of the county, one-third of the population was enslaved. Support for slavery—or at least tolerance for it—persisted in the valley's staunch antebellum Democratic Party politics. Especially in the plantation country along the east shore of the river, the atmosphere was, frankly, intensely hostile to abolitionism.

In 1833 and 1834, agents for the newly-formed American Anti-Slavery Society swarmed through the state, setting up hundreds of local branches, and recruiting many thousands of members. They were less successful in the Hudson Valley than in any other part of the state. Apart from the Quaker strongholds of Poughkeepsie and Hudson, they recruited almost no one. In 1839,
an agent assigned to the mid-Hudson was mobbed and driven out of Newburgh. The same year, a Liberty Party ticket received only 29 votes in Dutchess County—compared to 438 votes in Madison County, near Syracuse, which was a hotbed of abolitionist activity. And in 1840, Samuel Ringgold Ward of Poughkeepsie—the state abolition society's first black lecturer—was prevented from speaking anywhere. No churches or public buildings were opened to him. And the wheels were even stolen from his wagon.

In 1846, in a referendum on black suffrage, the vote in the valley against allowing blacks to vote was overwhelming: 92% in Columbia County, 96% in Westchester and Ulster, and almost 98% in Putnam.

THE LAND ROUTE
So let's come back to the question I began with. We know fugitives traveled through the valley in big numbers. But how did they do it?

In this early period many of the fugitives handled by the underground were not coming from the South, but fleeing from slavery right here in New York State, or from New Jersey, or Connecticut.

The main route—as best as I have been able to determine it—ran more or less due north through a chain of Quaker communities that extended from New York City to Vermont. Families and meetings were intertwined. Quakers could travel from New York to Burlington without ever sleeping beneath a non-Quaker's roof. So could fugitives.
In the 1830s, fugitives were dispatched northward by underground men like David Ruggles and Isaac T. Hopper. Ruggles—who had connections in Poughkeepsie—was the founder of the New York City Vigilance Committee, the first black-operated underground unit in the country. Hopper was, in a sense, the "father of the Underground Railroad." He began doing underground work in Philadelphia as early as the 1790s.

Fugitives dispatched from the city found protection at three Quaker-owned mills, and possibly at the Colored Peoples Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, in New Rochelle, and among Quakers in Mamaroneck and Scarsdale.

The route continued north to the homes of Joseph Pierce at Pleasantville, and John Jay Jr. at Bedford, in northern Westchester. The Jay family included some of the most important, if underappreciated heroes of the abolitionist movement. His grandfather, also named John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, was a founder of the New York Manumission Society (though a slave owner himself). His father, Judge William Jay, was one of the most prolific pamphleteers of the abolitionist movement. His son, William Jay Jr., reportedly forwarded fugitives out of New York City while he was a student at Columbia University. (I'll come back to the Jays later.)

Fugitives probably also found refuge, or at least assistance, in an African-American settlement known as "The Hills," near the town of Harrison.

From northern Westchester, fugitives continued on through Brewster, in Putnam County, and into Dutchess County to the Quaker stronghold known as Quaker Hill, near Pawling. Many, if not most, found shelter at the home of a Quaker farmer named David Irish.

North of Quaker Hill, fugitives could count on protection from Quakers belonging to the Oswego Meeting, to the northwest. Some were sheltered at Susan Moore's Floral Hill boarding house, a few miles from the Meeting, at Moore's Mills.

About twenty miles north of Quaker Hill stood the most important single abolitionist institution in the valley—and one of the most important in the country: the Nine Partners School, just east of present-day Millbrook.

This Quaker school may, in fact, have served as a sort of command center for the underground in the entire region. As early as the 1810's, students were required to memorize a lengthy anti-slavery catechism that described slavery as a "dreadful evil." Ending slavery, it went on, was "a great revolution," a "noble purpose" for which men and women had been created by their Heavenly Father.
Harriet Tubman (far left), an escaped slave and abolitionist who guided more than 70 families to freedom via the network of safe houses known as the Underground Railroad, eventually settled with her family (pictured here, along with neighbors) in Auburn, NY.

The school had a profound influence on students who went on to shape the entire abolitionist movement—and other great reform movements. They included abolitionist and women's rights advocate Lucretia Coffin and her future husband James Mott, also a prominent abolitionist. And Daniel Anthony, later a stationmaster on the Underground Railroad, and the father of Susan B. Anthony.

The school's headmaster Jacob Willetts—he was author of the most popular textbooks of the day—personally sheltered fugitives at his home just down the road from the school. So did several of his Quaker neighbors.

Some fugitives may have been sent west to Poughkeepsie, where there was a strong abolitionist community. Underground activity in the city has not yet been documented. But fugitives may very well have been assisted by members of the Congregational church, which sponsored a first-rate school for African-Americans as early as the mid-1830s. (David Ruggles probably taught there, along with Samuel Ringgold Ward.)

But the main land route continued due north. The best evidence I've seen for what route they may have followed is in a letter written by Roland Robinson, the owner of Rokeby, the wonderful museum and underground site just south of Burlington, Vermont. Robinson was a close friend of Isaac T. Hopper and other hard-core Quaker abolitionists. His home was, in effect, a northern terminus of the Underground Railroad. Robinson was describing the route he followed in Columbia and Dutchess counties in the course of a trip to New York City. His stops included meetings at Nine Partners, Pleasant Valley, Poughkeepsie, and Crum Elbow, near Hyde Park, all in Dutchess County; and Claverack, Hudson, Ghent, and Chatham, in Columbia County; and then Troy. I think this is certainly the route by which fugitives were sent.
The most important underground center in Columbia County was Hudson. In the early nineteenth century, two-thirds of the families in the city were Quakers—and the rest were said to be "half-Quakers." A contemporary described it as "a city of bustling warehouses, wharves, and docks, ropewalks, and industry," with a population of about 5,000. The meeting house is still there.

Until his death in 1843, the pivotal underground figure in Hudson was a man named Charles Marriott. He was an English-born Quaker and gentleman farmer. Marriott is another one of the great forgotten figures of the underground. He was a key link in the whole web of underground activity in eastern New York. He was in constant touch with fellow antislavery Quakers in Vermont, Rhode Island, Rochester, and New York City. He was an intimate collaborator with Isaac Hopper, in New York City, and with Roland Robinson, the proprietor of Rokeby, near Burlington, Vermont.

So far, I've been talking about the Quaker route up the eastern edge of the valley. There is also evidence that a west-to-east land route also crossed the valley from Port Jervis, on the Delaware River, to Newburgh, on the Hudson. This was, apparently, one of several alternate routes available to the Philadelphia underground. The best source for this route is Roger King's small book "The Silent Rebellion: The UGRR in Orange County". King ferretted out old news stories and memoirs chronicling the passage of fugitives through the towns of Chester and Goshen to Newburgh. In Newburgh, they were often received by an African-American family named the Alsdorfs. King also suggests the existence some kind of route up the western shore of the river from New Jersey.

There is also some evidence that fugitives were sometimes rowed across the Hudson from Newburgh to the vicinity of Beacon, and led from there across Dutchess County to the Quaker enclave at Quaker Hill. Some fugitives may also have found refuge in the African-American hamlet of Baxtertown, near Beacon. Baxtertown's site has been lost. But, like the Guinea Settlement, it is only waiting to be rediscovered.
RIVER TRAVEL

After the 1830s, something odd happens. There is almost no mention of fugitives at all in the valley. What's going on? The answer, I think, has to do with something that happened in the valley in the year 1807, that had nothing whatever to do with slavery...the first successful steamboat, Robert Fulton's "Clermont."

After that, the Hudson rapidly became the great Interstate Highway of its day. Between 1826 and the Civil War, travel time between New York City and Albany dropped from 15 hours to just 7 hours. Sending fugitives by river was both cheap and fast. Traveling from New York to Albany by land might take ten days or two weeks, and require a massive commitment of escorts, wagons, shelter—and money.

Rev. Charles B. Ray, a central figure in the New York City underground explained how they did it: "New York was a kind of receiving depot, whence we forwarded to Albany, Troy, sometimes to New Bedford and Boston, and occasionally we dropped a few on Long Island. When we had parties to forward from here, we would alternate in sending between Albany and Troy, and when we had a large party, we would divide between the two cities."

With luck, a fugitive could expect to be in Canada less than a week after stepping on board a steamboat in Manhattan. Some fugitives may have traveled on so-called "Abolition boats" such as the People's Line owned by committed abolitionists, who carried fugitives on regular trips. Among these may well have been the family of Samuel Schuyler, a former Albany slave who had bought his freedom, and founded a prosperous tow-boat business that was carried on throughout the antebellum period by his sons.

Black stewards also served on the steamships that plied the Hudson between NYC and Albany. One of them was Steven Myers, a leader of the Albany underground. Myers worked as a steward on
the Armenia, which sailed between Albany and New York. Considering that he was the head of the underground in Albany, it's almost inconceivable that he didn't escort fugitives as a regular thing. (Steamboats were incredibly dangerous: they blew up, burned, and hit snags and sank all the time. In July 1852, the Armenia was beaten by the Henry Clay in the most famous race ever on the river—famous because, near Yonkers, the Henry Clay caught fire and became a floating inferno, killing eighty on board, including Nathaniel Hawthorne's sister.) Fortunately Myers lived on to serve the underground until the Civil War.

The image of fugitive slaves sneaking northward in the dead of night has a terrific iconic power. But in much of the North this was a myth. By the 1850s—and in spite of the Fugitive Slave Law—more and more of the underground's work took place completely in the open. In June 1852, the warden of Sing Sing penitentiary, in Westchester, released one day early a prisoner, a fugitive who had served two years for the theft of a boat—to keep him from falling into the hands of the U.S. Commissioner, who intended to hand him over to his former master. And when local Democrats complained to one Northern sheriff about the number of fugitive slaves who were passing openly through the county, he replied: "Let 'em!"

The underground always embraced new technology. Just as steamboats replaced the old land route, the underground literally took to the rails wherever it could. The opening of the railroad up the eastern shore of the river in 1851 cut travel time in half. In the 1850s, the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery office gave fugitives train fare for travel from New York City north. In January 1855, Harriet Tubman simply took three of her brothers, and several other companions she had led all the way from Maryland, to Grand Central Station and bought them tickets for Albany.

CONCLUSION
Although the land route was largely superseded, it apparently was never abandoned. Earlier I mentioned the Jay family.

William Jay Jr., the great-grandson of John Jay was deeply active in the underground. He was also a close friend of Stephen Myers, the head of the underground here in Albany. He was apparently also one of the underground's main financial supports.

The curator of the Jay home recently shared with me a remarkable letter.

In August 1860, Stephen Myers's Harriet wrote to William Jay Jr. from Albany (Stephen was working at the time as a butler at Lake George): "The two fugitives arrived here that you sent, and I sent them immediately on their route for Canada... I have
to attend to the fugitives myself. I was very thankful that you gave some aid, for it was on Saturday they came, and it would have been difficult to get money to send them on that day." She went on to thank him profusely "for all the favors you have done for the downtrodden that come to this office."

The relationship was so close that the Myerses named one of their grandchildren after him: William John Jay Myers. It is a signpost to the kind of remarkable relationships that the Underground Railroad inspired across racial and class lines. It was of course, just one of many-and an indication of the social and moral radicalism that the underground embodied. It's a fitting place for me to end.

Article by Fergus M. Bordewich with photos added by the Historical Society.
Bedford Stories is one of the many ways we bring history to life!

Please support us as we begin our second century of stewardship and ensure that history remains a part of the future! Thank you for your support.

Bedford Historical Society, P.O. Box 491, 612 Old Post Road, Bedford, NY 10506

SafeUnsubscribe™, [recipient's email].
Forward this email | Update Profile | About our service provider
Sent by info@bedfordhistoricalsociety.org in collaboration with

Try it free today