

Among these Hills: African Americans in Lancaster County's Southern End

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Interest in the Underground Railroad has reached new heights in recent years. Local, state, and national attention is focused on the almost semi-mythical efforts of a few to subvert an unjust law at a high risk to life and property. It is the stuff of high drama and conducive to a view that interprets history in terms of villains and heroes. An inherent danger in the continuing emphasis on the Underground Railroad is the occlusion of the breadth of the African-American experience and its homogenization. What I mean by homogenization is exemplified by traditional scholarship on the Underground Railroad and most of what has been written about its operation in Southern Lancaster County.

The local historiography of the Underground Railroad has an unmistakable filiopietistic cant. The Lancaster County Historical Society's 1911 commemoration of the so-called "Christiana Riot" was an exercise in which contemporaries honored their progenitors. In 1909 the Society had staged the Fulton Centennial and then again in 1910 the Bicentennial of settlement in the County. Society officials viewed these galas as public recognition of the Scotch-Irish and German-American elements in the County, respectively. Consequently, at the urging of Society official W.U. Hensel, it was decided in 1911 to have a public history extravaganza that highlighted the Quaker contribution to the County's heritage.

Descendants of the individuals involved in the events on September 11, 1851 were invited to participate in a public event. Two notables, Thomas Whitson, son of the local abolitionist of the same name, and Marianna Gibbons Brubaker, a distinguished woman of letters and daughter and granddaughter of two of the most prominent abolitionists in the region, delivered papers on the Underground Railroad, the events in Christiana, and other related topics in a lecture series that extended throughout the Society's program year. At one point, Peter Woods, a local African-American resident and last surviving member of the resistance group assembled by William Parker outside of his house, was also expected to relate his experiences. Illness prevented him, however, from attending.

What is wrong with this picture? The organizers of the commemoration were careful not to insult anyone by emphasizing victory or defeat; indeed, they were circumspect enough to refer to the events outside of Christiana as an "encounter"; thus, the commemoration sustained a view of the events rooted in local race relations and perpetuated by the events following September 11, 1851. To most Lancastrians

African Americans have always been the embodiment of Hegel's pronouncement about Africa. He considered it a "land without history", that is, devoid of culture and populated by primitive barbarians incapable of intellectual development or achievement. Lacking history Africans were thus mere objects and not actors in historical development. Being little more than inopportune children, how could the men and women around William Parker have conceivably conspired to commit high treason against the United States? To make the inconceivable a little more plausible civil authorities arrested and brought to trial several Quakers whom they believed had convinced Parker and his men to resist lawful authority and commit murder. For decades' abolitionists, had been criticized as the fomenters of discord, rebellion, and amalgamation. It was just a small step to think them complicit in an act of insurrection. The juries in Philadelphia and Lancaster came to a different conclusion, however, and sectional tensions were strained to the point that war became inevitable.

Thomas Whitson's, Marianna Brubaker's, and, more recently, Dr. Charles Spots' accounts of the local operations of the Underground Railroad support this myopic view of the anti-slavery campaign which either denies Black agency through omission or diminishes it by reducing it to footnotes attached to the more important exploits of the teller's ancestors. Marianne Brubaker's account is admittedly in that respect more balanced in that she does devote some space to the contributions of Columbia's African-American community led by William Whipper and Stephen Smith. But what about the Southern End?

In Thomas Whitson's essay on "Early Abolitionists of Lancaster" one can find the same information known by contemporaries in the 1850's and repeated by Dr. Spots in his memorable Pilgrim's **Pathway** (1966). There were three general paths which U.G.R.R. activities took in our region. From Baltimore north to southern York County, then across the Susquehanna to Drum ore and Fulton Townships area. Fugitives then went northeast towards Christiana, the Chester County line, and on to Philadelphia where, 1850, William Still readily aided.

A second path followed the course of the Susquehanna to the Octorara and then northeast across Chester County in the general direction of Philadelphia. Finally, the third path led overland from the area surrounding the Appalachian Trail through Adams, Franklin, and York Counties, across the Susquehanna to Columbia. Stephen Smith, William Whipper, William Wright, and others then sent the fugitives east through Lancaster to the vicinity of Bird-in- Hand where Marianna Brubaker's grandfather, Daniel Gibbons assisted possibly as many as 1,000 slaves to escape before 1850.

Although Canada increasingly became the goal of fugitives after 1829, many settled in the numerous Black enclaves along the way, seeking anonymity in numbers. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 changed that reality radically. Many who thought themselves safe in northern communities found themselves compelled to leave for the safety of Canada. "Safety" was, of course, relative. In the North they had been preyed upon by kidnappers who made a profit selling fugitive and freeman alike into bondage, as

witness the case of Solomon Northrup who spent seventeen years in slavery because kidnappers had lured him away from the safety of his Massachusetts home. After 1850 kidnappers such as the local Gap Hill Gang became emboldened by the promise of riches and made like unsafe for fugitive and freeman alike.

From the above description it is clear that two paths of the Underground Railroad passed through or near Lancaster County's Southern End. With the exception of William Parker's exploits near Christiana, there is little in the historical record that rises above the anecdotal level in describing the involvement of African Americans in Drumore, Martic, Fulton, Sadsbury, Coleraine, and Bart Townships in their own liberation. Dr. Spotts' narrative contains an oblique reference that is typical of the historical record on African Americans in that area:¹

“A second route was used by fugitives who came from Baltimore. They came to the banks of the Susquehanna at Peach Bottom, where they were met by a Negro, who rowed them across the river at night, and directed them to the home of Joseph Smith near Liberty Square.”

Who was that “Negro”? Who was Samuel Bond who is described as “a thick-set, heavy, stout mulatto”² who brought a group of twenty-two fugitives to John N. Russel's farm in East Drumore? Dr. Spotts' account does not tell us because they are not the focus of his story.

While it may never be possible to answer these questions with absolute certainty, they do confront us with the historical context of the Underground Railroad and challenge us to examine critically the simplistic and romantic notion that the Underground Railroad was a group of well-organized and dedicated Northern abolitionists who secretly helped thousands upon thousands of poor helpless fugitives. In fact, as the National Park Service asserts in its research and promotional efforts, African Americans were the prime movers in the Underground Railroad and most fugitives reached safety without any aid or assistance from stationmasters. In short, the history of resistance to slavery is much more complex than some traditional narratives would have us believe.

To understand more fully the Underground Railroad activity in the County's Southern End it is necessary to examine first the African-American experience there. Thanks to Marianne Brubaker and Dr. Charles Spotts Underground Railroad stations have been identified in Drumore, Fulton, Little Britain, Eden, Coleraine, Sadsbury, and Bart Townships. Fulton was, of course, created out of Little Britain in 1844 and Eden out of Bart in 1855.

It is not coincidental that all of these townships had a significant Black population in 1850 when the Fugitive Slave Act was passed. The two significant entry points, Drumore and Little Britain, had significant Black property-ownership as well as – in the case of the later Fulton Township – two distinct African-American enclaves. Perhaps the clearest indication of an African presence are the references on the 1864 and 1875 atlases to African Meetinghouses in Salisbury (near Welsh Mountain), Colerain, and Fulton Townships. The latter had two; the earliest being Rigby or today's Mt. Sinai American Union Church. In addition, the 1875 Atlas indicates an African School.

When one considers the paucity of information on African Americans in the area before 1861 and the general tendency of official records such as local directories and atlases to exclude or purposely obscure data on African Americans, these references to Black institutions are important reference points. The question arises: Where did these Africans come from and how many were there during the period of the Underground Railroad's operation? Ellis & Evans' 1883 history of the County provides a partial answer. Describing Drumore Township during the Civil War William P. Chandler notes that among "the black soldiers from Drumore were Reuben A. Cook, Elwood Stokes, Joseph Harris, Charles Body, Isaac Body."³ Chandler also identifies the last slaveholders and their slaves as:⁴

"Dr. Long: enslaved Judy Rodney and James Rodney
 Morrisons: Sall Whipper
 Col. Sam Morrison: Ebenezer Jackson (freed at age 23 by law)
 William Ankrim: unnamed
 Elijah Mackintyre: many slaves"

Chandler describes the end of slavery in Drumore in the following terms:⁵

"The last living slave in Drumore was owned by William Ritchie. Her name was Phillis Bush. She was a light-colored mustee with straight hair, and was long known as "Aunt Phillis." Her husband was Caesar Augustus. At her death involuntary servitude ceased. Many of the slaves were buried in a colored graveyard on the ridge east of Chestnut Level Church, on the Rogers Farm."

In a similar vein, John C. Lewis' comments on African Americans in Fulton Township focus on two:⁶

"...colored Methodist" churches: one congregation located on the Lancaster Road near Penn Hill and the other now located at Arcadia Station on the Peach Bottom Railroad."

This latter church was known as “Rigby” due, according to Lewis, to one of its members who along with Elisha Armstrong provided ground upon which it was originally built some forty years before Lewis’ narrative.

Except for a reference to the 3rd USCT regiment that had a number of men from the Southern End the above are all the information contained in **Ellis & Evans** on African Americans from the lower townships. Even so, that is more information than can be found in most of the local histories published since 1840. Despite the scarcity of the available information, using the facts recorded in **Ellis & Evans** it is possible to extrapolate some facts about the African-American communities in the Southern End.

As already noted the origins of local African Americans are to be found in slavery. Exactly when the first slaves were brought into the lower end of the County is not exactly known. It would be necessary to do extensive genealogical research in all the pioneer families between 1720-1800. An indication of the spread of slavery within the County after the Revolutionary War can be ascertained by reviewing the returns to the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780. This law as designed to provide a transition between slavery and indentured servitude. Africans who were slaves before March 1, 1780 could be registered as slaves for life. Their children born after that date were to be registered as indentured servants who were to serve until they reached twenty-eight years of age. Failure to register automatically freed the slave.

For 1780 Drumore had the largest number of returns. Twenty-three slaveholders reported forty-six slaves (12 women, 12 men, and 22 children). In that portion of Little Britain Township that would become Fulton Township, four slaveholders (William Porter, William Arbuckle, Joseph Frezar, and James Gilcrest) reported 22 slaves and offspring as property. The majority of these slaveholders were farmers and we can therefore assume that the slaves were used in and around the farms in the Township. With manumission and migration the number of Africans in the Southern End increased between 1790 and 1850, the high water mark for the County’s African-American population before 1950.

Following the pattern established in other parts of the County and elsewhere the Free Africans created communities by acquiring property, building churches and schools, and engaging in commerce and industry as much as the prejudices of the day would permit. Unfortunately, the Southern End had no William Whipper or Stephen Smith to represent them in the region or the nation but it must be remembered that although Whipper’s activities in the public arena unfolded in Philadelphia, Columbia, and other urban areas, he was born in Little Britain Township. During the Antebellum Era when Columbia’s Black population was approaching a thousand making it the most significant urban center in the County for Black activities, a larger number lived in the Southern End on farms and in numerous small communities. In 1850 the area’s African-American population was: Drumore 321, Martic 140, Sadsbury 148, Fulton 277, and Little Britain 239 for a grand total of 1,125.

Literature on the Underground Railroad in Lancaster County generally stresses the upper route (Wrightsville -> -> Columbia, Lancaster, Bird-in-Hand -> ->Sadsbury, Salisbury, and beyond) and notes the important roles played by African Americans such as York's William C. Goodridge, Wrightsville's Robert Loney, Columbia's Stephen Smith and William Whipper in the day-to-day operation. Accounts of the southern routes, overland through Drumore towards the Christiana area and up the Octorara into Chester County, still refer only to the white abolitionists and omit any but passing reference to the African Americans who lived in the area.

Assuming that the peak period for Underground Railroad activity falls between 1831-61 or from the publication of William Lloyd Garrison's **Liberator**, the chief organ of the radical abolitionists, and tumultuous decade following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, I would like to focus on one township, Fulton, and recount some basic information on the African-American communities there.

To reiterate: in what is now Fulton Township there were 22 slaves in 1780 and that number apparently remained fairly constant. The 1790 census report of 42 slaves and 32 "other free persons" must be interpreted in terms of both townships. Extensive research is required for the period before 1860 but some indications about the quality of Black life in Fulton Township can be gleaned from the early tax records. Unfortunately, the tax lists for Little Britain/Fulton Township are not complete but by comparing names from the 1850 and subsequent censuses it is possible to identify families and individuals.

The first reference to Africans in Little Britain tax lists is found in 1822 when these persons are listed as owners of taxable properties:⁷

John Miller	Samuel James
David McCann	Thomas Clark
Samuel McGill	Nathan Wiley
William Milburn	Francis Abelton
King Jenkins	Samuel Perry

McCann had a house and a lot while the others owned livestock. Their racial identity is certain since after their names one finds the descriptor "colour." There are also earlier (1819) references to John and Benjamin Whipper; and the 1824 tax list reports among the poor children in Little Britain, Washington (10 yrs.) and James (6 yrs.) children of John Whipper. Perhaps related to the famous William?

The same 1824 tax list also includes among the poor children in Little Britain the offspring of Christmas John, Samuel Clark, John Miller, George Maxwell, Edward Armstrong, and James Milburn – all men of color. Obviously life in the first third of the nineteenth century was not easy for people of color in

Little Britain; why else designate the children as “poor?” The economic standing of the Black residents was not fixed as the tax list for 1831 would seem to indicate. Now 28 Black freeholders were identified.

Christmas Johnson, whose child was reported as indigent in 1825, owned a house and a lot valued at \$80. Four freeholders enumerated that year are also noteworthy: Stephen Batchelor, Thomas Hopkins, James Lewis, and James Miller. These men of color owned a grand total of 61 acres of land valued at \$716. By no means wealthy men but certainly part of a nascent agrarian class that was surviving off the land.

The 1831 tax list also contains the first reference to Jarret Rigby who owned 1 head of livestock valued at \$10. Before discussing the importance of Rigby, a quick glance at the tax lists of 1835, 1837, and 1844 demonstrates the growth of the free African community in Little Britain. In 1835 there were 37 African-American freeholders who owned a grand total of 133 acres. The value of Black land had risen to over \$1,800; modest but significant growth. Jarret Rigby now was listed as the owner of 10 acres and 1 head of livestock valued at \$160. The 1837 tax list enumerates 45 freeholders but makes no reference to land. The 1844 list identifies only 17 freeholders but lists their acreage as 168 with a total value of \$2,449.

Jarret Rigby’s name appears on all three lists. In 1835 he had 10 acres but in 1844 he is listed as having only 5. What happened to the other half of his property? The reference in **Ellis & Evans** provides a partial answer but for a more complete answer we must consult a history written by Mrs. Helen Murray. Her article bears the title of “Mount Sinai Union American Methodist Episcopal Church and Rigby’s Meeting House” and appeared in the 1968 anthology **Churches of Today and Yesterday in Southern Lancaster County**.

The history of Rigby Meeting House connects the Southern End with the Mid-Atlantic region. The original meeting house was built in 1834 on land deeded to the Union Church of Africans. This denomination originated in the work of Peter Spencer (1779-1843) who followed a path similar to that of Richard Allen in Philadelphia. Both men worked in the Methodist Episcopal Church but soon found the need to organize an independent church to thwart attempts to control them. The group of churches led by Allen and his contemporaries was chartered in 1816 as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Earlier, on September 18, 1813, Peter Spencer and some followers organized an independent church in Wilmington, Delaware that became chartered as the Union Church of Africans. Perhaps in response to the crisis precipitated by the Fugitive Slave Act and the numerous urban riots aimed at the growing Free Black community, the corporation’s name was changed in 1852 to the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church.⁸

As was the case in all religious denominations the growth of the Union Church of Africans was nurtured by itinerant preachers who traveled the countryside, sometimes venturing outside the territorial United States as was the case of the A.M.E. Church which in the course of the nineteenth century did missionary work in Canada, Central America, and South Africa. In 1832 a certain Lewis P. Hood visited the

County's Southern End and among others stopped by the home of the said Jarret Rigby. In those areas where free Africans had no house of worship, private homes were used until sufficient funds were collected to build an edifice. Interestingly enough, Lewis P. Hood is also listed in Boyd's 1859-60 and Gopsill's 1863-64 Directory of Lancaster City as the pastor at Lancaster's African Union Meeting House which in the 1840's had been known as Isaac Gilmore's African Church. This Lewis P. Hood may also be identical with the Lewis Hood who was a teacher at Lancaster's African School located at the rear of Bethel A.M.E. Church.

Charter members of the newly constructed church were William Wilson, Daniel Webster, Bennet Jay, and Abraham Milburn. The charter Lay Elders were Jarrett Rigby, James Milburn, Sr., and Isaac Waters.⁹ Only James Milburn and, of course, Jarrett Rigby are listed in the 1831 tax list. The 1850 census does, however, provide some valuable information on a small community that evolved in and around Rigby Meeting House.

Of the 277 African Americans identified as residents of Fulton in 1850, 31 identified their place of birth as a state other than Pennsylvania. Of the 39 free households, 16 heads of household were born outside of the state (2 from Delaware and 14 from Maryland). Jarrett Rigby belonged to those of "foreign" nativity and his census information is as follows:

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Occupation	Assets	Place of Birth	Other
Jarret Rigby	56	Male	Black	Mason	\$150	Maryland	
Sarah	55	Female	Black			Maryland	
Amelia	28	Female	Black			Lancaster County	
William	21	Male	Black			Lancaster County	Deaf/dumb
Clark	17	Male	Black			Lancaster County	In school
Sarah	17	Female	Black			Lancaster County	In school
Ely James	13	Male	Black			Lancaster County	In school
Louisa	5	Female	Black			Lancaster County	In school

Both Rigby and his wife were born in Maryland and contrary to the tax list information we find here that he was a mason and not a farm laborer, hence the \$150 in personal assets. Besides his own children the child of another family (Ely James) lived with him – a not uncommon phenomenon in the free African community in which children lived with others either to learn a trade or because they had no home. Also noteworthy is that Rigby's son Clark attended school, probably the African School since Pennsylvania public schools were not desegregated until the 1880's, at least de jure. A daughter Sarah is mentioned in Mrs. Murray's essay as Sarah Rigby Milburn and lauded as the "founder" of the new church.

After Jarret Rigby died intestate in 1863 his property was disposed of and the church decided to seek a new location for their popular quarterly meeting and their church services.¹⁰ Gilbert James, a trustee of the old church, donated land for a new structure in Arcadia, about one-half a mile from Rigby's property. In its new location after 1876 the newly renamed church (Mount Sinai) was near the track of the Lancaster, Oxford, and Southern Railroad. But what has this to do with the Underground Railroad? A glance at the 1864 atlas and the map provided by Dr. Charles Spotts suggests an answer.

Dr. Spotts, following in the tradition of Marianna Brubaker, identified three Underground Railroad stationmasters in Fulton Township: Day Wood, Jeremiah Brown, and Timothy Haines. The tax lists for Fulton are unfortunately incomplete but a comparison of the two maps with the 1845 tax lists and 1850 census suggests an interesting hypothesis. The residences of two of those stationmasters (Haines and Wood) were located quite close to African-American enclaves that included Rigby's Meeting House and an African church north of Penn Hill that bore the name of Asbury African Methodist Church.

Dr. Charles H. Stubbs places the origins of this church in the year 1840 when a certain Elder Peters visited families that according to tradition had settled in the northern and western end of Little Britain and in the southwestern end of Drumore Townships ca. 1835.¹¹ Some of the families visited were those headed by Jacob Mitchell, Stephen Batchelor, Irwin Craig, and Samuel Donell.¹² Finally, in 1842 Irwin and Jane Craig sold one-eighth of an acre to Samuel Donell, William Wilson, Daniel Webster, Henry Bradford, and Jacob Mitchell, trustees of the church for the erection of a building. A link to Mount Sinai Church is suggested by the name William Wilson.

Both Timothy Haines and Day Wood had African-Americans listed as living in their households. Those individuals and Haines' and Wood's neighbors could have helped the stationmasters move their freight along the Underground Railroad. In doing so they could have made use of an important feature of African churches such as Asbury or Rigby: both were on circuits that required their ministers to serve more than one congregation. Also since both churches were parts of a larger corporate or episcopalian structure, quarterly and annual meetings were held which would permit individuals from a large area to intermingle freely. Such mobility and group meetings would, of course, be very useful for individuals wishing to help fugitives or fugitives seeking the anonymity of numbers. Also since some of Fulton Township's Black residents were migrants from slaveholding states, could they have maintained close ties to potential fugitives from slavery?

The answer to these and other questions about the Underground Railroad in Fulton Township may remain shrouded in history but it is important to emphasize that the township, and the indeed, the Southern End's African-American population, survived slavery to establish independent organizations such as churches and most probably played a significant role in the Underground Railroad. If we take Frederick Douglass and William Parker as an example then the fact that these two fugitives from slavery in Maryland

who were acquainted as slaves and then re-established their acquaintance in freedom may indicate that former Marylanders in Fulton Township could have entertained similar contacts with relatives, friends, and acquaintances still in bondage. Such contacts could have been used to induce slaves to come North.

Finally, it is also necessary to underscore that African-American history did not begin and end with the Underground Railroad. After slavery, indentured servitude, and insecure freedom – we must recall the incursions of gangs such as the Gap Gang, African Americans in Fulton Township and elsewhere enlisted and fought in the nation’s wars. Men and women from the Southern End not only were involved in the various churches in the area, at least half a dozen in number, but they were also instrumental in creating Sgt. Benn GAR Post and Lincoln Valley Lodge # F & AM. Although organized in Peach Bottom the latter organization now meets in Columbia. Thus the African-American experience in the Southern End typifies the key qualities of the African America: longevity, perseverance, and a pride of place.

¹ Charles Spotts, **Pilgrim’s Pathway**, 25..

² Ibid., 41.

³ Frank Ellis and Samuel Evans, **History of Lancaster County**, 1883, 798f.

⁴ Ibid., 799.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 860.

⁷ Tax List for Little Britain 1822 on file at Lancaster County Historical Society

⁸ Helen Murray, “Mount Sinai Union American Methodist Episcopal Church and Rigby’s Meeting House” in

⁹ Ibid., 95.

¹⁰ Ibid., 96.

¹¹ Charles H. Stubbs, “Asbury African Methodist Church”, 170. in **Churches of Yesterday and Today ...**

¹² Ibid.