Continuing today, a page of stories saluting the 150th anniversary of the Civil War

Underground Railroad clues point here

Research into origin shows support of freedom seekers as early as 1804, points to narratives decades after Civil War

BY RANDOLPH HARRIS
Correspondent

The scene is Columbia, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, 1804.

Thomas Boude is alerted to a commotion at his home, located along the burgeoning industrial riverfront of this boomtown.

Just a few years prior, Columbia was in the running to become the capital of the young United States of America.

But on this day, life and liberty are at stake. And the pursuit of happiness itself is threatened on Boude's doorstep.

The prominent lumber merchant, a recently defeated Federalist U.S. congressmen and Revolutionary War officer who served with Gen. George Washington, acts spontaneously to resist the commonly accepted practice of enslaving humans of African descent.

This incident sparks the movement we now call the Underground Railroad.

Does the event in time and place sound familiar? Probably not.

Check a standard history book, and you probably won't find it there, at least not in this context and not with these details:

■ Major Boude, as he was known, was also a former member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and a member of St. James Episcopal Church in Lancaster. In this incident, Boude, (1752-1822) then 52 years old, acted to stop the attempted abduction of Mrs. Smith, the mother of his indentured servant, Stephen Smith, who was about 10 years old. Boude's home was on Front Street, overlooking the Susquehanna River and his place of business.

History of Pennsylvania RR 1846-1896

A lithograph depicting Columbia in 1842 shows multiple sets of tracks serving the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad. Stephen Smith, below, rose from indentured servant to business owner in Columbia. His lumberyard is believed to have been a cover for the Underground Railroad. Photo courtesy of Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University Libraries. Advertisement from Sept. 13, 1834, reprinted from the Lancaster Journal.

NOTICE.

I OFFER my entire stock of LUMBER, either at wholesale or retail, at a reduced price, as I am determined to close my business at Columbia. My stock on hand is extensive, consisting of a large quantity of seasoned Pine

Boards, Plank, Scantling,

SHINGLES, together with yellow pine rds, Scantling, &c., & a large quantity of

LOCUST POSTS,
AND
e and Hemlock Rails.
ALSO,

and Plaster by the ton. Any persons of entering into the lumber trade can have the entire stock at a in; or persons intending to open the line of rail road, or builders, to their advantage to call on me or at my yard, as I am desirous of dishe above as soon as possible. I dispose of my real property in the consisting of a number of

OUSES AND LOTS,

them desirable situations for busi-

persons having claims against me are ested to present them for payment, and indebted are desired to call and discharge the same at my office in Columbia or in Lancaster, as I intend being there every Saturday for that purpose.

STEPHEN SMITH.

Columbia, Sept. 13th, 1834. 13-3mnq

■ Within the next 40 years, Smith would take over Boude's lumber firm and become one of the richest African-Americans in antebellum America. He was a philanthropist, a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and an outspoken Abolitionist. He became a key player in supporting hundreds of, perhaps a thousand, formerly enslaved men, women and children who came from the slave states of the South to Columbia via the many pathways to freedom we call the Underground Railroad.

■ Within a few years of the attempted abduction of Mrs. Smith, another Columbia citizen, William Wright, molded the community's anti-slavery sentiments into the earliest framework of a system we call the Underground Railroad. Today, Wright is widely credited with devising the systematic transport of formerly enslaved people with help from his family and neighbors, mainly members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), all across Southeastern Pennsylvania to give shelter and comfort to freedom seekers.

■ Yet little is known about another anti-slavery tactic employed by Wright, the grandson of one of the town's founders. As early as 1813, he initiated sophisticated legal actions in Lancaster County Court on behalf of jailed African-Americans, some of whom were freemen and threatened with removal to enslavement in the South. These legal filings are documented in local records but have never been thoroughly examined and placed in context with the origins of the Underground in Columbia.

■ The 80-mile Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad was only the second operating line in the nation, moving freight and passengers by the summer of 1834. Yet this real railroad seems to have played a key role in the naming and function of the Underground Railroad.

Southeastern Pennsylvania is so steeped in this heritage that the author of the most recent book of national scope on the Underground Railroad called the region "Underground Zero."

Fergus Bordewich, author of "Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America," spoke in Lancaster in 2005.

"In its earliest manifestations, the movement we have come to call the Underground Railroad existed nowhere in the United States except in Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania farming counties to the west," he said.

Stephen Smith and his business partner, William Whipper, owned railroad cars for hauling lumber from their yards on the riverfront in Columbia to Philadelphia. By 1838, the "traffic" on the Underground Railroad inspired them to create secret compartments in their boxcars into which they passed along the "freight" of formerly enslaved African-Americans looking for swift and safe passage to freedom.

This ingenious activity predates by several years the earliest known references in print of the term "underground railroad," which appeared in the first half of the 1840s.

From these incidents and hundreds of others, from the turn of the 19th century through about 1850, Columbia became a magnet for freedom seekers and those trying to capture them.

Published reports from as early as 1880 retell the widely known oral tradition of frustrated bounty hunters losing all trace of their prey at the town's industrial riverfront on the Susquehanna.

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"There must be an underground railroad somewhere," states this anecdotal account, captured in print by Dr. Robert C. Smedley in about 1880.

But how can we be certain that the Underground Railroad began in Columbia in the early 19th century, based on a specific act of resistance against slavery?

Until more concrete evidence surfaces, we can't make this claim with 100 percent certainty. No official record of the Underground Railroad exists to compare to the multiple volumes providing numbing detail about everything military that occurred during the Civil War.

The closest thing we have are the accounts written in the late 19th century. Some of these narratives were penned by people involved in this movement and some by people who knew the activists. Some of these accounts are based on fact and some on oral tradition.

William Still (1872), Smedley (1883) and Ohio State University professor Wilbur Siebert (1898) provide most of the Pennsylvania regional narratives that have made their way into the national press.

These accounts — and all others derived from them — draw a clear path to Columbia as the location of the earliest episodes of Underground Railroad activity, including as key evidence the anti-slavery works of the Wrights and their Quaker brethren and businessmen Boude, Smith and Whipper.

Rethinking terms: Slave or Enslaved; Riot or Resistance

BY RANDOLPH HARRIS
Correspondent

History is written by the victors, the saying goes.

So it has been with the American experience of slavery and the movement known as the Underground Railroad.

Recently, however, public and private initiatives focusing on the nation's anti-slavery experience have begun to question assumptions about the power of words in understanding this sometimes tragic history.

Terminology can enlighten understanding, but it also can block awareness and shade sympathies. Here are some new ways that contemporary scholars, researchers and historic site conservators are looking at this extremely sensitive subject:

■ The millions of people of African descent brought into the British colonies of North America and, later, the United States were "enslaved" as opposed to being "slaves." Use of this term calls attention to the person's forced condition rather than permanently branding him or her with a negative connotation not of his or her choosing.

■ Freedom seeker vs. fugitive, runaway or contraband. People who took the initiative to leave enslavement on their own or with help from others were indeed violating the laws of the period. But the nation has come to realize that these people were acting in self-preservation against a system and "peculiar institution" that was patently contrary to the spirit of the Declaration of Independence and a violation of many provisions of the U.S. Constitution.

■ Conflicts with national implications occurred in Lancaster County between freed and enslaved African-Americans on one hand, and the white majority and law enforcement on the other.

Confrontations in Columbia in 1834-35 and in Christiana in 1851 were branded by newspapers as "The Negro Riots" and "The Christiana Riot," respectively.

We now know that in the case of Columbia, white people formed mobs and acted violently toward their black neighbors mainly because of jealousy over the economic and social advancements that were made in that community, where employment and other opportunities were available to blacks.

In Christiana on that fateful day of Sept. 11, a black militia was formed to defend against frequent abductions by slave catchers and bounty hunters. African-Americans in that area often were seized and sold off whether or not they were born free in the North, were living there after being manumitted (or liberated) by their former masters or were passing through on a flight to freedom.

Contemporary scholars and historians tend to define the events as "The Resistance at Christiana." Branding this historic uprising as a "riot" against the evil institution of slavery is beyond anachronistic, some say.

State supports initiatives to raise awareness of Underground Railroad

BY RANDOLPH HARRIS
Correspondent

What actions by Abolitionists in support of the enslaved and what actions of African-Americans constituted the workings of the Underground Railroad?

To reach a consensus, one of the country's leading scholars on the heritage of African-Americans collaborated in 2007 with Pennsylvania historians and educators. He consulted also with owners and managers of historic sites and commercial properties and with staff members of travel and tourism offices and agencies.

Under the auspices of the Pennsylvania Underground Railroad Colloquium, Howard Dodson, chief of the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, worked with the group in attempting to define activities associated with the Underground Railroad beyond the most commonly accepted form of support — shelter.

To help guide state-level projects and programs as part of planning for the current Civil War 150 commemoration, the colloquium defined and expanded the scope of activities that can be considered as associated with the Underground Railroad:

■ Shelter, including direct harboring, as well as clothing and feeding of freedom seekers.

■ Flight from enslavement and the places, means and methods of transportation.

■ Legal actions by or on behalf of freedom seekers.

■ Resistance against slavery, whether a spontaneous uprising as in Columbia in 1804 or as part of a systematic approach to fighting slavery, as in the establishment of a black militia in and around Christiana in the 1840s and early 1850s.

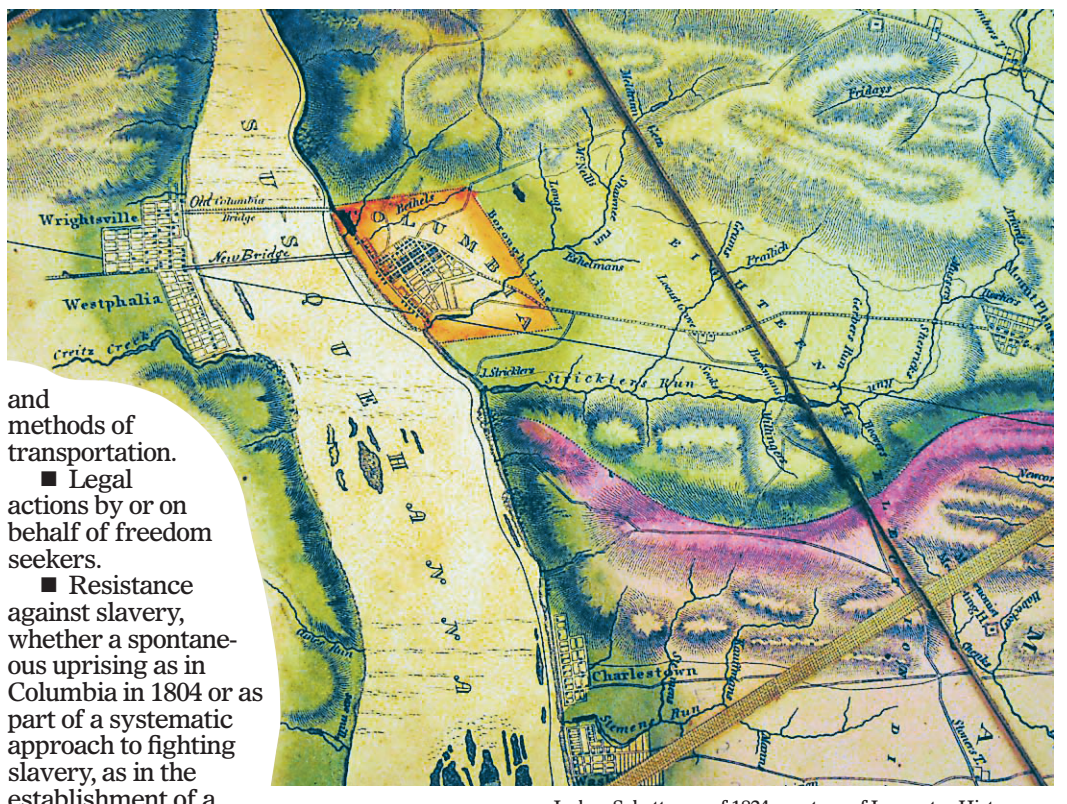
■ Self-empowerment by African-Americans, who acted on their own toward equality and freedom while still in bondage, as well as once they secured freedom via the Underground.

Clues of Underground Railroad activity

Shelter
Legal action
Flight
Resistance
Self-empowerment

The colloquium was formed in 2004 to inform state public policy and to encourage better understanding of the phenomenon of the Underground Railroad.

As part of advance planning for the Civil War Sesquicentennial, the colloquium is now composed of 16 public-private projects and programs in six regions of the commonwealth.



Joshua Schott map of 1824 courtesy of Lancaster History.org

Underground Railroad activities revolved around the point where the bridge between Columbia and Wrightsville touched the Susquehanna River's eastern shoreline. Located here were the businesses and homes of people assisting freedom seekers and the western terminus of the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad.

Staff support and planning grants have been made available to colloquium projects through the state Department of Community and Economic Development's Office of Cultural and Heritage Tourism Programs and in collaboration with state Historical and Museum Commission and state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

Marketing and logistical support for the projects has been provided by the PA Dutch Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Over the longer term, colloquium members believe this initiative will lead to increased public and private awareness of and efforts to invest in and preserve more sites and stories associated with the Underground Railroad.

For more information, visit the websites *PACivilWar150.com* and *paquestforfreedom.com*.