

# *UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN MERRIMACK*

From about 50 years before the Civil War, enslaved people were risking their lives to escape to free Northern states and to Canada. Fifty years earlier, a similar situation enabled slaves in Spanish Florida to escape to Mexico.

The system as we know it, was called "The Underground Railroad" with code names such as "conductor", passengers and "stations". It was supported by abolitionists along the route, many of whom were members of various religious groups, notably the Society of Friends (Quakers), the Methodists, and others who were previously freed slaves. They passed the escapees along their route risking their own safety in the process. They hid them in barns, tunnels, churches and hidden spaces/rooms in homes where they rested during the day, providing the strength to move to the next stop on foot or by boat.

The sympathizers risked much as well, since there were many laws forbidding such assistance or requiring that freedom helpers return slaves to their previous owners. This was the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Some Northern states also had laws forbidding settlement or hiring of free Blacks.

There were many escape routes known to pass through larger cities especially along the coast or river valleys. The most well-known route in NH went through the port of Portsmouth. The Merrimack and Connecticut Rivers Valleys made travel easier, and Merrimack itself was no exception.

Although we have little documentation, many homeowners, tavern keepers and churches claim to have had hiding spots frequented by such travelers, sometimes in a space between walls accessed through a closet or cellar, a crawl space between rooms, a hayloft, barn or tunnel leading to the river.

In a recent series of posts on the "You Know You're From Merrimack" website, I counted over 15 homes with claims to have been stops along the railroad. I personally climbed up into one area in Ann Burrow's old home on Baboosic Lake Road which led from her cellar into a space between the walls next to the fireplace where initials could be seen carved into the walls. One common story tells of a tunnel running from one of the two homes now forming Tortilla Flats, going east to the Merrimack River. This exit was closed when they poured concrete floors in the cellar at the Flats according to my son, who worked there. Many of the early homes and taverns are said to have been stops on the railroad. They include two homes (one known as the Meader house) since demolished to build Walgreen's, the red house at 626 DW Highway (known as the Scogland house), 475 DW Highway (formerly the Roby Tavern, then the Clapp, then the McConihe, then finally the Nevens Tavern until 1924, when it was moved to the current location across the street). Other sites included the apartment house on Woodbury Street, the Schneiderheist home, demolished for the current CVS mall site, the Gates/Disco home on Wilson Hill Road, a long-gone house at the end of Depot Street near the boat ramp, the Bowers home/Thomas More College administration building on Manchester Street. Still

others were the Barnes home on Lawrence Road, the Cummings/Pickering/Mahon home on Naticook Road, the demolished Hodgeman home on Meetinghouse Road, Rev. Jacob Burnap's home on Turkey Hill Road, and finally the two taverns which now house the Common Man and Buckley's restaurants. There are other homeowners in Merrimack who also have similar claims.

There are some records of slaveholders living in Merrimack and some census data records show slaves named in households. Tax inventories from 1767 to 1773 show an increase from three to 13 slaves in that six year period. From 1776 to 1803, five marriages are recorded: Peter to Dinah (no last names), Hills to Wentworth, Mungo to Moor, Chandler to Hull, and Mason to Gay. In 1776, Mingo, owned by Col. Edward Lutwyche is mentioned in a court case. In 1800 the inventory showed slave owners as Wentworth, Eayers, Lund, Gibson, Nichols, McClenche, and Barnes, but no given names identify the slaves themselves. Previous to the Revolutionary War, Castor Dickinson lived behind the McClure house and was given his freedom along with his wife and children. McClure fought at Bunker Hill. Caesar Barnes fought as a substitute for his owner and was freed after the war. He died in Washington, NH in 1804.

Many early Merrimack residents supported freedom in the Revolutionary War, and they or their families fought in the Civil War. Obviously, many of the Merrimack residents living in the early to mid-1800's sympathized with the plight of these enslaved people who risked their lives to escape and to risk their own lives to help them. Their descendants have passed along the stories of that time and they continue today, although we can't prove many them. However, with today's interest in the subject, perhaps there are letters found from the original families that would help with our historical records kept by the Merrimack Historical Society.

"LIVE FREE OR DIE" is our New Hampshire motto, which was well supported by many Merrimack citizens in the days of slavery and our slice of the Underground Railroad.

The Merrimack Historical Society is located in the original Schoolhouse #12 at 520 Boston Post Road in South Merrimack. It is open on Tuesdays from noon to 8 PM and by appointment. For more information contact John Lastowka at 603-759-9174 [John.lastowka@outlook.com](mailto:John.lastowka@outlook.com) or Anita Creager at 603-424-5084 [Anitacreager58@comcast.net](mailto:Anitacreager58@comcast.net).