

Slavery and the Underground Railroad

The Union County Historical Society will mark Black History Month with two programs at the Dale/Engle/Walker House, Strawbridge Road (off Rte. 192), Lewisburg.

On Sunday, February 14 at 2 PM Jeannette Lasansky will present the program "People as Property: Slavery and the Underground Railroad at the Dale House 1793-1840."

On Sunday, February 28 at 2 PM, the Society will show the critically acclaimed film *Safe Harbor*, the story of freedom fighters - free Blacks and whites - in northeastern PA who supported the anti-slavery movement. Exhibits and house tours are included in both programs.

Slaves

Understanding slavery and the anti-slavery movement in central Pennsylvania is a long-term project of the Historical Society.

In the census records for 1790 to 1840, there were about 50 families who owned slaves in Union County. A few families held slaves more than ten years, including Samuel and James Dale, Samuel Hunter, James Jenkins, Roan McClure, Thomas Strawbridge and David Watson. The census counted about 89 slaves in 1790, 30 in 1800 and only 3 in 1840 (held by James Dale, Alexander McClure and James Simonton).

From other records (only heads of households were named in early census), we have found a few slave's names: Mel, owned by John Clark; Judy, owned by John Linn; Tom, owned by John Jenkins and Kate, owned by Roan McClure. Dinah, a slave in the household of Samuel Dale, was born a slave in the mid 1700's at the Futhey household in Chester County. According to the PA Gradual Abolition Law of 1780, she would remain a slave her entire life, unless freed by her owner, Mrs. Anne Futhey Dale, who did not do so.

Free Blacks

Census records provide information about free Blacks in Union County. For example, in the mid-1800s in Hartley Township are the Bryson, McDonald, Dunlap, and Ford families; and free Blacks in the Emery, Maclay, Roush and Wilson households. Union Township Black households included Corsley, Grimes, Hines, Jones, Price, and Schofield. In Lewisburg, there were the Shields, Taylors, Waldrons and others. Over 300 free Black individuals are recorded in the county census records of the 1800's.

Underground Railroad

Free Blacks were an important part of the Underground Railroad - a system of travel routes and safe havens whereby people escaping from slavery in the South made their way north to freedom.

Black communities, sometimes found near iron furnaces where their skills and labor were appreciated, may have been part of this system of safe passage, which extended through Pennsylvania to New York and Canada. In Union County, iron furnaces were located at New Berlin, Hartleton, Winfield and White Deer. Underground Railroad stops have not been identified in these locales, but that is not unusual since sheltering runaway slaves was dangerous, and kept

secret from the general population. There is documentation of at least one safe stop in Lewisburg, in the University Avenue carriage house of Professor Bliss. Professors Curtis and Malcolm may also have provided shelter, as well as Jonathan Nesbit, on Market Street, Robert Irwin on Water Street, and the free Blacks who lived in the town.

The Union County Historical Society continues to research slavery, the Underground Railroad and our African American residents. This will be a focus of study during 2010, Black History Initiative Year, and 2011, the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War. Volunteers are being accepted to do research and plan programs. Please contact the Society at 524-8666 or hstoricl@ptd.net for more information.