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HIST 190 E51

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### African-American History in Bucks County

Bucks County, established in 1682 by William Penn after dividing his land into the 3 counties; received its name from Buckinghamshire, the county in England where Penn's family seat was located<sup>1</sup>. Little do many people know, Bucks County was a key factor in the Underground Railroad slave system for run-away slaves. It was home to both freed and slaved African-Americans. "Bucks County, one of the three original counties of Pennsylvania, was more conservative than Montgomery County. It has been the home of African-Americans as both slaves and freed persons since its founding in 1682<sup>2</sup>." A public registry in the year 1780 at Bucks County listed a slave population of 580 slaved African-Americans. Due to the Pennsylvania Act of Gradual Emancipation passed in 1780, the slave count began to decline; by 1790, "it was reported that there were 261 slaves in the county<sup>3</sup>." Through the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, many whites in Bucks County remained against the notion of giving African-Americans equal rights; nonetheless, Bucks Counties involvement in the Underground Railroad was evident, to the point where slave hunters would scout the county for potential runaway slaves<sup>4</sup>. In this paper, I will briefly discuss some of the Underground Railroad routes, those who were involved in the organization of those routes, and a couple influential African-Americans who resided in Bucks County.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mercermuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/A-Timeline-of-Bucks-County-History-1600s-1900s-rev-8-14-13.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Above Ground and Underground* pg.99

<sup>3</sup> *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Above Ground and Underground* pg.99

<sup>4</sup> *RICHARD MOORE AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AT QUAKERTOWN* pg.40

Most of the activity in regards to the Underground Railroad revolved around three main towns: Quakertown in the northern section, Buckingham and Bensalem Township. The active amongst the few was a station in upper Bucks County, the home of Richard Moore at Quakertown<sup>5</sup>.

The home of Quaker Richard Moore in Quakertown was a major station on Bucks County's Underground Railroad freedom network. Moore, a potter by trade, was the son-in-law of Quakertown Mayor Edward Foulke, whose Welsh Quaker relatives had arrived with William Penn and helped found Gwynedd Friends Meeting in 1699... He harbored William Parker in his home and forwarded him to Canada... Runaway slaves were hidden in Moore's barn during the day and were transported in his large pottery wagon covered with hay. Some escapees were also hidden in his home built in 1834<sup>6</sup>

The home of our friend Richard Moore, in Quakertown... [was] the last important station of the Underground Railroad in... [Bucks] county and... [was] the point where the northeastern Chester county-line and most of our Bucks county lines converged.<sup>7</sup>

Langhorne, Middletown Township, as well as, Newtown were routes also used to help escaped slaves get on the Delaware River across to New Jersey. Newtown was their place for shelter and their next push to Yardley Township. "The next leg of the journey took runaways from Horsham due east to the town of Langhorne, Middletown Township. Here the trail turned north and went to Newtown... In Newtown, fugitives received help and shelter from Mahlon Linton. The final leg of this route was from Newtown to Yardley, on the Delaware River across from New Jersey<sup>8</sup>." Along their journeys, African-Americans, created codes, riddles, passwords, handshakes, and rituals to help each other learn the ways of Underground Railroad; for example, "Steal Away to Jesus," used Jesus as an open invitation for slaves to steal away to freedom... "Follow the Drinking Gourd," was a code word for the North Star, which is found from the Big Dipper constellation, a fact that most slaves knew<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN PENNSYLVANIA* pg. 35

<sup>6</sup> *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Above Ground and Underground* pg.120-21

<sup>7</sup> *RICHARD MOORE AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AT QUAKERTOWN* pg.39

<sup>8</sup> *UNDERGROUND RAILROAD: in Pennsylvania* pg. 162

<sup>9</sup> *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Above Ground and Underground* pg.257

Nancy Cornneen, a former librarian, enriched with knowledge about African American history in Bucks County, after being introduced through a neighborhood friend, shared with me some information about an African Methodist Episcopal Church located at 1940 Holicong Road, Buckingham Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania. She said, “Before the Church, a group of free escaped slaves formed a congregation around 1822. It became a log cabin church at around 1834 and then reconstructed to the stone building it is today at around 1852. The surrounding landowners then were Quaker abolitionist and it is said that the community was a station on the Underground Railroad.” After further doing more research on my own about the church, I soon came across story about a man name Ben Jones.

One day while Ben Jones was chopping wood near Feasterville, his former owner, William Anderson, arrived with a four-man posse to take Jones back to Maryland. After an unsuccessful attempt to defend himself with his axe, during which he seriously wounded several of his captors and received injuries himself, Ben was subdued. He was taken to Baltimore to await sale on the auction block. With wounds that made him virtually unsaleable, Big Ben was detained in a slave prison until several citizens of Bucks County raised seven hundred dollars to purchase his freedom. Ben returned to Bucks County and here he lived for the duration of his life.<sup>10</sup>

It was also said that Ben, nicknamed “Big Ben”, stood six feet ten inches tall and weighed nearly three hundred pounds. He also served as the first minister at the Mt. Gilead A.M.E. Church. His grave resides at a cemetery in front of the church<sup>11</sup>. Another individual with a great story is Henry Highland Grant. Mr. Grant was the first African-American to deliver a sermon before the U.S House of Representatives, as well as, noted as an Underground Railroad agent who wrote about the assistance he and his family received from friends in New Hope running the Undergrounds there. “Sometimes, escapees were sent by trusted friends to agents and conductors on the New Hope to Easton line, and then to Stroudsburg. For some runaway slaves, the canal and river became their Underground escape route to freedom. The Delaware-Lehigh Canal was well traveled by barges carrying coal, lumber. And hay, and sometimes

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<sup>10</sup>THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN PENNSYLVANIA pg.36

<sup>11</sup>African Americans in Pennsylvania: Above Ground and Underground pg.122

slaves were concealed among the cargo mules who pulled the barges from town to town along the Delaware River<sup>12</sup>.”

In conclusion, Bucks County’s involvement in the Underground Railroad system was clearly evident. The Railroad system was connected through many of the towns we live in today. The rich history that had been buried in this county was dug up by the extensive research done by a few. Many of the information that I have written about was new to me and fascinated me very much so. I was not aware when I first moved to Bucks County that it even had anything to do with the Underground Railroad to begin with. Our Bucks County forefathers sure knew how to go down in history.

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<sup>12</sup>*African Americans in Pennsylvania: Above Ground and Underground* pg.121-22

## Work Cited

Blockson, Charles L. *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Above Ground and Underground.*

Harrisburg, PA: RB, 2001.

The author of this book has a vast knowledge of African-American history spanning over 40 years. His easy to read research has some of the best works about Pennsylvania's African-American experience for many years.

Blockson, Charles L. *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN PENNSYLVANIA.*

North Carolina: Flame International, 1981.

This version of the book uncovered for me different events that the first book did not touch on. What I pulled out from this book and found most useful to me was the story of "Big Ben".

Leight, Robert L. *RICHARD MOORE AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AT QUAKERTOWN.*

Bedminster: ADAMS APPLE, 2005.

This book written about the life of Richard Moore and the Underground Railroad gave me an overview of who Richard Moore is and how he was involved in the Underground Railroad. It goes into his family life and his character. It also talk about and explains a lot of the documents found relating to Richard Moore and his business proceedings.

Switala, William J. *UNDERGROUND RAILROAD: In Pennsylvania.*

Mechanicsburg: STACKPOLE, 2001.

An Underground Railroad cloaked in secrecy is revealed in this book on how and those secret routes were made and ran. This book helped me understand and give me an idea of what Bucks County and the towns within it played in the Underground Railroad.

Cornneen, Nancy. Personal interview. July 26, 2016.

Had a great phone conversation and gave me great insight and an idea of the African-American history in Bucks County. I enjoyed hearing about the A.M.E Church. This led me to go and conduct further research into this congregation and have a better understand of who and what they were.