The Underground Railroad in New Jersey

by William Switala

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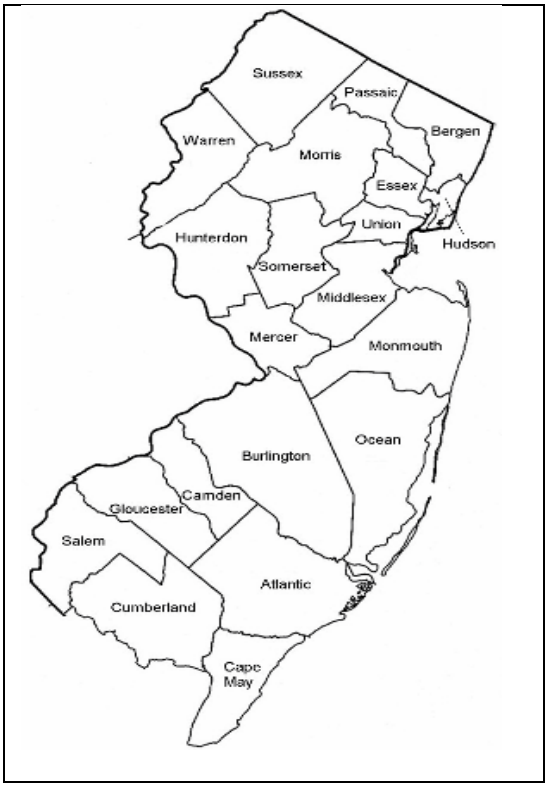
Wilbur Siebert, in his pioneering study of the Underground Railroad (UGRR) in New Jersey (*The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom*, NY: Macmillan, 1898), posits four routes that fugitives took to traverse the state. All of the routes generally merge at some point, as they make their way to an area across the Hudson River from New York City. New Jersey has a long, but narrow, configuration and more recent research has expanded the number of UGRR sites. This study discusses these routes as they appeared in three geographic sections of New Jersey: the Southern, Central, and Northern Networks.

Southern Network of Escape Routes



The Southern Network included Cape May, Cumberland, Salem, Atlantic, and parts of Gloucester, Burlington, Camden and Ocean Counties. Not only did freedom seeking slaves escape from these counties, but they were also entry points for fugitives fleeing Delaware, Maryland, Virginia and other states of the South. The majority of this group came from Delaware by crossing the Delaware River or the Delaware Bay. For the most part, the Southern Network channeled fugitives northward toward Camden, and Mt. Holly in Burlington County.

The Southern Network had a number of starting points. The "Greenwich Line" began at the town of Greenwich and proceeded through the towns of Swedesboro and Evesham Mount to Mt. Holly. From there the runaways went in a northwesterly direction eventually joining the "Philadelphia Line," the main escape route in New Jersey. Another southern route began at the town of Salem. This route went through Woodbury and Evesham Mount to Bordentown, north of Camden. At this point, it also connected with the "Philadelphia Line.

Greenwich, located in the southwestern portion of Cumberland County, was near the Cohansey River, a waterway over which fugitives regularly traveled. The county had a large population of free Blacks that had increased from 786 in 1830 to 1,295 by 1860. It also had three Quaker Meeting Houses. By 1856 the road network was very extensive and provided many opportunities for UGRR routes and a spur of the West Jersey Railroad ran from Bridgeton, a town just 6 miles to the north, to Camden.

According to Samuel Ringgold Ward, a noted Black minister and abolitionist, he was born in Maryland in 1817 to parents who were both slaves. When it was learned that his mother was to be sold to an owner in Georgia, the family decided to gain their freedom by fleeing and set out for Cumberland County. Ward says this area was chosen because of the Quaker presence there. Early in 1820 the family reached Greenwich safely and settled in Waldron's Landing. They remained there until 1826 when, due to the activity of slave-catchers in the area, they went to New York City. William Still, a prominent Black abolitionist based in Philadelphia, also recounted how his family escaped to this area of New Jersey and found safe haven in the Black community of Springtown, just outside of Greenwich. Their stay in freedom was short lived, because they were seized by slave catchers and returned to Maryland. Still's mother escaped again and went to Burlington County where she rejoined her husband.

Another escape route began in the town of Salem in Salem County and proceeded to Bordentown in Burlington County. Fugitives crossed the Delaware River about 40 miles south of Philadelphia and made their way, either alone or with the help of UGRR agents. In 1850, Salem County had a population of 2,075 free blacks, the fifth highest number of any county in New Jersey. It also had a large number of Quakers and a strong A.M.E. Church presence. Among the more prominent UGRR conductors was Abigail Goodwin, a Quaker woman who spent her entire 73 years living in and around the town of Salem.

On Cape May, two of the communities that played a role in UGRR activity were Erma and Cold Spring. A major road ran from the town of Cape May through Cold Spring and Erma. It then turned to the west,

running along that side of the Cape, northward to Cumberland County. An important Black community developed in the 1850s in Middle Township between Goshen and Townsend's Inlet. Most of the Blacks who lived in Cape May worked as farmers or domestics. Some became mariners and operated small vessels on the Delaware Bay. These individuals provided a ready source of assistance for slaves trying to flee their masters in the county and for those who came from Delaware or other states to the south. William Still included an escape story in his work that deals with fugitives arriving at Cape May Point who eventually made their way to Camden and Philadelphia. The main agent in Cape May on this route was Edward Turner. He had settled in the small black community of Union Bethel near Cold Spring in 1850. Turner used his farm as an UGRR station and transported fugitives in his wagon northward. He is purported to have helped Harriet Tubman during the summers of 1849 to 1852 when she worked as a cook at hotels in Cape May to help finance her UGRR activities.

Another escape route ran from Cape May Point through Middle Township to Port Elizabeth. Ezekiel and Amy Cooper, Black UGRR agents in the town, received the runaways there. This would have been a natural path of escape, since a major road connected Cape May with Port Elizabeth, as early as 1826. The road eventually became State Route 47. There was a small congregation of African Methodist Episcopal church members in the town that served as an Underground Railroad station. There were two steamboat lines operating between Port Elizabeth and New York City. While there are no written records of these lines being used by fugitives, they do fit the profile of possible means of escape.

The final escape route in the Southern Network involved areas around the town of Port Republic. Fugitives coming on ships and steamboats from Maryland and Virginia disembarked onto the banks of the Mullica River or at Abescon Island near Atlantic City. Free blacks who worked on the Camden & Atlantic City RR, completed in 1854, hid the fugitives in cars and sent them on to Camden where they entered the Central New Jersey Network.

Central Network

The Central Network lay in the region bounded by a line extending from Swedesboro to Barnegat in the south to a line going from Bordentown to the Atlantic shoreline. Most of the Underground Railroad activity took place in Burlington, Camden, and a small portion of Gloucester Counties. Period maps depict an area interlaced with well-developed roads and railroad lines. In 1850 there were 4,959 free Blacks living in Burlington, Camden and Gloucester, one of larger concentrations of free Blacks in the state. Quakers also had a strong presence with 31 Meeting Houses in these counties in 1850.

UGRR Station in Burlington

The "Philadelphia Line" led from Philadelphia, through Camden, eventually running all the way to New York City and was the most important UGRR route in the entire state. The route began in Philadelphia in the offices of Will Still. He sent fugitives across the Delaware River to Camden where they were met by the Reverend Thomas C. Oliver. Oliver was born in Salem, New Jersey in 1818 and attended a Quaker school for Blacks. He became a minister in the A.M.E. Church and served as a pastor in a number of New Jersey churches. During the 1840s he was the pastor of the Macedonia A.M.E. church in the Black settlement of Fettersville, an area that is now part of the city of Camden. Oliver used the church as a station where he would organize fugitives into small groups before taking them northward. From Camden Oliver guided the runaways over a road that ran along the Delaware River to the city of Burlington, about 20 miles from Philadelphia. He called his safe house in Burlington, "Station A," and used it to get fresh horses for the rest of the trip. The final stopover for the "Philadelphia Line" in the Central Network was the community of Bordentown, almost 30 miles to the north of Camden on the Delaware River. At this point the "Philadelphia Line" turned to the northeast and proceed to New York City.

An important stop on the route to Bordentown was Mt. Holly, where the Philadelphia and Greenwich lines merged. Mt. Holly was the home of the great Quaker abolitionist John Woolman, who in the 1750s wrote one of the early anti-slavery publications in New Jersey. The main agent in the town was a Black man named Robert Evans. Evans was an active parishioner of the Mt. Moriah A.M.E. church and used it as a safe haven for runaways.

There were two backup routes that also originated in Pennsylvania. Yardley was a small town on the Delaware River located about thirty miles the north of Philadelphia. The town had an Underground Railroad station and was part of the Eastern Branch of Pennsylvania's escape network. Some crossed the Delaware River there and reached New Jersey just north of Trenton where they entered the "Philadelphia Line." A second branch of the Eastern Network in Pennsylvania originated in Norristown, but instead of going to Yardley, it went to Bristol. This town was directly across the Delaware River from Burlington.

Northern Network

The Northern Network operated in an area bounded by a line extending from Bordentown to the Jersey shore in the south and from there all the way to the northern limits of the state. It ran mainly through the counties of Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, Somerset and parts of Warren and Hudson. There were 8,319 free blacks living in these six counties in 1850. While not as extensive as their presence in the Central Network, there were also a number of Quakers living there, and the A.M.E., A.M.E. Zion, and Colored Presbyterian Churches had congregations along the main escape route in the towns of Trenton, Princeton, Crosswicks, Allentown, New Brunswick, Perth Amboy and Jersey City. The Northern Network contained a number of escape routes that channeled fugitives from Pennsylvania and New Jersey to New York City.

The "Philadelphia Line" reached its conclusion in the Northern Network. After Bordentown, Underground Railroad conductors guided runaways to the town of Princeton where the horses used to pull the wagons in which the fugitives were hidden were changed. There were at least two Underground Railroad stations in the town. One was the Monteith House located on Nassau Street. From Princeton, freedom seekers were taken to New Brunswick where they crossed the Raritan River and proceeded to Jersey City. Cornelius Cornell lived just outside of New Brunswick and it was his job to keep a lookout for any slave catchers patrolling the area. If necessary, the conductors would employ an alternate route that took escapees to Perth Amboy. One of the main safe havens in Perth Amboy was the home of the famous abolitionists, the Grimke sisters. Sarah Grimke, her sister Angelina Ward, and Angelina's husband Theodore Ward, operated an Underground Railroad station in Englewood. From here they would see to the safe transportation of their "visitors" to New York City. John Everett, a Quaker, either took them to the Forty-Second Street railway station where he purchased tickets on a through train to Syracuse or to the home of Lewis Tappan on West Broadway. From Tappan's house fugitives could go to the Hudson River Passenger Station at the corner of Church and Chambers Streets where they were put on the night train for Albany.

Some freedom seekers arrived in Jersey City hidden in canal boats that had come over the Morris Canal. The canal was opened in 1824 and brought coal from the area of Pennsylvania around the town of Easton. Underground Railroad agents hid them in brick tunnels near the Sugar House on the waterfront at the end of the canal. Some were later transferred to boats traveling north toward the Erie Canal. Others were placed in ferry or coal boats headed across the Hudson River to New York City.

Robert Purvis, the great Pennsylvanian Black abolitionist and Underground Railroad agent, described another escape path that began in Philadelphia, but instead of crossing the Delaware River into Camden, it turned northward through Bucks County in Pennsylvania. Somewhere in the area of Morrisville, Pennsylvania, fugitives crossed the Delaware and went into Trenton. From there they proceeded to New Brunswick, and entered the "Philadelphia Line". Fugitives also crossed the Delaware at New Hope and made there way to Lambertville and then to Princeton or at Phillipsburg and then traveled to New Brunswick.

Recent research has unearthed an Underground Railroad site in the community of East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania in the home of Robert Brown, one of the sons of the famous John Brown. East Stroudsburg is only two miles from the Delaware River. Once fugitives crossed into New Jersey, they most likely followed the system of roads that later became Routes 80 and 280, all the way to Jersey City. This system would have passed through Boonton where the Underground Railroad station was located in the Powerville Hotel owned by the Hopkins family. Charles Fern Hopkins was a noted abolitionist and political figure during this era.

Constitution of the Colored Anti-Slavery Society of Newark

Sources: http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAantislavery.htm; Ripley, C. P., ed. (1985). *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume III, The United States, 1830-1846*. p. 132-133.

In 1831, Arthur Tappan and Lewis Tappan established the first Anti-Slavery Society in New York. Two years later it became a national organization. The Anti-Slavery Society organized meetings, circulated petitions, printed and distributed anti-slavery propaganda, and commissioned people to do lecture tours. By 1840 the society had 250,000 members. The Anti-Slavery Society was dissolved after the passing of the 14th Amendment and the Reconstruction Acts in 1867.

Supporters of the Anti-Slavery Society included William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Weld, Samuel Eli Cornish, Robert Purvis, Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown. Angelina Grimke and Sarah Grimke were the first women to lecture for the Anti-Slavery Society. Other women active in the Anti-Slavery Society who became leaders of the women's suffrage campaign included Susan Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone and Amelia Bloomer

In 1837 the AASS had more than a dozen Black auxiliaries in the North. The Colored Anti-Slavery Society of Newark, founded in 1834 by local Black clergymen, typified Black support for "immediatism." It later was closely identified with Samuel Ringgold Ward and helped to launch his antislavery career.

Samuel Ringgold Ward

A. Whereas, the Kind eternal, immortal, and invisible, the most high God, hath made of one blood all nations of men, to dwell on the face of the earth, and hath commanded them to love their neighbors and themselves; and whereas our fathers have been held in bondage in the United States, two hundred years, and kept in ignorance, blindness, and gross darkness, by the lovers of filthy lucre [money]; and whereas the people of the United States assembled in the city of Philadelphia, on the 4th day of July, 1776, in the presence of Almighty God, declared that all mankind are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And whereas after the lapse of nearly sixty years, since the faith and honor of the American people were pledged to this avowal before Almighty God, and the world, upwards of two millions of our colored brethren, are still help in bondage . . . And whereas a meeting of delegates from Anti-Slavery societies and the friends of emancipation, convened . . . in the city of Philadelphia . . . for the purpose of forming a national Anti-Slavery Society; and whereas the Anti-Slavery Society, in this declaration are determined to use all godly, holy and lawful means, to undo our heavy burden, and to break every yoke, that the oppressed may go free. We deem it to be our duty to use all holy and lawful means to aid the National Anti-Slavery Society in their great and glorious undertaking.

B. The object of this society shall be, to endeavor by all honest means sanctioned by law, humanity and religion, to collect funds, to aid the American Anti-Slavery Society, to effect the immediate abolition of slavery in the United States, to improve the character of us the free people of color to inform and correct public opinion in relation to our situation and rights, and to obtain for us, equal civil and religious privileges with the white inhabitants of the land.