

GREATER JEFFERSONTOWN
HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

February 2017

Vol. 15 Number 1

February 2017 Meeting

The **February** meeting will be held on **Monday, February 6, 2017**. We will meet at 7:00 P.M at the Jeffersontown Library, 10635 Watterson Trail. **Jim Holmberg**, Archives Curator for The Filson Historical Society, will be speaking about Kentucky and Indiana connections to the Lewis and Clark Expedition of Discovery. This is another joint presentation with the Jeffersontown Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library.

The Greater Jeffersontown Historical Society meetings are held on the first Monday of the even numbered months of the year. Everyone is encouraged to attend to help guide and grow the Society.

Kroger at the Tyler Center Expansion

It was noticed that in the Kroger expansion it appeared the trees along the drive back to the Robert Tyler property were possibly being taken. We checked – they aren't being taken out, but just as bad, the ground on the Kroger side was stripped completely away exposing the roots on that side.

Meeting Programs

I would love to hear any suggestions for topics or speakers. Call me – 502-491-6463. If you forget, you will find it again at the end of the newsletter.

October Meeting

Catherine Bache presented a program on her Girl Scout Gold Award project, "Faces of Freedom – The Underground Railroad". Part of the project was a reenactment play of various people's parts in running the Underground Railroad. She wrote, set each scene, and staged the play on her own which Catherine and her group presented as part of the project at Locust Grove on Friday, September 9. The play was not presented at our meeting.

The Girl Scout Gold Award is the equivalent to the Boy Scout Eagle Award. Catherine is a senior at Kentucky Country Day High School, and in the fall semester she was taking five advance program courses. Her sister, Julie, presented her Gold Award project on the Rosenwald Schools in Kentucky at one of our meetings a couple of years ago.

Catherine first got interested in the Underground Railroad while at a summer camp in the sixth grade, so when it came time to select a project for her Gold Award, she decided to work on preserving Underground Railroad stories and talk about human trafficking.

The Louisville, southern Indiana, and the southern Ohio areas played a large part in the Underground Railroad, and the Ohio River was the boundary of free and slave states. The John Parker house is on the river in Ripley, Ohio. Parker was born into slavery in Norfolk, Virginia and at the age of eight, John was forced to walk to Richmond, where he was sold at the slave market to a doctor from Mobile, Alabama.

While working at the doctor's house as a domestic servant, John was taught to read and write by the doctor's family, although the law forbade slaves being educated. During his apprenticeship in a foundry, John attempted escape several times. He asked one of the doctor's patients, a widow, to purchase him. After taking title to him, she allowed him to hire out to earn money, and he purchased his freedom from her for \$1,800 in 1845 by working in the iron foundries and at occasional odd jobs. He moved to Jeffersonville, Indiana, married there, and then moved to Ripley where he became involved in the Underground Railroad, eventually rescuing hundreds of slaves at the risk of his and his family's lives by going on slave owner's property to free slaves.

He built a house overlooking the Ohio River near a crossing point so he could observe the opposite bank for escaping slaves. Close to the Parker house, another abolitionist family, the Rankins had a house equipped with a tall pole where a light could be hung when all was well for escaping slaves to attempt a crossing.

Parker, who had six children, became an industrialist and one of the few early African Americans to be awarded patents for their inventions before 1900. All six children were college educated.

Catherine went to a National Park Service conference where she met several individuals with Underground Railroad history and returned with many ideas and inspiration for her project that includes a play that follows a slave member left behind when the rest of his family escapes. Through costumed characters that include free blacks, Quakers, a bounty hunter, and others, you follow his escape. The play is used to connect Underground truths and myths with modern day's human trafficking and slavery myths and truths.

Catherine based her reenactment on actual people she researched. The main character is William Wells Brown, who was born into slavery in Kentucky with a large family of siblings whom were sold to other slave holders, leaving just him and his mother. They tried to escape together but failed. Sometime later he was able to escape successfully by himself and wrote an autobiography which was published, making him one of the first blacks to be published.

There was the Thomas Garrett family, Quakers from Pennsylvania, who were dedicated to helping freedom seekers. John and Jean Rankin, mentioned earlier, are also represented in the play, as is Laura Smith Haviland, a Quaker, who left the organization so she could be more active in helping runaway slaves; this is Catherine's character in the play. In 1832 Haviland and Elizabeth Chandler helped to organize the Logan Female Anti-Slavery Society in Michigan, a group that helped slaves adjust to freedom. Haviland also did some of her work in Kentucky. Chancy Shaw, the meanest bounty hunter in the region that ended up in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is also a character in the reenactment. Two free blacks portrayed in the program are Jemima Woodson and Oney Judge. Woodson and her husband left Virginia for Ohio where they helped to found a church and a farming community in Jackson County. They had eleven children, who all helped fugitive slaves, and their work in the Underground Railroad led to the death of two of their sons. Oney Judge was Martha Washington's slave whom the Washingtons took to Philadelphia after George Washington was elected president. Oney first saw free blacks there and was fascinated. After Martha Washington told Oney she was to be willed to Martha's granddaughter on Martha's death she knew she had to escape. After serving dinner to the Washingtons one evening, she ran away and spent the rest of her life as a fugitive, never being a free woman under the law.

John Parker is portrayed in the play. Other characters are Mary and Anthony Compton, he from a slave holding family and she from an anti-slavery family, a Kentucky riverboat captain, who allows runaway slaves with fake free black papers to ride on his boat, and two teenage girls from Nebraska who travel 500 miles to Chicago; one of whom continues on to Canada.

A goal of the program is to shatter the myths of the Underground Railroad and each scene is designed to do this:

Myth – All slaves wore clothes that were worn and torn. Many slaves were actually able to earn money by being loaned out to other people making it possible to make purchases and, as in John Parker’s situation, buy his freedom.

Myth – Runaway slaves only traveled by foot using secret tunnels and rooms to hide. Even though they traveled mostly by foot, there were many instances where slaves used riverboats, covered wagons, and the train to escape.

Myth – Only adults escaped to freedom. Many children escaped alone; the two teenage girls from Nebraska being the example in the play.

Myth - Families in the south were all pro-slavery and families in the north were all anti-slavery. As we know this is not correct. There were pro- or anti- slavery sentiments in many towns, regions, even families in both north and south.

Myth – There were direct routes for freedom seekers to follow. Each runaway had to find his own way to freedom, many using only the North Star to guide them.

Myth – Freedom papers ensured freedom for a lifetime. If a bounty hunter took a black person’s freedom documentation, which they were required to have at all times, they could be sold back into slavery.

Myth – No enslaved black knew how to read or write. Many slaves were educated secretly by family members or even by their owners. John Parker was one of these.

Myth – The Underground Railroad was a system of abolitionists helping weak slaves escape. This certainly was not true. They were often very bright, strong, and clever. They had to plan and execute their escape.

Myth – The only people who helped slaves escape to freedom were white abolitionists. Although many who helped runaway slaves to freedom were white abolitionists, many others were free blacks, and even other enslaved blacks helped other slaves run to freedom.

Myth – All Quakers were active in the Underground Railroad. Although many Quakers freed their slaves early on, they didn’t want to be involved in the Underground Railroad. That was the case with Laura Haviland, who left the Quaker Society then became involved.

Catherine created a large bulletin board with all the characters and some biographical facts about each one that people could read after the performances. She delivered notices to all the homes around Locust Grove, alerting them to rifle shots during the program and met with Locust Grove personnel to work out all the details for the program. One of the best times for Catherine came when the ensemble began rehearsals and got to the dress rehearsals.

Finally the big day arrived. The reenactment was performed six times at Locust Grove and once at the John P. Parker House in Ripley Ohio, that required Catherine draw up a new scene staging map. Each performance was sold out.

At the beginning of each performance patrons could come in and choose a wrist band with the name of a freedom seeker and some biographical facts about the person, so a patron could walk in memory or in honor of the person during the play. Before each performance Catherine would give a short introduction to give context and set the theme for the play. She hands out copies of a Charles Weber painting, seen here, showing a white woman helping an older, feeble slave walk through the snow. This perpetuated the Underground Railroad myth of only whites helping weak slaves escape. Each patron also received a set of “freedom papers” that they had to present to one of the interpreters when asked to prove they were a free person. The guests followed the action of the reenactment as they walked through each scene with the performers.



As part of the Gold Award, Catherine nominated a site to the National Register of Historic Places. She nominated the Sroufe (Shroufe) House in Dover, Kentucky, in Mason County. It was the site of a famous Underground Railroad rescue by John Parker that Parker wrote about in his autobiography. The Sroufe house was located across and a little up the Ohio River from Parker’s place in Ripley.



James, the son of Sabastian and Mary Ann Sroufe, worked for John P. Parker in his foundry. James had questioned Parker about whether he worked on the Underground Railroad and James dared Parker to help some of his father's enslaved workers escape. Parker took this as a challenge. After some scouting trips, Parker made contact with Celia and her husband, who is never named, and laid out a plan. The husband trusted Parker and knew of his reputation, but he let Parker know that they would not leave without their son, Louis, who the Sroufes kept in their bedroom at night. Sabastian suspected Celia and her husband would attempt to escape and knew they wouldn't leave without Louis. Sroufe kept a candle burning in their bedroom at night and kept pistols close by.

When the time for the escape was to happen, Parker rowed across the river in a skiff and met the couple outside the cabin. Parker tried to convince the husband to go in and rescue Louis, but he refused. Celia also was too frightened to go in. Parker finally agreed to rescue Louis and instructed the couple to move toward the skiff. He took his shoes off and made his way through the house to the Sroufe’s bedroom. He was able to open the door without waking them, but when he leaned over to pick up Louis, Sabastian woke up, knocking over the candle, putting it out and causing the pistols to fall off the table. Parker ran out, Sabastian retrieved a pistol, firing a shot at Parker that flew past his head.

Hearing the shot, the couple ran back toward the cabin. Shoeless, Parker ran past Celia and her husband hollering he had the baby and they better turn around because when he reached the skiff he was gone. Parker was able to get the family across the river into the hands of others who took them to safety.

Though the Sroufes suspected Parker, and found his shoes, they were never able to prove Parker had freed the family. Parker had made it back home before the Sroufes arrived and searched his house. The Sroufes found where Parker had purchased his shoes, but Parker had made it to the clerk first and convinced him to play dumb if questioned. James Sroufe never returned to Parker's business.

Parker, if he had been caught or identified, would have lost his home, all his businesses; he and his family would have been sold into slavery, and he could have ended up being hanged for going on to the property of a white slave holder to save an enslaved person. A white man would have only received a fine.

Catherine feels that by learning about the Underground Railroad and the history of past slavery, we can better understand the horrors of human trafficking today. By immersing the audience into the performance, and accusing and questioning their freedom status as if they were part of the program, it made them emotionally involved, be connected to and eager to see the main characters gain their freedom. She feels many today don't realize the extent of human trafficking and slavery in the world today. It has happened here in Louisville. An oriental restaurant owner was keeping several Asians captive, transporting them to his restaurants and forcing them to work without pay and threatening to turn them in as illegals.

While Catherine was working on the project, she met an Iraqi couple at the John Rankin House. She learned that they risked their lives in Iraq helping women and children to safety there. Catherine has also had the opportunity to work with the Frederick Douglas Family Initiatives, an organization that works to prevent human trafficking, helping them with their curriculum.

After performances Catherine would hand out comment forms. She received many very complimentary replies back, reflecting the success of her more than 300 hours of work on the project. She volunteers at Locust Grove and several of the performers came from there and elsewhere in Louisville. The National Register application has been approved.

Contact Us

The telephone contact is your newsletter editor, John Ulmer, 491-6463. Our e-mail address is **jtownhistsociety@aol.com**.