

REMINISCENCE[sic] OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN CHESTER COUNTY

BY

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As a xxxxxxr[observer] of three generations of underground railroad operators and earthenware manufacturers in Chester County, and myself a native and for forty years a resident of the county, I am glad to meet again the Chester County historians.

My great grandfather, Thomas Vickers of Caln township was a prominent abolitionist. He was one of the original members of the first Anti-Slavery Society formed in Philadelphia, of which Benjamin Franklin was the first president, and he was one of the [xxfirstxx] earliest and most active agents of the underground railroad. He had an earthenware manufactory in Caln and there befriended innumerable run-a-away slaves, enroute to Canada.

When my grandfather, John Vickers married Abigail Paxson in 1803 he became a partner with his father in the business, until 1813 when he bought a farm in Whiteland Township and carried on the manufacturing of earthenware there, also the philanthropy of receiving, protecting and forwarding towards safety fugitive slaves.

In 1823 he bought land in Uwchlan, near Lionville, where he erected more extensive buildings, shops, kilns, and warehouses and settled for life. The clay beds becoming exhausted made these removals necessary, or at least advantageous. It being a matter of great economy to have the clay near at hand and on their own land. The proximity of forest of which the wood-leave could be bought was a consideration too, as over a hundred of cords of wood were consumed yearly by the kilns in which the ware was burned.

When my father married Ann Thomas Lewis in 1840 and needed a

separate home, grandfather took him into partnership and built him a house on the property.

Amid these activities and surroundings, I came into existence, and felt early that I was part and parcel of both homes, my father's and my grandfather's and the series of shops, kilns and buildings between; at the age of five or six often sitting on the high seat in Uwchlan Meeting with my grandfather as well as at the quarterly meetings at Caln and at the Yearly Meeting in Philadelphia, being taken with him as companion, his daughter's having married and scattered by that time. So as "little Sara" at an early age I was quite impressed with the views on anti-slaver subjects discussed by my elders.

In giving reminiscences one thus environed is likely to hark back to years beyond their time and question whether the earliest of them are memories of things seen, heard, and remembered or the echoes, of former generations. Early recollections come to us somewhat in the form of an inheritance, as we are in childhood the impressionable, receptive, rather than the active factors. While my memory pictures of the underground railroad at the Uwchlan Vickers Station are perfectly clear, I wish to speak a few minutes of the family's general connection with the anti-slavery movement which preceeds[sic] them and the organization of the earnest advocates of abolition which gave strength to the cause and protection and unity to those along the line who were at their personal risk and individual cost continually harboring and passing fugitives on towards Canada.

In 1833 the Declaration of Anti-Slavery Sentiments was written and

and signed in Philadelphia. My aunt and uncle, Mary and Aaron Vickers drove down to [sic?] Uwchlan to attend the meeting of anti-slavery leaders, their vehicle being what was then called a chair, My uncle Aaron Vickers, then but eighteen years of age was the youngest of 61 signers of that Declaration. My aunt accompanying him was older, she had been a student at Westtown and was then teaching a private school. When the Female Anti-Slavery Society was organized in 1836 she became an active member of that. I have in possession the Preceedings[sic] of the Anti) Slavery Society of American Women" from 1838 to 1849, and it is interesting to note their helpful cooperation in this great humanitarian cause.

In the Report of the Convention of American Women held in Philadelphia in 1838, there were 208 delegates present, 51 of them being from Chester County. The list included 4 from West Chester, 4 from Uwchlan and 6 from Kimberton. Grace Anna Lewis, whom we have so lately lost was one of those from Kimberton, and doubtless among the youngest, as she was seventeen at the time. From Westchester there was Lucretia Fleming, Phebe Darlington, Hannah Covington and Henrietta Simmons.

It was while this convention was in progress, May 15, 16, 17 and 18th in Pennsylvania hall, you will recall that the hall was burned by the mob on the evening of Thursday, May 17th. Indignaties[sic] had been offered the women earlier, but they were earnest, indegafatible[sic] and prayerful. On Friday they convened in a school house and completed their business.

Of the local Uwchlan Antislavery Society I have the original draft of the constitution and some copies of the Minutes in my grand-

father's writing. This constitution consists of a preamble and ten articles, which set forth the earnest and inflexible aim of the Society to bring about by peaceful means the abolition of slavery. "the immediate and universal abolition of slavery is an incumbent duty" the preamble states in article 2nd we find, "it is our aim to convince all our fellow citizens by arguments addressed to their understandings and consciences that slaveholding is a heinous crime and that the best interest of all concerned require its immediate abandonment without expiration" and to Prevent the extension of it."

From Article 6 I quote "The management of the concerns of the society and the disposition of the funds of the society shall be entrusted to the presiding officer, a recording secretary, a treasurer and a librarian, who together with four females shall constitute a board of managers whose duty it shall be to consider and adopt the means best calculated to promote the objects in view and report the same to the Society at each stated meeting. The officers shall be elected annually."

Article 6 says, "Stated meetings of the Society shall be held quarterly on the fourth day, following the first second day in the first fourth, seventh and tenth months"

In the Proceedings of the Pennsylvania Convention Assembled to Organize a State Anti Slavery Society in Harrisburg Jan. 31st 1837, a pamphlet of 100 pages we find the "call for this convention was signed by upwards of 1200 gentlemen from various parts of the Sate". Dr Bartholomew Fussell of Chester County called the convention to order. F. Julius LeMoyne of Washington County was elected president and

Dr Bartholomew Fussell vice president. There were 26 delegates representing local antislavery Societies in Chester County present Frm[sic] that of West Chester Henry Fleming, Samuel M. Painter, Aaron Vickers, Edward M. Bartlett and P. F. Smith from Uwchlan Simon Hawley and Paxson Vickers[.] These men were usually older than my father, who was then but 17 years of age.

This society was called into being, as explained in its constitution Article 1st, “as auxiliary to the American Anti-Slavery” Society Article 2nd says, “it’s object is the abolition of slavery in the United States” and Article 3rd “This society shall aim to elevate the condition of the people of color and encourage their intellectual development” and the earnestness of those men were true to the highest principles of human liberty rang through every article of the constitution. Emmor Kimber of Kimberton Chester County was a member of the Committee which drafted this constitution[.]

This convention was in session four days[.] It memorialized[sic] the House of Representatives asking for the use of the Hall of Representatives and the presence of the members for an evening meeting. The request was refused by a vote of 66 to 19. The representative from Chester County cast his vote in their favor.

The last resolution passed by the Convention, just before its adjournment on Feb. 3rd reads in part “Resolved; that the executive committee of the Pennsylvania Society be requested to ascertain the name of the persons legally held as slaves in their respective counties in this State and the names of those who hold them as property and report the same at the next annual meeting of this society”.

The convention memorialized the Congress of the United States against recognizing the Government established by the insurgents in Texas and discussed at length the evil of and remedies for slavery[.] Benjamin Lundy, who had been active for years with his colonization scheme was there. John G. Whittier spoke earnestly. He said “It is inconceivably ridiculous for us to give our vote to men we know will throw our petitions unread on the table”

Opinions were quite divided on how to best to get rid of slavery, but were a unit on the necessity of its speedy abolishment. Some thought the government should recompense the slave-holders, in a degree at least for the negroes and arrange for their employment at regular wages, others that the Government should transport the[m] to Liberia and yet others that their owners had no rights to consider and that the slaves were naturally free and should be informed of the fact and helped by all good, Christian people beyond the jurisdiction of our laws.

Benjamin Lundy was a constant and ardent advocate of colonization. He had travelled over the South for years, holding meetings and lecturing. In 1827 there were 130 Anti-slavery Societies in the United States and 106 of them were in the southern States, most of them having been organized by him after his lectures. He petitioned the governments of Mexico, Haiti, [sic] Texas and other near countries to grant him land for homes of the emancipated slaves. I have here a petition in his own writing to “his excellency the Governor of the State of Coahuila and Texas written at Nacogdoches July 3rd 1832, in which he states that as a resident of the United States he has devoted the greater part of his time for the “last

thirteen years to the general abolition of slavery, upon the principles of justice and safety in the southern States of the Republic; that during eleven years of this period he has published and still continues to publish a periodical work, entitled "The Geinus[sic] of Universal Emancipation, the sole object of which has ever been to collect and disseminate information and promulgate such liberal opinions and arguments as may eventually produce happy results; that he has twice visited the republic of Hayti[sic] and very recently performed a tour through the British possessions of upper Canada to investigate the state of things in those countries and assist in facilitating the emigration of slaves who have been liberated on the condition of their removal thither; that he believes in the cause of African emancipation is fast gaining ground in the United States, though the prejudice against the color is to[o] strong to effect it without the removal of a portion of them as aforesaid[.] The paper enumerates other facts and humanitarian reasons and ends with the following petition,

I Benjamin Lundy of the city of Washington in the United States of America request permission to colonize 400 families in the State of Coahuilla[sic] and Texas either in the tract of country lately granted to ~~Txxx~~ FFrost Thorn on the Trinity River or in such other suitable sections as may be designated. The said families will consist principally of respectable, industrious colored people, a part of whom will probably be emancipated from hereditary[sic] slavery on the condition of their removal from the United States. The general terms prescribed by the colization[sic] laws of Coahulli[sic] and Texas will of course ~~be observed~~ regulate the proceedings of all

the parties. None will be permitted to settle under this arrangement but such as are in addition to other requisite qualifications known to be positively in favor of maintaining the integrity of the Mexican Republic.

Should the above position be kindly favored by his Excellency, the undersigned will take measures to visit the seat of government of the State soon after the meeting of the Legislature with all the necessary credentials &c to pay every requisite attention to the business of the arrangement

M. Lundy

Nacogdoches July 3, 1832."

Benjamin Lundy more than any other man devoted his life to the abolition cause. He carried the type and material for the printing of his paper, the *Genius of Emancipation* started in 1821, on many of his travels, issuing it from Jonesville Ohio and Nashville Tenn in 1831, from Baltimore in 1824 from Washington in 1830 and at interval at whatever city he happened to be. Later more regularly from Philadelphia. The periodical was always intended to be monthly but when he was traveling it was rather intermittent. He continued to edit and publish it until his death in Lowell Illinois August 21st 1839.

He rather varied in his active efforts for colonization in 1837 because the current of thought of the Anti Slavery Societies in the north which were then strong favored immediate abolition and were less conciliatory in their methods. He edited the *National Enquirer* in Philadelphia for a short time. On March 15 1838 The *Enquirer* became the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, and John G. Whittier came from Mass. to edit it for the *Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society* and Benjamin

Lundy made preparations for a season of rest and domestic life. Though not then fifty years of age he had endured and sacrificed much for the cause, fought the battle for freedom for years almost single handed. The wife of his youth died while he was on one of his colonization trips to Hayti [sic]. The new Anti-Slavery leaders by their active and aggressive methods antagonized the South, they thought his peaceful methods slow and the fire of Garrison could not wait for the good seed he had sown to germinate (rather unfortunate some of we quaker folk have always thought)

Benjamin Lunday[sic] loved and became engaged to my aunt Mary H. Vickers in 1938[sic]. He went to Lowell Illinois in the Summer of that year, took up land on which he was building a house, to which he was ~~to return~~ to take his Chester County bride. A short time before he was to start his return trip for the wedding at the Uwchlan pottery Underground railroad home, on August 21st 1839, he was seized with a spasm of pain while working on an issue of his beloved Genius of Emancipation in the little printing office he had established in Lowell and suddenly died.

From 1833 John G. Whittier was in Philadelphia and at Anti slavery meeting occasionally[.] In 1838 he came to live here awhile as Sec of the Pennsylvania Anti Slavery Society and editor of the Pennsylvania Freeman, succeeding Benjamin Lundy, in 1838, He ~~occasionally~~ sometimes in the surrounding counties during the two or three years succeeding. He wrote much visited little[.] He was always rather recluse, attended some meetings of local Anti Slavery interest and formed ~~many~~ warm friendships. In speaking of the experience

of those years he told me in 1880, no papers or magazines but radical anti slavery ones would accept his writings at that time and drew the comparison with what the Atlantic Monthly was then offering "gurious world this"[sic] he added laughing. An amusing incident he realted[sic] about occupying the same boarding house bedroom on Arch Street in Philadelphia with Charles Burleigh and Miller McKim for some months occasionally to me. These three young men were in the Anti-Slavery work together. Charles Burleigh was out on lecturing trips frequently. He was rather unkempt in his appearance, in fact at this time his clothing was so shabby that the other men were quite ashamed of it, so they secretly took the measure of his old suit one night after he was sound asleep and had him a new one made, when it was finished, late one Saturday night, or rather in the night when they made sure by his loud breathing he was unconscious of all round him they quietly took his old clothes and hid them, putting the new ones in their place besides his bed. They expected to have a good joke in the morning, ~~and~~ but as he rose while they were yet a-bed watching, "he simply picked up the clothes and put them on without seeming to see the difference, and never said a word about them from that day to this" said Mr. Whittier laughing and that surpressed[sic] style peculiar to him which shook his whole form.

He also told me how he saw Pennsylvania hall burn and disguised in Dr. Parish, great white coat saw the mob rifle his desk and feed the flames with Lundy's good which were there awaiting shipment to Illinois, not daring to go near lest he should be seized by the rioters.

He knew Chester County people and remembered them kindly and gratefully asking for a number of them by name as he wrote or when I was at different times in his home and was rather tried[sic][.] I could remember little before 1850 “Thee missed a great deal not to know those people” he said to me one day when he was showing me some daguerreotypes of the Darlington’s and others.

I quote a passage from a letter received from him while living in my native County, dated “Amesbury [xxx], 6th 1st Mo. 1873

[“]Does Thee know I think the old quaker settlements of Chester, Bucks, Delaware and Lancaster County forty years ago were nearer to the perfection of human society than anything that I have since seen or read of before? As I sit alone these long Winter evenings I call before me the men and women and the scenery and the dwellings until I almost live my younger days over again. It is a greater privilege then St. Paul's Roman Citizenship to have been born in such a community.”

In writing of Bayard Taylor's funeral 2nd Mo. 22 1879 he said “I wish it was in my power to pay the last tribute of respect to my dear old friend, but my health is not equal to ~~xi~~ the effort.”

In regard to Dr. Robert Smedley’s book on the Underground Railroad, when giving us directions where the[e] find the original of the Declaration of Anti Slavery Sentiments he said “I am glad Dr. Smedley is preparing a book on the Underground railroad.”

And of a Chester County novel published in 1883 he wrote “The book is a fine picture of the people and their surroundings in Eastern Pennsylvania. As I read it I seem to see old Chester County and list to talk of its inhabitants.”

We have a right to be proud of our County and our ancestors and I have mentioned John G. Whittier's thought of them, simply because we all know of him better than other worthies who have worked among us and passed on.

Grace Anna Lewis, a rarely gifted woman, of whom you may have full record was a native and long resident of Chester County. She was born in 1821 and had memories of the troublous times from 1833 to 1849 which I must compass at second hand and from the numerous letters and papers I have inherited but her conversation was full of interesting incidents relative to fugitives they harbored and fitted out with clothing and should not be lost. There is quite a record of them in Dr. Smedley's book and note of the work in J. Smith Futhey's and Gilbert Cope's History of Chester County. Grace Anna with her mother and sisters did much towards clothing the womn[sic] and children and fugitives[sic]. They lived in West Vincent five miles beyond the Vickers Central Station[.]

Norris Maris in my early memory farmed their estate and cooperated fully with them, conducting the fugitives northward to Elijah Pennypackers in Schuylkill township or to Norristown or to some of the few other places where it was safe to shelter them.

The pottery, as the earthenware manufactory was generally called, was half a mile from Lionville at the croos[sic] roads. I can see the old pointer post that I spelled out early "1/2 mile to Lionville 2 miles to Chester Springs 7 miles to Pughtown 8 miles to West Chester" and the six acres of tall virgin Forest trees, Feitler's woods, opposite our line of buildings, bordering for the eighth of

a mile the Lionville and Pughtown roads. My grandfather's long two and a half story house had its end close against the West Chester road with its back to Lionville road and the forest its face to the orchard and the barn beyond, while the shops, warehouses, kilns, clay mills, retail rooms and wagonhouse stretched out for a square or two and grouped along the Lionville road with my father's house at the Lionville end of them. The barn housed from six to eight horses used in delivering the ware to stores through northern Chester County parts of Berks Montgomery and Philadelphia counties. The pottery was well suited as a hiding place for fugitives on account of the number of buildings lofts[.] Then there was often from fifty to one hundred cords of wood, ready for use in the kiln piled[sic] in the edge of the forest opposit[sic] and the forest itself was dense and protective[.] Back of the woods there lived in my time a colored man and his wife Joshua and Elizabeth Robinson who had hiding places under their floor where in emergencies fugitives who were unable to go on or whose masters were looking for them could be rested or secreted.

Fugitives were sent to the central Vickers station from Kennett Square, West Chester, Eurcildon Downingtown, Sadsbury and other stations along the line. ~~Thousands~~ hundreds of them being fed, housed and sent on. Sometimes the two horse ware wagon would be out with them for successive nights[.] The teamster who drove them for years in my memory being "Dave Countee" a former slave who had bought his freedom and was much interested.

This unlawful philanthropy was expensive as well as perilous. The fugitives were always hungry and often illy clad the woman and

children having if they had not been dressed at earlier stations often but one garment on and that made of sacking. Inexpensive garments were made and kept at the homes of those caring for the run-a-ways ready for distribution, and there was a close bond of unity and secrecy all along the line.

The underground trains ran only at night, except rare specials, reaching their destination at from 1 to 2 A.M. generally. My Grandfather kept in his yard along the pailing[sic] below his bed room window a long slender pole, and when a load of fugitives arrived the conductor would tap on the window with the pole as a signal and he would rise quietly and admit the slaves. The conductor going immediately back with his team in order to reach home before daylight. When the fugitives were able bodied men they would be directed and walk on themselves to the next station, having simply a word or a sign on a scrap of paper from the agent along the line, never his name, to insure protection.

It was when the larger groups or families came that the care and risk was heaviest or when parties came from different directions on the same night. They had occasionally as many as 21 and 35 at a time. My grandfather's housekeeper, trusty soul, never knew when she retired at night how many would be in the kitchen in the morning, nor did the little girl who ran over each morning too say farewell to her grandfather before going to the Friends school in Lionville. These strangers would be given their breakfast and be secreted about the buildings until darkness came again, when they would be directed or taken to Lewis' or beyond, sometimes to Halls on French Creek. Occasionally the men would stay to cut wood or

or do a few days work and before the passage of the Fugitive Slave law in 1850 both men and women were employed for longer service. My aunts used to receive letters from the son of an African Prince, who was kidnapped and sold about as he was being sent to this country to be educated[.] Through the influence of abolitionist his escape was effected and he was sent to Thomas Vickers in Caln where he remained a Winter and was taught to read and write[.] Funds were then collected to return him to his family in Africa and he wrote of his gratitude and well being to members of the family at intervals for years afterwards. There is no earthly record of what the zealous active abolitionists did for the enslaved African race, nor can there be, nor do I imagine for a moment those who rendered it desired later mention made of it[.] Every scrap of paper or letter relating to the emancipated as a matter of self protection was promptly destroyed and the work was done voluntarily[sic] as a conscientious duty.

The only caution to the young people growing up with never to allude to the subject outside of the home. This precaution was so firmly engrafted in our minds that I have associated with woman for years whose parents were engaged in harboring and transporting fugitives as my own and the matter has never been[sic] alluded to in detail by any of us.

With few exceptions those who helped the escaping slaves enroute to Canada at the risk of their own liberty and property in Chester County were members of the Society of Friends. Women were as active and self-sacrificing in this service as men.

One instance I recall distinctly is of Sarah Marsh Barnard, who lived in Pocopson arriving one night with a dearborn[sic] load of fugitives she had driven from her home. Her husband Eusebius Barnard was sick or away and she felt that the party, which consisted mainly of women and children must be helped on their way. She remained until the next day and I remember my mother showing her our flower garden in the morning and ~~telling~~ begging her never to take such a risk again; pointing out to her the dangers of a long midnight ride with strangers of whom she knew nothing, except that they wanted to come north. The dear old lady in the plain garb and bonnet did not promise that she would not in like circumstances do the same thing again.

A few years ago, before every vestage[sic] of the Vickers Underground Railroad Station had entirely dosappeared[sic], while the old house, which out-lived most of the buildings, and the forest guarding it were there I wrote verses to preserve the memory of the place, which embody some of my memories and I will conclude the little reminiscence you were so kind as to ask me to give with them.

SLO

-FROM-

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PHILADA., PA.