

“A Village Eighty Years Ago”

By Charles M. Vacca, Jr.

When Annie H. Kilton penned her nostalgic poem of Anthony Village, “*A Village Eighty Years Ago*” in 1910, little did she know that she was giving a glimpse into a mystery that has plagued us for decades. In her poem Kilton wrote:

“... In the old hall at Anthony,
Those players have come, and gone.
Here too “The Sons of Temperance”
Argued their pros and cons,
They climbed way up the winding stairs
Into a little room.
An air-tight stove in rooms like that
Gave out the potent heat,
Contestants were quite often warm
For they talked, and talked to beat.
Anti-Slavery was the topic then
A “temperance Pledge” was new
The leader wore a broadcloth suit
With hair dressed in a cue ...”

Local historians have looked at this passage and wondered whether abolitionism and its pride, the Underground Railroad, existed in Coventry. We know that Kilton, writing about life in the 1830s, alluded to the old Mechanics Hall on Mapledale Avenue, behind the former Anthony School. Today, one would not know that any abolitionist activity occurred in Coventry; as slavery has not existed since passage of the 13th Amendment, and remnants of abolitionism have been forgotten, as Mechanics Hall is now a two-story residential apartment complex.

However, let’s look at Coventry’s hidden past and the political environment back then. The Underground Railroad was a network of secret routes and safe houses used by 19th century black slaves to escape to free states and Canada (where slavery was illegal and there were no laws protecting slave hunters) with the aid of abolitionists, both black and white. It was created in the early 19th century; and by 1850, it was estimated that as many as 100,000 slaves had used the Underground Railroad to escape to freedom. The network was not a “railroad” at all, but figuratively, in the sense of being an “underground” resistance (much like that against Nazi Germany during World War II).

Individuals assisting in these operations consisted of small groups to maintain their secrecy, including people from all walks of life such as free-born blacks, white abolitionists, former slaves and Native Americans. Churches played a significant role, including that of the Society of Friends (or Quakers). In order to risk any infiltration, these small groups only knew of their part in the total operation, and not that of the whole scheme. Travel routes were not consistent, as escapees traveled often during the night and stayed at usually out-of-the-way locations before moving onto the next stop.

One of the reasons that historians lack significant and numerous pieces of information on Underground Railroads is that this activity was against the law. Under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, when suspected fugitives were seized and brought to a special magistrate, they had no right to a jury trial and could not testify on their own behalf. The marshal or private slave-catcher only had to swear an oath to acquire a writ of replevin for the return of the individual to his/her rightful owner. There were additional but less severe punishments for those caught working for the Underground Railroad.

So, what existed in Coventry during this period of time? Kilton tells us that the Mechanics Hall was used for activities such as abolitionism and related political activity. It is believed that readings of Harriet Beecher

Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (a novel that stirred further anti-slavery activity in the northern states) were held there. Local lore holds that the building served as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Nearby on Meeting Street was the Quaker Meeting House, which was in use until the 20th century, when it was converted into the local Polish National Alliance Hall. The Quakers were very active during the 1800s in Coventry, as there are two known Quaker cemeteries: including that of Friends Burial Lot (CY#65) on Meeting Street, and the Jabez Anthony Lot (CY#146) off Holmes Road. Among those buried in the Friends Burial Lot is Perez Peck (c. 1787 – 1876), who ran a machine shop and described as a prominent Quaker.

Kilton tells us in her poem that "... Our Court House", which today is an unassuming small storage building off Boston Street, served local citizens during the 19th century as a gathering place to discuss local politics, business and legal questions. Across the street is the former mill overseer's house, which still has a white chimney. Boston Street itself is named after a well-known freed slave, Boston Carpenter, who accompanied Col. Christopher Greene during the American Revolution. Although there are mixed opinions, white chimneys (as well as quilts, equally controversial, hung on a property's exterior) indicated a refuge for escaped slaves.

While communities across the north, including that of Rhode Island, held anti-black views and remained intolerable towards non-whites, Coventry had a tradition of tolerance towards African Americans. In the town's oldest cemetery, Brayton Burial Lot (CY#168) lays the remains of Elder Benjamin Roberts, the "colored Baptist preacher", and his wife. Further away off Maple Valley Road, local lore holds that a settlement of free African American laborers operated a sawmill in the 1800s near present day Parker Woodland.

Back to the alleged Underground Railroad stop: just down the street was located the tracks for the Providence-Hartford Railroad line, established in Coventry during the 1850s. Historians believe that this railroad line was not a main transportation line for escaped slaves, but it existed as an outlet.

Historians acknowledge five Underground Railroad sites in Rhode Island. They are:

- 1) Moses Brown House at the corner of Wayland and Humboldt Avenues, Providence. (The house no longer exists, but Brown was a prominent Quaker in the abolitionist movement);
- 2) Isaac Rice Homestead, corner of William and Thomas Streets, Newport (Rice was a prominent free African-American during the early 1800s);
- 3) Elizabeth Buffum Chace House, Hunt and Broad Streets, Central Falls (Buffum was one of the outstanding abolitionists in Rhode Island);
- 4) Pidge Farm, formerly on Pidge Avenue, Pawtucket (now located at the former Outlet Service Station); and
- 5) Charles Perry House, Margin Street, Westerly (who hid escaped slaves in sod huts in nearby woods). Out of this existed Jacob Babcock, who spent time as a machinist in Anthony, before becoming an abolitionist in Westerly.

Kilton's poem has further de-mystified whether the Underground Railroad existed in Coventry. It may not have operated on a large scale, such as the Buffum House, but there are enough historical facts to support an environment that fostered such an operation.

References: *Boston Street is named after ex-slave*. Pawtucket Valley Daily Times (Sept. 1990); *Coventry Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries*. Dr. Bill Eddelman, John E. Sterling (Gateway Press, 1998); *Underground Railroad*, http://wikipedia/wiki/Underground_Railroad_In_New_England. The American Revolution Bicentennial Administration (1976); *A Village Eighty Years Ago*. Pawtucket Valley Preservation and Historical Society. Anthony Walking Tour (2011). Also thanks to research materials from the National Park Service, Woonsocket, RI office.

