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WEEKEND EXPLORER

On the Trail of Brooklyn's Underground Railroad

By JOHN STRAUSBAUGH

LAST month the City of New York gave Duffield Street in downtown Brooklyn an alternate name: Abolitionist Place. It's an acknowledgment that long before Brooklyn was veined with subway lines, it was a hub of the Underground Railroad: the network of sympathizers and safe houses throughout the North that helped as many as 100,000 slaves flee the South before the Civil War.

With its extensive waterfront, its relatively large population of African-American freemen — slavery ended in New York in 1827 — and its many antislavery churches and activists, Brooklyn was an important nexus on the “freedom trail.” Some runaways stayed and risked being captured and returned to their owners, but most traveled on to the greater safety of Canada.


Because aiding fugitives from the South remained illegal even after New York abolished slavery — and because there was plenty of pro-slavery sentiment among Brooklyn merchants who did business with the South — Underground Railroad activities were clandestine and frequently recorded only in stories passed down within families. Corroborating documentation is scarce.

Still, it's possible to follow some likely freedom routes through Brooklyn. You begin in Brooklyn Heights, where the Promenade offers sweeping views of the East River waterfront. In the decades before the Civil War, this waterfront bristled with the masts of sailing ships. Many were cargo vessels bringing cotton and other goods from the South. Sometimes they brought secret passengers: slaves fleeing to freedom. The fugitives slipped ashore and filtered into Brooklyn, where they were hidden and helped along on their journeys. Acquiring its railroad imagery by the 1830s, this antislavery network had its own “stationmasters” and “conductors,” who helped organize runaways' passages north, and its own “stations” and “depots,” where they hid. Several Brooklyn churches participated. Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, a few blocks from the Promenade on Orange Street, between Hicks and Henry Streets, was called its “Grand Central Depot.”

Strolling up the tree-lined street to this simple, New England-style brick church (constructed in 1849, succeeding the smaller structure that still stands behind it on Cranberry Street), it's hard to imagine that this

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serene spot became a lightning rod of national debate when the Congregationalist founders invited Henry Ward Beecher to be their first preacher in 1847.

Beecher, a brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the 1852 best-selling, controversial antislavery novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin," was both celebrated and reviled for his abolitionist stance. The archives of the Brooklyn Historical Society (nearby, at Clinton and Pierrepont Streets) contain some of the hate mail he received. One letter bears a drawing of a lynching and the note:

"Henry Ward Beecher, here is the fate of all traitors. We are making a rope for you."

Beecher's Sunday services packed Plymouth Church to the rafters, not just with locals but also with Manhattanites, who crossed the East River in such numbers that the ferries docking at Fulton Landing were nicknamed "Beecher Boats." In 1860 a long-shot presidential candidate named Abraham Lincoln paid the two-cent fare to ride a Beecher Boat to hear Beecher preach; a plaque at the end of a pew marks the spot where he sat. Walt Whitman, who was fired from his newspaper job at The Brooklyn Eagle for his abolitionist views, and who set the type for his self-published "Leaves of Grass" in a nearby print shop, was a great fan of Beecher's sermons.

Beecher also invited antislavery giants like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips to address his congregation. Other guest speakers over the years have included Booker T. Washington, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens — who read "A Christmas Carol" to capacity crowds for three nights running in 1868 — and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., delivering an early version of his "I Have a Dream" speech.

"A lot happened in this church," Lois Rosebrooks, the church's director of history ministry services, said when I visited recently. "We know that this was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Charles B. Ray, an Underground Railroad conductor in Manhattan, brought people over and dropped them here. They were hidden in the church — we assume in the basement, as that would be the safest place for them."

Beecher's most successful tactic for arousing what he called "a panic of sympathy" for slaves was to stage mock slave auctions in the church, with the congregation bidding furiously to buy the captives' freedom. The 1914 bronze statues of Beecher and two girls in the church's courtyard by Gutzon Borglum, who later sculptured Mount Rushmore, depicts the first such auction, in 1848.

The most famous auction occurred in 1860, when Beecher urged his congregation to buy the freedom of a pretty 9-year-old from Washington, Sally Maria Diggs, called Pinky for her light complexion.

"After the service he called her to the platform and told the congregation her story," Ms. Rosebrooks said. "He said, 'No child should be in slavery, let alone a child like this.' I'm sure he played on this. She could be your niece. She could be your sister. Your next door neighbor. So they passed the collection plate and raised

\$900, which is about \$10,000 in today's dollars."

Congregants gave jewelry as well as cash. In a theatrical flourish Beecher fetched a ring from the collection plate, slipped it onto Pinky's finger and declared, "With this ring, I thee wed to freedom."

In 1927 when Plymouth Church celebrated the 80th anniversary of Beecher's first sermon there, one who attended was Mrs. James Hunt, a stately woman of 76. She was Pinky and had grown up to marry a lawyer in Washington. According to Plymouth Church lore, she brought the ring with her; Ms. Rosebrooks showed me a simple gold band set with a small amethyst. (A Brooklyn Eagle article from 1927, however, quotes Mrs. Hunt as saying the ring had been lost.)

From Plymouth Church, it's a 10-minute walk to the corner of Fulton and Duffield Streets, where the new Abolitionist Place sign hangs. The abolitionists Thomas and Harriet Truesdell lived at 227 Duffield Street in the 1850s, and William Harned, an Underground Railroad conductor, lived near Duffield and Willoughby Streets.

Even as the city unveiled the new sign, however, it was considering plans to demolish the small houses on Duffield Street as part of an economic development plan for downtown Brooklyn. New hotels, underground parking and a public square would replace much of what now stands on the block.

Joy Chatel, a cosmetologist who lives at 227 Duffield Street, and Lewis Greenstein, a retired city employee who owns 233, have fought that plan since it was announced in 2004. They believe their houses, both probably dating to the 1840s, were stops on the Underground Railroad and should be preserved.

In his sub-basement, Mr. Greenstein showed me what appeared to be a capped well and an exit shaft to the surface. Former tenants told him of finding old stoves and iron cauldrons there, since removed. It all led him to believe his house was "a feeding station" for escaped slaves passing through Brooklyn.

Ms. Chatel said that years ago she looked through an opening in a neighbor's sub-basement to see what she thought was an abandoned subway tunnel under Duffield Street. There's a low arch in her own subbasement, sealed with a large stone, that might lead to this tunnel.

No subway ever ran below Duffield Street. Ms. Chatel and Mr. Greenstein speculate that the tunnel was used by the Underground Railroad, and might have led toward the former Bridge Street African Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Church, the first African-American church in Brooklyn and a known depot, just two blocks away. (It's now Wunsch Hall of the Polytechnic University, on the Metrotech Center commons.)

Mr. Greenstein acknowledged that they have only circumstantial evidence. A planning and environmental firm commissioned by the city found no conclusive proof of their claims. The consultants made no attempt to

excavate that mysterious tunnel, noting in their report that “assuming that a tunnel was discovered, there would be no way of knowing if it served as a passageway for freedom seekers without corroborating artifacts.”

Still, Mr. Greenstein said, “I think there’s enough evidence here to say, ‘Let’s do an archaeological dig.’”

From downtown Brooklyn I rode the A/C line to Utica Avenue in Crown Heights, then walked four long blocks to another cluster of small 19th-century houses enjoying a happier fate. Like a sliver of the rural past, a row of freshly painted wooden homes stands on green grass near the corner of Bergen Street and Buffalo Avenue, surrounded by modern red-brick monotony.

They’re all that remains of the African-American community of Weeksville, which thrived from the 1840s through the 1930s, then was swallowed up by Brooklyn sprawl and all but forgotten. In 1968 the last dilapidated houses were scheduled to be demolished to make way for public housing when preservationists identified and saved them. They were restored and opened for public tours as the Weeksville Heritage Center. Each house is furnished to represent a specific decade, from the 1840s — simple wooden furniture and no indoor plumbing — to the electric lights and washing machine of the 1930s.

“Weeksville was founded in 1838, 11 years after the end of slavery in New York state,” Kaitlyn Greenidge, a research assistant, told me. “It was a community founded on land purchased by James Weeks, a free African-American, along with two other investors, buying land in central Brooklyn and cutting it up into plots to sell to other African-Americans.”

By 1855, Weeksville was home to more than 800 residents. They included doctors, craftsmen and businessmen. Weeksville had its own elementary school, orphanage, old-age home and churches, and its own abolitionist newspaper, *The Freedman’s Torchlight*.

Ms. Greenidge said that although Weeksville was widely known as a safe haven for African-Americans, and many blacks from Manhattan relocated there after the vicious draft riots of 1863, there was no documentation to confirm that it was a stop on the Underground Railroad.

“But we do know from census records that up to 30 percent of the black people who were living in Weeksville in the 1850s had been born in the South,” she said, which suggests that at least some were escapees.

Pamela Green, Weeksville’s executive director, said its mission today is to have an impact on young people. “We want them to see that here were a group of people who were active post-enslavement, who were able to create institutions, to persevere, to create communities,” she said. “What is it about their lives that enabled them to do that in arguably one of the worst periods in history? What can you learn from what they did that will help you in facing the challenges of the 21st century?”

On Abolitionist Place, Ms. Chatel said she would like to see her house put to similar use.

“There’s no black museum in Brooklyn to celebrate the Underground Railroad,” she said. “This is the house to do it in. It’s important that the children and all of the people can see what people had to go through to be free.”

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Sisters Hospital Foundation

An Affiliate of Sisters Hospital

Dear Lillian,

This was in today's
New York Times and I thought
you'd find it interesting. I
know I did!

I hope all is well and
please give my love to the
girls!

Love,

Giada