



Bliss-McClure House & Carriage House in Lewisburg, PA

The Underground Railroad

The carriage house beside the Bliss-McClure house at 38 University Avenue, Lewisburg, is the only recognized stop on the Underground Railroad in Union County. The home of Professor George Ripley Bliss, his wife Mary Ann Raymond Bliss and their 13 children was built in 1854. George Bliss was a professor at the University at Lewisburg (now Bucknell). The carriage house provided safe haven for escaped slaves during the period from 1854 to the end of the Civil War. George Bliss's daughter Lucy spoke many years later about making nighttime trips with blankets and food for the runaways.

Professors Howard Malcolm and Thomas Curtis, whose homes were also on University Avenue, had similar anti-slavery sentiments. The barns (now gone) behind their homes (also gone), might also have served as safe hiding places for those on the journey north. Other known area supporters of Underground Railroad activity were Daniel Hughes and the Updegraffs, in Pennsdale, Muncy and Williamsport.

Slavery and Abolition in Pennsylvania

Early residents of Union County were divided on the issue of slavery. From 1790 to 1840 about 50 families held slaves. Most of these slaveholders were settlers from Britain, who owned one or two slaves.

In 1780 Pennsylvania passed a gradual abolition law whereby those who were slaves would remain enslaved unless freed by their owners, and children of slaves would be freed at age 28. A few slaves were still listed on the 1840 census for Union (and Snyder) County. Slavery was fully abolished in Pennsylvania in 1847.

The (federal) Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required that escaped slaves be returned, even from "free" northern states. This increased the activity and support of Abolitionists and the Underground Railroad. The American Anti-Slavery Society lecturer James Miller M'Kim spoke in Lewisburg in July 1859. His appearance at the Independent Hall (located near S. Front and St. Louis Streets), a meeting place for abolitionist activity, was to a receptive audience, whereas his previous 1837 appearance in some area communities was met with hostility.

Black Families in Union County

Union County was not just a haven for escaped slaves. It became home to free Blacks before and after the Civil War. Notable among these was Charles Bell. Born in West Virginia in 1827, Bell worked for a planter and was sold into slavery for \$1050 at his employer's estate settlement. In August 1849, Bell and his wife escaped and walked through the mountains to Pittsburg, and thence traveled to Canada. Bell later returned to Pennsylvania to seek employment and settled in Lewisburg. He worked for the University for 40 years, living in a house on St. Catherine Street (still standing). Charles Bell died in 1912.

Others who called Lewisburg home included Eliza Cuthbert, who worked in the household of Elisha and Sarah (Meixell) Shorkley, Henry and Mitchell Carter, the Reelers, and Mrs. Taylor. Free Blacks lived in Union and Hartley townships, working at the furnaces and other industries.

These families and others will be the subject of the Historical Society program on February 22, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Daily Life for African-Americans in Union County's West End, 1840-1950." Contact the Society at 524-8666 or hstorici@ptd.net for details, and for more information on our continuing research on Black history in central PA.

