

The quest for human equality and dignity

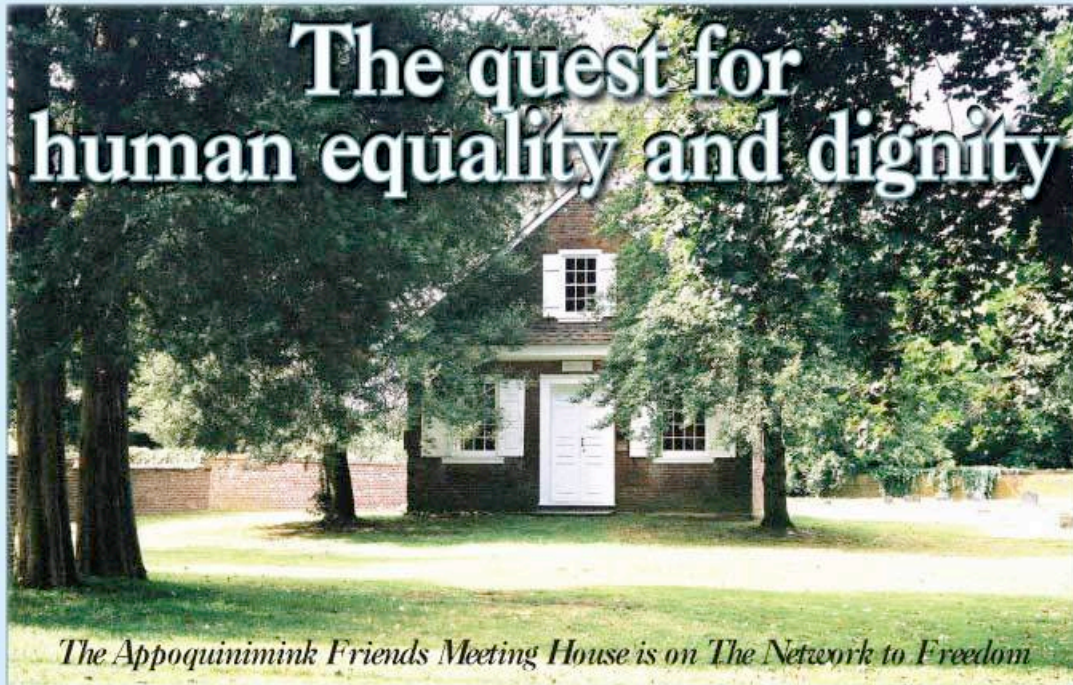


Photo by Carol Child

By Carol Child
Correspondent

“One Cannot Live Without Hope and Faith in Other People ...”

The night is black as pitch. In the eaves of heaven, deep behind an unfound door in the chambers of the earth's shadow, the moon hides. Tom runs through the woods, he runs over the fields, down the lost lanes between the corn rows and out across the swamp, keeping in the high reeds, crouching low, hoping a snake won't rise up and inject venom into his blood. His lungs ache. His heart is in his throat and his throat is dry. The tide runs up fast. It seeps in through the hole in the sole of Tom's shoe. The wind kicks up, but Tom has no time to wish for a jacket. The sheriff is hot on his heels, his shotgun ready, his bloodhound's nose to the ground. Tom keeps his eyes on the yellow light in the distant upstairs window. If only he can reach it. Keep runnin', keep runnin', runnin' to freedom. Huff, huff. He stumbles, catches himself; then he reaches the broad creek. He plunges in. The sheriff reaches the sandy bank, unties his skiff stashed in the reeds. The bloodhound jumps into the boat, settling between the seats, his nose wet and quivering with anticipation. The sheriff climbs in after him, laying his shotgun on the bench beside him. He picks up the oars and rows. Yes! He is gaining on Tom. Soon. Soon he will have him; the bounty high for runaway slaves, even here, north of the Mason-Dixon Line. The sheriff swiftly reaches the far bank. He leaps out into the woods, his bloodhound dashes ahead. After Tom – but where is he? The dog runs here and there, wags his tail, yaups, runs in circles. No Tom. Lost, a ghost. It's as if he has gone on some railroad underground, thinks the sheriff.

This story is common among runaway slaves: The light in the window, the run through the woods and the swamps, a kind hand, and a mystified bounty hunter reckoning the term and the invisible lines of the “Underground Railroad” into being. Fugitives arrived in the North mostly on foot or in secret compartments beneath vegetables in hay wagons, but also in coaches, onboard trains, steamships and even Mississippi paddleboats. Most came from the border states of Kentucky, Virginia and Maryland. He or she who undertook to run from the deep South up through all the other Southern states did so at great peril. And their protectors were subject to severe fines. Even federal marshals neglecting to capture and return fugitives were fined \$1,000 under the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, a law proposed largely by Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky.

Far back from the road, at the end of a two-rutted lane, secure beneath the leaves of the old trees and flanked by 200-year-old graveyards behind old brick walls, rests the Appoquinimink Friends Meeting House. Generations of families in the area have handed down stories of local farmers, prominent businessmen and housewives hiding runaway slaves up in the eaves. In the spring of 2008, the Appoquinimink Friends Meeting House was added to the Network to Freedom, along with the Corbit-Sharp

House, two of nine in Delaware designated by the National Park Service (NPS) as stops along the Underground Railroad. Robin Krawitz, a historian with the Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs, tracked down and uncovered the evidence.

The NPS National Historic Landmark program had just completed a national study on the Underground Railroad, mentioning the Appoquinimink Friends Meeting House as an associated site, Krawitz states in an e-mail, and her office was given a grant to research the connection. "Well, long as I looked and hard as I tried, I couldn't come up with any collaboration of this use," Krawitz says. Finally, while digging through records at the Delaware Historical Society, she found the notes of the 1914 lecture Mary Corbit Warner gave to the Colonial Dames of America about her mother, Mary C. Corbit (Mrs. Daniel Corbit), hiding the freedom seeker named Sam at the Corbit-Sharp House in a cubbyhole under the eaves.

"The lack of direct compelling evidence for actually assisting a runaway slave," Krawitz states, "kept the Appoquinimink Friends Meeting House from being designated a National Historic Landmark, the highest level of recognition available for historic properties from the Federal government. But the research was sufficient to update the National Register nomination and to get it designated a Network to Freedom site."

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Photo by Carol Child

This long, rutted road leads to the meetinghouse.

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The Appoquinimink Friends Meeting House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972.

Krawitz did find that the meeting house was "the center of the anti-slavery community of Quakers that lived in the Odessa/Middletown area and provided connections through religious practice and family ties to the larger network of anti-slavery activists across the Delmarva Peninsula and into Philadelphia."

One of the smallest Quaker Meeting Houses in the nation – one room, with a pitch roof covering a loft where a removable panel leads to spaces under the pent eaves -- the Appoquinimink Friends Meeting House in Odessa once served as a safe hiding place for escaped slaves running up from the South, even from as near south as Sussex County, Del., to freedom in Pennsylvania and other destinations north of Delaware. In 1783 or 1785 – the date is uncertain -- prosperous Odessa merchant David Wilson built the 20-foot-square red brick meeting house, situated on the south side of Main Street, today Route 299, just west of U.S. 13, and presented it to the Friends as a gift. In addition to the loft, the meeting house has a cellar originally reached by a small side opening at ground level.

In the United States, the Quakers were the first group to

help runaway slaves, according to Raymond Bial in his book, *The Underground Railroad*. Following the Biblical passage, "Thou shalt not deliver up to his master the servant which hath escaped unto thee" (Deut. 23:15), they assisted runaways from the time America was an independent nation.

In 1786 George Washington complained that a society of Quakers had attempted to liberate one of his slaves, Raymond Bial writes.

Of being the first: "I don't know if that's completely accurate, but it's certainly been since day one," says Wills Passmore, treasurer and acting clerk for Appoquinimink Friends Meeting. Passmore is a member of both Appoquinimink Friends Meeting and Wilmington Friends Meeting. Appoquinimink is a Preparative Meeting under the care and guidance of the Wilmington Monthly Meeting until such time Appoquinimink has enough members to go out on their own, not likely anytime soon. Presently there are approximately 15 members and another half dozen, Passmore says, who are interested and who come and take care of the meeting house when it is open during Christmas in Odessa.

The Religious Society of Friends arose amid the political and religious ferment in 17th century England when George Fox and fellow seekers sought to form a group uniting the constantly shifting Catholic and Protestant factions. Fox knew "that above all the darkness and conflict and evil in the world ... men could find the love and guidance of God directly

in their own hearts." Quaker, a member of the Society of Friends, comes from "Quake, an early leader's admonishment to 'tremble at the word of the Lord.'"

The Quakers explain the essence of Fox's teaching to be "that Christian qualities matter much more than Christian dogmas, best expressed, they state, by paraphrasing George Fox's comment, "You have heard what others say, but what do you say?"

How does the Quaker order of Christians observe Christmas differently from other Protestant denominations? Paulette de la Veaux, secretary for the Wilmington Friends Meeting, says that "Quakers do not celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday. We do not have religious holidays or sacraments. But many modern Quakers do celebrate Christmas with their families as a cultural holiday." Hence arises the annual storybook theme rather than religious of Christmas in Odessa tours.

Members of the Religious Society of Friends came with various groups organized by William Penn, settling in the area around present-day St. Georges south to Duck Creek (Smyrna) as early as 1763. According to Passmore and Friends in Odessa, the best historical sources are held in Duck Creek records in the Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Pa. The college, although non-sectarian today, was founded in 1864 by the Society of Friends and still

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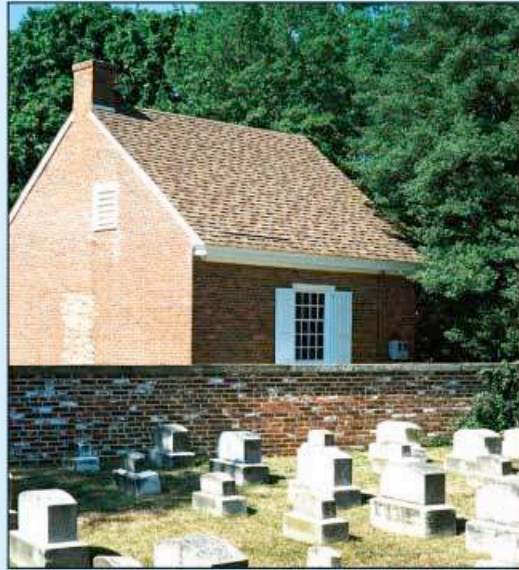


Photo by Carol Child

The meetinghouse and the graveyard.

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reflects many Quaker traditions and values.

Quakers hold "the conviction that peace can best be attained by striving to trust to love rather than reacting to fear." They believe peace to be the only way and work for equal rights for all, according to the Local Quakers Web site (<http://localquakers.org>), based in Kennett Square, Pa. Thus, they are known for their strong feelings against slavery.

In 1794 The Society of Friends declared that it was wrong to live in ease and plenty by the toil of those whom fraud and violence had put in their power, according to Bial's book. Quakers follow a dual commitment to spiritual awareness and social action.

Certainly, Quakers were not alone in their cause. In fact, Benjamin Franklin organized the first abolitionist society in Philadelphia in 1775. Free blacks, Methodists, Mennonites, Jews -- abolitionists of many faiths -- cooperated to make the Underground Railroad a safe passageway to freedom.

Many prominent local Quakers served as agents on the Railroad. They hid runaway slaves under the eaves of the meeting house. They doctored their wounds, gave them food, and clean, dry clothes, money, maybe a contact reference letter and via agents sent them on their way, locally largely through Thomas Garrett, often to Philadelphia, where



Photo by Carol Child

The interior of the meetinghouse.

freedom fighter and stationmaster William Still, born a free black man in New Jersey, would receive and document them -- one, Henry "Box" Brown, popping out of a shipping crate, as if from a celebratory cake, sent off from Richmond by a white shoe salesman. From Still they would go on, often to Canada beyond the long grasp of the Fugitive Slave Laws of 1793 and 1850, under which runaway slaves were stolen property and must be returned even from the North to their owners in the South.

Thomas Garrett, a Quaker, was a conductor on the Underground Railroad and one of its most prominent figures.

Born in Upper Darby, Pa., August 21, 1789, he moved as an adult to Quaker Hill in Wilmington. He is credited with helping more than 2,700 slaves escape to freedom over a 40 year period, according to the Quaker Hill Historic Preservation Foundation. He has been called Delaware's greatest humanitarian. He worked closely with another famous conductor, the woman who escaped from slavery in Maryland, Harriet Tubman, known as General Tubman, the Moses of her people. Tubman, who returned at least eight times to her native Maryland to free others, said when she first reached freedom, "When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything." Various sources state that in interviews with her, biographer Earl Conrad quoted Harriet Tubman as saying she hid in the Meeting House at times.

When Garrett was a child, his family hid runaway slaves in their farmhouse. When he was a young man, a family employee was kidnapped and nearly forced into slavery. Garrett chased after the kidnapers, freeing his family's friend. Garrett is said to have experienced a spiritual awakening that day, ever after devoting his life to "the active quest for human equality and dignity," the Foundation states on their Web site. Runaway slaves were told to make for the house of Thomas Garrett where he could secretly send thousands away to the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Offices, called Grand Central Station, and William Still. Still kept meticulous

records of slaves' experiences and was often able to reunite entire families, even finding his long-lost brother, Peter. He published his records in an 1872 book, *The Underground Railroad: Authentic Narratives and First-Hand Accounts*, providing an intimate portrait of the experiences of those who passed through to freedom. The book is readily available in paperback on Amazon.com.

Krawitz states that Still's book mentions three Odessa area Appoquinimink Meeting Quakers in specific accounts of assisting freedom seekers: "John Hunn, who was prosecuted along with Thomas Garrett in the famous Underground Railroad trial of 1848, attended here with his family as did John Alston, Hunn's cousin and mentor in the farming business. Alston was the caretaker of the building until his death in the early 1870s and then his family continued its care into the mid 20th century. The third was Daniel Corbit." Hunn and Alston were stationmasters on the Underground Railroad.

Still and Garrett may never have met face to face. Garrett burned his correspondence with Still for fear of discovery. Still hid his letters from Garrett in a cemetery, recovering them after the Civil War.

Indeed, at the 1848 trial held in the old New Castle County Courthouse, Garrett and Hunn were tried and convicted, by a stacked jury of Sussex County farmers who relied on slave

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labor, for aiding in the escape of the Hawkins family, from Maryland. Emeline and Samuel Hawkins with their six children, in the care of Samuel Burris, trekked in winter from Ezekiel Jenkins' home in Camden, Del., to Hunn's Middletown farm in a snowstorm, ultimately escaping through Delaware and into Pennsylvania to freedom. Garrett and Hunn were fined nearly to the point of bankruptcy. Hunn, ratted on by neighbors, was fined \$2,500 and had to sell his farm. Agent and conductor Burris, a free man, was sentenced into slavery, put on the Dover auction block, and on the stroke of freedom-lost, purchased with "abolition gold" by a Philadelphia antislavery activist. Burris never ventured south of the Mason-Dixon Line again. He died in San Francisco in 1869. The nationally broadcast video documentary *Whispers of Angels*, available on DVD, delivers a lucid and comprehensive account of Delaware's role in the Underground Railroad.

Ultimately, the Appoquinimink congregation waned after 1828 when a disagreement among Quakers as to Hicksite versus Orthodox philosophy occurred, and, after the death in 1874 of John Alston, its sole member, the members gave up the Meeting House. It remained closed for many years, but was reopened in 1950. It is open to the public for Quaker Meeting for Worship on the first and third Sunday of each



Photo by Carol Child

The small door panel in the loft

month at 11:00 a.m.

The Society of Friends welcome all, with hearts and minds. John Alston wrote in 1841, "Oh Lord...enable me to keep my heart and house open to receive thy servants that they may rest in their travels at this house...." He was praying for strength to continue his work as a stationmaster for the Underground Railroad.

Thomas Wolfe may have expressed the thought best in his

poem prefacing his novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*:

"...a stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door.
And of all the forgotten faces.

Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth.

Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?

O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on this most weary unbright cinder, lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When?

O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again."

Long before David Wilson built his little meeting house at the lane-end alongside the yews, now some of the oldest surviving trees in Delaware, the spot was found to be a place of respite, the NPS states; for the Native American Minquas, using the area in their travels and commerce, knew Appoquinimink as a resting place.

Author's note: "*One Cannot Live Without Hope and Faith in Other People ...*" comes from Raymond Bial's book, *The Underground Railroad* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995).



Photos (2) by Carol Child

This is one of the hiding places where slaves could avoid capture.

Prosperous Odessa merchant David Wilson built the 20-foot-square red brick meeting house. This is David Wilson's final resting place.

