

New Brunswick Connection with the Underground Railroad

by Edith Miller

Who would have thought New Brunswick had a connection with the Underground Railroad? Well, not I; though in American history classes we did learn that slaves escaped into Canada, the emphasis, I think, was to states that were free of slavery. It was more after the 1850 Compromise Bill, which ordered that runaways in the north must be returned to their "masters," that the slaves had the additional danger of bounty hunters, and abolitionists conducted the runaways to Canada. At Camp NeeKauNis, which my family and I attended in 1976, we were told about the slaves crossing the border into Ontario right near the camp. So I was astonished to find out this October that there were 130 Underground Railroad stations in Maine that led the runaways to New Brunswick.

Friends Church in Maple Grove, Maine (near Fort Fairfield, Maine, and Perth Andover, New Brunswick), a programmed Meeting, was build in 1859-63 by Quaker settlers who followed Joseph Wingate Haines and Mary Briggs Haines' arrival in 1844. The Haines family were among Quakers who helped conduct escaping slaves to the border. Nothing was recorded, because it was against the law to assist the slaves. Quakers were known for obeying civil law, but if they did assist them they certainly didn't want to be discovered breaking the law. In fact, it took the law-abiding Friends Society about 100 years even to make a stand against slavery.

"Stations" on the Underground Railroad "conducted" slaves. The James Fitzherbert Tavern in Fort Fairfield was one station. Slaves were hidden in a secret room behind a roll-away door that looked like a wall, then shuttled via Sam Everett Road to Tomlinson Lake in New Brunswick (between Carlingford and Beaconsfield). This route met another one that took slaves from Friends Church and Haines home sanctuaries, across Monson Pond to the border. Once in New Brunswick, they would be

met by communities of blacks along the St. John River between Saint John and Fredericton, established in earlier migrations.

In 1906 Friends Church was renovated, with a stained glass window, steeple, bell tower, oak pews, and organ. But in 1972, representatives of New England Yearly Meeting was to the sale of the church to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Its pastor, Reverend Charles Stanton then gave it to Frontier Heritage Historical Society in 1995 and started restoring it. This brings us to October 2000.

On invitation by Frontier Heritage, Michael and I and 25 other Friends and attenders of New Brunswick Monthly Meeting (half are cross-border State o'Mainers) came to celebrate the restoration of the Friends Church on October 22nd. Harry and Marilyn Roper, from the Houlton-Woodstock Worship Group of New Brunswick Monthly Meeting, have been active in the restoration programme. The great-great-great-grandson of J. Wingate and Mary Haines were there to welcome the congregation, which overspilled the pews. Frontier Heritage vice-president Dan Ayoob and Rev. Charles Stanton welcomed us. Harriet Price, the co-founder of Maine Underground Railroad Association, gave a presentation, and Ruth Mraz, coordinator of the Friends Church History Project, gave an overview of the project. The platform on which she spoke, she told us, oral historians believe covered a trap door to a secret hiding place of the slaves.

Marilyn Roper explained Quakerism as the audience was probably be unfamiliar with Quaker history and beliefs, and especially with the conduct of an unprogrammed meeting. This was followed by twenty minutes of silent worship. Out of the silence sprung words of thanksgiving to "the Quakers' courage and dedication in helping fellow beings," as "they walked the talk"; and comparing the light shining through the saints in the stained glass to the slaves'

efforts in making their way to freedom.

No mention of this ministry appeared in the local newspaper report - perhaps it was misunderstood by the reporter. A woman I talked to also seemed to misinterpret the ministry as she was left with the impression that the Quaker light within was like that of the light of a near-death or out-of-death experience. As I groped for an explanation amid the hubbub of the crowd, my answer to this bizarre comparison was more dialectical than definitive.

The short worship closed with all joining hands and singing "Tis a Gift to be Simple," a tradition with New Brunswick Monthly Meeting. The abolitionist song, "Follow the drinking gourd," was led by Audrey Zimmerman, voice, and Lewis Wirta, guitar, both of the Houlton-Woodstock group. This gourd was the symbol for the Big Dipper constellation and North Star, to direct the slaves north. "Abolitionist Hymn" was led by Harry Roper, French horn, and Dan Foster, piano.

After the event, we visited the Haines Maple Grove cemetery, restored by a descendent, then at the nearby Francis Malcolm Science Centre saw a "Follow the Drinking Gourd" show, delightfully interactive and intergenerational, by Larry Berz.

Carolyn Thomas, from the black community of East Preston, Nova Scotia, has also been researching the Underground Railroad and Nova Scotia blacks. When she met with Maine Underground Railroad Association members, they swapped oral history stories. One story was of a 92-year-old in New Brunswick whose great-grandparents had escaped by floating across a river, probably the St. John or St. Croix, in molasses barrels. MURRA co-founder Harriet Price says that, "they cheerfully celebrated the meeting as if each had been digging a tunnel from opposite sides and suddenly broke through!"

Edith Miller is a member of New Brunswick Monthly Meeting.