



HISTORICAL NOTES

on the

DISTAFF SIDE

MARION WALLACE RENINGER

HANNAH GIBBONS

From the early 1800's up to the time of the Civil War, there existed an organization known as the Underground Railroad. The object of this group of brave and active men and women was to assist fugitive slaves on their way to freedom in the northern states and Canada.

Paul A. W. Wallace, in his new work, "Pennsylvania, The Seed Of The Nation," refers to the so-called Underground Railroad, which operated from the eastern seaboard as far west as the borders of Ohio. It was particularly active in Pennsylvania and Lancaster County had several stations most of them established by Quakers.

Hannah Gibbons was the wife of the Quaker Daniel Gibbons. Their granddaughter, MARIANNA GIBBONS BRUBAKER, wrote this about the family, in a paper she presented on the subject, "The Underground Railroad," in the Lancaster County Historical Society Papers, Vol. XV.

They were "people who risked life and property in securing clothing, feeding and helping on their way to freedom, the poorest of the poor, members of a despised race, whose helpers were few indeed." As anti-slavery Abolitionists they worked to repeal the slave laws long before the the nation in general was aroused.

The Daniel Gibbons property was located about one-half mile north of the Bird-in-Hand station on the Pennsylvania Railroad. It was a tract of land about eight miles from the junction of Mill Creek with the Conestoga. Originally this tract of one thousand acres was purchased by Daniel's grandfather, James Gibbons.

Daniel and Hannah Gibbons, his wife, were both devout Quakers with ample means. Daniel had been injured on a business trip to the West as a young man. However, he was far from being an invalid, although he never could do hard physical labor for the rest of his life. He was aided

in the work for the fugitive slaves by his family. Joseph, the son, at the age of sixteen sometimes drove the slaves at night, concealed in his wagon, on to the next station.

The list of men in Lancaster County who ran these hidden places of refuge was long concealed. But later some of the records have been brought to light. It seems there were three routes used by the slaves in eastern Pennsylvania. One was through Delaware, another was about where the Conowingo Bridge now crosses the Susquehanna from Maryland and the third was at Columbia. The great depot at Columbia borough was a landing place for the slaves and William Wright, a descendant of the founder, ran this station. There were several reasons why this place was used for large numbers:—

1. Columbia was a convenient spot geographically.
2. Many of its settlers were Quakers who considered slavery absolutely wrong and assisted the fugitives.
3. Many free Negroes and emancipated slaves from the South lived in Columbia and gave it a large colored industrial community where a few Negroes could go unnoticed.
4. Stephen Smith and William Whipper, both Negroes, had a large and successful lumber business. They were men of excellent standing in the community who employed a large number of Negroes. At times a few fugitives could earn money by working there for a short time before proceeding on their way farther north. Stephen Smith was the largest stockholder of the Columbia bank at one time and it was said he could have been made president, excepting for the tone of his complexion.

William Wright was very well fitted to handle this station of the Underground Railroad. He was a very active man, knew the laws about slavery thoroughly, and had great presence of mind in emergencies. He passed many hundreds of slaves through by his ferry across the river. If he learned that any he had sent on were captured, he took steps to find and release them. Men were often sent by him disguised in women's clothes to Daniel Gibbons' station. Slaves escaped through Columbia in such numbers that for a while the slave owners paid a salary to a white man to stay in Columbia to intercept their property: slaves.

Some colored citizens of Columbia one night caught one of these slaves catchers and took him out of town and gave him a severe beating with hickory switches. Every Negro, coming from the South, knew the position of the North star, and by following that at night and hiding during the daylight hours, tried to reach free territory.

Dr. J. K. Eshleman in Strasburg sent fugitives to Daniel Gibbons, too. Often the men came on foot, with slips of paper telling where they came from and with directions about them. The women and children usually were hidden in wagons under loads of hay or produce. This method was generally followed by most of the agents. From Daniel Gibbons' station many fugitives were delivered to Thomas Whitson, Esq., of Bart township. Even his own children were never allowed to ask questions about his aid to the Negroes. He was entirely reticent and kept silent about his part in it all. From the Gibbons farm a reliable colored man would bring a party

of slaves and give a private signal to Mr. Whitson. He would wake up and no other member of his family knew what went on in the nights, as he had secret hiding places for these people during the daylight hours.

Once a family of fugitive slaves stayed at the farm of Thomas Bushong near Strasburg for a short while. One day a party of their owners appeared suddenly, arrested them, and took the whole family to Lancaster where they were placed in the jail. A sympathetic guard neglected to lock a door and they all got away again and arrived at Daniel Gibbons' station. Here they were hidden in a wheat field, given blankets and food and the following night were taken by Joseph Gibbons and Thomas Pearl to the next station in safety. "Pursuit was sometimes hot," writes Mrs. Brubaker. "Once a master came to the Gibbons home for his slave, a very young girl. Daniel Gibbons engaged him in conversation in his office and Hannah Gibbons hurried the girl out of the house and turned over her an empty rain water hogshead that was lying near. The entire premises were searched but of course, no slave was found."

At least one thousand fugitive slaves were received at the Gibbons' station. In 1836 a slave, very ignorant and dirty, arrived seeking aid. He was footsore and weary, could not tell how he came or who had directed him here. Evidently ill, he rapidly became worse. A doctor was called and pronounced the illness small pox. Hannah Gibbons, then a lady of forty-nine, shut herself up in a room with this poor Negro. For six weeks she nursed him kindly and carefully until he recovered and went on his way. She is described as a cultured woman of intellect, patience, self denial and warm affections. "Although loved by every one," writes her granddaughter, "the poor fugitives regarded her with idolatry."

Many white men spies were lured to kidnap escaping slaves and frequently dropped in at the Gibbons' property. So Daniel and Hannah had a lane built on two sides of a field, instead of a direct approach to the house. Thus they could observe arriving visitors of any kind. What a trying existence this must have been to the Gibbons family, year after year! When their son, Dr. Joseph Gibbons, returned from Philadelphia with his wife, Phoebe Earle, they, too, continued to help the slaves up until the outbreak of the Great Rebellion. They risked their own lives, security, and property, in evading the laws of their country, in order to obey a Higher Law of helping to free men in human bondage. Surely Hannah Gibbons deserves a place on the roll of women of whom Lancaster County can be proud.

APPENDIX

List of some of the men who helped in the Underground Railroad stations in Lancaster County—

William Wright	Columbia
Daniel Gibbons	1775-1853
Dr. Joseph Gibbons, Bird-in-Hand	1818-1883
Dr. J. K. Eshleman, Strasburg	1810-1893
Thomas Whitson, Bart	1796-1864
Lindley Coates, East Sadsbury	1794-1851
Joseph Bushong	1813-1880
Henry Bushong	1783-1870
Jeremiah Moore, Christiana	1803-
Joseph Hood and	1812-1866
Caleb Hood, his brother, Bart Township	
Joshua Brinton, Christiana	1809-1892
Thomas Bonsall, West Sadsbury	1797-1882
Lewis Pearl, East Lampeter	1808-1882
Joseph Smith, Drumore	1801-1878
Oliver Furniss, Little Britain Township	1794-1858
John Russel, Drumore Township	1804-1876
Day Wood, Fulton Township	
Christian Frantz, East Lampeter Township, the only Mennonite ..	1805-1890

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brubaker, Marianna Gibbons. "The Underground Railroad," **Papers Read Before the Lancaster County Historical Society**, XV (1911), 95-119.
- Clarke, Martha B. "Lancaster County's Relation to Slavery," **Papers Read Before the Lancaster County Historical Society**, XV (1911), 43-61.
- Whitson, Thomas. "The Early Abolitionists of Lancaster County," **Papers Read Before the Lancaster County Historical Society**, XV (1911), 69-85.
- Worner, William F. "The Columbia Race Riots," **Papers Read Before the Lancaster County Historical Society**, XXVI (1922), 175-187.