

# *Riots, Rumors, and Stories: The Underground Railroad and Abolitionists in the Valleys of the Susquehanna Region*

## **Centre County: Underground Railroad**

### Overview of Centre County

During the 19th Century, Central Pennsylvania and Centre County had reputations as being safe havens for those fleeing the bondage of slavery and for freed blacks. Bellefonte was at the intersection of waterways and stagecoach routes which along with its central location, and hilly terrain provided easy access and numerous places for fugitive slaves to hide with local African-American families and white abolitionists. Underground Railroad researcher William Switala found reference to a route used by freedom seekers that existed from Baltimore to Erie through Bellefonte, but details of the stops have been lost.

Several other locations in the county are suspected to have offered assistance to freedom seekers including houses in Milesburg, Phillipsburg, and Half Moon Township. An anecdotal account of Underground Railroad activity in the region was recorded by Myrtle Magargel in the mid-1900s: "they were taken after dark in a closed carriage to the next station wherever it might be. Some were in Bellefonte and some in Half-Moon. The slaves came for the most part from the Ohio and Juniata Rivers. They traveled mostly by water" (Centre County Geological Society Newsletter, March 1999).



### **Centre Stop #1, Bellefonte: Talleyrand Park (High Street and Allegheny Street)**



Bellefonte Governors Memorial

Bellefonte was established in 1795 and was the home of seven Pennsylvania governors. The town's residents were active in the Underground Railroad and abolition movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Oral tradition and/or some documentation exist that identifies several

potential Underground Railroad stations in town including the former homes of George Valentine, Samuel Harris, and William Thomas (1999).

Started in the 1960s to replace a deteriorated block, Talleyrand Park has been a beautiful work in progress in the center of Bellefonte and includes a gazebo and foot bridges. From here, several historic buildings and state historical markers, as well as the Centre County Tourism Information Center, are within walking distance. The information center is housed in a historic railroad depot located adjacent to the park on High Street, and offers visitors a variety of brochures and guides on the area.



St. Paul AME Church

One site of interest a few blocks from the information center is the Bellefonte African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. In the late 1830s St. Paul's A.M.E. Church was founded in Bellefonte to provide for a place of worship for African-American residents. According to Underground Railroad author Charles Blockson, the church itself was a location to provide temporary assistance to fleeing slaves. Charles Blockson stated: "Due to the strong anti-slavery influence in Bellefonte among a small group of Quakers, many of the fugitive slaves from the southeastern states, after reaching Centre County, settled in Bellefonte. The County's largest population was located there" (Bellefonte Museum for Centre County). Additional African-American history in the area and walking directions to the A.M.E Church are available at the information center.

## Centre Stop #2, Bellefonte: Centre County Courthouse



Soldiers and Sailors Memorial

A short walk along High Street takes a visitor past the Governor Andrew Curtin statue and two Commonwealth of Pennsylvania historical markers in front of the Centre County Courthouse. The courthouse was first constructed at this location between 1805 and 1806, and a wing and Grecian columns were added several years later. The rear section of the building was added between 1909 and 1911. The four streets that intersect here are known as the diamond. The statue of former governor Andrew Curtin and the Soldiers and Sailors War Memorial was dedicated in 1906.



Andrew Curtin

Andrew Gregg Curtin was the first Republican Governor of Pennsylvania, and served two terms from 1861-1867. He furthered his education in Milton, PA and while there became a friend of future Secretary of the Commonwealth Eli Slifer (for more information on Eli Slifer and his home in Lewisburg, see the tour stops in Lewisburg, Union County). Curtin led Pennsylvania during the Civil War years and after the war, established a school to educate the orphans of Union war veterans. During the mid-nineteenth century, Curtin was active politically and canvassed the state in support of abolitionist candidates.

### Story: Andrew Gregg Curtin's Ride

In 1909, William H. Mills Sr., an AME minister, recalled a story about Curtin's actions in an 1856 rescue attempt of Henry Thomas. Thomas had fled slavery in the South and, at the time, was employed by Bellefonte's Pennsylvania House Hotel. Slave hunters posing as business men, went to the hotel and requested assistance finding the route to Virginia and Maryland. They hired Henry to drive them south, and not wanting to raise suspicions, Thomas agreed. Once the group left Bellefonte, the slave hunters apprehended and restrained Thomas, and then continued on their journey.

As the group fled the area, Curtin passed them on the road. After his arrival in Bellefonte, Curtin learned of the abduction, organized a posse, and set out after the slave hunters. Unfortunately, Curtin's posse did not find Thomas, but he was later rescued near Chimney Rocks, Huntingdon County (Bellefonte Museum for Centre County).

Evidently, slave hunters and captures were common to the area as the story of a runaway slave named John Gray was apprehended while riding between Bellefonte and Howard, PA. Gray was returned to Virginia and then sold to an owner in Georgia. The family that Gray had been working for in Howard, located him, purchased his freedom, and returned him to Centre County (1999).

**Centre Stop #3, Half-Moon Township: Gray's Cemetery (Rt. 550 near Eagle Field Road)**



Gray's Cemetery

Gray's Cemetery, in Half-Moon Township is one of Centre County's many small cemeteries and contains the graves of generations of local residents including the Hartsock family. Henry Hartsock is considered one of Centre County's first abolitionist activists and lived in Patton Township. Mr. Hartsock is credited with providing direct assistance to those fleeing slavery and a statement of his support is recorded at Gray's Cemetery. Hartsock's headstone is etched with the following: "The untiring friend of the Negro in the days of American slavery." Centre County Historian John Blair Linn wrote of Hartsock that "runaway slaves seeking route to Canada ever found protection and aid at his home" (1999).



Hartsock Grave

If approaching the cemetery from the north, Henry Hartsock's grave is located to just north of the second entrance to the property. Limited parking is available on the shoulder of the highway.

In 1841, Half Moon Township hosted a visit by nationally recognized abolitionist and activist Lucretia Mott. During her visit, she delivered an inspirational speech on the evils of slavery. Her sermons commonly combined antislavery themes with calls for moral reform.

Person of Interest: Lucretia Mott



Lucretia Mott

Lucretia Coffin was born into a prominent Quaker family in Nantucket, Massachusetts. At the age of thirteen she was sent to a boarding school run by the Society of Friends, where she eventually became a teacher. Her interest in women's rights began when she discovered that male teachers at the school were paid twice as much as the female staff. In 1811, Lucretia married James Mott, another teacher at the school, and ten years later she became a Quaker minister.

Lucretia and her husband were both opposed to the slave trade and were active in the American Anti-Slavery Society. She moved to Philadelphia in 1821, and was known for speeches against slavery. Prior to her involvement, many Quaker men had been involved in the abolitionist movement in the very early 1800s. Lucretia Mott was one of the first Quaker women to do advocacy work for abolition.

Mott's letters reflect her regular travels in the mid-nineteenth century throughout the East and Midwest as she addressed various reform organizations such as the Non-Resistance Society, the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women as well as the quarterly and yearly Quaker meetings. Her letters not only express the thoughts of a public figure but they also show the anxieties and joys of a nineteenth-century woman. Her letters also reflect Mott's character and Quaker background.

Mott considered slavery an evil to be opposed, and refused to use cotton cloth, cane sugar, and other slavery-produced goods. Her husband supported her activism and they often sheltered runaway slaves in their home.

Before speaking in Half-Moon Township, Ms. Mott had recently returned from England where she spoke at the International Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840. At the conference in London, Ms. Mott and five other women delegates were not permitted to sit with male attendees and had to listen to the conference in a segregated area outside the view of the speaker's platform.

Ms. Mott continued her activism for equal rights and religious freedom until her death in 1880.

## Clinton County and the Underground Railroad

### Clinton County Overview

Clinton County's location along the West Branch of the Susquehanna River made it an active place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for persons traveling north to flee slavery. Unfortunately, since assisting runaway slaves was a crime at that time, much of the area's Underground Railroad history is loosely documented.

Researcher William Switala identifies Lock Haven as a key part of the Underground Railroad route that ran from Williamsport, PA to Olean, NY. He believes the route traveled through Williamsport to Jersey Shore, then to Lock Haven following the river's west branch, then along Sinnemahoning Creek to West Keating and Coudersport, and finally to Olean. Additional UGRR sites were rumored to exist in Clinton, Keating, and Glen Union (PA State Archives).

### **Clinton County Stop #1: Lock Haven Heisey Museum, Clinton County Historical Society 362 E. Water Street**



Heisey Museum

As mentioned above, Lock Haven was considered a stop on the Underground Railroad. Several of the downtown buildings were rumored to have tunnels beneath them, and the community was composed of residents friendly to the abolitionist cause. Located downtown, this stop is the historic Heisey Museum.

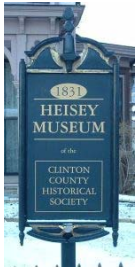
The Heisey Museum is part of a brick Federal farmhouse built about 1831 by Dr. John Henderson of Huntington County who married a daughter of John Fleming, a local landowner. Jerry Church, the founder of Lock Haven lived here when the building was used as a tavern, run by John and Walter Devling. Although Church and the Devlings both owned the property, the dwelling reverted back to the Hendersons in 1852 when Dr. William J. Henderson practiced medicine here.

William Fearon, Jr. of Beech Creek bought the house in 1854 and enlarged the building with brick additions in the rear. Seymour D. Ball became the next owner and in 1865 the house was extensively remodeled to its present state of Victorian Gothic Revival. Gables and verge board (decorative trim at edge of roof) and porches were added and windows

enlarged and partitions removed. Mr. Ball was a lawyer and his family resided here until 1911.

Mrs. Thomas Mann of the Mill Hall Axe Factory Manns was the next owner and her daughter Jean became the first wife of Samuel Heisey. Cora Frey Heisey, the second wife of Mr. Heisey, gave the house to the Clinton County Historical Society for use a Museum in 1962. After the flood of 1972, the Society decided to restore the Museum as a mid-nineteenth century house as it would have appeared when the Fearons and Balls lived here.

After the flood of 1972 the Society restored the house as a museum showing the Gothic revival dwelling as it might have appeared after the Civil War when Lock Haven was a booming lumber town. It was a Federal Style red brick farm house having a center hall, two rooms with fireplaces on each side on both floors.



The Museum has long been rumored to have played a role in the Underground Railroad. Recently, a tunnel was discovered in the basement of the museum that has further fueled this speculation. The tunnel is currently being excavated and appears to go toward the Jaycees Hall next door (which was formerly a church).

The Heisey Museum is open Tuesday through Friday from 10 am to 4 pm.

*Note: Information regarding the Heisey Museum is courtesy of Lou Bernard of the Clinton County Historical Society.*



Maria Molson

### **Person of Interest: Maria Molson**

Lock Haven resident Maria Molson aided freedom-seekers moving north during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Born in Lycoming County in 1825, she lived most of her life on Water Street in Lock Haven, Mrs. Molson resided a few blocks from the building that now holds the



Heisey Museum. Researching Mrs. Molson has proven difficult for historians as she was married three times and was of mixed race resulting in her being listed as white, black and mulatto on various Census records. Her third husband David Molson served as a soldier in the Union army, but died in 1864 (Lou Bernard of the Clinton County Historical Society).

Mrs. Molson is credited with helping as many as seventeen fleeing slaves in her house at one time. She provided runaways with food, medical attention, and lodging. Mrs. Molson resided in Clinton County for 45 years. She passed away in 1890 at age 66, and is buried in Highland Cemetery in Lock Haven.



Highland Cemetery

The Highland Cemetery is located near 6<sup>th</sup> and Akeley Avenue, is a short distance from the museum, and directions are available. This cemetery holds the grave of at least one escaped slave, as well as the graves of several Civil War soldiers--including one who was an honor guard at Lincoln's funeral (Lou Bernard of the Clinton County Historical Society).

The Clinton County Historical Society continues to research Mrs. Molson and the Molson family learn more about their Underground Railroad involvement.

## Columbia County and the Underground Railroad

### Columbia County Stop #1: Catawissa

#### Historical Marker

South Street, between S. 3<sup>rd</sup> and S. 4<sup>th</sup> Streets in Catawissa



For Columbia County, much of the Underground Railroad history is loosely documented. Rumored sites in the Bloomsburg area are currently privately owned or no longer in existence. Historical evidence does exist that some of the county's large Quaker population provided assistance to those fleeing slavery. Some historians have also mentioned sites in Berwick, Catawissa, Espy, Mainville, and Millville. Certainly, the county's proximity to the North Branch of the Susquehanna River and its watershed would support theories that local groups and individuals aided runaways who used the waterway as a natural guide north into New York. Unfortunately, the majority of known documentation of the region's UGRR activity is focused on the West Branch of the Susquehanna River, and the role the North Branch played in guiding those seeking freedom remains a mystery.



Society of Friends Meeting House

This stop in Catawissa features a Society of Friends meeting house, a historical marker, and a cemetery. The text on the historical marker states: "The nearby Friends meetinghouse, built about 1790, was the place of worship for early Quaker settlers among the pioneers of this region. Catawissa itself was laid out by William Hughs, a Berks County Quaker." The cemetery is located behind the meetinghouse, and contains the grave of suspected UGRR conductor Henry Jones.

As with other parts of the region, Quakers prominently participated in the Underground Railroad. Operating a ferry in the 1830s, the Quaker family of James R. Cleaver put their abolitionist beliefs into practice. Born in 1820 and dying in 1898, James wrote the following in a memoir dated 1895:

“Another event that happened about that time had something to do with shaping my life. One morning after the men had gone to work, my Mother took me to her barn and there I saw my first black man. Mother had his breakfast. I learned in after days that my father was one link in the chain of the then-frequently-traveled underground railway, as it has since been called. Sometime in the night previous, some Quaker friend had brought the Runaway to the south side of the river, and on the following night, someone came and piloted him onward toward Canada, the slave’s paradise in those days. This was the way it was done—some Quaker friend and the Runaway to be at certain points at a certain hour, and there be met with the next relief. A few days after this, the Sheriff and his posse were scouring the country and making very searching inquiries of my parents as to their having seen anger. I reckon my parents did not tell all the truth. Fine and imprisonment was the penalty for harboring a runaway slave. So you learn I was cradled an abolitionist and have been called one. I was taught to hate oppression, and I can say I have always been drawn to take the side of the poor against the rich and the weak against the strong—often to my loss. I don’t claim any credit for this—it was in me and I could not be otherwise.” (Reminiscences of James R. Cleaver’s Early Life)

**Person of Interest: Henry Jones**

Henry Jones and his family were one of only two African- American families living in Catawissa in the mid-1800s. A newspaper article dated September 07, 1882 stated that Henry was born in 1807 in Winchester, Virginia. In 1827 he escaped through the Underground Railroad to McKinney Ironworks which was located in the present day Newberry section of Williamsport. He remained there for some time then moved to New York. In 1847, he came to the Catawissa area and lived and worked on a farm owned by a local Quaker named Mr. Nathan Creasey. The Creasy farm was located on Corn Run Hollow (near the Susquehanna River), and Mr. Creasy also owned a store in Catawissa.

Was Henry Jones a conductor on the Underground Railroad? He certainly must have had good reasons to place his life in jeopardy by returning to Pennsylvania. By 1850 with the Fugitive Slave Act, all African-Americans were in danger of being sent south into slavery--freedmen and runaway. Even in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, African-Americans were routinely abducted during this time period.

If Mr. Jones was tending trot lines at night in the river, his appearance near the water would be a regular occurrence and locals would pay little attention—giving him the opportunity to covertly guide those fleeing bondage through Columbia County. Jones' son-in-law Augustus Brooks was a slave in Maryland. The Jones and Brooks Families are buried in the Quaker cemetery behind the meetinghouse. (Information for Mr. Jones was submitted by Steve Campbell of the Roaring Creek Catawissa Valley Historical Study Group).

It is hoped that further research into the life of local Quakers and Henry Jones will provide additional evidence to potential ties to the Underground Railroad.

## Lewistown and Mifflin County



### Mifflin County Overview

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mifflin County had a strong abolition contingent. Safe houses for those fleeing bondage were said to exist in several parts of the county including Lewistown and Milroy. Sites in the area were located along the Juniata River Watershed and main roads that allowed for night travel. In the 1830s, Lewistown captured national headlines with the publishing of former slave Charles Ball's compelling narrative. Further, the presence of African-American populations and religious groups such as the Quakers contributed to the area's strong anti-slavery movement.

*Note: Some of the information in this section was provided by the Mifflin County Historical Society.*



Former Mifflin County Courthouse

**Mifflin County Stop #1: Mifflin County Courthouse/Mifflin County Historical Society**  
1 West Market Street, STE 1  
Lewistown

The Mifflin County Courthouse was constructed in 1843 at a cost of \$15,000. Since the initial construction, the courthouse has been remodeled several times and houses the Mifflin County Historical Society—at the former site of the County Recorder's Office.

Period artifacts in glass cases can be found in the hallways and are available for public viewing.

### **Mifflin County's Abolitionist Movement**

Concerns about slave catchers wrongfully abducting Pennsylvania African-Americans in the early to mid-1800s, resulted in the Commonwealth passing legislation that required slave catchers to appear in state court and provide proof of ownership before being permitted to return South with a prisoner. In 1819, Pennsylvania Governor William Findlay, who detested the practice of apprehending citizens accused of being escaped slaves, advocated for laws to prevent what he termed "kidnapping" in a speech to constituents. As a result, many small town courthouses were the scenes of dramatic episodes involving the apprehension of African-Americans and the slavery debate. In 1834, the Mifflin County Courthouse was the setting for the dramatic escape of a man named Richard Barnes who was being detained and accused of being a runaway slave (Stroup, 1967).

### **Stories: The Thrilling Escape of Richard Barnes**

*Note the following was taken from a series of articles authored by local historian J. Martin Stroup printed in 1966 and 1967.*

In 1834, a group of southern planters on "splendid mounts" came unannounced through Lewistown. The men were in the area searching for runaway slaves. While in Lewistown, one of the planters accused a local man, Richard Barnes, of being an escaped slave from his plantation. They had Barnes arrested and placed in the county jail.

Locally, Barnes was known, liked, and respected for his hard work. Aside from the arrest, it was generally believed he was a fugitive slave who reached Lewistown by way of Fulton County, through Shirleysburg and Mt. Union, then down the Juniata River to Lewistown. Whether Barnes was a fugitive or not, he had earned a place in the hearts of many citizens, and the community became very interested in his case.

Pursuant to Commonwealth law, a trial in Mifflin County Court was convened to determine the planter's claims and ownership. Unfortunately, before a packed courtroom, the case went against Barnes and he was judged to be the planter's property. As Barnes was being transported back to the county jail, the sympathetic sheriff, purposely careless, allowed Barnes to escape and flee into the streets of downtown Lewistown. With an excited and supportive crowd from the courthouse in pursuit, Barnes ran up Main Street to Third Street, then east to near Dorcas Street, where he climbed down an open water well. The crowd of spectators surrounded the mouth of the well, trying to get a glimpse of the fugitive. Desperate and pledging not to be moved from Pennsylvania, Barnes swore that he would rather jump into the waters below and drown himself.

Among the gathered crowd were the slave catchers, who quickly realized the mood of the assembled townsfolk, and looked for an alternative to defuse the situation. Barnes' trusted employer Urie Jacobs, assured him of his safety if he would only exit the well. After a period of negotiation, Barnes reluctantly climbed from the well, unsure of what awaited him. To the astonishment of the fugitive and the equally shocked slave-catchers, the crowd had raised \$250 on the spot and purchased Barnes from the planter, thus ending the incident.

Local historian J. Martin Stroup's research indicates that after the incident, Barnes continued to reside with his family in Lewistown. Many years later, the community was organizing a celebration of the town's oldest residents. A blind Richard Barnes of West Third Street was recognized as being over 100 years old at that time, and living with his family. True to his pledge, Barnes never was taken from Pennsylvania.

### **Rumor: An Anti-Slavery Town Sued?**

*Note: This text is based on the work of local historian J. Martin Stroup that appeared in the Lewistown Sentinel in March 1966.*

In an 1892 journal, local resident James Martin recorded a slave-hunting story that occurred in 1820 in Lewistown's Public Square. This abolitionist saga occurred about 1820. Martin recalled that on the day there was a developing story in the Diamond or the Public Square. He and the other boys his age (about 10 years) ran to the scene. Martin's father J. McGinnis Martin remembered:

"I found a Dearborn wagon in which there was a large colored man handcuffed and shackled, resisting to the extent of his ability, while two broad brimmed, slouch-hatted southern drivers sat upon and held him in the wagon which they were ordering be driven to the river. But the gathering crowd had blocked the way. The wagon was stopped. The chained Negro squirmed, struggled and finally threw himself from under the swearing drivers into the mud where he wallowed and tried to regain his feet, while the drivers jumped upon him, swore and cursed, and flung him again into the wagon. One of them seized him and sat upon him.

The crowd was growing larger; a large number of free Negroes were crowding around. They were very much excited and ready to spring to the rescue if encouraged. We boys climbed lamp posts and dry goods boxes and looked on. My Uncle Joseph Martin, with a dry goods box for a rostrum, was exhorting the slave drivers to repent, amend their ways, perhaps to meet an avenging God at judgment. Again the poor manacled Negro, with groans threw himself into the mud. The air was full of cursing. Uncle Joseph's patients [sic] was exhausted. His exhortation was having no effect."

Evidently, the cruelty of the drivers became too much for the assembled crowd. The author continued: "McGinnis' Uncle Joseph gave the word and local freemen surged in and lifted the detained man, carrying him to the nearest blacksmith shop to remove his

shackles and handcuffs.... After swearing awhile, the slave drivers took the advice [of the gathered crowd] to leave and prevent trouble.”

Years later, it was said that the slave-catchers involved in this incident sued the town and received compensation. Was the town or individual officials sued? Was litigation a result of this incident or some other incident after 1850 (when the more restrictive law was in place) in which a slave escaped custody? These questions remain unanswered. Historian Martin Stroup concludes with the thought that no matter the litigation or cost to the town, the African-American was a free man.



Present day view of “The Diamond”

### **Stories: Fifty Years in Chains (the story of Charles Ball)**

Almost two decades prior to the controversial book Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a small book written in Mifflin County about Charles Ball swept many parts of the country with similar abolitionist fervor. Fifty Years in Chains: The Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man (later called Fifty Years in Chains) was a slave narrative first published in Lewistown. In graphic detail, the freedom-seeker’s narrative was recounted to Lewistown attorney and abolitionist Isaac Fisher and published in 1836, but the title became obscured with time.

Ball’s life story chronicles his birth in Maryland to a slave mother, of being sold into slavery, and then being sent south to work on cotton plantations in the Carolinas and Georgia. He escaped twice, but was captured and returned to his owners. On a third and successful attempt to escape, he stowed away on a cotton boat bound for Philadelphia. Ball was helped by Quakers to move north and eventually settled in Lewistown. Further, Ball spent one year’s service in the U.S. Navy under Commodore Barney during the War of 1812. In the late 1960s, Dover Publications and Kraus Reprints, both of New York, reprinted the narrative.

The following is an excerpt from Charles’ story describing a brief reunion with his family and typifies the sadness of families being separated during that period:

“After thirty-nine days in this jail, Charles found a weakness in one of the cell door timbers and escaped one night, crossing the Potomac River returning to his Maryland

home. About one o'clock in the morning, I came to the door of my wife's cabin and stood there, I believe about five minutes before I could summon sufficient fortitude to knock. I at length rapped lightly on the door and was immediately asked in the well known voice of my wife, 'Who is there?' - I replied, 'Charles.' She then came to the door and opened it slowly and said, "Who is this that speaks so much like my husband?" I then rushed in and made myself known to my wife, but it was some time before I could convince her that I was really her husband, returned from Georgia. The children were then called up, but they had forgotten me..."

The narrative continues: "My wife, who at first was overcome by astonishment at seeing me again in her cabin...seemed to awaken from this dream and gathered all the children in her arms and thrust them into my lap, as I sat in the corner, clapped her hands, laughed and cried in turns...and in her ecstasy forgot to give me any supper, until at length I told her I was hungry. Before I entered the house I felt I could eat anything in any shape of food, but now that I attempted to eat, my appetite fled, and I sat up all night with my wife and children...."



## **Mifflin County Stop #2: Milroy--Cemetery Adjacent to the United Presbyterian Church of Milroy**

**South Main Street near Kacy Lane, Milroy, PA**



United Presbyterian Church  
Of Milroy

This stop features the rural community of Milroy that was once an active center for abolitionist and reportedly Underground Railroad activities. The adjacent church cemetery contains the graves of Reverend James Nourse and several other abolitionists of the period. During the late 19th Century, Mifflin County became a valuable transportation center for the Commonwealth. Located near the geographic center of the state, the area became a hub for traffic moving in every direction. Primitive roads were scattered in the region, but it was the eventual construction of the Pennsylvania Canal in 1829 and the railroads that followed that truly positioned Mifflin County as an economic force in the state. Large quantities of raw goods and produce flowed through Mifflin County during this time. Also as a result of the increased transportation, Lewistown, Milroy, and surrounding communities began to expand. Between 1830 and 1860, Lewistown’s population grew from 773 to 2,638.

The Mifflin County area was no stranger to the slavery debates that dominated the 1800s. One of Lewistown’s adjacent communities named Milroy (formerly called Perryville) became an abolitionist stronghold in the 1800s. Located a few miles northeast of Lewistown, Milroy’s terrain was similar to that of much of the region—farming areas close to dense woods and old mountains. Local historian George Frysinger observed that the abolitionist sentiment in Milroy wasn’t universally held throughout Mifflin County: “In those days...the term abolitionist was contemptuously used by many, while others contended themselves neutral or indifferent, looking upon it as a southern affair.”

Much of what we know today about the county’s reaction to slavery came from Frysinger who founded the Mifflin County Historical Society. In 1966, historian J. Martin Stroup’s authored a series of articles on this topic that appeared in the *Lewistown Sentinel* in 1966. Stroup relied heavily on Frysinger’s collection and files on African-American history and the Underground Railroad.

Underground Railroad historian William Switala includes Milroy and Lewistown in his regular routes that those fleeing slavery used to move through Pennsylvania. He states

that those runaways who reached Mifflintown in Juniata County were assisted by a local African-American named Samuel Imes. Reportedly, Mr. Imes would lead groups of people along the Juniata River to Reverend William Grimes of Lewistown. Reverend Grimes was an itinerant preacher whose circuit ended in Milroy. Once there, he would entrust those fleeing bondage to Reverend James Nourse and his anti-slavery society (for more Rev. Nourse, see below).

Historical records do not list the many families that certainly supported and assisted abolitionist efforts in Mifflin County, as well as harboring those fleeing slavery. One such record from Ohio describes James Rothrock as being born into an abolitionist family in Milroy, PA in 1829. Rothrock then moved to Adams County, Ohio and assisted in an active Underground Railroad station by directly leading persons fleeing bondage to places of refuge. He later became an elected official and a justice in the Iowa Supreme Court.

### ***Story: An Incident at Pine Cottage***

An account that occurred just south of Milroy involved Mifflin County abolitionist families providing direct assistance to those fleeing slavery. It was told by James Martin and described in a March 11, 1966 article:

“The owner of Pine Cottage was an anti-slavery man in all his sentiments and sympathies. About 1855...a Negro called asking for work for a few weeks. He was readily given work as a farm hand in the summer and proved to be an exceptionally fine hand...” One day after harvest was over, father learned while in Lewistown that a couple of Negro hunters were armed and on the track of a fugitive whose description tallied with that of the man at Pine Cottage. When he returned home which was late at night, he awakened the Negro and told him the news. The man dressed himself, received his wages and then took from his belt a pistol and a large Bowie knife and said, ‘I have looked up the road (to Canada)—they can’t catch me. If they do, they will never take me back alive.’

Father cautioned him not to be too rash, gave him his best wishes...and he disappeared into the darkness... The slave-hunters left after a fruitless search of the county.”

### **Person of Interest: Reverend James Nourse**



Rev. James Nourse

Reverend James Nourse of Perryville or Milroy was known as a fervent abolitionist in his day. Born in Washington, D.C., the pastor served at a couple Pennsylvania churches before being called to the East Kishacoquillas Presbyterian Church in Reedsville, Mifflin County, PA. His stay in Reedsville lasted a few short years, when he left for Williamsport in 1833. In *Gibson's History of the Huntingdon Presbytery*, the author recorded why Reverend Nourse resigned: "...owing to the trouble arising from the agitation of the temperance and anti-slavery causes, both of which he was a zealous advocate, he resigned that charge and moved to Williamsport."

With their pastor gone, a committee was formed at the direction of the Presbytery to reconcile the factions at the Reedsville church. The committee was unsuccessful and it was decided to organize a new church out of the Reedsville congregation in 1834. The area of Armagh Township in the village of Perryville was selected. The newly formed church called out to its former pastor, Dr. Nourse, to return to them, becoming the Milroy Presbyterian Church's first minister. With the support of his congregation, Nourse returned to Mifflin County with much enthusiasm and began work on an anti-slavery agenda.

While in Milroy, Nourse's enthusiasm for the abolitionist cause was deep. In the 1840s, Reverend Nourse organized a local anti-slavery society. In cooperation with several local leaders including Dr. Samuel Maclay, John Taylor, and Samuel Thompson, he formed the Milroy Anti-Slavery Society. This group went beyond vocal opposition to slavery and translated their beliefs into actions. Local historian George Frysinger described their efforts as: "... [They] united in safely conducting a number of runaway slaves over the Seven Mountains from Milroy to Centre County."

Reverend Nourse's friend, Dr. Samuel Maclay, was the grandson of another Samuel Mclay who was a US Senator from Pennsylvania. The Maclay house is located in close proximity to Nourse's Milroy Presbyterian Church, and the house is believed to have been a sanctuary for persons fleeing bondage. Locals believe that in the house under a window of the front bedroom there was a space between the porch roof and porch ceiling that slaves were hidden. Reportedly, there was also evidence of a tunnel leading from the basement under the highway to the bank of Dry Creek just across the road. If this tunnel was used by escaping slaves, they could have fled from the house into the brush along the banks of the stream, and continued north over the Seven Mountains. In the 1970s, the tunnel was reportedly filled and walled-up. Currently, the home is privately owned.

Dr. Nourse continued as pastor until he had to resign due to failing health in 1849. He died in 1853 in Milroy and is buried in the cemetery adjacent to the church.



Rev. Nourse's Grave