

# The Freedom Seeker

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## A New Paradigm for the Underground Railroad Public History Conference: A Look at the 2017 Keynote Speeches

By: MaryNell Morgan, Ph.D.

The sixteenth annual conference marked a paradigm change with the introduction of a new signature phrase – “Liberty Con;” a venue change; and two remarkable keynote addresses! The paradigm change incorporated more round-table discussions than in previous conferences. The round-table format encouraged the participation of everyone attending the conference. The venue change took us to Schenectady County Community College (SCCC), Schenectady, New York. At SCCC all of the conference activities, except lunch on Saturday, were under one roof. The two remarkable keynote addresses, the focus of this article, were delivered by Tim Wise, Anti-Racism Activist, Writer, Educator, and Public Speaker; and CeLillianne Green, Lawyer, Poet, Teacher, Mediator, Playwright, and Speaker.

The 2017 Liberty Con adopted the theme “Americans@Risk: Race, Denial, Privilege, and Who Matters.” Both the Friday night and Saturday morning keynote speakers effectively addressed every element of the conference theme, and more.

The title of Tim Wise’s Friday night speech – “Racism, Denial, and Movement Building” – was a slight revision of the conference theme. His style of

delivery was reminiscent of a preacher / teacher with dynamic animation, and, even with a bit of humor, he provided an empirical, historical overview of White skin privilege. One of his most memorable statements came as something of an afterthought or



a footnote. The statement was intended to illustrate that to the American mind, policy statements that begin with or include the word “all,” refers to Whites. Or, put another way, in the USA, White is silent in statements like “all lives matter.”

The Saturday morning keynote speech by CeLillianne Green, was entitled “Cross Roads,” and focused on the enduring obstacles to securing the principles of liberty and justice for all in the USA. Her style of delivery was that of a poet / teacher. With profound griot-like, musically rhythmic, poetic prose, she invoked the spirit of the ancestors to overview historical and current issues that put Americans@Risk. With simple eloquence, she dismantled the notion that “color-blindness” is a positive pursuit. Literally, she noted that color-blindness is a “disorder of the eye.” To pursue a “color-blind” social policy is to render invisible people who are visibly Black, Brown, Red, or Yellow. Instead of invoking the pathology of color-blindness, we should see color, but we should not discriminate because we see color.



The messages in Green’s “Cross Roads” and Wise’s “Racism, Denial, and Movement Building” were comparable to two sides of the same coin. Both were engaging, informative, and inspiring. Together these two speeches illustrated the conference theme and set the stage for panel presentations, round table discussions, educational games, poster displays, and an art exhibit that add up to one of our best conferences ever!

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The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc., a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting knowledge of the 19th century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy in the Capital Region, in NYS, in the United States, and relating that history with us today. This newsletter is published three times a year. Editorial inquiries can be sent to URHPCR, 194 Livingston Ave., Albany, NY 12210 or [info@undergroundrailroadhistory.org](mailto:info@undergroundrailroadhistory.org).

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## Intern Profile



Hello! My name is Nathalie, I am an AmeriCorps VISTA summer associate and Siena Summer Scholar. I just finished my first year of college and I am happy to be spending my summer interning at URHPCR.

I grew up in Spain in a supportive family that provided me with a stimulating educational environment. However, I soon realized that not everyone was as lucky and that there was a world next door, where opportunities are fewer and far between. This woke me up to try to make a positive difference in other people's lives. In High School, I moved to the US and I found my passion for serving my community. I volunteered as a teacher in East Palo Alto, CA and in Las Vegas, NM. Now at Brown University, I am involved in empowering families, by helping them receive basic resources they are lacking. Volunteering has allowed me to get to know the place where I am living, understand the types of problems my community is facing and make connections with amazing people. Eventually, I hope to become a social entrepreneur who focuses on providing youth equal access to the necessary skills to lead a productive and fulfilling life.

### July 4th Oration: Truth, Justice, and the American Way, according to Stephen Myers and Dr. Thomas Elkins

Presented by: Paul Stewart & Janine Moon

July 4 - 11am-1pm - lunch included at The Myers Residence



In the aftermath of enslavement in New York a handful of Black activists distinguished themselves as leaders of the struggle for Black rights. In our effort to recover the stories of these key people, two individuals stand out..

Stephen Myers is perhaps the best known. While more remains to be learned, enough detail has been assembled to tell his story and reflect on its importance in relationship to liberty and justice and the kind of society he sought to achieve.

Dr. Thomas Elkins is another individual who stands out. Although he did not leave many personal writings, aspects of his story are reported in the local press. Supplementing the press accounts is a large artifact collection unearthed from the property on which Elkins lived for over thirty years. These artifacts have stories to tell.



On July 4<sup>th</sup> Paul Stewart and Janine Moon will explore these stories and their relationship with Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech, *What to the Slave is Your Fourth of July?*. Paul is co-founder of URHPCR and Scholar-in-Residence at Russell Sage College. He has explored the life of Stephen Myers for the last 19 years. Janine Moon, with a Master's degree in Public History and experience in curatorial work, is on the staff of the Albany Institute of History and Art and volunteers as a collections curator and interpreter with URHPCR.

### In Memoriam - Scott Christianson

1947 —2017



Our dear friend Scott Christianson passed away on May 14<sup>th</sup> of this year in an accident at his home. Scott was a friend of URHPCR and a member and workshop speaker at our annual conferences. He helped organize the first conference in 2002.

According to the Times Union newspaper obituary, his wife Tamar described him as one who "combined a voracious curiosity with a deep sense of social justice — and a keen nose for a great story". Scott was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and profiled as "one of the nation's top 20 investigative reporters" for his work at the Knick News.

Scott was particularly important in the 2010 conference at which he led a UGRR walking tour of Troy and collaborated with artist Mark Priest who presented his paintings of the fugitive slave rescue of Charles Nalle, on which Scott had published a book, *Freeing Charles: the Struggle to Free a Slave on the Eve of the Civil War*.

Scott Christianson will be well remembered for his contributions to a great American story.

## Over the Past Months



Liberty Con 2017 - past and present coming together

Capital District Council for Social Partners in Education award - May 2017



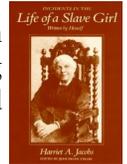
Stephen Myers on the road to the National Park Service Network to Freedom Conference, Cambridge, MD - May 2017

## Plan to Attend!



**Dining with Stevie** - the first Tuesday in each month, except for July. Make a purchase at a local restaurant that has agreed to donate 20% of each purchase to URHPCR. (\$)

**URHP Reads** - the second Friday of each month. Join this casual conversation focusing on the first person accounts of abolitionists and freedom seekers from the period. (Free)



**Underground Railroad Camp-In** - Friday and Saturday of each month. Get your jammies and sleeping bag and come on over to The Res for an unforgettable experience! (\$)



**Gardening Work Parties** - the last Saturday in each month at The Myers Residence Campus.

Details at [undergroundrailroadhistory.org/events](http://undergroundrailroadhistory.org/events) or by calling 518-432-4432

## News and Notes

### **Mission Statement of URHPCR:**

Underground Railroad History Project researches and preserves the local and national history of the anti-slavery and Underground Railroad movements, their international connections, and their legacies to later struggles; it engages in public education and dialogue about these movements and their relevance to modern society.

### **Welcome and thank you to new and renewing members:**

Mary Ellen Lee, Ann Marie Hess, Virgia Phoenix, Margaret M. Lavelle, Susan Haswell, Brea Barthel, Annette Johnson, Benita Law-Diao, Willie Terry, Sharon Calhoun, Tom Ellis, Julia Holcomb, Tanya Lopez-Mendez, Desiree Arthurton

**Invite someone you know to become a member, or give the gift of membership - details available on the Membership Page at [www.UndergroundRailroadHistory.org](http://www.UndergroundRailroadHistory.org)**

## Mark Your Calendars

### **Join with other volunteers in making great things happen -**

- ◆ **URHPCR Board Mtg** - 3rd Tuesday of every month, 5:45 - 7:00pm at The Myers Residence
- ◆ **Conference Planning Mtg** - 1st Monday of each month, 6:00 - 8:00pm at Russell Sage College, Troy
- ◆ **Building & Properties Mtg** - 1st Thursday of each month, 6:00 - 7:30pm at The Myers Residence
- ◆ **Collections Committee Mtg** - 2nd Thursday of each month, 6:00 - 7:00pm at The Myers Residence
- ◆ **Events Planning Committee Mtg** - 4th Thursday of each month, 5:30 - 6:30pm at The Myers Residence

**July 4** - July 4th Oration - *Truth, Justice, and the American Way*, according to Stephen Myers and Dr. Thomas Elkins - 11am-1pm at The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence - lunch will be served - please bring a salad or desert to share



**July 27** - Young Abolitionist Teen Scholars' Institute Open House at The Myers Residence Campus - 2pm-4pm

**October 21** - International Archeology Day at The Myers Residence Campus - 10am-4pm

**October 27** - Jazz@theUnderground — URHPCR's major fundraiser at The Renaissance Albany DeWitt Ballroom - 6pm-9pm



Questions? Concerns? Contributions? Interested in volunteering?  
Contact us at (518) 432-4432 or at [UndergroundRailroadHistory.org](http://UndergroundRailroadHistory.org)  
Follow us on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram

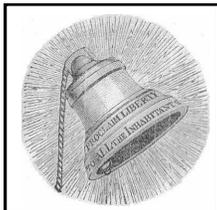
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***“When we work for justice, no matter what the outcome, the ultimate triumph lies on the fact that we made the decisions to stand up.” (Barbara Smith, activist, author, scholar)***