

The Freedom Seeker

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Slave Stampedes: A Borderland Phenomenon

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In December 1862, an article titled “What they Fear” appeared in the *Courier and Freeman* (Potsdam, NY). The article reporting on an address given by Governor Brown of Georgia speculated, “While there is no word of direct reference to the President’s [Emancipation] Proclamation in his address; yet the Governor evidently fears the approach of the first of January with its contingent probabilities of stampedes of slaves and untold troubles to slaveholders.” However, this fear, while new for the slave states of the deeper south, was a reality that border slave states had been living with long before the Civil War.

Borders not only create limits and divisions, they also create opportunities. For enslaved people, borders created unique prospects for escape and flight. In *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, “the accident of location” is listed as one of “the most prominent” circumstances that provided people held in bondage with the opportunities for running away. The authors write, “Slaves who lived in close proximity to free territory—near the Pennsylvania line, along the Ohio River, in the west or near the Indian nation, on the border with Florida, or in southern Texas—frequently tempted fate by striking out for freedom.” This proximity facilitated not only the escapes of single individuals but larger groups that were sometimes referred to in the 19th century press as “slave stampedes,” “stampede of slaves,” “negro stampede,” or “black stampede.”

holidays.”

The use of the term stampede to describe escapes started appearing in the press in the late 1840s. It was used not only to describe a large number of enslaved people escaping in a group, but also used to refer to several escapes from the same location in a particular space of time. Available reports show that stampedes involved as few as 3 and upwards of 100 freedom seekers. These groups, often comprised of family and extended family members, included men, women, and children and thus represent a departure from the “typical runaway” which is constructed as a young male traveling alone.

While the term at first glance may seem disparaging, conjuring up images of scared or frightened animals, further establishing enslaved people as chattel or subhuman, it seems that the use of the term was commonly used in the press to refer to any group of people regardless of race or other status.



Caption: Perhaps the most famous “slave stampede” is an 1856 event that today we don’t remember as such, involving Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who, when faced with capture, murdered her child rather than have it returned to slavery. In news coverage from the period, it was the stampede, not the infanticide, that took precedence. — Thomas Noble, “The Modern Medea,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 18 May 1867.

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These stampedes were often a two-fold border phenomenon, not only were they from border states, but they often were from border counties within those states. In 1858, a newspaper reported, “a considerable stampede of slaves from the border Valley counties of Virginia during the Easter

(cont’d on p.4)



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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.

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Thank You Giving Tuesday Donors!

A very big **THANK YOU** goes out to all Giving Tuesday donors who, through their generosity, joined with others to make a change through the transformative work of URHP. With a match from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, donors generated \$10,000 in contributions!

Donors include Alexandra Sautin, Alexis Bhagat, AnnMarie Hess, C. Claiborne Ray, Carol Felsen, Chris Cummings, Connie LaPorta, Darius Shahinfar, Deb Cavanaugh, Debbie-Ann Paige, Frank Wicks, Gary Dinnebeil, Janine Moon, Jean Poppei, Jennifer Burns, Jim Dease, Judith Mazza, Katherine Storms, Laura Welles, Lawrence Marwill, Lucinda Huggins, Marey Bailey, Mario Salerno, Mark Mishler, Mary Liz Stewart, Matt Kirk, Meg Walter, Odessa Martin, Patricia Eldridge, Patricia Oldham, Patrick Ryan, Rahleecoh Ishakarah, Randolph Treece, Roger Green, Ruth Kastner, Sandy Miller, Sara Darby, Sharon Robinson, Shawn Morris, Steven O'Connor, Suzanne Spellen, Sybillyn Jennings, William Carrigan, Wini Eisen, Yvonne Abunaw, and Zoe Nousiainen.

Donations will support the Young Abolitionist Teen Scholars' Institute, purchase of an exterior lift for The Residence, design of the Seeking Sanctuary exhibit, and Residence restoration.

Holiday Shoppe at The Myers Residence celebrating Hanukkah, Christmas, and Kwanzaa



Happy holidays from our house to yours!

50¢ to \$50 will supply your holiday shopping needs at The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence Holiday Shoppe. Lovely handmade jewelry and doll clothes, holiday ornaments, activity and reading books, art pieces from members of Black Dimensions in Art, and more are available during regular business hours which are Monday through Friday 5pm-8pm and Saturdays 12pm-4pm.

Need to shop outside of regular business hours? Call Mary Liz Stewart at 518-432-4432 to make arrangements. Additional photos are available at <https://www.instagram.com/URHPCR/> and at <https://www.facebook.com/URHPCR/>.



Over the Past Months



The 2nd annual Jazz+@theUnderground brought together jazz and blues aficionado Bill Sims, Jr., Crescente, Noche Latina dance troupe, a silent auction filled with tantalizing items, a raffle offering a week at a lakeside home in the Adirondacks, Portraits with Stevie, and great food, drink, and conversation in the acoustically phenomenal space of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Schenectady, a National Register building. Stay tuned for more information about the 3rd annual Jazz+@theUnderground! An evening not to be missed.



MetroNY Friends held their inaugural gathering on November 17! Generously hosted by Mark and Sylvia Barth and Morningside Retirement and Health Center (MRHC), the nineteen people in attendance learned about the work of Underground Railroad History Project and engaged in lively conversation around Underground Railroad History preservation and research in New York City and around the nation. MetroNY Friends will gather again on January 26 at 6pm in Brooklyn. Interested? Let Mary Liz Stewart know — 518-432-4432 or marylizugr@gmail.com.

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.

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 The Myers Residence
- ◆ **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

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

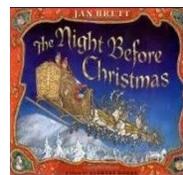
Plan to Attend



PAINT and DRINK and DINE for a GOOD CAUSE - URHP and Noche Latina are teaming up for an evening of painting, dining, and dancing. Take time out of your hectic schedule to treat yourself to a fun, relaxing evening. (12/9)



An 1850's Christmas with Stephen and Harriet Myers -



Explore the humble beginnings of the Christmas holiday. How were the first Christmas trees decorated? What did the first holiday card in the Capital Region look like? When did Santa Clause first appear in the newspaper? Activities and refreshments included in this family program. (12/10)

Caroling for the Holidays - Spread holiday cheer by caroling in the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence neighborhood. Fun loving spirit needed. (12/16)



Complete details are available by calling 518-432-4432 or visiting UndergroundRailroadHistory.org/events-calendar.

Welcome and thank you to new and renewing members:

Ann Von Linden, Darryl O. Freeman, Dawn Marar, Deborah Haber, Dora Lee Stanley, Elizabeth A. Lee, Grace Ngugi, Harriet Alonso, J. Peter Gregoire, Jacqueline Schmitt, Jan Pollow, Fred Moon, Janine Moon, Joanne Martin, Judith Hohenadel, Judith Wing, Linda McKenney, Kathleen Long, Lillie McLaughlin, Matthew Masur, Michael Salz, Nancy Robillard, Nicole Margiasso -Tran, Ron Ross, Sean Parkyn

Renew your membership - Invite someone you know to become a member - give the gift of membership - details available on the Membership Page at UndergroundRailroadHistory.org



Stevie Wants You



Your Move - From highly skilled to no experience necessary, enjoy this historic game in a historic house. Chess board and playing pieces are provided. Young and older welcome. (3rd Monday monthly)



URHP Reads - The Color of Law: a Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America (Richard Rothstein, 2017) - In this groundbreaking history of the modern American metropolis, *The Color of Law* incontrovertibly makes clear that it was de jure segregation — the laws and policy decisions passed by local, state, and federal governments — that actually promoted the discriminatory patterns that continue to this day. (2nd Friday monthly)

Full details at UndergroundRailroadHistory.org or 518-432-4432

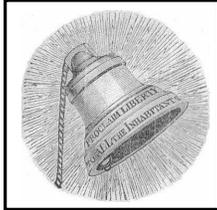
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Slave Stampedes: a Borderland Phenomenon (cont'd)

Enmeshed in the moral and political debates regarding slavery, stampedes garnered both local and national attention. They exposed the vulnerability of the institution of slavery and were used as propaganda by those on both sides of the slavery issue. For anti-slavery supporters, stampedes represented the resistance that was crucial to abolitionist propaganda. Stampedes provided a strong counter narrative to notions that the majority of the enslaved population was content in their bondage, pushing back at the idea that slavery was a positive good

and opposing paternalistic ideas that enslaved people and slaveholders were one big happy family. However pro-slavery supporters unwilling to recognize black agency, saw the stampedes as evidence of abolitionist or free black intervention.

After the passage of the 1850 federal Fugitive Slave Law, stampedes were used as evidence to show the inability of the law to curtail Underground Railroad activity. An article attributed to the *Detroit Advertiser* and subsequently published in other newspapers, talked about a "Great Stampede of Slaves" which was four incidents involving groups of 75, 12, 7, and 5 who made it to Canada. The

individual's own mother.

Another Slave Stampede.—On Saturday week, six slaves, valued at \$7,500, ran away from the vicinity of Parkersburg, and at last accounts had not been captured. The *News* says they were probably enabled to escape by "free negroes, who are fast getting to be an intolerable nuisance."

Wheeling Daily Intelligencer, 1 November, 1858.

1859 article argued that these escapes had resulted in the loss of \$94,000. It pointed towards the fact these escapes were significantly impacting the ability of the system to sustain itself, declaring, "The Underground Railroad was never before doing so flourishing a business. At the rate these ungrateful fellows are stealing themselves, the market must be seriously affected, unless kept supplied direct from Africa."

Whatever the side of the debate, both sides saw these stampedes as part of the rising tensions that were leading the country towards war.

1 "What They Fear," *Courier and Freeman* (Potsdam, NY), 3 December 1862.

2 John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 25.

3 *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, 13 April 1858.

4 Michael P. Johnson, "Runaway Slaves and the Slave Communities in South Carolina, 1799 to 1830," *William and Mary Quarterly* 38.3 (1981): 420

5 "Great Stampede of Slaves," *The Jeffersonian* (Stroudsburg, PA), 19 May 1859.