



The Freedom Seeker

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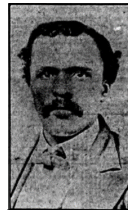
Spring 2023

The Kelley's of Troy: How the Underground Railroad Impacted Twentieth Century Racial Justice Activism in One Northern City

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Though we often think about the Underground Railroad as a pre-Civil War activity it did *not* cease when the war began. In fact, as Union troops marched South and battles spread across the southern states, the chaotic environment offered a new opportunity to utilize the Underground Railroad. While some enslaved folks seized upon the war's chaos to seek freedom in refugee camps at Union posts in the Confederate states, others continued to employ the Underground Railroad to seek freedom in and beyond New York state, and still others utilized the Underground Railroad then reversed course, clad in Union Blue, in the effort to terminate the institution of slavery entirely. The expectations of these African Americans to not only secure freedom for themselves and others but also to teach and guide future generations in communal strategies to agitate for racial equality reverberated in the North well into the twentieth century.

Richard C. Kelley, born enslaved in Lawrenceville, Brunswick County, Virginia, in 1842, capitalized on the war's chaos to seek freedom outside the South. Sometime in 1861, Kelley set out on the Eastern Shore Underground Railroad system enroute to Hoosick, Rensselaer County, New York. By 1862, he was settled there safely among friends and became immersed in the Black activist protest movement that demanded Black men have the right to fight in the war. The same racist paternalistic thinking that led White elected officials in the



Richard C. Kelley

free states to discriminate against African American men at the ballot box also informed their decision to prohibit African American men from military service, despite the history of African American military prowess during the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Across New York state longtime Black abolitionists

and civil rights leaders formed Friends of Freedom and Union Associations and in July 1863 held a state Colored Men's Convention at Poughkeepsie, New York to demand the federal government allow Black enlistment in the Union Army, and they resolved to assist in their recruitment in New York State.

In December 1863, the US War Department approved New York to raise a regiment of Black volunteers, the New York Twentieth Regiment United States Infantry. (It should be noted that so many Black men volunteered that two additional regiments were formed, the New York Twenty-sixth, and the Thirty-first which combined with Connecticut. Richard Kelley quickly volunteered for the Twentieth Regiment and was promptly mustered in. With the Twentieth, Private Kelley was stationed in the Department of the Gulf (Louisiana and western Mississippi Valley area). When his service ended in 1865, he settled in Troy, New York.

In Troy, Kelley used the carpentry skills he learned while enslaved to tap into the booming collar industry by specializing in the cutter tables used in the collar shops, opening a carpentry business, and joining the carpenters' union. He also started a family, joined the AME Zion Church, and surged to the forefront of local Republican party politics and civil rights activism. The same year that the Fifteenth Amendment was signed into law (1869), Kelley married Matilda Jane Decker, who was born free in Newburgh, New York in 1843, in the Troy AME Zion Church. Matilda's father, Rev. William Henry Decker, the longtime pastor of the AME Zion Church in Newburgh, where he and his wife, Rachel, operated an Underground Railroad station, officiated the ceremony. Rev. Decker had been born enslaved in Goshen, New York in 1817, then, after obtaining his freedom, moved to Newburgh around 1835, rising to prominence in the AME Zion Church conference. Like other Black ministers at that time, Rev. Decker served as an itinerant pastor in several churches outside Newburgh, including the AME Zion Church in Troy. Some sources suggest that *(Continued on p.4)*

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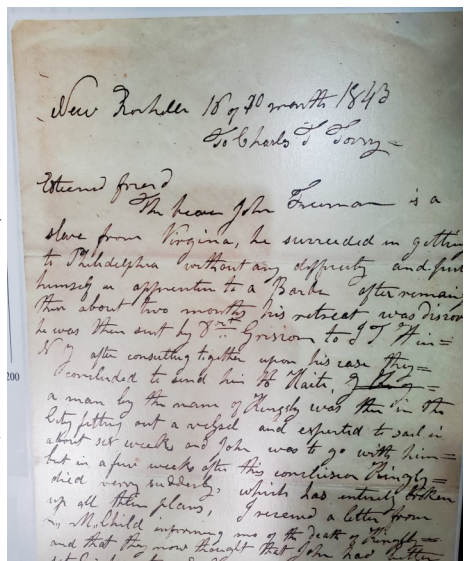
The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad Education Center, a non-profit corporation dedicated to researching and preserving the local and national history of the Underground Railroad movement, its international connections, and its legacy for today's social justice issues, thereby empowering people of all ages to be agents of change toward an equitable and just society.

Editorial inquiries can be sent to Underground Railroad Education Center, 194 Livingston Avenue, Albany, NY 12210 or urhpcr@localnet.com

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Freedom Seeker Corner

John Freeman in 1843 was helped by Charles Torrey to get to freedom. John had escaped from Virginia and encountered Torrey and was given a letter of reference to help him on his way. UREC has a reproduction of that letter at the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence historic site that illustrates John's story and his journey to freedom. Simple things like letters of reference were often provided in the 19th century when people new to an area sought employment or help in any way.



Follow Underground Railroad Education Center on Facebook for more Freedom Seeker Friday accounts



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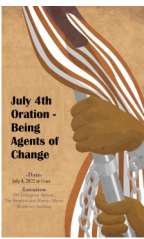
* Special thanks to Karl and Carol Felsen for a major pledge toward the Interpretive Center Capital Campaign

* Special thanks to Cynthia Redlo for her generous donation to the Interpretive Center Capital Campaign

* Special thanks to Lynnea Salvo and Sylvia Barnard for their generous donations to the Museum Studies Teen Program

* Special thanks to Carol Gardner for her donation to the Daniel Stewart Memorial Fund

Looking Backward and Looking Forward with UREC



July 4th Orator – Mark your calendars and plan to attend this hybrid event scheduled for Tuesday, July 4. The program will run from 11am -12noon and will be followed by sharing food and drink from 12noon -1pm. In order to be updated on program details please be sure to sign up for the UREC email list which is easily done by visiting the Underground Railroad Education Center website homepage and clicking on JOIN OUR EMAIL LIST. Looking forward to your joining in!



Restoration of the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence – UREC will be starting the predevelopment work on the interior restoration of The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence later in the spring of this year. This will lead us to construction documents that are one step away from actual restoration construction! As well, the front entryway should be under restoration construction this summer, so after that time you will be able to enter The Residence by walking up elegant sandstone steps with scrolled wrought iron railings. A long time coming, but well worth the wait! Stephen and Harriet will be proud!



Juneteenth – A highlight of this year’s event will be the display and presentation of our Young Abolitionist Leadership Institute Me-seum Legacy Projects. To democratize storytelling in museums, our teens, especially our teens from marginalized communities, must become active participants in the transformation of our museums. To this end, the afterschool pilot of a proposed Museum Studies Teen Program, intended to inspire and empower our teens to become agents of change in the museum field as future museumgoers, museum staff and museum leaders, will be proudly presented at the June 17th Juneteenth celebration which will run from 12pm-4pm at the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence.



Introducing Amelia Paul, UREC’s new Youth, Family and Senior Program Coordinator – Amelia comes to UREC with lots of prior experience in a variety of fields. Her creativity and enthusiasm for her current position are infectious. She is working with the Girl Scouts of Northeastern New York to establish a Scout troop at The Myers Residence. She is developing a virtual book reading program, and she is developing a senior and youth tour experience for the Abraham Johnson Garden. Stop over and say hello!

News and Notes

UREC MISSION STATEMENT

Underground Railroad Education Center researches and preserves the local and national history of the Underground Railroad movement, its international connections, and its legacy for today’s social justice issues, thereby empowering people of all ages to be agents of change toward an equitable and just society.

Leave a Legacy with UREC
Maximize your tax deductions through charitable giving by leveraging one of many planned giving opportunities. For more information call Mary Liz Stewart at 518-621-7793.



If we desire a society of peace, then we cannot achieve such a society through violence. If we desire a society without discrimination, then we must not discriminate against anyone in the process of building this society. If we want a society that is democratic, then democracy must become a means as well as an end. (Bayard Rustin, 1912-1987)



Stevie Wants You to Know



Interpretive Center of UREC – we’re moving through the Schematic Design Phase, so now we are talking about the dimensions of doorways and window details, and all those nitty gritty details that will bring the IC to life, both the building and the grounds around it. Whew! What a journey. If all goes according to plan we expect to have construction drawings in hand this December with construction beginning in May 2024 and concluding in June 2025. Of course, this also means we will have raised the \$10,000,000 (!!!) needed to pay for the construction of this 13,000 square foot building.

And if you haven’t heard, we are incorporating a NYS Dutch barn timber frame into the main event/exhibit space! This timber frame, standing in a rural NYS community when NYS allowed slavery to be practiced within its borders, will be dismantled, repaired, fumigated, and then reassembled in the Interpretive Center and repurposed as a tribute to emancipation. On the UREC website you can read more about why UREC is building the Center, the purposes to which it will be put and enjoy a few images of what to expect. Of course, we welcome donations and pledges to this project. If you are so inclined, or you know others who are, give us a shout if needed, or use the online option located on the Interpretive Center page on the UREC website.

A vision from the 2008 UREC Board coming to life!

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD EDUCATION CENTER

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Contact us at: undergroundrailroadhistory.org/contact/



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The Kelley's of Troy *(Continued from p.1)*

Richard and Matilda first met in Newburgh when Richard used the Decker's Underground Railroad station, but other sources present the possibility that they met at the AME Zion Church in Troy when Matilda's father temporarily pastored there in the immediate post-war years. We may never know their first meeting, but we do know that according to all accounts they were a good match and a loving couple who valued family and racial justice. In the following years the couple helped relocate Richard Kelley's three sisters to Troy from Virginia (part of the pre-Great Migration movement) and they remained close with Rachel Decker's extended family in New York and Massachusetts. Matilda's family included one sister, Sarah J. Decker, who married Rev. Eli George Biddle, the famed Massachusetts 54th soldier who became a reverend during the Reconstruction era and settled in Massachusetts after a short stint in Troy, New York. The relatives not only continued to visit with each other over the years, they remained so close that the Kelley's asked Eli to be the godfather of their son born in 1884 and named the child after him, George Biddle Kelley. (In 1934 when George married Harriet Gross, of Jersey City, New Jersey, his uncle, Rev. Eli George Biddle, officiated the ceremony.)

In tandem with his growing family and business, Richard joined other Black Trojan Civil War veterans as a member of the G.A.R., the Grand Army of the Republic, and the McConihe Post and became a political organizer in the local Black Republican club movement. For a short time, he even served as keeper for the Rensselaer County Court House. In this way, Richard Kelley, and his Reconstruction era peers, laid the groundwork for Troy's first National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter.

Activism and dedication to racial justice were a family affair for Richard and Matilda, and they expected and prepared their son to become a twentieth century "Race Man." George attended the old Troy Academy before entering Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) to study civil engineering. He transferred from RPI to Cornell University in 1905 where he earned his bachelor's degree in 1908. At Cornell, George became one of the seven co-founders (Jewel) of the first African American Greek Letter fraternity in the United States, the Alpha Phi Alpha, and served as its first president in 1906. The APA *(Continued on insert)*



George Biddle
Kelley