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# The UNDERGROUND RAILROAD in Hagerstown

## Slavery

From the 1740s through the Civil War era, slavery was part of life in Washington County. In 1820, about 14% of the county's population, or 3,200 people, were enslaved. When the Civil War broke out, almost 1,500 people were still enslaved in the county.



## ESCAPES

Over the long period of slavery, many Washington Countians fled from bondage. Escapes were common, though it's impossible to know how often they succeeded. Most of the help that freedom-seekers received locally was from free people of color.

## THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Existing mainly in Pennsylvania and other northern states, a network of activists known as the Underground Railroad helped people escape from slavery to safety. To reach the organized Underground Railroad, a freedom-seeker from Maryland or Virginia usually had to cross the Mason-Dixon Line (the Pennsylvania state line) first. At times the Underground Railroad did stretch into western Maryland.

## WHO WERE THE LOCAL AGENTS?

Finding agents of the Underground Railroad in Washington County was difficult for escaping slaves. It's also hard for historians to uncover their activities today, because their work was secret, illegal, and dangerous. Still, we do know of some courageous local individuals who helped slaves escape. This brochure tells their stories.

## With Special Thanks:

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African American Heritage Association of Western Maryland

Doleman Black Heritage Museum

Ebenzer AME Church, Hagerstown

And countless others who advised and counseled in the production of this brochure

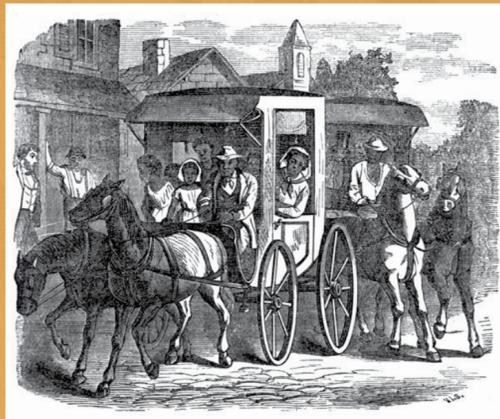
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## Planning an Escape

Here are some of the things that Washington County people took when they left slavery for freedom:

- ▶ **Money** that they earned from work on the side, such as making and selling brooms, or part-time jobs that they held with or without permission.
- ▶ **Extra clothes**, including clothes they took without permission. Clothing could be used to change their appearance or could be sold for money.
- ▶ **Weapons**, especially clubs.
- ▶ **Horses** and sometimes even a carriage. Moving fast was an advantage!
- ▶ **Forged documents**: passes or freedom papers that could help them pass as legal travelers.
- ▶ **Food** for the journey.



ESCAPING WITH SLAVE-OWNER'S CARRIAGES AND HORSES

**\$150 Reward!—Horse Thieves!**  
LEFT my house in Hagerstown early this morning, September the 25th, with my horse and buggy, on the road to Chambersburg, a fat yellow WOMAN, aged about 40 years, and well formed.— CHILD, aged about 10, stout and well formed.— Also, negro boy JACK, aged about 17, and negro boy CHARLES, aged 15, of a more yellowish complexion than Jack. Those boys wore a greyish colored coat each when they left. Charles had on a light made boot. Their clothing may be changed. \$150 will be paid for the apprehension of either of the boys, and \$150 for the woman DAPHNEY and her female child LOUISA, if committed in jail so that I may recover them wherever taken. Any information directed to WILLIAM FREANER, Hagerstown, Md., will be promptly attended to. Oct. 11, '54. J. HOLLINGSWORTH.  
N. B.—The above negroes were all house servants and accustomed as waiters.



What would you take along if you were planning to escape from slavery?

What information would you need?

What difficult decisions would you have to make?

## Local Heroes

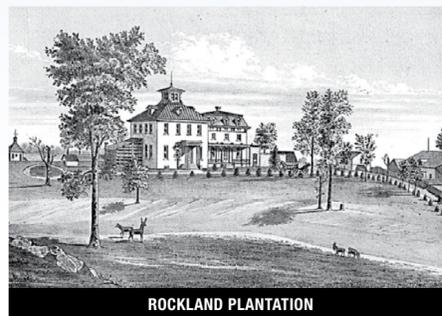


JAMES W.C. PENNINGTON

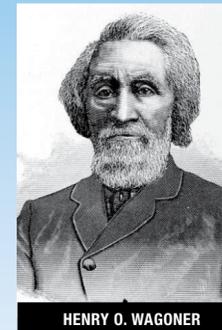
**James W.C. Pennington** was born James Pembroke, in slavery on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Brought to Washington County at age four, he grew up on the Tilghman estate of Rockland, south of Hagerstown. In 1827, at age 19, he escaped into Pennsylvania, connected with the Underground Railroad, and reached safety. He changed

his name to Pennington, attended Yale University, became a Presbyterian minister, and officiated at Frederick Douglass' wedding.

A prominent abolitionist writer and activist, Pennington helped several members of his family escape from slavery in Washington County to freedom. Although he never returned to Maryland before the Civil War, he sheltered his relatives after they escaped and raised money to secure their freedom. He wrote the story of his own life in *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, and he also wrote the first history of African Americans.



ROCKLAND PLANTATION



HENRY O. WAGONER

**Henry O. Wagoner** identified himself as an Underground Railroad agent. Born free in the Hagerstown area in 1816, to a free black mother and a German father, he went to school both locally and across the Mason-Dixon Line in southern Pennsylvania. Having relatives and friends who were enslaved, he grew up with an understanding of slavery as well as the local routes to freedom.

In Hagerstown, Wagoner "did some underground-RR work," as he later wrote in a letter to Frederick Douglass. Because of his activities, he "finally became under the ban of suspicion, and so I concluded to leave the State for freer soil." He left Hagerstown on August 28, 1838, traveling first to Baltimore, and then heading west to Chicago, where he worked openly for abolition and became a friend of Douglass. He was later a sheriff and civic leader in Colorado. Unfortunately, we know nothing specific about his Underground Railroad work in Hagerstown.

**Otho Taylor** escaped from slavery on Henry Fiery's farm near Clear Spring on Easter Sunday, 1856, along with his wife and two small children, his two brothers, a sister-in-law, and a small nephew. The group took Fiery's horses and two buggies and traveled through Hagerstown on the way to Chambersburg, Philadelphia, and eventually Canada. The Fierys tried many strategies to get them back, without success.

Otho Taylor could not forget his parents and a brother and sister left behind in slavery near Clear Spring. Immediately after settling in Canada, he started planning a rescue—very much like Harriet Tubman, who returned to Maryland to rescue others. The Underground Railroad wouldn't support Taylor's mission, so he funded it himself. But when he got back to Clear Spring in secret, his relatives declined to escape with him. As he later reported to the Underground Railroad, "They had been promised their freedom and preferred to remain till the time was up."

**Bill Bell** was a more shadowy figure who operated in the northeast part of Washington County in the years just before the Civil War. According to a local white writer who knew him, "He was... widely known as the strongest man in that part of the country. He... always rode a mahogany colored bay stallion... This black man was free, [and]... was generally a peaceable black man when let alone..."

"Later, he was suspected of helping manage the underground railway for running Southern slaves to freedom across the State of Virginia. This was a rather risky business and one in which a strong black man would be invaluable when the fleeing slaves were confronted by white kidnapers..."

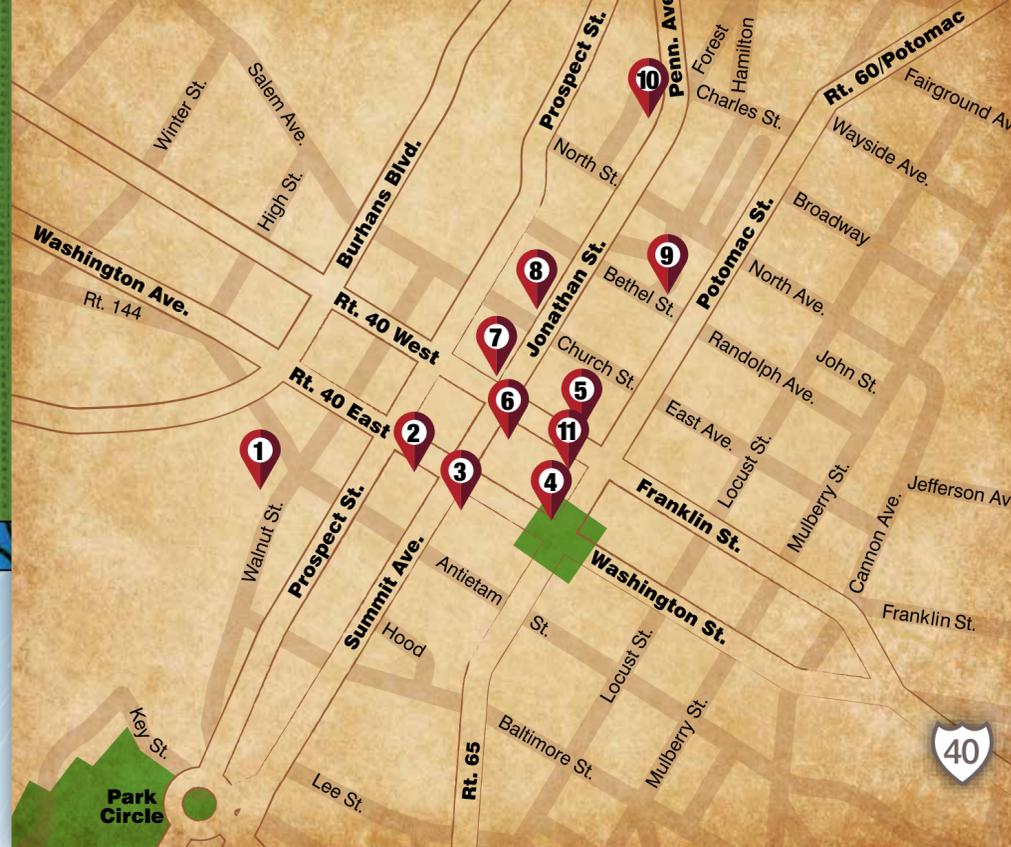
"One night while a small party of runaway negroes was being guided around a village not far from where Bill Bell lived, their guide, a powerful black man, stood off the kidnapper with a hatchet, and so badly cut one of the white men in the shoulder, that he nearly died, and the kidnapers ran away." The writer implies that Bell was the black man with the hatchet.

Bell probably guided freedom-seekers across the Pennsylvania line near Ringgold to Rouzerville and Quincy, where there were Underground Railroad agents waiting to assist them.

# HAGERSTOWN UNDERGROUND RAILROAD TRAIL

## Sites of Freedom and Resistance

This urban trail can be walked or driven. It takes you to sites in downtown Hagerstown connected with escapes from slavery, with people who escaped, and with people who helped them. There are original buildings still standing at some, but not all, of the stops on the trail.



**1 11 SOUTH WALNUT STREET, WALNUT TOWERS.** Former site of Cumberland Valley Railroad depot. In November 1851 the county sheriff arrested Otho Snyder for helping an enslaved man who had escaped from David and Hezekiah Clagett, in nearby Funkstown. Snyder had been trying to put a trunk onto a train to Chambersburg at the railroad depot (which stood on this corner, diagonally across from the Catholic church). The train didn't leave that night, so Snyder took the trunk home. The authorities followed him home and searched the trunk, finding clothes that belonged to the escaped man.

Born in Washington County as a free man of color, Snyder was described as having red or sandy hair, freckles, and a light complexion. Working as a carter, he had ready access to transport. His white neighbors suspected him of helping enslaved people escape. He was described as a "well known mulatto citizen" of Hagerstown and was a trustee of Ebenezer A.M.E. Church. (This story is continued at Stop #3.)

**2 127 WEST WASHINGTON STREET, Hollingsworth house. The Cummins family escape.** In 1854, four enslaved people staged a daring escape from this residence. They were forty-year-old **Daphney/Mary Cummins**, her 10-year-old daughter **Louisa/Lucy**, 17-year-old **James/Jack Cummins**, and 15-year-old **Charles/Benjamin Moody**. The group was probably assisted by two free women of color, **Malinda and Comfort**, who lived as servants in the house. Early one September morning, the Cummins family took Col. Jacob Hollingsworth's horse and carriage and drove north out of town to freedom, almost certainly along Jonathan Street.

Probably after passing through Chambersburg, the family boarded a train and traveled by stages to New York City, with the assistance of Underground Railroad agents. The trip took six months because of the danger created by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. After arriving in New York in April 1855, the two teenage boys stayed for almost a year in New York and New Jersey, and then went on to Syracuse. Mary Cummins and Lucy stayed for longer in New Jersey but eventually left for Toronto. Their story is preserved in the records of the Underground Railroad in New York City.

Next door to the Hollingsworth house stands the historic Miller House Museum, home of the Washington County Historical Society and Kinship Family Heritage Research Center, where you can trace your family story and learn more about the county's black history.

**3 24 SUMMIT AVENUE (corner of West Washington Street and Summit Avenue), Washington County Courthouse.** Otho Snyder, whom we met at Stop #1 on the trail, was tried here by the Circuit Court in December 1851, for assisting an enslaved man to escape—because he tried to send a trunk of clothes to the escaped man. At trial, Snyder claimed that he thought the trunk's contents belonged to the man's wife, a free woman. Snyder was convicted in Circuit Court for aiding in the escape of a slave; he was denied a retrial and served a full sentence of six and a half years in the Maryland penitentiary. After his release in 1858 the law required him to leave the state.

**4 2 WEST WASHINGTON STREET, Public Square Café.** Former site of **Victor Thompson's Drug Store**. In 1855, a young woman working here had a major dispute with her enslaver, **Ann Henson**, also known as **Addelaide Overton**, claimed that she had been legally freed (which was common in Western Maryland), but Victor Thompson would not let her go. He continued to refuse, even when she offered to buy her freedom, and again when a free African American friend of Henson's offered to purchase her.

Finally, in October, Henson stopped negotiating and left. She had money, which made escape easier. After getting out of Hagerstown and into Pennsylvania, she connected with the Underground Railroad organization and made it to New York City, where her story was written down.

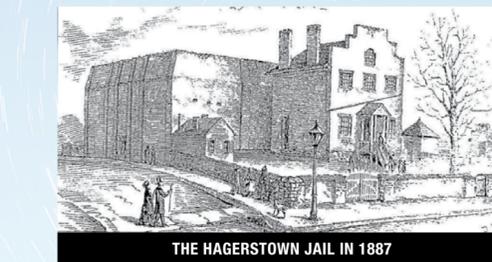
**5 44 WEST FRANKLIN STREET, Post Office parking lot. Former site of Snyder's Livery Stable.** In June 1856, Lewis Snyder's livery stable was part of a dramatic and well-documented escape by **Charles Bird, George Dorsey, Angeline Brown**, her sons **Albert and Charles Brown**, and **Jane Scott**. Bird later said he was "so decidedly opposed to slavery that he felt compelled to look out for himself. Serving another man on the no pay principle, at the same time liable to be flogged, and sold at the pleasure of another, ...was worse than heathenish..." Bird left behind four sisters in slavery.



CHARLES BIRD AND OTHERS ESCAPING IN 1856

The group escaped from three farmers in Funkstown, south of Hagerstown. Here at the Snyder stable they made off with two horses and a buggy, which they drove north out of town into Pennsylvania. They had also taken clothing and jewelry worth more than \$300 and were being pursued by the sheriff.

A few miles north of town, the buggy broke down and white men tried to arrest them. But Bird and Dorsey defended the party with clubs, knocking out their attackers. The freedom-seekers mounted the horses and rode off. Eventually, on foot, they reached Underground Railroad agents in Harrisburg and were helped on to Philadelphia, despite a large reward being offered and law enforcement in Philadelphia being alerted. They were sheltered by the great William Still, who recorded their story in his history of the Underground Railroad, along with an illustration. (above). (William Still was portrayed by the actor Leslie Odom Jr. in the 2019 film *Harriet*, about Harriet Tubman.)



THE HAGERSTOWN JAIL IN 1887

**6 71 WEST FRANKLIN STREET, FitzHugh house. The Gerrit Smith network.** Sheriff William FitzHugh held people in slavery on this site and enforced the law against freedom-seekers, but his sisters married abolitionists in upstate New York and freed enslaved people in Washington County. When FitzHugh's brother-in-law, the wealthy and prominent abolitionist Gerrit Smith, visited Hagerstown, he made friends with people enslaved by William FitzHugh and arranged for FitzHugh to free them.

Smith helped finance John Brown's raid and the Underground Railroad. Smith also received many freedom-seekers at his home in Peterboro, New York, including some from Washington County. In 1848, abolitionist William Chaplin, then based in Washington, D.C., reported to Gerrit Smith that he was in contact with "forty persons near Hagerstown, who ask assistance in attempting to escape from slavery. They are families from one neighborhood."

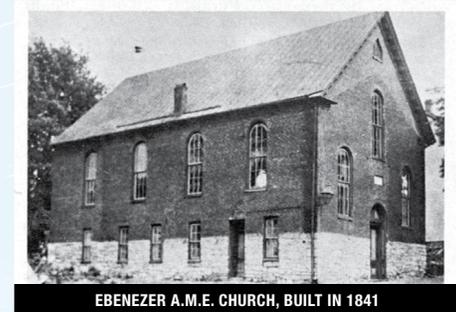
**7 JONATHAN STREET. African-American community/the route to Pennsylvania.** Jonathan Street is the center of the historic African American community in Hagerstown. As far back as the early 19th century, or even earlier, free people of color were living, worshipping, buying property, and establishing businesses in this neighborhood. The free black and enslaved populations were deeply connected, and escapees often found help here. In 1796, for example, a Hagerstown slaveholder described **Stephen**, a young man who had escaped from him: "...he plays on the fiddle, and it is probable he is harboured by the neighbourhood."

At its north end, Jonathan Street becomes the road to Chambersburg, PA, which was often the first major destination for enslaved people escaping from Washington County. Jonathan Street was surely the route of many escapes, as freedom-seekers not only passed along the street on their way north, but also stopped for directions, information, shelter, supplies, encouragement, and other assistance.

**8 CORNER OF JONATHAN AND CHURCH STREETS. Former site of county jail.** While the Jonathan Street community offered shelter and support to freedom-seekers, the jail loomed over it as a reminder of the constant danger in which African Americans lived. If suspected escapees were caught, the sheriff incarcerated them in the county jail and advertised for their enslavers to come pick them up. Many people enslaved in Virginia, attempting to cross Maryland in Washington County (Maryland's narrowest part) were arrested by the sheriff. Slave auctions were also held here. Otho Snyder, whom we met at Stops #1 and #3 on the Trail (see above), was held here while awaiting trial.

Occasionally people managed to break out. One night in 1816, four black men broke out of the jail together: **Richard Barret and John Thomas** of Virginia, **John Smith** of Allegany County, and **Abraham** of Hagerstown. The first three had been jailed under suspicion of escaping from slavery; Abraham was an enslaved man jailed as a punishment. In April 1825 **Joseph Quinn** and **William Harris**, "lately committed as runaways," escaped from the jail.

In December 1848, another alleged runaway broke out of the jail, by hiding himself "in the privy during the whole of Sunday," unfound by searchers who had noticed his absence on Saturday night, and then escaping "on Sunday night, by perforating the wall of his odiferous hiding place," according to the local newspaper. The following year, another runaway scaled the wall to escape successfully.



EBENEZER A.M.E. CHURCH, BUILT IN 1841

**9 26 WEST BETHEL STREET, Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church.** Chartered in 1820 by the Rev. Richard Allen and the other founders of the A.M.E. Church, Ebenezer is the second-oldest black church in Hagerstown and one of the oldest A.M.E. congregations in America. In 1839 it was incorporated by the **Rev. Thomas Henry**. Located at the heart of Hagerstown's free black community, this church also offered spiritual and other support to the enslaved population. Did that include assistance in fleeing from slavery? The records don't tell us, but here are two personal examples.

The **Rev. Thomas W. Henry**. Born in slavery in southern Maryland, Henry grew up in Hagerstown and was freed here as a young man. He became a Methodist preacher, but moved to the A.M.E. church. In his wide travels around Maryland and Pennsylvania he ministered to both enslaved and free people, and he was often accused of—but always officially denied—helping people escape slavery. Nevertheless, in his memoirs he wrote eloquently of the importance of freedom, and it is likely that he used his position to assist freedom-seekers.

After John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859, Rev. Henry's name was found in Brown's papers, mentioned as someone Brown should get to know. Because of this dangerous connection, Henry had to leave Maryland until after the Civil War was over. After he died in Washington, D.C., in 1877, he was buried here at Ebenezer in Hagerstown.

**Otho Snyder.** Snyder, whose activities were described at Stops #1 and #3 above, was a trustee of Ebenezer Church. Through his formerly enslaved mother, Elizabeth Snyder, Otho Snyder was Thomas Henry's first cousin once removed. Thomas Henry mentioned that out-of-town church guests stayed with Snyder, and that Snyder could travel to pick someone up in an emergency. Snyder is one of the people who connect the informal Underground Railroad to Ebenezer Church.

**10 465 PENNSYLVANIA AVE., future site of Doleman Black Heritage Museum.** Prominent 19th-century African Americans are honored by two parks adjacent to this site: Wheaton Park and the Medal of Honor Triangle.

**11 33 WEST WASHINGTON ST., Doleman Black Heritage Museum,** second floor, Room 210. These rooms temporarily house a unique collection of African American artifacts collected by one of Washington County's oldest black families. Exhibits include photographs of the Dolemans' ancestors, the Warfield family, who escaped to Pennsylvania from slavery near Boonsboro, and then returned to establish a dynasty in Washington County. Museum open: Mon.-Fri., 11-4:30; second Sat. of month, 12-5.

