

HOW WE LIVE

If you're watching 'The Underground Railroad,' learn about these Central Jersey debated sites

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Published 5:02 a.m. ET Jun. 2, 2021 | Updated 6:00 p.m. ET Jun. 5, 2021

The Underground Railroad — a network of safe houses, safe spaces and secret routes that assisted runaway slaves on their journeys to freedom to the North — has a mysterious history in Central Jersey.

The region has only a few documented Underground Railroad sites or points of interest — but far more that have garnered debate among historians and property owners.

"The trouble with the Underground Railroad is there were no records kept because it was all highly secretive," said Richard Moody, a former board member and longtime volunteer with the Cranbury Historical and Preservation Society, as well as a volunteer with the Historical Society of Princeton.

'I know how fraught those images are': Barry Jenkins on portraying slavery in 'The Underground Railroad'

"Unfortunately, as always, there are people who like to claim their house was a safe house on the Underground Railroad, but it's quite difficult to get the true story."

Reviving interest in the subject is the 10-part miniseries "The Underground Railroad," which debuted on May 14 on Amazon Prime.

What is known is that New Jersey was a crucial part of the Underground Railroad, being that it was close to the slave states of Delaware and Maryland. Plus, it is in between Philadelphia and New York City, two of the most active Underground

Railroad metropolitan centers.

From South Jersey, routes generally converged in Princeton and New Brunswick before heading toward Perth Amboy. The routes then continued through northern states to Canada, which abolished slavery in 1834.

New Jersey boasts a higher concentration of Underground Railroad communities than most northern states.

But the journey here was further complicated after 1826, when state legislators adopted a law requiring the return of fugitive slaves to their owners.

Plus, the Garden State did not provide safe harbor. It never adopted a personal liberty law in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which empowered federal agents to return runaways who had fled to the free states. Large rewards also were offered to those who assisted in the return of runaway slaves.

Here are some of the Underground Railroad sites of interest in Central Jersey — some debated, some documented, and others somewhere in the middle.

Elsewhere: Home where Harriet Tubman likely learned 'how to navigate and survive' discovered in Maryland

New Brunswick

Many Underground Railroad routes traveling through South Jersey, Delaware and Pennsylvania converged in New Brunswick on the way to New York City and Canada. There are no documented Underground Railroad sites in New Brunswick, although some people still believe sites exist.

New Brunswick had a large free Black population and easy access to road, water and, later, rail travel, according to "Scarlet and Black: Slavery and Dispossession in Rutgers History.

But Giles Wright, the former director of Afro-American History Program New Jersey Historical Commission, said there probably were not any safe houses in the city.

He passed in 2009 and was a state expert on the Underground Railroad. He wrote a guide under the New Jersey Historical Commission on New Jersey Underground Railroad sites.

His belief was recounted by Robert Belvin, director of the New Brunswick Free Public Library.

"Wright told me that he did not believe there were any Underground Railroad sites in New Brunswick simply because this was the choke point," Belvin said. "This was actually where the slave catchers would sit and wait. They would stay at the bottom end of East Brunswick and then it would be a dash to go north and get across the Raritan River and into Rahway."

The same is said in "Scarlet and Black: Slavery and Dispossession in Rutgers History."

"New Brunswick was also widely regarded as one of the most dangerous legs of the journey," the book states. "Self-appointed slave hunters enforcing the controversial Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 mercilessly patrolled the footbridge that stemmed from Albany Street eastward across the Raritan River."

Cranbury Inn, Cranbury

Local oral tradition states that the Cranbury Inn was a stop on the Underground Railroad. The belief is shared on the Cranbury Inn's website, as well as in Wright's guide, which also cites the oral tradition.

But the Cranbury Historical and Preservation Society believes otherwise.

There is no documentation to support the claim that the Cranbury Inn was an Underground Railroad site, however given the secretive nature of the Underground Railroad, not all sites are documented. But the nature of the inn leads the Society to believe it was not a site.

"As far as I can understand, there were no taverns that were safe houses," Moody said. "People stayed the night at the Cranbury Inn, had dinner there, went to traveling medicine shows and political caucuses, and it's the last place a slave would want to be. Also, we had an Underground Railroad site about 3 miles away, and there wouldn't be two within 3 miles."

John Whiteclay Chambers II, a retired Rutgers University history professor and author of "Cranbury: A New Jersey Town from the Colonial Era to the Present," agrees. He's also a board member of the Cranbury Historical and Preservation Society.

"It makes sense why runaway slaves would go to isolated farms," he said. "Would they go to a public inn? There would be too many people there — it would be very risky to put slaves up in a public inn."

Also: Six Delaware locations that are tied to Underground Railroad

Prospect Plains Road, Cranbury

However, there was a farm with a house and barn that was believed to be an Underground Railroad site on Prospect Plains Road in Cranbury. It was razed to make way for the widening of the New Jersey Turnpike that took place between 2009 and 2014.

Although that site also isn't documented, Chambers said there is oral tradition passed down from the former property owner.

There is also secondhand evidence from a person who spoke to Enoch Middleton, a Quaker and abolitionist who, alongside his son, helped move runaway slaves from his home in North Crosswicks section of Hamilton Township to Cranbury. It's believed that the site he moved the runaway slaves to was the farm on Prospect Plains Road.

Red Maple Farm, Monmouth Junction

This documented Underground Railroad site — listed on the New Jersey Register of Historic Places and National Register of Historic Places as Gulick House — was a circa-1752 home and bed-and-breakfast. It's now a private home at 262-329 Raymond Road.

The home was built by Joachim Gulick, whose family ran a stage line along what is now Route 27. From here, runaway slaves could continue their journeys to New Brunswick.

More Underground Railroad sites: Here are some North Jersey safe houses

Robert Horner House, Princeton

The Robert Horner House at 344 Nassau St. is claimed to be an Underground Railroad site, but the Historical Society of Princeton also has some doubts, said Moody.

More Underground Railroad sites: Guide to South Jersey sites to visit

The main section of the home was built in 1824, which was closer to the end of the Underground Railroad in 1863 during the Civil War. It's now a private home.

Eagleswood, Perth Amboy

Perhaps the most well-documented Underground Railroad sites in Central Jersey was Eagleswood, a community on the western border of Perth Amboy that was originally known as the Raritan Bay Union. It was located off the Raritan River, near the site of the modern Victory Bridge.

Its nearly 270 acres and 30 buildings were used for various purposes over its 34-year existence, including as a transcendentalist community; multiracial, progressive boarding school; farm; artists' colony; and military academy.

The main building, the Eagleswood Phalanx, was a massive space with a maze of corridors and rooms — making it an ideal spot to hide former slaves on their way to freedom. Escaped slaves were brought here via the Raritan River or horse cart.

The school was led by Theodore Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld and Sarah Grimke, who were all secret agents of the Underground Railroad. Marcus and Rebecca Spring —co-founders of Eagleswood — were also heavily involved.

North Jersey Underground Railroad sites: Here are some North Jersey safe houses

"Perth Amboy has a rich — but now mostly forgotten — history regarding the Underground Railroad," said Perth Amboy city historian John Kerry Dyke. "Eagleswood was a major station of the Underground Railroad. [Here], enslaved people

found safe haven. They were cared for, medically treated for their injuries and hidden from bounty hunters."

Jenna Intersimone has been a staff member at the USA Today Network New Jersey since 2014, after becoming a blogger-turned-reporter following the creation of her award-winning travel blog. To get unlimited access to her stories about food, drink and fun, please subscribe or activate your digital account today. Contact: JIntersimone@Gannett.com or [@JIntersimone](https://twitter.com/JIntersimone).