

Were any of our ancestors pre-Civil War abolitionists and/or involved in the underground railroads?

November 27, 2016 Grandkids, during special holidays, like a detective, I investigate (in a relaxed way) interesting mysteries amid the family histories (genealogies) of both my side (Brown-Lovett) and of your late Grandma (Young-McWilliams). I do this by blending what we already know about our family trees (which I keep on RootsMagic software) with online searches.

This year at Thanksgiving time, your Aunt Cheryl has asked me to see whether we have any ancestors who did things to try to help end slavery in the U.S. She, as quite a few Americans this year, are concerned about dangers to human rights in our own times. Cheryl is wondering whether there are persons in our own family histories who tried to help groups who were being badly treated, especially the slaves before the Civil War.

John Brown, the renowned or reviled Abolitionist, used violence – even killed people in Kansas and in West Virginia -- to push against Black slavery in the 1850s. You may or may not be pleased to know that John Brown seems to have been a distant cousin of your gr-gr-gr-gr-grandfather on my dad's side – Benjamin Brown, who lived in eastern Pennsylvania. There are lots of books about John Brown. Did he and his supporters do some good things amid taking the law into his own hands and “going to war” about his strong beliefs. That might be a good school project sometime.

For more, see the family mystery write-up that I did in 2007 about John Brown. I think that maybe John Brown and Benjamin Brown both stemmed from the same grandparents in Connecticut, back in the 1700s. But it's just a hypothesis. *Natalia, you and your dad drove to the John Brown family place in northern New York State in 2016. Maybe you found some clues there that are worth exploring further?*

Simeon and Betsy Dodge are said to have let run-away slaves stop at their home in Salem, Massachusetts, during the runaways' flight North. This was part of the network of “underground railways” throughout the Northeast U.S. Some of mom's ancestors immigrated in the 1600s from England to places near Salem. The last names of a few were Dodge too. Hmmm. Could Simeon and Betsy have been distant relatives of yours?

Today I browsed some free genealogical sites like WikiTree (which can have poorly researched info along with very good leads), and FamilySearch (which the LDS (Mormon) Church handles and holds to high standards). There is an active [Dodge Family Association](#), which does lots of genealogy and has a website. But nothing found there either about an underground station, thus far.

Sam Houston (1793-1863) was a complex man who “made waves” wherever he was. He went from being a teacher in Tennessee to Oklahoma as a friend of the Cherokees, then later became a general and governor in Texas. He owned a dozen slaves (apparently did not treat them meanly),

yet did not favor expansion of slavery to more states. He opposed what both the secessionists of the South and the abolitionists of the North were doing to tear apart the U.S. using violence, over slavery and other issues. (Wikipedia and many other online links have writeups about Sam. Here's one by a Texan, <http://www.forttumbleweed.net/historysam.html> ... has other Texas heroes too.

It appears that Sam Houston was a distant relative of you and me – maybe a great-great-great-great-great-great uncle (like seven generations ago). The link is through my mom's father, Rev. David Winslow Lovett (your great-great grandfather), who was born in Vermont. A great grandfather of his, Captain Robert Huston (1776-1863), said that he and Sam Houston wrote letters to each other and that they were "near relatives". (In those days, name spellings were not so standardized as now. For more, see "Genealogy of the Huston Family compiled by Rev. N. W. Wilder". I have an old copy in my files that I have scanned in for you. See pages 1 and 6.)

Pennsylvania is near Delaware, Maryland, Virginia and other states that had many slaves in the mid-1800s. Many desperate slaves tried to escape. They sought to reach the Northeast states. People who didn't like slavery—Quakers especially—established an "underground railroad", with places to stay secretly overnight, then directions about how best to head North the next day—mostly by foot, sometimes hidden in hay wagons and such. Southeast Pennsylvania was where the escape system first began.

Congress passed the "Fugitive Law" in 1850. This made it legal for hired agents of slave-owners to go North, and forcibly capture the escaped slaves. They were likely to be cruelly punished when back in the South. This made secrecy and a well-managed "underground railroad" even more important.

You and I have ancestors in Southeast Pennsylvania—especially Chester and Berk Counties near Philadelphia (my dad's family), and York County farther west (your Grandma Brown's family). Were any of them part of the "underground railroad" networks that helped the escaped slaves?

Not that I've been able to find thus far. But my search this Thanksgiving weekend has led to interesting internet links. They help to see from "the inside out" how badly slaves were treated, and how dedicated those who tried to help the escapees were. You may want to explore these further, perhaps as part of a school project:

<http://kennettundergroundrr.org> Kennett Underground Railroad Center, the first station apparently, in Chester County.

<http://www.berkshistory.org/multimedia/articles/the-underground-railroad/> "The Underground Railroad" by Wayne E. Homan, in the Historical Review of Berks County, Fall 1958.

<http://slavenorth.com/pennsylvania.htm> "Slavery in Pennsylvania". (Has for the other northern states too.)

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