

## The Underground Railroad and Quaker Street

Prior to and during the American Civil War, it is well known that the Society of Friends, or Quakers, were active in the Underground Railroad, aiding the runaway slaves whenever possible in their escape to Canada and freedom. In the homes of many Friends in Quaker Street and the surrounding area there were carefully concealed quarters where the runaway slaves could be hidden until they could be safely transported to their next haven of security.

The Quakers made a point to save all old clothes for men, women and children—boots, shoes, hats or anything wearable. They housed, clothed and fed the fugitive slaves for several days at a time until it was felt safe to transport them to their next haven. For these journeys, they would be hidden in lumber wagons under loads of hay or straw and carried to the next Underground Station which, from Quaker Street, was Charleston Four Corners, where there was another Quaker Meeting and settlement. Many escapees had traveled from the South through New York City, up the Hudson River to bypass Albany by coming through Coeyman's to Berne. They eventually made their way to Buffalo where they crossed into Canada to safety.

Participants along the Underground Railroad generally organized in small, independent groups. This helped to maintain the secrecy because individuals knew some connecting stations along the route but knew few details of their immediate area. To reduce the risk of infiltration, many people associated with the Underground Railroad knew only their part of the operation and not the whole scheme.

In the local Quaker Street homes, slave quarters were carefully concealed. Nathaniel Mead's home, located on Schoharie Turnpike, had a hidden entrance from the cellar into a space under the large stone front porch. The huge stones that make up the porch were quarried at and transported by ox cart from Huntersland (Middleburg area). Other stations included the two homes west of Wolfe's Market—the building beyond the store was a tavern until it was converted into a home. The next home to the west was owned by one of the Sheldons who was also instrumental in transporting the slaves to their next station. Other Quaker homes had double root cellars which were used as hiding places.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 allowed for bounty hunters and civilians the opportunity to hunt throughout the country to find runaway slaves. Individuals who aided fugitive slaves could be charged and punished under

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this law. Despite this possibility, several Quaker Street citizens courageously continued their efforts to help these runaways in their quest for freedom.