

Underground Railroad Local, Living History

By L. LEE JANSSEN
Sun-Gazette Staff

The story of the Underground Railroad should not be relegated only to the annals of black history. Rather, it is a part of every person of every race, Mamie M. Diggs, the great-granddaughter an "engineer" for the Freedom Road station, said yesterday. Diggs and Kelly Orso, a Pennsylvania College of Technology student, conducted a program on the subject for about 100 children, their parents and others yesterday at the Lycoming County Historical Museum. After the Black History Month

program, many in the group traveled to the college to attend Theatreworks/USA's production of "Freedom Train," the story of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad.

"It's for all of us," Diggs told the group as she read the names of people who, more than a century ago, participated in helping slaves on their journey to freedom.

Names like Updegraff, Scates and Kramer. Henry and Elizabeth Warner. Ed Morris, owner of the then Bullshead Tavern in Pennsdale, now known as the "House of Many Stairs."

She encouraged her audience to examine articles on the subject as it pertained to the local area and find connections with which they could identify.

And she spoke about her great-grandfather, a Muncie Indian chief named Daniel Hughes and a river rafter who helped transport slaves from Maryland. They all took chances, both slaves and those who extended the hand of freedom, she said.

Orso talked about some of the penalties and horrors of slavery.

Slaves, Orso said, initially were "stolen" from their homeland in Africa and transported across the ocean packed in the holds of ships "like sardines."

Slave owners would "chop off" the feet of those caught trying to run away, Orso said.

Those who were caught practicing native religions or speaking native tongues were subjected to harsh whippings which stopped only after they passed



ADMIRING ARTIFACT believed to have come from the House of Many Stairs at Pennsdale, where runaway slaves would stop on their journey to becoming free people, are Lycoming County Historical Museum speakers and guests. From left, are Mamie Diggs, seated; Kelly Orso, standing; Alton Richards, 10, son of Nayo Brown; Jeremy, 10, and Mark Shuback, 8, sons of Sharon Sullivan, all of this city.

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CRAIG W. SMITH/Sun-Gazette

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One is, though, and it now serves as the Commonwealth Bank at the corner of West Third and Pine Streets, Diggs said.

That building reportedly has places in the basement where escaped slaves could hide while resting, just as did the former building across from the bank.

That property now is nothing but a hole. Toward the back of the hole, people today may see openings, Diggs said.

"That's where slaves were put, so they could rest and be fed before they went on to Freedom Road," she said.

From there, the slaves would travel to their next stop in Trout Run before venturing beyond the local portion of the Underground Railroad and to their new lives as free people.