

FEB.

Beacon of Hope

Runaway Slaves 'Follow the N

By R.J. MILLER
Sun-Gazette Staff

The eerie howl of a timber wolf penetrates the still dark night.

The runaway stops briefly, then gazes upward into the midnight sky. His eyes quickly focus on his beacon of hope — the North Star.

Quietly, cautiously, he continues his trek across the mountainous terrain as he dreams of a future in freedom.

Assisted by friendly strangers met along the way, hundreds of runaway slaves realized their dreams and reached that Promised Land.

The strangers were part of a secret network of routes, safe houses and people from all walks of life known as the Underground Railroad. And West Branch Valley residents played a significant role in its success.

Neither underground nor a railroad, the system was used by anti-slavery Northerners to help escaped slaves on their journey to freedom.

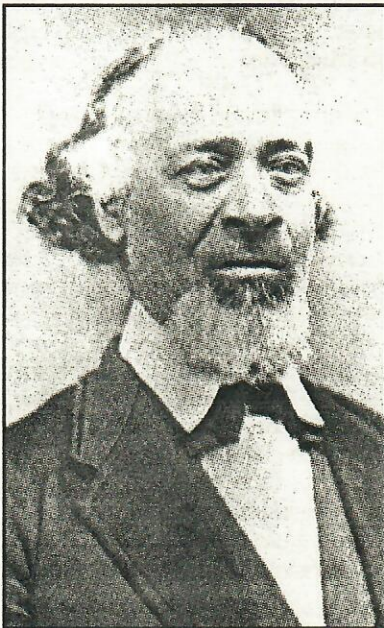
The runaways were guided along the area's Indian trails by night and harbored in various stations or hiding places during the day.

A documentary, written and produced by Karen L. Frock, owner of Creekside Copywriting, in conjunction with WVIA, the Scranton area public television affiliate, traces North Central Pennsylvania's role in the Underground Railroad which spanned a period of more than 70 years and included several generations of local families. The hour-long program, "Follow

the North Star to Freedom," will air at 10 p.m. Friday.

"People don't realize the extent of the Underground Railroad here," Frock said. "This region was involved from the very beginning."

After four years of extensive



DANIEL HUGHES, a lumber raftsman, guided runaways from the Chesapeake Bay to the New York state border.

research, Frock discovered the area's role largely was overlooked by historians. People were helping runaway slaves long before slavery was outlawed in Pennsylvania in 1780. Pennsylvania was the first state to pass laws leading to the gradual abolition of slavery.

"Two and three generations within some families took part in the effort," she said, "which is probably one reason why it con-

tinued here for such a long time."

Frock's interest in the Underground Railroad resulted from her research of the area's history for a now-shelved novel. Her initial research revealed a rich history of local involvement, yet no comprehensive project had been done to uncover all the region's networks.

People told bits and pieces of stories passed from generation to generation but nothing was ever put together, she said. Frock firmly believed the story was an important one that should be documented and not forgotten. When she approached WVIA-TV, the station agreed.

The program puts the pieces together for the public, she said, and gives an indication of the scope and activity here.

"I tried to acknowledge as many as I could who played important roles in the Underground Railroad," but everything couldn't be included in an hour-long production.

From the time of the Native Americans through the Civil War, individuals and families of the West Branch Valley have worked together to help others escape slavery, according to her research.

"As early as there was slavery in this country there were people seeking to escape it."

Assistance began in North Central Pennsylvania with the Iroquois Indians. The effort continued with white Quakers in the 1780s and 1790s and with African-Americans from the 1790s onward.

"Indian trails in this region were the only routes available.



KAREN FROCK, Frockdale Friends Meeting in the region.

The trails were for years," Frock said. The main north-south trail extending from Canada, used by the Quakers, was the Quinn Trail, which follows Route 15.

Quakers in the West Branch Valley helped runaway slaves to freedom, Frock said.

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Play Uses Symbolic Effect

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CRAIG W SMITH/Sun-Gazette

KAREN FROCK, producer of the documentary, "Follow the North Star to Freedom," stands outside the Penns-
dale Friends Meeting. Founders and early Quaker leaders of the Meeting were underground railroad agents
in the region.

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The trails were thoroughfares
 for years," Frock explains. A
 main north-south route,
 extending from the Carolinas to
 Canada, used was the Sheshe-
 quin Trail, which roughly fol-
 lows Route 15.
 Quakers in Philadelphia
 worked directly with Quakers
 in the West Branch Valley to
 help runaway slaves gain free-
 dom, Frock said.
 Over time, the Underground
 Railroad grew, gaining its struc-

ture and support. Gradually
 connections were formed among
 families, neighbors and people
 who worshiped together, she
 said.
 Frock's research revealed a
 notable absence of racial barriers.
 People from varied back-
 grounds worked side by side
 helping runaway slaves realize
 their dreams of freedom.
 "Our country's history of
 slavery reveals the worst in
 human nature, but the Under-

ground Railroad reveals the
 best in human nature," Frock
 said. "The Underground Rail-
 road was an example of whites,
 Native Americans and African-
 Americans cooperating — even
 though at great risk to them-
 selves — for a good cause."
 Since the activity was illegal
 and slaves were pursued by
 their owners and bounty
 hunters, codes, disguises, secret
 hiding places and travel by
 (Continued On Page 11, Col. 1)

Effect

“Underground” Documentary To be Aired Feb. 28

“Follow the North Star to Freedom,” a one-hour documentary about the Underground Railroad—a secret network of people, routes and safehouses that helped persons held in slavery escape to freedom—will air on Scranton/Wilkes-Barre’s WVIA-TV (Channel 44) on Friday, Feb. 28 at 10 p.m.

The program, which was made possible partly by a grant from CoreStates Bank, N.A., follows Underground Railroad routes through the rugged, mountainous terrain of northern Pennsylvania, which were traveled by runaways for more than 70 years. Through the use of maps and live footage, the documentary shows the routes that were used to transport fugitive slaves to freedom. Close to 20 Williamsport-area residents, including some from Pennsdale, appear in the film, and a number of them are actual descendants of Underground Railroad participants.

In addition to CoreStates, numerous volunteers from throughout the region assisted in the making of this program. This documentary, as well as its subject matter, demonstrates the interracial cooperation of people from many different religious faiths and is “must see” programming for everyone as a part of Black History Month.