Abolitionism, Quakers & the Underground Railroad in North Carolina

Overview
Throughout the 1800s, a clandestine network was underway along the North Carolina coast, and later the Piedmont, aiding enslaved people in escaping slavery: The Underground Railroad. Whereas along the coast, the escapes were largely made possible by number of Blacks (free and enslaved) familiar with waterways, docks and nautical work, the network spread to the Piedmont where it was aided by Quakers, as well as enslaved and free Blacks. In this lesson, students will learn about the Underground Railroad activities in the Piedmont through reading, discussion, and the review of primary sources from the Quaker Collections at Guilford College. They will then apply what they learn to develop a revitalization and preservation plan for Snow Camp, NC.

Grades
8 - 11

Materials

- Guilford College Underground Railroad Tour to the Tree (6-minute video):
- Abolitionism, Quakers & the Underground Railroad in North Carolina, reading & accompanying questions attached
- Primary Source Documents from the Quaker Collections at Guilford College’s Hege Library (formerly the Friends Historical Collection):
  - B10 – Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (3/31/1863)
  - B11 – Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (4/4/1863)
  - B12 – Letter from Delphina E. Mendenhall (4/20/1863)
    - Original letters available [here](#); transcriptions are available [here](#).
  - C17 - Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (6/26/1863)
    - Original letter available [here](#); no transcription available.
  - D17 - Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (11/24/1863)
    - Original letter available [here](#); transcription available [here](#).
  - G5 – Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (9/15/1864)
  - G30 – Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (6/12/1864)
    - Original letter available [here](#); transcription available [here](#).
- Abandoned colonial settlement, stop on Underground Railroad, falling apart in Snow Camp, article excerpt attached; full article and video available [here](#)
  - Note that Snow Camp’s Outdoor Theatre production of “Pathway to Freedom” specifically is designated as part of the National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom (NTF)
- Group Project: Heritage Directions, a Historic Preservation Consulting Firm
Additional Resources

- **National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom (NTF):** The mission of NTF is to honor, preserve and promote the history of resistance to enslavement through escape and flight, which continues to inspire people worldwide. Through its mission, the NTF helps to advance the idea that all human beings embrace the right to self-determination and freedom from oppression. Sites related to this lesson plan include:
  - Guilford College Woods (formerly New Garden Woods)
  - Additional lessons and interactive timeline available [here](#).
  - Quaker Archives at Hege Library, Guilford College:
  - New Garden Friends Meeting & Cemetery
  - Snow Camp’s Outdoor Theatre production of “Pathway to Freedom”

- **NC African American Heritage Commission’s Freedom Roads Trail:** Freedom Roads is a statewide trail system that recognizes the places (from rivers to towns) that were crucial to the efforts of freedom seeking throughout the state, as well as the freedom seekers and their allies, whose stories testify to the indomitable spirit found in thousands who strove to be free and aided them in success.
  - Freedom Roads sites include [designations in the National Park Service’s](#) Network to Freedom Underground Railroad program, as well as other sites and routes recognized by historians and/or archaeologists as significant to African American freedom seeking in North Carolina.
  - Mendenhall Homeplace is a Freedom Roads site referenced in this lesson plan.

- Digital Library on American Slavery
- Quakers and the Underground Railroad
- In Greensboro’s New Garden Woods, remnants of Underground Railroad live in the soil

Duration

- 60 minutes
- Additional time may be necessary for the culminating project.

Student Preparation

Students must understand expectations for respectfully discussing “hard history” such as enslavement. While this history brings up difficult topics such as racism and racial violence, such history represents a part of our shared state and national history that students must understand in order to comprehend its impact on the present. To ensure students are able to respectfully and empathetically discuss such topics, teachers must ensure a foundation of civil discourse, respect and empathy in the classroom. For techniques on building such a classroom community, see Carolina K-12’s classroom management activities in the Database of K-12 Resources under the “Activities” section and specifically [Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom](#).

Procedure

**Warm Up: A Video Introduction to Guilford Quakers**

1. Let students know that in today’s lesson, they will be learning about Quakers and their roles as abolitionists, as well as their involvement in North Carolina’s Underground Railroad network. As a warm-up, tell students they are going to watch a quick 6-minute video, Guilford College Underground Railroad Tour to the Tree. As they watch, ask them to jot down anything they learn about Quakers and the Underground Railroad, as well as anything they already know about these topics. Afterwards, discuss:
   - What did you learn and/or already know about Quakers and the Underground Railroad?
According to the presenter in the video, James Shields Jr., where might the term “Underground Railroad” have come from?

Why was music important to enslaved people? In what ways did music have multiple meanings for those enslaved?

In what ways were music and spirituals a form of resilience and even resistance of enslaved people?

- Ensure students consider that while we sometimes only think of resistance in terms of violence - i.e., an enslaved person fighting back or a rebellion, in actuality enslaved people were resisting daily in a myriad of ways, including through music.

Mr. Shields points out that communal signing was a way for enslaved folks to say “I know that you’re with me. I know that we’re together. I know that there’s hope.” Why do you think such hope was so important?

How would you characterize the idea or act of putting messages/stories into songs?

- It’s an ingenious mode of resistance and protest. On the surface enslaved people were simply re-telling a Bible story, so slaveholders couldn’t ban it without having their hypocrisy exposed. But it enabled those enslaved to express themselves and rebuke their situation in creative ways. At times, it also provided a clever way to shared coded language.

Mr. Shields noted that “we all have a creed we live by” and part of that is figuring out where you stand when things get tough. What do think he means?

What do you think he meant when he started his presentation by saying that he hopes tour-takers, and you – the viewers – are inspired? What do you think he hopes you’ll be inspired by or inspired to do?

Reading & Discussion: Abolitionism, Quakers & the Underground Railroad

2. Next, provide students with the attached reading and questions, Abolitionism, Quakers & the Underground Railroad in North Carolina. Explain to students that they will be learning more about Quakers and other abolitionists, and their collaboration to create a successful Underground Railroad across North Carolina, in the reading. Provide students with ample time to read, either individually or in reading partners, and to answer the corresponding questions on notebook paper. Afterwards, take time to discuss the reading as a class:

- In what ways did Quaker beliefs differ from most other North Carolinians?
- Why did Quakers face increasing hostility and harassment in the 1830s forcing many to leave the state?
- What was the dilemma that Quaker slaveholders faced in the early 18th century?
- How did the Society of Friends become one of the largest slaveholders in the state?
- What was the Underground Railroad and how did it operate in North Carolina?
- Who played a part in the success of North Carolina’s Underground Railroad? What skills and personality traits to you imagine one would need to have to help freedom seekers escape via the Underground Railroad?
- What role did Levi Coffin and the New Garden Friends Meeting play in the Underground Railroad?
- Who was John Dimery? What skills and personality traits would Dimery, and others seeking to escape enslavement, likely need?
- The Network to Freedom program “tells the story of resistance against the institution of slavery in the United States through escape and flight.” Why is it important that this program exists and that we learn about slavery and the brave resistance of those enslaved?
Mendenhall Plantation: A Quaker Homeplace in Jamestown, NC

3. Next, place students in small groups and let students know that they are going to spend some time exploring primary sources that will shed more light on the role of Quakers in the NC Underground Railroad. The sources come from the Quaker Collections at Guilford College's Hege Library (formerly the Friends Historical Collection), designated as part of the National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom (NTF). This collection provides access to rich primary source documents – primarily letters, diaries, and records of the Friends’ Yearly Meetings. Among the digitized items is the John B. Crenshaw Papers, which contain correspondence between Crenshaw, a prominent Quaker minister and other Friends members.

4. Tell students they are going to be reviewing documents from Delphina Mendenhall of Mendenhall Plantation in Jamestown, N.C., also located in Guilford County. The Mendenhall’s homeplace dates back to 1811 and the family were highly involved abolitionists. Richard Mendenhall was a founding member of the North Carolina Manumission Society and the family had a false bottom wagon, which was used to hide enslaved people as they aided them to freedom in their Underground Railroad network. (Today, the Mendenhall Homeplace/Plantation is on the National Register of Historic Places and is part of the NC Freedom Roads Trail.) The correspondence students will review references Delphina Mendenhall’s efforts to secure safe passage and freedom for Harriet Lane, an enslaved African American woman, conduct a discussion about her efforts.

5. Teachers can either print out primary source packets including the letters and corresponding questions, or if access to laptops is available, have groups access the materials via the internet using the links provided. Teachers should determine whether to have each group of students skim all of the letters provided, or have group members choose a particular letter to focus on then share its contents with the remainder of their group members. The primary sources students should review include:

- B10 – Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (3/31/1863)
- B11 – Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (4/4/1863)
- B12 – Letter from Delphina E. Mendenhall (4/20/1863) ***Original letter available here; transcriptions are available here.
- C17 - Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (6/26/1863) ***Original letter available here; no transcription available.
- D17 - Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (11/24/1863) ***Original letter available here; transcription available here.
- G5 – Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (9/15/1864)
- G30 – Letter to John B. Crenshaw from Delphina E. Mendenhall (6/12/1864) ***Original letter available here; transcription available here.

6. After reading these letters, students should work together in their small groups to summarize chronologically the steps Mendenhall took to help Lane. Finally, review/discuss as a whole class:

- What do we know about Harriet Lane from reading these letters? What could you additionally infer about her (her life, experiences, disposition, etc.?)
- What can we learn about the relationship between Delphina and Harriet?
- What emotions can you identify in these letters?
- What examples are there of others Delphina attempted to assist out of North Carolina? How did her efforts finally turn out?
7. Provide students with the attached article about Snow Camp, NC, which was mentioned in their earlier reading due to its connection to the NC Underground Railroad. (The Snow Camp Outdoor Theatre located there, which presents “Pathways to Freedom,” is also designated as part of the National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom). Unfortunately, the town is losing some of its history, since the cost and labor for historical preservation and upkeep is not small. Provide students with the attached group project assignment, and tell them they will be imaging that they are employees of Heritage Directions, a consulting firm specializing in historic preservation – and in this role, they are tasked with developing a revitalization plan for Snow Camp, NC. Students will utilize everything they have already learned about Quakers, abolitionism, and the NC Underground Railroad, as well as conduct additional research, to develop a plan that makes Snow Camp an important and well-known historical destination, while also preserving and celebrating its diverse history pertaining to the fight for freedom against the oppression of enslavement. Go over the assignment with students, letting them know the due date. (Teachers should determine how much time will be devoted to the assignment, which can be a simple in class activity, or a more significant and long-lasting project.)

8. On the due date, teachers are encouraged to have students present their work to the class. If time permits, allow students to ask questions after each presentation. The class might also vote on what they feel is the best revitalization plan for Snow Camp at the end of all presentations.
Quakers, or the “Religious Society of Friends,” are the oldest organized Christian church in North Carolina. North Carolina Quakers originated as a result of a missionary band that visited the Albemarle region in March 1672 for three days, holding the first religious services in the colony and laying a foundation that would result in North Carolina’s becoming, in its early years, virtually a Quaker province. Tradition has it that the earliest meeting for worship was established in present Perquimans County, also the site of the first North Carolina Yearly Meeting in 1698.

Quakers and the Issue of Slavery

When the Civil War began, many people of different religious faiths supported the Confederate war effort. Yet, the Quakers went against majority opinion and refused to support the war. They believed in pacifism - that war and violence were wrong. They also held a basic belief in human equality. Even though some of the early Friends enslaved people, the practice of slavery eventually became a moral problem for the Quakers. As they solidified their anti-slavery ideals, Quakers faced increasing hostility and harassment, forcing many to leave the state.

At the start of their abolitionism, Quakers tried to decrease the harsh treatment of those who were enslaved. Later, a movement began in the faith to free all of those enslaved whom the Quakers held in bondage. By the early 1800s, the Quakers had become devoted abolitionists and helped enslaved people escape through the Underground Railroad, a secret network that aimed to transport slaves to free states or territories.

Quaker Dilemma: Manumission in North Carolina

Long before the Civil War, in 1741, a colonial law had been enacted that forbade the manumission of enslaved people except as a reward for outstanding service to the state. County courts had the authority to decide the merits of service for each individual case and then, if freedom was granted, the freed person was given six months to leave the state. Some enslaved persons, for example, were freed for serving in the American Revolution.

As the slavery issue grew more troublesome, many Quaker slaveholders were caught in a dilemma. To continue owning slaves was becoming increasingly frowned upon in their society. However, to free enslaved people was illegal in NC. In April 1774 Thomas Newby of the Perquimans Monthly Meeting expressed his desire to free his slaves and requested guidance on the delicate question. Newby’s petition sparked a heated debate that resurfaced in meetings for nearly two years. Finally, in 1776, the Yearly Meeting created a committee for the express purpose of working with Friends who wished to free the enslaved people they owned. Newby and ten other Quaker slaveholders then freed forty individuals—a direct violation of the 1741 law. The NC legislature took notice of the Quaker action. Officials were enraged and accused the Quakers of attempting to start a slave rebellion. In response, the legislature moved to strengthen the 1741 law by empowering county courts to seize illegally freed people for immediate resale.

This step marked the beginning of a long series of legal battles between the state and North Carolina Quakers. These struggles continued well into the 1800s and caused great hardships among the Friends.

Continued Quaker Efforts to Free Enslaved People

The North Carolina Yearly Meeting in 1808 took action. Taking advantage of a 1796 statute that allowed societies to buy and sell property, the Yearly Meeting authorized its members to transfer title of their slaves to
the Yearly Meeting itself. By 1814, the group was the legal owner of nearly eight hundred enslaved people—making the Society of Friends was one of the largest slaveholders in the state.

The Yearly Meeting created a special committee to oversee those enslaved. For the most part, the freedom seekers were allowed to have more freedom than they had experienced when enslaved. They usually worked with less direct supervision and were often “hired out” as individual laborers. The committee saw that proceeds from their labors went toward a fund for their care and eventual resettlement to free territories in the North and West. This short-term solution was accompanied by strenuous lobbying efforts to convince the state to reform its manumission laws.

**Quakers and the Underground Railroad in North Carolina**

Probably the most legendary of Quaker antislavery involvement was the **Underground Railroad**. The Underground Railroad was a secret system of individuals (free Blacks, enslaved people, and white allies) who assisted enslaved people in their quest for freedom prior to the **Civil War**. The term, used between about 1830 and 1860, refers to this “invisible” network, and not any kind of actual transportation system. The courageous freedom seekers and the people who took the risk to help them would sometimes use railroad terms as code words when planning and executing such escapes. For example: hiding places were "stations," people who aided the runaways were "conductors," and the freedom seekers themselves were "passengers" or "freight."

The Underground Railroad relied on cooperation between free Blacks, enslaved people, white allies, and abolitionists such as those in North Carolina’s Quaker communities. While the most famous Black leader in the movement was **Harriet Tubman**, who is credited by different historians with helping anywhere from 70 to 300 enslaved people escape to freedom (modern historians believe the actual number is between 70 – 90), an active and less known group of people were doing the same across the state of North Carolina.

Throughout the 1800s, a clandestine network was busy along the North Carolina coast, and later the Piedmont. The escapes were largely made possible on the coast because of the number of Blacks (free and enslaved) familiar with North Carolina’s waterways and working on the docks, particularly in Wilmington.

Later, the network extended to the Piedmont area, where the Underground Railroad was aided by Quakers, as well as a community of free African-Americans, some of whom were born into freedom and others who had been able to work their way to freedom through the trades.

As early as 1819, Members of **New Garden Friends Meeting** had established an Underground Railroad “station” in Guilford County under the leadership of Vestal Coffin, his sons Alfred and Addison who carried on his work, and his cousin Levi Coffin – best known as the "conductor" of the so-called Underground Railroad in Greensboro. One stopping point in North Carolina is believed to be the **New Garden Meetinghouse** in Guilford County, where freedom seekers allegedly hid in the woods until they could resume travel at night to avoid detection.

The case of **John Dimery** is the earliest documented case of Underground Railroad activity in North Carolina. In 1819, Dimery had been freed by his master elsewhere in North Carolina, and came to live with his wife in New Garden. Upon the former master’s death, his sons came to New Garden to collect Dimery in the night. Dimery enlisted his daughter to “run for ‘Mr. Coffin.” Vestal and his friend Isaac White caught up with and detained the kidnappers while “the woman of the house” quietly untied Dimery, who “disappeared into the woods.”
Addison Coffin reports that Dimery “was started on the Underground Railroad that night and soon landed at Richmond, Indiana.”

While the Coffins are perhaps a more familiar name in North Carolina, the stories of the Blacks (free and enslaved) who operated the Underground Railroad have often gone untold. “Most of our focus has been on the north and on Harriet Tubman,” historian Adrienne Israel argues. Yet, the reminiscences of Levi Coffin for instance, included many references to assistance from free Black people, “even though they get very little attention” in our textbooks.

Although its membership diminished during the antebellum years, the Society of Friends continued to exert a powerful influence in the state. No doubt because of that Quaker influence, other antislavery groups found the central Piedmont to be fertile ground for planting their beliefs.

Today, New Garden Friends Meeting & Cemetery, the area now known as the Guilford College Woods, and the Quaker Archives at Guilford College’s Hege Library are all designated sites with the National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom (NTF). NTF “tells the story of resistance against the institution of slavery in the United States through escape and flight.” The program demonstrates the significance of the Underground Railroad as a scheme for eradicating slavery and “as a cornerstone of our national civil rights movement.” Relatedly, UNC-G’s Digital Library on American Slavery is also designated as an NTF site/program.

Nearby Snow Camp, NC, in Alamance County, another close Quaker community known to be part of the Underground Railroad network, also has a designated NTF site and program with its outdoor theatre production of a play called “Pathways to Freedom.”

This handout was comprised from the following sources:

- https://www.ncpedia.org/underground-railroad
- https://www.ncpedia.org/quakers-and-their-war-resistance
- https://www.ncpedia.org/culture/religion/quaker-abolitionists
- https://library.guilford.edu/c.php?p=656676&g=656676
- https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1205/index.htm

Think About It

1. In what ways did Quaker beliefs differ from most other North Carolinians?
2. Why did Quakers face increasing hostility and harassment in the 1830s forcing many to leave the state?
3. What was the dilemma that Quaker slaveholders faced in the early 18th century?
4. How did the Society of Friends become one of the largest slaveholders in the state?
5. What was the Underground Railroad and how did it operate in North Carolina?
6. What various people played a part in the success of North Carolina’s Underground Railroad? What skills and personality traits do you imagine one would need to have to help freedom seekers escape via the Underground Railroad?
7. What role did Levi Coffin and the New Garden Friends Meeting play in the Underground Railroad?
8. Who was John Dimery? What skills and personality traits did Dimery, and others seeking to escape enslavement, need?
9. National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom (NTF) “tells the story of resistance against the institution of slavery in the United States through escape and flight.” Why is it important that this program exists and that we learn about slavery and the brave resistance of those enslaved?
Abandoned colonial settlement, stop on Underground Railroad, falling apart in Snow Camp

By Heather Leah | October 31, 2020 5:16 p.m. EDT

Snow Camp, N.C. — The remnants of a small colonial community, built roughly 270 years ago, before the Revolutionary War, can be found crumbling and rusting on a country road and covered bridge in Alamance County. Small wooden houses, a historic post office, a museum and even an old school house are now ramshackle – and some are collapsing. The school even has old desks still inside. While most colonial homesteads and communities have been completely wiped away, Snow Camp had stood for centuries – in part due to its historic connection with the Underground Railroad. However, today the physical remnants of that history are slowly disintegrating.

Snow Camp Museum and historic site, like many other places in this area of Alamance County, has shut down. The current owner's father once collected damaged historic structures from around the county and moved them here, where they could be cared for and viewed by the public.

However, caring for buildings nearly three centuries old can be difficult – and expensive. The site has been closed for about a year, with the pandemic economy threatening to leave this colonial settlement weathered and abandoned.

The theater, which now has tall grasses growing up between the stadium seating, once put on live shows and told tales of Snow Camp's role in the Revolutionary and Civil War.

"I think it's sad because it's a piece of history that a lot of people don't know anything about," said Peggy Zachary, a generational member of the Zachary family who has spent generations in this area. Zachary is worried that the incredible historic work done in the 1800s will be forgotten.

This site was a stop on the Underground Railroad – a place where people escaping slavery could find refuge and aid with the abolitionist Quaker community who lived here. Many remnants of the Underground Railroad have vanished with the centuries – with Snow Camp being one of the few remaining tangible pieces remaining.

"Once they got into these 'anti-slavery' and 'free Black' communities, they just disappeared," said Dr. Max Carter, an Underground Railroad Historian and former professor at Guilford College.

Many Quakers like the Zachary family taught escapees how to read the Bible, and gave them instructions for how to get north. They'd also teach them laws, to help them become aware of their own rights. Finally, they'd show them how to read maps to help them escape.

"It was dangerous work. Some people lost their lives. And if you're a Quaker, you can't fight back," he said.

Regardless of the rich history, the site has been abandoned. The owner closed it several years ago. Today, many fear the moldy walls and rusted beams indicate the history will not be preserved.

"Sooner or later, our kids are not going to even know what happened in the past," said Zachary.

GROUP PROJECT:
Heritage Directions, a Historic Preservation Consulting Firm

As employees of Heritage Directions, a consulting firm specializing in historic preservation, your group has been tasked with developing a revitalization plan for Snow Camp, NC. You should rely on what you have already learned about Quakers, abolitionism, and the NC Underground Railroad, as well as conduct additional research, to develop a plan that makes Snow Camp an important and well-known historical destination, while also preserving and celebrating its diverse history pertaining to the fight for freedom against the oppression of enslavement. When creating your plan, your group should consider:

- What aspects of North Carolina’s Underground Railroad, the history of freedom seeking, and the resistance and resilience of enslaved and freed people are most important and compelling? How can Snow Camp be used as a site to tell these stories, including its own history pertaining to Quakers and the Underground Railroad?
- What buildings, sites, landscapes, etc. should be renovated, preserved, and/or recreated in Snow Camp and why? How will you make use of old and new space to effectively tell the story of North Carolina and the Underground Railroad?
- While celebrating its past, how will you promote the future of Snow Camp? How will you elevate this important history, highlight connections to today, and ultimately draw visitors to this area?
- When developing your revitalization plan, consider the following categories that you may want to include. Be prepared to describe your final ideas and selections in detail.
  - Historic buildings/structures to be preserved and/or renovated
  - Recreations
  - Education, Arts and Entertainment that helps convey the historical significance of Snow Camp (art installations, performances, lighting, landscaping, events, festivals, lectures, etc.)
  - Structures and Landscaping (sidewalks, parking decks, art installations, lighting, plants, etc.)
- How will your plan honor and celebrate the history of Snow Camp, while specifically elevating the stories of the courageous freedom seekers who resisted the institution of slavery? What will you include in your design to educate visitors about the history and its relevance to our lives today?

Your final revitalization plan must include:

- An overview (“birds-eye view”) map of your vision of a revitalized Snow Camp which labels the various buildings, structures, recreations to be built, installments, etc. important to the preservation and revitalization of this area; make sure you maintain the original sites mentioned in the article, “Abandoned colonial settlement, stop on Underground Railroad, falling apart in Snow Camp”
- At least one detailed sketch or 3-D model of one specific aspect of the revitalized town. This might be a detailed sketch of a particular building in Snow Camp, perhaps that which you deem most exciting or creative. Or, it might be a 3-D rendering of an art installation you’ve designed for the center of the town. It could be an artistic rendering and description of a ribbon cutting ceremony you’ve scheduled as a grand opening. Be creative!
- A pitch that you present to potential fundraisers, explaining your plan and vision, and why it will be successful in preserving and celebrating the important history of Snow Camp, while driving visitors there to have memorable, educational, and inspirational experiences. During this pitch, you will display your map, detailed sketch/model, and any other creative information you choose to include. Your pitch should be approximately 3 minutes long and can be delivered in any creative format you choose.

Due Date: ______________________________