Guilford College Underground Railroad Interpretation Guide

Webpage with the URR Tour Guide Training and Handbook
https://tinyurl.com/URRGuide

October 2023, Revised by Liz Torres Melendez

Table of Contents

About this Guide

This interpretation guide is a living document. It should be updated regularly, as policies change or are developed, as research provides new information, and as tour priorities evolve. A hard copy of this guide should be kept at a centralized location for easy access by tour guides, and every guide should have access to the online Coda or pdf of it. If any information in the guide is found to be inaccurate, inform a staff member or the tour coordinator immediately!

Visitor Services

Setting up a Tour

As a tour guide, it is **not** expected that you schedule tours yourself, please be sure to direct anyone interested in a guided tour to the Google Forms below. Please be sure that **every** guided tour goes through this scheduling process!

In order to schedule an Underground Railroad Tour, interested visitors should fill out the Google Form at tinyurl.com/UGRRGuidedTour, for self-guided tours they should fill out the Google Form at tinyurl.com/UGRRSelfGuided. If folks have additional questions they should email undergroundrr@guilford.edu.

Tour Expectations

As a tour guide, it is expected that you are able to provide folks interested in a tour with generalized information, but (as mentioned above), please do not schedule tours for yourself and instead direct interested parties to the Google Forms.

The Underground Railroad Trail begins at trailhead on Nathan Hunt Rd. beyond the Guilford Lake on the left. Trail to the champion tree is 0.3 mile one-way. It includes uneven surfaces with an accessible viewing platform and seating at the end. The Underground Railroad Tour is best experienced during the day as there is no additional lighting on the trail. Guided tours are limited to groups of 30 people or less. A guided tour takes around 1-1.5hrs. We recommend you wear sturdy shoes that you don't mind getting muddy. Visitors with mobility needs or accessibility concerns should ask the Tour Coordinator about alternative options to the walking tour.

There are no restrooms available along the trail. There are also no trash cans along the trail currently. There are private residences within the Guilford College Woods, so visitors should be mindful to “leave no trace.”

Visitors planning on doing a self guided tour should familiarize themselves with the Visitor Parking spaces on the Guilford College Campus Map, or plan to be dropped off at the trailhead. **Parking along the road is not allowed.**

Guided tours for on-campus groups begin in Founders Hall, off campus groups are asked to park in the Alumni Gym Parking lot, a gravel lot directly behind the baseball diamond.

The tour consists of five stops throughout the trail, culminating with the final stop at the Tree. As a tour guide, you can use the guiding questions in the ‘Underground Railroad Tour’ section of this guide to help you construct your narrative and build a conversation with your tour group. Use the rest of this guide to help you build *your* tour. It is important to be flexible

throughout your tour, listen to your group and their needs, assess their level of comfort and knowledge and try to tailor your tour to them.

Tour Guide Tips

1. **Face the crowd, not what you're talking about.** Tour guides often get so wrapped up in their subject they forget to face the people they are addressing. One secret to avoid this is to "deputize" somebody in the crowd to interrupt you if they can't hear you. (walking backwards)
2. **Be personal.** No matter how much we love the Woods, it's a fact that people connect with people. So it's good to have a few personal anecdotes ready, even if they're just about past tours you've done. You'll build a more personal connection to your group and create a memorable tour.
3. **Tell a story (historical or contemporary).** Make sure you have a few fun and compelling stories to tell about the Woods and sites you're looking at. People are more likely to feel engaged when they are listening to a story, rather than a list of dates and names.
4. **Get moving right away.** Tours often get bogged down before they ever begin with tour guides doing the ‘big wind-up'-introductions, setting the theme, providing context, etc. Plan to scrap 90% of it.
5. **Don't worry about being perfect.** People don't expect you to be perfect. Set the stage for human imperfection by acknowledging that people who may know more than you should speak up and share their knowledge with the group. The more interactive the tour is, the better.
6. **Get help to get organized.** Try to get a volunteer to check people in so you can chat with tour goers. People give tours for many reasons, but a big one is to meet new people, and the time before the tour is a great chance to get to know your group.
7. **End on time.** (Or try very hard to.) Try like crazy to end on time. Nobody wants to feel like they are in tour jail. Tours on paper always seem too short and on the ground are always too long. Two hours is the absolute maximum. An hour to an hour and a half is better.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

- Were Quakers enslavers?
- Why didn’t I hear this story when I was a student at Guilford College?

Tour Background

Goals & Mission

The mission of the Underground Railroad Tour Program is to provide accurate, inspiring historical information on Underground Railroad activities in the Guilford College Woods to 4th, 8th and 11th grade students and the community at large; hoping to lead all to consider how they might further social justice in their own time.

The program is primarily designed to offer both an online and onsite program for school children that is tailored specifically towards the goals and core standards targeted in North Carolina's 4th, 8th, and 11th grade social studies courses, which focus on North Carolina and United States history. We are committed to offering a consistent and informative field trip experience and to providing a well articulated online programming opportunity for multiple schools in a more accessible and equitable way.

The project also further enhances existing online topic guides on local Quaker and anti-slavery work by developing a subset of online resources specifically to meet the needs of a K-12 audience wishing to learn more about Guilford County's history relating to the Underground Railroad. In coordination with the onsite programming, efforts were made to develop an online interactive tour for those not able to schedule a trip to physically come to campus and as a supplement to the in-person opportunities.

Additionally, the program is available to any group or individual desiring to learn more about these activities in the Guilford College Woods, either with a guide or via a self-guided tour.

Land Acknowledgement

Every tour should begin with a land acknowledgement. This statement was revised in August 2021.

Guilford College — as all institutes of higher education in the United States — sits on Native land. In our case, it is land previously cared for and claimed, at various times, by the Keyauwee, Saura, and Saponi Peoples, some of whom such as the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, maintain a strong presence in the area, caring for it still. While Guilford College as an institution has not done all it could to respect and maintain its relationships with Native People, it is important to acknowledge these Peoples' survivance, and their care for the land in the past and the present and the future.

Doing so in a syllabus is an early and critical step in a larger process of relationship-building. Guilford has undertaken that work deliberately, working both to build and nurture relationships with the region's Indigenous People in ways that respect their claims to sovereignty, as well as ensuring that as a campus community we are as supportive of Native Students as we can be.

Terminology

In order to provide a high quality & ethical tour grounded in the best practices of African American history, there are specific terms that every tour guide should familiarize themselves with. The below list is not exhaustive and should be edited frequently. Most terms were adopted from the National Parks Service (NPS) Language of Slavery guide.

Abolitionist: A person opposed to slavery. Abolitionists were typically politically active and worked to eradicate the legal framework of slavery. They may or may not have acted on their antislavery principles by helping individuals escape from slavery.

Chattel: Portable personal property. Chattel slavery equated human beings with livestock, furniture, and any other portable personal property. Chattel could be inherited, sold, or transferred without permission, in the case of the enslaved person.

Conductor: This refers to an individual who escorted or directed freedom seekers between stations or safe houses. A conductor need not have been a member of an organized section of the Underground Railroad, only someone who provided an element of guidance to the freedom seeker.

Emancipation: This term is often used to refer to either individual or group freedom. For example, those enslaved in the District of Columbia were freed by an act of Congress in 1862, the Compensated Emancipation Act. The word is familiar because of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation issued in January 1863 which declared an end to slavery in states that were in rebellion against the United States. Individuals also attempted to emancipate themselves through escape or legal decisions.

Enslaved Person: This term is used in place of slave. It more accurately describes someone who was forced to perform labor or services against their will under threat of physical mistreatment, separation from family or loved ones, or death. For the general purposes of this website, the term refers to one of the tens of millions of kidnapped Africans transported to the Americas and their descendants held in bondage through the American Civil War.

Enslaved person emphasizes the humanity of an individual within a slaveholding society over their condition of involuntary servitude. While slavery was a defining aspect of this individual's life experience, this term, in which enslaved describes but person is central, clarifies that humanity was at the center of identity while also recognizing that this person was forcibly placed into the condition of slavery by another person or group.

Enslaver versus Master, Owner, or Slaveholder: An enslaver exerted power over those they kept in bondage. They referred to themself as a master or owner - hierarchical language which reinforced a sense of natural authority. Today, the terms “master” or “owner” can continue to suggest a naturalness to the system while also distancing us from the fact that enslavers actively enslaved other human beings who were entitled to the same natural rights as themselves.

The terms slave master and slave owner refer to those individuals who enslaved others when slavery was part of American culture. These terms can imply that enslaved people were less capable or worthy than those who enslaved them. Using the word master or owner can limit understanding of enslaved people to property. These terms also support a social construct that there are people who should naturally hold power (i.e. slave owners, slave masters) and those who should naturally not (enslaved individuals).

Freedom Seeker versus Fugitive: Freedom seeker describes an enslaved person who takes action to obtain freedom from slavery. The labels fugitive, runaway, and escapee were constructs of slave-holding society and patronizing abolitionists. These terms reflect how slave-holding society viewed African American efforts toward freedom and ultimately and take away their individual agency. The term fugitive is linked to the various Fugitive Slave Laws (1793, 1850) passed by the U.S. Congress, and emphasizes that the fugitive was acting criminally to escape from bondage. This language was key in attempts to preserve the view that the law was on the side of the slaveholding society—which it was—while reinforcing the view that the fugitive was incapable of acting responsibly in a society governed by the rule of law.

Manumission: The freeing of an individual or group of enslaved African Americans by will, purchase, legal petition, or legislation. Some enslaved African Americans saved up from jobs for hire or sale of goods to purchase their own manumission. Slaveowners sometimes freed individuals as a favor or picked favored enslaved people to free at the slaveholder's death. Some enslaved people were willing to take the risk of going to court to seek their freedom. Some people distinguish manumission from emancipation, using manumission to refer to only one individual at a time.

Maroon: Describes a community when used as an adjective or a member of a community when used as a noun of enslaved African Americans who escaped slavery and lived in a remote place like a swamp or the mountains. These settlements often actively assisted other freedom seekers. The Everglades and the Great Dismal Swamp were sites of maroon communities.

Operative or Station Master: An accomplice to escape by a freedom seeker. They might help arrange an escape, serve as a conductor, or otherwise help those escaping. If the freedom seeker was caught, the operative might provide a lawyer or money for fines and bail and/or arrange purchase from the slaveholder. A stationmaster provided shelter or a hiding place to

freedom seekers. They often served as a clearinghouse for information regarding safe routes and nearby pursuit of freedom seekers and coordinated with conductors and other stationmasters to provide safe passage for freedom seekers upon departure from that station.

Personal Liberty Laws: These laws for rights like habeas corpus, trial by jury, and protections from seizure defended those escaping, in direct opposition to the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850. Northern states like Indiana enacted laws providing these rights to freedom seekers starting as early as 1824. Such laws show the growing resistance to slavery in the North. Due to the cases of Ableman v. Booth and the United States v. Booth, the state of Wisconsin acted to nullify the decision of the Supreme Court whose southern justices found personal liberty laws unconstitutional.

Slave: As with enslaved person, this term is used for a person forced to perform labor or services against their will under threat of physical mistreatment, separation from family or loved ones, or death. For the general purposes of this website, the term refers to one of the tens of millions of kidnapped Africans transported to the Americas and their descendants held in bondage through the American Civil War.

Slave is a commonly used term to describe an enslaved African American, but one that suggests that the individual's identity was more fundamentally as property than as a human. It can also suggest that the person accepted their enslavement as a definition of their own identity. Additionally, it leaves out the presence of an enslaving individual or group whose ability of enforcement through violence backed the system of slavery. The National Park Service uses slave only when necessary in a historical context as part of a quote, preferring enslaved person as a more descriptive, complete choice.

Slave Patrol: Formed by state militias and county courts or by plantation owners themselves, these groups were responsible for preventing crime by Blacks and for keeping enslaved African Americans in the place prescribed for them by slave-holding society. Members might be poor whites or wealthier property owners. Mounted on horses, they were often armed with guns, whips, and clubs, and were not afraid to be brutal. They stopped Black individuals and demanded identification to demonstrate that Black individuals were not freedom seekers. Slave patrols had the right to search slave quarters.

Station: The station provided a haven for traveling freedom seekers, was secured by the stationmaster, and took many forms. Stations might be basements, cabins, homes, barns or caves, or any other site that provided an element of security while giving the freedom seeker an opportunity for rest and provisions.

Underground Railroad: The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program defines the Underground Railroad as the resistance to slavery through escape and flight.

Historical Background

Historical context is vital to helping visitors understand the Underground Railroad. The following three points give a good grounding for you as a tour guide to be able to expand from to help yourself be as successful as possible. Defining the Underground Railroad, Slavery, and the geography of Slavery are things you can do for yourself as you prepare for your tour and think about doing throughout the tour for your visitors. The readings in the 'Further Readings' section of this guide are great resources to helping you refine your definitions.

Define Underground Railroad - a system of cooperation among active antislavery people in the United States before 1863 by which fugitive slaves were secretly helped to reach the North or Canada —called also Underground Railway [Merriam-Webster] It was secret by necessity, so we do not have good records about it that were written at the time it took place. [An enslaver may have first used the term "Underground Railroad," as there was one instance where one of them said that the freedom seekers "disappeared, as if on an 'underground railroad.'"] People spoke and wrote about it many years later.*

Define slavery and note its effects - The historical term for human beings held in bondage and forced to perform labor or services against their will under threat of physical mistreatment or death.

- There were tens of millions of kidnapped Africans transported to the Americas, and held in bondage from the sixteenth century through the American Civil War. [Network to Freedom website; the NTF is a program of the National Park Service focused on the Underground Railroad.] The preferred term to use now when we talk about people suffering under slavery is "enslaved," to indicate that it was a condition imposed on them, rather than an inward condition of being inferior.
- It is important to note that enslavers were looking for particular skills, such as agricultural expertise, in the people they kidnapped in Africa.
- Those enslaved were forced to work without pay, severely mistreated and separated from their families at the whims of their enslavers. Living conditions were so bad that many were willing to risk everything for freedom.

Define location of slavery in U.S. - most who were enslaved were living below the Mason-Dixon Line in the U.S. This was originally the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania in the United States. In the pre-Civil War period it was regarded, together with the Ohio River, as the dividing line between slave states south of it and free-soil states north of it. The term Mason and Dixon Line was first used in congressional debates leading to the Missouri Compromise (1820). Today the Mason and Dixon Line still serves figuratively as the political and social dividing line between the North and the South, although it does not extend west of the Ohio River. [Brittanica.com, 10/1/2015, accessed 3/20/17]]

Timeline

c. 1600s -- Woods part of the lands of the Saura and Keyawee peoples.

Mid-1700s -- Initial settlements of European Americans in the area that is now western Guilford County. Slavery already present in the state so a part of the local economy from this period forward until abolition.

1752 – First meeting of New Garden Friends held at home of Thomas Beals, who held a concern against slavery and later moved west as one of the early Quaker settlers of Ohio.

1754 - New Jersey Quaker John Woolman's *Some considerations on the keeping of Negroes* published and accessible to North Carolina Quakers. Woolman traveled South to meet with Quakers and also with non-Quaker slave owners to persuade them towards change.

1758 – London Yearly Meeting admonishes Friends to stay away from slavery. A growing number of Quaker yearly meetings published papers discouraging the buying and selling of slaves and condemning the institution overall as Quakers in both Britain and America spoke in favor of gradual emancipation.

1770 – New Garden Friends Meeting urges Friends not be involved in slavery and issues stronger statements than most other Quaker meetings in the state at the time.

1776 -- Slave ownership becomes a disownable offense for members of North Carolina Yearly Meeting. North Carolina Quakers are no slower than Quakers elsewhere to speak out against slavery and pursue ways to legally untangle themselves and bring an end to the practice of slavery.

1780s and 1790s -- North Carolina Yearly Meeting routinely sends petitions to the North Carolina Legislature stressing the immorality of slavery and the importance of abolition.

1808 – North Carolina Yearly Meeting becomes a large owner of enslaved people due to the desire to discourage individuals to profit from slavery and increasingly restrictive manumission laws. The Yearly Meeting served as trustees, legally owning several hundred people -- supporting them in local apprenticeships and assisting them with relocation to freedom further north and abroad over the next half century.

1814 – North Carolina Manumission Society organizes at New Garden Friends Meeting. Levi Coffin (1798-1877) and Vestal Coffin (1792-1826) among the founding members of this interdenominational Quaker-dominated organization committed to gradual emancipation and legal reforms to bring an end to slavery.

1817 -- With support from local Quakers Vestal Coffin, George Swaim and Enoch Macy, Benjamin Benson's case to reclaim his freedom after an unlawful kidnapping was initiated in Guilford County Supreme Court. The case was resolved in Benson's favor in 1820.

1818 – North Carolina Manumission Society votes to amalgamate with new American Colonization Society, for "repatriation" of free blacks to Africa, causing some members to withdraw and focus on options with more direct support from and by local African Americans, such as supporting those wishing to move northward within the U.S. and those wishing to remain South as long as possible due to family ties.

1819 -- North Carolina and Virginia enact changes to facilitate interstate slave trade.

1819 – John Dimery is kidnapped by his former master's heirs and escapes to the woods to gain assistance from Vestal Coffin. According to Vestal's son, Addison, this was an early documented example of the Underground Railroad operating in Guilford County, as Dimery soon landed in Wayne County, Indiana.

1819-1852 – Active years of Underground Railroad activity in Guilford County.

1820s – The New Garden community, and Vestal and Levi Coffin in particular, become known for friendliness to enslaved fugitives.

1821 – Vestal and Levi Coffin establish a school, using the Little Brick Schoolhouse at New Garden Meeting, to provide reading instruction to local enslaved African Americans on Sunday afternoons.

1824 – North Carolina Yearly Meeting increasingly withdraws institutionally from anti-slavery action and direct work with African Americans as conditions become increasingly prohibitive. Individual efforts move underground with growing tensions and entrenchment of the slave economy.

1826 – Vestal Coffin dies, leaving his widow Althea and young son Addison, to carry on his work. Levi and Catherine Coffin relocate to Newport (later Fountain City) in Wayne County, Indiana where they continue their anti-slavery work by assisting people to freedom and promoting the free produce movement.

1826 – Regular "convoys" sent northwest as African Americans legally owned by North Carolina Yearly Meeting and others with legal papers to travel are accompanied by Quakers to seek freedom as a part of the "overground railroad." Wagons were stopped and searched, as slaveholders knew trails used for this purpose along the route from New Garden, North Carolina northwest to Ohio and Indiana.

1830 – North Carolina emancipation law requires posting of $1000 bond for each slave to be freed to require good behavior and insurance that the freed slave would leave the state within 90 days, making it increasingly difficult for Quakers and others supporting emancipation to legally assist people to freedom.

1831 – Nat Turner insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, raising fears among many whites and encouraging increasingly restrictive legislation against African Americans -- enslaved and free.

1831 – North Carolina law prohibits teaching the enslaved to read or write.

1833 – Abolition of slavery in British Empire

1833 – Rowland Greene, a Rhode Island Quaker minister who held a strong concern about the evil of slavery and the moral damage done to all living in the midst of it, visits North Carolina and advises Friends in the founding of New Garden Boarding School.

1834 – Last meeting of North Carolina Manumission Society held at Marlborough Friends Meeting

1835 – Hamilton's Saul, an enslaved African American known to have assisted in setting up escapes for others with Coffin almost twenty years earlier uses the Underground Railroad to gain his own freedom.

1835 – Revision of the North Carolina State Constitution disenfranchises free blacks. North Carolina also formally requests other states to suppress abolition societies and anti-slavery literature.

1837 – New Garden Boarding School, chartered in 1834, opens. Faculty include Rhode Island abolitionist activist Harriet Peck. She documents assisting in a Sabbath school for African Americans -- evidence that the work done by the Coffins in the 1820s continued, but not publicly due to increased illegality and danger. Peck also discusses the Free Produce Movement with her students, noting that the boarding school leadership was supportive of the movement as well, and distributes *The Liberator* and other anti-slavery literature in the surrounding community.

1845 -- Vestal Coffin's son, Addison, moves to Indiana. More research is needed to document who remained in North Carolina as active conductors in these later years of activity, especially after the departure of the Coffins and Hamilton's Saul.

1847 -- Virginia Yearly Meeting of Friends is discontinued, leaving North Carolina Yearly Meeting as the only Quaker organization entirely located in what would later become the Confederate States.

1850 - Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 requires that all escaped slaves were, upon capture, to be returned to their masters and that officials and citizens of free states had to cooperate in this law.

Underground Railroad Stories

These narratives and stories should be used to flesh out your tour. Familiarize yourselves with them and use them to enhance the visitors understanding of the Underground Railroad.

1. THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN ACTION:

“Slaves walked from station to station at night and when necessary hid in cornfields, forests and friendly homes to avoid being captured by owners or patrols. According to [Addison] Coffin, the system continued from 1830-1860 [most active years here were 1819-1852, with Levi leaving for IN in 1826 and Vestal dying the same year] without anyone finding out about the secret system.” (Beal, p. 21)

5 a. LEVI COFFIN FIRST SEEING THE ENSLAVED:

He dates his “conversion to Abolitionism from an incident which occurred when I was about seven years old.” There was a coffle of slaves (chained together in couples) who passed by on the Salisbury road. Levi and his father observed and spoke to them. They learned that the slaves were very unhappy because ‘They have taken us away from our wives and children, and they chain us lest we should make our escape and go back to them.’ Levi asked many questions of his father and learned about “the meaning of slavery, and, as I listened, the thought rose in my mind -- ‘How terribly we should feel if father were taken away from us.’” This, he said, was the beginning of his being in sympathy with the oppressed.(Coffin, L., pp. 12-13)

5 b. LEVI LEARNING ABOUT THE LIVES OF THE ENSLAVED:

“Runaway slaves used frequently to conceal themselves in the woods and thickets in the vicinity of New Garden, waiting opportunities to make their escape to the North, and I generally learned their places of concealment and rendered them all the service in my power.” He fed them scraps of bacon and cornbread meant for hogs, and “many a time I sat in the thickets with them as they hungrily devoured my bounty, and listened to the stories they told of hard masters and cruel treatment. . .” (Coffin, L. pp. 20-21)

5c. LEVI CONVINCED DAVID CALDWELL TO KEEP EDE:

Their neighbor, Dr. David Caldwell (physician and clergyman) was asked by his son, a Presbyterian minister, to give his son’s wife the gift of a house slave. Caldwell considered it (over the objections of his wife, who did not like the idea of separating a woman from her husband) and decided to offer Ede. She had 4 children, the youngest a baby only a few months old, who would accompany her to the new home 100 miles away. Just before she was to be sent away, Ede escaped into the woods with her baby, and remained for several days and nights. The child became ill, so she left.

“She made her way to our house. . . was kindly received, though we knew we laid ourselves liable to a heavy penalty by harboring a fugitive slave.” Levi continued: “The dictates of humanity came in opposition to the law of the land, and we ignored the law.” He himself went to visit David Caldwell to plead that Ede be able to remain with her husband and family. He “used

all the earnestness and eloquence I was master of, quoting all the texts of Scripture bearing on the case. . .” Ede had told Levi she was willing to return to the Caldwell home to be with her family. David Caldwell consented not to penalize the Coffins and to allow Ede to remain at his home with her loved ones. (Coffin, L. pp. 23-28)

5 d. STORY OF BENJAMIN BENSON:

In 1817 there was a lengthy legal case in the Guilford County Supreme Court in which a black man named Benjamin Benson was kidnapped in Delaware and sold in Guilford County to a slaveholder. The court decided in his favor eventually, but the backlash from slaveholders sparked the idea of an organized method of helping enslaved people to escape to freedom. Quakers in the New Garden community and other anti-slavery neighbors partnered with local African Americans, both enslaved and free, to provide a significant base of support for fugitives escaping from slavery. Author Fergus Bordewich calls it our “country’s first racially integrated civil rights movement.”(Bordewich, p. 4)

5 e. FIRST PASSENGER - JOHN DIMREY IN 1819:

During the time of this trial in Guilford County there was “a free black man named John Dimery [who] became the first known fugitive to be spirited away from Guilford County to the free states.” He had been freed by his master elsewhere in North Carolina, and come to live with his wife in New Garden. In 1819 the old master died and 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.”(Coffin, A., pp. 20-21, *Life and Travels*)

Many runaways (fugitives) went in this direction, as many Quakers were available to help along the way. There were other routes as well.

5 f. LEVI AND VESTAL INTERVIEWING RUNAWAYS, WITH HELP OF SOL (or SAUL):

“. . . Sol would manage to bring the person, by night, to some rendezvous appointed, in the pine thickets or the depths of the woods, and there Vestal and I would meet them and have an interview. There was always a risk in holding these meetings, for the law in the South inflicted heavy penalties on any one who should aid or abet a fugitive slave in escaping, and the patrollers, or mounted officers, frequently passed along the road near our place of concealment.” (Coffin, L. p. 21)

6a. HENRY “BOX” BROWN:

Henry Brown, enslaved in Richmond, Virginia, convinced Samuel A. Smith to nail a box shut around him, wrap five hickory hoops around the box, and ship it to a member of the Vigilance Committee in Philadelphia. The box was 2 feet 8 inches wide, 2 feet deep and 3 feet long.

At 5 feet 10 inches and more than 200 pounds, Brown had very little space for movement. Even though the box was marked "This side up with care," he spent some of the time upside down. He could not shift his position because that might attract attention. Brown took only a little water to drink, or to splash on his face if he got too warm, and some biscuits. There were tiny holes

within the box so he could breathe. In all, the trip took 27 long hours. When the box finally arrived in the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery office, four people locked the door behind them, knocked on the box, and opened it up. Henry stood up and reached out to shake their hands. He was a free man!

Henry 'Box' Brown went on to speak all over the U.S. and Europe about his escape. Samuel A. Smith tried to help another slave escape in the same way, but Smith was caught and sent to prison in Richmond for more than seven years. (©2004-2017 National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, accessed 3/20/17)

6 b. ARCH & VINA CURRY:

Another inspiring story of an African American's highly significant contribution to the cause is that of Arch and his wife Vina Curry. Arch was a free black man and was required by law to carry manumission papers, or other proof of being free. Vina was a washerwoman at New Garden Boarding School. When Arch died his papers stayed with Vina. "She decided to loan these to male slaves bearing some resemblance to her late husband, so they could travel north safely. . ." Levi Coffin, through a courier, returned them to Vina when the slave was safe. "No one knows how many slaves won freedom on Arch Curry's papers."(Hilty, 76)

6 c. ELLEN & WILLIAM CRAFT:

This couple was married, but enslaved in Macon, Georgia by different masters. Because they were "favourite slaves," they were given passes to go on a trip at Christmastime. Ellen could "pass for white," and dressed as a man, while William posed as her slave. They traveled by train and were not discovered, making it all the way to Philadelphia, in spite of several close calls. Underground Railroad workers helped them there and they moved to Boston, where William was able to do the cabinetmaking that was his trade. Slave hunters came after them in 1850, but they managed to escape to England, where slavery had already been abolished. (SMITHSONIAN.COM, JUNE 16, 2010. Accessed 3/20/17)

7 a. HOW THE URR WORKED:

Many escaping on the URR followed the North star on clear nights. Nails in trees (probably driven in by Coffins), etc. helped mark the routes. Levi claimed he walked to Richmond, IN (500 miles each way) 3 times – (Hilty, p. 75) In 1826 Levi moved to IN and helped runaways on that end of the "railroad." He and his wife Catharine had a house there that you can visit now and see places where the runaways might have hid.

From the starting point in NC to the great turnpike in VA the URR was built, constructed, or marked, as we may call it, by driving nails in trees, fences, and stumps. Where there was a fork in the road there was a nail driven in a tree three and half feet from the ground halfway round from front to back, if the right hand road was to be taken the nail was driven on the right hand side, if the left was the road the nail was to the left. If there were fences and no tree, the nail was driven in the middle of the second rail from the top, over on the inside of the fence, to the right, or left as in the trees, if neither tree, nor fence was near then a stake, or a stone was so set as to be unseen by day, but found at night." He then described how the slaves would find the nails or stones in the dark.

The most important position on this road was the conductor whose duty was to keep the road marked, and when necessary change and re-locate as emergencies required; this required a good memory of locality and engineering ability. . . The secret of the way marks was known to few, even of the directors, this was absolutely necessary that none might be imperiled by chance treachery, but the conductors, who in many places, and in many cases took his life in his hands when he undertook the dangerous charge. . .

Under no circumstance was the secret of the way marks imparted to anyone except to those who were sent through, and this, the last thing done, and then under solemn promise not to divulge it to any living creature which was always kept. . . Nor did any one of the anti-slavery men ever solicit, or persuade slaves to leave their masters. . . [Also], the conductor being a Friend, no arrangement was made, or thought of for fighting, or defense in case of pursuit. Strategy, swiftness of foot, and adroit maneuvering was the means of safety. . .” (Coffin, A. pp. 123-128, Early Settlements)

The conductors showed how to make a raft of 4-6 fence rails tied together with rope, cord, or a vine. After using this to cross the body of water, the slaves would cut apart the rails and float them downstream. Thus they would avoid leaving evidence of people having crossed.” (Beal, p. 23)

7 b. FALSE BOTTOM WAGONS:

Sometimes when conductors were moving runaways from South to North, they used wagons that had “false bottoms” built into the floors of those wagons, where the runaways could hide. The wagons appeared to be loaded with cargo of some sort, but under the floor were spaces where people could hide. There is a wagon like this on display at the Mendenhall Homeplace in Jamestown, NC. [Mendenhall Homeplace Tour]

8 b. REFLECTIONS ON WHY PEOPLE RISKED WHAT THEY DID:

We can easily imagine why those who were enslaved were willing to take such risks, but

“. . . it is proper here to give a word of explanation why [white] men engaged in so dangerous business without pay, without honor, or any kind of reward from men. First, they felt a divine impulse in their hearts that it was right in the sight of God, and that was enough, beside they saw and fully realized that slavery was dragging the master and his children down to the level of the slave, faster than the slave was being lifted up to the level of the master. . . but there was still another motive, it was to keep alive and intensify the agitation of the subject of slavery, to compel the indifferent to think, for a thinking community nearly always gets to thinking right on any subject.” It was a “calm sweet joy with which they look for their reward in the life to come.”

“In 1891, before I had any thought of undertaking this work, the editor of the Guilford Collegian requested me to write a series of articles on this subject, which was done. . .” (Coffin, A. pp. 123-128, Early Settlements)

Bibliography & Further Reading

Primary sources vary in terms of availability and trustworthiness. Some of the richest sources, such as the Peck letters, do not provide any details on Underground Railroad activities but do lend insights into other anti-slavery activities, people, and institutions who played a role. Additional detective work brings other elements to life, such as slave deeds connected to Vestal Coffin, court records relating to individual Quakers who were investigated for educating African Americans, and other civil records that line up to verify tantalizing references to provide support for distant oral traditions. The four most directly utilized for this particular application are listed below. Addison Coffin and Levi Coffin both were directly involved with the Underground Railroad at the application location and wrote their reminiscences decades later. The Harriet Peck letters were written by her in 1837-1838 while she was living at New Garden (now Guilford College).

- Browning, Mary A., ed. "Harriet Peck at New Garden Boarding School, and her North Carolina Letters, 1837-1839." *The Southern Friend: Journal of the North Carolina Friends Historical Society*, XXVI (2004): 3-55.
- *Greensborough Patriot.* Published by Swaim and Sherwood, Greensboro, NC.

(The full original letters and typed transcripts also available as unpublished manuscript collection in the Quaker Archives, Guilford College, Greensboro, NC.)

- *Coffin, Addison. Early Settlements of Friends in North Carolina: Traditions and Reminiscences, 1894 (unpublished typescript, 1952). Friends Historical Collection, Guilford College, Greensboro, NC. Also published as "Early Settlements of Friends in North Carolina: Traditions and Reminiscences." The Southern Friend: The Journal of the North Carolina Friends Historical Society (1983).*
- Coffin, Addison. *Life & Travels of Addison Coffin: Written by Himself.* Cleveland, OH: William G. Hubbard, 1897.
- Coffin, Levi. *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad; Being A Brief History of the Labors of a Lifetime in Behalf of the Slave, With the Stories of Numerous Fugitives, Who Gained their Freedom through his Instrumentality, and many other Incidents.* Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Co., 1880.

Site specific information was gathered directly from prior research specific to Guilford College's history and landscape.

- Rogers, Abbie. "The Guilford College Woods." Greensboro, NC: Friends Historical Collection brochure. Originally printed 2009 with revised edition 2014.
- Greensboro Heritage Community Application for New Garden/Guilford College Community, 2016. (http://www.greensboro-nc.gov/modules/showdocument.aspx?documentid=31464, last accessed January 15, 2017)
- National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) Application for Guilford College, 1990.

- McCracken, R.J. and R.B. Daniels and W.E. Fulcher, “Undisturbed Soils, Landscapes, and Vegetation in a North Carolina Piedmont Virgin Forest.” *Soil Sci. Soc. Am. J.* 53: 1989, 1146.

Numerous local newspaper stories and magazine stories have been published over the years. A selected list is below, including the earliest one on record from the local newspaper which provides some strong anecdotal information acquired directly from from oral tradition sources in the 1930s.

- Hoskins, Katherine. “How the Underground Railway Originated: This famous system of liberating slaves and conveying them safely to the free West was inaugurated at old New Garden by Vestal Coffin and carried on by other members of the Coffin family - its work completed, the organization disbanded at conclusion of Civil War.” Greensboro, NC: *Daily News*. Aug. 7, 1932, 6B.
- Perlmutt, David. “On a Mission: Getting City’s Black History on Record.” Charlotte, NC: *Charlotte Observer*. Oct. 23, 1995, C1.
- Schlosser, Jim. “City honors escape route from slavery.” Greensboro, NC: *News & Record*. Sept. 26, 1994, A1-2.

Several secondary sources are especially well researched and written with a focus that includes extensive discussion of the New Garden Quaker community, the Coffin family, and the woods which are now part of Guilford College.

- Beal, M. Gertrude. “The Underground Railroad in Guilford County.” *The Southern Friend: Journal of the North Carolina Friends Historical Society,* II:1 (1980): 18-29.
- Bordewich, Fergus. *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2005.
- Hilty, Hiram. *By Land and By Sea: Quakers Confront Slavery and Its Aftermath in North Carolina.* Greensboro, NC: Hiram H. Hilty, 1993.
- Sieber, H. A. *Drinking Gourds of Guilford: A Story of Change, 1771-2005*. Greensboro, NC: Tudor Publisher, 2005.

Additional secondary sources are useful for grounding this in the wider Quaker abolitionist context, though not focusing specifically upon the Underground Railroad or North Carolina Friends.

- Carey, Brycchan and Geoffrey Plank, ed. *Quakers & Abolition.* Urbana, Chicago and Springfield, IL: Board of Trustees, University of Illinois, 2014.
- Jordan, Ryan. *Slavery and the Meetinghouse: The Quakers and the Abolitionist Dilemma, 1820-1865*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 2007.

The Underground Railroad Tour

Stop 1: Welcome & Acknowledgement

Guiding Questions
Who am I telling this story?
Who is here with us?
How do I like to feel welcome into a space?
What is the invitation to care for yourself when hearing hard/traumatic/historic stories?

Preparation for the Tour/Moment of Silence

Introduce yourself

Welcome to this sacred space where we tell the history of this land, and the people who have used it as a refuge over the centuries. These are real stories that tell about the resilience, creativity, and courage of freedom seekers and also the suffering and atrocities that enslaved people faced under the system of slavery from which they were fleeing. We invite you take care of yourselves as you need. These stories might bring up emotions for you, we invite you to be present to them.

As we begin, we invite you to take a moment of silence in the Quaker tradition to center ourselves in this space before we get started.

Moment of Silence

Land Acknowledgement

Guilford College — as all institutes of higher education in the United States — sits on Native land. In our case, it is land previously cared for and claimed, at various times, by the Keyauwee, Saura, and Saponi Peoples, some of whom such as the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, maintain a strong presence in the area, caring for it still. While Guilford College as an institution has not done all it could to respect and maintain its relationships with Native People, it is important to acknowledge these Peoples' survivance, and their care for the land in the past and the present and the future.

Doing so in a syllabus is an early and critical step in a larger process of relationship-building. Guilford has undertaken that work deliberately, working both to build and nurture relationships with the region's Indigenous People in ways that respect their claims to sovereignty, as well as ensuring that as a campus community we are as supportive of Native Students as we can be.

Guilford Woods History

Known as the New Garden Woods in the 1800s, this is felt as a sacred place. Located within the historically Quaker New Garden/Guilford College community it encompasses old growth forest and at least one champion tree standing as a silent witness to Underground Railroad Activities.

Trail to the champion tree is 0.3 mile one-way. It includes uneven surfaces with an accessible viewing platform and seating at the end.

These woods remain a relatively stable landscape. Abolitionist Levi Coffin grew up north of the site and references these woods between his home and his New Garden Quaker Meeting as a place of refuge. The case of **John Dimery**'s escape and quick movement to Indiana in 1819 is the earliest documented instance of Underground Railroad activity. **Levi and Vestal Coffin** were known leaders assisting freedom seekers going to Indiana from 1819 to 1826.

The legacy of justice continued with documented anti-slavery activists serving on the initial staff of New Garden Boarding School when it opened in 1837 (t**he Story of Arch & Vina Curry**). A runaway notice in the Juanry 4, 1842 Greensborough Patriot specifically references the New Garden community. Even if the school was not institutionally involved, the land served as a crossroad to freedom–the Southern Terminus for those slipping away north to Indiana.

The historical significance of the woods as a place of refuge has been passed down through the years and they have been intentionally protected for the past twenty-five years. They are located near–but not on–several main local roadways of the early nineteenth century and, not inconsequentially, directly between New Garden Friends Meeting and the Coffin family farm along a southern branch of Horse Pen Creek. Portions of these woods remained unploughed and wooded through the eighteenth and nineteenth century, so there was plenty of cover created by trees and the terrain in less developed areas.

Quick facts:

- 240-acre oasis of biodiversity
- Land of Saura and Keyawee peoples, settled by European American Friends (Quakers) in the 1700s
- Site of enacampent of British and Americna troops in the Revolutionary War
- Refuge for enslaved people seeking freedom via the Underground Railroad and Quaker men escaping the Civil War Confederate draft in the 1800s
- Site of former College farm
- Educational and recreational resource

Stop 2: At the Bench, Context Setting of the Underground Railroad

Guiding Questions:
What language do we use when we tell this history and why?
What is the historical/economic/political context that the Underground Railroad arose from?
Was the URR actual railroad? Why do we use this language?
Why would you need something like this?
What do we know about enslaved people and the system of chattel slavery?

Define Chattel Slavery

Define slavery and note its effects - The historical term for human beings held in bondage and forced to perform labor or services against their will under threat of physical mistreatment or death.

- There were tens of millions of kidnapped Africans transported to the Americas, and held in bondage from the sixteenth century through the American Civil War. [Network to Freedom website; the NTF is a program of the National Park Service focused on the Underground Railroad.] The preferred term to use now when we talk about people suffering under slavery is “enslaved,” to indicate that it was a condition imposed on them, rather than an inward condition of being inferior.
- It is important to note that enslavers were looking for particular skills, such as agricultural expertise, in the people they kidnapped in Africa.
- Those enslaved were forced to work without pay, severely mistreated and separated from their families at the whims of their enslavers. Living conditions were so bad that many were willing to risk everything for freedom.

The term “Underground Railroad” was likely coined by an enslaver who said people were “disappearing, almost as if on an Underground Railroad.” In the early 1800s, the railroad was big business. It was a driving force allowing westward expansion and shuttled plantation made goods to the west and north.

Where in the US?

Define location of slavery in U.S. - most who were enslaved were living below the Mason-Dixon Line in the U.S. This was originally the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania in the United States. In the pre-Civil War period it was regarded, together with the Ohio River, as the dividing line between slave states south of it and free-soil states north of it. The term Mason and Dixon Line was first used in congressional debates leading to the Missouri Compromise (1820). Today the Mason and Dixon Line still serves figuratively as the political and social dividing line between the North and the South, although it does not extend west of the Ohio River. [Brittanica.com, 10/1/2015, accessed 3/20/17]]

Stop 3: At the First River Crossing, How did the Underground Railroad Work?

Guiding Questions:
What do we know about how folks navigated the journey?
Who was chosen as a traveler? How and why?
What did this journey look like?
How did folks navigate, survive, evade capture?
What tools/strengths/wisdom of the wilderness did freedom seekers bring and need to navigate this path to freedom?

Ethnobotany, Freedom Seeker Skills, Ecologies of Resistance

Uncomplicated historical narratives centering the abolitionist heroics of “kindly Quakers” have, until recently, “Written African American agency out of one of the central episodes of their historical being,”

The Underground Railroad Ethnobotany project is a parallel public intervention, on that similarly seeks to challenge the “images of shivering, frightened fugitive slaves,” in this instance, through the multi-stranded legacy of ecologies of antislavery resistance and the associated botanical agency asserted by freedom seekers, gained throught collective experience and struggle within the greater African diasporic community in the Americas. To begin, however, it should be said that this is not to suggest that freedom seekers were never frightened, nor does their deep knowledge and understanding of wild plants and animals suggest they never felt the pangs of hunger.

A deep knowledge of gastronomic and medicinal properties of plants (combined with hunting, trapping, and fishing skills) consituted a major instrument of survival and resistance (“survivance,” to borrow Gerald Vizenor’s phrase) for freedom seekers traversing the natural ecosystems along routes of the Underground Railroad. This knowledge was accumulated over two hundred years of adapting the fora and fauna of the Americas to the ethnobotanical systems of African-descended peoples.

Secret by Nature

This network had to be secret to work. The accounts we have were written, mostly by Quakers, 30 years after the end of the operational days of the URR.

Being “underground,” or highly secret, meant that all involved in the activities could not risk sharing what they were doing except with those people with whom they were directly working. Amazingly, there were no “leaks” in the system, according to Addison Coffin, son of Vestal Coffin. But years later stories by Levi and Addison Coffin were written about what had transpired.

Navigating the road to Freedom

Addison Coffin tells us in his book, *Early Settlements*, how folks navigated along the road to freedom. “From the starting point in NC to the great turnpike in VA the URR was built, constructed, or marked, as we may call it, by driving nails in trees, fences, and stumps. Where there was a fork in the road there was a nail driven in a tree three and a half feet from the

ground half way round from front to back, if the right hand road to be taken the nail was driven on the right hand side, if the left was the road the nail was on the left. If there were fences and no tree, the nail was driven in the middle of the second rail from the top, over on the side of the fence, to the right, or left as in the trees, if neither tree, nor fence was near then a stake, or a stone was so set as to be unseen by day, but found at night." He then describes how the freedom seekers would find the nails or stone in the dark.

"The most important position on this road was the conductor whose duty was to keep the road marked and when necessary change and re-locate as emergencies required; this required a good memory of locality and engineering ability…The secret of the way marks was known to few, even of the directors, this was absolutely necessary that none might be imperiled by chance treachery, but the conductors, who in many places, and in many cases took his life in his hands when he undertook the dangerous charge…

Under no circumstance was the secret of the way marks imparted to anyone except to those who were sent through, and this, the last thing done, and then under solemn promise not ot divulge it to any living creature which was always kept…Nor did any one of the anti-slavery men ever solicit, or persuade slaves to leave their masters…[Also], the conductor being a Friend, no arrangement was made, or thought of for fighting, or defense in case of pursuit. Strategy, swiftness of foot, and adroit maneuvering was the means of safety…" (from *Early Settlements* by Addison Coffin, 1894).

"The conductors showed how to make a raft of 4-6 fence rails tied together with rope, cord, or a vine. After using this to cross the body of water, the slaves would cut apart the rails and float them downstream. Thus they would avoid leaving evidence of people having crossed." (citation?)

"Slaves walked from station to station at night and when necessary hid in cornfields, forests and friendly homes to avoid being captured by owners or patrols. According to [Addison] Coffin, the system continued from 1830-1860 [most active years here were 1819-1852, with Levi leaving for Indiana in 1826 and Vestal dying the same year] without anyone finding out about the secret system." (from "The Underground Railroad in Guilford County" by M. Gertrude Beal, 1980).

Sometimes when conductors were moving freedom seekers from South to North, they used wagons that had "false bottoms" built into the floors of those wagons, where freedom seekers could hide. The wagons appeared to be loaded with cargo of some sort, but under the floor were spaces where people could hide. There is a wagon like this on display at the Mendenhall Homeplace in Jamestown, NC.

Spirituals & Songs

During the time of the Underground Railroad, spirituals were coded with hidden messages about maps, navigational strategies and timing for enslaved people escaping to freedom in the Northern states and Canada. Some songs gave directions about when, where, and how to escape while others warned of danger along the way. Harriet Tubman, known by many as "Moses," famously used music to communicate with travelers. Because there is no written proof of the these songs or their secret codes, some scholars are skeptical of their origins. But many

others accept them as part of the rich oral tradition of African American folk songs that continue to influence American music today.

Examples songs:

- Go Down Moses
- Follow the Drinking Gourd (navigate using the stars)
- Wade in the Water (follow the river/wade in the water to remove your scent if dogs are chasing you)
- Deep River
- Steal Away
- Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Stop 4: At the Second River Crossing, The Quaker and Black Abolitionist Origins of the Underground Railroad

Guiding Questions:
Who are Quakers? What do they believe?
What was the role of the Religious Society of Friends in Abolition?
Whose narratives & stories do we have, and whose are missing? Why?
Who was Levi Coffin, and how did he come to this work?

Quakers and Abolition in North Carolina

Quakers believed strongly in the presence of the Light of God in every person; with this understanding, slavery was abhorrent. However, the Yearly Meeting in North Carolina in the 1840s was opposed to the URR. They did try different strategies to help, such as the Manumission Society, then laws would erect a barrier. Sometimes they even purchased the enslaved person to protect them from slave catchers (these folks became known as “Quaker Free Negroes”).

In 1808, North Carolina Yearly Meeting (the statewide organization of Quakers) became a legal institutional owner of enslaved personson as a creative means of removing individual members from the taint of ownership and as a method of protecting enslaved people from being re-enslaved and/or relocated further South as legal means of manumission and freedom became increasingly difficult. Many of the African Americans legally owned by North Carolina Yearly Meeting traveled on convoys accompanied by Quakers as a part of an “overground railroad,” following the same routes often used by others seeking freedom along the route from New Garden, NC to the Northwest. The best documented route, known as the Kanawha Route, was popular with Quakers and others legally relocating from South to North as well as those seeking assistance at New Garden and illegally escaping to freedom. This route of approximately 500 miles matches many of the locations described by Levi and Addison Coffin.

Benjamin Benson

In 1817 there was a lengthy legal case in the Guilford County Supreme Court in which a Black man named Benjamin Benson was kidnapped in Delaware and sold in Guilford County to an enslaver. The Court decided in his favor eventually, but the backlash from enslavers sparked the idea of an organized method of helping enslaved people escape to freedom. The journey of John Dimery of New Garden in 1819 is the earliest one clearly documented and tied to New Garden as apart of what we now know as the Underground Railroad. Local Quaker Vestal Coffin was a leader in this work and collaborated with his cousin, Levi, who much later gained the popular designation as “President of the Underground Railroad.” Members of the Coffin family who lived in the New Garden community were actively assisting fugitives (both enslaved and free Black folks) to gain freedom. Quakers in the New Garden community and other anti-slavery neighbors partnered with local African Americans, both enslaved and free, to provide a significant base of support for freedom seekers. Author Fergus Bordewich calls it our “country’s first racially integrated civil rights movement.”

Stop 5: At the Tree, The Tree as an Alternative Symbol/Monument for Coalition Building

Guiding Questions:
Why do we call the tree a “Silent Witness”?
What does it mean to risk all to follow a leading?
What are the other stories we need to know to understand a fuller picture of this history?
How is this story a part of our justice work today? What can we learn?

Racial Justice Civil Rights Movements

The Underground Railroad represents one of the earliest grassroots movements in the United States in which people united across racial, gender, religious, and class lines in hopes of promoting social change. While allies assisted in journeys to freedom, those who sought freedom are at the center of this story, because there is no Underground Railroad without freedom seekers.

Query #38 from Britain Faith & Practice

“If pressure is brought upon you to lower your standard of integrity, are you prepared to resist it? Our responsibilities to God and our neighbour may involve us in taking unpopular stands. Do not let the desire to be sociable, or the fear of seeming peculiar, determine your decisions.”

Ethnobotany Guide

What does Ethno-Botany mean?
Ethnology- “the study of the characteristics of various peoples and the differences and relationships between them.” Botany- “the scientific study of plants…” **Ethnobotany refers to the scientific study of traditional cultural knowledge about, and uses of, plants.**

“Gone are the century-old definitions of the Underground Railroad dominated by images of shivering, frightened fugitive slaves. Fading away are the biased images of solitary men, criminalized for escaping slavery, usually on foot, and aided by sympathetic White abolitionists working within a loosely organized network dominated by kindly Quakers.”
–Cheryl Janifer LaRoche

“The old people could read the woods just like a book.”
-Formerly enslaved person from Maryland, in The American Slave: A Complete Autobiography, Vol. 16, George Rawick

The Underground Railroad Ethnobotany* Project (URREP) is an effort to study and interpret the relationship between freedom-seekers and the plants they likely would have encountered in the Guilford College Woods. Evidence of the plant knowledge of enslaved peoples is abundant. Archaeological investigations of former slave quarters and maroon settlements provide a valuable window into the agency and knowledge of both the enslaved and their self-liberated counterparts. The material remains of abundant wild plant species in slave quarters, for example, indicate interactions that extended beyond often meager plantation food rationing systems. Oral testimony from formerly enslaved persons collected by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s is another valuable source of information on the extent of ethnobotanical knowledge.

In their common passage through these woods, freedom-seekers would have enlisted familiar plant allies for food, for medicine, and for poisons. URREP maps these relationships onto the plant communities that find home in the Guilford Woods.

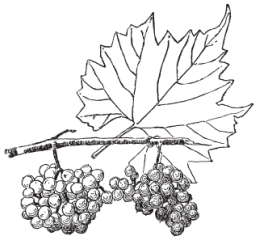
A deep knowledge of culinary and medicinal properties of plants (combined with hunting, trapping, and fishing skills) constituted a major means of survival and resistance for freedom seekers traveling the routes of the Underground Railroad. This knowledge was accumulated over two hundred years of adapting the plants of the Americas to the ethnobotanical systems of African-descended peoples.

Several genera of plants are common to both Africa and North America, resulting in an ease of identification on both continents. Through the Columbian Exchange, initiated a century before the Transatlantic Slave Trade, peoples of West Africa would also have been familiar with many New World crops and “weed” species from direct interaction and experience.

What are the common plants freedom seekers and enslaved Africans would have utilized that are present here today?

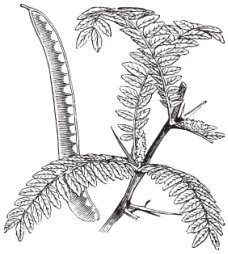
Common plants to point out along the trail-Many plants also have medicinal purposes, and freedom seekers had extensive knowledge of these natural remedies. Much of this knowledge was passed along from Native Americans who formed relationships with enslaved africans on plantations or in maroon communities. Enslaved Africans also brought extensive ethnobotanical knowledge from their native African lands, much of which translated well into the flora of the southern regions.

Muscadine / Wild Grapes



Muscadine grapes have been cultivated for over 400 years and were a staple in the diets of Native Americans for thousands of years. Archaeological evidence shows they were used in rituals, as well as for making dyes, jams, juice, and preserved foods. Medicinally, Muscadine leaves were brewed into tea for various health issues, including post-childbirth recovery and digestive ailments. Muscadines were also grown on plantations, tended by enslaved people, who sometimes traded them as part of their diets. Due to their abundance, these grapes became essential for freedom seekers, providing sustenance when they were in hiding or lost.

Honey Locust



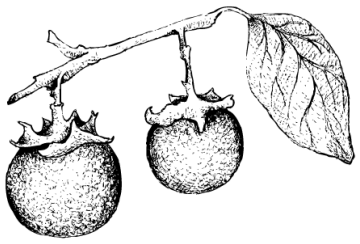
Enslaved people used the seeds of the honey locust tree to brew coffee-like beverages and used the pods as a sweetener. They also brewed honey locust and persimmons together in water to make a beverage that they carried with them to the fields. With their own discoveries and the knowledge passed on to them by Indigenous people, enslaved people had some level of autonomy by instituting cultural practices that included plant use.

Hickory and Pecan (Carya spp). (pignut hickory and shagbark hickory)

Carya is a genus of trees including hickory and pecan trees. This genus contains some of the most important plants for the lives of both Native Americans and enslaved people are notable for their incredibly nutritious nuts as well as their incredibly tough wood which made them useful plants for Native Americans and enslaved people. Some examples include Carya Illinoinensis or the pecan, Carya glabra or the pignut hickory, and Carya ovata or the shagbark hickory. They are related to walnuts and as both are part of the Juglandaceae family.
The nuts from this genus are an excellent source of nutrition due to their high content of fat and protein in a single nut.

Berries including Blackberries, gooseberries, serviceberries

American Persimmon (Diospyros virginiana)



The word persimmon comes from the Powhatan language and it translates to “a dry fruit.” The scientific name for persimmon is Diospyros virginiana which translates to “divine fruit” or “fruit of the gods.” Its common name is the American or common persimmon, it is also known as the American date plum.

Enslaved people and freedom seekers boiled the bark from persimmon trees and used it to treat fever and diarrhea. Enslaved people and freedom seekers used the fruit from persimmon trees to make vinegar, jelly, tea, syrup, and bread stuffing. They also made beer from persimmons. To make this beer the enslaved people would add persimmons in a keg to ferment with water, sweet potato peels, and pieces of cornbread.