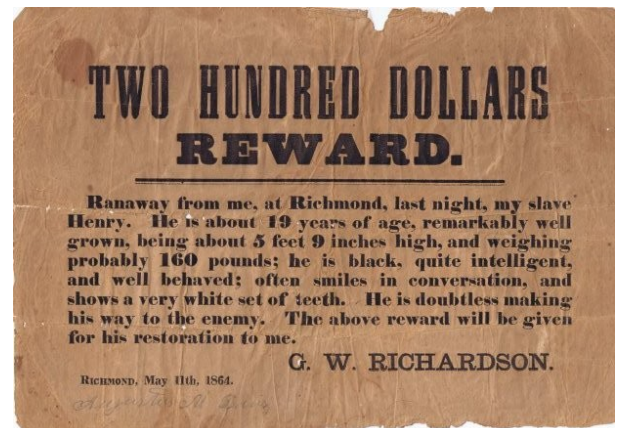


December 11, 2020

## Researching the Underground Railroad

Although slavery was abolished in Massachusetts in 1789, it was still legal in many other states until the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Fugitive Slave laws of 1793 and 1850 made capturing and returning enslaved people a lucrative business.

Those who made it to free states, like Massachusetts, lived under the shadow of national laws that favored those who had enslaved them. Free Blacks had worked since the 1700s to end slavery. They provided aid and protection to fugitives. Their work was the precursor to what we know of as the Underground Railroad.



ACHC #1970.046.1

It's important to remember that the Underground Railroad was an illegal activity that carried the risk of heavy fines and imprisonment for those who were actively transporting and protecting fugitives. Because of this, evidence of stops along the Underground Railroad and of those who helped people to freedom most often comes from oral histories, letters, and narratives of formerly enslaved people and Abolitionists.

### Professor Wilbur H. Siebert, Ohio State University

Between 1892 and 1898, Professor Wilbur H. Siebert of Ohio State University undertook a study of anti-slavery and the Underground Railroad. Between 1895 and 1897, Siebert lived in Massachusetts, where he gathered information about the New England states. He published the article, *Andover, Old and New*, in the Boston Evening Transcript in May 1896.

Siebert published his first book, *The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom*, in 1898. It was a comprehensive study and report that included activity in many states, including Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. His research into Congressional reports and other documents was supplemented by oral histories and reminiscences.



In Chapter 1, Siebert described the challenges of researching what was an illegal and clandestine activity. *"It is not surprising in view of the unlawful nature of the Underground Railroad service, that extremely little in this way of contemporaneous documents has descended to us."* He included stories about then-known accounts and ledger books that were destroyed after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850.

In the 1890s, when Siebert was gathering histories, given the age of those who would have participated directly in the Underground Railroad, Siebert wrote,

*"It may be said that a large part of the materials for this history were drawn from written and oral accounts obtained at a much later date; and that these materials, even though the honesty and fidelity of the narrators be granted, are worthy of little credit for historical purposes."*

When he could, he gave credit to finding the same story occurring from *"sometimes widely separated witnesses."*

**Historians have long debated the value of oral histories and reminiscences.**

A National Park Service toolkit for researching the Underground Railroad quoted historian Donald Richie:

*"oral history is as reliable or unreliable as other research sources. No single piece of data of any sort should be trusted completely, and all sources need to be tested against other evidence. The task of the modern historian of the Underground Railroad is not to toss these sources aside, but to document them with other historical evidence and evaluate their usefulness and credibility on a case-by-case basis."*

**Let's take a look at the Andover histories collected for Professor Siebert's book**

Professor Siebert's study of New England was published in 1936 by the Worcester-based American Antiquarian Society. The study included Andover and Frye Village stories.

For the most part, those stories were gathered and recorded by Miss Marion La Mere. Marion La Mere's letters and reports to Professor Siebert are among his papers available online at Ohio State University. Marion was paid for her research by Ohio State University. In a letter dated March 25, 1935, she discussed submitting her bill and documents related to photographic development services.



### Miss Marion La Mere

Miss Marion La Mere was born in North Andover, Mass., in 1888, the daughter of William and Mary LaMere. She was the eldest of their six children. In the 1910 census, she was living at home and working as a sales clerk in a department store. In the 1920 census, Marion was living with her mother and siblings in Lawrence working as a bookkeeper with a woolen mill. Marion is not listed in the 1930 census, however she is listed in the 1935 and 1937 Andover street directories. No occupation was listed in 1934, however, in 1937, she is identified as a “writer.” In the 1940 census, she was living as a lodger at 8 Chestnut Street identified as a writer working for the W.P.A. In 1943, she appears in the Boston street directory as working as a writer for the Massachusetts W.P.A. Writers Project. By the mid-1940s, Marion was working in Boston as a stenographer.

In the mid-1930s, Marion worked at Memorial Hall Library. The earliest of her letters and reports to Professor Siebert are dated November 25, 1934. *“As you state that you are most desirous to know the route taken by the fugitive slaves through Andover to the North...”* She listed among her sources, *“The Pioneer Preacher,”* an autobiography of Rev. Sherlock Bristol, *“an Andover ‘theolog’ who was ‘was dismissed from his studies’ along with 60 of his classmates, in 1834 and 1835, for anti-slavery sentiments..,”* saying the book will give Professor Siebert *“a snappy picture”* of Andover. She also listed volumes 1 and 3 of the 4 volume biography of William Lloyd Garrison written by his sons. *“...indexed under Andover and Rev. Ralph Emerson – you’ll get Andover Sem, in a nutshell.”* She went on, *“I may have much here that is of no value to you. Please advise me...”*

Given the Andover’s history in the anti-slavery movement, she told Professor Siebert, *“Such a pity that you hadn’t heard of Andover when you wrote your first book...Now I gather chiefly what ‘grandmother told Aunt Sarah, etc.; and don’t rely on that. The facts I set down are documented...”* She noted that the library at Phillips Academy had a *“battered copy of your first”* book.

Her research for Professor Siebert was conducted in her hours off from Memorial Hall Library. She ended her first letter with this postscript, *“Please address me at Library – nose y landlady trouble.”*

Also dated November 25, 1934 is the six page story of Andover in the Underground Railroad that is so often quoted. In her report, she notes histories taken from family members. For example Miss Belle Butterfield, the granddaughter of William Jenkins, was described as the authority for the Jenkins family story.



Reverend Ralph Emerson's connections with the Underground Railroad came from a his biography that was found in the library of the Andover-Newton Theological Seminary. On page 17, Marion noted, "Reminiscences of Andover" written by Susan E. Jackson, mentioned his home as a stop. *"Miss Frost, P.A. library head...also vouches for statement re slaves."*

Here she also included a history from the Reverend William C. Poor, the son of Joseph W. Poor. This is the source of the story about his grandfather's role in the Underground Railroad, Rev. Poor described "a quiet sound outside the house or some kind of knock, and we knew that father got up quickly, went down and harnessed Nellie into the covered wagon and drove away. He was always be back for breakfast as usual. Asked how far Grandpa went on his drive the reply was 'just over the line into New Hampshire.'"

Rev. Poor listed William C. Donald and Elijah Hussey, who was *"older than by grand-father, and he was equally secretive with his friends the two Williams."* Marion reported that the 94 year-old Mrs. Mary Hussey, the daughter-in-law of Elijah *"remembers nothing of slave transportation, but does recall frequent visits at the Hussey home"* by Sojourner Truth.

In Professor Siebert's papers in the Ohio State University archives are letters and reports Marion sent to him. In the online catalog of his papers, between January and April 1935, Marion sent letters and reports on 13 different days. In addition to her first letter November 25, 1934, she sent reports on January 15 and 25; March 8, 15, 22, 26, and 29; April 2, 4, 11, 24, 26.

Some are long histories; others are quick notes to pass on a juicy bit of information. From April 4, 1935, *"This is at the risk of boring you, but I don't want to miss a crumb of information before publication."* Siebert's book was published in 1936, so it appears she was on deadline.

Marion conducted research in published local histories and biographies. She gathered stories from grandchildren of those reported to be part of the Underground Railroad from Amesbury, Andover, Lawrence, Marblehead, Newburyport, North Andover, Reading, and Stoneham, along with Salem and Windham NH. She repeatedly asked *"What about Lowell??"*

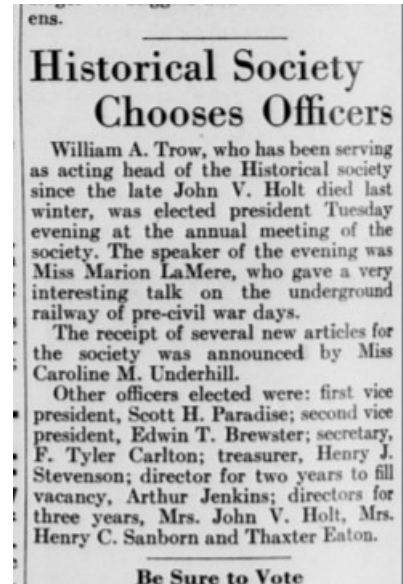
Over the months they worked together, they got to know each other, *"Thank you. Mother is improved and if all goes well she will be in a wheel chair in another week. Her foot had to be amputated. She is keenly interested in this quest, and won't be hurt if I take my day off and visit Lowell instead of Boston."*



Marion clearly enjoyed her researching and gathering histories. At the close of her January 25 letter, Marion wrote, *"This is great fun – Sincerely, Marion La Mere"*

On October 27, 1936, Marion La Mere was the featured speaker at the annual meeting of the Andover Historical Society.

It's after she completed her work for Professor Siebert in 1936 that Marion listed herself as a writer in street directories and the census.



### **W.P.A. Federal Writer's Project**

Recall that Marion is listed in the 1940 census as a W.P.A. writer, and appears in the 1943 Boston street directory (with a permanent Lawrence residence noted) as working for the Massachusetts W.P.A. Writers' Project

It's possible that Professor Siebert found Marion La Mere through the W.P.A. Federal Writers' Project, however, if she was employed by the Town to work at Memorial Hall Library and was receiving payments from Ohio State University, how likely is it that she was also working directly for the government through the W.P.A.?

From the Library of Congress website:

The WPA included a provision for unemployed artists and writers: the Federal Arts Projects. If they were poor enough to qualify, musicians, actors, directors, painters and writers could work directly for the government. The New Deal arts projects made a lasting impact on American cultural life and none contributed more than the Federal Writers' Project. At its peak, the Writers' Project employed about 6,500 men and women around the country, paying them a subsistence wage of about \$20 a week.





The Writers' Project provided jobs for a diverse assortment of unemployed white-collar workers including beginning and experienced writers--those who had always been poor and the newly down and out.

The W.P.A. officially closed operations in 1943, so it's possible that Marion worked in the Boston office of the Massachusetts W.P.A. Federal Writers' Project.

## Conclusions

Heeding the advice of the National Park Service, oral or written histories and reminiscences and local historical legends have value. It's important to "document them with other historical evidence and evaluate their usefulness and credibility on a case-by-case basis."

Legends – whether local historical or grand sweeping tales – highlight human values. In the case of local history, legends help people define part of their community and their values. Andover's role in anti-slavery and abolitionism is a valued part of the town's history. It's not surprising that histories and reminiscences of Andover residents' role in the Underground Railroad are also valued even though that role cannot be fully documented.

There's value in the search for documented history. It's easy to imagine Marion La Mere's excitement as she gathered histories for Professor Siebert. He had many people working for him, seeking out and gathering histories. He continued his research and continued gathering histories long after the 1936 publication.

And there's value in the curiosity that drives historical research and inquiry.

## LINKS & SOURCES

The National Park Service's online guide to *Researching and Interpreting the Underground Railroad* is a great source for historical background, research approaches, and resources.

[https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/ugrr/exugrr1.htm#intro](https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/ugrr/exugrr1.htm#intro)

Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground railroad from slavery to freedom*, 1898

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000562938>

Professor Wilbur H. Siebert, *Underground Railroad in Massachusetts*, 1936

<https://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44806916.pdf>



Professor Siebert's papers and collection of letters, publications, and memoirs can be read online in the Ohio History Connection.

<https://www.ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/siebert>

Marion La Mere's letters to Professor Siebert are included in his papers.

<https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/siebert/search/searchterm/la%20mere,%20marion/field/creato/mode/exact/conn/and/order/title/ad/asc>

The *Treasurers Accounts of the Boston Vigilance Committee to Assist Fugitive Slaves* can be found here.

<http://www.primaryresearch.org/bh/show.php?dir=vcaccountbooks&file=2>

For background on the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) and perspective on Marion La Mere's work.

American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-writers-project/articles-and-essays/introduction/>

List of Massachusetts WPA Writer's Project publications.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.li2zyx&view=2up&seq=6&size=125>