

Underground Railroad Research Group Report to the Providence Friends Meeting Community

On June 10, 2018, the Providence Research Group, comprised of six members of the Meeting community, shared the results of research done about the Underground Railroad (UGRR) and [Providence Meeting](#) in the summer of 2017. The research came about as the community renovated our childcare room, which was originally a school house.



In the late 1700s, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting encouraged the building of schools in Chester Quarter. In 1809, Providence Meeting built their own school house behind the original log cabin meetinghouse, which at that time was located on the front lawn closer to the Great Providence Road. The school house had something special though, a stone-enclosed room roughly seven feet by seven feet under a hatch in the floor in the corner of the building. The room had ventilation through two air channels opening to the outside. Providence Meeting tradition has long shared that the room was used to hide runaway slaves. High school students had been taken on tours and the ventilation systems used

for science lessons.

The presentation was led by [Sam Lemon, Ed.D.](#) , [Amy Betts](#) and [Ken Park](#), all long-time Providence Meeting members. Sam has authored two books, [Go Stand Upon the Rock](#) and [The Case That Shocked The Country](#). A copy of the PowerPoint presentation will be available in the meetinghouse library. A final report will be available on the Providence Meeting website in the near future. The report will also be archived at the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College.

The presentation began with the reading of the following statement to those present by Ruth Leach, Co-Clerk and a member of the research group.

We, the members of this Quaker research group, all members of the Providence Friends Meeting community, acknowledge not all Friends may agree with our research methods or findings. This was a most unusual endeavor for us, but Friends should know we earnestly approached this weighty task as a spiritual leading, an article and expression of our Faith, and in keeping with the teachings and principles of George Fox and august Quakers such as Rufus Jones. We were led by the Inward Light, and to that Light, we have been utmost responsive and faithful. Believing that Divine enlightenment is ongoing, we affirm the principles of George Fox that worship is experimental and experiential, and that the Spirit giveth life.

Ruth then asked Friends to worshipfully consider the following queries:

1. Do you pray? If so, to whom or to what do you pray, and why?
2. Do you consider God, or the entity you pray to, a supernatural power or being? If so, why?
3. Are your prayers intended to communicate with God, or the Divine, or the Universe, or some Higher Power, and to ask God – or that Higher Power – to intervene in your life? If so, why?
4. Do you believe in angels or other supernatural beings mentioned in the Holy Bible? If so, why?
5. Do you believe in an afterlife? If so, why?
6. Do you believe that Providence Meeting, other houses of worship, cemeteries, or religious shrines are spiritual places? If so, why and in what ways?
7. Knowing that the Holy Bible and other religious texts may have been divinely inspired, but not divinely written, what empirical evidence do you have for the existence of God, angels, or other supernatural beings? If you have no empirical evidence, what is the basis for your belief in such things?



Entrance to Hiding Space



Northeast Corner of Hiding Space

The report utilized a slide presentation developed by Sam Lemon and Amy Betts. Sam had done extensive research about the UGRR in the Media area and his maternal ancestors, who were former runaway slaves, for his first book, *Go Stand Upon the Rock*.

With his historical reference as a back drop, Sam shared a map of the hiding space and pictures of the space showing the ventilation shafts and the four corners. He then explained how he became involved after a conversation with Amy Betts and Ken Park. Ken has been a member of the Graveyard Committee for years. There is a large oval space in the graveyard outside the kitchen door. While all the other grave stones are evenly lined up in horizontal rows and marked, this space has no listed burial plots on the graveyard map. (There are still lots available to Meeting members in the graveyard, but this land is left free.) Over the years, the open space has become dear to current Meeting members and has often offered Friends a peaceful and silent site for Easter sunrise meetings. But why no graves? As renovation of our school house began, there was more energy to this question for Ken, who was



Clearing in Graveyard

coordinating the renovation with Bill Belanger. On June 16th, 2017, Ken asked Amy Betts to join him in the graveyard on that spot to use her spiritual gifts. Within seconds Amy felt the presence of former slaves reaching out and asking for help to make their stories known. Amy and Ken then contacted Sam. This began an experience that changed the members of the research group for life.

George Fox and Rufus Jones speak of the continuing experience and experimental revelation of one's relationship with God. Being open to this important tenet of Quakerism allowed the Spirit to assemble the group as members were led to it.

Sam continued his presentation by explaining the struggle of reaching clarity in the proper way to establish a relationship with the souls of those who were being shared with us, since there are no advices in [Faith and Practice](#) or anywhere else on how to do that. At first he realized his questioning had a slave hunter's tone with questions, such as "What's your name?" and "Where are you from?". He then shared the stories of his great-great grandparents and spoke in a friendlier, less formal way. The resulting conversations, with responses being passed back through the perceptive spiritual gifts of Amy and other members of the research group, were recorded, photographed and transcribed.

When asked what message needs to be shared today, the response from the most prominent member of the group of former runaways was:

"To be the Light of God and carry God with you at all times. All men, women, and children are truly the Light of God. Even those that don't want to hear messages of healing and peace can still hear them even if we don't think they are listening. We all must be strong and loving at all times. The Power is in loving all the time."

The presentation ended with the research group's recommendations:

1. The underground room should be considered a kind of religious or spiritual shrine.
2. Conduct further genealogical and documentary research to confirm our findings, particularly as to the identities of the former runaways we believe we encountered.
3. Installation of a commemorative headstone in the graveyard, to honor those former runaways who were given refuge at Providence Meeting, including those who died there and the courageous Quakers who gave them refuge and assistance.
4. Installation of a memorial plaque in the hiding room.
5. Since the hiding room is not handicap-accessible, part of the existing floor could be removed and a Plexiglas window could be installed, with LED lights that do not generate heat for safety purposes to illuminate the room.
6. A memorial event to be held around Thanksgiving, Easter, or "Juneteenth" to honor the former runaways.