

Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad as told to Patchwork by Bill Hughes

Interviewed by Charlotte Sachetti and Marisa Gregory in the spring of 2001

The Underground Railroad holds major significance in United States History. Although it was not actually underground nor a railroad, this secret system of transportation was the key to helping thousands of Negro slaves escape to freedom during the 1800s.

Pennsylvania's southern border, also known as the Mason-Dickson Line was the beginning of freedom for thousands of slaves. But the slaves had to continue hiding until they reached Canada because they were still in danger of being captured and returned to the south. The Hughes' house is among many buildings that were part of this railroad, making there house a big part of Columbia County's History.

Bill Hughes has lived on Old Berwick Road, Bloomsburg for the past several years. Their house is over two hundred years old and has a compartment in it said to have been used to hide slaves on the Underground Railroad. Ted Fenstermacher wrote a piece about Bill's house in his book Tracking Yesterday.

PATCHWORK: How long have you and your family lived in this house?

HUGHES: We moved here in 1986.

PATCHWORK: Do you know who built it?

HUGHES: No, we're not sure. I know it was built sometime between 1807 and 1826. We found a transcript for the building lot in 1806 and a deed for the house in 1826. Sometime between there, I think, they built it.

PATCHWORK: You mentioned the Trescotts in the book. Did you know them?

HUGHES: Yes, we used to live next door, when the Trescotts lived here. They were pretty old back in the 1980s, in fact, they were both in their 90s. And they lived here since the 1940s.

PATCHWORK: And when you bought the house were you aware of the relationship between the house and the Underground Railroad?

HUGHES: Yes.

PATCHWORK: How did you find out about it? Did they tell you?

HUGHES: Well, Mr. Trescott, the old guy that used to live here when we lived next door, he always used to tell us stories and I guess he and Ted Fenstermacher, they were old Berwick buddies, they used to trade tales.

PATCHWORK: Are there legends of this house?

HUGHES: I don't think of it as legends, besides the Underground Railroad people used to say there was a tunnel from the basement of this house over to this store that used to be across the street. See the people that lived here through the 19th century, which would have been the time before the Civil War when this Underground Railroad thing was going on, the Bartons, were merchants, and they owned the land on the other side of the street also. And they had a store over there, but I don't know about that tunnel thing. But anyway, people in the neighborhood have always said that there used to be a tunnel in the basement of this house to across the street.

PATCHWORK: Has the connection with the Underground Railroad made you value your house any more than before?

HUGHES: Yeah, I think it adds to a house that would have stories that go all over, you know.

PATCHWORK: What are some of the advantages of living in a historic house like this? Do you get to brag about it?

HUGHES: Well, I think you're the third group of students to come here to do a project similar to this. Although I think you're the first ones from Bloomsburg, I think the other kids were from Central.

PATCHWORK: Are there any disadvantages to this, like have you ever had problems that you wouldn't have?

HUGHES: Well, it's an old house, so yes. We moved here, the roof leaked. Minor inconveniences

PATCHWORK: Have you had any problems with the space up there or is it just sort of there?

HUGHES: It's just sort of there, yeah. Actually, the access to it, like I said, is I think after the bathroom was put in so you can get to the pipes underneath.

PATCHWORK: You said that about the stairway, what all did they change about the house? What are the changes that they've done?

HUGHES: Well, there are many changes to this house. I think when it was first built; it was probably this room and this hallway and the room above it. And then I think that room on the other side was added and there was an addition that way (gestures) and another addition that way (gestures in opposite direction). There have been a lot of changes to this house.

PATCHWORK: What were the changes to the stairway?

HUGHES: Oh yeah, when the back section of the house was put on, probably in the 1830s, they added to the stairway to have access to those back bedrooms so you don't have to go through these rooms to get to them. And that was created, I think, when they built the back section of the house they built over what was an old shed. That's why the ceiling is at different heights here and in the back that created that crawl space.

PATCHWORK: What are some of the features that still exist from that time? Is there anything in particular that hasn't been changed at all?

HUGHES: In this house? Yeah, well, this chair rail is original; a lot of the doors are still old. This fireplace is kind of an interesting thing. Notice the old wine goblets that are carved in the front. Now the fireplace has been the mantel, see they put a thick piece on top of the mantel. The mantel used to be thin but then they added that row of bricks and brought it out and made the fireplace a little deeper and they put that thicker mantel on top. But that, the mantel itself is probably an original part of this house and that parson's cupboard on the side there is an original part of this house. There is another fireplace right upstairs. Actually the floors are original.

PATCHWORK: Yeah, they mentioned a lot about the floors.

HUGHES: This house hasn't been changed as much as a lot of old houses have.

PATCHWORK: It mentions about the entrance to the outside. It said something about the siding on the outside of the house, like you noticed

HUGHES: Well, I couldn't find what Ted talked about in that book about a piece of the clapboard that could move so that, for ventilation. I never found that.

PATCHWORK: Ok

HUGHES: But I'm not sure that our back porch was there.

PATCHWORK: Have you changed anything about the hiding space or is it just the pipes?

HUGHES: No

PATCHWORK: So it's just what he did to it. To make the access to it, did he do that?

HUGHES: What?

PATCHWORK: The board that comes out of the wall.

HUGHES: Yeah. I think Mr. Trescott did that. Cause he, one of the things when he bought this house was take out a lot of the plaster and replaced the old plaster with plasterboard, and I think he probably made that crawlspace or made that access to that space.

PATCHWORK: Would you change anything else about the house or do you just like it the way it is?

HUGHES: Well, I've started to make a library out of a back bedroom. I ripped out a wall, but the wall was added. Originally the room was a big room, with a wall and a hallway. But yeah, a few little things, but overall I don't know. If you know of any old shutters that fit this house, I wouldn't mind finding them.

PATCHWORK: Are there any records of how many slaves went through here?

HUGHES: No, it's all just legend.

PATCHWORK: So nothing's for sure?

HUGHES: Right

PATCHWORK: Okay

HUGHES: And the Underground Railroad itself was the kind of term that kind of makes you think that it was more organized than it was. Actually it was the slaves' initiatives themselves. I think that they're the ones that really had to, you know, people might help them, but they're the ones that had to take all the risks.

PATCHWORK: Can I throw in a suggestion for a question? About the house's geographical context as far as the canal going through here?

HUGHES: Yes

PATCHWORK: So they understand how commerce moved and why slaves were coming through Espy.

HUGHES: Yeah, you're right, Jim. The old North Branch Canal ran right behind our house and in its day it's like having the interstate highway right next to you. That was a major form of transportation and the railroad slowly supplanted it? Is that the right word?

PATCHWORK: yes

HUGHES: It's nice to have an editor right here to answer my questions. But this was a major transportation route.

PATCHWORK: Did they build canal boats here?

HUGHES: Yeah, they did, and there was a canal lot here and several boat-building businesses. There was a big boat yard where the boats were taken out of the water in the wintertime because the canal was only used.

PATCHWORK: Where was that?

HUGHES: The boat yard was down where Arenellas" house is (2700 block of Old Berwick Road, north of Hughes" property).

PATCHWORK: If you can picture lots of trade and boats right in your backyard, you can see how hiding slaves during the war, that's why it's possible that this house could have been a stop. It's like being at the Buckhorn Truck Stop today, trucks going by all the time. Have you ever yourself used the space for anything or has it ever been a convenience to you?

HUGHES: No

PATCHWORK: It's just there. Do you believe that the space was built like, what do you think the space was built for, before the slaves?

HUGHES: I think that it came about because of the way that the house was gradually enlarged and I think when they built out over, I think our kitchen was originally a shed, the lower roof, the lower ceiling in the front part of the house, so when they tried to make the floor on the second floor even on one level that created the space between the ceiling and the floor on the back part of the house

PATCHWORK: Are there any other houses along, like in Espy, that have spaces that you've heard of?

HUGHES: No.

PATCHWORK: Are they're any around here?

HUGHES: I don't know enough about it, I really don't know. I know that this valley, because of the canal, was a route north, so there have always been lots of things about, you know, from Harrisburg up through Wilkes-Barre, part of a route north, a major route north.

PATCHWORK: Besides what you've been told about the Underground Railroad, are there any other legends or anything from that time about this house?

HUGHES: Hmm, not that I know of. There's a well underneath the back porch and I read some things that said it was one of, when this was just an early settlement, I guess you'd say in the early 1800s. It was one of only, I think, two or three wells in the village, but I don't know a lot about it. One of these days, when the porch boards get older and they have to be replaced, I'm going to try and see what's down there.

PATCHWORK: Okay, I think that's all we have. Is there anything else you want to say?

HUGHES: Well, you know that I mean if the Bartons did in fact hide slaves, they were taking a chance. The Fugitive Slave Law made it illegal for people to hide slaves

PATCHWORK: You said that they were mostly Quakers and Methodists?

HUGHES: That's my understanding that Quakers and Methodists had a lot to do with that, also I think free blacks in the north probably did a lot more. Wasn't it Harriet Tubman who actually, it's pretty amazing to think she'd go back into the South and she did it several times?

PATCHWORK: What was the punishment under the Fugitive Slave Law? Was that in effect throughout the country; was that a federal law?

HUGHES: Yeah, it was a federal law, right.

PATCHWORK: So if you were caught, you could be thrown in jail.

HUGHES: Yeah, I don't know what happened to you. I understood that there was something that the federal judge got \$10 if he sent somebody back, but only \$5 if he decided to free them. It was part of the Compromise of 1850, and I think the Supreme Court said that they upheld it because certain northern states were trying to create their own laws that nullify it. But we all know what happened during the Civil War.