



**INSIDE
THIS
ISSUE:**

President's Corner	2
Accessions	7
New Members	8
Hooked Rug Raffle	9

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today!***

The Inkwell

FALL 2023

William Still: Father of the Underground Railroad

By Debbie L. Cannon

William Still lived a remarkable life during one of the darkest periods of this country's history. Slavery was firmly embedded in the United States.

In 1821, the year William was born, about a million people lived in bondage; by 1850, that number had increased to about three million. Many slaves were determined to escape the horrendous conditions they faced on a daily basis. They could not do this alone;

they needed assistance from people who had the strength, determination, opportunity, and willingness to fight a cause that blackened the American landscape. One person who demonstrated all of those characteristics was William Still.

William's story begins on the Eastern

Shore of Maryland in Caroline County where his parents, Levin and Charity, were enslaved. The strength and determination that William used to navigate his own life was inherited



from his parents. Through sheer determination, Levin was able to convince his master to allow Levin to purchase his freedom. Although Levin could not do the same for Charity and their four children (two sons and two daughters), Charity exhibited her own tenacity when she made two attempts to escape to New Jersey, where Levin had relocated. The first attempt was

Still, page 3...

President's Corner

Greetings Members,

The volunteers at the Historical Society have been extremely busy since our last newsletter. In October several of our volunteers along with volunteers from the Cecil County Arts Council participated in Elkton's Halloween parade. We were gnomes and our float was a gnome's mushroom house and we won second place. Joann Gardner manned the table at the Cecil County Library's genealogy symposium and talked with participants about how the Historical Society could help them in the family history search. We also introduced Volume 2 of our popular Snippet series. November was filled with activity starting with the Farm

& Table Market held at the Historical Society. We had vendors selling homemade breads, local cheese, vintage tableware items, candles, antiques, local honey & beeswax creations and pottery. It was well attended and will be bigger and better next year. The following weekend Carol Donache was at the Cecil County Library's Book Lovers Market selling our Snippets series and other used books and simultaneously, Lisa Dolor and I were at the Fall Farmhouse Antique Show at Fair Hill, MD where we sold more of the same. Both events were successful, and we plan to

participate again next year. In December we will have one last event and that is First Friday where we will have a silent auction and the library and DeWitt collection will be open.

The volunteers are looking forward to a much needed break over the Christmas holidays. We will be closed from December 15, 2023, through January 1, 2024. The Board of Trustees and the volunteers of the Historical Society of Cecil County wish all our members and happy and healthy holiday season.

See you next year!!
Paula Newton, President

Officers

- ◆ PAULA NEWTON – PRESIDENT
- ◆ BETH MOORE—VICE PRESIDENT
- ◆ PAMELA HOWARD – TREASURER
- ◆ MIKE DIXON – HISTORIAN
- ◆ CAROL DONACHE – LIBRARIAN
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- ◆ LISA DOLOR – CURATOR

***HSCC wants to email the Inkwell
to as many members as possible!
Please send us your email address to
receive future issues via email.***

Trustees

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***Do you want to get involved?
Contact us!
cecilhstory@gmail.com***

Still —From page 3...

short lived as a slave catcher pursued Charity and the children and returned them to Maryland. A second attempt was successful but only after Charity made the heartbreaking decision to leave her two sons behind.

When Levin and Charity were reunited, Charity changed her first name to Sidney and the family's last name was changed from Steel to Still to provide some anonymity as Charity remained a slave for the rest of her life. This closely guarded family secret provided another incentive for William to get involved in the abolition movement.

Levin and Sidney's family grew once they reunited in New Jersey. They had fourteen other children. William, born in 1821, was the youngest. Because New Jersey was a free state, William was born free. While growing up William helped support the large family by working on neighbors' farms. By his teen years, William had become an industrious worker, another trait that would follow him into adulthood. William, who had little formal education, taught himself to read and write. His first encounter with assisting a slave occurred when he was a teenager. A slave hunter had arrived at a neighbor's farm to recapture a runaway and William, along with others, assisted the man to escape capture.

In 1844, at the age of 23, William moved to Philadelphia. William was determined to have a better life than most of his contemporaries. He chose Philadelphia not only because Pennsylvania was the first state to pass legislation in 1790 to abolish slavery through gradual emancipation, but there was a large free black population there. Although slavery did not exist in Pennsylvania, racial discrimination did and William faced discrimination on a daily basis. Despite that, however, William

persevered in ways that many people, both black and white, were not able to do so during that time period

When William moved to Philadelphia, he found a job as a clerk and janitor at the offices of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery (PASS). William realized immediately that the success of the abolition movement depended on integrated cooperation. The membership of PASS was made up of not only free blacks, but also of whites (many of whom were Quakers, the first group of white people who came out in favor of abolition of slavery). James Miller McKim, a white man and secretary of PASS, was responsible for hiring William. William also felt that violence was not the answer. John Brown had met with William to tell him his plan for Harper's Ferry; William declined to become involved because he felt the plan was doomed for failure.

William so impressed McKim, that William was given more responsibility at PASS. A nineteen-member Vigilance Committee was created to act as a clearinghouse for runaway slaves who arrived in Pennsylvania. A four member Acting Committee was created as a sub-committee and William was appointed chairman of the Acting Committee. The responsibility of the Acting Committee was to oversee every case that might require their aid, as well as the authority to raise the necessary funds to achieve their goal of helping runaway slaves. Both of these committees brought organization to Philadelphia's abolition movement that had up to that point proven to be less than effective and helped to make the Philadelphia branch of the Underground Railroad (UGRR) the most effective branch of the UGRR.

The Philadelphia branch of the UGRR was the busiest branch of the UGRR. Slaves came up from

the south and traveled through Philadelphia on their way to Canada. The UGRR was an organized network of both free blacks and white abolitionists who helped runaway slaves find food, shelter, and safe passage from their life of bondage. Those who helped with the UGRR were grouped into three categories: (1) those who opened their homes to runaways were classified as stationmasters; (2) conductors guided slaves between stations; and (3) stockholders provided food, transportation, and clothing. William was one of the few abolitionists who fell into all three categories.

When William married Letitia George, a free black dressmaker, in 1847 they opened their home as a refuge for runaways. Fugitive slaves would stay as long as necessary and were provided with food, clothing, and medical care. The couple, who had four children, understood the risk to their family and took every precaution to keep themselves and the fugitives safe.

William was a modest man. To him, the true heroes of his story were the fugitive slaves. When he published his book, "Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narrative and Letters" in 1872, he did so with the sole purpose of handing down their stories to future generations. In his book, William noted that the cases he wrote about showed the "extraordinary determination and endeavor that enslaved people would undertake to obtain their freedom."



William's book is not an easy book to read; he did not have the benefit of modern technology to organize his book in a cohesive fashion. But the information contained within the book has great historical significance. William made it his mission to individually interview each fugitive that crossed his path. He included all types of information: names, physical characteristics, clothing worn by the runaway, where the fugitive was coming from, who owned the slave, and other facts. The stories of the fugitives would have been lost to history if not for William's efforts.

One story that William relates is about how he met his brother Peter, who had been left behind by their mother when she made her escape, almost 40 years later in Philadelphia when Peter entered the offices of PASS. While interviewing Peter, William suddenly realized the story that Peter was telling was one told to William by his parents and that this was the brother he had never known. One can surmise the importance of this event to William because it is the first story in

his book.

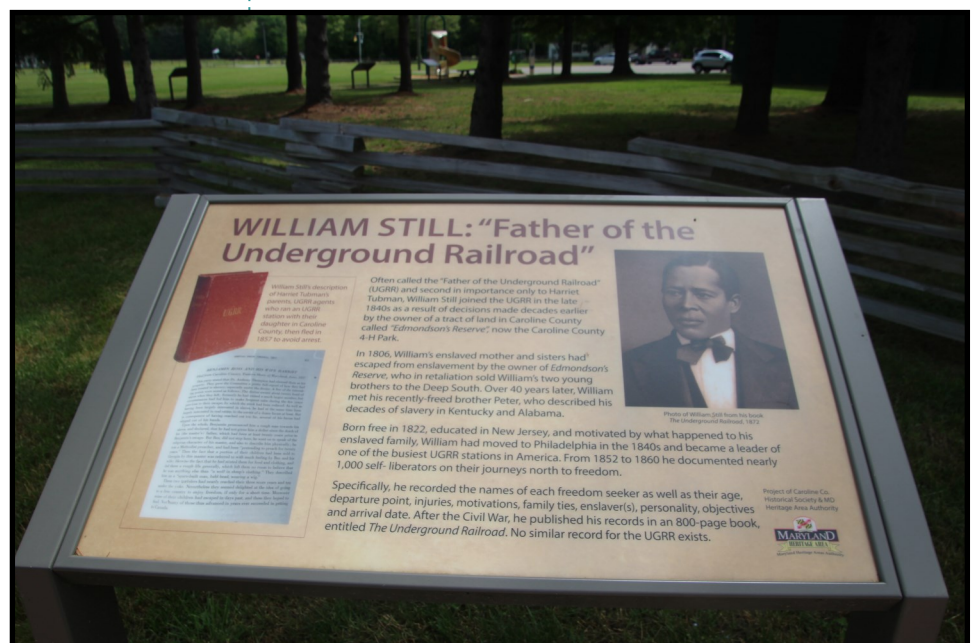
The exact number of fugitive slaves William assisted has been listed between 700-800. Included in those names are such notable names such as Henry “Box” Brown, a slave who made his escape from slavery by “mailing” himself from Richmond, Virginia to Philadelphia and whose story is documented in William’s book. Henry’s trip began in March 1849 and took 27 hours to complete. Brown’s box was transported by wagon, railroad, and steamboat before reaching its final destination. The box was received by PASS members James McKim, Passmore Williamson, and William Still. Another lesser-known name, Lear Green, was a female escapee mentioned in William’s book that followed Brown’s example. Her journey took her from Baltimore to Philadelphia where William took pictures of her in the box to illustrate the enormous risk that Lear had taken to become free.

Also recounted in the book, is the rescue of Jane Johnson, a woman whose owner had brought her from the slave state of North Carolina into the free state of Pennsylvania in 1855. In his book, William wrote “among other duties involving the Vigilance Committee when hearing of slaves brought into the State by their owners, was immediately to inform such persons that as they were not fugitives, but were brought into the State their masters, they were entitled to their freedom without another moment’s service, and that they could have the assistance of the Committee and the advice of counsel without charge, by simply availing themselves of these proffered favors.” When Jane’s situation came to the attention to the members of the Vigilance Committee, they acted quickly to

take the necessary steps to free Jane from her master. It is important to remember that the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was passed by the federal government and that the Vigilance Committee had been formed by the abolitionists of Philadelphia to protect fugitive slaves passing through this Pennsylvania city. This act, to assist Jane, by the Vigilance Committee became one of the first legal challenges to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Passmore Williamson was jailed for his involvement and William was tried for assault charges. Their efforts were rewarded when Jane and her two sons were eventually deemed freed.

On a local level, William’s book describes his encounter with Peter Johnson, a runaway slave from Elkton, MD. Johnson was 28 years old when he made his escape in 1853. William’s description states that Johnson was suffering from an “infliction of severe flogging” and that the “the Committee attended to his wants and forwarded him on North.”

In addition to the runaway slaves’ stories, William’s book contains letters from important individuals such as Thomas Garrett, a well-known Quaker abolitionist from Delaware. In his book, Williams



Still —From page 5...

described Garrett as a “close personal friend.”

William Still has received far less attention than many of his contemporaries, such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. Recently, however, this has changed. Recent biographies have been written about William: *William Still: The Underground Railroad and the Angel at Philadelphia* by William C. Kashatus was published in 2021 and *Vigilance: The Life of William Still, Father of the Underground Railroad* by Andrew K. Diemer was published in 2022. Maryland chose to recognize William by opening the William Still Interpretive Site as part of the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Trail. The site, located in Denton, MD, contains a replica of the cabin that his parents lived in while enslaved. In 2023 the Pennsylvania Senate declared the second week of February as “William Still Week” in Philadelphia.

In truth, however, William’s legacy began much earlier. William kept meticulous records and preserved more documents than anyone else about the UGRR and the fugitives that he assisted. On a personal level, his children are a testament to William’s “rags to riches” story. His four children inherited William’s traits of working hard and helping others. His oldest daughter became a doctor; his oldest son, a lawyer; his youngest son, a journalist; and his youngest daughter, became a teacher. In 1859, William penned a letter to the press about the racial discrimination that existed on Philadelphia streetcars. The fight on this issue did not end until 1867. After PASS closed, William began his own coal business and sold repaired coal stoves. He had been told that a business owned by a Black man would not succeed, but William proved everyone wrong. He was honest and

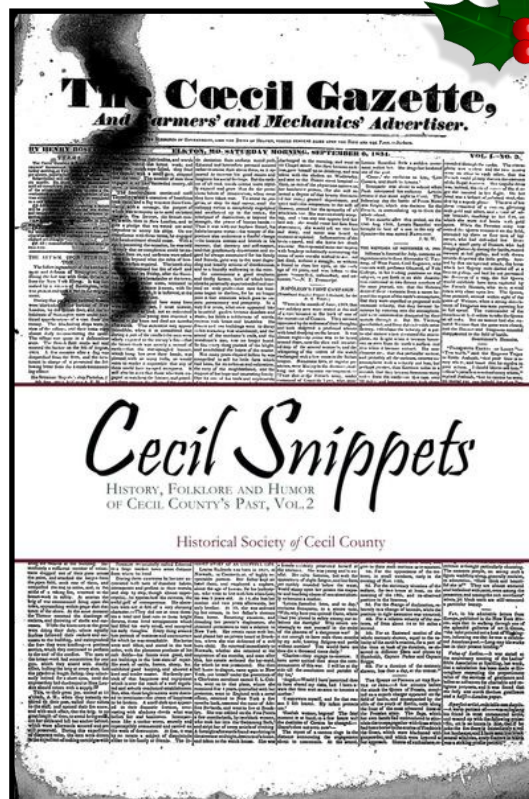
efficient in his dealings. In 1864, he provided supplies to the Black Union Army soldiers and in 1880 William organized one of the earliest YMCAs for Black youth.

When William Still died on July 14, 1902, the New York Times obituary called him, perhaps for the first time, “The Father of the Underground Railroad.” William was 80 years old and the obituary estimated him to be worth between \$750,000 to \$1,000,000. Against all odds, William forged a better life for himself and his family. Emerging as a leader of the free black community in Philadelphia and in the abolitionist movement, William’s hard work and ambition paid off in ways that no one at that time could ever imagine.



Now Available!

***Cecil Snippets*, Volume 2—\$25**



Accessions

April – November 2023

- **Norman & Wanda Marquess:** 2 Elkton Town Band uniforms
- **Susan Wright:** Framed photos of Port Deposit ice gorge
- **William Pattan:** Documents and photos from the estate of Sarah Cruickshank
- **Paula Burton:** Elkton trivia game
- **Emily Kilby:** Five class photos of Edith Kilby's students, ca. 1960s
- **Judy McDaniel Richmond:** Peoples Bank of Elkton anniversary booklet
- **Cheryl Ford:** Bohemia Manor High School yearbooks, 1964-1968
- **Frank Muller:** Cecil County Courthouse sign
- **L. Harvey Kirk III:** Two post office registration cards from 1886
- **Harry Mustard:** Oil portrait of Col. George Edward Mitchell
- **Maryanna Merritt-Valladares:** 1920s crib of the Merritt family
- **Town of North East:** 16 military uniforms
- **Joann Roark:** 6 military pins, 4 of which are associated with Triumph Explosives
- **Jane Creswell:** Collection of documents and artifacts from Triumph Explosives
- **Edgar & Mary Ann Mackie:** Information about the restoration of Foxcatcher Farms covered bridge

- **Bernie Bodt:** Three copies of Maryland Merchant Tokens, by David Schenkman
- **Janet Tennyson:** Legal and personal documents from the Hutton family
- **Earl G. Rakes:** North East City Directory, 1977 & 1979



VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

The Historical Society of Cecil County is looking for volunteers who are willing to help us fulfill our mission of preserving and interpreting our Cecil County History. The following are volunteer positions we need to fill:

- CORRESPONDING SECRETARY
- EVENT COORDINATOR
- VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR
- EDITOR OF THE INKWELL
 - WEBSITE MANAGER
 - RESEARCH ASSISTANT
 - LIBRARY ASSISTANT
 - GARDENER
- PUBLICITY/SOCIAL MEDIA COORDINATOR
- CURATOR'S ASSISTANT

If any of these positions are of interest to you, please contact us at (410) 398-1790

or cecilhistory@gmail.com

**Our Thanks to the
Following New Members
*April – November 2023***

- ◆ Alan Feldman, MD
- ◆ James E. Nichols, DE
- ◆ Thomas Kimble, DE
- ◆ Barbara Stevens, MD
- ◆ Stirling Marcum, CA
- ◆ Stephan Wallace, MD
- ◆ Ray Clough, PA
- ◆ Polly Binns, MD
- ◆ Jenn Cooper, MD
- ◆ Susan Heusinger, GA
- ◆ Barbara Crankshaw, NJ
- ◆ Kyle Baker, MD
- ◆ Tom Gunther, MD
- ◆ Eileen Courtney, PA
- ◆ Aubrey Pearre, MD
- ◆ Linda Hammell, MD
- ◆ Patricia McArdell, MD



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This rug is an example of the primitive style of rug making that might have been seen in 1787 here in Elkton. This piece uses unbleached linen as the foundation material, forgoing the burlap feed sacks likely used at that time, in the interest of preservation. The wool was hand dyed with acid dyes and cut into strips, 8/32" wide, as was typical of the primitive style. The main design depicts a scene from daily life, farming, laundry, ships, plants and animals. The border design uses the left-over strips of wool. Motifs such as the stars and "lambs tongue" arches were frequently used in borders. The edges are finished with lengths of wool, whipped stitched flat to provide a finished edge and to protect the rug edges from wear.

This rug was designed and created by local artist Colleen Tiefenthal with support in part by the Maryland State Arts Council (msac.org). It was donated to the Historical Society of Cecil County to help preserve the craft and share information about rug hooking.

The rug is going to be raffled off as a fundraiser for the Historical Society. The tickets are \$5.00 each. Buy your tickets now for your chance to own a true work of art.

We appreciate your support of the Historical Society of Cecil County.





ORIGINAL DESIGN/HAND CRAFTED
BY

COLLEEN TIEFENTHAL

WINTER RAFFLE 2023

*proceeds benefit the
Historical Society of Cecil County*

NAME

PHONE

\$5



ORIGINAL DESIGN/HAND CRAFTED
BY

COLLEEN TIEFENTHAL

WINTER RAFFLE 2023

*proceeds benefit the
Historical Society of Cecil County*

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BY

COLLEEN TIEFENTHAL

WINTER RAFFLE 2023

*proceeds benefit the
Historical Society of Cecil County*

NAME

PHONE

\$5

Become a Member!

Joining the Historical Society of Cecil County is a great way to support the Society's undertakings.

All members are invited to attend meetings and functions sponsored by the HSCC, receive discounts on books and items, use the HSCC library for free and get a subscription to *The Inkwell*, our newsletter.

For over 75 years, we have connected people with Cecil's past by collecting and preserving the county's history and we count on membership dues to help fund this endeavor.

Through your membership you help connect people to the county's past through our library and its significant collection of rare books, manuscripts and photographs; our outreach services, helping others understand county history; a website that attracts hundreds of visitors monthly; our museum, which contains fascinating displays; and our widely distributed print newsletter.

Ways to Join

Become a member online or send your payment by mail (the old-fashioned way!). Membership renewal is on an annual, calendar year basis.

Members joining on or after August 1st will receive credit for the remaining months of the year of receipt as well as a full 12 months in the following period.

By Mail

Membership
Historical Society of Cecil County
135 E Main St.
Elkton, MD 21921

Online Payment with Paypal

Select the appropriate category and click on the "buy now" button. It will take you to a secure PayPal page for payment.

You will receive your membership package within about two weeks.

**Have you found
answers to your
Cecil County family
history mysteries?
Share your Stories!**

cecilhistory@gmail.com

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Happenings!

PAGE 11



Historical Society President, Paula Newton and Cecil County Arts Council Director, Annemarie Hamilton



Historical Society Trustee, Chuck Dolor and Arts Council President, Gaby Coutz



The Zombie Gnome Float that was entered in the Elkton Halloween Parade, 2023.



Historical Society Librarian, Carol Donache at the Elkton Halloween Parade & Zombie Gnome Float



Farm & Table Market, November 2023



President Paula Newton and satisfied customer Tracey Reynolds at the From the Farmhouse Winter Antique Show.



HSCC at the Library's Book Lover's Market, Saturday, 11/11



Amy Martin, Elk Creeks Preservation Society and Lisa Dolor, Curator, Historical Society at the Farm & Table Market, 11/23

Genealogy Resources at Cecil County Public Library

<https://www.cecilcountylibrary.org/learn/history-genealogy>



HeritageQuest includes federal census records, source documents, and indexes. Rich with demographic and genealogical detail, the collection contains personal data such as education, place of birth, language, occupation, veteran status.



World's largest online repository of free genealogical records. As an affiliate library, enhanced digital content can be accessed by using within any CCPL library branch.

Enoch Pratt Genealogy Resources

The Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore has an extensive genealogy collection with great resources. Scroll to the bottom of the page for website links.

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CECIL COUNTY

135 East Main Street Elkton, MD 21921
(410) 398-1790

The Historical Society is open.

Monday and Thursday 10 A.M. - 4 P.M., 1st Saturday of the Month - 10 A.M. - 2 P.M.

Since 1932, the Historical Society of Cecil County Maryland has been the go-to resource for researchers, students and history buffs looking for answers about the culture and materials that defined (and continue to define) our county. We are a 100% volunteer-based organization.