Underground Railroad topic at Cornerstone meeting

Clayton Kilgore, left, dressed as Dr. Francis LeMoyne, and Cornerstone Genealogical Society member Herman osso, disucss the Underground Railroad, which was the topic of Kilgore's presentation at the Society's October 2013 meeting. (photo courtesy of Observer-Reporter)

WAYNESBURG – Clayton Kilgore, executive director of the Washington County Historical Society, dressed as Dr. Francis LeMoyne, spoke to members of the Cornerstone Genealogical Society about the Underground Railroad during its October meeting.

The Underground Railroad was formed in the early 19th century and reached its height between 1850 and 1860. The escape network was not literally underground nor a railroad. It was figura-tively "underground" in the sense of being an underground resistance. It was known as a "rail-road" by way of the use of rail terminology in the code.

The Underground Railroad consisted of meeting points, secret routes, transportation, and safe houses, and assistance provided by abolitionist sympathizers.

Individuals were often organized in small, independent groups; this helped to maintain secrecy because individuals knew some connecting "stations" along the route but knew few details of their immediate area.

Kilgore said the Underground Railroad started at the plantation, or other work venues where slaves were congregated.

The compelling question, Kilgore said, was how did the slaves know how to go north to obtain their freedom?

There were traveling ministers, he said, and they would convey messages about safe houses and what time of year was best to leave through the songs they sang. "Follow the Drinking Gourd" was one of the most commonly used. It referred to the North Star, so by following the North Star one could get north.

In 1850 the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, which made it illegal to help runaway slaves. If one was caught there was a huge fine, and sympathizers could end up in jail. Plantation owners would hire bounty hunters to search for slaves and posters were displayed up north, warning slaves that bounty hunters were in the area.

Harriet Tubman was a famous slave who escaped to the north. She helped many others and according to Kilgore, it is said made as many as 35 to 40 trips back to the south.

The slaves traveled by land and sea, many hiding on ships, but the largest number traveled by land. They went by foot, carriages, and in wagons with false bottoms. They traveled in small groups to avoid detection.

No one who helped with the Underground Railroad knew all of the safe houses or routes, so if one was arrested they would not be able to give out that information. The railroad terminology used was a way of secretly conveying messages. Safe houses were the depots and conductors were guides, Kilgore said.

Some of the safe houses in Washington County were in Washington, West Alexander, West Middletown and Ginger Hill. The most prominent stop was the McKeever house in West Middletown, where a room had been dug under a barn to hide slaves.

In 1997 the LeMoyne House was designated as a National Historic Landmark for the Underground Railroad, the first in Pennsylvania and only the seventh in the United States. **One of the safe houses for Greene County was the Thomas Hughes house in Jefferson.**

The last stops on the "railroad" were the Babcock House and the Isaac Chase House in Rochester, N.Y.

In 1870 the Washington Reporter published a series of articles about the Underground Railroad, telling stories about the people who helped.