

# THE WESTCHESTER HISTORIAN

QUARTERLY OF THE WESTCHESTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



## Moses Pierce, Westchester's Friend of Freedom

Dorothee von Huene Greenberg took a leave of absence from her teaching duties at Pace University to research and write this article about Moses Pierce, a man with deep Quaker convictions, who was a resident of Pleasantville.

In the years leading up to and during the Civil War, Pierce stood up for what he believed, quietly risking everything he had by participating in Westchester's Underground Railroad. Dr. Greenberg places Pierce's life within the context of world, national and local events and brings to life the inspiring story of an unsung hero of the abolitionist movement. . . . .4

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**Cover picture: A family escaping from slavery. From [www.dipity.com/JPJensen/A-Dividing-Nation](http://www.dipity.com/JPJensen/A-Dividing-Nation).**

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The Westchester Historian is published quarterly (ISSN 0049-7266) by the Westchester County Historical Society, 2199 Saw Mill River Road, Elmsford, New York 10523. Subscription to the journal is included in membership dues: \$35.00 Member; \$60.00 Contributor; \$100.00 Friend; \$150.00 Sponsor; \$250.00 Benefactor; \$500.00 Patron; \$1000 Sustainer. Libraries subscribe at \$35.00. Back issues are available at \$5.00 each plus \$1.50 postage/handling. Complete or partial sets of all back issues are available at a discounted rate (address inquiries to WCHS). Volumes 1-65 are available on microfilm for \$200.00.

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# MOSES PIERCE,

## *Westchester's Friend of Freedom*

by **Dorothee von Huene Greenberg**

A little-known hero of Pleasantville, New York, Moses Pierce (1816-1886), left no papers or letters that would document his courage in fighting slavery. Instead, he lived his life quietly, acting with conviction and inspiring members of his family and community with his strongly-held abolitionist beliefs. This article is an attempt to bring Moses' story into the light, to reveal the peaceful Quaker farmer who served a vital role in Westchester's Underground Railroad, the clandestine system that helped escaped slaves, or black self-liberators, make their way to Canada and freedom before and during the Civil War.

rich. To abjure the efforts to reduce free men to the hard money vasalage of slave."

### THE PIERCE FAMILY AIDS FUGITIVE SLAVES

When the Pleasantville station on the New York-Harlem railroad line from New York City opened in October 1846, it would have provided a new means of transportation for fugitive slaves traveling to the Pierce family home on their way to freedom. Pierce's son Jonathan wrote a letter in 1939 in which he explains how his family fit into the structure of the local Underground Railroad. Speaking of his aunt Phebe I. Wanzer, daughter of David Irish of Quaker Hill, Jonathan writes,

His [David Irish's] home was the last Station on the Underground R.R. My mother's home, Joseph Carpenter, New Rochelle, was the first Station out of New York City; my father's home [built by] Joseph Pierce, Pleasantville, was the second Station; Judge John Jay, Bedford, was the third station. This aunt's home, David Irish, Quaker Hill, was the fourth Station. At that place, 60 miles from N.Y., the fugitives were far enough on the way to Canada to find their way safely.<sup>75</sup>

Where did these fugitives come from, and how did they travel? Those arriving from south of Chesapeake Bay most likely traveled by sea on cargo vessels to New York Harbor from Norfolk, VA, or Charleston, SC, or New Bern, NC, or Richmond, VA, according to Darlene Clark Hines and her map of Underground Railroad routes.<sup>76</sup>

Others may have sailed up the Delaware River to "Quaker City" Philadelphia, and on to New York City by land, where the Anti-Slavery Society would have helped them make their way farther north. They could have stopped at the home of black abolitionist David Ruggles on 67 Lispenard Street in Manhattan<sup>77</sup> or at the Hopper Gibbons Greek Revival house at 339 West 29th Street, both havens for freedom seekers.<sup>78</sup> They might also have rested at 21 West 32nd Street, William Jay's New York City residence until his death in 1858.<sup>79</sup> Once in New York City, they could have left by several routes, depending on Joseph Carpenter's and Moses Pierce's preferences and the Quaker network that advised them. The fugitives must have traveled by boat north along the Sound or up the Hudson River, and then to Pleasantville by wagon or later directly by train.

If they had arrived in New York City by boat, they could have gone directly from the ship to Brooklyn, where private conductors would have helped them. They might have stopped off at Brooklyn's Congregationalist Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, known as "the Grand Central Depot [of the Underground Railroad]" where Henry Ward Beecher began preaching abolition in 1847.<sup>80</sup> Their next destination might have been Weeksville, a thriving African-American community in Brooklyn, where some could have remained. Others continued north, by wagon on the Boston Post Road or by crossing Long Island Sound on a

skiff, sailboat or canoe from Oyster Bay to Premium Point and up the Premium River in New Rochelle.<sup>81</sup> From New Rochelle, they likely continued by wagon, hidden perhaps under produce, along the Boston Post Road to Weaver Street and on to Moses' father-in-law, Joseph Carpenter's "isolated farm."<sup>82</sup> The Carpenter farm was on what is Weaver Street today, close to Stratton Road in New Rochelle.<sup>83</sup> The "Purchase Meeting House, [of which Carpenter was a member], was a key location [on the Underground Railroad] because of its large Quaker community.... Slaves brought to the New Rochelle-Scarsdale-Mamaroneck communities must have been sheltered, fed, and sent to the Friends in Purchase," according to one local historian.<sup>84</sup> Other historians declare that recent research disputes this contention, however.<sup>85</sup> Freedom seekers may also have arrived at the isolated Carpenter farm in New Rochelle, possibly on "the baggage wagon," which, according to Lydia Maria Child, passed "the farm house [at New Rochelle] three times a week."<sup>86</sup> From there they could have taken Boston Post Road to King Street, which would bring them to Bedford Road in Chappaqua, close to Moses' home. After December 1848, they could have traveled the 17 miles from New York City to New Rochelle by the newly constructed train line and continued northwest by wagon to Pleasantville.

Some fugitives may have traveled from Manhattan by steamboat to William Turpin's island (today's

Neptune Island and the causeway leading to Glen Island), which he purchased in 1828, and which is just five miles from Sand's Point on Long Island. At that time it was called Moses Island, a common given name. Turpin had emancipated his slaves at a cost of \$100,000. Among them was "his coachman, a very worthy colored man," whom he gave about \$50,000 for his past services.<sup>87</sup> It was fitting that Turpin would name his island for the man who had led his people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. The road and causeway connecting Moses Island with the mainland were built under Turpin's ownership, and a steamboat landing was moved from New Rochelle's Town Dock Road to Moses Island some time before 1833, perhaps to transport fugitives as well as vacationers.<sup>88</sup> The bond between Turpin and Joseph Carpenter must have been a strong one because after Turpin's coachman died in 1835, the three children of the former slave joined the household of Joseph Carpenter, where Lydia Maria Child reported enjoying their company.<sup>89</sup>

By whatever means fugitive slaves managed to reach Joseph Carpenter's home, they did not stay long, and they left no records. Fugitives might have rested there at most a night or two before being hurried 24 miles north to Moses Pierce's small Pleasantville farmhouse, now located in the hamlet of Thornwood, where Broadway intersects with Garrigan Avenue.<sup>90</sup> It was a small farmhouse, as modest as the home of his father. The Pierces

aiding fugitives—providing them with clothing to replace that which identified them as former slaves, along with better shoes, and perhaps the train tickets they would need to travel north. By 1860 Moses and Esther had moved to his deceased father's farm in the area of Pleasantville now known as Foxwood Condominium.

The earliest source for Westchester Underground Railroad routes is John Todd's biography of Moses Pierce, published the year of his death and quoted at the beginning of this paper. Twentieth-century reports confirm that route, as outlined in Jonathan Pierce's letter of August 1939. In addition, the year after Jonathan died, a local historian reported that Jonathan:

often told how the frightened negroes were transported during the night from station to station in produce wagons, concealed by vegetables, bags and boxes. During the day-time they were hidden in the house, fed and refreshed for the next jump. The route ran from the city to Quaker Ridge [in New Rochelle], to Pleasantville to Bedford and then to Pawling [Quaker Hill].<sup>91</sup>

This sequence was corroborated in a September 2010 interview with Phebe Washburn, who remembered Jonathan from Chappaqua Meetings in the 1930s where he mentioned that his father had hidden families in their home. When Phebe attended Pleasantville High School before World War II, Jonathan was a candidate on either the Socialist or Progressive ticket and spoke at the school. She recalls that he mentioned, once again, having seen run-

aways in his father's home.<sup>92</sup>

Although Jonathan may have been too young to remember many specific events, the drama must have made a deep impression on him, along with family stories about abolitionist activities. The fact that William Jay's published letter to Moses was written just one year after the arrival of the railroad in Pleasantville suggests that Moses had already established a reputation for himself as a "conductor" when only horse and wagon were available.

Fugitives and those who assisted them would have traveled on isolated dirt roads where the possibility of an encounter with other travelers must have triggered terrible anxiety over discovery and capture. After all, the penalty for not reporting a runaway was prison and a fine of \$1,000. Commissioners received a reward of \$10 if they proved an individual was a runaway, but only \$5 if the individual was adjudged to be a free person.

Once in Pleasantville, fugitives would have been fed and lodged and given provisions. It was relatively safe there for Moses since five other members of his family lived within walking distance,<sup>93</sup> and the Friends' Meeting House in Chappaqua was only three miles away. In addition, Methodists living in the area were probably supportive of his work as a stationmaster. "Wherever Methodist and Zion Churches were found, active participation in the Railroad and abolitionist activities were documented evidence," a local historian writes. "In many localities, there was a close working relation-

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- 51 Ibid., 32.
- 52 Ibid., 22.
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- 55 [www.slavenorth.com/nyemancip.htm](http://www.slavenorth.com/nyemancip.htm)
- 56 Fanny Kemble's diary, 1833, in Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 185.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Lydia Maria Child, *Selected Letters, 1817-1880*, ed. Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 35-47.
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- Horace Greeley, *Liberator*, April 1, 1864 p. 1 c3.
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- 68 [www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nycayuga/ugrr/seward.html](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nycayuga/ugrr/seward.html)
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- 70 Janet Hough, personal interview, July 5, 2010.
- 71 Phebe Washburn, personal interview, September 28, 2009.
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- 73 Frederick Douglass. Quoted in Ken Burns, *The Civil War. Episode One: The Cause*, 1961. PBS Home Video. 1997.
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- 76 Hine, *The African-American Odyssey*, 201.
- 77 Graham Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2010), 60.
- 78 Robin Pogrebin, "Change to Civil War-Era Building Disputed," *New York Times*, January 5, 2011.
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- 80 John Strausbaugh, "On the Trail of Brooklyn's Underground Railroad," *New York Times*, October 12, 2007.
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- 101 Tuckerman, *William Jay*, 126.
- 102 Ibid., 157.
- 103 Ibid., 159-60.
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