

A Load of Hay; Or, Taken for a Ride on the Underground Railroad

When I moved to 53 Poor Street here in Andover in 1994, I soon heard that a house up the street from mine was purported to have been a stop on the Underground Railroad. And for a couple of decades, walking by, I felt personal, admittedly irrational pride in the fact of it. When, however, the plan to put Harriet Tubman's image on the twenty-dollar bill was announced in 2016, in the spring before the first election of Donald Trump, I was prompted to look into the house's history, and found some fairly large holes in the story.

Indeed, the historical society's own records showed that Joseph W. Poor (1830-1910), my ostensible, very local hero, didn't even buy the house, at 66 Poor Street, until October 9, 1865, several months after the Civil War ended and, along with it, any need to help fugitive slaves to freedom. A professional genealogist I contacted—who happens to be related to the Poor family—debunked the notion further. When I mentioned what I had heard, he immediately retorted that “every house in New England with a root cellar” is touted as an Underground Railroad stop at some point in its life, especially when property changes hands, to enhance its value. Lo and behold, I did find that the story of its Underground Railroad past had been mentioned in a letter to the editor of the *Andover Townsman* during a contentious matter involving a piece of property in 1996. Developers wanted to turn it into condos (which they did, only not as many as they once had hoped). Still, I continued my little investigation.

The Poores of nineteenth-century Andover were descendants of one of the town's founders, Daniel Poor (1656-1735). Their patriarch, William Poor (1805-1898), established a wagon-making business at the southwest corner of what became known as Poor Street when he was still in his twenties, in 1833. With a younger brother, Jonathan, and his sons, Joseph and Charles, working alongside him, he eventually added a blacksmith's shop, lumber house, and wheelwright operation. But William's obituary in the *Andover Townsman* refers pristinely to his first calling only, praising him as “an honest builder of honest wagons... putting oak where oak was needed, and never sparing a screw or a bolt to save a few cents.” The obit also obliquely praised his efforts during the Civil War. “He was an enthusiastic American citizen,” it says, “the kind that lifts the hat to the stars and stripes, and gives of blood and fortune to keep the union.”

Early on, the Poores were ardent abolitionists, so much so that in 1846 they left their place of worship and helped start another church in Andover, because they didn't want to pray alongside anyone who wasn't anti-slavery. Their former church did not want to make a distinction between those for or against. So it makes sense that they would be inclined to harbor and help fugitive slaves. But, as for William's or any other Poor's participation in the Underground Railroad, I found mentions only in secondary-source materials.

For example, a 2011 report published by the historian of Andover's venerable South Church declares that the Poor family “built wagons with false bottoms and ran a stop on the Underground Railway through Frye Village [the former name of my neighborhood, now known as Shawsheen Village] for years.” A book titled *Andover Stories*, jointly published that same year by my local historical society and the *Townsman*, similarly states: “In false-bottomed wagons made in [the Poor family's] shops, escaping slaves could safely be concealed for transport under a load of produce or hay.”

Likewise, an early photograph in the historical society's collection showing the Poor compound of shops bears a caption that claims William "built wagons with hidden compartments to help smuggle slaves to freedom." And a circa 1895 photo of William himself, looking quite elderly just a few years before his death, was recently captioned by the society this way: "Poor started a successful wagon shop in 1883 [sic]. His shop was also used as an Underground Railroad stop. It is estimated that several hundred slaves stopped at his shop." That glaringly wrong date, nearly two decades after the Civil War ended, gave me pause. What else did the historical society have wrong? That "several hundred" people had been sent on their way to freedom in Canada seemed a phenomenal, too phenomenal, number. I was, nonetheless, still hoping to be convinced that the Poores truly were my local heroes, and pressed on with my informal investigation.

I recalled that, in 1999, when I attended Juliet Haines Mofford's Annual Memorial Lecture at the historical society, her topic had been the Underground Railroad in Andover. The transcript, in the collection of the historical society, refreshed my memory. Of great interest to me that was it showed Mrs. Mofford, a prodigious researcher and writer, had merely suggested what others before her and after her repeated as fact. The Poor wagons *would have been* "... handy for smuggling slaves...", she opined. It *would have been* "easy to hide them under a load of produce...", she speculated, and "easy for someone with William Poor's skills to build wagons with false bottoms..."**

As for her secondary (not primary) sources, among them was Wilbur H. Siebert's *The Underground Railroad in Massachusetts*, published by the American Antiquarian Society in 1936. Quoting the Ohio State University history professor, Mrs. Mofford said, "'When [William] Poor heard a gentle rap on his door or other subdued sounds in the night,' he dressed quickly, went out, harnessed his mare Nellie to a covered wagon and started with his dusky passengers, probably for North Salem, New Hampshire.'" Professor Siebert named Joseph Poor as being among others in Andover who "could be counted on to speed the black wayfarers on their journey." Crediting the academic, Mrs. Mofford merely repeated his words, but didn't vouch for them. She was wise not to do so. Professor Siebert, born in 1866, could not have been a witness to what he described.

So where did he get his information? I got a copy of the book and read the footnotes. His sources, again secondary not primary, include a letter written to him on November 25, 1934, by a Miss Marion La Mere; an undated letter written to her by a Rev. William C. Poor; and a book, *History of Lawrence, Mass.*, published in 1924 by Maurice B. Dorgan. Via the Internet, I learned that, like Professor Siebert, Miss La Mere could not have been an eyewitness; a lodger at an Andover address, she was born circa 1889. Same for Mr. Dorgan, born 1880.

Miss La Mere's research was conducted for a W.P.A. project designed to document actual routes of the Underground Railroad. Of her methods, Miss La Mere wrote to Professor Siebert, who was doing similar research as part of his academic work at Ohio State University: "...I gather chiefly what 'grandmother told Aunt Sarah, etc.,'" but she claimed she did not rely on that. "The facts I set down are documented." But what exactly was that documentation? She did not elaborate.

So it would seem the reverend—that is, William George (not C.) Poor (1858-1939), son of Joseph and grandson of William—would have had the most reliable information. As it

happened, the retired Congregationalist minister, a graduate of Dartmouth College and Yale Divinity School, spoke about his recollections of the Underground Railroad in Andover to a local woman's club and their guests on December 5, 1932, and the *Andover Townsman* published an account of it.

According to the reporter, the Rev. Poor, who was visiting from his home in Upton, Massachusetts, near Worcester, told the audience that two Underground Railroad stations had been located in the Poor Street vicinity, his old Andover neighborhood. One was the ink shop of William C. Donald & Company at the corner of Poor and Main. As for the other, he capily offered, Elijah Hussey (1801-1869) would have had something to say about it, "only he didn't talk about it." I take that to mean it was located at Hussey's sawmill or, if not there, then at Hussey's residence, a large Victorian structure that once stood on the very spot where my own house at 53 Poor Street, plus the Aberdeen condominium, at 354 North Main Street, stand today. That brings the story closer to home for sure, but no closer to the certifiable truth.

For a long time, I felt it wouldn't do any good to publicize this well-meaning myth-making. Nobody likes to be the skunk at the picnic. But when Harriet Tubman returned to the news, because of the delay on putting her image on the twenty-dollar bill, I began to realize these tales, including root-cellar rumors, trivialize what she actually did. Now that the idea of a new twenty-dollar bill seems to have been buried, writing this seemed all the more necessary. And consider this: when the Poors left South Church to help found the Free Christian Church*, they no doubt sacrificed friends and income for their wagon-making shop, especially at a time when churches were at the heart of community life in New England. Maybe that's reason enough for us to consider them local heroes.

*I customarily park in front of the Free Christian Church when I go uptown to Andover's main center. I am unaware of knowing anyone who belongs to it, and when I looked it up on the Internet, I realized why. Today it is an evangelical church, affiliated with the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference. It is anti-abortion, doesn't recognize gay marriage, and does not condone homosexuality or pre-marital sexual relations. That doesn't describe me or my friends. So there we have the cultural divide at one of its most cavernous points, akin to the chasm created by the slavery question. But I myself haven't felt compelled to leave a church—or even a dinner party—because of my convictions. For one thing, I don't belong to a church. For another, few people I know have dinner parties any more, at least not the kind that used to bring strangers together. Maybe that's one of the problems. Recently a friend asked me: "Do you know any conservatives?" She was interested in hosting a dinner in the Make America Dinner Again mode. It's a program designed to bring together people of differing political opinions, and she needed conservatives to balance the embarrassment of liberals.

**There is even a repetition of this idea on a National Park Service website devoted to the Underground Railroad in Essex County, Massachusetts: "Frye Village was the location of Elijah Hussey's sawmill, the ink factory of William C. Donald, and the flourishing wagon factory

of William Poor and his sons, where wagons were built with false bottoms in order to secretly transport slaves.” Credit for the information is given to “Julie Moffitt [sic], Andover Historical Society.”