

The Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

The Balch Library

Below is the rationale for including the Balch Library as a member of the Underground Railroad Network, a National Park Service organization. The text included here was taken from the application for membership submitted by the Balch to the Network. Network members are those who are” attempting to identify, document, preserve and interpret sites, approximate travel routes and landscapes related to the Underground Railroad, or that are developing or operating interpretive and educational programs and facilities.”

Thomas Balch Library is the genealogy and research library for Loudoun County, VA. It contains books and documents pertaining to family and local history in Loudoun County from its’ beginning in 1757 to the present, including a growing collection on African American history. The library’s Howard W. Clark Room, the result of a special gift to the library to increase African American holdings, was named in honor of a Loudoun County African American who has contributed greatly to this county. The library’s collection includes current historical and genealogical periodicals, microfilms of 18th and 19th century newspapers, special pamphlets and rare books, secondary sources, and archival collections. Oral histories are currently being collected from Loudoun County African Americans – many of them descendants of former enslaved persons from this county.

The collection contains important materials for research on slavery and resistance to slavery in Loudoun County, VA. The holdings of Balch Library can be used to document the history of both slavery and the Underground Railroad. The records can also be used to substantiate firsthand accounts and other findings related to the Underground Railroad. Government documents include property, estate, and tax records to learn about enslaved persons and their owners; court cases related to chattel such as enslaved persons, plus criminal trials (especially fugitive slaves and those accused of assisting them). The holdings of newspapers can recount news of the day, including runaway ads, court coverage and commentary on contemporary laws and practices. Our historical maps depict the geographical scene. Church records reveal the attitudes and activities of parishioners, enslaved and free, abolitionist and pro-slavery. There are demographic sources such as U.S. censuses and tax and property rolls. In addition to genealogical books and periodicals, the collection includes letters from freed slaves who emigrated to Liberia; photographs and files on buildings connected to the antebellum and Civil War period. Virginia and county histories provide context. There are also materials on anti-slavery activists in the county such as Quakers like Samuel Janney, indicted by a local grand jury for his anti-slavery articles in a local newspaper.

Materials related to slavery and the Underground Railroad must be extracted from various and numerous original records. Among government records significant to the study of the Underground Railroad are property, estate and tax records which provide the estimated monetary value of slaves. Court records provide details of attempted fugitive

slave escapes; marriage records document kinship ties for free African Americans; and manumission records detail slaves' liberation. Records within Special Collections related to the Underground Railroad and Slavery include photographs of 19th century residents of Loudoun County, maps that might be used to trace the escape routes of slaves, journals of Quaker activists detailing their involvement with African American liberation, church records and private papers telling us much about enslaved persons and their owners, and newspapers documenting the mores of those who opposed and those who supported slavery. As noted above, the library's collection includes periodicals, census records, special collections, genealogical and historical reference books, and local and state histories. Of special note are books like those of Brenda Stevenson – *Life in Black and White* – on family and community in the slave county of Loudoun, the autobiography of Samuel Janney, *Ye Meeting House Small*, a history of the Goose Creek Quaker meeting, and *Loudoun County Freed Negroes*, by Patricia Duncan.