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The Underground Railway  
and its possible relation to  
The Wells Tavern Stand

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Slavery in colonial times was not an exclusively southern institution. Men, women and children were bought and sold by the leading dignitaries of the Puritanic Colony of Massachusetts Bay. Slaves, on the death of their owner, were inventoried in their estates as property together with horses, cows and hogs. The earliest records of negro slavery in Deerfield is evidenced at the death of Robbert Tigo, negro servant to the Rev. John Williams, May 11, 1695.

Slavery in the Connecticut Valley was in the mildest form. Slaves became in a measure members of the family holding them, although there was no social equality. While the kitchen was the center of the home, the slave had his own table and his own corner. Separate seats were provided in the meeting house.

As slavery came into the colony and was accepted under English common law without legislation, so it was abolished by force of public opinion without any statute law. In the Constitution of Massachusetts, adopted 1780, there is not one word referring directly to retaining or abolishing negro slavery. Article First of the Bill of Rights declares: "All men are born free and equal..." The decision of the court at Worcester in September 1781 that Quaco, bought as a slave, was a free-man, owning his own body, sounded the death knell of slavery in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

With the conclusion of slave ownership in the state, a movement to eliminate slavery in the country as a whole developed. With the growth of anti-slavery the "underground" emerged, illegal but effective. Under the cloak of secrecy and darkness, a network of whispered roads and stations of sanctuary took form throughout the northern states.

The safety and success of the venture depended on concealment.

Small wonder the records have little information to offer. Where these stations were, who ran them, is largely conjecture. Most so-called stations can claim honor to that title only through supposition.

One of Greenfield's oldest houses, now the home of Earl Holtby, might have served as an underground station. Several oddities in architecture are of note. They may have been designed as a defense against sporadic Indian raids. They may have been used in the anti-slavery movement of another century.

This old homestead known to many local residents as perhaps the Howard place, Corbin place, or old Arms place was probably built shortly before the Revolution for Capt. Ebenezer Wells or his sons and was known as the Wells Tavern. The old tavern sign is now at Memorial Hall, Deerfield.

Records prior to 1789 - the first recorded deed - presumably go back to early land grants and the subsequent divisions of Green River lands by Deerfield.

Following Shay's Rebellion in 1787 Wells Tavern became the headquarters of Col. Buffington, stationed in Greenfield with 500 men. Nearly all the residents of Colrain were in sympathy with Shay's men. After reverses in Springfield many came to the Tavern accepting amnesty and giving up their arms.

In 1789 Elihu Goodman, who had served in the Revolution, bought the Tavern from the Wells brothers for 125 pounds current money.

Rebecca, daughter of Elihu, in 1816 married Chester Arms, a descendant of the first Arms who served with Turner in the Falls fight.

At his death, Elihu Goodman, making a curious will, bequeathed to his daughter Rebecca, the south half of the dwelling house and to Albert Hull Nims the following:

"8 rods of land with the north half of the dwelling house and

wood house, beginning on the road in the center of the front of the house running westerly thru the middle of the hall to its west end, 2 rods 6 links thence northerly to the middle of the chamber stairs, 3 and 1/2 links thence westerly thru the middle of the stairs and to the west side of the house and to the middle of the wood house to its west end," etc., etc.

Elihu Arms, son of Rebecca and Chester, inherited the property and in 1891 sold it to Gilbert Corbin who later resold to James Howard. In 1940 Helen Garrett purchased it and restored much of its former dignity, reselling to Earl Holtby in 1945.

While records of land grants, deeds, wills, local histories and genealogies were sources of the historical data for this paper, the house itself may well be its own historian.

The architecture shows the influence of the early Georgian period, when two chimneys, replacing the older central one, made possible the wide central hall, with two rooms on either side. With the house becoming more nearly square by the added depth, the hipped roof was devised to cover the increased span. The colonial builder understood the importance of proportion.

The doorway, with plain columns and fan light, the front hall with the wide arch before the recessed hall are of this period. The rest of the interior is simple and unpretentious, probably the work of a carpenter builder using materials at hand and building to last.

The dado, which is used on the first floor is made of tremendous single boards two feet in width and running the full length and width of the rooms. Some of these boards measure 15 feet and were cut from the hearts of virgin pine there being practically no knots.

Of the six fireplaces, no two alike, several show superior workmanship. The kitchen fireplace has the oven flush with the hearth, characteristic of the two chimney period.

The primitive Indian Stairway, steep and narrow, with plain board panel, was probably built to confine marauding Indians to the lower floor with a minimum of manpower. Its very crudeness is in sharp contrast to the graceful arch and columns of the lower hall.

A curious feature of the stair well is the Peak Hole in the side panel. Formerly covered with a sliding panel it afforded an observer concealed on the stairs an unobstructed view of the kitchen.

There is also a space beside one of the chimneys with two well concealed openings, one a small movable panel in the kitchen by the oven, the other an obscure trap door in the floor of an upstairs closet.

The Indian stair, the Peak Hole from it and the concealed space near the chimney might indicate the presence of hostile Indians when the house was built. These could also have served in the hiding of runaway slaves in a station of the underground. Without records there remains only supposition.

The French and Indian Wars were not ended until the Treaty of 1763. For years the Indians had made sporadic raids on Green River settlers. Francis Thompson in his "History of Greenfield", may have had reference to this house in his account of a surprise attack by Indians on a group of five harvesting flax near the river just south of the present Health Camp in 1756. "Being quite a party, they had no guard and placing their guns against a stack of flax, they began their labors. From a neighboring hill a party of savages had watched their proceedings and stealthily creeping thru the grass and stubble they got between the men and their arms and arose and fired but without effect. Benjamin Hastings and young John Graves jumped down the river bank, forded Green River and made their way across Irish Plain, reaching the Arms place in safety."

Over the years, the old house did not escape modernization and some change. At one time one end of the old kitchen, now a living room,

was closed off to form a pantry or cupboard. The small window panes were replaced with large ones, the front door received a large glass panel and the moldings above the dado were removed, and the dado itself disappeared under wall paper. The chimneys were lowered, the clapboards were covered with shingles and a wide front porch covered the fan light over the door.

Helen Gerrett restored the house nearly ten years ago to much of its original state. Many of the farm buildings have been torn down or moved away as was the Jeffords House, once the blacksmith shop where Elihu Goodman shod his own and many of his neighbors horses. The one time wood house now serves as a porch.

After nearly 200 years, the house remains, as its builder intended, to serve future generations.