



Just Over the Line: Chester County and the Underground Railroad

William C. Kashatus

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Located just over the Mason-Dixon line dividing free and slave states, Chester County was an important and dangerous junction on the Underground Railroad's Eastern Line. Predominantly populated by the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, the county saw much debate and conflict brought about by the terrible risk involved in this radical and subversive activity. While traditionally Quakers have been believed to be very cooperative in the enterprise of conducting runaways in their flight to freedom, the analysis offered here by William C. Kashatus shows that it was not that simple. For many Friends, the conflict between the law and their convictions was a difficult one, and the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 only added to their dilemma. This made Chester County a highly dangerous and yet geographically necessary stop on the journey north.

Previous histories of the Underground Railroad in the area have focused on this myth of unified opposition to slavery by the Quakers, but they have also committed another disservice. They ignored the actions and bravery of the African Americans who not only used the passages for their own escape but also facilitated the escape of others. This new history of Chester County's link in the Railroad attempts to correct that omission. Rather than propagate the history that the abolitionists themselves constructed, making themselves the heroes of the story, Kashatus digs deeper to find a more balanced view of this rich and fascinating history. This book is being published in conjunction with a new exhibit at the Chester County Historical Society that focuses on the Underground Railroad in Chester County.

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