

If only the walls could talk at Rocky Acre Farm...

Would they tell secrets of Underground Railroad?

By Marty Crisp
Sunday News Staff Writer

Living in a house that was once a stop on the Underground Railroad would be exciting.

You could imagine a tap on your window late at night signaling that slaves escaping from the south needed to be hidden in your attic or maybe in a secret closet behind shelves in your dining room or in a concealed vault under your barn.

You could imagine the fugitives, traveling by cover of darkness, fleeing across Lancaster County on their way to Philadelphia, and, eventually Canada, with only the clothes on their backs.

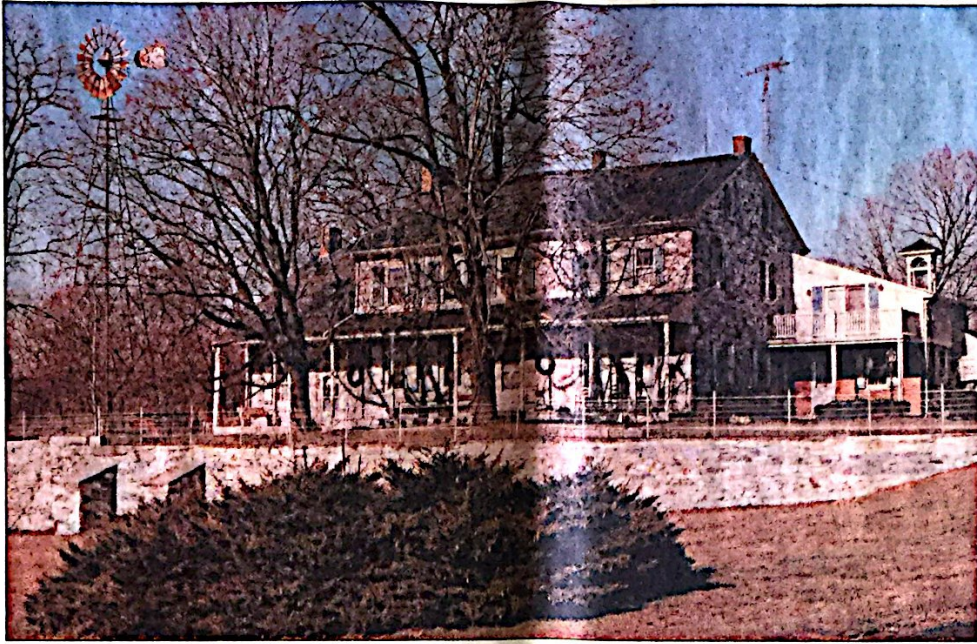
Just imagine, if your walls could talk, the stories of danger and intrigue they might tell.

Because the Underground Railroad, which flourished from 1830 to 1860, was a shifting network of "stations" along many routes northward, very little in the way of written records has survived to verify numerous claims to Underground Railroad distinction.

Although an estimated 50,000 slaves escaped with the help of this abolitionist network, the National Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 levied fines of \$1,000 plus six months imprisonment as punishment for helping runaways, thus giving further impetus to keeping the whole thing strictly secret. An 1888 report by historian Wilbur Siebert said "operators were quiet persons, little known outside the communities where they lived."

One claimant to the Underground mantle is Rocky Acre Farm in Mount Joy. A 130-acre dairy farm owned by Galen and Eileen Benner, Rocky Acre, 1020 Pinkerton Road, Mount Joy, about a mile down the road from Groff Farm Restaurant, was built in the 1770s from limestone quarried on its own, well-named rocky acres.

The two-and-a-half-story colonial-style farmhouse is a compilation of the original two-centuries-old structure, two additions built in the 1800s, and one addition erected in 1974.



Much of Rocky Acre Farm's history is still a mystery.

Sunday News photos/Jack Leonard

The oldest part of the house, with its walk-in fireplace and "Indian" door (a wooden panel in the bottom of the door slides up over the glass panes above, supposedly to keep light from escaping), is now a rental apartment.

In that apartment's upstairs bedroom, an area that once served as an attic smokehouse, the Benners discovered a hidden room when they moved into the home in 1959. Back under the eaves was a long, narrow space — about three feet deep and running the width of the house — that could only be entered by removing several yellow pineboards. The Benners eventually used those boards to build a bedroom closet upstairs in the third addition.

But when a woman who used to live in the house at the turn of the century, stopped by for a visit one day in 1987 and talked about the home's Underground Railroad connections, the hidden room's use seemed apparent.

The house is located about four

miles from the Susquehanna River, close to a spring that was once a popular area watering hole. The Benners say they've been told that runaways went from their home to some nearby caves as they moved along their escape route.

"Impossible," said Jack Loose, president of the Lancaster County Historical Society. "There were three routes through the county, and none of them were north of a line drawn between Columbia and Gap. Besides, lots of houses had hidden rooms."

Still Loose won't discount the story completely, saying, "Any legend or story adds color to a home. There's nothing wrong with that."

"It's not impossible, given the nature of the Underground Railroad," responded Leroy Hopkins, an associate professor of German at Millersville University and a respected authority on local black history.

"They're only about 10,000 of

them (places that claim to be former Underground stations) in Lancaster County," teased Hopkins, with a wry chuckle. Hopkins said he agrees with Charles Spotts, author of "The Pilgrim's Pathways," a 1960s study that suggested there were probably 25-30 stations operating locally.

"Mount Joy had a small community of blacks. In fact, their original African Methodist Episcopal church building is now Mount Joy's historical society building. The presence of that black community mitigates for it (Rocky Acres being a station)," said Hopkins, who explained that the best place to hide an escaping slave was among free blacks.

"There's very little you can prove. After all, it was not an organized entity. It was a clandestine operation. Mount Joy is a little off the beaten track, though."

"It was an act of defiance (to run a station)," continued Hopkins thoughtfully. "It could have been one person's individual statement."

Whatever the truth might be, Galen and Eileen Benner are proud enough of their possible Underground connection that they prominently mention it in the first paragraph of their bed-and-breakfast brochure.

But it's not the history that draws 1,500 visitors a year to this working farm. It's the rocking chairs on the wide front porch, the comfortable bedrooms with their original chair rails, and the friendly, walnut drop-leaf table that stretches the length of the dining room and seats 28.

It's the separate stone arch cellar with arched door, the big yellow bank barn nearby, and the 154 Holsteins who live there.

The foot-wide window sills, the wide-plank oak floors, and the unusual butterfly shelves in three built-in cupboards all remind visitors of the home's long history. "We tried to keep the original part (built in the 1770s) the way it was," said Eileen. "The other parts, we made up."

"Who'd want those dirty old things?"

The house the Benners moved into in 1959 had no water (other than a kitchen pump), no indoor bathrooms, and no heat. For the first year, they used the pump, powered by a still-standing outdoor windmill, for all their water needs.

A family farm, purchased by Eileen's grandfather in 1920, restoration and renovation of Rocky Acre quickly became a fulltime project for the couple, who didn't actually buy the property until 1974.

Besides plumbing and electrical installations, they took on jobs like removing paneling to uncover corner fireplaces and stripping the paint off the original wooden doors to restore them to a more natural appearance.

In 1974, they built a family room off their modernized kitchen, including a fireplace built from stone again quarried from the surrounding farm.

Eileen, 53, grew up on a steer and tobacco farm only a mile from Rocky Acre, while Galen, 56, grew up on a 20-acre general farm in Bareville.

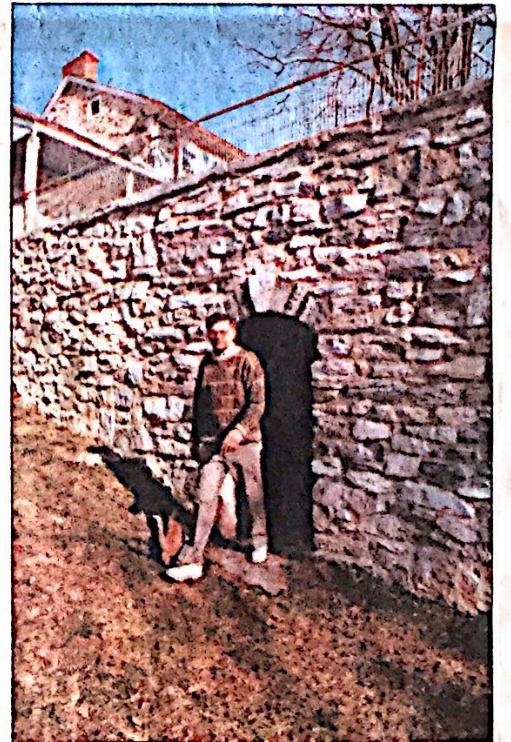
"I was too busy to be a history buff before," mused Galen. "But since my son took over farm operations last April, I think I'll enjoy looking some of this up."

The parents of four grown sons, and a 16-year-old daughter still living at home, the Benners have kept their sense of humor as well as their sense of history when it comes to the 200-year-old structure they call home.

"When our sons heard that slaves used to stay here," recalled Galen, with a wink. "They all joked that, considering the farm work they had to do, there were still slaves here!"

"We kept the fireplaces and the cupboards," agreed Galen. "But you can't afford to keep something just to look at. The parts that were just attics were impractical. They smoked meats upstairs. I must have hauled out about eight inches deep of dirt."

"I'm not sorry we took out the smokehouses," added Eileen.



Galen Benner exits from an underground cellar.



Eileen and Galen Benner used limestone from surrounding land for this fireplace.