

York salutes mogul who saved slaves

By David Dagan

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William C. Goodridge had a barbershop and an employment agency. He sold everything from baths to candy to newspapers. He was a landlord and eventually the owner of railcars that ran from York east to Philadelphia and west to Pittsburgh.

It was a 19th-century success story.

But behind the haircuts and the candy was a side of the business that Goodridge never talked about. He ran it below a kitchen trapdoor, just above the Mason-Dixon Line and on the knife-edge of American history.

One day, as the story is told, a box from Baltimore arrived at the Goodridge business. Inside the crate was a human being. He was a slave who had shipped himself to York.

At least one slave-catcher was already lying in wait to intercept the fugitive, said Scott Butcher, a Goodridge historian. The businessman's employees loaded the box onto a carriage and sped away with the bounty hunter in pursuit. They made it into a gated courtyard and locked out the slave-catcher long enough to spirit the fugitive away to one of Goodridge's hiding places.

It was the Underground Railroad at work.

Goodridge was a major figure in the network that smuggled slaves to freedom, a man whom Butcher compares to Underground Railroad legends such as Harriet Tubman and William Still. Now, the nonprofit Crispus Attucks Association of York is working on a project to convert Goodridge's home on West Philadelphia Street in York into a museum. The site already has been approved as a part of a national network of Underground Railroad sites.

After York, the destination for fugitives was usually Christiana, Lancaster County, which had a large black community where they could blend in. Many went on to Philadelphia and then north to Canada. Goodridge played his part in these journeys with a mix of discretion and daring.

Goodridge rarely told his stories, but some accounts have survived. In 1859, Goodridge hid a fugitive in the third floor of a building while the newspaper that rented space on the ground floor was blaring headlines about the wanted man, Butcher said. The fugitive was Osborne Perry Anderson, a black man who participated in abolitionist John Brown's attack on a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry - then in Virginia, now in West Virginia. Anderson got away.

But before Goodridge could help others, he had to build his business against stupefying odds. Goodridge was not like other prosperous businessmen of his age.

His father was white, his mother was black, and he was born a slave. He spent a lifetime navigating these ambiguities.

"He was basically accepted in the white community, although at the same time, he was very active in the black community," said Wm. Lee Smallwood, who began researching Goodridge in the 1960s and persuaded the state to place a historic marker outside the businessman's home.

Smallwood impersonates Goodridge at historical events.

"He is an individual who is entrepreneurial, he's a talkative individual, he's a likeable individual, he's a well-dressed individual, and people just tend to gravitate to him," Smallwood said.

Born in Maryland, Goodridge was enslaved to a Baltimore doctor but then sent to apprentice with a tanner in York, with the idea that he would eventually earn his freedom. Historians do not know why Goodridge was given that break, but the speculation is that his father was a man of prominence, Butcher said.

Goodridge began his career as a barber in a shop on Centre Square in York, now known as Continental Square. He bought out the owner and began expanding the business, bringing in newspapers, offering baths, even selling toys imported from Germany. He began buying properties and became a landlord. He built what was for a time the tallest building in York. And when the railroad came to York, Goodridge started his line of rail cars. Meanwhile, he hid fugitives in a cellar below his kitchen, in a peach orchard behind his home and probably at other sites, Butcher said. Goodridge also may have moved people in hidden railcar compartments.

It is one measure of Goodridge's influence that he managed to rally support from white leaders against the conviction of his son for rape in the 1860s. Supporters wrote in a petition that a white man would not have been convicted given the evidence, Butcher has found. Goodridge eventually won a pardon for his son from then-Gov. Andrew Gregg Curtin, Butcher and Smallwood said. Mingling between blacks and whites was not uncommon in 19th-century York, the researchers said. Folk art shows people of both races together in everyday scenes, Butcher said.

Other black businesspeople in Central Pennsylvania also achieved prosperity and risked it all to help refugees from slavery. They fit into a developing image of the Underground Railroad primarily as a system of blacks helping themselves rather than a network of benevolent whites, said Leroy Hopkins, a longtime researcher of black history in Pennsylvania.

In Lancaster County, Stephen Smith and William Whipper ran a Columbia lumber business and helped many people to freedom. Behind such figures was an emerging middle class of black residents, men who held jobs such as barbers, chimney sweeps and glaziers, Hopkins said. Historians are only starting to tell the stories of leaders such as Goodridge, Smith and Whipper, he said.

"We're at the very, very beginning," Hopkins said.

The museum will be known as the William C. Goodridge Freedom House and Underground Railroad Museum, but the project is still \$200,000 short of funds required to complete renovations on the building, said Carol Kauffman, community-development director for Crispus Attucks. The association would like \$500,000 more to endow the museum.

Goodridge's business career in York ended badly, Butcher said. The businessman lost almost everything by 1858 and eventually moved to Michigan, where he had family, Butcher said. A family photography business survived and prospered, though. Butcher said many stories about Goodridge will never be uncovered, but those that are known should be more widely appreciated.

"I think a lot of people still don't understand who he was and what he did," Butcher said.