American Women’s Heritage Society

Guide Training Booklet for the

Underground Railroad Museum

at Belmont Mansion

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October 2007
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American Women’s Heritage Society Mission and History

The American Women's Heritage Society (AWHS) was founded in November 1986 for the purpose of maintaining and restoring historic Belmont Mansion. Incorporated into Philadelphia's Fairmount Park in 1868, Belmont Mansion had endured numerous additions and alterations for use as a restaurant and suffered from deferred maintenance and abandonment. Before the Society’s move to the mansion, the building had lain vacant for several years until 1985 when it was partially renovated so that it could be used as a showcase house for the Junior League. AWHS is the first organization to operate Belmont Mansion primarily as an historic house museum.

The American Women's Heritage Society’s mission is to preserve, restore, collect and educate the public regarding the background and significance of the Historic Belmont Mansion, especially its use in the Underground Railroad; the role of the original owners – the Peters Family – in the Abolitionist Movement; and the relationship of the Mansion to African American heritage and history in Philadelphia. AWHS is the only African-American women's organization to administer an historic mansion in Fairmount Park. This non-profit historic preservation organization raises funds from membership fees, admissions, rentals, grants, and donations.

The American Women's Heritage Society, under the leadership of Audrey Johnson-Thornton, has succeeded in drawing attention to the importance of Belmont Mansion. In a 1987 Assessment of Ten Historic Structure in Fairmount Park considered to be at risk, Belmont Mansion was singled out as the most significant structure studied and among the most important in Fairmount Park. This work was followed by a complete historical study and architectural analysis published as the Belmont Mansion Historic Structures Report in 1992. Belmont Mansion and the Cottage Complex have been restored in two phases, the second of which will be finished in February 2007. Major funders were the City of Philadelphia, the National Endowment for the Humanities Save America’s Treasures Program, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the William Penn Foundation.

Through the Society, Belmont Mansion has also become an interpretive and educational center for the history and culture of African-Americans and women. The Society seeks to expose the African-American community to the fine arts (literature, art, dance, and music) as well as build bridges of communication and interaction amongst the various ethnic communities in Philadelphia. Belmont Mansion also serves as a site for wedding receptions, private parties, and meetings of civic and cultural organizations.

The American Women's Heritage Society has sponsored numerous significant exhibitions. In 1987 the Society exhibited commissioned portraits of African-American women from Philadelphia who made significant contributions to the arts, education, law, politics, and medicine. For the "We the People 200" celebration, the lives of 19th century African-American Philadelphians, including James and Charlotte Forten, were recreated through furnished interiors at Belmont Mansion. In 1989 the Tri-centennial Celebration of Belmont featured a gathering of the descendents of William and Richard Peters, the original owners of Belmont Mansion, and an exhibition of artifacts loaned by family members. Annual Black History Month and Women’s History Month exhibits have included "From Whence We Came", the history of black women's organizations, and "Historical Black Images and Film: Where We Were to Where We Are."
Belmont Mansion Interpretive Objectives

The major interpretive theme is:
The people who lived and worked at Belmont Mansion were committed to the idea of freedom for themselves and others and believed that one person can make a difference for a cause. Their willingness to act on their beliefs serves as a model for people today.

Interpretive sub-themes include:
1. The people at Belmont Mansion believed that slavery is inhumane and that they couldn’t stand by and allow it to continue.
2. The people at Belmont Mansion struggled to balance their desire for social justice with their respect for existing laws.
3. Economic independence and freedom go hand in hand.
4. The unknown stories in American history, particularly the history of African Americans in Philadelphia, continually need to be discovered and told.
5. The work of realizing the ideal that “all men are created equal” is not yet finished. The enslavement of African Americans and their struggle for freedom has left a legacy that affects race relations today. The visitor can help by pledging a personal commitment to make a difference.

As a result of the interpretive program, the visitor will be able to:
1. Describe the Underground Railroad and runaways’ experience in Philadelphia.
2. Describe how Belmont Mansion was used as a stop on the Underground Railroad.
3. Explain how the story of the Underground Railroad at Belmont Mansion was discovered and why the unknown stories in American history, particularly the history of African Americans in Philadelphia, continually need to be discovered and told.
4. Describe the Abolitionist Movement in Philadelphia and the Peters Family’s abolition activities.
5. Explain how the Peters Family used Belmont Mansion and the Belmont Estate and why Belmont Mansion is a significant architectural landmark.
6. Discuss ways in which the actions of the runaways and those who helped them in the Underground Railroad and the Abolitionist Movement serve as models for opposing social injustice today.
Summary Answers to Belmont Mansion Interpretive Program Queries

1. Describe the Underground Railroad and the runaways’ experience in Philadelphia.

The Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in Pennsylvania in 1780 stated "every Negro and Mulatto child born within the State after the passing of the Act would be free upon reaching age twenty-eight." The enslaved in Pennsylvania had to be registered with authorities by November 1780; those not registered were by definition free men and women. In 1790 there were 2099 free and 373 enslaved African Americans among the 54,388 residents of Philadelphia. By 1840 there were 19,831 free and 2 enslaved African Americans among the 258,037 Philadelphians. Since slavery continued in the states to the south, Pennsylvania became a destination for runaways on their way to freedom.

Many runaways fled not only for their freedom but also to escape inhumane treatment including whippings and the forced separation of parents and their children. To escape, the enslaved had to overcome many obstacles. First they had to learn about the possibility of reaching freedom. The enslaved heard about the Underground Railroad from members of the free black community, enslaved people who had already escaped, sympathetic neighbors (black and white), church members, and members of anti-slavery and abolition societies. Songs and quilts were also used to convey secret messages about routes of escape because the enslaved were forbidden to read or write. Then they had to face the fear of recapture. Armed men with dogs hunted runaways. Punishments for runaways caught escaping included death, beating, whipping, attack by dogs, shackling, and separation from family and friends.

Before the Civil War, Blacks and Whites helped runaways escape to freedom in the Northern states of the Union along a network of routes called the Underground Railroad. Escape routes from Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas ran through Philadelphia. Along the way they traveled on foot, by boat, train, wagon, and even carriage. Runaways were hidden in homes, barns, caves, churches and other localities that were called Underground Railroad stops or stations. Their helpers were called stationmasters and conductors. Helping runaways escape was illegal, and the people who sheltered them during their escape took a large personal risk for their actions. Some conductors like Harriet Tubman were formerly enslaved. Others like Lucretia Mott were members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) who opposed slavery because of their religious beliefs. Passmore Williamson was arrested for aiding the runaways Jane Johnson and her sons. Their story inspired Lorene Cary’s *The Price of a Child*.

Since runaways in Pennsylvania risked recapture and return to owners in the south under the Federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, they had to decide whether to stay in the Philadelphia area and risk recapture or continue to flee north to Canada and secure freedom. Rather than become a final destination, Philadelphia became an important stopover on the Underground Railroad for many runaways on the way north. Other Underground Railroad stations in the Philadelphia area include Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church, Johnson House, and Peter Mott House, and possibly other Fairmount Park houses that belonged to abolitionists such as Judge William Lewis and Judge Joseph Hemphill (Strawberry Mansion), William Rawle (Laurel Hill), Samuel Breck (Sweetbriar), and Judge William Coleman and Isaac Wharton (Woodford).
2. Describe how Belmont Mansion was used as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

At Columbia, Pennsylvania, Underground Railroad conductor William Wright met runaways from Maryland and Virginia who had crossed the Susquehanna River Bridge. Some were sent to Philadelphia hidden in the false end of a boxcar owned by the African-American lumber merchants Stephen Smith and William Whipper around 1847. Near Philadelphia they got off at the head of the inclined plane of the Columbia and Philadelphia Railroad, where an agent was waiting to receive them (R. C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad*, Lancaster PA 1883, reprinted New York 1968: 46; William Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, Philadelphia 1872, reprinted Medford NJ 2005: 113, 525). Approaching Philadelphia, the Columbia and Philadelphia Railroad, part of Philadelphia’s early industrial development, crossed the Schuylkill River at Belmont. From 1829 to 1853 the train cars had to be lowered to the river on the inclined plane crossing the Belmont estate. The head of the inclined plane was right next to Belmont Mansion (S.M. Rea and J. Miller, *Map of Blockley Township*, Philadelphia [1849]).

Runaways disembarking from the railroad boxcars may have hidden in several places on the Belmont estate. At this time Belmont Mansion, owned by the abolitionist Richard Peters, Jr., was not occupied by the Peters family or renters (Richard Peters, Jr. cash accounts for Peters estate at Belmont 1828-1848). Belmont Mansion, commanding the view down to the river and isolated from others, was well situated for use by the Underground Railroad. Runaways hiding in the attic of Belmont Mansion may have left the markings on its walls. The Boelsen Cottage, still standing on the banks of the Schuylkill River, was only occasionally rented and might have provided another refuge. The unoccupied Peter’s Island, offshore from the Boelsen Cottage in the Schuylkill River, would have made another excellent hiding place.

Former tenants of Belmont Mansion suggested that an underground passageway ran from Belmont towards the river, echoing the tale of a similar escape tunnel at Sarah Robinson Peters’ family home in Delaware and an underground passageway to a bathhouse near the river from Lansdowne, the mansion next to Belmont. Archaeological research around Belmont Mansion shows that early 20th century changes in the landscape disturbed any original nineteenth century features, so any tunnel that existed may now be gone.

The Peters family was sympathetic to the plight of runaways but, as officials of the court, Judge Peters and his son Richard Peters, Jr. could not have publicly acknowledged direct involvement in the Underground Railroad. Still, knowing the feelings of the Peters family, any of the numerous tenant farmers, servants, and laborers living at or near Belmont might have come to the aid of the runaways.

3. Explain how the story of the Underground Railroad at Belmont Mansion was discovered and why the unknown stories in American history, particularly the history of African Americans in Philadelphia, continually need to be discovered and told.

Twenty years ago Belmont Mansion was not being used and was at risk of being demolished. The American Women’s Heritage Society under the leadership of Audrey Johnson-Thornton saved it and sponsored the historical research, building rehabilitation, and interpretative programming that resulted in this museum. The connection between Belmont
Mansion and the Underground Railroad was unknown until AWHS sponsored research that uncovered this significant part of Philadelphia’s history. Underground Railroad conductors kept their work secret until after the Civil War because helping runaways was illegal. When slavery was abolished, William Still and others published first-hand accounts of their Underground Railroad activities. Belmont Mansion has now been designated the first Underground Railroad Freedom Station in Pennsylvania by the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, an Underground Railroad House Museum by the City of Philadelphia, and an Underground Railroad Network to Freedom site by the National Park Service.

It is School District of Philadelphia's policy "to provide a well-rounded program on African and Afro-American history and culture for every child in all areas of the curriculum as an integral part of his (her) total school experience." The instructional goals, which are the foundation of the program, include:

1. destroying myths and stereotypes as they relate to people of African ancestry,
2. helping all students gain an appreciation and understanding of the cultural heritage of people of African ancestry,
3. helping each student develop a frame of reference and a conceptual basis for understanding and attacking the persistent problems resulting from racism in American society, and
4. helping students develop the skills of inquiry to differentiate between factual knowledge and propaganda.

Telling the history of the Underground Railroad and Abolitionist Movement at Belmont Mansion helps fulfill these goals.

4. Describe the Abolitionist Movement in Philadelphia and the Peters Family’s abolition activities.

In the 18th century the Abolitionist Movement in Philadelphia used political advocacy to end slavery. The owner of Belmont Mansion, Judge Richard Peters, became one of the first non-Quaker members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1787. The Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery kept copies of manumission papers that proved formerly enslaved had earned or been given their freedom. Free African-Americans in Philadelphia needed written proof of their freedom to escape kidnapping by bounty hunters because the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 allowed slave owners or their agents to arrest African Americans as runaways without warrants in any state and then, after obtaining a certificate from a magistrate, to enslave them. Judge Peters worked to overturn the Federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 after witnessing injustices when he presided over hearings about the return of runaways to slavery.

Judge Peters was a neighbor and friend of Judge William Lewis, who wrote the Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in Pennsylvania in 1780. But the Act meant those born in slavery and registered with the state would not be free until they were twenty-eight years old. In 1790 there were still 373 enslaved African Americans in Philadelphia, according to the United States census. Although the number had decreased to 85 by 1800, there were still two African Americans held in slavery in Philadelphia in 1840. Although Pennsylvanians could no longer legally import the enslaved, they could buy and sell those who had been registered. In 1811, Judge Peters purchased an enslaved 25-year-old woman named Cornelia Wells and her daughter Jane from his neighbor Thomas Morgan. Although Cornelia still had three years left in her
indenture, Peters freed her and her daughter immediately. Cornelia worked as a cook at Belmont Mansion for three years under an indenture agreement. Then she was paid as a washerwoman, living on the Belmont estate at the Boelsen Cottage on the banks of the Schuylkill River from 1814 to 1830.

Philadelphia abolitionist also sought legal means to end slavery throughout the United States. Judge Peters promoted American economic development in agriculture without the use of slave labor in a report to President Washington in 1791.

Richard Peters, Jr. followed his father’s commitment to the Abolitionist Movement, joining Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery in 1800. As the Official Reporter to the United States Supreme Court in 1842, Richard, Jr. published the legal case Prigg v. Pennsylvania, in which the Supreme Court ruled that states were not obliged to do anything to enforce the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. The federal law was still in force, but only the federal government was required to enforce it. This ruling stimulated Underground Railroad activity until the new Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 provided federal commissioners to enforce the law. Earlier Richard Peters, Jr. had served as the lawyer for the African-American businessman James Forten from 1814 until the mid-1830s and the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in 1820. When Richard Peters, Jr. was President of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, he gave James Forten an opportunity to speak at their convention in 1818. He organized opposition in Pennsylvania to the admission of Missouri as a state permitting slave ownership in 1819.

Not everyone in Philadelphia supported the abolition of slavery. In 1838 slavery supporters burned the abolitionists’ meeting place, Pennsylvania Hall. So why did Judge Peters and his son get involved in the Abolitionist Movement? Judge Peters fought in the American War of Independence and served as Secretary of the Board of War and was an elected representative until he was appointed Judge of the District Court of the United States for Pennsylvania in 1792. They both believed that “all men are created equal,” as stated in the Declaration of Independence, applied to all races. They believed that slavery was inhumane and that the existing laws allowing slavery were in conflict with American ideals of social justice.

5. Explain how the Peters Family used Belmont Mansion and the Belmont Estate and why Belmont Mansion is a significant architectural landmark.

William Peters purchased Belmont Cottage and the surrounding farmland in 1742. He designed and built Belmont Mansion as a home for his American family and converted the surrounding farmland into ornamental gardens. William Peters was a loyalist and returned to England before the American War of Independence in 1767 after resigning his position as Secretary to the Land Office because of a corruption scandal. William Peters’ son, Judge Richard Peters, inherited Belmont Mansion in 1786 and turned it into an experimental farm. He experimented with the use of lime plaster to fertilize fields and introduced new crops and livestock. As President of the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, Judge Peters promoted agricultural developments that helped America become self-sufficient. Tenant farmers worked the land and servants performed the household work. Many of the “Founding Fathers” of the United States, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Marquis de Lafayette, Baron von Steuben, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, visited Judge Peters at Belmont Mansion. After Judge Peters died in 1828, Richard Peters Jr. initiated the
commercial development of the property but no family members lived at Belmont Mansion. Rent from tenant farmers, the Belmont Cottage Hotel, and other houses on the estate produced income for the Peters family. Stone quarries and limekilns produced building materials for sale. During this time the Columbia and Philadelphia Railroad was built on the Belmont Estate and the third floor was added to Belmont Mansion. After Richard Peters, Jr. died in 1848, trustees for the Peters Family heirs managed the Belmont estate as a commercial resort until the Fairmount Park Commission purchased it in 1868.

The 1745 Belmont Mansion is the first fully developed Palladian style structure in the American colonies. Palladian style means in the style designed by Palladio, an Italian Renaissance architect. Palladio built suburban villas, which gave gentlemen from the city a nearby place to restore the body and mind in a carefully planned "natural" landscape. William Peters, the designer and builder of Belmont Mansion, followed examples of English Palladian style country estate villas. These villas characteristically have a central hall which takes up over half of the first floor, flanked by small side chambers and a small winding staircase on the side, just as seen at Belmont Mansion. (Note that the central stair tower is a slightly later addition.) Symmetry in architectural features is another important characteristic of the Palladian style. When viewing the interior walls in the central hall at Belmont Mansion, the visitor sees a symmetrical arrangement of fireplaces, doors, and windows. In 1762 separate but dependent buildings, connected to the Mansion by covered piazzas, were added. In the 1790s these buildings were replaced with one-story wings off the central hall, housing a parlor and a library (later removed), and a columned front porch was added. The third floor and cottage complex were added in the mid-1800s.

The central hall in Belmont Mansion contains the earliest modeled plaster ceiling in America. It is an original design composed of the arms of the Peters family, musical instruments, scallop shells, and floral garlands. It contains individual elements found in ceilings known from 18th century England and illustrated in William Jones's *The Gentlemen's or Builder's Companion* (1739). Similar ceilings in England are known to be the work of traveling Italian plasterers.

The early 18th century Belmont Cottage (now the gift shop) is the only preserved example of this unique vernacular type of farmhouse, possibly incorporating a mixture of ethnic traditions. The cottage was the first structure built on the site. Its original rubble stone walls were galleted (that is, small stones were included in the mortar). The cottage has a surviving asymmetrical roof (a two story front sloping to a lower rear elevation), found in rural English houses but rarely preserved from 17th-18th century America. The original placements of the doors and windows on the facades were also asymmetrical. The asymmetry of the design is completely opposite from the strict symmetry of the Palladian style Mansion. The reconstructed interior layout, composed of a square divided into a hall and a parlor with corner fireplaces, was a mixture of English, German, and possibly Swedish house designs.

The original ornamental gardens included an axial gravel walk leading to a summerhouse and then on to an obelisk. Formal gardens composed of a labyrinth of low cedar and spruce hedges with classical statuary of ancient gods Apollo, Diana, and Mercury lay on one side; a wood cut into vistas with a Chinese temple lay on the other.
6. Discuss ways in which the actions of the runaways and those who helped them in the Underground Railroad and the Abolitionist Movement serve as models for opposing social injustice today.

Suggested questions and information for stimulating discussion:

Do we agree with the idea that “all men are created equal” applies to all Americans?
The Declaration of Independence (1776) states “all men are created equal,” but rights and protection under the laws established in the United States Constitution (1791) varied by state. Only white male citizens over 21 who owned property, paid taxes, and could read and write English originally had the right to vote in Pennsylvania. The following laws and amendments to the Constitution extended rights and protection to others:
  1856: North Carolina was the last state to eliminate property ownership as a voting requirement
  1865: 13th amendment abolished slavery
  1868: 14th amendment granted citizenship to all born or naturalized in the U.S. and equal protection under the law for all citizens
  1870: 15th amendment granted voting rights to male citizens over 21 regardless of race, color or previous condition of servitude
  1920: 19th amendment granted voting rights regardless of sex
  1924: Indian Citizenship Act granted Native Americans the right to dual citizenship in the United States and their tribal government
  1964: 24th amendment abolished poll taxes
  1964: Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination in voting, public access, work, and school based on race, national origin, religion, and gender
  1965: Voting Rights Act abolished literacy tests
  1971: 26th amendment granted voting rights regardless of age if 18 or older

Are there ways in which some Americans are not treated equally today?
Economic inequality is evident when 50% of all income goes to the top one-fifth of households. One in five children live in poverty, showing age inequality. Gender inequality is clear when women earn 81 cents compared to every dollar a man earns in the same job.

In what ways might one oppose the unequal treatment of others?
Respect people whose abilities, beliefs, culture, race, sexual identity or other characteristics are different from one’s own.
Examine one’s own biases and work to overcome them.
Set a positive example for one’s family and friends.
Work for equality in one’s own community.
Speak out against hate and injustice.

Are there reasons to break the law when opposing unjust laws and what are the consequences?
People used civil disobedience to protest unjust laws in the American Civil Rights Movement. Their actions included public demonstrations, sit-ins, and refusal to pay taxes, for which some people were beaten, arrested, fined, and/or sentenced to prison.
Does slavery still exist?
In the world today there are more enslaved people than before the American Civil War: 27 million. This is more than twice the number of people taken from Africa during the entire trans-Atlantic slave trade. These poor, uneducated, women, children, indigenous or marginalized people are forced or tricked into slavery in violation of international law. The CIA and U.S. State Department estimate that each year over 50,000 women and children are transported into the United States by force or deception for domestic work and prostitution.

How can Americans help free enslaved people?
Share what you have learned with family, friends, neighbors, classmates, and coworkers.
Support organizations working to end slavery (see list under Recommended Internet Resources).
Tell all governments to enforce anti-slavery laws.
Belmont Mansion History Timeline

1683  Jan Boelsen, a Dutch land speculator, granted property at Belmont
1739  William Peters immigrated to Philadelphia from England
1742  William Peters bought the Belmont estate and began building Belmont Mansion
1788  William Peters returned to England leaving Belmont in the care of his son Richard
1787  Richard Peters serves as the Secretary of the Board of War until 1781
1780  Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in Pennsylvania passed
1787  Richard Peters joined the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery (PAS)
1792  Richard Peters became Judge of the Pennsylvania District Court of the United States
1793  Fugitive Slave Act allowed slave owners to capture runaways in free states
1800  Peters Jr. joined Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery (PAS)
1804  Underground Railroad began when General Boudes of Columbia PA refused to return runaways in
defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793
1804  Schuylkill Permanent Bridge opened and the Peters Family lived at Belmont all year
1808  U.S. passes law forbidding the direct importation of enslaved Africans into the U.S.
1811  Judge Peters purchased and freed the enslaved Cornelia Wells and her daughter Jane
1814  Cornelia Wells resided at Boelsen Cottage until 1830
1814  Peters Jr. served as lawyer to James Forten until mid-1830s
1816  Peters Jr. expressed opposition to Fugitive Slave Act in letter to PAS
1818  Peters Jr. presided at American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery at which
James Forten spoke
1819  Peters Jr. expressed opposition to Missouri Compromise in letter to PAS
1820  Missouri Compromise established a dividing line between free and slave areas
1821  Peters Jr. resigned from Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery
1828  Judge Peters died; Peters family no longer lived at Belmont
1828  Peters Jr. appointed Official Reporter of U.S. Supreme Court
1829  Columbia-Philadelphia Railroad built across Belmont Estate
1830  The anti-slavery newspaper The Liberator published by William Lloyd Garrison with
financing from James Forten’s son, Robert
1837  Vigilant Association of Philadelphia formed to aid runaways
1838  Slavery supporters burn Pennsylvania Hall, where Philadelphia abolitionists met
1842  Peters Jr. published Prigg v. Pennsylvania, which made Fugitive Slave Act ineffective and
stimulated Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania
1843  Peters Jr. forced out of position as Official Reporter of U.S. Supreme Court
1847  Runaways sent from Columbia PA to Philadelphia on Columbia-Philadelphia Railroad were met by
an Underground Railroad agent at the head of the inclined plane on Belmont Estate until 1850
1848  Peters Jr. died; trustees for his heirs converted Belmont Estate into a resort
1849  Fugitive Slave Act reestablished right to capture runaways in free states
1853  Columbia-Philadelphia Railroad inclined plane abandoned by this date
1861  American Civil War began
1863  Emancipation Proclamation freed the enslaved
1865  U.S. Constitution 13th Amendment abolished slavery and the Civil War ended
1868  Fairmount Park Commission purchased Belmont Estate to preserve the quality of the water supplied to
City of Philadelphia residents by reducing industrial development along the Schuylkill River
1872  Publication of The Underground Railroad by William Still
1886  American Women’s Heritage Society founded to preserve Belmont Mansion
William Peters (born 1702, died 1786): Upper-class English lawyer who immigrated to Philadelphia in 1739 to escape personal problems with his wife in England and for economic opportunity because his wife had control over the income from his English land rents. William's brother Richard, an Episcopal minister who had become Proprietary Secretary of Pennsylvania (overseeing land transactions), helped him obtain work as a lawyer and an agent for the Penn family in enforcing the collection of their Pennsylvania land rents. When William gained control of his assets in England upon the death of his wife and father in 1742, he purchased the Belmont estate and began building Belmont Mansion. He was the architect of both Belmont Mansion and Cliveden in Germantown. As a result of a corruption scandal in 1766, William was obliged to resign the position of Secretary of the Land Office in which he had followed his brother. William was said to have exacted excess fees, accepted bribes, and engaged in land speculation. In 1768 he abandoned his American family and returned to England.

Mary Breintnall Peters: Daughter of a Philadelphia leather artisan who had been a Quaker until he was disowned from the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting for drinking. She was also the niece and heir of Mary Andrews, the daughter of the Colonial Governor of New York. William bought the Belmont estate as a place for her to reside and she bore him two sons there (William, Jr. and Richard) before the death of William's English wife allowed them to marry in 1744. William left the care of Belmont to her and their son Richard when he returned to England. Mary remained in the Philadelphia area and managed her property with assistance from both her son and her husband's brother Richard.

Richard Peters (born 1744, died 1828): American son of William and Mary Breintnall Peters, born at Belmont. He managed Belmont from 1768 on and inherited it from his father in 1786. A lawyer like his father, he became an American Revolutionary Army officer and Secretary of the Board of War and Ordinance. After the war he was an elected official in the early American government, serving as Representative to Congress under the Articles of Confederation, Speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, and Pennsylvania State Senator. From 1792 on, he served as Judge of the District Court of the United States for Pennsylvania. As a member of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, he actively opposed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which allowed the capture of runaways who had sought freedom in Pennsylvania. As President of the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, he was an early environmental scientist, turning Belmont into a model experimental farm. Richard sponsored the construction of the Schuylkill Permanent Bridge at Market Street, completed in 1804, thereby creating continuous access between Philadelphia and its western suburbs, including Belmont. Among his peers, Richard was known for his wit, characterized by comical anecdotes and puns.

Sarah Robinson Peters (died 1804): Ward of American Revolutionary Army General Anthony Wayne and sister of an American Revolutionary Army officer, her family home was at Naaman's in Maryland. She married Richard Peters in 1776. They had three sons and two daughters.
Sally Peters (died ca. 1850): Daughter of Richard and Sarah Robinson Peters, she managed the household at Belmont Mansion from her mother's death in 1804 until her father's death in 1828. Unmarried, she participated in literary and religious women's groups and was an advocate of useful work for women.

Cornelia Wells (died 1830): Enslaved African American purchased and freed, along with her daughter Jane, by Richard Peters in 1811. Cornelia served a three-year indenture as cook to the Peters family at Belmont. Then she moved to the Boelsen Cottage on the banks of the Schuylkill River within the Belmont estate and worked for wages as their washerwoman. She also ran an informal tavern there, selling spruce beer and horse-shaped ginger cakes.

Richard Peters, Jr. (born 1778, died 1848): Like his grandfather and father, Richard Jr. was a lawyer. He served as lawyer to the African-American businessman James Forten from 1814 until the mid-1830s. Richard Jr. had been a member of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery since 1800. In 1818 he presided over the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery at which James Forten was invited to speak. After the death of his father in 1828, Richard Jr. managed the Belmont estate to provide income for his siblings and himself, but did not live there. As a member of the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Internal Improvements, Richard Jr. supported the construction of the Columbia and Philadelphia Railroad across the Belmont estate in 1828. In the same year he became the Official Reporter to the United States Supreme Court. In 1842 he published the legal case Prigg v. Pennsylvania, which stimulated the Underground Railroad by making the Fugitive Slave Act ineffective. The following year Southern supporters of slavery forced him out of his position.

Abigail Willing Peters (born 1777, died 1841): Abigail (Abby) was the daughter of Thomas Willing, one of the richest men in Pennsylvania. Thomas Willing, along with Robert Morris, financed the American Revolution and was later President of the Bank of the United States. He also helped James Forten establish his business. Abigail Willing married Richard Jr. in 1804.
Review Questions for Guide Training

1) Why did William Peters come to America?

2) How did William Peters earn his living?

3) Why did William Peters buy the property at Belmont?

4) In what architectural style was Belmont Mansion built? List some characteristics of this style.

5) Why is the ceiling of the central hall at Belmont Mansion special?

6) What part of the Belmont Mansion Complex is the earliest structure? How do we know this?

7) Describe the landscape around Belmont Mansion when owned by William Peters.

8) Describe the relationship between William Peters and his son Richard Peters.

9) List four important positions held by Richard Peters.

10) How did Richard Peters use his life and the law to protect and assist people who ran away from slavery?

11) What is the Underground Railroad?

12) How did the enslaved find out about the Underground Railroad?
13) Did any enslaved people work for Richard Peters?

14) How did Cornelia Wells earn her living?

15) Name some significant people associated with the American War of Independence and the United States Constitution who visited Richard Peters at Belmont.

16) Why did Judge Peters and his son get involved in the Abolitionist Movement?

17) How are Belmont Mansion, the Columbia and Philadelphia Railroad, and the Underground Railroad connected to each other?

18) How might Peters Island, the Boelsen Cottage, and the Underground Railroad be connected to each other?

19) How are Richard Peters, Jr.; the legal case Prigg v. Pennsylvania; and the Underground Railroad connected to each other?

20) How did Belmont Mansion become part of Philadelphia's Fairmount Park?

21) When and why was the American Women's Heritage Society founded?

22) What is the current mission of the American Women's Heritage Society?

23) How are funds raised to operate and preserve Belmont Mansion?

24) How can Americans help free enslaved people today?
**Match the Event to the Date**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1683</td>
<td>Emancipation Proclamation freed the enslaved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1739</td>
<td>First Fugitive Slave Act passed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1742</td>
<td>The Schuylkill Permanent Bridge opened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>Richard Peters joined the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1768</td>
<td>Columbia and Philadelphia Railroad built on Belmont estate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>Belmont Mansion became part of Fairmount Park.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>U.S. passes law forbidding the direct importation of enslaved Africans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td>Jan Boelsen, a Dutch land speculator, granted property at Belmont.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1793</td>
<td>Runaways hidden in boxcars on the Columbia-Philadelphia Railroad met by Underground Railroad agent at Belmont.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1804</td>
<td>Judge Richard Peters died leaving Belmont to his children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1811</td>
<td>The American Women's Heritage Society founded to preserve Belmont Mansion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1828</td>
<td>William Peters bought the Belmont estate and began building Belmont Mansion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1808</td>
<td>Richard Peters became Judge of the District Court of the United States for Pennsylvania.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1842</td>
<td>Richard Peters purchased and freed Cornelia Wells, an enslaved African American.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1792</td>
<td>Publication of <em>The Underground Railroad</em> by William Still</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Tips for Guides**

Be on time. Let the guide coordinator know if you are delayed or unable to come.

Be appropriately dressed. Wear your nametag.

Be prepared. Know what you plan to say and have any supplementary material at hand.

Be safe. Know emergency procedures and exit routes.

Be friendly. Let visitors know that you want them to have a good experience and invite them to ask questions and make comments during the tour.

Be interactive. Engage visitors by asking open-ended questions that explore their interests and opinions.

Be respectful. Adjust your presentation to suit visitors’ age, interests, and background.

Be attentive. Observe visitors’ body language and adjust the pace of your presentation accordingly.

Be entertaining. Use vocal inflections, hand gestures, and facial expressions to energize your presentation.

Be engaging. Use personal experience to enhance your presentation without sacrificing the interpretive objectives for Belmont Mansion.

Be honest. Admit when you don’t know something and assist visitors in finding out.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Belmont Mansion, Fairmount Park Commission Archives.
Boelsen House, Fairmount Park Commission Archives.
Edward Carey Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection, University of Pennsylvania.
Peters Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture Papers, University of Pennsylvania.
Richard Peters Correspondence, Cadwalader Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
Samuel Breck Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
Roberts Vaux Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
(The AWHS Docent Training Reference Book contains transcriptions of letters to and from Peters family members in these manuscript collections.)

Secondary Sources:


Halpern, Martha [no date]. "The Dining Pavilion at Belmont Mansion." Unpublished manuscript under Belmont Mansion in the Fairmount Park Commission Archives.


Recommended Internet Resources

History of the Underground Railroad and the Abolitionist Movement:


*American Abolitionism.* Indiana University (americanabolitionist.liberalarts.iupui.edu).


National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (www.freedomcenter.org).

*National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.* National Park Service (209.10.16.21/Template/FrontEnd/index.cfm).


*Slavery in America.* Online Resources for Public Broadcasting Service Series (www.slaveryinamerica.org/home.htm).

Anti-slavery Organizations:

Free the Slaves (www.freetheslaves.net)
Anti-Slavery International (www.antislavery.org)
Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (www.catwinternational.org)
Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking (www.castla.org)
ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes; www.ecpatusa.org)
Equality Now (www.equalitynow.org)
iAbolish (American Anti-Slavery Group; www.iabolish.org)
International Justice Mission (www.ijm.org)
Stop the Traffik (www.stopthetraffik.org)
Historic Belmont Mansion provides the setting for the story of the Fairmount Park area of Philadelphia from colonization to the present. The property around Belmont Mansion was initially a group of farms. William Peters, an English lawyer and land management agent for the Penn family, bought the property in 1742. Peters designed and built Belmont Mansion, and he created formal gardens surrounding the Mansion. The property became part of Fairmount Park in 1869 as part of a program to preserve the quality of water. The Belmont Mansion property became part of Fairmount Park in 1869, and is now an underground railroad museum open to the public for tours. Features. Admission Fee. Local Resources Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau GoPhila.com VisitPA.com. The Museum of the American Railroad, previously known as the Age of Steam Railroad Museum, is a large railroad museum in Frisco, Texas. The museum is popular among train enthusiasts because it lets you get quite close to the equipment and walk through many pieces. Tours of the grounds can be self-guided or can be led by a guide. In addition to the museum exhibits, there is also a picnic area and interactive railroad garden near the entrance. The museum operates a heritage railroad on the grounds of the museum. The museum operates a heritage railway that allows visitors to experience the history of the railroad by participating in a 6-mile round-trip train ride pulled by steam locomotive. These train rides are the only of their kind in the state of Tennessee. Places to stay near The Underground Railroad Museum at Belmont Mansion. Plan your trip to Philadelphia. Get a personalized plan. When a traveler builds a plan from this page, the itinerary automatically includes The Underground Railroad Museum at Belmont Mansion. This is a great way for travelers looking for a great vacation in your city or country to also experience The Underground Railroad Museum at Belmont Mansion. Promoting your link also lets your audience know that you are featured on a rapidly growing travel site. In addition, the more this page is used, the more we will promote The Underground Railroad Museum at Belmont Mansion to other Inspirock users.