

The Underground Railroad

By

Professor Edward Smith

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(Transcribed from a video tape of the presentation)

Thank you very much; I'm very delighted to be here. I was mentioning to one of your members earlier, that my father was a thirty-third (33rd) degree mason and he was always proud telling me that fact but he never told me what masonry was all about so it's still very much a mystery to me which I guess is the way he wanted to keep it. I live in the Dupont Circle community of Washington, DC and right behind my home is the Scottish Rite temple and so as a neighbor I go there fairly often. I conduct study tours for the Smithsonian institution and one of them is devoted to the George Washington legacy that remains in Washington DC and so the Scottish Rite Temple is obviously one of the places where I take people. So I'm familiar to the extent that I'm familiar with your esteemed organization.

Now when Dick first invited me to speak to you all, he had a certain topic that he wanted me to cover, which was some relationship between Masons and the Underground Railroad. And of course, if you want to talk about the Underground Railroad, you can't talk about it without discussing the whole question of slavery, blacks in America, and the coming of the American Civil War. Now the Underground Railroad had become a topic of great interest to a lot of people recently; largely as a consequence of the work and research of one of my former students, a young man by the name of Tony Cowin, who also was not only one of my former students but who later became one of my administrative assistants. Tony, when he was working for me after he graduated from American University (AU), was doing a lot of work on the Underground Railroad and I told him that in order for him to do this work professionally and expansively as he wanted to do it, he was going to have to not work for me anymore (which was going to be a great personal loss for me because he was almost like a son). I took him to meet people at the Smithsonian and the National park service and they fell in love with Tony and the work he was doing and now he's been featured in the Smithsonian magazine, he made an appearance on the Oprah

Winfrey show, he took her on a trip on one of his Underground Railroad hikes, and she included it in her movie "Beloved", and of course Tony is writing his own book now. And the National Park Service recently produced this brochure on the Underground Railroad that has a map which shows the history of transcontinental slavery as well as some of the stations along the Underground Railroad. I'm going to give it to Dick; it's available to you at most national park service sites. And I think you all will find it very enlightening, given your research.

I think if you're going to talk about the Underground Railroad, you have to accept the fact that it wasn't a railroad. I mean there are people who actually believe that there were tracks, there are people who believe that when you say that such and such place was a station that there was a guy out there with a conductor's cap on and bells and so forth. Well, that was not the case. The Underground Railroad was underground because it was secret; it was hidden. It was something not to be noticed. A person's life and security would be in great jeopardy if it were known that they were participants in the Underground Railroad. Why? In 1793, the cotton gin was invented by Eli Whitney (who was not a southerner, who was a guy from Massachusetts, who went through the bashing of liberalism in New England, Yale University). Remember, there are two things that are very true in our society; there is such a thing called Yankee ingenuity and something called Southern Hospitality. I can assure you that the southerners would have never invented the cotton gin. Not because they're stupid, not because they have no technical skills; they simply wouldn't have done it. I mean they would have just gone about picking cotton the same old way. Obviously Eli Whitney's family had an interested investment in cotton production because his family had heavy investments in the New England textile industry, and obviously cotton was the raw material from the south that the north needed in order to make the finished product of the clothing that Northerners, Southerners and even some Europeans wore. So, any

invention that would contribute to greater cotton production was considered to be very important. The cotton gin in a manner of speaking was the 19th century, or I should say 18th century, black ops security. What it did was allow one (1) black to do the work of ten (10), meaning that we now have a surplus operation of nine (9) people that you don't need. They're nine (9) people that you own, you've paid for them, but you don't need them, at least as cotton pickers or field hands. So, what many of the masters did was take the blacks that were field hands and trained them to become master carpenters, master masons, master metal workers, master seamstresses, tailors, you name it. Many blacks dominated the skilled crafts in the 18th and 19th century in the way, which we commonly expect blacks to dominate certain segments of professional sports. Today when you turn on the television and watch the NBA playoffs, you're not going to be in any way surprised by the fact that nine (9) of the ten (10) players running up and down the court are black, even though the vast majority of the people in the seats are white and that was the same way in pre-Civil War America.

Now when the black population began to become problematic, which was shortly after the cotton gin was invented in 1793, remember that slavery was very profitable during that period but it only lasted for a very short time. Because anything that increases in volume automatically decreases in value. I mean that's a simple law of economics; it's a simple law of supply and demand. And so the black slaves became a liability to the masters, not assets. In 1793, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which meant that a runaway black, if he ran to a state where there were no slavery, if in fact the master could afford to hire somebody to search for that black and find him even though he might have been protected by somebody on the Underground Railroad, that person by pain of being inflicted with the penalty of violating the federal law had to turn that black over. Because if he didn't, that individual was violating the Fugitive Slave Act; and so even though slavery quietly and so forth was concentrated in the southern states, all of the Thirteen (13) colonies were slave colonies in the beginning. Massachusetts was the first one to abolish it, and they abolished it not because of any kind of moral compunction; they abolished it because it was not needed — they were a fishing community; they were becoming a manufacturing community. What in the

hell did they need slaves for? And of course, they got rid of them. New York did not abolish slavery until 1827; Jefferson died in 1826. New York City was a crazy place, but New York State was a very large state and so you can see how the large landowners would be able to use slaves. Now they meant that everybody in the country, in the free or slave states were tied into the system because of the Fugitive Slave Act. People like Daniel Webster, who was in many ways probably one of the most enlightened politicians this country has ever produced, constantly spoke on the rationality and the legality and the deception of the Fugitive Slave Act: that a person's runaway property had to be brought back to that person. And so, it was a problem morally for everybody, so those individuals who violated the Fugitive Slave Act by running stations along the Underground Railroad, these were enormously courageous people and at the same time they were felons; they were breaking the law. I mean there is no sweet way which you can explain it. Now, I'll come to this a little bit later in my talk before we break for questions. I think it's important for us to understand that the Underground Railroad really did not begin to develop into the system that we know it as today until after the 1830's. There were only three (3) great slave revolts in America. The first one was done by a black by the name of Gabriel Prosper in 1800; of course Gabriel and his handful of followers were caught and they were arrested and most of them summarily executed. In 1822, we had the second great slave rebellion and that was led by a South Carolinian by the name of Denmark Boyd. Denmark Boyd was not a slave; he was a free black and more importantly he was an educated black, which was a great fear, that the free persons of color, those who were educated, will be the ones who would lead slave rebellions. Because, they were no longer docile and submissive; they were free, and they were educated and therefore a tremendous threat. Boyd nicknamed himself "Spartacus". You all know your own history and you know that Spartacus was this crazy slave that became a gladiator and led a rebellion that almost brought Rome to its knees. And probably would have been able to extend his career had he not been betrayed by the people who made some kind sort of pact with Julius Caesar and the patrician Romans. Of course Spartacus was caught and he, along with his 30,000 survivors, was crucified. To make an example, that if there are any other slave revolts this is what is going to happen to you. They were all

crucified, men, women, children, old men, young girls all along the Appian Way. It would be like going to Washington, DC and traveling along Connecticut Ave. and imagining somebody was nailed to every lamp post. That's going to be a very effective display of slave revolt. In 1831, we have the slave revolt of Nat Turner, took place in South Hampton, Virginia. The irony of ironies is that, not only was Nat Turner free and well educated but in 1831 the state of Virginia had decided that the legislature should entertain the option of abolishing slavery from the state and was on the docket. Had Virginia abolished slavery in 1831, I am sure that many of the other southern states or most if not all of them would have eventually abolished slavery, because Virginia is the most important state in the Union. Even to this day. And certainly it was the most important state during the "Revolutionary War" period and during the "Civil War" era.

Remember that four (4) of our first five (5) Presidents are from Virginia, Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe. The first capital of the confederacy was Montgomery, Alabama and when Virginia succeeded, Jefferson Davis who's named after Thomas Jefferson, had the wisdom to relocate the capital from Montgomery, Alabama to Richmond, Virginia. Why? He was smart; he knew that Virginia was the home of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Patrick Henry, Peyton Randolph, and George Mason. By moving the capital from Montgomery to Richmond, he was objectively saying we are not rebels, we are revolutionaries. We are the true sons of 1776, not those guys on the other side of the river. If you have been to Richmond lately, you've seen the insignia of the Confederate States of America; you'll know that in the center of it is a statue of George Washington that is a replica of the statue of Washington in the state capital plaza. When did Jefferson Davis become president of the confederate states of America? February 22nd and of course you know the significance of that date; you don't need me to explain it. Now, after the Nat Turner revolt the Underground Railroad began to really pick up. Why? 1831 was a big year; it was the year which Robert E. Lee married Mary Custis not too far from here at Arlington house. Mary Custis was the foster great granddaughter of George Washington. Lee loved Washington; his own father was George Washington's Chief of Staff. Lighthorse Harry Lee, but that was Harry's only claim to fame. He was a,

the kind of guy today that we would see on the Jerry Springer show. And so George Washington became Robert E. Lee's adopted father. Even though he was born in 1807 and Washington died eight (8) years earlier, one does not have to be sighted by a person in order to accept that individual as a father. In many ways you all are as much the sons of George Washington as the sons that he never had. And so it does not mean that one's blood has to be the same because the intellect is as much a bloodline as the blood itself. And so Robert E. Lee when he married in 1831 in Arlington house of course we know that 30 years later he leaves there to become a General in the Confederate Army and 1865 he becomes the President of Washington College down in Washington, Virginia, which now bears the name of Washington-Lee and so father and son have become reunited or united I should say, at the institution.

1831 was also the year in which John Quincy Adams returned to Washington, DC; remember Adams was the son of John Adams who ran for re-election in 1828 against a friend of yours, President Andrew Jackson. And it was Andrew Jackson who beat John Quincy Adams. John Quincy Adams was a New England patrician; Andrew Jackson was a hick, or at least that was the way Adams felt about it. One of those big belly, beer-drinking guys that's going to be at the NASCAR races this weekend. Thinking how in the hell this country winds up producing somebody like this. Obviously Adams figured that Jackson was an absolute rejection of Darwin's theory of evolution; Darwin's theory says that things are supposed to get better. Well if you're going to say that Jackson is an evolutionary development from Washington and Jefferson, something obviously is wrong. Well Adams went into a deep funk for a few years; then in 1831 he decided that he had a few more years of public service left in him and he ran for Congress, was elected and returned to Washington, where he remains until he literally dies at his desk in the United States Capitol in 1848. With regards to the Underground Railroad, the most important thing that happened in 1831 was the publication of William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper "The Liberator". Now I want you to entertain the idea, that while the Underground Railroad developed (and the maps will show you the routes and the places and who were some of the prominent sponsors of them) many of them were Mason's like yourselves. I think the Underground Railroad began at Mount Vernon, Virginia; now I'm going to tell

you why. One of the greatest stories of American history that is rarely told (and it's tragic that it's not) is that magnificent, marvelous, relationship between George Washington and the Marquee de Lafayette. The Marquee came to this country as a young French local man who had lost his father at a very early age. George Washington had no children; he adopted Martha's. And more importantly he had no sons. Imagine the father of our country could not father a son. Any father we know that who shared this sentiment with many of his Virginia neighbors, they duly recorded it and therefore they by writing these things shared it with us. And he met Lafayette and within the first week it was literally love at first sight. Lafayette found in Washington the father that he wished he had. Washington found in Lafayette the son that he always wanted, and this bond between the two men grew and grew and grew; even though the Marquee lived much longer than Washington, remember that his first child is named George Washington Lafayette. One of the things about Lafayette that had a profound impact on Washington was Lafayette's passionate distaste for slavery. Even though he was much younger than his adoptive father, he reproached Washington on numerous occasions and we having it in writing. We have the letters. He said if you truly believe that the American Revolution is all about liberty then it cannot just be liberty for the whites; you've got to extend that liberty to the blacks as well. George Washington was a great man. I mean I consider it to be a great honor to be able to say to people that I am a third generation Washingtonian. When Carter G. Woodson, created Negro History week in 1926, he was asked why did he say that Negro history week, which is now Black History Month, should be in the month of February. He said "I believe that the three (3) greatest Americans were born in the month of February, and I will list them in the following order: Washington, Frederick Douglas, and Abraham Lincoln". When Booker T. Washington was born a slave in 1856, after the Civil War was over, some laughed "you don't have a last name; that means you're no different than a pet; you're Booker T. Don't you want a last name?" And he said "yes and I'm going to choose as my last name the name of the founder" and so he is Booker T. Washington.

You've all heard of the famous black Scientist, George Washington Carver. You read geometry, so I know you know him. He once said the reason why I have been so good at what I have done is because I

always felt compelled to live up to my namesake. People are going to expect things from a man named George Washington Carver. Now the point that I'm trying to drive home is that Lafayette, when he upbraided Washington, who was affected by peer pressure like all the rest of us. I mean we like to think that we have an independent autonomous moral code that is unaffected by what our peers think of us, that's pure nonsense.

We are probably able to live up to it maybe 85-90% of the time if we're lucky. What our neighbors think, what our friends think, what our colleagues think, affects us. And Washington was affected as we all are. And yet, Lafayette worried that this revolution that I'm helping you to fight and hopefully win is all about liberty and you are being less to yourself if you don't expand it to include liberty for the slaves. Now Washington was so affected by it that he upon his death extended the most magnanimous terms he possibly could extend to his slaves in terms of their freedom. He was a slave master, but he was very benign; the slaves on his estate were basically well educated, most of them were craftsmen. We know that Washington had a correspondence with Benjamin Banaker, the black freeman from Maryland, who he asked to assist Pierre L'Enfant in the designs of Washington, DC. It was a very smart move. Major L'Enfant was a very gifted engineer but he was an artist, he had the temperament of an artist and in all due respect you know what that means; these are very (how can I say this politely) difficult people to deal with and L'Enfant was such a person. Shortly into the building of Washington, DC he and Washington got into some kind of altercation and as patient a man as Washington, he had to terminate him. Fortunately, Banaker had worked with L'Enfant and knew the plans and Washington could say listen Benjamin you can finish this job.

The great black woman, who was a poet by the name of Phyllis Wheatley, she wrote a wonderful poem for George Washington. Washington became a correspondent with her, not as a slave but as an equal. All major correspondence to Phyllis was appropriately formed by referring to her as Mrs. Phyllis Wheatley, not in any way denigrating her; the poem that she wrote for him he considered to be perhaps the best accolade that was bestowed upon him by any person in literature. And Washington had a very intimate relationship with many of the people on the Mount Vernon plantation. I say this to

you because when we look at the Underground Railroad and the extent that Masons participated in it. And there is no way that we will ever know how many, what their names were, the locations; remember that in the beginning the Underground Railroad was underground it was secret, it was not public. They didn't do what Jesse Jackson did recently, by going over and rescuing 3 American soldiers and the first thing he did was have a press conference. The conductors on the Underground Railroad remained anonymous. But to the extent that the Masons were involved (and we know they were) they had only to look back to the most famous and foremost mason of them all, General Washington. And they knew that they as his sons were continuing to carry out his work; that this was the right thing to do.

Now today Washington and his sons are safe. A few months ago you probably read in the newspaper that a school district down in New Orleans, Louisiana, had the audacity to strip George Washington's name off of a public school and replace it with the name of the black scientist who invented blood plasma, Charles Drew. I'm a big fan of Charles Drew; I was born at Freedman's Hospital on the campus of Howard University, where Charles Drew did his research. So I certainly do not belittle the idea of a school being named after him, but if the school being named after him therefore means that George Washington's name is stripped I can not approve of that. I wrote an article about it which was published in the "Washington Times" editorial page a couple of years ago in which I talked about the virtue of Washington and why these young black leaders should be informed about this man, why he is deserving of remembrance. Next time you come to DC, some of you probably work there already; you know we have the African American Civil War monument on U Street right in front of the Prince Hall Masonic lodge. Prince Hall was born in 1735 and died in 1807, the year that he was born and became the founder of black masonry because he wanted to be connected to Washington and Masonry was a way in which you could do it, and this black civil war memorial is a beautiful piece of sculpture and they are now beginning to put the plaques on it that will bear the name of the blacks who served in the Union army along with their white officers. A Washington Post reporter called me and wanted me to comment on how I explain that there are over 850 Union black soldiers whose name is "George

Washington Blank". And I said "why, must you question". She said "I don't understand; he owned slaves." I said, "so what"; I mean he was more than that. And obviously these people who proudly bore his name felt that way as well, you have to understand that Washington, more so than any other member of the community of founding fathers, came as close to walking on water as anyone could see. The only other citizen saint that we have in our country is Robert E. Lee, who like all of us was another one of Washington's sons. I mean I don't mean to be sentimental, but I've always felt that Washington was in many ways fortunate by not being able to sire a son by blood, because through his spirit he sired all of us.

I will stop now and try and entertain any questions. Thank you!

Question 1:

Professor, there are some people who taught and write about how they feel that slavery had actually died out before the Civil War, partially because of the Underground Railroad, partially because of other reasons; there are others that are just the opposite — they think that if the Civil War hadn't come about that slavery would have been standard, that the South would have connected Cuba or Central America, extended slavery even more, there's even a movie where it talks about how the Civil War was a terrible waste of life since the practice of slavery was already abolished before it. Can you give us your views on whether you think slavery was on its way out and the Civil War was a terrible waste of life or was it something necessary in order to eradicate slavery?

Answer to Question 1:

That's a good question and I do believe that slavery like communism during the Gorbachev years was on its way out. If you look at the 1860 US Census, there were over 500,000 free blacks in the South. 60,000 free blacks in the state of VIRGINIA alone; these were blacks that were manual living or were able to buy themselves out of freedom or were part of a will like George Washington's slaves were free as a consequence of his will. They didn't go to the North; they loved where they were living at home in the South and so you had that small number of Southern fire who wanted to take slavery into the new territory that we acquired as a consequence of the Mexican war; they wanted to expand slavery into

Central America but remember that the fire leaders were as much a minority as the abolitionist and so the evidence clearly shows that it was done, even though slavery was not abolished from Washington, DC until April 16, 1862. Meaning that for the first year of the war Washington was as much a slave capitol as Richmond. By 1830, the free blacks outnumbered the slaves in Washington, DC. By 1860, you had nearly 10,000 free blacks in Washington and fewer than 2000 slaves. And Washington, as we all know, is a Southern city. The Mason-Dixon Line separates Maryland from Pennsylvania. My students at American University are mostly, upper middle class white private school kids from New Jersey, New York and so forth, and when I tell them that when they've decided to come to AU that they've chosen to be Southerners for the next 4 years, they're highly upset. You know they think they have to go down to Mississippi, or Georgia or Alabama. Some of them transfer. But in answer to your question whether this war was necessary, I've labored over this a lot and there was a time when I was new to the field where I believed that the nation could have used more jointly certain political and diplomatic devices to have prevented the war. Then I thought about the day that I was in the delivery room 29 years ago when my daughter was born. I have 5 sons and one daughter. I did not have the guts to be in there when my first child was born but when my daughter was born, my second child, I fortified myself with a heavy dose of spirits and when she burst forth from the womb, I mean it was a spiritual experience for me I've never quite forgotten. And what really hit me was all of the hollering and screaming and carrying on that my wife was doing going through labor which is very difficult for a husband to deal with because there is nothing you can do to stop it. And after my daughter was born I was unprepared for all of the blood and mucus that was associated with afterbirth and it made me realize years later when I was trying to figure out whether the war was necessary that with the birth of new life (and the Civil War gave birth to a New Nation) that the screaming and pain that my wife went through and the blood and mucous that issued forth after the birth of our daughter that you can't have the coming of new life, whether it's a new child or a coming of a new nation, without pain and blood. The Revolutionary war was not a discussion; it was an 8-year war. And the civil war was such as well. So I think in my later years, I have accepted the fact that it was and I guess I am

fortified also by the notion that Robert E. Lee after the war was over said "before and during the war between the states I was a Virginian; after the war I became an American". And that to me sums it all up, that for Lee like so many others during that time, their first loyalty went to the states. My country for John Adams meant Massachusetts, my country for Thomas Jefferson was Virginia, and when Lee said I was a Virginian then I became an American even though 2 of his ancestors signed the declaration of independence he was still a Virginian, and so for Lee to become an American and it took a war to do that, then for me the war was necessary.

Question 2:

Professor you spoke about the fact that the cotton gin freed up or made an excess labor market among the slaves. Actually, it was sort of my impression that they became more of an economic asset to their owners because if they became tradesmen they were hired into factories and a portion of that wage was given to the earner but the great majority of it went to the owner, and that portion was how some of them, as I understand it, were able to then purchase their freedom. But I think that they became even more of an economic asset then they had been, say working the field.

Answer to Question 2:

Well I think that between 1793 and by the time we get to 1807, the surplus had really become a critical problem. That's when Congress abolished the international slave trade. We can't have any more blacks coming over here from Africa and if anybody brings any blacks over here there committing piracy and piracy was punishable by death. 10 years after the international slave trade was abolished in 1807 – 1817, Robert E. Lee's father in law along with a bunch of other Virginians created the American conservation society. They created the colony of Liberia, saying look free blacks that want to get the hell out of here we'll send you back to Africa. Because we don't need you, I mean this has become problematic. And not that many blacks chose to go back to their ancestors' soil because whether they were free or slaves, whether they were North or South, they had become Americans. This was home, and so it had sort of. I mean you know how business men will invest in something and in the short term it becomes a very profitable thing, and within a manner of a few years, if it's not handled correctly you can begin to see the down side, for example,

when the worldwide web and internet became very fashionable, everybody said “gee what a great, wonderful, liberating thing this is”. I have a friend of mine that kept telling me I’ve got to get into computers, “you have to learn how to use the Internet, e-mail and all the rest of it”. I said “that’s not me, I think we began to fall to pieces when we stopped sending smoke signals to each other” and now two-thirds of the Internet’s revenue comes from the most degrading forms of pornography ever imagined. In its early stages, the visionaries said the bad guys wouldn’t get to it. But the bad guys do and when they do they take it over. Now we have all kinds of people being arrested for downloading, just ridiculous stuff, and so I think that the owners of the slaves were in that short time period very profitable, and would not only bring profit onto the master as you said, because they made the most by renting out their slaves who were skilled craftsmen. They also, gave their slaves a rent receipt by which he could purchase his own freedom, as well as his brother’s freedom. I think Jefferson had at least 250 slaves; obviously you’ve all been to Monticello; that’s hardly the land you could have a plantation with all the damn hills and everything else that goes up and down and so the blacks that live there were people that Jefferson was proud of, that in fact these people were concert musicians, and chefs and I just recently read a book on Jefferson which is the best book about him called “Jefferson the biography of a Builder” and three pieces of architecture that he’s best known for are the state capitol in Richmond, the University of Virginia, and Monticello. And he designed all three of those buildings but he supervised the slave laborers who constructed them. And he wrote with great pride, and profusely, “look at what we created and these are my people”. Everyday we still go down and marvel over what Jefferson designed and what slaves built, think about it. Jefferson died in 1826; in 1923, the 250th anniversary of his birth, he posthumously received the gold medal of the American Institute of Architects which is the highest honor that can be bestowed upon an Architect. The gold medal isn’t given yearly.

