

The Parkside Journal

Volume 5, Issue 7

Summer Edition 2024, Giving Back To The Parkside Community



Years Of Service To The Parkside Community



From the very beginning, The Parkside Journal has sought to show the history, culture and diversity within our community. Take a look inside and see some of the wonderful things coming up this year in your community.



Germantown Community Comes Together to Honor Local Legend and Freed Slave, Dinah

by Michael Burch



Here we see local students unveiling the new plaque that honors Dinah. (Photo credit: Parkside Journal)

Today when people think of slavery, they usually imagine large southern plantations staffed by hundreds of enslaved people toiling away in the southern heat. These fields would be filled with rows of cash crops like tobacco or cotton. The image that comes to mind is a true one but it's a southern image and not one we would have seen a lot here in the North. However, slavery occurred here, it just looked a little different. Once upon a time slavery was legal in many states across early America, even here in Philadelphia.

Dinah was an enslaved woman living and working in early Philadelphia for the wealthy Logan family. I cannot give you her last name because, like in so many other cases involving slavery, her last name and much of her life is lost to history.

Last month on April 20th, hundreds of neighborhood residents met at Stenton House in the Germantown section of Philadelphia to witness the unveiling of a new monument to honor Dinah, who is a local legend from centuries ago. She is believed to have saved the Stenton mansion, in colonial times, from being destroyed.

Stenton House, as it is known today, was built by James Logan in 1730. Logan was the secretary to William Penn and an early mayor of Philadelphia and a Chief Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. He was also a slave owner.

Today controversy seems to surround nearly every venerable old statue on display in the city of Philadelphia. With this type of mindset, it is not hard to see why we have so few monuments to African American women in the city of brotherly love. This has changed somewhat with the addition of this new monument.

In credited documents and other authenticated letters from the time, it becomes clear that Dinah's quick thinking saved the mansion from being burned to the ground by British soldiers during the Battle of Germantown in 1777. As the legend goes.

In the fall of 1777, Dinah was the lone caretaker in the Stenton property. This is the time of the Battle of Germantown between early American forces and British regular army. The British were burning properties in Germantown and they stopped at Stenton. Supposedly a few British soldiers approached the house and spoke to the old woman.

They told her to gather her things and leave. They then asked for something flammable to light the house. She sent them to the barn for hay and kindling or anything that might burn.

As this is taking place other British soldiers, officers this time, come to the home looking for British deserters. Dinah, quickly tells the officers that two soldiers are hiding in the barn. The men are captured and quickly carted off to face British punishment. Stenton is saved from destruction by the actions of the former slave.

Her actions show us the complexity of relationships between some enslaved people and their owners. Though to be fair by the time Dinah saved the home she had been granted her freedom, by her request, and worked as a paid servant in the house.



The above plaque was originally dedicated to Dinah's memory and was placed on Stenton grounds in 1912.

The Plaque reads: *In memory of DINAH the Fateful Colored Caretaker of Stenton who by her quick thought and presence of mind saved the mansion from being burned by British Soldiers In The Winter of 1777.*

By saving the home she saved not just an old building but a treasure trove of artifacts and documents from a time long ago. These old mansions give us an opportunity to peer into the past and try understand the way early Philadelphians lived, worked and thought.

I don't think anyone can really guess as to what Dinah was thinking as she sought to save the home of her one time enslavers. Did she do it because she sided with the American cause to seek independence from the British empire? Did she do it because she had a love or admiration for the family she worked for? Or did she do it because it was her only home and had nowhere else to go?

We can't answer any of these questions because there are no written records of how Dinah or any of the enslaved people who lived and worked at Stenton thought. She was never taught to read or write and so we have no way of ever knowing.

"This new memorial, a space in the Stenton landscape designed for questioning and reflection, conceived by acclaimed Philadelphia artist Karyn Olivier, seeks to rebalance Stenton's historical interpretation, bringing to light the realities of Northern slavery and enslavement by Quakers while highlighting the fullness of Dinah's humanity."

Executive Director Dennis Pickeral noted that "the Dinah Memorial Project has been transformative for the museum, revealing ignored and untold stories and histories of individuals who were enslaved and labored at Stenton, and for what the project has meant for the museum's relationship with the surrounding community, who helped create the Dinah memorial and are now partners in charting Stenton's course for the future."

Dinah died in 1805 and is buried somewhere on Stenton grounds, also at her request. Her gravesite has yet to be found. However, this is not the end of Dinah's story. Research continues on her life and time she spent in colonial Philadelphia.

This memorial is the physical culmination of Stenton's Dinah Memorial Project, funded by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, a years-long community engagement discussion.

For more information on Dinah's story and how to visit the memorial call Stenton at: 215-329-7312 or go to www.stenton.org/visit

