**Underground Railroad re-enactment dramatizes search for freedom**

**By Sharon Sheridan**

Riding crop in hand, James Griffin — aka Louisiana plantation owner John Hampden Randolph — stood at the top of the chancel steps and addressed 160 people crowded into the center aisle of St. James Episcopal Church in Upper Montclair, N.J.

“You are lucky to be here,” he said. “I can afford proper cabins and meals for my slaves. … I have purchased you at great expense because the world wants cotton, and we here in Louisiana grow some of the best there is. … The Bible says that you are mine to own and to have dominion over. … I expect you to work hard for the money I have paid.”

With that, he dismissed his new “property” to confinement in the church’s bell tower. Moments later, the church’s rector opened the church doors, admonishing the escapees spilling onto the front lawn to “look for your conductor, and go!” Their journey on the Underground Railroad had begun.

On Feb. 5, the first Sunday of Black History Month, a racially diverse gathering of congregants and visitors of all ages participated in a re-enactment of the secret route that escaped American slaves once followed north to freedom. Following clues and guided by railroad “conductors,” groups of participants wound through the church campus, stopping at “safe houses” to meet historical figures including escaped slave and legendary conductor Harriet Tubman, escaped slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and abolitionist Quakers Abigail Goodwin of Salem, N.J., Sarah and Angelina Grimke, and Angelina’s husband Theodore Weld.

Griffin and several others patrolled the halls, returning recaptured “slaves” back to the bell-tower “holding cell,” from whence they quickly escaped again.

Ultimately, all participants reached freedom in “Canada,” the church’s nave. The program concluded with an opportunity for them to reflect on the experience, followed by everyone singing “We Shall Overcome,” hand in hand.

Participants included 20 minority teens from Newark’s Christ the King Preparatory School for economically disadvantaged students. At one point, Griffin insisted on entering the home of Frederick Douglass, portrayed by Wendell Bristol, and led away a recaptured “slave.”

“That’s the principal!” said one student. “No school on Monday!”

Despite such lighter moments, the re-enactment was not a game, but a sober reminder of a dark piece of American history and what happens when we make people “the other,” said the Rev. C. Melissa Hall, St. James rector.

“In slavery, we made ‘the other’ of an entire race of God’s people,” she said in a sermon in the worship service preceding the re-enactment. “‘Othering’ is part of our human behavior, certainly not the best part. It is in the act of ‘othering’ when I no longer see you as a person, when your face and personhood disappear, when you are not human to me, but rather an object. Once I ‘other’ you, objectify you, I can do anything to you, and it gives me license to hate anyone I wish.”

“We ask this day, as you experience the Underground Railroad and what it is like being the ‘other,’ that you also ponder when we have been complicit … in the ‘othering’ of the Native Americans, the ‘othering’ of 12 million lost in the Holocaust and the disgraceful ‘othering’ in the internment of the Japanese Americans here in the U.S during World War II — just to name a few.

“And, in a quiet moment,” she said, “please ask yourself : ‘Who are we “othering” in the world today? Who will be the next brother or sister that we will make less than? Who will we stop seeing, stop feeling, and what terrible price will we pay for doing such a thing to God’s people?’”

The church was complicit in perpetuating slavery, justifying it by Scripture, she noted in an interview before the event.

With the Underground Railroad, added the Rev. Audrey Hasselbrook, assistant rector, “we forget that, hundreds of years before the abolitionists, slaves and freed slaves were finding their own freedom.”

The re-enactment was part of a continuing series of parish educational programs on racism and other instances of “othering” and on addressing them as people of faith. After a presentation by First Friends of New York and New Jersey, the parish began providing financial assistance to the nonprofit, which supports detained immigrants and asylum seekers, and one parishioner volunteered as a French translator and detention-center visitor.

Leading up to the re-enactment, Hasselbrook provided age-appropriate curricula for the church school classes and information for parents.

On Feb. 5, many families participated together. Afterward, some parents spoke of feeling fear if they got separated from their children, even knowing it was part of a drama. For many, embodying runaway slaves and historical figures proved powerful.

“I think that I was inside the shoes of an actual slave person,” said Christ the King sophomore Tia Bradley.

“There’s a difference between teaching black history and feeling black history,” said senior Jarad Collymore.

Ayana Hartsfield, who portrayed Harriet Tubman, said she was startled by the loud knocks at her door by the “slave catchers.”

“I’m in this room by myself,” she said. “It’s a little nerve-wracking,” hearing the knocks and thinking, “Are they going to capture me?”

“I would say, the first two knocks, I thought I was going to cry. I guess I didn’t expect the knocks to be so intense. I knew it would be immersive,” she said. But actually entering the re-enactment, “you do really get that chill.”

For some, the re-enactment proved empowering.

“The experience told me that, even if you’re labeled an ‘other,’ you can bring yourself out of it and you can open the eyes of others to the light that is within you,” said Christ the King junior Deladem Dag-Sosu.

For others, the history hit close to home. The historical re-enactors researched their roles and created their own character portrayals. Griffin modeled his role after his great-granduncle, owner of Nottoway Plantation in Louisiana.

“It really struck a chord in my heartstrings,” said Montclair University junior Alyssa Clauhs of Mt. Pleasant, S.C., who said she wished the re-enactment could be brought as an educational program to her home state.

Hall and Hasselbrook coordinated the St. James re-enactment based on a program conceived many years ago by the Rev. Karen Eberhardt, a deacon in the Diocese of Newark. Hall said she hoped it would serve as a platform for further education and “lead to more honest discussion and thought.”

“We’re a divided country on so many levels. This event can’t be a one-off,” she said. “This experience acknowledges our responsibility for our past, which we cannot change; but we are responsible for how we continue to contend with those behaviors in our present time.” n

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Captions:

***Photo/Sharon Sheridan***

***Harriet Tubman, portrayed by parishioner Ayana Hartsfield, watches for slave catchers during a re-enactment of the Underground Railroad at St. James Episcopal Church in Upper Montclair, N.J.***

***A sign on the font helps set the scene for the re-enactment of the Underground Railroad.***

***Left, James Griffin gives instructions to his new “slaves” during an Underground Railroad re-enactment at his parish, St. James Episcopal Church in Upper Montclair, N.J. He modeled his role of John Hampden Randolph, owner of Nottaway Plantation in Louisiana, after his great-granduncle.***

***Below, The Rev. C. Melissa Hall, rector, preaches before the re-enactment at a pulpit decorated with a quilt, recalling quilts some believe were stitched with secret symbols to help slaves find their way to freedom, and a Canadian flag. The church nave served as Canada, final destination during the Underground Railroad program.***

***Deladem Dag-Sosu, a junior at Christ the King Preparatory School in Newark, N.J. describes how he felt portraying a runaway slave following the secret route to freedom in Canada.***