



# Underground Railroad Free Press®

News and views on today's Underground Railroad

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## Editorial

### Let's Get Underground Railroad Sites Accurately Listed Before Many More Are Lost to Time

The nation lacks a reliable, comprehensive list of Underground Railroad sites but the elements are in place to construct something truly useful.

We are aware of three attempts to construct wide-ranging site lists, but each has its problems.

In our view, the truest listing is Google's MapMuse ([http://find.Mapmuse.com/re1/brand.php?brandid=underground\\_rr](http://find.Mapmuse.com/re1/brand.php?brandid=underground_rr)) now listing nearly 250 sites, many accessible with the interactive MapMuse map. MapMuse encourages listing of sites by anyone, but there is no vetting for site authenticity.

William Switala, professor emeritus at Duquesne University, has written three books listing nearly 500 Underground Railroad sites in six mid-Atlantic states. His site vetting appears to be best of the three lists mentioned here but so far his collective list is regional.

The Underground Railroad site list of the Network to Freedom, the federal government's Underground Railroad program, seems to have the best potential of becoming the definitive national list, but this list too needs vetting and far more careful definition of what is and isn't an Underground Railroad site.

A recent spot check by *Underground Railroad Free Press* showed one state's 21 Network to Freedom sites actually to include 17 places of enslavement or sites where freedom seekers or those who aided them were arrested or tried. Only the other four sites listed actually supported the Underground Railroad.

Further, the Network to Freedom's legitimate sites are listed only on the basis of documentary proof, discounting the Underground Railroad's

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## Ruckers Bring Back Music of the Underground Railroad

For more than forty years, Sparky Rucker has made a career of researching and presenting the songs and lore of the Underground Railroad, the Civil War and the early nineteenth century. Since the 1980s when they met, he and wife Rhonda have toured at home and abroad with their one-of-a-kind Underground Railroad historical presentations.



Sparky and Rhonda Rucker

The internationally acclaimed James "Sparky" Rucker, honored as a leading Underground Railroad historian, folklorist, musician, storyteller and author, sings songs and tells stories from a deep American tradition. Rucker, with a dozen albums to his credit, accompanies himself on guitar, banjo and spoons.

Dr. Rhonda Rucker practiced internal medicine for five years before the couple married and she became a full-time folk musician. A versatile performer on blues harmonica, pi-

ano and banjo, and a talented vocal harmonist, she appears on four recordings with her husband. The couple's 1991 *Treasures and Tears* album was nominated for the W.C. Handy Award for Best Traditional Recording.

The couple has appeared at the National Folk Festival of Scotland, Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Mississippi Valley Blues Festival, National Storytelling Festival and 1982 World's Fair, and on PBS and NPR among a long list of venues. The couple has performed at hundreds of university and school programs.

Sparky and Rhonda Rucker also publish historical pieces and give story-telling performances including their much lauded *Blue and Gray in Black and White*, a Civil War show.

Sparky, great-grandson of a slave, Rhonda, descendant of a Confederate Army officer, and their son Jamey are bright examples of how far their country has come in healing old wounds and giving life to the nation's founding promise that all are created equal.

For more on the Ruckers, their tour schedule or to book them, visit [sparkyandronda.com](http://sparkyandronda.com).

## Brooklyn Underground Railroad Safe-Houses Face Demolition

Previous issues of *Underground Railroad Free Press* reported on the fight of home owners and preservationists in Brooklyn, New York's Duffield Street neighborhood to block demolition of homes shown here once used as Underground Railroad safe-houses. The homes are coveted by a developer wanting to erect a parking garage, part of the mammoth Atlantic Yards urban redevelopment project.



Some of the Threatened Homes

On December 5, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Scenic America both

opposed the 22-acre project. Despite this, New York State's Public Authorities Control Board on December 20 approved the \$4 billion-project which will cause the largest demolition by far in Brooklyn's history.

However, the wrecker's ball has been delayed by two lawsuits with more expected.

Outgoing New York Governor George Pataki (R) and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (R) both supported the demolition.

Preservation groups Brooklyn Speaks and Develop Don't Destroy Brooklyn, a number of local elected officials and several thousand residents opposed the demolition, but as *The New York Times* reported, they "lacked the resources for a protracted battle against Forest City, which spent millions of dollars on lobbying, direct mail and public relations."

The developer, Forest City Ratner, is led by Bruce Ratner, owner of the National Basketball Association's New Jersey Nets. Ratner has said that he plans a new Nets arena for his team at the Brooklyn site.

true nature that the vast majority of safe-houses dared not keep written records and so today rely on oral tradition to confirm their roles. NTF tell us that this practice rests on its rationale that plantations, arrest sites and such — as starting or ending points of freedom seekers' journeys — were *ipso facto* parts of the Underground Railroad. But, there is official and public resistance to this theory which many see as a distortion of history. We agree.

The nation and the historical record need an all-embracing, credible list which rates sites fairly for authenticity, respects oral tradition in ratings, and separately lists, if at all, places which stood in opposition to the Underground Railroad. The Wellman Scale, a fair means of site rating, is readily available. (See [fourr.org](http://fourr.org) for more on this scale.) Where to start is melding the Map-Muse, Switala, NTF and other lists, culling spurious sites, rating and describing sites, and then widely posting the resulting accurate comprehensive list, the nation's first.

This major need awaits energetic, impartial attention. Let *Free Press* know if you know anyone or any organization working on this.

**Underground Railroad Free Press®**  
On Today's Underground Railroad

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## Network to Freedom Continues Grants, Makes 2006 Awards

The Network to Freedom, the federal government's Underground Railroad program, awarded 21 matching grants in 2006 for Underground Railroad site restoration, research and the strengthening of applicant programs. The 2006 grants averaged \$17,500, with three-fourths of proposals receiving funding.

Including \$368,000 in Network to Freedom funding plus grantee-provided funds, the 21 projects amounted to \$1.6 million applied to Underground Railroad work last year. But year-to-year Congressional funding for the matching grant program has been sporadic with most years receiving no funding.

Created by Congress in 1998, the Network to Freedom is hosted by the National Park Service. Through a spokesman, Diane Miller, the Network to Freedom's Omaha-based National

Coordinator, states, "The National Park Service is pleased to award Network to Freedom grants for a third time since they were authorized by Congress in 2000. These small grants, combined with their match funding and hard work of resource stewards go a long way toward preserving our endangered Underground Railroad heritage. We hope to continue this partnering in the future."

One of the largest 2006 grants supported structural repairs to Fulton, New York's 1832



Diane Miller

Bristol Hill Congregation Church, in its day an integrated, strongly abolitionist parish with at least two of its families involved in the Underground Railroad.

## Two States But Not Nation Yet Celebrate Harriet Tubman Day

After Maryland in 2000 and New York in 2003 passed laws establishing each March 10 as Harriet Tubman Day, many expected other states and the federal government to follow suit, but efforts to establish a national observance have stalled.



Harriet Tubman  
In Old Age

At the urging of Maryland Underground Railroad leader Louis Fields in 2000, the Maryland State Assembly legislated Harriet Tubman Day to be celebrated each March 10. As her birthday is unknown, it when she died, March 10, 1913, which establishes the date for this annual observance.

The state of New York followed suit, also declaring each March 10 as Harriet Tubman Day. Tubman resided in Auburn, New York, after her escape from slavery in 1849.

These state laws came after United States Public Law 101-252 in 1990 which declared March 10 as Harriet Tubman Day, but, perhaps through oversight, only for 1990.

Says Fields, "Our New York friends led the effort to move to a national campaign for a federal holiday for Tubman. We entertained the issue, but many thought that Friends of the Underground Railroad would take the lead on this and other issues. It is not too late, [it] just needs new life."

Please email *Underground Railroad Free Press* if you are aware of other state or federal efforts to create a Harriet Tubman Day.

## Gettysburg's Dobbin House: The Most Intact Safe-House?

Known more for its Civil War battlefields and Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower's retirement farm, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, is also home to a spectacularly intact Underground Railroad safe-house.

The Dobbin House's hotel, two restaurants and store occupy the very well preserved old stone home built in 1776 by Rev. Alexander Dobbin for his family.

Later owners used the home as an Underground Railroad safe-house and hid freedom seekers in a well-concealed four-foot-high space between the first and second floors accessible by a disguised staircase panel. Now on public display through glass where the panel used to be, the hideaway is outfitted with a tableau of figures in hiding.

We have seen only one or two other Underground Railroad hiding places this intact

and illustrative. Dobbin House's display might be the most authentic anywhere.



Dobbin House

The Dobbin House, located at 89 Steinwehr Avenue in Gettysburg, directly overlooks the spot where Abraham Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg address July 4, 1863. Visit [dobbinhouse.com](http://dobbinhouse.com) for more.