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UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FREE PRESS®

Independent reporting on today's Underground Railroad community

urrFreePress.com

The *Free Press* Underground Railroad Timeline, Stretching from 1585 to 2018, Answers Plenty of Questions

Writing an article or lesson plan on the Underground Railroad or just curious about something?

To gain a quick take on the evolution of the Underground Railroad, its triumph over slavery, and today's Underground Railroad community, visit the *Free Press* Timeline, which shows in chronological order nearly 100 of the institution's most important events.

Ever wondered in what state the Underground Railroad began? (Florida)

When it began? (About 1585)

When it took on the name Underground Railroad? (1842)

Which groups first organized against slavery? (The Mennonite and Quaker religions, then other denominations, then northern states)

Who assisted the most freedom seekers? (Probably William Still)

Who were the only three non-enslaving presidents before Lincoln? (Both Adamses and Elias Boudinot)

Who was the most prominent slave catcher? (George Washington)

When did slavery end in the United States? (It hasn't.)

How many are enslaved in the United States today? (About 29,000)

How many Underground Railroad programs and sites are operating today? (More than 160)

How many there were 30 years ago? (In the single digits)

Which of them has the highest public recognition and rating? (*Underground Railroad Free Press*)

What proportion of American and Canadian school children and being taught about the Underground Railroad today? (Virtually 100%)

Researchers, writers, teachers, site owners and just plain Underground Railroad fans all benefit from the *Free Press* Timeline and narrative that introduces it. For more, visit urrfreepress.com/#History or just click on Timeline on the homepage.

Free Press Prize Nominations Now Open
It's that time of year again. Do you know of a person or organization doing great things for the Underground Railroad? Submit a nomination for one of the three annual Free Press Prizes. It's easy. Visit "Prizes" at our website.

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Have a Burning Question You Want Answered?
Submit a question to be included on the annual *Free Press* survey coming up in late spring.

IN THIS ISSUE

They Were Few: A Southern Underground Railroad Route

One of an occasional series on Underground Railroad sites

There weren't many for obvious reasons but a handful of Underground Railroad routes in the South have been identified. A few, almost exclusively in the northernmost reaches of Virginia and Kentucky, were well travelled. Here, Virginia writer James Lee tells of the route running from Fredericksburg, Virginia, to the Potomac River, Washington, DC, and freedom. This article first appeared in *The Washington Post*. Reprinted with permission.

In an instant, the world changed. Rumbling cannon fire from across the river announced the presence of federal troops. For the enslaved people in Fredericksburg, Va., on Good Friday morning in 1862, that sound meant freedom.

My wife, Carol, and I had come to Fredericksburg to trace the Trail to Freedom. It's two trails, really: one a walking tour in Fredericksburg, detailing the life of former slave John Washington; the other a driving tour of Stafford County, recounting the migration of approximately 10,000 self-emancipated slaves from central and eastern Virginia during a four-month period in 1862. Washington was one of them.

Most of those 10,000 people are lost to history, but we know about Washington because he wrote a memoir in 1877 detailing

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What Solomon Northup Taught Me About Being Black in America

Guest article by Renee Moore

Renee Moore is the founder and guiding light of Solomon Northup Day, an annual observance held since 1999 in her and Northup's hometown of Saratoga Springs, New York. It was Ms. Moore's tireless efforts that led to the national awakening on Northup's quintessentially American racial saga and then to *12 Years a Slave*, 2013's Academy Award-winning film.

In Charlottesville, Virginia, we recently witnessed an ugly chapter of our history replay itself in plain view. Young white nationalists disrupted a peaceful rally, killing one and injuring 19 others, in an attempt to enforce their belief in white supremacy, and that the United States was once, and should again be, a nation by and for whites.

The fact that we have not advanced beyond this in 2018 stunned many – mainly older adults and perhaps some younger. Americans of my generation readily recall the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s, and the often ephemeral sense of having beaten back the cruel legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. It makes us remember that, without bearing witness to our past, many are bound to forget and even repeat it. For me, it brings to mind the story of Saratoga Springs, New York, native Solomon Northup, a freedman cruelly abducted under the yoke of slavery in 1841.

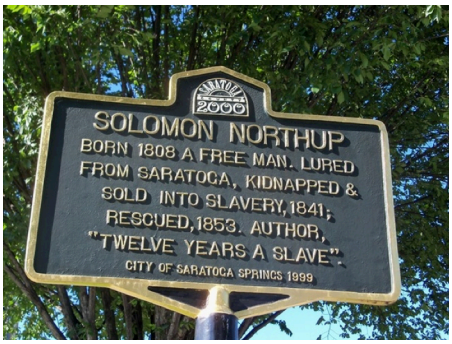
Many people were introduced to Solomon Northup after the release of the 2013 film *12 Years a Slave* based on his 1853 narrative, "Twelve Years a Slave." The Fox Searchlight/Plan B Production film went on to win the Academy Award for best picture and launched the career of Lupita Nyong'o who won for best actress.

The first time I heard of this freedman, kidnapped abducted and sold into slavery, was when I viewed Gordon Parks' PBS docudrama in 1984. I rediscovered Solomon Northup in 1999 at Union College's Nott Memorial during an extensive exhibition where I met Solomon Northup descendant Carol Sally who was laid to rest late last year in Geneva, New York.

Despite there having once been a bustling black business district and community in Saratoga Springs prior to urban renewal in the 1970s, there is no visible presence of blacks in Saratoga Springs any more, no monument or recognition of black life.

Renee Moore and Lupita Nyong'o

Seeing the need for formal recognition of Northup's amazing story, I went on to organize the first Solomon Northup Day in Saratoga Springs in 1999. This July, sponsored by the North Country Underground Railroad Museum in Plattsburgh, New York, we will celebrate the 20th anniversary of Solomon Northup Day.



What relevance does Solomon Northup's story have to us today? My childhood memories of the Rockwell Mansion where I played as a child immediately come to mind. It was the same house where my aunt, Beulah Jack, a domestic worker with a third-grade education, functioned as a mother to me, the Rockwell children, the community and, most importantly, Church Mother at Dyer Phelps African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. In fact, if you visit the church today, you will see her picture prominently displayed there. Like many Blacks in the community, she purchased a house on the west side of the city. I resided in that house throughout most of my childhood and would again in adulthood. She embodied the phrase, "Making a way out of no way," which made me see how much connectedness I have to Solomon's story.

Mr. Northup not only had to leave Saratoga in search of additional work to support his family, he traveled through unknown territory with nothing but his wits, his strong desire to return to his family and his belief in God, a monotheistic belief passed down through generations. He returned to a community to which we are still historically and traditionally bound. Mr. Northup quickly found out that though educated – he could read and write and play the violin – education alone was not going to be his savior.

We know black people share a common history, but is there also a collective memory of our experience that resides in a place we do not recognize, and perhaps are not even consciously aware of. It is my belief that not only do we suffer from what Dr. Joy DeGruy calls post traumatic slave syndrome (PTSS), a collective memory of trauma, but that we are still acting on this trauma subconsciously and that sometimes it plays itself out in destructive ways that solicit further examination.

Are recognizing and refusing to forget the history of enslaved humans and the Middle Passage similar to how Jewish people recall the Holocaust or just a way of making whites feel uncomfortable, indebted, or shamed?

Frankly, I am not so concerned about who feels uncomfortable.

Enslaved humans taken from a continent, transported under inhuman conditions, men, women and children alike, chained with 16-pound weights for months on end, living in their own excrement, the sick and the dead thrown overboard to the sharks - now *they* knew something about being uncomfortable!

Perhaps this African Holocaust has something to teach us as Americans. Our community, it appears, has lost it way. It has become consumed by consumerism, glamorization of the glamorous, and disrespect for the elderly and for women, and our children under siege in their own neighborhoods, educated but unsafe.

Perhaps we don't remember that we had a history before enslavement and have had a history since. As my dear friend Mary Jacobs reminds us, slavery is *not* our only history. We were and are scientists, doctors, inventors and mathematicians. Perhaps America – both white and black

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citizens – would be better served in remembrance of this crucial and significant evidence.

The fact that some blacks earned a place in the middle class forces an ever increasing separation among African-descended people. With that middle class shrinking, we find ourselves in the midst of suffering once again. We are, in fact, witnessing another Holocaust.

Our freedoms, however, are inextricably linked. When one of us is threatened, all of us are in danger of having our freedoms revoked.

Today, according to the Free the Slaves and the Freedom United organizations, slavery is a $150 billion industry with 21 million enslaved globally, many of them women and children. The fight for freedom and justice in the world continues unabated.

The horrendous experience of slavery on this continent reveals to us that we are the survivors, in fact, of a mighty people who would, in fact, be the builders of every economy they touched. The ancestors who came before us made a great sacrifice for us to be where we are today; as Professor Michael Dyson so eloquently states, "We are the children of those who would not die." What will we do with this great sacrifice?

To redeem ourselves, the white community has an obligation to work toward dispelling the myths of inferiority, dismantling white supremacy, and systemic and institutional racism, and exposing their children to the great history of African people before and after the Middle Passage. This must be done openly and honestly if they are to free themselves. In doing so, they will be revealing to tomorrow's leaders an accurate and honest accounting of a people they will undoubtedly rub elbows with on a daily basis, if not in America then throughout the African Diaspora and certainly beyond these borders worldwide.

Children who do not see a people as contributing or valued will respond in kind and that is what we see playing out in today's world, like trying to row a boat to safety without all the rowers having an oar. The Black community must learn our history, embrace it and teach our children this great heritage, a heritage of struggle, sacrifice, perseverance, excellence and belief, a rich heritage outside of enslavement.

Economic stability is a key element for survival that cannot be overlooked. Black middle-class flight has cost us a great deal, not to mention the $1.3 trillion dollars the black community spends in an economy that holds them in disdain.

We must recognize leaders within our own community, respect our elders, respect men, women and children, and most of all build community for each other rather than wait for government or members of the outside establishment to figure out what plagues us. We must take back the community. We owe each other a respect too long denied and now overlooked in an era of selfishness and divisiveness.

Regardless of whether or not what we have internalized as a remnant of PTSS, we must now recognize that we are accountable for what we do to each other. Our ancestors have already paid the price. The sacrifice has been made. The rest is up to us.

Route

his 24 years in bondage, most of which was spent within a 10-block radius in downtown Fredericksburg. It's an invaluable resource because so few accounts exist giving insight into the day-to-day lives of slaves.

Washington "finds a way to make clear that being enslaved was a powerful mental condition — not just a physical ordeal — and he never lets the reader forget that," said John Hennessy, chief historian of the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, which administers the trail.

To get a sense of Washington's life, we read his memoir then listened to the informative podcast on the Trail to Freedom website, which describes in rich detail each of the eight stops along the walking tour. Armed with this information, we entered Washington's world.

John Washington lived the first 24 years of his life in slavery in downtown Fredericksburg. In April 1862, he crossed the Rappahannock River to freedom.

He was an urban slave, born in 1838, and as such his life differed from those of slaves who toiled in the fields. For one thing, his mother, Sarah, was literate and taught him the alphabet. She and her five children were owned by Catherine Taliaferro of Fredericksburg.

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The first stop on the tour was the former Farmers' Bank building at the corner of George and Princess Anne streets, where Washington spent much of his childhood as Taliaferro's household servant. Her husband and two sons had been managers at the bank, and she was granted the privilege of residing in the upstairs living quarters. Today, this imposing federal-style, red-brick structure houses a restaurant: FoodE (pronounced "foodie").

Dressed in fine clothing, young Washington spent tedious hours here sitting on a footstool and awaiting his owner's whims. His mother and siblings lived a

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few blocks away on Sophia Street and were hired out as workers by their owner. We looked up at the second-floor window above the side entrance on George Street, imagining the lonely boy gazing out at the life of the city around him.

While he was living here, his greatest fear came to pass. Taliaferro sent Washington's mother and siblings away to work in Staunton, Va.

On the night before she left, Washington's mother came to his room on the second floor and said her goodbyes. He was devastated and now truly alone. He was 11 years old.

"Then and there My hatred was kindled Secretly against my oppressors, and I promised Myself If ever I got the opportunity I would run away from these devilish Slave holders," Washington later wrote.

The slave auction block and plaque at the corner of Charles and William streets in Fredericksburg. (James F. Lee/For The Washington Post)

He saw his mother once in the next 12 years. Mother and son eventually reunited, probably in the District. Sarah died in 1880, and is buried in Georgetown's Mount Zion Cemetery.

We next walked across Princess Anne Street to Faulkner Hall on the St. George Episcopal Church grounds, where Washington attended Sunday school. This small, single-story brick building offered a precious brief escape from the oppressive oversight of his mistress. He fondly remembered Olive Hanson, his kind Sunday school teacher, in his memoirs.

We continued around the corner to the busy intersection of Charles and William streets to observe an angular stone block where slaves stood at auction to be sold or temporarily hired out. Although Washington was hired out to other owners several times during his life as a slave, there is no evidence that he ever stood on this block. But there is plenty of evidence that thousands of others did.

When Washington was 17, he became a member of the African Baptist Church on Sophia Street, where the Shiloh Baptist Church stands today, receiving baptism and later marrying here. "And many happy moments have I spent with the Church in its Joys and Sorrows at that place," he wrote.

The church was perhaps the only institution available to enslaved people. "It was undoubtedly a haven of hope and a site of solace for those who were enduring the suffocation of slavery," said Mark William Olson, of Shiloh Baptist Church's history and archives committee. In 1863, freed slaves from the Fredericksburg church founded the Shiloh Baptist Church in the District.

The approach of federal troops across the river from Fredericksburg on April 18, 1862, sent white citizens into a panic. At that time, Washington had been hired out to the Shakespeare Hotel on Caroline Street. This building no longer remains.

Between April and September 1862, thousands of enslaved men and women escaped across the Rappahannock River to freedom under the protection of the Union Army via the Aquia Creek Landing. (Alexander Gardner /Library of Congress)

In his haste to evacuate, the hotel's owner gave Washington money to pay off the servants and orders to lock up the hotel, which he faithfully did, after taking time to toast the Yankees' health.

Then Washington did something astounding: He went to the Farmer's Bank to see Taliaferro at her upstairs residence.

She was packing her silver when Washington arrived. "Child [he was 24 and married at the time] you better come and go out in the country with me," she said. He told her he had to return to the hotel but that he would come back. But he had no intention of returning. On this day, he fulfilled his vow to seek his freedom.

Leaving his wife, Annie, behind, he crossed the Rappahannock on a Union Army boat near what is now Old Mill Park on Caroline Street. (Annie would join him later.) Today, the ruins of the mill are still visible. We walked along the river's edge, thick with sycamore and elm trees, and looked across the river into Stafford County.

The distance was short, but the effect of that crossing was earth-shattering.

"I had begun to fee[l] like I had truly escaped from the hands of the Slaves Master and with the help of God, I never would be a Slave no more," Washington wrote. A historical marker opposite 2622 Caroline St. explains Washington's escape. Once across the river, Washington offered his services to the Union army, serving for four months as an aide and cook.

And here, the driving tour picks up the story of the 10,000 self-emancipated slaves.

Word spread throughout the slave population in central Virginia that deliverance lay across the river. Thousands made their way eastward through Stafford County on foot, by cart or by train.

The ruins of the Union Church of Falmouth. Washington spent his first night of freedom near this site. The following day, he witnessed the burial of seven Union soldiers in the church cemetery. (James F. Lee/For The Washington Post)

Their goal: Aquia Creek Landing on the Potomac River, where federal steamships would take them to safety in Alexandria and the District.

"[This was] one of the most concentrated exoduses of refugees seen anywhere in America," Hennessy said. "The Rappahannock River constantly filled with rafts."

The *New York Times* reported: "At daybreak the exodus began, and out of every gate and alleyway sallied groups of men, women and children, carrying bundles, trunks and boxes, and bending their steps to the railroad station."

Remnants of the migration are few today. We relied on information presented on panels at each of the 10 stops on the driving tour to provide context.

At the Falmouth Beach stop, we observed a photo of freed slaves in ox-drawn carts traveling on the road as Union soldiers look on.

At the Chatham Manor stop, another huge photograph portrayed recently emancipated women and children crowded into a wagon staring forlornly at the camera, uncertain of their fate.

"These men and women [made] decisions for themselves and their families to embark on an uncertain world," Hennessy said.

The world was uncertain, but they were free.