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New Chicago Underground Railroad Site Recognized

By Tom Shepherd

Tom Shepherd is the lead organizer of the Little Calumet River Underground Railroad Project. Reprinted with permission of *Port of Harlem* e-zine.

The National Park Service (NPS) recently accepted the Jan and Aagje Ton Farm site into the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom registry. The site is roughly at 134th Street and St. Lawrence Avenue in Chicago. The farm is in the heart of the bi-state Calumet region, 20 minutes south of what will become the Obama Presidential Library in Chicago and 20 minutes west from the planned Hard Rock Café Casino in Gary, Indiana.

The NPS has found that the location "makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the Underground Railroad in American history and that it meets the requirements for inclusion as a site."

The farm originally contained 40 acres along the north bank of the Little Calumet River during the period of the 1840's until the Civil War, generations before the Calumet region experienced the great migration of Blacks from the South to Chicago and

Gary. The NPS acceptance announcement celebration took place at the nearby historic Pullman National Monument Visitor Center.

Today, a portion of the farm's original 40 acres is part of Chicago's Finest Marina, owned by Ronald Gaines. Much of the rest of the acreage is abandoned property that activist hope the local government will acquire and add to the adjoining Cook County Forest Preserves.

Professor Larry McClellan provided the research and documentation to the NPS that led the federal agency to declare that Ton Farm was an important "station" on the Underground Railroad and had been a "safe house" for countless numbers of Freedom Seekers and fugitive slaves seeking independence during their perilous journeys to Canada and other safe places in northern states. McClellan is the foremost authority on the Underground Railroad in northern Illinois.

Researchers have also memorialized the site's Underground Railroad conductors, farmers Jan and Aagje Ton, who were Dutch immigrants. Eagle Scout LeRone Branch, a descendent of enslaved Africans, spearheaded a

City of Alexandria, Virginia, to Purchase Notorious Slave Mart

From 1828 to 1836, the narrow three-story building at 1315 Duke Street in Alexandria, Virginia, was used by the partnership of Franklin and Armfield as the nation's busiest and most lucrative slave-trading business. The sordid commerce at the building continued under a succession of owners until the United States Army in 1861 ran out the last of the enslavers and freed the building's sole remaining occupant, a black man chained up in the basement.

It is estimated that, after disembarking from their trans-Atlantic passage at the Port of Alexandria, as many as 50,000 enslaved Africans were auctioned off by Franklin and Armfield and their successors at the site. Most were "sold South" and either force-marched in coffee lines or, once more, packed far too many

into boats, their main destinations Mississippi and Louisiana.

After long passing through a variety of uses and owners, last as a row house, the building was purchased in 1996 by the Northern Virginia Urban League, which restored it, used the building as its offices, installed a small museum, and renamed it Freedom House. But maintaining the old building was a strain, diverting revenues that the League uses for scholarships and community assistance. When the League put Freedom House up for sale in 2019 to insure better funded stewardship, the city of Alexandria stepped forward as the buyer. Freedom House sold for \$1.8 million, with the sale expected to be completed next month.

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campaign that resulted in the erection of a monument to them in 2011 at First Reformed Church in South Holland, a church that Jan Ton attended.

The Little Calumet River Underground Railroad Project plans a monument dedicated to Freedom Seekers and local abolitionists who assisted escaped enslaved Americans who traveled throughout Chicagoland and Northwest Indiana.



Freedom House in Alexandria

Review: The Search for the Underground Railroad in South Central Ohio

This review is provided by Renee Moore of Saratoga Springs, New York, who is founder of Solomon Northup Day. Edited for space.

With all the books out there about the Underground Railroad, I bet you're wondering why you should read another. This latest book by seasoned researcher and author Tom Calarco is one that shouldn't be overlooked.

From the truth about the Underground Railroad that can't be found on the Big Screen of Hollywood, this book reveals lesser-known facts while expelling myths about this poignant time in American history that readers will find historically informative and exciting simultaneously.

From the Fugitive Slave Act to the famous story of Henry Box Brown, an army of volunteer Samaritans risked everything to create a powerful network throughout the Ohio Valley determined and convinced of their God-given calling and commitment to freedom by any means necessary. This book takes you on a journey through south central Ohio linking it firmly to the wider national narrative on the struggle for freedom.

While white and black citizens were active in the Underground Railroad, black involvement in this struggle has been grossly underrated until now. Calarco makes clear that the role of enslaved Africans in their own fight for freedom is essential to any narrative about the Underground Railroad.

More than black and white, Ohio was a state torn between those who opposed slavery and those who sought to uphold it, which in some ways may still be relevant today.

From the black church's key role in this struggle to the ocean-going vessels used to secretly transport humans desperate for freedom, his thorough account takes you throughout the Ohio Valley and beyond into the intricacies of a region ripe with Underground Railroad history.

You can put this book among your indispensable collection of American history about noted people like Henry Box Brown, the collections of Wilbur Siebert and those most involved in this well organized effort, while removing the romanticism too often used to describe this vital part of American history.

Calarco's book brings into focus, the Oberlin-Wellington rescuers, the Ohio-Anti-Slavery Society, Presbyterian minis-

ter George Gordon and others dispelling the myths about the North and revealing its pivotal role in slavery played out in the farm country of South-Central Ohio.

Calarco takes the reader from the well-known Fugitive Slave law to lesser-known individuals like August West, John Copeland (hanged two weeks after John Brown), John Mercer Langston, the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society of Oberlin, David Jenkins, the enthralling story of August West, William Hanby, minister and one of the founders of Otterbein College, the heroics of Richard Dillingham, slave rescuer, to a little known Abraham Lincoln quote he wrote to Horace Greeley in 1862, "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union and its not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it."

The story of the underground railroad remains one that frees us all through its captivating legacy and does the necessary work of truth-telling.

The battle for freedom continues even today with shifting front lines throughout this great nation.

Alexandria

Said Alexandria Mayor Justin Wilson, "The building's preservation is vital to connect the stories of our past to our present-day conversation about race and equity, and ensure we are telling a broader, more candid account of Alexandria and our nation's history." Wilson said the city wanted the property in public ownership to stabilize its future. A City memorandum states, "Possible loss of this site to private ownership would deprive historians, and those interested in slave history the understanding of an important aspect of our Nation's and City's heritage. This site should remain accessible to the public, so what was once a place of horrors may be held for the public trust."

The transition to the City came about as an innovative public-private partnership, with the City covering the purchase, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam writing \$2.44 million into the state budget to help restore the property, the Urban League remaining as a tenant, and private sector partners being invited to help.

The Freedom House is open to the public on a limited schedule that is expected to be expanded. For more, visit alexandriava.gov/FreedomHouse.

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