



Editorial

Thank You!

This issue of *Underground Railroad Free Press* marks the fourth anniversary of the publication. When we launched in July, 2006, our goals were to provide news and history to readers as fast as we could grow our email subscriber list, and to fill a few gaps in the international Underground Railroad community including a central registry and calendar.

We completed these two goals and along the way added our annual surveys of the community and launched the Free Press prizes for contemporary Underground Railroad preservation, leadership and the advancement of knowledge.

When we got started, we had no idea how well received *Free Press* and its programs would become in such a short time. Lynx and Datebook, the *Free Press* central registry and calendar of the Underground Railroad community, continue to grow, and the Free Press Prizes have been especially well received, becoming the Underground Railroad community's top honors. The annual Free Press surveys are the only ones of their kind and go far in informing executives, readers and others of important trends.

But what we are proudest of is how enthusiastically *Free Press* itself is now regarded and read. Again you gave the newsletter high marks in the just-published 2010 survey. We had hoped that subscribers shared *Free Press* with others but were astounded to see three-fourths of you doing so. Nearly 15,000 now read *Free Press* making it the most widely read Underground Railroad news publication by a large margin.

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Underground Railroad Free Press®

Independent reporting on today's Underground Railroad

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How Underground Railroad Interest Surged in Last 15 Years

By Anthony Cohen

This is the first in a two-part series on origins of the modern Underground Railroad, its institutions and personalities. This article covers antecedents of the recent revival in Underground Railroad interest and the first modern organizations to develop. A companion piece will cover the international Underground Railroad community's development from 1998 to 2010.

Some great sage said long ago that history is invisible while we are passing through it. Thus, historians throughout the ages have faced a difficult truth- that while dedicating our lives to uncovering history, we all too often fail to see the history we make in the process.

I was recently reminded of this during an interview when I was asked if my nonprofit, The Menare Foundation, Inc., was the "first of its kind" in the nation. Formed in 1995 as The North Star Foundation before changing our name four years later, our mission was,

and continues to be, "to preserve the legacy of the Underground Railroad." At our inception, the Underground Railroad preservation movement was just coming into its own and many small but organized efforts were taking hold across the nation spurred by a move-

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Anthony Cohen is founder and president of the Menare Foundation, thought to be the first modern Underground Railroad entity. He manages Button Farm, a living history center depicting a nineteenth-century Maryland slave plantation. Cohen's 1996 walk of his freedom seeker ancestor's route from Maryland to Canada and a *Smithsonian* article on it helped to spark the modern revival of the Underground Railroad.



Anthony Cohen

2010 Survey Results In: Economic Woes but Stability in the Underground Railroad Community

Respondents to the 2010 *Free Press* Survey of the International Underground Railroad Community, conducted in May, say that they and their organizations are as dedicated as ever but that the Great Recession took its toll in 2009. The full survey report is available to view and download at the *Free Press* website. Here is a summary of this year's findings.

Stable Practices

Underground Railroad knowledge has been stable for four years at above average but not high. Main sources of knowledge remain the Internet and print media including *Free Press*. The proportion having visited Underground Railroad sites stabilized at 82 percent after rising five percent per year through 2009. More than half of respondents are involved with an Underground Railroad site, or-

ganization or program, and functionally in promoting Underground Railroad programs.

Optimism Amidst a Tough Economy

Many more Underground Railroad organizations are experiencing adverse impacts from the economy in 2010 than in 2009, with one in six shifting from some income to none. Even so, more than half of the survey's respondents see growth in funding, promotion and the number of identified sites as the most likely future trends in the Underground Railroad community.

Four Organizations Predominate

For the first time, *Free Press* is ranked higher in either familiarity or importance by the international Underground Railroad community

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Annual Albany Underground Railroad Conference Rises

The Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region will sponsor its annual Underground Railroad History Conference at Russell Sage College in Albany, New York, April 8 through 11, 2011.

The Project's nine previous conferences were a hit from the start, the first in 2002 drawing over 130 participants. They have grown and been widely praised. Says author and Free Press Prize judge Fergus Bordewich, "The annual Capital Region symposium is the gold standard of Underground Railroad confer-

ences, a national model for other communities which are in the process of reclaiming their role in antebellum abolitionist history."

Conference organizers Mary Liz and Paul Stewart write, "Each conference engages a multi-age diverse audience through a variety of presentation formats, recognizing that people engage history and its legacy in various ways. Artists, historians, academicians, educators, preservationists, librarians, stu-

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If anything, we were even more surprised to learn that the community now rates *Free Press* as the most recognized and valued Underground Railroad entity. For more on the 2010 survey, see this issue's article and the survey report on our website.

So, thank you. We've tried hard the past four years to serve the Underground Railroad community and it is most gratifying to know that you feel we are succeeding. We plan to keep on improving and are always looking for good ways to do so. Let us hear your ideas on this.

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Today's Underground Railroad

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Ohio Safe-House Newly Memorialized

In 1935, Dr. Howard Smith, a physician in Marietta, Ohio, decided to memorialize the work of his grandparents, James and Margaret Smith, who had used their farm as an Underground Railroad safe-house. Among other plaudits, the home had been the scene of a confrontation in which James Smith and his five sons successfully fended off at gun point a Virginia sheriff acting as a slave catcher. The grandson fabricated a marker and placed it in front of his grandparent's farm house, both shown here.



The marker was recently relocated from the Smith farm along Ohio Route 555 two miles south of Cutler, Ohio, to the nearby Belpre

Historical Society Museum. Belpre sits on the Ohio River, the threshold of freedom from slave territory.

Local historian Henry Burke states that the marker was moved because the farm was broken into small parcels of five acres or less after it was purchased by a land company in 2000, and it seemed that the marker could be in danger of being discarded or destroyed.

Cutler, Belpre and other Washington County, Ohio, towns were a main conduit of Underground Railroad traffic from Parkersburg, West Virginia, (then Virginia) through southeast Ohio. In his landmark 1898 *The Underground Railroad*, Ohio State University historian Wilbur Seiburt makes numerous references to Underground Railroad personages, safe-houses and routes in Washington County including the caves in Salem Township.

Burke himself descends from two Underground Railroad freedom seekers who settled near Belpre in the 1790s. One of Burke's ancestors was among the 500 enslaved people freed by Virginia's Robert "King" Carter in 1791, in the largest mass emancipation in United States history.

Chesapeake College Hosts Tubman Conference

The Choptank Region History Network and Chesapeake College sponsored the inaugural Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Conference in Cambridge, Maryland, near Tubman's birth place June 3 through 6.

Conference organizers brought together researchers who have studied Tubman and others who risked helping slaves escape this area of Eastern Shore Maryland where Tubman escaped from slavery.

The conference was spearheaded by local history researcher John Creighton who began

researching Tubman in the 1990s.

The Choptank region of Maryland is centered on the river from which it takes its name, one of the main tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay. The area retains the slow rural ambience and long vistas which Tubman knew before her escape from the Brodess plantation in 1849. The area today relies on agriculture, crabbing, fishing, oystering and, these days, tourism, and is well worth a visit for its tranquility and Tubman history.

Visit tubmanugrr.net for more.

Belmont Mansion Safe-House

One of an occasional series on Underground Railroad sites

Philadelphia's Belmont Mansion operates as a museum of the Underground Railroad and colonial history in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. Open to the public, the facility boasts a permanent collection of Underground Railroad artifacts, memorabilia and documents.



Belmont's abolition and Underground Railroad connection began with Judge Richard Peters and son Richard Peters, Jr., the Second Continental Congress Secretary of War. The father served as the first non-Quaker member of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, the son as its president.

Judge Peters worked to overturn the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and urged President Washington to promote development of agriculture without the use of slave labor. In 1811, Peters purchased the freedom of his neighbor, Cornelia Wells.

Belmont Mansion is operated by the American Women's Heritage Society, a predominantly African-American nonprofit group organized in 1986 to restore the mansion. Visit BelmontMansion.org for more.

It's no surprise. With a quarter million applications - "apps" - on everything else, Apple now offers an Underground Railroad app. The app displays the Google/MapMuse interactive web map, the most complete Underground Railroad map available. Cool. Google on "Underground Railroad app" to view or buy.



ment to recognize the Underground Railroad through the National Park Service.

By the early twentieth century, much of the memory of the Underground Railroad resided in communities nationwide where safe-houses, churches and burial grounds remained as fragmented vestiges of legend and lore. By the 1960s, through the Civil Rights movement and increased scholarship in African American history, the efforts to commemorate the Underground Railroad took the form of historic preservation and the dedication of monuments and memorials to honor its heroes and heroines.

Survey. Continued from page 1

than is any other Underground Railroad organization. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Park Service's Network to Freedom program and *Underground Railroad Free Press* have consolidated their positions into a virtual four-way tie as the most recognized Underground Railroad institutions.

During 2009, Friends of the Network to Freedom Association folded and the Underground Railroad Research Institute relocated from Georgetown College to the University of Louisville.

Use of the Wellman Scale, the best means of rating the authenticity of Underground Railroad site claims, and of MapMuse, the most comprehensive Underground Railroad site map, remains unexplainably low with only about one in five survey respondents having used these key tools. Private-sector organizations more often use these instruments than do government entities, also puzzling. This very low use, particularly by public-sector Underground Railroad entities, remains unexplained.

Five-sixths of *Free Press* subscribers are reading all or most issues of the publication. Nearly three-fourths forward their issues of *Free Press* to at least one other reader, with a majority forwarding to two or more. At least two subscribers say that they are each forwarding their issues to a thousand others. This sharing of *Underground Railroad Free Press* by its subscribers brings *Free Press* readership to nearly 15,000 not counting how many secondary readers might be forwarding the issues they receive. Based on these survey results, *Free Press* readership is growing at about 3,000 to 4,000 per year.

With the exception of the usefulness of Lynx and Datebook which dropped to middling ratings due to a different survey polling method, 2010 survey respondents continue to give high to very high ratings to *Free Press* reporting, programs, usefulness, the Free Press Prizes and overall. Readers' topical preferences remain much the same as in past surveys with historical articles the runaway favorite, followed by notice of upcoming events and reporting on contemporary issues and controversies of the Underground Railroad.

Conference. Continued from page 1

dents, interested individuals and others come together to be educated, to celebrate and to preserve an accurate retelling of this complex history that had a formative impact on the development of our nation while reclaiming the voices of the past that have been excluded from our standard canon and addressing the legacy of this history as it relates to us today."

The Stewarts are also the founders of the conference's sponsoring organization, the Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, located in Albany. They were winners of the 2008 *Underground Railroad Free Press Prize* for Preservation for their rediscovery and preservation of Albany's Stephen and Harriet Myers House, an Underground Railroad safe-house long forgotten.

The 2011 conference theme is "Abolishing Slavery in the Atlantic World: The Underground Railroad in the Americas, Africa, and Europe." Franklin Wright, Stulman Professor of History at Johns Hopkins University, and internationally known genealogist Tony Burroughs are the 2011 keynote speakers.

The Albany conferences use a traditional academic format of discussion panels and presentations of papers. Proposals for 2011 conference presentations are being sought and will be accepted through July 31. Proposals should address the conference theme of capture, enslavement, and resistance in Africa, Europe and the Americas, historically or at present, and the preservation of voices of the past and their relationship with us today.

The conference organizers say that proposals on related questions, not directly on the 2011 conference theme, are also welcome.

For more on the conference and submission of proposals, visit ugrworkshop.com or contact the Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region at info@ugrworkshop.com or 518.432.4432.

The Underground Railroad History Project also offers local events, a speaker series, theatrical productions, a walking tour of Albany Underground Railroad and abolition sites, block parties and *The Freedom Seeker*, a newsletter published three times per year.

The organization's mission is to research, preserve, and retell New York's regional history of the Underground Railroad, highlighting the role of African-American freedom seekers and local abolitionists.

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road, many of the well known sites of today are featured on the National Register of Historic Places, a designation that has bolstered Underground Railroad efforts and given birth to associated historical societies, community organizations and friends groups.

The John Rankin House was an active stop overlooking the Ohio River on a hilltop in Ripley, Ohio. With over 2,000 fugitives crossing its threshold, Rankin House was legend in the days of slavery, so much so that in 1892 the "Freedom's Heroes" memorial was placed at the gravesite of John and Jean Rankin thus starting efforts that eventually resulted in the state of Ohio restoring the home as a museum.

The Levi Coffin House in Fountain City, Indiana, known as the Central Station of the Underground Railroad, was acquired by the State of Indiana in 1967. Now operated by the Levi Coffin House Association, it was opened to the public in 1970, the same year that Rankin House was placed on the National Register.

Rokeby, the Vermont home of the Robinson family for two centuries, was a trusty stop for weary fugitives en route to Canada. The house remained in family hands until 1961 when it became a museum and solidified in time the legacy of this illustrious abolitionist tribe. Visiting Rokeby today, one sees the very room where fugitives slept and the intact nineteenth-century library with its two complete runs of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* newspaper. While it is not a historical society *per se*, Rokeby gives a rare unbroken continuity to the Underground Railroad story, and, covering 200 years of history, serves as one of the longest continually running Underground Railroad sites.

In the 1970s, interest in the Underground Railroad was the domain of lone activists, historians and researchers, and was certainly accelerated during the 1976 Bicentennial year with the popularity of Alex Haley's book *Roots* and the miniseries of the same name that followed. Credited for launching the genealogical movement in America, *Roots* gave hope to African-Americans that their family legacies could be recovered.

One earlier effort came in the form of the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation, founded in 1970 by Vincent and Robert DeForest. Fresh on the heels of the Civil Rights movement, the organiza-

tion was formed to bring black perspectives to the national story to be celebrated six years later. Thus the organization was launched in a ceremony at Frederick Douglass's Cedar Hill Home in Washington, DC, and was followed by annual readings of Frederick Douglass's famous "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" speech. Vincent DeForest's efforts to bring forth the stories of the Underground Railroad at that time would place him at the forefront of efforts two decades later to interpret the Underground Railroad for the National Park Service.

Perhaps the biggest boon to the Underground Railroad came in the form of historian Charles Blockson, "Grandfather" of modern Underground Railroad studies who first heard tales of the "lightning train" as a child during World War II. Blockson eventually became a collector of all things Underground Railroad by the 1960s, and today his collection of a half million items on the global black experience is housed at Temple University and includes a large Underground Railroad collection.

Blockson's 1984 *National Geographic* article put him and the Underground Railroad on the global map, making him the go-to authority for a decade and more afterward. In his 1994 *Hippocrene Guide to The Underground Railroad*, Blockson amassed a state-by-state accounting of Underground Railroad points of interest featuring "over 200 sites including museums, historical markers, churches and homes of sympathetic citizens." Blockson's book illustrated for the first time that communities across the country had been chronicling this history through creative preservation and interpretive methods.

Despite these many individual and collaborative efforts, it wasn't until the 1990s that the Underground Railroad community as we know it today with its societies, government agencies, advisory boards, etc. came to be. Part of this was certainly due to the rise of the Internet which began linking sole site operators with like-minded researchers in community archives, universities and institutions through cyberspace.

But what might be called the great awakening began in 1990 when Congress ordered a Special Resource Study to recommend concepts for interpreting the story of the Underground Railroad through the National Park Service. This call to action electrified the Under-

ground Railroad community and sparked smaller groups, historic districts and governmental entities to take a closer look at their own Underground Railroad stories. Within two years, an advisory committee for the project had been formed which featured Thomas Battle, John Fleming, Ancella Bickley, Charles Blockson, Barbara Hudson, Robin Winks, Vivian Abdur-Rahim, Rose Powhatan and Glennette Tilley-Turner as representatives. By 1995, the Special Resource Study publication — a 194-page document which laid out multiple concepts for potential Underground Railroad interpretation — was released.

Key to the document was the inclusion of an appendix listing nearly 400 representative Underground Railroad sites in 34 states and two territories resulting in the most comprehensive profile of Underground Railroad organizations, and historical and natural resources up to then. While the study was a watershed moment for the movement, the reaction to its release was doubled-edged. For many who managed to get their hands on a copy, it opened a window to the breadth of Underground Railroad resources that existed. It also struck a negative chord among small communities and groups nationwide which complained that their own Underground Railroad sites or projects had not been included for consideration. Yet in 1998, the resulting legislation, based on this original study, produced the Network to Freedom, a National Park Service program which today boasts over 400 approved sites, facilities and programs nationwide.

What we don't know and what remains to be told are the stories of countless individuals, groups and communities which, through tireless and often lonely efforts, have spent their lives documenting, preserving, researching, reenacting and interpreting the Underground Railroad. What are their stories, when did they form and who or what events inspired their inception?

Furthermore, the efforts of communities across Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean and the American West remain in the shadows and beg to be researched and chronicled. Only when we know the motivations of those who labor to preserve these stories will we understand the reason why the Underground Railroad has not been forgotten.

Part II of this series will appear in a future issue of *Free Press* and cover developments from 1998 until 2010.