



# Underground Railroad Free Press®

News and views on today's Underground Railroad

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## Editorial

### Quilts and Drinking Gourds

In fleeing north, did Underground Railroad freedom seekers sing of the big dipper as "the drinking gourd"? Did a sympathizer hang a quilt in a certain way or with a coded pattern to guide freedom seekers? Are places said to be Underground Railroad safe-houses but lacking written evidence actually safe-houses?

One school of thought on these and other Underground Railroad oral traditions holds that the record provided for the future on the Underground Railroad ought to rest mainly, even exclusively, on what can be documented.

Another maintains that history is what actually happened, documented or not, and that lack of written proof doesn't mean something didn't exist or happen.

The drinking gourd song and quilts as message devices elicit perhaps more naysaying than any other Underground Railroad oral traditions.

On his web site, [followthedrinkinggourd.org](http://followthedrinkinggourd.org), Joel Bresler posits a case that the song did not exist in Underground Railroad times since he can not find written proof that it did.

James Rucker, leading Underground Railroad musicologist, counters, "In researching the Underground Railroad, we have to use intuition. Most escapees were illiterate, and it's absurd to think a secret organization would keep written records."

On quilt codes, Brown University's Prof. James Campbell states, "No contemporaneous evidence proves that such a code ever existed," and on safe-houses he opines, "Countless white northerners who point proudly to the basement or old barn where there forbears sheltered escaped slaves are, more often than not, engaging in wishful thinking."

More often than not?

Historian Jacqueline Tobin tells of meeting Ozella Williams, an elderly

(continued on page two)

## House Reacts to Bush, Park Service Network to Freedom Cuts

President Bush's proposed 2008 budget includes the largest increase ever for the National Park Service but cuts the budget of the Park Service's National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program by 42 percent.

The proposed \$2.4 billion 2008 Park Service budget is \$230 million higher than its 2007 budget, a 10.6 percent increase, one of the largest for any federal department. The 2008 budget proposes 3,000 new employees and significant increases in park maintenance and cultural and natural resource programs but a cut for the Network to Freedom.

The Network to Freedom core budget, which pays staff salaries but not much else, is set to grow 1.2 percent to \$490,000 in 2008, not enough to cover the next federal cost of living increase. The Network to Freedom's Capital Grant Program, funded at \$368,000 in 2007, is set to receive no 2008 funding resulting in an overall budget cut of 42 percent.

A highly placed National Park Service headquarters spokesman said that the 2008 Network to Freedom budget cut resulted from a "high policy question" in the administration but did not elaborate on this.

The Network to Freedom is staffed by six Park Service employees some of whom have been seconded to other Parks operations as

the Network's budget is insufficient to cover all of their salaries, a situation which has existed for several years.

To correct this, Representative Alcee Hastings (D-Florida) and 26 co-sponsors on February 28 introduced legislation to fund the Network to Freedom at \$2.5 million annually slating eight full-time staff, \$2 million for operations and \$500,000 for the Capital Grant Program.

However, on May 15, when the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands heard testimony on the bill, senior Park Service staff opposed the bill's language raising Network staffing to eight.

This restriction would continue to hamper Network to Freedom effectiveness despite a larger budget. Network staff are restricted in commenting on budget matters and Park Service headquarters officials were mum on the Park Service's opposition to Network to Freedom growth.

The Network to Freedom program is housed within the Park Service's Midwest Regional Office in Omaha headed by Ernest Quintana.



Rep. Alcee Hastings

## Sacramento's California State University Bolsters West Coast Underground Railroad Work

The library of California State University, Sacramento, flagship school of the 24-campus California State University system, houses the California Underground Railroad Digital Archive, one of the most important Underground Railroad research collections in the western United States.

Launched in 2004, the archive is funded by the California State Library and the Center for California Studies, and is led by Joe Louis Moore, President of the Sacramento African American Historical and Cultural Society which is also a funder.

Using high-quality digital images of letters, journals, photographs, documents and newspapers, the searchable archive documents the brief and often overlooked chapter of California history dealing with slavery and the Underground Railroad.

With an already thriving multiracial population including people of African descent, California's Spanish era experienced slavery only rarely, but the influx of Americans with the 1849 gold rush brought in slavery. Though the Compromise of 1850 declared California a free state, enslavement of African-Americans and Native Americans continued through the Civil War and afterward.

As elsewhere, some enslaved Californians bought their freedom, some gained it by working off indentures and some simply fled. Accounts of the California Underground Railroad are thin and we are not aware of escape cases from either oral tradition or documentation. Mary Ellen Pleasant, an early California civil right champion known to have been an Underground Railroad conductor when living in Massachusetts, is thought to have continued this after moving to California in 1852.

quilter, who passed on her family's oral tradition that slaves stitched certain quilt patterns to guide freedom seekers. Tobin would agree with Campbell that there is no written proof of this but, by the same token, there appears to be no evidence to disprove the quilt story.

The oral tradition of a South African group is that it is one of lost tribes of Israel. Ridiculed for years by "experts," the group had its ancient oral tradition proven by DNA analysis. As with this oral tradition, Underground Railroad oral traditions do not simply arise from thin air.

For its entire 280-year existence, the Underground Railroad was an illegal clandestine operation recorded far more in oral tradition than in records which dared not be kept. We come down on the side of oral tradition to tell most of the Underground Railroad story. Shunting aside oral tradition would distort history, what actually happened, most especially regarding the Underground Railroad for which the bulk of what we know rests squarely on oral tradition.

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## Summer Reading List: Five Good Underground Railroad Reads

*Underground Railroad Free Press* publishes occasional reviews of books and articles and welcomes submissions of reviews.

Reviewed by Peter H. Michael

After decades of little more than academic articles and even a paucity of them, recent years have seen a blossoming of good books on the Underground Railroad, historical accounts and novels alike. Many regard Fergus Bordewich's 2005 *Bound for Canaan* as the new yardstick for broad Underground Railroad history. Recently, readers have also begun to benefit from well written accounts of individual Underground Railroad personalities and episodes, flights to freedom in particular. Here are two.

Karolyn Frost's *I've Got a Home in Glory Land* offers one more well-researched escape account to the growing list of recent Underground Railroad nonfiction. Frost, Executive Director of Canada's Ontario Historical Society, recounts the 1831 escape of Thornton and Lucie Blackwell from Kentucky, their rescue from slave catchers in Detroit and Canada's refusal twice to extradite the couple after they fled there.

The couple's ordeal in Detroit emerges as the apex of their lives and of the book. After slave catchers captured the Blackwells, Detroit's black community arose, recovering Thornton Blackwell at gunpoint and springing Lucie Blackwell from jail.

The United States' attempts to have the Blackwells extradited from Canada led to a sharp diplomatic exchange from which Canada refused to back down and which put the slave states on notice that their northern neighbor not only welcomed but would protect freedom seekers.

Equally as gripping as Frost's book is Mary Kay Ricks' *Escape on the Pearl*, telling of one of the best documented Underground Railroad escape attempts, this one nautical.

In one of the largest and best coordinated Underground Railroad flights known, more than 70 enslaved people fled Washington, DC, aboard the Pearl the night of April 15, 1848. But, a late departure attributed to a less-than-astute captain and bad weather stalled the Pearl at the confluence of the Potomac and the Chesapeake permitting a posse to catch her and thwart the escape.

Ricks, an attorney who operates Tours DC, concentrates on consequences of the Pearl escape attempt, telling much of the story through the eyes of freedom seeker sisters Emily and Mary Edmonson who were sold south after the Pearl capture but ended up making their way eventually to study at Ohio's Oberlin College. The account of this journey is high drama.

Nearly all Underground Railroad literature is nonfiction. A nice fiction addition to the Underground Railroad reader's list is David Durham's 2002 *Walk Through Darkness*.

This finely written historical novel vividly portrays hardships endured by enslaved people seeking their freedom, and the heroics of Underground Railroad freedom seekers, conductors and safe-house operators in 1850s Maryland, then still a slave state, and in Philadelphia, a prime seat of abolitionism. Routes, safe-houses, hideouts, perils and the intertwined life journeys of two families — one black, one white — are intensely rendered. The book's surprise ending speaks straight from the long American quest to right the nation's heart on race.

From the jacket, "*Walk Through Darkness* is a complex story that is uniquely American, reflecting the tortured natures of the country's bloodlines and uncovering the deep bonds — and wounds — that exist across racial lines."

David Durham was awarded the 2002 Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Fiction Award for his first novel, *Gabriel's Story*.

Few would have encountered the Blackwell or Pearl accounts or any mention of the Underground Railroad in their history classes. Typical is my undergraduate American history text which lacks a single word's mention of the Underground Railroad.

Correcting this is a 1968 history text book, out of print but available on Amazon and eBay, on United States history up to the Civil War through the lens of the Black historian. Reading Charles H. Wesley's *In Freedom's Footsteps: From the African Background to the Civil War* is akin to being transported to a parallel universe, by contrast confirming acutely how often incomplete is the taught version of United States history as written by white historians. This volume is especially strong in illuminating the African-American influence on the nation's intellectual history.

*In Freedom's Footsteps* is one of a series produced by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History founded in 1915 by Howard University's Carter G. Woodson, also the founding publisher of the *Journal of Negro History*.

I am grateful to sculptor and freedom seeker descendant Allen Nelson of Washington, DC, for making me aware of this important perspective-altering book.

Peter H. Michael, *Underground Railroad* author, speaker and site owner, is publisher of *Underground Railroad Free Press*.