



# Underground Railroad Free Press®

News and views on today's Underground Railroad

November, 2006  
Volume 1, Issue 3

urrFreePress.com



## Editorial

### Safe Passage for Friends of the Underground Railroad?

Elsewhere in this issue, we report on the pause run into by Friends of the Underground Railroad, Inc., and this two-year-old national body's current transition. Because the Friends concept and mission are so vital to the national Underground Railroad community, *Underground Railroad Free Press* encourages Friends' progress and urges the Underground Railroad community to do so.

[Disclosure: *Underground Railroad Free Press* publisher Peter Michael sits on the Friends of the Underground Railroad board of directors.]

Until Friends came along in 2004, the nation lacked a broad-gauged Underground Railroad entity with an overarching national mission. Three other national Underground Railroad organizations existed at that time, each with major operating limits.

The Network to Freedom, the federal government's Underground Railroad program with a mission which its annual budgets find difficult to fulfill, is restricted by law in fundraising or lobbying for itself.

Cincinnati's dramatic Underground Railroad Freedom Center had a national scope in mind after its 2004 debut, but soon found it necessary to settle into a local museum role.

Maryland's Menare Foundation, aspiring to a broad Underground Railroad role, also adapted to a local presence.

Enter Friends of the Underground Railroad, a private, tax-exempt national nonprofit whose well formulated mission sought to fill the gaps of the three other entities as the Underground Railroad's comprehensive "go to" umbrella organization, a clear and much needed mandate.

But, as we report in this issue, (continued on page two)

## Farmington Meeting House Underground Railroad Site Saved

In the nick of time, a group of preservationists in upstate New York has stepped in to prevent demolition of a former Quaker meeting house used as an Underground Railroad safe-house. The Farmington, New York, meeting house, constructed in 1816, was on its last legs when the group led by local Underground Railroad historian Judith Wellman organized in early 2006 and got to work.



Judith Wellman

Within six months, fundraising began, the old building was saved from what had been an imminent razing, and it was structurally stabilized and listed on a national Underground Railroad site list. Plans are to restore the building to its original appearance and donate it to an organization which will preserve and operate it as an Underground Railroad interpretive center.

Farmington and towns near it in this part of New York are as rich as anywhere in the nation in the history of the Underground Rail-

road and abolitionism. The area also spawned the women's rights movement. Farmington, a village of about 100, is forty miles from the Harriet Tubman home in Auburn, New York.



The Farmington Meeting House in 2006

Restoration of the Farmington Meeting House has been aided financially by the Heritage New York Women's History Trail, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the New York State Arts Council and the Quaker Church.

## More Descendants of Canadian Freedom Seekers Find Roots

After the second Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Underground Railroad freedom seekers could not truly be safe unless they left the United States, the most convenient friendly foreign soil being Canada where thousands of fugitives settled. Increasingly, freedom seeker descendants in both Canada and the United States are reconnecting with their roots and relatives back and forth across the border.

As Canadian journalist and *Free Press* subscriber Lawrence Hall writes us, "I am a descendent of two Underground Railroad escapees, Charles Williams, who fled to Montreal, Canada, from Boston, and Samuel Hall from Harford County, Maryland, to Niagara Falls. Hall is said to have been one of the early fugitives guided to Canada by Harriet Tubman. Both Williams and Hall established families and remained in Canada where they are buried. Williams' daughter Margaret Ruth married Hall's son Samuel, Jr. giving me one set of grandparents."

Mr. Hall's inspiring finds are not unique as descendants of other cross-border freedom seekers uncover their roots, too.

Washington, DC, sculptor Allen Nelson descends from freedom seeker Frank Wanzer of Aldie, Virginia, who settled in Toronto, Canada in 1856 after leading six others to freedom. Wanzer's escape was immortalized in William Still's 1872 *The Underground Railroad* by one of the best known images from Underground Railroad times, the engraving shown here. Mr. Nelson has located the Toronto grave of Frank Wanzer, and Wanzer descendants have begun holding large family reunions.



The Wanzer Party Fends Off Slave Catchers

though Friends experienced a promising launch after its October, 2004, incorporation, certain critical challenges have not been met successfully, their toll requiring the Friends board to retrench.

Some of these challenges are faced by any start-up: successful execution of the mission, charting a clear course, and then building membership, programs, image and treasury. Also central to Friends was the test of forging a national presence.

Spotty communication to members, too many of its directors making no effort in fundraising or membership development, the absence of planning, and even roadblocks to holding regular board meetings are symptomatic of Friends' main frailty of failing to develop basic business acumen. Also taking a toll were contentious debates crowding out reasoned discussion.

Recent board turnover would seem to have cleared the way for Friends directors to rebuild around healthier culture, good will and better execution. We urge new blood on the Friends board to do so early on and bring to life the bright promise of Friends of the Underground Railroad.

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

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## Friends of the Underground Railroad Retools

After incorporating in late 2004, Friends of the Underground Railroad seemed to get off to a promising start. The Friends board, a national body, began holding regular meetings around the nation, and soon the non-profit had an inspiring mission, four program areas decided, tax exemption, an expanding board of directors, growing membership, a handsome web site and money in the bank.

Founded to preserve Underground Railroad sites, support others' programs and raise up the Underground Railroad legacy for future generations, Friends of the Underground Railroad sought to encourage the federal government's Network to Freedom program and Cincinnati's Underground Railroad Free-

dom Center – the two other major national Underground Railroad programs – but has not yet organized well enough to do so.

In 2005, Friends saw dwindling energy of the founders and waning progress, and in 2006, inexplicably cancelled board meetings and internal debates over the group's roles and pace. Board turnover offers a rethinking of Friends' directions by its board.

*Underground Railroad Free Press* will keep readers posted on progress of Friends of the Underground Railroad as it retools its important national effort. For more, see our editorial in this issue and the Friends web site at [fourr.org](http://fourr.org).

## Louis Fields and Baltimore's BBH Tours Roll On

Louis Fields has done as much as anyone to promote the legacy of the Underground Railroad in his home state of Maryland. Founder and president of Baltimore Black Heritage Tours – BBH Tours – Fields has researched and put together a series of heritage excursions in Baltimore and nearby which appears to be one of the nation's better collections of African-American heritage tours.

One of BBH Tours' main Baltimore attractions is a well researched Underground Railroad circuit which includes the Frederick Douglass escape site and a building of five townhomes owned by Douglass.

At his request in 2000, the Maryland State Assembly legislated the creation of Harriet Tubman Day in Maryland which has been celebrated on March 10 each year since. As her birthday is not known, it when she died, March 10, 1913, which has established the date for this annual Maryland observance.



**BBH Tours President Louis Fields at a Frederick Douglass Site in Baltimore**

Fields and BBH Tours also organize conferences, symposia and other gatherings on the Maryland Underground Railroad and African-American heritage. Visit [bbhtours.com](http://bbhtours.com) for more.

The busy Louis Fields also heads the African-American Tourism Council of Maryland.

## Menare Launches Virtual Underground Railroad Experience

The Menare Foundation, oldest of the nationwide Underground Railroad organizations, has launched what Menare founder and president Anthony Cohen bills as The Bridge, an Underground Railroad immersion experience.

States Cohen, "Participants will be transported back in time to experience the journey from slavery to freedom." This first-of-its-kind workshop will be held November 18 and 19 at the Menare Foundation's restored eighteenth century demonstration farm near Germantown, Maryland.

The foundation's Underground Railroad immersion concept had a bright start when Cohen in 1997 trained Oprah Winfrey at an old Maryland plantation for her role as Sethe in the film *Beloved*. Blindfolded and then immersed into an authentically staged 1850s

plantation slave role, Winfrey "escaped" on a virtual Underground Railroad route. She describes her experience as enslaved and then as an Underground Railroad freedom seeker as life-altering.



**Menare President Anthony Cohen**

This year's workshop participants will experience a similar re-enactment and, as Cohen aptly describes it, "face what enslaves them through the redemptive story of slavery and freedom."

For more on The Bridge or The Menare Foundation contact [MenareLectures@aol.com](mailto:MenareLectures@aol.com) or 202.345.3376.