



# UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FREE PRESS®

Independent reporting on today's Underground Railroad

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## Fields, Dobbin House, Gunner Named 2015 Free Press Prize Laureates



Fields



The Dobbin House Hideaway



Gunner

In the eighth annual awarding of the Underground Railroad Free Press Prizes, *Free Press* honors state leader Louis Fields, Historic 1776 Dobbin House Inn & Tavern, and map maker Nicholas Gunner as the 2015 winners.

The Free Press Prizes are regarded as the international Underground Railroad community's top honor.

### Louis Fields Awarded the 2015 Free Press Prize for Leadership

Baltimore's Louis Fields, more active in Maryland Underground Railroad work than anyone for several decades, has compiled a record as one of the foremost state or provincial Underground Railroad leaders in the United States or Canada.

In 2000, Fields led an effort to persuade the Maryland General Assembly to legislate an official annual observance of Harriet Tubman. As her birthday is unknown, March 10, the day she died in 1913, is now celebrat-

ed every year in Maryland. Following Maryland's lead launched by Fields, a number of other states have since legislated their own Harriet Tubman Day.

Also beginning in 2010, Fields began coordinating county and regional observances of Harriet Tubman Day throughout Maryland and tirelessly visits the observances each year. He also got the State to include the Underground Railroad in Maryland tourism marketing campaigns, collateral materials and press releases.

Fields works closely with Harriet Tubman descendants living on Maryland's Eastern Shore where Tubman was born and escaped, and has gone as far as organizing reunions for them. He was instrumental in persuading the state's two United States Senators to introduce the bills which are creating the new Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument on the Eastern Shore.

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The 2015 Free Press Prizes for leadership, preservation and advancement of knowledge are announced.

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In a border-state county, an extensive network of escape routes operated.

1



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Oberlin, Ohio and Oberlin College made themselves into Underground Railroad and abolitionism hubs.

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View photos of the web of Underground Railroad routes in one county today.

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## A Border County's Seven Recognized Underground Railroad Routes

One of an occasional series on Underground Railroad sites

Because of higher pro-slavery sympathies to the east and more difficult terrain in the Appalachians just to the west, many freedom seekers coming up from Virginia funneled through a 50-mile swath centering on Frederick County, Maryland. The more than 80 identified safe-houses, routes and people involved in the county's Underground Railroad include the seven firmly documented routes below. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, Kathleen Snowden and Ann Lebherz independently began keeping lists of places in the county that they had heard were or may have been

involved with the Underground Railroad. Over several decades, civic leader Lebherz's list grew to 20 sites, mostly safe-houses but also a few routes. Ann Lebherz died march, 2015. Snowden went much further, compiling the county's best-ever collection of local African Americana, a prize collection which after her passing went to the Museum of Frederick County History. Snowden was a biologist who worked for the National Institutes of Health before retiring and becoming an elected member of the Town Council of

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## Tubman Memorial Construction Nears Completion

Construction of the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument near where Tubman was born and escaped on Maryland's Eastern Shore is nearly complete. Authorized by presidential proclamation on March 25, 2013, the \$13.9 million project is funded by an \$8.5 million federal Transportation Enhancement Program grant, \$3.5 million in State funding, a \$1.1 million grant from the National Park Service, and two grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Monument is located on Maryland Route 335 a mile south of its junction with Key Wallace Drive. The National Park Service and the Maryland Park Service will operate the

new facility jointly when it opens in 2016.

Born Araminta Ross in 1822 on the nearby plantation, Harriet Tubman lived and worked enslaved in this area from childhood until she escaped at age 27 in 1849. In her own era, she made her name and became famous nationwide for returning to the area from which she had fled to free an estimated 300 members of her family, friends and other enslaved African Americans, becoming the best known Underground Railroad conductor. In 1859, she purchased a farm in Auburn, New York, and established a home for her family and others, which she used late in life as a home for indigent elderly women. In the Civil War she worked as a

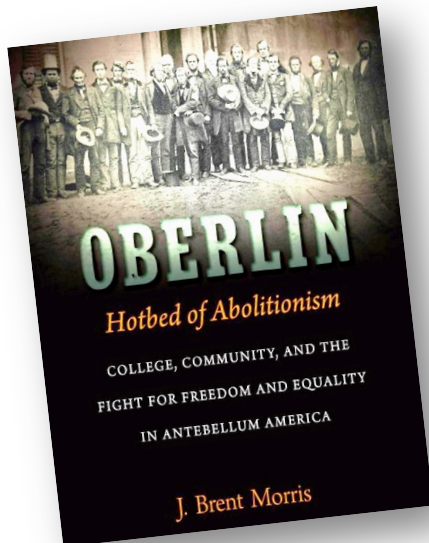


Union scout, spy and nurse. In a single week, she led Union forces up South Carolina's Combahee River and freed 756 enslaved people, becoming the first woman

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## The Oberlins – Town and College – Made Their Abolitionist Marks

Book review by Owen W. Muelder



Owen Muelder, recipient of the 2014 Free Press Prize for Preservation, is author of two books on the anti-slavery movement, and director of the Galesburg Colony Underground Railroad Freedom Center at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois.

J. Brent Morris's new book, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism, College, Community and the Fight for Freedom* (University of North Carolina Press, 352 pp.) pushes aside mythology of Oberlin's early history to present a historically accurate account of the community's anti-slavery past. Morris has produced a first rate piece of work.

No other institution of higher learning was more deeply committed and actively involved with the anti-slavery crusade in the United States than Oberlin College. Beyond the college campus itself, the citizens of the town of Oberlin were steadfastly committed to bringing about the

emancipation of the nation's enslaved as well. In addition, the community eventually gained a reputation as a center of Underground Railroad operations. Consequently, Oberlin endured remarkable hostility from those who looked upon the school and town's inhabitants as radicals and self-righteous troublemakers.

In the early 1840s, the Ohio legislature even debated an unsuccessful proposal to repeal the college's charter.

The author expertly details how the college managed to go from an institution on the verge of collapse to a school that stabilized and soon afterward thrived. This was primarily due to the arrival of several young men who came to Oberlin in 1835 from the Lane Seminary in Cincinnati. In 1834 Lane students had conducted a lengthy debate about slavery that turned nearly all of the seminarians into radical abolitionists. The students' anti-slavery advocacy at the school and the aid they gave to African Americans in the city outraged the school's authorities who demanded that the seminarians disengage themselves from these activities. The seminarians rebelled and the majority dropped out of Lane. The core of these "Lane Rebels", dedicated to the immediate emancipation of all slaves, later moved to Oberlin and their arrival at the college brought boom times to the institution. Before they agreed to come to Oberlin, however, they insisted that the college adopt a colorblind admissions policy. Simultaneously, financial support was given to the college by the wealthy Tappan brothers in New York City, which al-

so helped to ensure the school's future.

Morris develops several significant themes in his book, one of which is his description of the abolitionist movement in the east splitting apart at the very time that Oberlin College was beginning to grow. Arguments between factions along the eastern seaboard, for a variety of reasons, led to the rupture of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1840. But at Oberlin (and at anti-slavery outposts throughout Ohio, Michigan and other upper Mississippi Valley states) abolitionists, for the most part, were able, in Morris's words "... to accommodate the differences that disturbed eastern anti-slavery unity in 1837-40." Therefore Oberlin's abolitionists were able to "...avoid being side-tracked by debates over 'proper' or 'pure' means by prioritizing the ultimate goal of emancipation." There were abolitionists throughout the north who wanted to see human bondage eradicated, but that did not mean they viewed African Americans as equals. However, in Oberlin, Morris describes a notable effort to regard each person "...according to his personal worth and not his color." Blacks in the community and college were encouraged to be leaders and the town became a truly integrated community. Oberlin was also among the first colleges to admit women.

The last part of the book lays out in detail Oberlin's fearless efforts to aid fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad including first hand accounts confirmed by several reliable sources. They describe freedom seekers who moved out of Oberlin

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## Seven Routes

New Market, Maryland. In 2001 when he purchased his family's ancestral farm which his ancestors had used as a safe-house, *Free Press* publisher Peter H. Michael began collecting all of the family Underground Railroad information he could find, and interviewed family elders and others, identifying another fourteen sites. The National Park Service informed Michael of another five sites.

### The Potomac River

From the western reaches of the Appalachians all the way east to the Chesapeake Bay, freedom seekers had to cross the Potomac River which separates Virginia and West Virginia from Maryland and, during the Civil War, Union from Confederacy. The Potomac is shallow over its entire 18 miles of Frederick County shoreline permitting eleven fords and ferries to operate in the days before bridges. Many well documented accounts exist of freedom seekers crossing the Potomac at these shallows. Perhaps the largest documented group was 39 people led by John Jones who in 1844 escaped from Loudoun County, Virginia, directly south of Frederick County, Maryland, and made it all the way to Elmira, New York, where Jones became a major safe-house operator and conductor. In its flight, Jones's group was aided by Mark Twain's future father-in-law Jervis Langdon.

### The Towpath of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal

Begun in 1824 in Washington, DC, when President John Quincy Adams turned the first spade of earth, the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal runs 185 miles directly along the Maryland side of the Potomac River to Cumberland, Maryland. Freedom seekers' heading north across the Potomac meant immediately crossing the canal's towpath along which mules pulled barges up and down the canal. Some freedom seekers used the towpath as their escape route. In 1843, James Curry, having fled from Person County, North Carolina, crossed the Potomac at Georgetown in Washington, DC, and walked the towpath across the entire breadth of Frederick County, turning north into Pennsylvania at Williamsport a few miles further upstream. The Blackford family, owners of Ferry Hill Plantation in neighboring Washington County, wrote of their capturing freedom seekers who were using the canal's tow path as an escape route in 1829 and in 1839.

### The Susquehanna Path

The Susquehanna Path, an ancient aboriginal route, enters the southwest corner of Frederick County from the eastern panhandle of West Virginia (until 1862, Virginia), runs through the county seat of Frederick, and leaves the county near its northeast corner into Pennsylvania where the path goes on to the Susquehanna River corridor. In 1844, the African American ferry operator Joseph Blunum was arrested for ferrying freedom seekers across the Potomac River from Harper's Ferry (West) Virginia to Frederick County and jailed for three years. Blunum resumed work as an Underground Railroad conductor after his release. The Susquehanna Path through Frederick County comprises today's US Route 340 from the Potomac to Frederick and Maryland Route 194 from there to Pennsylvania.

### The Old Carolina Trail

Another ancient native route traversing Frederick County is the Carolina Trail running from Augusta, Georgia, to Philadelphia, which, after use by European settlers, came to be called the Carolina Road and then the Great Carolina Wagon Road. A branch of the trail enters Frederick County at Edwards Ferry on the Potomac and follows today's Dickerson, Old Licksville and Tuscarora Roads which comprise the western-most stretch of Maryland Route 28. Edwards Ferry was operated by the African-American Underground Railroad conductor Basil Newman and then Newman's son in the late Underground Railroad era.

### Roads Alongside the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad

Freedom seeker Frank Wanzer told William Still, author of the landmark 1872 *Underground Railroad*, that Wanzer and his five compatriots, after escaping enslavement at a Virginia plantation on Christmas Eve, 1855, traveled by horse-drawn wagon from the Potomac into Frederick County along roads "on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad." The most likely Potomac crossing point of the party would have been Edwards Ferry with its Newman family conductors, only a few miles from the Wanzer party's point of escape. Wanzer reported to Still that on Christmas Day, 1855, he and his fellow freedom seekers went on from an unnamed overnight safe-house, continuing alongside the Baltimore & Ohio

Railroad tracks through the county. Taking the route described by Wanzer, the six fugitives would have passed by a string of safe-houses including the African American villages of Flint Hill and Bartonsville, the Bush Creek Quaker Meeting House, the Plummer home and Prince Hall of the Black Masons in New Market, the Dudderar home near Urbana, the African American village of Dorseytown, and Priestland, a Jesuit-owned farm near McKinstry's Mill. Just past Priestland when reaching Hood's Mill in adjacent Carroll County, the six were accosted by slave catchers. Frank Wanzer and his fiancée and the Grigsby couple with them fought

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## Prizes

Fields founded, owns and operates Baltimore Black Heritage Tours and personally conducts the Frederick Douglass Underground Railroad Path to Freedom walking tour in the historic Fells Point section of Baltimore near the city's harbor. Douglass escaped slavery at Fells Point and after the Civil War built five adjoining homes there. Fields is active at the moment trying to persuade the City and State to purchase one of the homes that has been put up for sale, and use it as a Frederick Douglass museum.

A book, *Freedom Seekers: Early Abolitionists in Antebellum Baltimore*, which Fields is writing will be published in 2016.

### Historic 1776 Dobbin House Inn & Tavern Awarded the 2015 Free Press Prize for Preservation

Dobbin House, the oldest surviving building in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was built in 1776 by Reverend Alexander Dobbin for his family and as a school teaching the classics, and is still going strong as today's Historic 1776 Dobbin House Inn & Tavern. Dobbin House is within sight of the spot where Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address.

In the mid-1800s under new owners, Dobbin House began to be used as an Underground Railroad safe-house, sheltering freedom seekers coming north through Maryland up the Monocacy Valley, along the eastern slope of Catocin Mountain and via other routes. The hiding spot used was a broad crawl space about three feet high between the ground floor ceiling and second floor, reached through a removable wall panel of a stairway in the inn portion of the building. That this nook was used on the Underground Railroad is authenticated by letters written to and from the safe-house operators. Dobbin House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 and its Underground Railroad story has been featured in *National Geographic* and in *Underground Railroad Free Press*.

Several years ago, present owners of the building outfitted the hiding space with a tableau of three wax figures of husband, wife and child, and a few plain period accessories. The tableau is illuminated with an electric candle and seen through a Plexiglas panel in the wall where the secret panel was. Dobbin House shows the display, located in a distant part of the building, to customers who ask to see it.

In the exact undisturbed spot where it once operated and very authentically

displayed, Dobbin House's recreated hiding spot is quite possibly the most realistic and best preserved Underground Railroad site in existence.

Dobbin House's two restaurants, Abigail Adams Ballroom, inn and store are worth a trip. The old stone building with its large exposed ceiling beams and wide-plank flooring exude eighteenth century charm. Visit [dobbinhouse.com](http://dobbinhouse.com) for more. Straight from 1776 is the inn's Springhouse Tavern in the cellar with the ancient spring running through.

### Nicholas Gunner Awarded the 2015 Hortense Simmons Prize for the Advancement of Underground Railroad Knowledge

Entrepreneur, webmaster and cartographer Nicholas Gunner is the youngest recipient of a Free Press Prize since the inauguration of the prizes in 2008. Gunner is recognized for the pro bono development of an extensive online Underground Railroad map of safe-houses, routes and people in western New York.

The project involving over 300 sites is hosted by orbitist.com owned by Gunner Media, founded by Gunner when he was still an undergraduate. Says Gunner, "Orbitist is a tool for telling beautiful stories with digital maps." Gunner also serves as New Media Manager at the State University of New York at Fredonia.

Gunner's interest in the Underground Railroad was piqued in 2013 as he listened to a presentation by Free Press Prize laureate Wendy Straight on her Underground Railroad discoveries in western New York. A conversation led to Gunner's offer to compile and automate her deep database, and post it all to an interactive online map hosted by orbitist.com.

Says Straight, "Nick knew that he could help us immediately share our findings with the public. Within a few months, he had created a unique space for us, and we now continually upload new findings and edit earlier postings as needed. Thereby, we are immediately sharing our research with large numbers of interested persons at all times of the day or night, and at very low cost. The feedback from fellow researchers helps our investigations as we connect anti-slavery families and church members across New York and Pennsylvania. Without Nick's map and database, it would have been very easy for us to become discouraged.

## Congressional Black Caucus Underground Railroad Forum

In its 45<sup>th</sup> Annual Legislative Conference to be held September 16 to 20 in Washington, DC, the Congressional Black Caucus will convene an Underground Railroad Issues Forum to commemorate legislative protection and recognition of the Underground Railroad. Panelists led by Rep. Corrine Brown (D-FL) will discuss expectations since the Emancipation Proclamation. Visit [eventscribe.com/2015/ALC](http://eventscribe.com/2015/ALC).

The annual conferences address issues impacting African Americans. More than 9,000 thought leaders, legislators and citizens will explore public policy issues from an African-American perspective.

## Monument

to lead American troops in combat.

Near the new Monument, many places where she grew up and worked remain: Stewart's Canal dug by slaves; the farm of Edward Brodess, enslaver of Tubman's mother and her children; the Bucktown Crossroads where a slave overseer hit the 13-year-old Tubman in the head with a heavy iron as she protected a young fleeing slave, resulting in an injury that affected Tubman the rest of her life; Scott's Chapel and its African-American graveyard with headstones dating to 1792; the James Cook Home Site where Tubman was hired out as a child; and the Jacob Jackson Home Site, an early Underground Railroad safe-house. Jackson was a free black man to who helped Tubman free her brothers. The Jackson Home Site has been donated to the United States.

In 1868 Frederick Douglass wrote to Tubman: "I have had the applause of the crowd and the satisfaction that comes of being approved by the multitude, while the most that you have done has been witnessed by a few trembling, scarred, and foot-sore bondmen and women, whom you have led out of the house of bondage, and whose heartfelt 'God bless you' has been your only reward. The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism."

Douglass would be relieved to know that today Tubman does not live in anonymity. And as President Obama observed in his proclamation, "The midnight sky and the silent stars and the landscape of Harriet Tubman's homeland remain much as they were in her time there. If she were to return to this area today, Harriet Tubman would recognize it."



## Seven Routes

off the their assailants. One of the others was captured and the sixth person killed. The four made it safely to Toronto, Canada, where they lived peacefully for the rest of their lives. In August, 1856, Wanzer travelled back to Virginia and in an act of high daring rescued his sister, brother-in-law and friend, and took them to Toronto. In returning to Virginia and then back to Canada, Wanzer said he used the same route as on his escape.

### The Potomac-to-Doubs Route

This route ran up from the river for three miles through six contiguous farms owned by the Michael family and their in-laws and ran through Cooling Springs Farm, a well documented safe-house. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad line (the nation's first rail line) runs through Cooling Springs Farm as do local roads "on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad." The Cooling Springs Farm spring house, the actual safe-house used to shelter freedom seekers, lies 150 feet from the rail line and one of the roads beside it, and is nearly the exact midpoint between the Wanzer party's escape point and Hood's mill. It is speculated that this is where the party spent the night of Christmas Eve, 1955.

### The Eastern Slope of Catoctin Mountain

In 1841, freedom seeker Charles Bentley, as he later stated in his autobiography, crossed the Potomac River at Point of Rocks in Frederick County and "went up alongside Catoctin Mountain." Doing so, he would have passed through Hall Town, a tiny, very isolated African-American maroon community on the eastern slope of Catoctin Mountain a mile or so from where Bentley crossed the river. As he continued along the eastern slope, he would have come to or near Mountville, Hayes Spring, Bussard Flat, Markley Fields and the Coates Cabin, all Frederick County safe-houses known today through oral tradition.



Looking Across the Potomac River from Frederick County, Maryland to Virginia



View from the Eastern Slope of Catoctin Mountain Near the Site of the Maroon Community of Halltown



The Potomac to Doubs Route of the Underground Railroad, the Wanzer Escape Route Running Alongside the Baltimore & Ohio Rail Line



The Canal Tow Path of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Park



The Old Carolina Path, Today's Maryland Route 28 Near Point of Rocks, Maryland



Where the Ancient Susquehanna Path Enters Maryland from Harper's Ferry, West Virginia (1865 photo)

## Oberlin

lin to safety in Canada. The author also recalls Underground Railroad operators with ties to Oberlin who were caught and imprisoned after helping bondsmen inside slaveholding states. Morris also retells the story of the famous Oberlin-Wellington Rescue. In 1858 Oberlinites rescued fugitive John Price who was taken to the town of Wellington. Price eventually regained his freedom and the trial of his rescuers is masterfully presented.

The book does have one disappointing exclusion. Although Morris makes passing reference to the influence of New York's Oneida Institute on Oberlin, he fails to adequately describe how truly significant this influence was. The first anti-slavery society of any kind in the state of New York was established at the school in the summer of 1833 and the Institute's anti-slavery society's "Object of Purpose" was paraphrased by the Lane anti-slavery society's constitution in 1834. The goals of Oberlin's Anti-Slavery Socie-

ty were replicas of Lane's. Lane's radical anti-slavery students came in large numbers from the Oneida Institute and many other former Oneida students went directly to Oberlin from the New York school. It was chiefly from Oneida reformers that Oberlin was derived. As one historian of Oberlin has recalled, "Lane's radicalism came from Oneida and Oberlin's chiefly from both." Despite this omission, I highly recommend this outstanding book to anyone interested in the history of the abolitionist movement.