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Independent reporting on today's Underground Railroad

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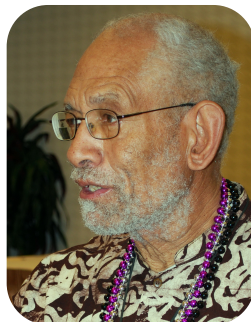
Winfrey, Nelson, Grey Roots Museum Named 2016 Free Press Prize Laureates



Oprah Winfrey



Grey Roots Museum & Archives



Allan Nelson

In the tenth annual awarding of the Underground Railroad Free Press Prizes, *Free Press* honors philanthropist Oprah Winfrey, Underground Railroad descendant Allan Nelson, and Canada's Grey Roots Museum as the 2016 winners.

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

Oprah Winfrey Awarded the 2016 Free Press Prize for Leadership

For setting the example in private fundraising for the new National Museum of African American History and Culture and encouraging other major donors, Oprah Winfrey is awarded the 2016 Free Press Prize for Leadership in the international Underground Railroad community.

From an abused child clothed in bur-

lap to a multi-billionaire epitome of generosity, Oprah Winfrey has come a long way along a path which no one would have predicted. Entrepreneur, media magnate, television hostess, actress and philanthropist, Winfrey parlayed a winning personality, discerning sense of business opportunities and sheer hard work into a \$3.5 billion net worth.

Along the way, Winfrey became the United States' first Black multi-billionaire and the nation's all-time leading Black philanthropist. By 2012 she had given away over \$400 million to educational causes including more than 400 scholarships to Atlanta's Morehouse College. Oprah's Angel Network has raised more than \$80 million to assist charitable organizations around the world, and her Oprah Angel Network Katrina raised

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The 2016 Free Press Prizes for leadership, preservation and advancement of knowledge are announced.

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Free Press gets a preview showing of the Smithsonian's newest museum and its Underground Railroad treasures.

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Interesting results are now in from the 2016 *Free Press* survey of the North American Underground Railroad community.

2



A new publication quickly becomes the all-time best-selling Underground Railroad book. And it's a *novel*.

2



Our editorial advocates for better Underground Railroad coverage at the new National Museum of African American History and Culture.

3



Take part. The *Free Press* website offers many ways to become involved in today's Underground Railroad.

At urfreepress.com

Preview: National Museum of African American History and Culture But the New Museum Inexplicably Goes Light on the Underground Railroad

Underground Railroad Free Press was invited to tour the Smithsonian Institution's newest museum on September 14 in a private viewing held for the national press.

It has been a long time coming. First conceived by the Committee of Colored Citizens, a Civil War veterans organization, over a century ago as the National Negro Memorial, an official federal venue showcasing the African American role in national life will finally become reality on September 24 with the grand opening of the

National Museum of African American History and Culture along Washington, DC's National Mall.

After a number of legislative false starts beginning in the 1920s up into the 1980s, the concept finally began gaining traction under the leadership of the late Representative Mickey Leland (D-Texas) and, after Leland's passing, Representative John Lewis (D-Georgia). In 1991, a Smithsonian commission recommended the

Please see Preview, page 3, column 2

2016 Free Press Survey of the Underground Railroad Community Reveals Strong Grass Roots but Low Impact of Major Programs

Our latest annual survey of the Underground Railroad community in the United States and Canada shows healthy gains in awareness, involvement and site visits, but continued low ratings by the community on how well major Underground Railroad institutions are doing.

Free Press thanks subscribers and others who participated in the 2016 Free Press Survey of the International Underground Railroad Community, our tenth annual survey since 2007. To view or download full results of the 2016 or previous surveys, go to our website's Surveys page.

Community Knowledge and Status

A healthy 82 percent of the community has visited an Underground Railroad site, a six-percent increase over 2015. On the one-to-ten rating scale used for many survey questions, respondents rated their Underground Railroad knowledge at 6.9,

above average, a one-point drop since 2015. The drop probably correlates with there being more newcomers to the Underground Railroad community in 2016. In order, the community gets its information on the Underground Railroad from books, then articles, then a tie between *Free Press* and the Internet. Among the four major Underground Railroad news publications, *Free Press's* market share is 62 percent. Second is the National Park Service Network to Freedom's *Conductor* newsletter at 16 percent.

Community Environment

The average length of Underground Railroad involvement rose slightly to 16.5 years. Two of every five in the community are directly involved with an Underground Railroad site or program, a drop likely attributable to an expanding community. Three of every five sites or programs operate with no revenues. Of those



with revenues, the average budget is \$36,500, a 25-percent drop from 2015, but this could be because of new sites and programs just beginning to build revenues. Thirty percent more sites are seeing revenue increases rather than decreases.

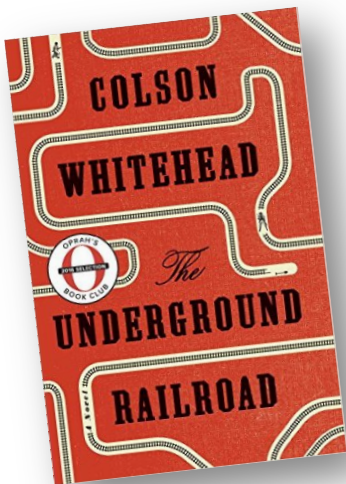
Underground Railroad Institutions

Among 12 institutions operating Underground Railroad programs national or international in scope, the four leaders in both familiarity within the community

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Oprah's Book Club Skyrockets Novel's Sales Making It the All-Time Best Selling Underground Railroad Book

Book review by Ron Charles, *The Washington Post*



This review first appeared in the August 2, 2016 edition of *The Washington Post*. Reprinted with permission.

Editor's Note: As of August 29, this book was the fifth best-selling of Amazon's 1.8 million titles, making *The Underground Railroad* the all-time best-selling Underground Railroad book, either fiction or nonfiction.

Nobody could wait for Colson Whitehead's new book — including Oprah, so here it is, a month early. In a surprise announcement Tuesday morning, Winfrey chose "The Underground Railroad" as the next title for Oprah's Book Club. Originally set for release Sept. 13, the novel is

available now, the result of an extraordinary plan to start shipping 200,000 copies out to booksellers in secret.

Far and away the most anticipated literary novel of the year, "The Underground Railroad" marks a new triumph for Whitehead. Since his first novel, "The Intuitionist" (1999), the MacArthur "genius" has nimbly explored America's racial consciousness — and more — with an exhilarating blend of comedy, history, horror and speculative fiction. In this new book, though, those elements are choreographed as never before. The soaring arias of cleverness for which he's known have been modulated in these pages. The result is a book that resonates with deep emotional timbre. "The Underground Railroad" reanimates the slave narrative, disrupts our settled sense of the past and stretches the ligaments of history right into our own era.

The conceit of Whitehead's novel is oddly whimsical: He imagines that the Underground Railroad, the system of safe houses and clandestine routes used to smuggle slaves north, was, in fact, an actual railroad built underground. "Most people think it's a figure of speech," a slave catcher says, but in this version of the antebellum South, that engine of courage is



Colson Whitehead

forged from tons of iron, stone and wood. The first time we see one of the stations in Georgia, it's wondrous: "The black mouths of the gigantic tunnel opened at either end. It must have been twenty feet tall, walls lined with dark and light colored stones in an alternating pattern. The sheer industry that had made such a project possible. . . . The steel ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting toward a miraculous terminus."

Please see Whitehead, page 5, column 1

Editorial

As elsewhere in this issue, the Underground Railroad—a defining piece of African American and United States history—is absent among the new National Museum of African American History and Culture's splendid inaugural exhibits. As our reporter toured, museum staff members he asked were not aware of any Underground Railroad displays.

Lack of attention by this particular museum to an institution which defined the nation as surely as did its Declaration of Independence and became its first mass civil rights movement is an oversight hard to fathom. Let's just call it that, an unfortunate oversight, which in this case should be easy enough to correct.

For 280 years, every American—black, white, Native American—knew of slavery, that every enslaved person craved freedom, that some would daringly seek it, and that a growing number of free people would risk all to aid freedom seekers' quests. Americans and Canadians were vividly aware of these things which were tightly interwoven into the fabric of daily life and formed a deeply rooted part of the very consciousness of the two nations.

Thus, the long North American contest between freedom and slavery, good and evil, was indeed the war for the soul of America. It took 280 years—an extraordinarily long time—to win this war, but won it was. The moral certitude, perseverance and courage of safe-house operators and conductors but especially of freedom seekers themselves delivered the continent and the American democratic experiment from darkness.

One too seldom sees Underground Railroad figures listed in the pantheon of American greats, but it was they, more than the Nobelists, explorers, inventors or generals, who most clearly articulated the moral bedrock of what it means to be an American. When we think of who best exemplifies the United States, it ought to be they who come to mind, and even more so the Unknown Freedom Seeker, the uncounted anonymous souls who bolted for their freedom. Americans and the National Museum of African American History and Culture must forever honor them all for anchoring the American moral compass.

Mr. Bunch, it is time to mount a permanent Underground Railroad exhibit in your splendid new museum.

Preview

creation of a national museum devoted to African Americana, but enabling legislation failed first in the House, then the Senate, and the project languished for another decade.

In 2001, Representative Lewis, Representative J.C. Watts, Jr. (R-Oklahoma), Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kansas), and Senator Max Cleland (D-Georgia)—two black, two white, two Democratic, two Republican—successfully spearheaded a fresh bipartisan effort to establish the museum. Finally in December of 2003, 88 years after its first of many false starts, Congress enacted The National Museum of African American History and Culture Act, Public Law 108-184, authorizing creation of the museum under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution.

In October of 2004, the Smithsonian Board of Regents appointed a national blue-ribbon advisory council to the project, and in March of 2005 Lonnie G. Bunch III, the then director of the Chicago Historical Society, was appointed as the museum's Founding Director. In 2006 the regents chose as the new museum's site the southwest corner of Washington, DC's Constitution Avenue and 14th Street along the National Mall and "museum row." The indefatigable Bunch got to work hiring staff, collecting 37,000 historical objects, executing a \$270 million fund drive to get his museum built, and dreaming of the day, now at hand, when it would open its doors.

And what a museum it is.

After addresses by Bunch and Smithsonian Secretary David Skorton in the Oprah Winfrey Theater, members of the press were given a tour of exhibits on the museum's eight exhibition floors, four below ground, four above. The museum's 15 planned inaugural exhibits will portray the American South, the American West, civil rights, clothing and dress, communities, education, family, literature, the military, music, photography, politics, religion, segregation and slavery.

Among the 4,000 or so objects of the museum's collection on display or soon to be included are Harriet Tubman's bible, Emmitt Till's glass-topped coffin, a complete segregated Pullman rail car, objects from a slave shipwreck found off the coast of Africa, freedom papers of emancipated slaves, Louis Armstrong's

trumpet, a restored Stearman biplane in which Tuskegee Airmen trained, a slave child's shackles, the Emancipation Proclamation, and much, much more, virtually all of it profoundly moving and right at the core of the unvarnished American experience.

Conspicuous though is the absence of an exhibit assembled on the Underground Railroad or, for that matter, much in the way of Underground Railroad artifacts or the Underground Railroad story. See this issue's editorial for the *Free Press* appeal to have this gap corrected.

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Prizes

more than \$11 million for Gulf Coast relief efforts after hurricane Katrina. In 2013, Oprah Winfrey was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Obama.

When the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture set out more than a decade ago to raise the \$270 million in private funds required to construct the Museum, Oprah Winfrey came forth with the first large donation, a \$12 million gift that set the tone for other major donors to step forth. To date, Winfrey has donated more than \$20 million to the Museum, among thousands one of only three donors at this level. The others are Robert Smith and the Lilly Endowment. In honor of her support and tireless efforts recruiting other donors, the Museum has named its theater, one of the largest spaces in the museum, the Oprah Winfrey Theater. The 350-seat venue will serve as a prime forum for performances, education, authors, lectures and official addresses.

Note: *Underground Railroad Free Press* is a Founding Member and donor of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Allan Nelson Awarded the 2016 Free Press Prize for Preservation

For decades of work in researching and preserving the history of the oral tradition handed down in his family of an ancestor's famed Underground Railroad exploits, Allan Nelson is awarded the 2016 Free Press Prize in Preservation.

Growing up in Tupelo, Mississippi, Nelson heard from a great-aunt one of the supreme accounts of the Underground Railroad, the story of her grandfather Frank Wanzer's escape from slavery, fighting off slave catchers, finally reaching freedom in Canada, then returning south to rescue three others and making it safely back to Canada.

On Christmas Eve of 1855, Wanzer, his fiancée Emily Foster, Barnaby and Mary Elizabeth Grigsby, and two unnamed others fled from Luther Sullivan's plantation near Aldie, Virginia, about 20 miles south of the Potomac River. On Christmas morning near Hood's Mill, Maryland, the two couples fought off a band of armed whites who tried to capture them. One of the unknowns was captured, the other killed in the gun battle. The two couples unhitched the horses from the wagon they had used and rode double

bareback overnight to the safety of a Columbia, Pennsylvania, safe house where they were sheltered until being moved on by railroad freight car on New Year's Day to the Philadelphia home of famed Underground Railroad operator and author William Still. By January 28, 1856, the four had made it safely to Toronto, Canada, where they shared a home for the rest of their lives. In August of that year, in an act of the bluntest courage, Frank Wanzer went back to Aldie, lived in the woods for two weeks waiting for the right moment, and then spirited his sister, brother-in-law and friend away, again passing through Still's home and on to Canada.

In his landmark *The Underground Railroad* (1872), Still recounted the two Wanzer party escapes, bringing to public attention what became two of the most famous and inspiring of all Underground Railroad accounts.

When he began seeking more detail in his youth, all Allan Nelson had to go on were his family story and the Still account. Over decades of research and travel, Nelson identified the escape site, the exact route taken, stops made where the two couples were sheltered, the home along the way where Frank and Emily were married, the minister, dates, the couples' Toronto address, their gravesites, and dozens of Wanzer descendants. Over his years of work, Nelson's became one of the finest pieces of Underground Railroad research and authentication.

Allan Nelson is professor emeritus of engineering at the University of the District of Columbia and a renowned sculptor who works under the artist name Uzikee. Visit uzikee.com for more.

Grey Roots Museum and Archives Awarded the 2016 Hortense Simmons Prize for the Advancement of Underground Railroad Knowledge

For its long diligent work in uncovering and bringing to public light the Underground Railroad and African Canadian history of Grey County, Ontario, Canada's Grey Roots Museum and Archives is awarded *Free Press*'s 2016 Hortense Simmons Prize for the Advancement of Underground Railroad Knowledge.

Since its founding in 1955, the Grey Roots Museum and Archives has promoted research on the historical Black community of Grey County. With both virtual and physical exhibits, the Museum brings to life the story of the County as a main Un-

derground Railroad destination of freedom seekers escaping northward from the United States, and of the vivacity and people of the County's Black community. Since 2002, the Museum has published *Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal*, Canada's only Black history journal, and has hosted an annual Black history event in conjunction with the release of the journal.

The Grey County Museum & Archives studies, researches, and reports on the migration of African Americans into and through Ontario during the Underground Railroad era and afterward. The Museum's large collection of African Canadian and African American resources supporting researchers.

Black citizens have been a part of Grey County since the earliest non-Native settlers began arriving. Some of these first African Canadian pioneers were born in Canada while others had only recently slipped the bonds of slavery in the United States. The growing Black community contributed significantly to the settlement of the last available land in southern Ontario in the mid-nineteenth century.

After long and arduous journeys to freedom, escaped slaves arrived to discover more challenges awaiting them with racism too often overshadowing their efforts to begin new lives. Insecurity and uncertainty in border cities often propelled people to move further north to relative safety in northern Ontario. Indeed, John Hall, one of Grey County's most prominent early Black citizens, born in Amherstburg, Ontario, was kidnapped in a border raid as a young man and sold into slavery in Kentucky.

Some important Grey County Black settlements were Priceville, Nenagh and Virginia (now Ceylon) in the southern part of the County, Negro Creek and Holland Centre in the middle, and Owen Sound in the north. Some Black families made homes for themselves elsewhere in the County. These settlements, too, flourished and swelled with a population ready for challenges and hard work.

The Grey Roots Museum and Archives is located in Owen Sound, the seat of Grey County, and is owned and operated by the County of Grey. The Museum is open at least five days a week with hours varying by the season. Visit greyroots.com for more.

Whitehead

As a feat of imagination, this network of stations and tracks is a marvel, but it could easily have overwhelmed the novel, recasting the pre-Civil War era with steampunk kitsch. Wisely, Whitehead only rarely shows us the underground railroad. It gains real heft as a symbol of bravery and perseverance, a subterranean force in the story, which usually remains strikingly realistic.

The central character is a young woman named Cora, enslaved on a Georgia cotton plantation owned by Mr. Randall, a wealthy twin with a gruesome turn of mind. His slaves are whipped and beaten, of course, but they're also raped and flayed and murdered in ways meant to satiate his own degenerate lusts and keep his human chattel in a state of debilitating terror. Cora, left behind when her mother escaped years earlier, lives in the plantation's lowest shack, a place for the dying and insane, those flogged into imbecility and permanent disability.

This is grim material to be sure, but hope animates the story, and Whitehead's narrative is a fascinating lamination of disparate tones. Sentences seem to twist phrase by phrase — mocking, mourning, satirizing, celebrating. While describing the horror of the plantation, he also honors slaves' courage and relishes their wry humor. Elegant lawn parties are undercut by casual references to torture. But the ultimate effect of sabotaging our glossy history is to remind us that we stand upon "stolen bodies working stolen land."

Cora, so observant and determined, makes a perfect witness of this grotesque realm of gentility floating on blood. Fleeing via the Underground Railroad, she passes through the varieties of slave experience in America. A station agent assures her, "South Carolina has a much more enlightened attitude toward colored advancements than the rest of the South," and indeed, she and a friend "have to learn how to walk like freemen" and "undo some of the damage to their personalities wrought by slavery." But too quickly the sinister aspects of their faux liberty become apparent, and Cora must escape again, reinventing herself in that most American way in some new temporary oasis. Running from "the miserable thumping heart" of one town after another, she moves through a culture deter-

mined to domesticate African Americans, infantilize them, sterilize them, demonize them or ultimately exterminate them.

Cora is such a sympathetic character and her survival is so constantly threatened that the story charges along with incredible power. Danger is everywhere, but her particular nemesis is a slave catcher named Arnold Ridgeway, who failed to retrieve Cora's mother years ago and won't be made a fool of again. He's part of a gang of patrollers: armed men empowered by their own confidence and lack of scruples to stop any black person at any time and demand complete obedience on pain of death. (Fortunately, this never happens in America anymore.)

As Cora winds her way across the country looking for refuge, we can hear echoes of other periods of terror and moral idiocy, such as the Tuskegee syphilis study and the Salem witchcraft trials. In one town, fine Southern men convene to solve "the colored question," a harrowing allusion to the 20th century's central atrocity. And Cora's temporary job in a Museum of Natural Wonders suggests with comic and cringing effect just how early we began manufacturing our national myths, anesthetizing ourselves to others' pain and rendering invisible the bounty stolen from generations of African Americans.

"Truth was a changing display in a shop window," Cora thinks, "manipulated by hands when you weren't looking, alluring and ever out of reach." She recalls a fellow slave at her birthplace who was trained to speak for the delight of their master's guests: "Cora had heard Michael recite the Declaration of Independence back on Randall plantation many times, his voice drifting through the village like an angry phantom. She didn't understand the words, most of them at any rate, but created equal was not lost on her. The white men who wrote it didn't understand it either."

Cora can be a deadly defender of her imperiled liberty, but she also knows that her oppressors are, in some ways, "prisoners like she was, shackled to fear. . . . America was a ghost in the darkness, like her." Cora may not ever find freedom, but she's on the right path.

The canon of essential novels about America's peculiar institution just grew by one.

Survey

and effectiveness in building Underground Railroad awareness are, in order, *Free Press*, the National Park Service's Network to Freedom program, Cincinnati's National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, and the about-to-open National Museum of African American History and Culture. Overall familiarity and effectiveness for the 12 institutions were both rated at only 4.0 on the 10-point scale, a rise from 2015 but still low.

Community Demographics

With an average age of 61.5 and only 3.4 percent younger than 40, demographics do not bode well for the future of the community or retaining the memory and history of the Underground Railroad. Most frequent types of involvement are writers or researchers, donors (or their employees or volunteers), those not involved with but interested in the Underground Railroad, private-sector site or program people, public-sector site or program people, university or college faculty, Underground Railroad descendants, and school teachers. Most often cited occupational title levels were CEOs, managers, tenure-track faculty, and supervisors or coordinators. Women again outnumbered men three to two.

Opinions on *Free Press*

The community rates the importance of *Free Press* providing the Lynx Underground Railroad organization registry, the Datebook community event calendar, the Free Press Prizes and our annual surveys all at 10 on a 10-point scale. Relevance of *Free Press* topics and quality of reporting were rated at 9 on the 10-point scale. By a substantial margin, readers prefer shorter articles pointing to deeper information over longer or in-depth articles. Favorite Underground Railroad reading is nonfiction books and short articles, followed by in-depth articles and newsletters. Novels are the least favorite Underground Railroad reading, preferred by only 27 percent of respondents.

Free Press Readership

Six-tenths of subscribers forward *Free Press* or notifications of new issues to others, notifying an average of eight nonsubscribers, resulting in more than 38,400 additional readers beyond the *Free Press* subscriber base. Some second-tier readers also notify others, and so on through succeeding tiers, resulting in an estimated readership of 110,000 per issue.