



UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FREE PRESS®

Independent reporting on today's Underground Railroad

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Music, Modern Anti-slavery, and Long Collaboration Win the 2020 Free Press Prizes



Preservation



Leadership



Knowledge

Preserving Underground Railroad music, bending an international nonprofit in the right direction, and the value of collaboration are recognized in the 2020 Underground Railroad Free Press Prizes for preservation, leadership, and advancement of knowledge, respectively. This year's winners well exemplify the contributions that long-lasting perseverance can make. The prizes have been awarded by *Free Press* annually since 2008 to recognize the most outstanding contributions in the international Underground Railroad community in promoting Underground Railroad heritage and are regarded as the community's top honors.

IN THIS ISSUE



The 2020 Free Press Prizes for leadership, preservation, and advancement of knowledge are announced.



Why not? African American whalers long worked in US east coast whaling. They whaled off Alaska, too.



The world's most active Underground Railroad route runs for thousands of miles only to cross an adjacent border.

The 2020 Free Press Prize for Preservation

It's not just buildings, sites, and artifacts that can be preserved but important intangibles, too. Music for example.

Husband and wife musicians **Kim and Reggie Harris** have been awarded the 2020 Free Press Prize for Preservation for discovering and reintroducing songs of the Underground Railroad over a very long performing career.

Kim and Reggie—their stage names—have been at it for nearly forty years. Given an opportunity to present an assembly in several schools in Philadelphia in 1982, the two chose the topic of the Underground Railroad because Kim Harris recalled having been exposed to the institution in fifth grade. At that time, there was no way for the couple to know that their half-hour presentation of songs and sto-

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The 2020 Free Press Prize for Leadership

The Rotary Action Group Against Slavery (RAGAS) is awarded the 2020 Free Press Prize for Leadership for its forceful initiative in persuading Rotary International, generally regarded as the world's most influential global service organization, to put its weight behind the fight to eradicate human slavery, especially the enslavement of children.

Despite the organization's ambitiousness and can-do ethic, its international board of directors was initially reluctant to take up the cause on slavery, and vacillated with an on-again off-again approach. In 2009, British Rotarians Mark Little, Stephen Sypula and Harry Payne decided to have another go at engaging Rotary and put forth a formal motion to have the Rotary International board put slavery back

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The 2020 Hortense Simmons Memorial Prize for Advancement of Knowledge

This year's Hortense Simmons Memorial Prize for the Advancement of Knowledge is awarded posthumously to **Kathleen Snowden and Ann Lebherz**, two long-time community historians who did more than anyone to identify Underground Railroad sites and operators in one United States county, and in doing so set the example of dedication nationwide of the value of community historians.

Of the more than 70 Underground Railroad routes, safe-house sites, and person-ages identified or suspected in Frederick County, Maryland, today, these two women were responsible for identifying nearly half. For decades, the two separately maintained lists that they would add to whenever they heard of local sto-

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Did You Know that African American Whalers Settled in Alaska?

By Darryl O. Freeman, Department of Ethnic Studies, California State University, Sacramento

Did You Know is an occasional series on unusual facts about the Underground Railroad

While researching information for a webinar in which I participated sponsored by Rotary International regarding racism and prejudice in Alaska, I came upon this bit of information on African American whalers I suspect many people are unaware of.

Shortly after the Revolutionary War for independence, the United States began to develop the industry of commercial whaling. Whale oil was a major fuel for lighting and lubricating machinery in colonial America. By the 1830s the United States

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African American Whalers of Alaska

The Underground Railroad of North Korea

By Doug Bock Clark

This article appears as a companion piece to this issue's announcement of the 2020 Free Press Prize for Leadership on page 1, which mentions the Underground Railroad escape route out of North Korea. The article first appeared in the March 26, 2019, issue of GQ for which the author serves as Correspondent. This long-form article is being serialized over this and the next two issues of *Free Press*. Reprinted with thanks.

For over two decades, a secret network has worked tirelessly to help thousands of refugees escape the world's worst dictatorship. This is the story of one desperate woman who risked her life to reach freedom, and of the complicated man who led the way.

1. The Impossible Journey

Any North Korean knows that escaping their nation is nearly impossible.

First, the woman called "Faith" would have to evade the soldiers and surveillance cameras on the border. But even once she'd sneaked into China, the danger would only have just begun. To reach a South Korean embassy, where she could receive asylum, she would still have to clandestinely journey thousands of miles across China and then several Southeast Asian countries. If she was discovered anywhere along that trek, she would likely be repatriated to one of her nation's infamous gulags, where prisoners slave with so little food they capture rats to eat. But after more than 30 years of never daring to criticize the dictatorship out loud, even after enduring a famine, she was willing to risk anything to free herself.

By late 2017, thanks to the help of a secret network of activists who serve as an underground railroad of sorts for North Koreans seeking asylum, Faith had managed to make it over 2,500 miles from her home. As she approached China's border with Vietnam, where many refugees have been arrested—she recognized that she was facing one of the most hazardous passages of her odyssey. Faith, her two preschool-age kids, and five other North Koreans hiked on a mud path through farmland and jungle, following a Vietnamese man in silence, for speaking Korean would blow their cover to anyone they passed. At the end of the trail, a sol-

dier appeared, guarding a bridge over a river, and their guide hailed him. Safety lay just beyond the soldier. She waited for him to respond. In this moment, she would discover if her bravery had won a better life for her and her children—or if she had doomed them all.

2. Faith

Faith was born in the People's Paradise of North Korea in the late 1970s. There her easy life was envied by the rest of the world—or at least that was what she was taught. At home, she and her mother were supposed to polish their household portrait of the smiling Great Leader each day, though they only cleaned it in advance of inspections, since they could be punished if it wasn't shiny enough. A giant version of that portrait, with its you-will-be-happy smile, greeted her at every school, factory, and railroad station. And after turning 16, like all adults, she pinned a button with the portrait over her heart each morning. Of course, Faith's actual life was nothing like what the dictatorship's propaganda depicted. In the mid-1990s, as a teenager, she survived a famine that reduced the population to scavenging pine bark, insects, and frogs, and killed hundreds of thousands of people. But if the ever-present secret police caught anyone complaining, the whiners could end up in gulags, so Faith sang patriotic songs and echoed the slogan that North Koreans had "nothing to envy" about the lives of foreigners. But because Faith lived just a few miles from the heavily guarded Chinese border, sometimes people from her hometown sneaked across the river, snaking through the mountains to search for food, and by the mid-2000s she had become exposed to goods smuggled in from outside—especially DVDs of South Korean soap operas. North Koreans are taught that South Koreans are an impoverished people ground beneath the heels of American "imperialist wolves," so images of South Korea's futuristic megalopolises amazed her, especially when she compared them with the dreary Soviet-style farming town where she grew up. But what really kept her binge-watching all night, while keeping an ear out for police, were the love stories. In North Korean cinema, heroines fall for the Great Leader and the Party, so

she was amazed by glimpses of a world where personal romance came first.

Such a life, however, was beyond her grasp. She married and had a child. By 2012, she was actually relatively well-off, as she illegally traded mountain herbs. And though North Koreans were no longer starving in the streets, life remained bleak. (A 2018 United Nations report found that 43.4 percent of North Koreans are undernourished.) Still she was sick of "voluntary" communal labor assignments, such as shoveling gravel to build roads, and the lies that undergirded North Korea's "rotten" society. She was also having domestic problems with her husband.

So when cross-border smugglers told her that they could get her a job in China, from which she could earn money to ultimately buy passage to South Korea, she decided to leave her husband and child behind and risk the gulags by trying to sneak out of the country. Once she had saved up enough in China, she told herself, she would pay the smugglers to bring her son (but not her husband) over the border and then she would usher him to a better life. When Faith arrived in China, however, the smugglers stunned her by revealing that she was to be sold to a Chinese husband. The smugglers, it turned out, were far from the good men she took them to be. Rather they were merchants in North Korean women, exploiting the gender imbalance created by China's one-child policy—which unintentionally encouraged patriarchal parents to abort female fetuses, creating a surplus of 30 million Chinese men, thousands of whom are so desperate for partners that they buy North Korean wives. "I didn't know anyone and I couldn't speak the language," Faith would later say, "so what could I do?" Several bids were made before she was ultimately auctioned off for about \$800 to a poor Chinese farmer.

Faith's days became an endless blur of farm and house labor. During the first two years of her captivity, before she learned Mandarin, she communicated through hand gestures. She considered herself lucky, as "my husband had a kind

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ries would so greatly influence their repertoire and resurrect a vibrant national treasure of material.

They began to gather the spirituals that slaves used in their quest for freedom and in 1984 released their first recording, "Music and the Underground Railroad." The album, the first of nearly a dozen, re-introduced Underground Railroad songs such as Follow the Drinking Gourd, Steal Away, Swing Low, Free At Last, Wade in the Water, and No More Auction Block. Over the years, the duo continued to explore—reading, researching, visiting sites, listening to stories, and gathering an ever deepening store of information and songs which ever since they have been presenting to audiences across the United States and around the world. As a result of their CDs "Steal Away" and "Get On Board" and materials developed in their work with the Kennedy Center, Kim and Reggie Harris have earned wide acclaim in historical and educational circles for their contributions to the resources and knowledge base on the Underground Railroad and the modern civil rights movement.

Say the Harrises, "The songs, beautiful—rich in spirit and texture—reveal the hope, power, and ingenuity of an enslaved people who used their traditions, passion, and resources to express their faith, strengthen their relationships, and communicate important information that led many of them to freedom. We present these songs as contemporary artists of our time seeking to honor the tradition and spirit of the music through the prism of our own musical experience and evolution. We offer this work as a loving tribute to the courage of the travellers, conductors, agents, shepherds, and crews of the Liberty Line and also, as a reminder, that the struggle for freedom, equality, and the future is now in our hands."

Audiences at the Kennedy Center, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Smithsonian Institution, Reunion Arena, the Psalm Festival of Graz, Austria, and myriad theatres, arts centers, festivals, universities, and schools have given this inspiring duo standing ovations for their vibrant performances. Consummate musicians and storytellers, Kim and Reggie Harris combine a strong folk and gospel legacy with a solid background in classical, rock, and pop music. Creative curiosity, years of road and stage experience, and interactions with performers such

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Leadership Prize

on its agenda. After another four years of wavering, the board finally came around by formally authorizing the creation of the Rotary Action Group Against Slavery in 2013.

RAGAS's objectives are to create awareness that millions of children are held captive for illegal gain and promote projects to rehabilitate and protect children from slavery and its consequences.

From the Group's website, "There are over 40 million enslaved people, four times more than those taken out of Africa during the 400 years of the Atlantic slave trade. Modern slaves, however, are disposable, cheap, hidden from plain sight, and have no human rights. Young children are now in greater danger than ever as sex traffickers exploit opportunities arising from natural disasters, deprivation, civil conflict, and mass migration."

The estimate of the current number of enslaved people in the United States is 29,000, consisting mainly of manual laborers, sex workers, and domestic servants, nearly all of them foreign-born and trafficked. Many of them are children.

There is a modern but fitful global Underground Railroad that exists almost entirely uncoordinated in various locations, much resembling the condition of the American Underground Railroad before the 1780s when its operators began to find and assist one another. Perhaps the most noted effort at present is the chain of conductors and safe-houses ferrying North Korean freedom seekers through China and Southeast Asia to the South Korean embassy in Bangkok. A trans-Saharan route operates to help slaves in Mauretania, the nation with the highest proportion of slaves, get to Europe and asylum.

Startling is that Underground Railroad routes still operate in the United States but are outward bound. *Free Press* has written (September, 2018 issue) of the Roxham Road route near Plattsburgh in upstate New York. *The New Yorker* (March 6, 2017) reports on a heavily travelled route running to a safe-house in Buffalo, New York, that shelters an average of a dozen freedom seekers daily. The terminus of both routes is nearby Canada which accepts refugees who might be deported by the United States.

Founded in 1905, making it the world's oldest service organization, Rotary today

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Knowledge Prize

ries naming sites or people who had had roles in the Underground Railroad.

The stories they heard led to research by the two identifying more places and people. As the two were different races—Snowden black, Lebherz white—they tended to draw from different pools of oral tradition, together yielding a rich and diverse picture of the Underground Railroad in their home county.

The result of their work is that there are today only a few US counties with more collected Underground Railroad lore than theirs. Snowden identified four African American conductors, all of them clergy, who worked in or near Frederick County; and Lebherz gathered twenty suspected safe-house sites over the same area. The two were twentieth century contemporaries who knew each other, became friends, and grew fond of comparing notes.

Kathleen Snowden was a biologist who worked at the National Institutes of Health for 42 years, and became the first African American elected to the Town Council of New Market, Maryland, her home. She was the greater region's foremost collector of African Americana and the author of four books, all histories. She died in 2008 at the age of 75.

Throughout her life, Ann Lebherz was a steadfast proponent of the historic preservation of numerous buildings and sites in Frederick County. She was a founder and president of the Frederick County Landmarks Foundation, founder of two museums at Rose Hill Manor, a National Historic Site, founder of the Frederick Alliance Française, board member of a long list of other community organizations, and recipient of numerous awards and recognitions. Ann Lebherz died in 2015 at 90.

A number of times since its founding in 2006, Underground Railroad Free Press has made use of the research of these two persevering women in its articles and in assisting researchers. Their lives stand as beacons to others who seek to uncover the history of the Underground Railroad in their own locales.

Underground Railroad Free Press welcomes guest articles, Lynx database entries of Underground Railroad sites and organizations, notices of forthcoming events for Datebook, and display advertising. Visit us at urfreepress.com for information on these programs. We make it easy.

Preservation

as Pete Seeger, Ysaye Barnwell, Jay לנו, Tom Paxton, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Harry Belafonte, and others, have led them to produce music that entertains and inspires.

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a city rich in cultural and musical heritage, Kim and Reggie's early exposure to the diversity of musical styles and genres was nurtured in the schools and churches of their youth. Both continue to write, record, and produce music to promote creativity, education, social responsibility and understanding in the world community. Several years ago, Kim Harris completed her Ph.D. at Union Theological Seminary.

Whalers

was the preeminent whaling nation in the world. Ten thousand men manned the whaling ships on the east and west coasts of the country. Marginalized in American history books is the fact that over 3,000 of these whalers were free and escaped enslaved African Americans. At one time one third of the fishermen of the whaling industry who contributed significantly to the economic development of Alaska and the western United States where African American. African American historian Skip Finley has documented 63 African American whaling captains. Some of the whaling ships had all African American crews. Formerly enslaved African Americans were reliable whalers not only because on board they were treated like all of the rest of the seaman, but also because the off-land work allowed them escape from enslavement and economic independence.

North Korea

heart," meaning he didn't beat her or yell at her like many of the other husbands she'd heard about, who abused their purchased wives. "Still, it was like prison," as her in-laws watched her as closely as wardens to keep her from running away. After she had two more children with her second husband, she constantly worried that the three of them would be sent back to North Korea. Four years into her captivity in China, she had become even more depressed than when she'd been living in the dictatorship. Despite her new in-laws' efforts to isolate Faith from the six other North Korean brides in the

Leadership

is present on all seven continents in the form of more than 34,000 local entities called clubs. Rotary's 1.4 million members in nearly 200 countries and territories volunteer their time, skills, and wallets in helping their communities and the world at large by fulfilling the organization's motto "Service Above Self." This is realized through a broad array of hands-on humanitarian projects concentrating on peace, disease, clean water, education, mothers and children, local economies, and disaster response.

Rotary's most ambitious effort has been to eradicate polio among humans, a quest begun in 1988 and now 99.9 percent complete, with polio remaining only in a few pockets of Afghanistan and Pakistan. In mid-2020, the continent of Africa was declared polio-free after Nigeria wiped out the disease. Since 1988, Rotary helped immunize over 2.5 billion children in 122 countries and contributed more than \$1.8 billion toward eradicating the disease.

village, the women eventually found ways to scheme together about how to flee to South Korea. There were shadowy brokers, they had learned, who, for several thousand dollars, could smuggle you to a South Korean embassy in Southeast Asia. The risk was obviously huge: They'd already been betrayed by smugglers once. But in 2016, two of the North Korean women from her village took the leap and paid for the high-risk passage. When they ultimately arrived safely in Seoul, South Korea's capital, the women connected their broker to Faith. On a cell-phone call, Faith had to admit to the businessman that she lacked the money—but rather than cutting her off, as she had feared, the businessman explained that there might be someone who could help fund a charity case. Eventually she was told that she had been selected to be helped by the North Korean Underground Railroad.

Normally it would be the responsibility of the United Nations to assist the thousands of North Koreans hiding in China. Instead, because China labels North Koreans "economic migrants" rather than refugees at the behest of its ally North Korea, "it is up to the heroic civilians of the Underground Railroad to risk their lives to do what the international community is prevented from doing by China," said Suzanne Scholte, president of

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the Defense Forum Foundation. Over two decades, Underground Railroad activists have built up a network of secret routes and safe houses to transport refugees across Asia and, in doing so, have managed to fill in where some of the world's most powerful institutions have failed.

Look for the next installment in the following issue of *Free Press* in November.