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Survey of Underground Railroad Activities, American Visions, 1999

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State-to-State Survey of Underground Railroad Activities

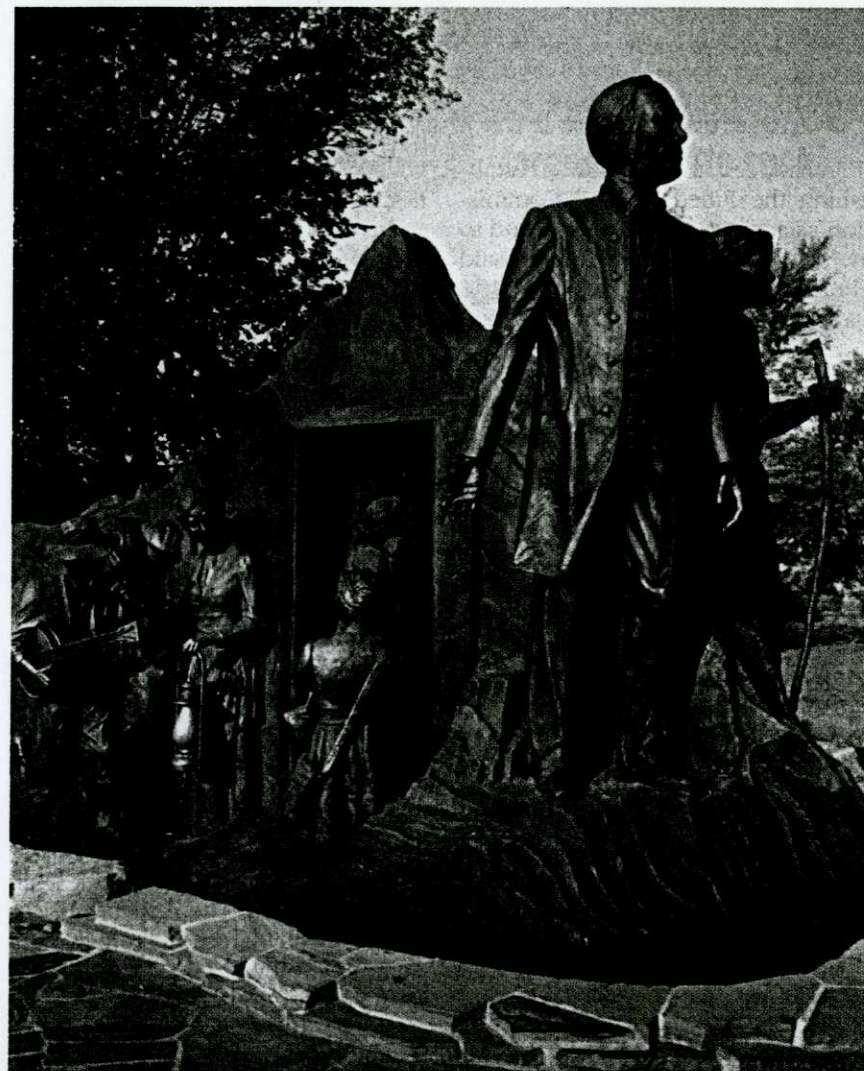
by Ann E. Eskridge

Celebrations, workshops and tours commemorating the Underground Railroad can already be found in various states (see sidebar, page 44). If the recent federal legislation succeeds in focusing greater attention on—and gaining more fiscal support for—Underground Railroad initiatives, the resulting network of landmarks, trails and interpretive programs could be one of the most important in the world. Every effort—like every station on the Freedom Train—deserves our gratitude and vigilant support. Some of the Underground Railroad activities in various states are described below.

On October 30, 1997, the **New York** Legislature passed a bill establishing a commission on the New York State Freedom Trail. A panel of 12 members is preparing a study to serve as a blueprint for the yet-to-be-appointed commission.

"The tactic we are taking," explains Howard Dodson, chief of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and chairman of the Freedom Trail panel, "is that the Freedom Trail should not be driven, exclusively, by the presence—or lack of presence—of standing physical properties.

"We are looking at doing several things. One is the placing of Underground Railroad activities into the context of the broader freedom struggle initiatives that took place in New York state, dating back to the beginning of slavery. Second, we are trying to look not only at stand-



Underground Railroad sculpture, Battle Creek, Mich.

ing physical properties, but at personalities and events. Third, we want to place our primary focus on the enslaved Africans who initiated these freedom-seeking activities."

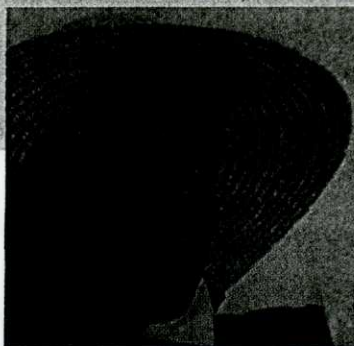
In addition to the statewide commission, Underground Railroad initiatives are developing on New York's county and regional levels. Says Dodson, "There is a lot of grassroots activity taking place in the state, building on the federal legislation, but particularizing it to New York."

The **Michigan** Legislature passed Public Act 409 in December 1998 to create a Freedom Trail Commission, which will oversee the

research, documentation and interpretation of the Underground Railroad. Working with the commission will be the Michigan Underground Railroad Collaborative, a group of three organizations—the Michigan Historical Center, the Black History Network, and the Underground Railroad Association—formed in January 1998 to preserve and promote the Underground Railroad story.

Michigan's legislation was proposed by State Representative Samuel Buzz Thomas III, a descendant of two of Detroit's first Underground Railroad conductors, Joseph Ferguson and William Webb.

Courtesy W.K. Kellogg Foundation



"Follow the North Star," an educational program based on the Underground Railroad, dares visitors to walk in the shoes of a fugitive slave."

TRAVEL

"I introduced the legislation establishing the Freedom Trail Commission as a tribute to my history and to the noble history of Michigan," said Thomas at a news conference held at one of Detroit's Underground Railroad sites, Second Baptist Church.

In 1995, the **Connecticut** General Assembly authorized the establishment of the Connecticut Freedom Trail. The trail will include Underground Railroad sites, as well as locations significant to the Amistad trial of 1841. Twenty-six locations within the state make up the trail, which is described in the brochure *Sites That Represent the Concept Freedom*.

Under phase II of the **Pennsylvania** Heritage Tourism Initiative, which is administered by the Pennsylvania Federation of Museum and Historical Organizations, a three-day, two-night Underground Railroad tour through Philadelphia and Lancaster has been developed. Pennsylvania also offers other tours of its numerous historic sites, landmarks, and special collections related to the Underground Railroad.

Chester, Lancaster and Philadelphia counties have many Underground Railroad sites, most of which are churches, homes of abolitionists and Underground Railroad conductors, cemeteries and parks, as well as other historic dwellings.

In Cincinnati, **Ohio**, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center hopes to open in 2003. The planned center will be a museum of reflection, touching the heart as well as the mind by using powerful experiences to inspire a new understanding of history. An extensive national education center and distributive museum will focus on the cooperation of enslaved and free African Americans, sympathetic

whites and American Indians who helped fugitive slaves escape.

In **Missouri**, the MidAmerica Multicultural Travel and Tourism Network holds an annual forum and awards ceremony to inform people about aspects of the Underground Railroad. "This year, the forum focused on preserving Underground Railroad sites and brought in a number of national speakers," says network spokesperson Anita Dixon-Andrews. She explains that the awards ceremony honors local, regional and national individuals and organizations "who have demonstrated the spirit of the Underground Railroad in their present-day work."

The **Vermont** General Assembly authorized funding in 1995 for a report on the Underground Railroad, and in 1997, a follow-up study was done, which traced the course of runaways from Vermont into eastern Canada. The results of these reports will be used to develop a self-guided tour.

In Ferrisburgh, Vt., the Rokeby Museum was once a sheep farm belonging to Quaker abolitionists Rowland and Rachel Robinson. It was here that, in the 1830s, the Robinsons began hiding fugitive slaves. The farmhouse was transformed into a museum in 1961 and became a national historic landmark in 1997.

In **Kentucky**, the Kentucky African American Heritage Commission is helping the state's preservation office, the Kentucky Heritage Council, form an advisory committee to identify and preserve Underground Railroad sites. The council is planning a spring symposium that will focus on the status of the research.

The council is also working with the Center for Excellence for the Study of Kentucky African

Americans, at Kentucky State University, on an archaeological investigation at Maplewood Farm (in the north of the state). Margaret Garner, the historical character who inspired the book *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, was a slave at Maplewood Farm.

Indiana has several initiatives, but has yet to build a solid network. Several professors at Ball State University, as well as individuals in Steuben County, are researching and documenting Underground Railroad sites.

The Conner Prairie museum in central Indiana provides educational experiences designed to show how America developed during the 19th century. Its presentation of "Follow the North Star," an educational program based on the Underground Railroad, dares visitors to walk in the shoes of a fugitive slave. The program takes participants on a journey into the world of slavery, where they are verbally berated, menaced with a shotgun, and forced to work like slaves.

As in Indiana, Underground Railroad activities are scattered throughout **Illinois**. Three years ago, the Alton Convention and Visitors Bureau developed an Underground Railroad tour. Alton (located 20 minutes by car from St. Louis) was a haven for fugitive slaves and abolitionists. Its six-hour tour pays visits to 10 to 12 sites, such as the Rocky Fork Church, which originated before the Civil War when free black people and slaves crossed the Mississippi River from Missouri into Illinois.

The National Park Service has designated the Milton House Museum, an Underground Railroad station located in **Wisconsin**, a national historic landmark.

"The problem we have in **Washington, D.C.**, is that we don't have anything physical left to interpret," says Frank Faragasso, historian, the National Park Service National Capital Parks-East. "Washington has torn down and

built over many of its older structures, and there are very few tangible sites. But the district office is planning a spring training workshop, which will bring together local historians to identify and interpret any remaining sites."

Research is continuing in Brownsville, **Texas**, where runaway slaves slipped across the Rio Grande into Mexico. Supervisory historian Aaron Mahr Yáñez, at Brownsville's Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site, is currently working with the Mexican government on research and interpretation of several fugitive slave colonies that formed in Mexico.

Resistance movements similar to the Underground Railroad have appeared throughout Africa's diaspora. The impact of the Maroons' fight for liberty is richly felt in countries such as Jamaica, Suriname and French Guiana; within such communities as the Seminoles in the United States; and along the Mexican border.—A.E.E.


Let's Join Hands

American Visions has joined the movement to help identify and preserve Underground Railroad sites, increase the public's awareness of such activities, and stimulate communication among the groups that are critical to achieving those goals. This issue of the magazine marks the beginning of our coverage of Underground Railroad activity. In each issue we will continue to bring our readers the latest news on the Underground Railroad Movement.

If you would like to contribute information that will aid us in our mission, send it to Underground Railroad Movement, 1156 15th St. NW, Suite 615, Washington, DC 20005.


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