

THE CONDUCTOR



VOLUME 2

DECEMBER 2000

ISSUE 3

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Network Launched in Philadelphia

On October 12, supporters of the National Network to Freedom gathered in Philadelphia to launch the network mandated under the 1998 legislation. The event was a joyous one, bringing together people from across the US -- for example, from Texas, Missouri, South Carolina, Kentucky, and Michigan. The event provided an opportunity to honor members of the Advisory Commission to the Underground Railroad Special Resource Study, many of whom were reunited for the first time since the mid-1990s. The day was made possible thanks to the combined efforts of the team of regional coordinators (especially Tara Morrison and Diane Miller), and to help from Barbara Woods and the National Parks Conservation Association.

Director Stanton spoke no fewer than three times to mark this auspicious occasion. The day began with a breakfast at which Melba Moore performed, and ended with a formal dinner. Self-guided tours were

available in the morning for those eager to explore Philadelphia, but most took the option of a bus tour to the Johnson House, a National Historic Landmark in Germantown owned by a Quaker family who made their home a stop on the route to freedom.

Much awaited, the network's official logo was unveiled during a press conference in the early afternoon. First, NPS director Robert Stanton, joined by National Parks Conservation Association Vice President William Chandler and by the great-great grandson of freedom seeker Addison White, announced the new Network program. Director Stanton read a proclamation from President Clinton in honor of the special day. Then the Network's logo, designed by Californian Shelly Harper of Harper Designs, was unveiled; the logo will be displayed by sites, programs, and facilities which have applied to the Network and shown a verifiable association with the UGRR. A Network web site (www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr/) was announced, and the new brochure introducing the Network to the public was distributed. After a final song from the US Postal Choir, participants marched to Mother Bethel AME Church, an important focal point for Underground Railroad activity.

There, amidst a sense of history, participants celebrated the UGRR. A descendant of Richard Allen, the church's founder, greeted the group, and Director Stanton addressed them. A performance called, "Seven Quilts for Seven Sisters," enthralled the audience with a combination of spirituals and a history of quilt designs.

The day ended with a formal dinner, an appropriate celebration for all the hard work by people from all walks of life to bring the story of the Underground Railroad to life. National Network to Freedom Day is not the end, but just the beginning of the National Park Service effort to commemorate the significance of the movement which furthered the realization of freedom for all Americans and served as a precursor to the civil rights movement.



NATIONAL SCENE

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Announcing the Network to Freedom Application....

After much hard work, NPS is pleased to announce that the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program Application form is now available. Annually, deadlines will be January and July 15. A packet with the form and explanations has been sent to external partners on the NCR UGRR mailing list, and is available to park UGRR representatives and superintendents. The National Network will be a nationwide system of comparable sites, programs, and facilities fostering networking and coordination of educational, preservation, and commemorative activities related to UGRR.

NCR should continue to lead implementation of the 1998 National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act. Obvious Underground Railroad-related sites in NCR parks worthy of nomination include: Harpers Ferry, Roosevelt Island, Arlington House, Frederick Douglass NHS, Lincoln Park, the African American Civil War Memorial, and Antietam NB. Other promising sites requiring additional work on documentation of escapes from slavery or assistance by members of the free Black community are: C&O Canal, the Potomac River, Ferry Hill, Oxon Hill, Seventh Street Wharf, and Manassas NBP. Programs like those related to the Civil War and emancipation at Fort Stevens, if held regularly, also deserve nomination.

UGRR is a significant heritage related to resistance to slavery and flight to freedom. Membership in the new Network will provide national recognition to authentic historic sites, programs, and facilities, and will foster coordination among them. Members will be featured on a Network database on the Program's web site. NPS will work with UGRR partners to identify funding for identification, documentation, preservation, and commemoration activities related to UGRR. Members will have the privilege to use and display the striking new UGRR Network logo.

Pacific West Region UGRR Coordinator Wins CRM Award

At CR2000, coordinator Guy Washington was recognized for his contribution to awareness of African American history in his region. Besides working with partners, he arranged for lectures, a reenactment of Mary Ellen Pleasant, and a site bulletin on California UGRR activists. Congratulations!

VIDEOS & BOOKS

For those aware of the role of Washington, D.C., and Alexandria, VA, in the internal slave trade in the years before the Civil War, [Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market](#) by Walter Johnson (Harvard University Press, 1999) will be a necessary read. You have but to visit the Franklin and Armfield Office (now Freedom House, Northern Virginia's Urban League, open by appointment), to palpably feel the weight of that sad commerce. Walter Johnson brings this history to life, through a focus on the New Orleans market, one port to which Franklin and Armfield's ships sailed.

HOME FRONT

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From Old Fetters to New Liberty: African Americans in Search of Freedom at Harpers Ferry

During 1848, a higher than normal number of runaway slaves was reported by House of Delegates member, Charles James Faulkner, who declared "that his [VA] county, Berkeley, had lost forty-two slaves in the previous month, and that Jefferson, Clarke, and Frederick had lost almost as many." Whether these figures were correct, at least the slave-holding south was trying to come to terms with its loss. Jefferson County's largest town, Harpers Ferry, contributed to the number of runaways.

Runaway slave advertisements appeared from time to time in the local newspapers, but the vast majority of African American-related advertisements dealt with hiring or sale of slaves rather than escape. When escape ads did appear, usually the owner was so anxious to recover valuable human property that a higher reward was offered if the runaway was apprehended at a greater distance from the master's home. Masters wanted to make it worth a slave catcher's time and energy to pursue a fugitive to the end of the earth, or at least to the outskirts of Canada.

Even the few slaves per year who took to the open road were apparently a few too many for Jefferson County masters who did not wish to lose their investment in human property. For masters who wanted to recoup the financial loss suffered when slaves stole away, a slave insurance policy could be purchased, for example, from the Virginia Slave Insurance Company of Charles Town, incorporated in 1835.

Did the town of Harpers Ferry channel escapees to the safety of the north? Whether or not the Ferry is ever established as a common path of escape, the town did present an ideal stopping place for escaped slaves. The freedom of the north was not very far away. Pennsylvania, a free state, was less than forty miles from the Ferry, at a convergence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers. Harpers Ferry had a large black slave and free population, a bonus to those in flight. Local African Americans were often engaged in work on the Ferry's rivers or railroads which could provide a runaway a quick escape from town. Local blacks could help fugitives escape notice by slave catchers and local authorities, and would understand town laws and ordinances concerning slavery.

In 1844, one local news article names a local free black boatman, Joseph Blanhum, who assisted slaves from Fauquier County in their flight for freedom. Blanhum risked his ferryboat business, his dependable reputation, and his personal safety by illegally transporting runaways on his boat. This notice appeared in the local newspaper, the *Virginia Free Press*, in September 19, 1844, "Free Black Convicted for Aiding Runaway Slaves. On Monday last, a free Negro, Jo Blanhum, living near Harpers Ferry, was tried by a court of five Justices, on a charge of aiding and abetting the escape of several Negroes belonging to a Mr. Diggers of Fauquier. Blanhum was sentenced to pay a fine of 100 dollars and to be confined in the penitentiary for the term of three years." After several years imprisoned, Blanhum resumed his ferryman duties once more. Whether or not he continued his support of runaways, he was never convicted of additional crimes.

Use of the words, "Underground Railroad" did appear a couple of times in the local press. "*Virginia Free Press*, November 9, 1860. News. Seven fugitive slaves including one from Harpers Ferry, passed through Syracuse by the Underground Railroad on route to Canada. Reported that seven others would come over the same route this week." Slaves owners in the Ferry could have interpreted this notice to mean that one of their own slaves had tapped into the organized system of flight.

A second appearance of the wording, Underground Railroad, appeared in the same year of 1860 but in a different vein. The John Brown Raid had occurred a year prior to this runaway article. "*Virginia Free*

Press November 13, 1860. From the Iowa Exchange. Many slaves are passing through Iowa City on the Underground Railroad on their way to Canada. They are under the conductorship of the brother of Coppic who was executed at Harpers Ferry for his complicity in the John Brown Raid." The article fueled the fear and notion that although Brown was dead and in the grave, his mission of northern interference in the southern business of slavery continued through other disciples. The article, however, served as a quick reminder of the death sentence for freedom fighters caught stealing human property from southern masters.

During wartime, pre-war methods of slave retrieval like runaway ads seemed futile. When Civil War erupted, institutions like slavery and local governments, broke down, opening the flood gates that allowed slaves to stream toward the freedom of the north. Nineteenth century local writer and artist, David Hunter Strother, witnessed a change in early wartime blacks. Strother related that, "even the Negroes were excited and jubilant." [showing] "... a gleam of anxious speculation, a silent and tremulous questioning of the future." "March 8, 1862 Society was thrown into a ferment today by the advent of a wagonload of negroes, composed of several families, with their household goods and plunder en route for a free country. But the sight of this family of emigrants, with its household goods and gods, passing northward unchecked, could not be misunderstood. Hitherto the negroes who had gone went light-handed and as fugitives; now the exodus has commenced in open day, laden with the spoils of the Egyptians. The sensation created is profound."

Most local slave owners and civilians would never have believed that by a few short months into the Civil War their town would be a magnet for wartime black refugees (so-called contraband), and eventually a brief U.S. Colored Troops recruiting effort. By the last summer of the war, the average person encountered on the streets of Harpers Ferry was African American. Many post-war refugees later became students in the town's first normal school of black education. The school, founded to educate the freedmen, evolved into Storer College, a bright beacon of hope and inspiration to many African Americans. Harpers Ferry, the slave town that had witnessed an abortive attempt at uprising and had been decimated by the resulting war over slavery, endured to provide a major site of education and advancement to new generations of African Americans .

Melinda Day, HAFE

ON A HISTORICAL NOTE

Henry Plummer (1844-1905), was born on the Calvert plantation in Prince George's County, and sold to owners in D.C., and then Howard County, Maryland. He escaped slavery in 1862, and joined the Navy in 1864. He spent 16 months of honorable service, mostly on the gunboat *Cordelion* and learned to read. After his discharge, he prepared for and attended Wayland Seminary, graduating in 1879; meanwhile, he was a watchman at a D.C. post office and a minister. He later became the first black chaplain in the United States army.

THANKS ARE DUE: SHUNDA YATES, GERRARD JOLLY, AND ALICE THOMAS FOR THEIR SPECIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE NCR UNDERGROUND RAILROAD COMMITTEE IN THE PAST FISCAL YEAR.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Greetings from the National Capital Region Underground Railroad Committee. We are proud to present this latest issue in an electronic version. This newsletter is put together with you in mind, whoever you are. This newsletter has a three-fold agenda: 1) to pique curiosity, 2) to educate, and 3) to build commitment to accurate portrayal of the Underground Railroad. *We welcome your comments, upcoming events, and contributions. This newsletter is meant to be a forum.* Direct input to Jenny Masur (jenny_masur@nps.gov).

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**JOYOUS HOLIDAYS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR TO ONE AND  
ALL!**

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