

# N E W S L E T T E R



D-62  
File:  
Underground  
Railroad

## U N D E R G R O U N D R A I L R O A D S T U D Y

May 1993, No. 1

National Park Service • Denver Service Center

*During the period from the 1830s to the end of the Civil War, a secret network of routes, people, and hiding places developed to assist slaves escaping to freedom. This network came to be known as the "Underground Railroad." From 40,000 to 100,000 slaves are estimated to have escaped through the Underground Railroad during this period [to find freedom in the northern states and territories of the United States, as well as Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean area]. The fact that slaves would go to such extraordinary risks, against such odds, for freedom, gave powerful testimony against the propaganda of slaveholders about the system of slavery. (From Senate Report 101-504)*

### THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD STUDY

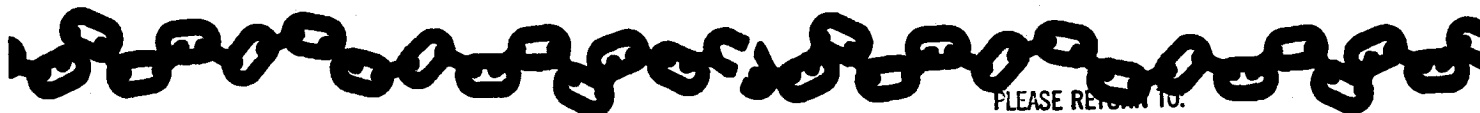
In 1990 Congress passed Public Law 101-628, which recognizes the significance of the Underground Railroad to American history. The legislation directed the secretary of the interior through the National Park Service to conduct a study of alternatives for commemorating and interpreting the Underground Railroad. According to the legislation, the study will

- consider the establishment of a new unit of the national park system
- consider the establishment of various appropriate designations for those routes and sites used by the Underground Railroad

- consider alternative means to link those sites, including those in Canada and Mexico
- make recommendations for cooperative agreements with state and local governments, local historical organizations, and other entities
- include cost estimates for each alternative

One additional task in the legislation directed the National Park Service to prepare and publish an interpretive handbook on the Underground Railroad in the larger context of American antebellum society, including the history of slavery and abolitionism.

The National Park Service has assembled an interdisciplinary team to conduct the study on behalf of the secretary of the interior.



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## INTENT OF THE STUDY

THE STUDY WILL	THE STUDY WILL NOT
Provide Congress with a range of alternative concepts for consideration	Be a detailed plan or action document
Explore the potential roles of the National Park Service and other entities in preserving, interpreting, and commemorating the Underground Railroad	Prescribe actions that will detract from existing programs that are currently preserving, interpreting, and commemorating the Underground Railroad
In conjunction with a national historic landmark theme study, identify historic sites, structures, trails, and landscapes associated with the Underground Railroad	Be a comprehensive inventory of all historic sites, structures, trails, and landscapes associated with the Underground Railroad
Identify existing and potential management and ownership of candidate sites and structures	Specify an acquisition program or provide funds for preservation of sites

### WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR?

The National Park Service in 1992 began data collection that continues to the present. The data collection is for the purpose of identifying sites, structures, trails, and landscapes associated with the Underground Railroad. These resources may have high potential for interpretive or protective measures, listing as a new national historic landmark, or as a new unit of the national park system.

In 1992 the National Park Service produced a public brochure entitled "Taking the Train to Freedom," which many of you have already received. This brochure gave an overview of the Underground Railroad story, the NPS study process, a chronology of Underground Railroad events, and a comment sheet for people to return. More than 200 people and organizations have requested to be on our mailing list. Several comment sheets listed sites associated with the Underground Railroad and museums that currently interpret the Underground Railroad, slavery, and abolitionism.

To help get the Underground Railroad study underway, the National Park Service conducted a workshop in Kansas City, Missouri, in October 1992, in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History. And in March 1993, the first Underground Railroad Advisory Committee (URAC) meeting was held in Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania. Highlights of these two activities follow.

*Kansas City.* Participants in the workshop held on October 4-5, 1992, brought expertise in the Underground Railroad or in related aspects of African-American history. The workshop addressed issues concerning the study's scope, data sources, work already in progress, applicable criteria, possible role of the National Park Service and other agencies and institutions, preservation of sites, and consideration of alternative concepts. The key findings of the workshop were as follows:

- The Underground Railroad story includes history of institution of slavery and resistance to slavery.
- The Underground Railroad story links historical themes related to slavery and the African-American experience.
- The peak period of Underground Railroad operation was 1830-1865.
- The Underground Railroad was not a simple route north, but reflects network patterns as well as complex connections to American Indian tribes, Mexico, Canada, and the Caribbean.
- The story focus will be on escapees and on those who offered aid.
- Many types of resources are associated with the Underground Railroad, including routes, buildings, landscapes, artifacts, music, language, literature, and communities.

**Philadelphia.** The NPS study team and the newly appointed URAC came together for two days to kick off a shared team effort. On March 31, 1993, introductions and welcome remarks by NPS officials opened the meeting, which later ended with presentations and discussions by the URAC and the NPS study team. The URAC communicated their goals and expectations as committee members and as consultants to the study team will work directly with the NPS study team throughout the study process. Election of officers to the URAC (chair, vice chair, and secretary) and appointments to three subcommittees (history/interpretation, sites/structures/trails, and public involvement) were conducted. Study team presentations included briefings on the background and progress of the study. Topics involved national historic landmark properties, the Kansas city meeting, interpretive themes, and preliminary alternative concepts. Comments from the URAC on these subjects are expected at a later date.

On April 1, 1993, the study team and some committee members visited several known or potential Underground Railroad sites and the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection at Temple University. One group participated in tours to the Mother Bethel AME Church, the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, the Training Camp at LaMott, and the Blockson Collection. The other group participated in a meeting with Quaker community members at Friends Historical Library, attended a slide show at the Longwood Meeting House, and toured related Underground Railroad sites.

## WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

The NPS study team will be conducting fieldwork to develop alternative concepts to present to the public. These draft alternatives will be developed with the advice of the URAC. The potential impact of the alternatives will also be assessed. A draft special resource study will be prepared. This draft document will be reviewed by the National Park Service and the URAC. After all comments are evaluated, the document will be finalized and sent to the secretary of the interior for transmittal to Congress.

Congress may enact legislation based on the range of alternatives contained in the final study, enact legislation based on a different concept, or take no action. If new legislation is drafted, congressional hearings may be held for further public involvement. Some ideas from the study may be implemented by the National Park Service and others without new legislation.

## WHO IS ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD ADVISORY COMMITTEE?

LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENTS IN PUBLIC LAW 101-628	APPOINTMENTS
Three members to be appointed who shall have expertise in African-American history.	Dr. Thomas Battle Dr. John Fleming Dr. Ancella Bickley
Two members to be appointed who shall have expertise in historic preservation.	Mr. Charles Blockson, Chair Ms. Barbara Hudson, Vice Chair
One member to be appointed who shall have expertise in American history.	Dr. Robin Winks
Three members to be appointed who shall be from the general public.	Ms. Vivian Abdur-Rahim Ms. Rose Powhatan-Auld, Secretary Ms. Glennette Tilley-Turner

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