

Interpretive Planning Session Report
for the Myers Residence
Albany, New York



Funded by
Heritage New York

Administered by
The Upstate History Alliance

Introduction

The Myers Residence, located in downtown Albany, is owned and operated by the Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region Inc. Stephen Myers, a stationmaster on the Underground Railroad, lived in the home shortly after it was built in 1847; it is also significant as the one-time office of the Vigilance Committee of Albany, an Underground Railroad organization. The site is included in New York State's Underground Railroad Heritage Trail.

Heritage New York provided funding for the day's brainstorming session, in an effort to prepare the site, and its stakeholders, for increased visitation and a need for better interpretation. I was asked to facilitate the meeting and was joined by Lisa Sorensen Stahl, an interpretive planning specialist. Members of the URHPCR board were present: Paul and Mary Liz Stewart, Eileen Kawola, Ahimsah Teabout, Barbara Smith, as well as . We met on September 15, 2007 at the Ten Broeck Mansion after a brief tour of the Myers Residence.

Joann Lindstrom
Facilitator
October 5, 2007

Interpretive Mission Statement

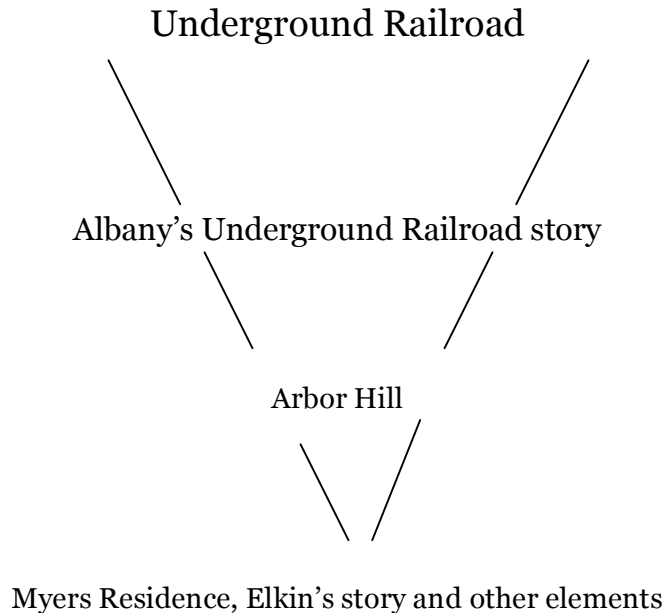
The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence will serve as a beacon to educate, inspire, and motivate our community and the nation to acknowledge and embrace the complex history of the African American experience through the Underground Railroad story of survival, struggle and the quest for freedom.

URHPCR envisions the residence as an interactive learning center that recognizes the contributions of African Americans, past and present. Working in collaboration with neighborhood residents, we will respect the historic character of the building and its environment.

Visitors to the center will have opportunities to understand the history and its relevance to the ongoing struggle for racial and social justice today.

Core Story and Themes

A framework for the site's core story and themes was articulated using the model, below. The Underground Railroad serves as the Core Story, with three sub-themes:



Interpretive Themes

Eight major interpretive themes were identified for the Myers Residence site:

- 1) Underground Railroad
 - danger, risk, bravery, civil disobedience, perseverance and relevance
 - abolitionists
 - going against modern interpretation that African Americans were not actively involved—movement was out in open
- 2) Women's roles—were not on the front lines but were pivotal
 - Harriet Myers
- 3) Family
 - Involvement of children (Myers' had four children)
- 4) Suffrage/voting rights "Suffrage Clubs"
- 5) National scope – honoring African Americans
- 6) The Johnson Family
- 7) Residence may serve as a monument or a beacon for the neighborhood and to the city about African American contributions to U.S. history
 - Relevance to life today
 - Tying in history of the neighborhood to current residents
- 8) Active slavery in New York State part of story

How Will This Story Be Told? Interpretive Products

Tours

- Designed for specific audiences
- Develop into more than a one-to-one conversation as it is now
- House will eventually dictate tour topics
- Will develop an herb garden, furnishings, etc.
- Can show photos of rooms now and after the restoration, touching on preservation, architecture
- Changing people's perceptions about life in Albany in the 1850s
- Walking tours (ghost tours) at the cemetery and include other local/historic homes
- Costumed guides with first person interpretation

Public Programs

- Presentations taken off site to various sites within the city
- Re-enactment of abolitionist activities
- Create an interpretive center behind the house
- Mobile/lightweight exhibit panels
- Following routes of freedom seekers

Exhibitions

- Kiosks that withstand weather
- House will be restored to 1850s era
- Multiple mobile displays

Signage

- Effect on historic character of house
- Now zoned residential
- Window scrims of image of Myers and/or text

Online/t.v

- Televised conference
- Download podcasts/tours
- Distance learning

To Whom is This Story Told?

- Immediate neighborhood
- City residents
- Scholars/Researchers
- Investors
- Tourism boards throughout the U.S./Canada, convention/visitor bureaus
- Tourists
- Members of organizations
- Schools
- Senior groups
- Preservationists

The group identified the following strengths and challenges to implementing its interpretive plans:

Strengths

- College at St. Rose (space for conference)
- Neighbors help with maintenance
- Good local media coverage
- Location as an opportunity for the community, an asset to the neighborhood
- Enough street parking for occasional tourists
- Can be a source for youth in community
- Research on the home and Underground Railroad in region
- Support from other community organizations (Jack & Jill, etc.)
- Building—integrity, historic relevance
- Volunteers & board
- Individual academic support
- Central / city location
- Proximity to schools
- Uniqueness as site
- No lack of good ideas
- Network to a larger statewide effort—national significance
- Conference: caliber, quality, and acts as an access point
- School named after Myers
- Outreach programs
- Interpretation
- Supporting amenities
- Relationship to visitor's center/tourism board
- Web presence/email list

Weaknesses/Challenges

- Between Lark & Swan Streets—may impact tourism efforts
- Parking/no room for buses and narrow street in front of site
- Traffic issues
- Neighbor presents challenges (fire, etc.)
- Immediate environment/security
- Public transportation
- Involving youth
- Not accessible to people with disabilities
- Lack of infrastructure to implement new programs
- No restrooms
- Documenting programs
- Site maintenance
- Linking house with conference
- Area colleges—lack of institutional support

Conclusion

The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence has the potential to be many things to a wide audience: a community center where members of the neighborhood can gather for programs, a museum for exhibiting objects related to the Underground Railroad around the Capital Region of New York State, and a historic home preserved to its 1850s integrity.

Through the hard work and dedication of the URHPCRs board of trustees, commitment from the community and funds from Heritage New York and other partners, the Myers Residence will be able to develop interpretive components to help tell the important stories of the Myers' lives and those who had the courage to escape to freedom.