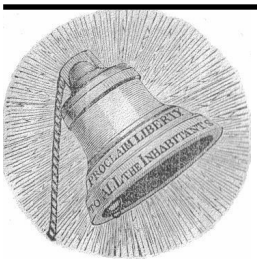
Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc.



The Freedom Seeker

Volume II, No. 1 *Summer 2005*

February Conference: Great Success

Over three hundred people braved freezing weather to travel from across the state to attend the fourth annual Underground Railroad History Project conference at the end of February. They gathered in Schenectady High School to listen to speakers and participate in workshops, enjoy original music and meet artists, all of whom are working on some aspect of the Underground Railroad story.

The conference received strong support this year from the city of Schenectady's political leadership. Mayor Brian Stratton provided opening comments. He was joined on the dais by Gregg Fields of the Schenectady School District. URHPCR's Paul and Mary Liz Stewart delivered this year's keynote address, for the first time bringing before the conference audience part of the educational program they present around the Capital Region the rest of the year.

A watercolor of the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence, painted by Bob Link, was presented to URHPCR by Bill Bouchard. A troupe of performers led by Kim Harris performed an outstanding music and theater production, an original UGRR Opera about Henry "Box" Brown

URHPCR likes to involve community organizations and agencies as much as possible in the running of our conferences. This year Duryee Memorial AME Zion Church in Schenectady catered the conference. The youths of the Hamilton Hill Arts Center as the Umoja Drummers and Dancers of the Hamilton Hill Arts Center opened the day's program with drumming and African dance. We had an especially large number of vendors this year selling photography, collectables, African Art, books and many other items.

The conference even had a direct effect on the Schenectady environs, inspiring Schenectadians in the audience to organize a clean up of the Vale Cemetary where historic Schenectady figures were buried. Others will be working on the annual Juneteenth celebration.

Conference planning has begun for the 2006 annual conference. This fifth anniversary conference will be held in Troy on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, February 24, 25, and 26.

Barbara Smith leads conference workshop on modern freedom seekers (Photo: Michael Saafir)

Coming Events

July 14: Hartgen Student Archaeology Day, Ten Broeck Mansion (URHPCR tour)

Aug 6: African American Family day, Empire Plaza (URHPCR table)

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The Freedom Seeker is a publication of the Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc., a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting and encouraging knowledge and understanding of the 19th-century Underground Railroad Movement in the Capital Region, in New York State, and in the United States. This newsletter is published three times a year. Editorial inquiries can be sent to URHPCR, P.O. Box 10851, Albany NY 12201. Email at info@ugrworkshop.com

Myers House Update

Work continues on the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence at 194 Livingston Avenue in Albany. The building is still covered in the back to protect it from moisture while awaiting repairs. The board is presently interviewing architectural firms specializing in restoration. Once the architect is hired, we will be able to complete a Historic Structure Report to guide restoration. While the project has recently been awarded a grant of $75,000 from Heritage New York, a state office that manages Governor Pataki's Heritage Trails, these funds have not yet been received. URHPCR continues to raise funds to support restoration. The building has been named to the National Register of Historic Places, New York State's Historic Register and the Governor's Heritage Trail of significant sites in the history of the Underground Railroad.

UGR Tours

Once again will be offering tours of underground railroad sites in downtown Albany . Tours start at the Albany Visitor's Center at Quackenbush Square. There is a modest charge for taking the tour. For more info call Mary Liz or Paul at 518-432-4432. Tour dates:

June 26, 2005
July 24, 2005
August 21, 2005
September 18, 2005
October 9, 2005

UGR History: Vigilance Committees

by Paul Stewart

As the 1830's drew to a close and the 1840's began, committees were formed in some cities in the north to protect fugitive slaves from re-enslavement, and to assist them in their flight to freedom in the north or in Canada. As slave catchers sought fugitives, these "vigilance" committees provided legal assistance, food, clothing, money, employment, and temporary shelter.

Such a committee formed in Albany in the early 1840s and one continued to exist up to the time of the Civil War. Albany's anti-slavery newspaper, *Tocsin of Liberty,* identifies ten people, Blacks and whites, as members of the executive body of the local Vigilance Committee in 1842. Some are familiar names from the city's history, such as Thomas Paul and Revolutionary War veteran Benjamin Lattimore. The rest of the Vigilance Committee was composed of all those who contributed financially to its work.

Albany's Vigilance Committee worked alongside other local anti-slavery organizations such as the Liberty Party and the Eastern New York Anti-Slavery Society, and with anti-slavery newspapers such as the *Tocsin* and the *Albany Patriot.* Another group, the Northern Star Association, like the Vigilance Committee, directly assisted fugitives. In the early 1840s, the principal agent for this group was Stephen Myers.

The Northern Star Association published a newspaper, *The Northern Star and Freeman's Advocate*. Under Myers' direction the group also sought employment and provided advocacy and education for people of African descent. Myers spoke around the region, raising money and publicizing the association's work assisting fugitives.

Anti-slavery groups did not always cooperate. Historical documents show that the Northern Star Association and the original Vigilance Committee competed with each other in the early 1840s. There was even some hostility between Myers and members of the Vigilance Committee, who accused Myers' group for not doing enough to aid freedom seekers.

It appears that the hostility between the groups subsided after Myers' chief opponents, Abel Brown and Charles Torrey left the scene. An activist Baptist minister, Brown campaigned tirelessly against slavery. He died of

(Continued on page 4)

News and Notes

This March URHPCR's Mary Liz Stewart received two awards back to back! On March 9th she was one of twelve recipients of the Governor's Merit award for her outstanding contributions to the community through work with the Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region. On March 10th she received the Harriet Tubman Spirit award along with twelve other recipients. These two well-deserved honors highlight her (and the project's) important contribution to the mission of educating the public about the Underground Railroad.

♣ ♣ ♣ ♣

We would like to welcome the following new members and renewals:Lucy Wong, Bob Wallace, Major Eddie Gurewitz, J. W. Bouchard, Eileen Kawola, Benna Thompson, Donna Whitbeck, Dot Willsey, John Battin, Sharon Calhoun, Dan Ceaser, Susan Clark, Amy Godine, Jack Nicholson, MD, Joe Cavazos, Lois Conklin, Leslie Javarone-French, John Coniglio, Rita Hoffman, Mary Elizabeth Jones, Peston Pierce, Stan Malecki, Beverly Mills, Raymond and Roberta Nunn, Nuriyah Bone-Owens, Effie Bennett-Powe, Barbara Boss-Powell, Cynthis Seacord, Ann Slaterpryce, Barbara Strangfeld, A. Louise Yeaton

♣ ♣ ♣ ♣

Among the events warming up the cold winter was a performance by the UGR Players of "El Hajj Malik: The Story of Malcolm X." The show played to enthusiastic audiences at the Egg in the Empire State Plaza and at at Schenectady County Community College.. Director Wanda Webster expressed delight at the hard work the non-professional actors put in. The play told the story of Malcolm Little's transformation from a child struggling with his father's death at the hands of Klansmen, to street hustler and criminal, to prison inmate, to follower of the Nation of Islam, to independent thinker and human rights activist. "El Hajj Malik" brought to life the story of an activist who still compels us, almost forty years after his death, to reflect on the quality of our lives and the direction of the freedom struggle.

BECOME A MEMBER

The Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc. (URHPCR) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and encouraging knowledge and understanding of the 19th-century Underground Railroad Movement in the Capital Region, in New York State, and in the United States. Among other goals, URHPCR promotes and encourages historical research and education on the Underground Railroad Movement and seeks to mark places of historic interest relating to the Underground Railroad Movement in the Capital Region.

Benefits of Charter Membership:

- **Invitation to the annual Albany Conference in February 2004.**
- **Subscription to *The Freedom Seeker* (published three times a year).**
- **Invitations to URHPCR special events**
- **Walking tour of Downtown Albany Underground Railroad Sites for a nominal charge.**
- **Calendar of local, state, and national events on the Underground Railroad Movement**

A limited number of subsidized individual memberships is available. Please call 518.432.4432 for more information.

Check one:

☐	**Individual**	**$ 25.00**
☐	**Family**	**37.50**
☐	**Contributing**	**50.00**
☐	**Sustaining**	**75.00**
☐	**Student**	**12.50**
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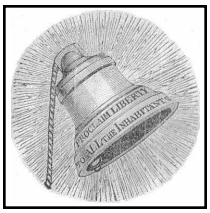

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ON THE WEB AT

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Vigilance Committee

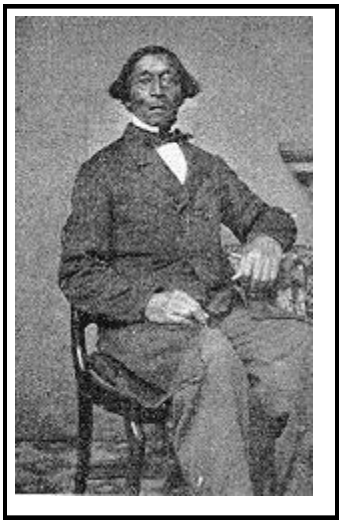
(Continued from page 2)

pneumonia in western NewYork in 1844 while on a preaching campaign. Torrey was imprisoned in 1844 for assisting fugitive slaves in Maryland and died in prison two years later. In the late 1840s, Myers succeeded them as the key player in the Vigilance Committee, directing the group into the early 1860s.

After the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, vigilance committees sprang up in many other cities, including Lansingburgh, where a committee held meetings in that city's AME Zion Church. These committees expressed widespread citizen opposition to slavery, especially to the Fugitive Slave Law, which enlisted the power of the federal government on the side of slave owners.

The underground railroad was not a physical structure but a movement of anti-slavery activism, of which vigilance committees were a key element. Other organizations formed parts of the network that we call the underground railroad. Wesleyan Churches, Quakers, Free Will Baptists, African Methodist Episcopal, and African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Anti-Slavery Societies, Unitarians, and many members of Congregational and Presbyterian Churches all worked in the movement to assist fugitive slaves.

But many people with no organizational or denominational affiliation assisted too. And of course, the movement in our part of the country was also the *movement* of enslaved African people to become freedom seekers and travel across the land to the non-slave northern states and to Canada.



While Abel Brown (represented by picture on left in detail from early cartoon) and Stephen Myers (on right) were occasional rivals, together they helped build the freedom movement.