

Volume X, No. 3

The Freedom Seeker

Fall 2013

A Trail Grows in Brooklyn

Compiled by Sharon Robinson, Dean Emerita of Russell Sage College

If you've never been to Brooklyn, it's worth a trip in general—and it offers some excellent Underground Railroad history as well. You might even want to start by walking from Manhattan across the beautiful Brooklyn Bridge—just over a mile; on a nice day, you'll have plenty of company.

In a 2007 *New York Times* article, John Strausbaugh notes that “with its extensive waterfront, its relatively large population of African-American freemen - slavery ended in New York in 1827 - and its many antislavery churches and activists, Brooklyn was an important nexus on the ‘freedom trail.’ Some runaways stayed and risked being captured and returned to their owners, but most travelled on to the greater safety of Canada.” And while it is often difficult to authenticate claims of Underground Railroad history, Brooklyn offers at least two well-documented sites, and several other points of likely UGR activity. Numerous walking tours can be found online, and the “In Pursuit of Freedom” project, a public history partnership, has a particularly rich web site. Here are just three of the highlights, reflecting projects at different stages of development.

Plymouth Church (1847)



At the corner of Hicks and Orange Streets in Brooklyn Heights, Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims is probably Brooklyn's best-known abolitionist site. Its fame - and the part it played in New York City's Underground

Railroad - derives primarily from its famous antislavery preacher, Henry Ward Beecher (brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe). “I opened Plymouth Church,” said Beecher, “though you did not know it, to hide fugitives. I took them into my own home and fed them. I piloted them, and sent them toward the North Star, which to them was the Star of Bethlehem.” Beecher was known for his fiery sermons, and for staging public events such as mock slave auctions, where the congregation would pass the collection plate to buy the freedom of actual slaves. It's little wonder that Plymouth Church

became known as Brooklyn's “Grand Central Depot” of the Underground Railroad. Church tours allow visitors to sit in the pew where Abraham Lincoln once sat, and view a ring given to the slave child Pinky when her freedom was purchased by the congregation. The ring had been placed in the collection plate, and as Beecher gave it to her, he is reported to have said, “With this ring I do wed thee to freedom.”



Weeksville Heritage Center



A \$3 million dollar renovation project in 2005 restored four historic homes on Hunterfly Road in Crown Heights - all that remains of Brooklyn's oldest African-American community, which had its own school, newspaper, social and athletic groups, an orphanage, a home for the elderly, plus many churches. Professionals, as well as civil servants and craftsmen, lived in houses built between 1840 and 1883. Named for James Weeks, an African-American longshoreman, Weeksville was an obvious source of Underground Railroad support from black abolitionists. The houses have been restored to reflect different periods of life in the community, and a new 19,000-square-foot education and cultural center adjacent to the houses is almost complete.

Abolitionist Place

Abolitionist leaders Thomas and Harriet Truesdell, who helped to organize an antislavery convention at Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia and founded the Providence Anti-Slavery Society before moving to Brooklyn in 1851, lived at 227 Duffield Street, which is currently in about the same condition as the Myers residence was when it was purchased by URHPCR. Though the city renamed the corner of Duffield and Fulton Streets “Abolitionist Place” in 2007, and while circumstantial evidence certainly points to this home as an Underground Railroad site, developers have other plans for the real estate and the future of the 227 Abolitionist Place Museum remains in doubt. Currently ‘more history than museum,’ it reflects the urban dilemma of historic preservation.



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URHPCR and the Young Abolitionists offer our deepest thanks to the following sponsors of the Summer Institute:

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The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc., a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting knowledge of the 19th century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy 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.

Over the Past Months



Clockwise from upper left:

← **Filming of "The Big Picture"** during the Young Abolitionists Teen Scholar Institute; **Work day at the Myers Residence** in Preparation for the August Open House; the annual July 4th Oration program based on Frederick Douglass' 1852 speech in Rochester, "What to the Slave Is Your Fourth of July?" ; **URHPCR participates in the North Star Peace Walk** sponsored by University at Albany Interfaith Center →



Young Abolitionists Teen Scholars' Institute

Building on the success of its inaugural summer of 2012, URHPCR expanded the Young Abolitionists Teen Scholars' Institute, which was held at the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence during the month of July. Under the leadership of Mary Liz Stewart, Co-Founder and Executive Director of URHPCR, 30 teens spent much of their time immersed in research on the Abolition movement and Civil War. They used that research, their own creative instincts, and the help of their mentors to design a culminating event open to the public. The result was a well-attended and very polished array of presentations and demonstrations. Teen Scholars presented an original dance choreographed to a student's poem, engaged children and adults alike with military drill demonstrations in Civil War dress, and presented a gallery of photos they'd taken. Of particular note was "The Big Picture," a 15-minute film written and performed by Institute participants that sought to define what slavery means for young people today. It features a young protagonist who must choose between a scholarship to art school and the dangerous life of street violence that seems to him to be his destiny. In an interview with the Albany *Times Union*, Prince Sprauve, the film's director, said that he had asked the students for their definition of slavery. "Most of them told me things like whips and chains. Slavery is truly psychological; it's a way of thinking. When you have people killing each other on street corners they don't even own, taking drugs and losing sight of what really matters, that's slavery," said Sprauve. Students reported that in addition to deepening their understanding of slavery, the film-making process gave them new and useful skills. In addition to preparing the demonstration (cont'd on page 4)



Asha Everett, 14, of Albany relates the story of Sara Emma Edmonson, who disguised herself as a man to fight in the Civil War. (John Carl D'Annibale / *Times Union*)

News and Notes

Mission Statement of URHPCR:

Underground Railroad History Project
researches and preserves the local and national history
of the anti-slavery and Underground Railroad movements,
their international connections
and their legacies to later struggles;
it engages in public education and dialogue about
these movements and their relevance to modern society.

Welcome and thank you to new and renewing members:

D. M. Dobbs, David Easter and Family, Anthony Hilferty, David Hochfelder and Family, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, Lucinda Huggins, James Owens, Trip Powell, Barry Walston, David Yeaton

Your support is greatly appreciated!

Invite someone you know to become a member, or give the gift of membership - details available on the Membership Page at www.UndergroundRailroadHistory.org

Mark your calendars and plan to attend -

- ◆ **URHPCR Board Meetings** - 3rd Thursday of every month, 5:45-7:30pm at Russell Sage College, Troy
- ◆ **Conference Planning Mtg** - 1st Monday of each month, 6:00-7:30pm in Rm. 105, Gurley Hall at Russell Sage College, Troy
- ◆ **Building & Properties Mtg** - monthly, 5:30-6:30pm at The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence
- ◆ **Gardening & Landscaping Mtg** - 1st & 3rd Tuesdays, 5:30-6:30pm at The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence
- ◆ **Finance Committee Mtg** - 2nd Tuesday of each month, 5:30-6:30pm at Albany Center for Economic Success
- ◆ **URHPCR Grounds Beautification and Maintenance Work Parties** - the last Saturday of each month, June through October, from 10am-1pm

Information about these meetings and events is available at 518-432-4432 or at info@UndergroundRailroadHistory.org

Registration is now open for the **2013 Induction Ceremony** at the National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum in Peterboro, NY. Visit www.nationalabolitionhalloffameandmuseum.org for details and registration

Registration is now open for **Harriet Tubman - No Longer Underground Centennial Symposium** at Cayuga Community College - visit www.cayuga-cc.edu/tubman/ for symposium details and registration

Questions? Concerns? Contributions? Interested in volunteering? Contact us by calling 518-432-4432 or by visiting www.UndergroundRailroadHistory.org

Young Abolitionists *(cont'd from p.3)*

of their research accomplishments, the students also spent time working on the Underground Railroad History Project properties, maintaining the gardens and grounds, and contributing to preservation of the historic site and beautification of the neighborhood.



Members of the Young Abolitionists Teen Scholar's Institute. From left: Nijair Smalls, 15, dressed as a 26th U.S. Colored Troops soldier; Sam Levitt, 18, in period dress as an abolitionist veteran; and Wayne Cooperider, 15, dressed as a 26th U.S. Colored Troops Sergeant. (John Carl D'Annibale / *Times Union*)

Conference Call for Proposals: Slavery and the Underground Railroad: the Larger Context, the Lingering Legacy

The 13th Annual Underground Railroad Public History Conference will take place at Russell Sage College, Troy, New York, April 11-13, 2014. The Conference focus will be on the role of slavery as the impetus for the Underground Railroad movement, investigating the legacy of slavery against which the Underground Railroad is interpreted and made relevant for us today. The enslavement of African descended people in the Americas, and the United States in particular, has contributed to the historical and cultural setting in which we find ourselves.

We invite proposals that address reinterpretations, teaching, new research, and other ways that illustrate, address and celebrate the story historically and contemporarily. Also welcomed are proposals related to the Underground Railroad Movement, enslavement, or emancipation in the United States, and the relevance for us today.

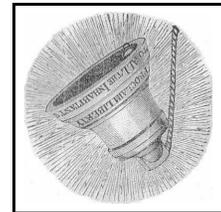
Full details are available at:

<http://undergroundrailroadhistory.org/call-for-proposals-2014/>

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