

The Freedom Seeker

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Summer 2008

Underground Along The Ohio

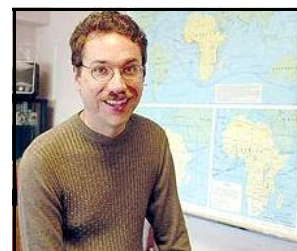
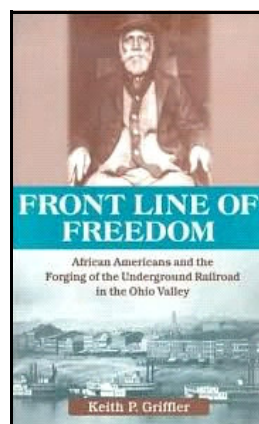
Keith P. Griffler, *Frontline of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley*, The University Press of Kentucky, 2004, 169 pages, \$35.00 hardcover

Reviewed by Paul Stewart

Telling the story of the Underground Railroad from different points of view is part of what keeps the story fresh. *Front Line of Freedom* by Keith P. Griffler ventures to tell the story with a view toward the African Americans who made up many of the communities along the Ohio River. Their story is one of confrontation and struggle against the backdrop of anti-black laws that made up an ugly feature of life in the free states of Ohio and Indiana in the antebellum period. The preface to this volume states, “*Front Line of Freedom* demonstrates that African Americans were central to the development and operation of the Underground Railroad, a thesis that has been considered but not yet made the focus of a book-length study.” It further argues “rather than treating the struggles along the Ohio River as historical footnotes to emancipation, it argues that they played an important role in the combination of many complex

factors that ended American slavery.”

The Ohio River is at once a river of slavery and a river of freedom. Enslavers utilized the Ohio to ship enslaved people, men, women, and children to the deeper south and to trade with the cities and towns of the north bank for hardware and other supplies. Enslaved people recognized it as the River Jordan



Dr. Keith Griffler, Professor in the African American Studies Department at University at Buffalo of the State University of New York

in their great exodus to the land of promise and freedom.

In unfolding the story of the Underground Railroad Griffler points out that the term Underground Railroad has strangely allowed people’s imaginations to focus on the railroad motif as the defining factor in understanding the social movement that came to have this name. But the deeper story is to be found in the first word, “Underground”. Aside from the enduring myths of tunnels, the underground, or the secret movement that struggled for freedom against oppressive laws, was extensive and embodied in stories that can be recovered and told. These stories are recovered from new and extant oral histories, letters, and reminiscences. John Mason’s is an exemplary story.

Mason had escaped from slavery in Kentucky in the

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Coming Events

Walking Tours Continue

Mark Your Calendars

Clean Up Days

Contribute to the preservation and beautification of the Myers Residence grounds and property

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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, New York 12201. Email at info@ugrworkshop.com.

Call for Proposals

The Underground Railroad, Its Legacies, and Our Communities
College Park, Union College, Schenectady, NY, February 27-28, 2009

The UGR, as a crucial part of the struggle against US slavery, has had enormous impact on the State of New York, the country, and the world - both in its day and ever since! The theme of the 2009 UGR History Conference calls on us as community members, students, teachers, and scholars to examine and discuss the many legacies of the UGR. For example:

* *How has the UGR shaped history and identity, locally and nationally, to this day? In particular, how has the UGR shaped the 400-year history of New York (an especially important question in the coming "quadricentennial" year)*

* *How has the memory of the UGR been constructed and reconstructed over the years, and how have stories of the UGR been transmitted, memorialized, and mythologized? How has African-American resistance to slavery been portrayed (or ignored) in the public memory?*

* *How has the UGR influenced subsequent and contemporary social movements, and what is the relationship of the UGR to current struggles against racism, ethnic oppression, and slavery?*

* *What does the UGR teach us as advocates of democracy and as citizens of the world?*

The Planning Committee of the 8th UGR Conference is soliciting brief proposals for presentations, panels, and workshops that address these questions and this theme. However, proposals on other aspects of UGR history are welcome. Proposal submissions are due by 9/30/08.

For more details, visit www.ugrworkshop.com or call 518-432-4432.

Preservation Preparation at the Myers Residence

An important element in advancing the restoration of the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence are the many volunteer work parties that help keep the property clean, in order, and beautified. While the restoration awaits the professionals who will restore plaster, replace brick, shore walls and complete many other professional and skilled tasks, volunteers keep the lawns mowed, weeds abated, trash picked up, and flowers planted.



"One of the goals of the clean-ups", says Paul Stewart, one of the co-founders of Underground Railroad History Project, "is to move the site in the direction of what it will be. I keep reminding myself that this building is on the National Register of



Historic Places and, when finished, it will be a first rate historic attraction like many of the National Park Service sites."



Dozens of work parties have been organized since the property was acquired in the summer of 2004. A wide variety of people and groups have contributed time, energy and talents, including teens, college aged volunteers, young adults, middle-aged volunteers, and senior citizens. Come join us as we work together to preserve this historic treasure. Bring a friend!



BECOME A MEMBER

The Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc. (URHPCR) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting knowledge and understanding of the 19th-century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy 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 Membership:

- ◆ Invitation to the annual Albany Conference
- ◆ Subscription to *The Freedom Seeker*, published three times a year
- ◆ Invitations to URHPCR special events
- ◆ Walking tours of Capital District Underground Railroad Sites at a reduced rate
- ◆ Announcements of local, state, and national events on the Underground Railroad Movement

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

Check one:

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UNDERGROUND RAILROAD HISTORY PROJECT OF THE CAPITAL REGION, INC.

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News and Notes

Our condolences go out to Judy Wellman, long time supporter of URHPCR and advocate for UGR research and preservation. Her husband, Paul Malo, died July 22. A man of many talents, committed to family and community throughout his life, he has left a legacy of numerous memorable contributions that improve the quality of life for us all.

People of Courage, People of Hope, Seekers of Justice - UGR walking tours in downtown Albany will be held on August 17, September 14, October 12. Details available at www.ugrworkshop.com or 518-432-4432.

Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence and UGR Campus clean-up dates - bring your gloves, gardening tools, enthusiasm, and muscle power to 194 Livingston Avenue on August 9, September 13, and October 4. Clean ups begin at 9am and conclude by 1pm. Light refreshments will be served.

Invite URHPCR to speak at your event - call 518-432-4432 or email info@ugrworkshop.com.

Visit www.ugrworkshop.com Highlights page - new information and photos are frequently posted there.

Welcome and thank you to new and renewing members John Coniglio, Matt Kirk, Joy Chatel, Preston Pierce, Lois Conklin, Bob Wallace, Sue Clark, Major Eddie Gurewitz, Eileen Kawola, Barbara & Frank Traver, Marey Bailey, Scott Christianson, Beverly Mills, Lucy Wong, Kathy Gurney, and Joy Heitman.

Donations to URHPCR gladly accepted online on the homepage of www.ugrworkshop.com.

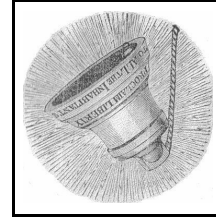
URHPCR Committees need volunteers. Can you contribute time to the Jazz Event Committee, the Conference Committee, the Finance Committee, or the Property Committee? Join us as we work together to move forward the mission of URHPCR.

Mark your calendars for these upcoming events -

- ◆ *Slavery By Another Name* book talk and signing - September 9 at Christ Church United Methodist, Troy
- ◆ Friends of the Network to Freedom Conference - September 15 - 20 (www.ugrfriends.org)
- ◆ Capital District Civil War Roundtable Heritage Day - September 13 (www.cdcwrt.org)
- ◆ National Abolition Hall of Fame Commemoration - October 24 - 26 (www.abolitionhof.org)
- ◆ UGR History Conference - February 27 - 28, 2009
- ◆ Annual URHPCR Jazz Event - April, 2009

ON THE WEB AT WWW.
UGRWORKSHOP.COM

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of the Capital Region, Inc.*



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**UNDERGROUND RAILROAD
HISTORY PROJECT OF THE
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Underground Along The Ohio

(cont'd from p.1)

1830s. He escaped at the age of 12 and earned money waiting tables while he worked his way through Oberlin College. Oberlin was the only institution of higher learning in Ohio open to African Americans at this time. Upon graduation he committed himself to underground work in the Ohio valley. If one were to try to count the number of people Mason helped, a number of more than 1,300 would not be an underestimate. Mason dedicated his life to "the vital interests of his brethren".

As a person of exceptional character and nerve he regularly exhibited quick wits and coolness under pressure. He worked collaboratively with white abolitionists such as John Rankin of Ripley, Ohio. Mason was last heard of when one of his rescues of four enslaved persons resulted in a struggle where he was wounded and captured. At the earliest opportunity the enslaver sold Mason down river farther south in New Orleans. Upon being sold to

another plantation owner Mason escaped again and with yet another freedom seeker accompanying him made his way back up the river only to disembark at Cincinnati and disappear from further record.

While the book tells many stories like this one, along with a few stories of white abolitionists, it does not give any quantity of detail about broader life in the African American communities along the Ohio. We don't get a look into how they were structured or what their social life was like.

There are other stories, nonetheless. Stories of John Parker, Henry Boyd, Kittie Doram, William Watson, and William Casey are told. These, and so many other African Americans, made great sacrifices in opposition to slavery and in helping others to freedom. Their stories remind us that there is much about the Underground Railroad that is yet to be told or discovered. They remind us that the railroad terminology should not distract us from searching for and uncovering the richer story and recognizing the central role of African American underground activists.