

The Freedom Seeker

Volume I, No. 3

Fall 2004

URHPCR Buys Myers Residence

By Paul Stewart and Andrew Feffer

It was the sort of mystery historians love. A document in the Massachusetts Antiquarian Society listed an address for the headquarters of Albany’s Vigilance Committee, the organization that directed underground railroad activity in much of the Capital district

That 1856 address was on Lumber Street, which became Livingston Avenue after the Civil War – that much was certain.

But numbers on the street had changed at least twice. Which building bore what number in 1856? Did the building that went with the number in the document still stand?

These were the questions that confronted URHPCR’s Mary Liz and Paul Stewart. Assisted by Tony Opalka, they pored through tax and census records, deeds, and City Directories, and visited sites. Finally in the fall of 2003 there was no longer any doubt – the Vigilance Committee headquarters still stood. It was a brick building at 194 Livingston Avenue.

This was where Stephen and Harriet Myers, organizers of the Vigilance Committee, lived. From within its walls the Myerses and others planned the liberation of slaves and their transportation to freedom . In this place they bent the arc of American history toward racial justice.



Myers Residence, 194 Livingston (photo: P. Stewart)

Coming Events

October 22 7:30 pm — Hear escaped Sudanese slave, Francis Bok at the Palace Theater, Albany

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As luck would have it, the building was available for purchase from Albany County, which sold it to URHPCR on July 13 for restoration into a museum to interpret the story of the Myerses and the local Underground Railroad movement.

In March , URHPCR qualified the Myers Residence for the State Register of Historic Places. And the building has been designated one of 28 New York State Underground Railroad sites as part of Governor Pataki’s New York State Underground Railroad Heritage Trail system. We also applied for National Historic Registry status.

Then the real work began. The house needed a great deal of cleaning up and renovation. So, from the middle of July until the end of August, seven volunteer work crews put in hundreds of person-hours of labor readying the building and property for restoration. Teams of board members and volunteers have cleaned the yard, removed tons of trash, and rebuilt and painted the front stoop. On three work days the Albany Boys and Girls Club sent crews of young people to lend their enormous energy and enthusiasm to cleaning up the site.

Under current plans, the project will advance in three stages. Stage one involves preparing the building for restoration work, especially attending to emergency repairs. Phase two will be the major restoration work. Phase three will be

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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

194 Livingston

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putting the final touches, such as floor and window treatments and furniture, in order to return the building to its appearance in the mid-1850s.

Costs for the initial phase are estimated at \$35,000. We have applied for some major grants, but their funding cycles reach into next year. And while generous private contributions have been made, we are still well short of our goal.

So, any and all funds for this project will be graciously accepted. Other help is needed too, especially skilled and unskilled labor. Work parties are scheduled through the fall. Feel free to join us!



The Albany Boys and Girls Club lends a hand at the Myers House (photo: Mary Liz Stewart)

Francis Bok to Speak on Contemporary Slavery

By *Mary Liz Stewart*

Slavery was outlawed in the United States in 1865. But it was not defeated. Unfortunately, it is alive and well, with an estimated 27 million people still in bondage around the world.

Chattel slavery, the sort practiced here before the Civil War, unbelievably persists in other parts of the world. In Sudan and Mauritania one person can still own another as property. Elsewhere (including the US) other, less overt, forms of slavery like debt bondage, forced labor, and sex slavery are surprisingly widespread.

While URHPCR's primary goal is to preserve the history of our region's struggle against slavery, we also offer public education about the problem

of slavery in general. With this in mind we have invited Francis Bok, a freedom seeker from our own time, to speak in downtown Albany.

Bok was born in southern Sudan. When he was seven, while at a market near his home village, Bok, several other children and several women were kidnapped by northern Sudanese militia and forced into bondage. For ten years during the 1990s, Bok suffered brutal beatings and endured dehumanizing treatment as a "chattel" slave. On his third escape attempt he finally reached freedom, eventually making his way to the United States. He presently works in Boston with American Anti-Slavery Group.

His description of his enslavement, detailed in *Escape from Slavery*, reads quite like American slave

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News and Notes

Guided Walking Tours of Albany downtown Underground Railroad sites will be conducted on the following dates this fall. Walking tours begin at the Albany Heritage Area Visitors Center (2-4 pm)

- ◆ Sunday, September 12
- ◆ Sunday, October 10



Work parties at 194 Livingston Avenue (8AM to Noon). Bring gloves and wear old clothes.

- ◆ Saturday, September 11
- ◆ Saturday, October 9
- ◆ Saturday, October 30
- ◆ Saturday, November 13



Other scheduled events

- ◆ September 17 - Paul & Mary Liz present workshops at Underground Railroad Freedom Center, Borderlands III Conference,

- ◆ Northern Kentucky University October 15 - New York State Historical Association Teacher's Conference – Workshop
- ◆ October 19 - URHPCR Board Meeting 5:30 PM 175 Central Avenue, Albany
- ◆ October 22 - Francis Bok Event – 7:30 PM Palace Theater, Albany
- ◆ Saturday, February 26, 2005 - *Underground Railroad: Emerging Discoveries - What Do We Know and Where Do We Go From Here?* 4th Underground Railroad History Conference

Thanks to everyone who has volunteered at the Myers residence: Andre, Ishmael and Tiana Allen, Bill

Bouchard, Brother Yusuf and the Boys and Girls Club, Jana and Karen Burks, John Crosby, Cheila DiaoFama Diao, Andy Feffer, Steve Goodman, Wayne H. Hymes, Benita Law-Diao, Marggie Skinner, Dan, Joel, Paul and Mary Liz Stewart, Kate Storms, Kathleen and Peter Tunny, Susan Walker, Al Wells and Wally Wheeler.



Thanks also to folks who generously contributed funds to the Myers House: Dr. David Barnart, Linda Becker & John Wolcott, J. W. Bouchard, G. Stephen Christopher, Andrew Feffer and Michelle Chilcoat, Jill McGrath, Rosine Katan, Kathleen Kelly, Tam Kistler, Lynn P. MacGowan, Deborah LaFond, Barbara Lavigne, Wendy Lund, Stan Malecki, Jon A. Olson, Ellen Picotte, Marggie Skinner, Carol Wallace, Richard White-Smith, and Dot Willsey.

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.

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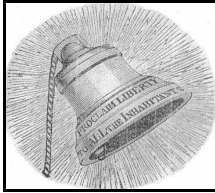
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Francis Bok

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narratives from before the Civil War. Bok's personal witness reminds us that modern slavery is still a fact of life, even though it was outlawed by much of the world in the mid-19th century.

Francis Bok Speaks: The Past Lives on in the Present, will be presented at the Palace Theater in downtown Albany on Friday, October 22. This free program will begin at 7:30pm. Facilities are accessible to those with disabilities, and sign language interpretation will be available. Free parking is easily accessible in nearby lots. Partial funding has been provided by New York Council for the Humanities. Partial underwriting support is being provided by the Palace Theater.

A ticketed reception will follow, at a cost of \$15 for URHPCR members, and \$20 for non-members. Benefactors at \$150, Sponsors at \$100, and Partners at \$50 will receive complimentary reception tickets, be listed in the program for the evening, and help support this significant cultural and educational event.



Hear Francis Bok speak on contemporary slavery — Palace Theater Albany Oct. 22 7:30 pm