UNDERGROUND RAILROAD EDUCATION CENTER

The Freedom Seeker

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Marcus Garvey's Liberty Hall: How African Independence Began on 138th Street in Harlem

Written by James Kaplan, a historical walking tour guide and writer, past President of the Lower Manhattan Historical Association, and founder of the Manhattan law firm of Greenberg & Kaplan.

A comprehensive PBS special on Africa implied that modern African independence had its origins in a number of ancient African kingdoms before European colonialism. With all due respect, I believe African independence in the 20th century, which is one of the great events in world history, actually began in the United States at 120 West 138th Street in New York, which was the headquarters of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association ("UNIA").

Marcus Garvey was a Jamaican born printer who as a young man travelled through the Caribbean and became keenly aware of the severe discrimination against Blacks, particularly dark-skinned Blacks, internationally. He later moved to London where he met several Black Nationalists seeking to end White European colonialism in the continent of Africa. At a library in London he read and was greatly inspired by Booker T. Washington's "Up From Slavery" in which Washington, the founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, urged that Blacks should pull themselves up and establish Black institutions before confronting Whites or seeking equal rights through integration

Garvey came to the United States in 1916 in the hopes of meeting Booker T. Washington, but Washington, with whom he had corresponded, had recently died. Meanwhile, while in Jamaica Garvey had formed the UNIA whose purpose was to encourage Blacks worldwide to form their own enterprises and institutions, and also to seek an end to White domination in the African continent. He soon found himself in Harlem and began his public presence as a street speaker on 135th Street and 7th Avenue, which is near today's Schomburg Center, promoting without great success the UNIA's program. At the time, Harlem, which had previously been a predominantly upper class Jewish community, was becoming the cultural, political and intellectual capital of Black America. It was through the efforts of Philip Payton's Afro-American Realty Company, previously backed in part by Booker T. Washington and others (See "Philip Payton and the Development of Black Harlem" New York Almanack August 5, 2020) that Black entrepreneurs had successfully overcome racial restrictions to live in one of New York's most elite neighborhoods. Although the effort to move into Harlem had been significantly fostered by Black enterprises operating on Booker T. Washington's principles, it had been arguably supported by certain White, primarily Jewish, allies and by the established Black leadership through such organizations as the NAACP.

Marcus Garvey

Garvey was highly skeptical of such a strategy that sought cooperation with Whites, as he believed White cooperation could not be trusted, and that Whites, particularly Jews, would ultimately seek to dominate these organizations. In his view Blacks should operate separately and not mix with White people. His message was therefore not in tune with the established Black leadership in Harlem. However, he got his big break when Huber Harrison, a Black socialist, asked him to speak at a meeting at a church in Harlem. Garvey made an impassioned plea for Blacks to assert themselves around the world, noting particularly their subservient position in their native Africa. "Where is the Black man's government?" Why are we in chains around the world?" At the time, right after the first World War, many Blacks in Harlem had high hopes that the country would move toward greater racial harmony and equality, but with recent race riots in East St. Louis and elsewhere, this did not seem to be happening. Thus Garvey's message that Black's should assert themselves with their own enterprises and particularly should try to overthrow White colonial governments in Africa began to attract many supporters.

His movement, the UNIA, soon expanded into a church at 120 West 138th Street which he named Liberty Hall. At Liberty Hall he would develop a more *(Cont'd. p.2)*

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The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad Education Center, a non-profit corporation dedicated to researching and preserving the local and national history of the Underground Railroad movement, its international connections, and its legacy for today's social justice issues, thereby empowering people of all ages to be agents of change toward an equitable and just society.

Editorial inquiries can be sent to Underground Railroad Education Center, 194 Livingston Avenue, Albany, NY 12210 or urhpcr@localnet.com.

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Freedom Seeker Corner

2. Moses Roper
From Moses Roper, *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery* (London, 1946)

MOSES ROPER came through Albany in the 1830s in his search for freedom. As part of his effort to gain permanent freedom he sought work in Albany and took a position as a Steward on an Erie Canal boat. In his memoir, Roper refers to the Erie Canal as the Western Canal. He later obtains work as a Steward on a canal boat on the Champlain Canal, which in his memoir he refers to as the Northern Canal. Moses Roper's narrative has been reprinted and is available through various online book sellers, and his complete narrative can be digitally accessed at https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/roper/roper.html

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Marcus Garvey's Liberty Hall *(cont'd from p.1)*

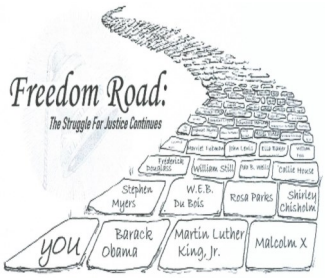
extensive organization. Very conscious of symbols, he unfurled the Black, Green and Red UNIA flag. The green represented the green of Africa, the black the race triumphant, and the red the blood of millions shed in the fight against slavery. He announced an African legion of Black soldiers who would take back Africa and a number of Black owned businesses, including a Black owned steamship company called the Black Star line which would ferry goods and emigrants to Africa.

In 1920 the UNIA organized at Madison Square Garden in New York City what it claimed was the first international convention of Blacks which was attended by more than 25,000 people, including delegates from many African peoples. On 1921, more than 50,000 members of the UNIA's African legion proudly marched through Harlem in an attempt to build a show of force to wrest African colonies from European domination. The UNIA recruited contributions from Afro-Americans throughout the country for investments in its Black Star Line which purchased two steamships for voyages to Central America and Africa. From a political point of view the initial sailings of the Black Star Line Ships, was a huge success as it is estimated that more than 100,000 people came to greet it in Panama. Similarly, the sailing of the Black Star Line Ship Phillis Wheatley from the 135th Street pier in Harlem drew more than 10,000 excited well wishers. Unfortunately, from an economic standpoint, the Black Star Line was poorly managed as it was cheated on the price and purchase of these ships and other supplies resulting in its economic failure.

Garvey also ran into conflict with the established civil rights leaders in Harlem, particularly W.E.B. Du Bois and the NAACP. Garvey's program of Black separatism and the hostility to efforts to obtain equal legal rights for Blacks did not endear him to those who were seeking to rebuild the Civil Rights coalition of reconstruction in a multi-racial society. They were particularly outraged in 1923 when he met with the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan who endorsed his program for Blacks living separately and returning to Africa.

When the Black Star Line failed, Assistant District Attorney Edwin Kilroe indicted Garvey for mail fraud, and in 1924 he was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison. His sentence was later commuted by President Coolidge on condition that he be deported to Jamaica and never return to the United States. Garvey attempted to *(Cont'd. p.4)*

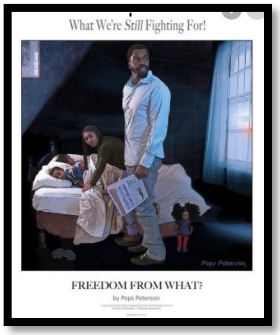
Looking Backward and Looking Forward with UREC



FreedomCon 2021 continues virtually for only two more sessions on 10/23 & 11/27. The enriching presentations are offered by academic and independent scholars from around the country.

Visit undergroundrailroadhistory.org/freedomcon-2021 for details.

FreedomCon 2021 Raffle - Join us in celebration and support. Purchase your raffle tickets online and take a chance on thirteen raffle prizes! $5 for one ticket, $10 for three tickets. Drawing will be November 27 - in time for your holiday gift giving.



Details are available at ----
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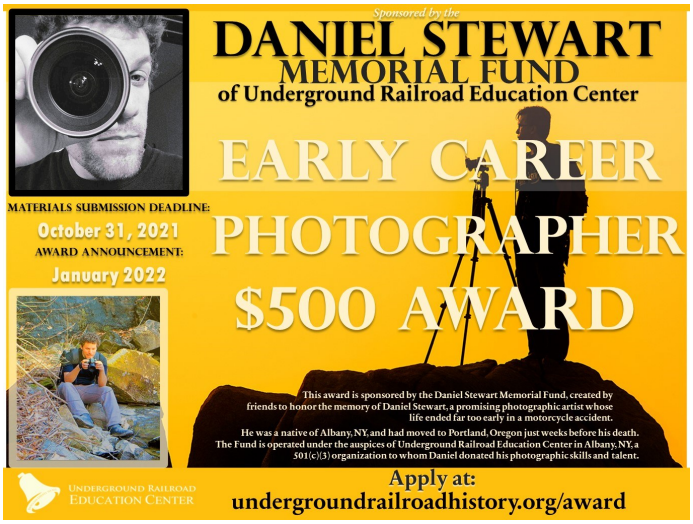

STAY TUNED - - - -

- **DECEMBER DASH** will be coming your way soon!
- **FEBRUARY FUNNIES** - a UREC fundraising comedy show like no other - details will be on their way to you!
- **TOWARD CHANGE - TOWARD EQUALITY -** FreedomCon 2022 - A hybrid event with exciting new features! Be an agent of change!

News and Notes

UREC MISSION STATEMENT

Underground Railroad Education Center researches and preserves the local and national history of the Underground Railroad movement, its international connections, and its legacy for today's social justice issues, thereby empowering people of all ages to be agents of change toward an equitable and just society.

Leave a Legacy with UREC - Maximize your tax deductions through charitable giving by leveraging one of many planned giving opportunities.

For more information call
Mary Liz Stewart at 518-621-7793.

Young Abolitionist Leadership Institute resumes for a fall session beginning this month! Albany High School will provide meeting space for the afterschool meeting hours with work days planned for The Myers Residence. **What to Do With Phil?, It's a Garden Party!, and Building Businesses is Best** are our three Focus Groups. Great things are happening!

Stevie Wants You

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Marcus Garvey's Liberty Hall *(cont'd from p.2)*

reestablish the UNIA in Jamaica but never had nearly the success that he had in Harlem. He died in London in 1940, considered a failed prophet with the UNIA and its dreams often forgotten.

In 1935, in his book *Black Manhattan* (1930) prominent Harlem NAACP leader James Weldon Johnson assessed the impact of Garvey's movement in Harlem of the 1920's. He was complimentary of the UNIA in encouraging many Blacks to have the self-confidence that they could build their own institutions. However, he felt that Garvey's ideas that Blacks around the world being led from a movement in Harlem could overthrow White colonial governments in African countries and create Black states similar to the precolonial African kingdoms was completely ridiculous and irresponsible. Undoubtedly many of the people in Harlem who had followed Garvey's flag and marched in his African legions were disappointed at his failed dream at the time of his death in 1940. However, although many of Garvey's supporters may never have lived to see it, they need not have despaired.

Garvey's wives, Amy Ashford and particularly his second wife, Amy Jacques Garvey, sought to keep alive his ideas by publishing his speeches and seeking to hold together the remnants of the UNIA. In 1945, along with Frank Nkrumah, a U.S. college professor who had taught for ten years at Lincoln University and the University of Pennsylvania, they organized the Fifth Annual Conference of African Peoples in Manchester England. At that conference they laid out plans to raise Garvey's flag and his concepts throughout the African continent and overthrow the racist White Europe governments. After having lived in Pennsylvania throughout most of his adult career, Nkrumah returned to his native West Africa to lead the Independence party. Much to the shock of the ruling British who probably considered him and Garveyism a fringe American import, his party won an overwhelming victory in the 1950 elections. With 250,000 Whites in the country and 5,000,000 Blacks, Nkrumah, now taking on the name Kwame, forced the British to grant full independence to the African state of Ghana in 1952. With the success in Ghana other Garvey disciples from the Manchester convention such as Jomo Kenyatta would have similar success in creating the independent state of Kenya. Although Garvey never set foot in Africa, by the year 2000 his program of having Blacks retake control from the White colonial governments first announced in 1919 at Liberty Hall on 138th Street had completely succeeded, and the UNIA flag of the Red, the Green and the White now flies in triumph over virtually all of Africa.