

INTERPRETIVE CENTER OF UNDERGROUND RAILROAD EDUCATION CENTER

CASE FOR SUPPORT: *IT'S MORE THAN A PRETTY BUILDING*

What is Underground Railroad Education Center?

Co-founders Paul and Mary Liz Stewart have built an essential organization laser-focused on promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility via the sharing of documented history of the Underground Railroad, slavery and abolitionism, which we *all* must understand as our shared American history if we are to build a more perfect union.

Underground Railroad Education Center (UREC) exists to tell the whole story—celebrating courage, exposing injustice, and passing forward the legacy of resistance. We believe history must be seen, heard, and felt to fully inform an intentional future committed to justice. Just as our communal ancestors worked for justice, UREC carries on in their footsteps, committed to empowering all people to be agents of change toward an equitable and just society.

For over 20 years, the organization has advanced its purpose through innovative humanities, arts, community and youth programming, tours of the historic Steven and Harriet Myers Residence, extensive research, and the growth and stewardship of its holdings ---- all supported by continuous, aggressive fundraising, and cultivating productive relationships.

UREC is especially focused on its ongoing and extensive engagement with the Albany, NY community of Arbor Hill in which the organization is located, a marginalized community impacted by the legacy of the institution of slavery, redlining, disinvestment and urban renewal. Via its relevant adult and teen programming, many affiliations and collaborations, the organization has become a significant community anchor.

Why does UREC need the Interpretive Center?

UREC is currently headquartered in the 2600 square foot Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence in Albany New York, an award-winning documented Underground Railroad site listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Affectionately called “The Res,” this partially restored historic building has no central heating, no air conditioning, and no indoor plumbing. Yet the building currently hosts virtually all UREC’s indoor programming and events, including guided tours, and houses workspace for 10 staff persons, all administrative operations, and our 10,000-piece historical material holdings collection.

- *UREC has grown dramatically since its inception.* Demand for our programs, exhibits, and community gatherings has outpaced our walls. Media coverage of the organization and its activities has greatly increased, further contributing to increased participation. UREC staff has grown commensurate with program growth, so that daily operations can no longer be conducted effectively out of the Myers Residence.

- Our material holdings are stored under less-than-optimal conditions for preservation, research and public exhibition.
- UREC plans to restore the Myers Residence interior to the elegant state it was in when Stephen and Harriet Myers lived there, the Vigilance Committee met there, and freedom seekers sought refuge there. This project cannot proceed until our holdings, operations, and programming are transferred from the Myers Residence to the new Interpretive Center, and The Residence becomes a dedicated historic site.
- UREC needs the Interpretive Center to broaden its program offerings, serve the community in innovative new ways, advance its mission via more arts-related programming, serve a larger and more diverse audience, and contribute to the local, regional and state economies.



The Interpretive Center of Underground Railroad Education Center will provide extraordinary space, not just more space

Imagine walking into a space where the walls honor the voices of freedom fighters, where young people stand tall as they discover the courage of those who came before them, and where our community can gather to celebrate progress and plan for a more equitable tomorrow. That is the promise of the Interpretive Center. More than just a building — the Interpretive Center will be a living legacy, designed for sustainability and innovation, uniting the past with the present, and passing the torch from one generation to the next. The construction of the Interpretive Center will have a transformational impact on UREC’s capacity to advance all aspects of its mission, and on the Arbor Hill, City of Albany, and New York State economies. Interpretive Center features:

- **Environmentally forward!** Adjacent to the Myers Residence at 194 Livingston Avenue in Albany, the 14,000 SF building will model and promote the highest level of environmental sustainability. It will be the only building in NYS combining Net Zero features with a 1760s Dutch Barn timber frame with CORE Living Building Certification by the International Living Future Institute. Just a few of its many green features include sustainably harvested cross-laminated timber, geothermal HVAC to reduce energy use by 75%, 120 rooftop solar panels, 70% of lighting needs met by natural light, and an underground filtration gallery to manage

storm water. Professionally landscaped green spaces, including historically themed native plant gardens, will increase biodiversity and stimulate social interaction.

- **Imaginative spaces/innovative design!** To support increased participation in existing programs, new and revenue raising programs, a more age-diverse audience, expanded research capacity, inter-organizational partnerships, and much more, the Interpretive Center includes: Exhibit space, assembly/performance space, a library and research center, dedicated children's center, conference room, state-of-the-art temperature controlled storage for material holdings, a media center, café and commercial kitchen, offices, Myers Mercantile gift shop, an apartment to house grounds/security staff, and a studio apartment for visiting artists and scholars.
- **A spectacular reassembled pre-Revolutionary War Dutch barn timber frame!** This timber frame, from a New York State farm worked by enslaved individuals, will boldly frame the entire first floor. Immediately upon entering the building, visitors will have the visceral sense that they are walking through history. The juxtaposition of the imposing timber frame and the otherwise contemporary building design will visually communicate the strength of the relationship between past and present.
- **Spaces for new ways to serve the community!** The spaces in and outside the Interpretive Center will enable UREC to provide services to the Arbor Hill community which are currently lacking, including workforce development opportunities, legal clinics, job fairs, a farmer's market to mitigate food desert conditions, children's programs, and more. In collaboration with Trinity Alliance, the Interpretive Center will be a Resilience Hub for the northern portion of Albany, providing critical support, resources, shelter, respite, and refuge during community crises, emergencies or disasters like climate events.

Why the Interpretive Center of Underground Railroad Education Center deserves your support

- **The project advances the region's economic development strategies, contributing to local workforce development, tourism growth, placemaking and downtown revitalization.** The Interpretive Center will provide 35 to 45 construction jobs and 10 new full-time jobs at opening. UREC is working with our primary contractor to host job fairs, with the goal of bringing on more than the state-required 30% Minority/Women-owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) certified contractors. Workforce development projects, including a café and catering business housed in the Interpretive Center's commercial kitchen will create more jobs in subsequent years. UREC is affiliated and has collaborated with many local, state and national institutions; Interpretive Center facilities will make UREC an even more attractive partner to collaborate with on programs and exhibits, greatly expanding the size and diversity of its audience. The manyfold increase in local and out-of-town visitors will attract new businesses to Arbor Hill and support downtown Albany businesses. With its focus on African American history, culture, and arts, and especially on the local Underground Railroad story set in its state and national contexts, Interpretive Center of UREC will quickly become a star contributor

to Governor Hochul's I LOVE NY Black Travel Initiative. This stunning one-of-a-kind building, its variety of spaces, creative programming, arts and culture exhibits, world-class café, and proximity to the award-winning historic Myers Residence will transform the UREC campus into a premier New York State arts and cultural destination.

- **UREC has a proven track record of successful management of large construction projects.**

UREC has successfully managed over \$3 million in operations and capital expenditures related to the Myers Residence, including its award-winning exterior restoration. We received and successfully administered over \$500,000 in NYS Consolidated Funding Application funds, a notoriously complex process, as well as a \$350,000 Environmental Protection Fund grant. We have navigated and completed the bidding/hiring process for the Interpretive Center architect and primary construction company, as well as all city, state and federal zoning, preservation and environmental requirements.

- **We are 'shovel ready!'** Architectural plans from schematic design through construction drawings have been completed. Required rezoning of the properties has been approved by the Albany Planning Department and by Albany Common Council; UREC is in compliance with all zoning regulations. As required by NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, UREC has completed archaeological investigations on all the involved lots, produced a 161-page report of findings, and drafted a Data Retrieval Plan (DRP) for archeological supervision during construction. The 900-page Environmental Site Assessment (ESA) is completed, an updated property survey and plat map are completed, with the SEQRA and LEAF parts 2 and 3 to be completed during construction.

- **UREC will leverage its 20 years of successful program and capital fundraising experience to raise the remaining funds needed to get us to the finish line.**

\$12 million is needed to complete construction of the Interpretive Center by December 2027, plus an additional \$2 million to cover soft costs. To date, UREC has applied \$825,000 in grant funding to predevelopment needs, and \$150,000 toward the identification, purchase, dismantling, and storing of the pre-Revolutionary War Dutch barn timber frame.

As of 10/2025, UREC has \$6.17 million committed in hand or by contract:

\$1.4 million from New York State Energy Research & Development Authority (NYSERDA), \$2 million from the NYS Assembly, \$2 million from Empire State Development (ESD), \$679,000 from the Inflation Reduction Act (in jeopardy), and \$90,000 from National Grid.

NOTE: By the end of 2024, UREC had raised \$9.85 million in federal funds that have since been eliminated: \$6 million in federal appropriations, \$3.6 million from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and \$250,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Because this \$9.85 million in federal monies was eliminated, \$2 million in Community Investment Funds was not achievable, and \$2 million in New Markets Tax credits is in jeopardy.

Here's what our consultants have to say about why they are excited to work on this project, and what it means to them:

Shawn Hamlin, Owner/Managing Principal, Hamlin Design Group, award-winning architect of record for the Interpretive Center: *"As a person of color, whose family came from the south during the Great Migration, the stories of slavery and emancipation were not always openly discussed. I am pleased to be a part of a project which intends to accurately document, store and present that history for all."*

AJ Lomnes, VP, Bast Hatfield Construction, the well-respected local construction company that has contracted with UREC for the building of the Interpretive Center: *"Bast Hatfield is thrilled to be part of this project."*

Kevin Schaefer, Owner/Principal, Schaefer Engineering: *"We are excited to be involved in design of the Interpretive Center for UREC because the project will provide an important resource and become part of the fabric of the community. If we don't understand our history, we cannot learn from the past and grow to become better citizens and leaders."*

Kurt M. Bedore, Owner, KB Engineering and Consulting: *"I am excited to contribute to this worthy project which captures a critical and often overlooked part of our national history. The human condition that was experienced resulting in the Underground Railroad was grim and its utility must never be forgotten as we strive for a better and more perfect union. The issues surrounding the Underground Railroad are timeless and no less relevant today than then."*

Jack C. Healy, Principal, Ryan Biggs/Clark Davis Engineering, DPC: *"Albany is full of history, and your mission highlights the character of Stephen and Harriet Myers and the Vigilance Committee. I cannot think of a more worthy cause."*

Mary Moore Wallinger, Owner/Principal, LAndArt Studio: *"The story of the Underground Railroad is a story of hope, perseverance, and triumph. It is a story that brings to light one of the ugliest parts of America's history while at the same time celebrating the bravery and the heroism of those who took a stand and worked to right the terrible wrong that was slavery. It is a story that everyone needs to know so that we can continue the path to a better America and a better world. The building of the new Interpretive Center embodies the very essence of that path."*