



UNDERGROUND RAILROAD STUDY NEWSLETTER

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The Underground Railroad was perhaps the most dramatic protest action against slavery in United States history. It was a clandestine operation that began during the colonial period, later became part of organized abolitionist activity in the 19th century, and reached its peak in the period 1830-1865. The story of the Underground Railroad is one of individual sacrifice and heroism in the efforts of enslaved people to reach freedom from bondage.

*File:
Underground
Railroad*

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In 1990 Congress directed the National Park Service to study how to best interpret and commemorate the Underground Railroad, emphasizing the approximate routes taken by slaves escaping to freedom before the Civil War. The *Special Resource Study* was completed in cooperation with an advisory committee representing experts in historic preservation, African American history, United States history, and members of the general public with special interest and experience in the Underground Railroad.

Underground Railroad Advisory Committee

Mr. Charles Blockson, Chair
Ms. Barbara A. Hudson, Vice Chair
Ms. Rose Powhatan (Pamunkey), Secretary
Ms. Vivian Abdur-Rahim
Dr. Thomas Battle
Dr. Ancella Bickley
Dr. John Fleming
Ms. Glennette Turner
Dr. Robin Winks

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The most important findings of the study include the following:

- The Underground Railroad story is nationally significant.

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- Some elements of the story are represented in existing NPS units and other sites, but many important resource types are not adequately represented and protected.
- Many sites meet established criteria for designation as national historic landmarks.
- Some sites have very high potential for preservation and visitor use.
- Many sites are in imminent danger of being lost or destroyed.
- No single site or route completely reflects and characterizes the Underground Railroad. The story and resources involve networks and regions rather than individual sites and trails.
- There is a tremendous amount of interest in the subject, but little organized coordination and communication among interested individuals and organizations.
- A variety of partnership approaches would be most appropriate for the protection and interpretation of the Underground Railroad — e.g., federal, state, and local governments along with a variety of private sector involvement.

The *Special Resource Study* involved consultation with 34 states, two territories, hundreds of interested individuals and organizations around the country, as well as connections with Canada and the Caribbean.

ON MICROFILM

The study considered 380 suggestions about potential sites of significance to the Underground Railroad story. Additional research has identified 42 sites as having the highest potential to meet established national historic landmark criteria for national significance. Detailed descriptions of 13 sites that appear to have the highest potential for preservation and interpretation are provided in the study.

THE CONCEPTS

Five concepts have been developed for preserving, commemorating, and interpreting resources associated with the Underground Railroad. Management options for these concepts range from no federal action to the creation of a new national park system unit. All of these concepts, with the exception of no action, are intended to enhance public understanding and appreciation of the Underground Railroad and to preserve its many important resources. A no-action concept is also included to provide a base for comparing existing conditions with the other concepts. It is important to note that while each concept could stand on its own, certain elements could be combined to better serve resource protection and interpretation objectives.

Concept A — At a newly established commemorative, interpretive, educational, and research center, visitors would come to understand the whole story of the Underground Railroad and its significance in their area or region and in United States history. Resources related to the Underground Railroad would be fully inventoried and documented.

Concept B — An appreciation of the Underground Railroad would be accomplished by improving existing interpretive programs and by implementing new programs that would provide visitors with a complete, in-depth understanding of the Underground Railroad while focusing on local aspects of the story of the site.

Concept C — Visitors would have an opportunity to encounter a concentration of Underground Railroad resources over a large geographic area (up to several hundred miles). These areas could include national historic landmarks and existing NPS units associated with the Underground Railroad story, documented escape routes used by enslaved Americans, structures and sites associated with personalities and aspects of the Underground Railroad story, various landscapes significant to the Underground Railroad story, and

opportunities to illustrate the international connection to the Underground Railroad.

Concept D — The history, meaning, significance, and legacy of the Underground Railroad would be remembered through a single commemorative monument. This monument would honor those people who risked or lost their lives to escape the oppression of slavery and reach freedom on the Underground Railroad and those who assisted them.

Concept E — Visitors would have an opportunity to travel along trail systems that evoke the perilous experience encountered by those who sought freedom through escape on the Underground Railroad. A variety of natural resources (e.g., swamps, forests, and rivers) and cultural resources (e.g., Underground Railroad stations, homes of significant individuals, and archeological sites) along these trail systems would help to bring this story alive. A trail or trails would be designated through the National Trails System Act of 1968, as amended. One option in implementing concept E would be to establish a government-chartered commission or foundation to work toward establishment of the trail(s).

Concept F (No Action) — The history, meaning, and significance of the Underground Railroad would continue at the current level of commemoration, interpretation, and preservation.

The study also includes an environmental assessment of the potential impacts of the concepts. Because the ideas presented in this study are conceptual, the potential consequences can only be addressed in a general way. Should any of the action-oriented concepts be implemented, specific environmental consequences would be evaluated during any necessary management planning or subsequent development planning.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Underground Railroad Advisory Committee actively advised the NPS study team and national historic landmark theme study team throughout the development of the *Special Resource Study*. Their recommendations are as follows:

- That the U.S. Congress authorize a national Underground Railroad Commission and fund a national initiative to support projects focusing on activities associated with the Underground Railroad.
- That concepts A-E in the *Special Resource Study* be pursued with equal vigor and simultaneously as appropriate.
- That public and private sector (corporate, university, organizational) partnerships be encouraged and pursued wherever possible and appropriate to achieve the varying goals of the Underground Railroad project.
- That an interpretive handbook on the Underground Railroad be researched, written, and published, and that the skills of non-NPS experts be used wherever possible to ensure historical accuracy and the broadest range of interpretation.
- That the mandate of the current Underground Railroad Advisory Committee be extended through the congressional funding and NPS implementation stages to ensure project continuity and to maintain project oversight.
- That, regardless of the existence of other congressional mandates or funding initiatives, the National Park Service continue and accelerate its efforts regarding the documentation and interpretation of the Underground Railroad in all parks, memorials, and trails within its jurisdiction.
- That the National Capital Field Area Office of the National Park Service be authorized to coordinate Underground Railroad activities throughout the National Park Service.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT

The study report was transmitted to Congress in early February 1996.

Individual members of Congress may propose legislation or action to the appropriations committees to follow up on some of the ideas in the study.

Interested individuals and organizations will be working from the "grass roots" to identify sites, route, and interpretive or commemorative opportunities.

OTHER ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS UNDERWAY OR PROPOSED

In addition to any action that Congress may take on the Underground Railroad study, a variety of other activities and projects will commemorate and interpret this significant part of American and world history.

- An interpretive brochure will depict in text, maps, and illustrations the Underground Railroad story (available through the National Park Service in spring 1996).
- A handbook will be produced to interpret the Underground Railroad story in the larger context of American antebellum society, including the history of slavery and abolitionism. The handbook will also be a guide to representative Underground Railroad sites.
- An internal NPS task force will continue to work toward preserving, commemorating, and interpreting the Underground Railroad story. Mr. Vincent deForest of the National Capital Field Area, (202) 619-7077, will be the coordinator of NPS efforts to recognize the Underground Railroad. Initiatives could include (1) working toward establishing an international link with Mexico, (2) surveying selected parks to find out what Underground Railroad activities or programs reflect the story, (3) developing educational materials on the Underground Railroad through teaching with the Historic Places Program and the Junior Ranger Program, (4) building on existing national historic landmark designations and completing thematic inventories of Underground Railroad sites from the Historic American Buildings Survey, National Register of Historic Places, and similar lists, and (5) revising interpretive programs in national park system units to include Underground Railroad issues.
- An international exchange and study tour involving the National Park Service and Parks Canada is underway. This program will focus on sites in the Niagara Falls area, and seek broader opportunities to link Canadian Black History Initiatives with similar efforts in the U.S.
- The NPS Internet home page will include key parts of the study report, including the various concepts for interpretation and commemoration, sites considered, and information about other organizations active in interpreting Underground Railroad routes. Internet address is as follows: <http://www.nps.gov/undergroundrr/>

- In Cincinnati, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, Inc. has made substantial progress in securing financial support from the private sector for a commemorative and interpretive center.

NPS staff have been corresponding with members of the Ohio congressional delegation and the sponsors of the project to define how the National Park Service can be a partner in this project, while recognizing tight constraints on federal funds.



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