

NPS Study to Preserve and Interpret the UGRR

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 of enslaved people to reach freedom from bondage.

In passing Public Law 101-628 in 1990, Congress directed the National Park Service “to study the underground railroad, its routes, and operations in order to preserve and interpret this aspect of American history.” This legislation further required that the study be 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. Congress further required that escape routes to Mexico as well as Canada be considered in the study. The Washington Office of the National Park Service (NPS) requested that the Denver Service Center undertake this project in consultation with all involved NPS regions. Over the next several years, this advisory committee worked with the NPS planning team on gathering data, public involvement, and developing a range of alternatives.

The number of possible sites and structures associated with the underground railroad story is immense. The underground railroad is every route the enslaved took, or attempted to take, to freedom. It is a vast network of paths and roads, through swamps and over mountains, along and across rivers and even by sea, that cannot be documented with precision. The Underground Railroad Special Resource Study involved consultation with 34 states, two territories, hundreds of interested individuals and organizations around the country, as well as Canada and the Caribbean. The study considered 380 suggestions about potential sites of significance to the underground railroad story. Since the study was finished additional sites have been identified. Additional research has identified 42 sites as having the highest potential to meet estab-

lished National Historic Landmark criteria for national significance. The NPS is completing National Register of Historic Places forms and submitting these for designation as National Historic Landmarks.

Given the national significance of the story, the need for long-term preservation of resources, the public enjoyment potential, and the current amount of public ownership, the underground railroad story could become an example of the “new wave” national park unit—a cooperative or partnership park. Cooperative or partnership efforts, if successful, should reduce NPS staffing and development requirements and operating costs.

Through working with the URAC, the public, and NPS regions and parks, five alternative concepts were developed for preserving, commemorating, and interpreting resources associated with the underground railroad. All of these concepts were intended to enhance public understanding and appreciation of the underground railroad and to preserve its many important resources. Each concept is briefly described below:

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, 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 Trail 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).

The study also included an environmental assessment and a required no-action alternative. On August 11, 1995, the Underground Railroad Advisory Committee made the following recommendations:

- That the Congress authorize a national Underground Railroad Commission and fund a national initiative to support projects focusing on activities associated with the underground railroad.
- That all alternatives identified as concepts A-E in the Underground Railroad 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 (recently published).
- That the mandate of the current Underground Railroad Advisory Committee be extended through 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, the National Park Service continue and accelerate its efforts to document and interpret the underground

railroad in all parks, memorials, and trails within its jurisdiction.

- That the National Capital Regional Office of the National Park Service be authorized to coordinate underground railroad activities throughout the National Park Service.

In addition, the study contained findings which included the following:

- The underground railroad story is nationally significant.
- A few elements of the story are represented in existing NPS units and other sites, but many important resources are not adequately represented and protected.
- Many sites remain that meet established criteria for designation as National Historic Landmarks.
- Many sites are in imminent danger of being lost or destroyed.
- There is a tremendous amount of interest in the subject, but little organized coordination and communication among interested individuals and organizations.
- Some sites have very high potential for preservation and visitor use.
- 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.
- A variety of partnership approaches would be most appropriate for the protection and interpretation of the underground railroad. These partnerships could include the federal, state, and local governments along with a variety of private sector involvement.

The study was completed and submitted to Congress on February 7, 1996. A series of bills have been offered which would implement some of the study's alternatives, but Congress has not taken final action on any of these bills. The NPS, through interpretive media and programs, continues to develop new ways to present the underground railroad story to the public. These programs include the development of an interpretive handbook which would not only interpret the underground railroad, but also serve as a guide. In addition, the NPS is working with Parks Canada to develop a more comprehensive interpretation of sites associated with the underground railroad. The NPS continues to work toward nominating underground railroad sites and structures as National Historical Landmarks. Meanwhile, organizations and individuals outside the NPS continue to work toward the recognition of the importance of the underground railroad to American history.

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