

## Slavery and Resistance Expanding Our Horizon

When asked to serve as guest editors of this issue of *CRM*, devoted to the distinct but related topics of slavery and the underground railroad, we knew we had an enormous task on our hands. North American slavery extended over hundreds of years, involved millions of lives, and included practices and sentiments that are alien to us today. Great passion surrounds this aspect of our history. The underground railroad operations, extending over a similar time period, are shrouded in secrecy with few identifiable locations and even fewer artifacts. The underground railroad might be described as part of the larger history of the worldwide resistance to enslavement. In this way, it is possible to include in the description other forms of resistance which grew naturally out of the human spirit and opposed the oppression of one person by another. In this sense, the story of the underground railroad has more to do with morality, ethics, and how competing principles contend for authority in men's minds and less to do with actual physical locations.

One cannot tell the story of slavery without including the history of its resistance. The underground railroad is a large part of the story of that resistance. In the Americas, resistance sometimes came in the form of armed rebellions such as the Haitian uprising, the Stono uprising in North Carolina in 1739, and Nat Turner's revolt in Southhampton County, Virginia, in 1831. While infrequent, armed rebellion, when it occurred, sent shock waves throughout the old South.

Long before there was an underground railroad, slaves were escaping and organizing themselves in groups called Maroons. Sometimes slaves resisted in ways that were less dramatic such as work slowdowns and covert destruction of property. Learning how to read, which was usually a punishable offense, was another form of resistance.

Much of the history of slavery and of the underground railroad remains to be written due to the existence of meager sources and the lack of written records. Nonetheless, despite these obstacles, work is proceeding and surprising gains are being made. Indeed, more effort than ever before is currently being devoted to the capture of that past.

Everywhere it seems people are studying, writing about, and telling stories of slavery and the underground railroad. National Park Service employees are expanding site interpretation and launching new initiatives pertinent to the issues. There is a need for good information and the exchange of ideas.

The *CRM*'s call for articles on slavery and the underground railroad resulted in an overwhelming response. The large number of articles that were received testifies to the attractiveness of the underground railroad as a topic of keen interest. There seems to be an irrepressible optimism that, despite limited resources, information will emerge and advances in our understanding will be made. While the study of slavery is one of relentless oppression, the story of the underground railroad engenders hope and inspiration and provides examples of whites and blacks working together for a common cause despite overwhelming obstacles.

Having put some time between the period of slavery and the upheaval of the Civil War and having come through the Civil Rights movement and the efforts to instill ethnic and racial pride, we are at a point in our national history where it is possible to look at the horrors of the past and decide that if we do not act now, much of that history will be lost. The historian Carter G. Woodson aptly explains that the alternative to historical truth is myth presented to suit the needs of the teller. Woodson was convinced that historical research was necessary to document the contributions of African Americans in a society that did not want to recognize those accomplishments.

This is the appropriate time to deal with these subjects—the same time that the National Park Service is officially expanding the categories of historical interpretation. The “new history,” which has been taking shape for many years, is being adopted in interpretation. As our society becomes more inclusive and multicultural, the National Park Service acquires new properties that tell the stories of individuals and groups previously absent from the official record. Not only is there an imperative to develop new interpretations, tours, exhibits, and the like at new sites, such as the Bethune Council House in Washington, DC, but efforts are being made to reinterpret older sites, such as the Frederick Douglass NHS, with a new

perspective. The process has been accelerated by the launching of a series of NPS initiatives on women's history and the underground railroad. These initiatives promote research, the dissemination of information, and networking; and they offer policy recommendations to upper management.

In some cases, certain individuals have been advocates for a particular topic, such as Vincent deForest's indefatigable efforts to promote an understanding of the underground railroad. NPS Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley must be given credit for widening the historical concerns by promoting the new thematic framework for the interpretation of history. Finally, the task rests on the interpretive rangers who breathe life into the information that is compiled here and make it possible for the public to benefit from this research.

So, the windows and doors are thrown open to let in some fresh air. This is not to say that what was done in the past is any less important. It is simply time to seriously expand our horizons. In fact, it is well past the time.

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## ***NPS Sites Associated with African-American History***

African-American Discovery Trail, DC  
 Booker T. Washington National Monument, VA  
 Boston African American National Historic Site, MA  
 Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, KS  
 Cane River Creole National Historical Park, LA  
 Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park, MD  
 Colonial National Historical Park (Jamestown), VA  
 Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park, OH  
 Fort Davis National Historic Site, TX  
 Fort Scott National Historic Site, KS  
 Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, DC  
 George Washington Carver National Monument, MO  
 Gulf Islands National Seashore (Fort Massachusetts), MS  
 Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, WV  
 Jean Lafitte National Historical Park (Chalmette), LA  
 Lincoln Memorial, DC  
 Lincoln Park, DC  
 Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, VA  
 Martin Luther King Jr., National Historic Site, GA  
 Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site, DC

New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, LA  
 Nicodemus National Historic Site, KS  
 Perry's Victory and International Peace Memorial, OH  
 Petersburg National Battlefield, VA  
 Port Chicago Naval Magazine Memorial, CA  
 Richmond National Battlefield, VA  
 Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, AL  
 Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve (Kingsley Plantation), FL  
 Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site, AL  
 Virgin Islands National Park, VI



*Niagara Movement meeting. Storer College, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. Photo courtesy Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.*

## ***Underground Railroad National Historic Landmarks Theme Study***

As a part of Public Law 101-628, directing the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study of alternatives for commemorating and interpreting the underground railroad, the National Park Service has undertaken a National Historic Landmarks Theme Study on the underground railroad. To date, nine National Historic Landmarks have been designated as a result of this theme study:

Fort Mose Site, St. Johns County, FL  
Owen Lovejoy House, Princeton, IL  
Eleutherian College Chapel and Classroom  
Building, Lancaster, IN  
Wilson Bruce Evans House, Oberlin, OH  
John P. Parker House, Ripley, OH  
John Rankin House, Ripley, OH  
Johnson House, Philadelphia, PA  
F. Julius Lemoyne House, Washington, PA  
Rokeby (Rowland T. Robinson House),  
Ferrisburgh, VT

Eight other properties are under active consideration with a nomination either being prepared or in review. Some of these nominations have been independently prepared, but the majority have been done through contracts with the State Historic Preservation Offices. The National Historic Landmarks Survey will also be producing a cover document for the theme study which gives a context for the underground railroad in addition to property types and registration requirements for future nominations for NHL designation or listing in the National Register of Historic Places. For more information on the theme study, the properties listed above, or to suggest additional properties for consideration, contact Patty Henry, National Historic Landmarks Survey, NRHE, NPS, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, DC 20240; 202-343-8163 or at [Patty\\_Henry@NPS.gov](mailto:Patty_Henry@NPS.gov).



*Above, Johnson House, Philadelphia, PA. Right, from top, Rokeby, Ferrisburgh, Vermont; Parker House, Ripley Ohio; Eleutherian College Classroom and Chapel Building, Lancaster, Indiana.*