

# Efforts may shed light on Underground Railroad

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WASHINGTON — Taking their lives in their hands, many slaves escaping their Southern owners in the early 1800s traveled secretly through Illinois' towns and rural areas toward Chicago and ultimately, they hoped, freedom.

They were aided in their long journey by a clandestine network of abolitionists who offered food, a hiding place and sometimes transportation to the next stop on what came to be known as the Underground Railroad.

"It's the greatest civil rights effort this country has ever seen," said Terry Ransom, an Illinois Department of Transportation employee for whom researching the Underground Railroad has become a passion.

Thirty-eight Illinois Underground Railroad sites were identified in a 1996 National

## Inside

■ Proposed funding to research Underground Railroad sites may determine the scope of the role the Fox Valley and McHenry County played in helping slaves escape to freedom. **A3**

Park Service study among 380 possible ones in 32 states through which fleeing slaves were believed to have traveled. Many of the sites are documented only by local legend. Many more probably have been lost or destroyed.

In an effort to preserve this unique aspect of the nation's history, U.S. Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun, D-Ill., has introduced a bill to authorize \$500,000 in the first year and as much as \$1 million each year after to help build partnerships with local groups interested in researching and preserving such sites.

"I think it's important for all Americans to reach back and tell the truth about our history in the first place, but also to find those occasions to celebrate people standing up for good in the face of desperate odds," said Moseley-Braun, the first black woman elected to the Senate.

A Senate committee is expected to hold a hearing on her bill this spring.

## Few sites open to public

Illinois has been slow to recognize this aspect of its history.

The Owen Lovejoy home in Princeton is the only one that has been designated a national historic landmark. Lovejoy actively helped fugitive slaves and was a strong anti-slavery voice in Congress.

Only a few other sites in Illinois are open to the public. The Quincy home of Richard Eells, who was charged with aid-

ing an enslaved man, is being restored. The Old Graue Mill and Museum in Oak Brook also is said to be a site where slaves were hidden.

Attempts to prove the legends are hindered since the Underground Railroad was, by necessity, a secretive operation.

Little evidence was kept. Those involved usually only knew a few other "conductors" or "stops" in their area. For their own protection, parents hid their involvement from their children. Years later, when the stories finally were told, they often were distorted by time and family pride.

After the Civil War, which lasted from 1861 to 1865, many families claimed they were part of the Underground Railroad.

"It was kind of like putting a bumper sticker on after the election," said Ted Hild, the state's deputy historic preservation officer.

❖ Turn to **RAILROAD, A5**

# RAILROAD

From page A1

The Underground Railroad routes in Illinois are believed to have run from southern and western parts of the state toward Chicago.

## Lists incomplete

Using the suggestions from state officials, scholars, local historians and others, the National Park Service drew a map of likely routes including stops in Quincy, Galesburg, Toulon, Princeton, Byron, Buffalo Grove, Chicago, Sugar Grove, Ottawa, Peru, Magnolia, Metamora, Washington, Morton, Groveland, Tremont, Dillion, Delavan, Springfield, Alton, Chester, Sparta, Centralia, Cairo, Griggsville and Jacksonville.

But this preliminary list is by no means complete or fully documented.

For example, the city of Galesburg and Knox College were founded by abolitionists. Records from that time show George Washington Gale, the city's founder, was charged with harboring slaves. He later was acquitted.

"Quite literally, these people were outlaws," said retired Knox College history professor Rodney Davis. "They were operating in opposition to the law."

Trying to document their activities is like "writing a biography of Jesse James," Davis said. "The people involved were usually quite good about covering their tracks."

In Springfield, the proof is just as elusive.

Luther Ransom once had a boarding house in the city that is said to have housed fugitive slaves. He was a charter member of the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society. But there is no documentation, said Terry Ransom, whose interest was prompted by their shared last name. Ransom, an IDOT civil rights specialist, also is vice chair of the Sangamon County Historical Society.

## Dueling sentiments

Illinois was a state with dueling sentiments over the issue of slavery.

Technically, Illinois was a free state when it entered the Union in 1818. But state laws gave even free blacks only minimum protections.

For escaped slaves, "Chicago was a kind of mecca" because its

residents — including a large population of free blacks — worked actively for their freedom and vigorously fought slave hunters, Ransom said. "They figured if they could get to Chicago, they could make it."

From there, many took steamships to Detroit, where some proceeded on to Canada.

In addition to the Chicago area, strong anti-slavery sentiment existed in cities such as Ottawa, Galesburg, Jacksonville and Quincy.

In southern Illinois, people were more apt to share the pro-slavery views of the neighboring slave states of Kentucky and Missouri.

"So people who ran the Underground Railroad were dealing not only with the risk from law enforcement officials, who were enforcing the law, but also with public opinion," said retired Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill., who pushed for the National Park Service study.

Simon recently wrote a book on Lovejoy's brother, Elijah, a newspaper editor in Alton, who was murdered in 1837 for his abolitionist views.

In addition to "safe" houses, Illinois had "slave houses" where runaway slaves and kidnapped freed

blacks were held sold back to their owners to work in area saw mills. A Slave House in de Kalb County still stands.

## Little statewide

There is little systematic research on the Underground Railroad in Illinois.

Ransom said he has conducted an archaeological excavation of a site in Pope County, near a body in Washington.

"I'm finding people in little pockets of resistance throughout the state, but it's not coming together," he said.

Ransom is organizing a group, called the Underground Railroad Alliance, to help promote and coordinate efforts. He hopes to take advantage of the National Park Service's expertise. Sen. Simon's bill is approved.

He also hopes the group will encourage more people to tell their stories and will spark interest in proving the

"Within every body there's some truth,"