

Preserving the History of the Underground Railroad -- March 2007

Although Black History Month has just come to a close, each of us should continue to remember throughout the year those events and challenges that so radically shaped the history of the United States and honor those who played such heroic roles during those times, such as the men and women who helped establish the Underground Railroad and bring thousands of people to freedom. The Underground Railroad, which was at its height between 1810 and 1850, consisted of a vast network of people who aided fugitive slaves escape to the North and to Canada.

The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program was signed into law in 1998 to increase public knowledge and awareness of the Underground Railroad. A National Parks Service program, the Network to Freedom works locally to help communities, scholars, and national park units to more effectively tell their stories of the men and women who resisted slavery through escape and flight in the Underground Railroad. This is the only national program dedicated to the preservation, interpretation, and dissemination of Underground Railroad history.

Delaware is home to nine participating Network to Freedom sites from Dover to New Castle to Wilmington. Additionally, it has been reported that more passengers came through Wilmington on the Underground Railroad than any other place due to its location as one of the last stops before men and women reached freedom in the North. Consequently, the Network to Freedom program is extremely pertinent in Delaware and exemplifies the large role our small state played during this crucial time in our United States history.

A couple of weeks ago, I visited the Wilmington Friends Meeting House, one of the participating Network to Freedom sites, to announce my co-sponsorship of legislation to expand the Network to Freedom program. As I stood in the middle of the Meeting House, next to Bob Seeley, a descendant of Thomas Garrett who was such an influential player of the Underground Railroad in Delaware, I was amazed by the extraordinary history that surrounded me. The experience reinforced for me the value of providing every American with additional knowledge and awareness of this pivotal time in our Nation's history.

The legislation will provide increased funding to cover needed operations costs associated with carrying out the provisions of the program. It will also increase the availability of grant funding to support a wide variety of Underground Railroad preservation and interpretative projects throughout the United States.

Each of us as Americans should be aware of the unique history that has shaped the founding and development of this country. Black History Month correctly tries to honor that history, but we must always be proactively learning about that time and expansion of the Network to Freedom program will encourage that important instruction.

