



FEATURES

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Your Hometown: Uncovering and preserving secrets of the Underground Railroad in Central New York

By: Erin Clarke

Throughout the month of February, YNN has taken a look at the rich history of the anti-slavery movement in Central New York. But of course, there's so much that we didn't get to and there's even more still being uncovered. In the final part of our series, YNN's Erin Clarke tells us about efforts to unlock the secrets of the Underground Railroad and preserve them for years to come.

ONONDAGA COUNTY, N.Y. -- It's a home steeped in history. Number 930 was the first of the James Street mansions, built in 1853, and the only one left standing today, but there's much more to this grand home and its owners.

"They were supporters of abolitionists and freedom seekers," Crawford and Stearns Architects Senior Associate, Beth Crawford.

James and Rebecca Barnes' home is holding up pretty well for one built in the 1800s, but it needs some repairs.

"They really need a roof. They have water problems in several different locations," said Crawford.

The Barnes Foundation hopes to make the mansion the house at 210 East Genesee Street in Fayetteville, the former home of Matilda Joslyn Gage, also a supporter of the abolitionist movement. Gage's house is the only home in Onondaga County that was used as an Underground Railroad stop that is open to the public today.

"We know that this home in Fayetteville was offered as a station and when Jermaine Loguen, who was head of the Underground Railroad in Syracuse came to the door she said it was one of the proudest acts of my life that I chose to offer my home," said Sally Roesch Wagner, Executive Director of the Matilda Joslyn Gage Center.

The Gage House is currently being restored and today it looks just like it did in 1854. It's set to open in March as an interactive museum, much like another historical exhibit.

In fact, the Freedom Bound exhibit at the Onondaga Historical Association Museum was birthed out of an effort to preserve a group of carved faces that were discovered at the former Wesleyan Methodist Church in Syracuse, now the Mission Restaurant.

"They were down in the basement tunnel. We know the building was there at the time of the Underground Railroad. We know the building; the church's congregation was very active in the antislavery movement. There was a pretty firm assumption made that these carved faces could have actually been carved by fugitive slaves waiting to move on to the next stop in their escape," said the Onondaga Historical Association Curator of History, Dennis Connors.

Obvious clues like the faces are unfortunately rare. Often times when it comes to connections to the Underground Railroad people just have a hunch.

"The evidence that people have is 'oh my house has a hidden room' or think that there's a tunnel that went down to the river," said Historical New York Research Associates Principal Investigator, Judy Wellman.

Judy Wellman is a historian who investigates the validity of Underground Railroad sites.

"Judy will research was the building actually around before the Civil War when the Underground Railroad was actually active, who owned it at that time and you get the name of the owners, well what church did they belong to at that time? Did they belong to the Wesleyan Methodist Church which was a strong abolitionist church, so you start building the evidence up in terms of whether it's very likely that this person could have been involved in the Underground Railroad," said Connors.

Some of those places identified in Syracuse have been marked, making a walk through the city like a trip to the museum.

"Several years ago the City of Syracuse actually appropriated some money and worked together with the Preservation Association and the Onondaga Historical Association to do eleven signs in the City of Syracuse that tell the history of the Underground Railroad movement and the abolitionist movement," said Crawford.

These groups, researchers and community members are now working to preserve the old A.M.E. Zion church on East Fayette Street and get it put on the National Register of Historic Places.

"Historically that was the core of the organized Underground Railroad among African Americans in Syracuse," said Wellman.

Central New York has much more anti-slavery history to be discovered. Researchers say if you suspect a place or artifact has a connection to the movement, follow up on it. You may be surprised at what you find.

"It's like a detective story. You have questions and you go find the evidence and put together a hypothesis and finally maybe you figure out something that no one has ever known before except the people who actually did it," said Wellman.

For more information about historic places in Central New York or ways to find out if your property have ties to the Underground Railroad visit:

www.historicalnewyork.net

www.pacny.net/freedom_trail

www.cnyhistory.org

www.grbarnes.org/GR_Barnes_website/Welcome.html

www.matildajoslyngage.org

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