

'Railroad' projects get on track in western New York



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(Photo: Jeff Swinger, *The Cincinnati Enquirer*)

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Most people are more likely to associate western New York with apple orchards, industrial cities or heavy snow in winter than with the Underground Railroad of the 19th century.

But the Underground Railroad — the network of hiding places and safe houses used to help fugitive slaves escape the South — is a big part of the area's history. Its "conductor," Harriet Tubman, is buried near Syracuse, and the final resting place of abolitionist Frederick Douglass is in Rochester.

Now, thanks to renewed interest throughout the state, the public is getting new opportunities to learn more. And residents of different races are coming together to plan important projects at a time when the country appears to be at a crossroads regarding race relations.

A former U.S. Customs station and post office in Niagara Falls is being converted into an Underground Railroad Interpretive Center, and Auburn, the town where Tubman is buried, is one of two sites approved by Congress for a new national park honoring the abolitionist. Also, historians from across New York have formed a consortium to publicize the state's historic sites.

"There's just so much material that's now available on the Web that wasn't available before, in particular with census records and newspapers," says Judith Wellman, a consortium member and a professor emeritus at the State University of New York at Oswego.

The fascination with history developed about five to 10 years ago, Underground Railroad enthusiasts say. Some say it was tied to two events.

In 2000, chef Steve Morrison was opening a restaurant, The Mission, in a building formerly occupied by Syracuse Wesleyan Methodist Church. Morrison wanted to make sure that seven faces carved into the dirt walls in the basement were preserved. Historians had determined that the church saw activity during the Underground Railroad era and speculated that fugitive slaves carved the faces. But after Morrison offered the artifacts to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, community members argued that they should stay in Syracuse.



The former home of the People's African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest black church congregation in Syracuse, N.Y., was once headed by abolitionist and AME Zion Bishop Jermain Loguen. The congregation, which has operated out of a newer building for decades, was set to tear down the old building because of the cost of maintenance. But the community rallied, arguing the building's history was important. *(Photo: Melanie Eversley, USA TODAY)*

The Cincinnati center agreed to relinquish ownership in exchange for replicas, and the original carvings moved around the corner to the Onondaga Historical Association Museum & Research Center, where some of them are part of a permanent exhibit.

"There just seemed to be this surge of interest, and the faces just seemed to stimulate that because there was this tangible artifact," says Dennis Connors, the association's curator of history.

Meanwhile, about three years ago, the congregation of a church once headed by abolitionist Jermain Loguen, a former slave and a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, made a painful decision that they could no longer afford to maintain their unused, dilapidated former church building near downtown Syracuse. The idea that the 1910 structure could be torn down alarmed area residents.

"We began to hear stories of people — someone was baptized there, a wedding was held there, community organizing was held there," says Daren Jaime, pastor of People's African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

Now, thanks to two state grants, the building will be converted into a culinary training institute and a café, Jaime says. "There's this surge among people to know history," says Jaime, whose church is the oldest black congregation in Syracuse. "People are taking a closer look at not just what is but what was."

Wellman also has been helping the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area create an exhibit, and organizers anticipate a 2015 opening. The National Abolition Hall of Fame in Peterboro, which was home to abolitionist Gerrit Smith, marks its 10th anniversary this year.

Wellman says she is hopeful about the possibilities of state residents working together on shared history.

"It's such a powerful story. I'm hoping that together we can be more than the sum of our parts."