



the

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New Philadelphia: Rediscovering Free Frank's Foundations of Freedom

A gravel road, a few foundations, and a historic marker are all that remains of a 19th century community set amid the rolling farmland not too far from the Mississippi River. Located just east of Barry, Illinois in Pike County and about 75 miles west of Springfield, New Philadelphia was the first town in the United States to be incorporated by a black man. New Philadelphia was founded in 1836 by Free Frank McWorter.

Just five years earlier, Free Frank McWorter, his wife Lucy, and four of their children, made the treacherous trip north from Kentucky to their new home in western Illinois. Juliet E.K. Walker explains extensively in *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier* the dangers involved with the trip to Illinois. The McWorters had to worry about poor or undeveloped trails, and perhaps, most significantly, slave catchers, who could kidnap them, destroy their freedom papers, and sell them all back into slavery. Slave catching, a lucrative business at the time, was always a potential threat to the McWorter family, even as they made their home in New Philadelphia in such close proximity to the slave state of Missouri. Pioneers also were forced to rely on river boatmen, who helped them cross the Ohio River by flatboat. Often the boatmen were untrustworthy, robbing pioneers or handing them over to kidnappers. As Free Frank and his family wintered in Greene County before reaching their final destination, they struggled with

a dwindling food supply. The trip took over half a year to complete.

Juliet E.K. Walker published her doctoral dissertation as *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier* in 1983 about her great-great grandfather Frank McWorter.



Photo courtesy of the Illinois State Museum

The work describes Free Frank's efforts to achieve freedom for his family and himself and the development of New Philadelphia as a frontier community. Dr. Walker commented in a *State Journal-Register* article: "The book is significant because it's really the first history, or biographical study of a black man who lived on the frontier, both as a slave and freed man. Most studies on blacks during the period of slavery focus on plantation slavery."

Free Frank was born in 1777 in Union County, South Carolina. His mother, Juda was born in West Africa, and purchased by a plantation operator named George McWorter. In 1795, George moved his operations to Pulaski County, Kentucky. In 1799, Frank married Lucy, who was a slave on a neighboring farm in Pulaski County. Frank bought Lucy's freedom in 1817 for \$800 and his own freedom two years later with money he earned mining saltpeter

in Kentucky. Frank's owner allowed him to earn money in his spare time, although he had to pay his owner for that privilege. According to *Free Frank*, it was a risky undertaking to hire his time out, because it was an illegal activity in Kentucky. Eventually, Free Frank was able to buy a small farm in Kentucky by hiring out his services to other

farmers and through his mining operations. However, as time progressed, it became increasingly difficult for Frank to earn a living in Kentucky, so in 1829, Free Frank traded his successful saltpeter mining operation for his son Frank Jr.'s freedom. Frank then traded his farm and business in Kentucky for land located between the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers in western Illinois.

New Philadelphia

Frank and his family became the first settlers in Hadley Township where New Philadelphia was located. Frank made a successful living as a farmer, land speculator, businessman, and by raising livestock. His farm proved to be enough of a success that he could afford to acquire more land. He purchased 80 acres from the federal government for \$100 and platted out 144 lots. He even named the streets, the two major thoroughfares being Main and Broadway. He then sold lots to both blacks and whites. The money from the sale of town lots was used to buy his family from slavery. Fifteen family members achieved their freedom through Frank's resourcefulness at a total cost of \$14,000. *The Living Museum* magazine states that by 2003 standards, the equivalent would be \$305,000. Free Frank did not live to see all his family members freed, having died in 1854 at the age of 77, but he stipulated in a will that money be used toward freeing others. Seven grandchildren and great-grandchildren were freed after his death. Free Frank's wife Lucy died in 1870 at the age of 99.

Free Frank selected an active trading area for his town located in the midst of a number of county roads, busy with people transporting their agricultural products and goods to the Mississippi River, a mere 20 miles away. Located near the Mississippi River, New Philadelphia may



Photo courtesy of the Illinois State Museum

have also served as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Proposed construction of the Illinois-Michigan canal prompted development of many towns, and a proposed railroad line in Pike County further led to increased land sales and development.

An 1850 census revealed the population of New Philadelphia to be 30 percent black and 70 percent white and mulatto. New Philadelphia's population peaked at the time of the 1865 state census at 104 whites and 56 black inhabitants. At one point, New Philadelphia was able to maintain a post office, restaurants, a Methodist church, a general store, and tavern. An express coach also operated between Springfield and New Philadelphia. However, the number of residents fell to 93 individuals, a decline of 30.1 percent by 1880. New Philadelphia had been bypassed by the Hannibal & Naples Railroad in 1869; that event was a major factor in the town's eventual demise. The community became unincorporated in 1885, and gradually disappeared. A few families remained until the 20th century, and the New Philadelphia school house remained open until 1936. For about the last 100 years, New Philadelphia has remained farmland, giving no indication that a thriving community once existed there.

More Recent Events

In 1990, Juliet Walker was successful in having her ancestor's gravesite placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Only three gravesites in Illinois are listed on the National Register of Historic Places: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and Frank McWorter. She undertook a 17-day trip, retracing her great-great grandfather's steps, by walking the 400 miles from Somerset, Kentucky to Pike County in order to dedicate a plaque establishing McWorter's grave on the National Register of Historic Places. More than 200 people were in attendance at the event paying honor to Frank. Dr. Walker had started an organization to rebuild her ancestor's town, but when that effort failed, she shifted her focus to restoring the cemetery where Frank and several other family members are buried.

In 1998, a local farmer named Philip Bradshaw and a group of Pike County residents formed the New Philadelphia Association (NPA) in an effort to promote the town's history and the site's historical significance. Additionally, the NPA is committed to researching, preserving, and interpreting New Philadelphia. By the late '90s, Dr. Juliet Walker, who taught history at the University of Illinois



Photo courtesy of the Illinois State Museum

at Urbana/Champaign during the '80s, had moved to the University of Texas in Austin to teach history. The NPA met with Vibert White, then a professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield to discuss establishing a historical marker. White, who is now at the University of Central Florida's Center for Public History, joined the cause to promote awareness about New Philadelphia and its significance. In an *Illinois Times* article, "History in the Making," White is quoted as saying "I realized this was the greatest discovery of a lifetime – not only in reference to the ethnic history and Illinois society but to the whole history of race relations in the United States." White was able to secure a \$50,000 grant from UIS for the project to help develop New Philadelphia as a national historic site. White then enlisted help from other scholars when he held a conference at UIS relating to researching and preserving African-American frontier settlements. Paul Shackel, professor of anthropology at the University of Maryland, was one of the attendees who became actively involved in the project.

The scholars decided to survey and map out the site during three walkovers of the site, which occurred in October and November of 2002 and March, 2003. These walkovers turned up 7,000 artifacts, which were taken to the Illinois State Museum Research and Collections Center. The NPA, a not-for-profit organization, is currently committed to raising \$16,000 to complete the cataloging of the artifacts found during the walkovers. Such artifacts include nails, buttons, a porcelain doll's head, and bottle

fragments. Lynn Fisher, an anthropologist at UIS and Terrance Martin from the Illinois State Museum walked all over the site, flagging the locations of all the artifacts. Archaeologists used deed and census data in addition to surface distribution of artifacts to determine known house lots. Under Martin's guidance, volunteers washed and prepped artifacts for analysis. In a June, 2004 *State Journal-Register* article, Shackel states, "All of this will tell the story of New Philadelphia, how people lived their every day life. Our goal is to show how an integrated community survived."

The Excavation Project

Excavation at the site of the vanished town of New Philadelphia began this past summer, funded through a grant awarded to the University of Maryland. Paul Shackel, director of the Center for Heritage Resource Studies at the University of Maryland was instrumental in obtaining the grant, which was provided by the National Science Foundation's Research Experiences for Undergraduates. The \$226,500 grant will be used to train undergraduate students to excavate over three summers and will fund the excavation and artifact analysis. The project is a collaborative effort of the Illinois State Museum (ISM), the Center for Heritage Studies at the University of Maryland (UM), the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), and the New Philadelphia Association (NPA). Co-directors of the field school are Paul Shackel, Terrance Martin, curator of anthropology at the Illinois State Museum, and Chris Fennell, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois –Urbana/Champaign. They hope to recruit college students with no access to archaeological research, as well as minority students in particular for the field school each summer. According to the Illinois State Museum's publication *The Living Museum*, "students learned to excavate, catalog artifacts, identify biological remains, and use historical records."

During the summer of 2004, nine students from around the country were chosen to participate in a ten-week-long project from May 24th to July 30th; five weeks were spent doing field work, excavating likely sites of remains where students worked along side archaeologists. Another five weeks was spent doing laboratory work with staff at the Illinois State Museum Research and Collections Center. They analyzed artifacts that were discovered during the first phase.

Initially, Dr. Michael Hargrave of the United States Army Corps of Engineers surveyed part of the site using



Photo courtesy of the Illinois State Museum

an instrument that can detect buried objects, such as foundations and outbuildings. Based on the results, archaeologists determined 19 sites that showed potential for containing artifacts. In fact, over the course of the summer, approximately 3,000 artifacts and 1,000 animal remains were found. In a January 2005 *Smithsonian Magazine* article, Shackel explains that it [archaeology] can illustrate the way of life for groups of people living in a biracial community. Archaeology is a way to provide a story of a people who have not been traditionally recorded in history.”

Latest Development

This spring, the Illinois Department of Transportation will post two brown historical road signs on either side of the Barry exit on I-72. The measure to have a sign display on the interstate highway designating

Frank McWorter’s gravesite was promoted by State Representative Mary Flowers. As she said in an *Illinois Issues* article, “He [Frank] made a very important contribution to this state and this country. His story is worth being told.” Supporters of New Philadelphia would like to nominate the town site to the National Register of Historic Places, but evidence of intact architectural and archaeological features is a requirement. United States Representative Ray LaHood of Peoria has been following the project and would consider sponsoring such a proposal, which would require approval by Congress.

Free Frank demonstrated hard work, determination, and an entrepreneurial spirit, all in an unstoppable belief that he and his family should be free of slavery and live as equals among people of various races. He relentlessly pursued the goal of freeing his family from bondage. In the course of doing that, he accomplished the remarkable and previously unheard of feat of incorporating a town, a quarter of a century even before the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. Even though he gained his freedom by paying an exorbitant price by today’s or any standards, Free Frank McWorter still faced constant threats to his freedom, as well as deeply rooted racism. Nonetheless, he flourished as a businessman, farmer, resident of his community, and family man, even in the face of such obstacles.

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