



the

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Woodlawn Farm: An Underground Railroad Story Unfolds

When Jacksonville, Illinois farmer Michael Huffaker died in 1883 at the age of 84, he apparently took a big secret to his grave.

Some believe Huffaker was active with the Underground Railroad (UGRR) and used his farm, Woodlawn, as a UGRR station. The Underground Railroad was a network of anti-slavery activists that helped slaves escape to freedom in antebellum America.

“Jacksonville was home to a lot of abolitionists in the 1800s,” explains Curtis Mann, Springfield, Illinois’ City Historian; he’s been working on getting Huffaker’s farm listed on the National Register of Historic Places. “Members of the faculty at Illinois College (in Jacksonville) were anti-slavery, several participated in the Underground Railroad and some were prosecuted for that. Jacksonville was a hotbed of anti-slavery and Underground Railroad activities. Several

houses there are designated as Underground Railroad stations and this gives credit to the idea there would have been other stations on the way...Huffaker’s house probably would have been a station for slaves being taken out of Jacksonville and sent either to Springfield or farther north.”

Huffaker came to Jacksonville from Kentucky with his wife, father, mother, brothers and sisters in 1823 and purchased 160 acres of land in Jacksonville. “He was among the first settlers in the area,” Mann says. As Huffaker’s family grew, his farm expanded to almost 600 acres, and he hired free blacks to work on it.

“Since Huffaker had free blacks work for him, it wasn’t odd for people to see black people working on

his farm,” says Art Wilson, the resident historian for the Underground Railroad Committee of the Morgan County Historical Society, which owns the farm. “Huffaker would mix runaway slaves in with the free blacks. It was a perfect hiding place.”

Wilson and Mann say the best evidence that Woodlawn Farm was a UGRR station is a family memoir written in the 1930s or 1940s by Huffaker’s granddaughter, Fanny Grassley. “Few people ever knew that the Huffaker farm was an Underground Railroad Station,” Grassley wrote.

She related a story her mother, Huffaker’s youngest daughter, told her. “Mother (who was also named Fanny) did not know about the Underground Railroad ‘til long afterwards. The only evidence she would have had, had she been old enough to put two and two together, was the fact that some of the col-

ored help did not stay very long; (there was) also an incident in the middle of a certain night.”

“The children slept upstairs and were never allowed to come down after being once sent to bed... but on this particular night some unusual sound awakened little Fanny. She heard people moving about in the hall downstairs and a baby crying,” Grassley wrote.

“She jumped out of bed, crept to the head of the old walnut stairs and, clinging to the banisters, looked down into the hall. There were a colored man and two white ones whispering together and a mulatto woman with a little child in her arms. The woman’s eyes rolled with fright and she tried to hush the child’s cries. Then she saw a neighbor, Hess Craig, open a

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This is an old illustration of Woodlawn Farm, from the Atlas Map of Morgan County, 1872.

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door and hustle the strangers into a room. The colored people were in a pitiful state, bedraggled and only half clothed. Mother thought they must be some new help and thinking she would see them in the morning she went back to bed."

The next day little Fanny tried to find the strangers in the hired helps' cabins, but she couldn't find them anywhere. She asked her mother (Huffaker's wife) about them, but her mother "seemed strangely troubled and made (young Fanny) solemnly promise she would never tell anyone about them having been there because the Negroes were in great trouble."

Grassley even laid out the general path runaway slaves took to Woodlawn Farm. If slave catchers were using dogs to track the slaves' scent, the runaways would walk in the middle of a stream to throw off their smell. Otherwise, they might be led through "the famous tunnels in the town," she wrote. They'd exit the creek into an orchard next to Huffaker's property and head for his house or one of the free blacks' cabins.

Some preliminary archaeological tests conducted at Woodlawn by the Illinois State Museum "reveal there was probably a cabin in the back of the house," Mann says. The existing structure is a two-story, brick house built for Huffaker's family around 1840 with bricks Fanny Grassley said her grandfather made from hand.

The Underground Railroad Committee of the Morgan County Historical Society hopes to turn Woodlawn Farm into a living history museum; it received a grant from the Illinois Bureau of Tourism and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity to help achieve that goal. Currently the public can tour the site during special events and regular summer hours. Thanks to state grants and private donations, the farm built a new bridge a couple of years ago that enables vans and buses to reach the site.

Senator Deanna Demuzio, a Democrat from Carlinville, has helped Woodlawn Farm get state support because "it is one of several noteworthy tourist destinations in west central Illinois which highlight our rich history. Woodlawn Farm is a beautiful historic asset for Morgan County and our state," she says. "It has been an honor to work with the Underground Railroad Committee and the Morgan County Historical Society in support of their efforts to preserve Woodlawn Farm and bring its important history to life."

In about ten years, Wilson hopes visitors to the farm will see a working replica of antebellum farm life. "It will be a living museum where people will play the part of the characters who lived there," he says. "Mr. Huffaker will come riding up on a horse to visitors and he'll talk to them like they're travelers from the past looking for a place to settle.

"In the old days, a lot of time you couldn't af-

In 1998 the National Park Service established the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program to highlight the importance of the Underground Railroad (UGRR) in the anti-slavery and Civil Rights movements.

One part of the program established the "Network to Freedom," a network of sites, programs, and facilities with verifiable associations to the Underground Railroad. Illinois is lucky to have 12 sites or programs in the Network so far. Network judges depend on local communities to nominate a site or program, they do not nominate entities, according to James Hill, the Midwest Region Program Manager for the Network to Freedom. Illinois' Network to Freedom honorees include:

- the Congregational Church in Jacksonville
- Illinois College's Beecher Hall and site of the College Building (which burned down), both in Jacksonville,
- the Dr. Hiram Rutherford Home in Oakland,
- the Dr. Richard Eells House in Quincy,
- the Galesburg Colony UGRR Freedom Station - Knox College program,
- the Home of Benajah Guernsey Roots in Tamaroa,
- the Lucius Read House in Byron,
- the Old Slave House outside Equality (as part of the "reverse UGRR"),
- the Owen Lovejoy Homestead in Princeton,
- the Pettengill Home Site in Peoria,
- Rocky Fork - a former community of free blacks near Alton,
- "The UGRR in Illinois," a program by Glennette Tilley Turner, who is based in Wheaton.



Woodlawn Farm's house as it appears today. Photo courtesy of Sangamon Researchers, Springfield, Illinois.

ford to put your family up in a hotel. You'd leave them with other farmers and in return you'd work for them and your family would work for them while you went into town and bought the land," Wilson says.

"Tourists (at Woodlawn) will have the opportunity to go into the fields and talk to the hands... they'll be treated as if they're from the past."

That's the long-term plan. In the meantime, Woodlawn Farm will be open for tours this summer on weekend afternoons, in addition to special event days, Wilson says.

For more information about touring Woodlawn Farm, call the Jacksonville Area Convention and Visitors Bureau at 217/243-5678 or Art Wilson at: 217/725-7947. Woodlawn Farm is located off Arnold Road a few miles east of Jacksonville.



It's Not Easy Being Moses

Runaway slave Harriet Tubman must have been tough as nails. After successfully escaping slavery in 1849, she returned to the south 19 times to rescue about 300 other slaves, according to the Library of Congress. (Other sources say she made 13 trips; no one knows for sure, even Tubman didn't remember.)

Each trip was a life or death venture. Large rewards were offered for Tubman's capture. But she always succeeded. She carried a gun and when a slave would get frightened and consider running back -- thereby endangering the entire group, Tubman showed the weapon and said, "Live free or die!"

For her amazing feats as an Underground Railroad "conductor," she became known as "the Moses of her people."

It wasn't easy being Harriet Tubman and it's not easy portraying her either. Just ask Kathryn Harris.

Harris, the Library Services Director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, has portrayed Tubman for "at least eight or nine years." She's "been" Harriet for so many groups, she's lost track. "I tried to compile that once and got tired of counting," she says.

It all started by chance. The Old State Capitol's

(OSC) site manager at that time, Carol Andrews, asked Harris to reenact Tubman for an outreach program about the antebellum and Civil War eras.

As part of the program some OSC staff members portrayed historic characters for a Springfield school. The students wanted to see Tubman, but there were no African-Americans on the OSC staff to portray her.

Harris gladly filled in, but had no intention of playing Tubman anywhere else. Her audiences, however, had other ideas.

One request led to another, and another, and now Harris portrays Tubman dozens of times a year for schools, libraries, churches, historic sites, living history events, and the like.

At first, learning about Tubman was a challenge. Although there are numerous children's books about the former slave, there was a dearth of scholarly information about her. "The one, full-length, adult biography that existed at the time was published in 1943," Harris says. "Harriet was not literate, so she left no records." Tubman did tell her life story to a woman abolitionist who published it in 1869,

in Tubman's dialect, but "it is extremely difficult to read at times," Harris said.



Kathryn Harris, from Springfield has portrayed abolitionist and former slave Harriet Tubman hundreds of times. Photo courtesy of Kathryn Harris.

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Thankfully, three new, scholarly books have been written about Tubman since 2003, which help Harris greatly, especially when audiences try to stump her with questions. That's the most challenging aspect of this labor of love.

"Being prepared to answer any question that an audience member might ask me is tough," Harris says. If she doesn't know an answer, Harris thinks on her feet and uses her general knowledge of Tubman, slavery, and the Underground Railroad to answer it.

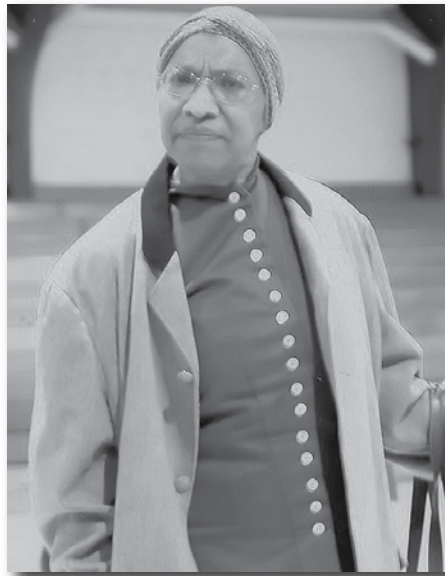
Once a child asked the names of Tubman's siblings. "I'd read somewhere that Harriet's sisters had been sold away, and it was very painful for her to even remember their names. That is a hard concept for a child, for an adult, too. So that's kind of how I responded."

Afterward, Harris pored over her books for the real answers, as she always does. "I came back and found the names of some of Harriet's brothers and sisters, not all. I think she had nine siblings."

When Harris dons her "Harriet" costume, she also dons what she believes was Tubman's tough personality.

"The thought of being a slave is totally foreign to me," she says. "But Harriet said she never met a slave who did not have the desire for freedom burning in his belly. That's pretty powerful and that helps me mold (her) persona... I envision her as being a very 'take no prisoners' person."

During a performance, Harris (as Tubman) proudly walks before her audience and boasts: "I never run my train off the track and I never lost a



Harriet Tubman also served as a nurse and spy during the Civil War.

passenger!", directly quoting Tubman.

"She was very proud of that," Harris explains. "All of those who traveled with Harriet got to freedom."

The last trip Tubman took was to free her own aged parents. She secreted them out of Maryland and got them safely to Canada.

"Harriet said, 'Where the good Lord leads you, he will not leave you! He has never left me yet.' She truly did believe that the good Lord called her to do this work," Harris adds. "She believed that he was watching out for her while she did this work and that explained why everybody got to freedom who traveled with her.

"I think that is what helped her persevere. She had some close calls on the Underground Railroad, but as I say when I portray her, 'Close don't count!'"



Transitions

Christopher Koch became the new head of the Illinois State Board of Education on April 19. Previously, Koch was the interim state school superintendent. He assumed that position after his predecessor, **Randy Dunn**, resigned. Dunn left to become head of Murray State University in Kentucky.

In mid-April, Director of the Governor's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs **Joseph Cini** resigned for a job in the private sector.

Former State Representative **Rolland Tipword**, a Democrat from Taylorville, died on April 5 at the age of 81.

On March 26, Superintendent of the Illinois Lottery **Carolyn Adams** died from breast cancer.



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