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## American Legacy; Along the Underground Railroad Today; 1999

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CELEBRATING AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

# American Legacy

Summer 1999 • Volume 5/Number 2

**Along the  
Underground  
Railroad  
Today**

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**Paradise  
in Harlem**

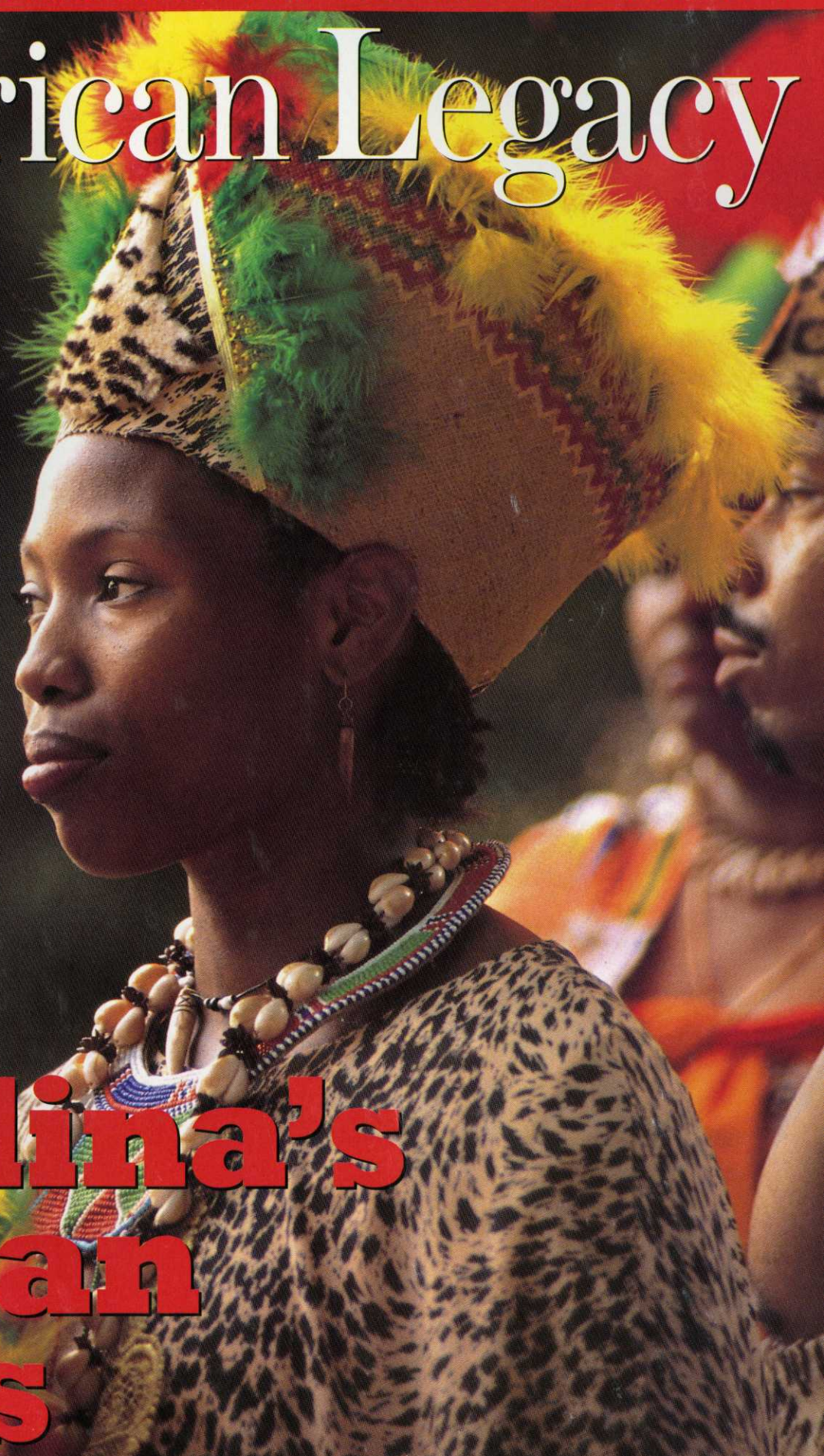
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**Black  
Saviors  
of the Sea**

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**King of  
the Blues:  
B. B. King Talks**

**Carolina's  
African  
Roots**





**A**LTHOUGH THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD CEASED operation almost a century and a half ago, its stock today is at an all-time high. Books about it are flying off the presses: There are more than 180 Underground Railroad histories, novels, and children's books in print, many of them new. State and local associations are popping up all over, their members eager to discover, research, and commemorate former railroad "stations." The Internet swarms with Web sites—bibliographies, virtual museums, interactive packages for school kids. Chambers of commerce and visitors' bureaus are, in the words of one observer, "actively promoting Underground Railroad tourism," offering bus tours, opening home-grown museums, and printing guides. An ambitious museum, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, is slated to open in Cincinnati in 2003. And in July 1998 President Clinton signed into law the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act, under which the National Park Service will play an active role in raising public awareness of this complex and elusive episode in American history.

Why is a piece of the past suddenly catching fire? In order to answer this question we must first ask a more obvious

# *Uncovering The Underground*

BY TONY SCHERMAN

ILLUSTRATED BY BARRON STOREY







IT OPERATED IN SECRECY AND HAS ENDURED AS LEGEND. NOW, AT LAST, ITS TRUE STORIES ARE BEING REVEALED AND COMMEMORATED AND CELEBRATED.



# The Underground Railroad had no Directors, schedules, or plan.

one: What *was* the Underground Railroad? Because its operation was clandestine, facts about the railroad have always been hard to come by—its participants weren't eager to generate documentation. Survival meant stealth. But if much of its history remains to be written, we know more than enough to paint what is indeed a fascinating picture.

The Underground Railroad had no directors, no schedules, no overall plan or structure. As one

writer puts it, "The Underground Railroad is every route the enslaved took, or attempted to take, to freedom. . . . It is a vast network of paths and roads, through swamps and over mountains, along and across rivers and even by sea, that cannot be documented with precision."

Slave escapes did not become highly pub-

licized until well into the nineteenth century, but they had long been part of the fabric of slavery. In 1786 George Washington complained about having to recapture an escaped slave in Pennsylvania, where, as the father of our country testily wrote, "it is not easy to apprehend them because there are a great number [of Pennsylvanians] who would rather facilitate their escape than apprehend the runaway."

We don't know when the phrase *Underground Railroad* entered the language; obviously, not before real railroads began to proliferate in the 1830s and 1840s. In 1831, according to legend, a runaway slave leapt into the Ohio River, swam to the northern shore, and vanished so completely that his pursuers swore he "must have gone off on an underground road." By 1844 the railroad image was in place: An abolitionist cartoon from that year, over the caption "The Liberty Line," shows a Canada-bound train carrying a load of refugees.

Slaves lit out not only for the Northern states and Canada (where slavery was banned in 1833 and fugitives were at least officially welcomed), but also for Spanish Florida, Mexico, and the Western territories, and they sometimes sought refuge with Native Americans.

Until the mid-nineteenth century runaways were fairly safe in the Northern states, although by law they could be recaptured. In 1850 the old Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 was supplanted. Now Northern lawmen were required to assist in the recapture of fugitives. Not only were runaways suddenly imperiled, but free blacks were vulnerable too—it wasn't hard for a slave catcher to fake documents that "proved" the captive a fugitive. The new law sent a clear message to blacks: Nowhere in the United States or its territories were they entirely safe. Accordingly, the 1850s saw an increase in Underground Railroad activity to Canada.

How many rode the liberty line? Reliable numbers are hard to find, making accounts like William Wells Brown's valuable. "In the year 1842," wrote Brown, an escaped slave who used his job on a Great Lakes boat as a means of smuggling fugitives North, "I conveyed from the first of May to the first of December, sixty-nine fugitives over Lake Erie to Canada." An illuminating 1857 item in the Troy (New York) *Daily Times*, reported that the city's Vigilance Committee (as fugitive-aid groups called themselves) had sheltered fifty-seven escapees the previous year at a cost of \$125.40. On the other hand, the Delaware abolitionist Thomas Garrett's claim of helping 2,700 fugitives to freedom over thirty years is hard to accept. According to the best estimates, by the 1850s one thousand men, women, and children escaped slavery each year.

**M**ore often than not, the escapee traveled alone, running by night, hiding by day, trusting to courage and the North Star. We'll never know how many simply walked to Canada, fending for themselves. "I do not know of any fugitives being transported by anyone," wrote a former abolitionist in 1896. "They always had to pilot their own canoe, with the little help that they received." A slave named Josiah Henson—who came to serve as the prototype for Harriet Beecher Stowe's long-suffering Uncle Tom, although the latter had none of Henson's tough independence—fled slavery in Kentucky with his family; they were, Henson wrote, "thrown absolutely upon [their] own poor and small resources, and were to rely on [their] own strength alone . . . dar[ing] look to no one for help."

This is not to say that white abolitionists played no role. Citizens like the Indiana Quaker Levi Cof-





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fin busily and bravely transported fugitives for years. But runaways were more likely to seek another source of aid: other African-Americans, whether fellow slaves or freemen.

A handful of African-American Underground Railroad activists are American legends. Harriet Tubman, of course, heads the list. After escaping from a Maryland plantation in 1849, she returned South again and again, rescuing some three hundred slaves. Although illiterate, she was a brilliant, resourceful navigator. There are less well-known heroes too: for instance, John Parker, of Ripley, Ohio, a former slave and a foundry owner and one of the few nineteenth-century African-Americans to be awarded a patent, having invented a tobacco screw press. Parker helped many a

fugitive on his or her way to freedom. William Still, the chairman of Philadelphia's Vigilance Committee, organized escape routes throughout the Northeast and wrote *The Underground Rail Road*, a voluminous compendium of runaways' narratives. Published in 1872, Still's book was overlooked for decades but is now recognized as an immensely valuable resource.

As single-minded and well-organized as a Tubman, Parker, or Still was, others who offered help to runaways tended to do so informally and spontaneously, basing their actions on natural sympathy rather than

conscious political involvement. The author Pauli Murray writes of her ancestor Thomas Fitzgerald, a free black farmer in Pennsylvania: "Great-grandfather Thomas noticed that his barn began to attract a lot of strangers" who asked if they could spend the night there. Old Fitzgerald offered them a room in his house, which they invariably declined. Nor did they ever eat the breakfasts he

made them—although often, after they were gone, Mr. Fitzgerald noticed that his cows were a little short of milk. The story of the Underground Railroad is filled with people like old Fitzgerald, who belonged to no political groups and did not see themselves as activists but merely performed acts of decency while going about their daily business.

One of the legacies of Alex Haley's *Roots* is America's, especially black America's, heightened interest in genealogy. And as more African-Americans discover escaped slaves in their family histories, they grow interested in the Underground Railroad. Charles Blockson, one of the leading authorities on the subject, remembers opening Still's *The Underground Rail Road* to discover his great-grandfather's name among those of escaped slaves—and an old family tale suddenly took on the majesty of history. Many other African-Americans, experiencing the same thrill, whether in Still's book or elsewhere, have come to understand that what they once saw as impersonal history is as real as flesh and blood.

Among professional historians multiculturalism has helped foster "new history," which tells the stories of groups largely overlooked by traditional historians. The Underground Railroad is certainly such a story, and more and more historians are exploring its mysteries. Researching the history of disenfranchised peoples often poses special challenges because few tangible clues remain to help document their lives or their resistance. Researching the railroad is doubly hard: Not only was it made up largely of marginal Americans, but it was carried on in secrecy. With a little ingenuity the difficulties can be, and have been, overcome. Oral histories, census records, marriage registers, city directories—all these tools are being used to map the liberty line's vast, unknown contours.

Even as America begins to fully recognize its multicultural present, it still sometimes chooses to ignore its past—especially such searing memories as slavery. Yet learning about the Underground Railroad is a way of confronting slavery that by no means induces only despair; on the contrary, it is uplifting. "The story says to people, 'Maybe we can come together, just as we did then, when circumstances were far worse,'" says Edwin





*The escapee was often alone, running by night, hiding by day.*

J. Rigaud, president of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

Vincent deForest, the driving force behind the National Park Service's Underground Railroad initiative, extends Rigaud's point. "The Underground Railroad gives us a way of confronting slavery without depicting African-Americans as victims," deForest says. He sees the nation's mushrooming interest in the railroad as part of what he calls "a new movement in this country. People are beginning to come together around the Underground Railroad as a generator for change.

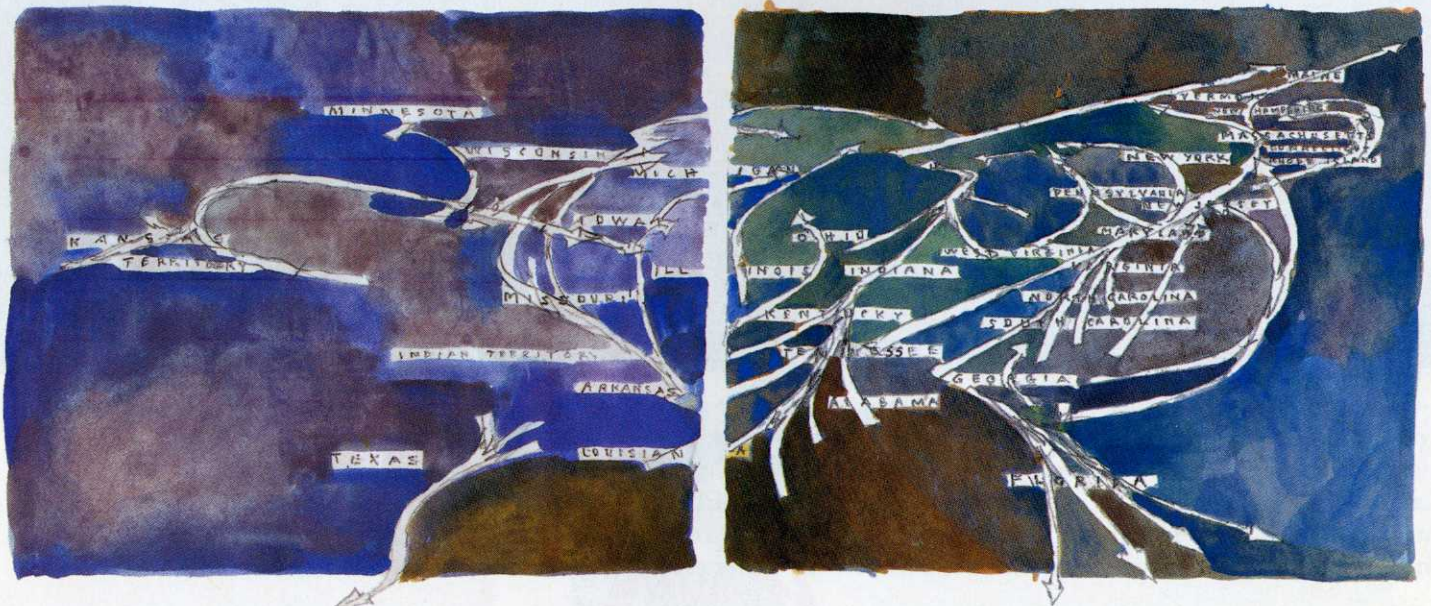
"I'm talking about a movement that helps to empower people," deForest continues. "If we can help people at the lowest ebb of society to use this story as a point of departure to raise themselves a little higher, then we'll be keeping the legacy of the Underground Railroad alive. When you look at world history, there is nothing, in my mind, that compares to this thing we call the Underground Railroad. It is centered in the heart. That's why people across the country are responding to it."

Those responses range from well-endowed to shoestring, centralized to grassroots, collective to individual. The most ambitious, financially at least, is the \$80-million-plus National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. According to Rigaud (who is "on loan" from Procter & Gamble, where he is vice president of government relations), the Freedom Center's goal is not merely to curate the past but

to "encourage people today to apply its lessons of courage and compassion in the quest for freedom. We want to open up a dialogue that might lead to racial healing." In addition to a museum the center will feature a research institute for both scholarly and public use. There will also be what Rigaud calls "a civic forum, to encourage people to come to Cincinnati and discuss broad-ranging freedom issues. A forum might focus on affirmative action or on freedom struggles in Bosnia or Rwanda."

At the heart of the museum complex will be two or three "story theaters" crafted by Richard Rabinowitz of the American History Workshop, of Brooklyn, New York. Software-driven, the theaters may incorporate virtual reality. "They are our attempt to get people to feel the history," Rigaud says. "Each of these rooms will tell a different tale of heroes of the Underground Railroad. These may not be famous names; in fact, they probably won't be."

**H**istorian Anthony Cohen has devised a method of exploring the Underground Railroad that, while not as high-tech as the Freedom Center's, is equally unconventional. A practitioner of what one might call ambulatory history, Cohen (whose name comes from the Jewish family that adopted his great-grandfather) has made two grueling, mostly peripatetic journeys to Canada: one in 1996 from his home state of Mary-





# Ohio's railroad association is the biggest and best organized.

land, the other in 1998 from Alabama. The aim of his walks—which he occasionally supplemented with rides on trains and canal boats—was not merely to research but also to dramatize and publicize the subject, which he initially embraced as a college student.

On his first walk Cohen started with documented stations and tried to discover more by connecting the dots. It wasn't as easy as he had hoped; he wound up debunking a lot of local legends. "I'd be invited to see a house on the Underground Railroad only to find it had been built in 1922," he says ruefully. But he generated a substantial amount of interest. His walking restores people's personal connection to their history. "You can only understand history so much from reading a book," Cohen says.

Cohen's account of his first trek will come out later this year as a book, *The Underground Rail-*

road. Sometimes I'm a folklorist, sometimes an anthropologist, sometimes an archeologist, sometimes just an explorer."

**C**ohen has encountered many local enthusiasts on his treks. There are statewide groups, such as the Maine, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin Underground Railroad associations (the biggest and best-organized is the three-year-old Ohio group, which has twelve branches across the state); there are smaller, regional groups, like the Underground Railroad Research Center of Southeastern Ohio; and there are historical societies with active Underground Railroad programs, like the Vermont Historical Society and the Mound City (Kansas) Historical Society. In upstate New York's Niagara County, a half-dozen outdoor sculptures, dubbed "Stations," are being erected at documented railroad sites. Students at all levels are using or designing Underground Railroad Web sites, from the State University of New York at Albany's History Net ([www.nyhistory.com/ugrr](http://www.nyhistory.com/ugrr)) to HistoryWeb St. Louis ([www.artsci.wustl.edu/~educ/historyweb/maintrain.html](http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~educ/historyweb/maintrain.html)), a site for elementary school students.

A huge federal agency like the National Park Service may seem to represent the opposite of a groundswell of local enthusiasts, but that's not how Vincent deForest sees things. "We in the Park Service," he says, "are not the point persons. We have a greater responsibility: getting involved with people in communities who feel passionate about their local Underground Railroad heritage. We're not the leader; we're the partner."

A former member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, deForest has been active in African-American historic preservation for more than two decades. Working on preparations for the 1976 bicentennial, he found that "out of fifteen hundred National Historic Landmarks, only three related directly to blacks." One thing led to the next, and deForest became involved with the Park Service, first as a consultant, then full-time, his attention increasingly drawn to the Underground Railroad.

By 1990 the advocacy of deForest and others began to pay off. Congress passed a bill authorizing the Park Service to hammer out ways to commemorate the railroad. An advisory committee chaired by Charles Blockson and composed of the staff of the National Park Service, historical organiza-



road: *A Personal Journey*; he prepared a feature-length documentary film of his second. He has dug up enough leads to fuel many a future Ph.D. thesis or book. "My goal," he says, "is to put different methods of research on the table, and to challenge people to develop still more. It's not that I don't apply traditional historical methods. I go beyond



*One historian has followed the liberty line on foot.*

tions, and community historians identified more than three hundred Underground Railroad sites as potential National Historic Landmarks. Last year President Clinton signed the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act. Under this law the National Park Service has begun to document railroad sites (twelve have been designated to date, including John Parker's house), which will be marked by a yet-to-be-designed logo. The law provides for educational programs too, with books, pamphlets, speakers, and artistic events. The only drawback to the Network to Freedom Act is the limited sum allocated for it: a mere \$500,000 a year.

Although deForest is disappointed by the small amount of money, he points out that "the Underground Railroad is about much more than whether we put a plaque on a building. The broader signi-

ficance of what we are all about"—and by "we" he means not just the Park Service but everyone pursuing the cause—"goes far beyond what legislation alone can accomplish."

On one level deForest is talking about official government recognition of the thousands of Americans who, in forming the railroad, fought the most evil institution ever sanctioned by that government. On another level, one with far greater significance to deForest and the activists whose paths he crosses as he goes about his work, he means the dream many share that all Americans can learn about the Underground Railroad and can be moved to follow its lessons, joining forces to combat and finally defeat the enemy—racism. ★

*Tony Scherman's profile of Duke Ellington appeared in the Spring 1999 issue.*

