Where is Our Freedom Trail? Let's Celebrate Syracuse's Proud Role in the Abolitionist Movement

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WHERE IS OUR FREEDOM TRAIL? - LET'S CELEBRATE SYRACUSE'S PROUD ROLE IN THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT

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Black History Month is gone, but let's not wait another year until we address the need to celebrate the significant sites of African-American history in Syracuse. We should remember Syracuse's black history year-round.

Prior to the Civil War, Syracuse was a center of abolitionist activity and an important hub of the Underground Railroad. Yet despite the annual efforts of The Syracuse Newspapers and others, this history remains virtually unknown to most city residents and visitors to our region. Only one marker in the city - the fine monument to the Jerry Rescue, installed at Clinton Square in 1990 - clearly commemorates this important past. This monument, as expressive as it is, does not place the event in any extensive historic or topographic context.

The Jerry Rescue was a glorious occasion of whites and blacks coming together in Syracuse for the common good. Oct. 1, 2001, marks the 150th anniversary of the Jerry Rescue and presents another opportunity for countywide cooperation and commemoration. As part of this celebration, our community should create a local Freedom Trail by installing an informative and artistic series of signs and markers throughout the City of Syracuse, indicating important Underground Railroad, abolitionist and African-American sites.

In the context of the celebration of Syracuse's Sesquicentennial, funds were allocated to mark the important places in Syracuse related to the Abolitionist movement, the Underground Railroad and the African-American community. On Dec. 15, 1997, the Onondaga County Legislature created the Onondaga County Freedom Trail Commission. This commission was to assume responsibility for coordinating the preservation and interpretation of Onondaga County's Underground Railroad resources.

Unfortunately, the commission has not been very active. The signage project and other Freedom Trail initiatives in Onondaga County were never carried out. Funds allocated for signage were not spent.

There has, however, been progress in recognizing African-American history in Syracuse and Onondaga County, as evidenced in the successful public effort to keep the Wesleyan Methodist Church Faces in Syracuse and to have them conserved, and with the extensive coverage The Syracuse Newspapers have given to local black history for the past few years.

But other communities, some quite nearby, have been doing much more, and the pivotal role that Syracuse played in the 19th-century freedom movement for American Blacks is not being adequately presented - for our own residents and for the nation.

Auburn in Cayuga County and Peterboro in Madison County have moved ahead with efforts to commemorate important Underground Railroad sites. The efforts of these neighboring centers have brought state and national attention to the Underground Railroad history of the region. To date, the Harriet Tubman Home has received approximately $900,000 in federal and state aid - a $284,000 grant was announced earlier this month. Soon the Tubman Home and related properties, together with
Auburn's historic Seward House, will be a powerful educational and tourism draw for Central New York. In Peterboro, the estate of social reformer and abolitionist Gerrit Smith is being preserved as a historic resource.

Syracuse, too, should be developing a better educational, historic resource identification and tourism effort to be part of this regional initiative. There is a hunger in our community to know more about this past and for it be properly remembered. And there is interest from around the country and abroad. There is also a belief in the local business community that Syracuse can take advantage of its history to promote cultural tourism today. Not everyone travels to shop at malls.

Beginning in 1997, our community came together to rescue and conserve the Wesleyan Methodist Church Faces, which had been deteriorating in situ beneath the abolitionist church located at Columbus Circle. The Preservation Association of Central New York and a coalition of community groups, including the Central New York Community Foundation, the Onondaga Historical Association, Bethany Baptist Church and Syracuse University, collaborated to ensure that the Faces stayed in Syracuse and were protected and conserved. The OHA is now using the Faces as the framework upon which to design a major exhibit about the Underground Railroad in Central New York.

Now our community should extend this work from the museum into the city, by creating a trail of signs and markers to commemorate and teach the historic lessons of the 19th-century abolitionist and freedom movement. Many of the buildings associated with important Underground Railroad people and events are long gone. Yet the local history of the Underground Railroad and what it meant for African Americans can still be told by other means, beginning with the recognition of the location of these places - today often empty lots - creating a "landscape of freedom." This local Freedom Trail can be identified by a variety of historic signs and other markers that will provide more extensive information about the Underground Railroad and the history of African Americans in Syracuse. The more the whole community participates in the creation and placement of these signs, the more they will care for them, and notice them in the future.

Among the places proposed for inclusion as part of the trail are:

The Jerry Rescue Site at Clinton Square.

The site of Jermain Loguen's house and his major Underground Railroad "station" at Pine and East Genesee Streets.

The former Wesleyan Methodist Church at Columbus Circle.

Rose Hill Cemetery on the North Side.

South Salina Street near the site of the former Ainsley House.

The Dana Building on the northwest corner of Warren and East Water Streets, near where George Vashon, a significant African American in early Syracuse, had his law office.

The site where Harriet Powell made her escape in 1839, believed to be located approximately behind Key Bank's main office facing Washington Street.

The former AME Zion Church at 711 East Fayette St., already listed as a City of Syracuse Protected...
Plymouth Congregational Church at 232 East Onondaga St., home of a congregation that was a major force for abolition.

The Harriet May Mills House, believed to have been an UGRR site.

As this effort moves forward, additional sites will certainly be identified. The Preservation Association encourages everyone to participate in this process. A committee to move this project forward is in formation, and we invite volunteers. To be involved, call the Preservation Association at 475-0119.

Time is short. Oct. 1 will be here before we know it. So let's get to work.

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