



## The Pursuit of Freedom on the Illinois Frontier



NPS

Above: View of New Philadelphia today.

To a casual observer, New Philadelphia looked like a typical Illinois pioneer town. As travelers got closer, they would have found a small but bustling community where Black and White villagers lived and worked side by side. For formerly enslaved Free Frank McWorter, the town meant new beginnings and an opportunity to free family members. New Philadelphia, which he founded in 1836, is the first US town platted and registered by a Black American.

### Free Frank McWorter and the Rise and Decline of New Philadelphia

New Philadelphia's story began in 1777 South Carolina with Frank's birth to Juda, an enslaved West African woman. Frank spent the first 42 years of his life in slavery and during that time moved to Kentucky. On the Kentucky frontier, Frank met his wife Lucy and they started a family. During the time he was not required to work directly for his enslaver, his time and skills were hired out to other pioneers. Frank also mined local caves for saltpetre, a component of gunpowder, vital for life on the frontier and in demand for the War of 1812. While Frank was known for his ingenuity and hard work, the opportunity to earn income was not an option for many enslaved people.

After some time, Frank saved enough money to buy the freedom of then-pregnant Lucy. This ensured that the child she was carrying and subsequent children would be born free. Two years later, in 1819, he purchased his own freedom. In 1830, Free Frank, Free Lucy, and their free children moved to Illinois, where he had purchased land between the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. The family carved a home-stead and farm out of the Illinois frontier.

In 1835, Free Frank paid \$100 for an eighty-acre parcel of land just south of the family farm. He laid out the town he called Philadelphia (later known as New



COURTESY OF PAMELA AND SHEENA FRANKLIN

Free Lucy McWorter, Free Frank McWorter's wife, 1800s.



COURTESY OF CHRIS FENNEL, PROFESSOR OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND LAW, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

Excerpt of an April 1998 aerial photograph from the U.S. Geological Survey shows lots and the landscape on which New Philadelphia was located.



Philadelphia) on 42 acres of that land. He subdivided the property into 144 lots and sold them to Black and White settlers. There were no reports of racial violence in the town.

Free Frank continued to save the funds he earned from farming and the sale of New Philadelphia lots to buy the freedom of more family members. In total, Free Frank freed himself and fifteen of his relatives at a combined cost of \$14,000 (equivalent to about \$500,000 today). After his death in 1854, Free Frank's sons continued this effort.

Free Frank's commitment to the freeing of enslaved people did not stop with his own family. As a free, racially diverse community and only 20 miles from Missouri, a slave state, New Philadelphia became a stop on the Underground Railroad. The McWorter family sheltered and escorted freedom seekers.

The community's population peaked in 1865 and then began declining. New developing communities nearby and a bypassing railroad were likely contributors to the decline. Only one family remained in the 1950s. New Philadelphia disappeared as plows turned the soil and buried material remains left behind.

## Keeping New Philadelphia's Story Alive

Town descendants and neighboring communities did not forget New Philadelphia. Historical documents, oral histories, archeological research, organizations, and individuals have kept the town's story alive. The New Philadelphia Association, a local non-profit organization, has managed the site since the late 1990s. New Philadelphia has been the subject of a collaborative archeological project sponsored by the National Science Foundation Research Experience for

Undergraduates program from 2004-2011. The program was conducted by the universities of Maryland, Illinois, North Carolina, and the Illinois State Museum. More than 150,000 historic artifacts were unearthed by archeologists. This research has added to our understanding of integrated towns in the late 1800s. New Philadelphia became a unit of the National Park System in December 2022. The National Park Service is working to establish a presence at the site.



Excavation of an early twentieth-century foundation at New Philadelphia.

## Visiting New Philadelphia

New Philadelphia National Historic Site is open to the public. The site is located three miles east of Barry, Illinois, and can be reached by turning onto 306th lane from County Highway 2. An informational kiosk is immediately on the left after turning. The site is currently maintained by the New Philadelphia Association.

The Association manages the informational kiosk and an augmented reality self-guided walking tour. The app for the 1/4-mile-long walking tour can be downloaded onto handheld electronic devices, cost-free, at the kiosk. There are no restrooms, trash receptacles, or services on site, so please plan ahead.

## Learn More

New Philadelphia is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, designated as a National Historic Landmark, and included in the National Park Service's National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program. The site also lies within the Abraham Lincoln National Heritage Area.

It is represented in the Smithsonian Museum of American History "Many Voices, One Nation" exhibit.

Visit the park website for more information: [nps.gov/neph](https://nps.gov/neph)