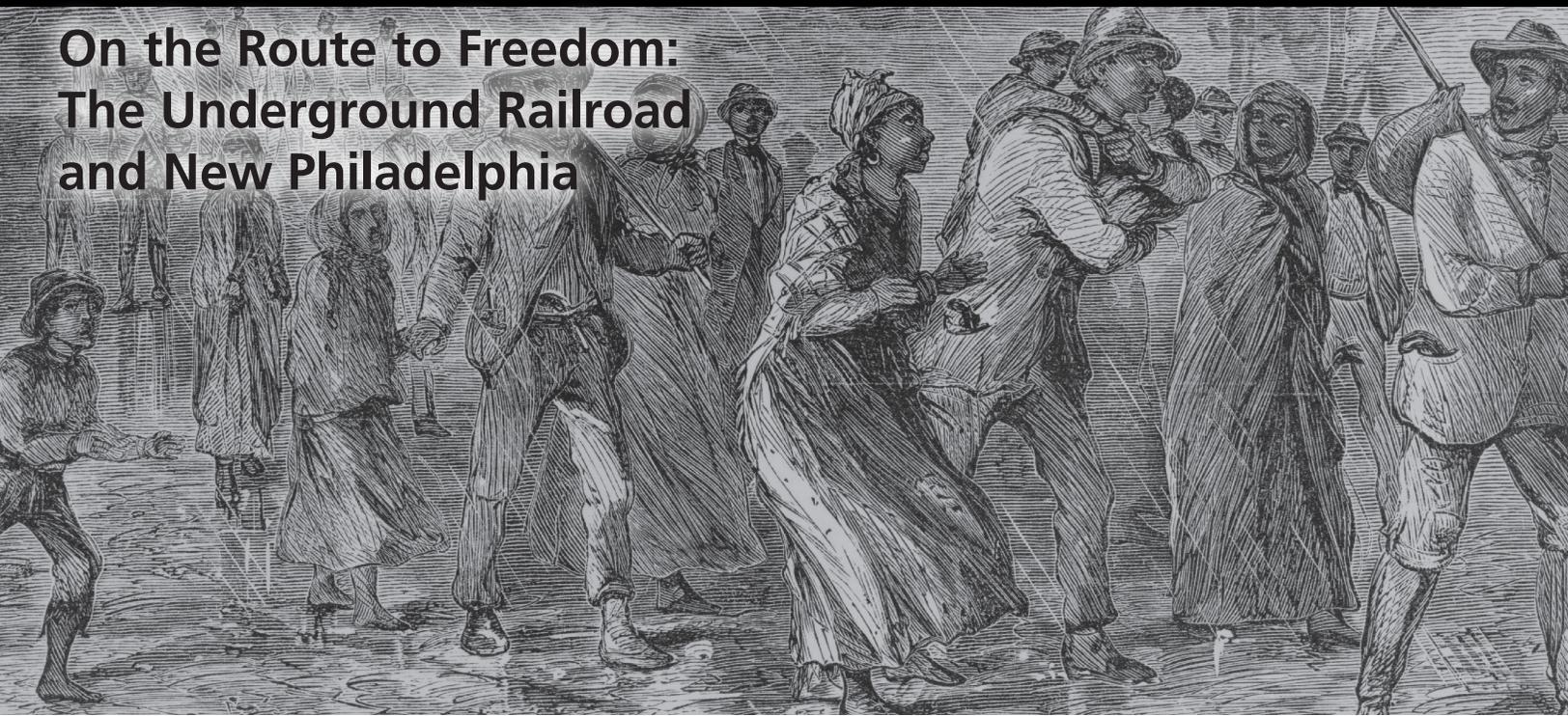




## On the Route to Freedom: The Underground Railroad and New Philadelphia



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Above: Illustration of freedom seekers in the 1872 publication *The Underground Railroad*.

The Underground Railroad refers to the efforts of enslaved Black Americans (freedom seekers) to gain their freedom by escaping slavery. Wherever slavery existed, there were efforts to escape. The laws of the time said that freedom seekers were “fugitives” who could be captured and sent back into slavery. Most freedom seekers began and completed their journeys without aid; however, assistance efforts grew over the course of the 1800s.

Free Frank McWorter broke the bonds of slavery by purchasing freedom for himself and 15 family members, all through his own initiative and enterprises. In 1836, Free Frank made history as the first Black American in our nation to plat and record a town, New Philadelphia. New Philadelphia and area residents actively participated in the Underground Railroad by sheltering, concealing, and sometimes accompanying freedom seekers north to Canada. Once a bustling town on the Illinois frontier, today New Philadelphia is an archeological site and now a unit of the National Park System.

### **Built on a Foundation of Self Determination, the Pursuit of Freedom, Opportunity, and Love for Family**

On a South Carolina plantation in 1777, Frank, as he was known in his youth, was born into bondage to his enslaved mother Juda. It is likely that George McWhorter, their enslaver, was Frank’s father. Frank grew up working his enslaver’s land in South Carolina. When McWhorter expanded his land holdings in Kentucky and Tennessee, Frank managed the Kentucky property. In 1799, Frank married Lucy, a woman enslaved on a nearby plantation. Frank and Lucy became parents to four surviving children while in bondage.

George McWhorter hired out Frank’s time, allowing him to keep a portion of the earnings. Frank also earned money mining caves for saltpetre, a component of gun powder. This was a key commodity on the frontier and in the War of 1812. By 1817, Frank saved enough money to purchase Lucy’s freedom, ensuring that the child she was carrying and subsequent children would be born free. In 1819, Frank purchased his own freedom and acquired land in Pike County, Illinois. He was known as Free Frank after his release from slavery. A devoted family man, he traded his lucrative saltpetre operation to enable his

son, Frank, Jr., who had fled to Canada, to return to Kentucky and remain free. Free Frank and Free Lucy left with their free-born children and Frank, Jr. to the free state of Illinois in 1830. In 1836, Free Frank founded a town he called Philadelphia, later known as



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

COURTESY OF PAMELA AND SHEENA FRANKLIN

New Philadelphia, and sold lots to Black and White pioneers. In 1837, the state legislature approved Free Frank's petition to assume a last name, McWorter, for legal standing. With money earned from lot sales, the McWorters returned to Kentucky, again risking capture by slave patrols, to free children still enslaved.

Before his death in 1854, in addition to himself, Free Frank had purchased the freedom of nine family members and made provisions in his will to free six more family members from bondage at a cost more than of \$14,000, equivalent to more than \$500,000 today.

## The North Star Leads Through Illinois

New Philadelphia was on a route followed by many freedom seekers fleeing enslavement north through Illinois. The community was 13 miles northeast of the Mississippi River, which separated Illinois from the slave state of Missouri. The town's rural and remote landscape was like other communities in Illinois that were stops on the Underground Railroad. New Philadelphia became a racially diverse community working in concert to help freedom seekers evade capture and achieve freedom.

Oral histories and historical records by residents support New Philadelphia's participation in the Underground Railroad. Clarissa Shipman, who lived on a farm near New Philadelphia, wrote to her family in New England that freedom seekers were captured in Barry, only three miles away. Shipman believed that the freedom seekers wanted to come to the New Philadelphia area, writing,

"There seems to be reason to believe that the fugitives are enticed to flee here. They came as far as Barry, as though they were among friends. There they were set upon and returned."

Other oral histories also support the community's participation in helping freedom seekers. Descendant Ruby Duke remembered stories passed down by her grandmother. Her grandmother told of freedom seekers who worked in her grandparents' garden and their efforts to thwart bounty hunters. Familiar with the route north and escape routes from the south, the McWorters helped and sometimes accompanied freedom seekers. Ellen McWorter Yates, great-great granddaughter of Free Frank, recalled stories told by the McWorter family. In these oral histories, freedom seekers were sheltered and aided in the McWorter family home, north and just outside the town's boundaries.



A map showing the differing routes that Underground Railroad travelers would take to reach freedom. The green star in western Illinois shows the approximate location of New Philadelphia. States shaded in orange (including Missouri, Kentucky, and Virginia) permitted slavery in 1860.

## National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program



The National Park Service National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program honors, preserves, and promotes the history of resistance to enslavement through escape and flight, which continues to inspire people worldwide. This work is completed in collaboration with individuals, organizations, and local, state, and federal entities.

The Network to Freedom Grant program partially funded a virtual tour available for Apple and Android devices at New Philadelphia.

Learn more about the Underground Railroad and the Network to Freedom: [go.nps.gov/ugr](https://go.nps.gov/ugr)

## Learn More

New Philadelphia is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, designated as a National Historic Landmark, and featured in the Smithsonian Museum of American History exhibit, "Many Voices, One Nation." It was established as a unit of the National

Park System by Congress in 2022.

Learn more about New Philadelphia National Historic Site and partner organizations: [nps.gov/neph](https://nps.gov/neph)