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Modern Representations of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia

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A Thesis in Historic Preservation Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Historic Preservation 2007.

Advisor: Randall Mason

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MODERN REPRESENTATIONS OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN
PHILADELPHIA

Eldra D. Walker

A THESIS

In

Historic Preservation

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

2007

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1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of the Underground Railroad (UGRR), within the context of Philadelphia, and examine how that message is transmitted to the public. This study will attempt to answer several questions. What is the UGRR story in Philadelphia? Why is this story significant within the context of Philadelphia? Once the story is understood, one can ask additional questions. Additionally, how can cultural institutions and heritage sites within Philadelphia effectively represent the story of the UGRR?

Based on initial preliminary research on this topic, the story of the UGRR seems to be disconnected from the institution which spurred its creation, slavery. With this in mind, it is imperative to understand how the Philadelphia UGRR story fits within the context of slavery.

1.1 Methodology

The methodology for this study was comprised of three phases. The first phase involved data collection. Data were collected from interviews and observations of UGRR interpretive programs. Analyzing and evaluating the data from the interviews and observations were the next step in this study. The creation of recommendations was the final phase of the study.

1.1.1 Data Collection

Collecting data about the representation of the UGRR in Philadelphia was the first phase in this study. Choosing representative sites to study within Philadelphia area was the initial step in this phase. Before selecting the site which would be studied, a general survey of possible UGRR related sites within Philadelphia was conducted. Numerous sites were excluded from the survey for various reasons. Mother Bethel AME Church was excluded because the site did not have any UGRR collections or UGRR interpretive programming. Despite having UGRR artifacts in their collections, the African American Museum in Philadelphia was also excluded. The museum was not displaying those artifacts at the time of the study. After completing the initial survey, three sites were chosen:

1. The Civil War and Underground Railroad Museum of Philadelphia (CWUR),
2. The Historical Society of Philadelphia (HSP), and
3. The John Johnson House (“Johnson House”).

These sites were selected because of their diverse connections to the UGRR.

CWUR is a museum that has began interpreting the UGRR story in 2003. Their UGRR story grew from their collection of UGRR memorabilia collected by Union soldiers. To interpret the UGRR story, the mission of the museum was broadened, so that the museum’s story was more inclusive. According to the website of CWUR: “the Museum is redoubling its efforts to collect, preserve, and interpret artifacts, photographs, books,

letters and manuscripts, and personal stories relating to slavery, the Underground Railroad, and the antislavery movement.”¹

The Military Order of the Legion of the United States, a group comprised of Army, Navy, and Marine Corps post-war veterans, founded CWUR in 1888. The Civil War collections of CWUR are comprised of several collections such as Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant memorabilia to a collection of medical and surgical devices used in the Civil War.

HSP is a repository of historical information and documents that pertain to “the peoples of Pennsylvania and their contributions to American history.”² In addition, HSP has an education component, which is comprised of online lessons on various topics relating to Philadelphia history.

HSP, which was founded in 1824, contains a vast amount of materials from the 17th, 18th, and 19 centuries. Those materials are books, graphic items, manuscripts, pamphlets, and serials. In addition to abolition and the UGRR, HSP’s collections cover a variety of topics, such as architectural history, Pennsylvania history, Philadelphia neighborhood history, and women’s history.

¹ Andrew Coldren, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, March 2007. and *Civil War and Underground Railroad Museum of Philadelphia Website*, 13 May 2007, <<http://www.cwurmuseum.org>>.

² *Historical Society of Pennsylvania Website*, 13 May 2007 <<http://www.hsp.org/default.aspx?id=334>>.

The Johnson House differs from both HSP and CWUR. The Johnson House is different because it was a stop on the UGRR. The house, built between 1765 and 1768, is believed to be “the oldest residence built for year round living still standing in Germantown,” and, according to its National Historic Landmark Nomination, it is nationally significant because of its connections to “reform movements,” “social history,” and black heritage.

The Johnson family, who were Quakers, was a multi-generational abolitionist family. Several members of the Johnson family were involved in the creation of the Junior Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia and resided as officers for other abolitionist organizations, such as the Upper Delaware Anti-Slavery Society, the Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia, and the American Anti-Slavery Association. In addition to active affiliations with anti-slavery organizations, there are documented accounts of the Johnson family hiding and assisting runaway slaves.³

In addition to being an historical, archaeological, and architectural resource in the Philadelphia area, the Johnson House functions as an Underground Railroad Museum and hosts a variety of events. The events range from educational programs, jazz concerts, and special tours. The house is also used as a meeting facility for other organizations to use.⁴

³ Avi Decter, *National Historic Landmark Nomination for the Johnson House Historic Site* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1998) 15-16 and 22-24.

⁴ Linda Talbert, interview by author, Germantown, PA, March 2007. and *Johnson House Website*, 13 May 2007, <<http://www.johnsonhouse.org/index.php>>.

After the site selection process was complete, staff interviews were scheduled. The interviews took place with individuals who were responsible for creating or designing the Underground Railroad visitor's experience, i.e. exhibits, or tours. The interviewed staff members were:

1. Andrew Coldren, Curatorial Associate at CWUR,
2. Jennifer Coval, Educator at HSP, and
3. Linda Talbert, Executive Director at the Johnson House.

Once the interviews were complete, the UGRR interpretive programs were observed at each site. Interpretive programming at CWUR consisted of a reenactment and a small exhibition. HSP interpreted the UGRR through a variety of online lessons, while the Johnson house told the story of the UGRR through tours.

1.1.2 Interpretation Evaluation

Evaluating the way institutions in Philadelphia addressed and interpreted the complex story of the UGRR in Philadelphia was a major part of this study. The NPS booklet *Exploring a Common Past: Researching and Interpreting the Underground Railroad* was consulted for this portion of the study because it was “designed to help National Park Service staff, members of the public, and administrators of historic properties, produce, review, and evaluate interpretive programs and media.” Also the booklet was a part of a NPS initiative to create research methods which “address American history in a more integrated, diverse, and complex way.”

Within *Exploring a Common Past: Researching and Interpreting the Underground Railroad*, the National Park Service advises UGRR researchers that “responsible interpretations” of the Underground Railroad should: “Document the factual elements of the Underground Railroad through primary source materials and connect them to broader historical issues of slavery, abolition, American history.” Since, the UGRR in Philadelphia was intimately related to other forms of resistance to slavery, it was vital that interpretive programs were “responsible” in representing this complex history.⁵

1.1.3 Recommendations

Recommendations were given during the final phase of this study. These recommendations were given to offer guidance to sites to overcome the challenges that were discovered during the data collection and evaluation phases. In addition, a framework was developed based on a National Park Service Resource study. This framework would allow for Philadelphia’s UGRR story to be fully represented. Ultimately, the goal was for the recommended framework to enhance the visitor’s UGRR experience.

⁵ U.S Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Exploring a Common Past: Researching and Interpreting the Underground Railroad* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2000) 1.

2.0 Core Issues

Before attempting to understand the current interpretations of the phenomenon must be understood within a broader context. To understand any of the sites within this study approach their particular UGRR story, the core issues which created the UGRR must be explored and movements that developed concurrently must be understood.

2.1 Beginning of Slavery in North America

Between the years of 1450 and 1850, nearly 12 million Africans were imported to the Western Hemisphere. The majority of Africans were brought between 1680 and 1810 as the demand for human labor increased with the growth in agricultural, mining, and mercantile businesses.

The perception of Africans in servitude shifted over time. During the early 1600s both blacks and whites served as indentured servants, meaning they would serve an owner for a specified duration. However, court decisions in the 1640s reflected the view that lifetime bondage was the standard for Africans and their progeny. By the late 1600s, slavery had been “firmly and legally” established in the North American colonies.⁶

Within the local context, Blacks were often brought to Philadelphia by merchants as a part of return cargoes on ships from the West Indies. Just as there was national demand

⁶ Marie Tyler-McGraw and Kira R. Badamo, *Underground Railroad Resources in the United States Theme Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, September 2000) 4-5.

for increased slave labor, the growth of Philadelphia businesses increased the amount of slave trafficking. Philadelphian merchants were so familiar with the slave trade by the 1730s that they regarded “black labor as just another commodity to be bought and sold like ordinary merchandise.” By 1751, half of Pennsylvania’s slaves labored in Philadelphia.⁷

2.2 The Legal Framework

To maintain the institution of slavery, laws and acts were developed and implemented to control blacks. These laws were to prevent escape and detail the means for claiming and retrieving runaways. Colonial laws consisted of resolutions restricting the movement of blacks, keeping them “immobile and isolated.”⁸ National legislation focused on the retrieval of runaway slaves. The Fugitive Slave Clause in the Constitution and the subsequent Fugitive Slave Acts, empowered slave owners and outlined punishments for those who aided fugitives. Both colonial ordinances and constitutional statutes shaped the way slaves were viewed.

2.2.1 Pennsylvania Colonial Law and Slavery

Colonial laws were the earliest means for controlling blacks. Local ordinances limited the movement of enslaved blacks by restricting their travel or by instituting curfews. Some colonies even instituted slave patrols to prevent curfew violations and to maintain order. Some ordinances forbade slaves from traveling more than ten miles from their home,

⁷ Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1973) 7-16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

without permission from their master, or from gathering and meeting in groups larger than four.⁹

In 1700, Pennsylvania passed an act “for the better regulation of servants in this province and territories.” This act detailed the punishment for running away or for assisting runaways. If a servant were to “absent him or herself from the service of their master” for more than one day, the servant would have to work for five additional days to compensate their owner for any damages incurred by their absence. Those who assisted the runaways would receive a penalty of thirty shillings “for every twenty four hours he or they shall entertain or harbour him or them.”¹⁰

The 1700 Act was applicable to both black and white servants. Only within Section VII of the act was there a distinction made between black servants and white servants. Section VII described the punishment that a servant would receive if they stole from their master and assigns different punishments for white servants and black servants. If the servant was white, they would satisfy the debt to their owner “after the expiration of his or her time [as an indentured servant], to double the value of said goods.” Yet, if the servant were black, “he or she shall be severely whipped, in the most public place of the

⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁰ Marion Gleason McDougall, *Fugitive Slaves (1619-1865)* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971) 97.

township where the offence was committed.”¹¹ Though the crime was the same, blacks received a punishment which would inflict physical pain and public humiliation.

In 1780, Pennsylvania implemented “an act for the gradual abolition of slavery.” This act stipulated that all blacks born within Pennsylvania would “not be deemed and considered as servants for life or slaves.” However, any blacks who were currently slaves and all children born up to six months after the passing of the act would be servants until they reached the age of 28.¹² With this stipulation, slavery continued to exist in Pennsylvania until 1848.¹³

2.2.2 Constitutional Law and Fugitive Slaves

National legislation reflected the increased awareness of runaway slaves. The legislation also addressed the status of a slave and how it might change if they entered a free state. The Fugitive Clause, within the 1787 Constitution, addressed these issues. This clause stated that if a slave escaped to another state, the slave would not “be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due.”¹⁴ Despite entering a free state, an enslaved person could not escape their former status as a slave.

¹¹ John Purdon, *A Digest of the Laws of Pennsylvania, 1700 – 1836* (Philadelphia: M’Carty & Davis, 1837) 911-912.

¹² Ibid., 740-743.

¹³ Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Philadelphia and its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 111.

¹⁴ Gleason McDougall, 105.

To empower the Fugitive Clause within the Constitution, the first Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1793. This act gave states the authority to arrest fugitives who fled to their state. Slave-holders were allowed to appoint agents to retrieve fugitive slaves from other states. In addition, persons who would “knowingly and willingly obstruct or hinder” the reclamation of a fugitive by the slave-owner could be fined and imprisoned.¹⁵ The second Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 granted slave-holders even more power in reclaiming runaway slaves. With this act, slave-holders could now pursue runaway slaves “without process, and by taking, or causing such person to be taken, forthwith before such court.”¹⁶ Slaveholders could retrieve a fugitive from another state without the burden of providing any proof or evidence of their claim.

2.3 Moral Protests against Slavery

During the 18th and 19th centuries, religious sects debated the propriety of human bondage. This debate about slavery often led to national schisms among the various church assemblies.

Quakers were against slavery because the idea of slavery did not reconcile with their religious beliefs. In general, Quakers were against the idea of slavery because of their belief that “all human beings are brothers” and that people are “equal before God and the laws of the state.” In the 1750s, the Society of Friends (Quakers) in England questioned

¹⁵ Ibid., 105-106.

¹⁶ Ibid., 112-115.

the morality of human bondage and later viewed slavery as “incompatible with membership with the Friends.”¹⁷

Local Quakers, so outraged by the idea of slavery took action towards slave holding Quakers. In 1688, Quaker Mennonites of Germantown, Pennsylvania drafted an anti-slavery resolution, which has been said to be the “first formal protest against slavery in the Western Hemisphere.” By 1696, the Society threatened slave importing Quakers with expulsion from the Society.¹⁸

The Quakers, however, were divided in their view of slavery. Levi Coffin, a Quaker well-known for his antislavery activities, described the different opinions held by Quakers about the issue:

Some Friends advocated colonization, or gradual emancipation, and many joined the popular current of opposition to abolitionism. Some of us felt that there was need of more earnest labor and renewed exertions on behalf of suffering humanity, even among Friends who professed to bear a testimony against slavery...¹⁹

Late in the 18th century, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church officially condemned slavery. Shortly afterwards, in 1808, the Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania congregations declared that “slave holding was a sin” and “the practice was both morally evil and unjustifiable.” By 1859, Southern Presbyterian congregations withdrew from the

¹⁷ Tyler-McGraw, 11 and William Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001) 167-168.

¹⁸ Tyler-McGraw, 11. and Kenneth Estell, ed. *Reference Library of Black America, Volume 1* (Detroit: Gale Research, Inc and Afro-American Press, 1994) 6.

¹⁹ Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, 2nd ed., (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968) 223-224.

assembly's jurisdiction because of the antislavery sentiments of the General Assembly and of other Northern Presbyterian churches.²⁰

In 1816, the Methodist Church warned its members that holding slaves would make them ineligible for obtaining any official position within the church. Similar to the Presbyterians, this finding led to a formal schism between the northern and southern Methodists churches.

The Baptist church followed the same trend as the Quakers, Presbyterians, and Methodists. In 1789 the Philadelphia Baptist association endorsed abolition societies and encouraged member churches to form their own abolition societies. This act helped to cause the division between the northern and southern churches by 1830.²¹

Without any equivocation or uncertainty about the morality of slavery, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church possessed a congregation that supported abolition through words and actions. William Switala believes that the AME church was so adamantly antislavery in their actions because of the mainly African American congregation and the fact that “there was never a question in their minds as to the evils of slavery, the need to abolish it, or the moral obligation to assist runaways.”²²

²⁰ Switala, 170.

²¹ Ibid., 174.

²² Ibid., 166.

Mother Bethel, the first AME church, was founded in Philadelphia in 1789 by Richard Allen, a former slave who was not allowed to become an ordained Methodist minister. As more AME churches were opened, they were considered “the first places to give fugitives sanctuary.” Allen urged fugitives to head towards Canada until the institution of slavery was abolished in the US and he encouraged fellow congregations to become active in dealing with the “slavery question.”²³

On a national level, the various denominations varied in their opinions about the morality of slavery. However, within the context of Philadelphia, there were a number of congregations, which spanned different sects that were involved in some capacity with the antislavery movement. In addition to the AME church, Mother Bethel, the Central Presbyterian Church of Color and the First Congregational Unitarian Church, both of Philadelphia, were known as places of refuge for runaway slaves. Also, the congregation at the Shiloh Baptist Church of Philadelphia was known to assist fugitives.²⁴

2.4 Day to Day Resistance

Slaves resisted bondage in numerous ways. While running away is the most popularized method of resistance, slaves found ways to protest and survive their enslavement on a day to day basis.

There were various forms of day to day resistance employed by slaves. Slaves destroyed their masters’ property. They “pulled down fences, sabotaged farm equipment, broke

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 165-175.

implements, damaged boats, vandalized wagons, ruined clothes, and committed various destructive acts.” Slaves also burned auxiliary buildings and mistreated animals and livestock. If given the opportunity, they stole “nearly anything that was not under lock and key” from their masters’. To sabotage their owners, slaves performed their tasks sloppily, or “took unscheduled respites.” They would elude their masters by hiding in outbuildings or feigning sickness. Some slaves abused alcohol as a temporary means of escaping or expressing their frustration.²⁵

Some slaves would run away for short periods of time. This was called “truancy,” “absenteeism,” or “lying out.” Slaves would often escape to a location near the vicinity of the plantation where they worked and would return “on their own accord.” Slaves would leave for a brief time to visit loved ones who resided nearby. Some slaves would runaway or in order to be sold. For instance, one slave ran away and negotiated with his owner that he would return only if he were sold in a city that was closer to his wife.²⁶

2.5 Organized Protests to Slavery

During the 18th and 19th centuries, several groups and committees were organized to promote antislavery sentiments. Over these two centuries, the strategies of these groups evolved and were considered much more radical. Motivations shifted from helping free blacks maintain their freedom, to gradually abolishing slavery within a local region, to the idea of immediate emancipation. These groups became progressively diverse over

²⁵ John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 2-3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 98-100.

time. However, this evolution contrasts with the motivations and actions of black abolitionists and other free blacks.

2.5.1 Evolution of Antislavery Sentiment

Rumblings of discontent with the institution of slavery grew within the 17th and 18th centuries. At this time, the demand for African labor and the reliance of colonial economies on slave labor was at its peak. State abolition societies were created as a result of this discontent. These types of organizations became popular in the mid 18th century. The purpose of a state abolition society was “to abolish slavery through public legislative action and private manumission,” with the belief that slavery would be abolished gradually over a generation.²⁷

In 1775, the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in Bondage was formed in Philadelphia and is believed to be the first abolitionist society in the United States.²⁸ The Society was later known as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), but its original moniker more clearly defined its purpose. The group was formed to prevent “unscrupulous persons” from trying to “claim as slaves people who were free under the law.”²⁹

²⁷ Tyler-McGraw, 10 and 24.

²⁸ Estell, 9.

²⁹ Christopher Densmore, “Seeking Freedom in the Courts: The Work of the Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and for the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in Bondage, and for improving the Condition of the African Race, 1775-1865,” *Pennsylvania Legacies* 5 no. 2 (November 2005): 17.

The PAS strategy was twofold, consisting of “petitioning” and “legal work.”³⁰ Members of the society successfully petitioned state and national governments to “increase the power of the antikidnapping laws” and to end the domestic slavery trade. PAS preferred to work within the law, because “legal freedom was more secure.”³¹

While the PAS was sympathetic to the plight of free blacks, it was not focused on equality. The membership of PAS remained segregated and was comprised of white males until 1842 and was all male until the 20th century. At this point in time, those who supported the antislavery movement, a group comprised of blacks and whites of both genders, felt that there was a need for a change in the abolitionist movement.³²

The publication of William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, an antislavery newspaper, in 1831 is often cited as the beginning of a much more visible attack on slavery and the slaveholding south. Mainstream abolitionist thought, persuaded by the growing influence of black abolitionists, began to support immediate, over gradual, emancipation of all slaves.³³

³⁰ Richard S. Newman. “The Pennsylvania Abolition Society: Restoring a Group to Glory,” *Pennsylvania Legacies*, November 2005 5, no. 2 (November 2005): 7.

³¹ Densmore, 18 and 19.

³² Margaret Hope Bacon. “Antislavery Women Find a Voice,” *Pennsylvania Legacies* 5, no. 2 (November 2005):, 10 and Newman, 9.

³³ Tyler-McGraw, 3 and 24.

2.5.2 Black Abolitionism

As abolitionist thinking became more radical, the voice of the black abolitionist finally began to emerge. In addition to fighting to make their voices heard within the antislavery movement, black abolitionists had to decide whether they would support African repatriation or fight for blacks place in the states. During this time, black abolitionists continued to fight “proslavery propaganda,” “notions of racial inferiority” and the growing colonization debate.³⁴

Black abolitionists efforts in the antislavery movement were greatly affected by their personal experiences with slavery and “racial oppression.” Black abolitionists had a key role in the antislavery movement. Their lectures, writings, and speeches made the movement more “authentic, credible, and emotional.”³⁵ David Walker’s *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* illustrates the increasingly militant vibe of the black antislavery movement:

Can our condition be any worse? – Can it be more mean and abject? If there are any changes, will they not be for the better, though they may appear for the worst at first? Can they get us any lower? Where can they get us? They are afraid to treat us for worse, for they know well, the day they do it they are gone...³⁶

In addition to having differing views on abolition, black and white abolitionists had different motivations. Blacks conceived antislavery as the “all-encompassing struggle for

³⁴ C. Peter Ripley, ed. *Witness for Freedom* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

racial equality.”³⁷ Ending slavery was the “first priority” for blacks, while white abolitionists viewed antislavery within a “larger human reform movement.”³⁸

Vigilance Committees, which were comprised mostly of blacks, were developed to assist free blacks and to assist fugitives. Buckmaster called them “the first formal effort to organize the Underground Railroad on a businesslike basis.”³⁹ They helped to provide basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, and money; in addition to helping fugitives establish themselves by finding homes, jobs, and other family members.⁴⁰

William Still, who was born free, worked as the director of the General Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia. The value of Still’s work is a testament to the importance of work of these Vigilance committees. In this position, he documented the travels and escapes of hundreds of fugitives as they made their way their way through Philadelphia.

2.6 The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad (UGRR) was another branch of resistance and protest to the institution of slavery. While this may seem straightforward, defining the UGRR is just as difficult as defining the religious views of slavery or the changing thought within the

³⁷ Ibid., 68 and 65.

³⁸ Tyler-McGraw, 29

³⁹ Henrietta Buckmaster, *Let My People Go* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941) 107.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 30.

antislavery movement. For instance, the date of its origin varies from source to source, originating when the first slave escaped or as late as the 1780s.⁴¹

Recent explanations for the railroad were rather general and described it as a system of assisting fugitive slaves as they escaped from bondage. In the 1998 National Park Service Interpretive Handbook about the Underground Railroad, C. Peter Ripley offered a similar definition of the Underground Railroad (UGRR). He defined the UGRR as “the movement of African American slaves out of the south to the allies who assisted them in their search for freedom.”⁴² The researchers of the National Park Service’s 1995 Resource Study focused on the physical routes that slaves followed and defined the UGRR as “every route the enslaved took, or attempted to take to freedom.” In addition, the UGRR was “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.”⁴³

By 2000, the National Park Service offered a similar, yet more detailed, definition of the UGRR which focused on the people involved:

The Underground Railroad refers to the effort – sometimes spontaneous, sometimes highly organized – to assist persons in bondage in North America to escape from slavery. While most runaways began their journey unaided and many completed their self-emancipation without assistance, each decade in which

⁴¹ Ibid., 1-2.

⁴² C. Peter Ripley, “The Underground Railroad,” *Underground Railroad Handbook 156* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior. National Park Service. Division of Publications, 1998) 45.

⁴³ U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Underground Railroad Special Resource Study: Management Concepts/ Environmental Assessment* (Denver: U.S. Department of the Interior. National Park Service. Denver Service Center, 1995) iii.

slavery was legal in the United States saw an increase in public perception of a secretive network and in the number of persons willing to give aid to runaways.⁴⁴

Historically, the origin of the UGRR has been attributed to several events and in various locations. William Still declined to give a definition to the Underground Railroad, deferring to the prominence of the fugitives' stories that he transcribed. While he continually referred to the UGRR as an "enterprise" or "the movement," he reasoned with the reader that the records within his book, *The Underground Railroad*, could not "cover the entire Underground Railroad operations" for many local branches existed in different parts of the country."⁴⁵

Other historians were not as cautious in their explanations of the UGRR. R. C. Smedley, author of *History of the Underground Railroad*, placed the origin of the UGRR in Columbia, PA in 1804. Smedley claimed that the Quakers in the town, reacting to the "kidnapping and shooting" of fugitive slaves, threw "around the colored people the arm of protection." Smedley continued saying that when fugitives were chased to Columbia, PA slaveholders "lost all trace of them," for they would reach an "abyss, beyond which they could not see, the depths of which they could not fathom."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ U.S Department of the Interior, National Park Service. *Exploring a Common Past: Researching and Interpreting the Underground Railroad*, 3.

⁴⁵ William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872) 5.

⁴⁶ R.C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad* (Lancaster, PA: Printed at the Office of the Journal, 1883) 26 and 34-35.

By trying to define the UGRR, Smedley added to the stereotypes that surrounded it. His Quakers were heroic and self-sacrificing, while the fugitives were helpless. He also defined the UGRR in supernatural and unrealistic terms.

Henrietta Buckmaster, in *Let My People Go*, found that “the first fugitive slave who asked for help from a member of his own race or the enemy race drove the first stake of that ‘railroad’.” Buckmaster removed the physical element from the UGRR when she described the way the UGRR developed: a fugitive slave “added another tie until in the course of moral development the ‘railroad’ extended to the lengths of necessity and assumed the shape of righteous indignation.”⁴⁷ Buckmaster added to the growing number of stereotypes surrounding the UGRR and continued to add another interpretation of how it might have developed.

The definitions of both Smedley and Buckmaster typified the stereotypes that Larry Gara described in his work *The Liberty Line*. Gara described the interpretation of the UGRR as a “melodrama,” where the “villains are the slavecatchers” and the abolitionist is idealized as “a pure heart knight in shining armor – who plays the heroic role.”⁴⁸ Gara questioned information about the UGRR because most of the information about the UGRR appeared after the Civil war. This material was often comprised of “reminiscences and histories”

⁴⁷ Buckmaster, 11.

⁴⁸ Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line*. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1961) 3-4.

which tended to “enlarge its scope ad exaggerate its importance, and thus contributed much to one of America’s best known but least examined legends.⁴⁹

The phrase “underground railroad” was a clear metaphoric description of the way the movement functioned. The term “railroad” relates the organization and hierarchy of the movement. The UGRR had “conductors,” “stations,” “routes,” “cargoes,” “packages,” and “passengers.” While the term “underground” speaks to the secretive and clandestine nature of the movement.⁵⁰

Not every slave was able to participate in the UGRR. The health of the runaway slave and his or her location could help predict their success in escaping. Most of the runaway slaves, who were a part of the UGRR, were healthy young males. In addition, the runaways were usually enslaved in the upper southern states. Pennsylvania and New York were the destinations for slaves on the east of the Appalachians, while those on the west would traverse the Ohio River. In addition to luck and opportunity, a favorable landscape assisted fugitives.⁵¹

For the purposes of this study, a working definition of the UGRR was developed. The UGRR should be defined as just one form of resistance and protest to slavery. More specifically, the UGRR was a method used by fugitives to emancipate themselves, and utilized by others to assist fugitives to freedom. The UGRR was formalized and well

⁴⁹ Gara, 18.

⁵⁰ Ripley, “The Underground Railroad” 45.

⁵¹ Tyler-McGraw, 52.

documented in some locations, yet unrecorded in others, thus the productivity of the system will most likely never be calculated.

2.7 Preserving the Underground Railroad

There are many ways to preserve the UGRR. One way of preserving the story of the UGRR is to preserve the documented “stations” where fugitives sought aid. Another method is re-telling the stories of those fugitives who escaped bondage. In recent years, Congress has created laws to determine if the story of the UGRR can be preserved and how to honor the story of the UGRR. However, to truly commemorate and interpret the story of the UGRR, it must be reframed with the preservation of the stories of slavery, antislavery, and other forms of resistance.

2.7.1 Creating the Network to Freedom

In 1990, Congress passed a law “to study the Underground Railroad, its routes and operations in order to preserve and interpret this aspect of American history.” The law charged the Secretary of the Interior with conducting a study to determine ways of “commemorating and interpreting” the UGRR and the routes that fugitives took “before the conclusion of the Civil War.” In addition to publishing an interpretive handbook on the Underground Railroad, the study was to include the following:

1. the consideration of the establishment of a new unit of the national park system;
2. the consideration of the establishment of various appropriate designations for those routes and sites utilized by the Underground Railroad, and alternative means to link those sites, including in Canada and Mexico;
3. recommendations for cooperative arrangements with State and local governments, local historical organizations, and other entities; and

4. cost estimates for alternatives.

The Secretary of the Interior, as directed by the law, was to establish an “Underground Railroad Advisory Committee,” comprised of three African-American history experts, two historic preservationists, one American history expert and three individuals from the general public.⁵²

By 1995, the Underground Railroad Advisory Committee (Advisory Committee) had completed the *Underground Railroad Special Resource Study*. The Advisory Committee reached several findings about the Underground Railroad, including the fact that it is a “nationally significant story,” many sites related to the UGRR meet the criteria for designation as national historic landmarks, and that “no single site or route completely reflects and characterizes the Underground Railroad.”⁵³

Within the *Resource Study*, the Advisory Committee delivered five management concepts which were “intended to enhance public understanding and appreciation of the Underground Railroad and to preserve its many resources.” The five management concepts were:

1. Concept A: Establish a Commemorative, Interpretive, Educational, and Research Center
2. Concept B: Enhance Interpretation and Preservation of Multiple Sites
3. Concept C: Establish National Park System Project Area
4. Concept D: Establish a Commemorative Monument
5. Concept E: Establish Underground Railroad National Recreational Trail(s)⁵⁴

⁵² Public Law 101-628, HR 2570. § 601 - § 604.

⁵³ U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Underground Railroad Special Resource Study: Management Concepts/ Environmental Assessment*, iii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 65-88.

The 1990 law enabled the story of the Underground Railroad to be clarified and contextualized. Congress was trying to determine how the UGRR would fit into the larger American story. In 1998, Congress passed the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act (“Network to Freedom Act”) to “establish within the United States National Park Service the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program.” With this act, Congress had carved out a place for the UGRR.

The Network to Freedom Act was created after Congress found that the Underground Railroad was “one of the most significant expressions of the American Civil rights movement during its evolution of more than three centuries.” Congress also determined that the UGRR “bridged the divides of race, religion, sectional differences, and nationality.”⁵⁵ The Network to Freedom Act would legitimize a certain understanding of the UGRR.

Unfortunately, the language of the Network to Freedom Act glossed over and simplified the very complicated relationships that surrounded the UGRR. There were tensions between white and black abolitionists and internal struggles and formal schisms among religious denominations. And the voice of free blacks and fugitives struggled to be heard.

The Network to Freedom Act had two purposes. The first purpose of the act was to recognize the importance of the UGRR, focusing on the “sacrifices made by those who used the Underground Railroad in search of freedom and tyranny... and the sacrifices

⁵⁵ Public Law 105-203, § 2.

made by those who helped them.” The other purpose of the act was to give the National Park Service the authority to “commemorate, honor, and interpret the history of the Underground Railroad,” because of “its significance as a crucial element in the evolution of the national civil rights movement, and its relevance to fostering the spirit of racial harmony and national reconciliation.”⁵⁶ While this law formally states the need to recognize and honor the role of the Underground Railroad in American history, it idealizes the phenomenon. Even rudimentary research of the UGRR shows that those who participated in the UGRR possessed various motivations and it is unclear if “racial harmony” was the overarching goal.

The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program (NTF), which is described in section 3 of the act, was developed to satisfy the purposes of the Network to Freedom Act. Once the NTF was created by the Secretary of the Interior, it would:

1. produce and disseminate appropriate educational materials, such as handbooks, maps, interpretive guides, or electronic information;
2. enter into appropriate cooperative agreements and memoranda of understanding to provide technical assistance...and;
3. create and adopt an official, uniform symbol of device for the national network and issue regulations for its use.⁵⁷

The NTF is a “network of sites, interpretive and educational programs, and research and educational facilities with a verifiable connection to the Underground Railroad.” The NTF excludes sites, programs, or facilities that are solely associated with “abolitionism and antislavery thought.” The basis for this exclusion is that participation on the Underground Railroad was an illegal act, since it violated the Fugitive Slave Acts. For the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., § 3.

NTF, individuals who participated in this illegal act “demonstrated an exceptional level of commitment to the principles of freedom and self-determination.”⁵⁸ However, by excluding sites that do not meet this specific criterion, seemingly skews the perception of history. The NTF essentially invalidates the efforts of other organizations, instead of creating a context in which all forms of resistance can be properly considered and researched.

2.7.2 Reframing the UGRR Story

The UGRR developed concurrently with the growth of slavery and evolving abolitionist thoughts. While the PAS negotiated manumissions for slaves, the UGRR was in operation. As the various religious sects debated the slavery question, a runaway was being assisted on the UGRR. The UGRR and other forms of protests to slavery were being developed and implemented concurrently. So to consider Philadelphia’s UGRR story without the context of other burgeoning movements would be a grave mistake. The UGRR must be studied in context with other forms of resistance which grappled with slavery.

⁵⁸ Diane Miller, “The Places and Communities of the Underground Railroad: The National Park Service Network to Freedom,” *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*. David Blight, ed. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2004) 280-283.

3.0 Evaluating Current Representations of Philadelphia's Underground Railroad

3.1 The Visitor's Experience

As defined in the *Underground Railroad Resource Study*, the visitor's experience, in terms of the UGRR, is "the experience that people take with them after visiting routes, sites, landscapes or commemorative centers associated with the Underground Railroad."

After having visited these locations, visitors should have learned about the history of the UGRR and have gained an appreciation for the heroism of its participants. In addition, it is explained in the *Underground Railroad Resource Study* that visitors should:

1. learn more about the controversial aspects of the Underground Railroad story – such as those dealing with race, human rights, and the continuing struggle for freedom;
2. sense the presence at related sites of people who participated in the Underground Railroad system, including runaways and others who risked censure, jail, or loss of life.⁵⁹

Given the context of Philadelphia and its history with the UGRR, these final goals are important to this study.

The visitor should have the opportunity to learn and appreciate the complexity of the antislavery movement and the motivations of the groups involved. Visitor's should learn about the continued efforts of the free black population who fought slavery legally, through committees and organizations, and illegally, with the UGRR. Visitors should be

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Underground Railroad Special Resource Study: Management Concepts/ Environmental Assessment*, 57.

exposed to the many efforts to resist slavery that existed within Philadelphia, whether they were politically, morally, or racially based.

For this study, the UGRR interpretive programs from three sites were evaluated. After interviewing key staff at each site and experiencing the various interpretive programs, each program was evaluated based on criteria developed by the National Park Service in their booklet, *Exploring a Common Past: Researching and Interpreting the Underground Railroad*. These criteria, as mentioned in chapter one, were developed to assist the public, as well as the National Park Service staff, “review and evaluate interpretive programs and media.” The questions from the booklet were:

1. Does interpretation help the public better understand the multi-faceted development, organization, and history of the Underground Railroad?
2. Does the interpretation include information about the activities of “ordinary” individuals and groups as well as popular or famous people?
3. Does the interpretation present undocumented or debatable information as historical fact?
4. Does the interpretation reflect that both historical and legendary information are elements of the history of the Underground Railroad?
5. Are interpretations based on information from a variety of reliable sources which reflect the complex nature of the Underground Railroad?
6. Are contemporary political, economic, and social issues incorporated into narratives of Underground Railroad activities?
7. Is the interpretation representative and inclusive of all individuals significant to the story?⁶⁰

However, for this study, it was assumed that the story of the UGRR was only one form of resistance to slavery. Therefore, it was necessary to ask an additional question of the

⁶⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Exploring a Common Past: Researching and Interpreting the Underground Railroad*, 29-30.

interpretive program: Does the site acknowledge and represent other forms of resistance to slavery that may have occurred at the site?

The following sections of this chapter are devoted to explaining and evaluating the UGRR interpretive programs at the three sites chosen for this study. The remainder of the chapter will discuss the various challenges when presenting their programs to visitors.

3.1.1 The Civil War and Underground Railroad Museum of Philadelphia

The Civil War and Underground Railroad Museum of Philadelphia (CWUR), was located in a four-story row home, where each floor was dedicated to exhibition and interpretive spaces. The UGRR artifacts, comprised of about 20 pieces, were contained in two glass cabinets. These cabinets appeared almost bare when compared to the other cabinets and shelves, which are overflowing with dusty Civil War memorabilia. Since there was such a dearth of UGRR materials, the museum's primary method of communicating the story of the UGRR was through reenactments.

Andrew Coldren, Curatorial Associate at CWUR, believed strongly in the power of interpretation and reenactments. He found that it was difficult to exhibit the UGRR in a static way and using representative artifacts visitors would have the opportunity to open up and talk.

CUWR relies on an interpreter, who channels famed UGRR conductor Harriet Tubman, to interpret the story of the UGRR for visitors. During a typical tour, a group was led up a

small winding staircase to the second floor. They entered a room filled with Abraham Lincoln memorabilia, containing busts of various sizes and portraits exhibiting a range of stoic expressions. As the group settled into their seats, Harriet Tubman entered the room. Tubman, dressed in baggy clothing and head rag, sang an Old Negro Spiritual, “O Freedom.”

Tubman reached the front of the room, stopping right in front of a looming bust of Abraham Lincoln. As she began her monologue, she spoke in broken English, possibly mimicking the dialect those who were enslaved and had to learn a new language. Her story begins in her childhood, recalling when and how she was first whipped. She continues on to her escape from enslavement and how she walked in the night. She recalls with great sadness how her first husband, who was free and living in the south, would not leave with her. She recounts how he did not approve of her actions because she would not “stay put,” so he decided to find another wife who would.

Tubman continues to tell of her travels to Philadelphia and this is where the story remained. Tubman shifts her story to the harrowing escape of Henry “Box” Brown, the runaway who shipped himself in a crate to Philadelphia. Climatically, Tubman recalls how Brown rose from the crate “singing a song of praise.” The introduction of the Brown story was confusing because it was not clear if Tubman even knew Brown.

Tubman then opened up to the audience for a question and answer session. One group member asked Tubman how the UGRR started. She quickly answered “when the first

slave asked for help.” The interpreter’s certainty about the origins of the Underground Railroad did not reflect the years of ambivalence from researchers and historians about the initiation of the UGRR. Another member of the audience questions Tubman about her life in Auburn, NY. The interpreter hesitated, unable to answer the question. Eventually, the interpreter changed the subject and began discussing the hardships of slavery. Since the interpreter had not fully researched the life of Tubman, which extended beyond Philadelphia, the visitor was not able learn about the breadth of Tubman’s work and connections with the antislavery movement.

As the interpreter completed her reenactment and proceeded to leave the room, she stopped at the youngest members in the group. As she leaned towards them she stated: “Slavery still exists today, and the Underground Railroad is education.” While her statement was an attempt to relate the UGRR to contemporary issues, it only seemed preachy. Comparing the unparalleled brutality of slavery to a current form of mental disempowerment was not believable.

At CWUR, the visitor’s experience of the UGRR was very limited by the lack of resources and the narrow scope of the Tubman reenactment. The visitor was told a story laden with dramatics, but lacking in facts. Instead of discussing the numerous documented fugitives who traveled through Philadelphia seeking freedom, the visitor’s learned about the most fantastic and albeit adventurous aspects of the UGRR. Focusing on the popular stories of Harriet Tubman and Henry “Box” Brown only diminished the work of other individuals who contributed to the UGRR story.

The interpretive program at CWUR had a glaring deficiency. No attempt was made to connect the story of the UGRR to the Civil War. Even though Andrew Coldren, a curatorial associate at CWUR, stated that the museum staff worked to make the museum's story more inclusive, this was not apparent. The UGRR exhibits, which consisted of items such as shackles and chains, spoke more to the slavery experience and not the experience of a fugitive slave.

When developing the UGRR interpretive program, Coldren stated that several local authorities were contacted. He went on to say that there was a great deal of responsibility in the telling the story because it was "sacred" and that there was a "very protective feeling" surrounding the UGRR. To overcome this barrier, the museum staff contacted the congregations of local churches and local historians to determine how they should tell the UGRR story properly. While this was an appropriate step, it could also have been limiting. Without consulting a wide variety of complex and varied sources CWUR's program was just another regurgitation of often told UGRR legends in Philadelphia.⁶¹

3.1.2 The Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Educators at HSP created online lessons based on the primary source material that they house. Using documents from their "Pennsylvania Abolition Society" collection, they created lessons that pertained to antislavery, abolition, fugitive slaves, and free black society. All of the lessons were based on historical events within Philadelphia. Some of the materials in this collection include the Journals of William Still starting from 1852,

⁶¹ Coldren, interview by author.

actions involving Fugitive Slaves from 1786 – 1834, and actions involving the illegal enslavement of free blacks from 1787-1830, and Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia records from 1839 – 1844.

The purpose of the online lessons was to highlight the various forms of resistance to slavery, which included the UGRR. Jennifer Coval, an educator at HSP, believed that it was important to inform the public about the size and significance of slavery resistance and the UGRR. Each lesson contained materials for both student and teacher: lesson plans, recommended readings, and copies of primary source documents, and information about other online resources. The lessons fall under one of three themes:

1. Building a Movement: Strategies for Social Change in the Abolition Movement
2. PAS and Philadelphia's Free Black Community
3. Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad

The educators at HSP outlined the skills and learning objectives. The lesson pertaining to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society has the following objectives and goals for students:

1. Understand the type of assistance the Pennsylvania Abolition Society provided for the free blacks and slaves.
2. Recognize the financial and social expenses incurred by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in fighting slavery.
3. Identify the Pennsylvania Abolition Society's decision-making processes with respect to the manumission of slaves.
4. Appreciate the Pennsylvania Abolition Society's role in the abolition movement.

By completing additional lessons, students will be to learn much more about forms of resistance to slavery and their context to Philadelphia. Students are introduced to the shifts within the antislavery movement to mixed race and mixed gender organizations,

specifically exploring the role, strategies, and tactics of women in the antislavery movement. Lessons also provide a “composite sketch of the free black community in Philadelphia” during the 18th and 19th centuries. There are opportunities for students to learn about the diversity of Philadelphia’s free black community and the obstacles that it faced. Additional lessons allow students to “understand slave laws in Pennsylvania in the antebellum period and assess their implications for the free black, slave, and general populations of Philadelphia.” Students also learn about the operations of Pennsylvania’s Underground Railroad and Vigilant Committee.

By focusing on the use of primary source material, the educators at HSP add credibility to the information they are trying to teach. However, the lessons were limited to the timeframe of those primary sources since there were no connections with current political, economic, or social issues.

The interpretive program at HSP encouraged thinking about the UGRR within a broader context. The student will learn that the Underground Railroad was just one facet of resistance to slavery. Students learned about several currents of thought that surrounded slavery and antislavery during the 18th and 19th century in Philadelphia.

However, the lessons created by HSP may have been biased, since HSP houses all of the papers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS). The sheer volume of information about this organization may have led to an over-representation and exaggeration of their efforts in the lessons. In addition, the story of the free blacks was delivered from the

perspective of the PAS. Therefore it was questionable whether the role of free blacks in the antislavery movement was represented fairly or accurately.

In addition, while the information is easily accessible, the format of the lessons were geared towards a classroom environment. While the information they provided was valuable, it would not translate well for other visitors.⁶²

3.1.3 The Johnson House

The UGRR interpretive program at the Johnson house consisted of a tour and a sparse exhibition space. Visitors began their tour at the Johnson house by watching a brief video about the structure. Afterwards, they were led on a tour of the home, which was given by either Linda Talbert, the executive director, or one of two docents.

The Johnson house was a station on the UGRR, therefore its connection to the UGRR differs from the other sites in this study. Despite this status, the bulk of the UGRR representation was delivered by a tour guide. However, the house was used as a tool to dispel UGRR myths. Talbert stated that showing the house and the surrounding property to visitors was a way of illustrating that runaway slaves were not hidden in caves or hiding holes.

⁶² Jennifer Coval, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, March 2007.

During each tour, Talbert had a firm agenda. Her first aim was to determine how much the group knew about the UGRR. With this information, she felt that she could tailor her tour to each group. Slavery and the dangerous life of fugitive slaves were two topics that were emphasized to the Johnson House visitors. Talbert divulged in an interview that she often felt that she spent a great deal of time educating visitors, particularly adults, about the connections between slavery and the UGRR.

Talbert stated that her target audience was African Americans, particularly black youth. Talbert, who is African American, felt that she was personally responsible for communicating this story because it was inspirational. She wanted other blacks to know that fugitive slaves were survivors and that they should be motivated and empowered by their stories.

However, the UGRR interpretive program at the Johnson house was not focused on the site, but on the institution of slavery and its affects on blacks. Without any doubt, the UGRR was a response to slavery. Yet, the history of the Johnson's and their connection to the UGRR was completely missing from the tour.

Talbert even stated that most visitors are shocked to learn that the Johnsons were white. The story of the Johnson family, a multi-generational abolitionist family, was lost in Talbert's mission of focusing on one aspect of the site's history.⁶³ In addition to misrepresenting the history of the site, the visitor does not learn about one of the ways

⁶³ For a detailed discussion of the Johnson House, see pg. 4 above.

whites participated in the UGRR. While Talbert earnestly tried to inspire blacks by focusing on the black experience, she lost sight of the other layers of significance at the Johnson house.

3.2 Challenges

Each site had various challenges when representing the UGRR at their site. When considering criteria developed by the NPS, it was evident that none of the programs within this study was able to fully represent the UGRR as it related to their site or within the context of Philadelphia.

The interpretive program at HSP made the best effort at helping the visitor understand that the UGRR was a very complicated phenomenon. In addition, they showed the visitor that the UGRR existed alongside other forms of resistance. HSP tried to help the visitor understand how various forms of resistance developed in Philadelphia during the 18th and 19th centuries. The programs at neither CWUR nor the Johnson House attempted to explain the development or organization of the UGRR.

All three sites presented relatively narrow perspectives on the UGRR. HSP was able to represent the most expansive story, as its UGRR interpretation was placed in the context of other forms of slavery resistance. Yet, HSP's interpretation was from the view of one organization involved in the antislavery movement. CWUR presented a story which was dramatic and was focused on very popular participants in the UGRR story. Thus CWUR's interpretive program allowed for the efforts of lesser-known participants to be

overshadowed. And the representation of the UGRR at the Johnson House was influenced by the personal bias of the staff, which ultimately disconnected the visitor from the site's history.

Finally, both CWUR and the Johnson House struggled from a lack of artifacts and material culture. This inhibited their ability to connect their sites to the story of the UGRR. Without any artifacts, their interpretations of the UGRR were based on the views of tour guides or interpreters, who tended to give dubious or unverified information about the UGRR.

4.0 Establishing a Project Area in Philadelphia

The final phase of this study was to develop recommendations to improve the representation of slavery resistance for the sites within the study. However, after evaluating the three sites in the study, it was determined that, while each site had its own significant contribution, there should be some way to connect these sites. In addition, after reviewing the numerous sites within Philadelphia, it was apparent that there was an opportunity to fully represent the story of slavery and antislavery.

Instead of offering site specific recommendations which would only be relevant to the sites within the study, a framework for a proposed UGRR project area within Philadelphia was developed. This proposed project area was developed based on one of the five draft management concepts developed by the Underground Railroad Advisory Committee (“Advisory Committee”) in the *Underground Railroad Special Resource Study*. Concept C, “Establish National Park System Project Area,” was the chosen model for this proposed framework. This concept was chosen because it provides a model for connecting and relating sites and structures, of various types, across a geographic area.

4.1 The Purpose and Components of a Project Area

The Advisory Committee defined the project area as “a concentration of Underground Railroad resources over a large geographic area (up to several hundred miles).” This project area could include the following components:

1. National Historic Landmarks,

2. Existing NPS units associated with the UGRR,
3. Documented escape routes,
4. Structures or sites associated with personalities and aspects of the UGRR,
5. Landscapes which are significant to the UGRR story, and
6. Any international connections.

The Advisory Committee suggested that the visitor should have a very specific experience, which is tied to the geography of the Project Area. The visitor should experience what the “journey to freedom” would have been like for fugitives. The visitor will have this experience by seeing the physical relationships between the landscapes, routes, and places of refuge for runaways.⁶⁴

However, the proposed *Philadelphia Project Area* will be different from the project area outlined by the Advisory Committee in numerous ways. The first major difference from the original project area is that the *Philadelphia Project Area* will include a concentration of sites which are related to various forms of slavery and slavery resistance in Philadelphia. Since the UGRR has been interpreted, for the purposes of this study, as only one form of resistance to slavery, the *Philadelphia Project Area* should reflect these other related sites.

The size of the Philadelphia Project Area will also be much smaller than the geographic area proposed by the Advisory Committee. The geographic area will be smaller for two reasons. The first reason is that the number of sites which are related to slavery resistance is likely to be greater than sites just related to the UGRR. The proposed area should be small enough where it can be easily managed, yet large enough so that a wide variety of

⁶⁴ U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Underground Railroad Special Resource Study: Management Concepts/ Environmental Assessment*, 76.

sites and structures are included. The second reason for this change in size is that the Advisory Committee received negative feedback in regards to the size of their project area. Subjects found that the project area was “too large and geographically disassociated to be effective.”⁶⁵ This size could be adjusted at a later date depending on the discovery of new information relating to slavery or slavery resistance within the Philadelphia region.

The components of the Philadelphia Project Area will become more inclusive.

Philadelphia’s story of slavery and antislavery would include a wider variety of sites than those proposed by the Advisory Committee. The property types listed in the *Underground Railroad Resources in the United States Theme Study* includes a greater range of property types which may be applicable to the various movements in

Philadelphia. The possible associated property types are:

1. Properties associated with prominent person
2. Slave rebellion sites
3. Properties associated with legal challenges to slavery
4. Properties associated with documented slave escapes
5. Properties associated with documented fugitive rescues.
6. Churches associated with congregations active in the slavery resistance
7. Maroon Communities
8. Archeological Sites
9. Properties related to slavery resistance in some other way.⁶⁶

The *Philadelphia Project Area* would be comprised of sites which will fit into any of these types, or in any of the categories for the original project area concept. While all

⁶⁵ U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Underground Railroad Special Resource Study: Management Concepts/ Environmental Assessment*, 123.

⁶⁶ Property types 6 and 9 were modified and include the phrase “slavery resistance” in place of UGRR. From Tyler-McGraw, 38-39.

these types are not applicable for the Philadelphia area, they could be utilized in project areas developed for other regions.

The visitor's experience is the final area of consideration for the *Philadelphia Project Area*. In addition to experiencing the fugitive's physical "journey to freedom," the visitor will experience several paths towards or away from freedom. For instance, the visitor will learn about how the antislavery movement was radicalized at Adelphi Hall with the formation of the American Anti-Slavery Association.⁶⁷ By visiting Independence Hall, the visitor could learn about the signing of the Constitution, which also instituted the Fugitive Slave Clause.⁶⁸ The visitor could visit the location of the London Coffee House, where blacks were purchased as slaves in Philadelphia.⁶⁹ This experience would be a truer reflection of history and a richer experience for the visitor.

4.2 Potential Philadelphia Project Area Sites

A list of diverse sites and structures can be developed by reviewing already published sources and historic site listings. In addition to consulting the National Register of Historic Places and search the National Historic Landmark database, numerous publications can be consulted. Some initial sources of sites are the works of local and regional historians, sites listed with the Pennsylvania Historical Marker Program, and sites that are a part of the Network to Freedom.

⁶⁷ Ripley, *Witness for Freedom*, 1-4.

⁶⁸ Charles S. Blockson, *African Americans in Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, PA: RB Books, 2001) 38-40.

⁶⁹ McManus, 27.

Charles L. Blockson lists numerous properties that are associated with prominent persons in his work *African Americans in Pennsylvania*. One such property is the home of William Still, abolitionist and author of *The Underground Railroad*. Another property would be the residence of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a black writer and poet, who was hired as a lecturer for the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. A final example would be the former office of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, which was founded by Lucretia Mott, a Quaker Abolitionist who would help initiate the Women's Rights Movement.⁷⁰

Prominent sites, which were involved in slavery resistance, are discovered by reviewing the Pennsylvania Historical Marker Program's listing. One such site would be the location of Pennsylvania Hall. The hall, which was built in 1838 by the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, was torched by rioters who did not believe that the interracial group should meet.⁷¹

William Switala documented the antislavery activities of several congregations in his work. These congregations would include Mother Bethel AME Church, Central Presbyterian Church of Color, First Congregational Unitarian Church, were known as places of refuge for runaway slaves. Also, the congregation at the Shiloh Baptist Church of Philadelphia was known to assist fugitives.⁷²

⁷⁰ Blockson, 34-36, 79-80, and 54.

⁷¹ PHMC: *Pennsylvania Historical Markers Program website*, 13 May 2007, <<http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/doh/hmp.asp?secid=18>>.

⁷² For a detailed discussion of Congregations and slavery resistance, see pp. 11-14 above.

4.3 Potential Benefits of Philadelphia Project Area

In addition to adding to the visitor's experience, creating a *Philadelphia Project Area* has two major benefits. These benefits would be the creation of opportunities of exchange and collaboration between sites and a more accurate representation of the UGRR and other forms of resistance to slavery. Opportunities would be created for the various properties share ideas and information, such as resources, source material and artifacts. In addition, this project area could act as a checks and balancing system among the various sites.

This framework could also function like that of the Network to Freedom Program.⁷³ However, the *Philadelphia Project Area* would not only include sites which were UGRR, but also those which were solely involved with the antislavery or abolition movements. Inclusion of all sites which were involved with slavery resistance will provide a full spectrum of the history of slavery resistance within Philadelphia.

⁷³ For a detailed discussion of the Network to Freedom, see pp. 24-28 above.

5.0 Conclusions

This study attempted to uncover how an historical phenomenon was currently interpreted and represented. During the initial phases of the study, several questions were developed. These initial questions that were posed pertained to the historical interpretation and significance of the UGRR within the context of Philadelphia. To answer these questions, the development of the UGRR from slavery had to be researched, on both a local and national level.

Several core issues emerged. These issues included the origins of North American slavery and the legal framework that supported it through the 19th century. On a local and national level, slavery was nurtured by the burgeoning colonies and was legitimized by local and national statutes.

Other core issues which were important were the issues which were the most divisive: the religious interpretation of the morality of slavery and the evolving antislavery movement. Denominations split along state lines because of the issue of slavery and the propriety of slave holding. The antislavery movement became increasingly radical through the 18th and 19th centuries, as participants turned towards immediate emancipation. Again, these issues made an impact on a local and national level.

One underlying current among each core issue was the voice African American and the struggle to attain and maintain freedom. From the origins of indentured servitude within

this country, blacks were differentiated from whites. As blacks emancipated themselves, they began to form their own support networks through their congregations or Vigilance Committees. And by the 19th century, blacks became more militant in their demands for emancipation for all of those who were still enslaved.

Yet, concurrent to each of these core issues, was the development of the UGRR. From further research, it was determined that the origins the UGRR may never be known. Despite the intense amounts of research complete by various historians, who have each added their own interpretation to how the UGRR began and how it received its name.

The re-interpretation of the UGRR continued, as Congress enacted laws to determine the significance of the UGRR. Once again laws were created which would legitimize an institution The UGRR was now legitimized as a shining example of “racial harmony.” The UGRR was purported to have connected people of all races and religions during a time, when many aspects of life in this country were divided.

From researching the core issues that surrounded the UGRR, it became apparent that the UGRR must have had some connection to the other forms of slavery resistance which developed during the 18th and 19th centuries. In addition, the UGRR could not be fully understood without understanding other forms of slavery resistance.

Another question which was presented in the initial phase of this study dealt with how the story of the UGRR is represented today. To answer this question, three sites, with

differing interpretive programs were studied and evaluated. It was determined that the visitor should have certain experiences at these study sites. The visitor should have the opportunity to learn and appreciate the complexity of the antislavery movement and the motivations of the groups involved. The visitor should also learn about the continued efforts of the free black population who fought slavery legally, through committees and organizations, and illegally, with the UGRR. And the visitors should be exposed to the many efforts to resist slavery that existed within Philadelphia, whether they were politically, morally, or racially based.

After studying these three sites, and comparing them to certain criteria, it was determined that none of the sites effectively communicated the story of the UGRR as one form of resistance to slavery. Based on this result, recommendations were made to improve the representation of the UGRR within Philadelphia.

Instead of focusing on site specific recommendations, a management concept, as outlined by the National Park Service, was proposed. This concept called for the creation of a project area which would be tailored to the location of Philadelphia and its multilayered story of resistance to slavery. This project area would add to the visitor's experience because they would be presented with a more complex, albeit less palatable, representation of slavery and how it was protested and abolished within Philadelphia.

The project area had two potential benefits. The first is that the project area would create opportunities for various institutions to collaborate and coordinate their efforts. And the

second is that any site which played a role in the effort to resist slavery would be represented within its proper historical context.

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