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September 21, 2020

Illinois News

Renewed effort to make New Philadelphia national park

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Posted: Sep. 20, 2020 12:01 am Updated: Sep. 20, 2020 12:06 am

BARRY, Ill. — In a time of social unrest nationwide, Phil Bradshaw believes the story of New Philadelphia and its founder Free Frank McWorter resonates more than ever.

McWorter founded New Philadelphia — the first town platted and legally registered by an African American — in 1836 in Pike County.

Blacks and whites lived together in community at the town site near Barry, and while "it may not have been in complete harmony all the time, they learned to live together peacefully, and I think that's very important," said Bradshaw, president of the New Philadelphia Association.

More attention could be focused on New Philadelphia and McWorter with a renewed effort to make the town site a national park.

U.S. Rep. Darin LaHood introduced a bill last week to establish the "New Philadelphia Historical Park" as a unit of the National Park Service with coordinated efforts to protect, preserve and interpret the "many significant aspects" of the site.

"New Philadelphia and Frank McWorter's story is an important part of our Illinois and our nation's history that is not often told," LaHood said in a news release. "I believe this site deserves to be a National Historic Park."

The park service manages two other sites in Illinois — the Lincoln Home National Historic Site in Springfield and the Pullman National Monument in Chicago.

Bradshaw said a study done three years ago said New Philadelphia met "all the qualifications" to be a national park.

"We feel like this is what needs to be done," Bradshaw said. "We've been able for 20-some years to keep the site kind of open and kind of keep it going, but to have the longevity that it needs, it needs to be part of the national park service."

New Philadelphia is listed on 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.

The association's plans call for donating the roughly 40-acre town site to the park service, Bradshaw said, leaving little, if any, upfront expense to the federal government. More savings could come from using the same staff managing the Lincoln Home site in Springfield for New Philadelphia.

The association plans to launch a national campaign to build support for the legislation, Bradshaw said, reaching out to New Philadelphia supporters across the country and asking them to contact their congressmen and senators.



Bradshaw said he's "pretty confident" the site will become a national park.

"The Black community, the African American community had a history here. This is a way to show the history of how they contributed to what we have today," Bradshaw said. "We're building something here we can be very proud of."



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