

# CHICAGO FLASHBACK

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Period-appropriate structures adorn the New Philadelphia site near Barry, Illinois, in 2008. New Philadelphia was a multiracial community founded by Free Frank McWorter in 1836.

## Preserving New Philadelphia

Descendants of first free Black man to found American town tell his story

BY CHRISTINE LEDBETTER

The pages of history turn agonizingly slow, particularly when chronicling the lives of African Americans. What else explains why the story of Free Frank McWorter, the first Black person to legally plan a community in America, isn't taught in every middle school history class.

"If Robert E. Lee is going to continue on our historical landscape, and as a historian I think he should, then I do insist that Harriet Tubman be up there and Free Frank be up there," said Alan Spears, a National Parks Conservation Association director.

A great-great-grandson of Free Frank and retired professor said he wonders: How many Black people are part of the national story? "The white male narrative of this country is a fabrication to honor themselves," said Gerald McWorter, who taught African American studies at the University of Illinois.

Free Frank was an enterprising enslaved Kentucky man who purchased freedom for his pregnant wife, Lucy, then his own, by manufacturing and selling a component of gunpowder and fertilizer. He moved his family to Illinois, a free state, in 1831. He bought 80 acres for \$100 and in 1836 founded New Philadelphia, a promising city of brotherly love, in Pike County, 20 miles from the slave state of Missouri. Collectively, his family acquired 600 acres of farmland.

Free Frank sold lots to Black and European Americans to secure the eventual freedom for 16 more family members.

In New Philadelphia, Black farmers worked next to white farmers; Black children were schooled with white children; Black families attended church with white families. Only the cemeteries remained separate.

The city and farming community grew to become home to 160 people by 1865. It also was a refuge for freedom seekers. Black people from Missouri would swim across the Mississippi River to get to New Philadelphia.

In recent years, in addition to being acknowledged as a stop on the Underground Railroad, the community was deemed a National Historic Landmark. Last year, U.S. Rep. Darin LaHood of Peoria introduced a bill to make the site part of the National Park Service.

The town was dissolved around 1880, about a decade after the railroad notably bypassed it. But two groups work tirelessly to tell Free Frank's story — his descendants, spread widely across the country, and a small group of local residents who form the New Philadelphia Association.

Juliet E.K. Walker memorialized her great-great-grandfather's trek in 1990 by walking from Somerset, Kentucky, to Barry, Illinois, ending just miles from his grave site, which she

campaigns to have listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Walker, a history professor at the University of Texas, journeyed 400 miles over 17 days, as the Tribune reported at the time.

Walker's mother, Thelma McWorter Kirkpatrick Wheaton, who taught in Chicago schools, was the family's first archivist. She kept the family connected, says Gerald McWorter, the family spokesperson. "She would have invented Hallmark cards before Hallmark cards."

In college, Wheaton heard a professor describe the difficulty of noting African American history because there were few written records. Wheaton knew her family possessed some. She returned to New Philadelphia, and with her grandmother's permission, took McWorter family documents back to Fisk University in Tennessee. Her action saved much of the family history: A fire destroyed the homestead shortly after.

Using some of those papers, Walker wrote her book, "Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier."

Oral history has also preserved Free Frank's story. Generations have remembered Free Frank as a man who, while illiterate, navigated a legal system rife with restrictive Black codes; traveled the perilous route to Kentucky repeatedly to free family; developed an interracial community; and negotiated working relationships in a racist country.

Descendant Helen McWorter Simpson, in her book "Makers of History," recounts a conversation Free Frank had with his son Solomon after buying him out of slavery. Solomon was to work hard, deal fairly with neighbors and give back to the community. He was also expected to continue freeing family.

The son honored those wishes, buying seven grandchildren and great-grandchildren within three years after his father's death in 1854 at age 77.

"Even as a child I understood how important the McWorter name was," said Gerald's sister, Sandra McWorter Marsh, who grew up in Chicago and lives in Barry now. "The story was told of Frank's birth, how his father was



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Descendant Gerald McWorter: "Local history means there are always people ... who care about the value of their community."



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A bust by Shirley McWorter-Moss imagines what Free Frank McWorter looked like. He bought his freedom and that of many family members.

his owner, and his mother, Juda, a slave. The fight for freedom was very much a part of our growing up.

"By the time we had to struggle for freedom in our lives, in the '50s and '60s, we knew we were expected to participate in the civil rights movement," she said.

Local history is a powerful aspect of America, said Gerald McWorter, who with his wife, Kate Williams-McWorter, wrote the book "New Philadelphia,"

from highway development. Under his leadership, the association began to buy back the land. The group is still raising funds to pay off two mortgages.

"Back in high school, I recognized the importance of New Philadelphia," he said.

"When you see what happened at the Capitol (on Jan. 6), you look at the things we can do to show that people of all colors and genders deserve respect. The only

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— Alan Spears, a National Parks Conservation Association director

published in 2018, about community and family efforts to recognize the town. "Local history means there are always people in the local community who care about the value of their community. They are the load-bearing beams."

The New Philadelphia Association was started in 1996 to get the site recognized and remembered. Its founder and president, Philip Bradshaw, is a politically connected farmer and activist who protected the town's location

way we get to that is to tell the stories that haven't been told."

Today, nothing remains of the town. Grasses grow over the buildings, long plowed under. The McWorter Cemetery is all but inaccessible. Three historic-appropriate structures sit on original foundations. A kiosk with augmented-reality stations provides information.

Still, relics have been found, and from them, history revealed. Paul Shackel, a University of

Maryland anthropologist, secured a federal grant to locate traces of New Philadelphia. Archaeologists found thousands of artifacts, from children's toys to kitchen tools, a Tribune story reported in 2004.

Recognition could go a long way to a national healing, Shackel said recently.

"It is at the plateau of two significant places in the area — the Lincoln Home and Mark Twain's. There could be a really amazing synergy between these three places; a strong message about the history of race that will elevate New Philadelphia to the national level," he said.

Adoption by the National Park Service will take three people to make it happen — Rep. LaHood and U.S. Sens. Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth. LaHood said he plans to reintroduce the House bill, and Durbin or Duckworth must bring it before the Senate.

If the bill is adopted, tourism would nurture the local economy, Shackel said.

"People will come because they will want to be at this sacred place," he said.

Being a national park would guarantee the site remains, said Marynel Corton, the association's director. "We ... have kept it going, but we are older, and can't always be around to raise the money to make sure it's there. It deserves to be preserved."

Free Frank McWorter's story seems especially poignant now, in our state of cognitive dissonance. Confederate monuments toppled after George Floyd's death. Just months later, Confederate flags brandished at the Capitol. An insurrection, and two weeks later, an inauguration.

"It is one step forward, two steps back," historian Spears said. "Our challenge of the last 10 years, the last 10 months is to acknowledge what the African American experience has been."

It has taken five generations of McWorters to get this far: Gerald, son of Festus, son of Arthur, son of Solomon, son of Frank.

"If New Philadelphia is possible, maybe America is possible," Gerald McWorter said.

To celebrate that, the younger generation must get involved, he said.

"My grandson, who is currently graduating from high school, plays the viola. He is applying to music schools, and one says to him, 'Tell us something interesting about you.'"

"Well," he said, "my name is Solomon."

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Have a Flashback idea? Share your suggestions with editors Colleen Kujawa and Marianne Mather at ckujawa@chicagotribune.com and mmather@chicagotribune.com.