

New Philadelphia

In 1818, Illinois entered the United States as a “free state.” But its first constitution in 1818 had both anti-slavery and pro-slavery parts. It said that further slavery could not be introduced into the state, but it also allowed slavery to continue in salt mines and didn’t free those still enslaved. And local officials didn’t always enforce bans on enslaving more African Americans. Anti-slavery and pro-slavery forces in Illinois would continue to battle in the decades to come.

Still, in free western states like Illinois, African Americans saw an opportunity for liberty and success. In 1836, one Black man formally established a town in Illinois. He was the first to do so. The town was called New Philadelphia, which means “new city of brotherly love.” It would help his family and many others get to freedom.

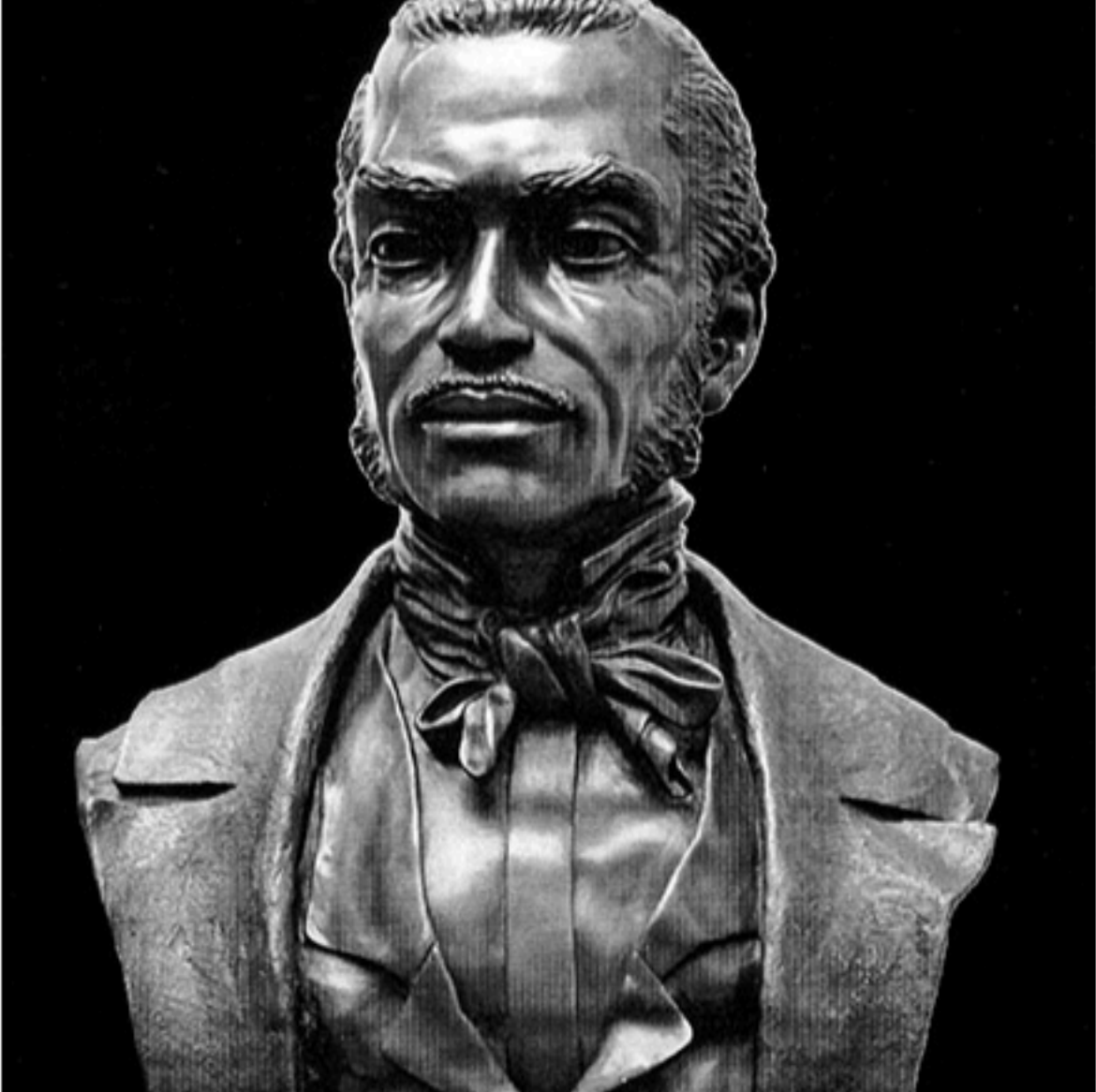


African Americans looked to western states such as Illinois for opportunities to live as free people.

“Free Frank” and “Free Lucy”

Frank McWorter was born into slavery in South Carolina in 1777. His mother Juda was from Africa. His father, George McWhorter, was their enslaver. When Frank was 19, George took him to Kentucky and put him to work clearing the land for farming. He had Frank manage the farm, but he did not free him. Frank did get his enslaver’s permission to work after hours and keep part of his earnings. A freedom vision was taking shape.

First, Frank used his money to buy his wife Lucy out of slavery in 1817. Lucy was pregnant and, this way, their next child would be born free. Then Frank bought his own freedom. The two became known as “Free Frank” and “Free Lucy.” This let everyone know that they were no longer enslaved. It helped to keep them from being kidnapped and sold back into slavery.



Frank McWorter



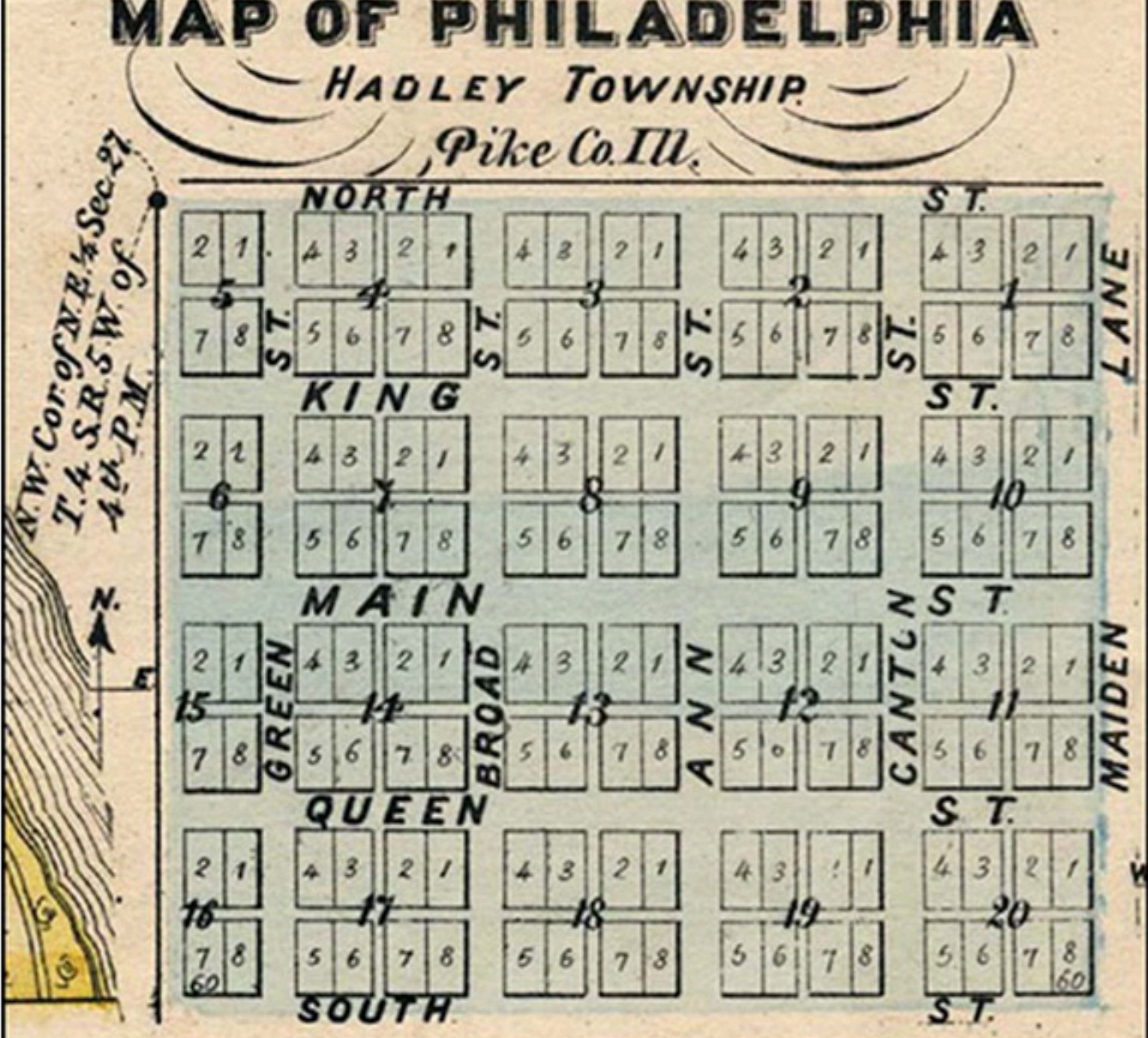
Lucy McWorter, Frank’s wife. Lucy worked on a plantation near the plantation where Frank was enslaved. Frank bought her freedom when she was pregnant with their son, Squire.

Frank mined and sold saltpeter, an ingredient for gunpowder. But violence and laws discriminating against free African Americans were spreading with slavery across the Southern states, so the family made plans to leave. Frank arranged for someone to purchase land for him in Illinois. He carefully sold everything.

His son Frank Jr. had escaped to Canada. He returned and Frank paid an extra high price to buy his freedom. Then Frank, Lucy, their three small children (who were born free), and Frank Jr. set out for the family’s land in Illinois. They would live through the terrible blizzards of 1830–1831 and it would take them seven months. But they would not forget their enslaved family members back in Kentucky.

Carrying on the Freedom Mission in Illinois

As they cleared the land, they farmed and saved. In 1835, Frank went back to Kentucky to free his son Solomon. The family mission was set. More trips were made. They were dangerous, but successful. In 1836, Frank set aside some of his land for a town. He platted and registered New Philadelphia. He was the first Black man in the United States to do so. Others joined the freedom mission as he sold town lots to pay for more family members back in Kentucky. By 1837, Frank needed legal protections that only White people in Illinois had. He got a “name law” passed that enabled him to “sue and be sued” in court—and officially named him and his family McWorter. It was spelled without the h to be different from his relatives who were enslavers.



The town of New Philadelphia

New Philadelphia became home to African American and European American people, many of whom were actively helping others become free. They purchased relatives and guided freedom seekers. As family oral history put it, “The story was, If you can get to New Philadelphia, those McWorter boys’ll get you a pair of shoes and a horse and help you get to Canada.” There were two shoemakers in that tiny town. Frank had the franchise to gather up all wild horses in the area. And Frank Jr. made horseshoes in his blacksmith shop.

Equality and Invention

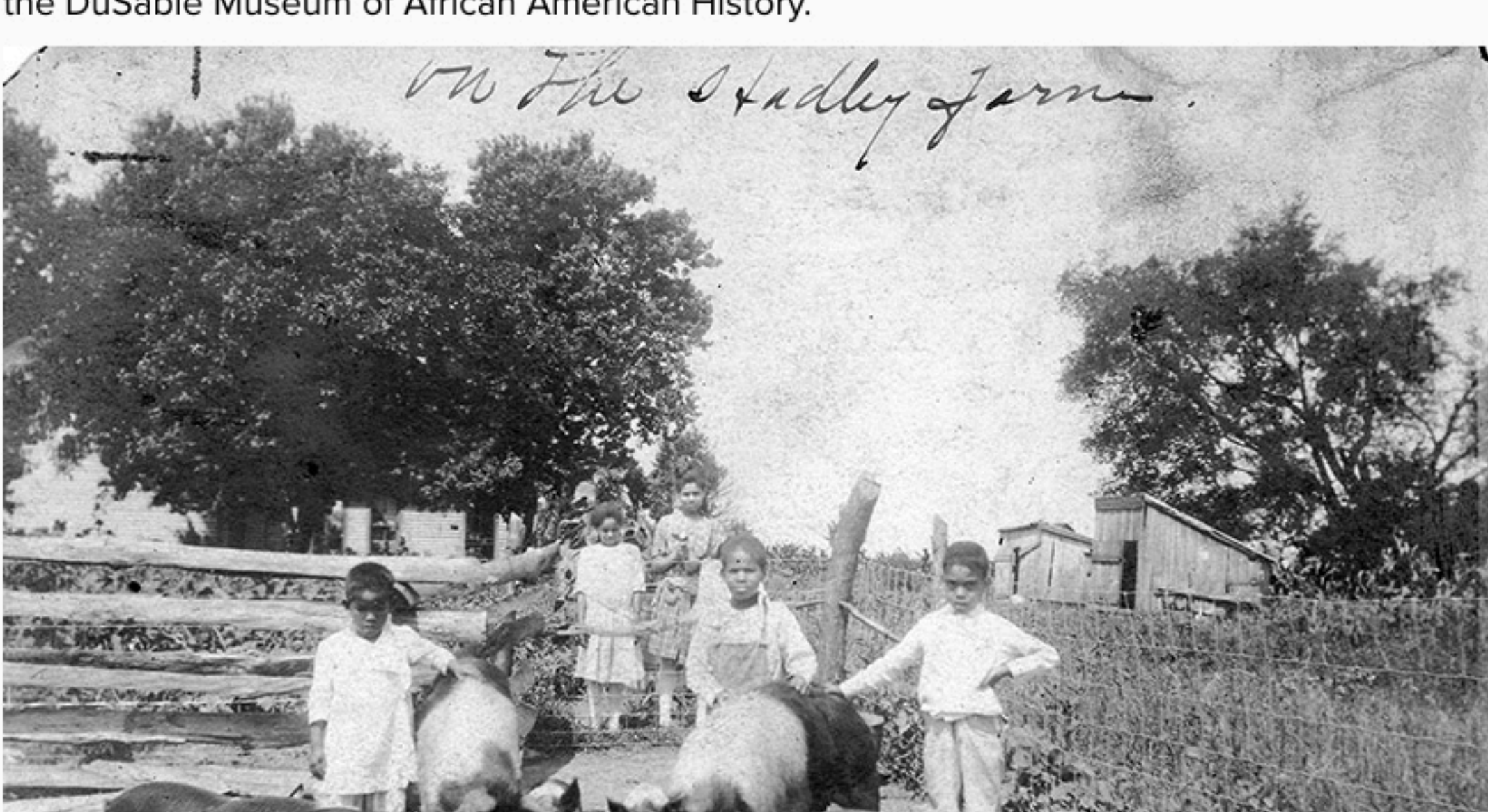
New Philadelphians had limited resources, but they wanted both African American and European American children to be educated, in the same school. So they built one. Businesses in the town were integrated. Free Frank’s son Solomon ran a furniture business with a European American business partner.



New Philadelphia schoolchildren, 1925

Frank McWorter died in 1854 and his children continued the freedom mission. His daughter Sarah went back to Kentucky and in one day bought three children from three different men. It took 40 years, but Frank and his family freed 16 family members.

Frank’s son Solomon invented a device for making sorghum syrup, which abolitionists used instead of what they called “blood-stained sugar.” His grandson John patented new designs for aircraft. His great-granddaughter Thelma taught in Chicago Public Schools and helped start the DuSable Museum of African American History.



Frank’s great-granddaughter Thelma and other great-grandchildren tend to pigs in New Philadelphia.

New Philadelphia never grew beyond 160 residents that we know of, but it had a big impact. Countless people passed through the town on their way to freedom. A railroad was built through Pike County, but with investors from the slave state of Missouri, and it deliberately avoided New Philadelphia. People were eventually drawn away to jobs in big industrial cities like Chicago. A small number stayed and farmed. They remembered and respected New Philadelphia and the freedom mission that took root there.



A family reunion in New Philadelphia, 1920s

What Do You Think?

Talk With a partner. What do you think about Frank, the McWorters, and New Philadelphia?