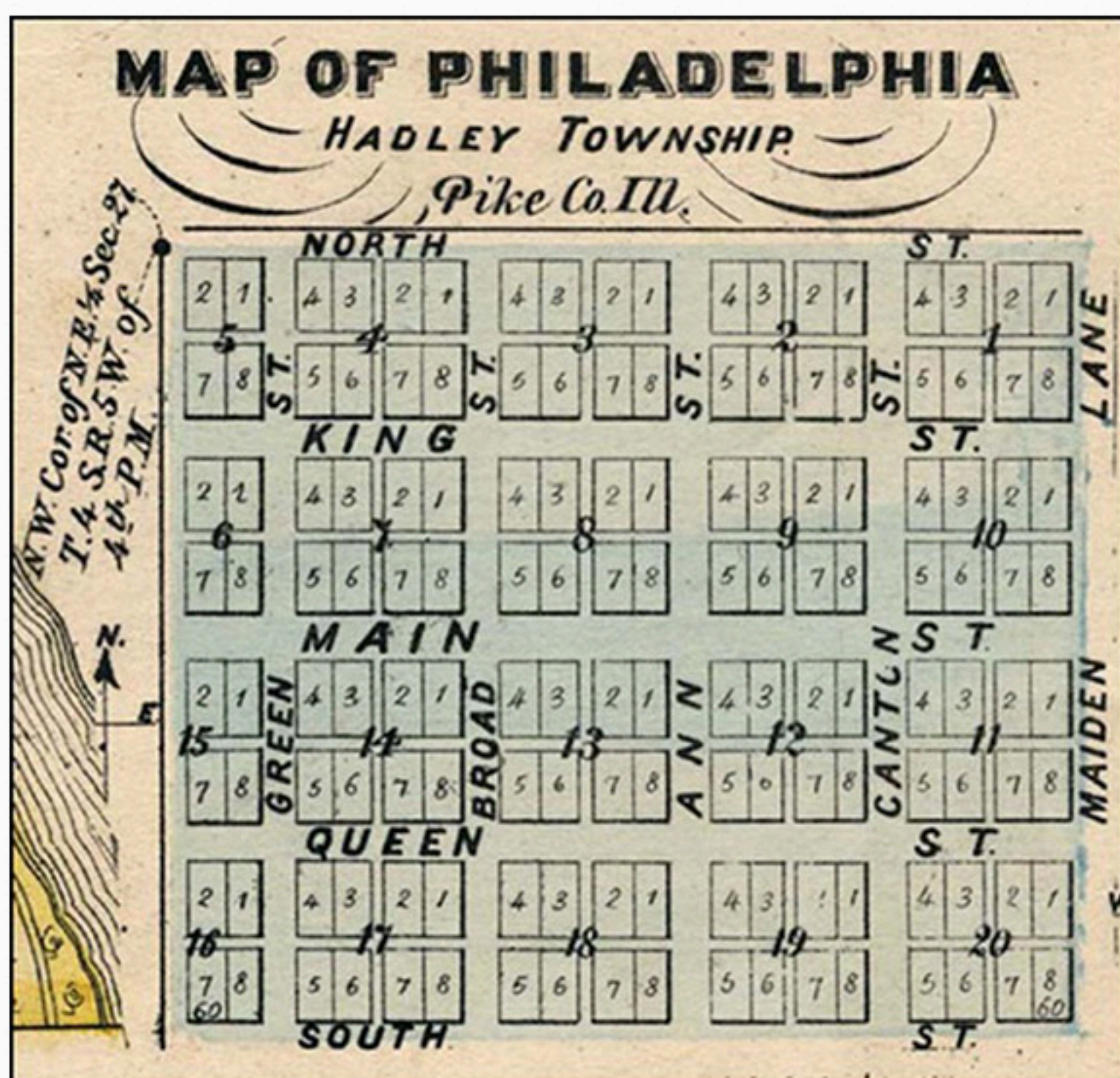


National Park Plans for New Philadelphia, Illinois

Earlier in the Unit, you read about New Philadelphia, Illinois. The town was platted and legally registered by Frank McWorter in 1836—the first ever by an African American man in the United States. It was a stop on the Underground Railroad, with residents helping their families and others out of slavery to freedom. Frank sold town lots to Black and White people and used the money to purchase freedom for his family members still enslaved.

New Philadelphia, Illinois



The town of New Philadelphia

With the national migration from rural to urban areas, New Philadelphia lost residents. It lost its businesses, post office (in 1885), and school (1947). It became a tiny settlement of farming families. But it was remembered and respected. In 1966 the Burdick family, who had arrived at the same time as the McWorters, proposed a permanent marker to help people know the history of the town. Later, a highway was built that just missed New Philadelphia. That sparked even more efforts to mark and learn about the town.

Years of Ever-Increasing Recognition

Local activists formed the New Philadelphia Association. They recruited archaeologists to study the town site. From 2002 to 2011, excavations found more than 150,000 artifacts, plant remains, and animal remains. These tell about daily life among early Native Americans and, later, New Philadelphians. They affirm that African Americans and European Americans shared their lives in the town.



New Philadelphia schoolchildren, 1925

Regional and national media began to tell the story. That brought more attention to the town and its achievements. It told everyone that New Philadelphia is part of American history and belongs to all of us.

Each step in national recognition took a lot of organizing. Great-great-granddaughter Juliet Walker walked from Kentucky to Illinois to win recognition of Frank's gravesite. Other honors and attention followed. The dream of making New Philadelphia part of the National Park Service was becoming reality. As of 2021, Congress is weighing the decision.

New Philadelphia and the National Park Service

Becoming part of our national parks would help bring the story of New Philadelphia to many more people. Lots of questions must be answered first: Is the place significant? Is the site suitable? Is park status feasible? And what kind of management would be needed?

If and when the town site joins the National Park Service, the service will make the site more accessible and informative. They will build on what is already there: three cabins dating back to the 1800s, a shelter with informational signs, parking space for three or four cars, an augmented reality tour of the site, a gravel road, and a beautiful view of rolling Illinois hills and fields. They will use what has already been written and filmed about New Philadelphia. And, six miles from the nearest town, there are no buildings on the site that would need to be torn down to make room for the park.



Cabins on the site of New Philadelphia

Your work in Unit 7 has been about different ways people moved west in the early years of the United States. Many of the places and events of this time are unknown. Sometimes these important historical events and places are commemorated as National Parks for their influence on our nation. Together as a class, work out the details of creating such a park site in New Philadelphia, Illinois.

You will be assigned a role by your teacher. Community members, legislators, and the National Park Service will come together to plan a park site at New Philadelphia. Each group does their part to complete the simulation. Here's what each group will do:

Group 1: Community members will discuss the pros and cons of having a park in their area. They'll think about the effects it will have on the community and tell the legislators about the details.

Group 2: Legislators will come up with questions they want to ask the community members. Legislators must consider important issues such as the local and national effect, and what cause or purpose the Park will serve.

Group 3: The National Park Service will step in and research the town site itself. They will figure out the practical part of the Park. How will people get there? What will they do once they are there? The Park Service has to plan to meet the needs of community members, legislators, and future visitors.

Think about National Parks you've read about, seen pictures of, or visited as you work on this simulation. Whether you are a community member, legislator, or a member of the National Park Service, think about the plans Frank and Lucy made to free their family and others. How can New Philadelphia tell its freedom stories?