



Underground Railroad Free Press

The largest circulation Underground Railroad news publication

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Young Conductors

Here are recent essays by two students which capture what is happening in Underground Railroad education in grade schools and middle schools these days. As *Free Press* has reported, our research has shown that only about twenty percent of Americans who graduated from high school in the 1960s or before had received any education on the Underground Railroad in school, but that the proportion had risen to over eighty percent for those who graduated in the 1990s. It is probably close to or even past ninety percent today and that is a wonderful thing.

When Harriet Tubman, the last major figure of the Underground Railroad, died in 1913, the nation's memory of the Underground Railroad began to wane until by the 1960s many Americans had not heard of the Underground Railroad or had only vague notions of what it was. This nation-defining moral imperative, the war for the soul of America as author Fergus Bordewich has aptly put it, was well on its way to the forgotten dusty back shelves of history.

It was teachers on their own who in the 1960s began to rekindle the nation's Underground Railroad legacy by introducing the topic into their teaching. Their initiative spread to other teachers, entire schools and school districts, and of course to their students and the students' families. Since the 1990s, the press and authors began writing again on the Underground Railroad, and several major Underground Railroad institutions have been founded. Among these are *Underground Railroad Free Press*, Cincinnati's marvelous National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and the National Park Service's Network to Freedom program. The Underground Railroad is back and it was teachers who got the revival started.

Below read two nice examples of this revival in the essays of Emma Carton, a third-grader at Erdenheim Elementary School in Glenside, Pennsylvania, and Eli Sanchez, an eighth-grader at Plum Point Middle School in Huntingtown, Maryland. The essays are followed by our interview of Diane McGrath, Emma's teacher. Be sure not to miss the discovered connection between Emma and Eli below.

Slaves Become Free!



By Emma Carton
April 7, 2009

On Friday, April 3, 2009, the 3rd graders at Erdenheim Elementary became slaves! They had a simulation of the Underground Railroad where some teachers helped the students while other teachers tried to capture them. If students got captured, with a red marker the teacher who captured them would put a red X on their hands. The only way students could enter a room without getting a red X was to enter a door with a quilt square next to it. There were five safe-houses. At one of the safe-houses (the art room) the students got water and Saltines and were asked to find a route on a map to Canada. After the students finished their water and Saltines, the teacher (who was Mrs. McGrath, my teacher) at that safe-house led them through a pretend paper river made by the 3rd graders in Mrs. McGrath's class and followed the North Star. Another safe-house was the school Library where the students answered questions about books. The final destination was the Principal's office where the students received a freedom pass that confirmed they were free. All the 3rd graders made it to freedom! They also did a web quest on the computer and watched a movie called Follow the Drinking Gourd. It was a good learning experience because the 3rd graders got to see what it was like to travel the Underground Railroad.

[Editor's Note: We informed Emma's teacher about the quilt myth.]

News independently reported on today's Underground Railroad
The Free Press Prizes, the Underground Railroad community's top honors

Datebook, the Underground Railroad community's central calendar
Lynx, the central registry of Underground Railroad organizations
Free Press surveys of the Underground Railroad community

Eli Sanchez's essay on the Underground Railroad work of his fourth great-grandparents, Ezra and Margaret Michael, was a prize winner at his school. Eli's full work on the project is posted at his mother's website, http://web.me.com/melaney68/Site_4/Welcome.html.

Ezra Michael, Traitor or Freedom Fighter?



By Eli Sanchez
2008-2009 school year

Thesis

Ezra Michael hosted a spring house that saved hundreds of Freedom Seekers during the Civil War. His legacy made history by creating one of the few safe-houses that continues to be owned by the same family. This safe-house is a historical site that can be visited by the public. Ezra's legacy made an impact on the people who visited the spring house in the 1800s. Today, the Michael family carries on that legacy through educating others about the Underground Railroad.

About Ezra

Ezra was born on November 9, 1813 and died on March 16, 1886 at the age of 72. Ezra married Margaret Ellen Dudderar on June 7, 1841. Margaret was born on November 9, 1823 and died on October 1, 1897. In 1878 Ezra built [the new home at] Cooling Springs farm. Ezra and Margaret Michael had seven children.

So What?

If Ezra Michael did not have a safe-house fewer Freedom Seekers would have made it to the safety of the North. At that time, if you were found helping Freedom Seekers you could be killed or arrested, depending on how much the town liked you. Ezra Michael put his life on the line to stand up for what he thought was right. The Michael family is proud to be one of two original families in the United States that has maintained a farm with a safe-house. Ezra surely did not know the legacy he had established.

Conclusion

Ezra Michael relates to the theme Actions and Legacies in History because his action (the safe-house he ran) left his legacy in history (Ezra was a safe-house operator). His actions could have gotten him killed but that didn't stop him from doing what was right. He valued the lives of Freedom Seekers and went against the belief that slavery was acceptable. Because of this value of life he started a safe-house. Thanks to the safe-house, many more Freedom Seekers made it to the North. That is what Ezra Michael did for history.

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In an unusual coincidence, Emma Carton's father happened to grow up on the same farm where Eli Sanchez's ancestors operated their safe-house. Eli and Emma aren't related and have now met by email.

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Emma Carton's teacher, Diane McGrath, is another modern-day Underground Railroad pioneer who took the initiative and introduced many elements of her teaching on the Underground Railroad into her classes on her own. Her innovations have since spread school-wide. Ms. McGrath reports that her Pennsylvania school has had the Underground Railroad in its curricula for at least as long as the twelve years she has taught there. Some of the teaching innovations which she introduced are the simulation which you read about in Emma's essay, a video on the drinking gourd, using the example of Harriet Tubman to teach morality, and combining instruction on wetlands and the Underground Railroad to reinforce both. When she introduced her innovations into her lesson plan which is reviewed by the school for approval, other teachers rapidly adopted them and the innovations spread school-wide. McGrath's innovations have now caught the eye of her school district and appear to be on their way to being instituted district-wide.

This is how the nation's reawakening to the Underground Railroad unfolded: one teacher at a time. The nation and the international Underground Railroad community need to be grateful to their Diane McGraths who have now made millions aware of how the war for the soul of America was won.