



UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FREE PRESS®

Independent reporting on today's Underground Railroad community

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Whitehead, Wellman, 2 NYC Officials Named 2017 Free Press Prize Laureates



Colson Whitehead
Knowledge

A 2017 Pulitzer Prize winner, the creator of Underground Railroad site evaluation, and two elected officials key in saving Manhattan's last Underground Railroad site have been named winners of the 2017 Underground Railroad Free Press Prizes.

The 2017 Hortense Simmons Prize for Advancement of Knowledge has been awarded to Colson Whitehead for illuminating the Underground Railroad to millions through his novel, *The Underground Railroad*, which won this year's Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

The Free Press Prize for the Advancement of Knowledge is named for former prize judge Dr. Hortense Simmons who died in 2011 of Lou Gehrig's disease.

The 2017 Free Press Prize for Leadership in the Underground Railroad Community has been awarded to veteran Underground Railroad historian Judith Wellman, originator of the



Judith Wellman
Leadership



Richard Gottfried
Preservation

Wellman Scale, which has become the standard for evaluating Underground Railroad site and story claims.

The 2017 Free Press Prize for Preservation has been awarded jointly to New York State Assemblyman Richard Gottfried and New York City Council Member Corey Johnson for their long, tireless efforts that successfully preserved Hopper-Gibbons House, Manhattan's sole surviving Underground Railroad safe-house.

Whitehead's blockbuster *New York Times* best-seller was also awarded the National Book Award for Fiction, the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction, and the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize.

In a controversial twist, the novel re-makes the Underground Railroad in-
Please see Prizes, page 3, column 1



Corey Johnson
Preservation

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The 2017 Free Press Prizes for leadership, preservation and advancement of knowledge are announced.

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How is it possible that the Underground Railroad is hardly mentioned at the National Museum of African American History and Culture?

1



Sign of the times: right-wingers silence a major television voice on the Underground Railroad.

2



Did Virginia law enforcement stand aside in Charlottesville in sympathy with white nationalists? Looks that way.

2



Who was it who reawakened the nation's memory of the Underground Railroad? Probably someone you knew personally.

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Take part. The *Free Press* website offers many ways to become involved in today's Underground Railroad.

At urfreepress.com

Free Press Lobbies National Museum to Include Underground Railroad

In July *Free Press* wrote to National Museum of African American History and Culture CEO Lonnie Bunch commenting on the conspicuous omission of the Underground Railroad from the museum, and urging that the gap be corrected. To date we have received no response.

The Underground Railroad community's desire to have the museum recognize the Underground Railroad as

the fundamental strand of the African American story that it is was vividly born out in the 2017 Free Press survey of the international Underground Railroad community in which an overwhelming 96 percent want the museum to "tell the story."

See our request to Dr. Bunch on page 4 here. Visit the *Free Press* website for the full survey report and its slide 32 on the museum's omission.

The new National Museum of African-American History and Culture does not have an Underground Railroad display or program. Should the museum tell the story of the Underground Railroad or are current displays and programs sufficient without much mention of the Underground Railroad?

Citing this survey result and other appeals, *Underground Railroad Free Press* has written to National Museum of African-American History and Culture CEO Lonnie Bunch and to selected Members of Congress urging that the Museum mount a permanent meaningful Underground Railroad exhibit.



Tell the story: 95.7%

OK as is: 4.3%

Right-Wing Sinclair Broadcast Group Buys Producer of *Underground* Television Series, Then Cancels Series, Saying "No Longer Fits"

Following conservative Baltimore media company Sinclair Broadcast Group's purchase of Tribune Media, Tribune CEO Peter Kern announced that its acclaimed series, *Underground*, "no longer fits with our new direction" and was being dropped. Through Tribune, Sinclair now owns Chicago television station WGN America, producer of the series.

Said Kern, "As WGN America evolves and broadens the scope and scale of its portfolio of series, we recently announced that resources will be reallocated to a new strategy to increase our relevance within the rapidly changing television landscape. This move is designed to deliver additional value for our advertising and distribution partners and offer viewers more original content across our air."

The \$3.9 billion Sinclair-Tribune merger gives Sinclair control over more than 200 stations nationwide in what is rumored to be Sinclair's plan to reposition itself as a national competitor to Fox News.

Underground aired for two ten-episode seasons, its last installment in May. However, attempts are being made to transplant the *Underground* series to a new home.

Oscar-winning musician John Legend, the show's executive producer who played abolitionist Frederick Douglass in *Underground*, is lobbying for the series to be picked up by another content provider. Said Legend, "Be wary of Sinclair. They're trying to make local stations into mini Fox Newses. WGN America has been bought and is going a different direction strategically. We will find a new home for *Underground*. Content wins. We're not reliant on a particular network to make great content. We're so proud of our show and the audience that supported it."

The Hollywood Reporter reports that Sony Pictures Television, which co-produced *Underground*, is looking to continue *Underground* if a new home can be found for the series.



Did Virginia state troopers and Charlottesville police deliberately stand down to give voice to white supremacists?

Charlottesville: of 1,000, 8 arrests, 3 dead, 34 hurt. **Boston:** of 40,000, 33 arrests, no deaths, no injuries.

Remaining unexplained is the lax law enforcement response to the white nationalist riot in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12 in comparison to successful policing of the counter-protest in Boston a week later. While the Boston demonstration of 40,000 resulted in no injuries or deaths, Charlottesville's, involving only 1,000, sent dozens to the hospital and resulted in the deaths of innocent bystander Heather Heyer and two helicopter pilots.

News outlets covering the riot reported that in clash after clash between white nationalists and the Ku Klux Klan on one side and anti-racists on the other, both city police and state troopers stood back, letting fighting between the two groups escalate. Taking their cue from permissive law enforcement, the white nationalists spread their attacks unabated and far outside the previously authorized boundaries for their demonstration.

A ready explanation for the law enforcement stand-down that doesn't seem to have made its way into news reporting is that a critical mass of law enforcement personnel present in Charlottesville that day wanted to see what they regarded as

elite effete multi-culti townies learn who is in charge when it comes to race and "southern tradition."

Nearly all law enforcement personnel in Charlottesville that day were southern and most were white. In a Home Box Office news clip, what catches the eye vividly are only a single arrest, and what appears to be a grinning stand-back by the Virginia State Police acting as so many beefy, over-testosteroned white sympathizers who, by doing nothing, were tacitly rooting for their skinhead bros.

Rev. Carlton Smith, a minister present with other clergy counter-protesters put the situation plainly: "The hope was that there would be intervention by police to remove us in the event of violence. But in terms of being a presence at the park, at the rally, they were not there. There wasn't a possibility that the police were going to come to our defense when the white supremacists turned on the clergy."

After an officer of the Charlottesville police force revealed to reporters that Charlottesville city manager Maurice Jones had ordered police chief Al Thomas to re-

frain from direct police action unless he, Jones, authorized it, accounts of what actually transpired quickly diverged at odds to each other.

During the riot, Jones was in touch with Thomas throughout but his authorization to Thomas to control escalating violence never came. Thomas is African American and Jones is white.

Though Chief Thomas said in carefully chosen terms that he didn't tell his officers not to intervene without permission from Jones, he did not go as far as to say that Jones had never given the order.

Following the riot, Charlottesville Mayor Michael Signer held Jones responsible and demanded a full accounting from him for his lack of action. Jones then volubly tried to shift blame to Signer and the City Council, which, however, are powerless under Charlottesville's city-manager form of government to have had any on-the-spot authority to override Thomas and end the riot.

Rumor has it that Jones will be fired but, as if this writing, that has not happened.

Prizes

to a literal subterranean mechanical conveyance, a license which some felt adds to misperceptions of some that the Underground Railroad was in fact Underground.

But *The Underground Railroad* is a terrific read that earned its many honors and has done as much as any publication to put the Underground Railroad front and center in the public mind.



It was Dr. Wellman whose research conclusively showed that, with over 96 percent of site claims lacking proof of Underground Railroad involvement, meaningful interpretation of the Underground Railroad must rest primarily on oral traditions. Her work upended the narrow "documented proof only" dogma propounded by some academicians and the National Park Service which resulted in alienating them from the mainstream Underground Railroad community, especially site owners.

Using her widely adopted five-point scale, Wellman showed that two-thirds of sites rest on handed-down stories with little if any evidence, a finding closely matching later research by *Free Press*. Lack of solid site documentation is no mystery, as the Underground Railroad was illegal throughout its entire 280-year existence.

With 24 of every 25 safe-house and route claims absent of hard proof of involvement, the Wellman Scale reveals the Underground Railroad as it was in its time: mysterious, clandestine and, now as then, knowable almost entirely from what was heard and inferred.

To view, download or use the Wellman Scale, click on [How to use the Wellman Scale](#) on the home page of the *Free Press* website.

Dr. Wellman, Professor Emerita of History at the State University of New York, headed the restoration of the 1816 Farmington Quaker Meeting House, and has long been active in writing on the history of the women's and suffrage movements in the United States.



Over the last nine years *Free Press* has reported and editorialized on the now long-running saga of Hopper-Gibbons House, a 19th-century townhome in New York City's Manhattan Borough that had been owned and used as a safe-

house by abolitionists Isaac Hopper and his daughter Abigail Gibbons.

Since 2008 when owner Anthony Mamounas began construction of an illegal extra story and alteration of the old building's façade, neighbors Fern Luskin and Julie Finch have led a resolute battle to maintain the building's original design. Mamounas fought back, dragging the case through court and Historical Commission hearings without clear resolution until earlier this year.

Enter State Assemblyman Richard Gottfried and City Councilman Corey Johnson. Says Luskin, "Assemblyman Gottfried has supported us from the beginning and has been there for us every step of the way. He spearheaded the coalition of all the electeds, offered his amazing analytical skills and guidance on strategy, held successful press conferences, fundraised (he himself made a generous contribution), organized meetings among government offices, made TV appearances and showed up to these hearings to read his testimony himself."

She adds that, "Corey Johnson is so passionate about Hopper-Gibbons House that he mentioned it in his inaugural speech when elected as Council Member. Without mincing words, he hosted one of Mayor De Blasio's Town Hall meetings on Hopper-Gibbons House where De Blasio's and his courageous responses finally led the City to make Mamounas tear down the additions."

As reported in our May issue, the high-level official attention finally moved the City's Historic Preservation Commission to order restoration. When Mamounas had done nothing by his July 27 deadline, the City Building Department was authorized to step in, perform the tear-down itself, and bill Mamounas.

First elected in 1970 as a student, Richard Gottfried is the longest serving member ever of the New York State Assembly.

In his first run for political office on a pro-LGBTQ platform in 2013, Corey Johnson was elected to the New York City council with 86 percent of the vote.

For their parts in preserving Hopper-Gibbons House, Fern Luskin and Julie Finch were the recipients of the 2009 Underground Railroad Free Press Prize for Preservation.

Did You Know . . .



Only about 20 percent of Americans who went to school in in the 1960s received any instruction on the Underground Railroad from their schools, but today nearly all students in the United States are being taught about the Underground Railroad before they graduate from high school.

This marked improvement was begun by individual teachers inserting the Underground Railroad into their teaching beginning in the 1960s.

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Peter H. Michael
Publisher

July 20, 2017

Dr. Lonnie Bunch, Director
National Museum of African American History and Culture
1400 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC, 20560

Dear Dr. Bunch:

Underground Railroad Free Press, North America's top-circulation Underground Railroad news publication, is distributed internationally free of charge to an estimated 110,000 Underground Railroad site owners, program executives and operators, Congressional leaders and their staff, federal and state officials, researchers, enthusiasts and the general public. *Free Press* covered the lead-up to and opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture with multiple positive articles.

Free Press (urrfreepress.com) serves as the international Underground Railroad community's central registry of contemporary Underground Railroad programs, institutions and sites, and awards the three annual Free Press Prizes for Underground Railroad leadership, preservation and advancement of knowledge, the community's top honors.

Since 2007, the annual *Free Press* surveys have provided valuable information not available elsewhere on Underground Railroad knowledge, opinions, practices, economics, trends and topics. Full survey results are made available to the community, executives of major American and Canadian Underground Railroad organizations, and Members of Congress interested in the Underground Railroad. Results also help *Free Press* in shaping its future content and programs.

I am writing to you to inform you of a striking result concerning the National Museum of African American History and Culture from the 2017 survey just conducted. In the survey, we asked, "The new National Museum of African-American History and Culture does not have an Underground Railroad display or program. Should the museum tell the story of the Underground Railroad or are current displays and programs sufficient without much mention of the Underground Railroad?"

Survey respondents were more than emphatic in their opinion.

95.7% "The museum needs to tell the story."

4.3% "Current museum displays and programs are sufficient without much mention of the Underground Railroad."

View or download 2017 survey results at urrfreepress.com/index_files/2017_Survey_Report.pdf.

The survey question was asked as a result of my visit to the museum during the pre-opening press tour that I attended last year during which I could find no display devoted to the Underground Railroad, only scant mention of it here and there, and multiple museum staff unaware of any Underground Railroad display or program. I was struck by this absence in your otherwise outstanding museum which impressed me overwhelmingly positively.

It is hard to think of any aspect more central to the African American experience than the Underground Railroad, making its absence in the museum all the more a mystery. As one promi-

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

ment author on the Underground Railroad has put it, the Underground Railroad was "the war for the soul of America." A war it was figuratively and literally, and won it was by the thousands of freedom seekers, safehouse operators and conductors who risked everything in what was the nation's first civil rights movement and first integrated mass undertaking. This noblest of American enterprises, racial or otherwise, defined the national moral bedrock of today.

We urge you to consider mounting a permanent Underground Railroad display at the National Museum of African American History and Culture as soon as is practical in the near future. *Free Press* stands ready in any way possible including articles, editorials, reporting, positive publicity and advice, as you might request it, to aid you and the museum in making this a reality.

Please let us know at your earliest convenience what the public may expect in the not too distant future about remedying the absence of the Underground Railroad at the museum.

Please accept this letter and our recommendation in the constructive spirit in which they are offered.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Peter H. Michael". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Peter H. Michael
Publisher