

# Touring Illinois on the Underground Railroad Challenges Local Researcher

Story and photo by LIZ QUIRIN  
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Taking a trip requires planning, packing, perhaps a map, sometimes a bon voyage party, and then a sharing of photos, souvenirs and memories.

That's not the way it was for African Americans traveling on the Underground Railroad who risked their lives for freedom. To celebrate Black History month, we talked with people who want to research the past and change the future of the descendants of a people who came to this country enslaved.

"We have to look at the migration issue as one that occurred in waves," Anne Walker said. Walker of East St. Louis is documenting the Underground Railroad through a six-year grant from the state of Illinois.

The project, Freedom Trails: Legacies of Hope, is documenting the Illinois trails and the journeys of those enslaved as they traveled to freedom. Along the way, Walker has discovered some of the places where freedom seekers found safe haven and some of the people who assisted them on their journey.

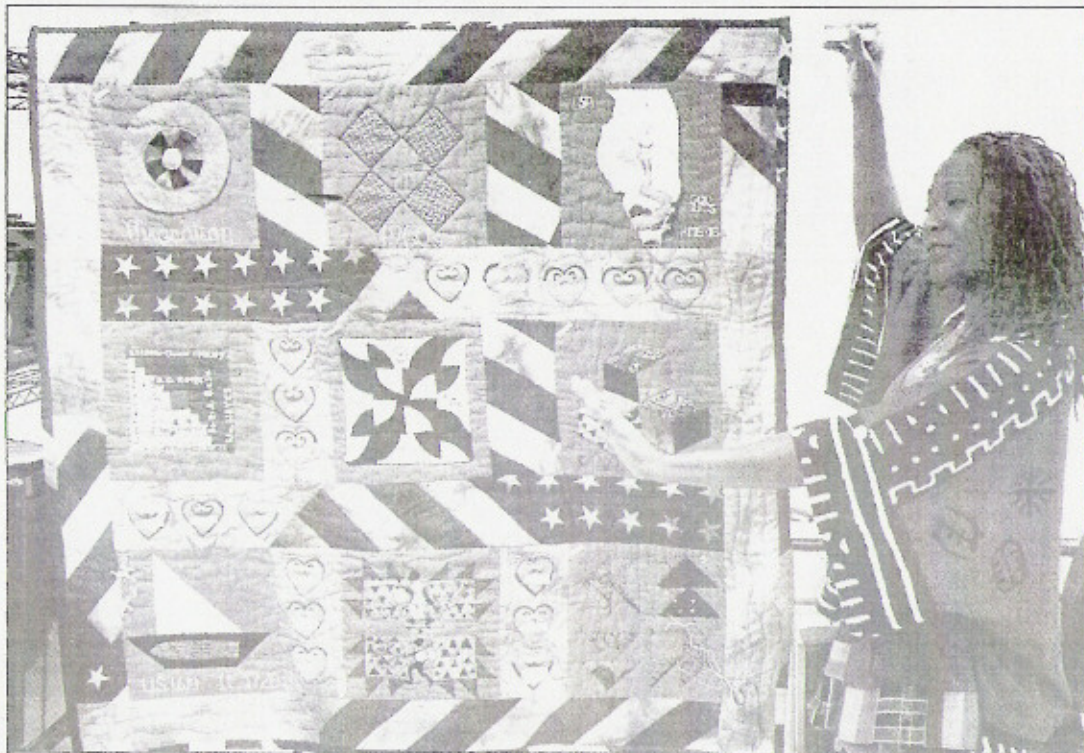
"The goal is to create a cultural inventory — to map out visitor friendly trails that people will be able to follow," Walker said.

Walker commissioned artist, Edna Patterson Petty, to take her vision and translate it into a quilt from which she tells the story of migration from enslaved to free, and Walker names some of the people who have had an impact on those earlier journeys and present-day people who continue their journeys today.

One block of the quilt shows a log cabin with a red square in the center. If the quilt was hung on a line or a fence post, a freedom seeker would know this was a safe house. Another quilt panel, called flying geese, has one direction sewn in black that indicates the direction the freedom seeker should take from that point on.

The songs sung in the fields or by people traveling on the railroad often held messages: "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" suggested freedom seekers would be traveling by wagon through the area. The word went out in song.

In researching the railroad, Walker has spent hours pouring over old court documents, talked to hundreds of people, listened to stories and now has a fascinating story of her own to tell



"It's a talking quilt," Anne Walker says. With it, she tells the story of the Underground Railroad in Illinois and some of the people — past and present — who have had, and continue to have, an impact on Americans today.

about the heroism of both those who traveled the Underground Railroad and those who helped them.

These stories were sometimes difficult to find. "Everything was so secret," she said. "I have to piece it together like a patchwork quilt."

Help came from across Illinois, a free state, George Burroughs of Cairo, a black railroad conductor, sometimes gave railroad passes to those escaping from Kentucky or Missouri, to ride the train to Chicago where they would be free and safe.

Those traveling on this railroad could find a safe house with Benjamin Roots of Tamaroa, Walker said.

In East St. Louis, "I have been told Church Lane was an Underground Railroad stop, and folks at St. Philip may have been involved," Walker said. She hasn't found any way to verify the Church Lane stop yet, but she's still looking for information and listening to stories. "People give me bits and

pieces," she said. "People are still reluctant to talk about the Underground Railroad. It was a secret then, and people don't want to admit slaves were brought here."

Sometimes, instead of calling them slaves, people called them "servants," Walker said.

The Old Slave House along Rte. 1 near Equality is the "reverse of the Underground Railroad," Walker said. Now closed, the house was used to hold runaway slaves until their "owners" came to reclaim them. Walker wants the house reopened because this is part of everyone's heritage.

Walker said she suspects "Catholics were more involved than we know."

Walker, gives presentations about the Underground Railroad to groups, both to educate them about the sites and to introduce the people who traveled and maintained the railroad. She is also looking for information and sto-

ries to add to the knowledge she has.

Walker's research has surfaced stories that document a journey taken by those seeking freedom after slaves were brought to the United States in 1619.

"It's all about a journey," she said, but it's a journey that continued long after the Civil War. She talks about the "migration" as occurring in waves: first, people were enslaved and brought to this country; the Civil War and Emancipation Proclamation freed them on paper; the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s brought another wave to the surface and pointed to injustice and a lack of freedom for African Americans.

The project is "a reaching back, giving acknowledgment to our ancestors as we move forward," Walker said.

For more information on the project, please see the web site: [www.freedomtrails2legacies.org](http://www.freedomtrails2legacies.org). To schedule a presentation, please call 397-5511.