

Freedom Trails, Legacies of Hope



African American Heritage Tourism Development
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Media Release

Date: June 7, 2004, 2004

Effective: Immediately

Suggested Lead:

Lamps of Learning, Lights to Freedom Conference is Successful

Fifty years ago, Brown versus Board began to open eyes about the inequities in the public school educational system. The case provoked the evolution from separate and unequal to integration in this country. Today, we look back over those transitions and marvel at “from whence we came.” This reflection stimulated one organization, “Freedom Trails, Legacies of Hope” to want to look back at higher education’s impact on the African American Experience in Illinois. On June 5th, in the city of Jacksonville, on Illinois College’s campus, the Lamps of Knowledge, Lights to Freedom Conference brought together representatives from several colleges to explore the vital roles of Illinois’ Educational Institutions and their surrounding communities in the anti-slavery and Post-Civil War eras.

Created and presented by Freedom Trails, Legacies of Hope, hosted by Illinois College in collaboration with the Jacksonville Visitors Bureau and the Morgan County Historical Society, the conference featured scholarship, networking and adventure. Representatives from Illinois, Knox, Wheaton Colleges and Southern Illinois University presented on panels. The conference is designed as an annual event to rotate on various campuses throughout the state. Among the presenters were Lecturer Dr. Owen Muelder, Archivist Dr. Davis Malone, Black Studies Director Dr. Joseph Brown, Consultant Charlotte Johnson and John Powell, publisher of the Jacksonville Journal Courier. Loreli Steuer, the 1st

Lady of Illinois college and James Murphy, Illinois College Public , led by Art Wilson Relations Director served as moderators and hosts.

The City of Jacksonville, located about 40 miles southwest of Springfield, was a hotbed for Underground Railroad activities. Several homes used as stations are still standing and regular tours are conducted. The conference featured this tour, led by Art Wilson and an interactive reenactment celebration of freedom with dance and music, at the newly acquire 180 year old Woodlawn Farm. Dancers from the SIU East St. Louis Performing Arts Center, under the direction of Theodore Jamison presented both Square dance and Dunham technique. Artist Kunama Mtendaji called to the ancestor and welcome quests with opening drum songs. Springfield musician Virgil Rhodes ended the program with a jazz demonstration. The Morgan County Historical Society purchased the Farm with plans to turn it into an Underground Railroad museum this past December. The Illinois Historic Preservation Agency estimates some 500 properties in Illinois were associated with this movement.

The National Park Service's National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program integrates such verifiable properties into regional and national stories. At Freedom Trail's Legacies of Hope's conference, James Hill, the program's Midwest regional coordinator, discussed NPS role and introduced participants to the Network to Freedom's nomination process.

Incorporated in 2001, Freedom Trails is designated as one of Illinois' Heritage Programs, which is supported by funds from the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunities. It has as its mission to preserve, enhance and promote historic sites pertaining to the African American experience in Illinois. This includes the Underground Railroad movement, other historic events, significant people and places. The intent is to achieve this through research, collection, interpretation, education, information dissemination and linkages of relevant trails, sites and experiences in a systematic order allowing for cultural and economic development opportunities. Freedom Trails, under the direction of Anne Walker is headquartered in East St. Louis at 8787 State St.

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