

Law could preserve, expand anti-slavery sites

By Melissa B. Robinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (AP) — After spending years in jail for trying to smuggle slaves to freedom, an ailing, poor Capt. Daniel Drayton checked into a New Bedford, Mass., hotel on a summer night in 1857, downed a vial of opium and slit his legs.

Until now, the fate of the white schooner captain has been known mainly to historians and local residents.

But it is one of many tales linked to the slave escape route known as the Underground Railroad that could gain greater prominence through a new, national monument.

"There's just something absolutely fascinating about the fact that somebody would risk life and limb... to get to the North, just so they could be free," said Kathryn Grover of New Bedford, who is writing a book on fugitive slaves in that city.

Under the National Underground Railroad to Freedom Act, signed into law last month by President Clinton, the National Park Service is authorized to spend \$500,000 a year to link the sites of the Underground Railroad into a network and produce educational materials.

Some of the money, which Congress still must approve on a yearly basis, could go to help states identify and preserve new sites with potential links to the Underground Railroad. Drayton's grave, for instance, could become part of the network.

Now, only 32 sites of some 80,000 on the National Register of Historic Places are linked to the Underground Railroad. Just two, Boston's African-American National Historic Site and abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's home, are in southern New England.

Despite the dearth of official listings, New England's links to the Underground Railroad appear to be many.

The region was a hotbed of abolitionism where fugitive slaves, historians say, found help in homes, churches, factories, farms and even on fishing vessels. The challenge is documenting sites so they can be recognized as worthy of preservation because of their historic significance.

"We're trying to find out everything and anything we can that's related to the Underground Railroad," said Frank Middleton, a ranger at the Boston African-American historic site. "We're trying to identify some of these lesser

known sites. We're trying to locate people we don't know about, we're trying to locate routes they might have taken, organizations they might have belonged to."

What became known as the Underground Railroad began in the 1500s and peaked between 1830 and 1865.

It reached as far as Canada and the Caribbean and enabled an estimated 1,000 slaves to reach freedom each year. Thousands more tried and failed.

A 1995 National Park Service survey documented nearly 400 sites with potential links to the Underground Railroad in 29 states, Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean Islands. It also found that many were in danger of being lost or destroyed.

The list included 55 sites in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, some as obscure as a set of stone huts in Westerly, R.I., believed to have served as a way station for runaway slaves.

Some sites are tied to well-known events, such as the Farmington, Conn., home that housed the slaves that rebelled on the infamous ship, Amistad. After winning their freedom from the U.S. Supreme Court, the ex-slaves lived in

Farmington until they could secure their passage back to Africa.

"They talk about that (city) as being the Grand Central Station on the Underground Railroad in Connecticut," said John Shannahan, director of the Connecticut Historical Commission. Other sites with potential links to the Underground Railroad were not even covered in the study.

In New Bedford, one of three historic houses in one neighborhood was the likely home of Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave renowned for his eloquence on the immorality of slavery.

Some sites, too, have already been destroyed, such as the New Bedford-based whaling vessels where fugitive slaves often found work. And some face contemporary threats, such as developers' plan to turn historic homes owned by two black sisters in the 1840s in Bridgeport, Conn., into a skating rink.

"We do suspect that these two houses were part of the Underground Railway," said Mike Horvath of the Bridgeport Preservation and Development Trust, a local, nonprofit group working with the state to get the houses listed on the historic register.

Top black stars needed for successful shows

Special to Sentinel-Voice

NEW YORK (AP) — Magic Johnson says the main reason his talk show failed was that black A-list celebrities wouldn't appear on the program.

"We all have to support each other, and we don't do that. Black stars think that if they're not on 'Leno' or 'Letterman,' then they're not making it. That's the problem," the former basketball star said in an online interview posted Friday.

"Their managers and agents keep them off of the black shows. There it is, there's your major problem right there."

Johnson, whose "The Magic Hour" was canceled earlier this month, urged blacks to support the next attempt at a black entertainment program.

"We still need an avenue," he said on the Electronic Urban Report Web site.

"Because, regardless if the show was good or not, you don't have an outlet anymore. Now we will complain because we don't have anything."

Zambia

(Continued from Page 13)

She cites the example of policy on women, Bonaventure Mutale, the newly-appointed attorney general, would only say, "The government is in the process of preparing Zambia's report on the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women."

Mutukwa believes that although women's struggle for equality has not produced concrete results, there is much greater awareness of it.

She says that as a result of campaigns many more people now realize the devastating impact sexual abuse has on women's lives and are taking the initial steps to address it by reporting these cases in larger numbers.

Vusa Dawini/Wanga Saili is a correspondent for Africa Information Afrique, a news and feature service based in Harare, Zimbabwe.

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