

# Colony played anti-slavery role

## Mount Hope was a stop on the underground railroad

By Karen Hansen  
PROJECT COORDINATOR

A small pile of crumbling tombstones is the only visible reminder of the Mount Hope colony.

Its most important public buildings, a church and a school, were long ago dragged by teams of oxen to nearby McLean for use. Settlers moved on after the Chicago, Alton & St. Louis Railroad veered east, sounding the death knell for the community of New England Congregationalists in southwestern McLean County.

But for its brief 19-year life, the small community's abolitionist views played a key role in the county's anti-slavery movement.

"They were part of a distinct minority," Greg Koos, executive director of the McLean County Museum of History, said of the colony's predominantly anti-slavery sentiments.

However, it was primarily personal gain — not social change — that spurred the beginnings of the colony in 1837.

"But no Yankee is ever satisfied with his condition. More, more riches, knowledge, power or whatever may be his ideal. The great hunger of the Anglo-Saxon is land, land, more land," wrote colonist David McFarland about the founding of Mount Hope in McLean County Museum of History documents.

A group from Providence, R.I., set its sights on the area, creating a company called the Farmers & Mechanics Emigrating Society, as part of a "grand scheme of colonization," according to "History of McLean County, Illinois," a book written in 1879.

Similar ventures targeted Kansas, Nebraska and other areas of the Western Plains.

About 15 families emigrated from Rhode Island and Massachusetts to settle on the fertile Central Illinois farmland in 1837.

"They were, with scarcely an exception, rank abolitionists," according to the 1879 history.

"People travel with their views," Koos noted. "Abolitionism certainly would be a Yankee kind of trait."

Not long after its establishment, the colony became a stop on the underground railroad — a criss-crossing of serendipitous routes that led hundreds of thousands of slaves to freedom in Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean.

It was one of two known stations in McLean County, the other

being near Lexington. History accounts connect it to at least two underground railroad routes: the Chester route, which transported slaves from Southern Illinois to Chicago, and a second route that skirted west through Galena, then turned north into Wisconsin.

Since the activities were illegal, details are sketchy.

"It was a time of unrest, the age of iron and steel and steam was coming in, breaking up the old physical monotony of life," wrote McFarland, among the colony's abolitionists. "The daily paper ... was preaching a new gospel in Boston. ... (Abolitionists William Lloyd) Garrison and (Wendell) Phillips were just being heard from. ... People's minds were in a ferment."

McLean County forbade abolitionist meetings at the courthouse, a directive enforced by the sheriff. State law also compelled anyone who was asked to help law enforcement hunt for runaway slaves.

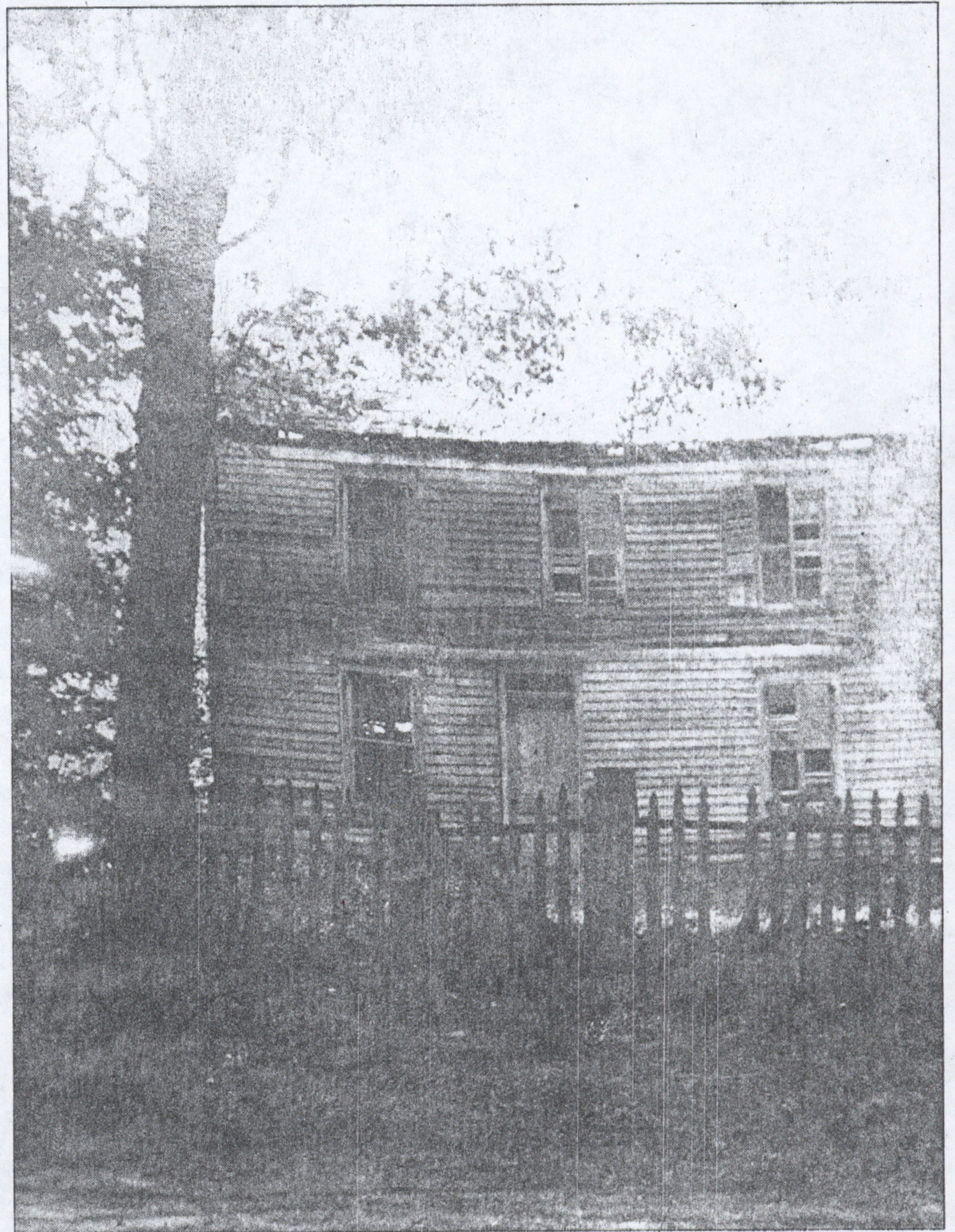
McFarland told officers they could compel him to hunt, "but they couldn't compel him to find any negroes," according to the 1879 history.

Another McFarland, Thomas, hid fugitive slaves in his cornfields, which adjoined the colony's land. Reports in the 1879 history indicate that more than once he returned from Bloomington "with egg-splattered clothing because of his abolitionist doctrines."

Fellow abolitionist John Moss was another key player in Mount Hope's efforts to aid slaves on their way to freedom. He reportedly had a secret chamber in his cellar, and only he knew its precise location. The basement room hid runaway slaves until they could be safely transported to the next safe house.

"In the dark recess, during the day, at the approach of danger, the dark objects of Mr. Moss' solicitude, received by way of the railroad the previous night, were concealed until the danger was past," according to the 1879 history.

"This would have been a dangerous place to come through," Koos said of the underground railroad's presence in the area. "I think the one reason the underground railroad doesn't go through Bloomington is there were so many southerners in Bloomington. Southerners dominated this town."



Courtesy of McLean County Museum of History

The picture above shows a 1931 photo of the house of Daniel McFarland, a 19th-century abolitionist who lived in Mount Hope colony.

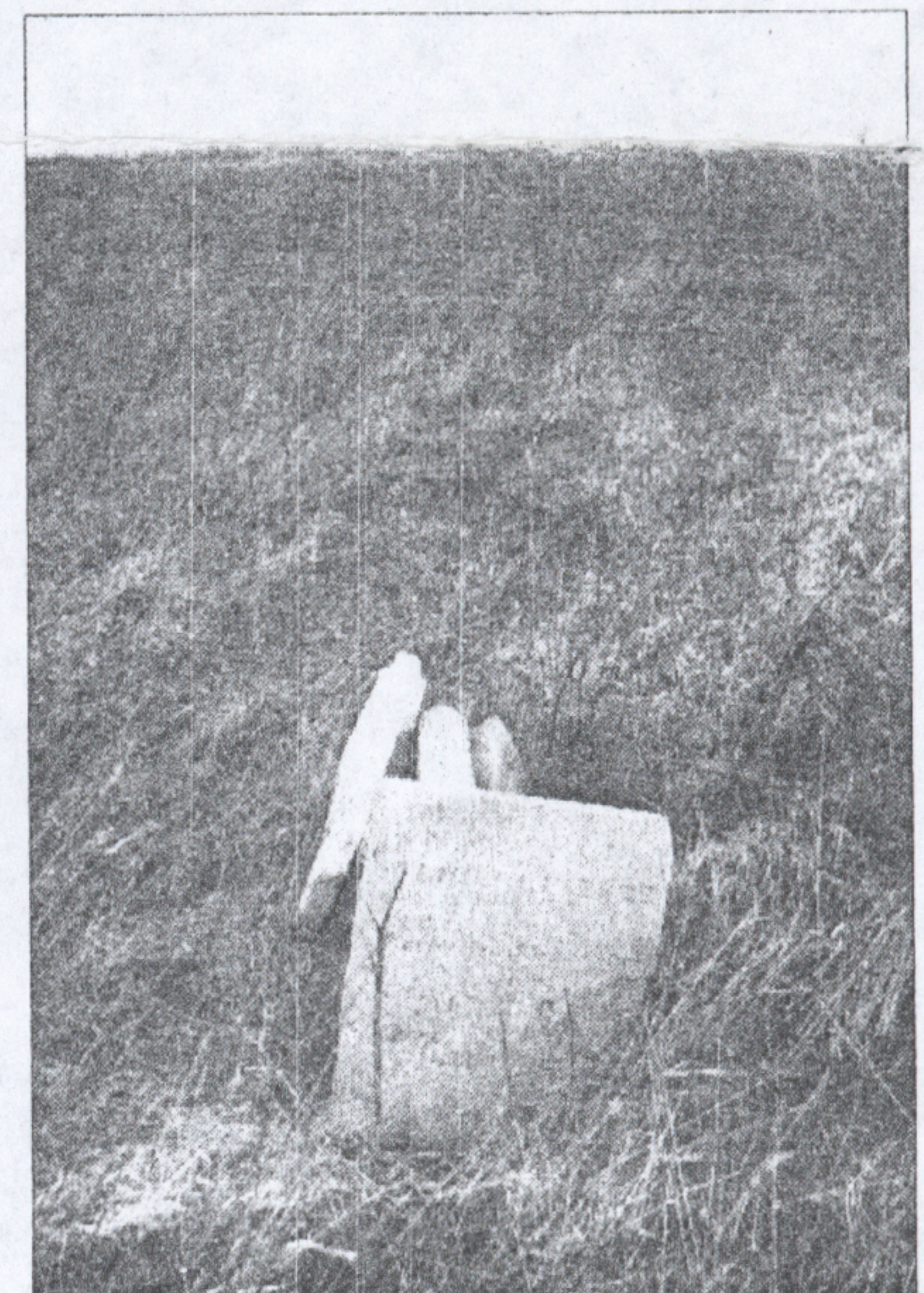
It's not known how many slaves passed through the area on their journey to freedom or precisely how long Mount Hope took part in the underground railroad movement.

But while the movement was active in the mid-19th century, the business ventures planned by the New Englanders never really took hold. Hopes to colonize the area were stalled almost immediately by the financial panic of 1837 that resulted in the closing of 40 percent of the nation's banks. Frustrated, unhappy settlers returned to the East Coast.

And when the Chicago, Alton & St. Louis railroad laid its track several miles east of the area in 1853, it was likely the final blow. By 1856, the colony of Mount Hope ceased to be.

But the risks the colonists took in opposition to slavery don't surprise Koos.

"People in the 19th century are far more ideologically driven than we are today," he said. "I think opinions were more deeply held and quickly acted upon."



The Pantagraph/LORI ANN COOK

A few tombstones in a farmer's field are among the only visible reminders of the Mount Hope colony in southwestern McLean County. The short-lived 19th-century community was settled by New Englanders with anti-slavery views.

By Fergus M. Bordewich

**F**EW aspects of the American past have inspired more colorful mythology than the Underground Railroad. It's probably fair to say that most Americans view it as a thrilling tapestry of midnight flights, hairsbreadth escapes, mysterious codes and strange hiding places.

So it's not surprising that the intriguing (if only recently invented) tale of escape maps encoded in antebellum quilts — soon to be enshrined in a Central Park memorial to Frederick Douglass, as well as in a metasizing library of children's books and teachers' lesson plans — should also seize the popular imagination.

But faked history serves no one, especially when it buries important truths that have been hidden far too long. The "freedom quilt" myth is just the newest acquisition in a congeries of bogus, often bizarre, legends attached to the Underground Railroad. Despite a lack of documentation, tales of actual tunnels through which fugitives supposedly fled persist in communities from the Canadian border to the Mason-Dixon Line.

Popular songs associated with the underground rarely withstand scrutiny, either. Recent research has revealed that the inspirational ballad "Follow the Drinking Gourd" — perhaps the single best known "artifact" of the Underground Railroad — was first published in 1928, and that much of the text and music as we know it today was actually composed by Lee Hays of the Weavers in 1947. Nor do its "directions" conform to any known underground route.

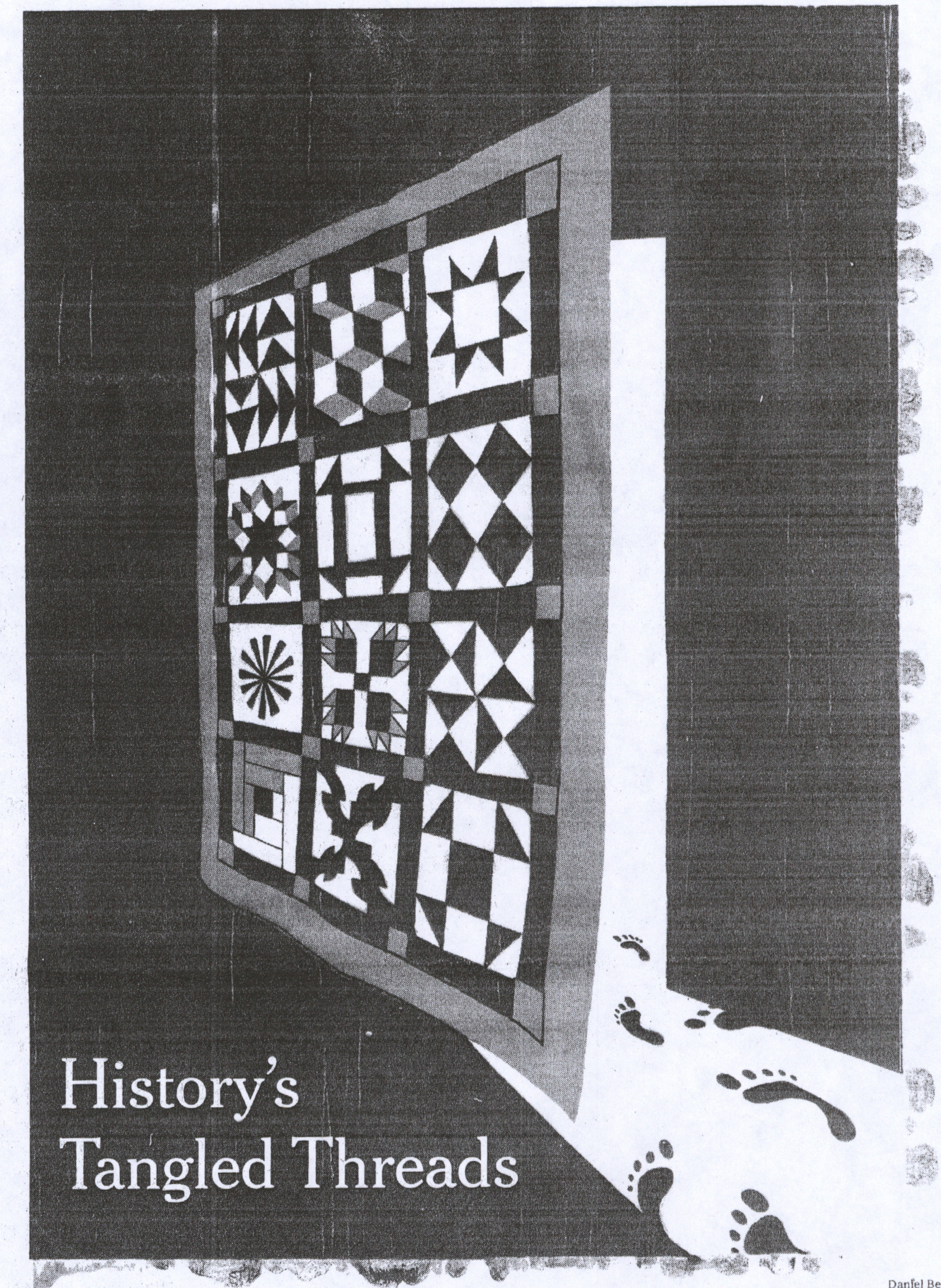
Legend has also elevated to near superhuman status the underground conductor Harriet Tubman, typically claiming that she led north more than 300 slaves. The actual number was closer to 70, according to a Tubman biographer, Kate Clifford Larson. The truth takes nothing away from Tubman, a remarkable woman by any measure, but her deification as the embodiment of the Underground Railroad has obscured the work of many lesser-known African-American activists — among them New York's David Ruggles, who organized the city's underground in the 1830s and helped more than 600 former slaves to freedom.

The notion of maps hidden in quilts surfaced in the 1980s — in a children's book, according to a quilting historian, Leigh Fellner, who has shown that many of the patterns supposed to contain "coded" directions for fugitives date from the 20th century.

Such fictions rely for their plausibility on the premise that the operations of the Underground Railroad were so secret that the truth is essentially unknowable. In fact, there is abundant documentation of the underground's activities to be found in antebellum antislavery newspapers, narratives of escape written by former slaves and the recollections of participants recorded after the Civil War, when there was no longer danger of reprisal. None mentions quilts, tunnels or, with the rarest of exceptions, any hiding place more exotic than a barn or attic.

Most successful fugitives were enterprising and well informed. The vast majority had little need for coded maps, since they came from the border states of Maryland, Virginia and Kentucky, just a few days' or hours' walk from the nearest free state.

*Fergus M. Bordewich is the author of "Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America."*



## History's Tangled Threads

Danfel Bejar

The Underground Railroad provided shelter, transportation and guides, but through most of the North its work was hardly secret. Abolitionist newspapers reported news of fugitives in detail — their passage through town, the names of people who'd assisted them. In some places, activists distributed handbills announcing what they were doing, and how many fugitives they had helped. Jermain Loguen, the African-American leader of the underground in Syracuse, advertised his address in local newspapers as an aid to freedom-seekers.

The larger importance of the Underground Railroad lies not in fanciful legends, but in the diverse history of the men and women, black and white, who made it work and in the far-reaching political and moral consequences of what they did. The Underground Railroad was the nation's first great movement of mass civil disobedience after the American Revolution, engaging thousands of citizens in the active subversion of federal law, as well as the first mass movement that asserted the principle of personal responsibility for others' human rights. It was also the nation's

first interracial political movement, which from its beginning in the 1790s joined free blacks, abolitionist whites and sometimes slaves in a collaboration that shattered racial taboos.

During the long dark night of Jim Crow politics, these deeper truths of the Underground Railroad were suppressed: in a nation committed to seg-

in a new way.

Americans still have a difficult time talking about race and slavery, and the Underground Railroad deserves to be part of the national discussion. It forced Americans to think about slavery in new ways, by delivering tens of thousands of former slaves into Northern communities.

There, for the first time, whites began to learn firsthand about the realities of slavery — the physical and emotional cruelties, the ruptured families, the abuse of enslaved women — and to empathize with black Americans as people like themselves, with the same human needs and desires, the same vulnerabilities, the same devotion to family and faith.

In an age when self-interest has been elevated in our culture to a public and political virtue, the Underground Railroad still has something to teach: that every individual, no matter how humble, can make a difference in the world, and that the importance of one's life lies not in money or celebrity, but in doing the right thing, even in silence or secrecy, and without reward. This truth doesn't need to be encoded in fiction in order to be heard. □

### The Underground Railroad needs no mythologizing.

regation and blind to racism, the story of a politically radical, biracial movement led in part by African-Americans was far too subversive to accept.

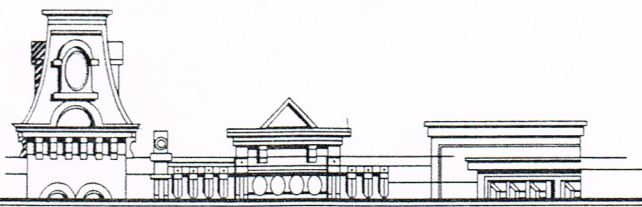
Eye-catching quilts and mysterious tunnels satisfy the human penchant for easily digestible history. Myths deliver us the heroes we crave, and submerge the horrific reality of slavery in a gilded haze of uplift. But in claiming to honor the history of African-Americans, they serve only to erase it

**KIDNAPPER IN TOWN.**—Last Saturday there was a certain fellow from Cape Girardeau, Mo., in our town on the hunt of a little mulatto boy about twelve years old, whom we have seen and know very well. This specimen blood of "Southern chivalry" has been skulking about town for a day or two, watching his chances to get hold of the little contraband and ship him off slyly without letting the citizens know anything about the affair.—He is supposed to be watching around town yet for the boy.

To the "Southern gent" we would say, the sooner you make tracks from Bloomington the better.—You are known, and the lucrative business you follow does not elevate you any in the estimation of our citizens: You are after your "property," are you? You miserable, low-lived, sneaking blood-hound, you deal in flesh and blood, do you? Well, if you do you won't get *that boy*—that's sure.

**"HONOR TO WHOM HONOR IS DUE."**—*Editor Pantagraph:* In the *Pantagraph* of Friday, you say Joseph Moore, charged with manslaughter upon the person of Mrs. Griffin, who was found dead in a privy some days ago, has at last been caught by our efficient city Marshal Briscoe. While awarding to Marshal Briscoe all credit due him, for bringing from Peoria the above named man, let us also give to another his share of credit for arresting said Moore. By giving place to this and the accompanying article from the *Democratic Union* of Peoria you will render to Mr. Crouse—an efficient officer and a personal friend—what is his due.

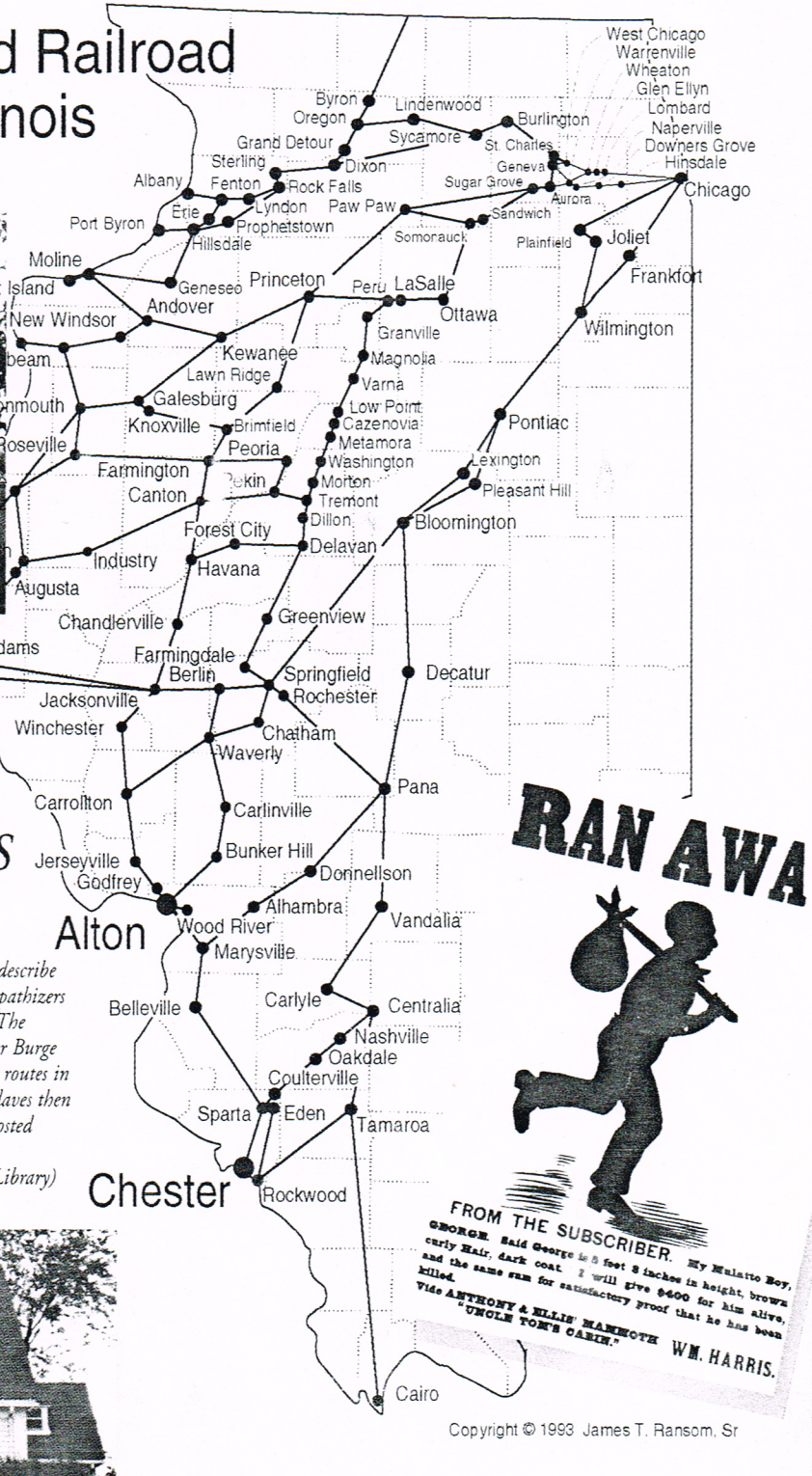
HENRY WARNER.



# HISTORIC • ILLINOIS

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency • Division of Preservation Services • Vol. 22 • No. 6 • April 2000

## Underground Railroad Routes in Illinois



## THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN ILLINOIS SPECIAL ISSUE

*The Underground Railroad was the euphemistic title used to describe the routes that slaves traveled to reach freedom in Canada. Sympathizers along the route provided secret and safe haven in their homes. The Richard Eells House in Quincy (pictured above) and the Luther Burge House in Farmington (pictured below) were two stations along routes in Illinois. All routes led north, usually to Chicago, where many slaves then boarded ships to be carried further north. Slave owners often posted broadsides advertising rewards for the return of runaways.*  
 (Photos courtesy J. Terry Ransom and Illinois State Historical Library)



**RAN AWAY!**



**FROM THE SUBSCRIBER.**  
 GEORGE. Said George is 5 feet 8 inches in height, brown curly hair, dark coat. I will give \$400 for him alive, killed.  
 Also ANTHONY & ELLIE MANNOTH "UNCLE TOM'S CABIN." W.M. HARRIS.



This is a Photograph of one of  
the TOKENS used by the "Con-  
ductors" of the "Underground  
Railway" previous to the Civil  
War who assisted the Negro  
Slaves in escaping to Canadian  
territory. Presented by

*R. W. Phillips,*  
1915)

*Bloomington, Ill.*