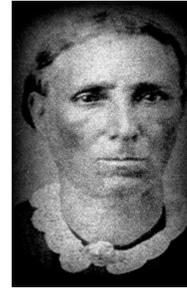


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Louisa Clark McWorter

## New Philadelphia on the Route to Freedom

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Situated amid the rolling hills of Pike County in rural west central Illinois, the town of New Philadelphia was on a route followed by many enslaved African Americans fleeing bondage. According to one account, “Pike County had a few stations on what was known as the Underground Railroad in slavery times. Many honored old citizens were often severely censured because they sheltered and fed runaway negroes” (Massie 1906:132).

Founded in 1836, New Philadelphia is the first town in our nation platted and legally registered by an African American. Town founder Frank McWorter, a freedman, built New Philadelphia on an ideological foundation of self-determination, the pursuit of freedom and economic opportunity. McWorter sold lots in his town to white, black and mulatto settlers and, with the earnings, bought freedom for family members remaining in bondage (Matteson 1964:10-11; Walker 1983:162).

New Philadelphia was only one of hundreds of towns established during the push to settle the western frontier of the United States, but it was unique as an integrated settlement that existed during one of the most racially turbulent eras of our country’s history. Once a thriving community where formerly enslaved individuals, free-born African Americans and European Americans lived together, today New Philadelphia is an archaeological site.

Archaeological and documentary studies of New Philadelphia increase our knowledge and understanding about the development and character of our nation and provide insight into life in integrated communities of the era. Oral histories tell us about the town’s involvement in the abolitionist movement to end slavery.

Historian and McWorter descendant Juliet E. K. Walker reports that Frank McWorter’s son, young Frank, escaped slavery in Kentucky by fleeing to Canada in 1826. The elder McWorter negotiated with slaveholder Obediah Denham, exchanging his lucrative saltpeter manufacturing operation located in Danville, Kentucky, for his son’s freedom in 1829. Once manumission legalities were completed, young Frank returned to the United States a free man (Walker 1983:53, 61).

As Frank McWorter accumulated enough funds, he returned to Kentucky, risking capture by unscrupulous slave catchers, to purchase freedom for family members left behind in bondage when Frank, his wife Lucy, their 3 free-born children and emancipated young Frank moved to Illinois in 1830. One of Frank McWorter's earliest return trips to Kentucky may have occurred in 1835 to free son Solomon (Matteson 1964:11; Walker 1983:71).

According to Walker, Frank and Lucy McWorter's free-born son, Squire, met his future wife Louisa Clark on a return trip to Kentucky. Assisted by Squire, Louisa subsequently fled to Canada to escape slavery. Walker writes that Frank McWorter purchased Louisa's freedom sometime before 1850 (1983:162), however documentary evidence indicates that Louisa and her mother Kesiah Clark were emancipated in 1825 by John Bicksler (Spencer County, Kentucky, Deed Book A:116-117). A plausible explanation for this discrepancy may be that Kesiah and Louisa were kidnapped and returned to slavery; not an unusual practice in the region where ruthless slave catchers sometimes illegally captured and sold freed African Americans back into bondage (Lubet 2011:31).

Louisa appears on the 1850 Illinois federal census in a household along with her husband Squire McWorter as a twenty-six year old mulatto female born in Kentucky. Three children, aged 1 to 5 years, are also included in the household; all three children were born in Illinois (Walker 1983:157; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1850).

Solomon McWorter's son, John, recounted that his father and uncles not only aided runaways, but sometimes accompanied them to Canada (Walker 1983:149, 168). It may have been on such a trip that young Frank met and returned to Illinois with Mary Ann, who is recorded on the 1850 federal census as Mary A., a twenty-two year old white female born in England. Mary and two children, described on the census as a 3 year old mulatto female born in Canada and a 5 month old infant mulatto girl born in Illinois, were living in the household of Squire and Louisa McWorter, young Frank's brother and sister-in-law (U. S. Census 1850).

Family descendant Ellen McWorter Yates recollected that the original McWorter home included a cellar room used to hide fugitive slaves (Walker 1983:149). Local resident Elmo Waters also remembered that a rock cellar in a building across from the town sheltered runaways (Christman 2004-2005: Waters oral history 2004). Both of these recollections may refer to the same dwelling, the original McWorter home located directly north of the town site.

Area resident Ruby Duke remembered her grandmother's account that a wagon used to carry produce to the railroad depot for transport to markets was specially outfitted to hide those fleeing slavery. "They had a box built under the bottom of the wagon and if a slave come in on the train, then they would hide them in it and take them back to the farm" (Christman 2004-2005: Duke, oral history 2004). Mrs. Duke remembered that fugitive slaves sometimes

worked in her grandmother's garden and that the family dog barked, *at those posses coming up this little dirt lane...they would take off and run to the Creek. Down by the creek there was a big cave. Others would get into a box that was under the nest where the chickens laid their eggs. Then, my grandparents would let a chicken out and that dog would kill the chicken. So, when the bounty hunters got there, that's what they thought was all the commotion. . . . My great-grandpa never did lose one of the blacks then, even though they had a lot people looking for them* (Christman 2004-2005:Duke, oral history 2004).

Not all enslaved African Americans passing through Pike County found their way to freedom, as illustrated in an undated letter written by Clarissa Shipman. Clarissa, her husband and children moved from economically depressed New England in 1832 to Pike County, lured by the promise of affordably priced, rich agricultural land on the frontier. In her sobering missive, Clarissa tells of

*stirring times around here lately. Half a dozen of our neighbors caught four fugitive slaves from Missouri and carried them back to their masters, for which it is said, they got twelve hundred dollars. . . . There seems reason to believe that the fugitives are enticed to flee here. They came as far as Barry, as though they were among friends. There they were set upon and returned. I think we have fallen on evil times* (Cahill 1996:17, 55-56).

The fugitives may have been en route to New Philadelphia, only four miles distant and the town nearest to Barry.

New Philadelphia was recognized for its historical and archaeological significance by designation as a National Historical Landmark in 2009 for the potential its archaeological resources hold to provide a better understanding of daily life in multiracial communities of the era and affect current research methods. Oral histories support New Philadelphia and area residents' reports of the community's involvement in the quest to help enslaved African Americans find freedom. Further research and additional oral accounts may provide deeper insight and revelations of New Philadelphia and area towns folks' participation in the abolitionist movement to end slavery.



*The New Philadelphia Association needs your support to continue the legacy of Free Frank McWorter by preserving and interpreting the town site. You can help by joining us and contributing your membership fees and donations toward this effort:*

<http://www.newphiladelphiail.org/members.htm>