



GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT
AND REFORM
COMMITTEE

Witness Form

Today's Date MARCH 14, 2022

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Organization Representing: NATIONAL AFRO-AMERICAN MUSEUM AND CULTURAL CENTER

Testifying on Bill Number: HB 340

Testimony: Verbal Written Both

Testifying As: Proponent Opponent Interested Party

Are you a Registered Lobbyist? Yes No

Special Requests: _____

March 14, 2022

Government Oversight and Reform Committee

To Chairman Roegner, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Craig and the Committee members.

My name is Dr. Charles A. Wash, Jr. and I am the Director of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center (NAAMCC) in Wilberforce, which is a division of the Ohio History Connection (OHC). I come before you today on behalf of myself, our staff in Wilberforce and the entire Ohio History Connection organization in support of HB 340, which seeks to designate the month of September as International Underground Railroad Month in the state of Ohio.

The history of the underground railroad is very near and dear to our organization for many reasons, but chiefly because we are stewards of several important Ohio sites that directly reflect and share that history with the public. In fact, Ohio has 89 sites listed on the National Park Service's National Freedom Trail, second only to Maryland which now has 92. Within the OHC statewide system we have sites such as the John Rankin House in Ripley, Ohio that was a major station on the underground railroad leading from Kentucky across the Ohio River and into Ohio. Making the trek into Ohio was the equivalent to freedom for countless travelers. The John Rankin site is also home to the well-known "Freedom Stairs", which are 100 steps that lead from the Ohio River to the Rankin House itself on the hill. John Rankin, a Presbyterian minister and educator, was an avid member of the abolitionist movement here in Ohio and represented the progressive nature of the state to the rest of the world during this period.

Another important site that was a major stop on the underground railroad is the Benjamin Lundy House and Free Labor Store in Mt. Pleasant, Ohio. This is one of our newer sites and it reflects Quaker involvement in the national and international abolitionist movement. We are currently in the process of restoring the house that also included one of the only surviving Free Labor Stores anywhere in the country. Free Labor Stores were operated by people who staunchly opposed slavery and engaged in socially conscious commerce as they sold no goods that had any connection to slavery and the enslaved at any point in the supply chain. This is a rare example of how people truly put their money where their mouths were.

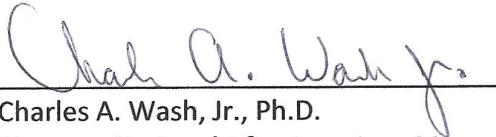
Even our National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce is located in an area ripe with underground railroad activity in the Miami Valley region and works very closely with the Charles Young Buffalo Soldier National Monument operated by the National Park Service. The Young House is a very important point on the underground railroad in Wilberforce and we are dedicated to assisting the NPS in better understanding its role in not only Ohio history, but also international underground railroad history.

We also operate the Harriet Beecher Stowe House, which was home to the internationally renowned author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book that transformed the abolitionist movement everywhere. We also work very closely with our federal partners to share stories from the other

As you can see, the state of Ohio has a very long and deep-rooted history related to the underground railroad in the United States. Unfortunately, many of Ohio's citizens are unaware of the state's direct connection to this widespread system of freedom and have limited appreciation for the role that Ohio played in affording hope to countless enslaved Blacks who sought the most basic of human rights as freedom.

The proposed legislation in HB 340 that seeks to designate the month of September as International Underground Railroad Month in the state of Ohio is long overdue. HB 340 is completely supported by both the NAAMCC and the Ohio History Connection as a whole and we look forward to partnering with the state of Ohio to eventually celebrate this occasion each year to bring awareness to this most important aspect of not only Ohio history, but also American History. The underground railroad is not only unique to the United States, but it also inspired many around the world to reverse course on such a dreaded institution as slavery. We believe this history should be fully appreciated and celebrated by all.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to present this testimony to your committee today and I hope to work with each of you to share and celebrate this very important month in Ohio.



Charles A. Wash, Jr., Ph.D.

Director, National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center
Ohio History Connection