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Sponsor Testimony
House Bill 340
Before the House Committee on State & Local Government

October 27, 2021

Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and Members of the House State & Local Government Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 340, which will establish September as “International Underground Railroad Month” in Ohio.

International Underground Railroad Month acknowledges the significance of the Underground Railroad, and all those involved, for its contribution to the eradication of slavery in the United States. It honors the inspiring efforts of the people from around the world who have committed themselves to document, interpret, and share with the public the Underground Railroad through the National Park Service’s National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

In 2020, eleven states and several other entities proclaimed September as International Underground Railroad Month. Maryland's Office of Tourism initiated this commemoration in 2019.

The states of Maryland and Michigan were trailblazers in 2020 to grow this commemoration, working with the National Park Service's National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom to connect with the community of people dedicated to telling and preserving Underground Railroad stories. These same parties are eager to share the energy and awareness by bringing others into the circle by next September.

The Underground Railroad was about people helping people. The escape of enslaved persons via the Underground Railroad was by no means a passive act. All involved parties had to participate in various activities such as raising money, transporting escapees, and locating places to stay. The journey was not easy. It was risky and dangerous to both those who were escaping and those who were aiding escapees.

While communities all over the state of Ohio were involved as “stations” along the Underground Railroad’s path to freedom in Canada, my district of Clermont and Brown Counties along the Ohio River were especially important... and dangerous.

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One of the most famous of “Conductors,” Rev. John Rankin of Ripley in Brown County, had his entire family involved with the operation. His wife Jean fed escapees and his sons guided escapees to Sardinia, which was the next town north on the way to freedom. Kentucky slaveholders offered \$2,500 for the assassination of John Rankin. The John Parker House in Ripley was another important stop for escapees along the Ohio River, and stands as a historic house museum today.

In Clermont County, my hometown of New Richmond was the heart of abolitionist sentiment in southern Ohio. Cranston Memorial Presbyterian Church in New Richmond was the center of abolitionist work. The church passed a statement that slavery was a “flagrant sin against God and man, and is in every form it assumes diametrically opposed to every principle of the Gospel of Christ.” Famous abolitionists from New Richmond include Dr. John Rogers – who delivered Ulysses S. Grant – Thomas Donaldson, and Amos Dresser, who was given 20 lashes while traveling through Nashville, Tennessee for distributing anti-slavery pamphlets. The Ross-Gowdy House in New Richmond, also a museum today, hid and fed escapees as well.

There are many, many stories to tell about the Underground Railroad in communities all over Ohio. It is my hope that designating September as a month to recognize these efforts will enable the stories to be preserved for future generations.

HB 340 is a bill that celebrates freedom. It celebrates people helping people. And it recognizes the danger faced by both those escaping slavery and the sacrifice of those who enabled and aided.

I’d like to invite my joint sponsor Representative Blackshear to share his remarks with you as well, and then we will be happy to answer your questions.