

House State and Local Government Committee
HB 340 – Proponent Testimony
Woodrow Keown, Jr., National Underground Railroad Freedom Center
October 27, 2021

Good afternoon, Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly and members of the House State and Local Government Committee. My name is Woodrow Keown, Jr. and I'm honored to serve as President and COO of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (Freedom Center) located in Cincinnati, OH.

On behalf of our board of directors I come before you today to provide the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center's full and enthusiastic support for H.B. 340.

It is appropriate that Ohio lead this action because of its historical origins tied to the Underground Railroad. In 1831, Tice Davids, a fugitive from slavery, fled from his owner in Kentucky. Davids swam across the Ohio River with his owner in close pursuit in a boat. Davids reached the Ohio shore at the town of Ripley just a few minutes before his owner, but the owner could not find him. The owner purportedly said that Davids "must of gone off on an underground road."

The Underground Railroad is the resistance to enslavement through escape and flight. It embodies the efforts of enslaved African Americans to gain their freedom by escaping bondage. Wherever slavery existed, there were efforts to escape. At first to maroon communities in remote or rugged terrain on the edge of settled areas and eventually across state and international borders. These acts of self-emancipation labeled the enslaved as "fugitives" or "runaways," but in retrospect "freedom seekers" is a more accurate description. Though many freedom seekers began their journey of emancipation on their own, the establishment of the Underground Railroad expanded the possibility of freedom for hundreds of thousands of slaves.

The Underground Railroad, quite simply, begins with the unstoppable desire for freedom. Starting with individuals who found the courage to escape on their own, to a network estimated to be of over 100,000 conductors and abolitionists, the Underground Railroad was the first large-scale, diverse intercontinental social justice movement in human history. People from four continents and every background imaginable worked together to help freedom seekers and bring an end to legal slavery. This was the largest social justice movement in world history. It was the foundation from which all other social justice movements in the United States formed. From the Suffragist Movement to Black Lives Matter and every movement in between, these individuals drew their inspiration from the freedom seekers, conductors, and abolitionists that came before them. Today's social justice movements are a continuum of the former network of allies – Black, White, and Brown - known as the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad's fundamental principles of courage, cooperation, and perseverance are common threads that link these movements throughout history.

The Ohio River and the great State of Ohio played a strategic role in providing a pathway to freedom for the enslaved. The Ohio River, commonly referred to by the enslaved people seeking freedom as “The River Jordan”, represented the final barrier to freedom for enslaved people self-liberating on the Underground Railroad. Scholars have estimated that approximately 40,000 freedom seekers crossed the Ohio River, most of whom crossed in the Cincinnati area.

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center was formed in 1994, opened in 2004 and has developed into a world-class cultural learning center on the banks of the Ohio River, that River Jordan. Our location was significant to the Underground Railroad and has been referred to as the “Gateway to Freedom.” It stands in a place once known as “Little Africa,” where once enslaved people built a community that supported each other and still remained to be of service to others seeking freedom.

This legislation is not only about recognizing a moment in the past, but signaling a direction for the future. It will signal to the nation and the world that the great State of Ohio can be a global influencer around key issues of freedom.

We support this legislation because we believe it has the opportunity to:

- Draw attention to the mission of the Freedom Center to continue to tell the story of courage, cooperation, and perseverance.
- Encourage Ohioans to reflect on the purpose and power of the Underground Railroad.
- Provide economic benefit to the State of Ohio by attracting increased tourism for visitors coming to learn firsthand about the Underground Railroad.
- Improve human relations across the state.

The Freedom Center welcomes members of this Committee and the Ohio General Assembly to visit the museum and learn with us the power of being a conductor as we move forward in the fight for freedom. We look forward to celebrating next September as International Underground Railroad Month with all of you next year.

Thank you!