



Office of Representative Willis E. Blackshear Jr.

39th House District

Sponsor Testimony – Ohio Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Craig and members of the Ohio Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to advocate for support of HB 340 in the House. Thank you Representative Bird for including me as joint sponsor on this bill. I am appreciative of the opportunity to introduce this historically important piece of legislation in the 134th General Assembly.

The purpose of International Underground Railroad Month is to commemorate the significant impact that the Underground Railroad had on the community of people who supported the audacious endeavor of assisting enslaved people in their quest for freedom. In recognizing International Underground Railroad month, we also have the opportunity to acknowledge the work of historians and scholars in Ohio and across the United States that have dedicated their careers to preserving the history of the Underground Railroad, and have committed to sharing this history with the public through the National Park Service's Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

Ohio had the most active Underground Railroad network in the country, due to our strategic location between two slave states – Virginia and Kentucky- and our proximity to the Canadian border. Ohio was a free state in the Union, and crossing the Ohio River was a checkpoint for enslaved people who were escaping to freedom in other Northern states and in Canada.

Abolitionists across this state risked their lives to help those who were escaping from horrors unimaginable in the Southern slave states, and hoping for a better life in the North.

This history doesn't exist in a vacuum; and the legacy of those that escaped and those that aided the escaped often hide in plain sight. Daniel Alexander Payne was a free black man, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the founder of Wilberforce University who used his platform to spread the word about the Underground Railroad. Wilberforce University, which still stands today in Greene County, was a safe haven on the Underground Railroad for formerly enslaved persons. Joseph Wheeler was born a slave in Virginia, and came to Dayton as a free person in 1824. Mr. Wheeler and his descendants are recognized today as most notable members of the Dayton community and contributors to the history of Dayton. The Kelton House, which stands a mile away from this House floor, is another Underground Railroad Historical site, that remembers the lives of Martha and Pearl Hartway, that escaped slavery in Virginia and became a part of the Kelton Family, residing in the Kelton House for over 10 years. The stories of those freedom seekers, abolitionists and those whose names are no longer known have created legacies in our state that must be honored, preserved and recognized.

If H.B. 340 were signed into law, Ohio would join eleven other states in designating the month of September as International Underground Railroad month. The month of September is significant because it marks the month that both Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglas escaped to freedom. Designating September as International Underground Railroad Month in Ohio, is not only appropriate, but necessary to honor the history of Ohioans who contributed to the Underground Railroad's mission of justice for enslaved people and to continue to champion those whose scholarship shines a light on this time in history.