



**HB 340 Proponent Testimony – National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, a Division of the Ohio History Connection**

October 26, 2021,

To Representatives Adam Bird and Willis Blackshear, Jr. and the rest of the State and Local Government Committee members.

My name is Dr. Charles A. Wash, Jr. and I am the Director of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, a Division of the Ohio History Connection. I write to you today on behalf of myself, our staff in Wilberforce and the entire Ohio History Connection 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 near and dear to our organization as we are stewards of several Ohio sites that reflect and share that history with the public. Of our more than 59 sites around the state, we have several 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. Taking on a journey such as this and ending in the state of Ohio was the equivalent to freedom for many. The John Rankin site is also home to the "Freedom Stairs", which are exactly 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 state's overall position against slavery to the rest of the world during this period.

Another important site that was a major stop on the underground railroad was the Benjamin Lundy House and Free Labor Store in Mt. Pleasant, Ohio. This is one of our newer sites and it reflects the Quaker's involvement in the national and international abolitionist movement. We are 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 ever been touched by 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. Again, Ohio is arguably the only place in the nation that still has an authentic Free Labor Store still standing and we are proud that it is a part of our site system.

Even our National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center celebrating 33 years in Wilberforce is located in a hot bed of 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 the international underground railroad history.

We also operate the Harriet Beecher Stowe House, which was home to the international renowned author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book that transformed the abolitionist movement everywhere. Elsewhere, we know the North Star took freedom-seekers up towards Lake Erie to various documented sites in Northeast Ohio and then on to Canada. We also work very closely with our federal partners to share stories from the other sites such as the John P. Parker House in Ripley, Wilson Bruce Evans House in Oberlin and the Putnam Historic District in Zanesville to name a few. This legislation only helps us bring to the surface this important history for all to celebrate.

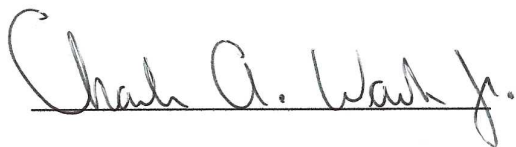
As you can see, the state of Ohio has a very long and deep-rooted history related to the underground railroad in the United States. In fact, Ohio has more sites listed on the NPS's National Freedom Trail than any other state. At last count, Ohio had 89 listed sites and Maryland, the home to Harriet Tubman and the next closest state by number, had 86. Unfortunately, many of Ohio's citizens are unaware of our deep connection and roots to this widespread system of freedom and have limited appreciation for the role it played in affording hope to literally 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 as a division 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 unique to the United States, and it should be fully appreciated and celebrated by all.

**OHIO HISTORY CONNECTION**

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Thank you very much for the opportunity to present this testimony to your committee today and please do not hesitate to let us know if there is anything else we can do to assist in the passing of this very important bill.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles A. Wash, Jr." with a horizontal line underneath the text.

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

Director, National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center

Ohio History Connection