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January 23, 2007

Freedom trail stops in Rochester

An underground railroad conference is slated for this fall

Jim Memmott
Senior editor

A major conference on the Underground Railroad has been set for late September in Rochester.

Called the Frederick Douglass International Underground Railroad Conference, the gathering will be held Sept. 28 through Sept. 30 at the Riverside Convention Center.

Also in the plans are a Freedom Festival, which will take place at the same time, celebrating and showcasing community cultural and educational resources.

"This is an opportunity to put Rochester on the map," said. Alfreda Brown of the Rochester Institute of Technology, the chairwoman of a committee organizing the conference and the festival.

"We all know about Frederick Douglass, and we all know about Susan B. Anthony and the other famous people in Mt. Hope Cemetery, but we haven't had an engagement where we're all learning about the past together."

The conference will be presented by The Rochester/Monroe County Freedom Trail Commission and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati.

"Being hooked into Cincinnati really gives us greater visibility," Brown said. "I see it as a plus. We can't go wrong with it."

The conference will focus on the role this area had in the Underground Railroad, the secret network that helped slaves escape to freedom before and during the Civil War.

There were several Underground Railroad "stations" here. And there were prominent anti-slavery figures, including Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave and abolitionist editor and orator.

The Freedom Center has pledged \$50,000 toward the conference. The City of Rochester has promised \$25,000, and Monroe County will also contribute \$25,000.

The other sponsors of the conference are the Rochester Area Community Foundation and the Workforce Diversity Network.

The committee Brown heads is a subcommittee of the Freedom Trail Commission.

"That we have gone this far is a credit to the endurance of the committee," said David Anderson, a member of the committee and the chairman of the Freedom Trail Commission.

Conference organizers have put out a call for possible presenters.

Some of those presentations will be scholarly, but Anderson said he hopes there will be presentations that are artistic in nature, as well.

In addition, the Freedom Festival, which is seeking funding, will present events of broad community interest.

The key to the entire gathering, Anderson said, is to celebrate and illuminate the lives of the slaves who sought "their own freedom and the people who were risking their freedom to help them."

And Brown added that it is especially fitting to celebrate the fact that the Underground Railroad existed because of the efforts of people of different races.

"This was a time in the history of Rochester in which we really helped each other across racial lines," she said.

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On the conference

For more information about the Frederick Douglass International Underground Railroad Conference, go online at www.workforcediversitynetwork.com.

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