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National Park Service Recognizes Underground Railroad Sites in the Tristate through the Appalachian Freedom Heritage Tourism Initiative

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LAWRENCE COUNTY, OHIO – The Appalachian Freedom Heritage Tourism Initiative has reached a significant milestone in its mission to document the region’s Underground Railroad history, with the first three of twenty-seven verified sites now officially listed on the National Park Service’s (NPS) National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. Supported by an Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) POWER Grant awarded to the Lawrence Economic Development Corp. (LEDC) and the Center for Public History at Shawnee State University, this nine-county, tri-state project spans Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia, and is currently developing a tour to highlight these newly recognized sites. The initiative aims to preserve historically significant locations and promote economic development through cultural tourism in the Appalachian region.

The first sites added to the NPS Network to Freedom include:

- **Allen Chapel AME Church (Portsmouth, Ohio):** A historic African American church with roots tracing back to the pre-Civil War era, Allen Chapel played a pivotal role in supporting freedom seekers in Portsmouth. As a central institution within the local Black community, the church’s members, including John J. Minor and his wife, Martha Minor, Joseph Love, John Q. Weaver and his wife, Mary Weaver demonstrated resilience and agency, actively participating in the Underground Railroad and leaving a legacy of courage and hope that continues to inspire future generations.
- **Isaac Downey’s Escape from Globe Furnace (Lynn, Kentucky):** This site tells the powerful story of Isaac Downey, a 40-year-old enslaved man who escaped from the Globe Furnace ironworks in Greenup County, Kentucky. Located near the Ohio River, the furnace’s proximity to freedom provided Downey and others with a glimmer of hope. Today, the site highlights both the region’s industrial slavery history and the courage of those who sought liberty despite formidable risks.

- **John T. Wilson Homestead (Tranquility, Ohio):** Situated in Adams County, Ohio, the homestead of Congressman John T. Wilson serves as an enduring monument to Underground Railroad activities in the Appalachian region of Ohio. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the homestead was a key station in a documented corridor of freedom-seeking activity, connecting Mason County, Kentucky, and Ripley, Ohio, and underscoring Scott Township's vital role in the fight against slavery.

Dr. Andrew Feight, Director of Research and Outreach for the Appalachian Freedom Heritage Tourism Initiative, expressed the importance of this work, stating, "It is exciting to see this Federal investment in the historical assets we have in the tristate region. Our research is recovering important lost chapters of local history that will transform our understanding of the past and help draw interest and visitors to the region."

Marty Conley, LEDC/Tourism Director of Lawrence County, Ohio, added, "We're honored that the Appalachian Heritage Freedom Tourism Initiative has helped make it possible for the National Park Service to recognize these three Underground Railroad sites. This is a meaningful step in preserving these stories, and we look forward to safeguarding even more local history for future generations."

Pastor Antonio Neely, Outreach Specialist for Scioto County, reflected on the significance of Allen Chapel AME Church's inclusion: "The work of Allen Chapel AME Church's members presents to us a legacy of a freedom, a demonstration of God's faithfulness, and a metaphor of unconditional love for people who no longer wanted chains on their lives."

Similarly, Jaime Bloss, Greenup County Tourism Director, emphasized the local impact of the initiative in Kentucky, stating, "The addition of Isaac Downey's Escape from Globe Furnace to the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program is positioned to improve historical tourism in Greenup County. We are excited for the tourism opportunities, community engagement, and educational development that the program will create. Being a part of a national network opens doors for collaboration with other organizations dedicated to preserving Greenup County's rich history."

The NPS Network to Freedom currently includes over 800 sites nationwide, representing a diverse array of locations significant to the Underground Railroad's legacy. As part of this network, the Appalachian Freedom Heritage Tourism Initiative's verified sites will not only contribute to historical preservation but will also serve as educational resources and destinations for cultural tourism.

For more information on the Appalachian Freedom Heritage Tourism Initiative, visit www.appalachianfreedom.com or contact Marty Conley at marty@visitlawrenceohio.com or Dr. Andrew Feight at afeight@shawnee.edu or Dr. Cicero Fain III at fainc@marshall.edu.