

the Underground Railroad

The National Underground Railroad Museum was founded in 1994 upon a shared idea that the collection and preservation of facts, sites, records, artifacts and stories related to an important but often overlooked segment of United States history would be critical to the educational enrichment of future generations. Even more, an active entity that would offer interpretation of African American heritage through the spectrum of slavery and the abolitionist movement, as well as the Civil War and Reconstruction,

Small Museum with a Big Idea

would be needed to offer support to educational institutions in the development of social science and history curricula that actively engages students in meaningful dialogue regarding humanity's struggle with race and power. And while this idea, though not easy to achieve, through time has been proven right and worthy, as national interest regarding the legacy of the Underground Railroad and the abolitionist movement continues to grow and attract interest.

The National Underground Railroad Museum (NURM) incorporated became the first national museum dedicated to study, chronicle, and celebrate the Underground Railroad movement and received tax exempt status to operate as a non-profit, small museum with the express purpose to provide educational tours for all ages by means of a walk-through tour and review of exhibits and artifacts, led by a guide who "tells the story" of the underground railroad, which was a network of natural highways and byways, trails and waterways that the slave and abolitionists used to elude the recapture of the fugitive on their way to Canada and free territories to obtain freedom.

Since its conception and establishment, nearly 20 years later the museum has stayed true to its original precepts. Today NURM offers regular operating hours from 10 AM to 3 PM to the general public on Wednesdays, Fri-

days and Saturdays. All other times and days for tours are arranged in advance by appointment. Admission to the museum is \$1 for 1-3 grades; \$2 for 4-6; \$3 middle/high school; \$4 for college students; and \$5 for adults. Tour groups range from elementary schools to homeschool groups; colleges and universities such as Berea College's Carter G. Woodson Center for Interracial Education; professional, fraternal and religious organizations; summer camps and family reunions as well as accommodations for city, state and national tour operators in the travel industry such as American Queen Steamboats, AAA and Freedom Time Tours.

As a regional attraction in both the Ohio River Valley and the Commonwealth of Kentucky, the museum serves as an educational resource, providing a wealth of tools, information and support with exhibits that feature and interpret antiquities, art and images, as well as books, guides and research compilations of African American marriages, slave owners and newspaper articles regarding runaway slaves and abolitionist activities. With the advent of technology, the museum was the first to provide a web source to its visitors to assist the learner to gain an understanding of the contributions of the African slave and their descendants; the implications of the abolition movement in Kentucky, the nation and abroad; and the net-

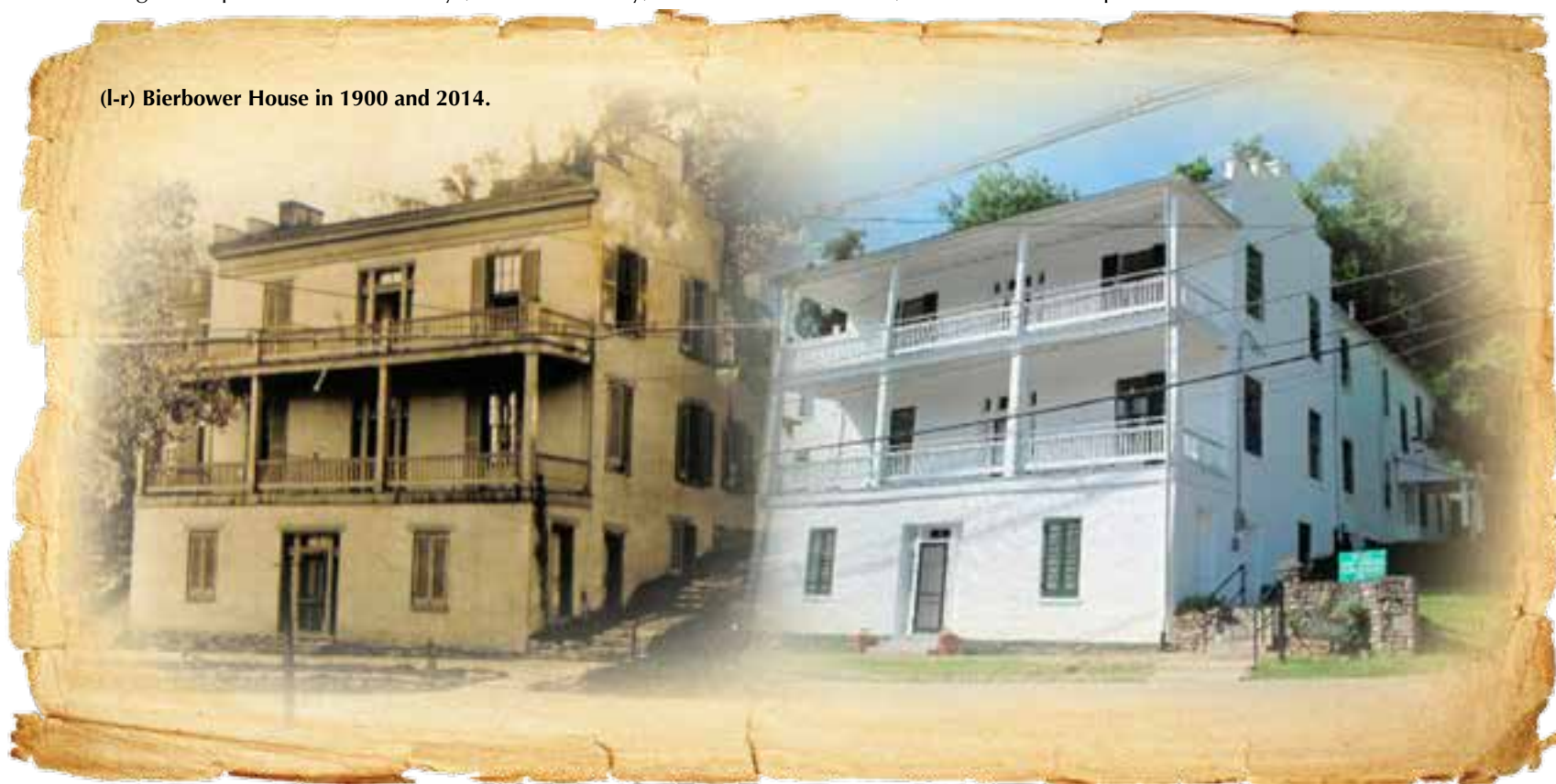
work of white, black, slave and free individuals who assisted the runaway north to freedom on the Underground Railroad. A new website will be available this month online at ugrr.us and will feature tools for the mobile user and new research regarding early anti-slavery activity in the Ohio River Valley and Maysville.

The Advent of the Bierbower House

NURM was first located at the Kentucky State Welcome Center at Bridge Street, where for over ten years at the location, volunteers dedicated time and attention to educational tours and the promotion of local, regional and state tourism. Their work was featured in historical and commercial publications such as *Southern Living*, newspapers around the state and across the country in addition to television features on the History Channel and Kentucky Education Television. As a trailblazer in the UGRR experience, the National Underground Railroad Museum became an organic experience for visitors who sought authenticity through personally traveling the routes of the freedom beginning in Maysville, Kentucky, a city within a slave state on the edge of freedom, then journeying onward to "Borderland" sites within the Ohio River Valley and beyond.

Today this experience and the simple ideas of preservation and remembrance are estab-

(l-r) Bierbower House in 1900 and 2014.





lished in the permanent home of the museum within the renovated and preserved family home of the Bierbower family of Maysville, formerly of Pennsylvania. Located within the historic district of downtown Maysville atop of Sutton and Fourth Streets, the Bierbower's home boasts a beautiful view of the Ohio River and the shores of the Brown County pioneer settlement of Aberdeen, Ohio.

The Bierbower family hid fugitive slaves in the lower level of their house. This historical revelation was provided by former resident and owner, the late Mrs. Christine McNutt-Maher through an oral history recorded by Mrs. Alice Gallenstine of Maysville and resulting in sufficient evidence to warrant action to secure the home for preservation. In consideration of this need, through the stewardship of the Mason County Fiscal Court, funding was secured and allocated from the KY General Fund Surplus Expenditure Plan (1998-2000, Part X of HB 321) to purchase the home and the restoration project of the Bierbower/Maher property was approved in 2001, and secured through the

Kentucky Transportation Cabinet Transportation Enhancement Program (TEA-21) funds.

As a significant historic site for our region, the Bierbower family history is only beginning to be revealed to the curators of the National Underground Railroad Museum. A publication is scheduled for online use and will be available in 2015 as a resource providing details regarding the family history in Kentucky and surrounding areas of Ohio, Illinois and Pennsylvania. Sons of the Bierbower family of Maysville, Col. Frederick Huber Bierbower and Dr. James Culver Bierbower were both officers in the Union Army regular as well

as the United States Colored Troops. Bierbower family members have provided details regarding the family history through photos and family publications.

Future Support and Educational Initiatives

As an educational institution, the museum's daily operating focus is to provide each visitor a unique experience through the telling of personal narratives and stories regarding slavery and the UGRR to inspire visitors to make connections with their own histories growing the collective narrative. Aligned with this focus is the museum's mission to present the truth historically and to this end, since its official opening within the Bierbower House site in July 2006, the primary goal has been to increase research in support of the inhabitants of the site and those who resided in the surrounding areas engaged in abolitionist activity.

Priority in developing a broader "story" to include not only the Bierbower site but surrounding areas, some of which are within walking distance of the museum, is already a City of Maysville tourism objective as walking tour brochures, phone Apps are available and feature the Bierbower House as attractions. However NURM seeks to provide a laser focus in order to fulfill the museum's goals, while sustaining and growing new interest for future generations by establishing new valuable linkages to expand current preservation and educational initiatives, and expound upon the combination of the traditional indoor museum exhibits with outdoor sites with information to incorporate historical geography as it relates to the Underground Railroad.

Students with NURM Board Member and Curator Nona Marshall at former location.

