

Published: April 02, 2008 03:00 pm  
Johnstown Tribune Democrat

## **Fleeing for their freedom | Community program tracks Underground Railroad**

By TOM LAVIS  
TLAVIS@TRIBDEM.COM

Area residents have an opportunity to discover the challenges runaway slaves faced as they used a vast network of people who helped them escape to the North and to Canada.

As part of Cambria County's One Book, One Community program, organizers are offering a series of lectures, movies and discussions this month to learn more about the dramatic accounts of slaves seeking freedom on the Underground Railroad.

"I hope that people who attend the events walk away with a greater understanding of what the Underground Railroad was, how it operated, and how active it was in our area," said Barbara Zaborowski, associate dean of library science at Pennsylvania Highlands Community College, Richland Township.

"There are numerous stories of slave catchers who regularly came into Cambria County and Johnstown in search of runaways but never found them because the local 'conductors' went to such great lengths to protect the escapees in their charge," she said.

All events are free.

The series begins at 7 p.m. Tuesday with a lecture titled "Destination Freedom: The Main Line Canal and Underground Railroad" at the Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site in Gallitzin.

"We will discuss the connection between the Underground Railroad and the Main Line Canal," Zaborowski said. "It is hoped that as a result of this research, the Allegheny Portage Railroad can receive a designation on the National Freedom Network."

As part of the program, readers of The Tribune-Democrat voted in October for "Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement," by Fergus Bordewich of Red Hook, N.Y., to be used in this year's program.

"I think this selection has proven to be a great choice because everyone that I have spoken to who has read it has found it to be very interesting and thought provoking and they are eager to hear the author speak about it," Zaborowski said.

Bordewich will present lectures April 17 and 18 at Mount Aloysius College and Pitt-Johnstown, respectively.

"Fergus Bordewich is very excited to have an entire countywide reading program centered around his book," Zaborowski said.

"It would be helpful if people attending the lecture would have read his book. However, we will be presenting so much historical information, all they need is an interest in the history

of the Underground Railroad.”

Another highly regarded lecturer taking part in the series is Commonwealth Speaker Nilgun Anadolu-Okur, who will be at the community room of Cambria County Library in downtown Johnstown at 5:30 p.m. April 22.

“He will have stories pertaining to the famous escapes on the Underground Railroad,” Zaborowski said.

Each year, the program gains in popularity. This year, the committee extended the program to elementary schools by providing them with a copy of the book, “Henry’s Freedom Box” by Ellen Levine.

“We have 1,200 middle-school students scheduled to participate in Underground Railroad Days on April 29-30 at the Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site at which time they will take part in activities associated with the Underground Railroad and meet the author of their book, Elvira Woodruff,” Zaborowski said.

Underground Railroad Days will be conducted April 29-30 at the Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site. The event begins at 10 a.m. each day.

#### Schedule

Tuesday: 7 p.m., “Destination Freedom: The Main Line Canal and Underground Railroad” lecture; Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site, Gallitzin.

April 10: 7 p.m., “A Night of Stephen Foster Music,” Dale Valley Arts and Cultural Center, 188 David St., Dale Borough.

April 14: 7 p.m., “Coffee Talk,” Starbucks, Richland Township; registration closed.

April 15: 7 p.m., “Race to Freedom” movie, JFK Auditorium, St. Francis University, Loretto.

April 17: 7 p.m., “Meet the Author,” Fergus Bordewich, Academic Hall, Mount Aloysius College, Cresson.

April 18: 7 p.m., “Meet the Author,” Fergus Bordewich, Pitt-Johnstown.

April 22: 5:30 p.m., “Stories of Famous Escapes on the Underground Railroad,” by Nilgun Anadolu-Okur, Cambria County Library, Johnstown.

April 25: 6 p.m., “Whispers of Angels” movie, Gallitzin Public Library; limited seating; 886-4041.