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Free Frank Leaves Descendants a Legacy of Freedom

By Deborah Gertz Husar, Herald-Whig Staff Writer

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Gerald
McWorter

BARRY, Ill. -- Growing up amid the legacy of Free Frank McWorter, the founder of New Philadelphia, provided both a blessing and a curse to Gerald McWorter.

"A blessing because it showed me the way to the light, that freedom road was a path of righteousness," said McWorter, a great-great-grandson of Free Frank who teaches at the University of Toledo.

"The curse really was the weight it issued. As a person who came of age in the 1960s, my historical legacy was awakened. The freedom road chose me as much as I chose it."

The legacy of freedom provided a powerful force in the lives of all McWorter family members, and a way for others to remember Free Frank.

"Frank is remembered because he gave his life for freedom, freedom of his family, and as a successful entrepreneur and a leader in a 19th Century integrated community. We have to think of Frank as a really true American," McWorter said.

"The real meaning of the McWorter family is the American experience. We got all of it up in our family. Perhaps that's how it should be," he said. "If we can work out what's up in our family and begin to reconnect the generational links and live with that rhythm, then America is possible."

McWorter shared thoughts about family Thursday night as part of a lecture series sponsored by the National Science Foundation as a part of an archaeological field school at the New Philadelphia site.

"A lot of black people don't really know their family history. Any family that knows its story has a higher level of responsibility to tell the story," McWorter said. "In that sense, the story of Frank McWorter and his contributions and his children is very important."

The field school hopes to uncover more of the story of Free Frank and the people who lived in the community he founded.

"We hope to create an open dialogue with the family about our research," said Paul Shackel, head of the Center for Heritage Resources at the University of Maryland who oversees the field school. "This is a very important first step."

The lecture brought together McWorter descendants, in Barry for a family reunion on Saturday, along with students working with the field school, members of the New Philadelphia Association and community members. In effect, it created a "family" of the sort favored by McWorter's late aunt Thelma, the genealogist and hub of his own family.

"Her definition of family was not blood relation. Her definition was blood, marriage, really close friends and anybody who would insist on being included," McWorter said.

McWorters have been active in anti-slavery efforts, the civil rights movement and every war since the Civil War.

Around 50 descendants of McWorter will gather Saturday in New Philadelphia, the town he founded in 1836. Family members will view the archaeological work being done on the site near Barry, talk with summer field school students at the site and meet with members of the New Philadelphia Association committed to researching, preserving and interpreting the historic site.

The association will host a picnic lunch for family members at the New Philadelphia site, then will meet with family members at the Barry Baptist Church, where Free Frank was a member.

In the private meeting at the church, "we'll be discussing our future plans," NPA President Phil Bradshaw said. "The family has been very receptive of what we're doing, very easy to work with."

NPA and McWorter descendants met formally in October when eight family members from four states turned out for the Barry Apple Festival.

"Knowing the dig is taking place, all the things taking place to find out about Free Frank and honor Free Frank, it was overwhelming," said Shirley McWorter Moss, a great-great-granddaughter of McWorter and a sculptor who lives in Anaheim, Calif.

The reunion also provides a rare opportunity for students working at the site at summer field schools offered through the National Science Foundation and the University of Illinois.

"In not too many archaeological projects do you get to meet the descendants," Shackel said. "They'll also be able to get some oral history from the family."

Related news: The town site of New Philadelphia was added to the National Register of Historic Places as a nationally significant archaeological resource on August 11, 2005. Additional details of the archaeology project are discussed in an article by Jennifer Pinkowski in the September/October 2005 edition of Archaeology Magazine.