



William Francis Galvin
Secretary of the Commonwealth

Contact: Brian McNiff
617-727-9180

October 23, 2007

THREE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD SITES APPROVED FOR NOMINATION TO THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth, is pleased to announce that the Massachusetts Historical Commission approved, at its September 12, 2007 meeting, three properties for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places as additions to the Underground Railroad in Massachusetts Multiple Property submission. The nomination will be submitted to the National Register of Historic Places at the National Park Service in Washington, DC, for final consideration and designation.

“The Massachusetts Historical Commission is dedicated to preserving the Commonwealth’s rich archaeological, architectural, cultural, and historic resources,” Secretary Galvin said. “Inclusion of these properties on the National Register will help to protect our heritage for generations to come.”

Ashburnham, Whitmore House

Built after 1818, the Enoch Whitmore House is a large and distinctive Federal-style dwelling, sitting in a remote corner of the lightly settled town of Ashburnham. The Whitmore property has a solidly documented association with the Underground Railroad in Massachusetts and represents a certain type of rural abolitionist activity. Records of the first Boston Vigilance Committee, an organization that operated in 1846 and 1847 and was devoted to assisting fugitives from slavery, document that committee secretary John White Browne sent the Maryland fugitive Josiah Thomas and his family to “live with Jones & Whittemore” in Ashburnham. Josiah Thomas and his wife stayed in Ashburnham for the remainders of their lives.

Leominster, Drake House

The Frances H. & Jonathan Drake House is located just west of the town center. Largely through Frances Drake, who lived in this house from its construction to her death in 1900, the house emblemizes the reach of abolitionism in relatively remote towns, where abolitionists were less highly organized and black populations were small. Built in 1848, the Drake house achieves its chief historical significance for its association with the famed escape of fugitive Shadrach Minkins in February 1851. Minkins was the first fugitive seized in New England under the authority of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, and his stop with the Drakes in Leominster was one of several he made on his trip to Montreal, where he would spend the remainder of his life. With the assistance of a federal commissioner and deputies newly compelled by the law to assist slave catchers, a slave agent from Norfolk, Virginia, had Minkins arrested at the Cornhill Coffee House in Boston, where he worked. He was jailed at the Boston Court House, but within days the city’s radical black abolitionists managed to rescue him. After hiding him briefly in Boston’s black neighborhood on Beacon Hill, former fugitive Lewis Hayden and John J. Smith took Minkins by carriage to Cambridge and then to Concord. From there the abolitionist blacksmith Francis Bigelow brought Minkins to the Drakes in Leominster. His sensational flight from Boston was widely touted as a decided abolitionist victory.

-More-

State House, Room 337, Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Northampton, Hill-Ross Farm

The Hill-Ross Farm is in the Florence section of Northampton, a village historically associated with the utopian Northampton Association of Education and Industry (NAEI). The farmhouse was constructed about 1825. The Ross Farm is the only landmark surviving from the utopian community, and the NAEI was the only utopian community known to have declared a commitment to racial equity as part of its aim “to work out an improved state of society.” For a village its size, an unusually large number of fugitives from slavery came to and lived in Florence, and both occupants of the house after 1840—Samuel L. Hill and Austin Ross—assisted several of them. Samuel Hill lived in the farmhouse until 1846. Though it is not firmly established that he assisted fugitives in this house, his son Arthur, born in 1841, remembers numerous instances of such aid on his father’s part. Hill also helped Sojourner Truth buy her Florence home and published the first copy of her narrative.

These are three of 10 resources around the Commonwealth approved for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places by the Massachusetts Historical Commission at this meeting.

Secretary Galvin serves as Chairman of the 17-member board, which meets regularly and considers historic resources eligible for the National Register four times a year.

The National Register is the nation’s official listing of significant cultural resources. In Massachusetts, there are over 65,000 properties listed in the National Register. The Massachusetts Historical Commission has been administering the National Register of Historic Places program in Massachusetts since 1966.

The Massachusetts Historical Commission is the office of the State Historic Preservation Officer and the State Archaeologist. It was established in 1963 to identify, evaluate, and protect important historical and archaeological assets of the Commonwealth. Visit our website to learn more about the Commission’s programs (www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc).

-End-