from SLAVERY to Freedom

An exhibit that explores our understanding of freedom

By Samuel W. Black

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“In 1843, when I left the old home for the North and that freedom I so often dreamed of ... I rode rapidly towards Pittsburg[h], to the smoky city. J.B. Vashonś [sic] and Thomas McKeever kept a regular station on the underground and here I found refuge.”
~ Charles A. Garlick

Born into slavery in February 1827, Charles A. Garlick, like many others before and after him, found Pittsburgh a destination of freedom from chattel slavery.¹ His story is recalled in From Slavery to Freedom, a multi-faceted public history project highlighting the history of abolitionism, the Underground Railroad, and the impact of 19th century activism on the 20th century quest for civil and human rights in Pittsburgh. This long-term exhibit aims to engage both regional and national audiences and raise awareness of a crucial chapter in American history. Visitors will learn about the evolution of Pittsburgh’s African American community, beginning in Africa and, from that point of departure, moving through the exhibit’s thematic galleries toward the 21st century. Each section of the exhibit will delve into unexplored histories of slavery, freedom, and the African American experience using fascinating artifacts, documents, graphics, and audio and video components to illustrate the story. From Slavery to Freedom’s thorough examination of Pittsburgh’s African American history adds important insights to Western Pennsylvania’s rich cultural heritage.

¹ From Slavery to Freedom, a multi-faceted public history project highlighting the history of abolitionism, the Underground Railroad, and the impact of 19th century activism on the 20th century quest for civil and human rights in Pittsburgh.
The exhibit begins by taking visitors centuries into the past and thousands of miles away from Western Pennsylvania, to the West African coastal regions of Guinea, the Bight of Benin and the Bight of Biafra, the Congo, and coastal islands. These areas would later be the point of embarkation for most enslaved brought to North America. Patrons will explore the sophisticated cultures, economies, educational systems, and social networks of these regions. Centuries of trade across the Sahara and other parts of the interior enabled the development of major city-states such as Fouta Djallon, Massina, Jenne, Gao, Loango, and Luanda, and ethnic regions such as Igbo, Calabar, and Sosso. West Africa had a long history of imperial authority and expansive kingdoms (many with large populations). From Slavery to Freedom argues that Africa’s history is not rooted in slavery, but that the slave trade had a deleterious impact on African civilizations. Cultural artifacts on loan from the Carnegie Museum of Natural History highlight the opening of the exhibit with items of everyday use and graphics that explore the cultural dynamics of African civilization. These societies were disrupted and transformed by the events of the transatlantic slave trade.

**THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE**

From 1501 to 1867, the transatlantic slave trade dominated the movement of people from east to west—the Atlantic Ocean was the dividing line, with Europe and Africa in the east, and the Americas to the west. Everyone who came to the New World during this period was connected either directly or indirectly to the enslavement of native people or Africans who were transported across the Atlantic Ocean. During the course of three centuries, over 389,000 people of African descent were transported through the Middle Passage to be enslaved in North America.

An installation based on an 18th century diagram of the slave ship *Brookes* will greet visitors as they enter the hull of a slave ship with the moans and groans of the ship’s captives in their ears. The slave ship was a significant machine of the global economy. It provided for over 12 million Africans to be shipped across the Atlantic to be enslaved. So profound was the economic impact of the slave trade, it helped develop London, Liverpool, Charleston, and other port city economies. “London benefitted enormously from the transatlantic slave trade,” David Spence of the Museum of London Docklands explains. “Nearly 3,000 slave ships left London before the abolition of the slave trade…. The landscape of East London was transformed when the West India Docks were created to handle slave plantation produce.”

Liverpool had even a greater impact on the slave trade and, in turn, the city was transformed into a major port and economic center. Between 1787 and the abolition of the trade by the British in 1807, over 120 ships per year departed from Liverpool, accounting for three-quarters of all European slave ships during this period. Liverpool ships transported half of the 3 million enslaved Africans across the Atlantic by British slavers. The port of Philadelphia began docking slave ships as early as 1759. However slaves were present in the eastern part of the commonwealth as early as 1639. From 1759 until 1800, 10 slave ships docked in Philadelphia.
STOWAGE OF THE BRITISH SLAVE SHIP "BROOKES" UNDER THE
REGULATED SLAVE TRADE
Act of 1788.

Fig. 1.
Longitudinal Section.

Note: The shaded squares indicate the beams of the ship.

Plan of Lower Deck with the Stowage of 292 Slaves
130 of these being stowed under the shelves as shown in Figures 3 & 4.

Plan showing the stowage of the additional slaves round the wings or sides of the lower deck by means of platforms or shelves
(In the manner of galleries in a church) the slaves stowed on the shelves and below them have only a height of 2 feet 7 inches
between the beams and far less under the beams. See Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.
Store Rooms.

Fig. 3.
Store Rooms.

Fig. 4.
Cross Section at the Prop.

Fig. 5.
Cross Section amidships.

Fig. 6.
Lower tier of slaves under the beams.

Fig. 7.
Shall tier of slaves under the beam.

Captains' Cabins.

Appropriated to the Crew.

Captains' Cabins.

Appropriated to the Crew.
A Middle Passage transition room, with shackles, manacles, leg irons, and graphics, illustrates the brutal subjugation of Africans in Africa, aboard ship, and at the point of debarkation in the west. For millions of enslaved, the Middle Passage represented the beginning of the traumatic nightmare that transformed African civilization forever. Once Africans were captured and confined they were brought to the coast and jailed in one of the hundred or so European slave “castles” that lined the West African coast from Goree to the Congo. After weeks confined in a castle holding pen, the enslaved would then be transferred to one of the thousands of slave ships bound for the Americas. This six- to eight-week trip across the Atlantic Ocean was an intensely harrowing experience. Many Africans chose death rather than enslavement, jumping into the ocean whenever they had the opportunity. Those confined in the stinking hold faced other horrors, such as death from disease, rape at the hands of the crew, and whippings for suspicion of insurrection. Once the ship arrived at its North American port, the enslaved were removed to the market for sale.
Though generally associated with the South, Pittsburgh and Allegheny City too were deeply invested in the cotton industry.

**The Slave Economy**

Visitors will then disembark and move into the Slave Economy gallery, where cash crops such as sugar, rice, tobacco, wheat, and corn illustrate the economics of slavery. Artifacts, including shackles and ankle irons from the Antigua sugar plantation of the British Tudway family, document the impact of sugar on personal and national wealth. Between 1761 and 1807, a profit of £13.8 million was made by British investors in this aspect of the slave trade. Sugar was the largest commodity imported to Britain, its colonies, and other European nations, and not far behind in importance was rice. Grown for a millennium in the Guinea coastal area from the Senegambia region to Sierra Leone, West African rice farmers were prime targets to be enslaved in the rice plantations of the American South. Rice was used as food onboard slave ships crossing the Atlantic, and was also the major starchy food of colonial America. West African rice shovels, fan baskets, graphics, and slave auction broadsides illustrate this section.

Tobacco, wheat, and corn have long been part of America’s agricultural heritage. Tobacco was cultivated in Virginia, the Carolinas, and other areas of the American east coast, using slave labor as the major means of production after the 17th century.
The gallery includes graphic advertisements for Pittsburgh tobacco dealers and jars from Weyman’s, one of the most popular manufacturers of smokeless tobacco products sold by local dealers.
As tobacco exports increased so too did the demand for slaves. Slave labor was used at all levels of production—planting, harvesting, processing, and manufacturing. Antebellum Pittsburgh had numerous tobacco shops that sold the product and paraphernalia. The gallery includes graphic advertisements for Pittsburgh tobacco dealers and jars from Weyman’s, one of the most popular manufacturers of smokeless tobacco products sold by local dealers. Visitors will learn about the various tools used in the cultivation of the plant and its impact on the Pittsburgh economy.

Though generally associated with the South, Pittsburgh and Allegheny City too were deeply invested in the cotton industry, a mammoth part of the country’s economy and credited with 46 percent of the nation’s GNP. Local textile mills imported tons of Mississippi-grown cotton each year. Maps showing the riverbanks where steel mills would sit decades later instead show antebellum textile mills. The Eagle Cotton Works, Hope Cotton Works, Anchor Cotton Mill, Banner, Penn Cotton, Globe Factory, Union Factory, Steam, and the Phoenix Cotton factory helped make the three rivers region a major textile center.

### THE FREEDOM SEEKER EXPERIENCE

Africans resisted chattel slavery from the very beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. For those enslaved in North America the resistance came in many forms. Running away, self-purchase, barter, and violent insurrections count among the various methods of confrontation. Historians John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger maintain that the flight for freedom was the single most common act of rebellion aside from day-to-day resistance.5

There are many terms used to describe the enslaved who took their freedom, self-liberators or fugitive slaves being two of the most common. From Slavery to Freedom uses the term “freedom seeker.” A transition room will lead visitors from the gallery on the slave economy to the challenges of the freedom seeker experience. This section asks the question that all freedom seekers had to answer: “What and who will you take with you?” Numerous postings for reward and capture list the clothing, food, or persons accompanying those who chose to self-liberate. For all the challenges liberation posed, such as the hunt of the slave catchers and the uncertainty of where to go and who to trust, this exhibit contends that the first difficulty encountered was nature.

Many freedom seekers who ventured into Western Pennsylvania had to traverse the Allegheny Mountains, rivers and other waterways, gorges, and peaks plus avoid slave catchers on the trail. Confronted with hunger, sickness, and trauma, many turned to the natural environment for shelter, sustenance, and support. This section of the exhibit focuses on the environment in the neighboring states where many freedom seekers originated as they made their way north. An array of graphic illustrations of regional plants used for food, medicine, and shelter are accompanied by reproductions of the specific species, which carry the story of the relationship between the freedom seeker and the environment. These illustrations, derived from research at the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation at Carnegie Mellon University, are examples of the knowledge that African Americans held about the natural environment.

This knowledge was expressed in a culinary culture learned in the slave community and linked back to Africa. African American foodways help tell the story of freedom seekers who settled in Pittsburgh and brought their culinary traditions with them, making the region a diverse pot of ethnic flavors. These aspects of the freedom seeker experience have rarely been explored until now. What was the typical diet for African Americans in slavery and freedom? What culinary traditions were brought with them to Pittsburgh? Graphics and artifacts will introduce the foodways story both locally and in general terms. Visitors will gain a greater understanding of means for survival for African Americans both slave and free.
Manumission and Freedom

Freedom came in many forms. Archival documents found in 2007 by Valerie McDonald Roberts and her staff at the Allegheny County Department of Real Estate are mounted in a transition space at the end of the Freedom Seekers gallery. These documents are testament to Pittsburgh’s role as a destination of freedom and as a slave-holding territory. The emancipated, manumitted, and indentured came from Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. The indenture status was a common way of gradual emancipation but also a means to extend the use of slave labor. It is, perhaps, shocking to read of a six-year-old girl contracted as an indentured servant. Her status raises certain questions: was the indenture contract used as a method to free the girl, or did her master intend to eventually use her as a concubine? Other records are affidavits testifying to the free status of steamboat workers, or those jailed for being suspected as fugitive slaves. The fact that African Americans had to protect their status with legal documents filed in public offices indicates the fragility of freedom and the real possibility that one could be taken and sold into slavery at any time.

The exhibit goes beyond a display of the documents. It presents commentary and additional research conducted by the Afro-American Historical & Genealogical Society of Pittsburgh, whose members located descendants of former slaves listed in the documents. Caroline McAlfrey, her husband Lewis, and their sons Alexander and Abdullah were filed in 1844 as emancipated slaves from Montgomery, Alabama. Research revealed that Caroline may have been the daughter of her slave master, Benjamin Hassell, and that her husband was a committeeman in the 1843 Convention of Black Men in Pittsburgh. Abdullah moved west into Utah and California and changed his name to A.D. McAlfrey. Further research revealed that Caroline had two sisters, Venus and Josephine. The possibility that descendants of people listed in these 57 documents could be discovered gives the material added importance.

Abolition and the Path to Freedom

The collection of freedom papers sets the stage for a discussion of the specter of slavery in Western Pennsylvania, found in the Abolitionism gallery. One of the reasons such a militant abolitionist community existed in Pittsburgh was the continuation of slavery and indentures. Some of Pittsburgh’s most renowned citizens were slaveholders, namely James O’Hara, John McKee, William Croghan, Phillip Winebiddle, and Presley Neville. McKee, the founder of McKeesport, and O’Hara, one of the wealthiest men of early Pittsburgh, are entangled in the freedom papers as they bought, sold, and indentured human beings. Noted citizens who were abolitionists included John Peck, Jane Grey Swisshelm, Charles Avery, John Black, Thomas J. Bingham, and Dr. Francis J. LeMoyne. The visitor’s eyes will be drawn to the imposing life figure of Martin R. Delany, a man of many talents and staunch abolitionist, as he stands and delivers his famous 1850 speech at the Allegheny City Market denouncing the sponsors of the Fugitive Slave Law and challenging anyone to cross his threshold looking for escaped slaves. This section delves deeply into antebellum Pittsburgh and profiles some known and some unknown members of the movement.

The sub-section The Path to Freedom offers a glimpse into the structure of the Underground Railroad network. Digital touch screen interactives utilizing video game technology bring to life the safe houses of Martin R. Delany, Dr. Francis J. LeMoyne, Thomas J. Bingham, John B. Vashon’s barbershop, and the Monongahela House Hotel. Visitors will be able to manipulate the screen to see nuances of
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crewman onboard the many riverboats that travelled the Ohio River to points south and west. His daughter, educator Hallie Q. Brown, recounted her father’s numerous stories about rescuing slaves along the Ohio River and in Pittsburgh. The Browns were indicative of the passion of African Americans against slavery.

There were many incidents of confrontations involving pro- and anti-slavery factions, and much of the hostility was espoused in the abolitionist newspapers of the time. Journalists such as Jane Grey Swisshelm, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Delany advocated for the cause in the sheets of their papers, The Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter, North Star, Frederick Douglass’ Paper, and the Mystery. The papers also carried debates about the direction for black liberation. One such argument supported emigration from the United States for African Americans. Douglass, Lewis Woodson, and John B. Vashon were against emigration, but David Peck and Delany defended the idea. The decade of the 1850s, from the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Law to the 1857 Dred Scott decision, gave reason for many to leave the United States for Canada, Africa, and the Caribbean. In 1854 a group from Allegheny County travelled to Cleveland, Ohio, to attend the National Emigration Convention. Delany, William Webb, Charles W. Nighten, and Thomas Brown served as officers of the central committee. Delany never dropped his emigration plans and in 1860 travelled to present-day Nigeria to negotiate land leases for African American immigrants in Abeokuta.

African Americans and the Civil War

By the time Delany had returned from Africa, America was on the brink of Civil War. Allegheny County was deeply affected by the conflict; black Pittsburghers sent able-bodied men almost immediately into action. On April 17, 1861, the Hannibal Guards, an African American militia group, petitioned General James Negley and volunteered to serve the Union cause, but were rebuffed. On April 22, 1861, the 12th Pennsylvania Volunteers became the first regiment organized by General Negley; Company I of the regiment contained the only men of color. Nonetheless, by 1863, as a provision of the Emancipation Proclamation, President Abraham Lincoln established the United States Colored Troops and relied on the Underground Railroad network in the nation’s abolitionist communities to recruit soldiers.

On the Pittsburgh home front, African Americans immediately began organizing to help their troops. Guns and clothing were collected for departing soldiers. Susan Paul Vashon and other women helped gather support for the servicemen’s families. African Americans also built fortifications in the city. There were two redoubts built using black labor, one located at the St. Nicholas Cemetery of Reserve Township (which was built in part with African American labor from Allegheny City), and a second at Fort Robert Smalls, located south of the Monongahela River in what is today Arlington Heights, adjacent to St. Peter’s Cemetery.

Hundreds of African American men from Allegheny County served in various United States Colored Troops units during the war. Both the Massachusetts 54th and 55th regiments contained Allegheny County residents. Among the units from Pennsylvania, Alexander Kelly of the 8th USCT won the Medal of Honor. Owen Barrett, a chemist who worked in the B.A. Fahnstock pharmacy and joined Martin Delany in the National Emigration Convention, enlisted in the 118th United States Colored Infantry in 1864. By 1865, Delany had met with President Lincoln and received a commission as a major in the 104th United States Colored Infantry. Within weeks of his commissioning, the war was over and so was American slavery.
Black Reconstruction

By the time the Confederacy had surrendered at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, freedom for nearly 4 million enslaved was in sight. The Civil War gallery also explores the 13th and 14th constitutional amendments that ratified the end of slavery and citizenship rights for most African Americans. But these amendments were both the beginning of promise and also the continuation of hostilities toward African American freedom.

When Pennsylvania ratified the 15th Amendment granting voting rights to African American men, a period of reconstruction was initiated in the state. However, Pennsylvania did not have an African American legislator until 1911. Southern states with black majority voting blocks elected numerous local, state, and federal office holders. Much of the political gains around the passage of the three amendments and the 1866 Civil Rights Act were achieved through the efforts of the National Equal Rights League. This national organization of African American leaders in business, education, religion, and the professional class formed state chapters that lobbied legislators to pass each amendment and law. In Pittsburgh, George Vashon was very active in the NERL.

From the 1870s until the end of the century, Pittsburgh’s African American community grew steadily and its economic status changed as well. The gallery profiles a number of business, professional, organizational, institutional, family, and community developments. It also looks at the struggle for civil rights continuing to be a deterrent in full citizenship rights. Despite these negative conditions, Cumberland Posey, Sr., was able to establish the Diamond Coal & Coke Company and build barges that operated along the three rivers. Mary Peck Bond founded a home for aged colored women and provided care and a community for former slaves. George Turfly started a clinic and laid a foundation for black medical service in the region.
World War I impacted the black community as many men went off to war and for the first time more industrial jobs were open to blacks and women.

After returning to Pittsburgh from the trenches of WWI, the men of the 351st Field Artillery were among those marching in a welcome-home parade on March 7, 1919.

HHC Detre LAC, gift of Frank Bolden.
**The Great Migration**

Black Reconstruction transitions into the Great Migration of the early 20th century. By the early 1900s, Pittsburgh was again a city of advancement. Reminding visitors that the area was a destination for freedom seekers some 50 years before, the Great Migration gallery welcomes patrons to the 20th century explosion of African American life. Profiles of migrating men and families who came to work in the mills or other industries, the founding of the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper that became a beacon of professionalism and civic pride, and the creation of Pittsburgh jazz indicated a new idea of freedom for former slaves and their descendants. World War I impacted the black community as many men went off to war and for the first time more industrial jobs were open to blacks and women. World War I veterans came back to the U.S. and extended the war’s fight for democracy in America.

**Continuing the Journey**

As new freedoms were clarified and defined, civil rights became a major issue and post-World War II Pittsburgh witnessed a reemergence of the quest for freedom of 100 years earlier. The Civil Rights movement was championed with campaigns such as Double V during World War II and Operation Dig during the late 1960s. The Double V campaign called for a dual victory—one over the Axis powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan and another over the racism that plagued America. Operation Dig focused on the continued discrimination in the building trades harkening back to the challenge of economic opportunities for freemen a century earlier.

The Journey Continues gallery also explores the furtherance of the migration of people of African descent. No longer brought to its shores in bondage, Africans have come to the U.S. seeking opportunity and freedom. Some have come for education or jobs, while others seek asylum. Some hail from the same regions that the slave trade impacted more than 200 years before. Today,
From Slavery to Freedom is an exhibition that challenges what we know about African Americans, slavery, and the Underground Railroad/Abolitionist history. It also brings new research to the freedom seeker experience and sheds light on the volume of freedom papers that document slavery and freedom in Allegheny County. There are numerous stories to explore in the exhibit, such as the role of slavery in the development of America’s economy that impacts us to the present day, and the activism of Pittsburghers around slavery issues and civil rights. The quest for freedom has been a long and arduous road to travel and continues to be a challenge, not only for African Americans, but for all those seeking an understanding of freedom throughout the nation.

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1 Charles A. Garlick: Life: Including his escape and struggle for Liberty of Charles A. Garlick born a slave in Old Virginia, who secured his freedom by running away from his masters farm in 1843. Self published, 1902.
4 Bressey, et.al., 17, 21.

From Slavery to Freedom is generously funded by the U.S. Department of Education Underground Railroad Educational and Cultural Program. This long-term exhibit project includes programs, curricula, and publications with strategic partners from Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh Public Schools, the Afro-American Historical & Genealogical Society, The Art Institute of Pittsburgh, CWPA 150, Friends of the Forks of the Road Slave Market Museum of Natchez, Mississippi, The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, and a host of scholars and consultants.

Fellows from the Carnegie Mellon University Center for Africanamerican Urban Studies and the Economy (CAUSE), and the World History Center at the University of Pittsburgh will expand the research component of the project while the Pittsburgh Public Schools African American curriculum project will utilize the exhibition, programs, and publication to further the education of K-12 students in the district. The Art Institute of Pittsburgh will develop a Game Art interactive that explores the dynamics of regional safe houses and components of history of the slave trade. One of the greatest impacts of the project will be the genealogical work of the Pittsburgh Chapter of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society research on the 57 manumission papers as well as Allegheny County’s National Emigration Convention delegates of 1854.

From Slavery to Freedom opened to the public in November 2012 with the eager anticipation of embracing a greater dialogue about race, freedom, and community development from the 18th to the 21st centuries.

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