

Cyclists tracing history

Underground railroad trail will stretch 2,000-plus miles

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The routes of the underground railroad – the paths slaves took while attempting to escape their Southern owners – are difficult to track for one obvious reason. At the time the trails were being used, the last thing people helping hide and shelter fugitive slaves wanted was discovery.

“That’s the challenge for us today, to verify the truth of an illegal activity,” said Guy Washington, a regional coordinator for the National Park Service’s Network to Freedom program.

At the time, anyone caught helping slaves flee their owners faced loss of property, fines and imprisonment.

The best a captured fugitive slave could hope for was more enslavement. The punishment could be considerably worse.

Daviess County has its place in the history of the underground railroad. In 1830, Josiah Henson and his family crossed the Ohio River at Daviess County on their way to freedom in Canada. Henson later risked his life again when he returned south to help other slaves escape.

When Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” she based the main character on Henson’s life. Hundreds or perhaps thousands of other fugitive slaves are believed to have crossed the Ohio at Daviess County to escape their owners.

Owensboro history with the underground railroad has been memorialized, in a sense, by the Montana-based Adventure Cycling Association. Last year, the nonprofit organization released maps for the first two stages of its underground railroad trail.

The two stages stretch from Mobile, Ala., to Owensboro – a distance of more than 860 miles. Ginny Sullivan, new routes coordinator for Adventure cycling, said other maps will be released later that will follow the trail farther north into Canada. The trail will wind just over 2,000 miles from end to end.

The route was created with bicycling in mind and follows roads conducive to long-distance bicycling. But the trail could give people riding it something of the feeling slaves must have had when fleeing their owners.

“There were so many ways we could have gone, but we had to find one that represented it all,” Sullivan said. “...What we feel about this route is, by experiencing the underground railroad by bicycle, you’re going to experience a smidgen of what it was like to be moving by your own means.”

Washington, who consulted on the route, said the park service is confident of the authenticity of the underground railroad routes through Kentucky. In the Deep South, however, the trail is still being authenticated by members of Adventure Cycling.

“In some places, we know the story exists,” Washington said. “...Adventure Cycling has a number of people who are scholars or investigators or amateur historians.”

The route will give bicyclists a taste of what life was like for fugitive slaves, such as “how do you get food, how do you get water?” Washington said.

The maps will actually be marked with various food, shelter and rest stops along the way, Sullivan said. The routes were planned after consulting with historians and veteran long-distance bicyclists, Sullivan said.

“We tried to find good roads, we relied on local cycling knowledge...(and) we consulted the National Park Service on what we should do,” Sullivan said.

The route has sites important to the underground railroad along its path.

“There’s no one route to freedom,” Washington said. “There were as many routes as people who wanted to escape.”

Washington acknowledged that not everyone will be happy about a trail commemorating the underground railroad – which, naturally, is a reminder of the country’s history of slavery.

“There are very few people, especially down in the South...who are neutral about it,” Washington said.

On The Web

Copies of the underground railroad route maps can be purchased from the Adventure Cycling Association Web site, <http://www.adventurecycling.org>.