

COURAGE, COOPERATION, PERSEVERANCE: EXHIBIT INTERPRETATION  
AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AT THE NATIONAL UNDERGROUND  
RAILROAD FREEDOM CENTER

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: *Courage, Cooperation, Perseverance: Exhibit Interpretation and Educational Programs at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center*

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (NURFC) is a museum located in Cincinnati, Ohio. It anchors a riverfront development project where, beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, cities and towns in southern Ohio and northern Kentucky invested in areas around the banks of the Ohio River. NURFC therefore serves multiple purposes as a tourism draw taking advantage of waterfront property, an educational institution, a monument, a place of employment, and a “museum of conscience” akin to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC and the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. As a “museum of conscience,” NURFC is devoted to telling the story of abolitionists fighting African American chattel enslavement prior to the US Civil War and human trafficking in the present day, as well as facilitating racial reconciliation in contemporary Cincinnati. Its mission is as lofty as it is multifaceted and daunting. This dissertation is the result of a year and a half of participant observation, surveys, and ethnographic interviews. It explores NURFC’s various missions and provides a set of evaluative criteria regarding them.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION: MUSEUM OF CONSCIENCE, MUSEUM OF COOPERATION**

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (NURFC), located on the banks of the Ohio River in Cincinnati, OH has multiple institutional roles. Among them is tourism, specifically one devoted to the “dark tourism” written about by John J. Lennon and Malcolm Foley (2000). Its focus on historic trauma of the sort described by James and Lois Horton (2011) makes NURFC a “call to action” in the vein of the Museum of Tolerance in LA or the Holocaust Museum in D.C. According to Carl Westmoreland, NURFC’s senior historian, the museum is meant to be seen across the Ohio River from Kentucky, looming like the lantern in the window of an Underground Railroad safe house. It fronts Smale Riverfront Park, thereby “anchoring” the riverbank in the words of NURFC’s former Creative Director (personal interview: February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

This ties into NURFC’s second role; a landmark. As you can see in Figure 15 in the Appendix, the museum is built on a monumental scale. Indeed, one visitor referred to the building as a “secular temple” (personal interview: February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018). The museum’s scale testifies to Cincinnati lore as the city existing as a hub on the Underground Railroad. Moreover, given the fact that NURFC is situated on the banks of the Ohio River, it reinforces the idea that Ohio – a Free State – represented “freedom” for those on the Underground Railroad, even though freedom seekers were not truly free until they left the country. The museum’s landmark status is probably one reason NURFC was featured in a Jeopardy question in May of 2019.

NURFC's monumental status also factors into another role in plays, that of community center. When NURFC opened in August of 2004 it was also intended to serve as a site of racial conciliation/reconciliation. In the words of Richard Rabinowitz, who helped establish NURFC, the museum was intended to be a space where conversations about race can happen "out of the rain" (2016: 305). It is a forum in the original sense of the word; where people can come together to discuss weighty matters. In more recent months it is a place where people can watch and listen to scholars like Carol Anderson and David Blight. On a day to day basis, it is also an informal educational institution where school groups can come to learn about state and local history.

This brings me to the final role NURFC plays; that of educational center. Indeed, this factored into my own role as a member of NURFC's education team. Many K-12 school groups come to NURFC, especially during February, i.e. Black History Month. The experiences they undergo are intended to satisfy state and national learning standards. When I began working with NURFC first as an intern and then as a staff member many colleagues wanted to incorporate Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) standards in order to solidify NURFC's status as an informal educational institution serving the community. There was also a movement to make STEM into STEAM by adding an "A" for Art.

These four roles – tourism site, landmark, community center, educational institution – are embedded in the experiences found on floors one through three of the museum. Four also factors in to a limited degree. The fifth floor is where

these experiences are brainstormed and developed. Please see Figure 1 in the Appendix for a map of NURFC.

My fieldwork at NURFC led me to address three primary research questions. First: how does NURFC interpret African American chattel enslavement? What stories are foregrounded, and how are they framed? Second: how is local memory about the Underground Railroad reflected through NURFC's visitor experience? How do the exhibits, artifacts, and programs interact to construct a particular narrative about the informal network that guided freedom seekers north from Slave States to Canada (and, in some cases, Mexico)? Finally: what role – or roles – does NURFC play in the Cincinnati community through programs? Given the existence of a museum dedicated to the Underground Railroad in a city where almost half the population is African American – and where many employees grew up in and around Cincinnati – how does NURFC's mission relate to the museum's role as a community focal point?

### **Overview**

This introductory chapter lays out the overall theoretical grounding of my dissertation which uses three principal theoretical frameworks. The first involves heritage sites such as museums and how they interpret history. I invoke authors such as Amy Lonetree (2012) and John Collins (2015) and their work on exhibit interpretation at museums and heritage sites associated with marginalized populations; as well as James and Lois Horton (2011), Juanita Moore (2018), Fath Davis Ruffins (2006), Rochelle Riley (2018), Richard Rabinowitz (2016), and Robyn Autry (2013, 2017a, 2017b) on sites specifically devoted to the

African American experience. John J. Lennon and Malcolm Foley's 2000 work on dark tourism also factor in. Authors on historic buildings like Deborah Ryan and David Vagnone (2015), Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small (2002), Alexandra Alexa Chan (2007), and John Michael Vlach (1986, 1991, 1993) make an appearance when I discuss NURFC's primary artifact, the John W. Anderson Slave Jail.

The second focuses on the construction of narratives and how they help us "make sense" of our history in order to understand the present. Here, David Scott's 2004 work on the construction of modernity through constructs such as Tragedy makes an appearance, as does Hilary Iris Lowe (2015) and Alexander Spencer's (2016) engagement with Romantic narratives. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's 2002 discussion of so-called North Atlantic universals and their outgrowth from plantation enslavement also figures prominently in my discussion of NURFC's galleries. Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa (2015), Augusto Boal (1993), David Blight (2001), Brigitte Sion (2014), and Brenda Tindal (2018), among others, bring these discussions forward to museums and heritage sites associated with historically traumatic events and conciliation/reconciliation through applied calls to action.

Finally, my experience as an employee of the site at which I conducted fieldwork led me to explore the process by which employees, who largely exist "backstage" at NURFC, help craft the narratives which unfold at the museum. In so doing I build on institutional anthropologists such as Laura Nader (1972) with authors like Michael Zickar and Nathan Carter (2010), Wes Sharrack and John

A. Hughes (2004), and John Helliwell and Haifang Huang (2010). I apply institutional anthropology to the museum workplace specifically via authors such as Nina Simon (2010, 2013, 2016), Ditte Laursen (2012), Kristina Von Tisch (2019), and Maria Veronica Valarino de Abreu (2016). I drill down into the creation of museum education programs via Cherie Pandora and Kathy Fredrik (2017), Mike Murawski (2017), Mariruth Leftwich (2016), Louise Bunce (2016), and Robert Connolly and Elizabeth Bollwerk (2017).

I examine the overarching, global narrative of oppression NURFC constructs, of which African American chattel enslavement is treated as a segment. A significant segment, but a segment, nonetheless. My analysis will focus on the role NURFC plays in the world of museums dedicated to engaging with the legacy of African American enslavement as well as oppression post-emancipation and abolition (Moore 2018, Riley 2018, Autry 2017a, Autry 2017b, Autry 2013, Burns 2013, Ruffins 2006). I will pay particular attention to the ways in which the treatment NURFC gives this iteration of involuntary servitude ties into the “arc of oppression” it constructs. On a more practical level I will articulate how NURFC is embedded within the Cincinnati community both serving as a community center and providing an opportunity for racial “conciliation.” This dual purpose, intertwined with Cincinnati’s fraught racial legacy, means that NURFC can be considered an “identity-driven” museum (Autry 2013). Part of NURFC’s identity is telling the story of the African American experience from enslavement to empowerment, in a similar way to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened in 2016, and the Anacostia Museum in

Washington DC, which opened in 1967 and, in a similar way to NURFC, incorporates local narratives (Autry 2017b; Burns 2013).

NURFC's identity exists in tandem, however, with the existing tensions between the reality of Cincinnati racial dynamics and the narrative of a racially harmonious Underground Railroad existing within NURFC's walls. In analyzing this I will draw from literature related to heritage and museum theory, particularly ideas related to heritage tourism. Specifically, NURFC's narrative gives a nod to "dark tourism," the practice of visiting sites which memorialize tragedy (Lennon and Foley 2000; Sharpley and Stone 2009; Horton and Horton 2011; Sion 2014). It ultimately ends up on the side of Romance by celebrating individual stories of resistance. In this way my introduction sets up the overall trajectory of my analysis of NURFC; a place where emphasis is placed on abolitionists who were "righteous." This includes, in many cases, in the religious sense. African American enslavement is therefore situated within a global, overarching story of oppression, where "modern day abolitionists" are cast as the heirs to figures like Harriet Tubman, John Brown, and Ohio's own Levi Coffin and John Rankin.

Taken as a whole, NURFC simultaneously challenges us to examine enslavement as a key part of the economic development of the Americas while reassuring us that opposition to enslavement is an American value. This simultaneous challenge represents a concerted effort on the part of a museum at undoing the segregated nature of "cultural memory" (Ruffins 2006: 396) as well as foregrounding African American history and culture in the public consciousness (Burns 2013). At a more mission-specific level with regard to

NURFC, equating opposition to enslavement with patriotism – at least in the present day - encourages us to embrace that value by becoming modern day abolitionists fighting against trafficking. This is narratively driven home in the galleries on the third floor, with the second floor illustrating this at a more personal level through artifacts and works of art. The first floor purports to instruct on why our mental wiring enables this and - perhaps - what we can do about it in the Implicit Bias Learning Lab. This space houses *Open Your Mind*, a facilitated discussion about the subject of implicit bias. Taken together, the museum constructs a narrative of constant struggle against oppression, both internally and externally.

The city of Cincinnati is folded into the various aspects of NURFC’s mission, including that of “museum of conscience.” This is apparent in multiple ways. The following section of this chapter provides an overview of this southern Ohioan city, particularly NURFC’s relationship with it.

### **“A Site of Struggle”**

In terms of tourism, NURFC represents one aspect of a bi-state riverfront development project. NURFC was built during a time of intense revitalization on both sides of the Ohio River. This was a period of overall development along the Ohio Riverfront. In May 1999, the Newport Aquarium opened just across the river in Kentucky. In August of 2000 the new home of the Bengals, Cincinnati’s NFL team, started hosting home games. It would be linked to the Great American Ballpark starting in September of 2008, when the city broke ground on construction of Smale Riverfront Park. Named for a former CEO of Cincinnati

based company Proctor and Gamble (P&G) and his wife, this park connects landmarks along the river such as Brown Stadium, and the Roebling Bridge, prototype for the Brooklyn Bridge (Tolzmann 2007). Intended as a community gathering space, urban renewal project, and tourist draw, the city awarded this ongoing project \$40 million in capital funds for development. This large amount of money causes Smale Park to remain controversial to this day, despite its enjoyment by tourists and visitors alike.

Walking east along the river through the park, visitors pass family friendly activities such as a carousel, a large-scale chess board, and labyrinth akin to the one at Chartres Cathedral. They will also pass a memorial to the “Black Brigade,” an all African American regiment which defended the city of Cincinnati against a possible Confederate invasion from Kentucky during the Civil War in 1862 (Suess 2016).

The fact that NURFC is so close to Cincinnati’s riverfront and its amenities means that the museum can tell a locally situated narrative of freedom centered on the city’s position on the north bank of the Ohio River. Like the activities at the park, this narrative is also “family friendly,” focusing on intrepid people of all ethnicities fighting for freedom for everyone.

Rising from the riverfront park is one of the many local landmarks visible from NURFC’s property. The John Roebling Bridge, one of many bridges which connect Cincinnati and the northern Kentucky cities of Covington and Newport, is the most iconic of them. Stone arches topped by decorative bronze colored cross shapes rise from a blue suspension bridge. Cincinnatians relish boasting

about the fact that the Roebling Bridge was the prototype for the Brooklyn Bridge. It dominates the view from NURFC's second and third floor balconies. High-rise hotels and columnated plantation houses line the Covington coastline on either side of the bridge.

Cincinnati's status as a "hub of abolitionism and the Underground Railroad," a narrative often promulgated during tours, is compelling but inaccurate in many ways. During the time of the Underground Railroad, as now, Cincinnati was a "site of struggle" in the words of Novella, a member of NURFC's education team and a veteran historic reenactor (personal interview: December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017). Carl Westmoreland, NURFC's senior historian who was affectionately known as "Mr. West," referred to Cincinnati as a place that "wasn't perfect but was striving to become livable" in terms of race relations (personal interview: June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018). The struggle between livability for African Americans and utter lack of perfection is at least 150 years old. NURFC's proximity to Cincinnati's riverfront and its amenities means that the museum can tell a locally situated narrative of freedom centered on the city's position on the north bank of the Ohio River, constructed in contrast to Northern Kentucky, visible just across the water.

Cincinnati and Covington, KY are connected by several bridges, including the John Roebling Bridge, renamed for its architect in 1983. This bridge was the prototype for the Brooklyn Bridge and was opened to traffic in 1867, two years after the Civil War (Tolzmann 2007). One of the most notable things about the Roebling Bridge is that it was built to begin with. Throughout most of the Underground Railroad era, Kentucky took pains to ensure companies financing

the building of bridges across the Ohio River would be liable for any freedom seekers - NURFC's preferred term for self-emancipating enslaved workers - who crossed them to freedom (Blackett 2018). This fact has been cited by museum volunteers and employees to further reify the "Ohio River as boundary between enslavement and freedom" narrative, which is underscored by the presence of a piece of the Berlin Wall. In local memory, the preferred local route across the river for many freedom seekers was either by skiff or hopping from ice floe to ice floe. The character of Eliza in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* immortalized this form of escape. Today, of course, Covington is marked by a skyline consisting of high-rise hotels and a Main Street dotted with restaurants and bars featuring Kentucky bourbon. There is also a historical marker on 6<sup>th</sup> and Main commemorating the start of the ill-fated Margaret Garner's journey, a picture of which appears in the Appendix.

On the Cincinnati side of the Ohio River, the Roebling Bridge rises from Cincinnati's Riverfront Park. Walking east along the Riverwalk visitors pass family friendly activities such as a carousel, a large-scale chess board, labyrinth akin to the one at Chartres Cathedral, and Black Brigade Memorial. The bridge is directly across the street from the museum, meaning that the building occupies a highly coveted spot near the riverfront.

During the Underground Railroad era Cincinnati was the sixth largest city in the United States. This boom was facilitated due to waterways such as the Ohio River and Miami-Erie Canal, although the latter project was over before it began thanks to the genesis of steamships and railroads. Along the banks of the

Ohio River, a diverse community nicknamed “Little Africa” developed, due to the relatively large number of free African Americans who lived there. These people often worked as stewards on board the steamboats which traveled up and down the river (Hurley 2015). Many residents of Little Africa were also conductors on the Underground Railroad, such as William Casey and John Hatfield (Trotter 1998). Hatfield was also a church deacon and the owner of a barbershop, as one can learn from NURFC’s exhibits. As one can learn during tours at NURFC, the museum is built roughly on the site of Little Africa.

On the eastern edge of downtown lay “Bucktown,” another community of free Black folks. A visitor mentioned to me during a tour the name of this community contained an archaic slur for an African American or Native American man, indicating that this neighborhood had probably been pejoratively nicknamed by the white residents of Cincinnati (personal interview: February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018). This community was also home to many Irish Americans and people of Jewish and Muslim descent (Trotter 1998). During the time of the Underground Railroad unequal economic opportunity, racial segregation, and an underlying ideology of white supremacy led to clashes between Cincinnati’s two major ethnic groups (Moss 2004). For example, in 1829, the Irish American residents of Cincinnati rioted over competition with African Americans for jobs, a harbinger of continued racial tension in Cincinnati. Anti-abolitionist groups started riots during this time, and unemployed white residents attacked free black people, blaming them for job scarcity. It is against this backdrop of a city experiencing century-long racial tension and currently undergoing gentrification

projects which tend to displace poor and black residents that NURFC, the self-identified “museum of conscience,” opened its doors in 2004.

This history exists somewhat at odds with the mostly positive story told about NURFC’s home city by the museum, where well-meaning people of all ethnicities operated in interracial cooperation on the Underground Railroad. There, enslavement is effectively “decoupled” from the racism experienced by free African Americans during the Underground Railroad era and, by extension, their descendants (Dattel 2009: 109). Including this information would undoubtedly complicate the overall progressive historical narrative promoted by the exhibit where enslavement is an anomaly and history was always destined to land on the side of inclusion. This is a narrative of particular interest to Cincinnati, which has been undergoing a great deal of urbanization and gentrification.

With regard to the Underground Railroad, Cincinnati’s narrative takes pains to highlight white abolitionists who lived in and around Cincinnati. One such person is Levi Coffin, who has a substantial display on NURFC’s second floor, and is also the subject of a painting in the Cincinnati Art Museum. Coffin was nicknamed the “President of the Underground Railroad” by his contemporaries (Coffin 1880; Haviland 1884). He is a key player in a Romantic narrative set in a Cincinnati envisioned as an abolitionist stronghold, which exists in the few exhibits at NURFC which focus on the city. In truth, however, Cincinnati had an ambivalent relationship with abolitionism reflecting the “wider complicity for slavery within American society” rather than being contained in the

US South (Ruffins 2006: 406). Given that the city was located across the Ohio River from the Slave State of Kentucky, many white residents of the “most northern southern city” had ties to enslaving families (personal interview: July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017). Many black residents did as well; William Casey’s wife, who he urged flee to join him, was an enslaved worker in Kentucky (Hurley 2015). In 1836 the offices of the *Philanthropist*, a Cincinnati abolitionist press were “sacked” and “several blacks were beaten” (Grimsted 1998: 62). Despite the city’s clear connections with the abolitionist movement, as well as the presence of a several small but thriving communities of free blacks, Cincinnati did have underlying southern sympathies which are largely erased from NURFC’s Romantic historical narrative. This racial tension has endured through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marked by riots in Cincinnati’s Avondale neighborhood after the 1969 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Racism in the Queen City has endured to the present day. This is, ironically, reflected in the attitudes many Cincinnatians have towards the “guilt museum,” an unflattering nickname some use for NURFC (personal interview: August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017). I first heard that nickname from one of my interviewees, a white IRS employee who lives in a suburb of Cincinnati. He did not personally endorse that nickname but shared it by way of providing me with local context. I also heard the nickname repeated by many NURFC employees, typically said in distinct tones of frustration. More notoriously in the 1990s Marge Schott, owner of the Cincinnati Reds, became infamous for a series of racist and anti-Semitic remarks (Erardi 1998). In 2001, three short years before NURFC opened its

doors, police shot and killed an unarmed 19-year-old African American man in Cincinnati's Over-The-Rhine neighborhood (Larson 2004). This community owes its name to the influx of German immigrants during the 19th century.

Over-The-Rhine, or OTR, is located north of downtown and has, over the course of less than a decade rapidly gentrified from a poorer and predominately African American neighborhood into an upscale area marked by breweries and craft business. This incidence of police violence sparked the largest wave of urban unrest since the 1992 Los Angeles riots (Grace and White 2004). The 2015 police shooting of Daniel DuBose in the Clifton neighborhood, where the University of Cincinnati is located, reignited racial tensions, and the ruling in July of 2017 that the police officer would not face a third murder trial lent credence to Novella's identifying Cincinnati as a "site of struggle."

In the face of this struggle which spans centuries Cincinnati's African American population has persevered. Indeed, ever since Ohio became a state in 1803, African Americans have flourished despite obstacles such as the Black Codes, passed in 1804, which were intended to limit their numbers. The period since the time of the Underground Railroad, Civil War, and Civil Rights Act was marked by increased African American migration north to states like Ohio to escape the Jim Crow South (Anderson 2016). For reference, during the time of the 1829 riots, Cincinnati's total population was 24,831. Of this number, 2,258 residents were African American (Taylor 2002). In raw numbers, this means that heroic African American Cincinnatians like William Casey and John Hatfield

represented less than 10% of the city's population. This fraction would undergo a rapid increase due to the Great Migration.

During the Great Migration, Cincinnati's African American population increased from 2% to 5% from 1920 to 1930. This coincided with an overall growth in the city's population. While the population of the city has more than doubled since the time of the Underground Railroad, Cincinnati itself has fallen from sixth most populous city in the United States to the 65th. Most recently, Cincinnati had a population of 296,943 as of the 2016 US Census. This number has been steadily declining since 2000. According to the 2010 Census, Cincinnati's two largest demographic categories were white (49.3%) and African American (44.8%). This means that while the number of Cincinnatians of African descent has increased since the city's founding, the ethnic makeup of the city remains primarily "two races, one language" (personal interview: January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018). This exists in the context of a southern Ohioan city with a declining population overall. In the midst of this demographic shift, however, Cincinnatians live their lives.

In 2017, there were 133,420 occupied homes in Cincinnati. A slight majority of these homes, 33,848, consisted of families with children under the age of 18 (US Census Bureau 2017). Meanwhile, African American families in Hamilton County, where Cincinnati is located, have a poverty rate of 35.5 percent. This is about twice the overall Hamilton County poverty rate of 16.6 percent (ibid). Given that 44.8% of Cincinnatians are African American, these figures mean that Cincinnati has more than its fair share of Black families with

school-aged children living in poverty. According to the numbers from a 2018 US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 30.3% of Cincinnati's African American community live in poverty, while 9.7% of white residents live below the poverty line (May 2019).

There are not just numbers to NURFC's Education Team. This team consists of people who have spent careers working with local schools. Many of them are from Ohio, or proximate states. They are therefore rightfully conscious of the fact that a local museum can be a vital resource for education. The fact that NURFC is dedicated to the African American experience gives the museum a niche to fill. Various tour groups have noted that what they experience at NURFC is not "what they've been told," which redounds to the credit of this team (personal interview: November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Deconstructing narratives which downplay the evils of enslavement is a key part of what the Education Team strives to accomplish. In so doing, that team attempts to also go beyond the narratives presented by many of NURFC's exhibits; ones which play up the role of white abolitionists in the anti-enslavement movement and on the Underground Railroad. Exploring the fraught relationship among various ethnicities living in Cincinnati during the Underground Railroad era could provide a template for conciliation in the present day. This leads to many potential opportunities to connect with NURFC's host city of Cincinnati.

Educational initiatives, both old and new, are the museum's primary ways of introducing students and their families to a conciliatory space that doubles as a place of learning. Among new initiatives, the crafting of a STE(A)M tour by a

museum primarily dedicated to an examination of history would be auspicious and noteworthy. It is, to use a cliché, a way of “thinking outside the box” museologically speaking. At the time of this writing, unfortunately, the STE(A)M tour drafts had not yet been implemented into a concrete tour and is unlikely to be.

What follows is an overview of the different neighborhoods which might be the initial beneficiaries of one of the first STEM tours in the nation developed at a history museum. I will also discuss how a changing Cincinnati has contributed to NURFC providing a valuable educational supplement to local schools.

### **Geography and Demographics**

There are opportunities for connection both in exploring Cincinnati’s past and its present. In addition to its historical mission, NURFC tries to represent life in the Cincinnati area in the post-Civil War era, particularly as it relates to the African American community. This is a highly fraught tale. In 2016, Cincinnati was ranked the US’ fifth most segregated city (Kent and Frohlich 2016). In terms of layout, two major highways radiate north from the riverfront, where NURFC stands, and serve as rough boundaries between communities. I-75, which runs northwest towards Dayton, and I-71, which goes northeast towards the state capitol of Columbus, form a wedge shape. Within this wedge, lying at and by the Ohio River and at NURFC’s back is the downtown business district with its shops and businesses. Examples include the national and local headquarters of major corporations such as Procter and Gamble (P&G), Macy’s, Kroger, Duke Energy, and Cincinnati Bell. These companies’ names are prominently displayed on

plaques in halls, staircases, and galleries. They have also all invested heavily in the downtown riverfront, including the embedding of the original Cincinnati Kroger store's foundation in Smale Riverfront Park.

North of downtown is OTR. With its glossy condos and chic restaurants, this neighborhood could be considered an example of gentrification and the displacement of original residents. Many of the previous residents, most of them African American, have been priced out of this neighborhood. Along with this has been a gradual erasure of OTR's legacy as a predominately African American neighborhood by indexing the presence of German immigrants during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For example, independent breweries and distilleries with names like "Rhinegeist" dot the neighborhood. Liberty Avenue is the boundary between the mostly white and gentrified southern portion of OTR and the still mostly African American and less affluent northern part. Many suspect gentrification will "jump" Liberty Ave. (personal interviews: July 6th 2017; August 5th 2017; February 22nd 2018). The use of this term by one of the people I interviewed evokes a sort of economic epidemic. Many former OTR residents have relocated to "Westside," a neighborhood to the west of I-5 which, at the time of my employment with NURFC, was undergoing development of its own.

North of OTR is Clifton, where the University of Cincinnati is located and where I lived during my time working for the museum. The university is flanked by commercial strips with restaurants, bars, consignment stores, and an independent theater. Two major hospitals also dot Clifton's landscape. Beyond

the shops, restaurants, and hospitals are residential neighborhoods with single family homes and small apartment buildings.

To the north and west of Clifton is Northside, a neighborhood many of my friends described as “crunchy” and “bohemian” (personal interviews: July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017; August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017). Bars and businesses, including a medical marijuana dispensary, front the main strip while run-down neighborhoods lurk behind it a few blocks away. Northside has a unique, historic connection to the Underground Railroad: in 1853, 28 freedom seekers stayed in the neighborhood with local abolitionists connected to John Hatfield and Levi Coffin. Along the way, these self-emancipators lay to rest an infant in an integrated cemetery, now the site of a Kroger parking lot (personal interview: February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018). No marker commemorates this likely resting spot. The “Cincinnati 28,” as these freedom seekers are called, are the subjects of another new lesson plan drafted by NURFC’s education team. This is another way in which the museum and Cincinnati community intersect.

What follows is a section which goes from outside to inside. We move from the city of Cincinnati to inside the museum. I will attempt to orient the reader in a similar way to visitor.

From October of 2017 through the summer of 2019 I served as an employee of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (NURFC). This garnered me access and enabled me to perform a degree of participant observation, typically in the fifth-floor break room but sometimes during meetings. Becoming a known quantity with a stake in the museum enabled me

to gain trust not just as a researcher but also as a coworker. I also was able to witness many changes in structure and process, such as the elimination of guided tours in the spring of 2019 and the implementation of “experiences.”

A large part of gaining this trust involved collaboration with my colleagues on the parameters I would respect during data collection. These conversations helped me establish, over time, the parameters I would need to respect with regard to my research. Some of them, admittedly, took me by surprise.

One day in February of 2018 Tara Riley, my supervisor at the time, called me into her office. I remembered when she had moved into what had recently been “Richard’s Office,” over the summer of my internship. As the Great American Ball Park loomed in the distance, Tara told me that she had overheard me talking with one of the Education Team’s potential collaborators, a local teacher. I had mentioned to her an interest in examining NURFC’s connections to Proctor and Gamble, a major donor whose former CEO had played a major role in getting the museum started. Tara made clear that she was not comfortable with me pursuing that particular avenue of inquiry. At first, I was puzzled. All of the financial information I had included thus far was part of the public record. Besides, nobody reads dissertations anyway.

Tara’s perspective was very different. Even if only a hypothetical “two people” read my dissertation, that would still be two more people who knew the nitty gritty of the NURFC’s donor structure. While common knowledge in the museum world is that “corporate museums” - or, in the case of NURFC, “semi-corporate ones” - are a reality, long-term members of NURFC’s administrative

staff understandably did not want me drawing undue attention this fact. After all, they had brought me on board with the understanding that I would be helping with education. As Tara told me all this, her gaze downward, a sickening realization dawned on me. *She doesn't trust me*, I thought to myself in horror. This woman who had always been friendly towards me, who had invited me into her home on Thanksgiving, felt a sense of betrayal due to my actions. I had become unreliable. Later, when another colleague mentioned getting a job here to “use the place,” I recalled stopping in my tracks. Was that me? Was I yet another white male academic using a “culture” for my personal and professional development?

*No*, I decided. I would not include financial data beyond that which had an impact on the museum’s founding and vision, and which was publicly available. Tara was my coworker as well as a potential respondent. She was at least as informed and passionate about the educational potential of museums as I was. Since most of the people I worked with were well-educated with graduate degrees, they were perhaps more likely than other respondents to read the results of my work. My research design would need to reflect the dynamic of my field.

This meant that any participant observation I engaged in would out of necessity need to be heavier on the “participant” side than Malinowski might have liked. Moreover, this floor more than any other reflected the applied nature of my work. It was here that the Education Team, of which I am a member, compiled programs. I compiled interviews based on my experiences with my

coworkers while working on these programs, as well as during meetings and lunch breaks. The programs themselves, meanwhile, inform the bulk of the evaluative criteria I will contribute to NURFC after their implementation this year.

For now I provide an overview of NURFC's funding, all of which is publicly available. I emphasize revenue sources that have an impact on how NURFC itself was constructed, as well as the educational programs the Education Team worked with and implemented.

### **“Courage, Cooperation, and Perseverance”**

NURFC was founded in 2004 thanks to many private donations from corporations such as P&G, Duke Energy, Macy's, and Kroger. Most public funding is related to specific projects such as a \$25,000 donation from the NEA in 2015 for a “professional development initiative” (National Endowment for the Arts 2017). This grant included funds for travel to conferences in order to learn “best practices” in educational programming, a major focus of both my 2017/2018 employment at the museum, my research, and the evaluative criteria I am developing as a condition of my involvement with NURFC. The museum has also received \$1.2 million in challenge grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities (National Endowment for the Humanities 2018). For the most part, however, NURFC tends to limit itself to private grants, in part due to the optics of pursuing public funding after having been granted a coveted spot by the highly trafficked riverfront. For instance, the NEA grant is far less than the money given by private donors such as John Pepper, a former P&G CEO who served as NURFC's first executive director. He and his wife, Francine, provided 10% of

NURFC's private funding in 2000, four years before the museum opened its doors. The Peppers' donation makes the observations of Juanita Moore (2018), former CEO of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, about the fact that museums devoted to the African American experience cannot rely solely on African American donors due to the US' racialized wealth disparity that much more salient.

The clout of individual African Americans is also conveyed by NURFC, however. The monumental building of travertine marble and copper was designed by an African American-owned architectural firm from Indianapolis, along with another firm from Portland, OR. At NURFC's groundbreaking one of the major speakers was Edwin Rigaud, an African American businessman and donor. NURFC consists of three pavilions connected by a series of breezeways. The pavilions are named (from east to west) the Pavilion of Courage, the Pavilion of Cooperation, and the Pavilion of Perseverance. These are, as NURFC docents are wont to explain, the qualities the institution sees as vital to fighting oppression and injustice.

The museum's walls and grand staircase are rounded and undulating. According to Walter Blackburn, one of the primary architects of the building, the smooth-edged quality of the building is meant to evoke the fields in which enslaved workers labored. The curved walls and grand spiral staircase also call to mind the dreaded Middle Passage and other bodies of water such as the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. The Ohio River, visible from NURFC's second and third floors, is often incorporated into tours. Many docents point out the river and

Kentucky's northern shore and give some examples of surreptitious crossings. For example, they will mention freedom seekers who took advantage of the fact that the Ohio would regularly freeze over in winter. Examples include Eliza Harris, the inspiration for the heroine of Cincinnati Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* who famously hopped from ice floe to ice floe, and Margaret Garner, the tragic inspiration for Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Visitors are encouraged to begin their journey on the third floor of the museum. This floor includes two galleries: *From Slavery to Freedom*, which walks the visitor through the legacy of enslavement in the Americas from European contact through the Reconstruction era, and *Invisible: Slavery Today*, a permanent gallery on modern-day enslavement. *Freedom* is located in the Pavilion of Courage, with *Invisible* in Perseverance. Each gallery has a small theater which plays short, documentary style films on a loop. The third floor also has a balcony, which offers a panoramic view of the Ohio River and the banks on either side of it. The balcony is located off the south side of the Pavilion of Cooperation. Cooperation also is home to the first-person Virtual Reality simulation *The Rosa Parks Experience (Rosa)*.

Visitors are advised to continue their journey through the museum by descending to the second floor. They may do so via the large elevators which run up and down a central bank, or the Grand Staircase which descends in a spiral around the elevator. Either route leaves the visitors in the Great Hall, a vast space housing many of what NURFC describes as highlight exhibits. These include the John Anderson Slave Pen, a rare example of what Vlach (1993)

describes as “slave” or “plantation architecture.” The second floor Pavilions of Courage and Perseverance branch off of the Great Hall, which occupies space in the Pavilion of Cooperation. Courage houses the Harriet Tubman Theater, which hosts many programs, as well as regular showings of the Angela Bassett narrated *Suite for Freedom* which plays every half hour on the half hour. Perseverance houses the interactive *Escape* Gallery and the Flight to Freedom Theater which hosts regular showings of the Oprah Winfrey narrated *Brothers of the Borderland*.

Finally, the first floor is where visitors purchase tickets at the front desk or visit Smith and Hannon, an African American-owned bookstore located in the museum. It sells, among other things, museum souvenirs. The Implicit Bias Learning Lab, which hosts regular informational sessions about implicit bias is also located on the first floor. You can take the Implicit Association Test, developed by Harvard University, at one of a row of tablets by the entrance. Towards the rear of the first floor is a space with rows of picnic tables, where visitors can eat lunch. This is the only space in the museum where one is officially allowed to eat. Large tour groups who have pre-registered for guided tours can also be corralled here while staff members assign them docents. All of this is contained within the Pavilion of Cooperation. The first floor Pavilion of Courage contains the seldom-used box office for the Harriet Tubman Theater while the Pavilion of Perseverance contains the North Star Café, which was not in operation during my time at NURFC.

What follows is an examination of how NURFC's museum space engages with abolition and racial conciliation both historically and in the present day. This section introduces a key component of this dissertation; an examination of both the visitor friendly narratives NURFC presents about Cincinnati's role in the Underground Railroad and the more fraught histories they obscure. I emphasize the role presentation plays.

### **Cincinnati, Enslavement, and Abolitionism at NURFC**

On the one hand, as many NURFC tours discuss, many people who owned safe houses on the Underground Railroad and served as guides for freedom seekers did call Cincinnati home. Levi and Catharine Coffin, a Quaker couple who owned and operated a safe house in Cincinnati's Northside neighborhood and the subjects of a display at NURFC, are one example. On the other hand, however, many residents of the city, both African American and white, had familial ties with enslavers – and enslaved – in Kentucky, just across the Ohio River. Pro-enslavement whites frequently attacked African American residents of Cincinnati, and at least one conductor – William Casey - had an enslaved wife who he urged flee from Kentucky to Cincinnati (Hurley 2015). Meanwhile, two pro-enslavement mobs looted the office of James Birney, editor of the *Philanthropist*, an abolitionist tract. The imbrication of preferred narrative and historical truth parallels the fraught relationship between the increasingly developed and gentrified Cincinnati and its legacy of racial tension. Notably, part of NURFC's mission was to address this tension, a mission which Cincinnati's African American community does not believe the museum has fulfilled

according to “Mr. West,” NURFC’s senior historian (Rabinowitz 2016; personal interview: July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018). In NURFC’s text-heavy historical galleries, deconstruction of the local and preferred Underground Railroad narrative as one of interracial cooperation can get overwhelmed.

Multiple employees echo this sentiment. My colleagues on the Education Team, such as Novella and Tara – the latter being the chair of team -- fully embrace NURFC ‘s status as a “call to action museum” (personal interviews: October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017, November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018). In short, there is a conviction at NURFC that a museum like it, one devoted to the African American experience, must “do something.” Part of this involves not just constructing narratives that resonate with visitors, but also engaging with the community.

There is tension here. On the surface, NURFC is dedicated to telling the story of abolition and resistance to enslavement in both the past and present. How abolitionism and resistance to enslavement are constructed is fraught, however. These tensions are inherent within NURFC’s mission statement which declares that the museum seeks to “reveal stories of freedom’s heroes . . . [and] to draw inspiring everyone to take courageous steps for freedom today.” Hence, a “call to action.” At the same time, in order to carry out this mission NURFC must be in a position where the museum can keep its doors open, financially speaking. This can lead to exhibits and experiences which are developed, at least somewhat overtly, with revenue enhancement in mind. *Rosa*, a first-person

virtual reality simulation, which I became tasked with managing, was one example.

I am not arguing that NURFC should not turn a profit. After all, a museum forced to shutter its doors cannot carry out its mission, racially conciliatory or otherwise. Moreover, even exhibits such as *Rosa* which takes advantage of technology can be profoundly educational. Nevertheless, for many individuals NURFC's pursuit of profit – particularly after its acquisition by the City Museum Center – has made many lower income members of the Cincinnati community feel left behind (personal interviews: October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019). This information was gathered during an interview with multiple long-term NURFC employees including Tara, head of the Education Team and my erstwhile supervisor; Novella, the Volunteer Coordinator; “Mr. West,” NURFC's Senior Historian; and Dan, the Interim Executive Director during my internship with NURFC and the first part of my employment. This feedback, transmitted to me by my colleagues on behalf of many members of Cincinnati's African American community, gives a sense of urgency to both educate and provide a narrative that goes beyond idealized constructions of Cincinnati as well as identify NURFC's unique place in the community.

Such constructions tend to focus on presenting the abolitionist movement as an early example of interracial cooperation with local roots. This dynamic is exemplified by the painting *The Underground Railroad*, on display at the Cincinnati Art Museum. It features Cincinnati stationmaster Levi Coffin, centered

in the painting, welcoming a group of African American freedom seekers to his property. This painting reinforces a particular narrative imparted by many of NURFC's displays and tours both about pre-Civil War era Cincinnati.

NURFC's home city is cast as "Grand Central Station" of the Underground Railroad, with well-meaning people of all races cooperating to help people get to freedom. The museum features white local abolitionists like Levi Coffin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and even John Rankin, a whose house served as an Underground Railroad safehouse in the nearby Southern Ohio town of Ripley. While particularly pronounced in the third-floor galleries the permanent exhibits on the second floor also do this. Most of the second-floor exhibits are considered "highlights" by the museum; primary artifacts, works of art, and feature films. These also largely operate within an overall Romantic and triumphalist narrative of US history which features benevolent white saviors rescuing enslaved African Americans who are in dire straits. The complexity of the past is "tamed" and converted into "digestible moral lessons" about social advancement from a discrete and "knowable" past to a present simultaneously different from and yet informed by that past (Autry 2017a: 22). Through this mechanism the Underground Railroad is cast as part of an overall progressivist historical narrative with chattel enslavement an unfortunate anomaly.

At the same time, a closer look at some exhibits and their interpretations reveal subtle deconstructions of this narrative. For example, although they can get lost amidst the sea of placards, many panels in *From Slavery to Freedom* on the Third Floor tell the stories from the perspective of freedom seekers

themselves. This goes against the “conventional styles and tropes used to represent the past” in the form of emphasis on white abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Rankin (Autry 2017a: 22). The interactive *Escape* Gallery on the second floor also emphasizes those who made their way north to freedom as well, including a full display labeled “Runaways.” There is also a replica of the wooden crate used by Henry “Box” Brown to mail himself from Virginia to Pennsylvania. There is also a display by *Escape*’s entrance flat-out stating that the Underground Railroad was primarily “for Black people, by Black people.” It is worth noting that the emphasis in *Escape* is on the importance of individual freedom seekers and abolitionists, thereby tying into an overall Romantic narrative. These narratives center on Great Men and Women of the Underground Railroad, who cooperate with one another and make strides towards equality. Many of these narratives also incorporate Tragedy, foremost among them Margaret Garner, whose story centered on Cincinnati and inspired such literary figures as Toni Morrison.

She is also present at NURFC in many ways in the form of an 1867 painting by Thomas Satterwhite Noble titled *The Modern Medea* as well as a three-legged potjie pot excavated from the Kentucky plantation on which she was enslaved. She ties together many themes at NURFC including danger, sacrifice, the connection between Northern Kentucky and Cincinnati, the Ohio River, the vital role free Black people played on the Underground Railroad, and white abolitionists. Telling her story also plays into the mission of giving voice to

freedom's heroes and helps visitors - particularly children - connect with the museum's mission at a more visceral level. Many docents, including Ms. Verneida, a veteran described by Novella as a "full time volunteer," find the use of these stories invaluable (personal interview: August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

### **The Tragedy of Margaret Garner**

This section focuses on the known biography of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who worked on a plantation called Maplewood Farm in Boone County, KY. Her story was the inspiration for Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, as well as the opera *Margaret Garner* which toured through Cincinnati. Here, I tell her story with an emphasis on how both NURFC's mission and focus weaves its way through what Ms. Verneida calls "the Garner fiasco" (personal interview: August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018). I will explore both the political and social impact of her case.

Garner was born into enslavement on Maplewood plantation in 1834. In January of 1856 she, her family, and several other enslaved workers crossed the frozen Ohio River into Cincinnati. This demonstrates a fact repeated during many tours and which exists in local Underground Railroad lore; the use of ice floes to cross into the free state of Ohio. Eliza Harris, the inspiration for the heroine of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, crossed into Ripley, OH using this same method. The fact that the Garner party crossed from Covington emphasizes the connection between the two states.

Once in Cincinnati, the Garner party split into two smaller groups. One group made it to Canada, while the other - which included Garner and her family - sought refuge with one of Garner's relatives, a formerly enslaved worker named

Elijah Kite. He resided on Cincinnati's west side below Mill Creek, in one of the city's free Black communities. The central role of African Americans as well as the communities in which they lived is also a major theme in many of the tours at NURFC.

Margaret Garner made it no farther north than Cincinnati. Upon seeing the size of the party seeking refuge, Kite left to ride north in order to enlist the help of Levi Coffin, the self-professed "President of the Underground Railroad" who lived in Cincinnati's Northside neighborhood. He was white and a Quaker. Coffin is the subject of a display in the *Escape* Gallery on NURFC's second floor, an interactive space which focuses on people and places associated with the Underground Railroad. While Kite was gone, his house was surrounded by US Marshals as well as Archibald Gaines, Garner's enslaver.

The marshals stormed the house. Garner's husband, Robert, shot at and wounded one of them. The marshals surrounded Garner and her two-year-old daughter. Garner decided that under no circumstances would she allow her daughter to live as an enslaved woman, perhaps motivated by her own experiences as such. She grabbed a kitchen knife and murdered her daughter, thereby ensuring that the girl would never suffer as she did. This caused everyone, the marshals included, to freeze. Mrs. Kite wrestled the knife away from Garner, but not before Garner wounded her other children and herself. Garner was arrested and returned to Kentucky - along with her entire family - to stand trial; not for murdering her daughter, but for trying to escape. For better or worse, Margaret Garner was about to become nationally famous.

For context, the trials of most freedom seekers apprehended en route lasted less than a day. Garner's lasted two weeks. That an enslaved woman would commit infanticide rather than allow her beloved daughter to experience enslavement did what decades of rarified debate in the halls of Congress could not do. It galvanized the anti-slavery movement, pushing many "moderates" firmly into the immediate abolitionism camp. The Garner fiasco also humiliated the plantocracy in the US South and enraged Northern abolitionists. Many of the latter took at advantage of the opportunity provided by her trial to speak of the plight of women and African Americans.

Unfortunately, in some cases the use of Garner's arraignment as a platform looked rather like exploitation. Feminist abolitionists Lucy Stone and Sarah Grimke, for example, made note of the light complexions of Garner's children. This was evidence, to them, of sexual abuse on the part of Gaines. Lucy Stone's involvement echoes the display in *From Slavery to Freedom* on the third floor of the involvement of early feminists in the abolitionist movement. The Garner display qualifies this by noting that Stone and Grimke's accusations were never proven. The problematic overtones of casting Garner as little more than a defiled and traumatized woman are not touched upon, however.

Garner herself, meanwhile, undergoes a sort of apotheosis into a classical, Medea-like figure. This is emphasized by the presence of an 1867 painting by Lexington, KY-born artist Thomas Satterwhite Noble. Noble is buried in Cincinnati's Spring Grove Cemetery and was the first head of the school that would become the Art Academy of Cincinnati. In this painting, Garner wards off

the slave hunters over her daughter's body. She is portrayed as a heroic, fierce, devoted mother willing to do the unthinkable to ensure her daughters salvation both from enslavement and a bitter and unjust Earth. Her connection to domesticity is cemented through the presence of a three-legged potjie pot unearthed from Maplewood Farm during a 1998 archaeological excavation funded by Kentucky State University. Pictures of both can both be found in the Appendix.

During Garner's trial, her case made its way up the governmental hierarchy. Salmon P. Chase, Ohio's abolitionist governor and later a member of Abraham Lincoln's cabinet, whose tombstone is on display in *From Slavery to Freedom*, tried to have Garner extradited to stand trial in Ohio for the murder of her daughter. Garner herself was in favor of this. Doing so would not only give her another chance at freedom, even though she might suffer execution, but it would also serve two purposes for the abolitionist movement. It would give enslaved parents a degree of authority over their children, and it would punch a hole in the Fugitive Slave Act. The Fugitive Slave Act, about which there is copious information in *From Slavery to Freedom*, gave enslavers the right to apprehend freedom seekers, even in Slave States. Trying Garner in Ohio for infanticide meant that freedom seekers who committed crimes while escaping would be exempt from the Act. Since escaping was technically a crime, Chase probably saw the possibility of expanding this loophole. Unfortunately, the judge in this case ruled that the Garner case was a fugitive slave case, and not a murder trial.

Chase tried to have Garner arraigned for infanticide, thereby giving her “another chance at freedom,” to no avail. Gaines had already sold her south on the Internal Slave Trade, about which there are many exhibits in NURFC. On the way to a Gaines plantation in New Orleans, the boat on which Garner was riding down the Mississippi River collided with another ship, and she and her youngest daughter were thrown overboard. Garner survived, but her daughter drowned. Garner was reportedly “overjoyed” that her youngest had also escaped enslavement, so there were rumors she had murdered that child as well. This has never been proven. From here, Garner disappears from history until Robert reported that she had died of typhoid in Mississippi in 1858.

The tragic story of Margaret Garner is encapsulated in two short years. However, NURFC gives it attention for a few good reasons. Her story did more to galvanize the anti-enslavement movement than the abstract philosophizing of abolitionists at places like Cincinnati’s Lane Theological Seminary, which is also featured in a display at NURFC. It also ties together many subjects covered by tours, exhibits, and programs at the museum. Her compelling story also emphasizes the importance and utility of narratives of enslaved people in all of its tragic vividness. It “brings things home” in terms of enslavement’s brutality as well as due to Garner’s connection to Cincinnati. In this way, she becomes a microcosm of resistance to enslavement both during the Underground Railroad era and in the present day.

## **Forward of Dissertation Chapters**

The economic system enslaved workers like Garner labored in is set into stark relief at NURFC. It also undergirds the arc of oppression engaged with at NURFC, where modern day enslavement is cast as an extension of the chattel slavery of the Underground Railroad Era. The museum's displays discuss the role slavery played in the development of the Americas. Resistance to that enslavement is linked to modern day efforts at eradicating enslavement in the present day. Historically speaking, however, these displays underscore the role enslaved workers played in the production of cash crops in the Caribbean, such as sugar, paralleling Mintz (1985) and Trouillot (2002). This includes displays on the role rice played in the Carolinas, paralleling Carney (2001). After displays about the American Revolution and drafting of the US Constitution there are displays on "King Cotton," which ultimately tie into the Civil War. Without saying so directly these exhibits, taken together, evince the historic debt owed to enslaved African Americans. The fact that NURFC is located in a historically heavily African American populated city underscores the importance this building has for many of the city's residents (personal interview: July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

What follows is a synopsis of this dissertation's five primary chapters. The first three follow the typical visitor experience at NURFC, from the third floor to the first. The fourth and fifth concern the administrative offices on the fifth floor, with an emphasis on the lesson plans and tours developed in that space. The STEM tour is the primary example. The final chapter concerns the fourth floor, which is a space where visitors and staff members intersect.

## **Synopsis: Chapter 2**

At NURFC, these exhibits and displays craft a particular narrative along with the strategic deployment of items in the museum's collection, accompanied by sometimes copious amounts of interpretive text. For example, the permanent galleries on the third floor engage with the legacy of enslavement in the Americas as well as modern-day enslavement in broad historical and social terms. Chapter 2 focuses on these galleries, with emphasis on the global narrative of oppression crafted in them of which African American enslavement is the focus. It explores the triumphalist narrative and call to action constructed on the third floor.

*From Slavery to Freedom* is NURFC's most historically situated gallery. Its rooms tell a story of evil confronted and overcome. Located in the "Pavilion of Courage," one of the museum's three cavernous buildings, *Freedom* features a series of displays, dioramas, and vitrines accompanied by copious amounts of interpretive text about enslavement, abolition, and Civil War. *Freedom* therefore covers, roughly, the period from European contact during the Early Modern Era to Reconstruction after the US Civil War. One begins by facing a replica of the French abolitionist painter Francois-Auguste Biard's *The Slave Trade*, which depicts enslaved Africans on the African coast being whipped, branded, and prepared for sale. One ends in a room featuring displays about the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments alongside a replica of an early Klansman's robe. These beginning and ending displays reveal seemingly dueling narratives; one underscoring the international nature of enslavement in the Americas – including

African complicity, thereby possibly downplaying European responsibility – and one acknowledging lingering white supremacy. Both are picked up in the third floor's second gallery.

*Invisible: Slavery Today* is NURFC's permanent gallery on modern day enslavement. The space focuses on bonded labor, forced labor, child labor, sex trafficking, and domestic servitude. It is, to my knowledge, the first – and to date only – permanent exhibit in the US on human trafficking. It is an interactive space. *Invisible's* exhibits include facts about enslavement in the present day as well as information about nonprofits fighting modern day enslavement. One of these is End Slavery Now, a 501(c)(3) falling under NURFC's aegis.

While some elements of the third floor do focus on Cincinnati and Ohio, the overall goal is to construct an overarching, transnational narrative of oppression. African American enslavement is both commemorated and deployed as an antecedent to child laborers harvesting cocoa beans in Cote d'Ivoire, or trafficked women in Eastern Europe. NURFC's exhibits are mostly calibrated for visitors who not only want to learn about the mistakes of the past and how to address them, but also be reassured that people of all backgrounds have taken a stand for equality throughout history. In this way, visitors are invited to become modern day abolitionists.

### **Synopsis: Chapter 3**

Chapter 3 focuses on the Second Floor with its works of art, feature films, and NURFC's primary artifact: The John W. Anderson Slave Pen. The second floor also includes the *Escape* Gallery, which is an interactive space geared

towards kids. With its enhanced focus on person and place, the second floor constructs a locally situated, Romantic narrative. This aspect of the narrative, and how it fits into NURFC's mission is the focus of discussion here.

The Anderson Slave Pen most clearly ties into NURFC's overall mission, as a visceral reminder of the atrocities faced by enslaved African Americans and a link to modern day enslavement. This link is forged by the proximate depiction of incarcerated young African American men in *Mural*, by the artists Tom Feelings and Tyrone Geeter. An authentic jail for enslaved workers, the Anderson Slave Pen is a historic house. The first part of Chapter 3 therefore explores how it turns a lot of the literature about Historic House Museums on its head. Rather than telling the story of an elite homeowner, the Slave Pen illustrates the plight of a largely unknown collective; enslaved workers. These workers would have been confined to the pen prior to being force-marched south.

This story is depicted in the works of art and infographics displayed in NURFC's second floor Great Hall near the Slave Pen. One of these, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, is *Mural*. It depicts the story of enslavement in the Americas and ties in with the Slave Pen. The surrounding descriptive text and maps about the Internal Slave Trade also connect with the Slave Pen, as do a couple of panels in Amina Robinson's *RagGonOn*, which hangs nearby. Given that the Slave Pen was part of the infrastructure of the Internal Slave Trade, the cabin lends itself to analysis as part of that system taken with the surrounding displays. The fact that the Anderson Slave Pen stood

in Mason County, KY, which is not that far from where NURFC stands, makes it possible to ground part of the Internal Slave Trade locally.

By comparison, one can also use the *Escape* Gallery to ground the Underground Railroad locally. Displays in that space focus on particular people and places associated with the Underground Railroad. A multi-tiered timeline on one wall grounds these biographies and locations in time as well. A full display is devoted to Levi Coffin, a white Quaker who owned and operated a safe house on the Underground Railroad in Cincinnati's Northside neighborhood. His wife, Catherine, is part of a central display on the abolitionist movement. Poster displays and block books featuring the biographies of freedom seekers, conductors, and station masters like Coffin fill out the majority of the gallery.

The focus on individuals, both in *Escape* and vis-à-vis the Anderson Slave Pen, adds an element of Romanticism to the story of enslavement and the Underground Railroad. The emphasis on Levi Coffin adds a clear hero to the cast of characters involved with the Underground Railroad. Meanwhile, the Anderson Slave Pen gives us a villain; John Anderson, who stands in for the forces of evil in the "United States grapples with chattel slavery" story. Coffin, on the other hand, is on the side of good. The fact that he lives in Cincinnati allows NURFC to continue telling a positive story about the city where the museum – and many of its donors – happen to be located. The fact that Levi and Catherine Coffin were white lends itself to a perpetuation of the "white savior" narrative, which can arguably tie into the fight against trafficking in some cases. A close reading of these exhibits will deconstruct this narrative.

Directly across from *Escape* is the *Flight to Freedom* Theater, where the feature film “Brothers of the Borderland” plays regularly. Narrated by Oprah Winfrey, this movie also tells the story of benevolent white people helping desperate African American freedom seekers. It puts visitors in the role of a fictional freedom seeker named Alice who encounters two historical figures; the African American conductor John Parker, and the white station master John Rankin. Once again, chattel slavery is constructed as an evil anomaly concentrated south of the Ohio River with abolitionism a northern inevitability. The fact that Rankin was a minister means that the abolitionists were literally on the side of the angels. I will provide a deconstruction of the Romantic narrative promulgated by “Brothers,” particularly with regard to NURFC’s overall mission. The clear cast of characters the second floor provides us – people like John Anderson, John Rankin, and Levi Coffin – provides us with a Romantic drama connected with the Underground Railroad ripe for discussion.

The final two second floor exhibits I discuss are the ones intended to be aesthetically pleasing. These are “Suite for Freedom,” three animated shorts which play in the *Harriet Tubman Theater* and *RagGonOn*, a two paneled quilt by Ohioan artist Amina Robinson. The rich colors and pictures convey both personal and social narratives, serving as a way of orienting the visitor about the Underground Railroad. These contribute to the visitor-friendly, individualized narrative constructed on the second floor that simultaneously educates and uplifts.

## **Synopsis: Chapter 4**

Chapter 4 focuses on the first floor, where both visitors and many members of the museum's administrative staff begin and end their time at NURFC. The initial encounter with staff at the front desk can shape the experience. This is because these employees sell tickets, promote special attractions, hand out maps, and provide initial orientation around the museum. This orientation may or may not include two potential attractions on the first floor; the Implicit Bias Learning Lab, and – until it relocated from NURFC in 2019 - Smith and Hannon Books.

Chapter 4 will analyze both of those spaces with a particular focus on the contested real estate occupied by both. *Open Your Mind*, a facilitated experience where visitors are introduced to Implicit Bias, is unique in terms of being a cognitive experience at a primarily historical “call to action” museum. Staff are encouraged to plug it, but nobody is exactly sure of where it fits in. Meanwhile, Smith and Hannon is a privately owned and operated bookstore which, for a time, operated on the first floor of the museum selling NURFC-related merchandise. It is owned by a retired African American schoolteacher. Over time, *Open Your Mind* has expanded, taking up more and more of Smith and Hannon's workspace.

In Chapter 4, I will analyze the expansion of *Open Your Mind* into Smith and Hannon's former space as a microcosm of gentrification in Cincinnati. The fact that Smith and Hannon used to be the oldest, freestanding, African American owned bookstore in the city until its relocation to NURFC's lobby

makes this a germane comparison. Moreover, at the time of this writing, Smith and Hannon's had recently moved from NURFC to Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, just north of the banks.

### **Synopsis: Chapter 5**

Chapter 5 goes behind the scenes. It takes us to the topmost floor of NURFC, where the administrative offices are located. In offices and cubicles, conference rooms and break rooms, programs and tours are brainstormed, emailed, and revised. This chapter explores how these processes unfolded, with an emphasis on the development of one of NURFC's most potentially innovative programs: the STE(A)M Tour. Despite setbacks in implementing this experience, the Education Team continues to feel passionately about its potential.

In my analysis of the fifth floor, I focus on the Education Team. This group of people comprised my closest colleagues. My primary informants are drawn from among them, and I conducted extensive participant observation as a member of that team. Their backgrounds and experiences as educators and activists informed many of the difficult conversations we had about race and white supremacy as filtered through tours, projects, and exhibitions. They also informed interactions with and attitudes towards NURFC leadership.

The Education Team is also passionate about working with the local community, primarily school groups. Indeed, this is the primary audience for NURFC tours and programs, such as the STE(A)M tour. Chapter 6 will focus on analyzing this engagement as a way of heeding the "call to action" implicit in NURFC's mission. It focuses on how the tension involved in the interplay

between telling a positive story for the benefit of visitors and “calling to action” plays out among staff members instead of visitors.

### **Synopsis: Chapter 6**

Chapter 6 focuses on the fourth floor. This is the only staff-centered space which is also open to the public. In this sense it serves as a sort of bridge between visitor and employee.

The fourth floor is a small space. Like the first and fifth floors, it is contained within one of NURFC’s three pavilions. It consists of a semi-circular lobby area in front of the elevator, a breakroom for NURFC volunteers, office space which can be rented out, and NURFC’s collections space. The fourth floor also features the John Parker Library, which conducts genealogical research and houses the archives for both NURFC and a local African American church.

This short chapter explores the liminality of this floor. It ties in the importance of the service provided by the volunteers who staff the Parker Library. Due to enslavement, the family trees of many African American households have undergone erasure. Therefore, many visitors specifically ask for “the library,” making the Parker Library an important visitor experience worth exploring.

The rental space on the fourth floor is also worth touching upon. Exploring it articulates the importance of a consistent revenue stream to museums in an increasingly neoliberal economy. The question of profitability moved to the fore during the change in leadership which happened during my time at NURFC. It also became clear that “keeping the doors open” likely played a major role in the

addition of experiences involving Virtual Reality technology. This makes a discussion of office rental space salient.

### **Tying Together**

Due to the fact that NURFC's staff regularly grapple with the interplay between the museum's triumphalist narrative and the objective of being a "call to action" museum, I do not believe that these qualities are mutually exclusive. In fact, there are places where NURFC - however inadvertently - undercuts its own Romantic narrative. Rather, I envision these two aspects as situated on either end of a continuum. At one end lies NURFC's visitor-friendly element, focused on a positive retelling of US history. At the other is NURFC's identity as a "call to action" museum where critiques of the past and a dedication to serving the Cincinnati community are imbricated. Both of these axes stem from a similar origin point: the realization that museums cannot "remain stagnant as visitors, technologies, interests, and the world around us change" (Vagnone and Ryan 2015: 25). In this way, NURFC can be thought of as a "semi-corporate" museum existing between these two aspects, a museum of conscience beholden - out of necessity - to donors and visitors interested in an experience which is not only educational but also - perhaps primarily - uplifting. Moreover, they want to see their own country fighting to end oppression in the present day.

It is with these fraught, two-sided complication in mind that I begin with my discussion of the visitor experience. This experiences hinges on local history, national history, and enslavement in the present day. We begin where the visitor begins; having exited the elevator on the third floor.

## CHAPTER II: THIRD FLOOR, TRIUMPHALIST HISTORY

In this chapter, I focus on exhibit interpretation in the two permanent galleries on NURFC's third floor. I will place particular emphasis on the associations visitors tend to make regarding how the exhibit in *From Slavery to Freedom* and *Invisible: Slavery Today* lead them to specific interpretations about both about the past and the present. I will be focusing on how these galleries promote particular narratives regarding oppression, and resistance to it.

In doing so, I will draw from the exploration of museums as constructed spaces, using semiotics as theoretical scaffolding. I will also give the copious amounts of interpretive text a close reading, and how they guide interpretation of the objects on display. I begin with the assumption that successful museum ethnographies are dependent upon "know[ing] the history of the surrounding community, the collections, the staff, and the mission statement in order to understand how the museum sees itself and is seen by others" (Erikson in Lonetree 2012: 3). Therefore, I begin by providing an overview of NURFC's third floor, where visitors are told to begin by staff members at the front desk after purchasing their tickets.

### **The Front Desk**

In order to track the visitor experience we must begin in the first floor lobby, where museum guests do. When visitors enter on the first floor, they buy a ticket at the front desk. These people are often sent to the third floor to begin their journey. However, their first interaction with museum staff is at the front desk, after encountering the floor to ceiling doors in the front of the, in the words

of one visitor, “secular temple” that is NURFC (personal interview: February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018). The experience many visitors to NURFC may have can be either shaped by their initial experiences with the first floor, or their experiences upon exiting the museum when their journey ends, once again on the first floor.

While little museum scholarship engages with this space, a lot happens in this encounter. Visitors exchange money with the museum gatekeepers, the front desk staff. The gatekeepers at the front desk used to split their time between NURFC and the Cincinnati Museum Center (CMC), which merged with NURFC in 2012. After Dion Brown took the helm as executive director of NURFC in 2018, the front desk was stuffed with NURFC employees and only NURFC employees. One of them was Paula, who was effectively in charge of the front desk. Like me, she split her time between working on the fifth floor and engaging with the public. She was a warm, African American woman of about 50 who had been with NURFC for a long time. The front desk also included Kelsey, a young white woman, Toni, a middle-aged white woman, and Renee, a youthful African American woman. They distributed maps, brochures, rack cards, and other promotional materials.

These people, like front desk staff at other museums, have the potential to shape an entire visit (Laursen 2012). Therefore, encounters with members of the front desk staff can be fraught, as both Kelsey and Renee informed me. For example, some visitors who were people of color turned down tickets to the *Rosa* special attraction, explaining that simulating state sponsored segregation was not worth an extra five dollars.

Nonetheless, some front desk staff deliberately promoted the special attractions. Others gave more specific directions than others regarding the recommended route through the museum. The general consensus was to begin on the third floor and work one's way down.

The reception area of a museum can be used to interpret what that museum attempts to foreground. The promotional materials which front desk staff hand out, such as rack cards, can be clues to this. It is interesting to examine the stories museum front desks and their immediate environs do not introduce or do so as these narratives are reexamined. The inner life of an artist claimed by members of the local LGBT community may become foregrounded in the promotional materials distributed by front desk employees at that artist's historic house (Sandell 2017). The organization can try to actively recruit volunteers from the local community through informal networks of interested stakeholders (Connolly and Bollwerk 2017). NURFC's rack cards provide insight into all this.

For example, many of the rack cards promote volunteering at NURFC. These feature the image of Ms. Verneida, a trim, older African American woman who is described by many staff members as a "full-time volunteer." The cards also serve to foreground various museum programs at NURFC. These cards also advertise local attractions in and around Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, which serve to emphasize the fact that NURFC "grounds the riverfront" in the words of Jesse, NURFC's erstwhile Creative Director (personal interview: February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Some of these include the Newport Aquarium, which was

built about the same time as NURFC, as well as the carousel in Riverfront Park and information of interest to the LGBT community in Ohio. One card rack sits on the main front desk, another on a smaller front desk to the left as one walks in. Some more discreet racks are nestled almost discreetly behind a docent podium as one exits NURFC.

NURFC's entryway itself, airy but prone to crowding on free days or in the midst of many guided tours, provides foregrounding even before visitors come to the front desk. It foregrounds the museum itself. It tells a story of NURFC's founding, including its groundbreaking, its sponsors, and the presence of notable public figures. The entryway also emphasizes NURFC's special attractions: *Rosa*, NURFC's foray into virtual reality, and regularly changing temporary exhibits. See the appendix of figures for photographs of the lobby.

After visitors enter the museum, they pass a wall on their left decorated with reproductions of the artwork on display in the Skirball Gallery, which is on the third floor. This gallery houses NURFC's temporary exhibits. The fact that access to Skirball requires the purchase of a special attraction ticket is likely why visitors get a "preview" before purchasing their tickets. Footage of dignitaries such as Bill and Hillary Clinton and George W. and Laura Bush visiting NURFC plays on a loop on a flat screen TV alongside these images. A quotation by US Senator Rob Portman of Ohio, chair of the committee on refugees at the time of this writing, is part of this footage. Notably, many of the staff members who work at the front desk can recite the video (personal interview: June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018). The bipartisanship inherent in the depiction of these disparate political figures

emphasizes how opposition to chattel enslavement is constructed within the museum's walls as intrinsically intertwined within the national character of the United States. The presence of Democratic and Republican political figures extends this construction to modern-day enslavement, as opposition to human trafficking tends to achieve support on both sides of the aisle, as a representative from Polaris - an anti-trafficking organization - informed me (personal interview: August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Indeed, during my training to take over Coordination of NURFC's initiatives against modern-day enslavement, Sen. Portman was named as a consistent ally.

If there is a video element to the temporary exhibit, the bipartisan politicians featured in the video are sidelined in favor of snippets from whatever film plays in Skirball. This occurred in August of 2018, when a temporary exhibit on the role Confederate currency, monuments to Confederate soldiers, and displays of the Battle Flag of Northern Virginia play in contemporary memory called "Confederate Currency and Memory" was replaced by "Nelson Mandela: Journey to Ubuntu." The figures of enslaved workers displayed on Confederate currency and reproductions of the battle flag of Northern Virginia in various contexts was replaced by details of the interpretive text on Nelson Mandela's life and career. Meanwhile, the flat screen TV played a preview of the short video which played in the first room of the Skirball Gallery, backed by the South African national anthem.

No matter the time of year, visitors are greeted by an advertisement for the *Rosa* special attraction as they approach the front desk. It hangs on the wall

behind the front desk staff members alongside ticket prices for general admission and admission with the upsells. The changing exhibit is also displayed over the front desk. *Rosa's* operating hours, 11AM to 3PM, are shown in small letters beneath both the advertisement which hangs over the front desk and a sign mounted on an easel. Both special attractions were also advertised on a flat screen TV which hangs near that space.

I noticed that the advertisements did not really help visitors, as evidenced by many of my interactions when I was a member of the third-floor staff. For one thing, visitors did not tend to read the full text on the signs and other advertisements. The special attractions are listed as abbreviations, and the fact that *Rosa* only runs from 11AM to 3PM is conveyed through miniscule writing. According to various front desk employees, visitors also tended to “half listen” to the information given by staff members (personal interview: July 21st, 2018).

Fortunately, there were frequently volunteers or members of the floor staff waiting on the third floor. These people offered museum visitors a second chance at orientation after they exited the elevator. The museum's immense scale, including the architecture defined by three pavilions connected by a series of breezeways, made the presence of a floor staff member in this space helpful. They were a valuable supplement to the maps, which did not seem to serve as a viable guide. We begin; the third floor, in front of the elevators, in the Pavilion of Cooperation, where visitors encounter members of the third-floor staff.

### **Exegesis: Third Floor**

Directly in front of the third-floor elevators is a table draped with a black tablecloth. This cloth is emblazoned with NURFC's name and logo. A member of the floor staff, youth docent, or volunteer sits behind this desk. They greet visitors and see whether they have purchased tickets to *Rosa* or the temporary exhibit in the Skirball Gallery. They might also provide directions around the museum in general.

One such place floor staff might direct people is to the third-floor terrace. This terrace is open as long as the temperature is above freezing. If a visitor has purchased a timed ticket to *Rosa*, it is also a good place to kill time. Additionally, from the balcony one can gain perspective on the liminality of the southern Ohio/Northern Kentucky region with regard to enslavement, the Underground Railroad, and "freedom" as exemplified by the Free States to the north and ultimately Canada.

The view from the third story balcony of NURFC overlooks the museum's courtyard and affords a stunning view across the Ohio River to Covington, Kentucky. *Freedom's Eternal Flame*, a flame which will burn until the last person held in modern day enslavement is free, flickers outside on the terrace. The balcony is readily accessible to visitors via a revolving door or handicap accessible one, unless the weather is inclement, or the temperature falls below freezing. Plantation-style homes dot the riverfront on the far side, evoking the Bluegrass State's former status as a Slave State.

Visitors can see a piece of Berlin Wall, complete with graffiti, standing in the courtyard in front of NURFC's central pavilion. Signs on the balcony index the wall piece. The wall fragment echoes a central theme of local history, written small at the museum. The Ohio River, natural boundary between Ohio and Kentucky, comes to be seen as a borderland, referred to as such in one of the second-floor films. A close reading of the exhibits at NURFC which pertain to Cincinnati indicate that casting the Ohio River as a boundary between freedom and enslavement dates back to the Underground Railroad era. For example, docents will direct visitors' attention to the Ohio River through the picture windows on the third floor, and inform them that the "River Jordan" in many Negro Spirituals represented the Ohio or Mississippi Rivers. This was a coded message to freedom seekers about the dividing line between Slave and Free States such as Kentucky and Ohio.

By virtue of lying north of the Ohio River, and therefore serving as a route along the Underground Railroad, the museum's home city is firmly situated in "freedom" territory. This narrative is part of NURFC's overall Romantic historical interpretation of interracial cooperation leading to the end of African American chattel enslavement, as well as the invitation to fight modern day enslavement and human trafficking. Of course, the narrative of Cincinnati as an abolitionist hotbed - both past and present - exists in tension with the fact that, thanks to the Fugitive Slave Act, freedom seekers were not truly free until they reached the "Promised Land" of Canada.

NURFC addresses this ambiguity by walking a very fine line. The museum strives to do due diligence, especially on school group tours, to the history of enslavement in the Americas and, for older school groups, in the present day. For example, docents and tour guides explain that, during the time of the Underground Railroad, many conductors guided freedom seekers to Canada simply because the British Empire abolished enslavement decades before the United States. Moreover, crossing the US' northern border meant that the Fugitive Slave Act no longer hung over the heads of freedom seekers. On the other hand, Cincinnati has been home to several thriving African American communities since prior to the Civil War. These competing narratives mean that there are rich stories to be told, many of which are found in the interpretive text in the galleries on floors two and three. Cincinnati is also home to several local anti-trafficking organizations, meaning that school groups are encouraged to consider Cincinnati a continued "hotbed of abolitionism" in the present day. In this way NURFC also constructs a narrative where African American chattel enslavement is situated within a global arc of oppression.

What follows in this chapter is an exploration of what a visitor sees and experiences as they move through the third-floor galleries. In so doing I will recreate, aided by a close reading of the galleries' interpretive text, the overall progressive narrative constructed by NURFC's exhibits. I begin with an examination of *Rosa*, followed by a walkthrough of *From Slavery to Freedom (Freedom)*, followed by the film "The Struggle Continues" and I conclude with a walk-through of *Invisible: Slavery Today (Invisible)*.

## **The Rosa Parks Experience**

In this section, I discuss *The Rosa Parks Experience*, including the results of a visitor survey and interviews with floor staff. I will also explore the ways in which visitor backgrounds can have an impact on their response to this first-person Virtual Reality (VR) simulation. This is drawn from my role as Manager of this exhibit, which also entailed collecting survey data, the results of which are below.

Due to the VR-based nature of the experience it is worth beginning with a short description of this technology's use in museums. Many museums have begun dipping their toes, so to speak, in the world of VR. This is in part due to a desire to keep up with "disruptive shifts in visitor behavior and expectations" as well as being mindful of the fact that there is "a generation that is growing up with this technology" (Ugnow, Pokel, and Tutton 2017). This latter point is germane to the educational aspect of this museum, as many school groups do visit NURFC. Moreover, for a "museum of conscience" like NURFC, VR is useful for putting visitors "in a different person's point of view," as was expressed in a February 2019 forum discussion on the American Alliance of Museums website. In the case of *The Rosa Parks Experience*, the perspective is that of an African American activist being ordered by a bus driver to give up her seat on the bus in the Jim Crow US South.

This is not to say that the deployment of VR technology is uncontroversial. That same discussion reveals many qualms about the use of this technology.

Many museum professionals worry about the implication of “do[ing] tech for the sake of having the tech.” For example, the neck muscles of very young children are often not developed enough to support VR goggles, and the technology available on a museum’s budget is often outstripped by what children from more affluent families experience at home. Moreover, there is always the danger that the technology will “break or something happens that this tech is pulled and collects dust on a shelf.” These concerns, expressed in above-mentioned forum discussion, has happened with some of the headsets and smartphones used for *Rosa*.

Nonetheless, *Rosa* is, by far, the most interactive experience at NURFC. It is also, at the time of this writing, unlike most of the rest of the museum in that it focuses on the African American experience post-1870s. It is NURFC’s foray into Virtual Reality technology. Tickets are sold as a five-dollar special attraction at the front desk every ten minutes between 11AM and 3PM up to four at a time, noon to 4PM on Sundays and Mondays. Four tickets are sold for each time slot although at the time of this writing the Education and Museum Experience Teams were talking about expanding it. Visitors who purchase tickets experience an approximately three-and-a-half-minute simulation in the role of Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. NURFC advertises the experience as “putting yourself in her shoes.” *Rosa* is often where visitors begin their tour, casting them in the role of a freedom fighter about to encounter a universal narrative of oppression.

Interest in *Rosa* tended to vary but there the fact that all 100 potential tickets would sell some days indicated interest in this experience. This tended to happen on weekdays and holidays such as Martin Luther King Jr. Day, when NURFC offers free admission. On rare occasions nobody would purchase a ticket to *Rosa*.

The visitor who exits the elevator finds themselves facing this first-person narrative. *Rosa* is located in the Pavilion of Cooperation, the central NURFC building, which on the third floor serves as an atrium between *Freedom* and *Invisible*. A member of the floor staff, a volunteer, or youth docent typically recruited from local high schools is supposed to greet them. They sit at a table with an array of charging smartphones next to them. Behind this table is a row of repurposed school bus benches, set against the wall. The benches seat up to four people. Headphones and virtual reality goggles are pre-placed on the benches. The floor staff member checks tickets, making sure visitors scheduled to undergo the experience have arrived at their allotted time. Visitors are then instructed to have a seat on the bus bench, where the staff member instructs them on how to operate the VR goggles and informs them what they can expect from *Rosa*.

This information includes mentioning that the VR simulation consists of a reenactment featuring live actors. The reenactment is toned down with the exchange between Parks, the bus driver, and police officer verbatim from the police transcripts. That is to say, the visitor does not experience the racial slurs, physical violence, or yelling and screaming reported by Parks and other

witnesses. This downplaying of the more vitriolic elements of Parks' experience is in part to make the experience appropriate for all ages. Visitors are in disagreement as to the degree of verisimilitude appropriate when engaging with the events of December 1st, 1955, in Montgomery, AL.

The experience itself changed during my management of it. For example, at the directive of the new executive director, staff began bookending *Rosa* with information about Rosa Parks, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The person running the experience directs ticketholders to sit on the bus benches, and then recites a brief account of how Parks was a career activist rather than an "Everyperson" who engaged in a spontaneous act of defiance as is often told. Time permitting, the experience runner discusses other people like Claudette Colvin and Bayard Rustin, who had also protested segregated public transit. This is an attempt at changing the narrative slightly, incorporating the importance of movements, while also enhancing NURFC's offerings on the Civil Rights Era.

As for the simulation itself, it begins with an introduction as well, narrated by the actor portraying Rosa Parks. During the introduction she says "people say I was tired, but I wasn't tired. Not physically." This is a nod towards questioning the traditional Rosa Parks narrative of a regular, non-political citizen taking a stand, which at least one visitor noted. However, this is as far as the deconstruction goes. There is no mention of Rosa Parks being part of a larger movement or having undergone activist training at the Highlander Folk School. *Rosa* focuses on its namesake, and its namesake alone. All the same, some

visitors do get emotional, while others simply remark on how “short” the simulation is.

In this way *Rosa* contributes to a Romantic historical narrative by placing focus on the individual. This enhances the visitor experience by making a Civil Rights figure into a VR avatar for them. NURFC visitors become a “Great Woman,” lead role in the ongoing Romantic narrative of the struggle against prejudice and enslavement, both past and present. The trajectory of events and actions leading to the Montgomery Bus Boycott is collapsed into the act of one person, making social action seem more tangible to visitors at NURFC. *Rosa* invites us to engage in players in the drama of optimistic progress against oppression (Boal 1993; Glisson 2006; Spencer 2016). It focuses on individual stories with which NURFC’s visitors can relate. In the words of the advertisement for *Rosa*, we can “stand taller by sitting down” and become modern day abolitionists.

In this way *Rosa* operates in the service of NURFC’s call-to-action mission while also serving as a first-person orientation to a triumphalist and Romantic narrative of history. Visitors are invited to envision themselves on the “right side” of history as an active participant in protesting Jim Crow, just as they are invited to picture themselves as an abolitionist in *Freedom and Invisible*. Past, present, and future are linked in an upward trajectory of increased inclusion and equity. This narrative seems to resonate with most visitors, but by no means all. For example, some of the more qualitative responses to a 2018

survey I oversaw indicated that we should engage with “what really happened.” These responses were from visitors from a diverse array of backgrounds.

Some responses were more clearly tied to demographic categories. For example, one African American visitor reported that she could “experience it for free” (personal interview: December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018). This indicates a clear indication that visitor background can have an impact on one’s museum experience, albeit not universal. A large part of my time at NURFC involved running *Rosa*, which was open from 11AM until 3PM Tuesday through Saturday. It was also open Sundays from 1PM until 4PM, and occasionally Mondays. I did so in conjunction with James, a middle-aged white man from Northern KY who had charge of many of the floor experiences. During the week I would help supervise local high school students who operated the exhibit in order to earn volunteer credits. Saturdays I operated it myself, occasionally relieved by one of my supervisors, an intern, or volunteer.

Given the highly interactive nature of *Rosa* I decided it was the ideal opportunity to investigate the connection interpretive exhibits inspired with visitors. In order to do so I implemented a survey of visitors, asking them to evaluate the experience. The survey included the option to demographically self-identify. The results of this survey were also provided to members of the Education Team, with whom I engaged in sustained participant observation. A total of 219 visitors responded, meaning that there was a 5% margin of error. This allows for such factors as results being due to chance and errors made by respondents.

The survey used a scale of one through five which ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree, respectively. I expanded upon Census categories for race and ethnicity and allowed for non-binary categories in gender self-identification. The survey read as follows:

Please rate the following on a scale of 1 to 5 by circling. 5 = “strongly agree.”

- The *Rosa Parks Experience* is worth paying five dollars.  
(1)Strongly disagree (2)Somewhat disagree (3)Neither agree nor disagree (4)Somewhat agree (5)Strongly agree
- I am glad I experienced the *Rosa Parks Experience*.  
(1)Strongly disagree (2)Somewhat disagree (3)Neither agree nor disagree (4)Somewhat agree (5)Strongly agree
- I learned new information about Rosa Parks.  
(1)Strongly disagree (2)Somewhat disagree (3)Neither agree nor disagree (4)Somewhat agree (5)Strongly agree
- I wish the *Rosa Parks Experience* was longer.  
(1)Strongly disagree (2)Somewhat disagree (3)Neither agree nor disagree (4)Somewhat agree (5)Strongly agree
- There should be multiple versions of the *Rosa Parks Experience* (eg ones closer to Parks’ recounting of the experience with harsher language, more physical violence, etc).  
(1)Strongly disagree (2)Somewhat disagree (3)Neither agree nor disagree (4)Somewhat agree (5)Strongly agree
- I wish NURFC had virtual reality experiences for other historical figures.  
(1)Strongly disagree (2)Somewhat disagree (3)Neither agree nor disagree (4)Somewhat agree (5)Strongly agree
- What other virtual reality experiences would you be interested in? Why?

- Please circle your demographic information if you feel comfortable doing so.

<i>Age</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Sex/Gender</i>
0-9	Black/African American	Woman/Female
10-19	White/Caucasian	Man/Male
20-29	Latina/Latino/Latinx/Hispanic	Gender nonconforming
30-39	Asian	Other:_____
40-49	Native American/Inuit	
50-59	Pacific Islander	
60-69	Other:_____	
70-79		
80-89		
90-99		

Please write any additional information you think we should know below.

Of the additional experiences offered, Harriet Tubman was by choice the most popular response. This was likely due to her status as the best-known conductor on the Underground Railroad, as well as a spy for the Union during the Civil War. Discussion of replacing Andrew Jackson with her image on the 20-dollar bill probably also factored into her popularity. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was another popular choice, due to his prominence as a Civil Rights Movement leader. Malcolm X was another popular choice, perhaps due to his prominence in the movement as well. Interestingly, many respondents evinced a desire to experience being an unknown person. The results of the survey indicated that, on average, visitors were generally positively disposed towards *Rosa*.

As for the respondents themselves, a large number of them opted to self-identify. European American respondents tended to react more favorably than African Americans, perhaps due to the latter's more immediate experience with racism. Men and women tended to be evenly matched in their responses. Those

identifying as “gender nonconforming” had significantly lower approval rates. People over the age of 50 were more positively disposed to the experience than those under 50, perhaps because for many of them this was their first exposure to the experience. Interestingly, there was a small drop after age 70, perhaps due to the increased likelihood of first-hand experience with the Civil Rights Movement.

What follows are the results, sorted by question and demographic criteria:<sup>1</sup>

**DEMOGRAPHIC NUMBERS**

<b>ALL GROUPS</b>	
<b><i>BY ETHNICITY</i></b>	
<b>Black/African American</b>	68
<b>White/Caucasian/European American</b>	110
<b>Latino/Latina/Latinx/Hispanic</b>	5
<b>Asian</b>	5
<b>Native American/Inuit</b>	3
<b>Pacific Islander</b>	1
<b>Other (inc. multiracial, biracial, creole)</b>	8
<b>Declined to Disclose Ethnicity</b>	19
<b>Total Respondants</b>	219
<b><i>BY SEX/GENDER</i></b>	

<sup>1</sup> The following numbers do not include standard deviations, which is a shortcoming in this dissertation. I note there were few extremes, such as several 1s and 5s with few 3s.

<b>Men/Males</b>	57
<b>Women/Females</b>	118
<b>Gender nonconforming</b>	2
<b>Other</b>	1
<b>Declined to Disclose Sex/Gender</b>	41
<b>Total Respondants</b>	219
<b><i>BY AGE</i></b>	
<b>0 to 9</b>	7
<b>10 to 19</b>	36
<b>20 to 29</b>	10
<b>30 to 39</b>	20
<b>40 to 49</b>	26
<b>50 to 59</b>	32
<b>60 to 69</b>	48
<b>70 to 79</b>	16
<b>80 to 89</b>	
<b>Declined to Disclose Age</b>	24
<b>Total Respondents</b>	219

**THE ROSA PARKS EXPERIENCE IS WORTH FIVE DOLLARS (1-5 Scale Where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Somewhat Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Somewhat Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

<b><i>BY ETHNICITY</i></b>	<b>Mean Response</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
<b>Black/African American</b>	3.7	68
<b>White/Caucasian/European American</b>	4.2	110
<b>Latino/Latina/Latinx/Hispanic</b>	4.8	5
<b>Asian</b>	3.8	5
<b>Native American/Inuit</b>	5	3
<b>Pacific Islander</b>	4	1
<b>Other (inc. multiracial, biracial, creole)</b>	3.8	8
<b>Declined to Disclose Ethnicity</b>	3.4	19
<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.0	219
<b><i>BY SEX/GENDER</i></b>		
<b>Men/Males</b>	4.2	57
<b>Women/Females</b>	4.0	118
<b>Gender nonconforming</b>	3.0	2
<b>Other</b>	5.0	1
<b>Declined to Disclose Sex/Gender</b>	3.8	41
<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.0	219
<b><i>BY AGE</i></b>		
<b>0 to 9</b>	3.4	7
<b>10 to 19</b>	4.3	36
<b>20 to 29</b>	3.7	10

<b>30 to 39</b>	3.5	20
<b>40 to 49</b>	3.5	26
<b>50 to 59</b>	4.3	32
<b>60 to 69</b>	4.3	48
<b>70 to 79</b>	4.1	16
<b>80 to 89</b>	0.0	0
<b>Declined to Disclose Age</b>	3.7	24
<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.0	219

**I WAS GLAD TO EXPERIENCE *THE ROSA PARKS EXPERIENCE*** (1-5 Scale Where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Somewhat Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Somewhat Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)

<b>BY ETHNICITY</b>	Mean Response	Number of Respondents
<b>Black/African American</b>	4.3	68
<b>White/Caucasian/European American</b>	4.7	110
<b>Latino/Latina/Latinx/Hispanic</b>	4.8	5
<b>Asian</b>	4.3	5
<b>Native American/Inuit</b>	5.0	3
<b>Pacific Islander</b>	5.0	1
<b>Other (inc. multiracial, biracial, creole)</b>	4.7	8
<b>Declined to Disclose Ethnicity</b>	3.9	19

<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.5	219
<b><i>BY SEX/GENDER</i></b>		
<b>Men/Males</b>	4.6	57
<b>Women/Females</b>	4.5	118
<b>Gender nonconforming</b>	3.5	2
<b>Other</b>	5.0	1
<b>Declined to Disclose Sex/Gender</b>	4.3	41
<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.5	219
<b><i>BY AGE</i></b>		
<b>0 to 9</b>	4.0	7
<b>10 to 19</b>	4.4	36
<b>20 to 29</b>	4.7	10
<b>30 to 39</b>	4.3	20
<b>40 to 49</b>	4.2	26
<b>50 to 59</b>	4.6	32
<b>60 to 69</b>	4.9	48
<b>70 to 79</b>	4.1	16
<b>80 to 89</b>	0.0	0
<b>Declined to Disclose Age</b>	4.3	24
<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.5	219

**I LEARNED NEW INFORMATION ABOUT ROSA PARKS (1-5**  
**Scale Where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Somewhat Disagree, 3=Neither**  
**Agree nor Disagree, 4=Somewhat Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

<b>BY ETHNICITY</b>	Mean Response	Number of Respondents
<b>Black/African American</b>	3.7	68
<b>White/Caucasian/European American</b>	4.0	110
<b>Latino/Latina/Latinx/Hispanic</b>	4.2	5
<b>Asian</b>	3.3	5
<b>Native American/Inuit</b>	3.7	3
<b>Pacific Islander</b>	4.0	1
<b>Other (inc. multiracial, biracial, creole)</b>	3.3	8
<b>Declined to Disclose Ethnicity</b>	3.0	19
<b>Total Respondents</b>	3.8	219
<b>BY SEX/GENDER</b>		
<b>Men/Males</b>	3.9	57
<b>Women/Females</b>	3.8	118
<b>Gender nonconforming</b>	1.5	2
<b>Other</b>	5.0	1
<b>Declined to Disclose Sex/Gender</b>	3.5	41
<b>Total Respondents</b>	3.8	219
<b>BY AGE</b>		
<b>0 to 9</b>	3.1	7

<b>10 to 19</b>	3.6	36
<b>20 to 29</b>	3.7	10
<b>30 to 39</b>	4.0	20
<b>40 to 49</b>	3.6	26
<b>50 to 59</b>	4.1	32
<b>60 to 69</b>	4.1	48
<b>70 to 79</b>	3.4	16
<b>80 to 89</b>	0.0	0
<b>Declined to Disclose Age</b>	3.3	24
<b>Total Respondents</b>	3.8	219

**I WISH THE ROSA PARKS EXPERIENCE WAS LONGER (1-5 Scale Where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Somewhat Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Somewhat Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

<b>BY ETHNICITY</b>	Mean Response	Number of Respondents
<b>Black/African American</b>	4.7	68
<b>White/Caucasian/European American</b>	4.8	110
<b>Latino/Latina/Latinx/Hispanic</b>	5.0	5
<b>Asian</b>	4.2	5
<b>Native American/Inuit</b>	4.7	3
<b>Pacific Islander</b>	5.0	1
<b>Other (inc. multiracial, biracial, creole)</b>	4.6	8
<b>Declined to Disclose Ethnicity</b>	4.6	19

<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.7	219
<b>BY SEX/GENDER</b>		
<b>Men/Males</b>	4.7	57
<b>Women/Females</b>	4.8	118
<b>Gender nonconforming</b>	3.5	2
<b>Other</b>	5.0	1
<b>Declined to Disclose Sex/Gender</b>	4.7	41
<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.7	219
<b>BY AGE</b>		
<b>0 to 9</b>	5.0	7
<b>10 to 19</b>	4.5	36
<b>20 to 29</b>	4.8	10
<b>30 to 39</b>	4.8	20
<b>40 to 49</b>	4.7	26
<b>50 to 59</b>	4.6	32
<b>60 to 69</b>	5.0	48
<b>70 to 79</b>	4.9	16
<b>80 to 89</b>	0.0	0
<b>Declined to Disclose Age</b>	1.01	24
<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.7	219

**I WISH THERE WERE MULTIPLE VERSIONS, INCLUDING ONES WITH DIALOGUE DEVIATING FROM THE ORIGINAL POLICE REPORT (1-5 Scale Where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Somewhat Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Somewhat Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

<b><i>BY ETHNICITY</i></b>	Mean Response	Number of Respondents
<b>Black/African American</b>	3.8	68
<b>White/Caucasian/European American</b>	3.6	110
<b>Latino/Latina/Latinx/Hispanic</b>	4.0	5
<b>Asian</b>	4.4	5
<b>Native American/Inuit</b>	4.0	3
<b>Pacific Islander</b>	4.0	1
<b>Other (inc. multiracial, biracial, creole)</b>	3.4	8
<b>Declined to Disclose Ethnicity</b>	3.4	19
<b>Total Respondents</b>	3.7	219
<b><i>BY SEX/GENDER</i></b>		
<b>Men/Males</b>	4.0	57
<b>Women/Females</b>	3.6	118
<b>Gender nonconforming</b>	3.5	2
<b>Other</b>	5.0	1
<b>Declined to Disclose Sex/Gender</b>	3.6	41
<b>Total Respondents</b>	3.7	219
<b><i>BY AGE</i></b>		
<b>0 to 9</b>	4.1	7
<b>10 to 19</b>	3.7	36
<b>20 to 29</b>	4.5	10

<b>30 to 39</b>	3.0	20
<b>40 to 49</b>	3.4	26
<b>50 to 59</b>	4.0	32
<b>60 to 69</b>	3.8	48
<b>70 to 79</b>	3.8	16
<b>80 to 89</b>	0.0	0
<b>Declined to Disclose Age</b>	2.9	24
<b>Total Respondents</b>	3.7	219

**I WISH THERE WERE VERSIONS FOR OTHER HISTORICAL FIGURES (1-5 Scale Where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Somewhat Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Somewhat Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

<b>BY ETHNICITY</b>	Mean Response	Number of Respondents
<b>Black/African American</b>	4.8	68
<b>White/Caucasian/European American</b>	4.4	110
<b>Latino/Latina/Latinx/Hispanic</b>	4.2	5
<b>Asian</b>	4.4	5
<b>Native American/Inuit</b>	4.7	3
<b>Pacific Islander</b>	5.0	1
<b>Other (inc. multiracial, biracial, creole)</b>	4.5	8
<b>Declined to Disclose Ethnicity</b>	4.2	19
<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.5	219
<b>BY SEX/GENDER</b>		

<b>Men/Males</b>	4.8	57
<b>Women/Females</b>	4.5	118
<b>Gender nonconforming</b>	4.5	2
<b>Other</b>	5.0	1
<b>Declined to Disclose Sex/Gender</b>	4.0	41
<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.5	219
<b>BY AGE</b>		
<b>0 to 9</b>	4.1	7
<b>10 to 19</b>	4.9	36
<b>20 to 29</b>	4.8	10
<b>30 to 39</b>	4.8	20
<b>40 to 49</b>	4.0	26
<b>50 to 59</b>	4.6	32
<b>60 to 69</b>	4.7	48
<b>70 to 79</b>	4.0	16
<b>80 to 89</b>	0.0	0
<b>Declined to Disclose Age</b>	3.7	24
<b>Total Respondents</b>	4.5	219

These results were shared with the Cincinnati Museum Center, which merged with NURFC in 2012 when visitor numbers were low. They were incorporated into grant proposals geared towards expanding the experience. At the time of this writing the Museum Experiences team was ordering more VR

goggles, smartphones, and headsets in an effort to expand *Rosa*. This indicates a desire to invest in this technology, despite the misgivings many people have of “tech for the sake of tech,” due to the potential for visitors to don the shoes of freedom fighter and get inspired to take up the mantle of modern-day abolitionism themselves.

Once visitors have experienced the perspective of a Civil Rights hero, they are directed to go through *Freedom*, a historically situated gallery. The exhibits in this space focus on enslavement in the Americas, as well as resistance to it, up until the Reconstruction Era. This begins the overall trajectory of the museum’s displays, which bridge the abolitionist of the past with the present-day fight against modern day enslavement, both in Cincinnati and globally.

### **From Slavery to Freedom**

At the front desk, visitors are advised to start on the third floor with *Freedom*, NURFC’s largest and text heaviest gallery. *Freedom* does not shy away from the role chattel enslavement played in the development of the Americas, foregrounding “traumatic histories . . . in the public realm” (Autry 2017a: 22). However, it articulates a Romantic, triumphalist narrative of the legacy of enslavement in the Americas (White 1975; Hacking 1999; Lowe 2015). This narrative centered on where the enslaved workers came from, what they did, who their allies in the abolitionist movement were, and ultimately how they were emancipated and made citizens (Scott 2004; Trouillot 2015). *Freedom* is

textually rich and boasts impressive artifacts. Its narrative of African American enslavement and its legacy ends in the Reconstruction Era.

Due to the fact that the final room ends in the latter half of the 19th century, the fact that white Americans had largely become “conditioned” to viewing African Americans as inferior by the time the Civil War ended is largely glossed over (Blight 2001: 308). The replica of a Klansman’s robe which stands by *Freedom’s* exit, however, serves as a stark reminder of the lingering struggle against white supremacy. At the time of this writing there was talk of incorporating more of the Civil Rights Movement into NURFC’s larger arc of exploring oppression.

The beginning of the visitor’s journey through to *Freedom* involves approaching a large, gilt-framed replica of “The Slave Trade,” a vivid painting by the abolitionist Auguste Francois Baird which depicts the global nature of this forced labor. A picture of this painting can be found in the Appendix. European enslavers, both affluent and modest, interact with local leaders at a site on the West African coast as enslaved people are whipped and branded. This picture captures the brutality of African American enslavement. The trappings of wealth and location index the intersection of wealth and racialization in the Triangle Trade (Williams 1994; Baptist 2014; Swingen 2015; Beckert 2016). This painting serves as an introduction to the abolitionist movement, both prior to the US Civil War and in the present day. For example, high school groups taking the “Modern Day Freedom Fighter Tour,” which incorporates NURFC’s gallery on modern day

enslavement, asks students how they can fight human trafficking using their talents, as Biard did with his paintbrush.

The visitor then enters an exhibit on the Triangle Trade, which includes informational text about enslaved Africans of note who lived prior to US independence. Visitors can read about Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved poet who lived in Cambridge, MA and Olaudah Equiano, who went on a lecture circuit around London about his experiences as an enslaved worker in the Carolinas. Along the way they encounter displays conveying the significance of water to enslaved workers, primarily the Atlantic Ocean. A large diorama depicts desperate and exhausted enslaved people at a Caribbean port while Europeans haggle over them. Visitors can hear the sound of the sea in the background.

They then pass into the “Commemoration Room,” which is dedicated to the 1.5 to 2 million Africans who lost their lives on the Middle Passage. In the middle of this round, stone-walled chamber is a glass column, filled with glass beads and cowrie shells. These commodities were used as a form of currency by many West African communities during the time of the Triangle Trade, as cowrie shells were used as a form of adornment (Yang 2018). A blue light is projected onto the ceiling, evoking the feeling of being underwater. The walls of the room are inscribed with the names of slave castles and ships, some of which have ironic names like “Jubilee” and “Grace of God.”

The evocative Commemoration Room stands out amidst NURFC’s dioramas upon dioramas. In a similar way to spaces in the National Museum of the American Indian and the Holocaust Museum devoted to memory, the

Commemoration Room is “highly charged” and tells a story of enslaved Africans that is “intensely painful and searing” (Lonetree 2012: 77). It goes beyond Western representations of enslavement and focuses on the “historical trauma and . . . unresolved grief” caused by the plantation economies that developed in the Americas (125). In so doing, the Commemoration Room tells a story not just of death and loss but of endurance. This is reflected in the interpretive text as one enters the space. See the Appendix for a picture of the Commemoration Room and its interpretive text.

These first few rooms in *Freedom* drive home to role water plays with regard to the memory of African American enslavement. The Atlantic Ocean and rivers such as the Ohio and Mississippi feature into many NURFC experiences regarding both the Transatlantic and Internal Slave Trades. Moreover, crossing the Ohio River factors into discussions about seeking freedom on the Underground Railroad. Given that human trafficking frequently involves crossing state and international borders, movement across boundaries also figures into discussions of modern-day enslavement. In this way *Freedom's* displays and exhibits tie into the larger arc of oppression NURFC constructs through exhibit interpretation.

After the Commemoration Room, the visitor walks through exhibits on Caribbean enslavement, with displays about cash crops such as sugar, coffee, tobacco, and rice. Tools used to grow these crops are on display in vitrines, alongside interpretive text on how enslaved workers adapted these West African technologies to the Americas (Carney 2001; Trouillot 2002). These initial

galleries, centered on the Triangle Trade and plantations in the Caribbean and mainland American colonies, underscore how the “labor of slaves in at Atlantic complex” led to the interdigitation of such disparate locations as “London and Luanda, Baltimore and the Bight of Benin, and Havana and Salvador” (Collins 2015: 25). It is also anticipated by the placard for the “Commemoration Room,” reproduced above.

The labor carried out by enslaved workers is alluded to in the interpretive text about Mulberry Plantation, a plantation “big house” in the Carolinas: *Over many generations, the unremitting labor and agricultural innovations of these African peoples created fortunes for the Carolina slave owners. See the Appendix for an image of this house.*

The architecture in the foreground of the Mulberry Plantation placard is notable for being a prominently displayed example of what Vlach would call “slave architecture.” That is to say, unlike the big houses of the sort visible across the Ohio River on the Kentucky banks, the slave quarters visible in the picture were occupied and lived in entirely by enslaved workers. They anticipate NURFC’s primary artifact, the Anderson Slave Pen, on the second floor. They also indicate the confined spaces many victims of trafficking endure, such as shipping crates, trucks, and car trunks.

The cash crop room has examples of technology which might have been used on a South Carolinian rice growing plantation like Mulberry. They include flat bottomed baskets used to separate rice grains, gardening implements such as hoes, and examples of West African-style dykes modified for the Carolina

Tidewater region. These are intended as examples of the ingenuity of enslaved laborers, giving the lie to the concept of white supremacy. They also implicitly testify to the ingenuity of forced laborers in this day and age, who create many things we take for granted.

*Freedom's* cash crop room centers on the integral role enslaved labor played in systems of production that built the Western hemisphere. It includes information about technology used to grow and process commodities like tobacco, rice, coffee, and sugar. This ties into the museum's engagement with modern day enslavement given the role forced labor plays in the production of such things as food (Holmes 2013), clothing (Timmerman 2016), and electronics.

After the cash crop room the visitor enters a room focused on the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. This gallery focuses on the hypocrisy inherent in a document decrying being "enslaved" to a colonial power. It also informs the visitor about early attempts at compromise between the enslaving south and free north. For example, it outlines the Three-Fifths Compromise and the Fugitive Slave Act. This became relevant at the time I was composing this dissertation when then-Secretary of State John Kelly decried the lack of "compromise" in heading of the US Civil War (Astor 2017). This tied into the overall arc of oppression drawn by NURFC, particularly as it related to efforts at intertwining the African American experience post 1870s into the museum's narrative. Indeed, the text on the placard anticipates the shortfalls of the 13th amendment, which provides for the continuation of unremunerated labor and punishment for conviction of a crime.

There is also an exhibit on the role cotton played in the early economic development of both the US North and South. This industry underscores the tendrils African American enslavement spread throughout the Americas. The cotton gin is also yet another example of technology used by enslaved labor. It also anticipates the educational cotton gin replica on NURFC's second floor.

After that room are exhibits pertaining to the abolitionist movement, such as Cincinnati's Lane Theological Seminary. This school stood in Cincinnati's Walnut Hills neighborhood. It produced a number of members of the clergy, as well as orators in general, during the pre-Civil War era. It was the site of many spirited abolitionist debates. The leader of Lane Seminary, Dr. Lyman Beecher, was the father of local abolitionist author Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe frequently comes up in tours and lesson plans as an example of an abolitionist who used her talents to oppose African American chattel slavery. Therefore, she is also used as a role model for visitors to emulate when fighting modern day enslavement.

The display includes a small line of benches intended to evoke church pews facing a pulpit. A stained-glass window hangs from the wall behind the pulpit. The positive role religion played in enslavement is folded into this display. The Rankin family Bible is on display who, other than sharing in the abolitionist sentiment fostered at the seminary, had nothing to do with Lane Theological Seminary.

This display is completed by a large cutout of a freedom seeker who went on to become a pastor. This man, Rev. J.W. Loguen, is a former freedom seeker

and the subject of reenactments by the education team. He is included among talks about documented freedom seekers who have not achieved the fame of figures like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglas. Visitors can learn about other, similar figures in the *Escape* Gallery on the second floor. These everyday heroes can also serve as inspirations to potential modern-day abolitionists.

Beyond the display related to the role of religion are more displays on individual people and places affiliated with resistance to enslavement. Some of these include Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and the tragic figure of Margaret Garner. One such person related to the Garner situation is Salmon P. Chase, abolitionist governor of Ohio. The artifacts in interpretive text related to him underscore the role Ohio played in the abolitionist movement and Civil War. They also anticipate the role elected officials can play in fighting modern day enslavement.

Chase would go from playing a key role in the Margaret Garner case to taking his abolitionism to the White House during Lincoln administration. There are other displays and exhibits in *Freedom* which contribute to the Cincinnati-as-Hotbed-of-Abolitionism narrative. The section that follows will explore some of them. It begins with an exploration of one of the city's free African American communities.

#### Cincinnati: "Hotbed of Abolitionism"

At the same time Lane seminarians were holding impassioned debates about enslavement, Cincinnati's free African American communities were taking

concrete steps helping freedom seekers across the Ohio River. One of these neighborhoods was located on the very site NURFC was built in 2004.

This neighborhood, locally called “Little Africa” by the white residents of Cincinnati, was home to many conductors and station masters on the Underground Railroad. Some of these brave people included William Casey, who helped a mother and daughter across the river, and John Hatfield, who helped 28 freedom seekers through Cincinnati. Casey’s story is supposed to be told by an auditory exhibit, which at the time of this writing was not functioning.

Emphasizing local free African American communities serves as a way of demonstrating the role everyday people can play in fighting injustice and helping other people to freedom. It is also a way of foregrounding the role of African Americans, the driving force behind the Underground Railroad, in discussing the informal abolitionist network. It is a time for white saviors such as Levi Coffin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and John Rankin to step back and allow visitors to understand that the Underground Railroad was primarily “for Black folks and by Black folks,” in the words of Dan Hurley, a local Cincinnati journalist and former Interim Executive Director of NURFC (personal interview: July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

Finally, it is a way of foregrounding Cincinnati as a space where people have struggled against oppression, be it chattel enslavement or human trafficking.

Close to the display on free African American communities in Cincinnati is another one relevant to the local area. *Freedom* includes a printing press from a local metal works, of the sort used by abolitionist pamphleteers like William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglas, and James Birney. Birney published *The*

*Philanthropist* out of a print shop in downtown Cincinnati. His shop was raided twice by pro-enslavement factions in Cincinnati. As with Biard's painting at the front of the gallery visitors are invited to imagine what sort of talents they have which can be deployed in the interest of fighting enslavement.

Across from the printing press is an intersectional display about the role the first wave women's movement played with regard to abolitionism. A statue of a reading woman is intended to invoke feminists and abolitionists like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the local Laura Haviland, who witnessed a group of 28 freedom seekers come through Cincinnati. These women also help further the narrative of cross-group harmony in fighting oppression, both historically and in 2018. This display is intended to remind us in the present day of the role empathy can play in motivating us to help the less fortunate. We are invited to try and identify with a person forced to endure forced labor and human trafficking.

### The Civil War and Reconstruction

*Freedom* closes with an exhibit on the Civil War. Artifacts from both the Union and Confederacy are displayed in vitrines. Examples include guns, a Confederate battle flag, and a cannonball fired at Ft. Sumpter. There are also small board books about the role of women on both sides of the Civil War.

After this room is a chamber with large displays featuring the text of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the US Constitution. These amendments outlawed enslavement, extended US citizenship to all people regardless of race,

and granted African American men the right to vote, respectively. A close reading of the exhibits and their interpretive texts in *Freedom* reveal that these “impressive museum displays” are supposed to close out an attempted historical progression from a benighted past to an inclusive US present (personal interview: February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018). The visitor is supposed to exit *Freedom* on a note of resolution, with the United States having grappled with enslavement and emerged from the conflict on the “right side” of history.

I say “supposed to exit” and “attempted historical progression” because the triumphalist history outlined in *Freedom* ends on the ambiguous note described at the beginning of this section. Directly across from the amendment displays stands the red Klansman’s robe reproduction, mounted behind glass. Multiple coworkers who led tours noted that these groups tended to “go right for” the robe rather than the grand amendment displays (personal interviews: February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018). One group of African American students from the University of Tennessee stated that it underscored the fact that the amendments so proudly displayed “didn’t work. They weren’t fulfilled” (personal interview: February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018). *Freedom* therefore undermines the historical trajectory it takes pains to construct, conceding that US history is fraught with struggle and falling short of ideals. This ambiguity allows for “calls to action” to permeate the Romantic historical narrative. In essence, the gallery subverts itself in the name of the larger arc. We are presented with the arc of universe bending towards justice, but not quite there yet. The robe is a harbinger

of the continuing struggle against racism, white supremacy, and modern-day enslavement.

In the section which follows, I take a closer look at the exhibits in the final room of *Freedom*. These are three large plexiglass displays which, in flowing script, depict the text of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the US Constitution. Visitors to *Freedom* describe them as “beautiful” and have said that “the aesthetics are good” with regard to them (personal interviews: February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018). At a deeper level, however, what are they trying to communicate? The placement of these displays can help us answer this question. The fact that visitors encounter them at the end of a gallery which concerns itself with the legacy of enslavement in the Americas signifies that they are meant to impart some sort of conclusion to the historical portion of this floor. In this case, the displays convey the bringing to an end the horrors of African American chattel enslavement. These displays are tall and adorned with flowing script which echo documents like the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation. Their height signifies a sense of triumph, while the writing evokes the majesty of the law. Symbolically, these “huge and awesome things” are meant to communicate an end to the oppression of African Americans as they are permanently freed by the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, granted citizenship by the 14<sup>th</sup>, and bestowed suffrage by the 15<sup>th</sup> (men, at least) (personal interview: February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

If the displays signify an end, the Klansman’s robe signifies a bridge. It brings notes of Tragedy into the otherwise Romantic narrative crafted by

*Freedom*, and issues a “call to action” through the triumphalist history. Many visitors believe the robe even undermines what the amendment displays are trying to convey. The robe signifies that, in the words of the short film which plays across the atrium in in the Pavilion of Perseverance *Invisible: Slavery Today’s (Slavery Today)* gallery, “the struggle continues.”

Were the gallery fully operational, it would be interesting to see how effectively *Freedom* imparts both the narrative and the inadvertent deconstruction of same. Unfortunately, at the time of my position with NURFC many of the exhibits in *From Slavery to Freedom (Freedom)*, such as some of the first-person audio narratives and interactive maps, were not working. This caused frustration of the part of myself and many of my colleagues and led to a spirited exchange with one dissatisfied visitor in October of 2017. As my colleague James pointed out, any repairs employees could not do themselves would warrant contacting NURFC’s parent museum, the Cincinnati Museum Center (CMC), who would make NURFC pay out of pocket. In short, it was “all about money, which [NURFC] does not have a lot of” (personal interview: February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018). To me, the struggle to repair parts of a historically triumphalist gallery like *Freedom* underscores the perpetual struggle for money faced by history museums such as NURFC. If exhibits which are meant to be visitor-friendly by putting a positive spin on history languish, what does this mean for more challenging exhibits?

As such, the Klansman's robe also serves as an index. It points the way across the Pavilion of Cooperation to NURFC's permanent gallery on modern day enslavement, *Invisible: Slavery Today*. In addition to the short film "The Struggle Continues" visitors see exhibits on human trafficking, debt bondage, and child labor around the globe. NURFC's narrative therefore not only tries to leave US culpability - and by extension responsibility - for enslavement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also casts present-day responsibility for it in a more international scope. The "call to action" signified by the robe, therefore, ends up being incorporated into the larger call made by *Slavery Today* and the companion film. This contributes to an overall Romantic narrative with overtones of present-day Tragedy.

### **Rendering the Invisible Visible**

*Slavery Today* is the one part of the museum NURFC staff pose age restrictions on. Since part of my job at NURFC involves serving as a member of the 3rd floor staff, I have warned new visitors to the museum that some parts of *Slavery Today* may be "too intense" for members of their group or family under age 11. The responses of visitors varied. Some believed young people "need to be exposed to what happens" and opted to do just that with their younger children (personal interview: December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018). At least one person who did opt to bring their pre-teens into the gallery conceded that "liability alone" compelled us to warn people away (personal interview: October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017). Education Team policy however was that when it came to docent led school tours *Slavery Today* would be restricted to high schools.

One reason for this restriction is a series of five sculptures lining the entrance to *Slavery Today*. These sculptures represent the five forms of modern-day enslavement as defined by End Slavery Now, a nonprofit owned and operated by NURFC: forced labor, bonded labor, sexual slavery, child slavery, and domestic servitude. The sculpture for “sex slavery,” composed of body parts from a mannequin trapped inside a fold-up bed, is described by many visitors as “disturbing” (personal interview: February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018). The sculpture representing domestic servitude has a clock for a face with every conceivable increment of time measured out. These figures introduce what NURFC’s website describes as “the world’s first museum-quality, permanent exhibition on . . . human trafficking.”

*Slavery Today* features two large gallery spaces: “Invisible,” painted in dark colors which tells the stories of five different individuals enduring modern day enslavement, and “Freedom,” a bright white room which details efforts on the part of NGOs to eradicate modern day enslavement. The colors were chosen purposefully; “Invisible” is meant to evoke feeling trapped and closed in, while “Freedom” signifies a feeling of liberation (personal interview: July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017). While a much smaller gallery than *Freedom*, *Slavery Today* follows a similar progression in that the visitor moves from experiencing and learning about enslavement to exhibits and infographics intended to signify freedom. The difference is that while *Freedom* includes a clear conclusion in the form of the Reconstruction Era amendments, *Slavery Today* indicates that the struggle to free the approximately 46 million people suffering under modern-day enslavement continues. This figure is replicated on the website for End Slavery

Now, the anti-trafficking nonprofit operated by NURFC, which I was responsible for maintaining. *Invisible* constructs and reifies the overarching arc of oppression.

NURFC employees, particularly those on the Education Team, describe *Invisible* as “picking up where *From Slavery to Freedom* leaves off,” in essence confirming that trajectory (personal interview: November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017). In its compelling way, *Slavery Today* contributes to the Romantic historical narrative promoted by *Freedom* while simultaneously calling visitors to action by invoking the Tragedy of modern-day enslavement, thereby orienting “the present in relation to what is defined as the past” (Autry 2017a: 22). Infographic signs posted in *Slavery Today*’s gallery proclaim the end of enslavement in the Americas in no uncertain terms, while telling the stories of people trapped in bonded labor and domestic servitude See the Appendix for photos of these displays and text. Enslavement as depicted in *Slavery Today* is international, situated in sites like Italy, India, and Mexico. The transnational nature of African American enslavement is not invoked anywhere in *Slavery Today*. The US is therefore absolved of its legacy of enslavement in the present day, or at least benefits from diffusion of responsibility for it thanks to *Slavery Today*’s international scope. Constructing the arc of oppression is not without historiographic impact.

Throughout the first gallery, “Invisible,” the visitor encounters narratives related to the misery of the day-to-day lives of the individuals represented by the

five sculptures at the beginning. Meanwhile “Escape,” the gallery focused on efforts at eradicating modern-day enslavement, includes information on various NGOs, organizations, and corporations fighting human trafficking, including NURFC. These include Polaris, Free the Slaves, and Ben and Jerry’s.

### Constructing a Narrative of the Invisible

*Invisible* is noteworthy due to its focus on the present day. It is also, as stated on NURFC’s website, the first gallery of its kind. However, apart from the role it plays as a continuation of a Romantic narrative about Cincinnati and the US regarding the abolition of enslavement, its exhibits are unconnected with African American enslavement.

While enslavement is illegal in the United States, authors like Smith (2012) and Delgado (2012) have argued that mass incarceration undergirds the economy of the United States in a similar way to plantation enslavement. Indeed, one can point to the text of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment - the same amendment which abolished enslavement - which prohibits enslavement except as “a punishment for crime.” Mass incarceration, however, is beyond *Slavery Today’s* scope. The gallery instead devotes itself to linking modern day enslavement with human trafficking, effectively calling attention to an important issue through the skilled deployment of interpretive text, lighting, sound, and displays. The issue of mass incarceration will be engaged with in Chapter 3.

Once in “Invisible,” the first room in the gallery, the visitor is confronted with signs bearing informative text, and low-slung structures meant to signify buildings in which trafficking victims are kept. Meanwhile, in the background, the

visitor hears a low and mechanical hum. According to my coworkers as well as visitors to the exhibit, the experience is evocative of a “train depot” or “animal farm” (personal interviews: February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Others have invoked a work camp or dingy factory.

Emerging from “Invisible” into “Escape,” the second room in this gallery, is a literal move from darkness into light. “Escape” is airy, bright, and open. The placards with interpretive text about institutions working to end human trafficking adorn the walls in a similar way to many of the abolitionists featured in *Freedom* and elsewhere at NURFC. Indeed, visitors and staff members alike are invited to become “modern day freedom fighters.” If US enslavement was defeated by the “good guy” abolitionists, *Slavery Today* seems to say, modern-day enslavement can be eliminated in a similar way. The upward trajectory of history can continue if we work for it. Moreover, Cincinnati can continue being the “gatekeeper to the Underground Railroad,” as stated on End Slavery Now’s website. *Slavery Today* therefore parallels the progressivist journey one undertakes in *Freedom*, echoing and elaborating upon the historical narrative conveyed by that gallery.

The shipping crates and motor vehicles in which survivors of human trafficking are transported and hidden within are compared to the ships and slave jails of both the Triangle Trade and the Second Middle Passage during guided tours and experiences which engage with modern day enslavement. “Modern Day Freedom Fighters,” given to museum visitors who are high school age and older, is one such tour or experience. The economic contributions of forced and bonded laborers are compared to the enslaved workers who toiled on

plantations. The organizations mentioned in “Escape” dedicated to fighting modern day enslavement are compared to abolitionists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, and Salmon P. Chase during this experience. In this way it reinforces the overarching narrative of oppression crafted within NURFC’s walls.

### NURFC and the 20th Century African American Struggle

In the previous section, I discussed the two permanent galleries on NURFC’s third floor. The exhibits *Freedom* and *Slavery Today* are broadly historically and socially focused and uphold a Romantic narrative of US history and a progressivist notion of the present. In the final portion of this chapter I examine “The Struggle Continues,” a 15-minute film which roughly picks up where *From Slavery to Freedom* leaves off. Like *Rosa*, this exhibit is distinct from the two main galleries in that it specifically engages with the African American experience post-Reconstruction. It still contributes in its own ways to the overall Romantic historical vision promulgated by NURFC.

#### **The Struggle Continues**

This film establishes this Romantic vision in a way which casts the viewer as the hero. It plays in a small theater located next to the exit of *Slavery Today*. The film serves to bridge the historical gap between *Slavery Today* and the more historically situated *Freedom*.

“The Struggle Continues” (Struggle) is a fifteen-minute film sponsored by Coca Cola. It takes place in a theater decorated with posters promoting various social actions spanning the late 19th through the early 21st centuries. For

example, there are signs calling for the extension of suffrage to women, and an immigrant crossing sign. Taken together, they convey a message of shared struggle against insurmountable obstacles. This enhances the feeling that one is witnessing an extension of what was encountered in *Freedom*.

This is not an entirely undeserved sensation. Along with *Rosa*, “Struggle” is one of the few exhibits at NURFC which addresses the Jim Crow era and the 20th century struggle for Civil Rights. In this way, it simultaneously engages with an oft-overlooked part of US history and contributes to the overall Romantic narrative promulgated by exhibits at NURFC. What follows is a synopsis of the film and a discussion of how it frames the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement such that it ties into the overall narrative constructed by NURFC. In this instance, however, the visitor is foregrounded as a potential modern-day abolitionist, and Romantic protagonist.

The major way in which the film reframes the post-Reconstruction and 20<sup>th</sup> Century movements is by foregrounding interracial harmony in a similar way to *Freedom*. “Struggle” begins by cementing that connection by summarizing the Civil War and Reconstruction era amendments room in *Freedom*. The film follows by mentioning the “racial gap” which characterized life post emancipation. “Struggle” mentions “legislation” which restricted the rights of African Americans, such as efforts at preventing African Americans from voting and as “segregation” which legally consigned them to their own communities, schools, and businesses. The words “Jim Crow” are never uttered.

There is also no reference to segregation in the US military, even as the film mentions that the gates of camps like Auschwitz and Dachau were opened “by troops of every color.” Meanwhile, immigrants from Europe and Asia are described as being treated “almost” like enslaved workers. In this way it collapses the experiences of African Americans in with those whose ancestors came to the United States willingly. It is eerily reminiscent of the inaccurate online meme about “Irish slaves,” debunked by scholars such as Mark Auslander (Eversley 2017).

The film also erases aspects of both people and concepts associated with the Civil Rights movement, including at times their very names. Nor does the film delve into the economic impacts of barring an entire group of people from access to current textbooks, higher profile jobs, or networking opportunities. Over the narrator’s crisp and clear voice, “Struggle” shows images of African Americans enduring and protesting, although not always in their original context. For example, it shows the 1862 Houghton photo of an enslaved family in front of the Gaines House, taken three years before the end of the Civil War and the onset of Reconstruction. The movie also shows NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins commenting on school desegregation, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. talking about “saving the soul of America” at New York City’s Riverside Church. Neither of their names are mentioned, and “Struggle” does not specify that that particular King speech was devoted to criticizing militarism and the United States’ role in the Vietnam War.

A second way “Struggle” reframes the movements of the 20th century is, as with *Freedom*, by romanticizing them. A major way in which the film does this is by taking and extending the tendency of third floor exhibits to focus on broad historical and social trends. Social progress in the United States is portrayed progressively and almost as inevitable. In “Struggle” various movements, from different points in the late 19th to early 20th century eras, from all parts of the globe, are portrayed concurrently. Wave upon wave of Latinx, Native American, and LGBT marchers and activists flow across the screen, giving the illusion of tidal progress. There is no indication that there might have been any conflict or tension among these groups, underscoring the cooperative element of overall narrative of Romantic struggle against oppression.

For example, we hear nothing about the rift between Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass over the issue of black men being granted suffrage before women of any race, or of lesser known Civil Rights figures like Fanny Lou Hamer, who was beaten in prison for taking part in 1964’s “Freedom Summer” and proclaimed she was “sick and tired of being sick and tired.” There is also no mention of any tension which existed within the Civil Rights movement, such as regarding the non-violent resistance of King versus the more confrontational approach of figures like Malcolm X, also endorsed by Rosa Parks, who visitors can experience thanks to the VR experience on the same floor. The ambivalence different movements had toward LGBT people are also not explored, which is significant in light of “Struggle’s” invocation of “gay liberation.” While notable to a student of movements, this erasure of complexity is perhaps understandable in

light of the movie's goal of furthering the construction of an overarching and progressive narrative.

Finally, "Struggle" recontextualizes the Civil Rights movement in a way which fits perfectly with the overall theme of *Slavery Today*. The film internationalizes the struggle against oppression. The film invokes the anticolonial movement which began post-World War II. In order to do so, "Struggle" invokes Mohandas Gandhi, one of two individuals referenced in the movie by name. Gandhi is described as having "inspired" the Civil Rights movement in the United States, rather than the specific tactics of Martin Luther King. The visitor also sees footage of the Berlin Wall falling, echoing the piece on display in NURFC's courtyard. We also see the lone protestor standing before a tank in Tianenmen Square, as "Struggle's" narrator talks about the importance of individual action. The specific struggle for African American emancipation and citizenship invoked by the Underground Railroad gives way to a global campaign against injustice.

The film closes by referring to the increasingly rapid flow of information around the world, akin to Appadurai's mediascapes (1996). Emancipation becomes a transnational endeavor. Meanwhile, the United States is mostly absolved of its role as enslaver and becomes cast in the role of potential freedom fighter. Towards the end of "Struggle" the film invokes the name of Harriet Tubman, American conductor on the Underground Railroad and the only other individual mentioned by name. She is specifically indexed as a figure Americans in the present day and emulate in the fight against modern day

enslavement. The movie assumes, not without cause, that visitors to NURFC assume they would have done as Tubman did. “Go Harriet,” the movie asserts on our behalf. “I’d have been with you.” “Harriet is here,” the film challenges, in the context of invoking the millions of people who are enslaved in the present day.

## **Conclusion**

NURFC bills itself as a “museum of conscience” and a “call to action” museum. The narrative it constructs in service of its mission, however, is fraught. This is reflected in its two permanent, third floor exhibits: *From Slavery to Freedom*, and *Invisible: Slavery Today*. Both of them tell a triumphalist narrative of US history, extending this Romance into the present. Along the way the abolitionist heroes of this Romance shift from historical figures like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Tubman to Rosa Parks and visitors to NURFC themselves.

*Freedom* conveys through its exhibits, displays, and interpretive text a highly Romanticized narrative of US history predicated on the ultimate triumph of emancipation and freedom. In this way, NURFC demonstrates through its exhibits and interpretive text a particular narrative of history and culture intended to make visitors feel simultaneously comfortable and called to action. For example, *Slavery Today* situates the contemporary struggle against enslavement within the international crisis of human trafficking, thereby disrupting visitor comfort in specific ways. This disruption serves a historiographic purpose as

well; incorporating chattel enslavement within a larger narrative of oppression across history and across the globe.

The fact that the struggle against chattel enslavement was ultimately successful helps contribute to the idea that the fight against modern-day enslavement is also inevitably successful. The large arc of oppression becomes, in a way, seductive by virtue of its seemingly inevitable defeat. At the same time there are sinister implications. While human trafficking is a serious issue, taken together, *Freedom* and *Slavery Today* serve to absolve the contemporary US of lingering responsibility for the perpetuation of systems of racial oppression due to robbing it of its singularity.

There are a few instances where the exculpating Romantic historical narrative is disrupted, such as the juxtaposition of the Klansman's robe and displays on the Reconstruction Era amendments in *Freedom's* final gallery. However, as with many of the other exhibits at NURFC which engage with racial oppression in the modern-day US discussed in the following chapters, the robe - oddly enough - serves to ultimately uphold the overall Romantic narrative. In this instance, it signifies that "The Struggle Continues," and we can learn more about that struggle in *Slavery Today*. Those who choose to view *Slavery Today* learn about the fight against modern-day enslavement, one which NURFC has devoted much of its time and resources in joining. There is no concurrent effort at addressing continued systems racial oppression in the United States against African Americans in *Slavery Today*, however, or even elsewhere in the

museum. NURFC walks a line between calling visitors to action while still serving up corporate-branded, visitor friendly historical narratives.

NURFC's permanent third floor exhibits go a long way towards situating the museum between the poles of "museum of conscience" and purveyor of Romantic historical narratives. They set the stage in broad historical and social strokes, establishing a particular take on history which the second floor, with its more geographically and individually focused exhibits, brings to clearer life. The second floor exhibits and displays punctuate the Romantic narrative with self-described "highlights," including NURFC's primary artifact and two feature films featuring prominent narrators. I explore the displays on the second floor in the next chapter.

### CHAPTER III: FLOOR TWO: EDUCATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

The previous chapter focused on providing a walk-through of NURFC's third floor. These exhibits and galleries focused on galleries which construct a broad arc centered on a Triumphalist and Romantic historic narrative full of potential. Visitors are taken through the legacy of African American enslavement and invited to become modern-day abolitionists fighting the good fight against human trafficking. Two exhibits, the film "The Struggle Continues" and the virtual reality *Rosa Parks Experience* follow up on the African American experience. In so doing, they bridge *Freedom's* history with *Invisible's* call to action.

In this chapter I localize this arc by walking us through NURFC's second floor. The second floor most clearly articulates the pavilioned design of NURFC. See the appendix for a map of NURFC's floorplan, focusing on the outline of the second floor. This level includes exhibits and experiences which focus on the Underground Railroad and enslavement. By and large these exhibits are artifacts and works of art considered "highlights" by NURFC's Education Team.

The presence of such items and their important role in tours, particularly visiting schools, led to the subtitle of this chapter. I will follow in the footsteps of a guided tour, perhaps of older elementary school students or middle schoolers. It will include a visit to NURFC's primary artifact and memorial space, the John W. Anderson Slave Pen, a rare example of freestanding "slave architecture." It originally stood in Mason County, KY which is just over the Ohio River from Cincinnati. As such it helps ground NURFC's location to the Internal Slave Trade and, by extension, the Underground Railroad.

I begin with this structure, which I believe functions as a sort of “museum within a museum.” It looms large in NURFC’s Great Hall, which doubles as the Pavilion of Cooperation on the second floor. The reason I consider the Slave Pen to be a museum in its own right is because, for one thing, it is large enough to enter. For another, visitors enter it in order to learn about history while experiencing what Greenblatt (1990) refers to as “resonance and wonder.”

### **The Anderson Slave Pen and NURFC’s Great Hall**

As on the third floor, here the Great Hall forms an atrium between the Pavilions of Courage and Perseverance. The spiral Grand Staircase descends into the space, the John W. Anderson Slave Pen gradually appearing over the railing as the visitor - if able - takes the recommended route of walking from the third floor to the second. The Slave Pen is also one of the first things visitors see upon exiting the elevator as well.

The Anderson Slave Pen grounds a larger display on the US Internal Slave Trade which occurred from roughly the years 1807 through 1865. The building played a grim role in the Internal Slave Trade, occasionally referred to as the “Second Middle Passage.” The walls of the Great Hall also display standalone works of art by artists such as the late Aminah Robinson, an Ohio-born artist who created *RagGonOn*, a massive two-piece quilt depicting the African American experience, as well as *Mural* by the artists Tom Feelings and Tyrone Geeter. The works of art flank the entrance to the breezeway connecting the Pavilions of Cooperation and Perseverance. Given the fact that the Slave Pen dominates the Great Hall and gives a subtle nod towards the present-day

plight of African Americans at the hands of the criminal justice system, I begin with a discussion of this singular example of plantation architecture.

### **The Anderson Slave Pen as Vernacular Architecture**

The John W. Anderson Slave Pen was best described in print as a “hallowed place” by Carl Westmoreland, NURFC’s senior historian (Brown 2003). It is the US’ “only known surviving rural slave jail” (ibid) and a unique example of what Upton and Vlach (1986) refer to as “vernacular architecture.” Such architecture stands in contrast to the more enduring architecture of elites, evoked in the columnated houses visible across the Ohio River in Covington, KY. Such houses are often advertised as “heritage tourism” sites and are considered “Historic House Museums” (HHMs) by many museum professionals (Van Mensch and Meijer-Van Mensch 2011; Eichstedt and Small 2002; Ryan and Vagnone 2014; Vagnone and Ryan 2015). Structures like the Anderson Slave Pen are different in many ways. I believe that innovations in HHM literature can enhance understanding and interpretation of the Anderson Slave Pen both theoretically and in practice. Buildings like the Slave Pen can also fill in important historical gaps left by many HHMs. I begin with a discussion of some of these differences.

One major difference is, quite simply, that of scale. The Anderson Slave Pen is a one room cabin rather than a multi-storied great house with architectural adornments such as columns and pediments (Young 2016). Another is the fact that the buildings like the Slave Pen would have stood far away from grander buildings which ultimately become HHMs. They would have been located

elsewhere on the “plantation landscape ensemble” than the “big house” (Vlatch 1993: xv). A third difference is administration in the present day. HHMs are typically autonomous entities serving as museums in their own right, while the Anderson Slave Pen is administered by NURFC. The final difference is what the bulk of this chapter section focuses on; the fact that HHMs tend to focus on wealthy, white elites while “Afro-American architecture” like the Anderson Slave Pen do not (ibid).

The historical significance of the Anderson Slave Pen serves the theoretical aims proffered by Vagnone and Ryan (2015). It speaks to the ability of the Anderson Slave Pen to serve as a microcosm of the Internal Slave Trade, as many HHMs serve as time and space writ small. Taken a step further, the Slave Pen helps signify present-day events adversely affecting African American communities, such as mass incarceration.

This signification is underscored by the fact that the building is alternatively referred to as a “Slave Jail” by both staff and some visitors. The Slave Pen was used to imprison up to 70 enslaved workers at a time on their way to being sold at auction in the Internal Slave Trade. The pen was transported across the Ohio River from Mason County, KY, a site less than 60 miles from NURFC. It was reassembled on site in time for the museum’s opening in 2004 and is even visible through NURFC’s windows from Second Street, which runs behind the museum.

As one of the only free-standing rural slave jails in existence, the Slave Pen not only serves as an exemplar of vernacular plantation architecture, but

also forces us to reevaluate conventional understandings of what constitutes a historic building. Through proximate exhibits such as *Mural* by Tom Feelings and Tyrone Geeter the pen indexes the relationship between “rural slave jails” such as itself and the role of modern-day prison systems (Foucault 1979, 1988; Wacquant 2000). In this way, it also serves as an avenue of engagement with the Cincinnati community in service to NURFC’s “call to action” self-identification.

### **“A Slave Ship Turned Upside Down”**

As visitors descend the grand staircase from the third floor to the second, the cavernous second floor great hall is dominated by NURFC’s primary artifact and memorial space. The John W. Anderson Slave Pen was brought to NURFC from Mason County, KY, which is just across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. NURFC’s senior curator and historian, Carl Westmoreland, was instrumental in bringing the small cabin to NURFC. It is named for the enslaver on whose property it stood, and who profited from the advent of the Internal US Slave Trade. The Anderson Slave Pen is, in the words of Mr. Westmoreland, “a pile of logs . . . yet it is everything” (Brown 2003). Its status as an authentic artifact means that it is more likely to “promote curiosity and engagement” (Bunce 2016: 235). This unassuming cabin tells a powerful tale of endurance on the part of enslaved African Americans, as well as its own journey to the free state of Ohio and city of Cincinnati.

The John W. Anderson Slave Pen was Captain Anderson’s second such pen; the first such building was burned to the ground by an enslaved worker

trapped inside it named Peggy. She was tried and executed for her actions, and NURFC lore has it that her ghost accompanied the Anderson Slave Pen across the Ohio River to the museum. Peggy's presence is benign. She mainly seemed to serve as a spectral reinforcement of NURFC's "Ohio River as boundary between enslavement and freedom" narrative. A major reason for the Anderson Slave Pen's survival was that a tobacco shed had been constructed around it after the Internal Slave Trade ended with emancipation. The chimney, along with the fireplace, did not survive the move to Cincinnati.

Visitors enter the Slave Pen through a doorway where the fireplace would have been, passing under metal bars intended to evoke both it and the chimney. As they enter, visitors walk on stones from the original fireplace. Once inside, they can see the O-rings screwed into the posts which form the second-floor loft of the Slave Pen. A chest sits on the first floor of the pen which contains replicas of chains which would be threaded through the O-rings. Shackles on the ends of the chains would bind the adult men who occupied the loft of the Slave Pen to one another. Women such as Peggy lived and worked on the first floor, enduring - along with the men - the sights, sounds, and smells of the Slave Pen. They cleaned and cooked for the occupants of both plantation house and Slave Pen in conditions reminiscent of a slave ship during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Indeed, many have called the Internal Slave Trade, of which the Anderson Slave Pen was an integral part, the "Second Middle Passage."

While the occupants of the Anderson Slave Pen lived lives of confinement defined by misery and perseverance, they did live in that building and endure the

nightmarish conditions they faced. Interpretations at NURFC reflect this; discussions of the Slave Pen involve the enslaved workers confined within it as well as the building itself and its historical and economic context. The fact that the Slave Pen exemplifies the suffering enslaved workers underwent in the name of an industrial plantocracy means that it can, as with HHMs, convey the day to day life of historical agents.

HHMs, in brief, are historically significant houses which have been preserved or restored such that they are representative of their era and environment. They are, in effect, artifacts one can enter and have interpreted. As with artifacts, but on a larger scale, HHMs “allow us to empathize with, and engage, past people not just intellectually, or academically . . . but actually sensorially” (Chan 2007: 3). Many HHMs focus on their status as former residences of notable political or cultural figures, such as Virginia’s Monticello and Mt. Vernon, or the Longfellow House in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Visitors can sensorially engage with great white men like George Washington and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow at these sites by engaging with the art, artifacts, and landscape which would have surrounded them. The focus on notables is in part due to renewed interest in revitalizing HHMs and opening them to the public occurred after the First World War, “when there was a rise of nationalism and an enthusiastic allegiance to the US” (Ryan and Vagnone 2014: 168). This led to increased interest in restoring sites like Mt. Vernon, George Washington’s plantation, or Monticello, home of Thomas Jefferson. HHMs often consist of the belongings of the prior inhabitants, such as furniture and clothing. How these

“ensembles of objects” are “preserved” usually determines the “degree of authenticity” of an HHM (Van Mensch and Meijer-Van Mensch 2011: 19).

This leads to one significant question about viewing the Anderson Slave Pen as an HHM. Specifically, how can one craft interpretations of objects around occupants of a house when the occupants in question owned very few of the objects around them? By addressing the fact that enslaved workers - particularly those housed temporarily in structures like the Slave Pen - left behind relatively little in the way of material culture, NURFC helps expand the definition of what qualifies as an HHM. In doing so, NURFC docents engage with one of the functions of HHMs; portraying, in miniature, the historic, economic, and social milieu in which they were built and inhabited.

As this milieu around HHMs shift, the interpretation of artifacts and other objects on site tend to morph as well. In this way, HHMs come to reflect culture in its “broadest sense . . . as a way of life to . . . the result of aesthetic practices” (Mason 2007: 17). These buildings-*cum*-artifacts reveal the lifeways of their residents as well as how these lifeways both affected and were affected by the circumstances in which the occupants of HHMs lived their lives. As Romantic narratives surrounding the great white men who occupied HHMs are reexamined and even called into question, these men and their circumstances are reinterpreted. Often, this takes the form of incorporating residents of HHM whose lives have undergone historical erasure into HHM interpretations (Donnelly 2002). Examples include the inclusion of information about enslaved workers at

Mt. Vernon beginning in the latter portion of the 20th century. The Isaac Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford, MA is another example of this phenomenon. Following an excavation of a charnel pit near the Slave Quarters which unearthed artifacts connected with 18th century enslaved workers, the HHM began implementing interpretive narratives placing less focus on the wealthy Royalls and more on the enslaved workers who made the household run (Chan 2007). A similar excavation was conducted next to the site of the Anderson Slave Pen, with smaller artifacts such as dishware fragments used and handled by enslaved workers displayed next to the HHM. As is explained by the interpretive text in the display, enslaved women confined in the Slave Pen would prepare meals both for their fellow enslaved workers, as well as for the people who lived in the big house.

A focus on victims and survivors of the Internal Slave Trade goes against the grain of how houses associated with enslavement, such as plantation houses in the US south, have been interpreted. Many of these buildings focus on the lives of the white, wealthy members of the plantocracy who lived and dwelt in the foyers of the great house. The experiences of the enslaved African American workers who also lived on those properties undergo erasure. They are rendered passive in deed and voice (e.g. docents will often refer to “food being prepared” and “beds being made) (Eichstedt and Small 2002: 6). The cast of characters in narratives pertaining to agricultural economics before the Civil War is limited to white people, particularly white men. Limiting narratives related to enslaved labor at southern HHMs means that “plantation museums reflect, create, and

contribute to racialized ways of understanding and organizing the world” (Eichstedt and Small 2002: 6). Since plantation houses make up a large portion of the museum community south of the Mason-Dixon, this is problematic.

Unfortunately, despite developments such as the discovery and restoration of “slave architecture” such as the Anderson Slave Pen, excavation of artifacts connected with enslavement at sites such as the Slave Pen and Royall House and Slave Quarters, and the crafting of narratives inclusive of enslaved labor at museums such as NURFC, history still has far more to say about the lives of figures like Anderson rather than people like Peggy. In the case of John W. Anderson, for example, we know that he was a captain in the military. We know what he did for a living. We know that he had daughters, but no sons, a major reason for why the Slave Pen eventually passed out of his family and became the stuff of local lore. We know that he died in a freak accident while pursuing, on horseback, an escaped enslaved man, and that his sudden death precipitated the eventual breakup of the Anderson estate. Birth, life, death, and loss are all accounted for for the white, free members of the Anderson household.

Not so for those confined in the Slave Pen. With some notable exceptions, few enslaved workers “have written about their captivity and servitude . . .” (Vlatch 1991: 53). Therefore, other than what Anderson saw fit to document about them, we know very little of the enslaved workers who endured the unimaginable conditions inside his jail. Beyond that, “[w]e are forced to reconstruct a narrative out of odd fragments of the slave experience” (ibid). We

know “John” was epileptic and that “Peggy” destroyed the first such pen, was arrested, tried, and executed for it. These are stories NURFC tour guides impart to visitors.

While individual narratives help visitors mentally conjure up images of the enslaved people confined in the Anderson Slave Pen, the focus is more on the group. The imagined conditions inside the Slave Pen stands in for the unknown African Americans who endured the coffles and steamboats of the Internal Slave Trade. The Anderson Slave Pen is an artifact which provides additional perspective on the lives of some enslaved workers which has survived through the centuries. As a building which lends itself to analysis through the lens of HHM literature, it serves to broaden the traditional scope of historic houses in two primary ways.

One way the Anderson Slave Pen enhances this scope is by taking the HHM concept away from a focus on the dwellings of elite white men such as George Washington, Isaac Royall, and John Anderson. This emphasis occurs because, due to the patriotism which inspired a resurgence of interest in historic houses, HHMs tend to be staffed by “well-meaning and hardworking volunteers” who tend to be “elderly, educated, wealthy white women with conservative views of what history encompasses” (Ryan and Vagnone 2014: 166). The Anderson Slave Pen turns this on its head. Despite the fact that the building is named for the elite man who owned it, the focus is not on Anderson himself. Docents instead discuss his participation in the Internal Slave Trade while amplifying the voices of the enslaved workers who dwelled in the cabin. The narrative is

deliberately turned on its head. In fact, no one individual is focused on when docents interpret the Slave Pen. The emphasis remains on enslavement and its brutality, which led to the creation of the Underground Railroad. It helps that docents do justice to individuals like Peggy, who managed to immortalize herself by figuratively carving her name on the side of the Slave Pen.

A second way the Anderson Slave Pen expands the concept of what an HHM can be is the fact that it is situated within a larger museum. This historic dwelling doubles as NURFC's primary artifact. While all historic houses are artifacts of sorts, the Slave Pen is displayed as one. At the same time, it calls attention to itself as a historic piece of architecture, doing so inside a building designed itself to be monumental. The Slave Pen monopolizes the space in the museum's Great Hall, deliberately visible from multiple angles. It also anchors interpretive text and displays about the Internal Slave Trade, sometimes referred to as the "Second Middle Passage." Therefore, like many HHMs, the Slave Pen is presented as a microcosm of a historic phenomenon, indicative of a particular era. In this case the period in question is roughly 1807 to 1865, the era between Congress outlawing bringing enslaved Africans into the United States and the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. During this time enslaved workers were often sold "down the river" from border states like Kentucky to the plantations of the Deep South by men like John W. Anderson.

Before Anderson had enough enslaved workers to warrant the effort and expense of sending them south to large markets in such labor like New Orleans or Natchez, MS, his human chattel would be confined in the Slave Pen. Artifacts

excavated from a nearby charnel pit after the pen's discovery are displayed near the entrance. Some of these materials include dishes used by enslaved workers. A large wooden panel engraved with the names of occupants of the Slave Pen, such as John, as well the text of a letter written by Anderson about the enslaved workers, also stands near the spindly metal entryway.

The Anderson Slave Pen is also a notable addition to the all-too-few examples we have of "slave architecture," buildings related to African American enslavement in and around which enslaved workers lived their lives. Such architecture, which existed within the domestic landscapes of plantation houses, rarely survived to the present day. Due to that fact, as well as the fact that they were largely excluded from the HHM revival which began in the US during the interbellum period, we know little about the people who would have occupied buildings such as the Slave Pen.

Some HHMs have sought to include structures occupied by enslaved African Americans in tours and programs. Mt. Vernon famously started offering tours of their slave quarters, although such tours tend to be segregated rather than included as a main tour. Whitney Plantation in Louisiana, which has gone so far as to employ such architecture - going so far as to bring in other slave quarters from other properties - notably foreground and confronts the institution of enslavement. However, the fact that Whitney had to bring in buildings from elsewhere demonstrates that, in the words of John Michael Vlach, "[s]lavery used up artifacts like it used up people" (Elliott 2015). It is much rarer for

buildings such as the Anderson Slave Pen survive than the great houses built to both dominate plantations and last through the ages.

This makes the fact that the Slave Pen does not stand on John Anderson's Northern Kentucky estate notable. When the building was brought to NURFC, some community members questioned whether it didn't belong more properly in Mason County (Rabinowitz 2016). Had Anderson's daughters not sold his estate after his sudden death in 1836 it might have joined the ranks of Mt. Vernon, Whitney Plantation, and the Isaac Royall House and Slave Quarters as plantation-style landscapes incorporating "slave architecture." In an ironic twist, however, the Slave Pen endured as an artifact while the rest of Anderson's estate has faded from memory.

The fact that the Slave Pen endures means that it can impart narratives which go beyond the lives of an individual, let alone a "great white men." It holds a mirror up to HHMs, signifying both what its occupants went through as well as its role in a larger economic system in a similar way to the Isaac Royall House and Slave Quarters of Medford, MA. As memorial space it provides "evidence of slave endurance" (Vlatch 1991: 227). Given that it crossed the river from Kentucky to Cincinnati, as did many freedom seekers, it also implicitly stands in for the freedom seekers themselves given its new home in a museum dedicated to historical narratives centered on the Underground Railroad.

In examining the journey taken by the Anderson Slave Pen, one returns to the Ohio River. Back in Germantown, KY, where John W. Anderson acquired and sold enslaved labor, the chimney of the original Slave Pen faced the

Kentucky side of the Ohio River (Rabinowitz 2016). The Anderson Slave Pen's proximity to the natural border between Slave State and Free State, as well as its subsequent crossing of it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, contributes to the "Ohio River as boundary between freedom and enslavement" narrative. The Slave Pen no longer serves as a site of confinement and oppression. It has traversed the geographic and symbolic boundary that is the Ohio River to a museum devoted to engaging with African American enslavement. It commemorates the memory of enslavement and eventual emancipation. It also anchors interpretive text about the Internal Slave Trade.

The Internal Slave Trade is sometimes called the "Second Middle Passage." As the interpretive text around the Anderson Slave Pen explains, along with docents who lead tours, the Internal Slave Trade arose in response to the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves. This act, passed in 1807, forbade the importation of enslaved Africans into the United States as had formerly been done by the Triangular Trade. By the time of this act's passage, however, the 1794 patenting of Eli Whitney's cotton gin had already breathed new life into plantation enslavement in the US South. Enslaved workers were able to process cotton more quickly, meaning that the costs of feeding and housing them was more than made up for by their labor output (although they were still unremunerated and the process of growing, harvesting, and hauling the crop remained equally arduous). The economy of the future Confederate States of America, as well as border states such as Kentucky and West Virginia, were becoming inextricably intertwined with African American enslavement.

Enter enslavers such as John W. Anderson. Men such as he were largely responsible for the growth of the Internal Slave Trade. Merchants like Anderson would purchase enslaved workers at auction or at estate sales. These individuals would be transported south to larger markets such as New Orleans and Natchez, Mississippi. This journey would involve a forced trek as a coffle to Dover, Kentucky, a port along the Ohio River. Dover is highlighted on a map accompanying interpretive text about the Internal Slave Trade and is often mentioned during docent-led tours.

The march to Dover or over land all the way to Natchez or New Orleans would not take place until Anderson had acquired at least 30 enslaved workers. Until then they would be forced to endure the horrors of confinement in the Slave Pen. The cramped quarters and conditions call to mind the horrors of the Middle Passage as depicted in *Freedom*, on the third floor, making the “Second Middle Passage” moniker even more apt. Indeed, senior historian and curator Carl Westmoreland has in interviews described the Anderson Slave Pen as a “slave ship turned upside down” (Brown 2003). This line is included in a video about the Slave Pen which plays on a touchscreen near the Slave Pen and is occasionally said during tours by docents.

When showing visitors the interior, docents and tour guides try to paint as vivid a picture as possible. The Slave Pen is a one room, two story structure with an upper loft. Visitors enter through an opening where the fireplace would have been, and which would have been tended by enslaved women and children of both sexes under the age of 12. Enslaved men were chained together in the

upper loft. O-rings, which the shackles would have been run through, are still screwed into the upper loft. Replica manacles are stored in trunks in the Slave Pen, which tour guides show to visitors. Some tour guides have been known to wrap them around the wrists of younger visitors, which has caused a great deal of disagreement among NURFC employees.

While enslaved women and young children were not confined, they were trapped in the smoky and cramped lower level of the Slave Pen. They also endured, like the men, the sounds and smells of people forced to sleep, eat, and relieve themselves in spaces akin to the holds of slave ships. While Anderson feared the enslaved men enough to keep them chained, it is worth noting that an enslaved woman named Peggy set fire to his first pen. NURFC lore states that her spirit accompanied the second Anderson Slave Pen to Cincinnati, and presently haunts the museum building.

The fact that a ghost is associated with the Slave Pen anchors the cabin's connection with the past. Peggy's story underscores its significance as an extant building associated with enslaved workers rather than enslavers in the plantation house. It is effectively NURFC's centerpiece. Since visitors can enter the Slave Pen, it dramatically illustrates the horrors of the "Second Middle Passage." It serves as a rare example of vernacular, slave architecture which calls into question the Romantic narratives told by HHMs as well as NURFC on its third floor. It also grounds an educational display about the Internal Slave Trade. The next section will explore the Slave Pen's role in this display.

## **The Anderson Slave Pen and Internal Slave Trade Interpretation**

The John W. Anderson Slave Pen was a feature of the Internal Slave Trade. As NURFC's most imposing artifact, it grounds the museum's exhibits on the Internal Slave Trade. Maps and placards surround the Anderson Slave Pen, detailing the overland and river routes taken by enslaved workers. Interpretive text explains that until enslavers like Anderson had enough "inventory" to justify the trip south, enslaved African Americans would be confined in the Slave Pen. Authors like Cvetkovich (2012), Hartman (2006), and Alexander (2005) have noted the role that historic trauma can play in shaping the affect of individuals and groups in the present day. For example, Cvetkovich writes that the "invisible forces that structure comfort and privilege for some and lack of resources for others" make "depression . . . a very rational response to global conditions" (25). NURFC tours which focus on the Anderson Slave Pen allude to this. As with the ships which brought them across the Atlantic prior to the 1807 act, conditions inside the Slave Pen were torturous, confining, and terrifying. One can imagine that for some there would be echoes of the Triangle Trade, either first-hand remembrance or drawn from the stories of other enslaved workers. Carl Westmoreland's description of it as a "slave ship turned upside down" comes to mind.

When Anderson acquired 30 to 70 enslaved workers, they would enter the Internal Slave Trade. The interpretive text specifies that enslaved workers confined in the Slave Pen would march in coffles to Dover, KY. This was a town right on the Ohio River, where enslaved workers would be "sold down the river"

to the Deep South. Enslaved workers would also be marched south in coffles from border states to the deep south during the days of the Internal Slave Trade. Underscoring the river port in Dover where enslaved workers would be loaded onto ships serves to further reinforce the symbolic significance of the Ohio River as a boundary between enslavement and freedom. The Slave Pen's journey therefore echoes that of freedom seekers from Kentucky to Ohio.

A map mounted on the wall near the Slave Pen marks the various routes which comprised the Internal Slave Trade. Visitors see it as they approach the Slave Pen from the grand staircase. These routes crisscross the southeastern United States, extending from border states like Kentucky and West Virginia to the "cotton, rice, and sugar fields of the lower Mississippi Valley" (Rabinowitz 2016: 305). The cities of Natchez, Mississippi and New Orleans, LA, major regional markets in enslaved laborers who would toil in those fields, are featured prominently on that map. They were entrepôts on the Second Middle Passage.

This trade allowed a significant portion of the United States to continue espousing the contradictory ideals of liberty and enslavement well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In turn, the continuous buying and selling of African American enslaved workers lay the groundwork for the enduring legacy of Jim Crow. The Slave Pen and the dynamics of racial oppression in which it is embedded is depicted visually in Tom Feelings and Tyrone Geeter's *Mural*, which hangs on the wall directly across from it.

*Mural* contains a series of panels depicting the experiences of enslaved workers. The tale of enslavement begins with the uppermost panel, featuring a

three masted ship intended to represent the Triangle Trade. Two panels portray the Internal Slave Trade. In the middle on the left, an overland coffle of enslaved workers is driven by a figure with a whip. On the right, an enslaved man is dragged on board a waiting ship. These three panels represent the ever-present threat of forced movement which enslaved individuals faced. The conditions inherent to involuntary migration, be it across an ocean, down a river, or over land, would always be brutal. Therefore, this triptych of relocation first to the Americas, then to the Deep South, casts the Internal Slave Trade as a continuation of the Triangle Trade. The Anderson Slave Pen is situated dead center in *Mural*, below the three masted ship. This strikes a visual parallel between the vessels in which enslaved workers were confined in each iteration of the Slave Trade. The Slave Pen therefore is not only a “slave ship turned upside down,” but also a horrifying mirror image of the same.

*Mural* also reflects the imprisonment of enslaved African Americans during the time of both Middle Passages as well as the present day. The Feelings/Geeter piece represents the perceived status of enslaved African Americans as chattel. A shackled woman is placed in the center of the mural, tense and crouched. Behind her is a representation of the Anderson Slave Pen alongside an image of an occupied prison cell. All of the prisoners are black. This panel is NURFC’s only direct reference to the modern-day issue of mass incarceration in the US in its permanent exhibits. Parallels between chattel enslavement and mass incarceration in the present day have been explored by authors such as Wacquant (2000), Rhodes (2001), Lopez (2010), Alexander

(2012), Smith (2012), and Delgado (2012). Other museums, such as *The Legacy Museum* in Montgomery, AL have made more explicit links between African American enslavement and mass incarceration more directly.

The images of the Slave Pen and prison cell both index the Anderson Slave Pen, which itself stands witness to the imprisonment of enslaved workers. It also challenges visitors to recall the loophole in the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, where enslavement was abolished “except as a punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted . . . .” Those fifteen words lay the groundwork for the continued imprisonment of African Americans in service to the state. Mass incarceration has created, in the words of Alexander “a state sponsored racial caste system” like chattel enslavement (2012: 15). This similarity is tempered, as has been acknowledged elsewhere in the paper, by salient differences between the penal system and plantation slavery. The role prison labor has played in infusing the private prison industry with new job sites, particularly in rural locations, as well as inflating the population of the areas in which they are situated, is eerily similar to many of the benefits African American enslavement provided the Slave States of the future Confederacy.

Some people at NURFC, primarily volunteer docents, do not make the connection between “slave jails” like the Anderson Slave Pen and private prisons like the soon-to-be reopened Lee Adjustment Center in Beattyville, KY explicit (Watkins 2017). This is not due to any malfeasance on their part but rather because, as volunteers, they tend to be either retirees or otherwise in a position where they are able to volunteer their time to a non-profit organization. Perhaps

unsurprisingly, given the nature of the museum, many volunteer docents are African American. There are also a number of men. They do, however, fit the profile of “elderly” and “educated” with “conservative views of what history entails” as described by Ryan and Vagnone (2014: 166). These individuals are well meaning. After all, they spend hours on their feet in service to a museum of conscience and are therefore undeserving of opprobrium. However, one cannot note the missed opportunity for a “call to action.”

Many staff members, on the other hand, find the Anderson Slave Pen an uncomfortable reminder of the confinement of many African American men behind bars in the present day. Some of them find the docents’ lack of attention to this parallel not only a missed opportunity, but potentially harmful to younger African American visitors. This has prompted one of my colleagues, Novella, an older African American woman, to begin conversations with docents about the pitfalls of illustrating to school groups what it would have been like inside the Slave Pen by wrapping the chain replicas around their wrists. She also reacted with visible discomfort at a memory of adults taking pictures of African American children through the bars on one of the windows of the Slave Pen. In her words, “she didn’t want kids to see themselves behind bars” (personal interview: July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

The presence of the Anderson Slave Pen has inspired programs addressing mass incarceration, however. The programs, according to NURFC employees, caused a degree of discomfort among some museum guests who were confused by the sight of predominantly African American currently

incarcerated individuals gathered around the Anderson Slave Pen. This caused many employees to express their frustration with the continued racial tension which exists between members of the Cincinnati community (personal interview: August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017). That these tensions are occasionally evident within a building meant to serve as a site of reconciliation is all the more galling.

As NURFC's primary artifact, the Anderson Slave Pen is the focal point of many tours as well as the second floor Great Hall. The visitor is confronted with both the Slave Pen and interpretive text related to it as they descend the grand staircase. Interpretive text is posted on the mezzanine between the second and third floors, as well as around the Slave Pen. Much of this text focuses on the "Second Middle Passage," on which the Anderson Slave Pen served as a vessel. Given that visitors can enter the building and that it dominates the Great Hall the Slave Pen is no simple artifact akin to the ones in vitrines in *Freedom* on the third floor but one that, as with an HHM, invites the visitor to imagine what it may have been like to be an occupant of it. As such, it inverts the commonly understood notion of a historic house. Rather than the stately residence of a "great man" or "great woman," the two-story cabin was a jail for largely unknown groups of enslaved workers as well as a site of historic trauma. For tour groups and school groups, the Slave Pen is used as an exemplification of the horrors of enslavement. Since it was brought to Cincinnati from just across the Ohio River, it helps to situate enslavement, the Underground Railroad, and the lead-up to the Civil War locally. For many people, given the overtones of confinement and the bondage of enslaved men, the Slave Pen is also eerily reminiscent of the

mass incarceration of African American men in the present day. These sentiments have been expressed to me by my fellow members of the Education Team during meetings as well as visitors while leading them in tours or encountering them on the third floor during my duties as manager of the Rosa Parks Experience.

In general, however, the Anderson Slave Pen serves as a stark reminder that the enslaved workers on plantations came from somewhere and endured harsh privations during their journey. It also serves as an exemplar of vernacular architecture which existed on the plantation landscape along with great houses similar to those which dot the Kentucky shoreline. Were Anderson's estate still intact perhaps the Slave Pen could have served as part of a historic experience about the plantation system. Its presence in NURFC's great hall allows for a different possibility. It grounds a more straightforwardly educational display about the Internal Slave Trade and invites comparisons to the present-day issue of mass incarceration.

**“It Rags On and On.”**

Across the doorway to the Pavilion of Perseverance from the Feelings/Geeter *Mural* is NURFC's other principal work of art. This piece, Columbus-born artist Aminah Robinson's *RagGonOn*, is a massive two-paneled quilt. These two parts are called, going from left to right, “Journeys I” and “Journeys II.” *RagGonOn* tells the story of the African American experience in general, and in Ohio in particular. It celebrates both the role states like Ohio played in ending African American enslavement, and also makes clear that the

state also was an active participant in white supremacy. It hangs on a wall specifically constructed for it, next to full-length windows which overlook the Ohio River. Its bright colors and pictorial representations also provide visual relief from the museum's intense displays about African American enslavement and human trafficking.

During an all-staff meeting over the summer of 2017 Richard Cooper, NURFC's former director of museum experiences, noted that the sun from the windows was causing the upper right panels of "Journeys II" to fade. Given the fact that *RagGonOn* represents 35 years of labor on the part of a late artist, many staff members were filled with a sense of urgency. While long-term plans entail moving the *RagGonOn* to safer storage and replacing it with a digital version, as of the date of this dissertation the original still hangs next to the full-length windows in the Great Hall. The shades on the windows closest to the panels are permanently closed.

Due to the sheer scale of *RagGonOn*, a full discussion of Robinson's work is beyond the scope of this dissertation. I will therefore focus on some of the panels highlighted during tours, such as those given to visiting school groups. For example, I will examine those which satisfy regional history requirements in Learning Standards for Ohio and Kentucky. I will also note panels of significance to the artist herself, an African American woman from Ohio. See the Appendix for an image of this impressive work of art.

I begin with a short discussion of weaving and storytelling. There has long been a mental connection between weaving and storytelling. Penelope, wife of

the title character in Homer's *Odyssey*, is one of the most famous figures in the Western canon to be associated with weaving. At a more vernacular level, quilting itself was a popular art form among enslaved women. It fulfilled a variety of roles from an avenue to emancipation (Cash 1995), to an opportunity for socializing outside of laboring (Ferrero et al 1987), to a source of "income," "accomplishment," and "identity" (Cash 1995: 35). Like many forms of folk art, then, quilting was a multifaceted endeavor.

At a more individual level, for the women who sew them, quilts serve as a source of "social and intellectual history" (Cash 1995: 38). *RagGonOn* gives this uniquely American visual art form its due both because the piece is displayed as a work of art and because the piece intricately constructs a narrative around the themes inherent to the lives of Amina Robinson, an African American woman who grew up in a working class neighborhood in Columbus. It is also perhaps a nod to oral histories in which stationmasters on the Underground Railroad would display quilts as a signal to freedom seekers that theirs was a viable safe house on the Underground Railroad.

Many scholars such as Hicks (2016), Gates (2013), Foley (2010), and Brackman (2006) argue that tales about quilts as a domestic beacon of freedom are apocryphal. Many staff members, such as Novella, pointed out the implausibility of the Underground Railroad remaining secret for long if certain houses just happened to hang quilts outside, overnight, in a conspicuous location (personal interview: October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017). The second-floor gallery *Escape!* includes a panel debunking this bit of folklore. It is clear, however, that

quilts remain a cherished art form among both white and African American populations in the Appalachian region.

*RagGonOn* does not directly reference the quilt legend but does include an extended panel along the bottom of “Journeys I” depicting the faces of people undertaking the journey along the Underground Railroad. Cowrie shells form the eyes of the figures in this panel, evoking their use of currency in West Africa during the Triangle Trade. Dogs are visible in the background of this panel, evoking their use by slave hunters pursuing freedom seekers.

At a more regional level which also evokes the artist’s biography as a native of Columbus, Ohio *RagGonOn* tells the story of the Free State’s complicated role with regard to African American equality. This is alluded to by a panel which celebrates Ohio’s admission to the United States in 1803. It had previously been part of the Northwest Territories, land which had previously been part of Great Britain, and would eventually be organized into the states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and the northern part of Minnesota. These states included prohibitions against enslavement, but individual states could pass “Black Codes,” laws which curtailed the rights of citizens of African descent. Ohio was one such state, doing so a year after statehood.

These codes were intended, in effect, to discourage free African Americans from residing within the state of Ohio. They outlawed marriage between African Americans and whites and required any black person who resided within Ohio to provide proof of their freedom. White people who hired African American laborers without such proof would be fined 50 dollars. In 1807,

this fine was raised to 100 dollars, and the Black Codes began stipulating that any free African American who opted to settle inside the state needed to be vouched for by two whites. Even then they would not be entitled to public assistance, be able to serve on juries, or attend public schools. Despite this, African American people still integrated themselves in Ohioan society. They owned property, practiced professions, and started churches.

*RagGonOn* contains a panel both lamenting Ohio's past discriminatory practices, and celebrating the inclusion of people of color in that state from the beginning. In 1830, 9,586 African Americans lived in the state of Ohio. This represents a dramatic increase from the passage of the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, when Congress passed a law detailing how the Northwest Territory would be governed, and only 33 African Americans lived within the six full and partial states (Ohio Memory 2019). The passage of the Black Codes is marked in *RagGonOn* by a panel which reads "1804 Black Codes." It is close to another panel which celebrates the reading of the "Emancipation Proclamation" from the Ohio State House in Columbus. Taken together these panels elucidate the mixed legacy of race relations in Ohio.

The African American experience is also explored in a panel in the lower left-hand corner of one of the quilts. It depicts the Middle Passage of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade as a sea monster, spreading out over the entire ocean. The continents of "Afrika" and "Amerika" flank either side of the ocean and sea monster. Figures scream as they are thrown into the ocean by the monster's

tentacles. Next to it is a panel which depicts a slave auction in the southern states. Shadowy figures are lined up, prepared to be auctioned off.

Below these two panels is a long one which runs the length of the entire quilt, labeled "Underground Railroad." Simultaneously, the long strip depicting the Underground Railroad is shown "beneath the surface," cutting across other historical happenings. Faces with cowrie shell eyes peer out at the viewer, with dogs in the background. Visually, this long panel depicts the fear many freedom seekers experienced, as well as the fact that the Underground Railroad ran parallel to many other historical events such as the passage of the Black Codes and southern slave auctions. Indeed, the Underground Railroad outlasted many of these events.

Throughout the quilts, objects related to African Americans and chattel enslavement are stitched to the fabric. The eyes of the figures on the Underground Railroad are made of cowrie shells, items used as currency in West Africa during the time of the Triangle Trade. Many enslaved workers were sold for cowrie shells. Socks filled with herbs and sewn up also hang from *RagGonOn*, meant to imitate the traditional medicine pouches worn by both Native Americans and people from Africa. Music boxes represent the importance of music to African American life and are therefore also sewn into the artwork.

During tours, docents often call attention to these panels. They will also ask members of their groups to identify particular panels which jump out at them. In my experience, groups - particularly students - will point out the panel on the edge which reads "one day in 2004." They have also tended to notice the

representations of faces with cowrie shells for eyes, particularly the faces stitched into the representation of the Underground Railroad, which appears in the bottom panel. Groups from Ohio notice the panel labeled “Emancipation Proclamation,” which commemorates the reading of that document from the steps of Ohio State’s capitol. The state capitol building is depicted in the background. Student groups are also prone to notice the enlarged hands of figures which appear in Robinson’s work. *RagGonOn* is an approachable way to introduce younger visitors to the legacy of enslavement in the Americas. These visitors are more prone to get “museumed out” by the text-heavy galleries on the third floor.

*RagGonNon* and *Mural* are both pieces of art created by individual, African American artists. Both of them are situated in spaces which NURFC, in essence, constructed for them. Robinson’s is on the large wall which oversees the entrance to the Pavilion of Cooperation. Feelings and Geeter’s *Mural* hangs on the other side, interpreting the legacy of African American enslavement, emphasizing the post-1807 experience. It also interprets the historic architecture-of-the-enslaved that is the Anderson Slave Pen. Taken together, they ground local history related to both the Internal Slave Trade, the Underground Railroad, and in Ohio, as presented in the Great Hall.

To the west of the Great Hall is the Pavilion of Courage. These two spaces are connected by the West Bridge. The Harriet Tubman Theater is the primary feature in the Pavilion of Courage here on the second floor. “Suite for Freedom” plays on a loop in this space. The theater also hosts special talks,

particularly artists and curators associated with the changing exhibits hosted in the third floor Skirball Gallery.

### **Pavilion of Courage: Suite for Freedom**

The Harriet Tubman Theater is a full auditorium that can seat approximately 200 people. During regular museum hours this space is devoted to playing *Suite for Freedom*. The fifteen-minute film plays on a loop every half hour between 11AM and 4:30PM. On multiple occasions staff members leading tours or volunteer docents would lead visiting school tour groups into the theater by way of introducing them to the Underground Railroad and why it came to be. The film was a useful resource for very young school groups, or in the case of very large groups that needed to be split up among several different docents. Due to the theater's large capacity it is a useful space to bring unexpectedly large tour groups.

*Suite* is a series of three animated shorts narrated by Angela Bassett. Just before the film begins the lights in the theater dim. Quotations about freedom and enslavement appear on the screen which Ms. Bassett reads aloud.

There are three shorts: "Freedom/Unfreedom," "Slavery," and "The Underground Railroad." The first, done in colored sand, shows a person being trapped in a way reminiscent of being confined the hold of a slave ship or slave jail." "Slavery," done in ink, depicts a day in the life of an older enslaved woman. "The Underground Railroad," done in watercolor, shows a freedom seeker making his way north. Along the way he is aided by benevolent white people,

which reifies the Underground Railroad as a symbol of interracial cooperation and harmony.

The shorts culminate in a choral rendition of “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” a song which instructed freedom seekers to navigate their way north by way of the Big Dipper - commonly called the “Drinking Gourd” by enslaved African Americans -- and the North Star. As the constellations and asterisms of the night sky swirl on the screen, pinpoint overhead lights illuminate along the ceiling of the Tubman Theater. Younger students frequently express awe at this atmospheric affect.

The night sky is relevant because it ties into the role the Big Dipper plays in Underground Railroad memory. Due to its constant position in the night sky with the outer stars lined up with the North Star, it was a reliable index for orienting one’s way north. The song “Follow the Drinking Gourd” doubled as a coded message both telling freedom seekers about the Big Dipper’s viability as a compass - the asterism is referred to as a “Drinking Gourd” in the song - as well as gave information on the ideal time of year to begin the journey north. I will say more about “Follow the Drinking Gourd” in the chapter section focusing on the interactive gallery about the Underground Railroad, *Escape*.

The size of the Harriet Tubman Theater can make it seem as though effects like the illuminated ceiling play to an empty house, even if visitors are present. To the frustration of many members of the staff, visitors often seemed to wander in between showings of *Suite*. The sign posted in front giving show times seemed to do little to ameliorate this.

The sounds of young children mesmerized by the night sky made one acutely aware of the potential for wonder with films such as this. This made *Suite* a popular stop when working with some of the hundreds of school groups we would get during months such as February, which is National Black History Month. These groups would often have to be separated among as many volunteer docents as would be available. However, except for these large groups, docents often overlooked *Suite* when trying to compress the overall museum experience into two hours. For example, guides would only bring groups into the theater if other exhibits, such as the Anderson Slave Pen and riverfront windows, were occupied by other groups (personal interviews: May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018). In such cases, a 200-person theater became a valuable stopgap measure when there were too many people and not enough highlights.

To make more use of *Suite* we developed tours with it in mind. We called attention to such things as the role geography played in the Underground Railroad, as the final short depicts a freedom seeker crossing rivers and using the night sky to navigate. We also called attention to technology such as boats and false bottomed carts, also depicted in *Suite*. We also tried to do as much as possible to emphasize that free African Americans were instrumental to the operation of the Underground Railroad rather than benevolent white folks.

As with galleries and exhibits elsewhere in NURFC, *Suite* would also malfunction. This happened occasionally and was addressed by Otto, a middle

aged African American man who was the museum's AV/IT Manager. By and large, however, *Suite* played on, full house or empty, testifying to African-American oppression, endurance, and ingenuity.

The Harriet Tubman Theater would also sometimes serve as the venue for special programs. An example of such a program carried out in the theater included a lecture carried out by Carol Anderson after the publication of her book *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of our Racial Divide*. It also hosted programs like local nonprofits like Women of Alabaster, a faith-based organization that helped women who survived human trafficking. The Youth Docent graduation also took place in that space, which was of particular interest to the Education Team as they oversaw the Youth Docent Program. Many of these young people worked with me on the "Rosa Parks Experience" as well as provided interpretation for second and third floor exhibits.

### **Pavilion of Perseverance: King Cotton and the Underground Railroad**

From the Great Hall/Pavilion of Cooperation, visitors walk along a connecting breezeway. If they are members of a school group, they may encounter a display on Eli Whitney's cotton gin. This involves a replica of the Spinning Jenny where students learn about a piece of technology intertwined with the lives of enslaved African Americans in the US South. It is also a way to invoke the complicity of the US North as the cotton processed by enslaved labor would be sewn into clothing in northern factories. Perhaps most significant is the role this piece of technology played in breathing new life into chattel enslavement and, by extension, the US Civil War.

Past the cotton gin the Pavilion of Perseverance on the second floor is devoted to two exhibits. The first is the *Escape Gallery*, an interactive space which provides information about individual freedom seekers, conductors, and stationmasters on the Underground Railroad. It is a cornerstone of educational tours for school groups, particularly younger ones. This section will take us across the breezeway connecting Cooperation and Perseverance. I begin this section with a discussion of the Pavilion of Perseverance, beginning with the connecting breezeway. Photographs of the displays, galleries, and experiences in the second floor Pavilion of Perseverance can be found in the Appendix.

As mentioned above, Eli Whitney's "Spinning Jenny" style gin was instrumental in making it cost-effective to produce cotton grown by enslaved labor on plantations in the US South. The consequence of this was the perpetuation of enslavement past the 1807 prohibition on importing enslaved Africans into the United States. The cotton gin, therefore, was a primary impetus for the development of the Internal Slave Trade.

When NURFC hosts school groups for tours a docent will wheel a Spinning Jenny replica out from behind a curtain on the second floor. This curtain also conceals NURFC's freight elevator. While interpreting this replica, docents will demonstrate how the cotton gin was supposed to work. In order to do so, a docent will feed raw cotton into one end of the machine, turn a crank, and pull it out the other end. While the replica does not effectively remove the seeds, it does demonstrate how quickly they could be removed using a cotton

gin rather than by hand. A miniature replica of a processed and bound bale of cotton is typically passed around at this point.

The cotton gin station is used to demonstrate how the economy of the US South continued to be dependent on enslaved labor. By extension, it articulates why most of the Slave States joined together to form the Confederacy and went to war with their northern neighbors to preserve enslavement. It also underscores the economic reasons for the development of the Second Middle Passage, and why the informal network known as the Underground Railroad emerged in order to facilitate escape from this system.

### **“A Network of People Helping People”**

Ms. Verneida, one of NURFC’s docents and the model for the rack card soliciting volunteers, repeatedly describes the Underground Railroad as “a network of people helping people” (personal interview: May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018). This succinct definition serves dual features. First and most importantly, it emphasizes the value of “Cooperation” in fighting oppression and injustice. It is not an accident that one of NURFC’s three pavilions is named “Cooperation.” The descriptor “a network of people helping people” is also a way of reminding visitors, particularly school groups - as well as some adults - that the Underground Railroad was not a subway system but a secret network of abolitionists. The sign just outside the *Escape* Gallery also clarifies what the Underground Railroad was and was not.

For example, this sign makes the “not a subway system” point and is one of the few places in the museum acknowledging the pivotal role African

Americans played in it rather than benevolent whites. Another sign just inside the gallery demonstrates the coded railroad terminology used by freedom-seekers, conductors, and stationmasters. Another display notes the controversy surrounding the use of quilts as signals on the Underground Railroad previously discussed in the section on the *RagGonOn*.

Individuals associated with the Underground Railroad are discussed in the *Escape* Gallery. This is where Levi Coffin, the self-appointed “President of the Underground Railroad,” makes his appearance in the form of a full-length cardboard cutout. The suffragist and abolitionist Laura Haviland also referred to him as such in her memoirs. He stands next to his false-bottomed cart, which includes interpretive text specifying that many freedom seekers lay “under the boards.” Increased application of STEM means that this cart is depicted as an example of STEM on the Underground Railroad. His wife, Catherine, stands roughly opposite him, part of a larger installation about conductors, stationmasters, and abolitionists.

Like *Rosa Parks* on the third floor, *Escape* is interactive, albeit in a lower tech way. Board books mounted on displays tell the stories of people involved with the Underground Railroad, and the installation which includes Catherine Coffin reproduces contemporary photographs of abolitionists and includes interpretive text. Mounted poster displays near the entrance include information about freedom seekers including Mum Bett aka Elizabeth Freeman, who successfully sued for her freedom in Massachusetts. Her court case lay the foundation for the abolition of enslavement in that state.

*Escape* includes multiple features intended for interactive education, including a multi-layer timeline which spans one wall. The top line is focused on United States history, the second on the legacy of enslavement, and the third on the history of the Underground Railroad. Students can touch parts of the wall, and try guessing who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852. Each level includes multiple dates relevant to enslavement, abolition, and emancipation. Small vitrines dot the lines, encasing items like a model of the *Amistad*. This timeline satisfies multiple parts of Ohio's New Learning Standards for Social Studies, revised in 2017. This means that *Escape* features in many of the Education Team's lesson plans and advertisements.

The newer plans propose taking advantage of Math Standards which involve calculating area. These direct attention to "Henry's Freedom Box," a display about Henry Brown, a freedom seeker who quite literally mailed himself north in 1849. According to contemporary reports, he rode in a 2'8" deep, 2' wide, and 3' long wooden box for 27 hours from Richmond, VA to Philadelphia, PA (Still 1872). People, particularly children, are invited to get into a replica of Brown's crate built to those dimensions. They are invited to imagine holding that position for over a day taking only a small bottle of water with them. This account of enduring confined spaces in the pursuit of freedom echo the experiences of Harriet Jacobs in her grandmother's safe house (1861). The pediment crawl space in which she hid for seven years is reproduced on the third floor in

*Freedom. Henry's Freedom Box*, a children's book by Ellen Levine with Caldecott award-winning illustrations by Kadir Nelson, is displayed on top of the box replica.

Children can also physically explore *Escape's* model of a station master's house. This space includes potential hiding spaces such as a crawl space under the stairs, a cupboard, and a root cellar. Many elementary school students relish the chance to be more active and try out the hiding spaces in the stationmaster's house. They also need to be reminded that freedom seekers likely huddled in these spaces, frightened yet enduring the ongoing fight for their freedom. A lamp burns in the window, an example of technology used in the Underground Railroad which could tie into a tour more focused on technology and science.

Astronomy also makes an appearance in this educational gallery. A small display shows the Big Dipper aligned with Polaris, the North Star. As with the final short in *Suite for Freedom*, this evokes "Follow the Drinking Gourd," the folk song which doubled as a reminder to freedom seekers to use the Big Dipper to navigate. There is even a button on the display one can press which is supposed to play the song. Unfortunately, as with many other interactive displays, this was not working during my time at NURFC.

The name refers to the fact that dried gourds, cut in half, were commonplace items on plantations, particularly in the kitchens and yards. They would be used as dippers. This commonplace item was therefore used to orient oneself on the Underground Railroad using astronomy. Observing the natural environment and using it as a tool for freedom, as well as communicating exactly

how to do it by way of a seemingly innocuous song, required ingenuity on the part of freedom seekers. This is a way of imparting to school groups on a tour through NURFC the value of applied knowledge.

### **Brothers of the Borderland**

Directly across from *Escape* in the Pavilion of Perseverance is *Brothers of the Borderland*, a feature film narrated by Oprah Winfrey. This movie takes place in two separate theaters. In the first, Ms. Winfrey introduces the key players and setting of Ripley, OH. In the second, the feature film plays, with Oprah offering concluding remarks. Since I started working at NURFC *Brothers* has broken down twice. This caused no small amount of stress for Otto, NURFC's AV technician, because according to him at least once a group of tourists wanted to see "the Oprah movie" (personal interview: April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

The marquee for *Brothers* is located directly outside the *Escape* Gallery. It advertises when the next viewing will be. Shortly before the next showing, a door to a small theater which contains a number of flat screen TVs swings open. The door is automatic, and therefore intended to signal to visitors where to proceed. NURFC found it useful to assign student workers to that area, directing visitors where to go. This underscores a point made by many passionate employees of NURFC; the layout did not facilitate exploration as much as it could.

If oriented the right way, visitors enter a small theater where flat screen TVs are mounted along the wall. Oprah Winfrey appears and introduces the town of Ripley, OH. Ripley is about an hour south and to the east from Cincinnati. It also stands on the banks of the Ohio River, directly across that

natural boundary from Kentucky. This reinforces the “Ohio River as boundary between enslavement and freedom” narrative promulgated elsewhere by NURFC.

Oprah introduces two local heroes of the Underground Railroad. The first is John Parker, a conductor who rowed freedom seekers across the Ohio River from Kentucky to Ripley. Parker was an enslaved worker who successfully sought freedom and became a conductor. While nobody at NURFC to date has been able to find a verifiable picture of Parker, his house in Ripley is open to the public. It stands in front of the Ohio River and an attractive bike trail. Meanwhile, John Rankin’s house stands on a hill above the Ohio River. A white minister from Tennessee, Rankin moved his family to Ohio and dedicated himself to the abolitionist cause. Many freedom seekers knew of the staircase which rose from the Ohio edge of the river to his house. One could climb it relatively easily, but this meant one would be visible from as far away as Kentucky. The viewer encounters John Parker and Rankin through the eyes of a fictional freedom seeker, an enslaved woman named Alice.

Alice races to the Ohio River accompanied by an enslaved man named Nathaniel. Thanks to encroaching slave catchers and their dogs, Alice and Nathaniel are forced to separate. He swims across the Ohio clinging to a log. Alice is rescued by Parker, who informs her that despite her pleas that they help Nathaniel, they must continue to Ohio. She also serves as an audience surrogate when she asks Parker “if [she’s] free yet.” He informs her that there are slave hunters from “[here] to 200 miles north to Canada.” In this way, he

reminds visitors that the Fugitive Slave Act meant that freedom seekers weren't truly free until they entered another country like Canada or Mexico.

Parker leaves her with a "Mr. Collins," a resident of Ripley who seems to work as an undertaker. He harbors Alice in a crawlspace in his safe house and creates a diversion for the slave hunters. Mr. Collins conspicuously drives a cart laden with a closed casket through town. The slave catchers order to him to open the casket. He does so, revealing that the casket is empty. In the meantime, Rankin's sons spirit Alice up the stone stairway to their father's safe house. Collins, who appears only in relation to his status as a station master on the Underground Railroad, is an "everyman" figure of sorts. He is a cipher, onto which the audience member can project himself.

At a larger level, *Brothers* portrays the Underground Railroad as a model of interracial cooperation. The African American Parker and white Rankin work together to help Alice cross the Ohio River and evade slave catchers. In this way they exemplify Rabinowitz's (2016) description of how the Underground Railroad looms large in the imagination of many Americans. It centers on an "image of Black needfulness and White benevolence" (301). The lone African American member of the Underground Railroad portrayed in the film largely disappears after bringing Alice to Mr. Collins'. Parker also reappears only to draw a gun on one of the slave catchers. The slave catcher is training a gun of his own on the largely passive Alice and one of the "Rankin boys." Everyone in *Brothers* is a rugged individual. Some are more rugged than others, however.

The fact that it is a feature film also plays into conventional notions of the individualist narrative. If the heroes are individuals motivated by unique experiences, then the racism displayed by the enslavers and slave hunters must also be individual actions. This ties into a report by the Race Equity Project of Legal Services of Northern California reproduced by Delgado (2012: 169). If both oppression and resistance are individual actions, then *Brothers* can operate in service to the same mission of *Freedom* on the third floor. It is tailored to further a classic triumphalist message; that of cooperation across groups in the service of what the United States should be.

Oprah Winfrey's popularity and influence makes her a natural choice of narrator. Furthermore, her endorsement of the Underground Railroad serves a purpose in favor of the overarching progressive narrative of the United States where interracial cooperation is as much a feature of the culture as grit, creativity, and initiative. Winfrey makes *Brothers* an active draw, as reflected in surveying and interactions with museum visitors in my capacity as a member of the staff who spent a great deal of time on the museum floor. Many patrons have specifically asked where the "films" are, specifically mentioning Oprah on multiple occasions. When docents call attention to Ms. Winfrey appearing in the film, visitors across the board tend to perk up. It is also, like *Escape*, an interactive experience. In this case, *Brothers* "creates an experience" in the words of an Ohio fourth grade schoolteacher through a theater which includes scenery like trees, bird calls, and air conditioning (personal interview: May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018). This film puts the visitor in Alice's perspective, enduring exposure to the

elements on the banks of the Ohio River. She trusts in John Parker and the sons of John Rankin on the Underground Railroad.

Watching this film involves immersion in a Historic House Museum setting that embraces a fully Romantic narrative. Featuring the Rankins allows the movie to foreground a family of benevolent white folks. The fact that Rankin was a minister allows for religion to be seen as a key element of abolitionism alone rather than a justification for enslavement to begin with. The Rankin's relationship with John Parker allows it to highlight interracial cooperation. The environmental nature of the theater itself, which features trees and air conditioning intended to mimic the shore of the Ohio River, draws the audience into this Romance.

## **Conclusion**

The film *Brothers* also serves to localize the Underground Railroad. At the same time the Anderson Slave Pen localizes enslavement, and by extension resistance to it. They render both sides of this coin in miniature, making it more tangible. Meanwhile, *Mural* by Feelings and Geeter provide a visual representation of the African American story, of which buildings like the Slave Pen were a key setting. *RagGonOn* and *Suite for Freedom* provide a degree of visual relief from the darker aspects of the second floor. The *Escape* Gallery provides an educational opportunity for families and school groups.

The highlights on the second floor lend a degree of concreteness to the arc of oppression built by the galleries on the third. Visitors can see, manipulate, and - in the case of the Anderson Slave Pen - walk into material evidence of

enslavement. They can watch the story of people like John Parker and John Rankin. Interpretive text and interactive experiences articulate the narratives of figures like Henry "Box" Brown. If the third floor constructs an arc, the second floor articulates it.

## CHAPTER IV: FLOOR ONE: BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

The visitor's first floor experience is entirely confined to the largest of NURFC's three pavilions, the Pavilion of Cooperation. There are two exceptions. The first would be if they wanted to attend a special talk or film screening in the Harriet Tubman Theater, which has a first-floor entrance in the Pavilion of Courage. The second would be if they wanted to visit the - non-operational as of June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010 - North Star Cafe in the first floor of the Pavilion of Perseverance. The museum's lobby, however, is entirely within the Pavilion of Cooperation.

The lobby had two main attractions of interest to visitors. These are *Open Your Mind*, an experience which focuses on introducing visitors to the concept of Implicit Bias, and Smith and Hannon, an independently owned bookstore which sold merchandise related to NURFC. Visitors tended to stop by these two spaces once they completed touring floors three and two. While *Open Your Mind* is still present, Smith and Hannon has since relocated from NURFC's lobby.

A full discussion of the topic of implicit bias is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Banaji and Greenwald (2016) provide an extensive overview of implicit bias, Saul (2013) explores the role bias can play in academia, Jost et al (2009) have written extensively on bias in the workplace, and Sabin and Greenwald (2012) illuminate role it can play in medicine. The following section focuses on unpacking *Open Your Mind* specifically. It focuses on its staffing, its purpose, and how it fits in with the overall mission of NURFC including the visitor experience and staffing.

## **Open Your Mind**

*Open Your Mind* has been the subject of intense advertising since the Learning Lab opened in 2017. The lab is featured prominently on NURFC's website. This glass fronted, high-tech looking space was the subject of an article in the Cincinnati Enquirer (Curnutte 2017). There are rack cards advertising it on display at the front of the museum. Other than *Rosa*, *Open Your Mind* is the only museum experience to warrant its own card. Behind the banner advertising the *Rosa* on the third floor was a display advertising the Learning Lab, which has been papered over "Everyday Freedom Heroes." This advertisement was removed in February of 2019 after the 2018 change in NURFC leadership.

After this 2018 change *Open Your Mind* received even more promotion. Signs on the third-floor exterior elevator doors called visitors' attention to this first floor experience. Billboards went up around Cincinnati. The marketing team even recorded radio and television spots, with staff members urging potential museum visitors to "open their mind[s]."

The directors also brought in Diane; a consultant tasked with "professionalizing" the Implicit Bias Learning Lab. She started shortly after I joined NURFC as a part time employee in October of 2017 as the Implicit Bias Learning Lab manager. Diane is a friendly, middle aged African American woman who was extremely encouraging of me when she found out I was writing my dissertation. She made clear to me that I, her "tall white son," was expected to complete my dissertation. Her presence indicated a continued investment in *Open Your Mind*.

Despite - or perhaps because of - this investment the Learning Lab's presence is controversial. This is, ironically, much like the topic of implicit bias itself. Implicit bias is frequently updated and criticized (Fiedler et al 2006). Suffice to say the Implicit Bias Learning Lab takes the subject as a given and has increasingly become incorporated as part of the NURFC experience.

Anthropology and similar fields like linguistics have explored how the mind creates culturally significant linkages between categories. Lakoff (1987) discussed the role of metaphor in language and cognition. Semioticians and linguists have written extensively about meaning-making (Sapir 1929, Whorf 1956), particularly those which are entirely dependent upon "truly cultural conceptualizations" (Silverstein 2004: 621). Many anthropologists have also drawn upon the concept of the sign, bequeathed from semiotics by way of linguistic anthropology. Rick Parmentier (2007) is a prominent anthropologist who has deconstructed cultures through the use of signs and symbols.

Anthropology and related fields have more recently begun to apply the role semiotics and representation play in both the perpetuation of and fight against structural and symbolic violence against racial minorities. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) write about "hashtag activism" in the wake of shootings of unarmed African American men like Cincinnati Timothy Thomas. Pugliese and Stryker (2009) discuss racial profiling and its colonial origins, drawing from Foucault (2003) in the process. Collins (2015) explicitly ties the role memorialization plays in the remembrance of a historically racially mixed community explicitly tied to the African diaspora. Disparate items like ruins, paper archives, and even drug

paraphernalia become intertwined with race and legacies of racial oppression in Brazilian communities touched by the Trans-Atlantic Triangle Trade.

*Open Your Mind*, however, focuses on the here and now. It specifically centers on the Implicit Association Test, currently housed by Harvard University's Psychology Department. This test was designed by Banaji, described by Ryan, the staff member who facilitates *Open Your Mind*, as the person who "literally wrote the book" on implicit bias (personal interview: June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017). While Ryan has encountered authors like George Lakoff before, books such as *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* tend to adorn the Learning Lab's bookshelf rather than be featured in facilitated discussions. The bookshelf is occasionally used for reference but is primarily used to signal the intellectual underpinnings of implicit bias and add a sense of academic authority to the visitor experience.

When a visitor enters the lab, they are faced with a row of Apple tablets. This purpose was to enable visitors to take the "Implicit Association Test," or the IAT. The IAT was designed by Dr. Mahzarin Banaji the current head of Harvard University's Psychology department. Dr. Banaji developed the Implicit Association Test, which is based on the mind's ability to make associations. In brief, the Implicit Association Test is a sorting test. It measures the extent to which humans make automatic links between separate traits and qualities. There are tests about race and ethnicity, sex and gender, and sexual orientation. Dr. Banaji's IAT iteration on race and ethnicity challenges the taker to not make links between ethnicities like white and black and arbitrary value judgements like

“light” and “heaven” and “dark” and “vomit.” From there you go around the corner to the main part of the Learning Lab.

The overall look of the Implicit Bias Learning Lab is that of a cyber cafe or university space with state-of-the-art equipment. The lab’s decor also helps signify a certain set of qualities. The room’s overall sleek and modern design presents an image of progress and modernity. In this way it fits with the triumphalist approach to both history and human nature with an emphasis on cooperation across racial and national boundaries NURFC’s galleries tend to promote.

The administrative employee who runs the lab is a former graduate student from the University of Texas at Austin. He decided that his background would best be served working with the public rather than “writing books few people would read” (personal interview: June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017). It is worth noting that despite his decision to leave academia he still adorned the Implicit Bias Learning Lab with the bookcase which included works by professors such as Banaji and Lakoff. When I began my internship at NURFC in June of 2017, approximately four months before my hiring as a staff member and Diane’s beginnings as a consultant, the Implicit Bias Learning Lab was mostly thought to exit in the head of Ryan. That is, all programming went through him and all interpretation of the displays and experiences in the lab were done by him. In his words “if I went outside and got hit by a bus, the Implicit Bias Lab would no longer be a thing” (personal interview: June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017).

Ryan and I worked together “externalizing” and “curating” the lab, creating placards of sorts meant to guide visitors through the Learning Lab if he was not present. These included signs informing visitors that the tablets near the entrance were meant for taking a test to measure bias rather than, say, navigating how to get back to one’s hotel. Ryan appreciated that particular touch. He is a white man in his mid-30s from a relatively affluent background. He was clearly passionate about staying abreast of the latest literature related to implicit bias. He tended to focus on optical and “social” illusions by way of illustrating how the brain saves energy by wiring itself to notice patterns. From there, he builds an overall case geared towards explaining how those who engaged in African American enslavement could justify the atrocities they committed. From thence, the concept of white supremacy.

The uniqueness of this attraction, as well as the overall image of being at the “cutting edge” of science the Learning Lab tries to project, contributes to the potential for *Open Your Mind* to be perceived as a space where one’s preconceptions can be dismantled. My first visit to the Implicit Bias Learning Lab made clear that this was an experience outside the realm of the typical historical museum or museum of conscience. I first explored this space as an intern during the summer of 2017. Ryan, the Implicit Bias Learning Lab Manager, begins by presenting most visitors with a riddle. Ryan directs the attention of visitors to a framed advertisement for the Cincinnati ballet. He poses this question: “All seven of the dancers shown here are raising children. Five are the biological mothers.

How are the other two related to their children?" Visitors then have a few minutes to discuss.

When posed with this question, I responded by focusing on the word "biological." "They are the adopted parents," I responded. "Or they are stepparents. Or surrogates" (personal interview: June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017). The intern being introduced to the Learning Lab with me responded in kind. "They're foster parents," she offered. "Or guardians. Relatives like aunts or older cousins." The correct answer was the one most contrary to gender norms. The other two dancers were the biological fathers of the children. In fact, they were married to other dancers in troupe.

Many visitors would ask Ryan or me to repeat the question. We would. Ultimately, they would realize that the only gender-specific term in the riddle was "mothers." This word coupled with the stereotypically feminine images in the ballet ad - legs in tights and toe shoes striking graceful poses - tends to trigger pattern recognition in the brains of visitors in the lab. Those more experienced with ballet tend to notice the elastic in the toe shoes on two of the dancers, a feature unique to male ballet flats.

This simple introduction to implicit bias is intended to inspire a dramatic rethinking of stereotyping on the part of visitors. While there has been rethinking in the subject of implicit bias, the concept still has a dramatic grip on the public consciousness. As with other exhibits at NURFC I discovered, on the whole, when it comes to implicit bias public perception as a whole tends to lag behind academic attention. The Implicit Bias Learning Lab asks us to examine our own

wiring, the “blind spot” that makes us prone to stereotyping. It challenges us to examine our own behavior and modify it. Generally speaking, people prefer an optimistic view of history and their own culture. What is more optimistic than the drive for self-improvement? What is more uniquely individualistic than the ability to triumph over one’s bad behavior? Racism is, after all, the ultimate bad behavior for an individual in today’s day and age (Delgado 2012). Perhaps that is why the triumphalist view of history as presented by NURFC is so popular. The Implicit Bias Learning Lab is more oriented towards the natural sciences than one might expect at a “museum of conscience,” Lakoff notwithstanding. Indeed, it is a little bit jarring to be presented with a narrative which emphasizes that associating a feeling of unease with the presence of a person unfamiliar to you is the result of constant feedback between cognitive wiring and stereotyping. It is perhaps here that the Implicit Bias Learning Lab departs from semiotics and Linguistic Anthropology. It can make one feel despair, especially if one focuses on the plasticization of neural wiring over time. Introducing concepts from the Social Sciences into *Open Your Mind*, such as semiotics, could help visitors leave on a more optimistic note. Doing so could help them understand that the mental wiring underscoring implicit bias is, in part, culturally dependent and therefore can be mitigated if not unlearned entirely.

An injection of Social Science into *Open Your Mind* could also help address the “what do we do about it” question many visitors to the Learning Lab pose. Younger visitors in particular want to find ways to overcome implicit bias. Solutions are important here. Without them one can either feel frustrated or

absolved of responsibility for discriminatory actions. After all, if our wiring is to blame, bias is “out of our hands.” A discussion of how to reprogram our neurons through cultural changes at the micro level could keep *Open Your Mind* from falling into the Calvinism of “there’s nothing we can do about Implicit Bias” or the Evangelism of “since there’s nothing we can do, we are absolved of responsibility.”

While there is some exploration of how to fight implicit bias, *Open Your Mind* mostly served as a primer on the subject. What follows is a “typical” conversation with Ryan in the Learning Lab. Again, much of this antedates Diane’s consultancy.

### **The Conversation**

While visitors can explore the Learning Lab on their own, for the most part Ryan engages them. These conversations about understanding implicit bias, as well as how to combat it, all tend to happen in the main space of the Implicit Bias Learning Lab. The room is dominated by a massive conference space. At least 20 people can sit around this table as Ryan goes through his various optical and social illusions, although as few as six or as many as 50 might come in on a given day (personal interview February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019). These include the Rubik’s Cube illusion, the Checker Shadow illusion, and the Sara Nader illusion. All of these are used to illustrate the ways in which our minds tend to notice patterns, even if they do not exist in the real world. The walls of the main space display anecdotes relating fictional incidences of implicit bias, complete with images of

smiling people. These people represent the characters who either experienced bias or perpetrated it. Pictures from the Learning Lab appear in the Appendix.

These placards also, albeit unintentionally, engage in implicit bias themselves. Diane was only one person who noticed this inadvertent reification on the part of the placards. For example, one display tells the story of a Latino man denied a promotion in part based on an arrest predicated on differential treatment implied to be due to racial profiling. Meanwhile, while a white man of similar age and experience is promoted due in part to a lack of unfair treatment. The white man is presented at the top of the placard, while the Latino man is underneath. Meanwhile, in a scenario presented on a different placard, a young woman of East Asian descent is slowly frozen out of dorm activities by her white RA. This ultimately leads to her deciding college “is not for her.” It is noteworthy that women are used to illustrate implicit bias in social situations while men are used to depict it in the workplace. The unintentional nature of implicit bias which comes through in the placards underscores the insidious nature of it as opposed to explicit bias.

Perhaps because of the large number of corporations with headquarters in Cincinnati, including Proctor and Gamble, Ryan often drew from ways in which employers overcome implicit bias while guiding visitors through this subject. One such example is names. Ryan would invoke studies revealing that, for many potential employers, a job applicant’s name can lead to biased patterns on the part of job screeners. Statistically speaking, male candidates are far more likely to be called in for an interview, as are candidates with stereotypically “white”

names like Brad or Alison. Removing the names from resumes tended to result in more interviews for women job candidates and applicants of color. Moreover, when a feminine name is changed to a masculine name, Michael will likely be evaluated more favorably than Michelle. From here, the learning lab only needed to find ways beyond the world of work.

Similar techniques can be used when potential employees need to audition for an orchestra or philharmonic. These are often called “masking” in the field of implicit bias. Masking involves having auditionees perform behind a curtain in order to eliminate any implicit association between whiteness, maleness, and musical virtuosity on the part of those auditioning. Notably, the number of musicians who were women in professional orchestras increased dramatically.

By far, however, most research into implicit bias indicates that the most effective way of mitigating this impulse is through techniques like repeated exposure to individuals of a different background. Interestingly enough, the quality of these interactions seems not to matter; any form of sustained contact with members of other groups seems to lessen implicit bias. This concept is perhaps best illustrated by the late Jack Kemp (Martin 2009). This is borne out both by a study of college freshmen who roomed with roommates of another race (Shook and Fazio 2008). It would seem hard to hold negative views about your roommate’s ethnicity when you have seen them cram for their Calculus final at 3AM.

Popular culture provided other avenues towards repeated exposure to members of marginalized populations, particularly with regard to demonstrations

of non-stereotyped behavior. The Implicit Bias Learning Lab recommended exposure to non-white, non-male, and non-straight figures in media. To that end, it has invoked the *Black Panther* franchise, at least since I interned there during the summer of 2017, as an example of a hero which breaks the mode of predominantly white male superheroes. Ta’Nahesi Coates’ re-envisioning of the graphic novels occupies prominent spots in the Learning Lab. Many NURFC employees relished the opportunity to watch the progression of the character arc of T’Challa onscreen. Other than the “Solomon Northrup Tour” based on the historically authentic title character of *12 Years a Slave*, this is the primary instance of NURFC calling attention to an onscreen character of color. The inclusion of African American heroes like Black Panther enters into the realm of implicit association due to the associative nature of that field. It undermines associations between whiteness, goodness, and purity of the sort alluded to by the robes of the KKK. It also, by extension, undermines the ideas of white sacrifice signified by the blood red replica robe on display on NURFC’s third floor. T’Challa and his comrades do not only strike a blow at the enemies of Wakanda, but also at the mental wiring which compels us to associate people of African descent with danger rather than heroism. In the Trump era, many find that to be an enticing opportunity. All this serves to make undermining implicit bias a less heavy lift.

Over her tenure, Diane motivated Ryan to place more encouragement on making this lift. She also took the lab “out of his head.” Under her supervision, the Learning Lab began offering interpretations of the features it had to offer at

regularly scheduled times. *Open Your Mind's* subject matter also began being more seamlessly incorporated into overall tours and lesson plans at NURFC. Part of her efforts at making NURFC's programs on implicit bias more relatable included memorable lessons on the importance of being willing to make oneself "uncomfortable" in the pursuit of important goals. These include empathy and challenging dangerous stereotypes. Some of Diane's examples included "walking and talking with people when you'd rather sit in your air-conditioned office" (personal interview: May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018). As a result of Diane's efforts, Ryan became a much more effective teacher, particularly of younger kids. He took the emphasis off of our "hard wiring" with regard to stereotyping and began discussing how to mitigate this process through various solutions. He used *Black Panther* as an educational tool rather than just an example and pointed visitors, particularly younger ones, towards media by and for people of color, women, and members of the LGBT community.

*Open Your Mind* is intended to do just that; deconstruct conventional ideas around skin color, gender, and - at least when I began - sexual orientation. It is intended to make the subject of Implicit Bias accessible to the general population. As with NURFC in general, visitors to *Open Your Mind* tend to be "self-selecting" in the words of both Ryan and Diane (personal interviews: June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018). That is to say, they are the type of person who is more likely to visit a museum dedicated to fighting oppression and injustice in the first place. "Jeff Sessions" was brought up as the type of person Ryan wished would walk into NURFC, although it is worth noting that at the time of my

internship the Trump administration's family separation policy had not yet been enacted (personal interview: June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017). Both executive directors I worked under were intent that the Implicit Bias Learning Lab extend beyond the sleek, glass doors of the lab itself and be integrated into the rest of the museum.

This integration primarily involves incorporating the concept of Implicit Bias into tours. The STE(A)M tour was a logical place to start with this. For example, the Drinking Gourd involves elements of pattern recognition, semiotics, and making associations between seemingly unrelated objects. Drinking gourds which were used on plantations in the southern United States were symbols of the Big Dipper, also called the Drinking Gourd by enslaved workers on those plantations. The Big Dipper itself indexed the North Star, which in turn indexed Canada and freedom. All these together form a pattern of associations of great value to freedom seekers.

I would go so far as to say that exploring and unpacking the intertwined relationships between gourd, asterism, and direction dovetails with the original mission of NURFC. NURFC is billed as a place where conversations about racial reconciliation can take place away from the elements. It is also billed as a place where one can fight oppression and injustice, taking inspiration from figures on the Underground Railroad. Following the Drinking Gourd combines ingenuity, observation, and resistance to enslavement. It takes the pattern recognition inherent to implicit bias and turns it on its head, demonstrating that we can work with the same phenomenon in order to undo it. If mental association could give

us the Drinking Gourd by way of resisting enslavement, it can give is a way of resisting bias.

From here we will visit Smith and Hannon Bookstore. This space, run by a local African American entrepreneur, was effectively the museum store. It is next to the Implicit Bias Learning Lab and provided space for it.

### **Smith and Hannon**

In 2016, the US Census reported that in the African American community, women entrepreneurs tend to be more successful than their male counterparts (Becker-Medina 2016). Joyce Smith is an example of one such businessperson. Smith and Hannon is NURFC's museum store, located on the first floor. It is also a local institution, intertwined with local history. Founded in 2001 by Joyce Smith, a retired teacher, Smith and Hannon is the oldest black owned free-standing bookstore in Cincinnati. It was formerly located in Bond Hill, a predominately African American neighborhood in northeastern Cincinnati. Situated along Mill Creek, an urban stream which flows into the Ohio River, its demographic character shifted due to a historic combination of redlining and blockbusting. In 2010 there were 6,449 African American members of Bond Hill's population of 6,837 (US Census 2010). When Joyce Smith opened her bookstore in 2001, she did so in part to meet the educational and community needs of community beset by de facto segregation.

Fifteen years later, Smith and Hannon moved to NURFC's first floor. Joyce Smith and Clarence Newsome, then executive director of NURFC, indicated that this move meant that Smith's inventory of books by African

American authors would reach a wider audience (Cincinnati Enquirer 2016). In the name of entering a broader market for her passion, literature by and for African Americans, she moved her business from Bond Hill to the banks, a highly tourist-driven area. It would also, presumably, elevate her profile as well as the profile of her store.

Starting in 2016 Smith and Hannon operated out of the first floor of NURFC. The store is located just past the front desk and just before the Implicit Bias Learning Lab. Indeed, the lab had at one point been part of the bookstore. As with many museum stores, visitors do not have to pay admission in order to shop at Smith and Hannon. The fact that the store is not a NURFC gift shop per se might be why, in 2018, Joyce Smith was informed that her lease would not be renewed past the following year. She told me this news with a surprising amount of calm, seemingly resigned to the fact that “there’s a new guy [Dion] in town” (personal interview: June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018). This was surprising news to many NURFC employees. Once again, Smith and Hannon would be forced to make room for another project geared towards generating additional revenue for NURFC. This successful minority woman owned business had been a fixture on the first floor. When it first moved there, the goal was - according to then-NURFC executive director Clarence Newsome - to expose as many people as possible to the works of African American authors, both established and up-and-coming (Cincinnati Enquirer 2016). The store would both serve the community and visitors from elsewhere, fulfilling the museum’s educational mission.

Smith and Hannon was also a stand-by for museum employees. Members of NURFC's administrative staff often stopped in Smith and Hannon for candy, cards, and gifts for departing staff. They sell posters, including reproductions of the Feelings and Geeter *Mural* and Thomas Satterwhite Noble's 1867 depiction of Margaret Garner, *The Modern Medea*. This painting is on display in *From Slavery to Freedom* on the third floor. They include magnets bearing NURFC's logo, as well as other souvenirs related to Cincinnati. Smith and Hannon is truly tied to Cincinnati. It is a local institution owned and operated by a retired schoolteacher from the area. It is a powerful symbol of local, African American entrepreneurship. Would Smith and Hannon close for good?

The elimination of Smith and Hannon as a NURFC tenant reflects a specific value choice on the part of the museum. This decision is - in its uncomfortable way - understandable because "in an era of increased economic pressure, museums . . . are looking for economic returns wherever they can . . ." (Valarino de Abreu 2016: 86). In short, any economic return provided by a museum store would need to redound to the benefit of NURFC, regardless of educational benefit.

This meant a museum store dedicated to NURFC and NURFC alone. It could also mean "activating" the space as additional gallery space (personal interview: June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Repurposing the space formerly occupied by Smith & Hannon could involve multiple rotating exhibits. It could also mean allowing *Open Your Mind* to expand throughout the first floor. The ramifications of such

an expansion - that is, displacing an African American owned business in favor of a space facilitated by a white man - is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

For a time, however, NURFC still provided a direct service to local members of the community by hosting an African American owned business. It also provides an opportunity for racial reconciliation due to increased foot traffic and the promotion of educational materials. The fact that Smith was a former teacher definitely helped this. The books by and about African Americans could provide visitors with new sets of associations discussed in *Open Your Mind*, an opportunity which to date has not been officially tapped into. It also helps meet the museum's mission at home. Given that self-employment is often portrayed as an avenue out of poverty for marginalized populations by policymakers Smith and Hannon also, incidentally, ties into the triumphalist narrative of NURFC (Fairlie and Robb 2008). If the goal of museums centered on the African American experience is to foreground stories previously ignored, then NURFC did so through its support of Smith, an entrepreneur.

In fairness, Smith was the only person I spoke to who definitively informed me that she would only be staying one additional year. Other people who worked at NURFC either told me that they had heard otherwise, or that they did not know. One can understand the impulse to be discreet. Either way, by April of 2019, Smith and Hannon had relocated.

The final space on the first floor, the Group Sales area, was also never explicitly brought up as an additional space to be used as a gallery of sorts. Perhaps this was due to Group Sales' status as an outlier in terms of location.

The next section deals with the unique reasons Group Sales is exempt from NURFC's plan of activation.

### **The Group Sales Entrance**

For one-time visitors and staff members alike, their time at NURFC began and ended on the museum's first floor. Some staff members left through the front doors, saying goodbye to the staff at the front desk, or stopping to chat with Paula and the other gatekeepers. Others left through a set of side doors behind the Learning Lab, located in an area defined by a set of folding lunch tables. This space also included a time clock, making it a popular entrance and exit for the part time floor staff. Since I was the only member of the floor staff with a workspace on the top floor, I could clock in and out at my computer. It was simpler - and more collegial - to simply clock in and out as I walked in, however. For better or worse, I became well-acquainted with this sporadically used part of the first floor.

Aside from hourly staff, Group Sales is primarily used as a gathering space for large tour groups. The fact that many people might need to gather here at a moment's notice is the primary reason why it has not been converted into a space for displays or exhibits. Ms. Pam, who often took the lead in coordinating docents, oversaw the division of people who had had guided tours arranged in advance. During February - Black History Month - K through 12 school groups would gather here. Busloads of people, mostly senior citizens, doing package bus or boat tours would also decamp in Group Sales. The lunch tables would also be where they would sit and eat for a snack and meal. Canny self-guided

visitors who brought their own lunches would take advantage of the fact that this was the only location in the museum visitors could eat. The fact that a museum cafe was not in operation at the time of this writing made this factor additionally salient.

The doors to Group Sales require an employee badge for access. Staff members and volunteer docents will hold them open if groups need to file in. Directly next to the doors is the keypad where hourly employees can clock in and out. This is, of course, easier if large groups are not present.

### **Conclusion**

The first floor is where both visitors and administrative staff begin and end their time at the museum. During a regular day the first-floor experience is entirely confined to the Pavilion of Cooperation. Exceptions would be special events at the Harriet Tubman Theater or if someone had business in the (for now) defunct North Star Cafe. Staff at the front desk, which is where visitors to the museum invariably begin, typically serve as gatekeepers. Unless one enters through Group Sales, which is an exception for most visitors and staff members, the front desk employees are the first people one sees.

In the case of visitors, these gatekeepers sell tickets and provide a degree of orientation. They preside over an array of maps, rack cards, and brochures for the museum and the building's environs. They may or may not distribute them. The rest of the first floor consists of spaces which visitors encounter on their way out of the museum, if they engage with them at all. This lack of engagement is a major reason for increased investment in *Open Your Mind*. The decision to

displace Smith and Hannon with something more connected to the museum - rather than an outside store connected with the mission - is likely tied to the desire to have a NURFC museum store. Both of these, in their own ways, serve the economic interest of the museum.

From here this dissertation departs from the majority of the visitor experience. The following two chapters cover the fifth floor, where NURFC's administrative offices are located, and the fourth floor, a small space where visitors, volunteers, and staff members all come together. We will now move to the fifth floor.

## CHAPTER V: BACKSTAGE ON THE FIFTH FLOOR

If one considers the Romantic narrative told on the third, second, and first floors of NURFC a historic drama, and the visitors spectators to the exhibit interpretations in the galleries, then the fifth floor is the museum's backstage. On this level, the museum's staff develop scripts in the form of tours and lesson plans. Some have been imparted since the museum opened in 2004 while others, such as the STE(A)M tour, were still being figured out as of June 2019. I mostly focus on a typical day at a museum workplace undergoing significant transitions by emphasizing the uniqueness of this as a research site. My emphasis will be on how the workplace has an influence on the visitor experience, using the metaphor of a stage or performance space.

This chapter therefore focuses on this backstage area, the one floor off limits to museum visitors. It examines the culture on the fifth floor, focusing on the Education Team as it navigated changes in leadership. They were the principal actors charged with staging educational performances for visitors, including school groups. As museum professionals, the Education Team navigated their roles as "cultural heritage broker" between the community and museum and as "curator" with "authority and autonomy" (Van Mensch and Meijer-Van Mensch 2011: 60). Indeed, museum employees as a whole exemplify the need for the modern worker to be "flexible" with "a heterogeneous set of desirable work habits and attitudes" such as "self-direction, initiative, independence, pride, punctuality, and enthusiasm" (Darrah 2010: 5). This

diverse array of skills was channeled, among other avenues, towards facilitating the performances unfolding on the floors below.

### **The Education Team**

The reason for my focus on the Education Team is that this group, which includes the Museum Experiences Manager, is the team most directly involved with the visitor experience. They try to make this experience as participatory as possible, despite the traditional, “secular temple” nature of NURFC as a museum (personal interview: February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018). As Simon (2010) writes, “promoting participation in a traditional institution is not always easy” (323). As devoted as the Education Team is to Cincinnati, engaging with the local community requires a specific reinterpretation of museum administrator “roles and responsibilities” (ibid). In the case of NURFC this includes not just the roles of educator and customer service representative but also brand ambassador and social media expert.

Due to their connection to the community the Education Team also includes schools in and around Cincinnati as possible participatory partners. This means that innovative experiences and State and National Learning Standards play a role in the development of scripts which inform the visitor experience. Therefore, exhibits such as the VR *Rosa Parks Experience*, tours, and lesson plans fall under this group’s purview with all their attendant supplies and stressors. I examined the Education Team, of which I was a member, against the background of rapid changes in NURFC’s administrative structure. For example, the hiring of a new Executive and Deputy Director had a major impact on the

development of new projects. Meanwhile, I attempted to conduct an ethnography of this group as these changes unfolded on the shifting deck of a museological ship at sea.

The Education Team meets with one another in conference rooms and offices, conduct research on their computers and tablets, eat lunch together in the common room, and struggle with the copier and mailer. Despite - or perhaps because of - this collegiality, examining my workplace as a culture in its own right presented particular challenges. Laura Nader's *Studying Up* (1972), a seminal work on the anthropology of organizations in the modern Western world presents many of the challenges facing ethnographers in this setting. In more recent years scholars have built on this idea, elucidating the pitfalls of conducting fieldwork at a place populated by relatively privileged workers - and some not so privileged - in the United States (Zickar and Carter 2010; Darrah 2010; Sharrock and Hughes 2004; Gusterson 1997). Not least of these is the fact that "ethnographic access is by permission of people with careers at stake, where loitering strangers with notebooks are rarely welcome, and where potential informants are too busy to chat" (Gusterson 1997: 116). Urban workplaces in the United States pose their own unique challenges and opportunities to ethnographers in the field.

In NURFC's case, this workplace entails the construction of the visitor experience. The world of museum professionals, particularly those at an educational and historical museum, provides a novel example of anthropology of organizations. The museum workplace in particular is unique in that, in a similar

way to the retail environment, museums have a drive to “connect with new audiences, retain current visitors, and boost overall attendance,” as stated in *You Are Here’s* blog post on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018. Therefore, the anthropologist studying a museum workplace needs to take into account practical considerations such as whether an employee is in what I came to think of as “retail mode,” as well as more standard organizational considerations such as whether they are simply too busy. Ongoing stressors, such as rapid transitions in leadership and focus as NURFC underwent during my time there from 2017-2019, are other considerations one needs to bear in mind. I addressed these concerns by first interning at NURFC over the summer of 2017, and then parlaying that into first a part time, then a full-time job, as a member of the Education Team.

As my status as a fully-fledged member of the Education Team increased, I spent more and more time in the administrative offices on the fifth floor. These offices are entirely contained within the Pavilion of Cooperation, NURFC’s main building. As with many workspaces, social capital is tied to the space out of which one operates. First and foremost is whether the fifth floor is your primary workspace to begin with, followed by what sort of workspace you may have. The fifth floor is almost the exclusive domain of NURFC’s full-time employees. Part time floor staff do have access to the fifth floor and sit in the fifth-floor common room. They also have access to cubicles and volunteer computers. For the most part, floor staff work on the second and third floors.

In contrast to many other museums, however, the fifth floor has a large amount of available office space for those who work out of that level. In performance terms this means that a lot of dressing room space is available. In practical terms this means that it is possible to “claim” an office simply by asking for it, although doing so comes with certain expectations. Some of these are that you will remain there for a given period of time or be willing to defer to fellow employees with more seniority.

This ties into the small dramas which unfolded on the fifth floor. Many of them involved changes that happened in 2018 when NURFC experienced a change in leadership. This resulted in many alterations to the Education Team including structure and individual workplaces. Employees changed titles, offices, and status. People who had worked together for years suddenly found themselves on opposite sides of the fifth floor.

Along the way, the museum’s focus also seemed to change, with more projects and programs focusing on the Civil Rights Movement rather than enslavement. This shift in topical and temporal focus took many staff members by surprise, but we could not doubt its certainty. In a way, this seeming “unilateral” change made things easier. As Simon (2013) writes, “what was terrifying for its unknowability becomes knowable, and thus manageable . . . people can get on with their lives and jobs” (xvii). Some, such as Tara, a longtime employee and member of the Education Team, as well as the first supervisor I ever had at NURFC, did just that and opted to move on.

These changes influenced how we came to see the fifth floor: our workplaces, communal areas, and the tours and lesson plans developed for visitors. It also had an impact on how we viewed the museum's identity, particularly what sorts of historical dramas would be staged for the visitors-*cum*-audience. It affected morale in many ways, but the Education Team worked on, telling the stories of freedom's heroes during the time of the Underground Railroad, the present day, and ultimately the Civil Rights Movement as well. The fifth floor, a space apart from the areas of the museum frequented by visitors offered us a space where we could engage in the process of "selecting shared and common objects and features to talk about" such as what our thoughts were on the realignments and shifts in vision which occurred under NURFC's new leadership (Sharrock and Hughes 2004: 9).

I begin with an analysis of NURFC's workspace. The first section focuses on the behind-the-scenes layout of the fifth floor. It discusses office space and how the layout - complete with panoramic views museum visitors pay admission to see from the third floor - serves as an indicator of status among the employees. The fact that museum employees typically do not receive payment commensurate with private sector jobs makes these indicators highly relevant. This exists in tension with the open plan layout favored by many workplaces, including museums, which can have an impact on collaboration. This last ties into how the work done on the fifth floor has an impact on visitor experience.

## **Layout**

This section draws heavily from Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital, with emphasis placed on the workplace (Helliwell and Huang 2010, Timberlake 2005). One can think of this form of capital as being "curated" at an organization level. I will pay special attention to how the capital afforded by the type of workspace one occupied played out amidst the backdrop of Dion Brown taking NURFC's helm and changing the organization's internal structure.

Ybema et al (2009) have written that, as with any culture, workplaces have their own set of taken-for-granted symbols and practices which are subject to interpretation. NURFC's fifth floor includes such interpretable elements. The various offices, cubicles, and conference rooms convey role and status to the administrative staff who work on the fifth floor. This space is the backstage area for the educational performance that is NURFC. The workspaces can be considered dressing rooms and green rooms. As with any theater, the space allocated for each employee can be considered an indicator of how crucial their role is considered with regard to the daily performances as tour guide, ambassador for the museum, and vendor of the particular narratives promulgated by NURFC. See the Appendix for images of the fifth floor.

Office space on this level follows the layout of the museum, specifically within the Pavilion of Cooperation. In many ways it looks like any office space one might find in any of the office buildings by the Riverfront. It is mostly an open office style, with small cubicles filling the interior of the space. As with many workplaces, both in the for-profit and non-profit sectors, the open plan is meant

to inspire “collaborations . . . interpersonal relationships, and . . . active learning environments” (Lord et al 2012: 431). The Education Team has effectively worked together developing lesson plans and experiences such as a STE(A)M activity, a unique offering for a historically based museum.

Despite the collaboration promised by the open office layout, however, NURFC staff members have an ambivalent relationship with that type of setup. This is not unique to museum employees, and does not reflect a rejection of collaboration *per se*. I will demonstrate this through an example of enthusiastic collaboration on an innovative visitor experience by the Education Team later in this chapter. Rather, private office space is viewed as a precious workplace commodity for many in the museum field, including NURFC employees who work on the fifth floor.

One reason may be the fact that museum salaries tend to be, as with many nonprofit jobs, well below remuneration in the private sector. This makes the “actual and virtual” resources written about by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) such as workspace size, furniture accoutrements, and the view from one’s office window highly intertwined with workplace status (119). Given NURFC’s location proximate to Smale Riverfront Park in downtown Cincinnati, many of these offices overlook landmarks such as skyscrapers, sports arenas, green spaces, and the Roebling Bridge.

The Executive Director has, by far, the optimal view. This office is also the largest and has the most accoutrements, intended to convey status. One can see from this office a panoramic vista including the Ohio River, the Roebling

Bridge, and the Covington, KY skyline through their window. Their conference space includes not just a table and chairs, but also a sitting area with a couch, coffee table, and armchairs. This array of furniture implies the possibility of schmoozing as well as business meetings. During my tenure both Dan Hurley, the erstwhile Interim Executive Director, and Dion Brown, the permanent Executive Director during my time at NURFC, tended to use the couch and chairs in my presence rather than adopting a more formal position behind their desk.

Across the way the Deputy Director's office has a similar view of the river and bridge. It has a conference table and chairs, but no sitting area. It is significantly smaller than the Executive Director's office while remaining an ample space. During my time at NURFC Jacqueline (Jackie) Dace was the only person I knew who occupied the Executive Director role. From my perspective, this role went from nonexistent to seemingly omnipresent. Jackie brought with her a wealth of ideas about NURFC's future direction both large and small.

Two assistant's desks are located just outside of both directors' offices in an alcove. During my internship as well as at the start of my job/fieldwork, both of these desks were unoccupied. However, when Dion Brown became NURFC's Executive Director because he "wanted the challenge" of working with an organization with a complicated relationship with its home city, he asked a longtime employee named Ms. Pam to move to the desk outside his office (personal interview: March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018). She began working as his Executive

Assistant. At the time of this writing the assistant's desk outside the Deputy Director's office remains unused. The space is occupied by an underused Keurig machine and small refrigerator. What I came to think of as the "executive alcove" itself has a sweeping riverfront view, including the Roebling Bridge. It offers the same view visitors see from the third-floor terrace.

The executive alcove is located next to the Board Room, which is a formal conference room. This space facilitates large meetings, such as senior staff meetings, and some staff functions, such as holiday parties and observances of an employee's last day. It has projection capabilities so employees can conduct small presentations in this space. The Board Room is fronted with double doors of frosted glass and contains a large conference space including a long wooden table and plush office chairs, effectively conveying its status as a formal conference space.

In front of this conference room is the lobby and elevator bank. It is fronted by a receptionist's desk. This switchboard mostly stands unused except for when staffed by a volunteer during busy times. This made sense because, for the most part, nobody came up to the fifth floor unless they were expected since access to this level requires a key card. Therefore, the only time a visitor would end up on the fifth floor was when an employee hit the call button precisely when said visitor entered one of NURFC's elevators at a lower level and could be guided back down by the unwitting instigator of this confusion. This doubled as an unexpected behind-the-scenes look at museum administration for some visitors.

The perimeter of the fifth floor is dotted with offices occupied by various employees with titles containing words like Director and Vice President. The hallway which runs past them, as well as the offices themselves, follow the curve of the building. This means that some of the offices are irregularly shaped. This did not have an impact on the view afforded by these offices.

In the middle of five are a cluster of cubicles. As with many workspaces most of NURFC's cubicles included computers, phones, locking cabinets and drawers, and felt-lined walls. Many members of the Education Team either do or did work out of these spaces, including Mr. Westmoreland. His situation was an example of how intertwined a sense of deservingness was with regard to NURFC's private offices in addition to desirability. This is because while NURFC employees do value private space, there is a tacit understanding that some, particularly African American members of the staff who had been there since the beginning, should have priority over others when it came to occupying offices rather than cubicles. The fact that Mr. Westmoreland did not have an office was seen by many as an aberration if not an injustice. After all, he had been instrumental in bringing the Anderson Slave Pen to NURFC, a cornerstone of many tours. His crucial role in various capacities was belied by the fact that he worked out of a small cubicle. He seemed to simply not care about this state of affairs. The fact that there was little to no overt competition for office space - indeed, that many people believed folks like Mr. Westmoreland got short shrift in that regard - meant that collaboration was possible; indeed, it was desired. It

was in cubicles such as these that visitor experiences such as tours and lesson plans were developed and finessed.

Interestingly enough, there were more cubicles and offices than there were employees. This is dissimilar to the situation at most museums (Lord et al 2012). This was, in part, due to the departure of many employees during the change in NURFC's leadership. Subsequent cost-cutting measures on the part of the powers that be at both NURFC and CMC limited rehiring. The fact that space was not at a premium meant that some cubicles and offices ended up being used as storage space for the papers and other clutter that tends to accumulate in the workspaces of highly intelligent but harried people. It also meant that the status afforded by private office space was up for grabs for those willing to seize opportunities for enhanced responsibility. The ample real estate likely cut down on the sense of competition.

On at least two occasions, employees who had worked at NURFC since it had first opened requested office space. They used their tenure as leverage when making these asks. This was due to the fact that, as Kristina von Tisch (2019) writes, "because museum staff forego corporate pay to work in a nonprofit museum, they deserve a private office." At a practical level private office space means an environment free from distractions and the ability to not disturb others with meetings or phone calls. There was little overt rancor when this happened. When Novella, the School Programs Specialist's moving into a private office at the end of 2018, many said it was "about time" she had her own space (personal interview: December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Dion's assumption of NURFC's Executive

Directorship made moves like Novella's possible, due to the shuffling of employees which ensued. Given the open-door policy many employees at NURFC embraced, the fact that many preferred to have their own private workspaces did not hinder collaboration.

This was a good thing because, as Nina Simon writes in her blog Museum 2.0, "big objectives," "shared goals," and "measurable indicators" of whether or not these objectives and goals are achieved are of the utmost importance when collaborating on visitor experiences such as tours and other educational programs (2016). Members of the education team were particularly sensitive to the need for working together and being communicative. As Novella put it during a meeting about lesson plans and tours for school groups, "we don't just reinvent the wheel. We invent it, forget about it, and then invent a brand-new wheel" (personal interview: January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

Novella's quote about not just reinventing the wheel reflects the collaborative nature of workplace culture at NURFC. What follows is an exploration of collaboration on the part of the Education Team regarding the visitor experience, particularly the experience of local schools, against the backdrop of significant change. This will be used as a case study of museum office culture, as contained on the fifth floor. Along the way I will touch on the STE(A)M experience, a unique feature for a historically situated museum because it allows school groups to experience science in an informal environment (Bell et al 2009). In this chapter I will focus on this project's capacity to have an impact on how employees implement innovative educational

programs geared towards museum visitors. This tour also reflects the impact learning standards can have on the programs developed by museums (American Association of Museums Committee on Education 2005). This includes leading museums like NURFC, which deals primarily with American History and modern-day enslavement, to develop tours satisfying Science Standards. For more on the STE(A)M experience I would recommend turning to the Evaluative Criteria in this dissertation's final chapter.

### **The Process**

As an institution which seeks to connect with Cincinnati community, NURFC has an interest in coordinating with local educational centers like schools and libraries (Pandora and Fredrik 2017). These dedicated staff members believe that museums can be “critical sites of community dialogue and hubs for civic engagement” (Tindal 2018: 87). That they are, as the Art Museum Teaching form asserts, “not neutral” (Rodriguez 2017). The Education Team therefore views the programs such as the STE(A)M experience as fitting into the museum's values both in terms of innovation and a visitor experience intended to serve NURFC's home city and state.

The Education Team views Cincinnati as a “site of struggle” in need of service (personal interview: December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017). That is to say, that the legacy of African American oppression did not end with the Civil War and impacts many members of this community, which is nearly 50% African American. The impact of enslavement redounds to the present day through a de facto-segregated city beset by gentrification. Many communities belie the achievement gap between

African American and white students (Anderson 1989, 2002; Anderson 2004, 2012; Pedroni 2012, Grant 2017) and the mass incarceration of African American men (Smith 2012, Delgado 2012). These are issues faced by many students of color in Cincinnati, with one educator reporting while sitting in the Fishbowl that multiple students had “a relative in prison” (personal interview: August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017).

This has led to a more community-based approach to new visitor experiences based on community needs. Working in concert with teachers and other community stakeholders, Education Team Members have sat down with them in conference spaces like the Fishbowls and the Board Room. Out of these brainstorming sessions up in the administrative offices come the scripts of programs which are executed on the lower floors. In this way, fifth floor administrative staff seek to supplement the education received by Cincinnati’s youth.

## **Changes**

Museums tend to be resistant to change. Simon (2013) writes that since these institutions tend to be “non-profit, non-essential, non-competing” they have little intrinsic motivation to innovate (xv). This has stymied many efforts on the part of the Education Team to change NURFC into as essential a part of the community as possible. During my time at NURFC the key players in the drama that unfolds at the museum on a daily basis underwent a significant shuffling.

When I began interning at NURFC in June of 2017, the organization was run by an Interim Executive Director. Dan Hurley is a local journalist and historian, with a regular show on Cincinnati's NPR affiliate. He is also white. Hurley had served as an Assistant Vice President at the Cincinnati Museum Center (CMC). In 2013 NURFC merged with CMC, a decision which enabled NURFC to remain open in the face of declining ticket sales. While this merger helped save the museum, it also felt for many employees like a takeover. Therefore, the fact that NURFC's Interim Executive Director had previously been employed by CMC caused some tension.

This tension was exacerbated by the fact that Hurley remained at his post longer than anyone expected. Hurley himself noted his unexpectedly extended tenure in several all-staff meetings. He also emphasized the fact that the next Executive Director "had to be an African American." Virtually everyone else agreed with his assessment. First and foremost was because everyone on the fifth floor embraced the idea articulated by Lonetree (2012), Boast (2011), and Clifford (2013) that curation at museums which engage with oppressed populations should include present-day members of those populations at - ideally - every step of the way. This includes curation, development of tours, final say regarding artifacts, and management.

The narrative-based nature of the displays at this museum provides an interesting contrast to museums devoted to Native American societies (Boast 2011; Lonetree 2012). There are fewer artifacts of uncertain or fraught prominence on display in the museum. This is also vastly different from the

presentation of the African American experience at historic houses, where the wishes of architectural preservationists and members of the original owner's family may have certain interpretations of local history in mind. The fact that Cincinnati has a substantial African American community is likely an additional factor in the presence of a museum which engages with that particular experience. Many of the Education Team employees, as well as other staff members, were also African Americans who had grown up in either Cincinnati or other Midwestern states. Mr. Westmoreland himself, for example, had lived in Cincinnati for most of his life.

In any event, Dan Hurley's wish for an Executive Director whose background reflected the experiences of the enslaved workers featured in many of NURFC's exhibits was fulfilled. In March of 2018, the former director of the National Blues Museum in St. Louis - a city with a somewhat similar demographic profile to Cincinnati - Dion Brown, took NURFC's helm (Curnutte 2018). He had ideas for significant rewrites of NURFC's educational performances. To that end he scheduled one-on-one meetings with all employees to discuss, among other things, potential changes in structure, duties, and even focus. This stated commitment to dynamism went hand in hand with announcements regarding new program developments, dress codes, and schedules. Meanwhile staff members, including members of the Education Team, took new jobs within the organization, were reassigned to different managers, moved offices, or decided to leave and pursue new opportunities. The ambiguity of what this meant for ongoing projects reflected the fact that

many staff members felt “unsure how their skills would be valued in the new environment” (Simon 323). Would their experiences dovetail with NURFC’s new mission or would they feel irreconcilable discord with the changes?

Unfortunately, many staff members did feel the latter. One of the most salient Education Team disruptions was the departure of Tara, who had been my supervisor during my 2017 internship and at the start of my job with NURFC. She had served as a teacher and school principal in the Cincinnati area before spearheading NURFC’s educational initiatives. When she left in late 2018 this left many educational initiatives, including this dissertation’s primary evaluative criteria, up in the air.

Tara’s departure was a sobering reminder that a museum undergoing significant changes cannot be managed by a single person. A team, rather than a hero, is required to bring an institution like NURFC into the realm of regional educational cornerstone. The Education Team in particular had been committed to developing new tours and lesson plans and enhancing old ones.

The end result was a closing of ranks among the employees, which included encouraging Tara as she embarked on a new life and career stage. We became acutely aware of the fact that “change requires a painful level of uncertainty” (Simon 2013: xvi). This required profound soul searching. In the wake of people like Tara leaving and a fundamental restructuring of NURFC’s administrative staff, what would the museum look like? This was a particularly pertinent question as NURFC filled multiple roles: tourist center, history museum, educational space.

## Conclusion

The administrative offices on the fifth floor are not just a workspace but a backstage area. In this space staff put together new experiences for museum visitors, as well as serve as proxy educators. This workplace is the site of most of the brainstorming about how to fill gaps in local education. At first, at the directive of the new Executive Director, those of us on the administrative level spent less and less time leading tours than developing them. Rather than the “jack of all trades” many museum employees expect to be, members of NURFC’s administrative staff found themselves the subjects of a drive towards having as little contact with visitors as possible. Some even complained of being inside “silos,” an ironic complaint given Dion’s stated goal of eliminating them and bringing different NURFC groups together.

This did not remain the case for long. My experiences on the fifth floor illuminated that the life of a person working for a museum requires one to be as adaptable as possible, despite top-down directives. At a moment’s notice one might be required to go “on the floor.” Even directors with the workplace capital to have an office with a view could be suddenly pressed into service, adopting a friendly and helpful demeanor as they help orient visitors. Museum professionals are educators, curators, and customer service professionals all in one. Like many members of the non-profit sector they are *homo adaptus*. As funding for museums, particularly humanistic museums, become increasingly tightened museum professionals will probably be forced to become even more adaptable. As of April 2019, there has been talk of phasing out guided tours altogether. This

has led to no small amount of stress, but also opportunities for innovation, particularly with the STE(A)M experience. This experience, currently in abeyance, will be unpacked in the concluding chapter. For now, however, we will touch on the remaining NURFC floor, the fourth floor.

## CHAPTER VI: FOURTH FLOOR

NURFC's fourth floor is unique in that it is the one floor at the museum which is frequented by both visitors and museum staff. Padded chairs sit across from the elevators and just outside the John Parker Library, where the family members of amateur genealogists will sit and relax. Since the museum's collections are on the fourth floor, staff members will come to this level, buzzing themselves into the space with keycard badges. NURFC employees with curatorial duties have specialized badges which unlock the collections space. The volunteer break room is also located on the fourth floor. This space, therefore, is a microcosm of NURFC where all of its stakeholders on a given day - staff member, volunteer, and visitor - can interact in the same space.

The fourth floor also has space which can be rented out to other organizations. This space is located next to some artist-drawn details of *Mural*, signed by Tom Feelings and Tyrone Geeter. When I first began working for NURFC as a paid staff member, an African American company called Hillman rented out the space. No staff member seemed to quite know exactly what they did. They ultimately left without fanfare in early 2018, leaving only their unpaid and expired internet service. As of August 2018, Dion was actively trying to get another company to rent out the space.

Other than a pair of seldom-used bathrooms - a jealously guarded secret on the part of NURFC employees - the fourth floor hosted to the John Parker Library. The Parker Library houses archives from Union Baptist Church, a historic African American church that stood in one of Cincinnati's Underground

Railroad era free Black communities. Frustratingly, it was impossible for anyone from either NURFC or the church community to access these archives. The Parker Library also conducted genealogical research for museum visitors, free of charge. From Tuesday through Saturday, 11AM to 4PM, the fourth floor is accessible via elevator without the use of a keycard badge. Staff and visitors often encountered each other in this space.

The Parker Library conducted a valuable service for many who did not know their family background and were not sure how to begin going about researching it. Many African Americans find themselves in this situation. As Hartman (2006) writes, the legacy of enslavement created a profound disruption for many families of African descent. While visitors of all ethnicities can and do avail themselves of the Parker Library, its primary purpose is to bridge the genealogical disruption caused by the legacy of African American enslavement.

Due to the relatively small size of the fourth floor this chapter will be the dissertation's shortest. It will be split into two parts. The first will focus on the role the fourth floor plays for visitors by focusing on the John Parker Library. The second will focus on the role the space plays for museum employees. I will conclude with an examination of the encounters which happen on the fourth floor. I begin with a deeper examination of why some volunteers at NURFC research visitors' family trees.

### **Visitor Genealogy**

The John Parker Library uniquely addresses the fact that it is difficult to discuss contemporary race relations without contextualizing them in light of

African enslavement. People of African descent, who were not even considered people by the bulk of residents of the United States, “lived an existence and life very different from all other Americans, including American Indians” (Hattery and Smith 2007: 2). Much of this existence and life centered on the gradual, generational erasure of knowledge of one’s heritage. “Your dead cease to know you,” Chief Seattle is reported to have said about the willingness of white Americans to move away from the graves of their ancestors (Vowell 2005: 39). It may be said that many African American families have, through no fault of their own, ceased to know their dead.

Despite the forced separation of enslaved Africans from their heritage, their continent, and their home societies, African American families endured. This fact is nothing short of a testament to these families’ strength that they have, against all odds, persisted. During the time of enslavement, Black families “existed as social institutions despite being illegal” (Hattery and Smith 2007: xiv). Even after the Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, African Americans forged family bonds in the face of *de jure* segregation during Jim Crow and *de facto* discrimination after separate but equal facilities were deemed unconstitutional. Nonetheless, from Frederick and Anna Douglass to the Obamas, the African American family endured and flourished.

Along the way, many of these families developed an interest in finding out where they came from originally. Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976) is one of the most well-known earliest examples of this interest, written at a time when many Americans of European descent were tracing their family coats of arms. Hartman

(2006) is a more recent example. Within the walls of NURFC, Amina Robinson's *RagGonOn* is a visual example of tracing one's family history, as evidenced by her artist's statement. NURFC takes the question of African American heritage beyond the individual endeavors of particular writers and artists and directly serves the African American community through on-site research. Once the elevator doors open on the fourth floor, visitors are faced with a sign pointing them in the direction of the John Parker library which is directly to the right. Once in the library, volunteers greet the visitor, and ask them to fill out their family tree on a piece of paper. Ideally, they will be able to go four generations back, to all four sets of great-grandparents. This can be difficult for African Americans without extensive family records. Fortunately, according to the volunteers who work at the John Parker Library, they are able to work with information about grandparents, or incomplete information about great-grandparents.

It is worth noting that many of the volunteers associated with the John Parker Library are affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Given the denomination's belief in posthumous baptism, this is unsurprising. During my internship, when the volunteers at the John Parker Library discovered I was enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Oregon, they referred me to the Mormon family research center on 18<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Given the religious affiliation of many of the people and organizations associated with NURFC, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Mormon Church plays such a large role in the museum's family research center. The fact that Mormonism is somewhat of an

outlier in terms of Christian denominations makes this a fraught relationship at times. Nonetheless, they do provide a valuable service to many museum visitors.

## **Archives**

The other primary purpose of the John Parker Library is that of an archive repository. For example, they house the archives of Union Baptist, a historically African American church. These archives include such things as membership, marriages, divorces, and excommunications. Frustratingly, it is very difficult to access these documents. Members of the Education Team mentioned that many members of “the community” - presumably the African American community - felt “betrayed” due to not having access to the archives (personal interview: July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Indeed, nobody seemed sure who exactly did have access to them, and who controlled said access. Only two people, Chris and Katie, had ever seen to see them in person.

Once Jackie began her tenure as deputy director, she conceived of a plan to digitize the archives on file on the fourth floor. As of June 2019 that plan has not yet come to fruition. Doing so be of tangible benefit to the Cincinnati community, as Union Baptist does advertise on their website that their archives are housed at NURFC. Given that nobody seems able to access them, this seems a case of unintentional false advertising on the part of the church. Digitizing them will be a major step in the right direction, if NURFC does want to provide a uniquely localized visitor experience to the people of Cincinnati, particularly Cincinnati’s African American community. It could result in increased foot traffic and better use of space.

The fact that NURFC is located at the site of a free African American community, in which Union Baptist stands, makes the inability to access the archives on the fourth floor a particularly galling point for many. Making these documents available, perhaps as part of a larger exhibit or display about Cincinnati's Underground Railroad-era free Black communities, would be a way to extend an olive branch.

NURFC's administrative staff would play a central role in making the Union Baptist archives available to the general public. The other major way museum employees utilize the space on fourth floor is in collections. Art, artifacts, and other materials currently not on display is stored behind a locked door requiring a specific employee badge.

### **Collections**

NURFC's collection space is rather discreet. It is through a door behind the reception area on Four which, during my time at the museum, I never saw occupied. One enters through a secure door and goes down a corridor into a climate-controlled space. In accordance with museum best practices, one of the staff members who handles collections informed me that materials not on display are stored in metal shelves (personal interview: August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018). I was only able to visit the collections space once, in May of 2019. The space was somewhat small and included a large collection of African art, as well as some pairs of Muhammed Ali's gloves and an autographed guitar from B.B. King. In short, a diverse array of material culture related to Africa and African Americans.

## Rental Space

It is a testament to the pressure placed on museums in this day and age that NURFC is compelled to rent out office space. Doing so was a high priority for Dion when he became NURFC's executive director. In an age when museums worldwide are positioning themselves to take advantage of industry and investment, one can understand why a museum built on a monumental scale like NURFC would try and leverage the ample space it boasts. While academic work has been done on managing the past with socio-political and economic interests in mind on a macro scale (Plets 2016) NURFC is an example of how this occurs on a smaller, more business-oriented level. Indeed, the space's a common area and offices have mostly attracted smaller companies and entrepreneurs.

Details from the third-floor exhibit *Mural* by Tom Feelings and Tyrone Geeter hang on the wall just outside the rental space. These drawings are by Feelings specifically, having been completed before his death. The door to the rental space is just past the details, accessible with a key card badge. Standard NURFC badges do not open the door to the rental space. Indeed, only one of the three secure doors on this floor are accessible with standard NURFC badges, which underscores the penumbrous nature of this level.

Once inside, the commercial rental space consists of a large, airy common area with ample window space. When Hillman occupied the suite, high-top cafe tables had been set up. The common space has a series of offices set off from it. A door from the rental space opens to behind the reception area.

Interestingly, there is also a door which leads from the collections space to the rental area. The fact that the door is locked underscores the dichotomy inherent to this space; the leasable commercial office suite is in the museum, but not of it.

### **Volunteer Room**

The fourth floor also includes the volunteer break room. This space includes a large communal table and chairs, kitchenette area, and dry erase board. The dry erase board includes guidelines for volunteer conduct on the floor. Many of these instructions, particularly prohibitions against using laptops or Smartphones, are aimed at the youth docents. Given that they are high school students, NURFC's youth docents are simultaneously inspiring and frustrating. It is heartening that these young people evince an interest in history, particularly African American history. Their inability to remain focused, a trait common to many adolescents, meant that NURFC staff needed to moonlight as disciplinarians.

NURFC's administrative staff also needed to occasionally remind volunteer docents of proper attire. Volunteers are required to wear identifiable shirts. These shirts are similar in color and design to NURFC's staff shirts and include the museum's name and logo. Volunteers are directed to wear their uniforms by the same whiteboard which reminds youth docents not to use electronics on the floor of the museum. There are also lockers in which volunteers can store their belongings, and presumably keep their volunteer uniforms handy and accessible.

Docent meetings were often held in this room, which I began attending in August of 2018 as a full-time member of the Education Team. These meetings can become contentious. The volunteer break room is some of the most contested space at NURFC, at least among the people who work with visitors. Ostensibly places where docents can unwind, it is also large enough to hold all people present for docent meetings. Contested understandings of history between staff members and volunteers unfold on the latter's home turf. Attempts at unveiling new tours also take place in this room, which are not always received well by the volunteers. Many of them come to see themselves, not without reason, as experts with regard to a given tour. The STE(A)M tour was such a tour. Ms. Verneida, one of these docents, went so far as to suggest that James and I give the STE(A)M tour in lieu of the volunteer docents. This of course transpired before guided tours were phased out in 2019.

While volunteers are a crucial part of NURFC's workforce, it was not always smooth sailing working with them. As Vangone and Ryan point out, many museum volunteers tend to have "conservative" views of history, and fixed ones at that. Staff discussions centered around the fact that many white docents would invoke Irish immigrants as an example of "white slaves," contradicting the historical record about the difference between African American chattel slavery and indentured servitude (personal interview: July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018). The anthropologist Mark Auslander (Eversley 2017) and Brown University fellow Matthew Reilly (Stack 2017) have both worked hard to debunk this myth, noting that historical events seem to have conspired to perpetuate the "meme" of Irish

enslavement. In the words of Auslander, this is simply “not true” (Eversley 2017). All the same, many volunteers and visitors would ask for and impart information about the “Irish slaves” to anybody who would listen.

Be that as it may, NURFC volunteers - as with volunteers at other museums - tend to push their own “agendas,” in the words of NURFC historical reenactor Novella Nimmo (personal interview: July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018). These agendas can range from ideas about what the appropriate tour might be for a group of Mennonite tourists with a seventh-grade education, or to what degree a docent should engage with the complicity of coastal African societies in the Triangle Trade. While an exploration of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice to say they lead to some very spirited discussions about exhibit interpretation within the confines of the volunteer break room. When people who are passionate about history come together, particularly people with varied backgrounds and experiences, they are bound to exchange very strong opinions about the nature of the history under interpretation.

Case in point was the volunteer meeting August 2018. During this meeting the focus was on how to standardize the tours docents usually give, as well as how to encourage them not to engage in problematic actions during tours like wrapping replica chains around the wrists of visiting school groups in the Anderson Slave Pen on Two. This was more difficult than one would think. Docents tend to be, to put it bluntly, rather recalcitrant about changes. Ms. Verneida, a volunteer who commanded deference from paid staff, including the directors, warned me that the docents are “creatures of habit” (personal

interview: July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Indeed, true to form, they did not take very kindly to suggestions and recommendations from the members of the Education Team. While I shared in the frustration many staff members felt, I could not help but notice that many of us discussed the volunteer docents in a similar way to a particularly difficult to train dog or horse.

## **Conclusion**

The fourth floor is, rather bluntly, a hodgepodge in terms of the use of space and who has access to it. Staff members, visitors, and volunteers interact on this level. The fact that it is contained in tight quarters entirely within the Pavilion of Cooperation makes its multifaceted nature that much more evident.

For example, visitors can research their family trees in the John Parker Library. Volunteers can take a break and recharge in the volunteer room. Staff members - at least those with access - enter and exit the collections space or use the little-used fourth-floor rest rooms. NURFC tenants can conduct business out of the rental office space.

In this way the little-used, compact fourth floor is NURFC writ small. It is the one place where the three pillars of a museum - staff members, volunteers, and visitors - have the potential to encounter one another against the backdrop of art and artifacts, including prototypes of the *Feelings/Geeter Mural*. It is also a haven away from the hustle and bustle one finds elsewhere at NURFC.

## CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION AND EVALUATIVE CRITERIA

This dissertation has largely focused on exploring exhibit interpretation and educational programs at NURFC. By and large, my focus has been filtered through sustained participation-observation with members of the administrative team and docents, as well as visitor surveys in galleries and with the *Rosa Parks Experience*, by far the museum's most interactive experience. In doing so, I have examined the overall narrative promulgated by NURFC, by way of deconstruction and amplification of its contribution to an understanding of museums which engage with the legacy of African American enslavement. This investigation culminates in a set of evaluative criteria which I hope will be of benefit to the institution kind enough to host me, going so far as to help me get my foot in the museum door in a socially and historically vital way.

The phrase "betwixt and between" comes to mind when considering NURFC. Many of the people and places headquartered on NURFC's first floor had uncertain fates. Questions included: how would the Implicit Bias Learning lab be integrated into the rest of the museum? How would the staff and docents be trained with regard to implicit bias? What would be the fate of the space occupied by Smith and Hannon Bookstore, not to mention Joyce Smith? What of the front desk? Who would be on the front lines? How would this area change both as the initial point of contact for staff and visitors as well as a workspace? At a broader level, what impact would changes in museum leadership have on the museum as a whole?

This broader question ties into the fact that the Romantic, triumphalist arc constructed around African American chattel enslavement extends into the present day without definitive resolution. This means that the present and future as depicted at NURFC is left unwritten. While laden with potential, this fact necessitates certain choices as no museum can do anything. The following evaluative criteria stem from what seem to me to be the clearest choices in light of preexisting project and experiences. This includes visitor experiences tied towards school groups – particularly STE(A)M – and programs engaging with modern-day enslavement.

### **NURFC: Getting Oriented**

This dissertation is largely situated around the architecture and geography of NURFC. In fact, the chapters correspond with the floors, with the first three centered on the recommended visitor experience. This is in large part due to the fact that NURFC's architecture is rather unique, particularly as far as museums are concerned.

NURFC's cavernous halls and multiple pavilions reflect what I have termed the "semi-corporate" nature of the museum. It makes for an impressive and monumental edifice. It also, unfortunately, makes it a little bit difficult for some visitors to navigate, given that the galleries do not necessarily "run together," as many guests have inquired about. The maps provided by the front desk help, as do the verbal instructions offered by volunteers and staff on the third floor, where we recommend visitors begin. NURFC's mobile app, which was developed during my first year with the museum, is also helpful.

Additional promotion of the museum's mobile app might help visitors get oriented prior to visiting the museum, similar to how the pre and post-visit lesson plans for school groups were developed with that goal in mind. Pamphlets which include both written instructions - as well with maps - might also help self-guided guests feel less "lost" while at NURFC. Signage when visitors exit elevators on each floor would also be helpful. These would come in particularly handy if floor staff or volunteers are on break and therefore unable to greet visitors when they disembark.

### **NURFC: Tying Things Together with STE(A)M**

Shortly before I was scheduled to defend this dissertation, it was announced that the Education Team would no longer be drafting new tours. Indeed, NURFC would no longer be offering guided tours, period. This section, which concerns the proposed STE(A)M experience, should therefore be thought of as a blueprint for lesson plans or educational programs intended to satisfy State and National Learning Standards.

The various galleries, exhibits, displays, and labs within NURFC would benefit from the existence of some common threads. Given the multifaceted nature of the proposed STE(A)M experience, implementing it would be a viable way of tying together the different aspects of the museum. The STE(A)M experience would also be an innovation; a scientifically focused program at a historical museum.

The Education Team-developed STE(A)M experience would bring students from floors three through one. It focuses on the cotton gin, cash crops

grown through the use of plantation technology, and tools such as boats used to help freedom seekers find their way north. It has the secondary benefit of satisfying learning standards not typically covered by NURFC tours and lesson plans.

Given that a key component of the new director's tenure has been developing new programs, finalizing and implementing the STE(A)M experience fits in with that initiative. Bringing in school groups for such a tour not only serves to provide an in-depth historical overview of American enslavement prior to the Civil War but also articulates the ingenuity of African Americans both as the drivers of early capitalism and navigators on the Underground Railroad. Implementing the STE(A)M experience would therefore both fit with the mission of the museum and potentially increase attendance.

This would place NURFC in a similar realm as Conner Prairie, a living history historical site in Indiana devoted to the pioneer experience, just outside of Indianapolis. There also happens to be considerable overlap between Conner Prairie and NURFC, as many NURFC employees began departing to take positions at Conner Prairie starting in the summer of 2017. The first was the Director of Museum Experiences, a white man in his late 30s named Richard. That same year, Conner Prairie announced a plan to attract year-round visitors through the establishment of a "STEM history museum" that would include exhibits on rural electrification (Durel 2017: 66). This integrated experience draws from STE(A)M topics germane to time and place. Doing so ensures that Conner Prairie is instituting STE(A)M activities that "maintain the identity and

mission of a history institution” such that the scientific experience is “sufficiently historical to fit within that mission” (Hughes and Cosbey 2016: 176). In a similar way, NURFC incorporates technology used on plantations as well as on the Underground Railroad in its proposed STE(A)M experience.

For example, the Education Team decided that the STE(A)M experience should focus on technology associated first and foremost with the Underground Railroad and also with enslavement on estates and plantations prior to the Civil War. One way would be to invoke the use of skiffs to cross the Ohio River under cover of night as a form of technology that takes advantage of buoyancy. This would ensure that the visitor experience was just as focused on time and place as well as on STE(A)M, ideally resulting in a “new cohesive form after being cooked together,” akin to “scrambled eggs” (Hughes and Cosbey 178). Such a fully integrated experience would ensure that a STE(A)M experience would not be out of place at a historical/call to action museum like NURFC.

One way the Education Team thought we could “scramble the eggs” was to include information about the Cincinnati 28, a group of freedom seekers who made a dramatic escape through the Queen City on their way to Canada, as a feature of the STE(A)M experience. Along the way they encountered key local historical figures such as Levi Coffin, a figure who looms large in Cincinnati’s Underground Railroad lore. As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, he often referred to himself as the “President of the Underground Railroad.” He was also referred to as such by Laura Haviland, a suffragist and abolitionist who witnessed the arrival of the Cincinnati 28 while visiting the coffins. The Cincinnati

28 also encountered figures mentioned at NURFC like John Hatfield and John Fairfield. Both were conductors on the Underground Railroad who rowed freedom seekers across the Ohio River. Hatfield was African American, while Fairfield was white.

The Cincinnati 28 also used various forms of technology during their trek north from Kentucky to Canada. The skiffs piloted by Hatfield and Fairfield are two examples, as were the coaches and buggies used by the freedom seekers as they disguised themselves as a funeral cortege as they made their way through Cincinnati. Moreover, the fact that Fairfield's skiff sank due to it being overloaded allows for a quick lesson on density and water displacement.

The Education Team agreed that plantation technology and the steam engine should also be included, as enslaved workers came into contact with them in various ways. However, we figured that we should focus on what I came to call "technologies of resistance" such as skiffs and using the night sky for navigating northward. This would serve to keep things focused on the Underground Railroad itself and keep STE(A)M situated within the history of that informal network to freedom. Including a discussion of the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd," which describes using the Big Dipper and North Star to orient oneself north, could potentially serve to add an artistic element, ensuring STEM is expanded into STEAM. The process of deciding what information to prioritize in the STE(A)M tours was highly cooperative and collaborative, involving many meetings in offices, conference rooms, and even break rooms on the fifth floor. Along the way we discussed such things as enhancing the visitor experience for

students by including pre and post-visit lesson plans introducing them to STE(A)M concepts.

The proposed STE(A)M experience also includes activities involving the melting point of water. This enabled students to explore the role changes of state from liquid to solid played in helping freedom seekers escape by crossing the Ohio River. The river tended to freeze during the winter months, which many freedom seekers took advantage of. This meant that the Ohio lent itself to well to satisfying learning standards on how water tends to go from solid to liquid. This is how freedom seekers like Eliza Young, the inspiration for the main character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as well as the tragic Margaret Garner, were able to cross the river from Kentucky to Ohio. In this way we managed to enable the overlap of such things as English Language Arts and Social Studies.

Exhibit by exhibit, display by display, floors one through three were all linked together through a series of work sessions and meetings on the fifth floor by the Education Team. We drew on the detailed mental maps many members of the team have of floors one through three. We also thought about how we could use the exhibits connected with the STE(A)M activities as signifiers intended to help orient student groups in advance for the pre and post-visit tours. Given that NURFC consists of three rather large pavilions connected by bridges, the pre-visit plans could only help with flow. James and I came up with an idea. After each activity I included information about which museum experiences would tie into such things as Astronomy and the Ohio River. For example, the

Astronomy Activities would mention that students would learn more about the “Drinking Gourd” while watching *Suite for Freedom* in the Harriet Tubman Theater. Students would be asked to identify the Pavilion of Courage, where the theater in question is located, and from there the Harriet Tubman Theater itself. Moreover, after an activity on buoyancy, students would also be asked to identify the Pavilion of Perseverance, where *Brothers of the Borderland* plays in the Flight to Freedom Theater. From there, they can be asked to circle on the map where exactly in the Perseverance Pavilion the film plays. That film introduces visitors to John Parker, who rowed freedom seekers across the Ohio River in a skiff.

The STE(A)M experience was originally envisioned as a guided tour. In early 2019, however, the Education Team learned that NURFC would be phasing out guided tours and replacing them with self-guided experiences. Including the STE(A)M tour as one of these experiences would be a way to preserve the most innovative elements of it including the use of technology on the Underground Railroad. It would also bring NURFC into the exclusive group of historical museums actively engaging with STE(A)M fields. The Education Team’s disappointment at the STE(A)M experience being back-burnered is tempered by awareness of its potential.

### **NURFC: Fighting Enslavement Locally**

As organizations such as End Slavery Now and its partner agencies frequently mention, Ohio is a hub for the transport of enslaved workers in the present day. This is partly because of the state’s continued status as “gateway to

the west,” so far as trafficking is concerned. Not only do interstates such as 75 and 70 provide easy access to sites across state and national borders like Michigan, Indiana, and southern Canada, but the poverty faced by many of the residents of Cincinnati lead many of them into becoming victims of trafficking and involuntary sex work.

There are many local organizations which serve human trafficking survivors in Cincinnati. Many of them have close ties with End Slavery Now, interacting with employees during monthly meetings and local events raising awareness about modern day enslavement. Some of these nonprofits, like Women Helping Women, Women of Alabaster, and Shared Hope, could benefit from the resources End Slavery Now has by being associated with NURFC.

By partnering with these local organizations NURFC could enhance its connections with Cincinnati. It would be less a tourist center associated with the Banks, and more of a community center as well. The amenability of NURFC’s leadership to such partnerships makes this a promising development.

NURFC’s understanding of modern-day enslavement focuses on the five categories outlined in chapter 1; sex trafficking, bonded labor, forced labor, domestic servitude, and child labor. The prison-industrial complex is largely absent from NURFC’s permanent displays. The only nod to it within NURFC’s walls is one panel on *Mural* by Feelings and Geeter.

Many individuals, both visitors and administrative staff, have noted the conspicuous absence of engagement with mass incarceration within a museum devoted to African American experience. Mr. West, senior historian, has been

particularly vociferous about this lack. The Slave Pen itself, a former jail for people of African descent who would be forced to perform unremunerated labor, indexes what should be a likely contemporary parallel.

In a city where many people have a relative who is either incarcerated or has been in prison, adding mass incarceration to the roster of modern-day enslavement would provide yet another link to the local community. Local educators with whom NURFC partners mention how many students have at least one family member in prison. It would tie into existing displays such as the Slave Pen on the second floor and the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment on the third, which abolishes enslavement except for when convicted of a crime. It may not be as conducive to support from Republicans like Ohio Senator Rob Portman, but it would have resonance with many Cincinnatians.

### **NURFC: Home to a Museum within a Museum**

NURFC is home to a multitude of artifacts related to both enslavement and the Underground Railroad. The museum's primary artifact is the John Anderson Slave Pen, discussed in Chapter 2 and in the evaluative criteria. The Anderson Slave Pen is also a memorial space where visitors, particularly school students, are asked and expected to be on their own behavior.

The decorous attitude expected of visitors to the Slave Pen is reminiscent of the behavior expected of guests at museums. This, along with the fact that the Slave Pen is an authentic piece of architecture with original fixtures, means that it is - in a sense - a historic house in its own right. Examining the Anderson Slave

Pen in light of Historic House Museum literature demands a reexamination of what constitutes such a museum.

The fact that there a highly fraught structure within NURFC makes the museum - not to mention the museum within a museum in the form of the Slave Pen - an auspicious, ground-breaking institution. Billing it as such would be of interest to visitors, academics, and museum professionals. The fact that it is an extant example of free-standing vernacular slave architecture makes it all the more unique and compelling a historic house.

### **NURFC's Multifaceted Roles**

Focusing on this set of evaluative criteria might help visitors not only navigate through the building itself – leading to a richer visitor experience – but also the multiple roles NURFC has adopted. It is a site of memory where one can contemplate one of the Western world's greatest sins. It is a site of racial conciliation. It is a nonprofit combating human trafficking in the present day. Finally, it is a place of employment and volunteerism where visitor experiences are staged for visitors of all ages but where school age children receive special attention.

As NURFC enters a new phase of its existence it will be interesting to see which of these roles are prioritized and how they are imbricated. NURFC as workplace, as museum of conscience, as repository for a historic house, and as educational institution all have profound implications for Museum Anthropology and Museum Theory. Time will tell which of these, if any, are prioritized.

## APPENDIX: PHOTOS

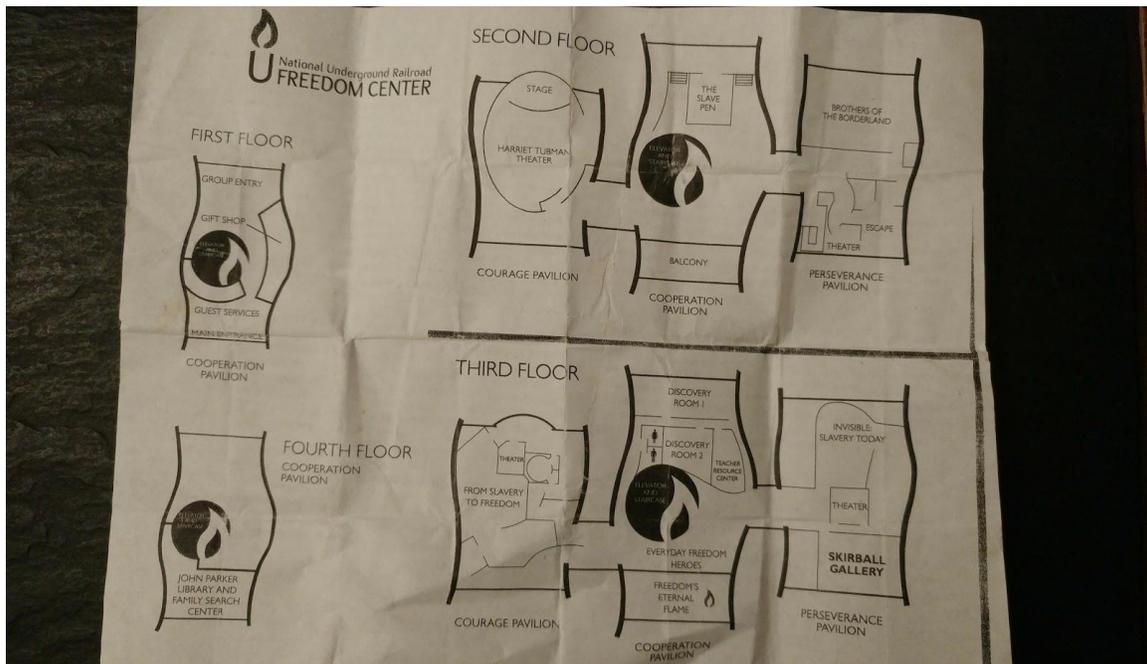


Photo 1: A map of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. Each floor is labeled above. Note how each of the three pavilions (Courage, Cooperation, Perseverance) are labeled. Note as well that the first and fourth floors are contained entirely within the Pavilion of Cooperation. Picture taken August 2018. All photos by author unless otherwise noted.



Photo 2: Smale Riverfront Park as seen from above in front of NURFC. Note the Covington, KY skyline on the south side of the Ohio River. Walkways and terraced garden plots are visible on the Ohio side. The park runs under the Roebling Bridge, seen in the center of this photo. Picture taken September of 2018.

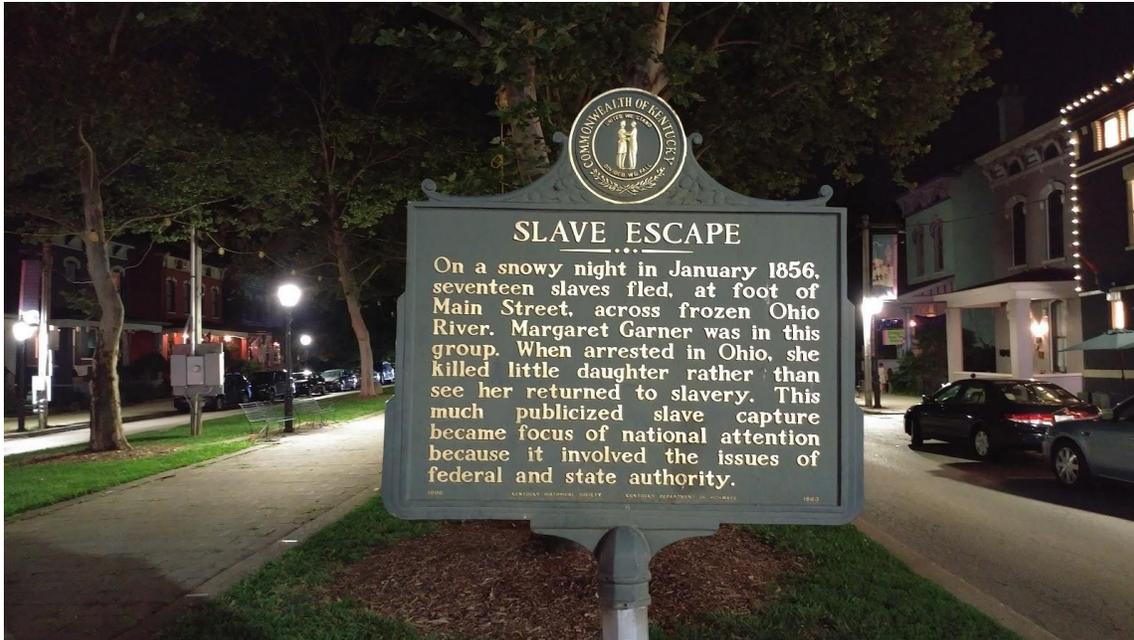


Photo 3: A marker posted by the city of Covington, KY commemorating the start of Margaret Garner's journey from enslavement into deeper tragedy and history. It stands at the corner of Main and 6th Street, less than a mile from the Ohio River. The text reads:

*On a snowy night in January 1856, seventeen slaves fled, at [the] foot of Main Street, across [the] frozen Ohio River. Margaret Garner was in this group. When arrested in Ohio, she killed [her] little daughter rather than see her returned to slavery. This much publicized slave capture became [the] focus of national attention because it involved the issues of federal state authority.*

Covington's main street is visible behind the sign. Picture taken June of 2018.

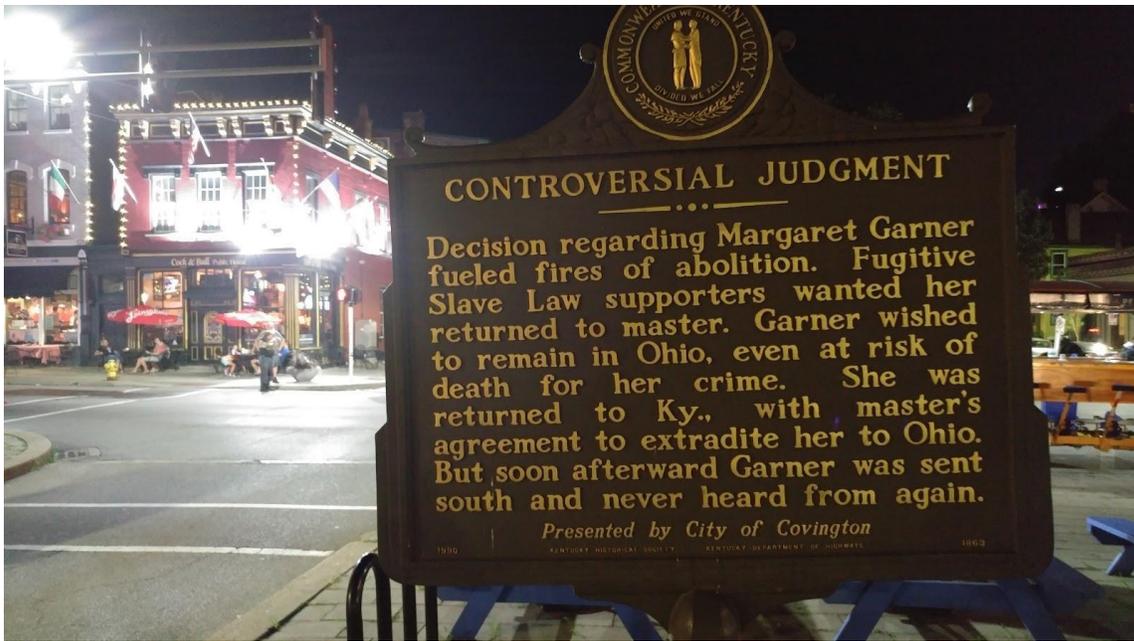


Photo 4: The obverse of the Garner marker at 6th and Main in Covington. Note how it emphasizes the role the tragedy played in galvanizing the abolitionist movement. Interpretive text reads:

*CONTROVERSIAL JUDGMENT: [The] [d]ecision regarding Margaret Garner fueled [the] fires of abolition. [The] Fugitive Slave Law supporters wanted her returned to [her] master. Garner wished to remain in Ohio, even at risk of death for her rime. She was returned to Ky., with [the] master's agreement to extradite her to Ohio. But soon afterward Garner was sent south and never heard from again.*

*Presented by [the] City of Covington*

The declaration that Garner “[was] never heard from again” contrasts with other accounts where Garner’s husband Robert provides an account of her eventual fate. Note the references to the role the Garner trial had in the development of the abolitionist movement, as well as the reference to the Internal Slave Trade. The bars and shops of Covington’s Main Street create a stark contrast with this tragic narrative. Picture taken in June of 2018.

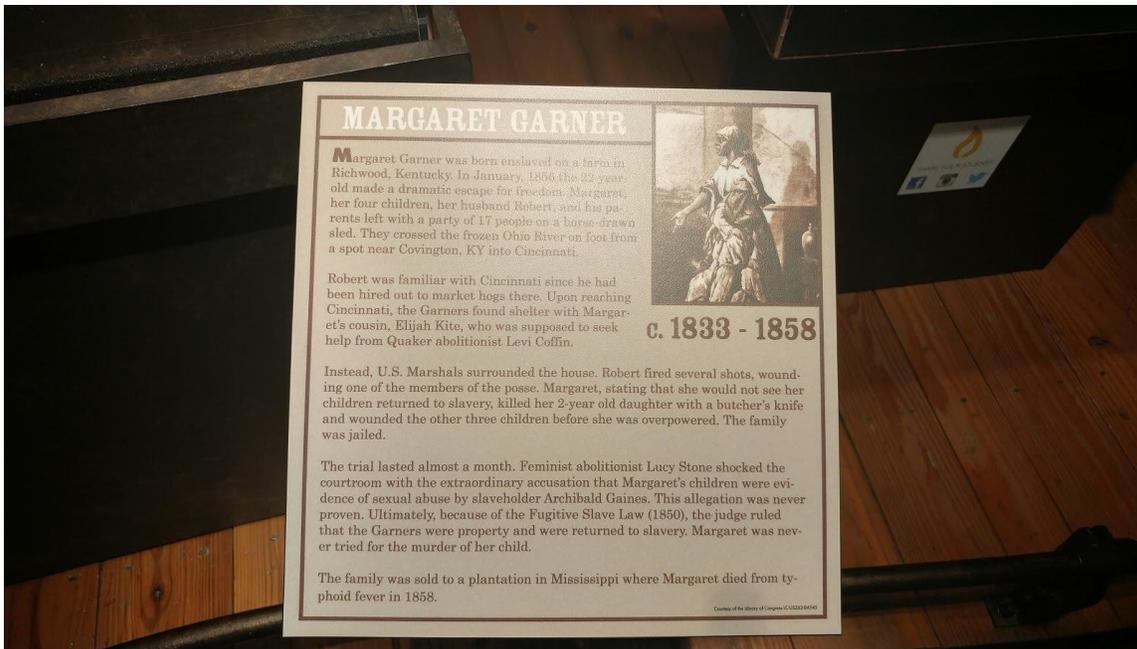


Photo 5: Interpretive text about Margaret Garner, included alongside a painting of her tragedy and a potjie pot unearthed from the plantation on which she was enslaved. The text reads:

*Margaret Garner was born enslaved on a farm in Richwood, Kentucky. In January, 1856 the 22 year old made a dramatic escape for freedom. Margaret, her four children, her husband Robert, and his parents left with a party of 17 people on a horse-drawn sled. They crossed the frozen Ohio River on foot from a spot near Covington, KY into Cincinnati.*

*Robert was familiar with Cincinnati since he had been hired out to market hogs there. Upon reaching Cincinnati, the Garners found shelter with Margaret's cousin, Elijah Kite, who was supposed to seek help from Quaker abolitionist Levi Coffin.*

*Instead, US Marshals surrounded the house. Robert fired several shots, wounding one of the members of the posse. Margaret, stating that she would not see her children returned to slavery, killed her 2-year old daughter with a butcher's knife and wounded the other three children before she was overpowered. The family was jailed.*

*The trial lasted almost a month. Feminist abolitionist Lucy Stone shocked the courtroom with the extraordinary accusation that Margaret's children were evidence of sexual abuse by slaveholder Archibald Gaines. This allegation was never proven. Ultimately, because of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850), the judge ruled that the Garners were property and were returned to slavery. Margaret was never tried for the murder of her child.*

*The family was sold to a plantation in Mississippi where Margaret died from typhoid fever in 1858.*

Note the qualified recounting of the question of the paternity of Margaret's children, as well as the passive construction of "she was overpowered" and "she was jailed," which renders her a central figure who is acted upon. Picture taken August of 2018.



Photo 6: *The Modern Medea* by Thomas Satterwhite Noble, who like Margaret Garner was connected with both Kentucky and the Cincinnati area. This painting is notable for being the first work of visual art that portrays a person of African descent akin to a Classical hero or heroine. Picture taken August of 2018.



Photo 7: A potjie pot unearthed from Maplewood plantation in Boone County, Kentucky. It was found in the location of an out kitchen, where it was likely used by an enslaved woman like Garner to prepare food. Note the frame of the Noble painting to the right of the pot. Picture taken August of 2018.

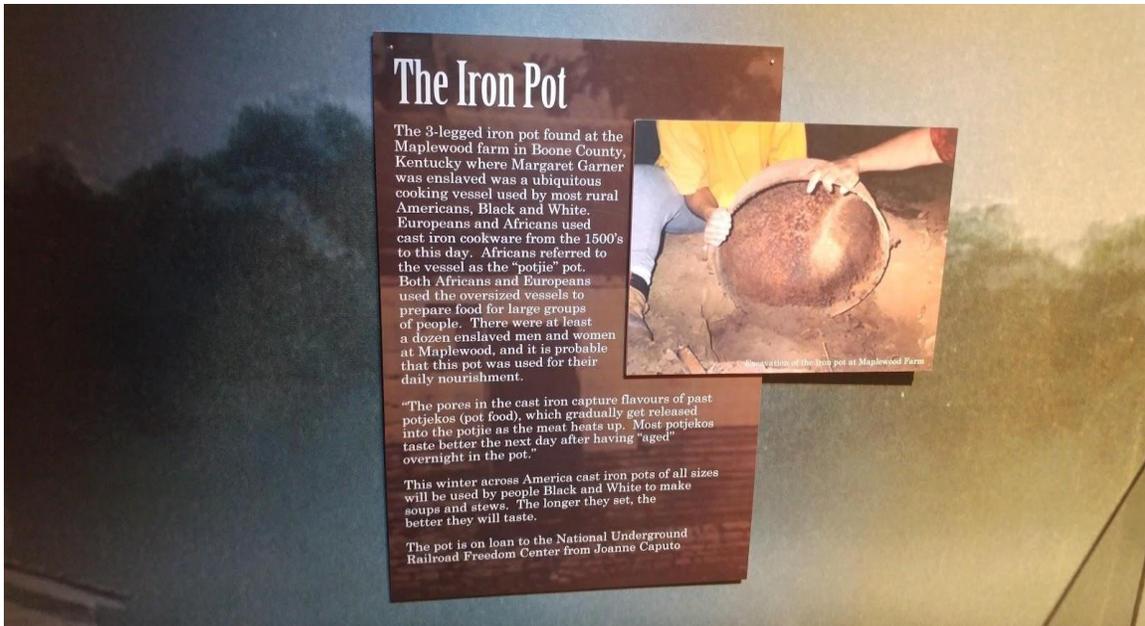


Photo 8: Interpretive text about the potjie pot, displayed above the artifact itself. It reads:

*The 3-legged iron pot found at the Maplewood farm in Boone County, Kentucky where Margaret Garner was enslaved was a ubiquitous cooking vessel used by most rural Americans, Black and White. Europeans and Africans used cast iron cookware from the 1500's to this day. Africans referred to the vessel as the "potjie" pot. Both Africans and Europeans used the oversized vessels to prepare food for large groups of people. There were at least a dozen enslaved men and women at Maplewood, and it is probable that this pot was used for their daily nourishment.*

*"The pores in the cast iron capture flavours of past potjekos (pot food), which gradually get released into the potjie as the meat heats up. Most potjekos taste better the next day after having "aged" overnight in the pot."*

*This winter across America cast iron pots of all sizes will be used by people Black and White to make soups and stews. The longer they set, the better they will taste.*

*The pot is on loan to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center from Joanne Caputo.*

Note the emphasis on pots such as this being used by "most rural Americans, Black and White" emphasizing perceived racial harmony through the manipulation of domestic technology. Picture taken August of 2018.



Photo 9: The full display on Margaret Garner. Note the interpretive text on Garner in the foreground. Picture taken August of 2018.

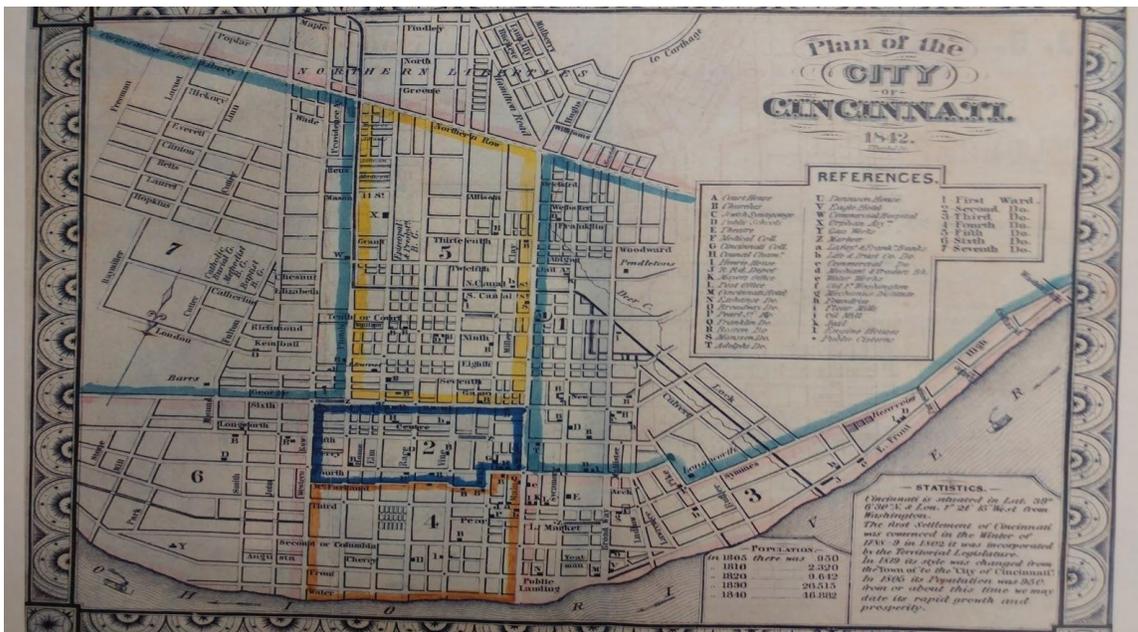


Photo 10: An 1842 map of Cincinnati. The area outlined in orange near the Ohio River contained "Little Africa," a neighborhood comprised primarily of free African Americans. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is also located in the orange area, between the streets labeled "Second" and "Front." The area in dark blue contained the pejoratively named "Bucktown," which was settled by African Americans, Irish Americans, and Americans of Jewish and Muslim descent. Little Africa and Bucktown were the site of race riots in 1841. Picture taken February of 2018.

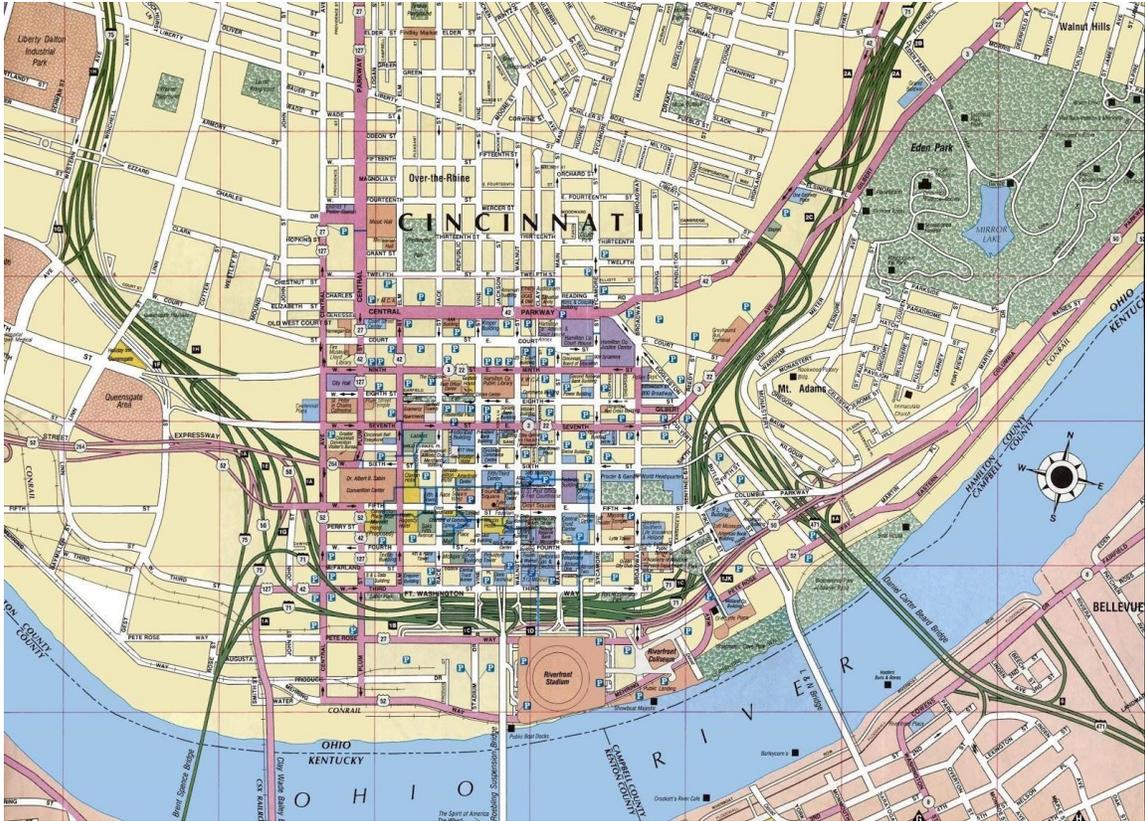


Photo 11: Cincinnati today. Note how downtown and Over-the-Rhine are framed by I-75 and I-71, as well as Liberty Avenue, the large diagonal street towards the top of the map. Image courtesy of Cincinnativiews.net (accessed 2-28-2018).



Photo 12: Flat screen TVs and advertisements for “Confederate Currency and Memory,” the changing exhibits during the time of my fieldwork. These sibling exhibits concerned representations of enslaved workers on Confederate money and the role memorials to the Confederacy play in contemporary memory. Note the flat screen TV, which usually plays a video on a loop introducing NURFC. Picture taken June of 2016.



Photo 13: Advertisements for upsells and ticket prices - including membership fees - posted above the front desk. At the time of this photo, the temporary exhibit was one on Confederate Currency and Memory, advertised on the right. Note that prices are broken down with and without upsells, and that the time's for Rosa Parks are given in tiny writing. Note also that acronyms for the upsells are used. Picture taken June of 2018.



Photo 14: The John A. Roebling Bridge and Covington, KY skyline as seen from NURFC's third floor balcony. Parts of Smale Riverfront Park are visible in front of the bridge. Picture taken in November 2017.



Photo 15: NURFC's exterior. One enters the central pavilion, the Pavilion of Cooperation. The Pavilion of Courage is to the left, and the Pavilion of Perseverance is to the right. Note the connecting breezeways. The glass building to the left of the Pavilion of Courage is the GE building. Photo taken February of 2018.



Photo 16: *The Rosa Parks Experience*, sponsored in part by P&G. Visitors who have purchased tickets to this upsell sit on the bus benches and put on VR goggles and headphones. A staff member, volunteer, or intern attaches smartphones, on which an app runs, to the front of the goggles and plugs in the headphones. The equipment is regularly sanitized with cleaning wipes, visible on the table to the right. Photo taken April 2018.



Photo 17: A banner advertising *The Rosa Parks Experience*. This banner is located to the right of Rosa Parks. It is moveable in the case of events hosted on the Third Floor. Note the advertisement for the Implicit Bias Learning Lab behind it, which is located on the First Floor. Note also the windows fronting the third-floor terrace to the banner's right. Photo taken April of 2018.



Photo 18: A replica of an early Klansman's robe, on display at the end of *From Slavery to Freedom*. Note the red color and demonic face as opposed to the more notorious all-white color. According to NURFC docents, the color was meant to evoke blood. Photo taken in February of 2018.



Photo 19: The entrance to *From Slavery to Freedom*. The visitor is immediately confronted with Baird's "The Slave Trade." Note the number 15 next to the painting, which is its number in NURFC's audio tour. Photo taken April of 2018.



Photo 20: Detail of “The Slave Trade” which depicts Europeans and Africans both participating in the Atlantic slave trade. Note the trappings of wealth - and lack thereof - such as fine clothing, bare feet, jewelry, and headgear. The plaque next to the painting reads:

*Auguste-Francois Biard (1799-1882) produced this painting in 1840 as a protest against slavery during a time when it was still legal in the French colonies in the Americas, especially in the Caribbean islands. The painting depicts a scene on the African coast where captives are being bought and sold. Though painted in a style that scholars call “Romanticism,” Biard accurately detailed how the Atlantic slave trade operated on the West and Central African coasts. Biard wanted people who saw the painting to be moved to act against the institution of slavery.*

*Large-scale paintings at that time rarely exposed the cruel and contemporary subject of slavery. Few patrons of the arts were willing to buy such a piece for their homes because of the torture, sadness, and greed such scenes showed. Eventually, the painting was given to Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, a British anti-slavery activist who worked to end the Atlantic slave trade. Neither Biard nor Buxton lived to see the Atlantic slave trade abolished in 1886.*

Note the emphasis on abolitionism and protest, as well as the situation of the slave trade on the African coast. Photo taken April of 2018.



Photo 21: "Caribbean Port." Note the figures of enslaved people sitting in front of what is probably supposed to be a customs house as European men haggle in the foreground. Note also the water in the background, indicating the maritime-based nature of the Triangle Trade. Photo taken April of 2018.



Photo 22: The painting "The Middle Passage." Note the ghostly images of enslaved workers emerging from the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, tying the crossing of this body of water to the legacy of African American enslavement. Water imagery, not to mention the crossing of borders more generally, factors into the NURFC experience. Photo taken April of 2018.



Photo 23: The Commemoration Room. The column filled with cowrie shells and glass beads dominates the center of the chamber. Note the vitrines in the wall which contain artifacts from slave ships. The blue ceiling above is meant to evoke water, and some of the stones in the wall are carved with the names of slave castles and slave ships.

The plaque into the antechamber, the wall of which is visible in the foreground, reads: *This space honors the African people, both unnamed and uncounted, who lost their lives during the Middle Passage. Carved into these walls are names, not of the enslaved, but of the “castles” where they were held on the African coast, and a fraction of the slave ships that carried them away from their families and homelands.*

*The trade beads and cowrie shells symbolize their ancestors by the millions who survived into slavery. Though they came unwilling to these shores, their labor helped to build America, and their dynamic spirits shaped our culture.*

*We grieve for the victims of the Middle Passage.*

*We honor the sacrifice and suffering of the enslaved.*

*We celebrate those who overcame slavery to create new lives.*

Note how the text in the second paragraph anticipates the next room by referring to the fact that the “labor [of enslaved African American workers] helped to build America.” photo taken April of 2018.

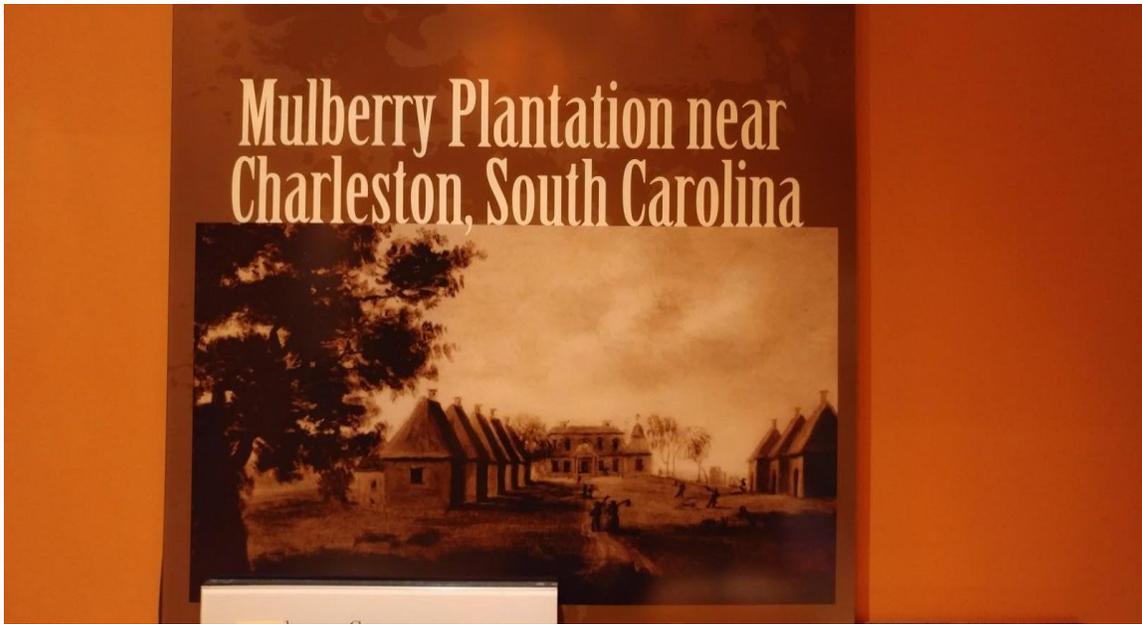


Photo 24: Picture of Mulberry Plantation in Charleston. Note the arrangement of “slave architecture,” quarters for enslaved workers, lined up in front of the “big house.” This is an example of the indexing of the chattel enslavement system through architecture in order to convey wealth and status, as written about by authors such as Vlach. Photo taken April of 2018.



Photo 25: Rice growing and household artifacts on display in *Freedom*. They include a fanner - a flat-bottomed basket used to separate rice grains - and a household iron. Photo taken April of 2018.



Photo 26: Tobacco hanging from the ceiling of *Freedom's* room devoted to early cash crops. Tobacco leaves would typically be hung up to dry in this fashion after enslaved workers would harvest them. Such crops were grown in the American colonies of Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina. Photo taken April of 2018.

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## Fugitive Slaves, Domestic Insurrections, and Export Taxes

After the vote on the slave trade, the Convention passed, without much debate, the fugitive slave clause, which prohibited states from giving freedom to slaves who escaped into free states. Congress would later pass two fugitive slave laws – in 1793 and 1850 – to enforce this provision.

In addition to these provisions, the Constitution obligated the national government to suppress “domestic insurrections,” which included slave rebellions. The Constitution also banned taxes on exports, most of which at the time were produced by slave labor.

After the Convention one of South Carolina’s delegates, General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, assured his state legislature: “We have a security that the general government can never emancipate them, for no such authority is granted.” He concluded that “In short, considering all circumstances, we have made the best terms for the security of this species of property it was in our power to make. We would have made better if we could; but on the whole, I do not think them bad.”

Most Southern delegates agreed, while a number of people in the North opposed the Constitution because of its many compromises with slavery. A letter to a Massachusetts paper condemning the Constitution noted that ‘this lust for slavery, [was] portentous of much evil in America, for the cry of innocent blood. . . hath undoubtedly reached to the Heavens, to which that cry is always directed, and will draw down upon them vengeance adequate to the enormity of the crime.’

Photo 27: Interpretive text on the Fugitive Slave Act. The text reads:

### **FUGITIVE SLAVES, DOMESTIC INSURRECTIONS, AND EXPORT TAXES.**

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Note the mention of “many compromises with slavery.” Picture taken August of 2018.



Photo 28: Cotton gin from the 1820s. Cotton gins like this one were used to extract cotton seeds much more quickly than by hand. They were operated by enslaved workers, who were forced to keep up with this new technology at every stage of cotton production. Photo taken March of 2018.



Photo 29: Display of Lane Theological Seminary. Note the church pew replicas and the interpretive texts, including the board books. This display indexes the role of religion in fighting African American chattel enslavement and, by extension, modern day enslavement. The cardboard cutout represents Jermaine Wesley Loguen, an abolitionist, author of a slave narrative, and bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He was a popular subject for historical reenactments by members of NURFC's education team. Photo taken March of 2018.



Photo 30: Interpretive text on Salmon P. Chase, abolitionist governor of Ohio, later a member of Lincoln's cabinet and a justice of the Supreme Court. To the left is an engraved silver pitcher given to him by the "Colored Citizens of Cincinnati." Picture taken August of 2018. The interpretive text reads:

*Salmon P. Chase (1808-1873) was an influential anti-slavery lawyer, politician, and judge who began his career in Cincinnati, Ohio. Chase often used the law in unique ways to defend the rights of fugitive slaves and support abolition. Opposing the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act, Chase argued that a slave leaving a slave state for a free state is no longer a slave. The anti-slavery cause would define Chase's career, prompting him to help create political parties, such as the Liberty party and the Free Soil Party, both opposed to the institution of slavery. After serving on the Cincinnati City Council, Chase became Governor of Ohio in 1855. President Abraham Lincoln appointed Chase as secretary of [the] Treasury in 1860, and nominated him as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in 1864. After the Civil War, Chase presided over several landmark cases that endorsed Reconstruction in the South, a political era that served to reunite the divided country.*

Picture taken August of 2018.



Photo 31: The first tombstone of Salmon Portland Chase. Text reads:

Salmon P. Chase  
Born Jan. 13 1808  
Died May 2 1873

Picture taken August of 2018.

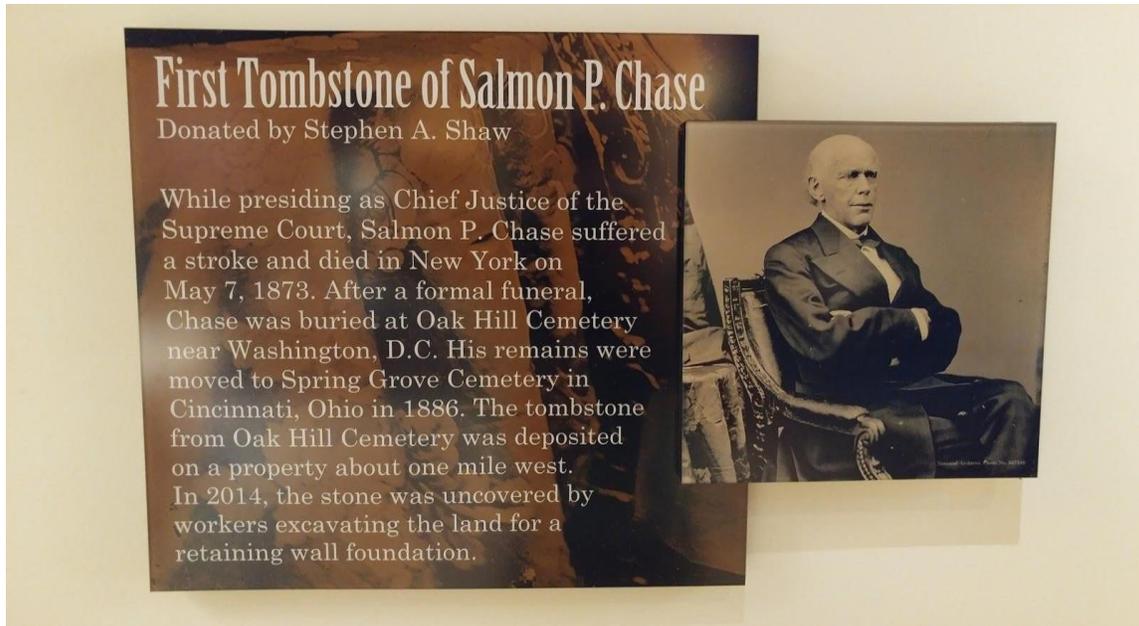


Photo 32: Interpretive text for Salmon P. Chase's first tombstone. Text reads: While presiding as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Salmon P. Chase suffered a stroke and died in New York on May 7, 1873. After a formal funeral, Case was buried at Oak Hill Cemetery near Washington, D.C. His remains were moved to Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1886. The tombstone from Oak Hill Cemetery was deposited on a property about one mile west. In 2014, the stone was uncovered by workers excavating the land for a retaining wall foundation. Picture taken August of 2018.



Photo 33: A silver pitcher given to Salmon P. Chase by “The Colored People of Cincinnati,” and interpretive text. Text reads:

**ENGRAVED SILVER PITCHER, PRESENTED TO SALMON P. CHASE BY THE COLORED PEOPLE OF CINCINNATI. MAY 6, 1845.**

This silver pitcher was presented to Salmon P. Chase by Mr. A. J. Gordon in a ceremony on May 6, 1845 on behalf of the free black people of Cincinnati as an expression of gratitude for Chase’s efforts in defense of the slave Samuel Watson.

Watson was being conveyed on the steamboat *Ohio Belle* from Arkansas to Virginia by a slave handler when on January 21st, 1845 the boat landed at Cincinnati. Watson stepped off the boat and went missing for a brief period before being located, seized, and detained by his handler. The matter was then taken before a magistrate to obtain a certificate for his removal. Mr. Watson and his handler were subsequently brought before Judge N. C. Read who had to decide if Watson was a fugitive slave subject to recapture, or was now a free man by virtue of his presence in a free state.

Salmon P. Chase, a well-known lawyer, abolitionist, and advocate for fugitive slaves, was one of three attorneys who represented Watson in court. Chase made a spirited and powerful closing argument that Watson was now a free man, but the judge rejected Chase’s points and allowed Watson to be retaken by his handler and returned to Virginia to resume a life in bondage.

Although Chase lost the case, the free black population of Cincinnati had watched the case carefully and were moved by the passion and force of Chase’s arguments. A decision was made to present Chase with an engraved pitcher for his work on the Watson case and for “public services in behalf of the oppressed.” The pitcher was fabricated and engraved by the Cincinnati firm of E. & D. Kinsey. The presentation ceremony took place on the evening of Tuesday, May 6, 1845 at the Union Baptist Church.

The pitcher remained in the possession of Salmon Chase's descendants until its recent donation to [the] Cincinnati Museum Center by Chase's great-great grandson, William Benjamin.

Note the account of Chase's involvement with another freedom seeker who butted up against the Fugitive Slave Act and was, in the words of chief historian Carl Westmoreland, "a gangplank away from freedom" (personal interview: July 10th 2018). Also note the portrayal of Chase as a white savior of sorts. Picture taken August of 2018.



Photo 34: A display on Cincinnati's free Black communities. Note the sign for the Dumas House, a boarding house owned by African Americans which served as a safe house on the Underground Railroad. It stood in downtown Cincinnati, close to where the present-day international headquarters of P&G is located. In the foreground is a barbershop pole, an artifact which indexes the profession many residents of these communities held. Photo taken March of 2018.



Photo 35: A printing press of the sort used by the local abolitionist pamphleteer, James Birney. Photo taken February of 2018.



Photo 36: Statue of a woman in *Freedom's* display on the role of women in the abolitionist movement. Photo taken February of 2018.

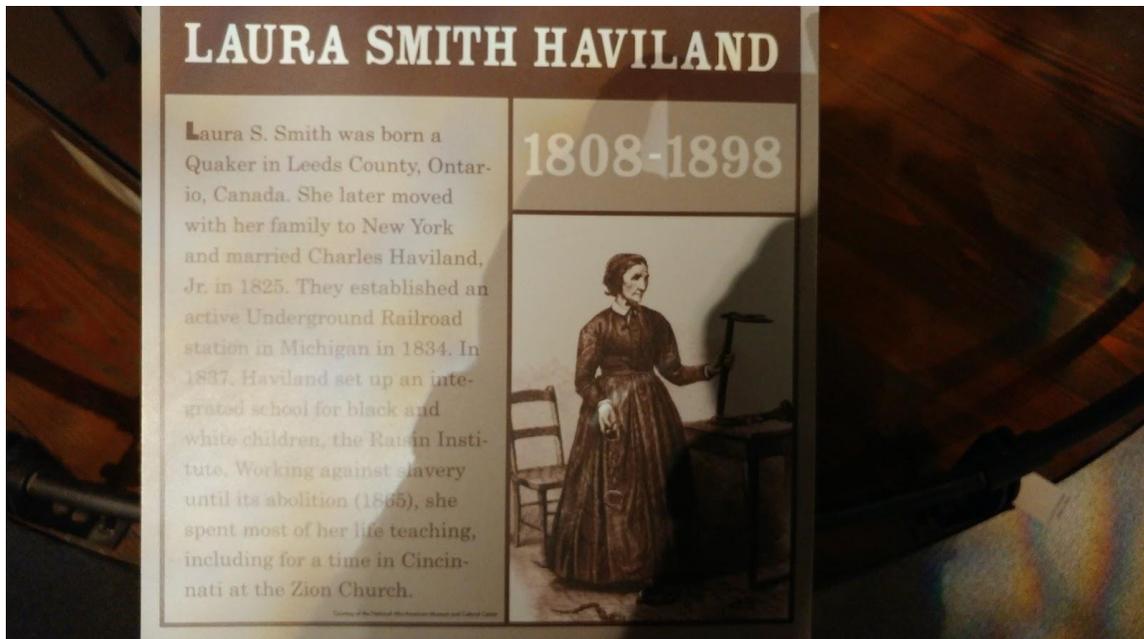


Photo 37: Placard about Laura Smith Haviland, a feminist and abolitionist NURFC includes in its narrative by way of establishing Cincinnati as a “hotbed of abolitionism.”

The placard reads: *Laura S. Smith was born a Quaker in Leeds County, Ontario, Canada. She later moved with her family to New York and married Charles Haviland, Jr. in 1825. They established an active Underground Railroad station in Michigan in 1834. Haviland set up an integrated school for black and white children, the Raisin Institute. Working against slavery until its abolition (1865), she spent most of her life teaching, including for a time in Cincinnati at the Zion Church.*

Haviland witnessed 28 freedom seekers, the largest successful such group, move through Cincinnati while staying with Levi Coffin. Photo taken February of 2018.



Photo 38: Vitrine displaying artifacts from the Civil War. Note the replica of the Emancipation Proclamation. Photo taken April of 2018.



Photo 39: Vitrine displaying artifacts from the Civil War. Note the placards and board books in the foreground. Photo taken April of 2018.



Photo 40: Battle flag of the army of Northern Virginia. This was temporarily moved in 2018 into the Skirball Gallery for a temporary exhibit on Confederate Currency and Memory, including the display of flags such as this and statues of Confederate Generals in public. Photo taken April of 2018.



Photo 41: Exhibit and display of the Reconstruction Era Amendments to the US Constitution (13th through 15th) in the final room of NURFC's *From Slavery to Freedom* Gallery. Behind the displays is interpretive text on other Civil Rights advancements such as overturning antimiscegenation laws, women's suffrage, and Native American progress. Photo taken in February of 2018.

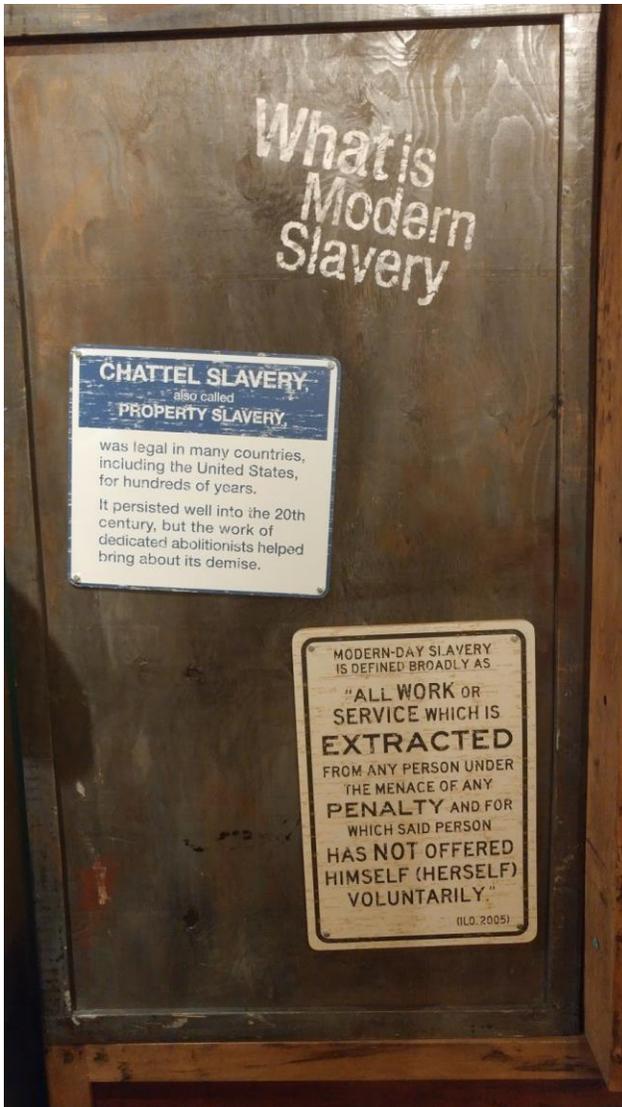


Photo 42: Signs on display in *Invisible: Slavery Today*. Note how they contextualize enslavement in the present day as distinct from chattel enslavement in the US. Photo taken in February of 2018.

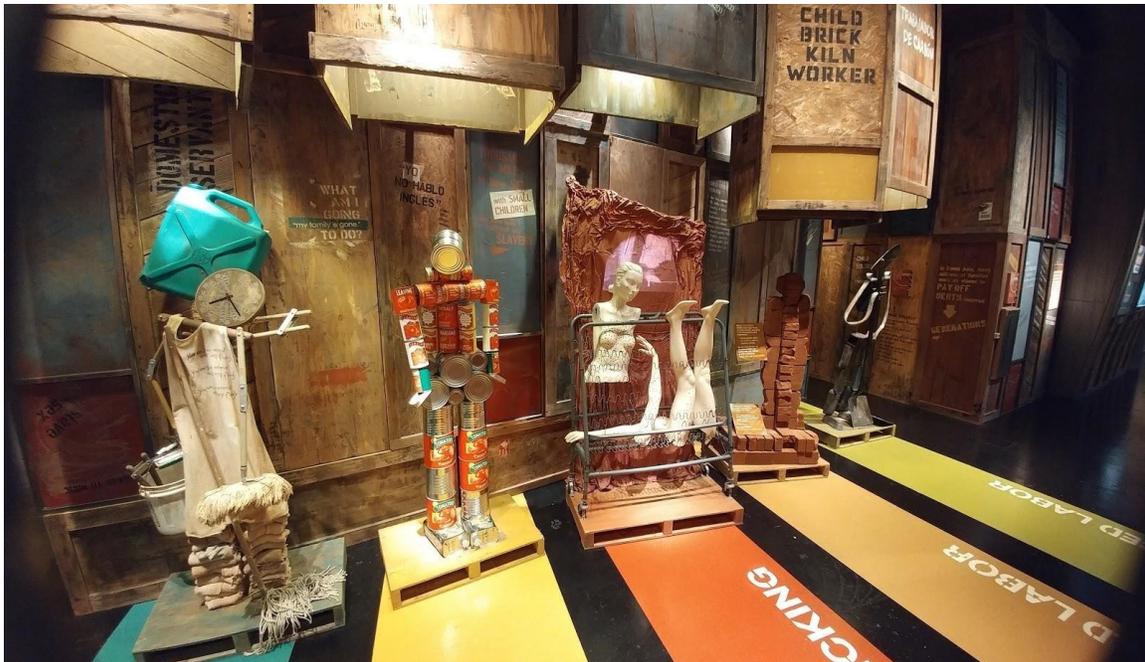


Photo 43: Statues at the entrance to *Invisible: Slavery Today*. From left to right: domestic servitude, child labor, sex trafficking, bonded labor, and forced labor. The mannequin which is part of the sculpture representing sex trafficking is drilled with 400 holes, each representing a forced sexual encounter. Photo taken in February of 2018.



Photo 44: *Escape in Invisible: Slavery Today*. Through the doorway is *Invisible*, the first room in this gallery. Note the contrast in color and lighting, as well as information on organizations fighting modern day enslavement. Picture taken March of 2018.



Photo 45: The small theater in which “The Struggle Continues” plays on a loop. Note the varied posters surrounding the screen. Photo taken March of 2018.

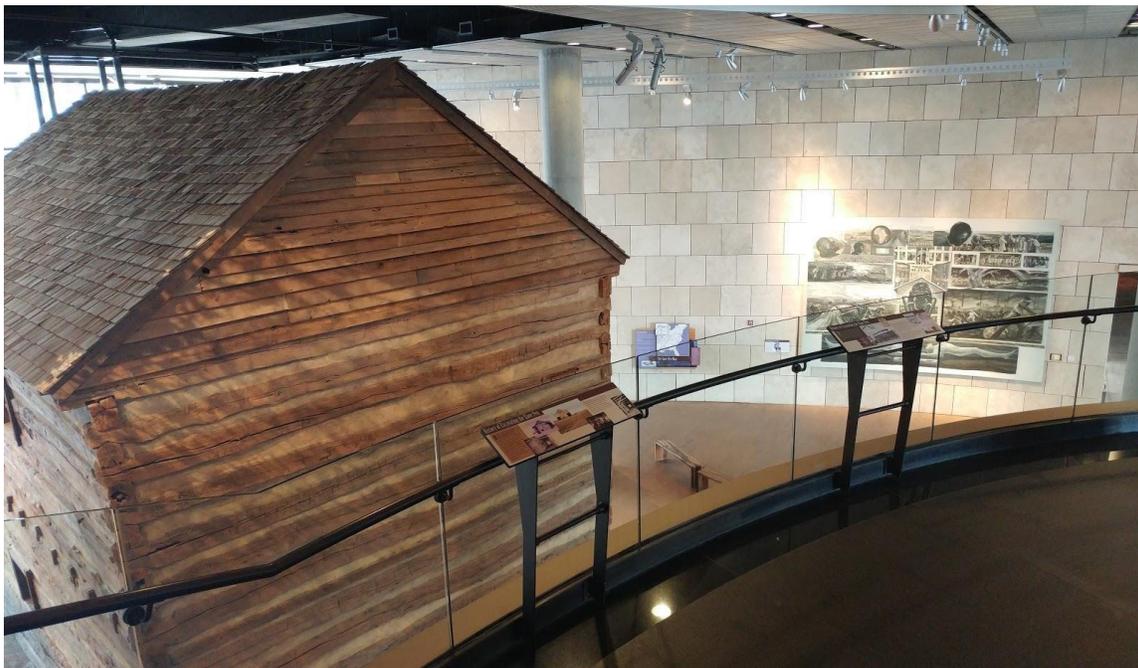
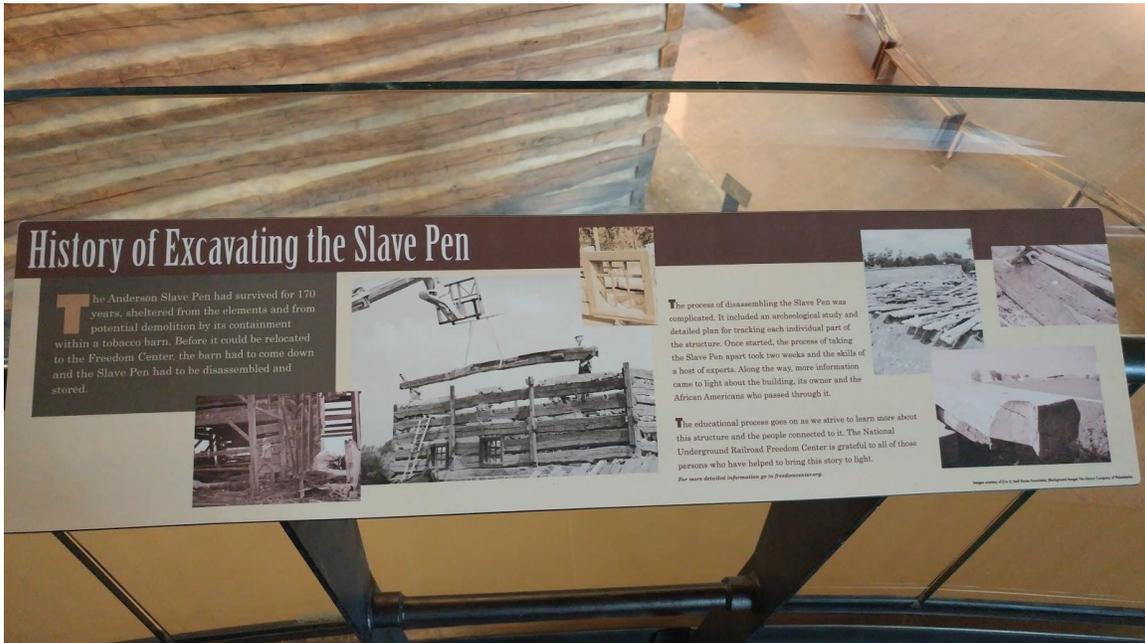


Photo 46: The John W. Anderson Slave Pen, as seen from the mezzanine of the Grand Staircase. There are panels with interpretive text by the railing. Note “Mural” by Tom Feelings and Tyrone Geeter hanging in the background. Picture taken May 2018.



Photos 47 and 48: Interpretive text on how the Anderson Slave Pen was moved from Mason County, KY to NURFC. Note the differences between how the building looks in situ versus at the museum. Pictures taken May 2018.



Photo 49: A close-up of one of NURFC's second story windows from outside the museum on Second Street. The side of the John W. Anderson Slave Pen is visible, along with some of the metal bars used to evoke the shape of the removed fireplace and chimney. Note the reflection of buildings in downtown Cincinnati visible in the window. Photo taken January of 2019.



Photo 50: The Anderson Slave Pen, a Historic House Museum in a museum. Note the second-floor windows, which make the building visible from the street. Also note the Feelings/Geeter *Mural* on the wall nearby. Picture taken May of 2018.



Photo 51: The visitor entrance to the Slave Pen, situated where the fireplace would have been. Stones from the fireplace line the entrance. Note the metal bars meant to evoke the fireplace and chimney, as well as the marker in front with commemorative verses by Carl Westmoreland, NURFC's senior historian. Picture taken May of 2018.



Photos 52 and 53: The upper loft of the Slave Pen where enslaved men were confined and chained, and a close-up of one of the o-rings. Lengths of chain were run through the o-rings, and shackles were run through the chains. Photos taken June 2018.



Photo 54: A detail of the window of the Slave Pen. The bars are original. Picture taken June of 2018.

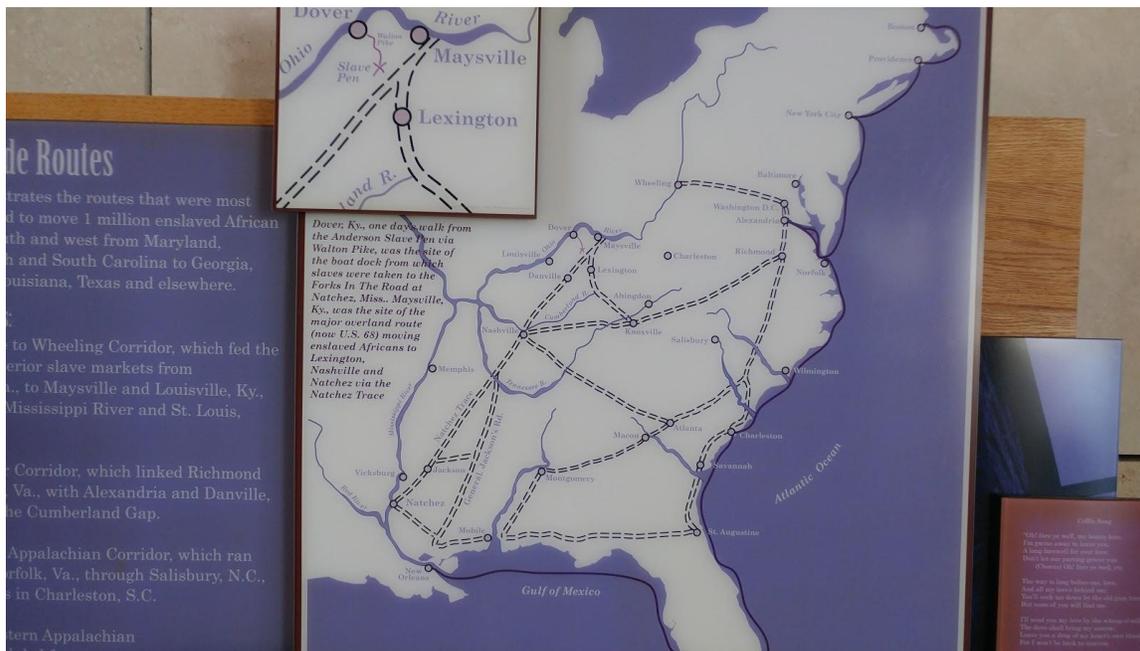


Photo 55: Map of Internal Slave Trade routes. The Internal Slave Trade was also known as the "Second Middle Passage." Note the inset which specifies the Slave Pen's location viz. the Internal Slave Trade. This inset makes clear how close the Slave Pen was to the Ohio River port community of Dover, KY. Picture taken June of 2018.



Photo 56: *Mural* by Tom Feelings and Tyrone Geeter. This picture hangs opposite the Anderson Slave Pen. Note the depictions of both Middle Passages at the top of the *Mural*. Note as well the juxtaposition of images of the Anderson Slave Pen and mass incarceration. Photo taken June of 2016.



Photo 57: Detail of *Mural* by Tom Feelings and Tyrone Geeter. Note the depictions of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the Internal Slave Trade on the upper left. Note also the depiction of the Anderson Slave Pen and mass incarceration in the center. Photo taken June of 2018.



Photo 58: Aminah Robinson's *RagGonOn*. It hangs in NURFC's Great Hall across the entrance to the Pavilion of Perseverance from *Mural*. Note the long panels along the bottom of both pieces, as well as the "one day in 2004" panel which runs the length of the left side of "Journey's II." Also note the closed shades to the right, intended to minimize light damage. Picture taken in June of 2018.



Photo 59: The Pavilion of Courage as seen from the Great Hall/Pavilion of Cooperation on NURFC's second floor. Photo taken May of 2018.



Photo 60: The Harriet Tubman Theater in the Pavilion of Courage on NURFC's second floor. Picture taken May of 2018.



Photo 61: Exterior shot of the Pavilion of Courage from the street. Up the stairs to the right in the photo is the street entrance to the Harriet Tubman Theater. This is the primary entrance for those accessing the first floor of NURFC without entering through the Pavilion of Cooperation. Note the glass GE building next to NURFC. Picture taken April of 2018.



Photo 62: NURFC's replica cotton gin on the breezeway between the Pavilions of Cooperation and Perseverance. This display can be moved behind the curtain to the right when not wheeled out for school groups. Note the sack of cotton the right of the platform which we use to illustrate the size of a child-sized bag of cotton. Note also the Feelings/Geeter *Mural* which hangs in the Great Hall. Picture taken February of 2018.



Photo 63: Detail of the replica cotton gin. Raw cotton is fed into the top of the machine on the left, the user turns the crank, and then a drawer on the right side is pulled open so the cotton can be removed. Note the tub of cotton which can be passed around, as well as the laminated images of enslaved workers picking cotton. Picture taken February of 2018.



Photo 64: A display on Levi Coffin in the interactive *Escape Gallery*. A prosperous merchant who called himself the “President of the Underground Railroad,” he and his wife Catherine ran a safe house in Cincinnati. The display includes a replica of Coffin’s false-bottomed carriage, where he would often transport freedom seekers “below the boards.” Note the display on Henry “Box” Brown behind the Coffin display, which includes a children’s book and a replica of the crate in which Brown mailed himself to freedom. Picture taken June of 2018.



Photo 65: A display on Catherine Coffin, wife of the self-appointed “President of the Underground Railroad. Unlike her husband who gets his own display, she appears as part of a larger display about figures associated with the abolitionist movement. One of her neighbors is Sojourner Truth. Note the dates above and behind her, which are part of a wall-mounted, three-level timeline which is on one wall. Picture taken June of 2018.

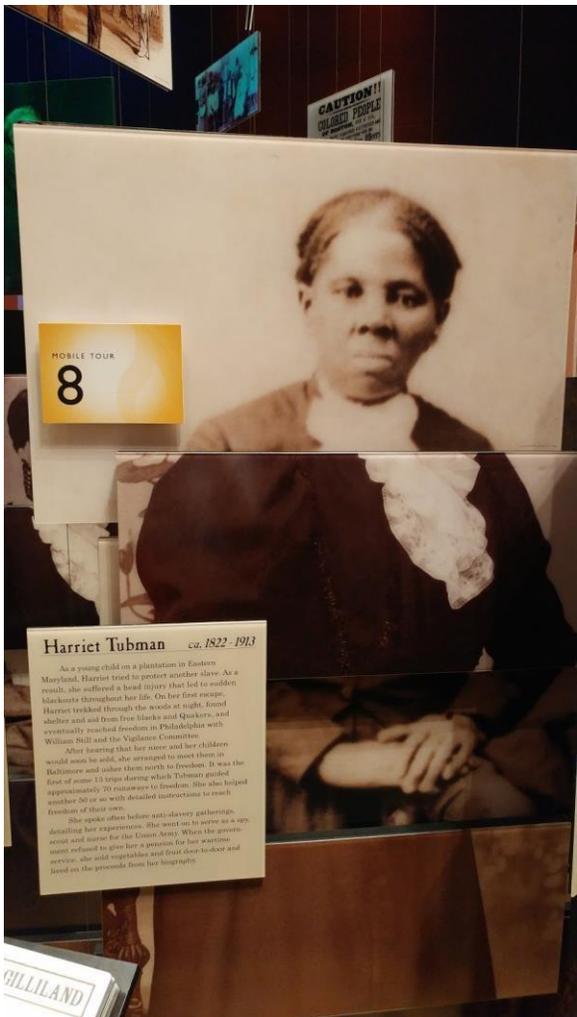


Photo 66: A display of Harriet Tubman. Her display is part of a larger one on figures associated with the abolitionist movement. Aside from NURFC promotional material, this is the only representation of Tubman at the museum. When prompted, many visitors to the *Rosa Parks Experience* evinced interest in a virtual reality simulation focused on the Underground Railroad conductor. Picture taken June of 2018.

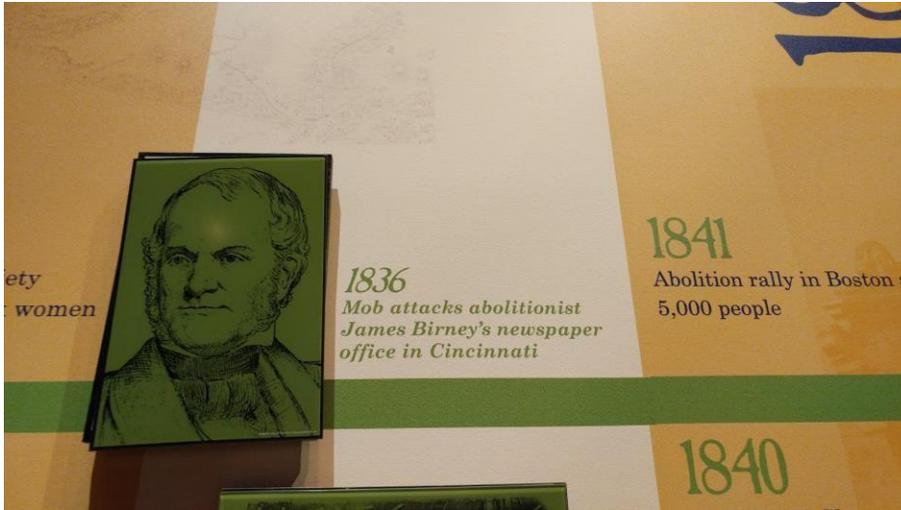


Photo 67: Detail from the three-level timeline which covers a wall in the *Escape* Gallery. Note the emphasis on Cincinnati-area abolitionist publisher, James Birney. Picture taken June of 2018.



Photo 68: Display on Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Cincinnati. Her display is part of a larger one on figures associated with the abolitionist movement. Note the reproductions of media, including newspaper clippings, which are part of the installation. Picture taken June of 2018.

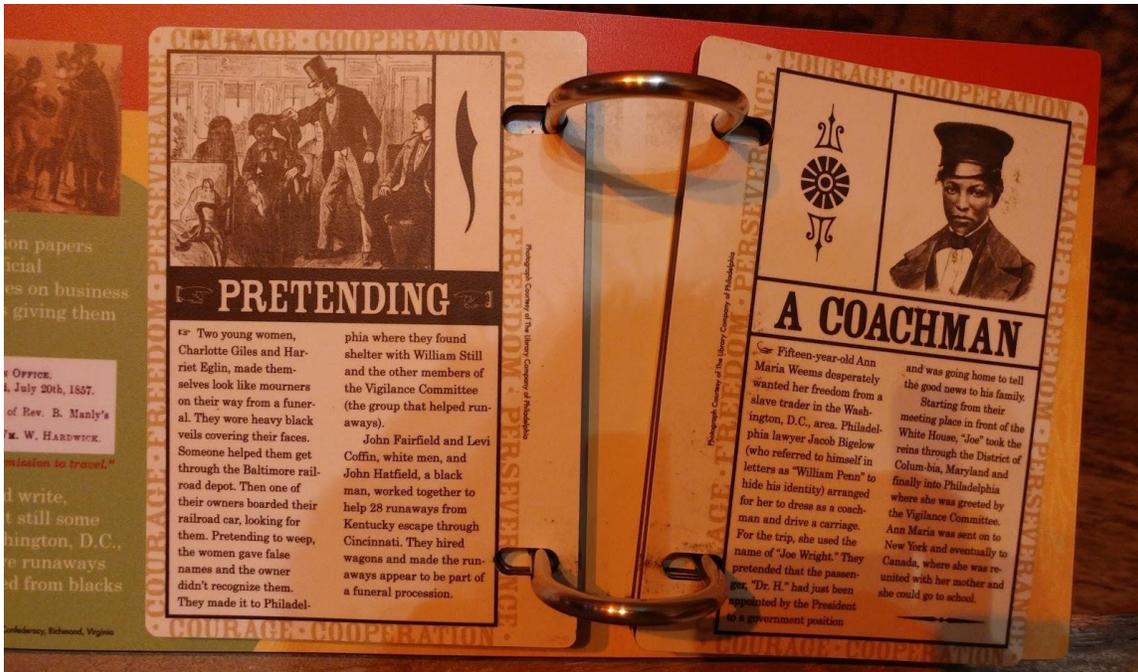


Photo 69: One of the board books on display in the *Escape* Gallery. The page labeled "Pretending" includes information about the Cincinnati 28, a group of freedom seekers who fled from Kentucky to Canada through Cincinnati. Note the emphasis on interracial cooperation in the discussion of the roles of station master Levi Coffin and conductors John Hatfield and John Fairfield. Picture taken June of 2018.



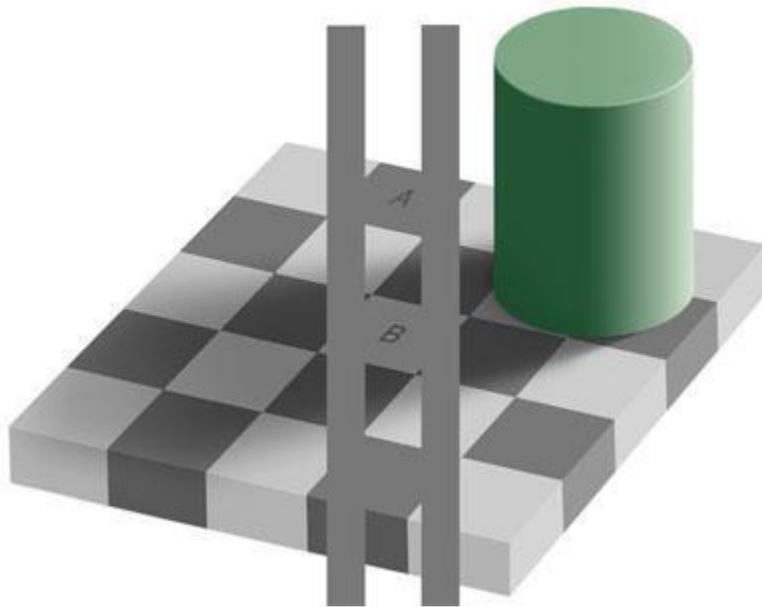
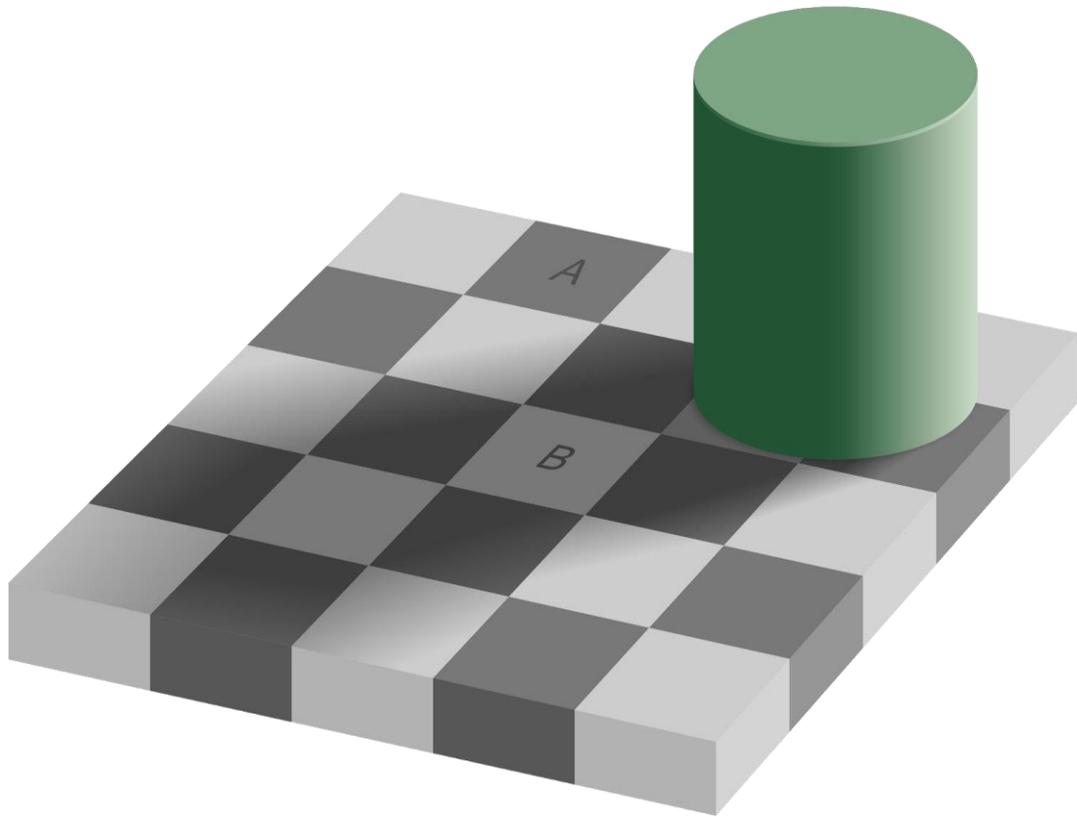
Photo 70: The Implicit Bias Learning Lab seen through the glass doors on the first floor. The four tablets are intended to be used to take the Implicit Association Test. Picture taken June of 2018.



Photo 71: Interior of the Implicit Bias Learning Lab. The poster for the Cincinnati Ballet on the far wall is where the staff member who facilitates *Open Your Mind* begins his program. The wall displays are intended to provide fictionalized accounts of Implicit Bias, but unfortunately reify bias themselves. Photo taken June of 2018.



Photo 72: The Cincinnati Ballet poster in question. The dancers in the yellow and purple tights are men. Note that they are wearing slippers instead of pointe shoes with ribbons, a detail visitors who dance often note. Picture taken: June of 2018.



Photos 73 and 74: The Adleson Checker Shadow Illusion and its proof. Due to our mind interpreting the shadow shading as a genuine shadow, as well as the checkerboard pattern, we perceive square A as darker than square B. The proof above demonstrates that they are the same shade of grey.



Photo 75: The executive alcove. The Executive Director's office is to the right, the Deputy Director's to the left. Note the outline of the Roebling Bridge visible through the left window. Picture taken in July of 2018.



Photo 76: A view of the fifth floor foyer. The elevator bank is to the right. Note the reception area in the foreground, the desk poking out behind the wall in the center, and the double doors to the Board Room in the background. The executive alcove is to the right of the Board Room doors. Picture taken July of 2018.



Photo 77: The hallway running down the other side of the fifth floor foyer. The windows of the Fishbowl are visible on the left side of the picture in the foreground. The filing cabinets visible on the right front a row of cubicles. Picture taken February of 2019.



Photo 78: The other side of the main workspace seen in the photo above this one. One arrives at this view by walking past the board room and making a left turn. The doors on the right lead to offices which afford views of the Great American Ballpark and the Cincinnati skyline. The filing cabinets on the left front cubicles. Picture taken February of 2019.



Photo 79: The curving hallway past the executive alcove. On the left are offices which follow the curve of the Pavilion of Cooperation. They afford views of downtown Cincinnati. Note the portraits lining the right wall: Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Sarah and Angelina Grimke. Picture taken February of 2019.



Photo 80: One of the Director's offices. During my time at NURFC this space was occupied, in succession, by Chris and Tara, both of whom headed the Education Team at different points. The windows overlook the Great American Ballpark. Note the wall on the left which curves, following the wall of the Pavilion of Cooperation. Picture taken February of 2019.



Photo 81: The John Parker Library through the glass on the fourth floor. Note the curved staircase directly ahead. Photo taken August of 2018.



Photo 82: The John Parker Library as seen through the glass doors. Note the emblazoned logo. Photo taken August of 2018.



Photo 83: The door to the collections space. Note the electronic lock to the left of the door, which requires a specialized key card to open. Picture taken August of 2017.



Photo 84: Artist's sketch of *Mural*. This hangs just outside the door to the rental space. Note the plaque next to it. Picture taken August of 2018.

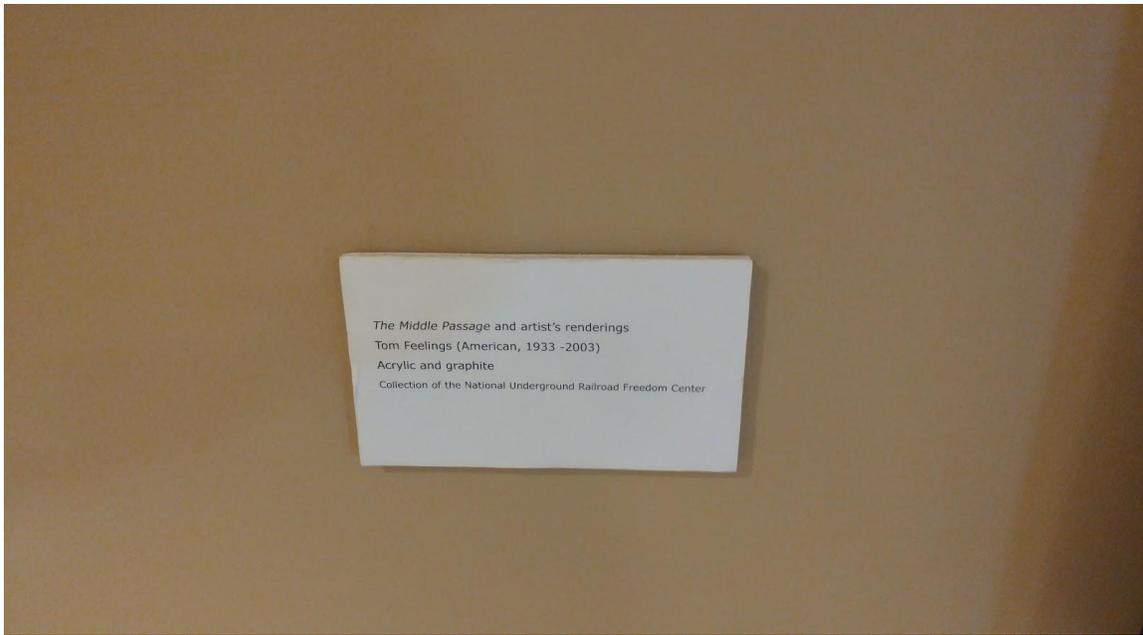


Photo 85: Plaque for artist's renderings of *Mural*. Picture taken August of 2018.



Photo 86: Details of *Mural*, as drawn by Tom Feelings. Picture taken August of 2018.



Photo 87: The volunteer room. Note the white board outlining decorum on the floor. This is primarily aimed at the youth docents. Picture taken August of 2017.

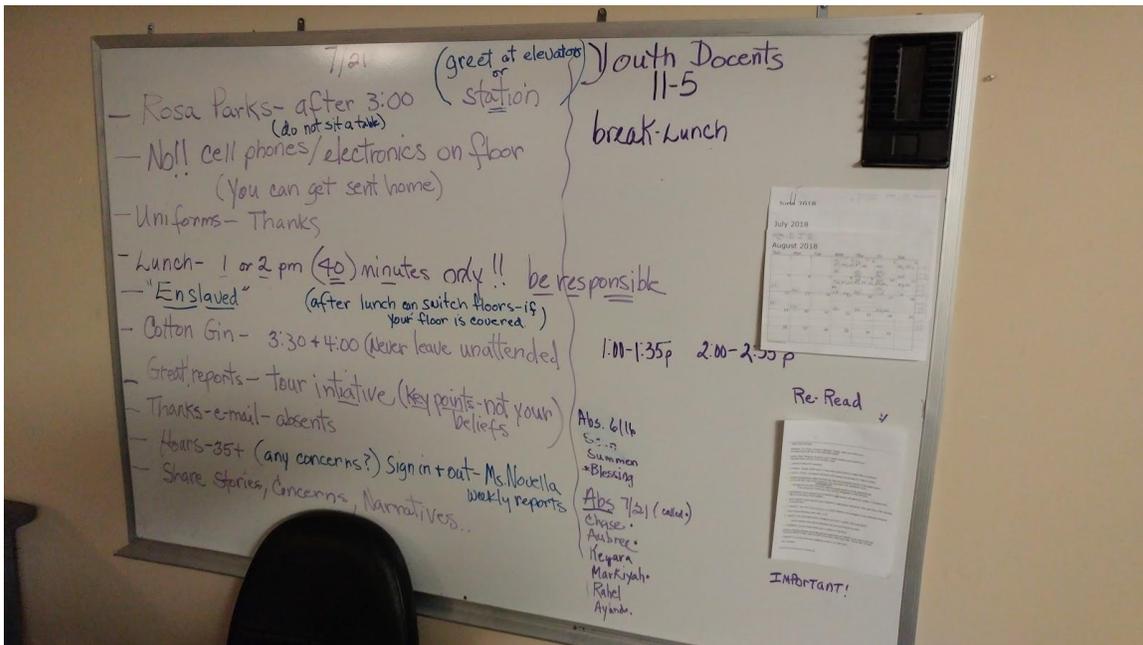


Photo 88: The white board in the volunteer break room. Note the admonishment against cell phones and electronics. Picture taken August 7th 2018.

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