



# **Alton receives Network to Freedom passport stamp**

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ALTON - Alton is now an official site for the Underground Railroad's "Network to Freedom" National Park Service passport stamp program and federal and local officials will celebrate the announcement during a special ceremony Monday, Jan. 15 starting at 10 a.m. at the Alton Visitor Center, 200 Piasa St., Alton.

The Alton Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau received the Network to Freedom passport stamp in December honoring the Underground Railroad sites in the Rocky Fork area of Godfrey. Both the New Bethel AME Church and the St. Louis Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America assisted in the application for the passport stamp.

Timothy Townsend, National Park Service Historian and representative of the NPS Network to Freedom, along with local historian Charlotte Johnson, Alton Mayor Brant Walker, Godfrey Mayor Mike McCormick, Pastor Brian Williams of the New Bethel AME (Rocky Fork) Church and Kevin Botterbush, representing the Warren Levis Boy Scout Camp will be recognized during the ceremony. Invited guests will enjoy a tour of the Rocky Fork area immediately follow the ceremony. Eric Robinson, a local Underground Railroad historian, will offer commentary during the tour

The Alton Visitor Center is now a location where National Park passport holders can have their books stamped with a cancellation stamp for the Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program administered by the National Park Service. The dated stamp is embossed with the words "Alton-Godfrey, Illinois" and the logo for the Network to Freedom program. Alton is also part of a local network of NPS passport stamps which include the Lincoln National Heritage Area and the Lewis & Clark National Historic Trail.

"This is a great honor for our region and the Rocky Fork area in particular," Alton Regional Convention & Visitor Bureau President and CEO Brett Stawar noted. "Thanks to the efforts of our local historians, Alton and Godfrey are on the National Park Service

Network to Freedom map. And now we have a passport stamp which enhances our region's presence in this program."

Alton's riverfront location along the Mississippi River played a vital role in helping slaves make connections to freedom in the northern U.S. The Rocky Fork area, located at the confluence of the Piasa and Rocky Fork Creeks west of Alton, was established as a community of African American freedom seekers as early as 1816. It grew into a more developed community in the 1830s and was one of the first Free State stops for slaves escaping Missouri. Fugitive slaves made their way up the Mississippi River to Piasa Creek, which they then followed to Rocky Fork Creek. Because Rocky Fork was deep in the woods, its location helped discourage slave catchers. Some slaves moved on from there to northern areas following the route of local creeks and rivers. Some escaping slaves remained in Rocky Fork and were among those who helped organize the Rocky Fork AME Church.

The Alton Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau offers Underground Railroad tours for the general public the last Saturday of every month. The cost is \$25 per person. The tours are led by Eric Robinson, of JE Robinson Tours. Tours are available at: [www.VisitAlton.com/Shuttles](http://www.VisitAlton.com/Shuttles) or by calling the Alton Visitor Center at (800) 258-6645.