

Underground Rail Tours in Alton Begin With Series of Two-Hour Guided Shuttle Tours

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ALTON - Take a journey on the infamous Underground Railroad in Alton during a series of two-hour guided shuttle tours scheduled throughout the spring and sponsored by the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau. The first tour of the season will be held Saturday, Feb. 29.

Seats are available for the 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 29 Underground Railroad Tours which will feature renowned Underground Railroad historian J.E. Robinson. The shuttle tours begin at the Alton Visitors Center, 200 Piasa St. Tickets are \$25 per person. To purchase tickets by phone, please call the Tourism Bureau at 618-465-6676 or 1-800-258-6645. Tickets may also be purchased online at www.visitalton.com/shuttle. Advance ticket purchase is suggested due to the popular nature of these tours.

Mr. Robinson will be the conductor on these journeys taking visitors to sites scattered throughout Alton and Godfrey where escaped slaves took refuge as they worked their way to freedom over 150 years ago. While there were no railroad tracks or trains present on the Underground Railroad, the effort to find freedom from slavery resulted in a series of deliberate and organized safe places for those escaping bondage. Located in the free state of Illinois, Alton's riverfront location along the Mighty Mississippi played a vital role in helping slaves make connections to freedom in the northern U.S. Scattered throughout Alton and surrounding areas, remnants of this period in history still exist.

New Bethel-Rocky Fork AME Church, which is located in Godfrey, originated before the Civil War when free people and slaves crossed the Mississippi River to begin life in Illinois, which was a free state. According to the National Park Service, as early as 1816, Rocky Fork Church was one of the first Free State stops for slaves escaping Missouri. In the 1830s, a more organized Underground Railroad route was established through the African Methodist Episcopal Church. This area continued to serve as both a way stop and escape community after the Missouri Emancipation Proclamation of 1865.

Alton's Union Baptist Church is one of the oldest Black churches in Illinois. It was populated by free Blacks and organized in 1836. John Anderson, Union Baptist's founding pastor, was Alton abolitionist newspaper editor Elijah P. Lovejoy's pressman prior to Lovejoy's death in 1837 by an anti-abolitionist mob.

Additional Underground Railroad Shuttle Tours are scheduled for March 28, April 25, May 30, June 27, Sept. 26 and Oct. 24. For more information on the Underground Railroad shuttle tours or to make advance registrations, please contact the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau at (800) 258-6645 or go to www.RiversandRoutes.com.