



**For Immediate Release**

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**Birmingham Museum to lead multi-community public history project on  
local Underground Railroad connections**  
*Michigan Humanities Council grant will create traveling exhibit and virtual map in 2023*

**BIRMINGHAM, MI**, November 15, 2022—The City of Birmingham is the recipient of a grant from the **Michigan Humanities Council** that would bring recent discoveries about the Underground Railroad in Oakland County to a broader audience. The project will coordinate research teams in five communities—Birmingham, Farmington, Pontiac, Royal Oak, and Southfield—to create a traveling exhibit and interactive virtual map that displays the physical locations and people involved in the anti-slavery movement in Southern Oakland County in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The project, entitled **“The Underground Railroad and Abolition Movement in Southern Oakland County-Traveling Exhibit and Website”** is made possible in part by a grant from Michigan Humanities, an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. It will focus on how local Oakland County communities developed a network to help formerly enslaved people elude bounty hunters to reach safety in Canada, and how physical proximity, transportation, and interpersonal connections of those involved may have played a part.

The grant award of **\$14,475** from the Michigan Humanities Council will be combined with a contribution of **\$2,500** from the Friends of the Birmingham Museum, as well as donations of professional services and volunteer personnel contributions. Birmingham Museum Director **Leslie Pielack** wrote the grant, and will act as Project Director for the yearlong project. Consultants for the project include **Carol Bacak-Egbo** as historical and educational consultant, and Oakland County Historical Commissioner **Rose Richardson** as African American cultural consultant. The **Oakland History Center** (a.k.a., Oakland County Pioneer and Historical Society) will play a major role in promoting the project and hosting the interactive virtual map, as well as providing research resources, volunteers, and meeting space. Volunteer researchers at the **Farmington, Royal Oak, and Southfield Historical Societies** will share their documentation and findings with those of the Oakland History Center (Pontiac) and Birmingham in a one-of-a-kind collaboration that will unite the stories of all five organizations to show their historic connections in the exhibit and interactive online map.

The project was inspired by recent research by the Birmingham Museum that brought to light the Underground Railroad connections of abolitionist Elijah Fish, and formerly enslaved freedom seeker George Taylor, both buried in Greenwood Cemetery. Taylor fled to Michigan in 1855 via the Underground Railroad, coming through Oakland County and then settling in Birmingham after first attaining freedom in Canada. George and his wife Eliza were well known in town and were the first African Americans to own property in Birmingham. While researching the Taylors, museum staff found that Birmingham pioneer Elijah Fish was actively involved in Oakland County’s anti-slavery movement from the 1830s on. With these new findings, the museum was successful in getting the two burial sites listed on the National Park Service’s Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, bringing greater awareness to the importance of Birmingham in the bigger story of the anti-slavery movement in Michigan. In the process, the little-known but established history of Underground Railroad activity in several nearby communities led to a project idea to help raise public awareness of this local heritage, ultimately resulting in the grant award from Michigan Humanities. The primary objective is to show how the various communities were connected rather than isolated in their efforts to fight slavery, and to make this little known history more accessible to a diverse public that includes families, students, educators, and researchers.

The project relies heavily on passionate and skilled researchers, such as retired U-M Professor of Political Science, **Nancy Kursman**. “I am fascinated to be working with others to shed light on the history of our local community that up to now we have not been able to link together,” she said. “I am excited to be a part of a project that will find the stories of people who struggled for freedom, and the path this struggle took. Connecting the dots between the voices of our ancestors can inspire others to learn whose shoulders we are standing on today.”

**Bacak-Egbo**, who serves as Oakland County Parks Historian, shares Kursman’s excitement. “I am thrilled that we are finally going to be able to research, document and share some of the stories of Oakland County abolitionists and freedom seekers in a well-structured, community-based project. It is long overdue!” Bacak-Egbo, who has been tracing early abolitionists and freedom seekers in various parts of Oakland County, is especially enthusiastic about bringing the different threads of the history together. “We have scattered bits and pieces of the stories but have lacked a systematic way to pull them together. This is a powerful way to begin that process.”

The traveling exhibit and interactive virtual map will be developed after the research has been concluded, toward the end of 2023, and will be available for at least three years. The intent is to take the exhibit all over Oakland County so it can be experienced free to the public in libraries, schools, public buildings, and community centers. The interactive digital map will be hosted by the Oakland History Center as part of its online map collection. Bacak-Egbo is optimistic about the future of this line of research. “There is so much interest in this topic area that this project will likely be merely a first step toward an expanded effort in the future to bring on new stakeholders and include more Oakland County communities.”

*The Birmingham Museum is open to the public **Tuesday-Saturday, 1 to 4 PM**, and by appointment. The museum also provides online content and educational materials about Birmingham’s story, including our Underground Railroad history. We also feature regular social media posts and photos on Instagram ([https://www.instagram.com/birmingham\\_museum\\_mi/](https://www.instagram.com/birmingham_museum_mi/)), Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/TheBirminghamMuseum/>) and Twitter ([https://twitter.com/bham\\_museum](https://twitter.com/bham_museum)). More video content on our current exhibit, lectures on historic Birmingham, and educational video shorts for adults and children can be found on our YouTube channel at [https://www.bhamgov.org/history/museum/lecture\\_presentation\\_videos.php](https://www.bhamgov.org/history/museum/lecture_presentation_videos.php) Want to know more about us? Check us out at [www.bhamgov.org/museum](http://www.bhamgov.org/museum). Or contact us by phone at **248-530-1928**.*

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