OUR STORY

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is a museum of conscience, an education center, a convener of dialogue, and a beacon of light for inclusive freedom around the globe.

Our physical location in downtown Cincinnati is just a few steps from the banks of the Ohio River, the great natural barrier that separated the slave states of the South from the free states of the North. Since opening in 2004, we have filled a substantial void in our nation’s cultural heritage. Rooted in the stories of the Underground Railroad, we illuminate the true meaning of inclusive freedom by presenting permanent and special exhibits that inspire, public programming that provoke dialogue and action, and educational resources that equip modern abolitionists.

MISSION

Our mission is to reveal stories of freedom’s heroes, from the era of the Underground Railroad to contemporary times, challenging and inspiring everyone to take courageous steps for freedom today.
On behalf of the Board of Directors and leadership at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, thank you for your continued support. In this report you will see that we have experienced significant growth and change in the last year, providing us with the momentum to continue our journey from great to greatness as we approach our 15th anniversary in August 2019. As we prepare for the exciting year ahead we’d like to share a few highlights.


We hosted several impactful exhibitions throughout the year. Two that challenged and redefined African American identity and representation in history and the arts were The Kinsey African American Art & History Collection, presented by Macy’s, and Confederate Currency: The Color of Money, presented by BB&T. Programs such as the John & Francie Pepper Freedom Lecture Series featuring speakers like Ethan Michaeli, Ronald C. White, and Dr. Nikki Taylor continue to inspire members and attendees alike to be active participants in discussions regarding history, race, culture and modern abolition. The education department recently launched a new Speak & Sign initiative – providing authors, local and national in scope, to engage with the public regarding their social justice driven work. The staff continues to produce great work in the areas of education, interpretation, outreach, and visitor experience.

Media coverage has included features or mentions in the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Associated Press, and several international travel articles – including the following quote from Yvette Caster of the Metro UK, “This museum may be one of the most necessary in the US if not the world today. It is certainly one of the most thought-provoking.” One of our most popular stories of the year was Mavis Staples being presented with the Everyday Freedom Hero Award. Ms. Staples’ illustrious career, from gospel to freedom songs to folk music – and beyond – has united audiences for decades. We were honored to present her with the award, in partnership with the Longworth-Anderson Series at Memorial Hall, and thank Ms. Staples for her dedication to civil rights.

We have much to be thankful for and much to strive for as we continue to grow as an organization.

With Gratitude,

Dion Brown
President and COO

Rev. Damon Lynch, Jr.
Board Chair
In April 2018, the Freedom Center received the Silver Award for the MANDELA: THE JOURNEY TO UBUNTU AV & Electronic Media Campaign at the Ohio Museum Association’s (OMA) annual awards program. Each year, OMA honors outstanding individual and institutional achievements and visual communications.

In July 2017, Jamie Glavic, Assistant Vice President, Marketing and Communications, was honored by the Association of Midwest Museums (AMM) with the Promising Leadership Award, recognizing individuals who have worked or volunteered for a museum or museum association for 10 years or less and provided exceptional service, demonstrated leadership skills on projects and among teams, or showed outstanding commitment to the field. AMM honors organizations, companies and individuals throughout the Midwest region for leadership, career achievements, and best practices.

In October 2017, the Freedom Center was presented with RUBY awards in the Radio Advertisement and Promotion Video categories and a Citation of Excellence for the 2017 Member Newsletter. The RUBY Awards, sponsored by Ohio Magazine, recognize outstanding achievements in marketing, advertising and public relations from Ohio’s travel industry each year. RUBY and Citation of Excellence Awards are presented to travel industry members during the annual Ohio Conference on Travel. Awards are presented for excellence in more than a dozen different categories, reflecting the creativity involved with creating new communications strategies using various media.
NEW STAFF PROFILES

DION BROWN, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER,

joined the museum in February 2018. Brown was the founding executive director of the National Blues Museum from June 2015 - February 2018. He helped the start-up grow and flourish, gaining recognition from CNN, National Geographic and the New York Post as a “must see” museum. His previous role was as executive director of the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola, Mississippi. While museum programming, tours, and attendance greatly expanded under Brown’s leadership, he simultaneously raised funds, balanced the organization’s budget and positioned the organization as a viable business and a strong community resource and champion. In 2013 he was recognized by the Delta Business Journal as one of its “Top Minority Business Leaders.” Prior to his leadership at the BB King Museum, Brown served as the chief operating officer for Exploration Place in Wichita, Kansas. He directed a staff of more than 70 people, and managed the day-to-day operations of the museum and its $5 million budget.

Brown holds a certificate of fundraising from the IUPUI School of Philanthropy, a bachelor’s of science in human resources and a master’s of science in leadership from Southwestern College. He is also retired from the United States Air Force after 21 years of service.

“Dion’s passion for the mission and dedication to community building gives me great confidence and excitement for the future.”
- Elizabeth Pierce

JACQUELINE K. DACE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR,

joined the museum in June 2018. Dace was the director of internal affairs at the National Blues Museum from February 2016 - June 2018. Her previous positions include project manager for the recently opened Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in Jackson, collections manager at the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago, curator of African American history at the Missouri Historical Society and adjunct professor of Afro-African American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis.

Dace is a recipient of the Hollywood Black Film Festival and the Kansas City Film Festival Awards, as well as the National Arts Strategies Fellowship. She participated in the inaugural Public History Institute, developed by the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance and Abolition and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, held at Yale University. Dace has served as a practitioner with W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s Racial Equity program and graduated from the Jackson Division of the FBI Citizens Academy. Dace also served on the local arrangements committee for the 2017 Annual Meeting of the American Alliance of Museums and is a board member for the Association of African American Museums. Dace was recently selected to participate in the first American Express Women in Music Leadership Academy, 2018, held in New York City.

“Jackie’s knowledge of our collective history and her vision for the cultural sustainability of museums will strengthen the institution’s upward trajectory – from great to greatness.”
- Dion Brown

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March 24 - August 20, 2017
MANDELA: THE JOURNEY TO UBUNTU
Commemorates the life and legacy of former South African President Nelson Mandela through photographs by Matthew Willman as he revisited many of the locations that played an important role in South Africa’s route to racial equality and Mandela’s personal fight for freedom. The exhibit also features artifacts from Mandela’s life on loan from the Nelson Mandela Foundation.

Attendance: 14,269

September 1 - 30, 2017
KING RECORDS: THE KING OF THEM ALL
Provides an overview of the middle years of the iconic label’s history (1954 - 1963) when the company expanded into other music genres including Rockabilly, Soul, Bluegrass, Jazz, and Chicago Blues. It examines the early careers of future Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, The “5” Royales, Little Willie John, Freddy King, and James Brown. The exhibit funded and developed by the Community Building Institute and Artswave.

Attendance: 6,468

November 4, 2017 - March 3, 2018
THE KINSEY AFRICAN AMERICAN ART & HISTORY COLLECTION,
Presented by Macy’s, is one of the largest private collections of African American art, artifacts and documents, spanning 400 years of history. Bernard and Shirley Kinseys’ collection features work by Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Jacob Lawrence and Richard Mayhew alongside archival material related to Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston and Malcolm X. The collection has been cited for three national awards one of which includes the President’s National Award for Museum and Library Services.

Attendance: 4,881
April 6 - July 13, 2018
CONFEDERATE CURRENCY: THE COLOR OF MONEY
Presented by BB&T, investigates the importance of slavery in the economy of the South. Artist John W. Jones researched and documented over 126 images of slavery that were depicted on Confederate and Southern States money. The juxtaposition of the framed Confederate currencies with the acrylic paintings inspired by the slave images on the currencies makes a very powerful statement on the contribution of enslaved Africans to the American economy. In these paintings, as Jones says, “history informs art, which in turn artfully reveals more history.”

Attendance: 2,897

April 6 - July 13, 2018
CONFEDERATE MEMORY: SYMBOLS, CONTROVERSY & LEGACY
Examines historical memory and the lasting legacy of the Confederacy, addressing revisionist history and the national Confederate symbols debate.

Attendance: 2,897

June 26 - August 19, 2018
THE COLUMBUS CROSSING BORDERS PROJECT
Sponsored by Catholic Charities Southwestern Ohio, is a traveling art exhibit that includes the works of 34 artists responding to stories shared by refugees. A visual tribute to the resilience, strength, and courage of those who survived incredible hardship within the migrant community, this exhibit inspires understanding, compassion, and support.

Attendance: 21,056
JOHN & FRANCIE PEPPER FREEDOM LECTURE SERIES

This series connects the public with award-winning authors, historians and thought-leaders, discussing themes on history, race, culture and modern abolition. The 2017-2018 series welcomed Ethan Michaeli, Ronald C. White, and Nikki Taylor.

THE LINCOLN SCHOOL STORY: A BATTLE FOR SCHOOL INTEGRATION IN OHIO

The Freedom Center hosted the regional premiere screening in July followed by a meaningful discussion with the filmmaker, Andrea Torrice; the Lincoln School Project Director, Kati Burwinkel; and two of the women who were children who marched with their mothers in 1954.

MLK DAY 2018

1,700 people enjoyed free general admission to the museum’s permanent exhibitions and programming on January 15, 2018. Special programming and initiatives included Hoxworth Cincinnati Blood Drive; Bead for Life bracelet sale in conjunction with Modern Day Slavery initiatives; membership opportunities for the chance to win prizes, and community concerts throughout the day.

I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO

In partnership with The Greater Cincinnati Foundation and YWCA of Greater Cincinnati, the Freedom Center hosted a special screening of I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO followed by a discussion with James Baldwin’s niece, Aisha Karefa-Smart. Aisha, the author of Dining While Black: A Guide to the Art of Modern Dining.
**EVENTS & PROGRAMMING HIGHLIGHTS**

**STARING SLAVERY IN THE FACE: IN LIBYA & BEYOND**
Lisa Kristine, I AM Campaign, and Freedom Center creates a one day symposium on combating modern day slavery and the illicit networks that sustain it. Lisa Kristine returned to Cincinnati to deliver the closing keynote address, after jaw dropping reviews for ENSLAVED: A Visual Story of Modern Day Slavery.

**THE GREEN BOOK CHRONICLES**
This live action documentary with animation aspires to be “Ken Burns + NPR StoryCorps + mixed-media animation.” Currently in production as a one hour film, the live interviews, motion media, and animation segments explore a range of personal experiences connected to the 1936-67 travel guide series, The Negro Motorist Green Book.

**OUR FOREMOTHERS**
Our signature Women’s History Month program illuminates lesser known women in various significant roles in history. This year’s women included Caroline Still Wiley Anderson, Marita Odette Bonner Occomy, Willa Beatrice Brown, Henrietta Vinton Davis and more.

**MLK50: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**
The Freedom Center joined a nationwide observance on April 6, commemorating the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination while recognizing his legacy and relevance today.
AN OUTRAGE
A documentary film about lynching in the American South. Filmed on-location at lynching sites in six states and bolstered by the memories and perspectives of descendants, community activists, and scholars, this unusual historical documentary seeks to educate even as it serves as a hub for action to remember and reflect upon a long-hidden past.

JOSIAH
Presented by the Urban League of Southwestern Ohio Guild and Young Professionals, and in partnership with the Harriet Beecher Stowe House, JOSIAH traces Josiah Henson’s harrowing journey from slavery in Maryland and Kentucky to freedom in Canada prompting us all to ask the question: are we using our freedom effectively?

SPEAK & SIGN SERIES WITH OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALIST MARY WINEBERG AND ACCLAIMED JOURNALIST ROCHELLE RILEY
This new series provides authors the opportunity to engage with the public and have conversations about their work that include topics pertaining to social issues.
2017 PICTURE FREEDOM ART CONTEST, SPONSORED BY TOYOTA

The Picture Freedom Art Contest is a nationwide student art competition sponsored by Toyota that challenges students to create works of art capturing America’s struggle for inclusive freedom and equality, drawing connections from the Underground Railroad to the Civil Rights Movement to the modern-day fight against slavery. The grand prize winner of the contest was Charles Rounds of Jackson, Mississippi, winning a $3,500 scholarship award. The second place winner, Desmond Young of Jackson, Mississippi won a $2,000 scholarship. The third place winner Jordan Havice, of Columbus, Ohio was awarded a $1,000 scholarship. Winners 4 – 8 received a $100 scholarship.

MAVIS STAPLES HONORED WITH THE EVERYDAY FREEDOM HERO AWARD

The Everyday Freedom Hero Award presentation took place during the reception prior to An Evening with Mavis Staples. The Everyday Freedom Hero Award was created to recognize individuals and organizations who strive to live up to the ideals of the Underground Railroad movement—courage, cooperation, and perseverance while using one’s resources for the wellbeing and betterment of their community. Previous honorees include Kerry and Annie Hilton, founders of Freeset Global, the Cincinnati Bengals Organization, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, Eric Foner, and Jim Obergefell, lead plaintiff in the landmark Supreme Court marriage equality case.

NEW OPERATIONAL HOURS

On Juneteenth the Freedom Center announced new operational hours starting July 1, 2018. The new hours of operation are Sunday – Monday: Noon - 5:00 p.m. and Tuesday – Saturday: 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. The museum will be closed on Mondays, October - February.
Our foundation is the era of the Underground Railroad – a secretive movement that acted against the law of the land. Freedom’s heroes in this struggle not only spoke out against injustice but actively participated in breaking the law to challenge societal norms and inspire true change. When an incident, local, regional or national in scope occurs, that calls out for formal comment, the Board Chair, President, or communications department can initiate a conference call to discuss whether or not the Freedom Center should issue a public statement.

On August 12, 2017, we issued the following statement regarding the events unfolding in Charlottesville:

We believe in inclusive freedom - all people enjoying rights and privileges of equal number, quality, and kind. We stand with the oppressed communities of Charlottesville - and this nation - who are traumatized daily by white supremacy. We cannot and will not be silent or silenced. We condemn racism, hatred, ignorance, and violence.

On January 12, 2018, we issued the following statement in response to President Trump’s comments on immigration:

As an organization devoted to exploring and understanding the legacy of slavery in order to ensure freedom for all, we at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center are appalled by the offensive language reportedly used by the President in reference to Haiti and African nations. This language is unacceptable and the attitude being articulated perpetuates white privilege and superiority – undermining people of color in our global community.

As an organization devoted to freedom, inclusion, and unity we denounce racist rhetoric. This is our charge as a museum of conscience, education center and convener of dialogue. The language used by the President, followed by the lament about not attracting more northern European immigrants is beyond alarming. The leaders at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center call on the public to take a stand and share that this language is not reflective of the attitude of all American people. As our history dramatically demonstrates, the success of our nation is thanks to our diversity and as a result, the American dream cannot and should not be an impossible dream for immigrant communities of color.

These statements are an extension of our mission, which is why our board and staff instituted and support a rapid response policy.
VISITOR EXPERIENCE

The most in depth and historically accurate museum of its kind.

I learned a lot and it was a very emotional experience for me. The information is so comprehensive that one needs more than a day to take it all in, but any amount of time invested will be well worth it. It teaches about much more than just the Underground Railroad itself, but also about slavery at that time in American history, and also the slavery still occurring in many forms around the world today. Highly recommended!

It is my third visit and I was still impacted by the power of the stories.

This was truly one of the most humbling experiences I have ever had. I am proud of my ancestors and how they overcame so much hardship.

“Awesome place- way more than I expected. All should visit. Doing so will make the world a better place.”

My wife and I loved the fact that every angle of the African American experience struggle for equality was examined. We brought along our 21-month-old daughter and will bring her again when she can understand the struggle and importance of her ancestry. It was triumphant and sorrowful at the same time......such is love!

Very informative, thought-provoking, and emotionally draining. It makes me want to do much more than I currently do to make the world a better place. It also makes me want to shake the truth into people who are still in denial about the atrocities that have happened and continue to happen in this world.Well worth the trip!

I found it to be a exceptionally emotional and educational experience, and highly recommend a visit to anyone who visits the area. If we learn about and from history, we are less likely to repeat it. We must never forget.

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