



Underground Railroad Database Project

The Eastern Region of the Forest Service recognized the Wayne National Forest for an innovative project on developing an Underground Railroad database for sites in southeastern Ohio. Harold Garner (far left) and Mary Reddan, Wayne National Forest Supervisor, received the award on behalf of the Forest.



Utilizing the talents of the students provided to the Wayne National Forest under the HBCUCP (Historically Black Colleges and Universities Comprehensive Program) for the past several years, an interactive Geographic Information System database has been developed that incorporates the historic records pertaining to the African-American Underground Railroad settlement known as Pokepatch. Last year (Summer, 2000), Tennessee State University students collected a vast amount of land ownership records within the ten core sections of Pokepatch from the years 1827 - 1878. So much information was collected that it became vitally important to organize the data before doing more research. Utilizing the Geographic Information System was determined to be the best avenue to facilitate organizing the data.

This summer (2001), Harold Garner (the primary data collector) returned to the Wayne to work for the summer, and two GIS students from Lincoln University in Missouri – Brandon Collins (below) and Adam Carrington (right) – were hired. The team has successfully taken the land record data recorded on Excel spreadsheets and merged them into the hand-digitized ownership parcels in the ten sections for each of the study years.

The database can now answer questions of land ownership for any selected year. For example, one can see how much land John Campbell (a major abolitionist and Underground Railroad conductor) owned in the Pokepatch area in 1838. The successful merger of these two fields allows the researcher not only to see the actual ownership parcels on the map, but simultaneously displays detailed land information in a table.

Their research has confirmed that the early iron furnace industry subsidized the operation of the Underground Railroad much more than previously thought. This confirmation represents a significant contribution to existing knowledge of the Underground Railroad in this region. As contiguous sections are entered, it is hoped that the “boundaries” of what was once Pokepatch can be better defined.

This database has far-reaching implications in that it can be shared and used by anyone who has Geographic Information System capabilities – within the agency, other agencies, and the public and private sectors. A detailed description of the project steps has been recorded and is available to anyone who would like to organize their land record data in a similar fashion. The project represents a significant accomplishment in improved data systems and definitely enhances heritage program management information.