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July 2007

In Our Own Backyard Travel on the Underground Railroad Experience Trail

by **Gina Hagler**

The Underground Railroad Experience Trail in Sandy Spring celebrates the area's Quaker heritage and traditions. The trail, linking a Quaker farmhouse to a Quaker town, commemorates the residents of Montgomery County involved with the Underground Railroad. While the trail is not a known part of the Underground Railroad, its residents may have helped slaves escape to freedom, as many Quakers were involved with the Underground Railroad. The trail provides a gentle way for your children to get a sense of what it was like to follow the Underground Railroad north to freedom.

Because my youngest child is 6, my kids and I opted out of the 90-minute formal tour (geared to ages 8 and up) and chose to explore the trail on our own one Saturday afternoon. We downloaded the map available at www.mc-mncppc.org/trails/trails_MAPS/Rural_legacy.shtm and used the information included about the key points along the way to spark discussion.

It took us a few minutes to discover the start of the trail — downhill of Woodlawn Manor and Barn, just past the horse pasture — marked with a sign of a man walking with his belongings tied up in a sack carried on a stick over his shoulder. This emblem is used along the path to mark the way. The trail is a natural surface trail, meaning grassy in some areas, packed dirt in others. It winds through the woods, beside a stream and along a cornfield. It's not a strenuous hike, but the trail doesn't accommodate a stroller. Even those designed for unpaved surfaces wouldn't be able to negotiate several narrow portions of the trail.

My kids and I discussed the Underground Railroad before arriving, but my 6-year-old was still surprised to see it was an actual path through the woods. Even adults don't always know what to expect. "People think the Underground Railroad was a series of hiding places in houses," says Susan Soderberg, park historian. "Actually, it was a relay system where one person would relay the freedom seekers to another as they made their way north. Freedom seekers would hide and sleep in the woods along the way. The person helping them would give them food and medical attention. Here, south of the Mason-Dixon Line, it was a very dangerous enterprise."

The two marked stops along the way that most interested my kids were #3, "The Brambles" and #5, "The Hollow Tree." Looking at the brambles, my 6-year-old had a hard time imagining what it would be like to purposely crawl into the prickly bushes and spend the day out of sight. My 10-year-old realized he would have to be very worried for his safety before deciding that hiding in the brambles was a better choice than continuing along the trail. The hollow tree struck all three kids as a better hiding place and a good way to cache supplies for the escaping slaves who followed, but none of them would have been happy to spend the day in that cramped space.

To help my kids appreciate what the journey would be like without a map or formal markers, we tried to make up a song that would help others follow the trail. It wasn't as easy as it sounds, and I was glad to see it caused them to really think about how difficult it would be to walk through the woods at night while hiding from anyone who might catch sight of them.

The trail route we downloaded had enough information for my 6- and 10-year-olds. My 16-year-old would like to return to take the formal tour. All in all, our walk along the trail provided an excellent opportunity for a discussion about slavery, what it would mean to have to escape in order to be free and what it would take to be a person who helped with the Underground Railroad. "[The trail is] a truly American experience," says Mike Robinson, a volunteer who acts as conductor on the tours. "It's about a community of people, black and white, working together to correct an injustice."

For information on other locations and trails around the country that are part of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, you can check www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr. For websites about African-American history, check out this National Park Service site: www.nps.gov/pub_aff/african_am/websites.htm.

Gina Hagler is a writer in Rockville.

Cost: Free

Address: 6501 Norwood Road, Sandy Spring, Md. (at Woodlawn Manor, which is not part of the trail)

Phone: 301-563-3400

Web: www.mc-mncppc.org/trails/trails_MAPS/Rural_legacy.shtm

Note: There are no benches or resting places along the way but we took time out to explore a stream and stop for a snack in the grassy area beside an open field.

Trail: You can walk the trail without being part of a tour. Go to the website to download a map with information about each of the stops along the trail.

Tours: Trained Underground Conductors will be leading free Underground Railroad hikes on the Underground Railroad Experience Trail (formerly the

Rural Legacy Trail) on Saturdays through November 3, 2007 at 10 a.m. The tours are recommended for ages 8+. Meet at the kiosk across from the stone barn at Woodlawn Manor. Rain or shine, unless thunderstorms, high winds or flood warnings. Call for more information.

Strollers: No. The trail is very narrow in some spaces and would be difficult to negotiate even with a stroller that does well on unpaved surfaces.

Resting Places/Restrooms: No benches or restrooms along the trail.

Parking: Available at no charge in the lot behind Woodlawn Manor.

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