Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage

Men and Women of the Underground Railroad in the Indiana and Kentucky Borderland

Permanent exhibit, Carnegie Center for Art & History, New Albany, Indiana

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage tells the compelling story of runaway slaves and the people who helped them make their way across the Ohio River and northward to freedom. Based on Pamela R. Peters’s The Underground Railroad in Floyd County, Indiana (2001), this is not an expansive exhibit with numerous artifacts on display, but it does not need to be. Its strength lies in its focus on New Albany and the city’s inhabitants, black and white. To be in this Ohio River city, imagining it as it was during the antebellum and Civil War eras, adds significant meaning to the exhibition. This is local history done well: New Albany details give it life while still suggesting the dynamics of other border towns up and down the river.

The exhibition begins with a brief overview of American slavery. Timelines list key legislation and legal decisions including such highlights as the 1787 Northwest Ordinance’s prohibition on slavery, the 1820 Missouri Compromise, and the 1851 Indiana Constitution’s “Exclusion Act.” Antislavery activity in the 1830s...
and after gave rise to the term “Underground Railroad,” which exhibit text defines as “a spontaneous liberation movement that encompassed a secret network of people—most of whom did not know each other—who actively helped blacks escape bondage in the South.” Geography brought these runaways to New Albany, which sits across the river from Louisville, Kentucky. Once there, runaways were either forcibly returned to their owners or successfully sheltered and sent on their way farther north.

The exhibition outlines different ways fugitive slaves crossed the river, discusses the state of race relations within New Albany, and describes representative individuals in the community. These include James M. Haines, a white conductor for the New Albany and Salem Railroad, who was thought to have prevented police from searching a train for escaped slaves; Sarah Lucas, an African American arrested for helping a runaway slave; and John Norman, the editor of the New Albany Ledger, who wrote anti-black articles. Labels placed throughout represent various residents’ perspectives on events in the city. Each includes a portrait, intended to represent the resident as a historical person, and accompanying first-person narrative expressing that resident’s point of view. The text is informative and lively, but visitors need to be aware that these are modern constructions of what a person in such a situation might have thought and looked like—not actual quotations or portraits of the named individuals. Few documents or artifacts are on display. Those that are include Floyd County’s 1853 “Register of Negroes and Mulattoes” and a “Book of Indenture” as well as shackles and a jail cell door. While the exhibition relies heavily on text and images, its text, in particular, is substantive and engaging. We read, for example, about the racial tension that led to violence in July 1862, the role of rail transportation in runaways’ escapes, and the influence of the Presbyterian New Albany Theological Seminary.

At the end of the exhibition, an interactive video traces the history of slavery, as well as of the antislavery movements, in the border region. Through it, we follow the experiences of Jacob Cummings, who escaped slavery in Tennessee by making his way north through New Albany. Interactive parts of this video then ask us to make decisions that runaways themselves would have had to make: how to cross the river, whom to ask for help, where to hide, and how best to continue to Canada. In all, as its title indicates, the exhibition successfully conveys the extraordinary courage of the ordinary individuals who participated in the movement against slavery.

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