

AN ACT concerning State government.

**Be it enacted by the People of the State of Illinois,
represented in the General Assembly:**

Section 1. Short title. This Act may be cited as the Illinois Freedom Trails Commission Act.

Section 5. Definitions. As used in this Act:

"Commission" means the Illinois Freedom Trails Commission.

"Department" means the Department of Natural Resources.

Section 10. Establishment of Commission.

(a) The Illinois Freedom Trails Commission is established. The purposes of the Commission are to explore, research, and commemorate the journeys of freedom seekers and the sites and landmarks in this State that became the networks of the Underground Railroad.

(b) The Commission shall consist of a chairperson and 10 additional members appointed by the Governor. The membership may include, but is not limited to, persons who are public officials, scholars, and community-based activists who have knowledge and interest in promoting the work of the Commission. Members shall be broadly representative of the State and the variety of groups interested in promoting the work of the Commission.

(c) The terms of the members shall be 4 years. Members shall serve until their successors are appointed and qualified. Any vacancy in the membership of the Commission shall be filled by the Governor for the unexpired term. Members shall serve without compensation, but may be reimbursed for reasonable expenses.

(d) Subject to appropriation, the Department shall provide administrative and other support to the Commission.

(e) Subject to appropriation, the Commission shall hire a full-time professional staff to implement Commission projects.

(f) At its first meeting and annually thereafter, the Commission shall elect from among its members a chairperson and other officers it considers necessary or appropriate. After its first meeting, the Commission shall meet at the call of the chairperson or if requested by 7 or more members.

(g) A majority of the members of the Commission constitute a quorum for the transaction of business at a meeting of the Commission. A majority of the members present and serving is required for official action of the Commission.

(h) All business that the Commission is authorized to perform shall be conducted at a public meeting of the Commission, held in compliance with the Open Meetings Act.

(i) A writing prepared, owned, used, in the possession of, or retained by the Commission in the performance of an official function is subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

Section 15. Duties of Commission. The Commission shall have the following duties:

(1) to provide resources for individuals and local entities seeking to learn more about the Underground Railroad in Illinois, including:

(A) an online resource website, including, but not limited to maps of journeys, historical sites, and conductor cemetery markers;

(B) a calendar of related events in this State;

(C) research sources and bibliographies;

(D) videos and links to videos; and

(E) pictures, brief histories, and other materials developed locally and at the State level;

(2) collaborate with organizations focusing on the Underground Railroad, including:

(A) local and regional Underground Railroad groups;

(B) county and regional historical societies;

(C) museums, especially museums that focus on slavery and the African American experience;

(D) academic programs, especially African American Studies at the college level and history departments; and

(E) organizations in African American communities;

(3) to create a grant funding program;

(4) to work with the National Park Service's Network to Freedom program and serve as a liaison between the National Park Service and local entities;

(5) to explore heritage tourism opportunities connecting the locations of freedom seeker journeys and Underground Railroad sites, working with the Illinois Office of Tourism and regional tourism agencies; and

(6) to connect freedom seekers and Underground Railroad stories to the range of freedom stories across and throughout the history of Illinois.

Section 20. Online database and educational programs.

(a) The Commission shall create a publicly available website that includes educational material concerning freedom seekers' journeys on the portions of the Underground Railroad in this State, including:

(1) an updated database of freedom seekers and their journeys to and through Illinois;

(2) an updated map of the geography of the Underground Railroad in Illinois; and

(3) a biographical dictionary of key persons identified with the Underground Railroad in Illinois, including freedom seekers, abolitionist allies, and pro-slavery antagonists.

(b) The Commission, in collaboration with the State Board of Education, shall develop and implement an educational

program to be made available to every public school in this State. The educational program shall include instruction on:

(1) events of African American history, including the African slave trade, slavery in the United States, and the vestiges of slavery in this country;

(2) the journeys of freedom seekers and the Underground Railroad in Illinois; and

(3) additional resources and activities to be used in February as part of Black History Month.

(c) The Commission shall identify scholars in higher education and community-based organizations to engage in research and to be recruited into a speakers' bureau on the Underground Railroad and anti-slavery activity in Illinois.

(d) The Commission shall support and publicize local activities in this State that focus on the Underground Railroad, including offering exhibits at meetings of organizations open to spreading knowledge about abolitionism and the Underground Railroad. The Commission shall focus on supporting organizations in African American communities, including assisting members of those communities undertake research related to the history of their communities.

Section 25. Historic site and landmark recognition and preservation.

(a) The Commission shall develop statewide guidelines for the evaluation of freedom seeker journeys and Underground

Railroad sites and landmarks in the State. The Commission shall use the guidelines to determine and maintain a list of freedom seeker journeys and Underground Railroad sites and landmarks and make the list available to the public. The Commission shall include a contact person who represents the site or landmark for each site or landmark included on the list.

(b) The Commission shall develop standards and guidelines for historic markers, signage, and other commemorative tools and activities for sites and landmarks listed under subsection (a). The Commission shall also assist sites and landmarks listed under subsection (a) that are threatened with demolition or deterioration.

(c) The Commission shall assist individuals and historic preservation organizations in assessing freedom seeker journeys and Underground Railroad sites and landmarks and shall collaborate with the University of Illinois Extension Master Gardener program, the Department, and other partners concerning opportunities for the development of freedom seeker journeys and Underground Railroad sites and landmarks.

Section 30. Grant program. Subject to appropriation, the Commission may award grants for the following purposes:

(1) to research and identify freedom seeker journeys and Underground Railroad sites and landmarks;

(2) to develop heritage tourism and promotional

activities on the Underground Railroad, including exhibits, lectures, symposiums, and online materials; and

(3) to support an Underground Railroad cemetery marker program.

Section 35. Annual report. The Commission shall submit a report to the Governor and the General Assembly by July 1, 2026, and each year thereafter. The report shall include, at a minimum, a description of the programs administered by the Commission.

Section 40. Rulemaking. After consultation with and written approval by the Department, the Commission may adopt administrative rules as may be necessary to carry out the provisions of this Act in accordance with the Illinois Administrative Procedure Act.

Section 45. Repeal. This Act is repealed on January 1, 2037.

(20 ILCS 3405/22 rep.)

Section 90. The Historic Preservation Act is amended by repealing Section 22.

Section 99. Effective date. This Act takes effect upon becoming law.