

Freedom Bound: Creating A Digital Public Art Project

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Freedom Bound is a collaborative Public Art Project about the Underground Railroad in Lycoming County, PA. The project includes an interactive web site and five large-scale digital banners, printed on waterproof canvas, which function as moveable billboards. The goals of the project were to inspire, encourage, and stimulate students to use their design and computer graphics skills to educate the public; to give art students experience in working collaboratively; to give students the opportunity to work on a project with a visiting artist; and to build ties between the college and the broader community.

The banners, which feature images from seven local Underground Railroad sites, were unveiled on Juneteenth Day at Wegmans Supermarket, where they were displayed during the summer before circulating throughout the Williamsport Area Public School District during the 2003-04 school year. Future banner sites include the public library, Lycoming County Historical Museum, YWCA, and local community centers. In the summer of 2005, the banners will begin a tour outside the county.



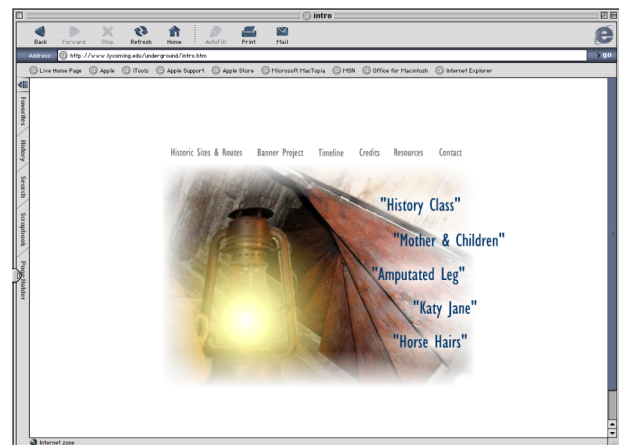
House of Many Stairs Banner

The creation of the digital banners represented collaboration on several levels. First, twelve senior photography and commercial design students worked with local historians to research the history of the Underground Railroad in Lycoming County, PA. Students shared their research and scanned the historical documents, maps and photographs they found for use by all. Members of the group scouted locations and contacted current owners of structures that harbored fugitive slaves in the past. Since the plan was to display the banners publicly, the School Board, Library and owners of local business had to be convinced to hang the banners when completed. Creating a public art project for display outside the usual art venues represented a new concept for our fine art students. The project required months of research, negotiation and collaboration across academic disciplines before the design stage began.

The original location images were shot and the banners were designed during the week of Stephen Marc's residency at Lycoming College in February 2003. Students were expected to clear their schedules and spend close to full time working on the project during that week. The day after Marc arrived, the biggest snowstorm of the season hit Williamsport. The governor closed the state; the president closed the college; but the class met and worked. We braved freezing cold, knee-deep snow and frozen camera batteries to photograph and keep the project on schedule. During the week, Marc, my students and I shot over 2500 original digital images at seven Underground

Railroad sites in the county. All images were downloaded to a shared server space. After we created a basic design format collaboratively, I divided the class into three groups to work on three of the banners using Adobe Photoshop. (Stephen Marc and I each created one of the five banners.) The entire group ate together and carried on an on-going work-in-progress critique during meals and while working together in the computer lab. Students literally worked day and night, handing work over to other students in their group when they left the lab. Because all students had read/write access to the shared server space, any student might return to the lab and find that others had drastically altered his/her work. For art student, used to total ownership of their art, working collaboratively in this way was a new experience.

The final stage of collaboration involved the creation of a web site (www.lycoming.edu/underground). The *Freedom Bound* web site features streaming audio of oral historian Mamie Sweeting Diggs telling stories that were passed down in her family, original animation, original photographs, historical photographs and maps, music by Kim and Reggie Harris, a timeline of important events and a resource section. Thomas Lee, a former student of mine, and I jointly created the web site during the summer of 2003 to accompany the banner tour to the local public schools. We wanted the site to be audio driven, highlighting the oral history stories passed down from Mamie Sweeting Diggs' great-grandfather Daniel Hughes, a conductor on the Underground Railroad. We wanted to experiment with the web as a vehicle for narrative stories and content presented through oral history interviews.



Web Page Main Menu highlighting oral history stories

In the fall, I worked with a committee of elementary, middle school and high school teachers appointed to develop an interdisciplinary art and history curriculum using the web site. During the school year, the banners rotated to the public schools, where 500 Williamsport Area School District teachers used the web site with the districts' 6000 students.

The project was an intense, exhausting, frustrating, exciting, and rewarding experience for everyone involved.