

Historic Woodlawn Farm reopens for tours

Written by Administrator

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The story of a pioneer family that established Jacksonville's historic Woodlawn Farm and risked their livelihood to shelter runaway slaves is being retold this summer at the 19th century farmstead in Morgan County.

Volunteers will share the story of the Michael Huffaker Family and describe the Huffakers' role in the Underground Railroad – the clandestine and illegal network of safe houses and escape routes that offered hope to freedom-seekers whose enslavement divided the nation during the first half of the 19th century.

Tours of the farm are available Saturdays and Sundays between the hours of 12 noon and 4 p.m. through August. A suggested donation of \$3 helps offset the continued restoration of the two-story brick structure that was built in the 1840s.

Crews completed extensive work on the 19th century farm house in 2008 but efforts continue to complete restoration of the first- and second-story windows. The Underground Railroad Committee of the Morgan County Historical Society operates Woodlawn Farm. Committee spokesman Jim Murphy said the number of visitors to the site has continued to increase since tours were first offered in 2004.

The structure was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2007.

Michael Bendorf, chairman of the committee's board of directors, said the group's long range goal is to convert Woodlawn Farm into a living history museum and to call attention to its important role as a station on the Underground Railroad.

"The site has already attracted several thousand regional visitors over the last few years, and more and more tourists are stopping by from out of state," Bendorf said in announcing plans for the 2010 summer tour season. "We're eager to preserve its history and its historic buildings and share the important Underground Railroad story of Woodlawn Farm," the group's chairman added.

Woodlawn Farm was established by the Michael Huffaker family in 1824 and soon began to play a prominent role in the development of modern agricultural practices that shaped much of Central Illinois during the 19th century. The two-story brick structure that sits just south of Interstate 72, approximately three miles east of Jacksonville, also served as an active Underground Railroad station for freedom seeking runaway slaves. Huffaker was known as an influential and respected landowner and was one of the first Morgan County farmers to employ free blacks.

Through anecdotal and documented evidence that is still being collected, research strongly indicates that the cabins occupied by Huffaker's workers provided safe haven as early as the 1830s for slaves who were seeking to reach freedom in Canada. Sympathetic local residents who opposed slavery served as conductors on the Underground Railroad, and at least nine sites have been identified in the Jacksonville area as places that were active in providing

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assistance and sanctuary for the freedom seekers who made their way through Morgan County. As part of the Underground Railroad network, Huffaker risked hefty fines, imprisonment, and the possible loss of his property if caught harboring a fugitive slave.

The Underground Railroad Committee, which purchased Woodlawn Farm in 2003, has raised more than \$300,000 in grants and private donations. Those funds have been used to build a new bridge to the homestead as well as complete extensive exterior repairs to the historic structure. The latter include providing a new roof and roof beams, completing the tuck-pointing of the entire exterior brickwork, and redoing all of the outside molding, soffits, and drainpipes. As immediate past chair, Loreli Steuer, explained, "We have recently restored some 22 windows and provided a new front door entrance and it is now time to turn our attention to refinishing and re-plastering interior rooms to further preserve the beauty and history of this landmark property."

Signs directing visitors to Woodlawn Farm are located along Old Route 36 at the intersection with Arnold Road, a short distance east of the Jacksonville Correctional Center. Information regarding group tours is available by calling 243-5938 or the Jacksonville Area Convention and Visitors Bureau at 243-5678.