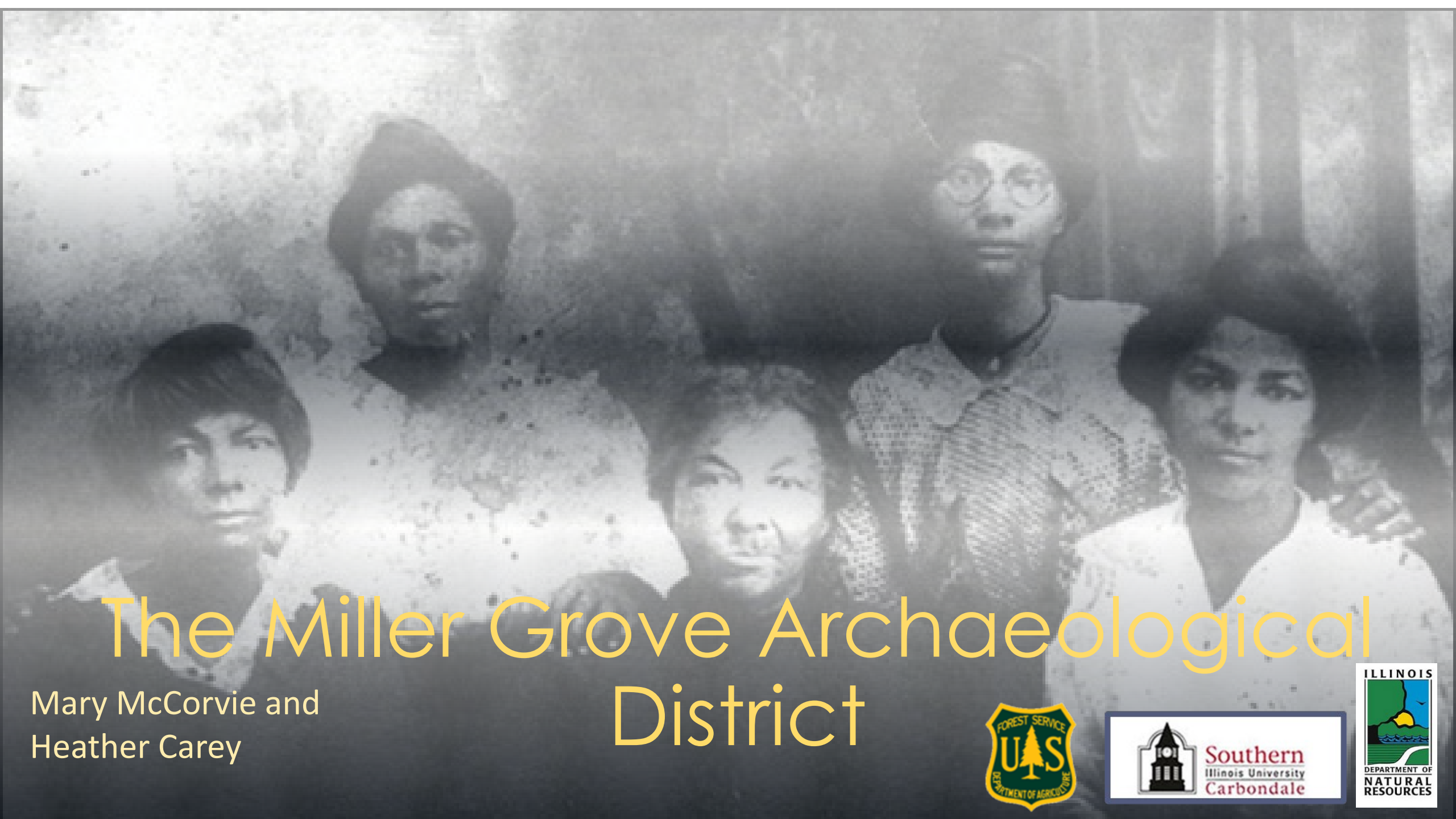




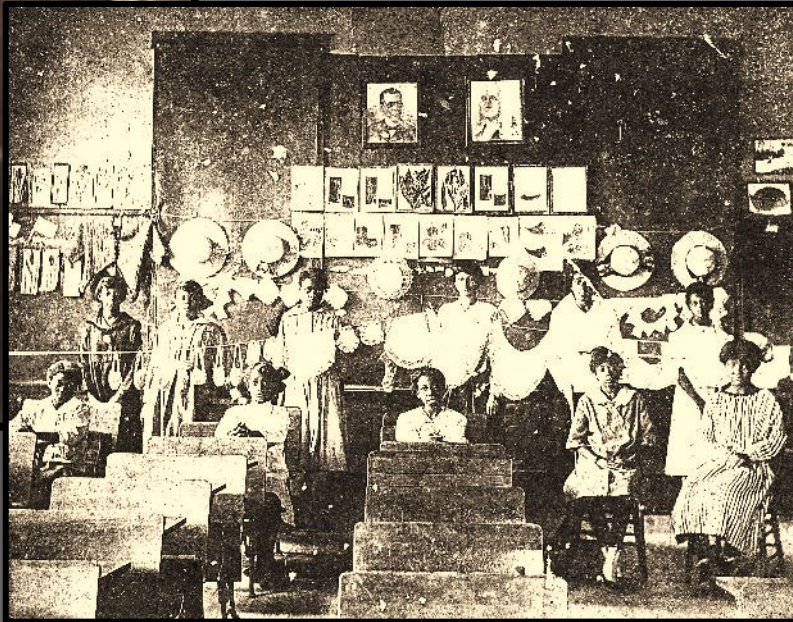
The Miller Grove Archaeological District

Mary McCorvie and
Heather Carey



Underrepresented Communities

This presentation is part of a larger research project identifying National Register eligible underrepresented communities in southern Illinois.



Stephen Bostick and his wife, Chaney.

Thanks to the

- National Park Service,
- Illinois State Historic Preservation Office of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources,
- Center for Archaeological Investigations at Southern Illinois University, and
- US Forest Service, Shawnee National Forest for contributing to this project.

African American settlement in southern Illinois has been silenced over the centuries. These communities have been hidden in plain view but often not recorded in established or traditional media such as county histories or newspapers.

To date, research has identified sites in southern Illinois on the Shawnee National Forest:

- Great Salt Springs
- Miller Grove
- Illinois Iron Furnace
- The Bostic Settlement
- Camp Pomona, CCC

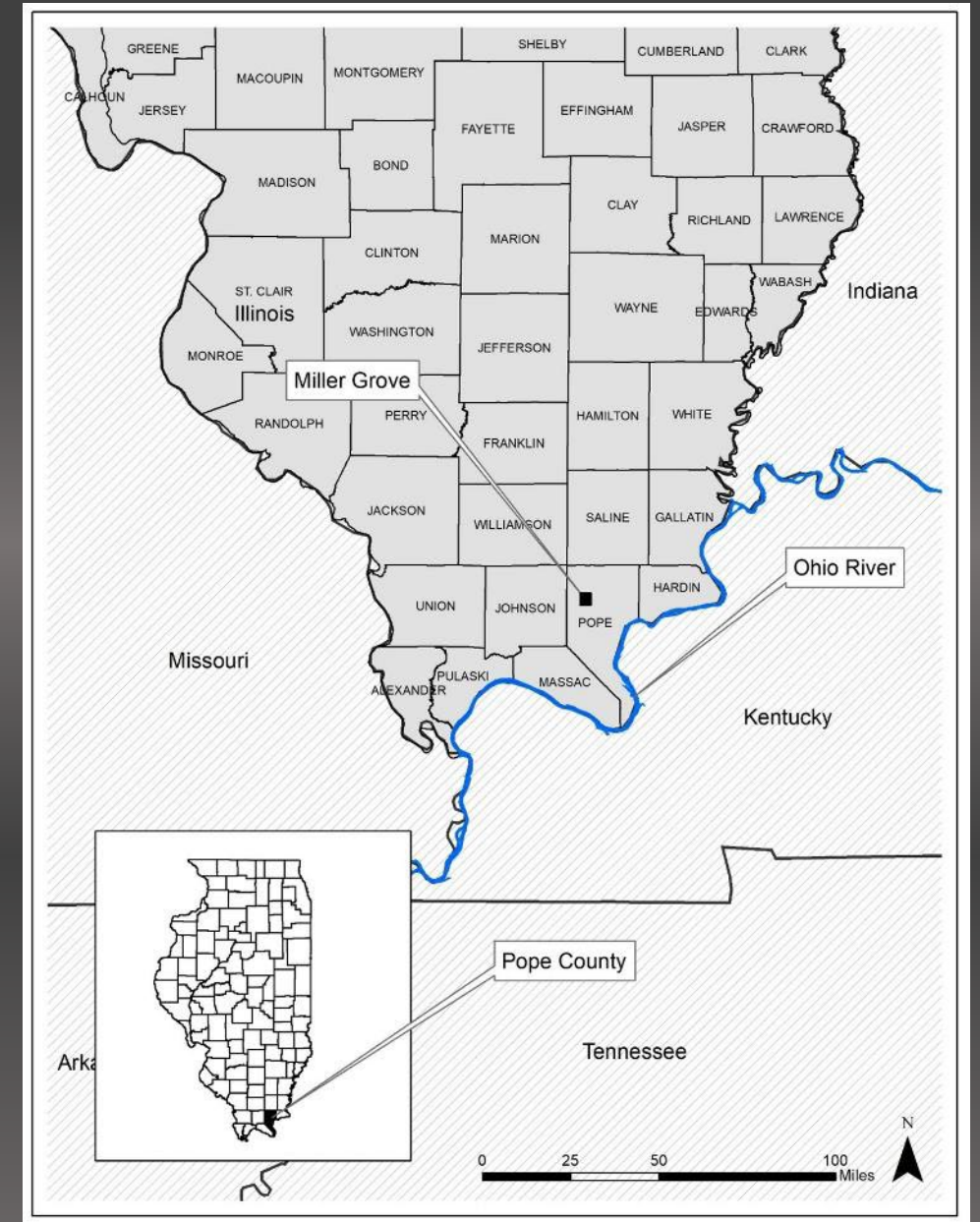


The Miller Grove Archaeological District



The Miller Grove Archaeological District

The Miller Grove Archaeological District is located in the northeast corner of Pope County, IL. It is situated on 1,533 acres in Sections 9, 10, 11, 12 and 14, T12S, R5E.

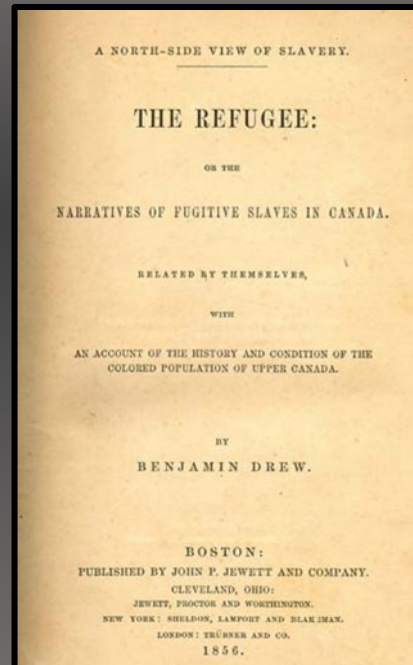


NRHP Eligibility – Criteria A

The Miller Grove Archaeological Historic District (Miller Grove) has statewide significance and is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places under:

- **Criterion A for Ethnic Heritage and Exploration/Settlement as an important Black American** farming community in southern Illinois founded prior to the Civil War. It is also eligible under
- **Criterion A for Social History related to the Underground Railroad** and for the significant information it provides about the efforts of formerly enslaved individuals toward self-manumission.

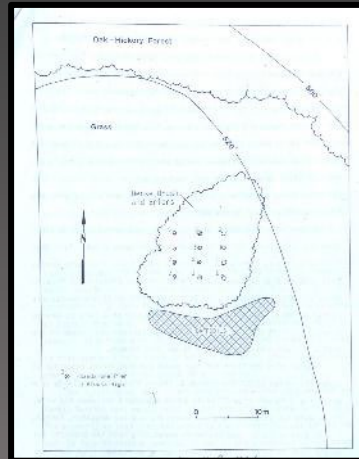
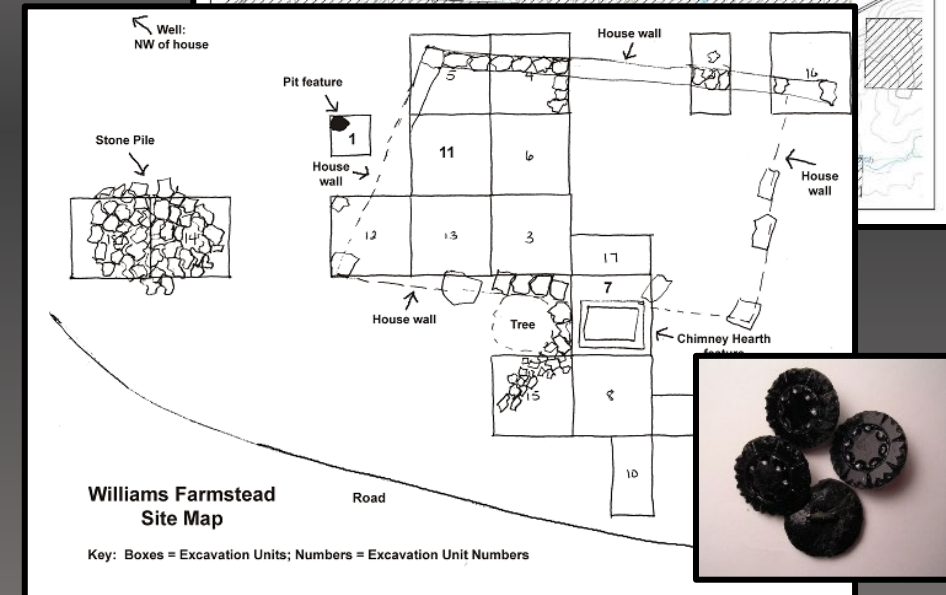
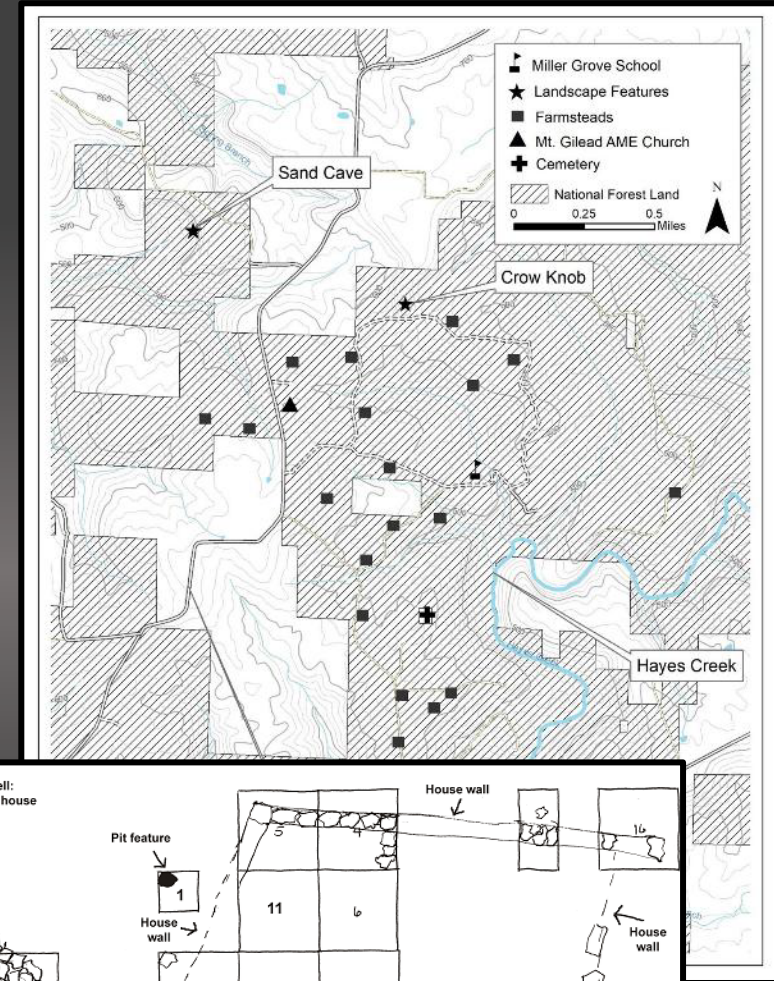
While Miller Grove has not historically been identified as one of the well-known Underground Railroad stops or havens, a combination of documentary, oral, and archaeological evidence strongly indicates that this small crossroads community played an active role in the movement.



NRHP Eligibility – Criteria D

Miller Grove is also eligible for the National Register under

- **Criterion D for its potential to yield information about the daily lives of Black Americans from before the Civil War into the early twentieth century.** Excavations conducted between 1997 and 2019 at several farmsteads have produced valuable information about the inhabitants of Miller Grove, including details about mid-nineteenth-century foodways, material culture preferences, and domestic architecture that are otherwise undocumented.
- The period of significance for **Exploration/Settlement** is from **1844, the year of its settlement, to 1865, the abolition of slavery.**
- The period of significance for **Ethnic Heritage, Social History, and Archaeology** begins in **1844** and ends in **1934**, when the community was largely abandoned.



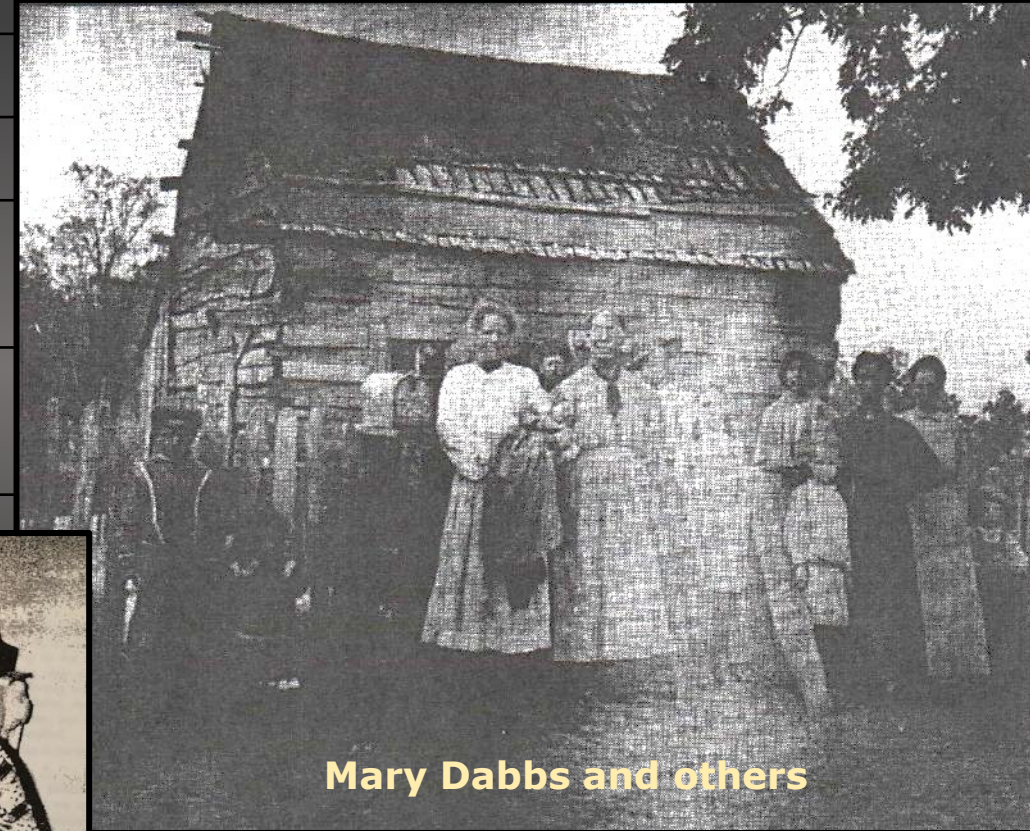
The Miller Grove Archaeological District

The Miller Grove Archeological District consists of **29 rural farmsteads and domestic structures, two church sites, a school and a cemetery.** Also included in the district are two natural features related to **Underground Railroad** activities.

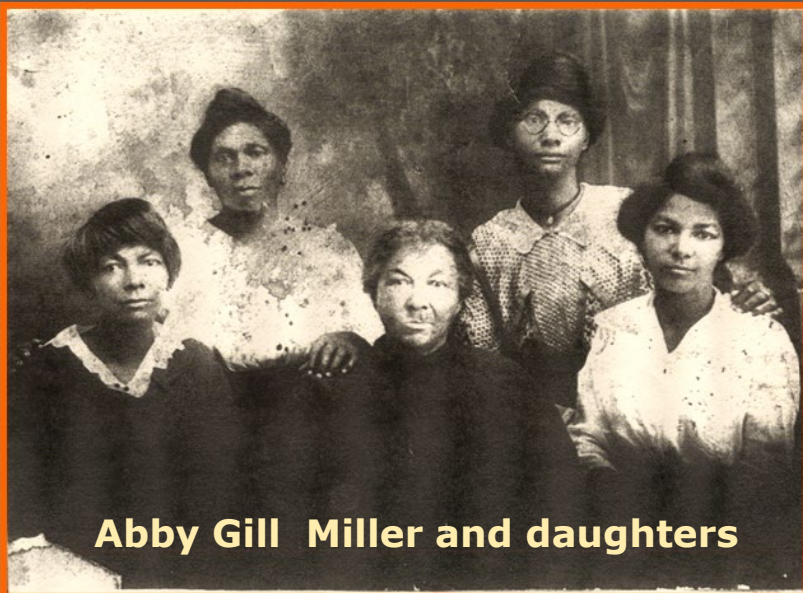


The People of Miller Grove

Year				
	1850	1860	1900	1920
Number of families	7	14	20	8
Number of individuals	32	71	108	21



Mary Dabbs and others



Abby Gill Miller and daughters



Flora Miller McGill Harbin

The People of Miller Grove



The earliest Miller Grove settlers had all been enslaved in Tennessee until the 1840s. Henry and Barbara Sides were born in North Carolina in 1777 and 1774 respectively. They married in Rutherford County in 1799 and by 1830 were living in Tennessee with four enslaved individuals valued at \$2,300. By 1840 Henry and Barbara owned nine enslaved individuals, but in ca. 1844 they had all removed to southern Illinois with the intent of freeing all.

The Millers were enslaved in Marshall County, TN but were freed by their enslavers in the mid 1840s: *“July 7, 1845 – Harrison - a negro slave, aged about 30 years, along with his wife, Lucinda, age 28, and their sons, Bedford, age 10, and Henry, age 5, and their daughters Francis, age 3, and Hanna, age one year, were set free along with another negro woman slave named Hannah, aged 55 years. They were set at liberty by an order of the Court of Marshall County, Tennessee on April 7, 1845. This was done by a petition by their owners, Allen Coffee, Andrew Miller, and Matilda Miller. Harrison and the others named herein came into Pope County to reside. Harrison and Henry Sides of Pope County entered a bond of \$1,000, ensuring that the family would not be a burden to the people of Illinois”* (Deed Book C, p. 355).

The People of Miller Grove (cont'd)

Joseph Dabbs's will: *"My will is that all my estate consisting of horses oxen wagons and so forth together with notes and voucher for dues in the State of Tennessee be divided among **my black family** whom I have freed in the state of Tennessee and with whom I have come to this state of Illinois...."*
(Will and Codicil Book F, p. 50, Pope County Courthouse).

William Riley Williams was a Black man from Henry County, Tennessee. He was born free because his mother, Elizabeth Williams, was a white woman. Riley was indentured on June 2, 1828, when he was only four years old, and was released at age twenty-one in 1844. Two years later he and Belzora Palston, a free person of color, were married by a justice of the peace. The Williams family came to Pope County in 1851, and Riley posted a \$1,000 bond for himself. He purchased his initial 40-acre parcel in 1854 and, by the time of his death, owned 620 acres. In 1860 he reported \$1,200 in real property and \$700 in personal property.



Archaeological Investigations at Miller Grove

Archival and archaeological investigations have yielded significant amounts of information about the people of Miller Grove:

- Reliance upon extended family work units
- Upland South log architecture
- The chimney and cistern were constructed of local dry-laid sandstone.
- Upland South Hogmeat and Hoecake foodways



Remains of an Upland South
diet of hoecake and hog meat



Foundation
remains at Riley
Williams farmstead

Typical southern
Illinois log
house, half-dovetail
corner notch.

Mt. Gilead A.M.E.

The church at Miller Grove, Mt. Gilead African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, was vital to the community formation.

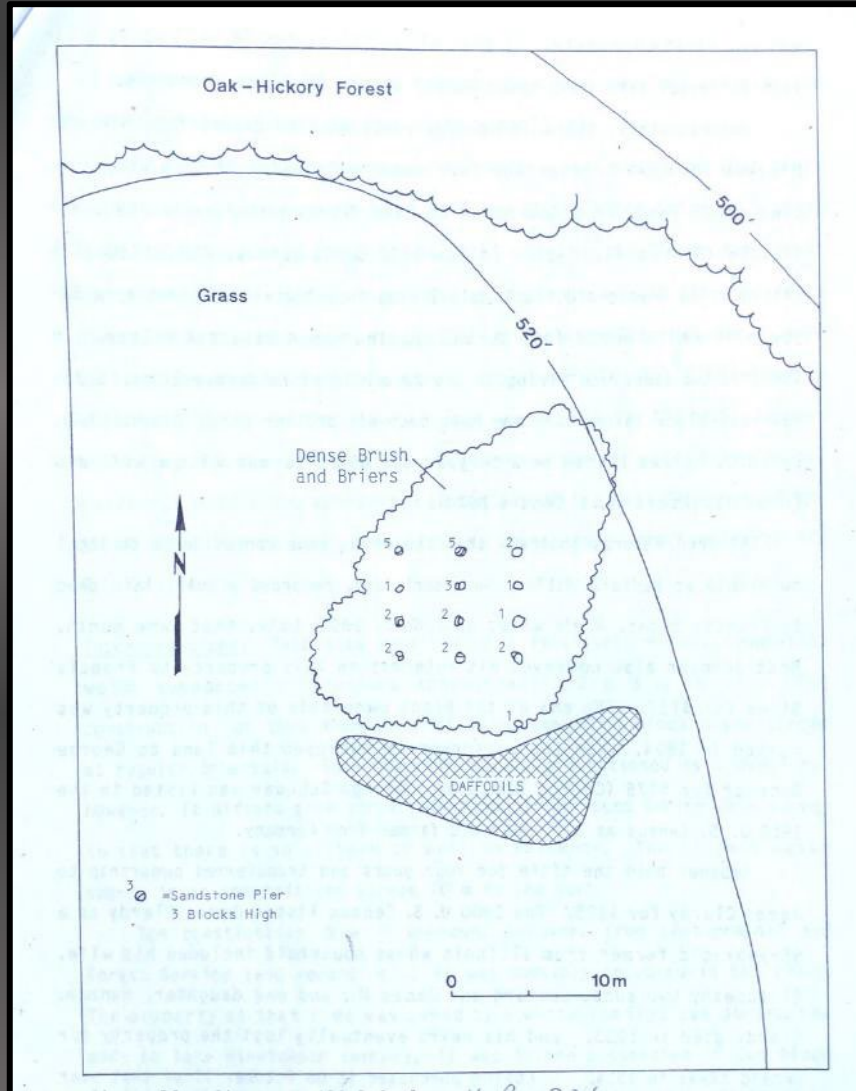
The church was the heart of every Black community.



It was originally built as a log structure but was replaced with a frame building that was destroyed by fire ca. 1918.

Another frame structure was built to replace the first frame church at another location.

Mt. Gilead AME Church (first location)

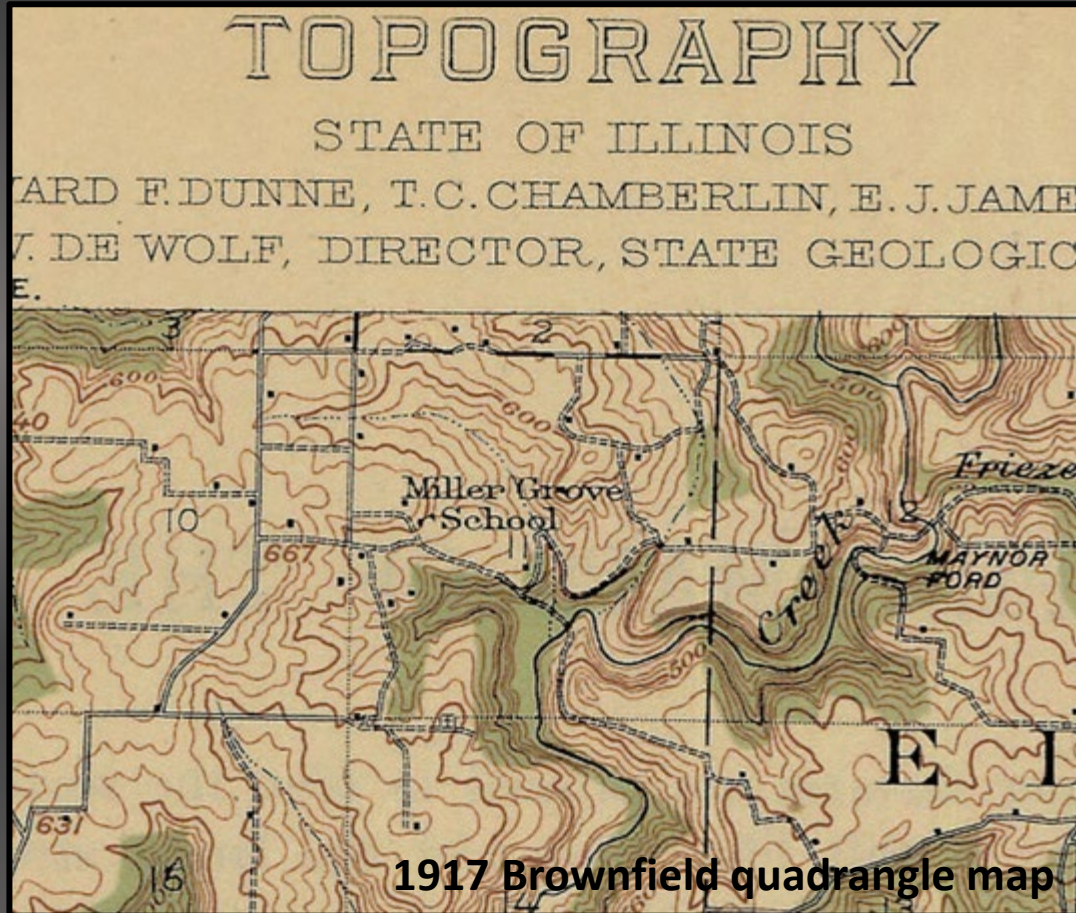


11PP327 Mt. Gilead A.M.E Church foundation, 1987



11PP327 Mt. Gilead A.M.E. Church, 2025

Miller Grove School

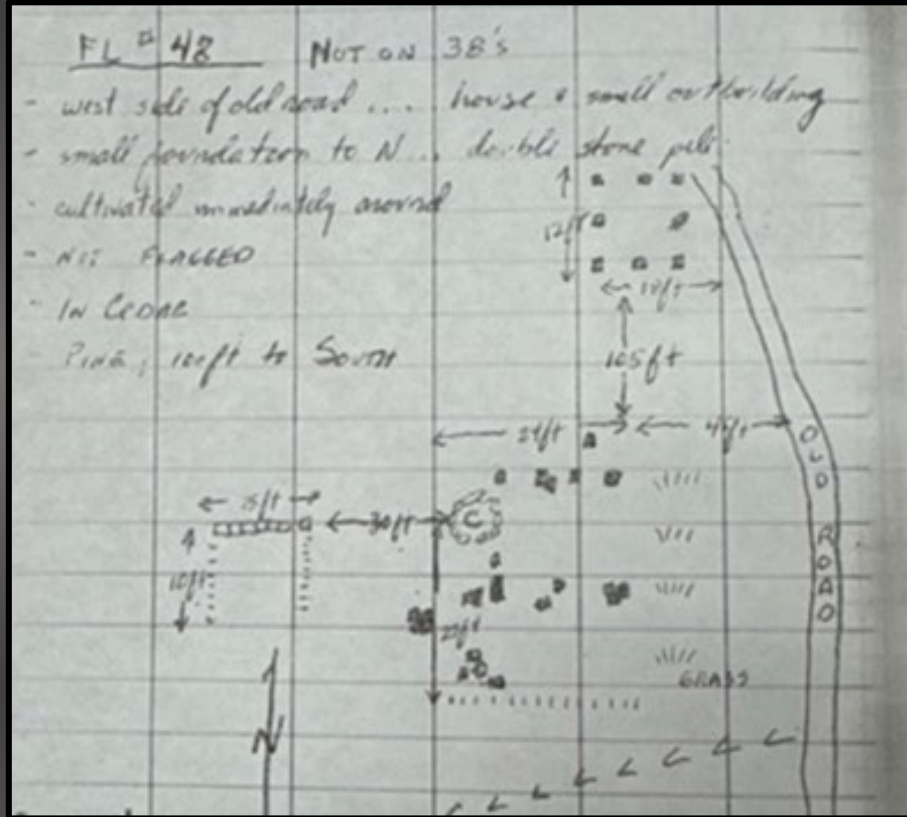


The presence of a school at Miller Grove reflects the value formerly enslaved Black people placed on learning as a “privilege that had been withheld [from them] by owners out of fear of slave insurrection.” The first known teacher, in 1860, was a 27-year-old Black woman from Tennessee named **Julia Singleton**.

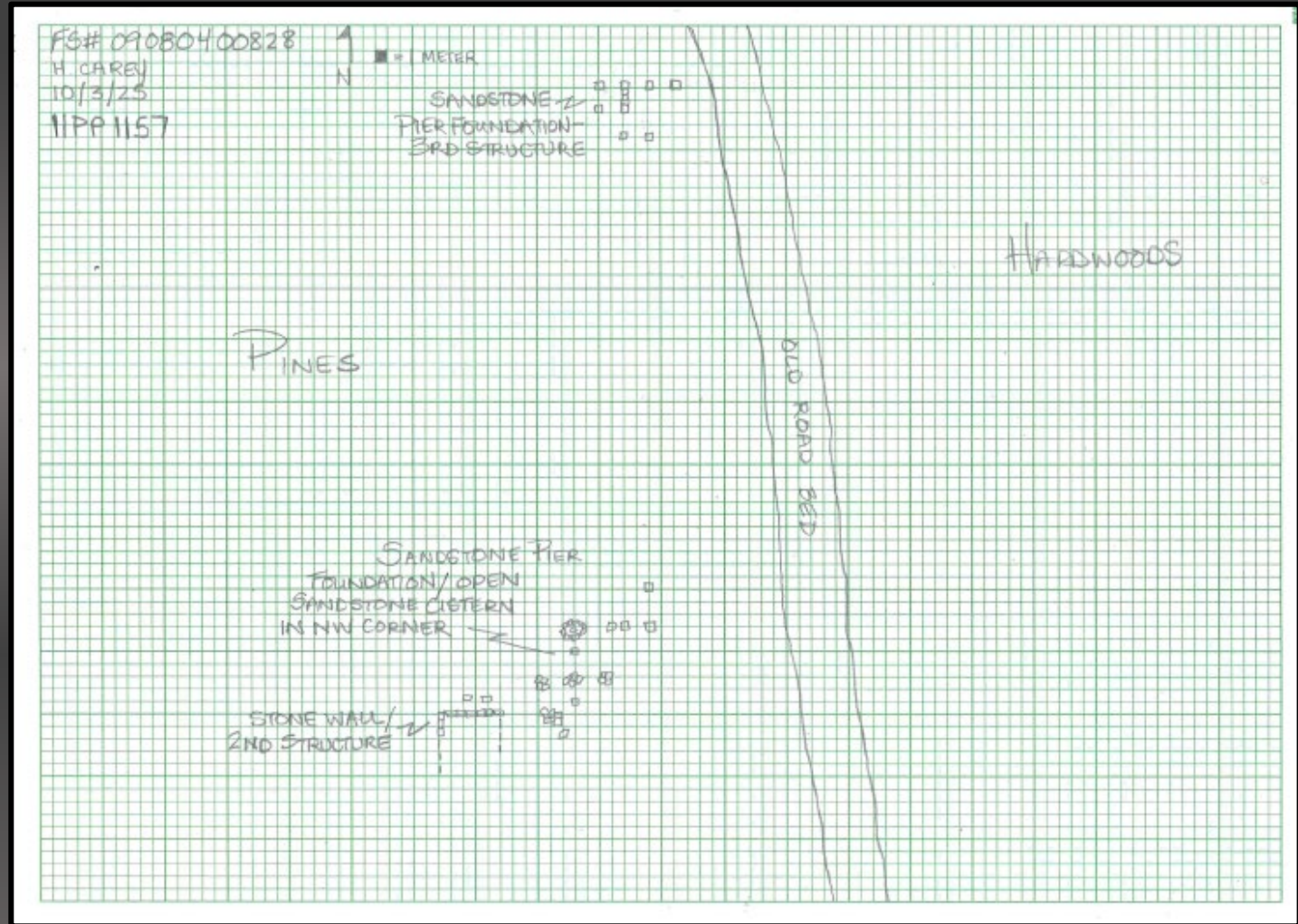
That a school was established early in the community’s history, and that many residents were literate, underscores the central role of education in this Black rural settlement.

Julia Singleton was one of the 42 persons formerly enslaved by Peter Singleton in Tennessee; all “emancipated and set free” by his 1850 will.

Miller Grove Farmsteads

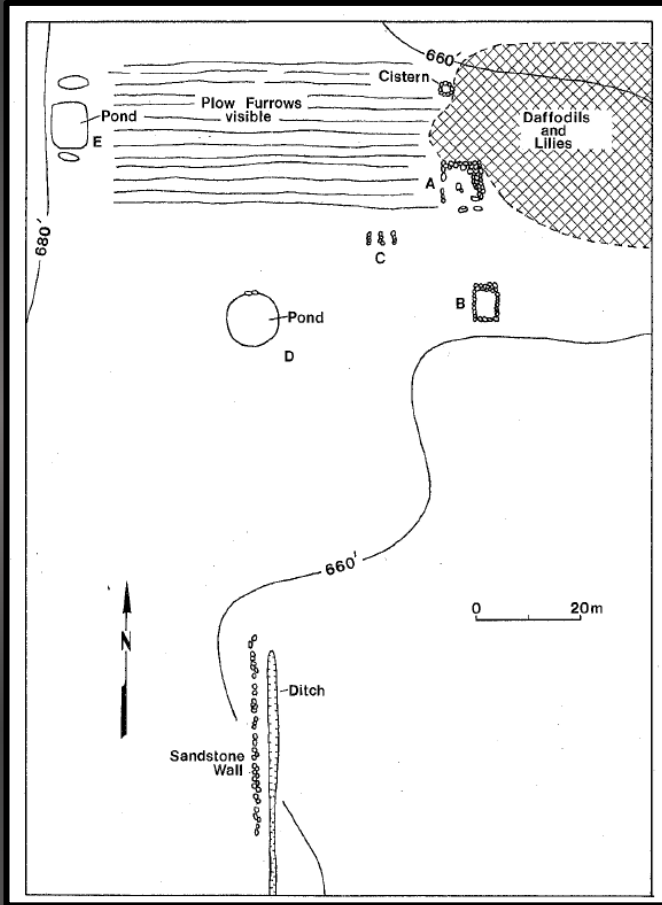


11PP1157 Alex Chavis Farmstead, 1989



11PP1157 Alex Chavis Farmstead, 2025

Miller Grove Farmsteads



11PP328 Harrison Miller Farmstead



11PP327 Miller Grove #1 and 11PP1161 Miller Grove #4



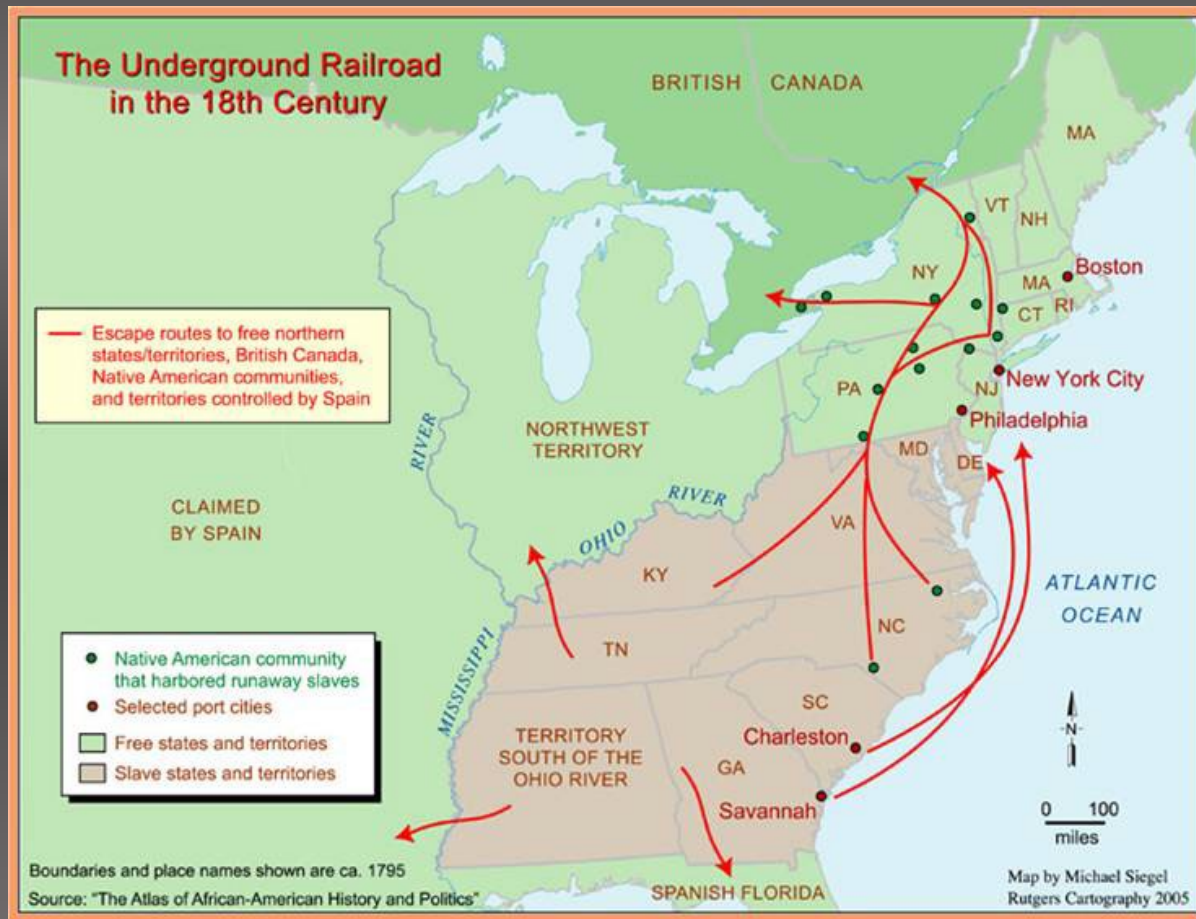
11PP448 Thomas Sides chimney fall and cistern



Miller Grove
And the
Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad

Initially, the Underground Railroad was focused in the eastern U.S.



But as the agricultural population moved west, so did the Underground Railroad.

Off the beaten path...

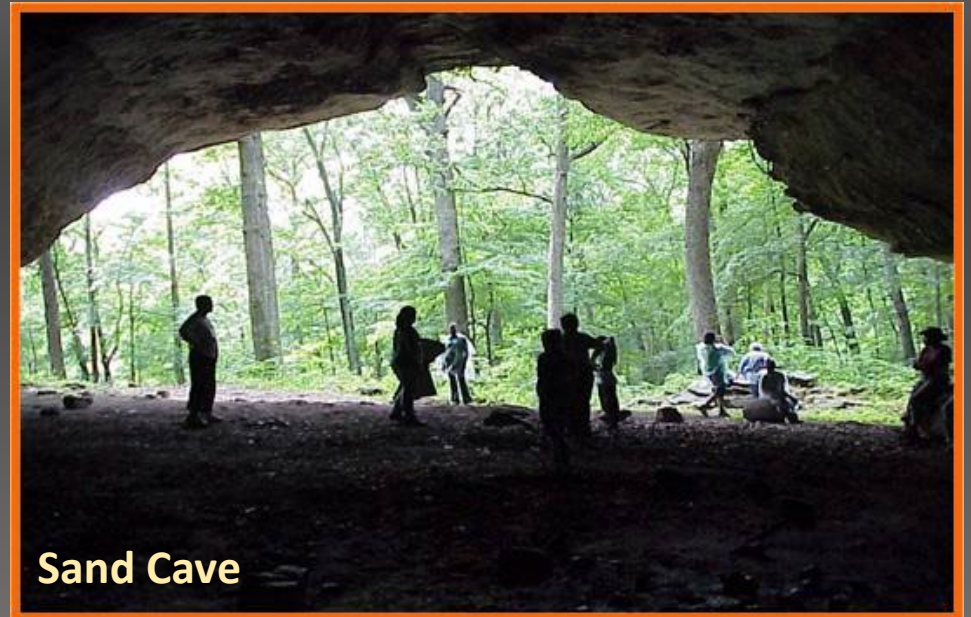
The Underground Railroad was a secret network that often avoided the main roads, but used instead travelways in creeks, forests and swamps.



Crow Knob



Sand Cave

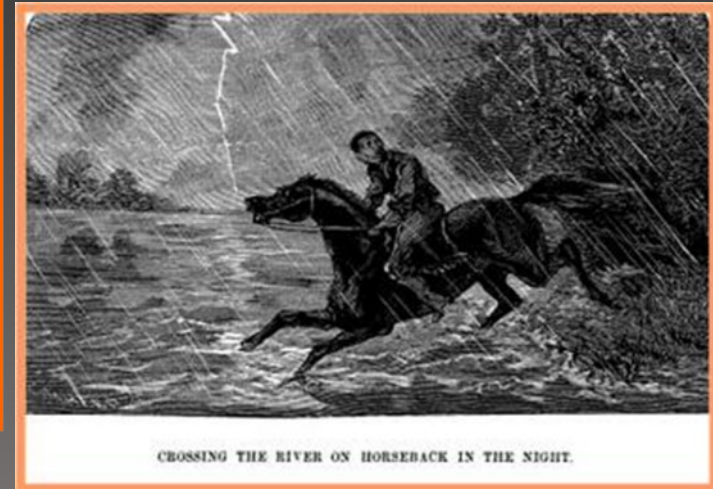
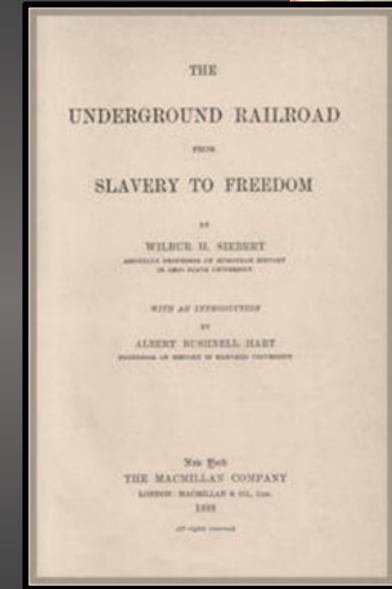


Sand Cave

Miller Grove and the Underground Railroad

Miller Grove was located near the Ohio River and 19th century roads and traces, but....the community's geographical location “*rendered underground enterprises in those regions more than ordinarily dangerous.*”

Wilbert Siebert, 1898



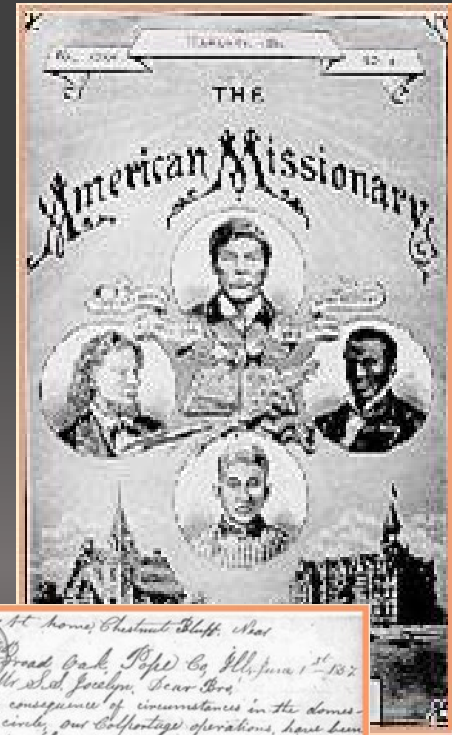
Miller Grove and the Underground Railroad

One factor that connects the archaeological and historical research at Miller Grove is the role of missionaries who came to southern Illinois to spread the antislavery gospel.

The American Missionary Association stationed over 300 missionaries throughout the region of Southern Illinois known as “Egypt.” AMA missionary James West, was stationed just three miles south of the Miller Grove community. The letters he wrote beginning in 1856, provide a rare glimpse of the heart of resistance to slavery in Southern Illinois.

“From the fact that nearly all of the emigration here has been from Tennessee, and that of the more common class, the influence exerted (sic) around us, is more thorough Pro Slavery, than where we were in Kentucky, with this difference; that no one here is owners.”

James West, June 1, 1857



At home, Chestnut Bluff, Ark.
Dear Oak, Popo Co. Ill. June 1st 1857
Mr. S. H. Johnson, Dear Bro.
In consequence of circumstances in the domestic, our Colportage operations, have been considerably shorn of what it would have been, had our affairs been otherwise, within the limits of April & May. So much so, that the first regular monthly report, class within the class of May.
Under the circumstances of seeing & conversing with so many, not at their homes, the accurate number of families visited, have not been strictly registered.
Of the books, on hands, a few only have been sold & the tracts & documents on hands, a hard put only remains, our labors being chiefly, what these silent, yet powerful, messengers, had been exerting an influence, for the last 18 months, which may prove costly, to your mind.
One individual, whose brother & brother-in-law, with their families, were among the poorest sufferers of the having a lengthy conversation, on the great wrong of slavery & comparing slavery, with some soil, proslavery, said, "It only remains, for a few missionaries to locate here, to give this portion of the state a stimulus, to make one, & to make this, an important portion of the state."
In a conversation with one who has had good opportunity to test the difference between slaves & free labor, said, "An imaginary line, dividing Missouri, from Iowa, has also, the influence of dividing the band, of the

Miller Grove and the Underground Railroad

Another factor connecting Miller Grove with the Underground Railroad according to researcher Dr. Cheryl LaRoche, *“wherever pre-Civil War free black settlements are investigated, the Underground Railroad must be considered a component of the research.”*



Mt. Gilead AME Church

She further notes that the black “church, community, and family were intertwined, interdependent, and inseparable” in their resistance to slavery.. *“The Underground Railroad was practically a church movement.”* Its prime leaders were preachers, and black churches were often used as Underground Railroad stops or stations.

Here as elsewhere, *“AME churches ... formed a vital portion of the network of stations for the protection of escaping bondsmen.”*

Miller Grove and the Underground Railroad



Several lines of evidence support the idea that at least some community members actively participated in resistance to slavery.

The community's physical location in a relatively isolated interior area "gives the impression that the safety of the inhabitants depended in part on the secluded nature of the community" - particularly important in regard to Underground Railroad activity. Natural features used as hide-outs and look-outs also contribute to the narrative.

Another line of evidence that links Miller Grove to the Underground Railroad includes the nearby location of white abolitionist missionaries with known ties to community members.

Research of Miller Grove over the past several decades has employed a multi-disciplinary approach to better understand the circumstances and impact of this historic community — both within the local setting of Pope County and southern Illinois, and within the broader effort to interpret the Underground Railroad and the many facets of its operation.

Landscape analysis, archival research, archaeology, and oral history have all contributed to a deeper understanding of the community, its residents, and their active participation, whether directly or indirectly, in the movement for equal civil rights.



Thank You!