



Underground Railroad Center Taking Shape

by EJ DICKSON '11
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Between the McDonald's drive-thru and CVS on Route 58 in Oberlin stands the Gasholder House, a one-story, cylindrical structure with red brick walls and a conical roof. For the past 80 years, it has stood vacant or underused, serving as a reminder of the city's industrial and architectural past—until now.

Within the next few years, the historic Gasholder House will reopen to the public as the Oberlin Underground Railroad Center, a monument to the city's heritage as a stop on the Underground Railroad. The building will house artifacts from the Civil War era, as well as art exhibits, lectures, performances, and other community events relating to the town's heritage as a focal point of the abolitionist movement.

The site will serve as a center for visitors to Oberlin, many of whom travel through Oberlin via Underground Railroad tours like the Adventure Cycling Underground Railroad bike route. For visitors to the area, whose most common request is Underground Railroad history, the center will serve as a singular resource to “stop and get information,” says Barbara Bickel, executive director of Visit Lorain County, adding that the site will be a huge “benefit to tourism in Lorain County.”

The Underground Railroad Center will also act as an “interpretive center” for interested organizations, says Darlene Colaso, assistant city manager and project coordinator of the Oberlin Underground Railroad Implementation Team.

“While African American Underground Railroad history will be the focus of the center, I anticipate this appealing to a wide range of community groups,” she says. “The goal is that every member of the Oberlin community will have a little piece of the center.”

Among the Civil War-era artifacts that will be permanently displayed in the center is the [gravestone of 4-year old Lee Howard Dobbins](#), a fugitive slave who arrived at Oberlin from Kentucky in 1853. When the sickly Dobbins became too ill to continue the journey to freedom up North, an Oberlin family took him under their wing.

When Dobbins died of consumption a week after arriving in Oberlin, the community mourned his passing by contributing 10 cents each for his tombstone, which was placed in the care of the Oberlin College Library Special Collections in the 1930s. When the center is completed, Dobbins’ tombstone will be displayed publicly for the first time in almost a century, serving as a monument to the town’s heritage and as a “symbol of a how our community rallies behind one person, concern or issue,” says city manager Eric Norenberg.

In addition to its function as a historical center, the site will double as a multi-modal transportation hub, serving as a rest stop for both automobiles and cyclists on Lorain County’s [North Coast Inland Bicycle Trail](#), which will ultimately span from Elyria to Toledo. Plans for the rest stop include public restrooms, picnicking and pedestrian amenities, and a sculpture park; as well as an air fill station and a bike shelter to be donated by the Oberlin Rotary Club.

Built in 1889 as a storage center for coal gas, the Oberlin Gasholder building supplied light and heat for the city’s street lamps until it ceased operation at the end of World War I. One of the few remaining structures of its kind in the nation, the building was placed on the National Register for Historic Places in 1998, which kick-started a city-wide campaign to restore the edifice and open it to the public. “It’s a very, very unique structure, from both an architectural and historical perspective,” Colaso says.

After the Gasholder building was officially donated to the city in 2004, members of the city council and the Oberlin community started toying with the idea of using it as a monument to the town’s Underground Railroad history. City council committed to providing some financial assistance for the project after a nine-member Underground Railroad Center implementation committee was formed to guide the project to its completion.

The project was also assisted by a \$917,600 federal grant administered through the Northeast Ohio Area-wide Coordinating Agency (NOACA), which was awarded to the city in 2003, and recommitted in 2009. The grant allowed the implementation team to move ahead with plans to stabilize the building and restore its distinctive circular dome, which had been weathered by more than a century and a half of northeast Ohio winters.

With phase one of the restoration process almost complete, the community was provided with a sneak peek of the Gasholder building during an open house over commencement

weekend. “It’s impressive when you get up close to the building to see how much it’s been restored,” Norenberg says. “I think it gave people a real thrill to peek inside.”

Despite the progress that has been made, the implementation team’s work is by no means done. Although Colaso estimates that the exterior will be “up and running from a visitor’s perspective” by fall 2013, the main goal is to come up with the funds to match 20 percent of the NOACA grant by April 2014, and the committee is currently working on grant applications and fundraising initiatives to start work on the interior.

Committee members are confident about the center’s future. “It’s a high-profile project, and we’re very pleased with how it’s turning out,” says Norenberg. “We’re excited that we’ve accomplished phase one, and we’re hoping that we’ll excite the community to donate for the next phases.”

The committee hopes that, just as the Oberlin community rallied together to buy Dobbins a headstone a century and a half ago, the town will once again come together to make the long-discussed dream of an Underground Railroad Center a reality.

“Oberlin has such a rich Underground Railroad heritage, and this center will be just one more fabulous addition to the wealth of historical resources we have in this city,” Colaso says.

For more information, visit the [Underground Railroad Center’s webpage](#) or the [project’s Facebook page](#).

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All photos by WILLIAM RIETER



The first phase of the Gasholder Building renovation included restoring its distinctive circular dome.



The Gasholder Building's roof seen from the interior of the building.



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The Gasholder Building's present and future were displayed simultaneously during the May 26, 2012, open house.