

# Double anniversary year

## Illinois 'most famous' Underground Railroad station

By Charles Stanley

There's a heart-stirring experience awaiting visitors to the Lovejoy Homestead in Princeton.



Before the Civil War the home was a station on the Underground Railroad, the perilous path to freedom for escaped slaves.

Princeton was on the Underground Railroad route in Illinois that ran from Quincy on the Mississippi River northeast to Chicago and then on to Canada. Other stops near Princeton included La Moille, La Salle, Ottawa, Paw Paw, Peru and Somonauk.

There's a lot to see at the homestead. But visitors will get a jolt on the second floor when a docent slides a wooden bureau to the side to expose a hidden door. The doorway leads into a storage area where runaway slaves would be hidden, in addition in the basement and barn. When the door is opened it reveals a mannequin dressed as a fugitive slave in hiding, waiting for conditions to be right to continue her journey to freedom.

It's a double anniversary year for the homestead. After a long restoration effort, 50 years ago in 1972 the Illinois State Historical Society recognized the homestead with a state historical marker. Then, 25 years ago in 1997, it was designated as a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service. Most recently, in 2001 the homestead was listed as a site on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program.

Beside being a preserved Underground Railroad station open for tours, the house also has the double distinction of having been the home of Owen Lovejoy, a clergyman, abolitionist, politician and friend of Abraham Lincoln.

"I would say that Owen Lovejoy was the most famous Underground Railroad operator in the State of Illinois," said Owen Muelder, author of



*The Owen Lovejoy historic house museum in Princeton, Illinois, is one of the state's most significant stations on the Underground Railroad.*

"The Underground Railroad in Western Illinois" and director of the Galesburg Colony Underground Railroad Freedom Center at Knox College in Galesburg. "If a person wants to visit an actual Underground Railroad site — not only in Illinois but anywhere in the United States, the opportunity to visit the Lovejoy Homestead on the east side of Princeton is a real attraction."

That's not taking anything away from the other Prairie State abolitionists and towns that supported the Underground Railroad, Muelder said.

"But Lovejoy is unique in that his fame rests not only on his abolitionist activism and the number of slaves he helped escape, but also in his career as a congressman in the then-new Republican Party and a friend of Abraham Lincoln."

Born in Maine in 1811, Lovejoy moved to Alton, Illinois. In 1837 he was present when his older brother, newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy, was killed in Alton by a mob angry with his

anti-slavery activities.

The following year he became pastor of Princeton's Hampshire Colony Congregational Church, where he served for 17 years. In 1854 Lovejoy was elected to the Illinois legislature and in 1856 he was elected to Congress, where he served until his death. In Princeton, Lovejoy boarded with the family of Butler and Eunice Denham, who also were abolitionists. After Butler died, Lovejoy married Eunice and they raised six children of their own and three born to Eunice and Butler.

Lovejoy was open about his involvement in the Underground Railroad, even advertising his home as a refuge for runaway slaves.

Sometimes there was excitement.

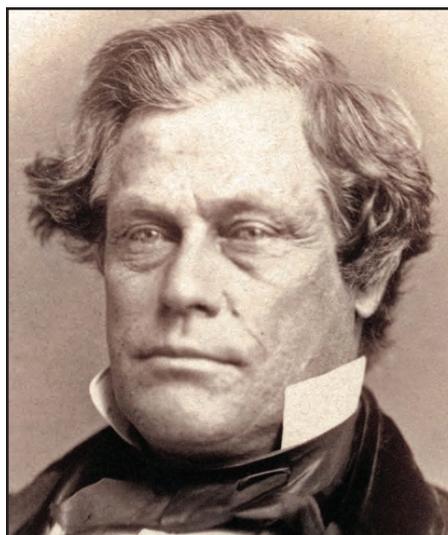
"Owen is said to have helped a slave dressed as a woman get out of town," said Lois Peterson, a homestead docent for 10 years and, like three of the other eight docents, a former teacher.

On that occasion in 1849, a young runaway slave from Missouri named John Buckner was apprehended by two slave catchers. According to an 1872 account by early Princeton historian Nehemiah Matson. Both slave catchers pointed pistols at Buckner's head. Then they tied his hands behind him and "led him like a dog through the streets of the town."

John and the slave catchers, who were arrested for kidnapping, were taken to court. In the excitement, Buckner was freed, placed on a horse and told to ride to the Lovejoy home.

**T**he excited crowd followed, surrounding the Lovejoy home.

When a figure on a horse was seen to ride out of the Lovejoy barn the slave catchers gave chase. But the man they caught up with turned out to be a white with a black veil on his face. Back at the Lovejoy home the slave catchers tried to force their way in but were stopped by Lovejoy, who demanded to



**Owen Lovejoy in 1859.**

see a search warrant. In the meantime, Buckner, garbed in a dress, was hidden in a wagon and got away.

Lovejoy died in 1864 while Lincoln was president.

"When Lincoln was informed of his death he said Lovejoy was his best friend in Congress," Muelder said. "So

that gives you an idea of his fame and reputation at that time and the extent to which the president of the United States thought of him as a genuine ally."

Tours of the homestead include the parlor, kitchen, dining room, bedrooms and other areas which are furnished with furniture and artifacts from the era.

"Adults who visit often comment on how big the house is," docent Peterson said. People taking the tour are usually placed in small groups of six to eight and on busy days started from different points in the house.

Peterson said visitors are discouraged from taking photos because they become distracted from the narrative about the home's historic significance.

The Lovejoy Homestead, located at 905 E. Peru St. in Princeton, is open May through September on Friday, Saturday and Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m. For details on tours visit online at [owenlovejoyhomestead.com](http://owenlovejoyhomestead.com) or telephone (815) 879-9151. 

## "The Conversation"

Last year the Illinois State Historical Society commissioned a limited special bronze casting of John McClarey's statuette "The Conversation," which features seated representations of President Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist Frederick Douglass in their first conversation in the White House, which took place on August 10, 1863. The Society is offering the statuette to individuals who contribute to the ISHS endowment campaign at the \$2500 level. Each statuette is signed and numbered, and comes with a certificate of authenticity and the gratitude of the Society's Board of Directors.



**To order "The Conversation," call 217-525-2781 today.**