

Creating the Underground Railroad Bicycle Route

By Ginny Sullivan

Beginning the journey

Have you ever started down a path, not knowing where it would lead, but confident in the knowledge that you were on to something good? Adventure Cycling took that leap of faith when we embarked on a project that would honor the Underground Railroad. By creating a 2,058 mile bicycle route that followed the storied Route to Freedom, we honored the freedom seekers and those that assisted them while creating an historic adventure for traveling cyclists to enjoy.

Adventure Cycling Association, the largest bicycling organization in the U.S., has taken leaps of faith before. Our inception began with an idea that Americans (and others, as it turns out) could celebrate the bicentennial anniversary of the United States by riding across our country by bicycle. Over 4,000 people did just that, beginning a brand new era of bicycle travel. Known as Bikecentennial, then as Adventure Cycling Association in 1994, our mission is to inspire people of all ages to travel by bicycle. We help cyclists explore the landscapes and history of America for fitness, fun, and self-discovery.

For over 30 years, Adventure Cycling has been creating bicycle routes and supporting those who like to tour by selling gear and maps, guiding tours, and producing *Adventure Cyclist* magazine nine times per year for our members. We also offer an amazing array of helpful information via our 800-page website and our printed and electronic versions of *The Cyclist Yellow Pages* (featuring thousands of bike organizations, companies, and resources worldwide). But the cornerstone of what we do is producing maps for cyclists. Unlike car travel, cyclists enjoy the roads less traveled. Our maps offer turn-by-turn instructions, elevation profiles and weather conditions, interesting geologic, historic and cultural information along with services for food, accommodations, bike shops, and libraries.

Conceptualizing the Underground Railroad

Our first leap into creating a heritage route came in conjunction with the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Celebration, wherein we created a bicycle route called the Lewis and Clark Trail. With the creation of this route, the interest from people outside the cycling world made us realize that history and culture could be the impetus to get more people interested in cycling and traveling by bicycle. After all, those that are interested in history might also be interested in experiencing history.

As a staff, we brainstormed some ideas for heritage routes and then asked our 40,000+ members what they thought. Clearly, they supported a route that honored the Underground Railroad—a clandestine network of loosely organized safe-houses that helped freedom seekers (escaped slaves) on their way to freedom across the Mason-Dixon Line, and later (after the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850), all the way to Canada.

But what did we, a bicycling non-profit located in Missoula, Montana, know about African American history? Furthermore, what did creating a bicycle route in honor of this challenging period in history mean to Americans and the rest of the world?

Certainly, it would be more than just another bicycle route—it would be something important to the country and possibly the world. Add to this the realization that our membership and the majority of the cycling community as a whole is mainly one dimensional—white, male, and middle aged (Outdoor Industry Association, 2006). If we were to survive as a healthy organization and attract a wider interest in cycling, we recognized the need to reach beyond the cycling community and welcome new demographics to the fold.

A partnership is born

Enter the Center for Minority Health, located within the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. The Center has been making significant impact in the health of African Americans in the greater Pittsburgh area via their innovative program utilizing barbers as lay health consultants. They also found that bringing health professionals to the people broke down barriers that prevented African Americans from seeking medical advice and sticking to it.

In 2003, Dr. Stephen Thomas, director of the Center, was looking for other ways to impact the health of African Americans, such as inspiring physical activity in a culturally relevant way. That's when he found out about Adventure Cycling's proposed Underground Railroad Bicycle Route. With this, our partnership was born.

A partnership between an academic health organization and a bicycling organization may seem strange at first. But when you put great ideas together, great things happen. We taught them about bicycling and they started a local Major Taylor Cycle Club. (Learn about this premier turn-of-the-century African American bicycle club at www.majortaylorassociation.org/who.) They taught us about minority health and how to bridge the gaps in our projects to encourage new and novice cyclists. Together, we created the Underground Railroad Bicycle Route, a historic and commemorative tribute

to the bravery of freedom seekers and those who helped them along their journey.

The entire Underground Railroad Bicycle Route travels from Mobile, Alabama, along the rivers and back road byways all the way to Owen Sound, Ontario, Canada, on Lake Huron. While the route is representational (freedom seekers took literally thousands of routes to freedom), it does encompass a great deal of history and moves people from the Deep South to a known safe-haven in Canada. The route offers African American museums and churches, military parks and civil war monuments, entire communities known to have offered safe passage to escaping slaves, incredible scenery, and great cycling.

Making connections with health and history

In February, 2007, Adventure Cycling completed the maps for the entire 2,058-mile route—five sections of approximately 400 miles each—and the inaugural tour began in April 2007. This first tour is comprised of 17 cyclists and two tour leaders traveling the entire corridor. They are carrying all their gear and life necessities with them using panniers and trailers. They camp in the evenings and sometimes travel as much as 75 miles in one day (rest days are scheduled about every 7th day). Not unlike what freedom seekers encountered during the days of slavery, the group has endured hard days of travel through intense heat, cold nights, and rain. But this incredible journey has also sparked an awareness of the Underground Railroad and bicycling.

What occurred along the route in Linden, Alabama, was a great example of collaboration between organizations. Without a campground nearby, the tour leaders contacted the local school administration and asked if camping would be possible on the school grounds. The superintendent decided this was an opportunity to teach the kids about history and bicycling. With the help of the Alabama Bicycle Coalition (AlaBikes), they did more than that; they invited state dignitaries, government agencies, and the press to line the streets and welcome the cyclists into town. A public reception with music, presentations, and a barbeque completed the day. The collaboration between AlaBikes and the school district has also stimulated interest in creating green-space development and safe routes and trails for kids to bike to school. Now, other communities are doing similar events to highlight their special Underground Railroad connection and their commitment to bicycling.

For the Center for Minority Health, participating in the tour is not only the culmination of the work they have done in Pittsburgh (check out the Healthy Black Families project at www.cmh.pitt.edu), but also a means to bring awareness to minorities in the health care and wellness professions. Norm Peterson, a University of Pittsburgh Medical Center student nurse, is participating in the tour in hopes of inspiring others in the African American community to embrace history and health. While in Linden, Norm spoke to the community assembled in the school gym. "As a nurse, I provide care to many 50- to 70-year olds suffering and dying from preventable diseases. Yet today, I am cycling 2,000 miles with 50-, 60-, and 70-year old men and women. The difference is an active, health lifestyle; eating well, exercising, and making good life choices." (Learn more about the

tour at WPXI- Pittsburgh's website at www.wpxi.com/news/11847198/detail.html. Here, you can read Norm's and CMH staffs' journals and view pictures of the trip.)

Anyone can bike the Underground Railroad

Many of us aren't prepared to take on a 2,000 mile bike trip since it takes time and training. However, most of us do own bikes—44% of U.S. households own at least one bike (Pucher, 2007) or can find inexpensive access to them (check out local free or recycled bicycle programs in your community). Though the route travels over 2,000 miles, that doesn't mean people have to take on the entire challenge. Maps can be purchased individually and can be cycled in small trips based upon areas of interest and geographic proximity. Indeed, many Adventure Cycling members choose routes (we currently have over 36,000 mapped miles of bike routes) and bike them in shorter sections over consecutive years.

Another great way to experience the route is by touring with Adventure Cycling on its supported Underground Railroad Celebration Tour, July 30-August 5. This tour travels 273 miles from Buffalo, New York, to Owen Sound, Ontario, ending at the 145th Annual Emancipation Day Picnic. The tour is appropriate for novice cyclists and will highlight the beauty of the Niagara Falls region, as well as the history of major settlements for freedom seekers in Ontario.

Day trips and local involvement

To make this route even more accessible, Adventure Cycling and the Center for Minority Health will partner with local communities to make the Underground Railroad Bicycle Route available in 10-20 mile segments. The day trip maps will be distributed locally and will be downloadable from Adventure Cycling's website. Our first venture will be in Ripley, Ohio. Additional interest has been generated in Louisville, Alabama, Buffalo, New York, and Cincinnati, Ohio. We are also working on 100-mile spurs that link important Underground Railroad sites and cities to the main corridor. Pittsburgh to Erie, Pennsylvania, will be our first spur and will be available in the Fall of 2007.

In addition, individual organizations, businesses, and libraries are supporting the Underground Railroad Bicycle Route. The Stationmaster program, with the visual display of a window decal, provides cyclists the opportunity to find safe-haven while on the road and encourages local awareness of the route. This is yet another method for not only grassroots involvement but accessibility and promotion.

Supporters and advisors

Numerous people and organizations have helped us on this journey. First and foremost are the members of Adventure Cycling Association and our partner, The Center for Minority Health. Additional partners include: the National Park Service Network to Freedom Program, tasked with authenticating and preserving Underground Railroad sites, history, and programs; Recreation Equipment Inc. (REI), a co-op retailer that has

supported the project financially and with media outreach; Bikes Belong Coalition, a coalition of bicycle suppliers and retailers working together to put more people on bicycles more often; and our Advisory Board and a host of outside advisors that have met with us every month, counseling us on everything from map text to website content.

What we've learned

The lessons we've learned from this project are two-fold: Great ideas can lead you down new paths and unique partnerships help achieve individual goals. Whether you work for a big corporation, a small business, or a non-profit—partnerships can play an important role in helping you achieve your goals. For Adventure Cycling and the Center for Minority Health, we've both benefited immensely from the three years we've worked together. The process of educating each other through meetings and collaborative project development enriched our understanding of the populations that we each serve and have helped us take huge leaps of faith in our programs. We've traveled much further down the road together.