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NEWS

# Plans for expansive Underground Railroad interpretive center in Albany take shape

Will be adjacent to historic Myers residence, which was a stop on the Underground Railroad

**Rick Karlin**  
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The Stephen and Harriet Myers house at 194 Livingston Ave. on Saturday, Feb. 18, 2023, in Albany, NY. The Myers lived there in the 1850s and were the central Underground Railroad activists in the Capital Region.

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ALBANY - It's currently an empty lot in Arbor Hill. And the main component is on a farm almost 60 miles away in rural Fort Plain. But eventually, these two components will merge into what its backers say will be a new, upgraded and expanded tribute to Albany's role in the Underground Railroad, the long, arduous route that Black families in the antebellum South used to make their way north and escape from slavery.

"It's been a dream," Mary Liz Stewart said of the expansion of the Underground Railroad History Project, which is currently housed in the 19th century home of Black abolitionists Harriet and Stephen Myers. The brownstone row house at 194 Livingston Ave. where the Myers lived was a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Today, Stewart and her husband Paul Stewart are co-founders of the History Project.

They've been at the forefront of restoring the Myers' home, turning it into an historic stop that draws school groups, history buffs, civil rights activists and visitors to Albany to name a few.

Now, with seed money from Pioneer Bank, and a fundraising campaign that is starting, they are planning a museum-interpretive center and community space on the lot next door that should bring greater prominence to the Myers and the city's role in the Underground Railroad.

Construction of the new building, which will be a full-scale interpretative center, is the logical next stage for the Stewarts, who since 2003 have been restoring and operating the Myers home as an historic site. The home is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The expansion, which would be named the Stephen and Harriet Myers Interpretative Center, is envisioned as a 13,000-square foot structure, housing spaces for archives, exhibits, lectures, a café, library and research space as well as spots for children's activities and screening room. Cost of the facility is estimated at \$8 million and they hope to have it up by 2025.

A key architectural concept is the barn framing, which is from a pre-Revolutionary Dutch-style barn the Stewarts have purchased from a farmer in Fort Plain, Montgomery County.

The idea is to give visitors a sense of what life was like in these early times when slavery was legal even in New York state.

"You will be within a barn space," said architect Shawn Hamlin, of Albany's Hamlin Design Group, which designed the center.

"It's going to create a wow factor that will enable the structure to evoke a sense of awe and grandeur," added Paul Stewart.

The Stewarts have already made progress on fundraising, with a commitment of \$525,000 in various legislative grants and \$75,000 from Pioneer Bank.

"When they came to us with this project we were excited to assist," said Pioneer's Amber Hensley Business Banking Relationship Manager. "This is a huge part of Albany's history so we were really excited."

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