

January 17, 2024

An open letter from Gerald McWorter (Abdul Alkalimat, mcworter@illinois.edu):

Crisis in the New Philadelphia Association

I write with disappointment but also a feeling of responsibility to report on a recent development in the New Philadelphia Association (NPA).

This week the NPA board voted to evict the McWorter family from using the Burdick House. It is the only remaining house on the site of New Philadelphia, my family's ancestral village. Why did this happen? Might the NPA reconsider this decision and work out a solution?

I cannot let this decision proceed without reporting it to the many supporters of New Philadelphia. If you care, people need to hear from you. Their names are at the end here.

New Philadelphia, Illinois, is the site of an integrated abolitionist village. It was also the first town in the US platted and legally registered by an African American. This was done by Free Frank and Free Lucy McWorter, my great-great-grandfather and -grandmother. They also bought themselves and 14 other family members out of slavery.

I have been serving as board member and vice president of the New Philadelphia Association for at least 15 years. (<http://newphiladelphiail.org/>). After a great deal of work by the NPA and others, the site is today one of the nation's 425 national parks.

The house was built by a family who arrived there very soon after the McWorters and stayed for 150 years. It was unused and in declining condition when McWorters began to use it at least 17 years ago, with the blessing of the NPA. Using it helped protect it from further damage, with more people keeping an eye on the house.

This eviction is I am afraid shortening the life of the one McWorter descendant who lives in the county, fifth generation descendent Sandra McWorter Marsh. She lives at Barry Health Care and Senior Living. Helped by their staff, she has been visiting the Burdick House weekly as respite from the nursing home environment. Every two weeks or so, my wife and I stay in the house to visit her and participate in local New Philadelphia events and meetings. Other family members who live further away have also used the house.

The NPA has the opportunity to donate the New Philadelphia land it owns to the National Park Service while also enabling McWorters to continue to use the house. The NPA will incur no costs. The National Park Service will not be inconvenienced. Various practical proposals have been written, even incorporating ideas from the National Park Service. There is a way for this to work, but the NPA board voted 9-5 to disregard the proposals and donate the land in such a way as to end McWorter family use of the house and shut it down for the foreseeable future. It will be vacant and at risk.

McWorters have worked for at least twenty years with the NPA, and much longer as a family, to remember New Philadelphia and to see it become a national park:

1. Four McWorters are the only African Americans on the board of the New Philadelphia Association.
2. A McWorter walked from Kentucky to Illinois, tracing Frank and Lucy's journey, to win recognition of Frank's grave as a National Historic Landmark and being listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
3. A McWorter created a bronze bust of Frank McWorter which has become one of the icons of New Philadelphia
4. McWorters have written three books about the family and town: Helen Simpson's *Makers of History* (1981), Juliet Walker's *Free Frank* (1983), Gerald McWorter and Kate Williams McWorter's *New Philadelphia* (2018).
5. McWorters have given dozens of talks about New Philadelphia (see for instance <http://newphiladelphial.org/archive/videos/>).
6. McWorters have traveled to discuss the future national park with members of Congress.
7. McWorters have worked and recruited others to work to clean and preserve the adjacent African American cemetery where family members and others are buried.
8. McWorters donated 16-plus acres of land (currently valued at \$106,000) that was owned by Frank's son Solomon McWorter, to see that land gets included into the National Park Service.
9. McWorters proposed and led a fund drive that raised more than \$300,000 to pay off the mortgages that the NPA owed on the land it had bought.
10. Generations of McWorters have told the story to their families and whoever would listen; taught it in classrooms; maintained and extended the family tree; organized family reunions where the story was shared; and returned to visit and celebrate the history.

Again, if you care about this, the following people need to hear from you. Please also send me your thoughts and copies of any correspondence:

Senator Richard J. Durbin, 202.224.2152 or 217.492.4062
National Park Service, 202-208-6843 or 402-661-1520
New Philadelphia Association, newphiladelphial@gmail.com

I write this with sadness that such an event must be placed before the court of public opinion. Thank you for reading this.

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