



For Immediate Release

**Contact: Leslie Pielack
(248) 530-1682**

Birmingham Museum team to present newly discovered local Black history at Southfield Public Library January 31

Program will focus on freedom seeker John Sella Martin, who was sheltered in Southfield in 1857

BIRMINGHAM, MI, January 17, 2024 — Birmingham Museum researchers will feature the story of **John Sella Martin** as a kickoff to Black History Month at a free lecture at the Southfield Public Library on Wednesday, January 31 at 6:30 p.m. The program, **"The Underground Railroad in Southfield and the Extraordinary Story of John Sella Martin"** is the first in a yearlong series sponsored by Oakland County's Historical Society, which is celebrating its 150th anniversary in 2024.

The Birmingham Museum has been leading a five-community research project on the Underground Railroad (UGRR) in Oakland County as part of a grant-funded effort supported in part by Michigan Council for the Humanities, an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The pilot project involves volunteer teams in Birmingham, Farmington, Royal Oak, Pontiac and Southfield conducting evidence-based research on area connections to the Underground Railroad.

"The goal is to bring awareness of stories of both abolitionists and formerly enslaved freedom seekers to the public," said **Leslie Pielack, Birmingham Museum director** and research project director. "Sharing documented evidence with educators, students and families will cast light on the little known history of the anti-slavery movement in our area. We all benefit when we have more of the whole picture." A traveling exhibit and interactive web site is funded by the grant and set to launch in February.

The wealth of information that has surfaced is astounding, according to Pielack. The initial research identified almost two dozen documented freedom seekers as well as nearly as many abolitionists. More are expected to be found. Talented volunteers have been key to the success of the project, which began in 2023 but received additional funding to extend it through 2024. "It can be very challenging to trace documentation of formerly enslaved people. Documents are minimal, and by its very nature, the UGRR was under the radar," Pielack said. **African American genealogist Joy Young** heard about the project and has lent her expertise in researching enslaved individuals to help locate family records and cross reference historical documents. "I was drawn to the project, and it has become a major part of my life," Young said.

One of the most exciting findings is that of freedom seeker John Sella Martin. Young, who has spent many hours researching and is writing a book on his amazing story, explained, "Martin, who was born in 1832 in North Carolina, had been enslaved by more than 11 different enslavers before fleeing the south." With the help of the Underground Railroad, he eventually made it to Southfield and the home of **abolitionist minister James S. T. Milligan** at the Covenanter Church (now Southfield Reformed Presbyterian). Milligan sheltered Martin for six weeks in 1857. "Milligan recognized Martin's gifts, and wrote that he was the smartest man Milligan had ever met," Young said. "Milligan gave Martin some instruction in the gospel, and Martin went on to become a world famous Baptist minister, colleague of **Frederick Douglass** and acquaintance of **Abraham Lincoln**." Martin was renowned in England and Scotland, where he was considered the most influential abolitionist in the struggle against the institution of American slavery, she said.

The free lecture begins at 6:30 p.m., but attendees must register in advance at <https://events.getlocalhop.com/the-underground-railroad-in-southfield-and-the-extraordinary-story-of-john-sella-martin/event/jEdMskdSDN/>. Seats are expected to fill early. The Southfield Public Library is located at 26300 Evergreen Road in Southfield; call 248-796-4200 for more information.

To learn more about the Birmingham Museum, the Underground Railroad research project, and to view its virtual exhibits and hear its podcasts, visit www.bhamgov.org/museum.

*The Birmingham Museum is open Tuesday – Saturday from 1 to 4 p.m. Admission is \$7 for adults, \$5 for students and seniors, and children 5 and under and Friends members are free. Questions? Contact the museum at 248-530-1928 or museum@bhamgov.org, or check us out on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/TheBirminghamMuseum/>), Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/birmingham_museum_mi/), or Twitter (https://twitter.com/bham_museum). More video content on our current exhibit, lectures on historic Birmingham, and educational video shorts for adults and children can be found on our YouTube channel. Want to know more about us? Check us out at www.bhamgov.org/museum. Or contact us by phone at **248-530-1928**.*

City of Birmingham – A Walkable Community. Visit the city's web site at www.bhamgov.org.

#