

LOCAL NEWS

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St. Paul's Pilgrim Baptist Church recognized for role in anti-slavery Underground Railroad



Pilgrim Baptist Church, established in downtown St. Paul in 1863, has been in its current location at 732 W. Central Ave. in St. Paul since 1928. (Courtesy of Pilgrim Baptist Church)



By **FREDERICK MELO** | fmelo@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press
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Born and raised in St. Paul, Elyse Pearson-Hill was always fascinated by the history of the sizable church just down the street. It was said that Pilgrim Baptist Church was founded by escaped slaves, whom [the Rev. Robert Hickman](#) dubbed his “pilgrims” as he led them by cover of night out of the plantations and farm fields of Missouri and up the Mississippi River to St. Paul.

Little did she realize during her teen years at St. Paul Central High School in the 1970s that she would someday play a role in elevating that church to a historic status.

With her help, Pilgrim Baptist Church has been newly listed as the first Minnesota location on the National Park Service’s “National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom,” a directory of more than 700 notable sites where slaves seeking their freedom hid or found refuge.

The National Park Service listed the church, which was [chartered in 1866 and moved from Cedar Street to Central Avenue in 1928](#), among 23 new sites added to the network in late September.

“We are very excited about the honor of being on the Underground Railroad Network, thanks hugely to the efforts of Elyse,” said Stephanie Dilworth, chair of the church’s board of trustees.

Network to freedom

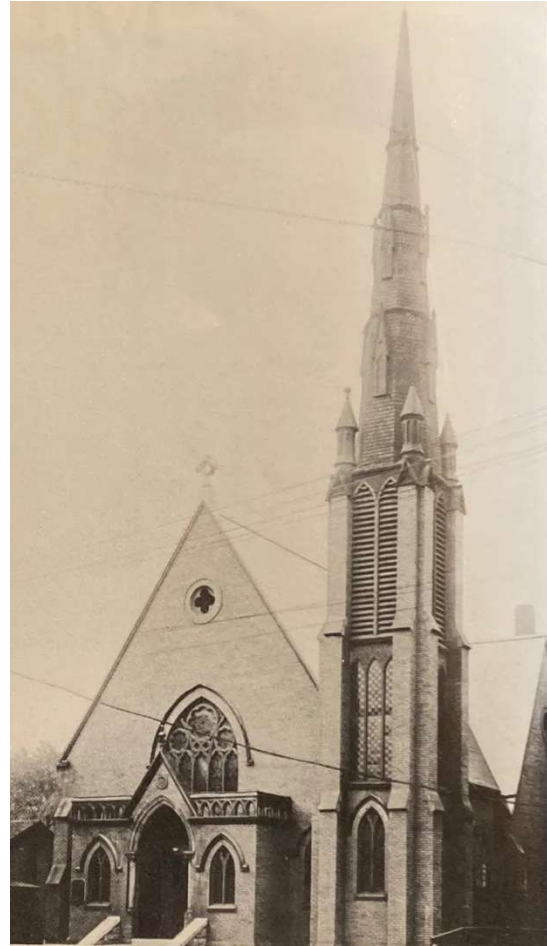
Pearson-Hill, who left Minnesota for the military after graduating Central High School in the late 1970s, later landed in Georgia, where she oversees health contracts for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. But Black history always fascinated her, leading her in her free time to obtain a professional certification in genealogy, with a specialization in African-American research.

Her projects have ranged from exploring the history of slavery at the University of Georgia at Athens to documenting the U.S. “colored troops” units in Kentucky.

About three years ago, she turned her attention back to [Hickman and Pilgrim Baptist Church](#).

She learned through a friend at the National Park Service that the church could be eligible for inclusion in its National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. Pearson-Hill contacted the church, and with church leaders’ permission, spent months finding concrete historical evidence that the lore was true.

While Hickman’s role in founding and leading the church after establishing himself in Minnesota is well-documented, “I wanted to find out if I could find out any information of these people during slavery,” Pearson-Hill said.



Pilgrim Baptist Church's Cedar St. location. (Courtesy of Pilgrim Baptist Church)

Her research took her to Boone County, Mo., where both Hickman and his wife Minta Spencer-Hickman had toiled on separate plantations owned by different slaveowners. Both slaveowners had died before the Civil War, and at the county courthouse, she found their probate files — financial appraisements of their assets and belongings, including their slaves. She also visited the Boone County Historical Society and the Minnesota Historical Society. A grant from the National Park Service helped fund her work.

With her assembled findings, Pearson-Hill prepared an application for Pilgrim Baptist to submit this summer to the National Park Service, which included the church among 23 locations added to the National Underground Railroad Network in September.

The church will receive a plaque and certificate, and it will be eligible to apply to the National Park Service for related grants associated with preservation, markers and signage, oral history projects, educational materials, accessibility, archaeological surveys or other documentation.

“These grants open up every year, usually in January,” Pearson-Hill said. “I just think it’s great. It’s the first site for the state of Minnesota.”

Pearson-Hill, who still has family in St. Paul, said she isn’t done with her Minnesota research. She’s looking closely at the Minneapolis Pioneers and Soldiers Memorial Cemetery, located on Lake Street between Cedar and Hiawatha avenues. Buried there is William Goodrich, a prominent businessman who was born into slavery in Maryland but obtained his freedom at the age of 16.

Goodrich came to own 13 freight railroad cars known as the Reliance Line, which secretly carried slaves to freedom in Pennsylvania. In his later years he moved to Minnesota to live with his daughter, Emily, and her husband Ralph Grey, active abolitionists who in 1860 helped a woman named Eliza Winston obtain her freedom through the courts while the family she served was visiting the state while on vacation from Mississippi. Incited by the court verdict, a mob formed around the Grey house that night, but the Greys had already helped Winston flee toward Canada with the help of the underground railroad network.

In addition to Goodrich, the Minneapolis cemetery is the final resting place of a U.S. “colored troops” unit, which Goodrich suspects may have been made up in part of former slaves.

“I’m just speculating that they were escaped slaves,” she said.

To prove that, she plans to do more research.



The sanctuary at Pilgrim Baptist Church in St. Paul features images of its past pastors captured in its stained glass windows. Among those is Robert T. Hickman, left, a Missouri slave who came to Minnesota in the 1860's and founded the church. Also seen are Rev. Harris, center, and Rev. Massey. (Courtesy of Pilgrim Baptist Church)



The Rev. Robert Hickman first established Pilgrim Baptist Church in downtown St. Paul in 1863, from where it moved to Sibley Street and then relocated again in 1928 to its current location at 732 W. Central Ave. (Courtesy of Pilgrim Baptist Church)