



John Rau

*Bill Analysis*  
*Legislative Service Commission*

## **H.B. 279**

123rd General Assembly  
(As Introduced)

**Reps. Barrett, Ford, Beatty, Bender, Boyd, Flannery, Jones, Krupinski,  
Logan, Opfer, Pringle, Smith, Sulzer, Sutton**

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### **BILL SUMMARY**

- Creates the Ohio Network-to-Freedom Commission as a permanent agency to preserve and promote the history of and to educate the public about the Underground Railroad.

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### **CONTENT AND OPERATION**

#### **Creation and organization of the Ohio Network-to-Freedom Commission**

(sec. 149.58)

The bill creates the Ohio Network-to-Freedom Commission, which is charged with preserving and promoting the history of the Underground Railroad in Ohio and to educate the state's citizens about that history. The Commission consists of the following 11 members:

- the Chief of the Division of Parks and Recreation in the Department of Natural Resources, or the Chief's designee;
- the chairperson of the National Museum of Afro-American History and Culture Planning Committee, or the chairperson's designee;<sup>1</sup>
- the Deputy Director of the Division of Travel and Tourism in the Department of Development, or the Deputy Director's designee;

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<sup>1</sup> Established pursuant to section 149.303 of the Revised Code, the National Museum of Afro-American History and Culture Planning Committee is a state commission whose members are appointed by the Governor with the advice and consent of the Senate and charged with offering advice to the Ohio Historical Society in the operation of the National Museum of Afro-American History and Culture, located at Wilberforce, Ohio.

- the Director of the Ohio Historical Society, or the Director's designee;
- the Superintendent of Public Instruction, or the Superintendent's designee;
- a member of the Friends of Freedom appointed by the Governor;<sup>2</sup>
- a member of the Ohio Historic Site Preservation Advisory Board appointed by the Governor; and
- four public members appointed by the Governor.

One of the four public members must be a member of the Ohio Bicentennial Commission, and the other three public members must be associated or affiliated with historical societies or community organizations. The six members appointed by the Governor serve five-year terms of office, which are staggered so that no more than two terms expire at the same time. The Governor must make the initial appointments within 90 days of the bill's effective date.

The member appointed from the Friends of Freedom serves as the Commission chairperson. In addition, the Commission annually must select from among its other members a vice-chairperson and a secretary. The Commission must meet at least four times per year and keep a public record of its proceedings. Members receive no compensation for serving on the Commission, but they may be reimbursed for the expenses they incur while carrying out their Commission duties.

The Ohio Historical Society must provide any support staff necessary for the work of the Commission for a period of two years, unless the Commission notifies the Society within that period that it has adequate financial resources to employ its own staff. After two years time, the Commission must hire its own staff. Throughout the initial two-year period and thereafter, the Society must provide the Commission with necessary office space and financial record-keeping services.

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<sup>2</sup> According to officials at the Ohio Historical Society, the organization currently known as the Friends of Freedom is a nonprofit organization devoted to the preservation of the history of the Underground Railroad in Ohio. It sponsors annual conferences exploring that subject and engages in other educational activities designed to raise public awareness of the role of the Underground Railroad in America's past.

### *Commission exempted from the sunset law*

(sec. 149.58(G))

The bill specifically exempts the Commission from the current law provision requiring a sunset of agencies created by state government (sec. 101.84, not in the bill). Thus, it appears that the Commission has no expiration date and is a permanent agency of the state.

### *Duties of the Commission*

(sec. 149.59)

The Commission *must* perform all of the following activities:

- develop a "public-private partnership" to perform historical research and compilation of reports and records to document Ohio sites associated with the Underground Railroad and to document the personal contributions of those who were part of the Underground Railroad;
- hold public ceremonies at historic Ohio Underground Railroad sites;
- develop signage identifying historic Ohio Underground Railroad sites;
- guide tours of historic Ohio Underground Railroad sites where possible;
- prepare a model curriculum and teaching materials to facilitate instruction on the Underground Railroad and distribute them at cost to all public and private schools in the state;
- preserve historic Ohio Underground Railroad sites;
- prepare a conservation plan "to inhibit deterioration" of historic Ohio Underground Railroad sites;
- under the direction of the Ohio Historical Society, the National Museum of Afro-American History and Culture, and local-government historians, develop exhibits;
- publicize the existence of the Commission; and
- submit an annual report of the Commission's activities to the Governor, the majority and minority leaders of the General Assembly, and the Ohio Historical Society.

The Commission is authorized to hire an executive director and professional staff, adopt bylaws, contract for services and goods, and receive financial and other aid from any private or public fund. The Commission may also solicit assistance from the Director of Budget and Management in acquiring aid from private or public sources.

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## COMMENT

Operating in the period before the U.S. Civil War, the Underground Railroad was an informal, secret network of personal contacts that provided aid to reputed thousands of fugitive slaves in their flight from southern plantations. Individuals who sympathized with the escapees would give them shelter and food, temporarily hiding them from masters and others who were seeking to return them to slavery. Eventually, the sympathizers transported the fugitives to other sympathizers for continuation of the journey to permanent safe refuge in northern states or Canada. Ohio was a major locus for Underground Railroad activity. Reportedly, there are hundreds of extant Ohio sites associated with the history of the Underground Railroad. (George W. Knepper, Ohio and Its People (1989), at pp. 215-16.)

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## HISTORY

ACTION	DATE	JOURNAL ENTRY
Introduced	03-24-99	p. 369

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