

Joan McNabb:

Dramatizing a “Small Part” of the History of the Underground Railroad

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Those of you who attended the 2005 Black History Event will have had the real pleasure of taking in Joan McNabb’s dramatization of Catherine Coffin, the well-known American abolitionist. Dressed in period Quaker clothing, Joan took her audience back to the mid 19th century Quaker household of Levi and Catherine Coffin in Cincinnati, Ohio. We learned of the work the Coffins did on behalf of the Underground Railroad, the incredible risks they took and their ceaseless generosity to their “cargo”, the former slaves who sought their safety, sustenance and support for the journey north to freedom.

Joan’s interest in Catherine Coffin was kindled when she worked as a tutor at the C.S. Wilson Centre in the Heritage Community Church in Collingwood. There she met Carolyn Wilson, proprietor and curator of the Sheffield Park Black History and Cultural Museum. Carolyn encouraged Joan to research Catherine Coffin and create a dramatization of her work. When Joan started on this project in the early 1990s, it was difficult to find information. She recalled checking out the *Encyclopedia Britannica!* She found just a few written resources on the Underground Railroad. Thankfully, times have changed! Joan now finds it easier to enrich her knowledge of Catherine Coffin and her important role.

Joan has performed at the Sheffield Park Black History and Cultural Museum for summer visitors, and at the Heritage Community Church for school children who visit during Black History Month. The youngsters, their imaginations sparked by her performance, have asked Joan intriguing questions about Catherine Coffin, and whether she might also do a dramatization of Rosa Parks! (These students’ teachers should be lauded for their efforts to prepare their students for the visit!)

Joan sees her dramatizations as “an interesting way to impart a little knowledge about the Underground Railroad story”. Although she says “it’s only a small part”, her portrayal of Catherine Coffin certainly induces her audience to want to find out more.

The Black History Event and *Northern Terminus* praise Joan McNabb’s creative and informative contributions to ensuring that Black history maintains its strengthening foothold in this corner of Southern Ontario.