

Reporter's walk of freedom nearly complete

BY DANIEL SCHWAB

LAKESHORE — Ottawa Citizen reporter Chris Lackner is walking the final steps of an 800-kilometre journey that has tracked the trails of freedom.

Since June 11, the 27-year-old has been walking from May's Lick, Ky., on a route similar to the path fugitive slaves took through the Underground Railroad to Canada.

Along the way, Lackner has interviewed historians and descendants of both fugitive slaves and Underground Railroad conductors for a feature series on the Ottawa Citizen's website.

The journey took him to Lakeshore Aug. 26, to the British Methodist Episcopal African Canadian cemetery and the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and

Underground Railroad Museum, where he spent the night.

"I'm flattered that people came out to see us on this part of the visit," Lackner said at the cemetery Saturday, where a group from the Lakeshore Black Heritage Committee gathered to welcome the walker and photographer Malcolm Taylor.

Lackner said he was moved by the inscription on a monument at the site.

It reads, "Lewis Jackson, born a slave in Kentucky. Died Apr. 12, 1897, age 62."

"It's extremely powerful," Lackner said.

Ken Turner, vice president of the Ontario Historical Society, said there may be as many as 30 to 100 fugitive slaves buried at the site.

"This site has been lost

for so long and forgotten about," Turner said. "(Lackner's) visit brings a little notoriety back to it and puts it back into the public eye."

Bryan Walls, curator of the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum, says many fugitive slaves idealized Canada while living in the southern U.S.

"This cemetery we're standing on is the resting place for many souls who looked upon Canada as a heaven that they sang about in their songs," said Walls, who is a direct descendent of fugitive slaves.

"The Underground Railroad was the first great freedom movement in North America. It was the first time good people of different races and faiths worked in harmony for



Ottawa Citizen reporter Chris Lackner, left, Glen Cook, chairman of the Lakeshore Black Heritage Committee, and Ken Turner, vice president of the Ontario Heritage Society, stand in front of a monument at the British Methodist Episcopal African Canadian cemetery in Lakeshore Saturday.

freedom and justice."

Walls was Lackner and Taylor's host Saturday night, giving them accommodations at the John Grey Simcoe log cabin, built in 1798.

For the majority of the journey through the U.S., Lackner and Taylor spent their nights sleeping at historical sites, museums, Underground Railroad locations, and even a jail that was once used to detain

fugitive slaves.

While on the road, Lackner said he walked as much as 12 miles per day, visiting "dozens upon dozens" of sites, on a route that hit as many historical locations as possible.

He said the goal of walking on the journey was to allow readers to get a sense of the geography that fugitive slaves may have seen and an idea of the exhaustion they may have encoun-

tered on their way to Canada.

"The walk itself was kind of a mechanism to draw readers into the series and give me some perspective and relay back to them," Lackner said. "But in no way was I trying to recreate a fugitive experience."

Lackner's route is coming to a close Labour Day weekend at the North Buxton National Historic Site and Museum.



Ottawa Citizen reporter Chris Lackner stands in front of a monument at the British Methodist Episcopal African Canadian cemetery Saturday. Lackner stopped in Lakeshore as part of his trip from May's Lick, Ky. to North Buxton, Ont. — similar to a path taken by fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad.

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