



Backstory: Park's Underground Railroad statue a powerful reminder

The new statue at Wilmington's Tubman Garrett Riverfront Park is nothing short of monumental. In a dramatic glimpse, it shows the city's role as an Underground Railroad stop called Freedomland. "It gives a sense of recognition of our history and an opportunity for school children to come to the park and recognize the legacy that's left to them," said Sen. Margaret Rose Henry.

Activist-educator Bebe Coker, who led the statue selection committee, was disappointed that schools didn't bring their students to the unveiling. Not to diminish the presence or toe-tap-pingly well-received performance of the Wilmington Children's Chorus that day, but Coker had a point. And she made another one, that studying and visiting the statue, unveiled last week, should be a required part of elementary school students' public education about the state. Once seen, it is not a statue easily forgotten.

Nor should slavery be, said Mayor James M. Baker. The outgoing mayor championed the park's naming and statue creation, both prominently notable in his legacy in the city he loves and served.

Sculptor Mario Chiodo said part of what made the project so special to him was that those involved were not derailed by political correctness that can plague the process of creating and dilute the message of public art. This is not comfortable art. Nor should it be. It is about slavery, with our forebears on both sides. Delaware was a border state, where people were enslaved for others' profit and where others risked their own liberty and fortune to help free them.

City Councilman Eric Robinson called the statue "a reminder that people stood up against wrong, both white and black." Here, in 3,000 pounds of bronze, is the human factor – in the real faces of Harriet Tubman and Wilmington Quaker Thomas Garrett – and imagined faces of the enslaved.

Wilmington historic planner Deborah Martin,



speaking at the unveiling, offered a perspective that would be well-shared in an interpretive sign for future visitors to the site. "Tubman was here ... with her precious cargo," she said. "She is with us."

Martin spoke of the city as "a beacon to the enslaved and a supreme irritation of the enslavers," of the "faith-filled risk" of those who broke the law to fight slavery, and of "cooperation across racial lines in the name of justice." She urged Delawareans to "take this history to heart ... It is the story of real people not told in history books."

The new statue will help the uncomfortable truth be much better told in Freedomland.