



## New Philadelphia: A Multiracial Town on the Illinois Frontier

New Philadelphia looked like

a typical west-central Illinois pioneer town to travelers cresting the hill overlooking the place in the mid-1800s. Imagine villagers filling baskets with a bounty of apples, corn, and wheat, while chickens clucked and pigs rooted in nearby pens. Picture farmers hitching mules and oxen to carts filled with vegetables, fruit, and grain to sell at



(Pat Likes, photographer)

markets. Listen for loud clanging from the blacksmith's shop as hammers shaped hot metal into shoes for mules and horses. As in other frontier towns, smoke from cooking fires swirled from the dwellings that dotted small plots of land.

But New Philadelphia was not a typical pioneer town. It was the first town platted and registered by an African American before the American Civil War. A formerly enslaved man called "Free Frank" McWorter founded New Philadelphia in 1836 as a money-making venture to buy his family out of slavery. Census records and other historical documents tell us that New Philadelphia was a place where black and white villagers lived side by side, but we know that the town's dead lie buried in cemeteries separated by color.

By 1885, many villagers had moved away in search of jobs and better economic opportunities. Plows buried any material remains left behind, and grazing livestock and crops covered most of the site. By the 1940s, nothing of the town remained above ground. However, the town's descendants and neighboring communities did not forget New Philadelphia. Descendants continued to live in the area until the 1950s. Grace Matteson wrote *"Free Frank" McWorter and the "Ghost Town" of New Philadelphia, Pike County, Illinois*. Later, Lorraine Burdick remembered the town in *New Philadelphia: Where I Lived*. McWorter family descendants were members of the Negro History Movement led by Carter G. Woodson, and through their activities the story of Free Frank was kept alive. Helen McWorter Simpson, great granddaughter of Free Frank McWorter, wrote *Makers of History*. Juliet E. K. Walker memorialized her great great grandfather in *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer*

*on the Antebellum Frontier.* Archeologists and historians pieced together historic documents, recollections of the town's descendants, and artifacts to tell the story of New Philadelphia and the lifeways of its diverse townsfolk.