

preserve the home of Quincy abolitionist Dr. Richard Eells at 415 Jersey. He met

Quincy-area preservationists including, from left, Jay Gardner, Joel Scarborough, Janet Conover, Ruth Deters and Jane Daniels.

Simon visits underground railroad site

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A century and a half ago, oppressed blacks found freedom at this Jersey Street doorstep.

During the 1840s, the home of Quincy abolitionist Dr. Richard Eells was a key stop along the Underground Railroad, a nearly legendary route to freedom for thousands of slaves lucky enough to escape bondage.

Today, the two-story brick building at 415 Jersey is boarded up, crumbling, vacant and nearly forgotten. For the moment, a local preservation group has saved it from the wrecking ball. Its future is far from secure.

U.S. Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill., toured the house

Tuesday, and says it's time for government to become more interested in cultural treasures like the Eells house.

"When the shopping centers and the other modern structures are long gone, ... these are the things we'll be remembered for," Simon said as he met with more than a dozen members of the Friends of the Dr. Richard Eells House Inc., a Quincy group dedicated to saving one of the few documented stops on the Underground Railroad.

"It's so easy to lose these things, and once it's gone it's lost forever," Simon said as he gazed at the structure. State historians call it the "second most significant" historic home in Quincy, second only to the John Wood mansion.

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Simon last year led his legislation through Congress, authorizing the National Park Service to develop an Underground Railroad national historic "trail." The measure establishes an advisory group to tackle the project.

But the project itself could be difficult to research because the path to freedom changed frequently in the years before the Civil War. Harboring slaves was illegal so little documentation exists outlining safe houses along the way.

Simon says he'll seek funding this year to let the advisory group begin its research "and determine what it's going to take to establish this trail. Obviously, funding is not going to be easy to come by this year, but we're not talking about a great deal of money to get started."

The federal government "seems to find plenty of money for non-cultural projects, but I think it's time to turn our attention more to our heritage, and the Underground Railroad definitely played an important role in the development of our country."

Simon cautioned the Quincy group to expect no federal funding help in preserving the Eells house. The group is working to acquire the house, which is involved in a family estate and trust. Group officials say the renovation could cost as much as \$500,000, and they plan to finance it with private donations.

Simon says development of the historic "trail" would help youngsters in Quincy and elsewhere appreciate the importance of the fight to abolish slavery. "It would help children all over the nation learn about their heritage, and it enriches them in so many ways," he said. "For people with even a casual interest in history, it gives them one more excuse for travel, and that helps everyone."

Quincy's economy would benefit from the additional tourist attraction, Simon said.

Local preservationists con-

The house is one of the few remaining homes which formed Quincy's first residential area. Most have been replaced over the years by commercial buildings and parking lots.

The Eells house is considered unusual among historians because it is a documented stop on the Underground Railroad. It received its notoriety when Eells was arrested, tried and convicted in 1842 for helping a man who escaped a Lewis County, Mo., slaveowner and swam the Mississippi River to reach the Eells house.

The case was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, where Eells was represented by Salmon Chase, who later became President Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury. Chase was assisted by William Seward, who later became Secretary of State under Lincoln. The original Circuit Court judge in the case was Stephen Douglas, who fined Eells \$400 for his offense. Douglas later became a U.S. senator, and was defeated in the 1860 presidential election by Lincoln.

As Simon listened to the Eells' story for the first time, he quipped, "You've got everybody in there except Abraham Lincoln himself. It's just one more reason this place should be preserved."