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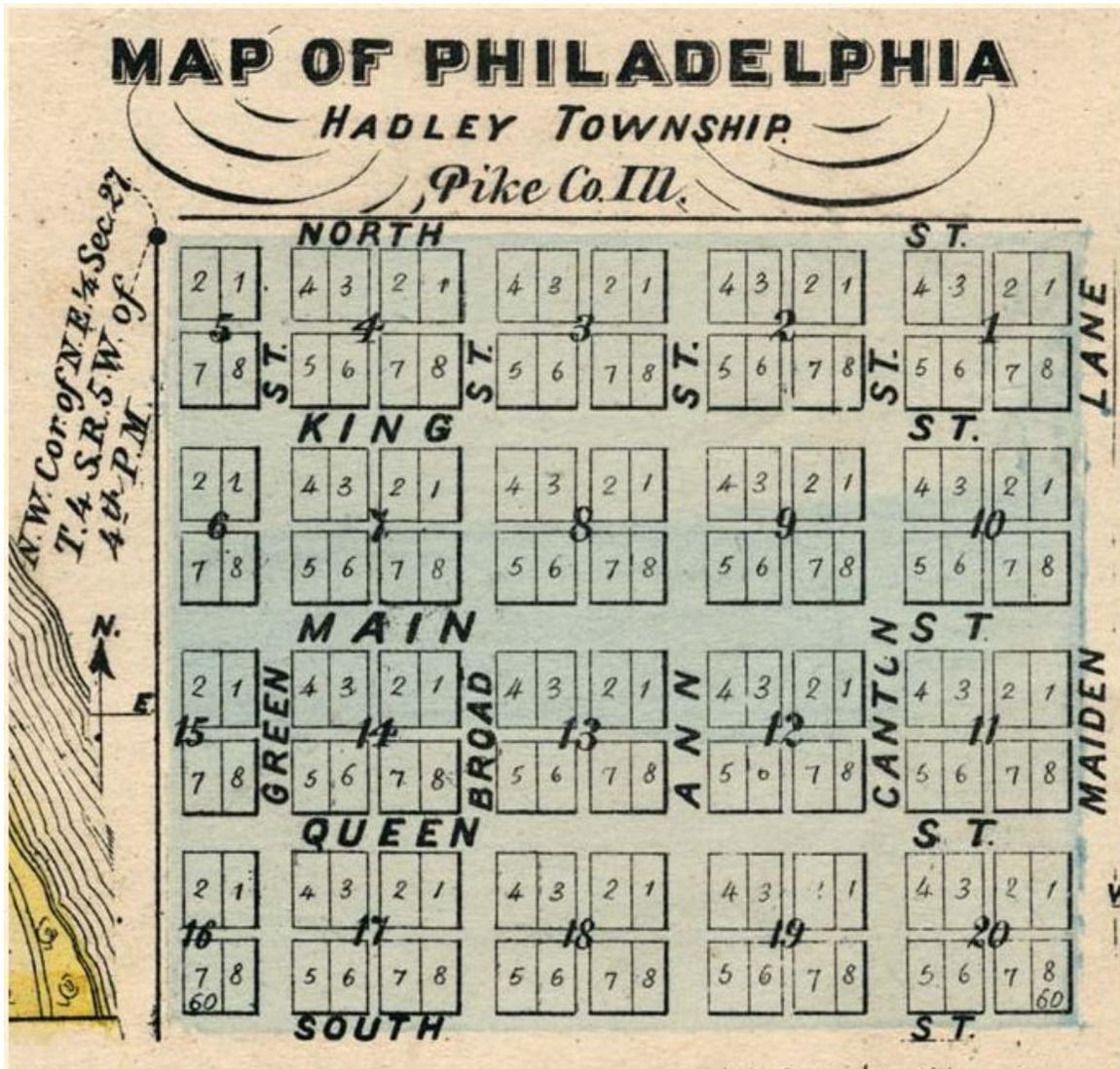
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New Philadelphia, Illinois (1836-1920s)

New Philadelphia, Illinois was located near the city of Barry, in Pike County. Founded in 1836, it was the first town in the United States platted and registered by a Negro before the American Civil War. The founder Free Frank McWorter was a former slave who was able to save money from work and his own business to purchase the freedom of his wife, himself and 13 members of his family in Kentucky.





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The story of Frank McWorter and New Philadelphia is one of daring, hard work, luck, and shrewd family leadership.

Born a slave in South Carolina in 1777, Frank McWorter moved to Kentucky with his owner in 1795. He married Lucy, a slave from a nearby farm, in 1799. Later allowed to hire out his own time, McWorter engaged in a number of enterprises, notably a saltpeter works, that enabled him to buy his wife's freedom in 1817 and his own in 1819.

Frank and Lucy McWorter and four of their children left Kentucky for Illinois in 1830, the year the Thomas Lincoln family, with son Abraham, moved to Illinois from Indiana. McWorter bought a farm in Pike County's Hadley Township and platted the town of New Philadelphia in 1836. The original town plan consisted of 144 lots in a 12 x 12 square, including 22 crisscrossing named streets. McWorter sold the lots.

The town was integrated, albeit with some typical 19th-century segregated facilities, such as cemeteries. There was one integrated public school.

McWorter promoted New Philadelphia strenuously, and engaged in other enterprises, managing to buy the freedom of at least sixteen family members from Kentucky. The town itself became a racially integrated community long before the Civil War, the 1850 and subsequent U.S. Census data showing black and white families living there.

Frank McWorter lived there for the remainder of his life in New Philadelphia, dying in 1854. A son, Solomon, assumed family leadership. Before the Civil War, New Philadelphia had become one of the stations along the Underground Railroad for shepherding escaped slaves to Canada. With emancipation, more settlers arrived in New Philadelphia. Its population peaked at close to 160 shortly after 1865.

In 1869, the Hannibal and Naples Railroad was built. It bypassed the town on the north; a station was built in nearby Barry, soon to be followed by transit and commerce. New Philadelphia rapidly declined in population thereafter. A small number of residents turned to farming a portion of the former town site. Such changes and abandonment were not unusual for U.S. small towns in the late 19th century, especially those bypassed by changing transportation facilities.



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In 1885 a portion of the town was legally dissolved. It reverted to farmland. Modern archaeological studies have indicated the area was inhabited through the 1920s. By the late 20th century, all vestiges of New Philadelphia had vanished save fragments of glass and pottery, and traces of the town's gravel streets.



The town site was added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places on August 11, 2005; subsequently, New Philadelphia Town Site was designated a National Historic Landmark on January 16, 2009 because of the significance of its history and archaeology.