Markers identifying spots on the Northup Trail unveiled to followers

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Descendants of Solomon Northup and the general public were among those to “follow in Solomon’s footsteps” on Thursday for the Louisiana Office of Tourism’s unveiling of the Northup Trail and Byway in Avoyelles and Rapides Parishes.

The Avoyelles Tourist Commission and Alexandria Pineville Convention and Visitors Bureau made a day out of the trail’s unveiling, inviting people to come out and caravan to a few of the Central Louisiana sites. The locations and buildings on the trail are ones Northup mentions in his autobiography “12 Years a Slave,” also released as a movie in 2013.

According to the Avoyelles Commission of Tourism, the trail includes the spot of Solomon Northup’s 1841 arrival in Alexandria, near where the Alexandria Museum of Art is located today; Ludger Barbin Landimg, where he left Marksville in 1853; and 20 places he visited in between. As the title of his personal narrative says, Northup was kidnapped and sold into slavery for 12 years, which he spent in Rapides and Avoyelles Parishes.

Thursday started out at the Haas Auditorium in Bunkie with a welcome from officials and introduction of presenters, who acted as tour guides for the day. After a lunch break, everyone met on the front steps of the Bunkie Depot, located in front of the former Bunkie Record newspaper building. A marker now identifies that land as a spot on the trail, because of the late Sue Eakin. She owned and operated the paper for much of her adult life, which she devoted to researching the Northup story.

Carlos Mayeux, chairman of the Avoyelles Commission of Tourism, called the documents she left “an amazing trove of information,” which have helped piece together more about Northup’s time in Louisiana.

Eakin, who also taught at Louisiana State University of Alexandria, is buried in Cen-

eyville at the cemetery next to Trinity Episcopal Church, another landmark on the Northup Trail and the third stop on Thursday’s outing.

At the Bunkie Depot a representative for Lt. Gov. Jay Dardenne who had been scheduled to appear, but was unable to attend, unveiled the new Louisiana Trails and Byways sign for the Northup Trail. Matching markers are now at the other 21 spots to identify their historical significance in the Northup account.

“We want to get people (tourists) off the interstates,” Doug Bourgeois, director of Louisiana Byways and Trails Program, said speaking to the program’s purpose. One of

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Cynthia Jackson, the great-great-great granddaughter of Solomon Northup, waits on Thursday to unveil one of the new signs marking spots on the Northup Trail.

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A marker in front of Live Oak Plantation identifies the house as part of the Northup Trail.

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the reasons is that many
smaller towns with spots
of historical significance
tell the story of the state,
Bourgeois said. He called
those places the “real Lou-

isiana.”

“We (in Louisiana) are
full of great stories,”
Bourgeois said. “... This is
one of those stories so spe-
cial that it can only be
found it Louisiana.”

Wilbert Carmouche,
director of the Avoyelles
Commission of Tourism,
said the trail is a “wonder-
ful tool” to boost tourism
in the area while also edu-
cating people.

“People are very inter-

ested in this story because
I think this has changed
the lives of people ... from
slavery to (where) we are
today,” Carmouche said.

“We’re hoping that people
realize the significance of
this trail and the positive
effects that this (story)
has caused through the
years and brought us to
what we are today as peo-
ple all united.”

From the Bunkie De-
pot, the caravan moved on
to Live Oak Plantation,
also in Bunkie, and the
home of Mary McCoy, a
prominent figure in
Northups’ writing. The
next stop was Trinity, and
the final destination was
the restored Epps House
now located on the camp-
us of LSUA. There, Jerry
Sanson, a professor of his-
tory and political science
at the school, talked about
the house where Northup
was a slave at for 10 years.
It was originally located
on Bayou Bouef.

Sanson also said the
new Northup Trail mark-
ers are “wonderful” for
the state as they designate
important historical loca-
tions that “we need to
have identified.”

“It’s a story that hap-

cened here in Central
Louisiana that has world-
wide implications,” San-
son.

Cynthia and Eileen
Jackson, the great-great-
great granddaughters of
Northup, flew in from
California for the unveil-
ing and “to just follow in
Solomon’s footsteps” once
again, Eileen said.

“To me that kind of
tribute deserved to have
his descendants here,” Ei-
leen said.

It was Cynthia’s second
time to see the trail and Ei-
leen’s fifth time, although
their first trip to Louisi-
a was just last year:
Both ladies said since the
movie was released, the
response from people in
Louisiana and across the
country has been ‘over-
whelming.”

“I feel just tickled to
death to know that people
care about Solomon this
much,” Eileen said.

“It’s a little over-
whelming knowing he has
such notoriety,” Cynthia
said.