

Milton House offers important slice of national history

By Jack McLaughlin
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Like Edgerton's rich background in pottery and brick-making that is often overlooked, the neighboring city of Milton is home to an important yet under-spoken piece of national history.

The Milton House, first built by the city's founder Joseph Goodrich in 1845 after his family relocated from western New York to settle the area, with its hexagonally-shaped stagecoach inn, has become a symbol of the town, having hosted a slew of local businesses before settling into its role as Milton's historical society and museum in the 1950s.

The building, which survived a collapse of several sections making up its middle (this took the entire summer of 1948 to clean), has led a rich and varied life in its nearly 175 years, and was even named a national historic landmark site in 1998.

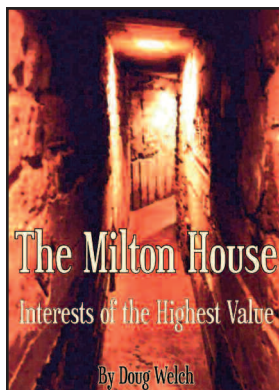
And while the edifice contains a trove of city history, it achieved national landmark status for its role in a larger-scale affair: the Underground Railroad. Since the 1980s, the passage of enslaved people through free states into Canada has rightfully come into sharper focus, and the Milton House, the only Underground Railroad site in Wisconsin that is able to be toured, has

grown in popularity.

Doug Welch, longtime Milton resident and recently-appointed assistant director to the Milton House, is currently working to maintain this progress.

"In recent years we've really tried to hone our narrative of the underground railroad," he said, noting that annual attendance for the museum has been steadily increasing in recent years; 2016 saw between 8,000-10,000 visitors.

Although the national landmark is steeped in these historical narratives, it is still a dynamic source of new stories as well. Welch, author of the newly published book, "The Milton House: Interests of the Highest Value," is alongside the city's historical society still discovering fascinating anecdotes involving the



The cover of Doug Welch's new book, "The Milton House: Interests of the Highest Value."



The historic Milton House in a photo from the early 1890s. (Photo courtesy of Doug Welch)

Milton House. One of the more gripping examples is the tale of slaves being regularly transported between Milton and Albion (these groups would clandestinely float north up the Rock River) hidden on carts underneath sacks of potatoes. "We hadn't even heard this story until sometime last year," Welch said.

Perhaps the most affecting aspect of the Milton House Museum is the way that tour groups are able to, at least partially, reenact the experience of fugitive slaves in their passage through Milton. A tunnel underneath the structure, an image of which is the cover for Welch's book, was most likely created for the purpose of transporting people in secret, and visitors are able to traverse it themselves.

It's this experience, of standing in the footsteps

of those brave individuals, that Welch believes, more than anything, truly resonates with visitors.

"People will often have something like a spiritual experience in the tunnel," Welch said. "When you see that kind of reaction, you can really tell just

how special and unique this place is."

The Milton House Museum is currently operating on its summer schedule, between Memorial Day and Labor Day, and is open daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Guided tours during these

hours begin every 30 minutes, although appointments are required for groups of 12 or more. More information, including admission fees and additional history of the building, can be found at the museum's website, www.miltonhouse.org.

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