



# Luna Stage Explores NJ's Black History Through the Lens of Howe House

## Transcript

Story by Maddie Orton

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON, HOST: I'm Maddie Orton, and you're listening to "The Jersey Arts Podcast."

The historic James Howe House in Montclair made headlines in late 2022 as preservationists worked to save the home from being purchased and potentially remodeled or even demolished. James Howe, a formerly enslaved man and an abolitionist was the first African-American homeowner in Montclair, and the story of his life, his home, and his legacy is at the center of Luna Stage's latest production, developed in collaboration with Crossroads Theatre Company.

"The Ground on Which We Stand" is a play composed of 14 monologues written by 12 playwrights. It spans nearly 200 years of history beginning with James Howe receiving the home through the last will and testament of the man who had enslaved him, and it continues through the eventual fight to save Howe House.

I'm joined by Luna Stage artistic director Ari Laura Kreith and award-winning playwright and screenwriter Richard Wesley to learn more about this piece of New Jersey history as told through the lens of the historic Howe House. Take a listen.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON:

Let's start with where the idea for "The Ground on Which We Stand" came from.

ARI LAURA KREITH (01:24):

Luna has ongoing created work inspired by specific, walkable neighborhoods in the communities that we

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serve, and during the pandemic, there was a historian named Frank Godlewski, who was creating podcasts about Underground Railroad history in Montclair, and I realized how little I knew, and just reached out to Frank to see if he would have coffee with me and tell me more.

And he ended up entrusting us with this body of research and saying, 'Anything that you can do to raise awareness of these stories and inspire engagement using theater, this is sort of like open source material.' So we made a commitment to explore these stories theatrically, and we're focusing on Montclair already for this particular cycle, just because Montclair is one of our constituent communities and we hadn't told a Montclair-based story yet.

MADDIE ORTON (02:26):

How does the House play into the history that was being looked at in regards to the Underground Railroad?

RICHARD WESLEY (02:33):

Well, James Howe was a former enslaved person himself, and he was an abolitionist and, you know, very active in the abolitionist movement for much of his adult life. Interestingly enough, I mean, the person who enslaved him for a while was Crane—Nathan Crane—who was from a family prominent enough here in Essex County that the original name of Montclair itself was Cranetown. That's how prominent that family was.

ARI LAURA KREITH (03:10):

It was actually Nathaniel, I think is his full name.

RICHARD WESLEY (03:13):

Nathaniel. I always, I always Yeah. Nathaniel. Not Nathan. No, Ari is absolutely right about that.

ARI LAURA KREITH (03:20):

So and I think James Howe was actually manumitted in 1817. So about 16 years before Nathaniel Crane died. And then in his will—so Nathaniel Crane rewrote his will in 1831 and left James Howe six acres of land, \$400, and the house. So when Nathaniel Crane died in 1833, that property passed to James Howe. But he had already been manumitted, so he was living as a free man.

RICHARD WESLEY (03:54):

That was still a time in American history where ownership of property was an important part of what it

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meant to be a citizen of the United States, because not everyone in the country at that time had that—land and money. There were only a handful of people, relatively speaking, who were in that position. And James Howe, as a free person of color, you know, was in a very unique position. And certainly he was able to take advantage of this when he joined the abolitionist movement.

ARI LAURA KREITH (04:35):

We don't actually know that his house was a stop on the Underground Railroad. There's actually not a lot of history about James Howe, and there's sort of even less history about his wife, Susan, and that there's a lot of research that's very actively happening right now, but that, you know, Frank really wants—Frank sort of like put this house on the Underground Railroad map, in part because he was really interested in preserving awareness of the house, but that we don't know that it actually was used in that way.

RICHARD WESLEY (05:10):

I would have to think either the house or some place on the property would have been put to that use. And New Jersey was a conduit on the Underground Railroad, moving escaped slaves from the south, you know, on the way up north to Canada. So if if James Howe owned the home and, you know, a parcel of land, even if he didn't have them in the house itself, hiding them in the basement or some secret compartment that he had built into the house, he might have used something on the land to shelter them and then move them on, you know, at the first opportunity.

So I think the historians who are speculating, are on pretty firm soil when they, you know, make that particular guess about what was going on. Where else would he have hidden them and how else could he have made use of his position in the New Jersey community at that time?

ARI LAURA KREITH (06:25):

Yeah, absolutely. And I know that, like, that house is very close to Eagle Rock, also. And that from what I've heard, there was a tunnel under what is now the MKA football field that was actually a freedom route up to Eagle Rock. And that Eagle Rock was where people who were fleeing to New York could actually see across the Hudson. And it was the highest point before having to go through the Meadowlands, which were, at that time, a swamp.

RICHARD WESLEY:

Mm hmm.

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ARI LAURA KREITH:

And so there were huge trees in that area. And so it was sort of the place to spot and chart a path to New York and to a relative safety.

RICHARD WESLEY (07:13):

You know, that has so much resonance with me hearing Ari describe it, you know, describe that area that way, because I think all of us who live in North Jersey know that people still to this day go to Eagle Rock to look eastward and stare all the way out. You can see Manhattan Island is clear as a bell, especially on a bright, sunny day.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON (07:45):

Let's talk about "The Ground On Which We Stand." So you're taking this history that some of it is uncovered and some of it you're still kind of piecing together, right? And you're making a really interesting collaborative piece that spans 200 years of history, right? Tell me when and how the idea and how you're putting it together.

ARI LAURA KREITH (08:09):

We start with James Howe. We start with the moment that he is deeded this property, and we move forward in history from James to his wife, Susan, to his son, who was drafted in the Civil War, and his daughter who inherited and then eventually lost the home due to foreclosure. And then we kind of chart this path through, kind of zooming out into abolitionists like the Reverend Thompson, who Richard is writing, and Amory Bradford, whose—Bradford School in Montclair is named after him. And then moving forward into the contemporary world, we actually take a tiny detour to Detroit and a man named Orsel McGhee, who had a landmark court case who actually was defended by Thurgood Marshall. That was a landmark court case for desegregation of neighborhoods, and his house was landmarked about four years ago, and his daughter—his granddaughter, excuse me—is writing that piece.

MADDIE ORTON

Wow.

ARI LAURA KREITH

So we kind of have the Detroit perspective on the Howe House through the character of Orsel McGhee,

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who joins us. Then we get into sort of the contemporary voices exploring the history of the Howe House and fighting for its preservation.

And we end with Aminah Toler, who is a community organizer, who is one of the leaders and the President of the Board of the James Howe House—or the Friends of the House—and was the woman who actually took possession of the key in February 2023.

MADDIE ORTON (10:02):

Wow. And Richard, you're writing two of these monologues, right?

RICHARD WESLEY (10:05):

Oh, yeah. I wrote the character of a Reverend Charles Thompson. Reverend Thompson was a mid-19th century abolitionist and minister who was Black, who was manumitted himself.

MADDIE ORTON (10:22):

Wow.

RICHARD WESLEY (10:23):

And had come to the Newark/Montclair area as part of his ministry. And when he became aware of the possible loss of land on the James Howe property, in my story, that was part of his motivation for trying to acquire that parcel of land that he did ultimately acquire. He was trying to preserve that history. He was trying to preserve—maybe not so much the history itself, Maddie, I think in a way that's a little too broad, the more personal thing is he was trying to preserve for posterity the cause for which he and James Howe devoted so much of their lives. They were trying to make sure that people remembered them, and what they fought for, and what they strove for. And he was trying also to make sure that that memory, or that victory, was something that was commemorated.

If all the land was lost, if everyone just allowed it to pass into memory and everything, the day would come when no one would remember at all. The land could be—could turn into anything.

MADDIE ORTON (11:50):

What is your process for sort of digging through that history and finding his voice and what his motivations might have been to purchase some of the land?

RICHARD WESLEY (12:00):

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One of the guidelines that Ari gave me was read the history, absorb the history, but, as she has reminded me a couple of times now, don't try to regurgitate the history—you know the history itself, because there are other people who are going to be doing that, who are going to be talking about the historical facts—the tour guides.

The people that we are writing about, what we're trying to capture is something of their personality, something of their motivations, something that allows us to see them as people who were involved in these historical moments and how those moments might have affected them. But we don't necessarily need them to tell us about the great things that they did. And so that was the process was reading about what they did historically and then imagining for myself how I might have reacted based on all of that information.

(13:08): I'm roughly now at the age that Reverend Thompson would have been, I'm maybe a slight, maybe a little bit older than the Reverend Thompson would have been at that time. I'm married. I have two adult children, just as he did at that point. I'm in Montclair with roots in Newark, the same way that he was at that point in his life. And so it's a question now of sort of imagining myself there, and reacting to some of the things going on around me, and wondering what that would have been like, you know, had I been there. So there's a little bit of me in the character. And then there's also a little bit, or I should say a lot, of the things that I've witnessed, you know, so many other people going through at similar times of their lives.

(14:09): And that's allowed me sort of created a multidimensional character or personality who can, you know, talk about how he felt knowing that that land was available, how he felt also having been an abolitionist who was in the movement and aware of who this person, James Howe, was. And how he might have felt knowing that it would be possible or is or was possible that everything that James Howe had had dedicated his life to was in danger of being lost in one way or another, and most specifically the land itself. And how that would motivate him, if he had the means to acquire some of that land, hold on to preserve it and preserve the history and the cause for which they all dedicated so much of themselves for future generations.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON (15:13):

I mean, that really speaks to the present day fight for preservation that had recently come to a

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conclusion. Can you tell me a little bit about what the history of the preservation fight has been in the establishment of the Friends of Howe House?

ARI LAURA KREITH (15:31):

I believe that the latest kind of groundswell began in 2020 and that the work was initially around achieving some sort of landmark status or acknowledgment of the history of the house.

MADDIE ORTON

Hmm.

ARI LAURA KREITH

And then in 2022, the house went up for sale. And at that moment, the Friends of the Howe House had the opportunity to potentially purchase the home and made an offer but were outbid. And so that was a moment of heartbreak where everyone thought that the house was going to be sold. And miraculously, that offer fell through. And in December of this past year, the Friends of the Howe House made an offer, were able to get a bridge loan, their offer was accepted, and in February of 2023, they actually took possession of the keys to the house.

There are tenants who are currently living in the house and they will stay till the end of their lease, which I believe is the beginning of 2024. And then the house will pass to the Friends of the Howe House who are working within the community now to explore and define what role that space will hold to support memory and social justice moving forward.

MADDIE ORTON (17:03):

And you've been in close contact with the Friends of the Howe House. How do they feel about this story being told?

ARI LAURA KREITH (17:13):

I mean, I am honored that they're trusting us to tell this story. Members of the Friends of the Howe House are actually characters in the piece, and they have been interviewed about their own stories. And then our commitment to them is that no one—no one's story will be told without their eyes passing over that story. So it's been a process of community collaboration.

Similarly, the historians have read all of the monologues before they have passed on to the actors, so that everyone agrees that the story that we're telling is as close to what we believe in this moment to be

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true, knowing that that understanding and knowledge is ever-evolving. And it is also amazing that there are so many historians who are dedicating themselves now to the excavating of research that might also contribute to our understanding.

MADDIE ORTON (18:13):

The play spans to present day. What do you think that holistic look at this place over this period of time does for the storytelling?

ARI LAURA KREITH (18:28):

One of the things that comes up for me is also just this idea that history is ongoing. And so, although the Friends of the Howe House have now purchased the home, this is sort of the next step in its history. And we're all potentially part of that history.

RICHARD WESLEY

Mm hmm.

ARI LAURA KREITH

You know, we may not be major players in that history like we're not James Howe, but how do we see our role in the shaping of the next chapter of this narrative?

And I think that that's one of the questions that this piece attempts to raise and that it also attempts to remind us that every single moment we're making decisions about our identity, you know, our individual identity, our identity as a community, the legacy that we leave, how we tell the story of the past, how we acknowledge our own present, and how we make choices that will define our future.

RICHARD WESLEY (19:35):

What Ari, and Luna Stage, and Crossroads Theater, and Friends of the Howe House, and the historians who've been pulled together, as well as the writers in making this project, we have now created an installation piece that potentially has it has a life of its own because it can be recreated so many times going into the future, and in which we are giving dimension and form and shape, not just simply to some historical facts, but to an important part of the life of the community in which we live. And that's a major part of what the arts are all about.

ARI LAURA KREITH (20:22):

And we look at the contemporary forces in Montclair, and the challenges of gentrification, and of people

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losing their homes, being displaced, being priced out. There are parallels between then and now, and that there are so many things that we have not figured out how to solve in the last 200 years. And that hopefully by elevating and understanding some of these questions and challenges, and that the not just the challenges of this moment or the challenges of Orsel McGhee's time when redlining was happening in Detroit and across the country and is still, you know, happening in subtler, less acknowledged ways, that the history of the land in our town has never existed independent of that.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON (21:17):

And I did want to mention that there are two different ways to experience this play.

ARI LAURA KREITH (21:27):

Everything is going to be staged outdoors between the Crane house and the Howe House. It's about a mile walk from Nathaniel Crane's home to James Howe's home. And so the audience will be led in groups of about 25, so every half hour we have a new kind of tour group that starts on this walk. And every few minutes they encounter a new monologue. So a number of community spaces have offered us the ability to perform on their land, on the ground, on which they stand. So, for example, Hillside School, and the Montclair Art Museum, and Unity Montclair, as well as in private homes. So individuals are actually allowing us to perform on their front lawns. And that's just been this sort of extraordinary gift of community connection, everybody wanting to be a part of the telling of the story.

MADDIE ORTON (22:22):

And then for people who don't want to or unable to make the trip, they can also see it seated at Luna Stage.

ARI LAURA KREITH (22:30):

Yeah, absolutely. So the outdoor performances are on Saturday, the walking tour, and then there's actually one walking tour at 11:30 that's a little bit slower paced than the rest. So if somebody wants to take a slightly slower walk, they can sign up for that one. And then on Sunday at Luna, we have two performances in our mainstage where, you know, audience will be seated, and those are at 2:00 and at 7:00.

MADDIE ORTON (22:56):

Thank you so much to Ari Laura Kreith and Richard Wesley for joining me. "The Ground on Which We

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Stand” will have site-specific outdoor performances on Saturday, April 29th and will be performed indoors at Luna Stage on Sunday, April 30th. For more information, visit [LunaStage.org](http://LunaStage.org).

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This episode was hosted, produced and edited by yours truly, Maddie Orton. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud. Special thanks to Ari Laura Kreith and Richard Wesley.

I'm Maddie Orton for “The Jersey Arts Podcast,” thanks for listening.

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