

CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES
By Jeannie Watson

PROFILE OF CASS COUNTY MICHIGAN'S UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Cass County, Michigan's Underground Railroad, a fugitive slave escape route to Canada, of Pre-Civil War America, was of great national historic significance. The enormity of the part it, and Southwestern Michigan, played to end slavery stands without question. This part of lower Michigan was the convergence point, and funnel, through which escaping slaves traveled on their way to Canada. However, it would never have happened without "fate's five designs," five factors that aligned to bring Cass County into the abolitionist movement. First, geography destined Michigan to be the sole practical route available. Second, a local community, with sympathetic humanitarian convictions, existed within a sea of apathy, and it happened to be in the right place, and at the right time in history. Third, dedicated individual free men and women, had the courage, intelligence and financial resources to secretly operate the movement as station conductors, agents and helpers. Fourth, the Congress of the United States created the Fugitive Slave Laws that sanctioned slavery, and made it illegal to help runaway slaves, forcing humanitarians to create an escape route. Fifth, the economy of the southern plantation system put such a high price on the heads of slaves, the monetary worth motivated southern slave-hunters to track them to Michigan, where the stage was set.

The American Abolitionist Movement (1783-1861), which opposed slavery and had a big part of its drama played out in Southwestern Michigan, did not originate there. It was part of a much bigger picture. Slavery of 1501-1836, began when colonial plantations of North America, South America, and the West Indies needed cheap labor. For three centuries Portugal, Spain, England, Holland and France transported over 15,000,000 slaves across the Atlantic Ocean to eager buyers who put them to work. "Slavery aroused little protest until the Age of Enlightenment," when rational thinkers "began to criticize it for its violation of human rights." In 1671, "the Quakers in Great Britain and America were the first significant opponents. By 1787, the Abolition Society tried to stop slavery in Great Britain and the North American English Colonies. After the American Revolution, between 1777 and 1804 "states north of Maryland abolished it." George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin condemned it, but the southern state's economies were based upon it. To protect their interests, the south pushed through the U.S. Congress the Fugitive Slave Laws, thus establishing and protecting slavery as legal in the United States. This legislation made it illegal to help escaping slaves, and against the law to refuse aid to slave hunters.

The emancipation movement of Abolitionist gained strength in America's Age of Reason, when writers like Robert Carter inflamed public opinion against slavery, and politicians, like John Quincy Adams, gave speeches demanding its end. Northern newspapers were published supporting abolition, further energizing the public of the north. Humanitarians united to put pressure on presidents, like Abraham Lincoln. When government proponents were not strong enough to end the southern institution of slavery, private citizens took matters into their own hands. A network of safe-houses were established, and the word was spread that any slave who could make it to the Ohio River from the south, would be helped to escape to Canada and freedom.

The Federal Congressional Act of 1793 and 1850 gave southerners the right to hunt down escaped slaves, forbid sympathizers to help fugitives, and required citizens to assist slave hunters. It demanded that the legal system of all states aid slave hunters, and gave the slave masters the right to seek financial recompense for lost slave property. In retaliation, Michigan passed the Personal Freedom Acts 162 and 163 in 1855. It gave slaves

"the benefits of the writ of habeas corpus and trial by jury," forbid the imprisonment of escaped slaves, and prohibited indenture and enslavement.

Southern slaves, with no economic resources of their own, had few escape choices. To the south lay the Gulf of Mexico, the unsympathetic Country of Mexico, and no one to help them. To the east lay the Atlantic Ocean, absolutely no hope of boarding southern ships, and aggressive southerners. To the west, over the Mississippi River, lay uncivilized land, hostile Indians, and uncertain perils. To the north, over the Ohio River, were humanitarian sympathizers, safe houses, food, lodging, protection and finally a free Canada. Along the northern routes there were, also, guides, who would travel from Michigan to the south to escort groups of fugitives to freedom. They traveled at night, followed the north star, and lessened the dangers of being caught, because these experienced travelers knew where to travel and when to hide.

Levi Coffin of Cincinnati, Ohio, a Quaker Abolitionist of English ancestry, became the Underground Railroad's President. The term "Underground Railroad" was used because of the secrecy required for it to be successful. The sole purpose of the railroad, as stated, "was to assist slaves who could reach the Ohio River, and help them onward to Canada." The Ohio River was important because it meandered for 981 miles from Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania to the Mississippi River, dividing the slave and free states. It was the "western extension of the Mason-Dixon Line" (demarcation between north and south), and the largest tributary by volume of the Mississippi River. It was difficult to cross, and marked the boundary of two economic cultures (southern plantation and northern free enterprise).

The "Ohio River-To-Michigan Border" Section of the Underground Railroad had two branches. Each had its own advantages, and offered a clandestine night boat ride across the Ohio River. The decision on which route to take usually depended on slaves' starting point in a southern state, and a guides preference.

The QUAKER LINE, was the first route, and went from the southern shores of the Ohio River, to Cincinnati, headed north through Ohio, turned west into Indiana, and reached the southern border of Michigan, at Cass County. Levi Coffin, himself, directed its operation. It was started in 1841, and all conductors (safe house hosts) along this line were Quakers. It was loosely organized, and slaves had to travel on their own from station to station (safe house), with directions given by each Quaker conductor. More slaves were seized by slave-hunters along this route, beaten, and returned to their southern masters, because it was a less organized system, but still highly successful.

The ILLINOIS LINE, was the second route. It was started in 1842, and also, began at the Ohio River. Some thought the Ohio River crossing was at Paducah, others at Cairo, and still others at St. Louis, Missouri (which would have required the crossing of the Ohio and Mississippi). Whichever crossing was used, that route wound its way from lower Illinois, turning northeast through Indiana to the southern border of Michigan at Berrien County, south of New Buffalo and close to the southern edge of Lake Michigan.. Conductors along this route were a mixture of religion affiliations, and used a different approach than the Quaker Line. It was very well organized, and slaves were not asked to travel alone on foot. Fast teams of horses, with false bottom wagons, concealed fugitives in hidden cavities. Stacks of goods, hay, straw, and various commodities were used to conceal compartments. Legitimate delivery trips to Cass or Berrien County County helped conceal runaways. Fugitives often had to wait until the next wagon was scheduled, but it was a safer way to travel.

MICHIGAN'S FREEDOM TRAIL (HISTORIC HERITAGE ROUTE) stretched for 209 miles from the French and English "parc aux vaches" (cowpens) trading posts, on the far west Indiana-Michigan border, below the town of New Buffalo, across lower Berrien County and up through Cass County, transversing the state, to Detroit. From Detroit, fugitive slaves crossed the U.S./Canadian border into Ontario, Canada. This Underground Railroad Route through Cass and Berrien County was called the Mastodon Trail (because mastodon bones have been found along the route), the Sauk Trail (major Native American Indian trail that

connected "she-gong-ong"/Chicago to what is now Detroit), and Old Chicago Road. It has, also, been known as a major stage coach route, Pulasky Highway, U.S. 12 and Route M-60.

Once fugitive slaves reached the Indiana-Michigan border, despite which line they came from (Quaker or Illinois Line), they only had two choices on the Freedom Trail; head directly into Cass County, or go to the W.S. ELLIOT STATION in Niles, Michigan (the agent was L.P. Alexander) and then into Cass County. All routes converged in Cass County, so the bounty hunters and southern plantation slave hunters, concentrated their spies, raids, and blood hound dog searches there. The entire northern portion of the Underground Railroad System depended on what the sympathetic souls in Cass County did to aid converging escaped slaves. Outside the thin Freedom Trail there was indifference, fear of retribution if one dared to help a fugitive, and slave law adherence. Michigan's 1855 Act 162 and 163 gave her citizens more confidence to act upon their convictions.

Southwestern Michigan, and the state, was a single oasis of humanitarians, because of the nature of its population, eastern state origins and settlement patterns. Cass County, Berrien County and the other Michigan areas involved as a whole were, for the most part, populated by pioneers from eastern territories where migration occurred because of European religious persecution. Their convictions meant they were opposed to slavery and human bondage of any kind. They were ethnically diverse, and had a high degree of tolerance for all races.

Due to the limits of human endurance, and horse stamina, stops along the Freedom Trail were essential. Therefore, approximately, every twenty miles, there was a safe house, or secret "station" with a "conductor" (friendly host). At each station, the escaping slaves (and horses) would be given a place to hide, rest/sleep, drink water, eat, and refresh themselves before continuing on to the next station. Travel usually occurred at night, as secrecy and clandestine movement was necessary. There were few bridges on this route, and the wide, deep, fast moving St. Joseph River (which curves around lower Cass County) was dangerous to ford by foot. The entire northern portion of the Underground Railroad required careful planning, the crossing of topographical barriers, and clever evasion of slave hunters and bounty seekers.

The southern economic plantation system (and its motivations), were based on slave labor. That factor should not be under-estimated in this historic drama. Slaves were expensive, and meant free labor for their life time, if slave masters could stop them from escaping. Slave bounty hunters were well paid for a reason. One local historian estimated that the able bodied escaped slaves, who made it through Cass County, would have been worth one and a half million dollars in those days before the Civil War. This was an enormous sum in Pre-Civil War (pre-inflation) times. The financial solvency of the south, and plantations' financial investments were strong motivators for slave hunters to track fugitives to Cass County where escape routes converged.

Within Cass County, the "Society of Friends" met and formed a secret alliance dedicated to the abolitionist's movement. There were five Underground Railroad Stations (safe houses) that took delivery of the human cargo fugitives slaves. For a long time it was assumed there were only four depots, but the Cass County Historical Society of 1951 and the Fox/Upson/Starring research before that, changed this concept. Based on the 1951 data, the five Cass County Underground Railroads were as follows:

The JOSIAH OSBORN STATION (Quaker) was on the northwest end of Shavehead Lake. His home was the safe-house, and he, upon occasion, hired slaves to work on his farm, if they decided to settle in Michigan instead of heading to Canada. If they wanted a job, he gave them their own log cabin, and helped them get established. It was at this station that the Kentucky Raid slave-hunters first attacked and captured several of his fugitive slave employees. The Osborn Station is close to the Michigan-Indiana border. It is considered to be one of two "points-of-entry into Cass County.

The STEPHEN BOGUE STATION (Quaker) was very active from 1840 to 1850, and the first of the Cass County, Michigan Underground Railroad depots. It was located between Cassopolis and Vandalia, on what

is now M-60. It was on the south side of the road at the Bogue Farm. Its existence was not as easily hidden, and much was written about it. Stephen Bogue was described as "morally above reproach, with a keen sense of justice." Not only an Underground Railroad Conductor, he served as a "community arbitrator for disputes." Stephen came to Cass County "in 1831 from Ohio and settled in Penn Township. He died in 1861, having committed himself to serving the "common good." The Women's Club of Cassopolis in 1931, placed a boulder and plaque on his farm to mark the spot as a historic site.

The ZACHARIAH SHUGART STATION (Quaker) was "located on the west side of Christianna Creek.. Zachariah was a Quaker friend of Stephen Bogue. His safe-house was "an old dilapidated building," which he owned. When the Kentucky Raid occurred, it was Shugart who took a fast horse, and went to warn Bogue that the southern slave-hunters were attacking them, capturing hidden run-away slaves, and stated that someone must have been spying on them to know where to attack.

The ISHMAEL LEE STATION (Quaker) was "one half mile south of the old Air Station Line Depot in Cassopolis on M-60 (Edwardsburgh Road)." He was a "faithful and successful conductor who ushered slaves through his woods to freedom," and onto the next station in the line."

The PETER TRUITT STATION, White Oak Tavern, (Methodist Episcopal) was in Milton Township, Cass County, Michigan and also, close to the Michigan Indiana border. It was thought to be (by a number of more recent researchers in 1951) the second point-of-entry into Cass County for the Underground Railroad. It was a tavern stage coach way-station, and the home of Peter Truitt (whose family lived on the second floor), before he became wealthy enough to hire a manager to run the place. Peter is believed to have been a major financial backer of the movement, and his tavern the sole Milton Township entry point into Cass County. Along the isolated stretch of road, where he resided, there were no other options for a safe house.

Cass County's guides (who escorted slaves from the Ohio River or Kentucky) were known as "Nigger Runners." WILLIAM JONES of Calvin Township (called "Nigger Bill"), and MODLIN WRIGHT of Williamsville bravely risked life and limb to help slaves reach Cass County.

Underground Railroad Stations were kept secret in those days, and many are veiled with assumptions due to that fact, but there is little doubt now that these men were Cass County abolitionists, and their cleverness exists without question. The dangers of fugitive slaves being caught out in the open were so great that swift night-time, secret travel was essential. Quick access to hiding places could mean the difference between life and death, as slave-hunters did not hesitate to shoot anyone getting in their way, if no witnesses were present. The pass words "can you furnish entertainment for myself and another person," were essential to distinguish friend from foe, and a southern spy from an innocent. Hidden compartments in the floor of wagons, "hollows" made in a wagon load of straw, and hiding spaces under carriage buckboard seats were commonly used. Michigan cellars (holes dug in the ground below buildings without benefit of stone walls) with their concealed trap doors, were useful. Water wells with tunnels and ledges dug into the sides of steep walls, required slaves to be lowered down the well with ropes and pulleys, but were undetectable from the surface. "Priest holes" (small secret spaces in a building's interior walls), allowed not only the concealment of valuables, but human beings as well. Planning a head for hiding spaces was essential when it was certain that slave hunters would be pounding on doors at night, conducting searches, prosecuting, and beating those who dared defy them.

From Cass County, runaway slaves were sent to the WILLIAM WHEELER STATION in Flowerfield, St. Joseph County, or to Kalamazoo County's NATHAN M. THOMAS STATION in Schoolcraft, Michigan. From these stations many went on to Battle Creek, eventually reaching Canada.

Much has been written about the KENTUCKY RAID, when Kentucky slave hunters, based on the intelligence gathered by a spy, attacked and captured fugitive slaves living in Cass County. The resulting

resistance by local residence, march to Cassopolis, and legal battle are legendary. The citizens of Cass County, not only stopped the bounty and slave hunters, they accomplished their defense without shedding blood.

Cass County's, and Southwestern Michigan's, final contribution to the abolitionist cause were the soldiers it sent to fight in the Civil War (1861-1865). In this era, the country was divided in its sentiment. The south's economic plantation economy was based on slavery. The north's economy was founded on free enterprise and the work of free men. When the north and the abolitionist movement put pressure on the south, it decided to withdraw from the union that was the United States of America. When the northern Union Army won the Civil War, it stopped southern state secession, held the country together, and ended slavery.

In conclusion, Cass County played a major part in the nation's Underground Railroad System. Its efforts, combined with the sacrifices of many abolitionists along the way, helped slaves reach the interior of Michigan. From there, honorable men ferried slaves to Canada and freedom. Cass County was the convergence point of the Quaker and Illinois Line routes heading north. Due to geographical location, and a sympathetic community, Southwestern Michigan was destined to become involved. Brave conductors, clever agents, tireless guides, and sympathizers gave refuge and aid. Congressional Fugitive Slave Laws forced the abolitionist issue, and a southern economic system funded slaver-hunters. Cass had a dramatic role in this historic saga. Local Cass settlers, Josiah Osborn, Stephen Bogue, Zachariah Shugart, Ishmael Lee, and Peter Truitt organized, funded, and helped southern fugitive slaves along the way to freedom. W.S. Elliot of Niles, Michigan, William Wheeler of Flowerfield, and Nathan M. Thomas of Schoolcraft were links to other abolitionists. In Berrien County, the Freedom Trail crossed its entire width, and fed fugitives to Cass County. With all route converging there, Cass County, Michigan played a major role in the nation's abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad.

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