

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

REV. WILLIAM A. STEWART, SR.,
& CHAIN LAKE SECRETS

Reverend William Stewart, Sr, wife Mary, his mother Martha Elizabeth, daughter Catherine, and son William D., Jr. were residents of Calvin Township, Cass County, Michigan in 1830. How they came to migrate to Michigan, and the secrets they hid, were so upsetting to their descendents that the story was tucked away in an attic and forgotten about for many years. You see, the good Reverend and his family were unwittingly pulled into a dangerous clandestine journey that would force them to leave their comfortable eastern home, forsake their ordered, safe life style, and keep secrets on the shores of Chain Lake, so big that federal law was broken and lives were threatened.

William Stewart and his family lived on the Swahatawaro Creek in Hanover Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (now called Dauphin Co.). They were English immigrants of Scottish ancestry, who enjoyed the simple life, the companionship of his flock of Baptist parishioners, and his extensive library. Post-Colonial American, following the Revolutionary War, was known as the "Age of Reason." Well educated men, like William, wanted to "understand the meaning of life," and "learn the truth of existence." The writings of people like Robert Carter (early supporter of religious freedom and emancipation) and politicians like John Quincy Adams had a strong effect on William. He believed in the U.S. Constitution, and in "brotherhood" ("we are all our brothers keeper"). He practiced "the Golden Rule" ("do unto others as you would have them do unto you"), and preached that "all men were created equal." He never anticipated that fate would unceremoniously toss him into a situation that would test the very core of his personal beliefs, and lead him to live out the rest of his life on the shores of Chain Lake in Calvin Township, Cass County, Michigan.

William had a cousin who lived in Southeastern Virginia, and they both shared the same first name, which was not an unusual occurrence in those days. To tell them apart, Colonel William Henry Stewart, was called "the Colonel" by the family, and William was often referred to as the "Reverend." The two cousins wrote often. The Colonel decided to have a family reunion, and being proud of his accomplishments, after he inherited the family plantation, he decided it should be held at his ancestral home. So, on the appointed day, the extended Stewart family arrived in Virginia from New York, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.

The Stewart's large Virginia plantation home had a white facade, with a pillared entry portico, and balconies. A lavish lawn and gardens surrounded the home, and old growth sweet gumwood trees sheltered the long drive access to the main entry. Inside the home, a marble tiled entry lead to an elaborately carved massive polished stairway. Reverend William, and his family, had the opportunity to refresh themselves, following their long and tedious journey by horse drawn coach. Then they joined the others in the lushly carpeted dining room. Fine china gleamed on the table, crystal stemmed glasses were filled by light brown skinned servants, and the aroma of succulent food made the Reverend's mouth water. Guests' every wish was fulfilled by waiting slaves.

William was aware that on March 22, 1794, Congress had passed the U.S. Slave Trade Act. It had prohibited U. S. citizens from becoming involved in the slave trade, but not slavery. The Colonel had assured the Reverend that his slaves wanted the home he provided, so William never questioned his cousin's actions. By the 1840s, northern white abolitionists would oppose slavery with a vengeance, but at this moment in history, the southern states relished their way of life without much opposition. The economic system of slavery was thriving in the south, irregardless of the opinions of a few northern writers .

The Colonel explained, in detail to the Reverend, and his other relatives, at that dinner, the details of his plantation's elaborate business. The Virginia Stewarts were cotton growers, who shipped bales of unprocessed cotton to textile mills in England. Business was good, and life was especially pleasant for the Virginia Stewarts. The southern plantation system and slavery was a highly profitable economic institution.

The next day, everyone was taken on a tour of the plantation. Fine thoroughbred horses whinnied in beautiful barns, the sweet smell of fresh hay drifted to the nostrils, clean well tended cotton fields stretched as far as the eye could see. There was no doubt that the economic system of the south was highly lucrative. The good Reverend was quite impressed by his cousin's success, until they rounded the farm buildings and reached the slave cabins. Tiny poverty ridden shanties surrounded a water well, "bare footed black children ran about playing, and smoke drifted upward from a communal fire. The contrast between the plantation house, the barns, and these shanties suddenly sobered William, and he had to quietly learn more. After the tour, that afternoon, on his own, William went back to the shanty cabins, but no one would talk to him, so he borrowed a horse and rode to town. It was there that he saw the slave auctions, and watched the bidding for human beings as they huddled on a raised platform. William's conscience was bothering him mightily, but still he figured it was not his business. The era from 1830 to 1860 was one of "plantation slave system expansion in the south," due to the demand for cotton from English textile mills. What William was witnessing was the "tip of a much bigger iceberg."

By mid-afternoon, the family gathered for a birthday party in the big house. Jennifer, the Colonel's daughter, unwrapped her presents, thanking everyone for their generosity. It was then that the Colonel announced he had a special gift for his fair haired, blonde, blue-eyed daughter. Beckoning a serving girl forward, the Colonel took the light brown hand of fifteen year old slave Ruby, and placed it on Jennifer's palm. The Colonel then announced that Ruby was being given to Jennifer as her own personal slave. As William watched this appalling spectacle, the humiliation, shock, tears and hurt on Ruby's face burned Reverend William to the depth of his soul, as she stared at the Colonel.

That night, after his relatives went to bed, William made his way to the kitchen. He had to know why Ruby was so unhappy. At first, the staff there did not trust him or his questions, but finally the truth came out. In the south, wealth was measured by the number of slaves one owned. They were expensive to buy, the Slave Trade Act of 1794 prevented the importation of additional workers, and the whites were offended by the black skin of their slaves. A common Virginian solution, and standard practice, was for the Master of the Plantation and his sons to keep black mistresses, breed, and reproduce their own slaves. The laws of the United States, at that time, declared that if you were born to a slave, you were a slave for life. There were two reasons why mulatto slave, Ruby cried. Her mother had been recently sold, and Ruby had no idea where the Colonel sent her. But more importantly, she had just been given, as a slave, to her white half sister, by her own father.

That night Reverend William Stewart's life changed forever. He talked, at length with his family, as this ghastly situation could not be allowed to continue. Ruby and her mulatto siblings were not just any slaves, they were of his own "flesh and blood." However, what he wanted to do as a remedy, was not only illegal, it was extremely dangerous. The next day, clandestinely, William talked to Ruby and gave her cause for thought.

William and his family went home to Pennsylvania, and started making plans to rescue these children. They faced many dangers. Ruthless slave hunters would try to track down fugitive runaways. If caught white rescuers would face beatings, prosecution, and maybe even death. The slaves would be returned to their angry masters, for cruel thrashings to insure no further escapes were again attempted. To make matters more urgent and desperate, these young illiterate mulatto youngsters could not be left to fend for themselves, once rescued. They needed care, schooling, protection, guidance and a future. The good Reverend would be immediately suspected of the deed and tracked back to Pennsylvania, so the Stewart family came to the only possible conclusion; they had to plan a new life somewhere else. After considerable research, the uncivilized wilds of the Southwestern Michigan Territory offered the perfect solution.

In 1829, Pennsylvania Quakers had settled in what is now Penn Township, Cass County, Michigan. They would not formally organize their Underground Railroad until the 1840s, but their beginnings started with incidents like this one. Before permanently moving from Pennsylvania, William made one last visit to the Colonel in Virginia. Quietly behind the scenes, he arranged for Ruby's slave mother (Minerva Jane) to be located by the local Baptists. Then, Minerva, Ruby and her siblings were offered choices, and time to consider their options. It wasn't long before all were in agreement.

It was too dangerous for fugitive slaves to travel with William, so several Baptists and Quakers arranged the transportation of the children and their mother. William and his family went back home to Pennsylvania. They sold all of their unnecessary possessions, packed covered wagons, and said their good-byes to William's Baptist congregation. The migration trip to Southwestern Michigan was a grueling affair. Once he arrived, William built two log cabins on the shores of Chain Lake. One was for Ruby and her family. The other housed the Reverend and his brood. The area was perfect for their purposes; isolated and close to clean water. When the fugitives slave children and their mother arrived, the good Reverend and his family were ready for them.

There was much to be done by Reverend William Stewart. To confuse the slave hunters, the children's surnames were scrambled. Three took the last name of Hawks, three became Cokers, and the last two chose to remain Stewarts. Ruby's first name was replaced, because it was so distinctive. Her mother, Manerva Jane, decided to retain her original name. Mary Steven Westlake Stewart, the Reverend's wife, and his mother Martha Elizabeth Petiford Stewart, began educating the now free mulatto Stewart family, as they settled into their cozy little cabin. Several other runaways joined his gathering of joyously free souls. According to family lore, "fugitive Kentucky slaves, Reverend William Stewart, his son William Jr., and his mulatto relatives all had a hand in building the first missionary log church on Chain Lake." William was said to have preached the first service, and a number to follow.

When the anticipated Virginia slave hunters arrived in Southwestern Michigan trying to track down Reverend William Stewart, he quietly prayed with his extended family, in the dense forests, on the shores of Chain Lake undetected. In 1838, the Chain Lake Missionary Baptist Church was established. By 1840, the black population began to grow in Cass County. That was when William, wife Mary and mother Martha Elizabeth withdrew their proctorship, realizing that "once you educate and give children wings, you step back, so they can spread those wings as self-determined free spirits." In 1845, new arrivals Lamoon Howell, Ezechial Cole, and John Stewart from Logan County, Ohio founded "the first permanent black settlement" in Calvin Township. On 1/4/1848 the Chain Lake Baptist Church was officially organized by Elder David Lett and 8 members. On September 18, 1850, the Congress of the United States passed the Fugitive Slave Law, "as part of the Compromise of 1850 between southern slave holders and the northern free-soilers." It was nicknamed the "Bloodhound Law," due to the fact that "dogs were used to track down runaways." On 5/18/1856, Turner Byrd and his wife donated an acre of ground for the Chain Lake Cemetery.

Just south of the stairs of the Chain Lake Cemetery, that lead east up the hill from the Chain Lake Church parking lot, you will find the graves of Scotsman Reverend William Stewart (3/18/1798-4/5/1858), his wife Mary Steven Westlake (5/20/1795-8/3/1882), and other family members. Mary's grave marker and some others crumbled away a long time ago. The burial plot of Martha Elizabeth Petiford (1768-1863) wife of Thomas Stewart and mother of Reverend William Stewart is up the hill. All burials are recorded in current cemetery records, and old DAR readings. Thomas Stewart, William's father, is buried in England.

William Stewart's original Virginia mulatto family members are buried up the hill with their own nuclear families. Even Manerva Jane Stewart rests peacefully among her descendants. The location of Ruby's grave is a mystery. She was 15 years old in 1829, and after coming to Michigan, she did marry and produce children. The question is, which of those graves is hers?

In 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States. Between 1861-1865, the Civil

War was fought to end slavery. Following those years, there was a long struggle to end discrimination.

Starting on April 6, 1984, a descendent of one of the Colonel's mulatto children, of Scottish/African descent, wrote one of the Reverend's Scottish/English descendents asking for help to locate her ancestors. She provided him with extracts from the 1860, 1870 and 1880 U.S. Census of Calvin Township, Cass County, Michigan copied in her own handwriting. Her Census sheets clearly indicate under the "color" column "m" for mulatto. Three of the most common surnames appearing on these census reports were "Stewart, Hawks and Coker." It is important to remember, if further research follows in the future, that some of Ruby's siblings' names were changed from Stewart to other names to protect their identity, and that European monikers were either given or taken by fugitives and slaves, because they were deprived of their own African heritage. There is a plaque at the Chain Lake Cemetery that recognizes the contributions of the early pioneers of Calvin Township. The name Stewart is among them.

In conclusion, Scotsman Reverend William Stewart was a resident of early Cass County, Michigan. His life in Pennsylvania, as a Baptist minister, was influenced greatly by the writings of Robert Carter and John Quincy Adams. Fate forced him to act upon his convictions, and rescue Virginia mulatto slave children who were the product of his cousin and an African mistress. The children and their mother, were brought to Calvin Township, where the Stewarts initially educated and cared for them. He and his family are buried just southeast of the stairway at the Chain Lake Cemetery. The original mulatto children grew to adulthood, had families of their own, and lived as free men and women in Cass County. William Stewart firmly believed in the ideals of the U.S. Constitution, and the tenet that "all men were created equal." He was, indeed, his "brothers keeper," and lived by the Golden Rule. He was an educated man, a local pioneer, and became involved with the quest for freedom in Cass County before the abolitionist movement became popular in America in the 1840s. William's life on Chain Lake, and the secrets he kept, should be secrets no more, as they are part of local history.

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