

The Underground Railroad in Cass County, Michigan—A series of four articles

Written by Cathy LaPointe (2018)

Underground Railroad Society of Cass County

#4—Lead up to the Civil War, and the Legacy of the UGRR in Cass County

Kentucky planters were incensed that slave catchers were not allowed to return 'their property' to them. They demanded that their friend, Senator Henry Clay, include a more stringent Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Compromise of 1850. This new law was draconian. It declared that captured slaves had to be returned to their owners, and officials and citizens had to cooperate, or be fined and imprisoned. Captured slaves had no rights in court and no defense. A white man could drag any black man or woman south into slavery solely on the power of his word.

Before the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, many people in this area had no opinion on slavery. Birch Lake Quakers split on the Underground Railroad, and those who wanted to be active were dismissed from the meeting. However, the Enhanced Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 galvanized northern sentiment against slavery. Birch Lake Quakers reunited and became active on the UGRR, along with many free blacks and others.

Many free states refused to comply with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Michigan included. In 1855 Michigan passed the Personal Freedom Act, which guaranteed to anyone claimed as a fugitive slave all the benefits of habeas corpus and the right to a jury trial. It prohibited the use of state and local jails for holding accused fugitive slaves. It said any attempt to send a freedman or woman south into slavery was a crime, subject to fine and imprisonment. When the Civil War started in 1861, South Carolina claimed free states' refusal to comply or 'nullification' of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law as the first complaint when it listed the reasons for secession.

Black men were not allowed to fight in the Civil War until President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. At that time over 100 black men in this area, mostly from Calvin Township, joined the 102nd Colored Troops and fought bravely in battle. They formed the Matthew Artis Post of the GAR in Calvin Center, and many are buried in Chain, Lake, Mt. Zion and Bethel cemeteries.

The legacy of the Underground Railroad in Cass County Michigan became manifest in the number of prosperous black farms, and cooperation and friendly relationships among the residents. It continued in schools where black and white children in Calvin township and Vandalia studied together from the start. To this day it is a still mixed community, racially harmonious, and supportive of each other. Descendants of original Quakers and free blacks, as well as freedom seekers, still reside in the area.

The non-profit Underground Railroad Society of Cass County (URSCC) was founded in 2010, with the mission of researching and telling the story of the UGRR in Cass County and the role local Quakers, African Americans and other abolitionists played. Our goals are the restoration of the James E. Bonine House and Carriage House as focal points for telling this story. We are proud that we are well along on both our mission and goals. You can find much more on our website www.urscc.org. You can download our 19 site UGRR Self-Guided Driving Tour, or find a map near the UGRR marker in the park in Vandalia. You can tour the Bonine House and Carriage House May through October. URSCC annual events are the Sam Adams and Portage schools UGRR Wax Museums in early June, Underground Railroad Days the second weekend of July, and Christmas at the Bonine House the first two weekends of December. We hope to see you soon.