

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN

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The area in and around Vandalia, MI, (specifically Calvin, Penn, and Porter Townships) was known as "Young's Prairie" in the 1820's - 1860's. It was in this area that many Quakers settled in the early 1830's and formed Birch Lake Meeting. They settled here to leave slave states and escape the hated practice of slavery. Some Quakers specifically settled here to become part of the Underground Railroad (UGRR), a network of safe shelters called 'stations.' Those who operated these shelters, mostly homes, barns and other out buildings, were known as 'stationmasters.' And those who took fugitive slaves (now referred to as freedom seekers) to the next station were called 'conductors.' Many of the Quaker families who settled in Young's Prairie moved here from Richmond, IN, where Levi Coffin called "the president of the UGRR" maintained a very active station. Quakers Josiah Osborn and sons Jefferson and Ellison, Joel East, Stephen Bogue, and Ishmael Lee established UGRR stations in the early 1830's. Zachariah Shugart arrived soon after and became a stationmaster and conductor on the UGRR. African American Henry Shepard settled in Vandalia, and also became a stationmaster and conductor on the UGRR. They took freedom seekers to the Nathan and Pamela Thomas station in Schoolcraft, and often to Battle Creek where Erastus and Sarah Hussy kept a well-known station. Isaac Bonine became a stationmaster in the late 1830's, as did William Jones, nephew of Stephen Bogue. James E. Bonine, son of Isaac, moved to Young's Prairie in 1843, married Sarah Bogue in 1844, and built their brick farmhouse in 1845. While there is no evidence that freedom seekers were sheltered in the Bonine House, there is ample evidence they were sheltered in the Bonine Carriage House across the street built c. 1850.

A large group of Free Blacks started arriving in the mid 1840's, mostly from North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee, and many established farms, primarily in Calvin Township. There are many Free Blacks and freedom seekers on the 1850 census for Calvin, Penn and Porter townships, and over one hundred Black-owned properties on the 1860 Cass County plat map. Thriving black churches were established -- Chain Lake Baptist, Mt. Zion Methodist and Bethel AME. Chain Lake Baptist established an Anti-Slavery Society in 1853. It is claimed that over fifteen hundred freedom seekers were helped on their journey to Canada by Quakers, Free Blacks, and other abolitionists in Young's Prairie. James E. Bonine established what came to be called "Ramptown" when he purchased Section 33 in 1853, inviting Free Blacks and freedom seekers to clear the land in exchange for the ability to build a cabin, grow their own food, earn their own money, send their children to school, and go to church. Ramptown, named for wild leeks in the area, grew to a community of about thirty cabins, housing over one hundred people by 1860.

Most freedom seekers came to Young's Prairie from the border counties of Kentucky. In early 1847 two parties escaped and made their way to Young's Prairie on the Quaker Line of the UGRR. Many stayed to work on Quaker farms, residing in cabins on the properties. Kentucky planters were incensed that "their property" was being stolen from them and sent thirteen slave catchers to bring their slaves back to Kentucky. They had the right to do this under the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. On August 17, raiders broke into smaller parties and captured nine freedom seekers on the Osborn, East, Shugart, Shepard and Bogue farms. They all met at O'Dells Mill in Vandalia, where they were surrounded by Quakers, Free Blacks, other abolitionists, and townspeople who said the slave catchers were not going to take the freedom seekers back to Kentucky. Violence was narrowly avoided. Since the slave catchers believed the law was on their side, they agreed to go to court in Cassopolis to let a judge settle the matter. They made the five mile trip to Cassopolis on foot, on horseback and in wagons. By the time they arrived, around 9am, there were hundreds gathered to witness the spectacle. The slave catchers were jailed and the freedom seekers were put under guard in the local tavern for their safekeeping. The Cass County Circuit Court Commissioner was out of town so Ebenezer McIlvain, the Berrien County Commissioner, was brought in to hear the case. McIlvain was a secret abolitionist. He delayed the trial for three days allowing both sides to prepare their cases. The slave catchers posted bail. When the trial resumed, McIlvain allowed freedom seekers to testify against their masters and the slave catchers, accusing them of assault. Bogue, Shepard and others accused slave catchers of breaking and entering, and destroying their property. The slave catchers had papers proving the freedom seekers were the 'property' of planters but could not produce "certified" Kentucky statutes. Based on this technicality, McIlvain found for the freedom seekers and dismissed the case. The nine kidnapped freedom seekers were taken to the home of Ishmael Lee, and along with over thirty others, escaped on the UGRR conducted by Zachariah Shugart, to Schoolcraft then to

Battle Creek, where some stayed and the rest went on to Canada and freedom. It was one of the largest recorded escapes on the UGRR. The Kentucky slave catchers went home empty handed but sued the Osborns, Lee, Shugart, Bogue, William H. Jones, David T. Nicholson and Ebenezer McIlvain in District Court in Detroit in 1849. This case was settled and dismissed in 1851. Perry Sanford, freedom seeker, gave his eye witness account of the Kentucky Slave Raid to a newspaper in 1884.

The UGRR continued to operate in Cass County until 1860 with Black churches and Free Blacks playing a much larger role. More Free Blacks continued to settle in the area, primarily Calvin Township, so that by 1860 Cass County had one of the highest Black populations in Michigan, second only to Wayne Township. Many Free Black families arrived here with money, or earned money working for local Quakers. They bought property, established thriving farms, and became respected members of the community. As noted, over one hundred Black owned properties were recorded on the 1860 Cass County Plat map, a startling fact during the 1850 Enhanced Fugitive Slave Act. Booker T. Washington visited Calvin and Porter Townships in 1902, and recorded his thoughts on this group of people in "Two Generations Under Freedom." The "Calvin Township" Room in the Bonine House has much research on early Black pioneers. The Estella Lawson and Mary Anne Bonine Collections in the Bonine House UGRR Library (also urscc.org) also tell the story of these brave, industrious settlers.

Over one hundred Black men from Calvin and Porter Townships volunteered to fight in the Civil War. Most joined the 102nd USCT (US Colored Troops) and fought bravely in several battles. Many are buried in Chain Lake, Mt. Zion and Bethel Cemeteries with marked graves. In the "Underground Railroad" Room in the Bonine House, there is a display that discusses the role of Black soldiers in the Civil War, and the men of the 102nd.

In 1837 Michigan ordered neighborhood schools be built, and by 1850 one room schools were established in five districts in Cass County. On the 1850 census for Cass County, it notes children going to school, both Black and white. On the 1860 Calvin Township plat map, it shows schools throughout the township. Most of the Calvin Township (and Porter Township) schools were integrated, a legacy of the Underground Railroad. Many Free Blacks had their own farms, and many lived and worked on farms in the area. They all sent their children to local schools. Black and white children going to school together set a standard for racial harmony that continues to this day.

The story of the Underground Railroad was recorded in Cass County history books, local historians' and academic accounts, but not many other places. The Black community didn't talk about it, and the white community didn't care. The local UGRR was not taught in schools, and the story almost disappeared from public scrutiny. During 2000-2010 a series of events rekindled interest in various aspects of the story. The Michigan Bar Association Milestone Marker placed at the Cassopolis courthouse, resurrected the story of the 1847 Kentucky Slave Raid, and inspired Ruth Andrews to create the "Sanctuary and Deliverance" mural in downtown Cassopolis. In 2002 Western Michigan University did an archeological study that proved "Ramptown" existed and was on James E. Bonine's property. Dr. Veta Tucker then connected the Bonine House to the UGRR. A community meeting took place in 2009 to determine interest in saving the Bonine House; and from that meeting Underground Railroad Society of Cass County (URSCC) was formed, receiving its 501c3 in June, 2010.

URSCC purchased the Bonine House and Carriage House in December of 2010, and the Bogue House was donated to URSCC in 2018 by Pleasant View Church of Christ. The Bonine House is now a community events and education center, and the Carriage House a UGRR station and budding community farm museum. The Bogue House allows visitors to experience part of the Kentucky Raid, and being hidden in the attic as a freedom seeker. All are open for tours June through September.

URSCC has fulfilled their mission of researching and educating the public about the UGRR in Cass County by a comprehensive website urscc.org, a UGRR 20 site, self guided driving tour around Vandalia, and annual events--the student UGRR Wax Museum, Underground Railroad Days festival, and Christmas at the Bonine House. The other part of the mission, restoring the Bonine House, Carriage House and Bogue House as focal points for telling this story, is ongoing, with tours June through September. URSCC has an active Board of Directors and Docent group, and over four hundred members. They have received local, state and national grants, as well as honors and awards. Local UGRR sites are well represented on the National Parks Service Network to Freedom, and in process with the National Register of Historic Places. URSCC has a track record that they are proud of, and appreciates your support to keep telling this amazing story that transcends time and resonates with everyone. -- Copyright URSCC 2022, written by Cathy LaPointe