Cass County and the Underground Railroad

The story of the Underground Railroad in Cass County is one of cooperation, respect and mutual trust among Quakers, free blacks, fugitive slaves and other abolitionists to combat the hated institution of slavery. One historian says “the interdependency of these groups created a unique environment that helped minimize racism, promote cooperation between the races and create an African American community unique to the North.”

Quaker Levi Coffin of Wayne County, Indiana is called the “President of the Underground Railroad.” Several Quaker families migrated to Wayne County, and from there to Cass County, Michigan, settling in Penn, Calvin and Porter townships. They formed the Young's Prairie Anti-Slavery Meeting in 1843 creating the “Quaker Line”of the UGRR, as well as a refuge for fugitive slaves, called freedom seekers, from all over the South, especially the border State of Kentucky.

According to early Cass County histories, the homes of Quakers Stephen Bogue, Zachariah Shugart, Josiah Osborn and Ishmael Lee were UGRR “stations of much importance.” The Stephen Bogue house still stands at M=60 and Crooked Creek Road. Quaker abolitionist William Jones' house at M-60 and Gards Prairie Road is also a noted UGRR station. James E. Bonine sheltered freedom seekers in his carriage house across the street from the Bonine House. It is claimed that over 1500 freedom seekers passed through Cass County on their way to Canada on a route through Schoolcraft, Battle Creek, Jackson, Ann Arbor, Detroit and finally Windsor, with many stops in between. There was so much UGRR activity in the area around Vandalia, that Henry Clay called it “that hotbed of abolitionism” on the floor of the US Senate.

Because of relative safety living among Quakers, many freedom seekers as well as free blacks settled in Penn, Calvin and Porter townships in the 1840's. Most worked on Quaker owned farms, living in cabins in exchange for clearing the land. Freedom seekers living in cabins on Quaker farms were targets of the infamous Kentucky Raid of 1847.

James E. Bonine, who built the Bonine House and Carriage House at M-60 and Penn/Calvin Center Road, allotted 5-10 acre plots on his land south of M-60 and west of Calvin Center to be cleared. Residents could build a cabin, farm, earn money, send their children to school and partake in community activities. This settlement of several cabins (60-100 are numbers cited) came to be called “Ramptown” after a wild leek that grew in the area. Many residents of Ramptown eventually purchased their own farms and prospered. Local area residents remember Ramptown well into the 1920's, but all traces of the cabins are gone.

Many African American families were free long before migration to Cass County and have documented their history. Early free black families of Cass County include the Andersons, Wilsons, Stewarts and Allens. These freedmen founded an anti-slavery society and engaged in anti-slavery activism, playing pivotal roles in the UGRR and Kentucky Raid. Descendents of these families still reside in the area. Chain Lake Baptist Church, one of the oldest African American churches in Michigan, was established in 1838 and played an important role in UGRR activities.

A Brief Description of the Cass County "Kentucky Raid"

August, 1847

In the years leading up to the raid, the number of enslaved blacks escaping Kentucky increased. Calvin Township slave runners William Holman Jones and Wright Modlin frequented Bourbon County Kentucky, bringing freedom seekers back with them to Cass County. Frustrated with the constant loss of their "property" and in an attempt to recover their lost investments, Kentucky planters banded together in hopes of retrieving their slaves rumored to be living among the Quakers in Cass County.

In August of 1847 a group of 13 Kentuckians arrived in Cass County. They broke into smaller parties and proceeded to various settlements, including the Bogue, East, Osborn and Shugart farms, capturing nine escapees. Word of the kidnapping spread quickly, and numerous people gathered to stop the Kentuckians, including Quakers, free blacks and other abolitionist townspeople (crowds are noted at 100-300!) A confrontation ensued at O'Dells Mill (near Milo Barnes Park in Vandalia) and the Kentuckians brandished weapons. The Quakers present at the confrontation were credited with calming the situation before it escalated into further violence. Because they were outnumbered, and because they believed the law was clearly on their side in light of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which said they had the right to recover their slaves, the Kentuckians agreed to go to Cassopolis and stand trial.

The Cass County Circuit Court judge was out of town and the Quakers brought in Ebenezer McIlvain, a magistrate from Berrien County and secret abolitionist, who found for the fugitives on a technicality; saying the Kentuckians didn't have the correct paperwork. After this ruling, all nine freedom seekers who had been kidnapped, along with about forty other fugitives, led by Zachariah Shugart and Henry Shepard, made their way to freedom on the Underground Railroad, mostly to Canada. The slave catchers returned to Kentucky empty handed; but in 1849 they sued Stephen Bogue, Josiah, Jefferson and Ellison Osborn, achariah Shugart, William H. Jones, David T. Nicholson, and Ebenezer McIlvain, in the US Circuit Court in Detroit for the value of their property. The civil trial took over a year, was settled and finally dismissed in December of 1851.
The Kentuckians received no money for their losses; but attorneys fees and witness costs were exorbitant, causing great hardship for some of the defendents. William H. Jones and Zachariah Shugart were forced to sell their farms and move out of state.

The outcome of the Kentucky Raid incensed Southern slaveholders It added fuel to Southern demands for a more stringent Fugitive Slave Law, which was passed in 1850, making it much more dangerous to be a freedom seeker or to harbor them. This law, authored by Senator Henry Clay, was a compromise to save the Union. However, it became one of the primary factors that led to the Civil War.