

#2 -- The 1847 Kentucky Raid

By the mid 1840's the area around Vandalia was home to several large farms owned by Quaker families who were part of the Underground Railroad. While most freedom seekers only stayed long enough to rest and provision for the next leg of their journey, some stayed to work for a time on these farms, residing in cabins on the properties.

Freedom seeker Perry Sanford, along with several others, escaped from Kenton County Kentucky, crossed the Ohio River and made the journey to Cass County via the Quaker Line of the UGRR in April of 1847. He and other members of his party were staying in a cabin on the Stephen Bogue farm. Other freedom seekers were staying in cabins on the Osborn and East farms.

On August 17, thirteen heavily armed Kentucky slave catchers broke into three parties. They were to rendezvous at O'Dells Mill, in Vandalia. Two raided the Osborn and East farms, and a cabin on Zachariah Shugart's property, kidnapping six freedom seekers. The third party went to the Bogue cabin, where they captured three. Perry Sanford escaped out the shake roof to warn Stephen Bogue. Hannah Bogue hid Perry upstairs in the house. Perry's friend Rube Stevens ran to Quaker William Jones farm less than a mile away. Unarmed, William Jones calmed the situation and kept the slavecatchers in place until Stephen Bogue returned with a group of men from Cassopolis.

The Kentuckians with their kidnapped slaves met at O'Dells Mill. By this time there was an angry crowd estimated at around two hundred surrounding them, saying they were not going to take the freedom seekers back to Kentucky. They decided settle the matter in court in Cassopolis, about three miles away.

The trial spanned three days. The judge, Ebenezer McIlvain, was a secret abolitionist from Niles. He allowed freedom seekers to testify in court and found for them on a technicality. He asked the Kentuckians to prove Kentucky was a slave state by showing him a copy of the state constitution. By the time they could produce it, all the freedom seekers were spirited out of town on the Underground Railroad. The Kentuckians went home empty handed. In 1849 they sued seven Quakers and two others in District Court in Detroit for the value of their slaves, but the trial ended in a hung jury. The case was later settled and dismissed, but court costs were high and some of the defendants had to sell their farms and leave the area.

The Kentucky Raid and ensuing trials incensed southern planters. They demanded a more stringent Fugitive Slave Law, enacted in 1850, making it much more dangerous for freedom seekers and those who helped them. This law was a factor in the lead up to the Civil War.

Perry Sanford stayed in Battle Creek, where years later he gave his account of the Kentucky Raid to a reporter for the Morning Call.

#3 -- Ramptown

After the 1847 Kentucky Raid, slave catchers knew they would have a very difficult time returning freedom seekers, so they didn't come to this area as much. In the 1840's many free black families, originally from Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee settled in this area. These families came with free papers and money to purchase land for farming. Stewart, Allen, Lawson, Hawks, Sanders, Ash, and Anderson, are among the early black families to settle in Cass County, mostly in Calvin Township. On the 1860 Township maps of Cass County, there are several parcels owned by these families. They founded Chain Lake Baptist Church, Mt. Zion AME and Bethel AME. Chain Lake formed an Anti-Slavery Society in 1853. In the midst of the repressive 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, a thriving black community was established, supported by Quakers and other local abolitionists. This community provided much help to freedom seekers still streaming through Cass County on their way to Canada.

Quaker James E. Bonine built his Greek Revival home at Penn Road and M-60 around 1845, adding the signature tower and porches after the Civil War. He built the Gothic Revival Carriage House at M-60 and Calvin Center Road around 1850. There is no evidence that freedom seekers were sheltered in the Bonine House, but there is a long history of evidence that the Carriage House quickly became a stop on the UGRR.

In 1853 James E. Bonine purchased Section 33 south of M-60 west of Calvin Center. He invited freedom seekers and free blacks to settle there. He lent them 5-10 acres for a determined amount of time, and in exchange for clearing the land, they could build a cabin, garden, earn their own money, send their children to school and attend church. This community grew to about 30 cabins, and came to be called "Ramptown" after a wild leek that grew in the area. While never a recorded name, there is evidence on the census records of Ramptown residents. This arrangement worked for all concerned. Section 33 was cleared, and many earned enough money to purchase their own farms. It can be surmised that with the Carriage House as a UGRR station, and Ramptown across the street, this area became even more of a safe haven for freedom seekers. Ramptown continued until around 1900, but all evidence of the cabins is lost. However, residents say they could see outlines of foundations for years, and G. Elwood Bonine said he would hit those foundation stones when he was plowing in the 1930's and 1940's.

The story and the location of Ramptown at Bonine St and Calvin Center Road has always been known to Cass County residents. There are PhD dissertations and eye witness accounts. A list of over twenty citations for the location of Ramptown can be found on our website. In 2003 Western Michigan University graduate students in archeology did a study called "The Ramptown Project" that examined the history, evidence and location of the community. They found that indeed Ramptown was on James E. Bonine property, Section 33. However the results were misinterpreted and for some years it was incorrectly claimed that Ramptown was dispersed over Calvin and Penn townships.