

1 -- The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad (UGRR) existed from 1830-1861, the start of the Civil War, and was neither underground nor a railroad. Rather it was a series of houses, barns, cellars and other hiding places that were stops for fugitive slaves on their journey north to freedom in Canada.

Rail transportation was becoming popular in the early 1800's and the UGRR adopted the terms. The routes that freedom seekers followed north were called lines. The places where they hid were called stations. Those who provided food and shelter at the station were called stationmasters, and those who carried freedom seekers to the next station were called conductors. Canada outlawed slavery in 1833 and became a beacon for freedom seekers everywhere. Escape from the deep south slave states was almost impossible. Most freedom seekers journeyed north on hundreds of lines from the border slave states of Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee through the free states of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and Michigan, crossing into Canada at various sites. It is said that between 50,000 and 100,000 freedom seekers escaped bondage by 1861, many on the UGRR.

Anti-slavery abolitionists of all races and religions participated in the Underground Railroad. Quakers were the first to declare slavery a 'sin against man and God' freeing their slaves in the late 1700's. Many moved to free states to escape slavery and freedom seekers followed them.

There was a large settlement of Quakers in Wayne County Indiana, many of whom moved into Cass County Michigan around 1830, settling in Penn, Porter and Calvin Townships, known then as Young's Prairie. Some of them became part of the Quaker Line of the UGRR. Freedom Seekers crossed the Ohio River at Cincinnati, were taken by conductors to stations along a route to Wayne County, IN up to Bristol IN to Vandalia, MI. Another route was called the Illinois Line. Freedom Seekers crossed the Ohio or Missouri Rivers, and traveled north through Illinois to Chicago to Niles, Michigan and into Vandalia. Well known UGRR stations and stationmasters in the area were the homes of Stephen Bogue, William Jones, Ishmael Lee and the Carriage House of James E. Bonine. Conductors Zachariah Shugart and African American Henry Shepard took freedom seekers to the next station, the home of Dr. Nathan Thomas in Schoolcraft. From there they continued their journey to Battle Creek, then stops about 20 miles apart until they reached Detroit, where they crossed the Detroit River into Canada.

Many free black families began arriving in Cass County in the mid-1800's, purchasing land and creating thriving farms. They founded Chain Lake Baptist Church and Mt. Zion AME, formed anti-slavery societies and played an important role in the UGRR. It is said that over 1500 freedom seekers came through Vandalia on the Underground Railroad. Slave catchers weren't far behind.