

RAMPTOWN, AND FREE AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN

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The creation of a flourishing African-American community in Calvin Township of Cass County prior to the War of the Rebellion is historically significant.¹ Dr. Harold B. Fields, the oft-honored full Professor of History at Michigan State University in Lansing and avid Cass County historian and authored a significant article detailing the growth of the early "Calvin Settlement." Dr. Fields used census records, deeds and tax records contemporary to settlement as well as three acknowledged county histories.² The final paragraph of his article that appeared in the *Michigan History Magazine* concludes:

The Calvin colony continued to grow at a rapid rate. By 1864, when the legal extinction of slavery was imminent, the Negro population of the county had reached a total of 1534 persons. Calvin Township, alone, then reported 998, which was about two-thirds of the White population. Perusal of the census returns for 1860, however, has not altered the conclusions expressed herein, namely, that the Underground Railroad brought relatively few permanent residents to the county; that migration of free Negroes from Ohio, Indiana and Illinois began about 1845 after they had lived some years in those states; that nearly two-thirds of the families which came in the first five years were able to purchase land; and that most of them promptly began to send their children to school and to build up a busy and prosperous community of firm and lasting foundations.³

Dr. Fields' notes are highly detailed and complete in the best tradition of a professional historian.⁴ As a child attending school in Dowagiac, from 1935 to 1948, the author remembers being taught about the Calvin Community of African-Americans that settled in the county before the Civil War. He believed they were *all* ex-slaves. He doesn't remember the phrase "Free Blacks" being used. Apparently, that was the

¹ The Calvin Settlement also included African-Americans living in Porter and Penn Townships.

² Rogers, Howard, *History of Cass County, from 1825 to 1875*: Cassopolis, 1875. (2) Mathews, Alfred, *History of Cass County, Michigan*: Chicago, 1882. (3) Lowell H. Glover, *A 20th Century History of Cass County, Michigan*: Chicago, 1906. A fourth publication, *Cass County, A Brief History*, compiled by Mae R. Schoetzow and published by the Marcellus News in 1935 while, not cited by Dr. Fields, gives a good account of Cass County slavery activities. The UGRR was written by Clara Bonine See pp. 55-62

³ *Michigan History*, December, 1960, "Free Negroes in Cass County Before the Civil War:" pp 275-383, and printed under the auspices of the Michigan Historical Commission. This article is a revision of a paper given by Dr. Fields at the annual meeting of the Historical Society of Michigan in East Lansing in 1958. In 1960 *Michigan History* magazine was a scholarly publication - far removed from the periodical of the same name that we know today. (2008)

⁴ Dr. Fields notes are housed at the Local History Library of the Cass District Library in Cassopolis.

teachers' opinion too. The author recalls his aunt (1861-1958) telling him that her father, Israel P. Hutton, brought the first "Negro" to Pokagon Township to live with them as a maid. Mr. Hutton was born a Quaker in Pennsylvania, but became a Free Will Baptist later in life. In other words, slave, Negro, black and fugitive were once synonymous in the author's Vocabulary. He is sure there are many others who believed (believe) the same thing.

Aside from the important Calvin Settlement covered precisely by Dr Fields, he also mentions, in a single sentence, an area known as Ramptown. He wrote: "*One settlement of fugitives, known as "Ramptown" was located a mile or so south of Bonine Corners, in Penn Township, some survivors of which are known to persons still living.*" The author's only citation for this one sentence reads: "Statement of Edgar Probst, Judge of Probate, Cass County, to the writer, September, 1958." Did Judge Probst mean simply "Black" rather than "fugitive?" (Dr. Fields' father, George M. and mother, Mabel, were both Probate Judges in Cass County.) This single statement by Judge Probst appears to be the only "proof" of a "fugitive settlement" in Penn Township and Dr. Fields did not elaborate.

There was a place called Ramptown located in Penn Township, but it was highly unlikely that it was a "fugitive settlement" using today's parlance. The authors believe an area of Penn Township about one-half mile to one mile south of the present M-60 adjacent to Calvin Center Road mostly or entirely on the property once belonging to James E. Bonine was the site of Ramptown.⁵ The buildings, purported to be log cabins, housed 14 - 19 families according to the 1860 U.S. Census and were occupied sometime soon after the gathering of the 1850 U.S. Census.⁶ We don't know if the structures were all built at one time. During the 1850s and part of the 1860s these buildings housed mostly African-American farm workers and their families. Beginning probably about 1867 the area was inhabited by white, railroad construction workers working to construct the Michigan Air Line Railroad that ran east and west between Niles and Jackson. The railroad right of way probably ran directly through or closely adjacent to Ramptown.⁷ The Ramptown community and its structures were possibly a victim of the Michigan Airline Railroad right-of-way. This phenomenon is clearly apparent by perusing the Federal Census of 1870. The 1870 census figures do not clearly pinpoint where the Black community of Ramptown was located ten years earlier,

⁵ The name probably derives from the plant more commonly called wild garlic or leek. One of its characteristics is that it flavors the milk of cows as well as breast-fed mothers' milk. Wild leek, and garlic and/or wild onion is indigenous to the area of Ramptown as it is throughout the whole of Southwestern Michigan. There were/are wetlands in the general area of Ramptown.

⁶ The 1854 census of Michigan recorded only 47 "Colored Persons" living in Penn township. See: *Census and Statistics of the State of Michigan, May 1854*, p. 67. The Federal Census of 1850 lists 28 African-Americans. Although we cannot know the location of the individuals listed in the Michigan 1854 Census, the federal census of 1850 clearly shows the African-Americans are spread throughout the population. It is possible that up to five additional residents in the 1860 census might have been part of Ramptown, but that cannot be confirmed and therefore mostly ignored in this study.

⁷ Following the end of the Civil War in 1865 the price of farm products fell steeply and many good farmers were forced to sell their property or face bankruptcy. Southwestern Michigan was severely hit and this brought about the founding of the Grange movement which boasted many chapters in Cass County. The Grange, the largest of many such activist farmer associations, became instrumental in lobbying Congress on behalf of the farmer.

only a possible residual containing at most four African-American families. There are no other signs of a Black community in Penn Township appearing in the 1870 U.S. Census.

The authors located only two references to "Ramptown" in print. Other than Judge Probst, Ramptown is named in the obituary of Andrew W. Jones that appears in the *Cassopolis [MI] Vigilant* of October 31, 1929: "He [Jones] was born in Penn Township, in a settlement known as Ramptown, the second of seven children. Here he spent his childhood." The obituary gives his parents as Nathan B. and Charity Morgan Jones and Andrew's birth date as "November 8, 1849." According to four separate census records Andrew was not born until 1852 or 1853, probably the former.⁸ Indeed, Andrew's father and mother Nathan and Charity Jones *might* have been fugitives at the time when they were living in Ramptown during the 1850s and 1860s. Nathan's obituary appeared in the *Cassopolis Vigilant* of January 11, 1923.⁹ Nathan claimed to be 109 years old and had lived in Michigan for 73 years (1849). He, his wife and daughter, (unnamed, but it was Sarah according to the 1850 census and she disappeared from the 1860 census) "[crossed] the Ohio River in a skiff and being conducted to Cass County by the famous Quaker 'underground' railway which spirited so many slaves away from their owners."

It now depends upon whether the reader believes Jones' story. His obituary is full of contradictions. The obituary stated he was born in Tennessee and sold to a "Kentucky planter." The state of Tennessee was never before mentioned in the various U.S census reports between 1850 and 1920, Nathan is listed once as being born in Kentucky, three times in North Carolina and twice in the "United States." (The 1900 census taker had mentioned (unofficially) that Nathan and Charity been "born in slavery" but this information was blocked out because it was not pertinent, and replaced by "U.S." Between 1900 and 1910, Nathan "added" ten years to his life. Whereas in the 1900 census he is aged "75", he became "95" in 1910 and "106" in 1920. In fact, according to several census takers, Nathan was very close to a century old when he died in December, 1922. In 1850 the Jones family lived in Porter Township; in 1860, Ramptown; in 1870 Calvin and in 1880, Newburg until his wife, Charity, died in 1903 and Nathan went into the County Infirmary.

In many ways Charity's story is as confusing as Nathan's. The Cass County

⁸ The U.S. Census of Porter Twp., Cass Co. Michigan dated 29 July, 1850, lists Nathan and Charity Jones and 5 year old daughter, Sarah M. They are living in structure #372 with Edward and Elva Williams - there is no record of a son, Andrew. In the 1860 U.S. Census of Penn Twp., Nathan, Charity and five children are located in structure #500, SQUARELY in the middle of **Ramptown** and son, Andrew is listed as aged 8(eight) - born 1852. In the 1870 U.S. Census of Calvin Twp. the Nathan Jones family is living in structure #50 with five children including Andrew, aged 18(eighteen) - born 1852. The 1880 U.S. Census of Penn Twp. Andrew is living with his first wife, Chloe, and his age is listed as 27(twenty-seven) - born 1853. (Dates are sometimes garbled as a result of the census taker asking how old you are today OR how old you will be this year.) The Jones couple were living alone in structure 243 adjacent to James B. Bonine. Furthermore, in 1849 in the alleged escape from slavery by father, mother and sister does not mention Andrew - only a "daughter," Sarah.

⁹ An obituary also appeared in the *Edwardsburg Argus*, January 11, 1923 which gives little additional information except that Nathan was buried in Chain Lakes Cemetery.

Death Record records her demise as November 28, 1903.¹⁰ She was listed as born in Kentucky, [age] "near 90", [Birth year] not known - Born slave." She died in Newburg Township of "paralysis" The name of Charity's mother is "Not Known", but her father was listed as a "Mr. Hampton." On the other hand, Charity was listed in all but one census as being born in Kentucky, Furthermore, the census reports show she was nearly the same age as Nathan which would be between 70 and 80 at the time of her death. In fact, the surviving family or its representative appears to have known virtually nothing about the parents life and "born slave" and *being* a slave when the Jones came to Michigan before 1850 is problematical. Could "Mr. Hampton," supposedly Charity's father, been her slave owner who freed his daughter and her husband before they left Kentucky? Under any circumstance the Jones Family apparently never left Cass County once they came here. They certainly did not go on to Canada.

According "to an interview by researcher, Sondra Mose-Urserly of Mrs. Margaret Adams, a local resident and descendant of a Ramptown resident, provided genealogical information about her family, the Gibsons, who settled at Ramptown. Adams offered photographs of her great-aunt, Mellisa (Gibson) Brown, rumored to have been the last child born at the Ramptown settlement."¹¹ Indeed, Marquis Gibson, and his family were occupying one of the 14 Ramptown structures of the 1860 census in Penn Township. His daughter, [geat-aunt] Mellisa, is precisely listed as being two years old. This agrees with Ms. Mose-Urserly's research.

Listed in the 1860 Federal Census are 14 occupied structures in Penn Township that can be singled out as Ramptown. These residences were not located on deeded parcels or acreage. Eight of them appear to be adjacent. The other structures are located "close-by." No value has been placed on the real estate on which the houses were situated, but the inhabitants were assessed for personal property. The names of the persons residing in these structures were: two Conner families, two Hays families, two Ridgely(?) families, Bindure(?), Tyler, Allen, Gibson, Jenks, Gilbert and Howard. Members of these families were listed as being Black or Mulatto.¹² One White family, headed by Erwin Allen, also appears in the official records. The Nathan Jones family, now including Andrew (listed as "A.W."), is clearly enumerated as occupying one of these structures. In all, 76 individuals are living in this "complex." as of June, 1860. In Schedule 4 of the 1860 Federal Census, *Production of Agriculture*, none of the aforementioned "heads of household" were listed as producers of agricultural products. It seems the occupants of these buildings were African-American farm workers. These laborers were probably working for wages for Mr. Bonine himself and/or adjacent farmers. Of the 14 "Heads of Household," in Ramptown 11 of them averaged only 27 years of age, a prime age for hard physical labor and later military service. Of the remaining three, Reuben Howard was aged 50. Samuel Hays, or Hayes, was aged 68. William Conner, father of William Frank Conner, was also a "head of household" in the Ramptown settlement.

¹⁰ Cass County Death Records Liber B, p.13.

¹¹ *Ramptown Project*, WMU 2005, p.14

¹² Whether an individual was listed as a "Black, White, Mulatto or Negro" was determined, not by the census taker, but the individual answering the census questions. There is the strong probability the census taker did not personally know the family being questioned.

The 1860 Census asks the question in column thirteen: "Persons over 20 years of age who cannot read or write." As can be expected the older men were illiterate, William Conner, Nathan Jones (not marked as such in 1860, but listed so in 1850 & 1870) and Reuben Howard. The younger men, Lewis B—(?), Himebrick Tyler, Frank Conner, Jesse Ridgely were listed as literate. That education would have only occurred in the North. Most of the women were illiterate, but that was traditional in those days in the White community too.

If Ramptown was located on the James E. Bonine property the owner would have been utterly foolish to house a group of perhaps 60 or more fugitives in plain sight for the world to observe every day. The name of James E. Bonine, owner of the property, never clearly appears in any of the stories and myths that have arisen regarding the transportation, housing or employment of fugitives, but he doubtless stood behind the scenes and was instrumental in furthering the flight of fugitive slaves to freedom and Canada. Mr Bonine was a canny businessman was a stockholder and on the director for many years of Asa Kingsbury's very successful Cassopolis Bank. Bonine raised prime livestock and his home was valued at \$48,000 according to the 1860 census. His personal property was valued at an additional \$3,800. The Young's Prairie Anti-Slavery Friends Meeting house was located on his property.¹³ Bonine was married to Sarah, a daughter of Stephen Bogue, another radical anti-slavery activist. James' father, Issac, as well as other family members, were strong abolitionists. James E. Bonine spearheaded the construction of the Quaker Church in Vandalia after the Civil War. Mr. Bonine moved to Niles later in life and died there in the home of his daughter in 1897.

The Ramptown farm workers probably harvested much of the "Indian corn" grown in Penn Township. In those days the harvesting and shelling of this product was highly labor intensive. In 1859, James E. Bonine produced 5,000 bushels of corn while his close neighbors, Issac James and William Jones, raised an additional 8,000 bushels. These three producers accounted for the bulk of the Indian corn raised in Penn Township. Bonine further raised 590 sheep that needed tending and marsh(?) hay while Mr. James had 300 sheep and William Jones another 565 head.¹⁴ The shearing of sheep using rude hand-clippers was a time consuming and arduous task. There was plenty of work to go around. It should be pointed out that a vast array of labor- saving farm machinery came onto the market between 1850 and 1870 perhaps making the existence of Ramptown as a farm labor camp obsolete. Some researchers maintain that the African-Americans cut timber and cleared the land in the area which is highly probable.

It is likely that the community shrunk in size following Lincoln's action of 1863 when African-American soldiers were allowed to join the Union Army. Sgt. [William] Frank Conner and Marquis Gibson and several other young Ramptown men enlisted from Penn Township in the 102nd USCI. Himebrick Tyler, also located in Ramptown in

¹³ *Glover*, p. 385-386. "Log building in the grove on the farm of the late James E. Bonine in Penn Township, and known as the Elk Park." This was the only anti-slavery Meeting located in Michigan and was probably directly responsible for the Underground Railroad movement in Cass County.

¹⁴ *Schedule 4. 1860 U.S. Census, Production of Agriculture for Penn Township, Michigan.* (Available on microfilm at the Niles, Michigan District Library.)

1860, was a sergeant in the 102nd according to the Veterans' Census of 1890. Several Cass County African-Americans also fought with the renowned 54th and 55th Massachusetts regiments. The African-Americans serving in the Union Army regiments from Cass County numbered no less than 100 men, a disproportionately high number of soldiers compared to their White counterparts.¹⁵

It is possible that Nathan Jones, Andrew's father, accumulated enough money while working as a farm laborer to buy the farm in Calvin Township where he and his family appear in the 1870 U.S. Census.¹⁶ Likewise, Reuben Howard and family owned a farm valued at \$2500 located in Cheshire Township of Allegan County, Michigan according to the 1870 U.S. Census. H[imebrick] Tyler, Willam Conner and his son William Frank migrated to what became the Covert Settlement in Van Buren County following the Civil War according to Anna-Lisa Cox.¹⁷ Examination of the Federal Censuses of 1870 for Deerfield, later Covert Township, and 1880 census of Covert Township show no African-Americans whatsoever were born in "Canada." Had any gone to Canada their children would have been so designated in the census.

During the 1930s A.F. Woods discussed Ramptown with Mrs. (Gibson) Brown and determined that it was located on the Calvin Center Road about one-half mile south of the present M-60.¹⁸ Woods' noticed that household and "farm" "artifacts" had been found in the area and there is no reason to question Mr. Woods observations except that there is no proof these "artifacts" had been the property of African-Americans anymore than the temporary White settlers who were building the Michigan Air Line Railroad that so closely followed the War of the Rebellion.¹⁹

The Federal Census was taken of the area in September, 1870. The African-American residents were gone from the Ramptown area with the exception of William Hayes, the son of Samuel Hayes, who was living in structure #56 with his wife and children; and it is unclear whether he lived in the same house as listed in 1860.²⁰ In 1880, as in 1870, there were comparatively few African-Americans living in Penn

¹⁵ Matthews, pp 138-139.

¹⁶ Wilson, Benjamin, *Rural Black Heritage between Chicago and Detroit*, Kalamazoo 1985. P. 47. "Between the 1850s and 1870s, many Blacks arrived in this section in poor circumstances. Frequently they started their economic lives working for their Quaker godfathers until a set amount of money was accumulated. Then they usually purchased acreage, thereby becoming somewhat independent."

¹⁷ *A Stronger Kinship* New York 2006.

¹⁸ *Ramptown Project*, WMU 2005, p. 15.

¹⁹ Back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Grafton regularly purchased artifacts from the Calvin Center area from Eddie Harden, a close African-American friend of the Cook family since the early 1940s. Eddie told Grafton that these artifacts had come from the homes of White people who gave them to their Black employees. They were called "Tote-ins" according to Eddie. Grafton can remember two items of particular rarity, a huge Chinese Export porcelain platter and an exquisite hobnail, multi-colored lamp base. Grafton traded many of these antiques for various, firearms, swords and coins to Mr. & Mrs Andrew Ness, high quality antique dealers in White Pigeon.

²⁰ Other than William Hays, there is a possibility that dwellings #57 (Henry W. Williams), #58 (Rachel Outtand) and #59 (Henry Shepard) are living in what remains of Ramptown. All the occupants are recorded as Black or Mulatto. Those on either side of these dwellings are listed as White.

Township and none located into what could be called a "community."

The question of a "fugitive settlement" located in the open landscape of Penn Township during the 1850s is implausible. There are many sound reasons for this statement. Foremost, the *Fugitive Slave Law of 1850* was passed by the U.S. Congress in September 1850 as part of the *Compromise of 1850*.²¹ This inflexible and bitter piece of legislation took the matter of fugitive slaves out of the jurisdiction of local and state officials and put it squarely in the hands of "Judges of the Circuit and District Courts of the United States." This also included U.S. territories. Federal Marshals were appointed to enforce this new legislation and "should such a fugitive escape, whether with or without the assent of such marshal... such marshal shall be liable, on his official bond to be prosecuted for the benefit of such claimant [the slave owner] for the full value of the service or labor of said fugitive... In no trial or hearing under this act shall the testimony of such alleged fugitive be admitted in evidence."²²

According to historian, Howard S. Rogers: *At the time* [following the Kentucky Raid in late 1847] *there were only fifty-two (52) Abolitionist voters in Cass County, but the difference in the enumeration of the Whig and Democratic parties was so slight that they (The Abolitionists) held the balance of power, and were respected accordingly.*²³

In a General Election held on November 5, 1850 the citizens of Michigan were asked to elect state officials, vote on the new State constitution as well as equal suffrage for "Colored People". While the new constitution easily passed, the outcome of the Black suffrage issue reflected the sentiments of Cass County voters. Of the 1385 votes cast only 183 approved of African-American Suffrage - 13 percent - while 1199 voted against the measure. Of that vote the largest disapproval rate came from LaGrange Township - 11 voters approved - 179 did not approve. That township included the village of Cassopolis. Calvin was the only township that ratified the voting issue - 48 approved while 32 disapproved. Other voting results beginning in 1840 where African-American questions were at stake reflect a widespread current of local animosity and intolerance.²⁴

For the escaped fugitive, residing in an open community in the ante-bellum days of the 1850s would have been a sure way to be returned to bondage. To repeat, *many* citizens of Cassopolis and vicinity were not happy to have an African-Americans community nearby. The extant copies of the *National Democrat* newspaper printed in Cassopolis during the 1850s make this fact abundantly apparent through its editorials.²⁵

²¹ Text available on website: <http://afroamhistory.about.com>_

²² A close reading of this document reveals that every detail and interpretation of the Slave Law of 1793 that allowed the Cass Court to free the fugitives to escape to Canada following the Kentucky Raid of 1847 was closed. It seems apparent that the 1850 Slave Law used the experiences learned following the Raid as the basis of the repressive new law.

²³ Rogers p. 140

²⁴ The 1850 vote does not quite tally because there were several spoiled ballots.

²⁵ Surveying copies can be found on microfilm at the Local History Library of the Cass District Library in Cassopolis.

The residents of Cass County were as intolerant of African-Americans as other members of the White community in the so-called "Free States." Anna-Lisa Cox mentions at length in several places in her book the prejudice African-Americans suffered at the hands of their White neighbors. It would have been a simple matter to alert the Federal Marshals to the existence of a "fugitive" population in Ramptown, had it existed. In the nineteenth century many Americans looked upon the African-American, as many Americans look upon the Muslim population in today's twenty-first century society, persons to hate and fear. It would be difficult to explain why a White rural population who less than twenty years earlier had driven the Red man from his land would now accept a Black man in his place.

The most convincing evidence for the non-existence of a "fugitive settlement" is *Section VII* of the 1850 Slave Law itself that reads verbatim:

And be it further enacted, That any person who shall knowingly and willingly obstruct, hinder, or prevent such claimant, his agent or attorney, or any person or persons lawfully assisting him, her, or them from arresting such a fugitive from service or labor, either with or without process as aforesaid or shall rescue, or attempt to rescue, such fugitive from service or labor, form the custody of such claimant, his or her agent or attorney, or other person or persons lawfully assisting as aforesaid, when so arrested, pursuant to the authority herein given and declared; or shall aid, abet, or assist such person so owing service or labor as aforesaid, directly or indirectly, to escape from such claimant, his agent or attorney, or other person or persons legally authorized as aforesaid; or shall harbor or conceal such fugitive, so as to prevent the discovery and arrest of such person, after notice or knowledge of the fact that such person was a fugitive from service or labor as aforesaid, shall for either of said offences, be subject to a fine not exceeding one thousand dollars, and imprisonment not exceeding six months, by indictment and conviction before the District Court of the United States for the district in which such offence may have been committed, or before the proper court of criminal jurisdiction, if committed within any one of the organized Territories of the United States; and shall moreover forfeit and pay, by way of civil damages to the party injured by such illegal conduct, the sum of one thousand dollars for each fugitive so long as aforesaid, to be recovered by action of debt, in any of the District or Territorial Courts aforesaid, within whose jurisdiction the said offence may have been committed.

The Slave Law of 1850 was highly successful in crippling the movement of fugitives northward as attested in the *Introduction to the 1860 U.S. Census*.²⁶ The authors would remind the reader that the foregoing statement is the official and supposedly unvarnished word, verbatim, of the United States government in Washington, D.C. Mr. Kennedy, the top census officer holder, was from Pennsylvania, who was re-appointed by the Lincoln administration and hardly a supporter of slavery. He was Superintendent of both the 1850 and 1860 Censuses. Kennedy was a traditional old time Whig who, like most others of that party, ultimately became

²⁶ *Population of the United States in 1860* compiled by Joseph G. Kennedy, Superintendent of the Census. Washington: 1864 p. XVI.

Republicans or were at least politically acceptable to that party.

From the tables annexed, it appears that while 1,011 slaves escaped from their masters in 1850, or one in each 3,165 held in bondage, (about 1/30 of one percent,) during the census year ending June 1, 1860. Out of 3,949,557 slaves only 803 escaped, being one to about 5,000, or at the rate of 1/50 of one percent. Small and inconsiderable as this number appears, it is not pretended that all missing in the border states, much less any considerable number escaping from their owners in the more southern regions, escaped into the free States; and when we consider that, in the border States, not 500 escaped out of more than 1,000,000 slaves in 1860, while near 600 escaped in 1850 out of 910,000, and that at the two periods near 800 are reported to have escaped from the more southern slaveholding States, the fact becomes evident that the escape of this class of persons, while rapidly decreasing in ratio in the border slave States, occurs independent of proximity to a free population, being in the nature of things, incident to the relation of master and slave.

It will scarcely be alleged that these returns are not reliable, being, as they are, made by persons directly interested, who would be no more likely to err in the number lost [the slave owners] than in those retained.

If a Ramptown of "fugitives" had existed in the 1840s why didn't the Kentucky slavers responsible for the raid, attack those people instead of the ones they took at the Osborn and East Settlements? According to Rogers, "*They were provided with complete maps of the roads and descriptions of the houses where their chattels were to be found...*"²⁷ The slavers would have unquestionably known of a slave populated Ramptown because they had previously sent a spy named Carpenter to specifically locate fugitives in the area prior to their expensive trip to Michigan.²⁸ (It should be noted that the trial of the slavers was conducted first under the Slave Act of 1793 that superceded the 1850 Slave Law.)

A Ramptown for Free Blacks, yes; a Ramptown for fugitive slaves, no! Bonine

²⁷ Rogers, p.137.

²⁸ An argument is sometimes made that the African-Americans in Cass County avoided the census takers. While the authors can document only one African-American who dodged the census, Henry Shepard, there appears little indication that the free African-Americans had any compunction about answering the questions asked by the census taker. (Shepard is credited with being a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad and enlisted from Cass County in the 102nd Regiment from Penn Township at the age of 46.) The 1850, 1860 and 1870 Censuses appears to include every citizen of the county although there were doubtless fugitive slaves living in the area temporarily who weren't counted, according to two county histories, somewhere between 45 and 100 individuals in 1847. Furthermore, slave hunters would have been hard pressed to examine contemporary census records. There were no photographs. The records were closed to informal inspection (as they are today) and no slave would have probably given his correct name anyway. That the census takers were in collusion with those protecting fugitives is absurd. County officials would have picked up apparent "cover-ups" in short order and the census taker would have lost his job for certain, and possibly been fined or gone to jail for malfeasance of his office, a federal crime. Furthermore, the job of Census taker was a political "plum." A good way to announce you were a fugitive is to not answer the Census taker's questions!

was too intelligent to get involved in a clear-cut violation of the Federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and risk the loss of his considerable fortune. Furthermore, there would have been no "winner" in such a confrontation - the fugitive would be returned to his master and Mr. Bonine would have forfeited his worldly possessions and reputation. And without question, that is exactly what would have happened.

In the late 1840s and early 1850s the horrors of slavery was not an issue of paramount importance to most Americans. It took Harriet Beecher Stowe's, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to foment the ire of the average Northern citizen. Following its release in book form in 1852, it sold 300,000 copies in the first year and ultimately three million copies. Southern slave owners and sympathizers unsuccessfully challenged the book as "criminal prostitution" and "high functions of the imagination."²⁹ The damage, however, was done. The industrialized North went to war with the agricultural South; two radically different societies, in reality two separate nations, connected by the umbilical cord of a common Constitution.³⁰ This dire event had long been predicted by the Democratic Party if slavery was rapidly abolished in the South with no compensation offered to the slave owner for his property. Many slaves were sent back to Africa and now form the nation of Liberia. This answer to the slavery question was initially supported by Lincoln himself during the 1840s.

Yet, in the beginning, the Civil War, as seen through the eyes of most American citizens in the North, as well as our immortal war president, Abraham Lincoln, as late as August, 1862, was not primarily about slavery. At that time Lincoln wrote the following in a letter to Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*: "*My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.*" Lincoln had already written the *Emancipation Proclamation* but did not release it until after the inconclusive Union victory at Antietam Creek near

²⁹ *The Annals of America, volume 8, 1850-1857, A House Dividing*. P.200. Published by the Encyclopedia Britannica, 1976.

³⁰ On at least three occasions locally, Whites came to the rescue of African-Americans in South Bend, Marshall and Cassopolis, Michigan. These were confrontations between Kentuckian slave owners and local residents protesting the return of fugitives to subjugation. Although the locals consisted of many Free Blacks and Quakers there were doubtless many others also involved. It is fair to assume that these interested citizens were not necessarily Abolitionists, but simply men and women who resented the intrusion of "foreigners" in their communities and were protesting the rights of anybody to forcibly remove their fellow human beings, Black or White. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mrs. Stowe describes Kentuckians as she perceives them: "Great, tall, raw-boned Kentuckians, attired in hunting-shirts and trailing their loose joints over a vast extent of territory, with the easy lounge peculiar to their race." She might have added that they spoke in a Southern dialect sometimes not intelligible to residents of Northern Indiana and Southern Michigan. Kentuckians had no more standing locally than they did in Mrs. Stowe's New England. They were unwelcome, hostile and heavily armed interlopers. That did not stop the authorities from fining White men who protected slaves as happened in the VanZangt case in Ohio and the Kentucky Raid in Cass County. There were certainly others.

Sharpsburg, Maryland in September, 1862. In fact, this epic annunciation freed only the slaves living in the States then in direct rebellion against the Federal government in Washington and left the status quo of slavery in the four border states of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware, who remained in the Union throughout the war. (And later in the war, Trans-Allegheny Virginia (West Virginia) was formed.) The conflict that began as a matter of saving the Union later became a war to end slavery in America, much to the consternation of many Northerners. The New York City riots of 1863 directed against the draft and resulted in the slaughter of many local African-Americans is a case in point. Slavery in the South was later replaced by Jim Crow laws, the Ku-Klux-Klan and general suppression of the Black population that took America another century to undo and were equally destructive to well being of the African-American citizenry as legalized slavery.

In conclusion: the authors believe that Ramptown was simply an agricultural labor camp / tenant farmer housing (area) located in Penn Township for Black farm workers and later occupied by White railroad personnel and their families. It was first populated by free Black Americans and *never* a community of fugitives, who might have remained with their brothers for a limited length of time. Nothing indicates that White Americans did not reside in Ramptown for as long a period as African-Americans. Perhaps much of the community was destroyed by the Michigan Airline Railroad during the late 1860s. Ramptown is a significant historical site in the rich saga of Cass County African-American history, but it was not inhabited by runaway (fugitive) slaves, but Free Blacks. Had it been a "fugitive community" its unique story would have been preserved along with the Underground Railroad and the well-documented Kentucky Raid. Ramptown does not have the legitimacy of other extinct communities such as Geneva, Charleston, Little Prairie Ronde, and Shakespeare that simply disappeared, but are carefully recorded in the annals of local history. To many, Ramptown has become a "preconceived concept" of the African-American experience instead of a specific "place" whose identity was lost because of its initial unimportance. Numerous fugitive settlements throughout Penn, Calvin, and Porter townships is totally at odds with all the historical accounts. From the early days The African-American communities have had proper titles, The Osborn Settlement, located near Shavehead Lake, The Saunders Settlement, located in Porter/Calvin Townships and the largest, the Calvin Settlement located in Calvin Township. Ramptown located in Penn Township lasted less than two decades.

STORIES OR MYTHS OF RAMPTOWN -

about one-half to one mile south of present day M-60 and west of Calvin Center Road

The following two articles about Ramptown were both published by local newspapers in the late 1930s, long after the demise of an African American tenant farmer community in Penn Township and are excellent examples using unsubstantiated oral history to perpetuate the myth that Ramptown was a community established for fugitive slaves. Fact and fiction are randomly intermixed and since their appearance in print have been repeated and further embellished over the next seventy years. Census records, deeds, court proceedings, and tax records are the best primary sources to use to validate oral history of this nature.

This verbatim article appeared in *Benton Harbor News-Palladium* on January 1, 1937:

"James E. Bonine cleared a tract of land on his farm in a small colony plan. He offered settlers the use of ten A. [acre] tracts for five years if they would fell the trees to build their cabins and clear their small fields. Many people took advantage of the offer and a settlement with a church, schools and homes grew up in the woods. This was called Ramptown from the wild leeks or "ramps" which grew abundantly in the woods and were a staple article of diet until other crops were grown.¹ Aunt Mellisa Brown is the last living person who was born in Ramptown, a cluster of of some 100 Negro cabins erected on the present Elwood Bonine farm for fugitive slaves.² From 'many Slave Found Safety in this region'(sic)."

This verbatim article appeared in the *South Bend Tribune* of March 15, 1938:

"One of the queer settlements of fugitive slaves was called 'Ramptown' and was a cluster of some 100 Negro cabins on the land now in the big 'Bonine farm.' 'Aunt Mellisa Brown', now aged 80 years, was born there.³ The parents of Aunt Mellisa arrived as fugitives from the Carolina(sic) to the Ramptown settlement.⁴ The cabins were torn down some half century ago from Bonine Farm near Vandalia, Rich in slave lore of Slave period before the Civil War, for sale."(sic)⁵

¹ There must have been a great deal of Bad Breath in those early years! That is to say nothing of the torn-up digestive tracts those African-Americans experienced as they were forced to eat leeks as a "staple." How did newborn babies who were breast fed fare as leeks would flavor their mother's milk.

² One hundred cabins at ten acres per cabin equals 1,000 acres! In fact, James E. Bonine owned only 990 acres in 1860. Bonine, according to the *Production of Agriculture census of 1860*, possessed 670 acres of "improved" land while 320 acres were "unimproved." Not only is nothing remotely similar to the community described as Ramptown in the 1860 [1856] and 1872 Atlases of Cass County, but, with the exception of two schoolhouses, there are no churches, cluster of houses, etc. pictured in the Ramptown area. There are, in both atlases, pictured the location of every occupied structure that was somebody's home. Furthermore, the authors can't but believe that the Quakers as well as the African-Americans would have found such an arrangement "defacto slavery" in itself. At the end of five years, Bonine would have had his land cleared, but the African-Americans would have nothing to show for five years of hard labor. African Americans wanted to purchase land and become independent farmers and members of a community. Where did the money come from the African Americas used to purchase land if not from wages paid by the Bonines and others who employed them.

³ "Aunt Mellisa Brown" was born in Ramptown, and probably was the only person still alive that was born there.

⁴ Were the parents "Fugitive slaves" or Free African-Americans who arrived here after being freed in North Carolina ?

⁵ The tear down date would be about 1880. By that time a White population had long since replaced the earlier Black population, if indeed the site of Ramptown had not been previously destroyed.