Free Negroes in Cass County Before the Civil War

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CASS COUNTY WAS THIRTY-FIVE YEARS OLD when the Civil War began, its first pioneer having arrived late in 1825.[1] Adjoining Indiana, and situated in the valley of the St. Joseph River, it had been one of the first counties in southwestern Michigan to be opened to extensive settlement. Its chief lines of communication were with Fort Wayne to the southeast and, after the opening of the Chicago Road in '829, with Detroit to the east.[2]

Within five years after the initial settlement, nearly a thousand people had come to establish homes,[3] and five thousand more had arrived by 1840.[4] In 1850—the year taken as the basis of this study—the population had nearly doubled,[5] and on the eve of the war it had mounted to almost eighteen thousand persons.[6] Although there were several villages in the county housing some industry, the main interest of its inhabitants lay in the field of agriculture.

From the very beginning, groups with common backgrounds and interests tended to cluster together, which often lent a distinct and characteristic flavor to certain neighborhoods. A large Quaker settlement, for example, at an early date, had taken form on Young's Prairie, which lay a little to the east of the county's geographical center. There, in section one of Calvin Township, they had built

[1]Howard S. Rogers, *History of Cass County, from 1825 to 1875*, 113 (Cassopolis, 1875); Alfred Mathews, *History of Cass County, Michigan*, 58-59 (Chicago, 1882); L. H. Glover, *A Twentieth Century History of Cass County, Michigan*, 41-43 (Chicago, 1906).

[2]George Newman Fuller, *Economic and Social Beginnings of Michigan; A Study of the Settlement of the Lower Peninsula During the Territorial Period, 1805-1837*, 256-57 (Lansing, 1916).

[3]Fifth Census of the United States (1830), Michigan, volume 1, in the National Archives, Washington, D. C.

[4]Sixth Census of the United States (1840), Michigan, volume 1, in the National Archives, Washington, D. C.

[5]Seventh Census of the United States (1850), Michigan, volume 2, in the National Archives, Washington, D. C.

[6]Eighth Census of the United States (1860), Michigan, volume 4, in the National Archives, Washington, D. C.

their church—the Birch Lake Monthly Meeting House—which may well be regarded as the social and cultural center of the Quaker community. Many of them had come from similar settlements in Ohio, such as those in Logan County and Preble County, and before that from long-established homes in the Carolinas, which they had left because of their strong repugnance for the blighting effects of the institution of slavery.[7]

It is within a few miles of the Birch Lake Meeting House that we find the core of the earliest Negro settlements in Cass County, although there is no indication that they were, themselves, Quakers. It cannot be established with certainty when the first of these people arrived within the bounds of the county, but the early census records show that they were not numerous before 1845. In 1830, for instance, only one inhabitant out of 919 was specifically described as a "free colored person."[8] Seven years later, in the first census taken by the state of Michigan, no one at all was so classified,[9] while in 1840 there were only eight. Four of these were males, four females; six of them were between twenty-four and thirty-six years of age, the others between ten and twenty-four. Since they were widely scattered in four townships, it would seem that they were working as hired help in white families.[10]

In 1845 the state of Michigan took its second census, and the reported results lead to some confusion in this matter. The published statistical tables show that seventy one nonwhites were then living in the county.[11] It is known, however, that some of these were Potawatami Indians living in Silver Creek Township, some twenty miles from the Birch Lake Meeting House. There had been twenty

[7]Mathews, *History of Cass County*, 243, 380.

[8]"Abstract of the Returns of the Fifth Census . . .," *Executive Document* 263:42 (22 Congress, 1 session, *Executive Documents, printed by order of the House of Representatives at the First Session of the 22 Congress begun and held at the City of Washington, December 7, 1831, in the 56 year of the Independence of the United States*, volume 6) (Washington, D. C., 1832).

[9]*Manual of the Legislature of the State of Michigan, 1839*, 74 (Detroit, 1839).

[10]United States Census Office, *Compendium of the . . . Sixth Census . . . (1840)*, 94 (Washington, D. C., 1841).

[11]*Manual Containing the Rules of the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Michigan, and Joint Rules of the Two Houses and Other Matters, 1849*, 100 (Detroit, 1849).

four of them in 1837,[12] at least twelve in 1840,[13] and about thirteen in 1850,[14] and it seems safe to assume that in 1845 there were approximately fifty persons of Negro ancestry in the county.[15]

Not more than three of these can be accounted for by name, however. One was a fugitive slave by the name of Lawson, who is said to have been brought in as early as 1836 by a Quaker preacher named Henry H. Wray, and who remained several years.[16] He may have been that Howell Lawson, age thirty, born in North Carolina, who was enumerated in the Federal census of 1850, and then disappeared from the record. He had no apparent connection with a family of Lawsons which arrived from North Carolina by way of Indiana in 1853.[17] Jesse Scott, a Guinea Negro, is said to have arrived in 1838. He, too, was a fugitive slave, and remained for some years, raising tobacco on a farm later owned by Andrew Hostler.[18] Although two families by the name of Scott had settled by 1850, however, neither seems to have included a man named Jesse.

The third colored pioneer listed was Willi.. Brown, and he is said to have been "among the first" to arrive.[19] This seems to be substantiated by his inclusion in the list of taxpayers in Calvin Township in 1846 and subsequently, and also in the census of 1850.

Fortunately for our purposes, the period between 1845 and 1850 is the one in which records begin to be more profuse. For the first time, the census of 1850 includes the name of each member of every family listed, together with age, sex, occupation (if any), value of real estate owned, and state of birth. A few other items often appear, also, such as an indication of which children in the family had attended school within the previous twelve months. In previous censuses we have only the name of the head of the family in each case, other members being counted in age-groups. Furthermore,

[12] *Manual of the Legislature of the State of Michigan*, 1839, 74.
[13] Sixth Census of the United States (1840), Michigan, volume 1.
[14] Seventh Census of the United States (1850), Michigan, volume 2.
[15] Mathews, *History of Cass County*, 110, estimates the Negro population of the county at fifty in 1847.
[16] Mathews, *History of Cass County*, 386.
[17] Glover, *A Twentieth Century History of Cass County*, 291. Statement of William Lawson, grandson of the immigrant of 1853, made in 1947.
[18] Mathews, *History of Cass County*, 386.
[19] Mathews, *History of Cass County*, 386.

we have the tax assessment rolls for 1846 and successive years, which have been preserved in the county treasurer's office, and various vital statistics in the county clerk's office, as well as records of estates administered in the probate court.

If, in 1845, as stated above, some fifty free colored persons were living in Cass County, the rapid growth of the colony must have begun about that time, since, in 1850, 389 residents were so classified. This number constitutes about 15 per cent of the colored population of the entire state. Cass County, indeed, outranked every county in Michigan except Wayne, where 724 were living.

Three-quarters of those in Cass County in that year were concentrated within a few miles of the Birch Lake Meeting House, although their homes were scattered in three townships, as follows: thirty families in Calvin Township, including 158 persons; twenty-one families in Porter Township, including 105 persons; five families in Penn Township, including 31 persons. It is this rather compact community of fifty-six families that was examined in an effort to determine its origins and the time of settlement within the county, together with something of its economic status at the time of settlement. The ninety-five other inhabitants, in 1850, were scattered over several other townships, and seem to have had only minor connections with this group.

The present writer was long of the opinion that many, if not most, of these people came into Michigan on one of the two branches of the Underground Railroad which met within Cass County, one coming from the neighborhood of Cincinnati, the other from southern Illinois.[20] From here fugitives were sent on to Flowerfield and Schoolcraft on their way to Canada. It has been thought that not less than fifteen hundred passed this way. Dr. Nathan Thomas of Schoolcraft estimated that he had helped at least a thousand on their way to freedom.[21]

Some, no doubt, thought themselves safe from capture when they

[20]Mathews, *History of Cass County*, 109. The writer is also much indebted to an unpublished paper, "The History of the Underground Railroad in Cass County," prepared by Mrs. Rena (White) Upson, of Dowagiac, while a student at Western Michigan University.

[21]This information is taken from Mathews, *History of Cass County*, 110. However, the papers of Dr. Thomas, now in the Michigan Historical Collections at Ann Arbor, are silent on this subject.

had come as far as Michigan, and chose to remain here for a time. One settlement of fugitives, known as "Ramptown," was located a mile or so south of Bonine's Corners, in Penn Township, some survivors of which are known to persons still living.[22]

One family of five, recently escaped from Bourbon County, Kentucky, felt safe enough to settle down in a cabin on the farm of Josiah Osborn, one of the Quaker leaders of Calvin. This family became the object of an intensive search in the summer of 1847, which was carried on in an intensive way by a large group of slave-owners. About the first of August this family was seized, together with four other fugitives found on the nearby farm of William East. Before the cavalcade could start for Kentucky, however, it was surrounded by a crowd of irate citizens and forced to go to the county seat. There it was delayed by such a confusing combination of legal and extralegal measures, that the Negroes were rescued and smuggled off to Canada.[23] This raid, together with the famous Crosswhite Affair at Marshall (which was carried out by the same group of Kentuckians), caused such a tremendous stir that it is credited with being partly responsible for the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.[24]

These events must have caused considerable panic among the other fugitives living in Cass County at the time, and no doubt some resumed their flight toward Canada. It is sometimes thought, on the other hand, that the willingness of their white neighbors to defend them induced others to take their place.[25] It is clear, also, that the migration of free Negroes from Ohio continued at an accelerated rate for several years thereafter.[26]

The assessment rolls for 1846—the year before the raid—show that five persons who can be definitely identified as belonging to the colored colony already owned land in Calvin Township. One of these was Willis Brown, already mentioned as one of the first to

[22]Statement of Edgar Probst, Judge of Probate, Cass County, to the writer, September, 1958.

[23]Mathews, *History of Cass County*, 110-15.

[24]The Crosswhite Raid is detailed in the Marshall *Evening Chronicle*, January 26, 1947.

[25]Glover, *A Twentieth Century History of Cass County*, 291.

[26]Frank U. Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio* (Ann Arbor, 1913), describes the social and political disabilities of Negroes in Ohio at this time, which drove many to seek homes elsewhere.

arrive. All in all, these five men owned three hundred twenty acres of land, valued at about two dollars an acre, and they paid a total land tax of $5.91. No other township in the county is known to furnish a similar example of Negro ownership of land at so early a date.

The rolls of the following year indicate that the Calvin colony had nearly doubled in size. Seven colored residents had then acquired title to 680 acres, while nonresidents in the same category held 360 acres more. By the spring of 1849 the colony had increased considerably, nineteen resident and three nonresident Negro owners being taxed on a total of 1646 acres. By this time, also, three individuals had purchased a total of 212 acres just over the line in Porter Township. A year later—the year of the federal census—twenty-six colored persons owned 1687 acres in Calvin, eight held 476 acres of farm land in Porter, while five others had purchased village lots in Williamsville.

Where did these people come from if, as it seems, many of them did not come in on the Underground Railroad? A study of the census returns throws much light on the subject, even if one discounts for the possibility that some of the statements given by the adults might be inaccurate, especially as eighty-five of the adults were classed as being "illiterate" in this very record. There might, also, have been a tendency to falsify the report in some instances, in an effort to claim birth in free territory for their children if not for themselves. On the other hand many of these claims, made in 1850, are supported by similar statements made ten years later,[27] by accounts in the county histories,[28] and by earlier records found in Ohio.

Of the fifty-six families in the Calvin colony in 1850, three indicated former homes of several years' standing in Indiana, and three in Illinois. At least twenty-three such families claimed residence in Ohio for some years prior to their migration to Michigan. A careful study of the birthplaces assigned to the children of these twenty-nine families shows the following claims of residence in one or another free state: twenty years or more, two families; fifteen to

[27] Eighth Census of the United States, Michigan, volume 4.

[28] Glover, *A Twentieth Century History of Cass County*, 291, names many of the families which came from Logan County, supporting the census records here cited.

twenty years, seven families; ten to fourteen years, eight families; five to nine years, seven families; one to four years, five families.

Of 152 children included in the same families in 1850, slave-state birth is declared for forty; for the remaining 112, birth in free states is stated as follows: Illinois, twelve; Indiana, eight; Ohio, seventy-three; Michigan, nineteen. Of those born in Michigan, all but two were five years old or less, which constitutes one of my strongest reasons for concluding that very few, if any, Negro families settled permanently in Cass County before 1845.

The birthplaces of the adults in the same families, however, show a very different pattern. Only fifteen out of 134 claimed birth in a free state, and not a single one of them mentioned Michigan as the state of nativity. In the free states, four were from Illinois, five from Indiana, and six from Ohio. Of the slave states, forty-three were from Virginia, fifty-nine from North Carolina, two from South Carolina, three from Tennessee, and eleven from Kentucky; a total of 118. Unknown, one.

In respect to the twenty-three families with previous residence in Ohio, it is demonstrable that the heads of at least fifteen of them were living in Logan County, Ohio, in 1840,[29] and it seems almost certain that two others were counted as minors living at home in 1840. At least two of these seventeen families were relatively "old residents" of Logan County, since their names appear in the census of 1830 as well.[30] Since more than two-thirds of these claim birth in North Carolina, it is suspected that they may have followed Quaker neighbors from North Carolina to Ohio and thence to Michigan, always moving from ten to twenty years later than their friends and benefactors.

Seven other families, of the fifty-six living in the Calvin colony, should be examined as an example of an entirely different type of group migration. Collectively, they constitute the only such instance to come to light in the present study. This involves a group of forty-seven Negroes which arrived in the fall of 1849 from Cabell County, Virginia. Sampson Saunders, a planter of that county (which fronts on the Ohio River in what was to become West

[29] Sixth Census of the United States (1840), Ohio, volume 15, in the National Archives, Washington, D. C.

[30] Fifth Census of the United States (1830), Ohio, volume 38, in the National Archives, Washington, D. C.

Virginia), had died some time before this, and had provided by will that his slaves should be freed and that his executors might expend $15,000 in establishing homes for them in a free community. They eventually chose Cass County as the site of such a settlement, partly, it is said, because of the cheapness of land and partly because of the friendly and helpful attitude of the white people in the neighborhood.[81] One wonders if the presence of between two and three hundred colored people in the community, already owning land and farming it, was not also an important factor in determining their choice. They purchased on October 12, 1849, four lots of land in Calvin and Porter Townships, on the edge of the Quaker settlement and of the free Negro community. These four lots amounted to 485 acres, in all, and the purchase prices specified in the deeds came to $3,637—an average price of about $8.00 per acre, for an average holding of about nine acres per person.[82]

The deeds in question are made out to groups, supposedly family groups, and included the names of the children as well as those of the adults, adding the phrase, "and to their heirs." The names of both children and adults tally with those enumerated in the census of 1850, taken some eight months later. Almost all of these people bore the name of Saunders, or Sanders, and a number of their descendants still live in the community after more than a century. Not less than forty-seven persons are accounted for in this migration, ranging in age from eighty years down to six months. Only one, the youngest of all, is credited with birth in Michigan, all of the others having been born in Virginia except one, who frankly admitted that she did not know where she was born.

Four other townships had Negro residents in 1850, but they were widely scattered. Even in Howard Township, where seventy-two were enumerated, the family names do not indicate close connections with the Calvin colony.

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 1,534 persons. Calvin Township, alone, then reported 998, which was about two-

[81] Mathews, *History of Cass County* (1882), 386.

[82] Liber L of *Deeds*, 403-7, 466, 515, 625 in the Register of Deeds office, in the Cass County Courthouse at Dowagiac.

thirds of the white population.[83] 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 on firm and lasting foundations.[84]

[83] *Census and Statistics of the State of Michigan, 1864*, 88 (Lansing, 1865).

[84] 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. Editor.