

#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.