

## #4 -- Lead up to the Civil War, and the Legacy of the UGRR in Cass County

Kentucky planters were incensed that slave catchers were not allowed to return 'their property' to them. They demanded that their friend, Senator Henry Clay, include a more stringent Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Compromise of 1850. This new law was draconian. It declared that captured slaves had to be returned to their owners, and officials and citizens had to cooperate, or be fined and imprisoned. Captured slaves had no rights in court and no defense. A white man could drag any black man or woman south into slavery solely on the power of his word.

Before the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, many people in this area had no opinion on slavery. Birch Lake Quakers split on the Underground Railroad, and those who wanted to be active were dismissed from the meeting. However, the Enhanced Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 galvanized northern sentiment against slavery. Birch Lake Quakers reunited and became active on the UGRR, along with many free blacks and others.

Many free states refused to comply with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Michigan included. In 1855 Michigan passed the Personal Freedom Act, which guaranteed to anyone claimed as a fugitive slave all the benefits of habeas corpus and the right to a jury trial. It prohibited the use of state and local jails for holding accused fugitive slaves. It said any attempt to send a freedman or woman south into slavery was a crime, subject to fine and imprisonment. When the Civil War started in 1861, South Carolina claimed free states' refusal to comply or 'nullification' of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law as the first complaint when it listed the reasons for succession.

Black men were not allowed to fight in the Civil War until President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. At that time over 100 black men in this area, mostly from Calvin Township, joined the 102nd Colored Troops and fought bravely in battle. They formed the Matthew Artis Post of the GAR in Calvin Center, and many are buried in Chain, Lake, Mt. Zion and Bethel cemeteries.

The legacy of the Underground Railroad in Cass County Michigan became manifest in the number of prosperous black farms, and cooperation and friendly relationships among the residents. It continued in schools where black and white children in Calvin township and Vandalia studied together from the start. To this day it is a still mixed community, racially harmonious, and supportive of each other. Descendents of original Quakers and free blacks, as well as freedom seekers, still reside in the area.

## # 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.