

The Underground Railroad in Cass County, Michigan—A Series of Four Articles

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Underground Railroad Society of Cass County (URSCC)

Article #2 The 1847 Kentucky Raid

By the mid 1840's the area around Vandalia was home to several large farms owned by Quaker families who were part of the Underground Railroad. While most freedom seekers only stayed long enough to rest and provision for the next leg of their journey, some stayed to work for a time on these farms, residing in cabins on the properties.

Freedom seeker Perry Sanford, along with several others, escaped from Kenton County Kentucky, crossed the Ohio River and made the journey to Cass County via the Quaker Trail of the UGRR in April of 1847. He and other members of his party were staying in a cabin on the Stephen Bogue farm. Other freedom seekers were staying in cabins on the Osborn and East farms

On August 17, thirteen heavily armed Kentucky slave catchers broke into three parties. They were to rendezvous at O'Dells Mill, in Vandalia. Two raided the the Osborn and East farms, and a cabin on Zachariah Shugart's property, kidnapping six freedom seekers. The third party went to the Bogue cabin, where they captured three. Perry Sanford escaped out the shake roof to warn Stephen Bogue. Hannah Bogue hid Perry upstairs in the house. Perry's friend Rube Stevens ran to Quaker William Jones farm less than a mile away. Unarmed, William Jones calmed the situation and kept the slavecatchers in place until Stephen Bogue returned with a group of men from Cassopolis.

The Kentuckians with their kidnapped slaves met at O'Dells Mill. By this time there was an angry crowd estimated at around two hundred surrounding them, saying they were not going to take the freedom seekers back to Kentucky. They decided settle the matter in court in Cassopolis, about three miles away.

The trial spanned three days. The judge, Ebenezer McIlvain, was a secret abolitionist from Niles. He allowed freedom seekers to testify in court and found for them on a technicality. He asked the Kentuckians to prove Kentucky was a slave state by showing him a copy of the state constitution. By the time they could produce it, all the freedom seekers were spirited out of town on the Underground Railroad. The Kentuckians went home empty handed. In 1849 they sued seven Quakers and two others in District Court in Detroit for the value of their slaves, but the trial ended in a hung jury. The case was later settled and dismissed in 1851. But court costs were high and some of the defendants had to sell their farms and leave the area.

The Kentucky Raid incensed southern planters. They demanded a more stringent Fugitive Slave Law, enacted in 1850, making it much more dangerous for freedom seekers and those who helped them. These were among the precipitating factors in the lead up to the Civil War.

Perry Sanford stayed in Battle Creek, where years later he gave his account of the Kentucky Raid to a reporter for the Morning Call.

Much more about the UGRR in Cass County and the Kentucky Raid can be found at www.urscc.org

Next: Ramptown