

High Drama: The Underground Railroad

Local historians must content themselves with mostly quiet tales of old time farmers and the doings of tiny country villages.

It's bland stuff, compared to the history of battlegrounds and revolutionary uprisings, but there is one local story that stands out clearly above the others. It is the tale of the underground railroad.

STILL STANDING today in the Observer area are homes in which runaway slaves were sheltered before the Civil War. Farmington, settled originally by devout Quakers, was the site of much underground



THE OLD POWER MILL was rumored to have been a station for runaway slaves along the Underground Railroad. Since harboring slaves was a national illegal act, there is little concrete evidence to prove the notion. . . or to disprove it. (Photo, Courtesy of Virgil Cornwell)

railroad activity, as well as parts of Livonia and Plymouth.

Slaves, on their way from the South to freedom in Canada, were often given sanctuary in the homes and barns of sympathetic Abolitionists.

Although many of these long ago local residents were outstanding members of their communities, they were clearly disobeying the Fugitive Slave Law which made the harboring of slaves by northern sympathizers illegal.

As unthinkable as slavery is today, most old, local residents were blandly unconcerned with it, deeming it to be a necessary evil or a problem for the South to solve by itself.

Local Abolitionists, then, risked not only imprisonment at breaking the law but the censure or disapproval of many of their neighbors as well.

MARCUS SWIFT, a preacher and farmer whose land touched parts of what are now Garden City and Westland, was one of the area's most outspoken Abolitionists.

Long before the outbreak of the Civil War he broke away from the old Methodist Church because many of its leaders actually owned slaves and refused to condemn the institution of slavery itself.

In a passionate proclamation written with an old quill pen, he announced his break from the old church establishment, denouncing slavery as the "sum total of all villainies" and accusing the church of discriminating against "the poor of Christ's flock on account of their colour."

For years he was ridiculed and ostracized; but he never forsook his militant stand.

He died in Plymouth at the home of his son long after slavery had been abolished. "I have lived in a glorious age," he said at the end of his long life. Descendants of Swift are still living in the Plymouth area to this day.

NATHAN POWER, one of Farmington's first settlers and an ancestor of Philip Power, publisher of the Observer Newspapers, was another man whom legend claims as an Underground Railroad supporter.

In 1836 Power, a member of the Quaker sect, attended an anti-slavery conference in Ann Arbor. His

diary, full of the details of early pioneer life in the area, reveals certain hints that point to possible anti-slavery activities.

Slaves themselves often traveled by night down the Rouge River. They were met by farmers who often hid them in their wagons under huge bales of hay, thus transporting them to the next "station."

Secrecy was the fuel for underground railroad activities. A leak would mean capture for the fugitives and jail or a stiff fine for their sympathizers. So quietly did the underground railroad run that there are very few documents today to tell its story.

MYSTERY CLOUDS much of what we might know about the local underground railroad network. Farmington historians can point to certain old houses in town with trapdoors and hidden tunnels that were probably used as shelters for runaway slaves.

The old house that formerly functioned as the Suburban Decor shop was probably a hiding place for slaves, as is an old house on Grand River next to Federal Department Store. Eleven Mile and Power is the site of another old home that legend claims as an underground railroad station, and the present intersection at Ann Arbor and Wayne Roads in Livonia is said to have contained yet another hiding place.

Freedom Road in Farmington is now traveled by cars and trucks and camping vehicles. Remember, though, that there was a time when wagon wheels and footsteps passed quietly over it by moonlight in a desperate search for all that its name implies.



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