

# Underground Abolition Work

by Joy Lewis

On March 2, 1850, 218 Richmond voters signed their names to a petition opposing passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. Their act of protest was yet another move in a decades-long and community-wide commitment to the principle of abolitionism. As early as 1828 a group of Richmond families had formed an Anti-slavery Association, one of the earliest in Ontario County. In the forefront of this endeavor were the brothers Hiram and Gideon Pitts.

Frederick Douglass, while living in Rochester, came rather often to Honeoye. He spoke a number of times at the Congregational Church to large gatherings, and formed friendships with several townsfolk. With members drawn from existing churches in Richmond, Canadice, Lima, Hemlock, Bloomfield, and Livonia, the Church of God in Honeoye – informally known as the “Abolitionist Church” – was inaugurated before 1840, calling nationally-known lecturer and author William Goodell as pastor in 1842. From about 1845 until the start of the Civil War in 1861, some of the townsfolk became involved in the most dangerous phase of abolitionist work: helping to conduct escaped slaves to freedom.

The American political climate of the 1840s and '50s was volatile, with contentious disagreement from several camps. The line of dispute was drawn primarily between North and South: those who opposed the notion that each state had the right to decide its own policy regarding slavery, and those who, citing the ideal of “states’ rights,” embraced the institution of slavery. Within the broad lines of these two opposing views were various factions: abolitionists, who wanted to see all slaves freed; others, like Abraham Lincoln, who believed slavery to be unjust and advocated for the transportation of all black Americans to resettle in Liberia; those Southerners who were not slave-owners, but wanted simply to be left in peace; vociferous others in the South who wished to see slavery extended to the newly-opened western territories. Fear, mistrust, and suspicion fueled the argument.

With enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law in September 1850, the work of the abolitionist became illegal – and dangerous. The legislation, one part of the Compromise that Congress worked out regarding the spread of slavery west of the Mississippi, required that fugitive slaves be returned to their owners. No state or territory was exempt from complying. Even those escaped slaves who may have been living for years as free men and women in the North were now subject to be reclaimed by their “owners.” With one fell swoop Canada became the only safe haven for America’s black populous.

Because of the risk incurred, the work of helping slaves escape to freedom was a close-kept secret – a secret kept within the family. Richmond family names of those involved in clandestine abolitionist work included Pitts, Blackmer, Reed, Briggs, Gilbert, Short, and Crooks.

Many routes led northward. From way-station to way-station, by one path then another, those escaping slavery came from Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina, along the eastern seaboard, making their way to Philadelphia. At each point along the secret road, multiple routes led ever onward. From Philly the trail led to Harrisburg, or Williamsport, or to Elmira, New York. Those who reached Elmira were shuttled to Lake Ontario then to Canada beyond. They might go by way of the western route via Niagara Falls, or the eastern route to Syracuse. The central route out of Elmira led eventually to Honeoye, and to Rochester.

In spite of the secret nature of the work, much has come to light in recent years regarding the abolitionists' labor in upstate New York. Some of the "facts" that we think we know about the work are long-outdated myths. One hundred twenty years ago Wilbur H. Siebert published his *History of the Underground Railroad*. In the decades since, much scholarly research has expanded our understanding of this clandestine endeavor. Unfortunately many of the myths associated with Siebert's work remain in circulation today. The modern view, supported by current research, thoroughly debunks such "popular notions" as slaves fleeing the South through escape tunnels; fugitives concealed for days in secret rooms in cellar or attic; and "freedom quilts" used to identify a safe house along a route. These old-fashioned notions, however, do have staying power.

The underground work done in Richmond, Naples, and Hemlock is but one small link in the organization that reached from New England to the Mississippi. The role Richmond played, however, was a noteworthy one: by those who lived locally and by a number of her citizens who emigrated to Michigan.

A fleeing slave, brought to Naples, was delivered to undertaker William ("Uncle Billy") Marks. In the dark of night the young man – more than 80% of fugitives were young men traveling alone – would be secured in the false bottom of Marks' ornate hearse and transported to the next stop. For safety's sake Uncle Billy varied his route often – one time he'd go to Canandaigua, the next time he'd head for Honeoye. Beth B. Flory of Naples wrote of Uncle Billy's work; by his own reckoning it is estimated that Marks helped about 150 slaves to freedom. It is supposed that about half of them made it to Rochester by way of Honeoye. Perhaps six or eight run-aways came through Honeoye in a year. With great care Uncle Billy would deliver the fugitive into the hands of Mr. Gideon Pitts, Jr. or his neighbor Mr. Jedediah Briggs.

In 1821 Gideon Pitts, Sr. built a two-story home on Main Street in Honeoye – the "new" house. (Today this house is identified by a historical marker in the front yard.) Seven years later Mr. Pitts died; his widow Lorinda lived alone in the house for a number of years. For about eight years after the 1844 death of Mrs. Pitts, the new house stood empty, then in 1852 Jedediah Briggs bought the place. The evidence is pretty clear that this house was used as a stop on the Underground Railroad; therefore Mr. Briggs' involvement may be inferred.

That Gideon Pitts, Jr. was one who transported "cargo" between stations is well documented. His own home on Main Street (#8744), was one of the stops along Uncle Billy's route. Having received of Uncle Billy a human "package," Mr. Pitts, in the black of night, would put the individual into the back of his wagon. West along Main Street they traveled, out of town, then on to Big Tree Road. Their destination – the home of Gideon's cousin, Harvey Blackmer, on the north side of Big Tree Road about half a mile west of Hemlock.

Arch Merrill, in his 1963 book *Freedom's Road*, wrote of Harvey Blackmer that he was "a true friend of the Negro and a consistent foe of human slavery." Merrill supplies further detail of the slave's journey toward Rochester: "Blackmer's wagons...hailed hay to East Avon. Those loads of hay often concealed Negro slaves, on their way to Canada."

There was near Hemlock Lake another home whose residents welcomed fugitive slaves brought from Honeoye – the Jacques house at the foot of the lake. Russell Jacques was a married man, childless. He built his home in 1851 and for a decade was busy with the work of secreting escaped slaves to freedom. Arch Merrill wrote of him, "The Jacques farmhouse at the northwestern corner of Hemlock Lake, near its foot, ... was a haven for runaway slaves."

The story is told of one young woman who arrived at the Jacques house with her infant son. Millie Durden was her name. She and the baby stayed with Mr. and Mrs. Jacques for some

months before traveling northward to Canada. Twelve years later, about 1868, she and Alfred returned to Hemlock Lake, to the Jacques home, where “Aunt Millie” worked as housekeeper.

By whatever route an escaping slave arrived in Hemlock, he or she left concealed in a hay wagon, bound for East Avon. On the northwest corner of Route 20 and Route 15, once stood an impressive two-story home built by Joseph Pierson in 1812. His daughter Catherine married Enos Batchelder and during the 1850s the Batchelders aided slaves as they escaped northward to Rochester. Some years later their granddaughter Grace wrote in a family memoir: “Both [of my grandparents] though quiet and unassuming, had firm convictions of justice and were courageous and consistent in their conduct. When harboring fugitive slaves was legally a crime, this house on [the] East Avon corner proved a shelter and protection to many a slave on the way from the south to Rochester and Canada.”

The abolitionists’ work extended throughout the North, from New England to the mid-west. And the seeds of anti-slavery sentiment sown in Richmond in the first quarter of the nineteenth century came to fruition in Michigan in the 1850s. Fitch (1814-1897) and Almira (1825-1901) Reed, brother and sister, were born and reared in Frost Hollow, the children of Wheeler Reed. Fitch settled in Michigan in his early twenties, where he married and raised a family. By the 1850s, Fitch, now in his forties, was much-involved with the work of spiriting fugitive slaves to safety in Canada.

Fitch’s sister Almira married her Richmond neighbor Warren Gilbert (1822-1899) and moved to Lenawee County, Michigan, settling in Rome Township near her brother. Abolitionists, champions of temperance and women’s rights, Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert were involved with the underground work in Michigan. Their home was widely known to be a “safe house,” and by sheltering run-aways the Gilberts were an influence to their kith and kin to treat “the destitute and wayfarer with kindness.”

Another Richmond-born couple active in the underground work in Michigan were Samuel Crooks (1802-1881) and his wife Abigail Short (1805-1900). Abby, daughter of Abel and Abigail (Pitts) Short, was the cousin of Gideon and Hiram Pitts. The Crooks home in Prairie Ronde (Kalamazoo County), was a busy “depot for fugitives” as they were funneled from mid-west escape routes to British ships crossing Lake Michigan.

Today’s residents of Richmond – knowing of the work done in the nineteenth century on behalf of enslaved persons – have much to be proud of when remembering our forebears.