

8 A STAND AGAINST SLAVERY

Chapter 8 Section 1

A Way to Freedom: The Underground Railroad

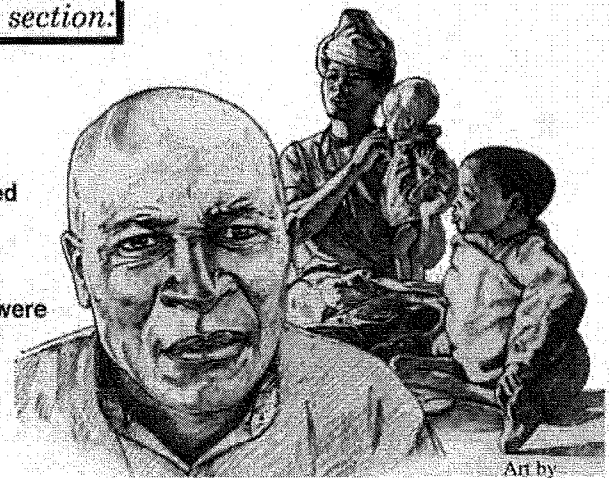
Here are the key concepts you will find in this section.

Michigan was admitted to the United States as a state which did not allow slavery.

Many people in Michigan were against slavery. They wanted to abolish or stop its practice.

Once slavery was made illegal in Canada, many escaped slaves passed through Michigan on their way there. They were often helped by members of the "Underground Railroad."

Some escaped slaves stayed in Michigan. From time to time southern slave catchers came after them.



Art by
Rasmussen

A Question of Freedom

The 1830s through the 1860s was a time of great struggle in Michigan and the whole nation. In many ways Michigan was right in the center of the conflict. It was a conflict which put neighbor against neighbor and state against state. Finally, the strain was too much and the United States was actually ripped apart when many states left the union. What follows is the story of Michigan during that terrible time.

The idea of allowing slavery in a nation founded on the principles of individual freedom was a sort of poison which began to slowly create more and more problems for the United States. But the use of slaves had become the economic way of life in the southern states. The states which wanted slavery were afraid they would be outvoted in Congress by those who wanted it stopped. By the time Michigan was admitted as a state,

Congress was forced to balance each new state which did not allow slavery with one new state that did allow it. Arkansas was the slave state admitted about the same time as Michigan.

Michigan was a "free" state. It did not allow slavery. Earlier, the Northwest Ordinance stated that slavery was illegal in the Northwest Territory. Yet there were slaves here. Early census reports mention slaves in Michigan. Some were brought here before the time Michigan was a part of the United States. Some early slaves were Indians. Later, judges ruled that those who were slaves in slave states must continue to serve their masters if the owner moved to Michigan. The law treated slaves just like any other property—a horse, a wagon, or a plough. Slaves sold for a lot of money and were considered to be valuable.

Put yourself in the place of a slave. Slavery was not a great life. Slaves had

to work hard and you could be whipped if the master did not think you were doing enough work. You did not get paid for your work and you could not hope to see your children do any better. In southern states it was against the law to teach a slave how to read. Your husband, wife, or children could be sold and you might never see them again. If given the opportunity, wouldn't you want to run away and start a new life in a place where you could be free?

Some Take Action Against Injustice

Elizabeth Chandler was a young Quaker woman whose heart was open to the troubles of the slaves. Her parents had both died before she was nine years old. In 1830 with her brother and aunt, she moved west from Pennsylvania to Adrian, Michigan. She had been writing antislavery poems for a newspaper in the East since she was 18. She was the first woman writer in the United States to make the slavery issue her theme.

Elizabeth especially appealed to other women to end slavery. She wrote these lines about a slave mother losing her child:

Think of the frantic mother,
Lamenting for her child,
Til' falling lashes smother
Her cries of anguish wild!

Think of the prayers ascending,
Yet shriek'd alas! in vain,
When heart from heart is rending
Ne'er to be join'd again.

During 1832 she started the first society in Michigan whose goal was to abolish slavery. Four years later her brother helped to start the statewide Michigan Anti-Slavery Society in Ann Arbor. Members of those groups were called *abolitionists* (AB oh LISH un ists). *Abolitionists wanted to abolish or end slavery.* Unfortunately, Elizabeth died when she was only 26, some 30 years before the end of slavery.

Through Michigan—On To Freedom!

There are early accounts of slaves escaping into Michigan from Canada. But in 1834 all of that changed. In that year Canada outlawed slavery which meant slaves from the United States would be safe in Canada. Because of the strong feeling against slavery in Canada, many Canadians were willing to help escaped slaves start a new home. Also, Canada did not allow slave catchers to go after slaves there.

The Underground Line

Over the years slaves did break away from their masters and escape. Many people in northern United States realized what a cruel thing slavery was and some of them began to try to help the escaped slaves. Beginning in the late 1830s, a number of Michigan people started working in an organization called the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad did not have steam engines and passenger cars. It was a loosely organized group of people who were willing to help the runaway slaves. It was called underground because it was supposed to be secret.

Railroad terms were used for the Underground Railroad. "Conductors" took the slaves in their wagons to the next house or "station." The "conductors" usually fed their "passengers" and kept them out of sight in a barn, stable, cellar or nearby woods until they could leave at night. The next "station" was generally just 15 or 20 miles away. The "conductor" would have to be sure the trip could be completed before daylight.

Many times thinly disguised newspaper ads were printed in local papers telling about a new "shipment" which would arrive at the "station."

Laura Haviland—One Woman With a Cause

Laura Haviland's friends called her "Superintendent of the Underground Railroad." She was a quiet and gentle woman who devoted her life to helping others. In 1837 Laura and her husband



Laura Haviland holding a device used to restrain a slave. (Courtesy Michigan State Archives)

started the Raisin Institute, a school for orphans on the Raisin River near Adrian. It was the first Michigan school which accepted black children.

In 1845, disease took the life of Laura's husband and one of their children. With great effort Laura raised money to keep the school going, care for her six remaining children, and pay taxes on their farm.

Her work to help escaped slaves increased after her husband's death. She went to Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky to do whatever she could. Not content to assist those who had already managed their escape, Laura actually helped slaves to make their getaway! Outraged slave owners put up a \$3,000 reward for her capture.

Bravely, Laura Haviland continued. Later she served as a nurse in the Civil War and worked to help educate blacks in Kansas. She died in 1898 at the age of 90. There is a statue of Laura Haviland in front of the Adrian City Hall.

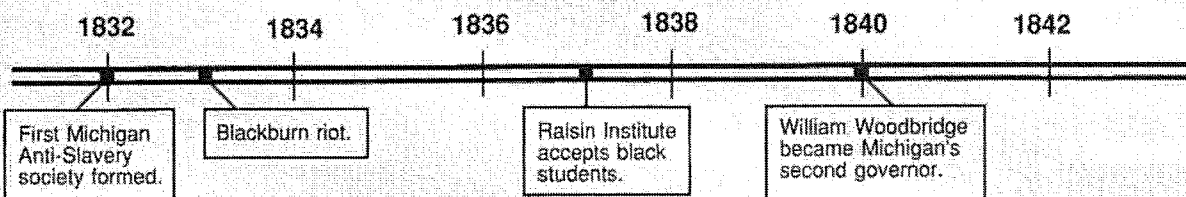
STOCKHOLDERS OF THE UNDERGROUND R. R. COMPANY Hold on to Your Stock!!

The market has an upward tendency. By the express train which arrived this morning at 3 o'clock, fifteen thousand dollars worth of human merchandise, consisting of twenty-nine able-bodied men and women, fresh and sound, from the Carolina and Kentucky plantations, have arrived safe at the depot on the other side, where all our sympathizing colonization friends may have an opportunity of expressing their sympathy by bringing forward donations of ploughs, &c., farming utensils, pick axes and hoes, and not old clothes; as these emigrants all can till the soil. N. B.—Stockholders don't forget the meeting to-day at 2 o'clock at the ferry on the Canada side. All persons desiring to take stock in this prosperous company, be sure to be on hand.

Detroit, April 19, 1853.

By Order of the
BOARD OF DIRECTORS.

This handbill was distributed throughout Detroit in 1853 telling about the safe passage of 29 slaves to Canada. There was also a request for donations to help the freed slaves. (Courtesy Michigan State Archives)



A Quaker Connection

Pamela Thomas, just 23 years old, learned about escaped slaves through her husband who was a Quaker. The Quakers were a religious group who also called themselves the Society of Friends. They were against violence and slavery. The Quakers took a strong stand against slavery and they did more than just talk. Many Quakers were members of the Underground Railroad.

Pamela remembers her first feelings about her husband, Dr. N.M. Thomas, "I thought him fanatical, when he asserted, 'Slavery cannot continue to exist under our government. If it is not put down by the ballot, it will go down in blood.'" Dr. Thomas meant that if slavery couldn't be made illegal by a vote, the nation would eventually go to war.

Doctor Thomas was so well known for his antislavery feelings that escaped slaves often came to him for help at his home in Schoolcraft which is near Kalamazoo. His wife became active in helping slaves after she met an old woman who had escaped slavery in Missouri and walked to Michigan. The former slave told Pamela Thomas some of the unmentionable things women slaves had to endure from cruel masters. Afterwards, Pamela felt she must do what she could for those trying to escape.

It wasn't easy for the Thomas family. Pamela said, "They began to arrive in loads of from six to twelve. This brought much hard work to me and great expense to my husband. Often after my little ones were asleep and I thought the labor of the day over, Friend Zachariah Shugart (Quakers called each other "friend") would drive up with a load of hungry people (escaped slaves) to be fed and housed for the night."

Not all escaped slaves knew about the Underground Railroad or used its

services. Their journey was a hard and dangerous one in any case. The worst part of the trip, through the southern states, was made on their own. They had a long way to go from their master's home to the first station. The escaped or fugitive slaves must have been suspicious of anyone they met.

The Routes They Used

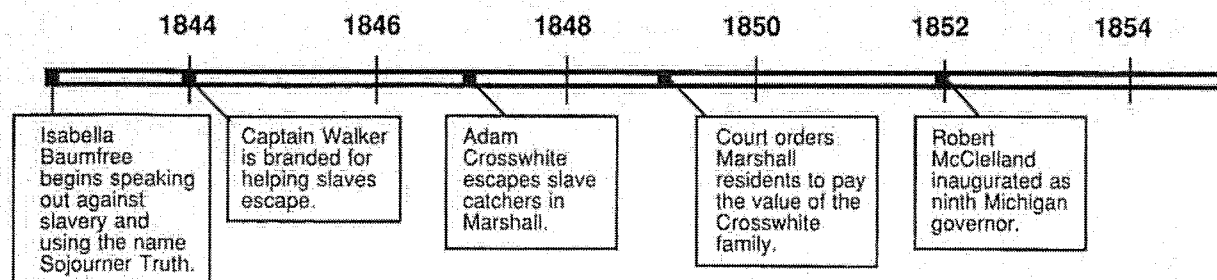
Several routes were used by the escaping slaves. The routes went through New York, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan.

One route was known as the "Michigan Central Line." It had the same name as the real railroad. The Central Line went from Niles and Cassopolis through Schoolcraft, Battle Creek, Parma, Jackson, Dexter, Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, and Detroit. Most of the routes ended at Detroit, but many times the fugitive slaves crossed the river at Port Huron. From Detroit it was on to Windsor or Amherstburg in Canada. Sometimes escaped slaves were put aboard ships and taken over parts of the Great Lakes. Some sailed from Toledo or Sandusky, Ohio, to Canada. Many of the relatives of escaped slaves still live in southern Ontario.

It is very difficult to know how many escaped slaves used the Michigan route of the Underground Railroad. Since the work of the railroad was secret, few people kept any records and probably no one knew all of those who were "conductors." Some historians guess as many as 40,000 to 50,000 slaves passed through Michigan, while others think those numbers are too high.

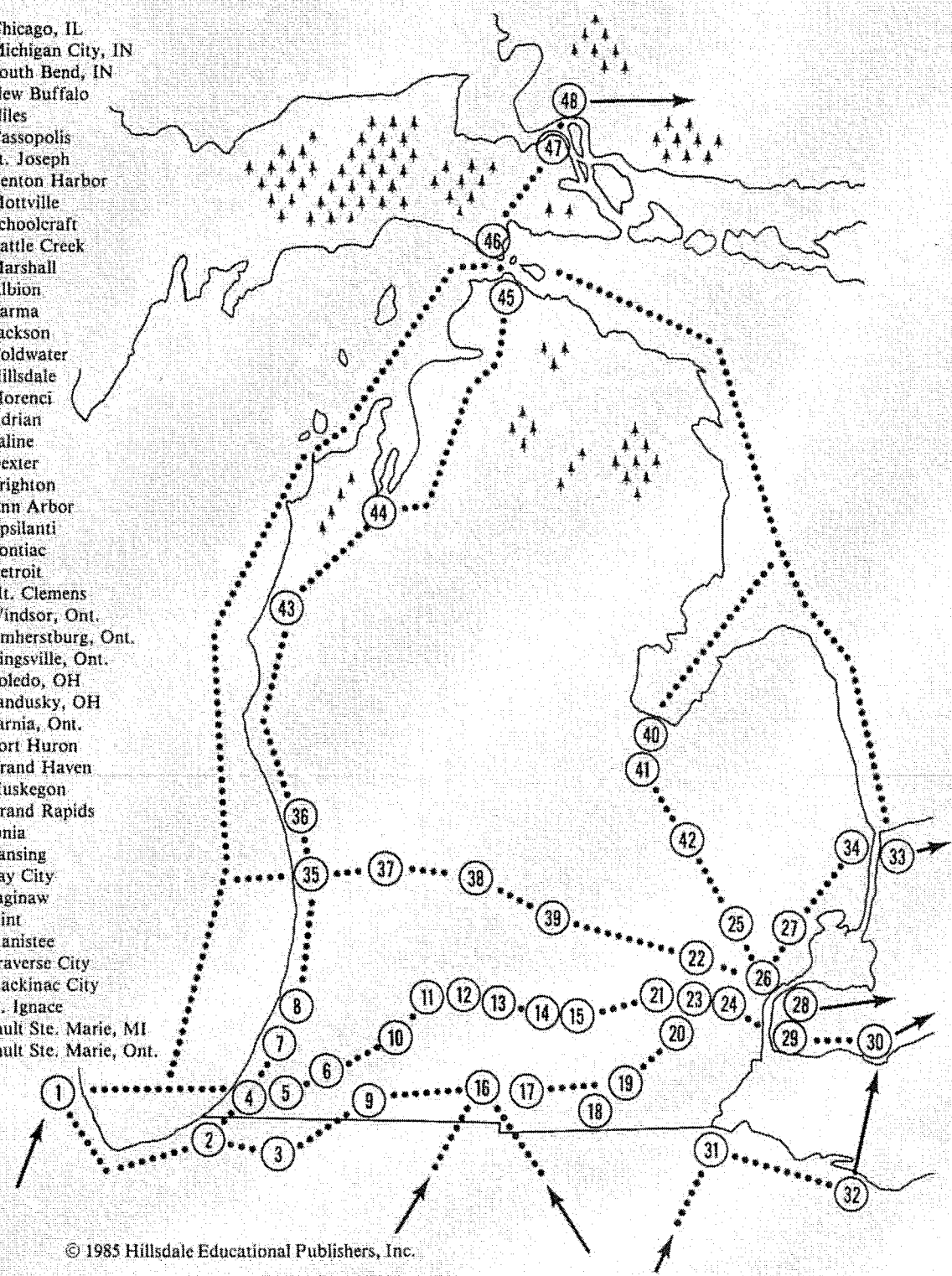
The Feeling Was Not Unanimous

Not everyone approved of the Underground Railroad, even though most of Michigan was against slavery. From time to time people would yell and swear



THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN MICHIGAN

1. Chicago, IL
2. Michigan City, IN
3. South Bend, IN
4. New Buffalo
5. Niles
6. Cassopolis
7. St. Joseph
8. Benton Harbor
9. Mottville
10. Schoolcraft
11. Battle Creek
12. Marshall
13. Albion
14. Parma
15. Jackson
16. Coldwater
17. Hillsdale
18. Morenci
19. Adrian
20. Saline
21. Dexter
22. Brighton
23. Ann Arbor
24. Ypsilanti
25. Pontiac
26. Detroit
27. Mt. Clemens
28. Windsor, Ont.
29. Amherstburg, Ont.
30. Kingsville, Ont.
31. Toledo, OH
32. Sandusky, OH
33. Sarnia, Ont.
34. Port Huron
35. Grand Haven
36. Muskegon
37. Grand Rapids
38. Ionia
39. Lansing
40. Bay City
41. Saginaw
42. Flint
43. Manistee
44. Traverse City
45. Mackinac City
46. St. Ignace
47. Sault Ste. Marie, MI
48. Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.



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This map shows many routes which were used by the underground railroad. Most led to the Canadian border. (Map by David B. McConnell)

at members of the Railroad—and sometimes worse things happened! The Battle Creek office of an antislavery newspaper run by Erastus Hussey was burned. In Illinois, the owner of another antislavery paper was killed by a mob! Slave owners would sue members of the Railroad who had helped their slaves to escape. If they lost in court, abolitionists often had to sell their homes and farms to raise the money.

A sailor with connections to Michigan, Captain Jonathan Walker, was helping seven slaves escape in Florida. He was caught and convicted in 1844 as a slave stealer. With a red-hot iron they branded the letters S.S. in the palm of his right hand so all who met him would know he was a slave stealer. That was just part of his punishment for helping the slaves. There is a historic monument in Muskegon, Michigan, in honor of the "Man with the Branded Hand."

A Home in Michigan—But Not Safe!

Often, however, the escapees decided it was safe to stay in Michigan. Some families remained near towns on the Underground Railroad lines. Many escaped slaves moved to Cass County. The number of black people there increased from five in 1840 to over 1,300 by 1860. In the late 1860s at least 60 percent of Michigan's blacks lived in that county.

Rutha and Thornton Blackburn escaped from Kentucky to Detroit in 1831. Two years passed, but then someone recognized Thornton and sent word to his former owner. The owner sent a slave catcher after the Blackburns.

The ex-slaves were put in jail until they could be sent south. Remember, the Northwest Ordinance said slaves would be returned to their masters in any of the original states. Many black people wanted to help the Blackburns. Rutha was smuggled out after exchanging clothes with a visitor. She was taken to Canada.

The next day a large crowd, most of whom were black people, stood in front of the jail. They knew Thornton Blackburn would soon be put aboard a steamship

which would carry him back to slavery. The sheriff tried to reason with the crowd three times and get them to go home but they would not. Then, the sheriff turned and saw Thornton standing in the doorway of the jail and holding a pistol! Somehow the gun had been smuggled into the jail and Thornton had hobbled out in his leg irons. The sheriff jumped for the gun and wrestled with Thornton. The crowd held the sheriff and took Thornton away. Thornton was eventually smuggled across the Detroit River. At that time there was less sympathy in the white community. Many Detroiters were shocked by the attack on the sheriff. Thirty members of the crowd were arrested and thrown into jail. The Mayor of Detroit was so worried he asked for soldiers to help keep order. The situation did not look good for the Blackburns either. They were arrested in Canada. Michigan asked that they be sent back, but under a new law the Canadian government had the right to refuse, and it did. Finally the Blackburns were released and were able to start a new home near Toronto.

Slave Catchers In Marshall

Over the years, people in Michigan became more sympathetic with the escaped slaves. Another famous event took place at Marshall, Michigan. In 1843, Adam Crosswhite and his family ran away from Frank Giltner's Kentucky plantation because Crosswhite learned that his four children were to be sold. The Crosswhites made the tough, exhausting journey and finally settled in Marshall.

Four years later, during 1847, slave hunters came to Michigan. Their arrival made everyone nervous and the countryside was in an uproar. Crosswhite was afraid they might come after his family. He had told friends that he had a gun and would fire a warning shot if he saw any slave catchers.

On the morning of January 2, 1847, David Giltner (the son of the Kentucky plantation owner), a slave catcher named

Francis Troutman and a local deputy were pounding on Adam's door. His neighbors heard the boom of his warning shot and came running. The cry of "slave catchers!" was shouted through the streets of Marshall. Soon over 100 people surrounded the Crosswhite home.

Words and threats were yelled back and forth. Francis Troutman began to demand that people in the crowd give him their names. They were proud to tell him who they were and sometimes even told him the correct spelling. Each name was written down into a little book. Finally, the deputy sheriff, swayed by the crowd's opinion, decided he should arrest the men from Kentucky instead of the Crosswhites.

The slave catchers were charged with breaking and entering, assault and battery, and illegal possession of firearms. Everything was done strictly according to Michigan law. By the time the slave catchers could post bond and get out of jail, the Crosswhites were on their way to Canada. But the story does not end here.

A Case in the Court

The Giltners went to the federal court in Detroit. They sued the crowd from Marshall for damages. Since they had many of their names it was easy to decide whom to sue. They wanted to be paid the value of the Crosswhite family. They believed the law treated slaves just like any other property. The Giltners felt their property, the slaves, had been stolen.

July 21, 1848, was the fateful day in court. The Giltners were sure they would win. Fortunately, the jury had different ideas and would not make a verdict one way or the other. The men from Kentucky had to go home empty-handed. But they were determined to be paid for the value of their slaves.

The Giltners were neighbors of Senator Henry Clay. There was some lobbying in Washington because many believed the slave owners had been mistreated in Marshall and in court. Even

some people in the North, like Lewis Cass, thought it would be better to keep peace with those in the South. These Northerners did not like slavery but felt it was more important to keep the North and the South from splitting apart.

The Verdict Hurts

Finally, the Giltners had a second trial with a United States Supreme Court judge brought to Michigan to take charge. A specially chosen jury said the Giltners should recover what the Crosswhites would have sold for in a slave auction. To keep the citizens of Marshall from having to pay, Zachariah Chandler, a prominent Michigan abolitionist, helped raise the \$1,925.

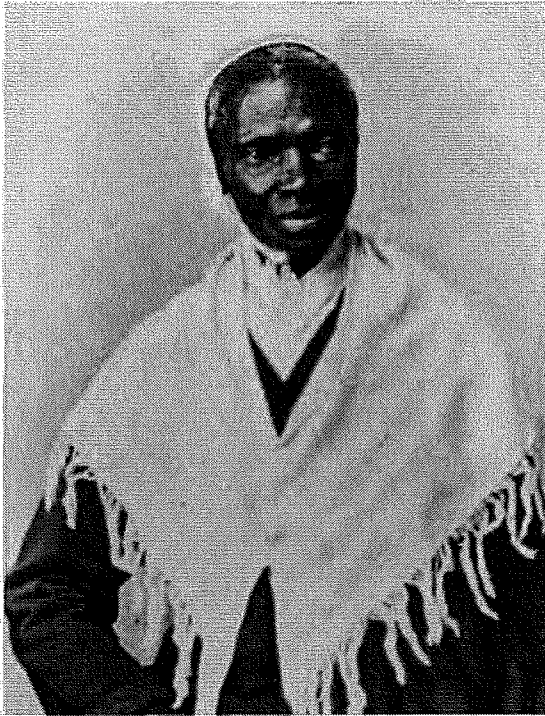
The Crosswhite case and others like it received national attention. Southern slave owners began to demand their rights. Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky denounced Michigan as a "hotbed of radicals and renegades." More trouble was brewing....

She Spoke the Truth— Isabella Baumfree

Elizabeth Chandler wrote about a black woman whose child was sold as a slave. She wrote about the pain and agony but Isabella Baumfree *felt it!* Her son Peter was sold as a slave and taken to Alabama.

Isabella was born in 1797 in New York state where she was a slave. She knew the humiliation of being sold along with sheep when she was a young girl. New York passed a law which would free the slaves by 1827, though the black children would have to continue working until they were adults. Her master promised to free her a year early, but decided she was such a good worker he just couldn't do it. He said she worked more than any man because Isabella would do laundry at night and be ready to go out into the fields in the morning.

Isabella was a strong, proud, six-foot tall woman who took matters into her own hands. In 1826 she gathered up her belongings and left with her youngest



Sojourner Truth. (Courtesy Michigan State Archives)

daughter. A Quaker family took her in and paid her master money so he would quit bothering her.

Then, she discovered her son Peter was no longer at the old master's house. She was told the shocking news that he had been sold and taken into the deep South. It meant he would probably never be free. But Isabella was a fighter and went to court, finally winning his release.

Since New York was mostly Dutch at the time, Isabella did not learn English until she was 30 years old, but she was a powerful speaker in any language. Isabella became very religious over the years. In 1843 she started traveling throughout the North and speaking

against slavery and for the equality of women. When she began speaking, Isabella changed her name to Sojourner Truth. She said that God had sent her on a sojourn or trip for the truth. Through her travels she met many great women of that time: Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucinda Stone, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. She wrote several songs. Here are some of the words to one:

I am pleading for my people—
A poor, down-trodden race,
Who dwell in freedom's boasted land
With no abiding place.

I am pleading that my people
May have their rights restored,
For they have long been toiling
And yet have no reward.

In the 1850s, Sojourner Truth came to Battle Creek where she began to work with the Underground Railroad. But she continued to earn her living doing housework.

During the Civil War Sojourner Truth visited the black soldiers at Detroit. On October 29, 1864, she talked with Abraham Lincoln at the White House. While in Washington, she helped at the Freedman's Hospital and worked to end discrimination on the streetcars in the city.

Sojourner Truth came home to Battle Creek in her old age and died in 1883. Born when our nation was young, Sojourner Truth saw many things during her life. She saw a new nation talk about freedom for all and lived to see a time when people began to believe in it. Her body is buried in the Battle Creek cemetery, but her spirit lives on.

Questions

1. What human rights struggle created conflict in Michigan and the whole nation from 1830-1865?
2. List five Michigan cities which were stations on the Michigan Central Line of the Underground Railroad.
3. Briefly tell what each of the following people did: Elizabeth Chandler, Laura Haviland, Sojourner Truth, and Erastus Hussey.
4. Write a short paragraph about the Adam Crosswhite case.
5. If you had lived in Michigan during the days of the Underground Railroad, how far would you have been willing to go to help the escaped slaves? Explain your reasons.