

# Birmingham's Connection to the Underground Railroad: Deacon Elijah Staunton Fish—Abolitionist

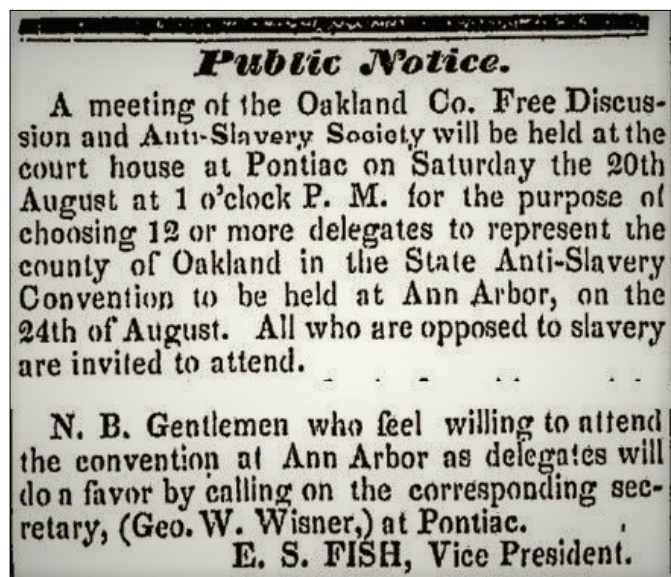
by Donna Casaceli



## The Early Years

**Elijah Staunton Fish (1791-1861)** was born in 1791 in Athol, Massachusetts. Although his mother died when he was young, he grew up in a comfortable home with his aunt and her daughters. Although he was not formally educated, Fish worked hard at numerous occupations, and his success as a vegetable merchant helped he and his wife migrate to the new territory of Michigan to settle and raise a family. In 1820, he purchased 160 acres on the Saginaw Trail, just north of modern Birmingham, where he soon established the first Presbyterian Church in Birmingham in his barn.

In the 1830's, abolitionists in the northern states began forming anti-slavery societies to combat slavery in America, with the intent to end the practice altogether. According to the *Pontiac Courier* in February of 1836, Fish helped found the Oakland County Anti-Slavery Society, with Fish "in the chair" and local prominent landowner John P. LeRoy as secretary. In June, Fish

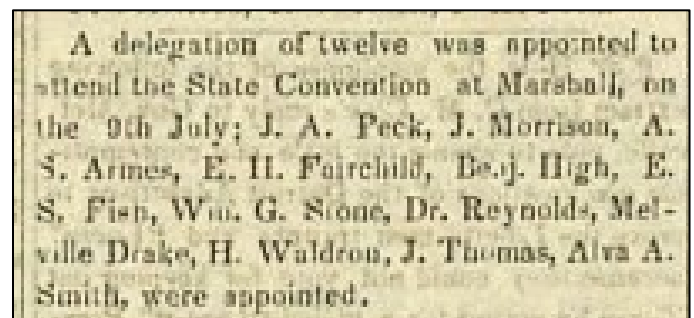


Excerpt, *Pontiac Courier*—July, 1836

published several public notices in the *Pontiac Courier* looking for delegates to go to Ann Arbor for the Michigan Anti-Slavery meeting, identifying his leadership role as Vice President in the notice. But Deacon Fish's anti-slavery activities ranged further and involved others in the movement in Michigan.

## Work with Other Abolitionists

During the 1840's, Fish was very active in anti-slavery and abolitionist movements, as evidenced by several mentions of his work in the *Signal of Liberty*, an abolitionist newspaper published in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Fish continued as chair for the Oakland County Anti-Slavery Society, and participated on various committees to support the election of sympathetic political candidates to local and state government office. He worked with well-known Michigan abolitionists of the time, including Farmington's **Nathan Power (1801-1874)**, a Quaker and anti-slavery reformer; and fiery abolitionist lawyer and writer **George W. Wisner (1813-1849)** of Pontiac. In 1845, Fish was one of twelve delegates to represent Oakland County at the Michigan State Anti-Slavery Society convention in Marshall, MI.



Excerpt from *Signal of Liberty*—July 1845

## Ties to Henry Bibb and Michigan's Underground Railroad

Working with abolitionists to end slavery politically was one thing; working to help bring enslaved people to freedom in Michigan was another, and for obvious reasons, often kept secret. It turns out that during his time working with the Oakland County Anti-Slavery Society, Fish was also directly involved with freedom seekers escaping enslavement, providing money and supplies to help them reach freedom.

Michigan's Underground Railroad had a high profile voice through a newspaper published in Canada by **Henry Bibb (1815-1854)**, *The Voice of the Fugitive*. Bibb was a well-known man who escaped enslavement in Kentucky and

came to Detroit in 1842. Bibb actively published and lectured across the country as a noted and eloquent abolitionist speaker. It is in *The Voice of the Fugitive* that Elijah Fish's involvement in the Underground Railroad is found:

"We would also thankfully acknowledge a small lot of clothing and provisions which H.B. [Henry Bibb] received from the hands of Deacon E. Fish, of Birmingham, Oakland Co., collected by him from the friends of humanity, for the same object, in that town." (*The Voice of the Fugitive*, March, 1951).

**HELP FOR THE FUGITIVES.**

We would also thankfully acknowledge a small lot of clothing and provisions which H. B. received from the hands of Deacon E. Fish, of Birmingham, Oakland Co., collected by him from the friends of humanity, for the same object, in that town. Most of this lot have been already distributed, to relieve the actual want among the destitute.

Excerpt from *Voice of the Fugitive*—March 1851

"Deacon E. Fish of Birmingham" is mentioned several more times in *The Voice* through 1851, including his involvement in the founding, and becoming the first president of, the "Refugee Home Society." This organization's purpose was to raise funds to purchase land in Canada, where freedom-seekers would be safe from re-capture and have a means of economic support.

**REFUGEE HOME SOCIETY.**

Pursuant to a call, the anti-slavery friends in Mich., met in Detroit at the City Hall, on the 21st inst., to consider the subject which had called them together. At half past ten o'clock, A. M. the house was called to order by Rev. C. C. Foote of Commerce, at which time the following officers were elected by the meeting:

DEACON E. FISH, of Birmingham, Pres't.  
ROBERT GARNER Vice President.  
Rev. E. E. KIRKLAND of Colchester, Sec'y,  
Wm. NEWMAN assistant Sec'y.

After which prayer was offered by Rev. D. Hotchkiss of Amherstburg. Several persons being present from Canada (some of whom were missionaries,) were invited to participate in the meeting. The following call which had been published through the state for several weeks was then read from the chair, and an explanation of the object of the meeting given:

Excerpt from *Voice of the Fugitive*, August 1851

## Birmingham and Abolition

In the Village of Birmingham, Deacon Fish was the public voice of the "Friends of Liberty in Birmingham," a group of local citizens involved in the abolition movement. The group was responsible for arranging and promoting public lectures by prominent abolitionists. These included Detroit's Henry Bibb in 1846 and Boston's **William Cooper Nell (1816-1874)**, a free black journalist and activist, in 1858. In addition, the Friends of Liberty in Birmingham also held at least one "Liberty Convention" in Birmingham in 1844, at the largest assembly building in town--Mechanic's Hall.

**Mass Liberty Convention!**  
IN OAKLAND COUNTY.

There will be a GRAND RALLY of the Republican Party of '76, at Birmingham, Oakland County, on Thursday, the TWELFTH day of September next, at 2 o'clock, P. M. All the friends and enemies of Universal Liberty and Equal Rights, are respectfully invited to attend. Our eloquent and faithful friend, CHARLES H. STEWART, of Detroit, has consented to address the meeting. Other prominent friends of our cause are expected.

There will be an opportunity for a discussion of our principles in the evening, if any Whig or Democrat pleases to enter the lists.

Our enterprising citizen R. T. MERRILL, has liberally granted the use of Mechanic's Hall, a large and commodious building, for the occasion. We should be glad to see a thousand ladies and gentlemen present.

In behalf of the friends of Liberty in Birmingham,  
ELIJAH S. FISH.  
Birmingham, August 31st, 1844.

Excerpt from *Signal of Liberty*—July 1845

## The End of Slavery

Deacon Elijah Staunton Fish died on February 28th, 1861. He had been ill off and on for several years, but had worked diligently to bring the message of abolition to the public, and to work behind the scenes to help enslaved people seek freedom. Although he did not see his work to end slavery accomplished, his children saw slavery officially end on December 6, 1865, with the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolishing slavery. Their father's legacy of activism has recently come to light, and will help us at the Birmingham Museum tell a more complete story of our community's history.

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