

A Farmington Childhood:

The WATERCOLORS  
of  
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by

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## Appendix B

# The Underground Railroad in Oakland County

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It would not be surprising in the present generation, but it is a little unexpected to find that many of the people who lived as neighbors, and even in the families of the principal promoters of this peculiar institution, never heard of such a thing. One man who was interviewed expressed considerable astonishment that a railroad could have been run underground in Oakland County and he not know anything about it. Where was that railroad anyhow?

The lack of knowledge on the part of the community, that you would expect to know, only shows how secretly the men of that day worked. They not only kept their own counsel at the time, but even when the danger of paying heavy fines for harbouring the runaway slaves was past, and the black man free, did they, except in rare instances, open their lips to tell the part they had taken in spiriting the slaves away from their masters.

The principal "station" in Oakland County was located at Farmington and the conductor was Nathan Power or "Uncle Nathan" as he was universally called. Associated with him were his brothers Ira and Abram Power, Ethan Lapham, George Wilber, Abram Moore and Elisha Roberts, all Quakers and all closely connected by marriage. In only a few instances have others than the Quakers been found helping the fugitives to freedom.

Chauncey Green, a prominent man in the community, saw a slave caught in Detroit and it aroused his sympathies for the down trodden race to such an extent that on one occasion at least he gave them assistance. His daughter Mrs. Florence Moore remembers hearing her people tell of a woman who appeared at their home one night. She was fed and kept over till the next night



when her father took her to Detroit. As Mr. Green always put up at the Finney House, it is supposed she was left at this well known "station" but no one can be found who definitely knows where they came from and who assisted them across to Canada. The fact that Nathan Power's brother and brother-in-law lived in Adrian, where Laura Haviland operated so extensively and that Ethan Lapham's brother-in-law Robert Glasser was connected with the Ann Arbor station makes a strong link in the chain of evidence that the slaves were forwarded from these places.

Mr. John Power, son of Abram Power, remembers that in an old red shed that stood back of their house he sometimes got a glimpse of a black man. He would see his mother coming from that direction with a plate and as no animals were ever kept there he would ask her what she had been feeding. Her evasive answers; the secret conferences of his father and Uncle Ira and the coming along of a load of hay or grain and the disappearance of the occupant of the shed, were mysteries that were not solved except in the light of later years.

I have met only one man, now living who personally harbored the runaways, Mr. Palmer Sherman (and he was not a member of the league) went out to his barn one morning in June and was considerably astonished to find thirteen negroes camping on his freshly gathered hay. "Holy Moses!" he exclaimed. "I hate to see so many clouds in haying time." "Never fear Marse dese clouds will soon scatter." It seemed that Uncle Nathan had more people than he could take care of and had directed this party to Mr. Sherman's barn. They had come from Virginia and although it was after the emancipation had been proclaimed, they could not be made to understand that they were as free as any one. One of the men who could read was the leader and he had a book in which was written full directions for reaching Canada, with names of the people who would care for them each night on the way. He also had a chart for their guidance. Their destination was Grosse Pointe, where a man was to take them across the river in a boat. As many of the neighbors were needing help in their haying, Mr. Sherman persuaded six of the party to stay, but the other seven were afraid to remain and asked his advice as to whether they should start together or separately. They finally decided to proceed in two parties. At Buxton (or Chatham) which was the end of their journey, they were hired by a lumberman to work in the woods at Lapeer. He gave them money to send for the six who had been left behind at Farmington. They were told to go to Pontiac, get supplies and proceed by the way of Oxford to Lapeer. That was the last Mr. Sherman knew of them. Mr. Sherman also said that many of the slaves crossed at Sarnia.

Just a word concerning Buxton, where were congregated so many of the colored settlers. The first ones were the slaves of Rev. King and his wife who brought them from the South, bought a tract of land and gave each of their twenty four slaves their freedom and a ten acre farm. At first a log cabin was used for a church until a better one could be built. Every morning at the ringing of the church bell every man was present and answered to roll call. The Rev. King remained with these people until his death, guiding them to the realization of their responsibilities of freedom and citizenship.

Many of the Abolitionists around Farmington and Livonia were subscribers to a paper printed by a colored man in Windsor by the name of Bibbs. His wife kept the colored school and was considered a very smart woman. While Mrs. Daniel Lapham was visiting in Windsor in 1854 she saw Laura Haviland bring into this place of Bibbs six slaves whom she had just assisted to escape.



Sojourner Truth visited the Quakers at Farmington frequently and Mrs. G. F. Chamberlin remembers hearing her lecture. She had several slaves with her whose scarred and lacerated backs she showed to the audience, Mrs. Chamberlin's grandfather, Ethan Lapham, one of the chief operators, prayed to live to see the day when the slaves should be free, but he was called home to his Master before his heart's desire was granted.

There is still living in Farmington township, an ex-slave. Mrs. Wilson, her husband and three others escaped from bondage in Virginia early in the 50's. They were pursued by their owners and overhauled. Aaron her husband was hit on the head, but quickly regaining consciousness seized a club and with the help of the others succeeded in beating the three white men to insensibility. They never knew whether they were fatally injured or not. About two miles west of the village lived John Thayer, not a Quaker, but a Methodist, who was in the league to help the runaways. The story is told that Mrs. Thayer getting heartily sick of having so many "niggers" around told her husband that the next time he brought one home he would have to sleep with him. As she was the kind of woman that carried out her threats John was obliged to make a bedfellow of the next unwelcome guest.

The name of Robert Garner an early settler of White Lake is associated with the workings of the "Underground." He was probably connected with the Farmington station, for one of the Lapham family was his neighbor and was also engaged in the work. Mr. Garner's son remembers at least a dozen instances where fugitives were kept for a time and then taken away by his father. About 1852 a slave girl about 12 years old was brought out to the Garner farm by Elder Foote from Detroit. She was given a home and remained with the family until her marriage when she was presented by her benefactor with 40 acres of land and fifty dollars in money, just half the dowry he gave his own daughters.

Mrs. Eliza Leggett, a Quaker lady residing at Clintonville, Waterford Township, also gave help and sympathy to these poor unfortunates. She often visited the Farmington Friends and it may have been from them she received these objects of her compassion. Mrs. Leggett was a woman whose like you will not find in a thousand. Her keen intelligence, kind and generous nature, and charming personality made her the peer of the best in the land. Indeed for years before she came to Michigan in 1852 she lived at Roslyn, L.I., as neighbor and intimate friend of the poet Bryant.

Nathan Power, the chief operator on the "Underground" was born April 19, 1801 in Farmington, N.Y. and died Jan. 20th, 1874 in Ypsi, Michigan. He was the son of Arthur Power, who made the first settlement in 1824 in Farmington, Michigan and because Nathan stayed in New York and looked after his father's interests, the first land that was cleared in the new country was for Nathan and the first house was erected on his 80 acres of land. The son came on to Michigan in 1826 and taught the first school in the township and for several seasons he would work his farm in the summer and in the winter, teach the village school. He was a member of the Whig party until slavery became a burning issue and then he voted Anti-Slavery until the Republican Party came into being. In 1854 he was sent to the state legislature where he was influential in securing passage of those memorable enactments, writ of habeas corpus and jury trial, guaranteed to persons charged with being fugitive slaves and in which the jails were closed



against their incarceration. Also the prohibition law. "Uncle Nathan" was the friend to every boy and girl in the village and there was no end to his kind acts. If a poor widow was out of wood, Uncle Nathan was sure to learn of her need and pretty soon you would see his ox team plodding along and a load would be left at her door. Many hungry children tasted spare rib or ham only through his generosity and in maple sugar time the youngsters were always sure of a treat. In fact, his generosity was almost a fault if such a thing can be, for from being a man of abundant means, his acts of charity not only used up his income, but made such inroads on his principal that he died a comparatively poor man. A great tragedy came into the life of Nathan Power on the 7th of August 1832 when his wife Selinda and a daughter seven years of age were stricken with cholera. They were interred in one grave, the first occupants of the burying ground, his father Arthur Power had given to the Quaker society, with an adjoining acre as a site for the meeting house which had just been erected.

The settlement had been known in its early years as Quakertown and this meeting house was their place of worship until the older generation had nearly passed away.

So few were left that Uncle Nathan remodeled the building for a dwelling but it was still used from time to time as a gathering place of the Friends who came from distant places, even within my remembrance. It was this old house that was the headquarters of the Underground railroad during and for several years previous to the Civil War. The house was wood colored and the side of the gable was toward the road sloping very low in front and a box like arch gave entrance to each of the two main rooms, which still retained some of their original features. A moveable partition separated one from the other, at least the upper half was movable so that the speaker could be heard, but the men in one room could not see the women in the other. This partition was painted a dark Venetian red, and the large beams and low ceilings gave a very odd look to the interior. The two bedrooms which had been added in front and the dining room and kitchen in the rear, were even with the ground and two steps lower than the original part of the building.

Elisha Roberts, another of the active Underground operators was a brother-in-law of Ethan Lapham and lived many years just south of the base line, in the township of Livonia, but he was always identified with early settlers of Farmington. After he had purchased his land he had no money left for living expenses. He tried to collect a debt owing him by a man in New York and was much chagrined to receive in return two barrels of cow bells. At first he was inclined to give them away, thinking they were of no value, but he soon found that the settlers would gladly barter flour, corn meal, beans, or pork for them, he found that the despised bells were really just as valuable as the money would have been. He really could have profitably disposed of two barrels more. Mr. Roberts' grandson still owns the old homestead. George Roberts, a son, purchased in the early 70's, a farm two miles west of the village on the Grand River road, where his father spent the later years of his life. He lived to be nearly a hundred. Mr. Roberts was a tall, spare man with a merry twinkle in his eye and his keen sense of humor, alert mind, good nature and conversational ability made him always a very welcome visitor.

It was his custom to walk to the village on his birthday and call upon his numerous friends. One year I remember very distinctly when he thus favored my husband, Dr. Avery. Not finding him at home he remained to chat with me and I tried my best to entertain the old gentleman until



the doctor's return. I soon found that he was the one that was doing the entertaining. Among the subjects discussed was poetry and Mr. Roberts spoke feelingly of his love for it and how easy it was for him to make "jingles." He said, "They tell me I don't make mistakes in putting in too many feet. About the time the fugitive slave law was passed, I was considerably stirred up and wrote a poem about what I thought. Do you think I could get anybody to print it, even for pay! No, they all said they didn't dare. Finally a fellow, who had a small hand press set it up and I had a few copies struck off to pass among my friends.

"Not a great while afterward, there appeared at my place one night the worst looking specimen of humanity I ever set eyes on. He was woebegone, dirty, and ragged, and wanted me to help him get to Canada. Heretofore I had always been able to do something for these poor black fellows but I didn't have even the 76 cents needed to pay toll to Detroit, and my work was in just that condition I couldn't very well leave so I told him I could nothing for him. The man looked so dejected I ransacked my brains to find something I might do to help him, and as a sort of joke I offered him one of my poems. He took it seriously enough, thanked me and went on his way and I thought no more about it. One day after the war was over I was walking along the street in Detroit when a spruce looking darky stepped up to me and said "How do you do Mr. Roberts?" I said "You have got the better of me." "Don't you remember who I am," said he, "No, I never saw you before that I know of." He said "Don't you remember a colored man that came to your house a good many years ago and you gave him a paper with some verses on it?" "Yes," I said I do remember you, but you surely cannot be that poor chap." "If you had given me a hundred dollars," he said, "it would not have been as much help as that piece of paper was, for my friends over in Windsor had a good many copies printed just before the Queen's birthday and we then sold them for 25 cents apiece. This gave me a start and I have prospered ever since."

After the doctor came in and had greeted Mr. Roberts he said, "I suppose you have enjoyed visiting with my wife?" "Yes," the old man said with a twinkle in his eye, "I rather like to hear the girls twitter." From a granddaughter living in Wisconsin I received this copy of the verses Mr. Roberts gave the slave:

### **The Fugitive's Triumph**

Though I am in the cotton field  
Hard toiling now a slave,  
The driver's lash no more I'll feel  
But prove myself a brave.  
The dipper points to the north star  
That star now beckons me  
Saying: Arise and break your bond  
And flee to Canada.

### **Chorus**

O, Slaveholders, that hand, that  
hand of thine,  
Can no more bruise my tender flesh,  
That flesh I claim as mine.



The eagle is a cruel bird,  
    She feeds on feeble prey;  
The lion is a noble beast  
    To him I'll bend my way.  
I now have started on the track  
    I will risk my master's scowl,  
I hear him calling to his dogs,  
    I hear his blood hounds howl.

But I am on Ohio ground,  
    My heart is beating free,  
Renewing step at every bound  
    I am now for Canada.  
I now behold Niagara,  
    I hear its welcome roar,  
My eyes look o'er to Canada,  
    I see her waters pour.

Young eagles now I call on you  
    To give me bare one dime,  
That I may cross the raging stream  
    And pass beyond the line.  
I have raised the cotton plant for you,  
    To keep you from the cold,  
I have raised the sugar cane also  
    To fill with sweets your bowl.

I have to toil, to sweat, and bleed,  
    And labor hard for you,  
To cultivate a filthy weed,  
    For you to smoke and chew.  
Our fathers toiled and died for you  
    In anguish, grief and woe,  
That you might dye your garments blue,  
    With baneful indigo.

But, if since you will your dimes all save,  
    I ask no help of you,  
I now am crossing o'er the wave  
    In a light and frail canoe.  
Young eagles now can have a feast  
    And pay their dimes for rum,  
Or hand it o'er to godly priests  
    To keep them blind and dumb.



I now am on Victoria's shore,  
Victoria's on her throne,  
My flesh no more shall stream no gore,  
My limbs are now my own;  
I will bless the Lord's most gracious name,  
I will bless him with my soul,  
He has broke my prison and my chains,  
And freed my heart from gall.

I have clasped the lion in my hands,  
I feel his powerful breath.  
The eagles beak and cruel fangs  
Shall no more tear my flesh.  
Glory to God who saves from death!  
Glory to God on high!  
I will praise him while I here have breath,  
I will praise him when I die.

Slaveholders, now I pray attend  
That you may shun great woe,  
Slight not the warnings of a friend  
Though given by Sambo.  
The bow of justice now is bent  
And sharp as many darts,  
And unless you soon report  
You will find them in your hearts.

You have pressed us hard through a long life  
And cruel burdens laid,  
You have torn the husband from his wife  
The Mother from her babe  
You have changed our color which  
Was quite an Ethiopian hue  
You have altered it to one half white,  
And claimed it as your due.

Your cup is full unto the brim,  
Of all iniquity,  
And if you would break off your sins,  
First let your slaves go free,  
Or tattered must your stripes appear  
And pale will grow your stars,  
They will be dimmed and blotted out  
By grief and bitter tears.



You stole us from our Africa,  
All for the sake of gold;  
You brought us to America,  
And chattelized the soul.  
Justice will reign, we need not fear,  
Your greedy love for pelf,  
For God Almighty has decreed  
Evil destroys itself.

The act decreed to hold us fast,  
Has broken quite in twain  
And you will find it at the last  
To prove our lasting gain.  
Your eagles beak now has a break  
And brittle are her claws,  
And you, yourself, already quake,  
For rotten are your laws.

As Greece and Sparta lost their state  
And Rome itself was cursed,  
So you must follow in their wake,  
You will have to bite the dust.  
Oppression cannot long subsist,  
Or with progression dwell  
And if it does at all exist,  
It must rear its throne in Hell.