



## SANDUSKY: KEY STOP ON ROUTE TO FREEDOM

BY BRENNAL WALKER, MARITIME MUSEUM OF SANDUSKY



*The “Path to Freedom” sculpture in Sandusky’s Facer Park. Artist Suzan Schultz used 800 feet of chain to create the life sized sculpture, which commemorates Sandusky’s role in the Underground Railroad.*

Sandusky was a station stop on the Underground Railroad, and the maritime industry played a large role in helping runaway slaves escape to Canada long before the great Civil War.

The city’s importance on the route to freedom became especially important after Congress approved the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and it remained a key stop until about 1861, when the number of escaping slaves dwindled.

The Fugitive Slave Act made it illegal to help escaping slaves. Despite the law, slaves continued fleeing their bondage in the South, and Sandusky became a hub where the route led to Canada. The Underground Railroad code name for Sandusky was “Hope.”

It was a reactionary movement by white people who did not like the institution of slavery. They were willing to give time, money and services to fugitive slaves and risk their own safety and possible prosecution. Stations were generally at houses or barns owned by abolitionists. Runaway slaves were hidden during the day and at night taken by wagon to the next station along the Underground Railroad.

Many runaway slaves were hidden in a barn on the property owned by Dr. Tilden at the northwest corner of Hancock and Jefferson streets and in a home at the northeast corner of Jackson and Madison streets. There was a built-in bookcase in that home that would swing open, concealing a room where slaves hid until they could be taken to boats for the last transport to Canada.

It's believed the first runaway slave to come to Sandusky arrived here in the fall of 1820. He traveled by foot with his master in close pursuit. Both came to Sandusky on the same day. The slave was hidden by Captain P. Shephard in a barn belonging to Marsh's Tavern.

For three days the master looked with the help of Shephard. The master managed to track the slave to Abner Strong's place. The fourth day after they arrived in Sandusky the steamboat Walk-in-the-Water made port in the Sandusky and planned an itinerary that included a stop in Detroit. Captain Shephard took his small boat with the slave on board to Fort Malden at Amherstburg, Ontario.

The slave owner returned from Detroit to pay his bill, and went South again without his slave.

The Rev. Anthony Binge escaped with a party of people, including his immediate family by way of Sandusky. They left their master in Newport, Ky., just across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. The family was brought by wagon to within 30 miles of Sandusky, where the horses became tired. A Quaker took the party to Sandusky for \$30, where they boarded the steamboat Michigan. The boat ran aground at the mouth of the Detroit River, however, forcing them to finish the journey aboard the smaller boat Phoebus.

Upon landing in Amherstburg, a Canadian town near the mouth of the Detroit River in Essex County, Ontario, other escaped slaves on shore welcomed the Binge family and rejoiced with them. The journey had taken the family six days. Rev. Binge lived in the area for 50 years.

After the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was enacted some 30 to 50 escaped slaves would arrive daily in Sandusky.

Josiah Hensen, the inspiration for the character "Tom" in "Uncle Tom's Cabin," escaped from slavery with his wife and four children in September 1830. They arrived in Venice, N.Y., in October, where a boat captain agreed to take them to Buffalo. The ship was loaded with corn and sailed to Bull's Island, where it anchored.

That night the ship's captain sent a small boat back to get the Hensen family. They arrived in Canada on Oct. 28, 1830. There was a mission school in Dresden, Canada, which is about 50 or 60 miles from Amherstburg, a place where many former slaves settled.

Fugitive slave Joe Daniel arrived in Sandusky in 1839 and stayed for a while with the Rev. Thomas Boston. Daniel was told to head to Canada, but he was sidetracked when he took a job in Detroit on the steamboat Sultana. Slave catchers caught up to him, however, and he was taken back to Virginia.

But Daniel escaped again and was back in Sandusky about three weeks later. The second time he took the advice he was given the first time around and went straight to Canada.

One of the biggest antislavery court cases in the area in Sandusky involved seven escaped slaves captured in 1852 attempting to escape aboard a Detroit bound steamer. They were dragged ashore and taken to the mayor's office. F.S. Hitchcock, John Irvine, and John B. Lott found Sandusky's infamous Rush Sloane, and asked him go to the mayor and find out about the slaves.

Sloane determined there was no legal documentation permitting authorities to detain the escaping slaves, and together they left the office. The slaves boarded a sailboat and were then received by Captain James Nugent, who secreted them to Canada aboard the vessel he commanded.

Sloane was taken to court for his role helping the slaves escape and eventually fined \$3,000.

The largest known group of fugitive slaves to travel through Sandusky was 20. They boarded the steamer United States on a Sunday when the courts were closed and their masters were on the wharf. They made a deal with the captain not to land until they reached Detroit. As the steamer approached Canada, the captain lowered a small boat with the runaways in it and it went to shore.

Captain Atwood also was a key seaman on the Underground Railroad, ferrying runaway slaves from both Sandusky and Toledo. Atwood commanded the Arrow, a side wheel boat built in Michigan in 1848 that ran the western half of Lake Erie for a few years before switching to the eastern half of the Great Lake.

In 1863 the Arrow was condemned. Captain Atwood was prosecuted under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and fined \$3,000 for his role in assisting runaway slaves.

Four fugitive slaves arrived in Sandusky in the summer of 1853, by way of previous stops in Cincinnati. They hid in trees just east of Mills Creek until nightfall. John Irvine arranged the final leg of their journey to freedom aboard a "Sharpee," a small sailboat used by fishermen and captained by George Sweigels. The captain was paid \$35, and the fugitive slaves arrived in Canada the next day.

The following year, Captain Sweigels aided another group. He sailed away with seven runaways on a small two-masted sailboat because the larger boat was being surveilled by bounty hunters. The smaller boat made port safely in Canada, but not until after some rough sailing caused by inclement weather.

Sandusky's maritime industry played a key role in the city's importance as a stop along the Underground Railroad, and many residents who were abolitionists continued to stand against slavery, risking reputation and fortune to help.