

MANY ON ‘UNDERGROUND RAILROAD’ DID ARRIVE BY TRAIN BY RANDY KOCH



A marker recalls Sandusky's early days as a railroad town.

SANDUSKY

The comment that the Underground Railroad was not a railroad brings to mind television sports personality Lee Corso's favorite line — "Not so fast, my friend." Many freedom seekers did reach Sandusky on trains.

With our rich maritime heritage, we tend to overlook the rise of our well-developed rail system in the decade prior to the Civil War. For centuries, travel over rivers, lakes or oceans arguably proved the most viable means of transportation. With the opening of the Erie Canal, the country embarked on a large-scale effort to create water channels suitable for travel in locations Mother Nature had overlooked. Ambitious leaders dreamed of a canal connecting Lake Erie with the Ohio River, creating an avenue for Ohio farmers and manufacturers leading to the vast Mississippi River System, which could carry their products over winding waterways to the port of New Orleans 2,000 miles away and beyond.

Prominent leaders, convinced selecting Sandusky as the northern terminus would be a boon to the evolving city, watched in disappointment as Cleveland was selected. In 1832, the 308 mile Ohio & Erie Canal reached Portsmouth. Despite primitive technology, the entire project only required seven years of construction.

Sandusky lost out for the second time to The Miami & Erie Canal, which was actually a consolidation of three different canals. Not until 1845 did a canal boat run the entire 250 miles from Toledo to Cincinnati.

Sanduskians of that era claimed they were out-politicked. Hindsight shows lack of adequate water sources between Sandusky and central Ohio to supply the canal easily eliminated us from the competition.

Mention should be made of Ohio's shortest canal and, for a brief period, one of its most successful, the three-mile Milan Canal connecting Milan to Fries Landing, allowing access to Lake Erie.

The inability to serve as a northern terminus for either of the two canals linking Lake Erie to the Ohio River pushed Sandusky to pursue a different form of transportation, which shortly proved much more reliable and efficient.

The Mad River & Lake Erie Railroad, chartered in 1832, was Ohio's first chartered railroad. Two years after, the 1835 groundbreaking iron rails linked Sandusky to Bellevue, slowly snaking southward, before eventually linking with the Little Miami Railroad in 1850. Finally, there was uninterrupted rail service from Sandusky to Cincinnati.

By 1845 what was to become the Sandusky, Mansfield & Newark RR provided service to Mansfield, with service farther into southeastern Ohio shortly thereafter. In 1851, a consolidation forming the Cleveland & Toledo RR linked Sandusky to both the metropolis to the west and larger city to the east.

According to Gordon Wendt's "In the Wake of the *Walk-in-the-Water*," regularly scheduled steamship service was initiated in 1846 at the instigation of Burr Higgins, who was affiliated with the Sandusky, Mansfield & Newark Railway. The extensive rail service to a city frequented by ships docking at ports including Detroit and Buffalo and even Canada multiplied the number of freedom seekers destined for Sandusky.

In 1853, fugitive Robert Blackburn boarded a train in Cincinnati early one morning, departed Sandusky late that night aboard a ship bound for Detroit, and then traveled to Amherstburg, Canada. If one overlays Thomas Cowperthwait's 1855 Ohio Railroad map, found in the Sandusky Library archives, atop Wilbur Siebert's 1896 Ohio Underground Railroad Map, one observes numerous Underground Railroad routes duplicated the railroad tracks.

Blending Sandusky's access to viable transportation with residents willing to assist fugitives, one understands African American Elijah Andersen's affinity for Sandusky as a northern terminus. He was believed to have led more than 1,000 fugitives to freedom. Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the 1852 novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and Levi Coffin, author of several nonfiction works, also referenced Sandusky's role in the Underground Railroad.

A number of documented accounts reveal dramatic escapes through Sandusky via railroads. In the fall of 1852 a party of men, women and children from Kentucky reached Sandusky aboard the Mad River & Lake Erie Railroad with their owners in close pursuit. Before the Arrow could sail, the slaveholders dragged them from the ship and took them to the mayor's office.

There, young attorney Rush Sloane further incited an angry crowd, which led to the melee which allowed the party to escape aboard a boat to Canada. Sloane was one of the first men convicted under the federal 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.

In the summer of 1855, an escaped slave, at times riding and others walking, trudged into Shelby Junction with trackers a scant distance behind. A sympathetic man nailed the fugitive inside a coffin, placed it in charge of an express agent, and telegraphed Sandusky that the “body” would be shipped to friends in Sandusky.

The wooden box, perforated with knotty holes and lined with wooden shavings, was loaded into a freight car, with the sweltering heat intensifying with each passing mile. S. R. Irvine accepted the “remains” at the Sandusky, Mansfield & Newark depot. Opening the coffin in a safe house, Irvine gasped at the sight of a man with bloodshot eyes, scarcely breathing and foaming at the mouth. A doctor’s quick response revived the “corpse” who traveled to Canada within several days.

The next account takes us to Christmas night in 1859 when nine fugitive men with train tickets scattered among the throng of holiday travelers crowding the Sandusky, Mansfield & Newark coaches in Utica. With the passengers thinning at each stop, the fugitives casually migrated into the last passenger car at Monroeville. Scrunching down in the darkness when the train reached Sandusky, the men waited for everyone else to disembark and for the rail platform to empty.

They anxiously held their breath as railroad president William Durbin, a southerner by birth, made his habitual inspection of his train before turning in for the night. Escaping detection, the fugitives were whisked to the home of George Reynolds, a fascinating character of mixed African American and American Indian descent. The former Michigan Central RR employee moved to Sandusky from Detroit, where he operated a carriage shop.

His name is mentioned in concert with activist Martin Delaney and an alleged clandestine organization forming in the South. Reynolds also attended John Brown’s 1858 Chatham Conference in Windsor. Numerous primary sources indicate Brown desperately wanted Reynolds to join him in Harpers Ferry.

The nine fugitives remained in Reynolds’ home on Madison Street until they crossed the ice to Canada, only two days ahead of slave catchers who had picked up their trail in Utica.

Railroads did serve as viable means of transporting freedom seekers north. However, when flipping the coin over, recognize that those same tracks just as rapidly often thrust captured fugitives back into a life of bondage below the Ohio River.

Randy Koch is vice president of the Erie County Historical Society, has written an historical novel dramatizing Sandusky’s role in the Underground Railroad, and has successfully submitted three of Sandusky’s four listings on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.