



Sandusky: Last stop on Underground Railroad BY RANDY KOCH

SANDUSKY

In the volatile decades before the Civil War, hundreds of fugitive slaves fled across the Ohio River. Until 1863, Virginia's western border shared almost 300 miles of the waterway with Ohio. Virginia boasted the most slaves and slaveholders in the union. The river also formed almost a 200-mile border between Ohio and Kentucky. Despite retaining the ninth-largest number of slaves, Kentucky claimed the second-highest number of slaveholders.

Runaway slaves discovered the majority of southern Ohioans maintained commercial and personal ties to the South, and thus retained sympathetic views to slavery.

Ohio entered statehood in 1803 as the first state that explicitly prohibited slavery, as mandated by the 1787 Northwest Ordinance. This conformed with northern Ohio's settlers, who possessed strong ties to abolitionist New England.

In 1833 Great Britain outlawed slavery in almost all its colonies, including Canada. The draw northward intensified for free blacks and escaped slaves with the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, which gave Southerners authority to intrude upon free soil with only a simple writ to reclaim alleged slave property. A federal marshal could require citizens — regardless of their personal convictions — to assist with the apprehensions. The legislation also strictly prohibited people from aiding runaways. And yet, the decree actually deepened the exodus.

Sandusky's first documented fugitive arrived in 1820 on the yet nameless Underground Railroad. His Kentucky master followed close behind. Black hostler John Dunker secluded the slave in Marsh's Tavern, at the corner of Water and Wayne streets, until a Captain Shephard whisked him away to Canada aboard the steamboat *Walk-in-the-Water*.

A PROPER NAME: UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Tradition links a onetime Sandusky resident with the clandestine operation's eventual moniker, the Underground Railroad. An often repeated story, originating in Ripley, Ohio, tells of runaway Tice Davids diving into the Ohio River from the Kentucky shore. After his master located a skiff and reached the opposite side, his quarry had vanished. The frustrated slaveholder complained his slave "must have gone off on an underground road."

Sandusky's connection kept pace with the tales of breathtaking escapes and heartbreaking captures on the network crisscrossing Ohio. Harriet Beecher Stowe's controversial "Uncle Tom's Cabin" patterned two characters after runaways passing through Sandusky. In 1830, Josiah Henson escaped bondage in Kentucky and fled to Sandusky with his family. From there they obtained boat passage to Buffalo, and eventual freedom in Canada. Although Stowe's "Tom" never obtained freedom, she modeled her devout Christian protagonist after Henson.

Eight years after Henson fled Kentucky, a slave woman carrying a small child chanced crossing the newly frozen river to Ripley. Despite breaking through the ice several times, she reached free soil and eventually made it to Sandusky. As the story goes: The woman cut her hair, dressed as a male, clothed her son as a girl, and boarded the *Arrow* to Canada. She became Stowe's "Eliza."

LOCAL HEROES

The escapes north succeeded only with broad-based support. Milan's Quaker Peter Hathaway, Lyme Settlement's Abner Strong, and Huron's farmer Jabez Wright offered sanctuary beyond Sandusky. Well-known Sandusky residents C.C. Keech, Henry Merry, Lucas Beecher and Rush Sloane — along with other prominent citizens — provided refuge. When Oran Follett admonished his wife for her illegal activities, she replied, "Husband, there is a higher law."

A preconception exists that primarily white conductors operated Underground Railroad stations, but Sandusky joins other sites contradicting this misconception. Numerous black people unselfishly aided fugitives. Josiah Henson frequently returned from Canada via Sandusky during forays into Kentucky. Black barber Grant Ritchie effectively conducted others before fleeing himself in 1834.

The Rev. Thomas Boston moved to Sandusky in 1839 and immediately transformed his home into a station. Second Baptist Church, originally formed by escaped slaves and freeborn blacks in 1849 as the Zion Baptist Church, remained active throughout the era. Today, Americans can look back with appreciation at the exploits of these selfless people, who conducted hundreds of fugitives through Sandusky on the Underground Railroad.

The scores of nameless area residents who faced the same hazards must also be saluted. Their greatest reward, however, likely derived from the warm smiles and sincere handshakes given by those departing on their journey to freedom.

Randy Koch is chairman of the Erie County Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee.