

Leaders of liberation

Sandusky Register, February 20, 2021, Tom Jackson.

SANDUSKY — Black people in Sandusky actively participated in fighting slavery both before and during the Civil War. They helped run the Underground Railroad, the secret network that helped escaped slaves make their way to Canada. They fought and sometimes died in the Union Army against the Confederacy. And Frederick Douglass, the famed Black abolitionist and leader, spoke in Sandusky during the Civil War. These accounts are drawn from the Sandusky history blog maintained by Sandusky Library at sanduskyhistory.blogspot.com and the Erie County Historical Society website, among other sources.

Second Baptist Church and the Underground Railroad

Second Baptist Church, 315 Decatur St., is still an active church in Sandusky today. Before the Civil War, it was a station in the Underground Railroad, giving shelter and aid to escaped slaves on their way north. African-American Christians founded the church in 1849 as Zion Baptist Church. Just before the Civil War, the church was reorganized at its present site on Decatur Street as First Regular Anti-Slavery Baptist Church.

Many African-Americans in Sandusky figure into the church's history. The Sandusky History blog mentions Sophronia Jefferson, born as a slave in Kentucky in 1842 and who died in 1927.

In a 1924 newspaper interview, Jefferson said it was difficult for slaves in the South to get news during the Civil War; slaves were banned from mentioning Abraham Lincoln's name. Jefferson said news of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 was the greatest moment of her life. Her second-best day: News of Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender in 1865, which clinched the Union's victory.

Sandusky was well known as a destination on the Underground Railroad. Sandusky is mentioned in "Uncle Tom's Cabin," a novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe that was the best-selling novel of the 19th century.

Black soldiers in the Civil War



About 15 Black men from Sandusky boarded a train in 1863 to travel to Readville, Massachusetts, so they could enlist in the Massachusetts 55th Volunteer Infantry. Harrison Washington survived the war, returning to Ohio for 30 years before moving to Kentucky, but William H. Johnson died from wounds he received on July 2, 1864, while fighting in James Island, South Carolina.

An 1860 lithograph depicts the storming of Fort Wagner by Black soldiers of the Massachusetts volunteer infantry, which included members from Ohio. The battle is depicted in the movie "Glory."



According to a resolution passed several years ago by the Ohio House, 511 African-American soldiers from Ohio served in the 54th and 55th Regiments of the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. They saw plenty of action, fighting in battles in South Carolina and Florida, including the Second Battle of Fort Wagner, depicted in the 1989 movie "Glory."

Five other Black soldiers from Sandusky who served with the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry also returned home. Morris Darnell and Elijah J. Brown are buried in Oakland Cemetery. Frank Gardner, Joshua Cole and Thomas Robinson are buried at the Ohio Veterans Home.

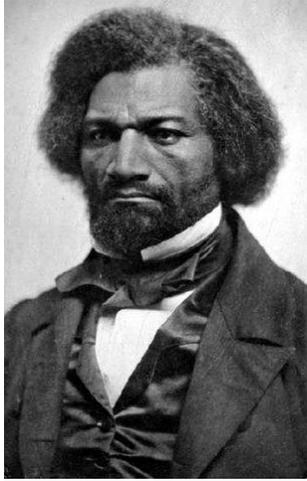
The tombstone of Miles Walker, a Black Civil War veteran from Sandusky.

Miles Walker, born in Tennessee about 1830, enlisted in the Union Army in 1863. He served as a cook for Company E of the Third Ohio Volunteer Cavalry. He settled in Sandusky after the war, married a local woman, and is buried in Oakland Cemetery.

Frederick Douglass speaks in Sandusky

Frederick Douglass, the famous American abolitionist and orator, on March 16, 1864, while the Civil War was still raging, at Norman Hall on Water Street in Sandusky. His topic was "Mission of the War."

The Sandusky Daily Commercial Register reported, "Suffice it to say that it was a masterly effort – both as to matter and manner was worthy of the speaker's reputation as one of the first orators in our country."



Incidentally, Douglass' son, Lewis Douglass, Frederick Douglass' son, served alongside Black soldiers from Ohio in the 54th Regiment. Lewis Douglass was wounded in the Second Battle of Fort Wagner but survived.

Frederick Douglass in 1856