THE BANKS HOMESTEAD: The Underground Railroad in Walled Lake, Michigan

By Judith Mendelsohn Rood

In 1995, a few years after I moved to Commerce Township, Michigan, I learned that a local landmark, known as the Foster Farmhouse, was going to be demolished. I researched the matter at the Walled Lake library, and I found that for many years various individuals had tried to find ways to preserve the farmhouse. The file on these preservation efforts dated back to 1974, when local historian Glenn Ruggles, with input from Robert E. Donohue, Jr., a local preservationist, submitted an application to the Michigan Historical Commission nominating the structure to the Historical Register on behalf of the owner, Louil Foster.[1] This attempt failed, but on December 6, 1983, Robert Tuttle, a member of the Commerce Township Area Historical Society wrote a letter to the owner of the property, Roy Mercer, thanking him for his "fine cooperation in preserving the historical integrity of the Foster Farmhouse."[2] On January 20, 1984, Martha M. Bigelow, Director of the Michigan History Division and State Historic Preservation Officer, wrote to Mercer upon learning of his desire to develop condominiums on the property. She informed him that her office had

> reviewed the historical documentation and an assessment of the significance of the farmstead and is of the opinion that the Banks-Bradley-Foster Farm may be of first importance as a site on the Underground Railroad.

Bigelow then warned Mercer, "The undertaking of site preparation work on the property may cause changes in the quality of the historical and archeological characteristics that give the farmstead significance." She told Mercer that the Michigan History Division was concerned that "the development could possibly destroy or alter part of the property." "In particular," she wrote, "we hope that the tunnel and its entrances will not be harmed to the point where this important resource or the information it might yield about the underground railroad is lost or irretrievable." She asked Mercer to consider "a site plan and development that avoids any disruption to the portion of the site that was associated with the underground railroad stop." She also asked Mercer "to engage a professional archaeologist who would be on location during construction and would salvage any information located at the site." Bigelow suggested that he "may want to apply to the Michigan History Division for a National Register grant-in-aid to conduct this archaeological investigation and to nominate this property to the National Register of Historic places." She concluded, "[t]he History Division wants to assist you in any way it can to recognize this important historic site. We would welcome meeting with you to discuss this further."[3] The result of this letter was that Mercer backed away from listing the property.

Then, in 1987, Bigelow reviewed documentation on professional qualifications submitted by Robert E. Donahue, Jr. and accepted his status as "historian". In 1992, Donohue, who by this time had also received certification by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior as an architectural historian, submitted a report documenting the condition of the Foster farmhouse at that time. He found that while the "maintenance condition of the exterior and interior items is very poor" the "structural condition appears to be quite good," concluding that the "house is worthy of historic preservation."[4] At this time, the City of Walled Lake commissioned a reuse study of the house, but no one came forward with a plan to finance the purchase of the parcel from the new owners of the property and its restoration. The asking price was $250,000 for the house and the acre: the deed stipulated that the house was to be preserved, but not where the developers offered to pay $12,000 towards moving the house: this represented the cost they would have paid to have it demolished. In August, 1996 I proposed that a group of concerned citizens form a community foundation to raise the money to save the house, which was by then under a demolition order. The council moved to suspend the order to allow the grass roots effort to raise money: within a few months $26,000 was collected, not enough to buy the parcel.

In September Kathryn B. Eckert, the State Historic Preservation Officer reiterated her support of the preservation of the farmstead and listing it on the state and national registers. She also stated,

> "[I]f preservation on site is not possible, it would be preferable that it be moved to protect it from demolition until the funds can be found for its rehabilitation. Our staff has applied the national register criteria to the property and determined it meets criteria A, B, & C. The house is significant for its architecture and association with historical personage (sic) and, if it can be documented through primary source materials, its role as a station on the underground railroad."[5]

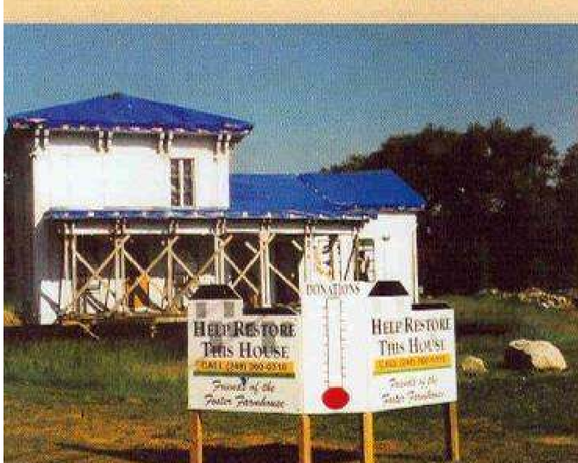
At first the Friends of the Foster Farmhouse collected money under the umbrella of the Foundation for Excellence, a local foundation supporting the Walled Lake School District. Within a few months the Lakes Area Community Foundation was constituted with the help of the City of Walled Lake. The Friends of the Foster Farmhouse began a public relations campaign focusing on local businesses and schools, and community support for the project was very encouraging. But time was running out.

A local resident proposed moving the house as a last resort to an undeveloped municipal park known as Riley Field, and the City Council agreed. Perk tests showed that the water table there was high: a special foundation had to be designed, and in May 1997, the house was moved. The Walled Lake Downtown Development Authority is slated to restore the rescued structure to serve as its headquarters, and the Friends of the Foster Farmhouse, who rallied to save it, will have a permanent home there.

The story of the Banks family was the story of those who had set out to build a better society based upon faith and action.

From this history, it seemed to me that the house was a treasure: the homestead of a family whose story was that of many forgotten American heroes. The story of the Banks family was the story of those who had set out to build a better society based upon faith and action. For a time, I was privileged to teach Michigan history at William Tyndale College and to work with a band of citizens to save and preserve the Foster Farmhouse. Collaborating with the local public school district, we hosted a major fundraiser, a concert of underground railroad song performed by Detroit's Highland Park Baptist Church Choir in honor of Black History Month. The Walled Lake Consolidated School District named its new middle school for Dr. Sarah Gertrude Banks.

Although I've moved on to teach at Biola University in La Mirada, California, I believe that the story of the Banks family is an important one in our national history. We know the broad contours of American religious history, the contributions of theologians and politicians, but we hear little about the men and women who wove the fabric of American life. This preservation story represents, to me, an example of how Christian historians can integrate their faith and serve their communities, to bring history to life and to remind people of the role of faith in confronting the evils of their times.



In a time of trouble and danger, Freeborn Henry and Amanda Banks fearlessly and anonymously lived their faith and did what they could to help their neighbors escaping slavery for freedom. Ever since we began the preservation battle, people have searched for documentary evidence that the house really was a station on the Underground Railroad, although it is widely recognized by scholars that such evidence is rare. The work was dangerous: those who served as station masters or conductors could be heavily fined or jailed for their actions. Typically no records were kept. Indeed, in the National Park Service's official webpage "Exploring a Common Past: Researching and Interpreting the Underground Railroad, Part II: Using Primary Sources: the Historian's Toolbox" begins with the question: "Where do we find evidence for a historical phenomenon that was, for the most part, unwritten and sometimes even unspoken?" The National Park Service's guide to researching the history of reputed Underground Railroad sites states that although good documentary sources are often lacking because "those involved in the effort were not always interested in leaving written evidence of their activities, they could not escape leaving footprints of their existence and activities in all kinds of ways."[6]

The Banks family, like the majority of the people involved in the Underground were not likely to leave paper trails of their activities or identify their underground contacts. The aiding and abetting of fugitive slaves in the United States during the nineteenth century was, after all, a highly controversial and illegal activity, punishable by fine, branding, incarceration, and enslavement. It is thus neither surprising not (sic) accidental that we lack consolidated and detailed written records about the process. Oral tradition fills a great void in the largely unwritten history of the Underground Railroad, and can contain valuable references to names, dates, and locations, events, and connections which can be documented in written primary and secondary sources.[7]

In part, I wrote this history of the Banks family in order to demonstrate that the farmhouse should be listed on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Register and should be recognized by the National Park Service for inclusion in the National Underground Network to Freedom program. In 1998, Congress passed an act to establish the network, due to the following findings:

1) The Underground Railroad, which flourished from the end of the 18th century to the end of the Civil War, was one of the most significant expressions of the American civil rights movement during its evolution over more than three centuries;

2) The Underground Railroad bridged the divides of race, religion, sectional differences, and nationality; spanned State lines and international borders; and joined the American ideals of liberty and freedom expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to the extraordinary actions of ordinary men and women working in common purpose to free a people;

3) Pursuant to title VI of Public Law 101-628 (16 U.S.C. 1a-5 note; 104 Stat. 4495), the Underground Railroad Advisory Committee conducted a study of the appropriate means of establishing an enduring national commemorative Underground Railroad program of education, example, reflection, and reconciliation.

Of particular interest to the Friends of the Foster Farmhouse was

4) The Underground Railroad Advisory Committee found that—

(A) although a few elements of the Underground Railroad story are represented in existing National Park Service units and other sites, many sites are in imminent danger of being lost or destroyed....

(B) There are many important sites which have high potential for preservation and visitor use in 29 states....

(C) No single site or route completely reflects and characterizes the Underground Railroad, since its story and associated resources involve networks and regions of the country rather than individual sites and trails; and

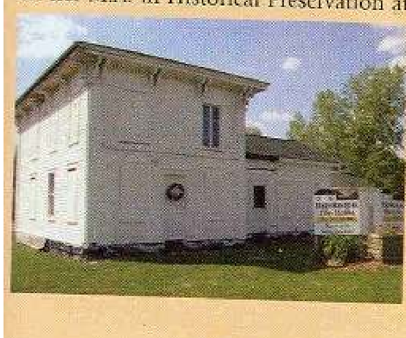
(D) Establishment of a variety of partnerships between the Federal

Government and other levels of government and the private sector would be most appropriate for the protection and interpretation of the Underground Railroad.[8]

More than that, I wrote this article because of the significance of the Banks' homestead to local, state, and national history. Indeed, as Kathryn Eckert wrote in 1996, "With continued growth in Oakland County it is increasingly important to safeguard properties such as this that serve as a tangible reminder of the social, economic and political development of our state."[9]

For many years physical evidence—hidden staircases, secret passages, garrett rooms, "tunnels" to barns—was cited to prove that a place really had been part of the Underground Railroad

For our purposes, two kinds of evidence have been brought forward to prove that the Banks family participated in the Underground Railroad as stationmasters and conductors: physical evidence and family history, based upon oral traditions and family memoirs. For many years physical evidence—hidden staircases, secret passages, garrett rooms, "tunnels" to barns—was cited to prove that a place really had been part of the Underground Railroad.[10] Regarding the Banks' homestead, Ann Marie Meenahan, in an M.A. thesis written for the University of Michigan, asserted such physical evidence based upon oral traditions. Meenahan interviewed Geraldine Graham, the daughter of Ruth Carey Dodge, of Walled Lake, who told her that she walked along the creek with her grandfather in the 1920s while he explained to her the story of the Banks' farm. Meenahan, working on her M.A. in Historical Preservation at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in 1983, tried to establish physical evidence so that the house could be preserved at a time that it was first being threatened by development. Meenahan's findings convinced the Michigan History Division to support the nomination of the house on for registration with the state historical preservation office.[11] Meenahan described what Graham had told her:



> He showed her the location of the entrance of the tunnel in the marsh. At the end of the Civil War, both ends of the tunnel had been filled in for two main reasons. Primarily, the Banks did not want those parties sympathetic to the southern cause to know they had assisted fugitive slaves during the Civil War. Secondly, they wanted to prevent any unauthorized individuals from sleeping in the shed.

Meenahan then went on to investigate the physical evidence *in situ*:

> After personal inspection of the site, the physical evidence of the tunnel becomes excitingly apparent. Geraldine Graham...informed me that the shed used with the tunnel is no longer standing. However, I found an approximately 2'x 3'x 2' deep hole beside the foundation of a porch on the site. Additionally, protruding from this hole, I found another length of exposed foundation which clearly had nothing to do with the existing porch structure. I noticed that the porch, (sic) is a modern structure which has been built on a previously existing foundation (the appearance of the concrete used and the form of the foundation matches that of the remaining sheds which were constructed in the same era). Therefore, I concluded that the shed spoken of by Mrs. Graham was standing on what is now this porch foundation.
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> The hole next to the foundation has visible wood boards under the grass. The wood is decaying and breaks easily. My companion and I swept the dirt away from an area on the edge of the hole. An approximately 2' square of exposed wood board is a portion of the roof of the tunnel. Some wood beams to hold the wood boards were also found protruding out of the grass. Thus, based on the discovery of the extant shed foundation, located next to the hole in which the actual roof of the underground tunnel is located, I blieved (sic) that I had unearthed the shed entrance of the tunnel. I called Mrs. Graham, and she confirmed my interpretation of these discoveries.
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> At the marsh entrance of the tunnel I found almost twenty field stones scattered in the brush....
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> Another interesting feature on the site is a visible mound depicting the pathway of the tunnel's roof from the shed entrance down to the marsh entrance. From this we can conclude that the tunnel has not caved in entirely yet, and if the Banks did not fill the entire tunnel with dirt, one could still walk through it....[12]

Some aspects of Meenahan's argument are wrong. The Banks' sons, Charles Henry and Thomas Paul, served in the Union Army band, and, upon their return to Walled Lake from service in the Civil War, often held concerts in town, playing their regimental music. The Banks trumpeted their support of the Union cause, and it's easy to understand why local history got mixed up with underground history myths about tunnels and secret passageways to outbuildings. Yet in their own accounts, family members told of fugitives coming to the door, eating in the house, resting there, and then riding by night in Freeborn Henry's wagon to the next stop. These facts contradict Meenahan's assumption that "the slaves could sleep in the tunnel during the day, collect the food and money that was left for them without meeting their benefactors face to face, without leaving a scent for the hounds to track."[13]

When the farmhouse was moved in May, 1996 we noticed two remarkable features pertaining to the Underground Railroad theory: a large cistern was located beneath the kitchen floor outside of the foundations of the Greek Revival structure on the east side of the house, and a staircase going to the garrett space in the attic of this same wing was blocked and disguised as shelving visible only from the kitchen.

Years after Meenahan's interview with Geraldine Graham, two Friends of the Foster Farmhouse spoke with her again. This account was much more detailed:

Ruth Tuttle: We are going to talk to Gerry Graham. Gerry is from the old Carey family and Gerry is going to tell us about her history in the old Carey family and what she knows about the Underground Railroad.

> ...*Ruth T.*: You lived across the street from the Bradley's (then owners of the Banks' Homestead) didn't you?
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> *Gerry G.:* My grandfather and Mort Bradley were very good friends. They belonged to the Masonic Temple and they used to go on trips together. They borrowed farm machinery from each other. Mr. Bradley was a widower. He had one daughter, Ruth and she kept house for him. She liked children and so did he, so Grandpa used to take me down there when he would go down there to visit Mort Bradley, he would take me along. That is how I happened to be shown the place that they kept the slaves for safe haven.
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> Ruth T.: So where was that place, Gerry?
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> *Gerry G.:* It was in their, uh, they had a feed barn, that they kept all of their bales of hay and grain, you know and they kept stuff in. It was a very large building. It was as large as their barn, almost. But, uh, uh, it was a well-built building. In fact, all of the buildings were kept up good in those days. So, my grandmother had shown me a grave in the Richardson Cemetery that was her brother's. He was killed in the Civil War. I was all excited about it and she told me about the Civil War and the slaves and everything. Those slaves were something new to me because, at that time, no one in this area had any slaves, you know. That was southern people more that had slaves. And then she told me about how they had helped these slaves make their way here, to get across the river to Canada to escape. She told me that the Bradley farm had been a stop on the Underground Railroad. Boy, I went crazy. Kids!! I was about 8 years old, I guess and I immediately, I had to see. So, we went down there and Mr. Bradley showed me where they crossed on the Greenaway Drain, down there. There was a lot of activity in those days and it was a bustling little creek running down there with some stones, you know. He showed me how they used to come down the drain to throw their scent off so the dogs couldn't follow. They would go across the creek there and go up to the back door of the Bradley house. There on the back part of the house had been built in and it was the kitchen. There was a bell there, but it didn't ring outside, it rang inside. That is what they had used. The slaves would go up there or whoever was conducting them and ring the bell. So, then the people inside would escort them in and let them go out through the fruit cellar and they would take them out through this grain barn. Well, my grandfather and Mr. Bradley were kind enough to move these, you [know] those bales of hay were huge and really heavy and they moved them to show me this trap door in the floor of the grain barn, where they lifted up the trap door and Mr. Bradley took a lantern and showed me down inside. There was, umm, well, it would be two thirds of the size of this (room) and probably about eight feet deep and lined with straw and there was even some dishes down there where they had given the slaves that were going to hide there, food in dishes that were still down in there, pottery things. He explained to me that the reason that they had food and had straw down in there, to make a soft bed. Well, that was because they might have to stay there a day or two or even longer if there was a hunt on for them. Oh, I was completely just discomboomerated (*sic*), you know. Boy! This was fascinating, you know. I wanted to get down in there, but they wouldn't let me because they would have to lift me in and out. So anyways, that was, uh, that's how I happened to see that, that, uh, uh, place and they said that the slaves would have to stay there until there was transportation arranged for them to go to Detroit or some other safe place. And, uh, my grandfather, of course, sold potatoes and produce to Eloise (hospital in Detroit). He used to go with a wagon. There were a lot of the farmers that did.
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> *Ruth T.:* Eloise was the state mental hospital?
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> *Gerry G.:* Uh-huh, yeah. To get them (the slaves) that much farther. So that's the story of it and I have never forgot it. You know, Ruth, this was real, not much interesting happened to me living with my grandparents, really. You know. Life was rather dull and I didn't have any brothers and sisters. So, this was really interesting as far as I was concerned. I have always remembered it and every time I ever went down the road and saw the water running down through there, I thought about those people coming down there, having to come down there, get in the water and go up there in the pitch black and get help.
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> *Robbie Falkenberg:* Tell us where the Greenaway Drain went.
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> *Gerry G:* Well, it came from what is now Maple Road. Uh, it used to be woods and swamp and it was the drain that ran across and went underneath Pontiac Trail and uh, after it crossed underneath Pontiac Trail, it came out as a creek that ran across Mort Bradley's pastureland.[14]

Alas, this archeological evidence is no longer there, and there was no time for specialists to come in to analyze the structure and record the evidence before the developer razed the foundation. However, Graham's story seems to support what the Friends of the Foster Farmhouse were able to see when the house was lifted for moving. To strengthen this evidence, I will present strong contextual evidence: a sociopolitical history of the Banks family that presents the motivations and beliefs of the family that led them to participate in the Underground Railroad.

I dedicate this tale to those Friends of the Foster Farmhouse who will continue the work of historic preservation in Walled Lake. Perhaps this story will inspire others to continue to learn about their neighbors and to love one another as heirs to the American legacy of faith in action. My engagement in this project presented me with a chance to work at the interstice between popular and professional history at a time that an important era of American history was gaining renewed significance. I hope that my contribution serves specialists in the field and the interested public, and might inspire others to help preserve our nation's religious history.

The intersection at Commerce Road and Pontiac Trail in Walled Lake, Michigan is completely unremarkable today. There's a telephone service exchange, auto dealership (both built in 1967), a post office (2001) apartment buildings (2000), and medical offices (2002) all on the northwest corner. The old white house and the big red barn that stood there for over 150 years are gone. The little creek—known as the Greenway Drain-- is lost behind the medical buildings, and the lovely grove of oaks and maples is gone, too. So were hopes that the acre of land where the house stood would become a park. The developer and lawyers had seen to that, despite the efforts of the Foster Family to ensure its survival into the next century. In 1996, after a battle with the developer failed to keep the old house in place, the City of Walled Lake agreed to work with the Friends of the Foster Farmhouse to move the dilapidated building about a mile down the road to a rundown city park. On May 26, Pontiac Trail and the intersection at Maple Road and Pontiac Trail were closed to traffic. Power, traffic, telephone, and cable crews worked hard and fast to move lines, railroad gates and signals as the house made its way slowly to its new setting on a flatbed truck. Crowds came out to watch the procession. Television helicopters buzzed overhead, and tv crews worked the audience for soundbites. A whole community, led by schoolchildren, had come together to make sure that the story of the Foster Farmhouse could be retold to their grandchildren, too. It was a fitting legacy for the Banks family.

The story of the Foster Farmhouse weaves together many of the great themes of nineteenth century American history: the integration of America and its indigenous peoples into the economic and political hegemony of Western Europe; the struggle for religious freedom; the frontier and the pioneers, slavery and the abolitionist movement, women's rights, the Civil War, urbanization.

Long before the Banks had homesteaded, Potawatami and Ottawa, both branches of the Algonquin tribe, had been traveling along the trails that marked off the eastern and southern borders of what would become their property. Pontiac Trail headed east and west, between what eventually would become Detroit and Lansing. Commerce Road wound north towards neighborhoods in a township that would only see a housing boom in the 1990s. Walled Lake, thought to have been walled off by the natives so that they could fish more readily from its swampy shores, was the place of regular summer encampments as the tribes migrated from one region of Michigan to another.

By the time the French landed in Michigan, intertribal warfare had led the Potawatami, Ottawa, and Chippewa to find relative safety in the territories that would become Michigan, and to seek alliances for protection against their enemies. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth century, trade between the French and native Americans at Ft. Pontchatrain helped to diffuse European goods throughout Michigan. The Potawatami proved themselves to be the French's best allies in their struggles with the British, and when the British won sovereignty over the area the Potawatami soon became their best allies against the long-knives: the Americans. By 1774 the Potawatami had built new towns near today's Ann Arbor.[15] There's little evidence of the voyageurs in this part of Michigan, but we know they must have tromped and paddled their way through here as they looked for trading opportunities. Alexander Henry told of his adventures in northern Michigan among the Chippewa to inform them that their father, the French king, had handed over their territory to the English king, whom they now "ought to regard as their father." Henry says that the Chippewas responded to his declaration with that "expression of approbation" so familiar to us among our friends and neighbors to the north, the Canadians and "Yupers" living on the

Upper Peninsula—"Eh!"[16] Soon, many settlers of English origin would come to Michigan. Among them were Freeborn Henry and Amanda Banks.

The European invasion of the Americas, tentative and hesitant initially, had dramatic consequences for three continents: first, and most obvious, for the Americas and its various civilizations and native peoples; second, for Europe which soon developed a voracious appetite for the land, products and staples of the Americas; and third, for Africa which, in time, came to provide the workforce which broke open key areas of the Americas to profitable cultivation.[17]

Between 1796 and 1801 the fur trade had declined badly, and the Detroit area Potawatami tribal leadership began to consider farming their only hope

for economic survival.[18] However, few warriors were willing to discuss this, forcing the tribe to become dependent on government support. General William Henry Hull met with the Huron River Band, among others, with the result that the Potawatami ceded their lands in southwest Michigan by treaty on November 17, 1807. During the pre-War of 1812 period, the Detroit area Potawatamis were friendly to the Americans, unlike some of the Potawatami further west. The British and the Americans competed for Potawatami favor by providing supplies and whiskey. Some settlers had unfortunate experiences with drunken warriors wandering into their cabins, which were, according to Tocqueville, still sparsely scattered throughout the woodlands west of Pontiac. In September, 1810 some 2,000 Indians, including the Huron River Band Potawatami met with General Hull to collect provisions, and heeded his warnings that the rebellion led by Tecumseh and the Prophet would destroy their tribal leadership. The Detroit area Potawatami remained neutral in that conflict.[19] In 1820, Lewis Cass and Solomon Sibley, appointed by Secretary of War James C. Calhoun, began working on clearing the way for U.S. ownership of all Indian lands in Michigan.[20] In August 1821, nearly 3,000 Potawatami met with Cass in Chicago and ceded all of their lands in southwest Michigan from the St. Joseph River east to the boundary of the 1807 treaty lands, north to the Grand River. By 1830, most of the Huron Potawatami had moved westwards to join the St. Joseph Band and the Wabash Band in western Michigan and Illinois. In 1840, the murder of a settler named Wisner by a warrior known as "The Net" and his subsequent arrest, led to clashes between the few remaining Potawatami and Michigan settlers. Governor William Woodbridge released "The Net" in return for the departure of all remaining Indians in Michigan for Kansas, but they refused to go. The government then began to root out the last of the Indians. Some fled northward and joined with the Ottowa tribe, but most were on their way to Kansas by mid-November.[21]

At first, indentured European servants served the labor needs of the American landholders: criminals, prisoners, volunteers, political refugees, and others willing to become indentured laborers crossed the Atlantic: between 1630 and 1680, more than half of the 75,000 Britons who came to the American colonies were indentured servants. Most moved on after their time of service ended, and by the 1680s it was becoming difficult to find new indentured servants.[22]

As historian James Walvin put it in his study *Questioning Slavery*, "the obvious answer was the African slave."[23] Slaving had been going on for centuries: Muslim law entitled those who captured men and women in war to own and sell them as slaves, and Europeans were happy to engage in the trade. In 1660 about 1700 African slaves were already present in the Chesapeake region in small numbers, working alongside indentured European laborers and freemen. By 1695 the number of black slaves had reached 4700, and by 1690, there were about 7700. However, as the cultivation of tobacco in Virginia increased, so did the number of slaves, and between 1700 and 1740 black slaves numbered about 54,000. In 1680 only 7 percent of the population of Virginia was enslaved, by 1750 the number had risen to 44 per cent. British naval superiority had made the English the most important slave traders.[24] The horrors of the Atlantic passage defy comprehension. British slave traders brought millions of Africans to the Americas—four times the number of European immigrants who settled there down to about 1820. By the beginning of the Civil War, "the United States had the largest slave population the Western world had seen."[25]

During the eighteenth century—the century of the great European wars fought for political freedom, the American and French Revolutions—theologians and philosophers, slaves and free people were beginning to question the morality of slavery. In Great Britain, religious leaders—Quakers, Methodists, evangelical Anglicans, led by the great parliamentarians William Wilberforce and William Pitt—campaigned against slavery using primarily moral arguments. This campaign resulted in 1808 with a law prohibiting British subjects from participating in the Atlantic slave trade. In 1833, Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act that gave all slaves in the British Empire their freedom. However, in the independent and sovereign United States, slavery was permitted, although the Atlantic slave trade was illegal.

The Banks and the Underground Railroad

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 outlawed slavery and became a remote territory where free blacks, fugitive slaves, and abolitionists found a welcome home. Many emigrated from the "burned over" districts of New York, where the Second Great Awakening, ignited by the preaching of revivalists like Charles G. Finney, swept through. Thousands of the faithful boarded barges on the new Erie Canal and settled in the Northwest Territories.[26] These "enthusiasts" extended the reach of ecclesiastical abolitionism into Michigan. Historian Douglas M. Strong wrote about those abolitionists, "who confidently believed that their antislavery endeavors were helping to fulfill God's design for 'a perfect state of society.'"

In their efforts to bring about the consummation of a sanctified, millennial society, political abolitionists broadened their familiar tactic of noncoercive moral suasion to include a more activistic strategy. Because their traditional Whig and Democratic parties were unwilling to take a firm stand against slavery, these activists formed a third political party; Liberty Party supporters sought the abolition of slavery and other social evils as a preliminary step to the establishment of the government of God on earth.[27]

The Banks family, like many Methodist families, took part in the general sociopolitical ferment that led to the establishment of the anti-slavery and women's rights movements in the United States. By the mid-1830s, antislavery church reform had become a movement among evangelical activists away from their denominations, which had refused to condemn slaveholders, to come out of the old denominations and to reorganize themselves into independent, locally controlled "abolition" or "comeouter" churches."[28] These new churches exemplified a "spiritual democracy" which aimed at restructuring American culture through political action. Critics of this ecclesiastical abolitionist movement denounced these churches for having as their chief purpose support of the new Liberty Party in order to join the political battle over abolitionism. While their critics accused them of mixing religion and political power, these abolitionist congregations were proud of their identification with the antislavery cause.[29] In July, 1840, American abolitionists attended the world's first Anti-Slavery Convention in London, and in 1841 the Wesleyan Methodist Church was formed after the Methodist Episcopal Church split over a gag on "agitators..." as one anti-abolitionist critic put it, "who tend to disturb the peace and prosperity of the Church."[30]

In 1680 only 7 percent of the population of Virginia was enslaved, by 1750 the number had risen to 44 per cent.

Henry Banks, the father of Freeborn Henry, was born in Kent, England in 1764.[31] He married Susanna Hooley, from Manchester, in 1788. There the two had five children: Thomas, Mary Ann, Mary Ann the second, John and Elizabeth. The family emigrated to Massachussetts, where, according to the family history, Henry built and operated the first "cotton jinny" invented by Eli Whitney in 1793. The family's firstborn American son was born on October 23, 1803 in "Newburgh County of Orange, New York." He was given the name Freeborn, a common Wesleyan Methodist name, and a fitting one for the first son born in the land of the free.[32] Many persecuted Methodists were jailed and became indentured servants and sent to America after 1750, but we have no way of knowing whether this was true of Henry Banks, or anyone in the Banks family. Freeborn Henry soon had a younger brother, William Hooley, who was born at Goshen, Orange County, New York on April 16, 1806 and a little sister named Susannah.

The territory that would become the State of Michigan in 1836 was rapidly developing a network of roads, stagecoach service, and railroads. It took two days to take a team of horses or oxen through the swamp between Detroit and Birmingham in 1819, the first time this was done by a Major Williams. Settlers would then take a stagecoach on to Pontiac, and then, from there, follow the Indian trails westward.

Freeborn Henry was apprenticed as a bricklayer. Their father had died in 1818, and in 1830, Freeborn Henry and William came out to the village of Walled Lake, which Walter Hewitt had founded in 1825. Hewitt named the village for a distinctive glacial moraine along the north shore of the lake, which for years people thought to have been built by the native Americans to make fishing easier.[33] By 1832 the Walled Lake trading post housed a post office. Jesse Tuttle, an early settler, converted pioneer William Jarvis' log cabin into an inn in 1833 to accommodate the steady stream of settlers passing through the area.[34] Freeborn Henry bought 200 acres of land from the federal government on the north side of Pontiac Trail, and his brother bought 200 acres on the south side. The brothers spent two years clearing the forest and grubbing the fields, building log cabins, and getting their homesteads ready for domestic life. During this time, a mason, a carpenter, and a cooper shop opened in the village of Walled Lake.[35]

In 1832 the two brothers went back to New York. Freeborn Henry married Amanda Bassett, daughter of Nathan Bassett and Sara Standish Bassett, a descendant of Captain Miles Standish, who had come over in the Mayflower in 1620, and Captain William Bassett, who came on the Fortune in 1621. The couple settled in their log cabin in 1833. William married Jean Ferguson McWilliam in Leroy, New York, and brought her to his homestead in 1834. Together, the two brothers and their brides "endured all the hardships of pioneer life...." However, their proximity to the booming village of Walled Lake must have eased their lives considerably.

In 1839 the Strap Iron Railroad was opened between Detroit and Birmingham, and by 1843 it reached Pontiac. The line was known for its leisurely pace. Passengers joked, "If you're in a hurry go by team and wagon," but "[i]f you have lots of time, take the train." Passengers were expected to replenish the wood supply from piles along the rails at regular junctures. Amanda Banks told about one of her trips between Pontiac and Detroit. Near Royal Oak the train broke down. She said that when the passengers got thirsty after a long wait, one of them, a young man, offered to milk a cow grazing nearby in a pasture. The only problem was

that he would need a cup or a container. Amanda remembered that she had a brand new pair of slippers in her luggage, and gave these to the young man. The young man brought back slippers full of milk, giving each of the passengers a sip. Since the slippers were "a little worse for the experience, the passengers took up a collection to buy a new pair" for Amanda, and the train eventually got underway.[36]

Amanda must have resembled the pioneering woman described by the famed political observer Alexis de Tocqueville, who traveled broadly in the American frontier in 1831:

> By the side of the hearth sits a woman with a baby on her lap…in the prime of life; her appearance seems superior to her condition, and her apparel even betrays a lingering taste for dress; but her delicate limbs appear shrunken, her features are drawn in, her eye is mild and melancholy…. Her children cluster about her, full of health, turbulence, and energy…. Their mother watches them from time to time with mingled melancholy and joy: to look at their strength and her languor, one might imagine that the life she has given them has exhausted her own, and still she does not regret what they have cost her….[37]

In his journal for July 23, as he traveled near Pontiac, de Tocqueville remarked,

> Strange mixture of prosperity and poverty. The Americans in their log houses have the air of rich folk who have temporarily gone to spend a season in a hunting-lodge.[38]

The Banks' log cabin would have been much like the one he described:

> The house inhabited by these emigrants has no internal partition or loft. In the one chamber of which it consists, the whole family is gathered for the night. The dwelling is itself a little world, an ark of civilization amid an ocean of foliage: a hundred steps beyond it the primeval forest spreads its shades, and solitude resumes its sway.[39]

Freeborn Henry "followed his trade of mason and built walls, fireplaces, and chimneys in many homes for miles around as well as farming his land."[40] Freeborn Henry's mother, Susanna, died in his house in Walled Lake in 1847. Freeborn Henry's brother William became a prosperous farmer active in religious and political affairs. In politics he was from the first an uncompromising anti-slavery man, being first a Whig and then a Free-Soiler, and when the anti-slavery sentiment began to culminate in the forming of the Republican Party, he was one of the very first to give the movement his active, energetic support.[41]

William remained "a prominent member of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, and had for some years been a licensed exhorter." In 1868 he sold his place in Oakland County and moved to Grand Rapids and thence to a farm three miles north of Ada village where he lived until his death.[42]

Over the years, Freeborn Henry and Amanda had six children, all born on the Banks homestead: Marion (1834-1855), Charles Henry (1836-1923); Sarah Gertrude (1839-1926), Lucia Jane (died in 1843-1844), Thomas Paul (1845-1921) and Lucia Emma (1850-19?). At some point early on, the family took down the log cabin, reusing the logs to build a one story Greek Revival style home. Greek Revival was the first vernacular style in Michigan, emphasizing the citizenry's appreciation of American democracy. In his report, Robert E. Donohue, Jr. wrote,

> The Greek Revival style portion of the house, Section I, is said to have been built upon the site of a log cabin. Evidence of the log cabin can ge found in the basement of Section 1. Floor beams made from the exterior logs of a log cabin can be seen and support the floor. Those logs have notched ends which were necessary for log home construction. Door sills and/or window sills or headers have been notched into some of these round logs. The ends of the logs were re-notched with much smaller notches for use in connecting to new sill beams which were squared (hewn) for use as a sill plate upon the stone foundation. The practice of reusing wood components was quite common in the early settlement period of Michigan. The reuse of major building components saved considerable time in construction.
> The presence of those logs in the Banks-Bradley-Foster House adds a tremendous amount of architectural and historical significance to the structure and site.[43]

In 1852, Freeborn Henry and Amanda added a magnificent two story Italianate wing for their growing family.[44] Donohue notes that although the Italianate style had become very popular in Michigan between the 1850s and the 1880s, "very few" Italianate style homes were built in the vicinity, and that the Foster Farmhouse is the only remaining example in Walled Lake.[45]

Sarah Gertrude, Freeborn Henry and Amanda's daughter, was a true daughter of the wilderness, and shared much in common with the much more famous Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, who had emigrated to Michigan from England as a twelve year old in 1859. Sarah Gertrude, eight years older than Dr. Shaw, later became her friend in their work in the women's rights movement.[46] Dr. Shaw described her first glimpse of her new cabin near Grand Rapids, and her mother's reaction:

> What we found awaiting us were the four walls and the roof of a good-sized log house, standing in a small cleared strip of wilderness, its doors and windows represented by square holes its floor also a thing of the future, its whole effect achingly forlorn and desperate. It was late in the afternoon when we drove up to the opening that was its front door, and I shall never forget the look my mother turned upon the place. Without a word she crossed the threshold and, standing very still, looked very slowly around her. Then something within her seemed to give way and she sank upon the floor. She could not realize even then, I think, that this was really the place father had prepared for us, that here he expected us to live. When she finally took it in she buried her face in her hands, and in that way she sat for hours, without speaking or moving… (sic) While my eighteen year-old brother was picketing his horses and building his protective fires, my mother came to herself, but her face when she raised it was worse than her silence had been…
> [it] never lost the deep lines those first hours of her pioneer life had cut upon it.[47]

Perhaps Amanda Banks felt the same way when she first came upon her new home. Sarah Gertrude, however, grew up at ease with the wilderness and pioneer life. This daughter of the wilderness, whose grandfather had built the first cotton gin, itself a powerful motor of emancipation for women from the hard labor of spinning[48], would find herself a young woman at the epicenter of the woman's rights movement. Still stinging over the stormy debates over women participating in the world's first Anti-Slavery Convention and their exclusion from voting on the proceedings held in eight years before, suffragettes Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton called for a convention on women's rights in the United States.[49] The Wesleyan Methodist Congregation in Seneca Falls, New York hosted the first Woman's Rights Convention July 19 and 20, 1848, when Sarah Gertrude was just nine years old. For the rest of her life, Sarah Gertrude proudly told of her friendships with two of the movement's best known leaders: Dr. Anna Howard Shaw and Susan B. Anthony.[50] However, it was Sarah Gertrude who first went to medical school—she enrolled at the University of Michigan in 1871, while Dr. Shaw enrolled at Boston Medical School in 1882.

In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, in part the result of the famous Crosswhite Case, which had occurred in nearby Marshall, Michigan. The law forced northern citizens to actively aid in its enforcement—even those whose consciences could not abide obedience to a law which helped slavers and made criminals out of those who aided runaways.[51] It was in 1850 that those fleeing the slave catchers could no longer go safely to Detroit, and instead began to head up to Port Huron and Sarnia from the Old Territorial Road. During this time period, it's likely that the surreptitious route through Walled Lake began to pick up traffic.

The Banks family, true to the Wesleyan Methodist tradition of political activism, proudly took part in what has been called the most successful dissident movement in history. In a letter to the editor, James Clapp, the husband of Gertrude S. Clapp, daughter of Judson Lorenzo and Lucia (Banks) Sibley, granddaughter of Freeborn Henry and Amanda (Bassett) Banks, and namesake of the famous doctor, wrote in 1954 that,

> My late wife used to recall her aunt, Dr. S. Gertrude Banks, and her mother, Mrs. J.G. Sibley, telling about hearing rapping on the door of their home at the north edge of Walled Lake, when they were still young. Their mother and father would let one or more runaway slaves in and mother would prepare a meal for them while father was hitching up the team.
>
> He would be gone the rest of the night, returning early the next morning. No questions would be asked but they knew that the "underground railway" had carried more passengers to some Detroit "depot" with Canada as the next stop.[52]

Stops were located eight to ten miles apart. A number of stops are known in the area, including Wixom and Orchard Lake, along the Pontiac Trail.

Judson Standish Sibley, the family historian, explained in his biography of their heroine, Dr. Sarah Gertrude Banks, that,

> Slavery had become a major issue before the Civil War, and freeing the negro slaves in the South seemed morally right to most Northern people, who were called "abolitionists." The family of Henry Banks was of that belief, and the sons [Charles Henry and Thomas Paul] went to war to support the Northern cause. Before the War, the home of Henry Banks...became a "station" on the "Underground Railroad." The way the name came to be used was said to be as follows: an escaping slave was closely pursued to the Ohio River. When he came to it, he plunged beneath the surface and swam under water to escape capture or being shot. It is likely that he never came up alive, but when his former owner returned home, he said the slave had taken the "Underground Railroad." The colored slaves who escaped found Northern friends who aided them on their dash to Canada where they were "free." There was not only one Main (sic) line of the "Underground Railroad," but several branches, where the escaping slaves went on foot or often by covered wagon or buggy at night. During the day, the slaves remained under cover in homes or buildings of northern sympathizers.[53]

While he may not have had all the facts about the Underground Railroad straight, Sibley was proudly asserting the family's claims about Freeborn Henry and Amanda's role as conductors and stationmasters in the Underground Railroad at the height of the Civil Rights movement.

At age 17 Sarah Gertrude began teaching at the Scotch School on Pontiac Trail (in today's Orchard Lake) after taking a course at Ypsilanti Normal. She enrolled at the University of Michigan medical department, then located in Pontiac, in 1871. In those days, women studying medicine were jeered and insulted, but Sarah Gertrude persevered and graduated, one of the first two female doctors in the state of Michigan. After a few years of traveling and service as a physician to a captain's wife out West, she settled in Detroit and began her nearly fifty years of medical practice there in 1893. She died in Detroit on January 13, 1926.[54] It was said of her that "she pulled more doorbells on Woodward Avenue than any other doctor in Detroit."[55] Among her patients were Governor Hazen S. Pingree, Senator Thomas W. Palmer, Thomas McGraw, Emily Ward, Judge Edgar O. Durfee, R.A. Parker, Timothy Failes, Robert Miller, and Mrs. Henry Ford.

The Banks lived on their farm for forty two years, and moved to Northville in 1875. They sold the farm to John and Martha Dolbeer in 1874. According to Leona Mason Heitsch, "even though the war was over, the old route to the north

The Banks family, like many Methodist families, took part in the general sociopolitical ferment that led to the establishment of the anti-slavery and women's rights movements in the United States.

was still in use." In a letter, she wrote that his daughter Jennie recalled "travelers moving along the Underground Railway, en route to northern destinations, stopping at night for food." [56] Though the war was long over, former slaves still used the old underground routes to get to Canada, where life was appreciably better than in the Reconstruction South. The Dolbeers sold the farm in 1898 to Morton L. Bradley. Bradley, born in New York in 1865, came to farm in Commerce Township near Bogie Lake Road as a boy. He was an active member of the community, serving as a trustee and Sunday School superintendent of the Methodist church, where he and his wife both taught, as a member of the Walled Lake School Board, both before and after the consolidation of the district in the 1920s, and as Commerce Township Justice of the Peace, Clerk, and Treasurer. His daughter, Ruth, married Louil Foster, and they were the ones who gave the house its popular name. They moved to the house in 1941 when Morton died. Louil raised prize cattle and horses as a hobby, and drove school buses for the Walled Lake School District, and Ruth worked for 24 years in the Walled Lake Post Office.[57] All of Freeborn Henry Banks' family, except Lucia, are buried in the Walled Lake Cemetery. H

endnotes

1 I would like to thank the following for helping me to locate the scattered sources on the house: Ruth Tuttle, Janice Leonhardt, Devaney Donigan, Glenn Ruggles, the Walled Lake Library, Tracy White, Charlene Long, and Robert E. Donohue, Jr.
2 Appendix 2.
3 Appendix 3.
4 Appendix 3.
5 Appendix 4.
6 National Park Service, "Exploring a Common Past: Researching and Interpreting the Underground Railroad," http://www/cr/nps.gov/histor/exugrr/exuggr3.htm.
7 National Park Service, "Exploring."
8 National Park Service, "One Hundred and Fifth Congress of the United States of America, Second Session, An Act to Establish within the United States National Park Service the National Underground Network to Freedom Program...." http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/hr1635htm.
9 Appendix 4
10 See Appendix I, "Memories of the Foster Farmhouse as Told by Geraldine Graham to Ruth Tuttle and Robbie Falkenberg, Members of the Friends of the Foster Farmhouse, On October 13, 2001," transcript of tape, Walled Lake Downtown Development Authority and Ann Marie Meenahan, "The Banks-Bradley-Foster Farm: A Discovery," M.A. Thesis, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1983. "The following represents a possible route: The fugitives traversed through Ann Arbor on Pontiac Trail to Farmington. From there they followed the Green Way Drain...to the Banks farm where they received (sic) food, clothing and money. They continued to follow the creek to the railroad tracks going northeast until they reached Pontiac trail again. This trail leads to Port Huron, where they crossed the border to freedom." (iii)
11 Appendix 2.
12 Meenahan, 7-10.
13 Ibid., 13.
14 See Appendix I.
15 R. David Edmunds, *The Potowatami: Keepers of the Fire* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 99.
16 David A. Armour, *Attack at Michilimackinac: Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories between the years 1760 and 1764* (Mackinac Island: Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1971), 27-9.
17 James Walvin, *Questioning Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1.
18 Edmunds, 159.
19 Ibid., 174.
20 On Sibley, who became the first mayor of the town of Detroit, see http://www.historydetroit.com/people/solomon_sibley.asp.
21 Ibid., 270.
22 Ibid., 11.
23 Walvin, .
24 Ibid., 12. On the moral cost of this trade, see John Newton, (a British slave captain, who wrote "Amazing Grace" as a result of his conversion to Christianity and who became a powerful opponent of slavery)" A Reformed Slave Trader's Regrets c. 1745-1754," in David Northrup, editor, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1994), 80-89.
25 Northrup, xiii-xiv.
26 For an excellent introduction to the religious and political issues driving Abolitionism , see James H. Moorhead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978) and Douglas M. Strong's excellent study, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999).
27 Stong, 1.
28 Ibid., 2.
29 Ibid., 3.
30 Margaret McMillan, quoted in Anthony Patrick Glesner, "Laura Haviland," *Michigan Historical Review*, 30-1.
31 Gertrude Clapp, *Henry Banks History* mss.1940.
32 "Freeborn Garrettson," *Cyclopedia of Methodism*, 1882.
33 Glenn Ruggles, Walled Lake oral historian, presentation, Shenandoah Country Club, 1997.
34 Meenahan, 3.
35 According to Meenahan, the cooper was a William T. Banks, but perhaps this was William H. Banks.
36 Florence Selden, "Swamp Road, Then Uncertain Rail Line, Linked Early Pontiac to Neighbor Detroit," *Pontiac Press*, (July 31, 1951). The Selden family is related to the Sibley by marriage.
37 Quoted in Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 6-7.
38 "The Alexis de Tocqueville Tour: Exploring Democracy in America," Journal Entry: July 23, 1831. http://www.c-span.org/alexis/
39 Ibid.
40 Gertrude S. Clapp, "Henry Banks History," unpublished mss. Dated September 10, 1940.
41 "Obituary of William Hooley Banks," *Grand Rapids Times* in *Oakland County 1876-1900 Pioneer Clippings*.
42 Ibid.
43 Appendix 3.
44 When the house was moved, the Friends of the Foster Farmhouse were able to see how the original logs had been reused to support the first floor of the Greek Revival structure. Many small objects were dug up and preserved in the few days that the group was allowed by the developer to remove artifacts: the archeologist from the Cranbrook Institution, Michael Stafford, came out to the site and concluded that the arrowheads recovered from the site were collected by the family in the area and hoarded at their cabin, and that the rest of the site had been too disturbed by the building and rebuilding process to draw any sound conclusions about the site before 1830.
45 Appendix 3.
46 Anna Howard Shaw,"The Project Gutenberg Etext of The Story of a Pioneer by Anna Howard Shaw," ftp://sailor.gutenberg.org/pub/gutenberg/etext95/stpio10.txt. According to Judson Standish Sibley, Dr. Banks became a member of the Society of Mayflower Descendants, the Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the National American Woman's Suffrage Association, and the Oakland County Pioneer Society, among others. "History."

"Anna Howard Shaw," *Anna Howard Shaw Center*, Boston University, http://www.bu.edu/sth/shaw/#ahs. Like Sarah Gertrude, she was a Wesleyan Methodist. "In 1878, she was the second woman to graduate from Boston University School of Theology, but she was refused ordination by the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. She was one of the first women to be ordained in any branch of Methodism by the New York Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church in 1880. While serving Wesleyan Methodist Church in East Dennis, Massachusetts, Shaw earned a medical degree from Boston University."
47 Quoted in Flexner, 7.
48 Ibid, 53.
49 Carrie Chapman Catt and and Nettie Rogers Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968) 17-19.
50 Judson Standish Sibley, *The History of Dr. Sarah Gertrude Banks*, (self-published pamphlet, 1968).
51 Glesner, 35.
52 James Clapp, "Letter to the Editor," *Pontiac Press*, May 8, 1954.
53 Sibley, *History of Dr. Sarah Gertrude Banks*.
54 Clapp, mss. In 1997, the Walled Lake Consolidated School District named a new middle school in her honor, prompted by the Friends of the Foster Farmhouse. Sarah Gertrude Banks Middle School is located in Wixom on Charms Road.
55 Sibley, *History*. The other female physician was Dr. Lucy Arnold.
56 Leona Mason Heitsch, letter, January 24, 1992. Friends of the Foster Farmhouse Archives.
57 Lee Philp, "Genuine Michigan Farm," *Supplement to the Inter Lake News/ Lakeland Tribune*, (April 10, 11, 1968.)

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