

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
THE BANKS-BRADLEY-FOSTER FARM: A DISCOVERY

A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
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A673 HISTORIC PRESERVATION
MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE
PRESERVATION CONCENTRATION

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INTRODUCTION

. . . Slavery was the issue that could not be compromised, the issue that made men so angry they did not want to compromise. It put a cutting edge on all arguments. It was not the only cause of the Civil War, but it was unquestionably the one cause without which the war would not have taken place.¹

Michigan is known to have been opposed to slavery early in the 1830's. Detroit became familiar with slavery due to the presence of 78 male and 101 female slaves in the city.² In 1787, Michigan, as part of the Northwest Territory, passed a Northwest Ordinance to prohibit slavery.³ There were also several organizations in Detroit against slavery, for example the Anti-Slavery Society of 1837. This movement against the slavery system was developed by experiences with vicious slave owners and by the accounts and sentiments of the Detroit Tribune and other Detroit papers.⁴

The Fugitive Slave Act was the prime motivator of the antislavery drive. Instead of governing the return of fugitive slaves, it aroused the Northern sentiment in favor of the runaways. This act caused a vast expansion in the activities of the "Underground Railroad," the informal organized system by which Northern citizens helped the fugitives reach free territory. Walled Lake Village was one of the

secret terminals that assisted the runaways to a safe refuge under the British flag in Canada.⁵ 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 (a creek) to the Banks Farm where they recieved 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.

PART I

THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE
OF THE BANKS-BRADLEY-FOSTER FARM.

CHAPTER I

THE EARLY SETTLERS OF WALLED LAKE

The First Settlement

Walter Hewitt came from New York to Detroit and settled on the east shore of a lake, twenty-eight miles northwest of Detroit. He saw a stone wall in the lake, five to six feet above the water's edge. This wall was built by the Pottawattomie Indians on the north shore, which led to its present name, Walled Lake. Hewitt founded the village in 1825 with the first settlement located by the present intersection of Ladd Road and Pontiac Trail on Sec. 34. Pontiac Trail was an Indian trail used by the Pottawattomies and the Ottawas, both branches of the Algonquin Tribe.⁶ The great leader of this tribe was Chief Pontiac. Within the next decade, many pioneers settled on Pontiac Trail near Hewitt's log cabin home.

The 1833 Industrial Movement

By 1833 substantial growth and progress in Walled Lake Village had taken place. There was a rush of immigrants into Michigan because the inhabitants of the east coast had heard of Michigan's desirable lands and favorable climate. There was an influx of immigrants into the area. Numerous covered wagons heading west had used the Mohawk and Genessee turnpikes across New York from Albany to Buffalo. The Erie Canal opened for traffic in 1825. Detroit's first stage coach was in service by 1822 and by 1830 the Pontiac and Detroit Railroad was chartered. To accommodate the steady stream of home seekers, Jesse Tuttle, in 1833, converted William Jarvis' log cabin into an "Inn".

Walled Lake's first Post Office was located in a trading post in 1832. A separate facility for the Post Office was not constructed until 1949. Sawmills located in Pontiac and Farmington supplied the village with lumber until their own mill was built in 1840. In order to assist the booming construction, a blacksmith, Mr. Godfrey; carpenter, Randall Colvin; mason, F. H. Brooks; started their businesses in town. In 1833, the same year, the town's cooper shop was built by W. T. Banks. This shop made the barrels, pails and washtubs for the village for many years. The owners of these shops were the first prosperous citizens of Walled Lake.

The first frame house was also built in 1833 by Hiram Barrett. (This house still stands at 2255 Pontiac Trail.) Mr. Barrett was a prominent representative in politics of the country and state. 1833 was additionally the year of the establishment of the first general store, the first religious service and the first school.

The Farm of Freeborn H. Banks

The first pioneers, Mr. and Mrs. Freeborn H. Banks, who settled on the site of the present "Banks-Bradley-Foster Farm" came in 1833 from New York.⁷ Due to the limited population of Walled Lake Village at this time, we must assume that W. T. Banks, the cooper shop owner, was a relative of Freeborn H. Banks. Furthermore, the expensive Italianate Victorian house could only have been built with the support of a wealthy businessman, such as the village cooper. The Banks built this wood framed home in 1852. The dates for the two barns and three sheds are unknown.

One of the many reasons why this Farm Homestead is historically significant is because of the Banks' daughter, Gertrude. Gertrude Banks was a member of the first class of women admitted to the University of Michigan in the year 1871. "She graduated from the Medical School and for nearly fifty years was a practicing physician in Detroit."⁸

CHAPTER II

THE "UNDERGROUND RAILROAD" OF WALLED LAKE

The Friendly Quakers

Farmington was settled in 1823 by the Quakers.⁹ This village, nine miles southeast of Walled Lake, is connected to Walled Lake by Pontiac Trail. It is known that the Quakers, during the Civil War, made significant contributions toward the abolition of slavery.¹⁰ We also know that "Signals" were given to the slaves during their journey on the underground railroad. (The taped interview with Ruth Carey Dodge explains this system.) These signals were pieces of information given to help the slaves proceed in the right direction. The route had periodic "resting stops" every eight to ten miles so the slaves could acquire food, clothing, and money. The signals also told the slaves where these resting stops were so that after walking throughout the night, they could stop and hide "underground" someplace out of sight during the day. Dr. Robert Fayne, Professor at Oakland University, has conducted extensive research on the underground railroad. He has personally walked one possible route of the fugitives through Michigan. Dr. Fayne informed me of some interesting accounts of

evidence we now have today. He stated that Pontiac Trail was definitely used because of its direction towards Fort Huron. Dr. Payne advised me of information to look for in order to verify a hypothetical route. "Quakers played an important role along Pontiac Trail", he said. One must also find another resting stop within eight to ten miles. The Quaker settlement in Farmington, along Pontiac Trail, nine miles away, was quite possibly the place the fugitives acquired signals of the resting place at the "Eanks' Farm".

The Fear and Sympathy for the Slaves

Most settlers of Walled Lake had a sympathy towards the fugitives, but certainly not everyone. There were several men on the lookout for the slaves with their bloodhounds in order to be rewarded in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Act. Prejudice also existed which resulted from a fear and uncertainty about the slaves. People wanted to help the slaves without having to come into contact with them. The Quakers were one of the few groups of people that dared to speak to the runaways. However, any communication between the settlers about the underground railroad had to be kept strictly secret. Trust amongst the neighbors was

essential in order to keep the organization going. Thus, although the settlers sympathized with the slaves, they were not only afraid of them, but were more afraid of the punishment for helping them to escape their southern captors.

The Banks' "Underground"

Until now, there was no concrete evidence about the Banks' Farm being used in the underground railroad. When word of the Farm's possible destruction in order to build a new condominium community was received by local Historical Activists, concern was raised about the irreplaceable loss of this historical monument. This paper represents the first extensive research done in attempt to prove the historical significance of this Farm. The evidence for the Farm's involvement in the underground railroad is twofold: (1) Locational and (2) Physical. Previously, only the following locational evidence has been recognized. The Farm is within ten miles of a Quaker "resting stop" in Farmington (recall that Dr. Fayne has stressed the importance of a nearby sympathetic Quaker community in order to validate a presupposed underground route). The Bank's Farm is near a railroad which could have been used in conjunction with the "signals"

to help give the slaves directional bearings. The Green Way Drain crosses Pontiac Trail and may have served to guide the slaves from Farmington to the Farm while at the same time concealing the runaways' scents from the Bloodhounds.

The physical data (evidence found on the premises of Banks' Farm), on the other hand, was only uncovered during the last week of November and is being presented for the first time in this paper.

Geraldine Graham of Walled Lake, walked along the creek sixty years ago with her grandfather while he explained to her the story of the Banks' Farm. 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.

After personal inspection of the site, the physical evidence of the tunnel becomes excitingly apparent. Geraldine Graham, the daughter of Ruth Carey Dodge, 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 has nothing to do with the existing porch structure. I noticed that the porch, 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.

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 wood roof of the underground tunnel is located, I believed that I had unearthed the shed entrance of the tunnel. I called Mrs. Graham, and she confirmed my interpretation of these discoveries.

At the marsh entrance of the tunnel I found almost twenty field stones scattered in the brush. See the photographs of the stones. Notice the three stones that have been cut and placed in that position.

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 if either of the entrances were excavated. The desire to restore the premises and see what remains inside the tunnel is very tempting. Roy Mercer, the present owner of the Farm, has the access road for the condominiums staked out on the property directly over the tunnel. He has promised that the house will be saved from demolition. As a compromise, the condos will be built behind the Farm. However, what is presently unknown to the community at large is that the crucially important slave tunnel could be buried forever beneath this access drive if there are no changes in the plans. Mercer should use the historical monument to his advantage by making sure it is preserved; if the presence of the tunnel is made known to the public--the news coverage alone could draw crowds to the site. The condos will attract history-conscious individuals who will want to live there because of the importance of the location to our regional and national history. Mercer has a valuable historical property within his possession. By placing the site on the National Register makes it eligible to be considered for matching 50-50 grants-in-aid from the Historic Preservation Fund. It will allow Mercer to apply for historic preservation loans insured by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, as authorized by Section 4(a)

of the Emergency Home Purchase Assistance Act of 1974.¹¹
As a certified Historical Structure, Mercer can deduct
25% of the rehabilitation costs in the first year of cost
recovery.

In summary, the locational and physical evidence
of the site's historical significance meets three of the
criterion for evaluation of site and therefore is a potential
entry for the National Register.

1. The site is associated with events that have
made a significant contribution to the broad
pattern of our history; and
2. The site is associated with the lives of persons
significant in our past; and
3. The house has distinctive characteristics of a
type, period, and method of construction.¹²

PART II

THE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION
OF THE BANKS-BRADLEY-FOSTER FARM

A CHECKLIST TO SUMMARIZE THE
HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FARM.

1. Gertrude Banks is one of the first women admitted to the University of Michigan.
2. The house was built in 1852, therefore, it was in existence during the Civil War and is a fine example of the Italianate Victorian Style.
3. The first owners of the house, the Banks, assisted the runaway slaves in the "underground railroad".

Evidence of this is as follows:

- a. The Farm is located within 10 miles of another "resting stop". Farmington, where Quakers communicated with the slaves and told them how to get to the Banks Farm.
- b. Pontiac Trail, already recognized as part of the route, was used between Farmington, the Farm, and Fort Huron.
- c. The railroad could have also been used as a directional guide.
- d. The fugitives were tracked with bloodhounds, they walked the creek to prevent their scents from being identified.
- e. The Banks did not want to confront the runaways directly, so they left food, water, and supplies in the shed for them to pick up at night.
- f. An underground tunnel was constructed between the creek and the shed, with the entrance to the tunnel hidden in the marsh. 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.