

Where  
the past  
is present

# DETROIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## TEACHER RESOURCE LESSON PLAN

### DETROIT AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD



#### INTRODUCTION

This lesson helps fourth grade students understand the social, cultural and economic changes that occurred in Detroit in the second quarter of the 19th century. The lesson includes a comprehensive background essay, a list of additional resources, and copies of worksheets and primary sources.

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What role did Detroit and Detroiters play in the Underground Railroad?

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the secret codes and handshakes used in the Underground Railroad.
- Analyze similarities, differences, and the significance of primary sources to Detroit history.
- Identify answers to their own questions and important information in a written interview.
- Develop a narrative which characterizes major elements of freedom seekers experiences using the Underground Railroad.

#### MI GLCES – GRADE FOUR SOCIAL STUDIES

##### H4 – History of Michigan Beyond Statehood

- 4-H3.0.2 - Use primary and secondary sources to explain how migration and immigration affected and continue to affect the growth of Michigan.
- 4-H3.0.7 - Use case studies or stories to describe the ideas and actions of individuals involved in the Underground Railroad in Michigan and in the Great Lakes region.

##### G4 - Human Systems

- 4-G4.0.1 - Use a case study or story about migration within or to the United States to identify push and pull factors that influenced migration.

#### COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS - ELA

##### Reading

- 1 - Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

##### Writing

- 3 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen detail, and well-structured event sequences.

##### Speaking and Listening

- 2 - Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

# LESSON PLAN: DETROIT AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

## BACKGROUND ESSAY

The 1800s brought many changes to Detroit. The animals and trees that once filled the shoreline were replaced by docks, mills, roads, and businesses. The fur trade was no longer an important industry. Not many Native Americans walked the streets. Gradually, they were forced to move north or west to reservations. The 1805 fire and Woodward plan forever changed the look and feel of Detroit. It was no longer a cozy settlement and a military post. By the 1860s, it was transformed into a mercantile center full of stores, hotels, and new immigrants. It was a settler's gateway to the rest of Michigan and to Canada. Detroit was a rapidly growing city full of opportunities for people from many places around the world.

During the first half of the 19th century, innovations in transportation made traveling faster, easier, and cheaper. The steamboat was the first to impact travel to Detroit. Before the steamboat, travel between Buffalo, New York, and Detroit took a month. In April 1818, the first steamboat on the Great Lakes, named the *Walk-in-the-Water*, made the trip in 44 hours and 10 minutes.

When the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, travel to Detroit was made even easier. The Canal connected the Hudson River with Lake Erie, making it possible to travel completely by water from the Atlantic states to Detroit. Moving from New York to Michigan became affordable and easy, because it was cheaper and faster to travel by water than by wagon.

When the railroad arrived in Detroit in the 1840s, transportation changed again. By 1854, Detroiters could travel to New York City in a matter of days on the railroads.

With travel to the interior of the country made easier, thousands of people made the choice to settle in Michigan. The United States government opened a land office in Detroit to sell land in Michigan. Large numbers of people travelled through

Detroit every day on the way to their new land. They all needed places to stay, food and supplies. Many people settled in Detroit where jobs were plentiful; Detroit needed people to build houses and shops, wagons and train cars, better roads and railways. It also needed merchants to sell everything from food and clothing to furniture and hardware.

In the mid-1800s, Detroit was on the verge of becoming an industrial city. Copper, iron ore and lumber replaced fur as the key exports. Detroit was the perfect location for raw materials to be brought for manufacturing. Detroiters took advantage of the dense forests of white pine which covered much of the Lower Peninsula. Lumber was brought as logs to



Detroit where it was then sent to sawmills to make boards. The boards were used to make wagons, carriages, ships and furniture. Copper and iron ore from the Upper Peninsula were brought to refineries in Detroit, where they were made into products like wheels, rail tracks, rail cars, stoves, pots, wire, or furnaces.

A variety of other products were made in Detroit. Tobacco was processed into cigars and pipe tobacco. Pharmaceutical drugs were manufactured. Hybrid seeds were produced and packaged. Flour was milled, and beer was brewed.

### The Underground Railroad in Detroit

A few free African Americans lived in Detroit and owned property in the early 1800s. Detroit and all of Michigan was a free state by the mid-1800s. Many abolitionists (people working against slavery) lived in Michigan. There were free African Americans, Catholics, New England Protestants, Quakers and people of many backgrounds. They provided support to African Americans who decided to leave enslavement and seek their freedom in the north.

In 1850, the Fugitive Slave Laws passed in the nation's capital. They said that runaway enslaved people could be captured and returned to slavery.

# LESSON PLAN: DETROIT AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Many free African Americans living in the north faced being returned to the south as slaves, and greedy bounty hunters tried to make money by hunting runaways. Detroit was just across the river from Canada, which outlawed slavery in 1819. Many refugees came through Detroit as their last stop on their way to Canada, where they could not be caught and sent back to slavery.

Runaways stayed in several Detroit area locations, including Seymour Finney's barn at Griswold and State Streets. It was a livery stable, but many fugitives stayed there until dark when they were taken to the river to cross into Canada. Another place to hide was the Second Baptist Church at Monroe and Beaubien Streets, which was built in 1856. This was the first African American church in Detroit. It was founded in the 1830s. Many members were formerly enslaved, and they were eager to help others to freedom. There were also several safe houses in the outskirts of the city.

Many people formed groups which participated in the Underground Railroad and fought to change slavery laws. One group was called the Convention of Colored Citizens of Detroit. The members were free African Americans, white abolitionists, and Quakers.

There were several individuals who were active in the Underground Railroad. William Lambert was manager and treasurer of the Underground Railroad station in Detroit. He was also a member of the Convention of Colored Citizens of Detroit. Lambert was a free African American from New Jersey who came to Detroit at age 18. He was quite wealthy, after opening a successful tailor shop in downtown Detroit. He used his money to fund abolitionist groups. He helped to free thousands of enslaved people by hiding them in his house and arranging for their transport at night. He sometimes created diversions for slave catchers and authorities while freedom seekers escaped across the river to

Canada.

One of Lambert's closest friends, George De Baptiste, was also an important abolitionist. De Baptiste grew up in Virginia. He worked in the White House for a period and was said to have been a close friend of President Harrison. He was in the clothing and catering business in Detroit. He was a leader and active supporter of the Underground Railroad in Detroit. He also helped thousands escape to Canada.

Another abolitionist was William Webb, a free black. He was a grocer from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He raised funds for escaped enslaved people to build new lives in Canada. Mr. Webb often held meetings for important leaders in the

abolitionist movement at his house on East Congress Street. William Lambert, George De Baptiste, John Brown and Frederick Douglass had a famous meeting at Webb's house in 1859. At this meeting, they planned to fight for freedom of enslaved people at



Harper's Ferry, Virginia.

## Conclusion

By the mid-1800s, the busy docks along the shoreline were bustling with people. Some were busy unloading logs into sawmills or iron ore into refineries. Others were loading finished goods into shops bound for eastern cities. Still others were getting off steamboats with the hopes of finding a better life. From the shore, goods traveled in and out of the city by new railroads or by horse and carriage.

Streets were lined with shops and businesses from millineries to printers to bakers. There were also factories that made shoes, cigars, glassware, packaged seeds, and stoves. Mueller's Confectioner and Ice Cream Saloon served sweet treats and Conklin's Watches and Jewelry repaired necklaces and other items.

# LESSON PLAN: DETROIT AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

## MATERIALS USED:

### Data Elements

- *Photo: William Lambert*
- *Photo: Finney's Barn*
- *Illustration: Underground Railroad Routes in Michigan*
- *Article: The Detroit Tribune: Freedom's Railway*

### Pencils and Paper

## LESSON SEQUENCE:

1. Show the picture of William Lambert and Finney's Barn. Ask the students what the African American tailor and the barn have in common. Students will most likely not know. Explain that one photo is of William Lambert, who was a prominent resident of Detroit from 1840s until the 1890s when he died. The other photo is of Seymour Finney's barn. Explain that the two images have something very important in common: they were both involved in the Underground Railroad.
2. Explain that Detroit was an important part of the Underground Railroad. Many thousands of enslaved African Americans passed through Detroit. Ask the students why they think Detroit was important to the Underground Railroad. Show the map of the Underground Railroad routes in Michigan. Discuss how many routes led to Detroit and how close Detroit is to Canada, which didn't allow slavery.
3. Explain that the map and Finney's barn are well known today as part of the Underground Railroad, but in the 1840s and 50s, only certain people knew this information. Ask them why they think this was. Discuss how the Underground Railroad was a secret operation. Folks who ran the "Railroad" were in danger of being arrested for helping enslaved people reach freedom. They spoke in secret codes and passwords, and used special handshakes to identify themselves to others in the Railroad.
4. Explain that many years after slavery had ended, William Lambert gave an interview about his and Detroit's part in the Underground Railroad. He told what some of those special handshakes and passwords were. Pass out *Article: The Detroit Tribune: Freedom's Railway* and ask students to practice the secret code and handshake which appear in bold type.
5. Ask students to brainstorm questions (as a class or in groups) they would ask William Lambert if they could interview him about the Underground Railroad in Detroit. Ask students to read the Lambert interview in full and write down the answers they find to their questions and any other interesting information.
6. Discuss the questions and answers as a whole class. Some sample questions could include:
  - How did the freedom seekers travel without getting caught?
  - What were the steps of a journey from Southern slave states through Detroit to freedom in Canada?
  - What forms of transportation were used to move the freedom seekers?
7. Ask students to write a story of a journey from slavery to freedom through Detroit. It should be in first person and tell the journey from a place of slavery all the way to Canada. It should include some elements they learned from William Lambert, such as secret handshakes, the McKinseyites, stops at stations, forms of transportation used at different parts of the journey, and the feelings and hardships of the freedom seekers along the way. It could be written as a diary, an interview, a letter or a story. These could be shared with the class on another day.

# LESSON PLAN: DETROIT AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Farmer, Silas. *The History of Detroit and Michigan*. Charleston, SC: BiblioLife/BiblioBazaar, 2009.
- Glazier, Jack, and Arthur Wesley Helweg. *Ethnicity in Michigan: Issues and People*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001.
- Grimm, Joe. *Michigan Voices: Our State's History in the Words of the People Who Lived It*. Detroit, Mich: Detroit Free Press, 1987.
- Ketenbaum, Justin L., ed. *The Making of Michigan, 1820 – 1860: A Pioneer Anthology*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990.
- Mull, Carol E. *The Underground Railroad in Michigan*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Publishers, 2010.
- Ostrander, Stephen Garr, and Martha Aladjem Bloomfield. *The Sweetness of Freedom: Stories of Immigrants*. East Lansing, Mich: Michigan State University Press, 2010.
- Tobin, Jacqueline, and Hettie Jones. *From Midnight to Dawn: The Last Tracks of the Underground Railroad*. New York: Doubleday, 2007.
- Walker, Lewis, Benjamin C. Wilson, and Linwood H. Cousins. *African Americans in Michigan*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001.
- Walker, Lewis. *Discovering the Peoples of Michigan Reader*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008.

## LINKS

- Aboard the Underground Railroad: A National Register Travel Itinerary. 22 November 2011. <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/>
- The Underground Railroad. 22 November 2011. <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/>
- The Underground Railroad. 22 November 2011. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html>

For more information about the **Detroit Historical Society**, or to schedule a field trip to the **Detroit Historical Museum** or **Dossin Great Lakes Museum**, visit [detroithistorical.org](http://detroithistorical.org)

PHOTO: WILLIAM LAMBERT

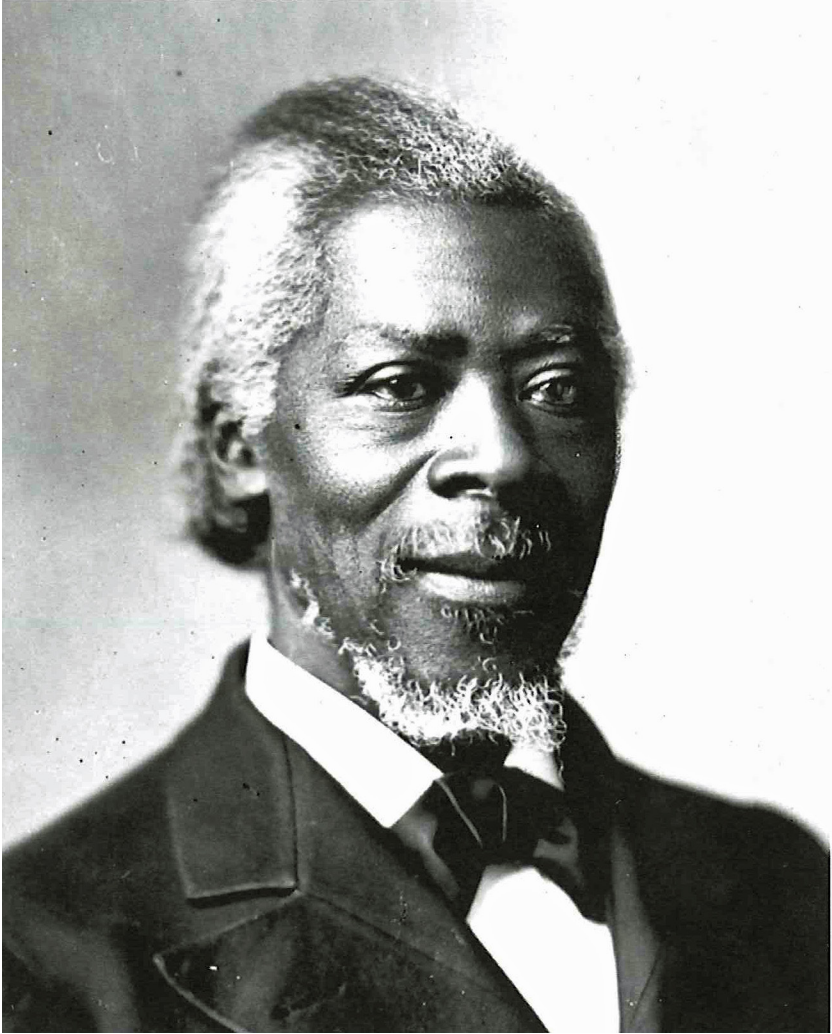
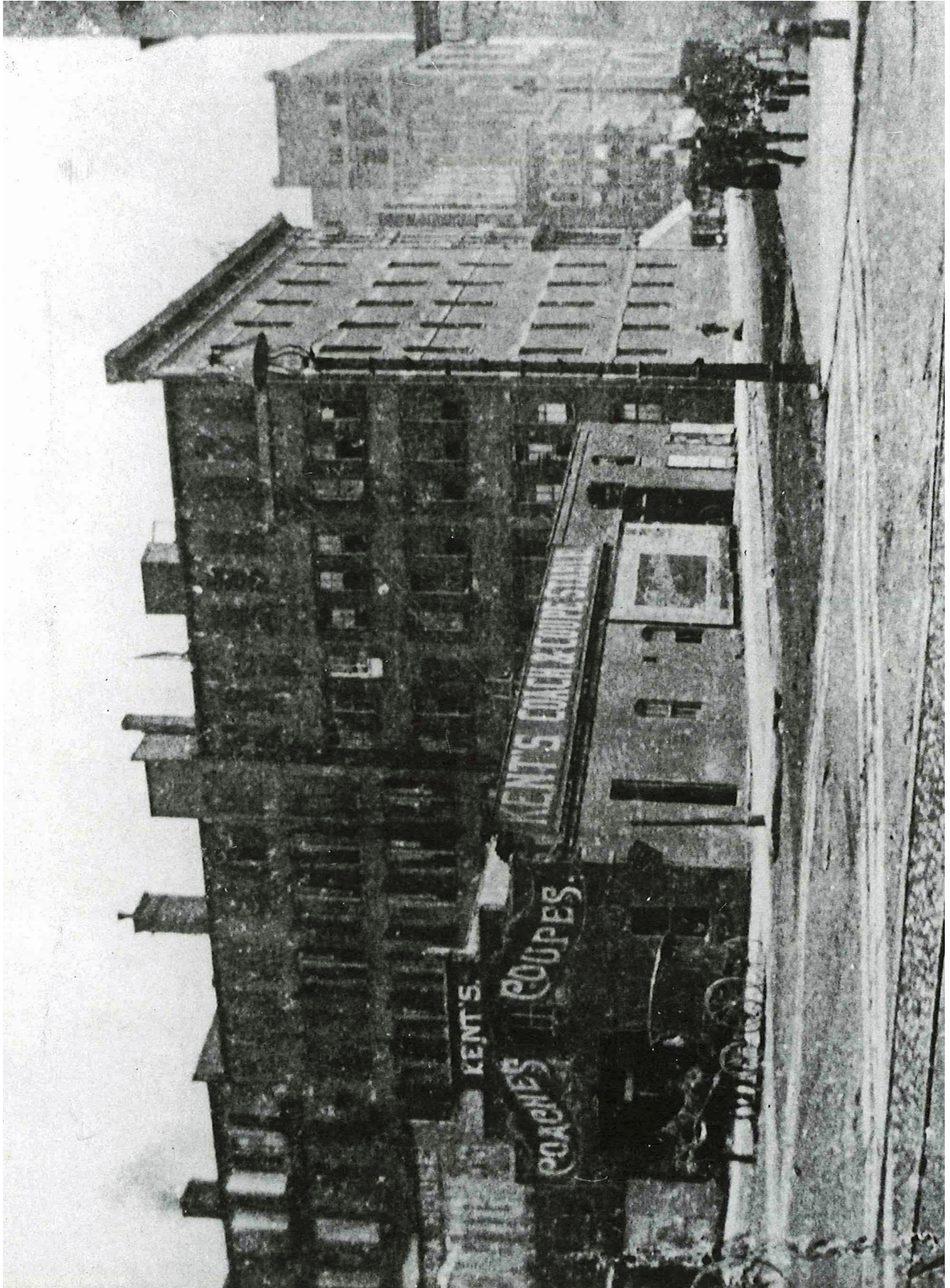
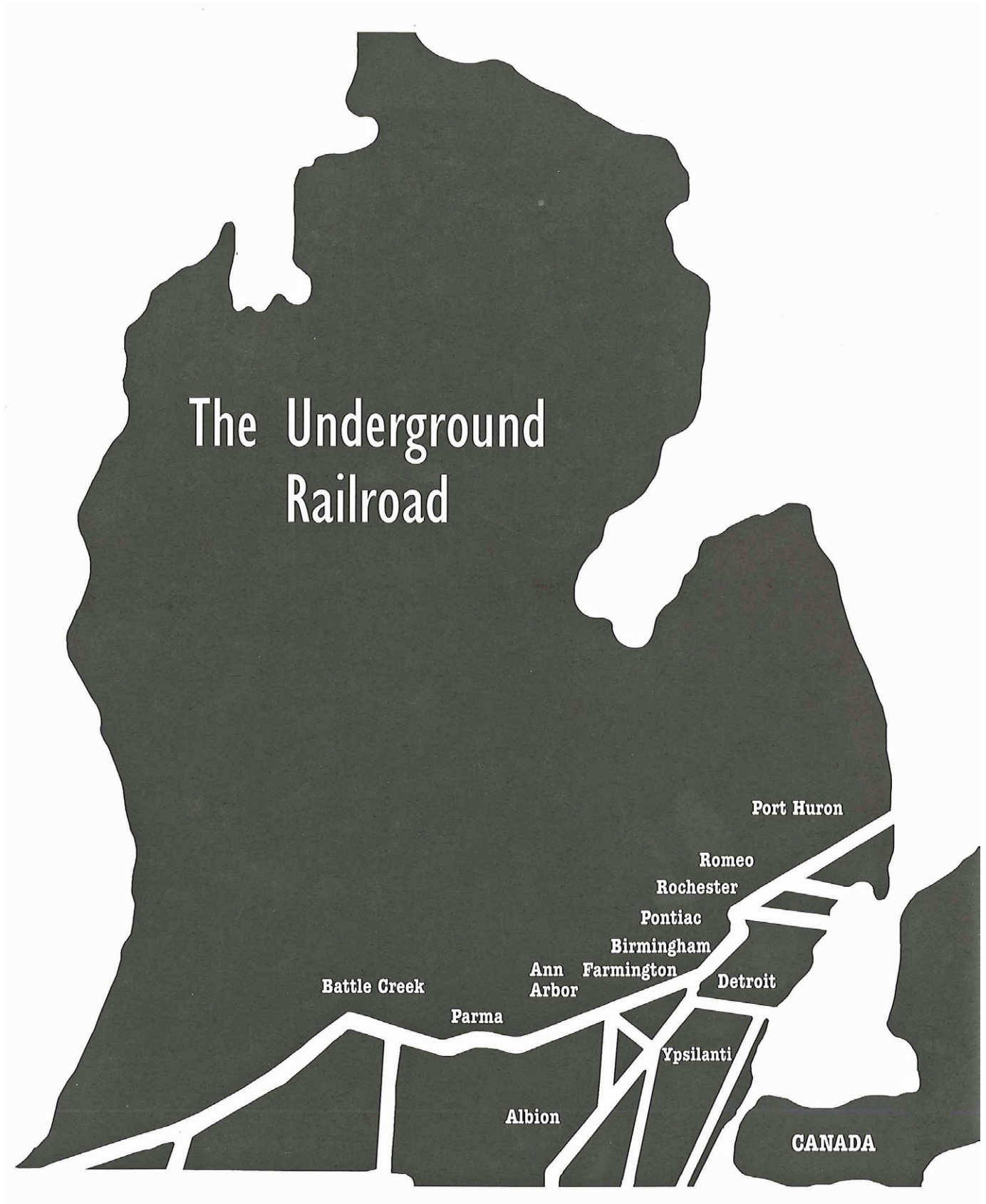


PHOTO: FINNEY'S BARN



**ILLUSTRATION: UNDERGROUND RAILROAD ROUTES IN MICHIGAN**





## ARTICLE: THE DETROIT TRIBUNE: FREEDOM'S RAILWAY (PAGE 1)

January 17, 1886

### Freedom's Railway

Reminiscences Of The Brave Old Days Of The Famous Underground Line  
HISTORIC SCENES RECALLED Detroit The Center Of Operations That Freed Thousands Of Slaves

The western underground railway paid no dividends, never had a general meeting of its directors. Its objective was Canada and Freedom, its trade was derived from the slave plantations of the south, its patrons were people of color, and its promoters and managers had their headquarters in Detroit. Some of them still live and all of them recall the days of the underground road with the hearty satisfaction that comes from a good work accomplished.

Among those living here, well know and highly respected, is William Lambert, age 70; occupation, tailor and philanthropist; son of a slave father and free mother; a man of education, wide read, rare argumentative power; the founder of the colored episcopal church of this city, and the leader of his race in this state. It is no wonder that William Lambert was chosen as active manager of the underground railway service. His energy was unflagging and his executive qualities of the highest order. Associated with him was George DBaptiste, also colored, and like Lambert, possessed good executive ability. DeBaptiste is dead, but Lambert still lives, his mind and eye undimmed and his enthusiasm for the advancement of his race sparking as bright as ever. He told the greater part of this story which follows, but the charm of its narration is lost in the writing, for Lambert's modulated voice, his careful gesticulation and the carefully chosen and accurately pronounced words with which he clothes his (teaching) ideas can only be suggested here. Nearly 40,000 slaves were made free by crossing them into Canada over Detroit and St. Clair rivers between the year 1820 and 1862, when the last one was ferried over. In the last twenty years of that time \$120,000.00 were collection and expended to bring slaves from the south to Canada, by way of Detroit. There escaped to

Canada in all the estimated number of 50,000 slaves. A few of these were not travelers on the underground railroad, but they were a small minority. The larger number were brought from Florida and Louisiana and from the border states. They were never left unprotected in their journeys, and the hardships they underwent to secure liberty were not only shared with them by their conductors, but repeated time after time by the hundred or so men who cheerfully assumed this arduous task.

Taking up Mr. Lambert's story of personal reminiscences he begins with 1829, at which time a band of desperadoes, something in general character like the James' Boys, were the terror of the south-western states. McKinseyites they were called, and in number were some sixty or seventy. They robbed and pillaged whenever they could with safety, and these people were the first southern agents of the underground railway system of Detroit. "It was a long time," said Mr. Lambert, "before we could make up our minds to make use of these scoundrels, but we at least concluded that the end justified the means. Indeed, we went further than that before we got through our work. These men would, with the permission of the slave himself, steal him away from the owner who had title to him, and then sell him. From this second bondage they would steal him again and deliver him to us on the line of the Ohio River. They got their profit out of the sale, although they had to commit two thefts to do it. There were no steam railways in those days. We traveled at night, or if in the daytime, with peddling wagons with false bottoms, large enough to hold three men, traveling though the south. Our association with the McKinseyites was from the very necessities of the case of short life. They were sure to be caught sooner

or later, and at last some more daring robbery than usual brought some of them to prison and dispersed the rest.

"We began the organization of a more thorough system and we arranged passwords and grips, and a ritual, but we were always suspicious of the white man, and those we admitted we put to severe tests, and we had one ritual for them alone and a chapter to test them in. To the privileges of the rest of the order they were not admitted."

He took from a desk where "Walker's Appeal for Freedom", and the letters of Mr. John Brown, Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips, two books bound in sheep, and of the pattern called memoranda books in the trade. In Lambert's own handwriting was the ritual, the test words, grips, description emblems and lessons. The order using was composed of nearly 1,000,000 free negros in the United States and Canada.

**To complete the ritual, which was the one actively used by the underground railway managers:**

**Word – "Leprous".**

**Password – "Crossover" – spoken thus:**

**Question – Cross?**

**Answer – Over.**

**Fir – Lecture.**

**Q. Have you ever been on the Railroad?**

**A. I have been a short distance.**

**Q. Where did you start from?**

**A. The depot.**

**Q. Where did you stop?**

**A. At a place called Safety.**

**Q. Have you a brother there? I think I know him.**

**A. I know you now. You traveled on**

## ARTICLE: THE DETROIT TRIBUNE: FREEDOM'S RAILWAY (PAGE 2)

### the road.

This conversation was the test. It was taught to every fugitive, and the sign was pulling the knuckle of the right forefinger over the knuckle of the same finger of the left hand. The answer was to reverse the fingers as described. It is an interesting feature of this history to remember that nearly 40,000 slaves used this test, and it was on the lips of every Quaker in America, the first and only time forgoing the use of "thee" and "thou" in order to make the test more certain.

The Grand chapter lodge had its rooms on Jefferson between Bates and Randolph about where No. 202 now is. When the applicant for the degree of captive was brought up for examination he was detained without while asked what it was he sought.

"Deliverance" was the answer.

"How does he expect to get in?"

"By his own efforts."

"Has he faith?"

"He has hope."

It was from this body that John Brown took on his task of raiding Harper's Ferry. One of the prominent members was Mr. Lambert. John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry was planned here, and much of the used was subscribed here.

It was on some of the personal qualities of John Brown that the reporter continued the interview with Lambert.

"When did you meet Brown first?"

"Here in Detroit. I was expecting a train from the south and we were waiting for it at the lodge on Jefferson Avenue. This was our custom. The fugitives were brought in from the country from Wayne and Ann Arbor so as to arrive at night. They would be brought to the vicinity of the lodge, when we would go and test them and all those with them. Some twenty or thirty came on the night I speak of, and I went down to test them. Among others to whom I applied the test was a tall, smoothly-shaven man. When he had answered correctly I cried

out, 'Are you John Brown? You are. I know it brother.' 'Yes brother, I am John Brown.' From that moment he and I were the firmest friends.

"He stopped with me at my house, then in the western part of the city, and became a conductor on the underground railway. He brought to Detroit more than 200 fugitives. Here are the books. If you care to go over them you will see the reports that give the dates and names, and from whence they came. He penetrated every part of the south and visited every colored man that it was possible to get at, who had intelligence to grasp the idea of freedom, and yet make no boast of it. He was indefatigable in these respects. He was always on time, and his person courage tested a thousand times, was beyond dispute.

"When we had received the people at the lodge, we took them to the rendezvous, which was the house of J.C. Reynolds, an employee of the company then constructing the Michigan Central Railway. His residence was at the foot of Eight Street, just opposite the place where the first elevator was subsequently built. The house has long since been torn down. We would fetch the fugitives there, shipping them into the house by dark one by one. There they found food and warmth, and when, as frequently happened, they were ragged and thinly clad, we gave them clothing. Our boats were concealed under the docks, and before daylight we would have everyone over. We never lost a man by capture at this point so careful were we, and we took over as high as 1,600 in one year. Sometimes we were closely watched and other rendezvous were used. Finney's barn used to be filled with them sometimes. It stood opposite the hotel property which bears Finney's name. Well, one night we had reason to believe we were watched. Two persons were skulking about and we turned upon them. Brown seized them both and dropped them over the pier head first into the water. He had scarcely done so when he

threw off his coat and plunged in after them and brought them safely to land. They would have certainly been drowned had he not interfered to save them. Once in Indiana, near Indianapolis, he was driving a covered wagon with nine fugitives concealed under some old furniture. He was pursued by some slave hunters who had got on the trail in some way, and although they were armed and fired at him he boldly faced the crowd and drove them away, and brought his charge through in safety. But those incidents of Brown were the recurring ones to every conductor, of whom we had as many as a hundred employed. It was fight and run – danger at every turn, but that we calculated upon and were prepared for. Our organization of stations was very good. We sent many white men to take up farms at convenient places, and as these stationmasters multiplied the operation of the road became less difficult. Many of the men were of good means, for it was necessary at times to have bail at hand and influential people to help us out of our troubles. In 1859 our organization was so complete that we could get through an invoice of freight by our own road from the river to the lake in ten to eleven days. If the war had not come we would have had 33 percent of the 3,000,000 of slaves of the south in Canada by the year 18\_\_\_. The war ended the usefulness of the railroad. The line of freedom crossed the lakes and moved south, keeping step with the battle line of the union."

"Who was the first and last person who traveled over the road?"

"Ah, well; I suppose the first has long since gone over another river to a greater country. I do not remember who he was, nor do I recall the last. It was April, 1862 we sent him. When a fugitive got here our first object was to secure for a means of making a livelihood, then to bring him his family. For the former purpose we had the fugitive home and employment society on the other side. We took up land, and the rest of that part of the task was easy. Then we had the fugitive

## ARTICLE: THE DETROIT TRIBUNE: FREEDOM'S RAILWAY (PAGE 3)

photographed. This photograph with all the necessary directions, were given to a conductor with orders to bring that family. He would seek it out. The photograph served as credentials, and when we had shown it to the people all he had to do was to use the best means to get them over the river and on to the line of one of the routes of railways. After that it was hard to capture them again. We did not lose many."

"All of these conductors and the rest of it must have cost money?"

"Yes, but we got enough, although at times much hampered for the lack of it. Perhaps it was better that we not get more than we did for our enthusiasm, if not expended in the necessary channel of getting money, might have led us into greater mistakes. We were impatient and might have gone so fast as to defeat our own purposes. However, we got the money. One of the reasons, though by no means the important one, that led us to get a man his family, was that he would always be willing to contribute something to help that being done when he might otherwise have hesitated to share his means. The chief reason, though, was to sweeten the cup of liberty for him, because without his family about him his happiness was only partially secured by his own escape from bondage. He was not likely to become a good citizen and a man to do good in the world without his family, and our aim did not end with the deprivation of the slaveholder of his property. It looked toward the civilization of the man, the raising of him up, so that one object was only half gained when he was free.

That our success has been marked is proven by the condition of 50,000 good citizens contributed to the dominion of Canada.

"Now about incidents. Reynolds, of whom I spoke, was a very ardent worker. He had been with Levi Coffin in Cincinnati and had been very successful in getting slaves away. Cincinnati was the shopping place for a good many southern people who used to come with their servants. We used to get so many of these away that their trade was almost lost to the city and went to St. Louis instead. Then the merchants remonstrated, but we kept on and sent out people into the south to secure fugitives. We kept them on the boats on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, sent them down to become overseers, and every place we could think of where they could do the best work. We worked every thing we could that way, and were very successful. We got a good many from Louisiana at first while that state remained under the laws of the old French code. It provided that no child of a white mother could become a slave. The amount of proof adduced about this time to give claimants for liberty white mothers was simply outstanding. But when the law was changed, the distance to Louisiana was so great as to seriously interfere with our work there. Nevertheless, we used to get a great many.

"It would be a picture if you could only have seen it, never to be forgotten, if you could have witnessed many of the scenes of families reuniting and of freemen reaching Canada. For any labor, or cost, or danger, that was our ample

reward. I guess more of the incidents that happened in Detroit were pretty well known. After we got to Michigan we didn't have a regular route, but we did have others. We used to work up the Wabash river to Ft. Wayne, and then cross into Washtenaw county, where Ann Arbor is, you know. There we had lots of friends and help. Then if the hue and cry had been sharply raised we would keep our people in concealment and get them over the ferry when we could. They used to lay in barns and all sorts of retreats and doubtless underwent many hardships, which at time caused them almost to regret their flight, but we got them through all right at last. Girls were often brought as boys, and women disguised as men, and men and women were frequent arrivals. When railways began to be built we used to pack them in boxes, and send them by express. We got thirty or forty through in that way, but the danger of their lives by reason of lack of careful handling and fear of suffocation made that means dangerous.

"Well, our work went forward here just thirty-three years. It was a great one, and I am satisfied with my share of it. I have told more of it to you than I ever did to any one before. Indeed, I am quite hoarse with talking."

The old gentleman rose, indicating thereby that he had talked himself out for one sitting, and giving me a courteous good night, added that, some other day, he would like to tell about the Bulwer-Clayton treaty at length. F.H.P,