Michigan Time Traveler

An educational supplement produced by Lansing Newspapers In Education, Inc. and the Michigan Historical Center.

KIDS' History

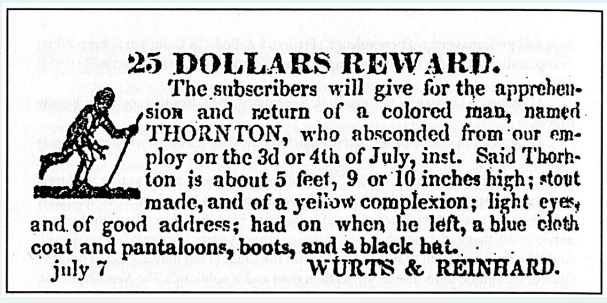
The Blackburns' Escape

In celebration of Black History, this month's Time Traveler takes you on an extraordinary, courageous journey with Thorton and Lucie Blackburn who fled from Kentucky to Michigan and then to Canada.

The Blackburns—in the United States

On July 3, 1831, a couple—Thorton Blackburn and Lucie—left their homes in Louisville, Kentucky, for Michigan. As enslaved people, they feared being sold deeper into the south, where they believed slavery would be even harsher.

They boarded the steamboat *Versailles* for Cincinnati. From there they took a coach to Sandusky, Ohio, then switched to another coach to Detroit, Michigan Territory.



25 DOLLARS REWARD.

The subscribers will give for the apprehension and return of a colored man, named THORNTON, who absconded from our employ on the 3d or 4th of July, inst. Said Thornton is about 5 feet, 9 or 10 inches high; stout made, and of a yellow complexion; light eyes, and of good address; had on when he left, a blue cloth coat and pantaloons, boots, and a black hat.

july 7 WURTS & REINHARD.

Four days later, the *Louisville Public Advertiser* published a notice seeking information about the Blackburns. The Browns claimed to own Thorton Blackburn. The McKnights claimed to own Lucie. The Browns' nephew tried to capture them but was unsuccessful. The Browns and McKnights then sued the steamboat company for taking them and won.

Thorton and Lucie married and settled into a good life in Detroit. Time passed. One day, one of the Brown's friends visited Detroit and recognized Thorton Blackburn on the street. He pretended to be concerned about the Blackburns, but he returned to Kentucky and eventually told the Browns of his discovery.

Representatives of the Browns and the McKnights came to Michigan. They asked the Detroit sheriff to imprison the Blackburns until a court could determine whether the Blackburns were free or slaves.

According to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, the Blackburns were slaves. Michigan was required to return them to their owners.

During the trial, both the Black and White communities were upset. The Blackburns lost and went to jail to wait to be taken back to Kentucky.

Detroit's Sheriff Wilson knew the African Americans were very upset, so he allowed the wives of two leaders of the Black Baptist Church to visit the Blackburns. After a daylong visit, two women left the jail. One was Lucie Blackburn wearing her friend's clothes. Other friends took Lucie across the Detroit River to Canada. The woman who stayed in the jail in Lucie's clothes was later freed.

June 17, 1833, was the day Thorton Blackburn was to leave for Kentucky. Sheriff Wilson led him out of jail in chains. Four hundred African American people had gathered to protest sending Thorton back to Kentucky.

The sheriff abandoned his deputy, returned to the jail and locked the door. The protesters then attacked the sheriff's deputy. Several protestors hauled Blackburn in a wagon to the Detroit River. They didn't have any money to pay for his trip across the river to Canada, so one man sacrificed his gold watch.

Looking to Canada

The Blackburns—in Canada

Once the Blackburns were in Canada, twenty-one year old Acting Governor Stephens T. Mason of the Michigan territory requested that Canada return the Blackburns to Michigan. However, according to Canadian law, slaves could only be extradited—or sent back—if they had committed a crime in their country of origin. Escaping slavery was not a crime under Canadian law.

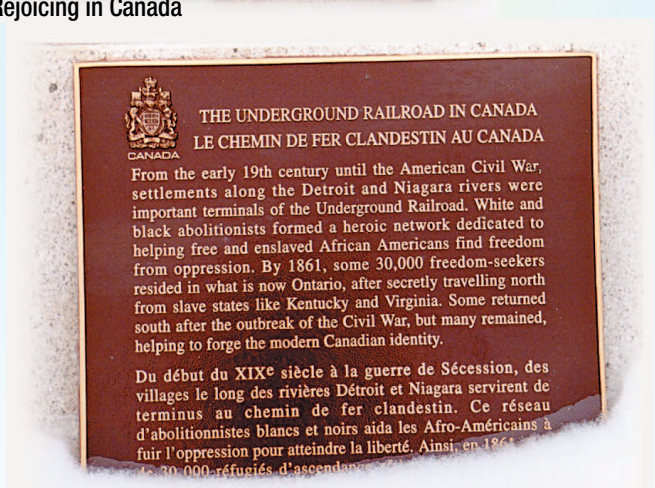
Acting Governor Mason called the protest a riot and accused the Blackburns of starting it. Upper Canada's Lieutenant Governor John Colborne was an abolitionist—someone who supported ending slavery. He said that he could not understand how Lucie or Thorton Blackburn could have incited a riot while in prison. He refused to return the Blackburns to Michigan.

The Blackburns were finally really free. In 1834, they moved to Toronto. Thorton Blackburn worked as a waiter. Later he started the first cab company in Upper Canada (now called Ontario). The cab, pulled by a horse, was painted red and yellow. He called it *The City*. Today, you can still see red and yellow cabs in Toronto.

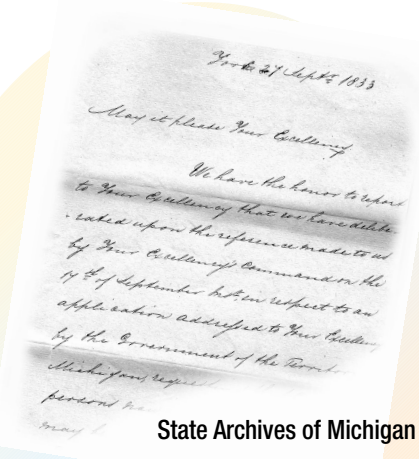
Saying Good-bye to America

Rejoicing in Canada

Looking back to Michigan



A Letter from the Canadian Government to the Acting Michigan Territorial Governor



State Archives of Michigan

May It Please Your Excellency,

We have the honor to report to Your Excellency that we have deliberated upon the reference made to us by Your Excellency Command on the 17th of September. . . . In respect to an application addressed to Your Excellency by the Government of the Territory of Michigan requesting that certain persons now inhabiting their Province may be apprehended and sent to that country to answer to a charge preferred against them for assaulting and beating the sheriff of the county of Wayne, and rescuing a prisoner from his custody. . . .

We beg respectfully to state that these prisoners having been once already apprehended and in custody in this province upon this same charge and liberated by the decision of the Governor and Council, after consideration of the case, upon an application made by the Government of Michigan. We should not think it fit that the Governor and Council should authorize a second apprehension of the parties. . . . This course, we think, could not be approved of unless in the case of some atrocious offender, new and strong evidence should be discovered. . . .

The conclusion, therefore, which we have come to is that these parties are not charged with any of the offences enumerated in the statute annexed; and consequently that the Lieutenant Governor and Council are not authorized by its provisions to send them out of the Province. . . .

Two of the persons whom the Government of the Province is requested to deliver up are persons recognized by the government of Michigan as slaves . . . and by the laws of the United States be exposed to be forced into a state of slavery . . . if they should be sent to Michigan, and upon trial be convicted of the Riot and punished, they would . . . be . . . confined in a state of slavery for life. . . .

A Slavery Timeline

1787: The Northwest Ordinance prohibits slavery in what becomes Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois and Ohio. However, people who already own slaves are allowed to keep them.

1793: The Fugitive Slave Law requires the return of escaped slaves to their owners.

1831: The Blackburns escape slavery in Kentucky and move to Detroit, Michigan.

1832: Elizabeth Chandler, a Quaker, organizes Michigan's first anti-slavery society.

1833: Slavery is prohibited throughout the British Empire, including Canada.

Detroit's African American Community assists the Blackburns in their escape to Canada.

1850: The Fugitive Slave Act makes it illegal to refuse to help return fugitive slaves to their owners.

Two Underground Railroad Monuments—in Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario, Canada

As part of the celebration of Detroit's 300th birthday in 2001, Ed Dwight created two bronze sculptures commemorating the heroes and heroines who fled to freedom on the Underground Railroad and those who assisted them. They both stand on the Detroit River—one on Detroit's Riverfront Promenade, the other on Windsor's Civic Esplanade. The Blackburns' names are listed on the plaque on the monument in Detroit.

Things To Do

- At www.michiganhistory.org, tour the Civil War Gallery. Then go to *Kids' Stuff* and *Teachers' Stuff*.
- Find other articles in the newspaper about African Americans and their contributions to Michigan.
- Comments or Suggestions? Write to timetraveler@michigan.gov

At the Michigan Historical Museum

Visit the Civil War Gallery.

The Michigan Historical Museum is located two blocks west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing. Museum admission is free. Hours: Monday-Friday: 9 a.m.- 4:30 p.m.; Saturday: 10 a.m.-4:00 p.m.; Sunday: 1-5 p.m. Telephone hotline: (517) 373-3559. Visit the Michigan Historical Museum's Web site: http://www.michiganhistory.org.

Lansing school children learn about the Underground Railroad from Michigan State University students in the Civil War Gallery at the Michigan Historical Museum.

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