

# Doorway to Freedom:

"Michigan's Role in the Underground Railroad"

“The Underground Railroad was not a physical railroad. It was a network of people across racial identities who helped people fleeing enslavement,” the Michigan’s History Center writes on its website.



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Because of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, slaves captured in the northern U.S. could still be sent back to their slave owners.

The Detroit "stations" were essential in the path toward freedom because of its close proximity to Canada.

But as these maps show, the Underground Railroad had "stops" throughout the United States and Michigan.



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One of them was Second Baptist Church, Michigan's oldest Black congregation, which was founded in 1836. Slaves were held there in the basement under the church's sanctuary until they could continue their journey to Canada.

Today, the church offers tours of the institution to the public led by the Rev. Lawrence Rodgers.







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- Mariners' Church is widely considered the 'spiritual lighthouse' and a safe space for escaped slaves.
- It was popularized by the 1976 hit song by Gordon Lightfoot, "The Wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*."
- The church was founded in 1842 and has long been the center for the Great Lakes community. Each year on November 10, the church holds a memorial service to honor the crew of the SS *Edmund Fitzgerald* and all the other mariners who have lost their lives on the Great Lakes. During the services, the church bell is rung in honor of those sailors and their families.
- After the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* in 1975, the pastor of the Mariners' Church led the first memorial service for the crew members who had lost their lives. The church had a long history of ministering to the needs of sailors and their families, and the church bell was used to signal ships coming into port.



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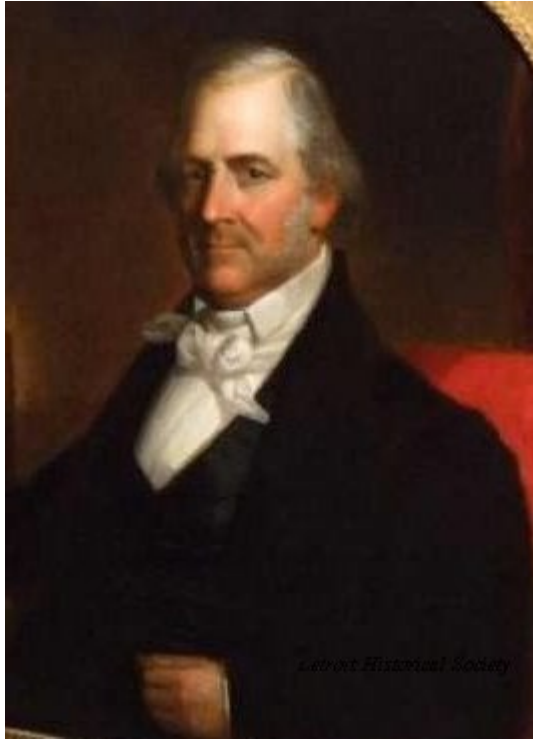
Seymour Finney, a business owner and Underground Railroad stationmaster, was born in Orange County, New York, where he worked as a tailor.

He moved to Detroit in 1834, where he became an active supporter of the abolitionist movement in the area. Starting in 1850, Finney ran a tavern near Capitol Park, followed by a hotel.

He also owned a nearby stable at the northeast corner of State and Griswold streets where many freedom seekers hid before crossing to safety in Canada.



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Shubael Conant, the Detroit Anti-Slavery Society's first president.

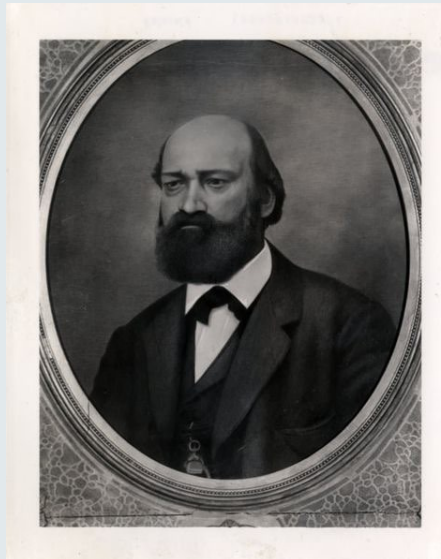
It was founded in 1837, the same year Michigan was admitted in the Union.

The Society not only demanded the abolition of slavery, but also focused attention on "the elevation of our colored brethren to their proper rank as men."

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“Detroit was one of the most critical stops on the Underground Railroad, because it was generally the final stop before achieving freedom,” the Detroit Historical Society writes on its website.

“There are at least seven known paths that led freedom seekers from various points in Michigan to the Canadian shore and it is estimated that 200 Underground Railroad stops existed throughout Michigan between the 1820s and 1865. The Underground Railroad ended in 1865 with the end of the Civil War and the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery.”



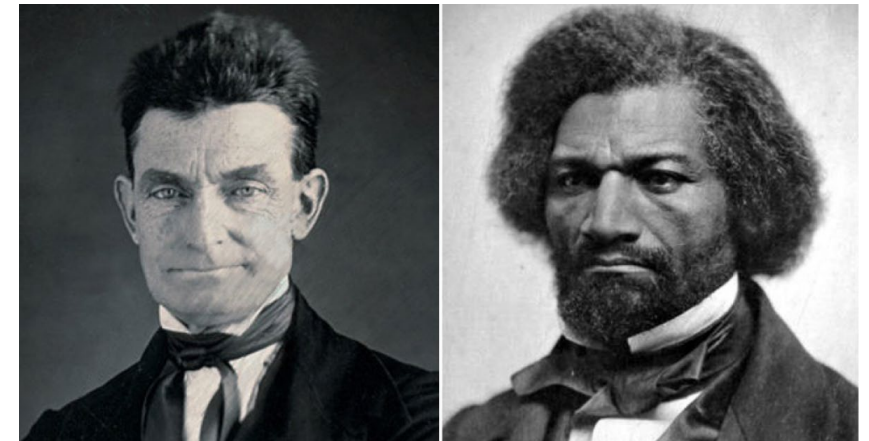
George  
DeBaptiste,  
an Underground  
Railroad  
"conductor"

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In the home of William Webb, two famous Americans met several Detroit Negro residents on March 12, 1859, to discuss methods of abolishing American Negro slavery.

John Brown (1800-1859), fiery antislavery leader, ardently advocated insurrectionary procedures, and eight months later became a martyr to the cause. Frederick Douglass (c. 1817-1895), ex-slave and internationally-recognized antislavery orator and writer, sought a solution through political means and orderly democratic processes.

Although they differed on tactics to be used, they were united in the immortal cause of American Negro freedom. Among the prominent members of Detroit's Negro community reported to have been present were: William Lambert, George DeBaptiste, Dr. Joseph Ferguson, Rev. C. Monroe, Willis Wilson, John Jackson, and William Webb.





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In Battle Creek, a statue stands that lifts the abolitionist's effort of Sojourner Truth, who lived in Michigan during her final years.



The former slave and women's rights advocate died on Nov. 26, 1883. She is buried in Battle Creek's Oak Hill Cemetery.

This statue was dedicated in 1999.



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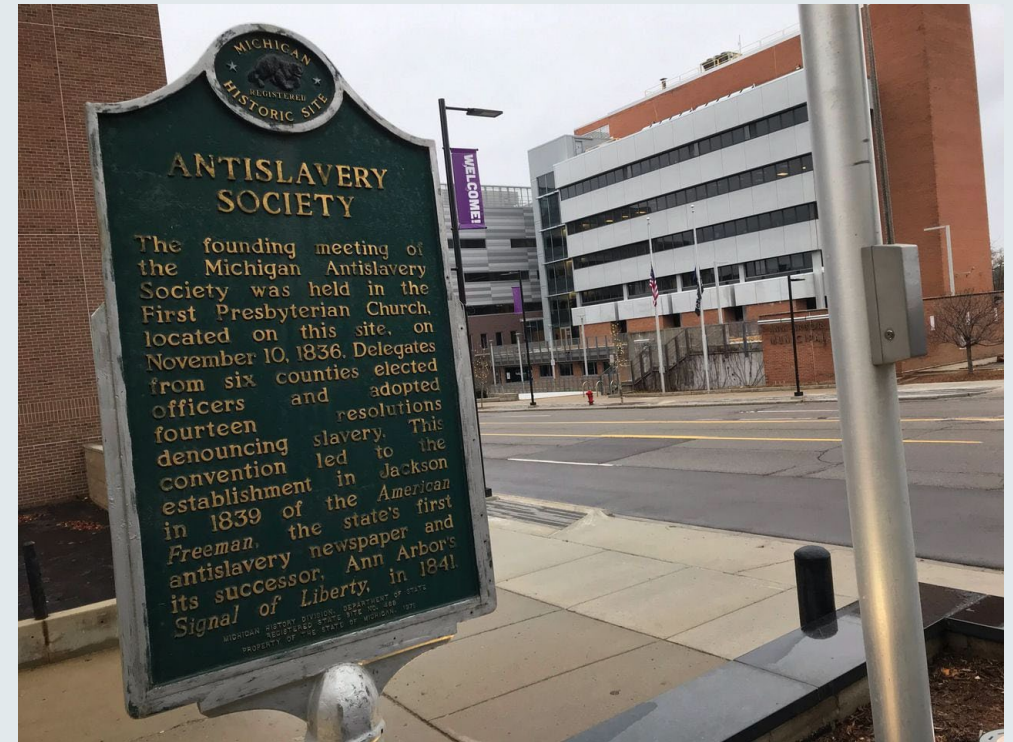
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### Anti-Slavery Societies in Michigan

Michigan Anti-Slavery Society, also called Michigan State Anti-Slavery Society, was founded on Nov.10, 1836, in Ann Arbor between (1805–1837).

The first meeting was held at the First Presbyterian Church on East Huron Street.

These organizations often included whites and Blacks. Detroit also had an Anti-Slavery Society. It was formed in 1837.



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The Michigan Freedom Trail Commission “preserves, protects and promotes the rich legacy of the Underground Railroad and the antislavery movement in Michigan,” according to its website.

The commission annually holds its “Heritage Gathering,” an annual fall series of virtual and in-person programs.

The Michigan History Center, in partnership with the Michigan Freedom Trail Commission, has collected 24 stories of people fleeing enslavement in the mid-1800s into a new [interactive map](#).

The map is to help anyone discover and learn more about the history of the Underground Railroad and the antislavery movement in Michigan. The stories on the new map are tied to physical sites across the state. Some sites are marked with new signs that note a site’s recognition by the National Network to Freedom and the Michigan Freedom Trail Commission. The signs include a QR code that, when scanned by a mobile device, connects to the interactive map and the stories of people and events at that site.



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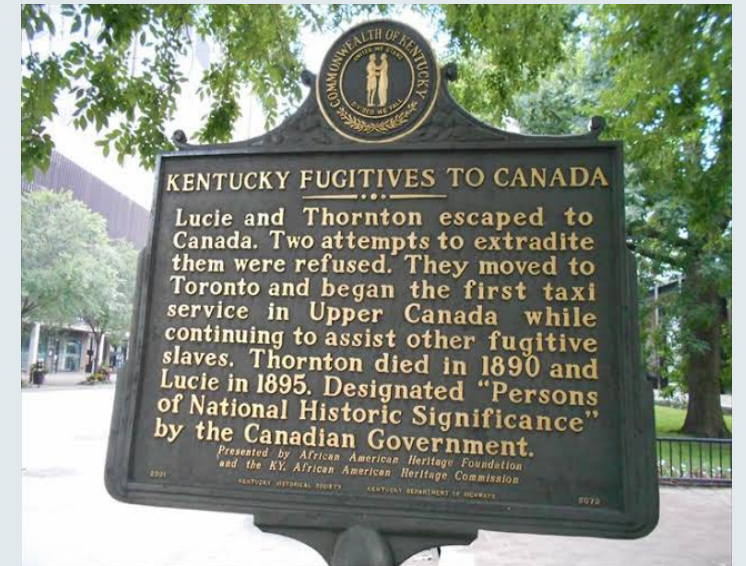
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## The Blackburn family

On July 3, 1831, Thornton and Lucie Blackburn, Black slaves, bolted from Louisville, Ky., headed for freedom. The couple would arrive nearly 360 miles North in Detroit several weeks later.

During their stay in the Motor City, the Blackburn couple became immersed in the free territory of Michigan.

That is, until Kentucky authorities trekked North and arrested them in 1833. At that point, a civil uprising touched off after the fugitive slave couple had been apprehended by the slave catchers and were poised to be returned to their white master in Kentucky, under the U.S. Fugitive Slave Act of 1793.



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A crowd of Black residents gathered at the Wayne County Jail to protest a court verdict upholding the claim by agents of the Kentucky master. The sheriff abandoned his deputy, returned to the jail and locked the door. The protesters then attacked the sheriff's deputy. Several of them hauled Lucie 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.


Thornton would later escape. Once the Blackburns were in Canada, Gov. Stephens T. Mason of the Michigan territory demanded that Canadian officials return the couple 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. Mason called the protest a riot and accused the Blackburns of starting it. Upper Canada's Lt. Gov. John Colborne was an abolitionist — someone who supported ending slavery. He refused to return the Blackburns to Michigan. The couple was finally free.

In 1834, they moved to Toronto. Thornton Blackburn worked as a waiter. Later, he started the first cab company in Upper Canada (now called Ontario). The couple continued their activism in Canada. In 1851, they attended the "Convention of Colored Freeman" at Toronto's St. Lawrence Hall and were designated "persons of national historic significance" by the Canada government in 1999.

The 1833 incident is generally considered Detroit's first racial civil uprising.

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**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.**

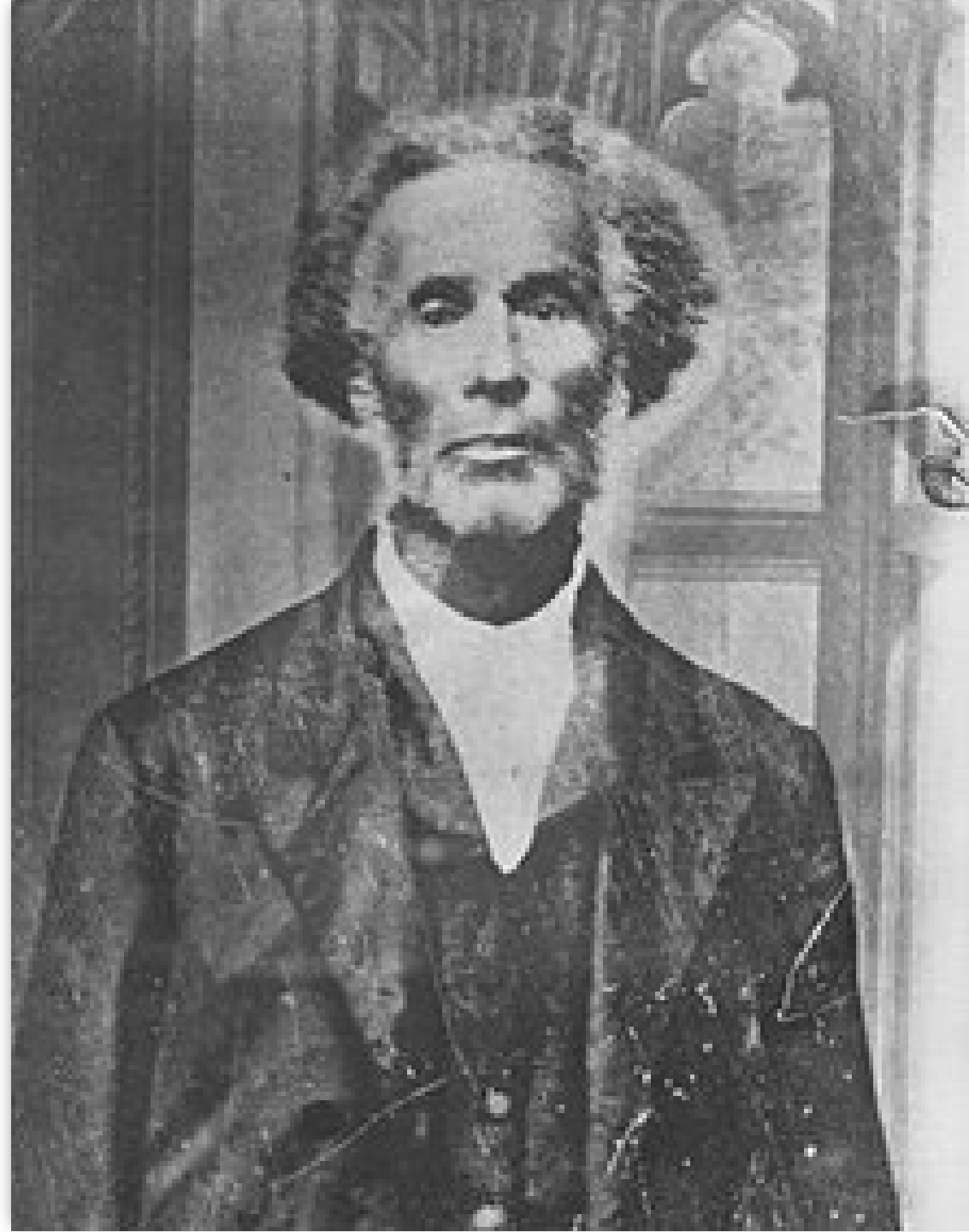


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Adam Crosswhite (1799–1878) was a formerly enslaved man who fled slavery along the Underground Railroad and settled in Marshall.

In 1847, slavers from Kentucky came to Michigan to kidnap African Americans and return them to slavery in Kentucky. Citizens of the town surrounded the Crosswhite's house and prevented them from being abducted.

The Crosswhite family fled to Canada, and their former enslaver, Francis Giltner, filed a suit, *Giltner vs. Gorham et al.*, against residents of Marshall. Giltner won the case and was compensated for the loss of the Crosswhite family. After the Civil War, Crosswhite returned to Marshall, where he lived the rest of his life.



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## **The Underground Railroad Society of Cass County looks to restore four historic structures**

The mission of The Society is to research and educate about the Underground Railroad in Cass County and to restore four related buildings as focal points for telling this important, compelling story.

Its website: [www.urscc.org](http://www.urscc.org)

The Society's goals are being fulfilled by owning and restoring the:

- James E. Bonine House,
- Bonine House Carriage House,
- Stephen Bogue House,
- Brownsville School #1.

Webinar  
Feb. 22, 2024  
1 PM ET



Brownsville School #1



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The North Buxton community in Ontario, for example, recently held its annual Underground Railroad celebration in August.

The rural community east of Windsor was established in 1849 as a haven for and by former African-American slaves who escaped to Canada to gain freedom. It is home to a museum that chronicles the history of Black people in Canada.

The community's history includes Mary Ann Shadd, an anti-slavery activist, journalist, publisher, teacher, and lawyer. Shadd was the first Black woman publisher in North America, according to many accounts.



Mary Ann Shadd



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Shadd was born to free parents in Delaware, a slave state, and was the eldest of 13 children.

She was educated by Quakers and later taught throughout the northeastern United States, including New York City.

Following in the footsteps of her activist parents, whose home was a safe house (or “station”) on the Underground Railroad, Shadd pursued community activism upon settling in Canada.



Mary Ann Shadd  
statue in Windsor