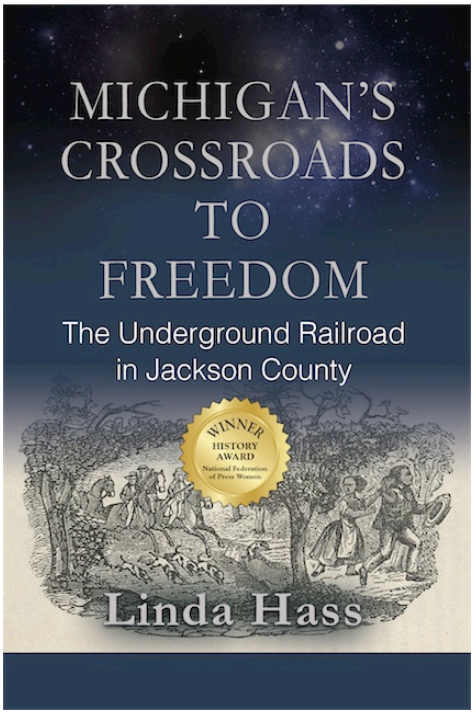

A personal look at the Underground Railroad in Jackson, Michigan.

MICHIGAN'S CROSSROADS TO FREEDOM: The Underground Railroad in Jackson County

by Linda Hass

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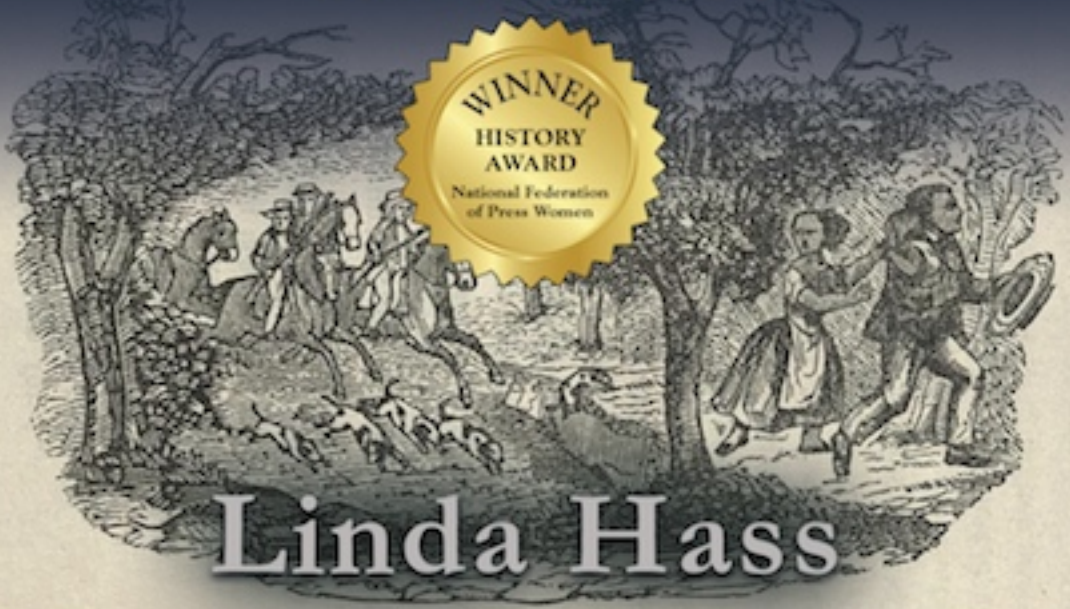
The Underground Railroad in Jackson County



Linda Hass

Michigan's Crossroads to Freedom

The Underground Railroad
in Jackson County

Linda Hass

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First Edition

Dedication

To the freedom seekers who passed through Michigan and the Jackson County residents who assisted them; to Jean Ritsema, whose map expertise is unparalleled; and to my family, who humors my preoccupation with local history.

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Foreword

I have worked on many writing projects with Linda Hass through *Jackson Magazine*, and I have found her to be dedicated to research, passionate about stories, and the perfect person to have written this extremely relevant part of Jackson's history. For years, Jackson has been reputed to be a stop on the Underground Railroad; Linda's book, *Michigan's Crossroads to Freedom*, answers the rumors with solid facts and conclusive reports.

After countless hours spent reading first-person journals and accounts, Linda has not only shared their stories, she brings these individuals back to life. Anyone interested in history, or uplifting stories about courage and kindness, will enjoy this book. Linda, as usual, has gone above and beyond the role of the author to add something extra – a chance for any reader, Civil War buff, human rights activists, or historic tour group to visit the public spots mentioned in the book and see where the stories unfolded.

Jackson has always embraced our history and involvement in the Civil War; each year we host a Civil War Muster, in which visitors and the community reenact various Civil War battles to commemorate this defining period in U.S. history. Jackson is filled with other historic sites, such as the Birthplace of the Republican Party. It also offers the promise of historic connections waiting to be discovered and researched by people like Linda. I look forward to whatever future historic secrets Jackson has yet to reveal.

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Introduction

In the early to mid-1800s, Jackson County was home to two branches of the Underground Railroad, a secret network of routes, safe houses and agents dedicated to transporting fugitives from slavery in the South to freedom in the North and Canada. One track ran along a west-east corridor, roughly paralleling Interstate 94. The other track ran along a south-northeast corridor, branching up through Norvell and Napoleon townships (see Appendices 1 and 2). It's possible travelers on both lines converged on the eastern edge of the county without even knowing it, so secret was the operation of this network.

The transportation system they used wasn't a railroad in the conventional sense of the word. No shining metal tracks ran parallel paths to a well-marked destination. No whistles alerted passengers of approaching stations and no conductors shouted, "All aboard!" It was a railroad of whispers, code names and figures huddled under blankets, wedged in hidden compartments or hidden in cargo holds. Yet these uncomfortable accommodations were in high demand by its desperate passengers. Many freedom seekers walked hundreds of miles through hostile land, waded through fetid swamps or picked their way through dense thickets to access this network. The agents who transported them used wagons, carriages and other forms of transportation to take passengers from slave-holding states in the South to Free states in the North and beyond.

This book is about the Jackson area residents who risked their lives to keep the wheels of this system rolling through their county. It profiles the conductors who transported a precious human cargo and the women and men who opened their homes from as far west as Concord Township to the eastern tip of Norvell Township. It also spotlights those who gave support along the way, from funding the secret enterprise to sounding the alarm when slave catchers approached. Who were these brave Jacksonians? Where did they live, what were their occupations, their political and religious affiliations, and their methods of operation? This book will answer

these questions; bring these heroes to life; and allow readers to befriend them, if only virtually.

While we will never know the exact identities of all the enslaved Americans who stepped foot on Jackson's soil, this book pays tribute to them, as well. These ingenious men and women successfully evaded slave catchers, braved the elements, persevered through hunger and thirst and exhibited great courage under fire. Not only do they serve as inspiration, they are a powerful reminder that Underground Railroad agents only assisted what resourceful African Americans instigated. While most fugitives passed through Jackson County briefly on their way to Detroit and then Canada, a few chose to remain here. Their identities also will be discussed in Chapter Two.

When research began for this book, some critics claimed it was a "cold trail," that an expert had already probed the subject and could not find evidence beyond a few unsubstantial references. But a thorough investigation of history proves otherwise. Published autobiographical accounts of local residents are especially significant because, unlike hearsay or second-hand information, this primary evidence presents first-person accounts of direct participation in the Underground Railroad. Not only did local families provide safe houses, many served as conductors and wrote extensively about it!

Jackson County agents also are identified by historians, including scholar and historic preservationist Carol E. Mull in her comprehensive book, *The Underground Railroad in Michigan*. In addition, the names and experiences of Jackson agents are preserved in hand-written letters and documents stored in the Bentley Historical Museum, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; the Detroit Public Library; and museums throughout the state.

This wealth of primary and secondary evidence should put an end to speculation about whether Jacksonians actively participated in the Underground Railroad. Did other cities play a more important role? Absolutely. Cincinnati was a vital hub for escaping slaves and is today the site of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. Detroit was a major destination because of its proximity to the ultimate land of freedom, Canada. But Jackson was an important link in this system, and residents

served that role bravely. Their contributions to the Underground Railroad are a credible part of the county's heritage, and one worth commemorating.

Something else distinguishes Jackson from all other locations where Underground Railroad agents operated. Abolitionists in this southcentral Michigan county felt so strongly about their cause that they hosted a national convention designed, among other things, to abolish slavery. The July 6, 1854 convention gave birth to a new political entity—the Republican Party. By the time the event ended, the new party adopted a platform that condemned slavery, called for the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law, nominated candidates, and pledged to defend non-slaveholding men in confrontations with slaveholding men, among planks. No other town can claim this legacy.

Many of the Underground Railroad agents profiled in this book attended the convention and several helped to organize it. But Jackson's agents, who represented a wide political spectrum, did more than attend gatherings and give speeches—much more. When serving as editor and publisher of a local anti-slavery newspaper, Charles DeLand's printing office was torched. During an anti-slavery speech, Rev. William Sullivan was mobbed and narrowly escaped a lynching. And when Norvell Township farmer Royal Watkins employed a former fugitive, his property was raided by a Kentucky posse. This book aims to bring these and other heroes to life again, to shine a spotlight on their bravery, and allow their songs of service to resonate in the present.

The Bible speaks of an ark that carried a treasured cargo across a watery expanse from one location to another to protect its precious contents from extermination. In a way, this book is like an ark carrying travelers from the past across an expanse of time. As you read this book, you allow these virtual passengers to reach their destination--the eyes and ears of the present generation. Let these historical figures speak to you as they disembark. Listen to their stories as they tell how men and women of diverse backgrounds came together for a cause bigger than their differences. They will tell you there is much to learn from the past. They will tell you that in the past, as now, mankind aspires for a higher moral ground that lifts it above the shifting sands of culture, time, and passing fads. These pages bring to life real people who laughed, bled, dropped from exhaustion

and rose to the occasion. Relish the fact these Jacksonians trod the ground you walk on, lived on property right under your noses, and breathed the air you breathe.

This book will set the scene for this unfolding drama by describing the evolution of the Underground Railroad; the modes of transportation and types of hiding places used; the diversity of agents within the system; and the strategic importance of Michigan. Mostly, however, this book aims to preserve Jackson's contributions to the Underground Railroad through the specific examples of real-life residents who turned their county into a crossroads to freedom.

Amazingly, one of those freedom seekers would walk all the way from Augusta, Ga., to the doorstep of Jackson agent Rev. William Sullivan one chilly October day. The fugitive had no idea that the details of his 1,000 mile trek would be immortalized in notes kept by another conductor who corresponded with Rev. Sullivan. In fact, when the enslaved American slipped off an Augusta farm under the cover of darkness in 1838, he wasn't even sure if he would survive.

PART ONE: SETTING THE SCENE

Chapter One

A Fugitive Finds Refuge

The following story, and all the profiles presented in this book, are based on an abundance of facts, including primary evidence (autobiographies, diary entries, letters written by the person profiled, etc.); secondary evidence (biographies, obituaries and other accounts provided by those who knew the person profiled); corroborating evidence; and general facts (the documented climate or geography of a region).

This wealth of information forms the outline of each story like walls form the exterior shell of a house. But shells tend to be cold and lifeless. To fill the void with color and warmth, supplemental information has been added that is within the grain of known historical evidence.

Chapter One, for example, is based on these facts: In March 1838, the man enslaved as Joseph Mallory escaped from an Atlanta, Ga., plantation under the cover of darkness with some coins, spare clothes and knowledge to follow the North Star. He reached and crossed the Ohio River in the fall and chose a new name: Lewis Hill. Quakers who participated in the Underground Railroad helped him through Indiana, but he was attacked and robbed by men who nearly captured him.

In Michigan, Hill found refuge in the home of Quaker Josiah Osborn, who sent him to Underground Railroad station master Dr. Nathan Thomas in Schoolcraft, Mich. Dr. Thomas fed him, gave him clothing and money, and wrote a letter directing Hill to other agents in his network, including Rev. William Sullivan in Jackson. Later, Dr. Thomas sent Rev. Sullivan a letter informing him that their collaboration was successful because Hill reached freedom in Canada. The following story is intended to bring these facts to life; to infuse them with a beating heart; and to present as many sensory-rich experiences as the facts imply.

Augusta, Ga., March, 1838

Joseph Mallory wipes the sweat from his face, then rubs his moist, dirty hands on patched jeans. It's a cool March night in Augusta, Ga., but the fugitive fleeing slavery is overheated and out of breath after running hard for the last six miles. He leans up against a hickory tree and turns a fearful ear to the South. Several sounds fill the night: a chorus of crickets, the annoying buzz of mosquitos and a lone owl in the distance. But the sound he fears the most, the howl of bloodhounds, is conspicuously absent. He sighs in relief, then searches the firmament to get his bearings. The warm blue sky near the horizon dissolves into darkness as it stretches upward into an endless galaxy of wonder, sprinkled with twinkling stars.

For the next several months, the stars will be more than points of light against a black backdrop for this desperate traveler; they will serve as beacons to freedom. He well remembers the advice of older slaves at the plantation where he labored. Look to the night sky for the stars that resemble a drinking gourd, they told him. The two stars on the cup's edge will always point North to the Promised Land of freedom. (1)

Not only does nighttime reveal this celestial compass, it also concealed Mallory's means of escape several nights ago. The resourceful freedom seeker had rubbed garlic and onion on the soles of his shoes to camouflage his scent from bloodhounds, then he slipped off his master's farm under the cover of darkness. His only possessions were some coins in his pocket, a bag slung over his shoulder containing a few spare clothes, and the knowledge to follow the North Star.

Several predecessors had perished making similar escapes. Some died from starvation; others from injury or infection; still others were captured by slave hunters. But Mallory is willing to face these risks rather than endure innumerable miseries as a slave. He seeks the right to marry whom he chooses, to earn a decent wage for a hard day's work and the opportunity to escape the capricious whims of a master. He'd rather die pursuing these goals than continue to live in bondage, so he runs during the night and sleeps during the day, hiding in caves, under haystacks, in swamps or anywhere he can stay out of sight. (2)

The odds are stacked against his cross-country trek from the beginning. A successful escape from the Deep South into Michigan is more difficult

than escapes from Kentucky, Missouri and other mid-American states. As an early historian from Alabama stated:

Throughout the South…a more or less competent and comprehensive patrol system was maintained. No slave was permitted off the premises of the master…Hence we see the matter of capturing a fugitive slave resolve itself into the simple office on the part of the patrol to take up any Negro seen upon the highway, day or night, unattended by some person in authority. Nor was it an easy matter for a run-away to travel across the country, since in doing so he almost invariably came into contact with some slave overseer, or owners, to whom he was unknown, whereupon he was promptly arrested. (3)

But Mallory is one of the rare enslaved Americans who not only reaches Michigan, he shares his story with a Schoolcraft, Mich., abolitionist who writes about it. At this moment, however, a successful escape is less a certainty and more a mystery draped in black, from the night sky, deep with mysterious wonder, to the normally red Georgia soil, shrouded in shadow like everything else in the colorless world of night. Mallory takes one last look at the stars, mentally plots his northward trajectory, and then resumes running, eager to put as much distance as possible between himself and any blood hounds that might be on his trail. Ahead of him lay Georgia's foothills. North of that, the free state of Michigan, where he will find refuge in many homes, including one owned by Rev. William Sullivan. (4)

Jackson, Mich., March 1838

As the morning sun drives creatures of the night into the shadows, other creatures begin to stir in the sleepy Village of Jackson, including the rooster crowing near the home of Rev. William Sullivan. The feathered alarm clock is partially effective. Rev. Sullivan's wife, Harriet, continues to sleep, but the 27-year-old preacher is awake. He sits up in bed, stretches, then quietly puts his feet on the cold wooden floor. He wraps a blanket around his shoulders, walks to a table and sits down. Dipping his pen in an inkpot, he writes a few words for an upcoming sermon. Perhaps he cites Proverbs 14:31: "Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God." Or perhaps he cites Exodus 9:1: "…Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'This is what the LORD, the

God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go…'" Whatever scripture he cites, the words of this fiery preacher frequently reflect his anti-slavery convictions. They also revive the like-minded, stir the indifferent and occasionally inflame opponents. (5)

Rev. Sullivan is among a small but determined band of local abolitionists willing to defy the law in order to aid freedom seekers passing through, what was at that time, the Village of Jacksonburg. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 made it a federal offense to aid escaped slaves and carried a fine and prison term for violators. Like other conscientious objectors, however, Rev. Sullivan's loyalty aligns with a higher moral law that upholds equality of all races in the eyes of God.

Perhaps his sentiment is best summed by legendary abolitionist Laura Smith Haviland who lived in nearby Adrian, Mich. Speaking with a slavery supporter, Haviland said: "I presume, if the slave claimant should come with a score of witnesses and a half-bushel of papers to prove his legal right, it would avail him nothing, as we claim a higher law than wicked enactments of men…" Although the Underground Railroad is not exclusively a Christian endeavor, Haviland and Rev. Sullivan are prime examples of how Christianity is a driving force for many faithful (see Chapter 12). That's especially true for Quakers, Baptists and Methodists like Rev. Sullivan. (6)

Rev. Sullivan, born in 1811, came by his abolitionist sentiments naturally. His family was originally from Virginia, a slave-holding state, but moved to the free state of Ohio when William was a child because of his father's opposition to slavery. Rev. Sullivan's move to Michigan in 1832 and his role as a Methodist-Episcopal preacher likely reinforced his anti-slavery leanings.

Two years after moving to Michigan, the preacher married Harriet Bennett. The couple, who originally lived in south eastern Michigan, moved to Jackson in 1837. They would remain married 37 years, have eight children, and endure many threats due to his anti-slavery position. But on this quiet morning in Jackson, all is calm. As the sun's golden rays stretch over the horizon and creep into the Sullivan house, the preacher's wife and 2-year-old child begin to stir. He uses the remaining quiet time to pen a few more lines about freedom in Christ. He has no idea that seven months from now he will find at his very doorstep a weary freedom seeker. (7)

Cumberland Plateau, Tenn., April 1838

Six hundred miles south, Mallory cautiously peeks out from a cave in Cumberland Plateau, Tenn., and takes a deep breath. One month has passed since he left the Augusta, Ga., farm. Dogwoods are blooming and the scent of lilacs hangs in the fresh sweet air of the early evening. The night sky is not yet dark enough to yield its starry compass, but just dark enough to obscure Mallory's presence from any onlookers. The plateau, which rises 1,000 feet above the Tennessee River Valley, is a maze of rocky ridges and grassy gullies etched by waterfalls and caves. The terrain is ideal for hiding, but not easily navigable. (8)

Mallory's biggest problem, however, is not the terrain. Cloudy nights confuse his sense of direction. Without the stars, he is as likely to venture south as north. Hunger also plagues him. It's as if a knife were thrusting around inside him, scraping his stomach. A few edibles grow in April, including asparagus and strawberries. Walnuts are another food source, but sometimes he takes chickens' eggs from farms. Other times, he solicits food from slaves' quarters, distinguishable as wooden shacks away from their owner's larger house.

This evening, his hunger is so powerful he ventures into the dwelling of slaves who are returning late after a long day's work. Cornmeal flatbread lies on a bare table made of two long rough boards on crossed legs. Nearby is a broken saucer of greens, a small piece of lukewarm pork cut in thin slices, and a pitcher of water. In spite of these meager provisions, the slaves provide a generous donation for their unexpected visitor. Mallory takes a bite. Pork slides down his throat like a slice of heaven. He licks his lips, smiles, stuffs the rest of the food in his pocket, then whispers "thanks." In an instant, he disappears into the night. This freedom seeker cannot afford to linger on any slave owner's property for too long. (9)

Jackson, Mich., May 1838

Rev. Sullivan might have wished he could disappear into the darkness on this May night in Jackson. Not only does the preacher give sermons on the Methodist Episcopal Church circuit, he often is invited to deliver lectures in public, including the 1,000 who assembled in Jackson's Court House to hear him talk this evening. His topic must have been fiery! The audience

listens politely at first, but when he begins to expound on the evils of American slavery, electricity sizzles through the crowd. Though many Jacksonians oppose slavery on principle, opinion on what to do about it is varied. Some favor radical solutions; others embrace a "live and let live" attitude. Still others oppose slavery—but not if it involves any action that would require military force against their countrymen (see Chapter 10).

Whatever Rev. Sullivan may have said on this night, one thing is certain--his message rubs listeners the wrong way. One by one they shout objections, then rush the podium. The scene degenerates into pandemonium and something worse, as the words "noose" and "hang" are shouted. Soon, emotion supersedes decorum. The court house is like a grenade with its pin pulled. According to one newspaper, an "effort was made to mob him in Jackson, and the design was to hang him for his abolition sentiments, but he managed to elude his pursuers." (10)

Circuit preachers delivered sermons in various locations (author photograph, 2016 Jackson Civil War Muster).

No mob can still Rev. Sullivan's spirit, however. The reason he moved to Jackson in the first place was to promote his anti-slavery views to a broader audience. The move was set in motion when community leaders decided the village needed a newspaper and offered an incentive for a printer to set up shop in 1837. The committee extended an offer to Rev. Sullivan's brother, Nicholas Sullivan, a printer from Vermont. Not only did the preacher convey the offer and financial incentive to his brother, he ended up assisting Nicholas in the venture. Together, the duo produced Jackson's first newspaper, the *Jacksonburg Sentinel*, in honor of the town's original name. The *Sentinel* was a 4-page, 20-column sheet that measured 24 x 36 inches. It was printed on a Ramage press, mostly made of wood, and required four impressions to print

a single paper. The anti-slavery bias of this newspaper was evident from the beginning. The sixth issue, printed April 22, 1837, carried on its front page an article stating: "THE SLAVE TRADE: Notwithstanding the efforts that have been made to put down this diabolical traffic, it is still actively carried on. The day of retribution will come before long." The thought of the newspaper, and the influence it could wield, comforts Rev. Sullivan as he heads home from his ill-received speech this spring evening. He is discouraged, but not defeated. After all, a printing press can effectively disseminate an abolitionist message to more than 1,000 people…and from a safe distance. (11)

Lexington, Ky., June 1838

Three months. Three miserable months. That's how long Mallory has been on the run. This morning he is hiding under a haystack in Lexington, Ky., when he gets an inspiration. What if he walked through town appearing to deliver goods on behalf of a master? Or run an errand? Would he not be allowed to proceed? He rolls the idea over in his mind, as the hay prickles his skin. And what if he appeared to be sick; wouldn't bystanders leave him alone? He hesitates at the boldness of the plan, then chuckles at the normalcy of it. After all, he's run errands for his master many times and never attracted unnecessary notice.

A figure from The Underground Railroad Sculpture in Battle Creek, Mich. (author photograph).

His inspiration floats in the air like a buoyant balloon, then drifts out of the haystack, beckoning him to follow. In an instant, he emerges from his shadow world into broad daylight. Red brick buildings in the distance blaze with color. Trees cover hills in billows of vibrant green. His glance drifts to the great blue beyond, where his spirit soars unshackled. After hiding in dank caves or confined spaces, he breathes deep draughts of the summer air, freshly scrubbed by the night's rain. Brushing strands of hay from his wrinkled damp clothes, he steps forward. It is time for a new

approach.

As he nears town, however, his newfound confidence begins to falter. Buildings seem to loom menacingly. The closer he moves to the center, the smaller and more vulnerable he feels. Alarmed residents stop in their tracks and stare as he approaches. He resists the temptation to run, forcing himself to proceed with the casual demeanor of a slave on an errand. He holds fast to his dream of freedom, visualizing it over and over again until it eclipses the images of fear that lurk in dark corners of his mind. When bystanders draw near, he recalls his plan to appear sick, and coughs conspicuously. Few want to risk catching whatever a sick slave might have. The crowd parts before him like the Red Sea before Moses. With the path clear, Mallory continues forward, a slight smile creasing his lips.

The ruse is not too far-fetched. After three months on the run, he is not in the best of health. His feet are blistered and his skin is cut and bruised. But he is determined to continue the journey or die. In fact, once he reaches free soil, he has decided to re-name himself in honor of the milestone. His slave name, Joseph Mallory, is not appropriate for a new identity based in freedom. His goals are high and lofty and his name will reflect that sentiment; perhaps even evoking a point of elevation. He considers the possibilities as he walks through Lexington appearing to run an errand, which is in fact he is; except this errand is a cross country mission to freedom. (12)

Jackson, Mich., July 1838

About 400 miles north, Rev. Sullivan walks into the office of the *Jacksonburg Sentinel,* at the intersection of Jackson Street and Public Square (today West Michigan Avenue), to discuss the possibility of another publication with his brother. The Fourth of July is approaching; time to consider the broader implications of freedom. At the moment, Nicholas is focused on his work. He opens a long, narrow drawer in a wooden chest, grabs tiny metal pieces cast in letters of the alphabet, and arranges them on a metal plate. The pieces form words, sentences and paragraphs which, when smeared with ink and pressed on paper, create the lines of printed copy in the newspaper. Nicholas continues working as he listens to his brother talk about the possibility of a new venture, an anti-slavery

newspaper that champions the cause of abolition…perhaps something called *American Freeman?*

If William could look into a crystal ball and see the future, he would know that one year from now his inspiration would indeed blossom into a reality. But he would also see that the task would prove daunting; in fact, only four issues would be printed. William's idea would live on, however, when Seymour B. Treadwell revives the paper under a new banner, *Michigan Freeman,* and breathes fresh life into its pages as a passionate editor and publisher. William cannot see into the future, however, and at this moment, his inspiration is a glimmer of hope in his heart. (13)

Ohio, August 1838

The Fourth of July has come and gone in southern Ohio. Church bells tolled, fireworks exploded and brass bands played. Mallory could only listen from a safe, isolated, distance while the rest of the country celebrated openly. Freedom was not within his grasp at the time, but it's only a river away now. He stands on the banks of the Ohio River on this hot August night, from the Kentucky side. Once he crosses the water boundary, his feet will stand on the free soil of Ohio. Since slaves had no opportunity to learn how to swim, abolitionists often hid boats on the southern shore so fugitives could cross on their own. In fact, Henry Bibb, a former enslaved man who wrote an account of his escape, said when he arrived at the Ohio River he found a small craft tethered to a tree that he used to ferry himself across the river.

Whatever method Mallory uses, he successfully crosses the river and climbs the slippery bank to enjoy a moment of triumph on a hill. Upon crossing the line into freedom, famed abolitionist and escaped slave Harriet Tubman is quoted as saying, "When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven." Whatever thoughts went through Mallory's mind, the moment must have been special for him because he changed his name. From that time on, he would be known as "Lewis Hill." He smiles at the thought, and then disappears into the free Ohio countryside. (14)

The journey north for Mallory, now Hill, has been a cautious one. He has avoided making friends with whites, preferring to wait until Michigan, where he's heard folks were "friends to colored people." But when he sees how Ohio's Quakers treat people, he takes a chance and cautiously reveals his identity. His trust is rewarded with assistance, as the group helps him through Ohio and into Indiana. Hill often prefers to travel on foot alone because of the autonomy it provides. That preference proves unfortunate, however, since slave hunters often target Ohio, Indiana and Michigan.

Walking along an Indiana fence line on this August night, Hill hears the sound of footsteps behind him and breaks into a run. It's too late. Hands grab him from behind and pull him to the ground. More hands pummel him, but he hasn't made it this far to be captured now. Renewing his strength, he maneuvers to his feet, pushes free, and runs full speed, disappearing into the dark. (15)

Later, the weary freedom seeker crosses into Michigan and finds refuge in the home of Josiah Osborn, a Quaker from Cass County, Mich. (see Appendix 1). Hill has reached the northernmost state on his path to freedom. But his brush with slave catchers has renewed his determination to press on to Canada, the ultimate Promised Land. During the entire journey, he has steadfastly moved north as if pulled by an invisible cord. Now, for the first time, his inner compass points eastward towards Detroit and ultimately, Canada. Osborn refers him to the next eastward station in the Underground Railroad, the home of Dr. Nathan Thomas in Schoolcraft. (16)

Schoolcraft, Mich., September 1838

Hill's visit with Dr. Thomas is immortalized in notes Thomas wrote about the encounter describing, among other things, the fact that Hill spent the night on a couch in his medical office. The office, on the west side of the house, is an amazing sight to Hill. Vials of all shapes and sizes line the top of a massive wooden desk. A black leather bag filled with instruments leans beside the wall. In another corner of the room, a wood burning stove provides warm comfort on a cool fall night. On the wall hang paintings of a family the doctor obviously adores. The room is a showcase for devotion. It's also a stark contrast to the treatment slaves received.

Dr. Nathan Thomas received patients in this office during the day and fugitives like Lewis Hill at night (author photograph, Schoolcraft, Mich.)

The secret hiding place in Dr. Thomas' home (author photograph, Schoolcraft, Mich.).

Dr. Thomas is so devoted to the safety and welfare of fugitives under his roof, he has equipped the house with a hiding place on the second floor. The secret space, accessed by a trap door, opens to an empty area literally under the roof rafters. Likely, a chest of drawers was placed in front of the trap door so it was not visible, according to local historians. But the need to hide under the rafters is not necessary tonight, as a couch is set up in Dr. Thomas' office. Hill departed a few days later. Sometime after that, Dr. Thomas wrote about the encounter: "I advised him (Hill) to go no further, as I thought he could safely remain here. But he expressed a determination not to stop short of Canada. The next day I replenished his clothing, added to his purse and sent him on his way rejoicing."

Hill set out from the doctor's house on a chilly October morning after a hearty breakfast carrying a letter Thomas provided with the names of abolitionists along his eastward journey. In Jackson, Thomas directed Hill to stay with "trusted friend" and fellow Underground Railroad operator "William Sullivan." (17)

Jackson, Mich., October 1838

Rev. Sullivan is not expecting any guests on this chilly October evening. His 2-year-old son is asleep in bed and his wife is reading when he sees a lantern held close to his window. The minister cautiously opens the door to find a white man with an expectant expression. "Can you give shelter and protection to one or more persons?" asks the stranger. Rev. Sullivan recognizes the question as code for a fugitive needing refuge. He opens the door wide and steps aside. The stranger extinguishes the lantern and walks inside, followed by another man hiding in the shadows. Rev. Sullivan quickly shuts the doors and closes the curtains, then extends a hand in greeting to the black fugitive and his white companion. After seven months of trekking 1,000 miles through five states, the paths of Lewis Hill and Rev. William Sullivan finally intersect in a warm handshake.

Written accounts of the exchange don't exist, but Henry Bibb, a former enslaved man, describes how he felt upon entering the home of an abolitionist in his autobiography. Bibb wrote: "I had found a friend in the time of need among strangers, and nothing could be more cheering in the day of trouble than this." Rev. Sullivan's obituary left no doubt about the hospitality he extended to his fugitive guests. It described him as "…an ardent anti-slavery man, and one of the leaders of the abolitionists…the small but earnest band of liberty-loving citizens who loved free soil…looked to him as one of their guides." As was customary at safe houses, Rev. Sullivan likely provided for Hill's needs, including food and lodging, and either transported Hill to the next stop on the line, or pointed him in the appropriate direction with a letter of introduction. (18)

Washtenaw County, Mich., Winter 1838-Spring 1839

Historian Mull noted that Hill continued his eastward trek into the fall, but was forced to stop during the winter. Mull wrote:

By this time, nourishing berries clung shriveled and dried on vines, and once plentiful walnuts lay shrouded by a skin of hard frost. Lewis Hill, in fear for his life, had trekked on foot for seven months through five states. He likely walked along the Brooklyn-Sharon Valley Road into western Washtenaw County…Beyond the short hills lay the plains of the Sharon Valley and the home of Amasa Gillet. Lewis Hill remained with Amasa Gillet over the winter. In the spring, the man enslaved as Joseph Mallory crossed the Detroit River to Canada to begin a life of freedom as Lewis Hill. (19)

Allegan, Mich., 1839

While Hill is finally safe, Rev. Sullivan is not. In 1839, the Oakland County Anti-Slavery Society sent the preacher to Allegan to generate financial support for anti-slavery libraries. Though the mission was well-intended, it proved dangerous. According to a Jackson newspaper article, Rev. Sullivan "was set upon by certain lewd fellows of the baser sort." This group wanted nothing to do with Sullivan or his anti-slavery message—and it let him know it! The newspaper also reported that Sullivan "made an appointment for an anti-slavery lecture at a school house in Bellevue, but was forbidden the use of it, by a paper signed by a justice of the peace." (20)

But 1839 also brought good news. Rev. Sullivan received a letter from Dr. Thomas informing him that their collaboration was successful because Hill reached freedom in Canada. Thomas wrote: "I attended the Ohio anniversary held at Putnam while there I saw a colored man…from Augusta Ga. an old acquaintance of Lewis Hill's. He manifested great joy when I informed him that Lewis was safe in Canada." Many agents played a role in shepherding Hill to Canada, including the two who now celebrated such a happy ending to their collaboration. (21)

Leoni Township, Jackson County, 1840-1871

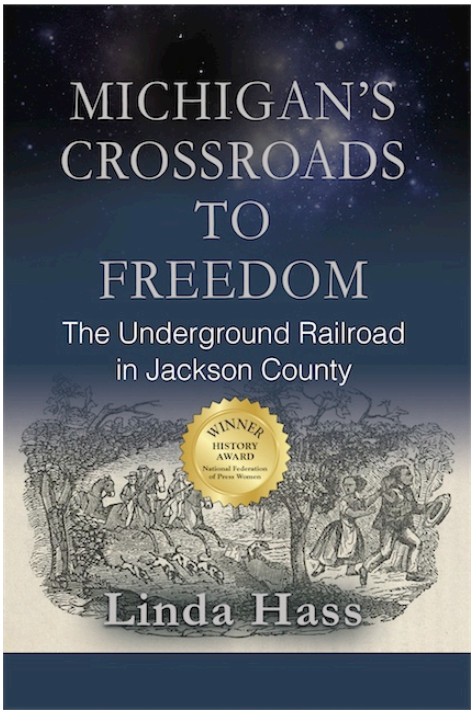
In 1840, Rev. Sullivan switched to the Wesleyan Methodist Church, which he felt took a stronger stand against slavery. He was given a circuit, serving members in Jackson, Hillsdale and Lenawee counties. His work was so exemplary, five years later Wesleyan Methodist leaders asked him to form an educational institution in Leoni. To pursue the task, he moved to

Leoni Township in 1845. There, he also engaged in the mercantile business and later, farming. According to Mull, "…Reverend Sullivan was asked by the Wesleyan Methodists to help form an educational institution in Leoni. From that location, the Reverend Sullivan lived out his days helping people escape from slavery. The Michigan Union College later moved to Adrian." The educational institution, which evolved into Leoni Theological Institute, changed names to "Michigan College" in 1855. In 1859, the college closed and transferred its assets to Adrian to establish Adrian College. Today, the private, co-educational liberal arts college is affiliated with the United Methodist Church and is accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools in the United States. (22)

On May 18, 1871, the preacher who strove to correct the ills of slavery died of typhoid fever in his Leoni Township home. Rev. William Sullivan lived long enough to see his dream, the end of slavery, become a reality before he closed his eyes one last time. The 61-year-old preacher was buried in Leoni Cemetery, Jackson. His obituary stated: "Mr. Sullivan, with the little band of abolitionists, carried on the work of agitation for which they were proscribed…He was an exemplary citizen, and was one of the few men who loved principle and honor above all things." (23)

This is the Leoni Cemetery tombstone of Rev. William Sullivan (author photograph, Leoni Township).

While Rev. Sullivan's legacy includes a college and daily newspaper, it also includes intangibles not easily tracked. The gratitude of enslaved Americans who turned to him for assistance can't be measured or weighed, but it undoubtedly existed, due to his willingness to open his house to those traveling along Jackson's Underground Railroad. The next chapter will shed light on the county's involvement in the secret network, the reasons Michigan became a major terminus, and the origin of the Underground Railroad.



A personal look at the Underground Railroad in Jackson, Michigan.

MICHIGAN'S CROSSROADS TO FREEDOM: The Underground Railroad in Jackson County

by Linda Hass