

This book takes an in-depth look at the dramas and personalities involved in Jackson County's Underground Railroad, including a male fugitive whose attempted recapture sparked legal battles, a female fugitive who escaped from a Virginian plantation, and Concord Township Underground Railroad agents whose love letters are immortalized in archives.

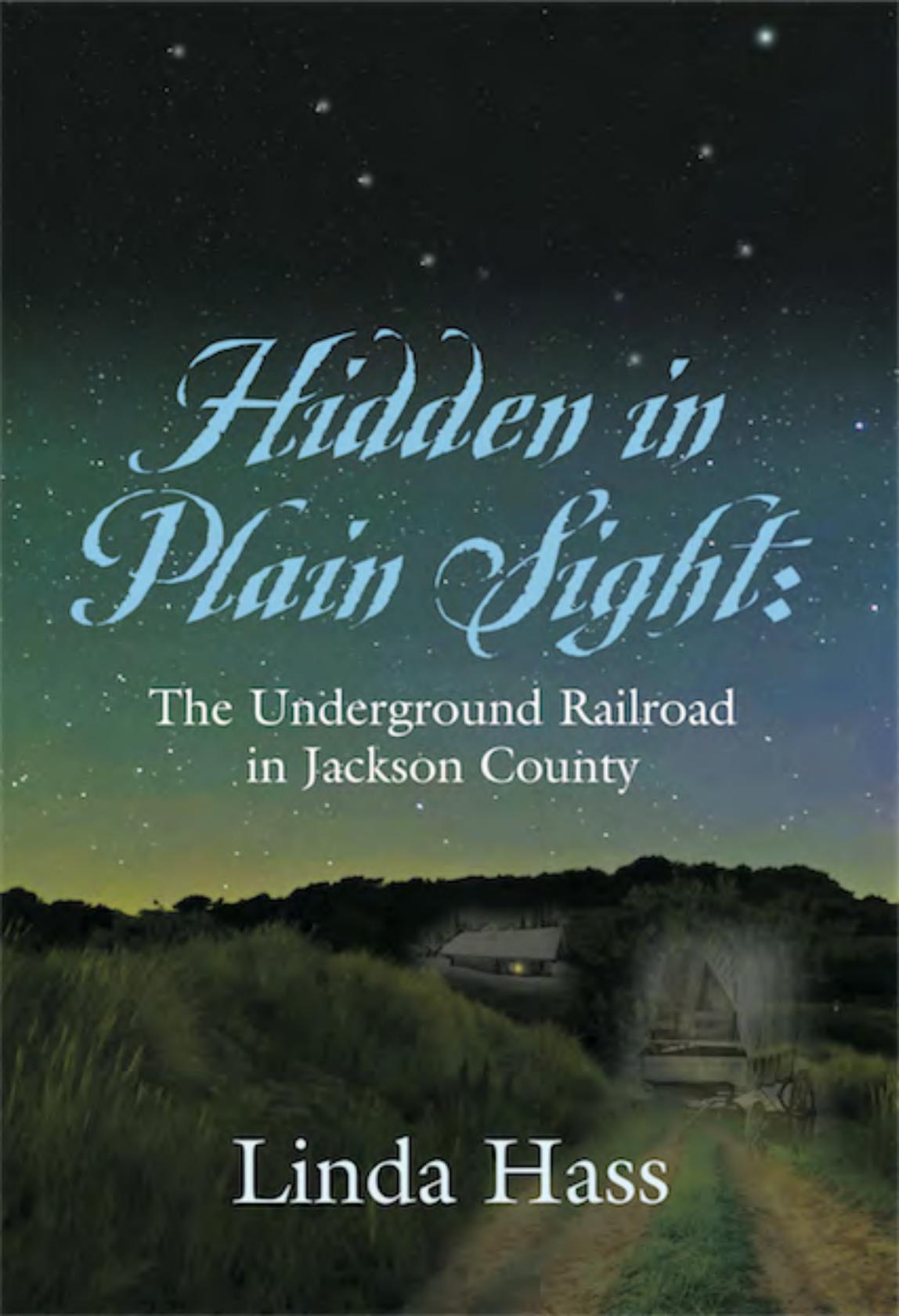
**Hidden In Plain Sight:
The Underground Railroad in Jackson County**

by Linda Hass

**Order the complete book from the publisher
[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/9613.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

The background of the cover is a night scene of a rural landscape. The sky is dark blue and black, filled with numerous small white stars. In the middle ground, there is a small, simple house with a light glowing from a window. To the right of the house, there is a tent or a covered structure on a dirt path. The foreground is dominated by tall, green grasses. The overall mood is quiet and mysterious.

*Hidden in
Plain Sight.*

The Underground Railroad
in Jackson County

Linda Hass

Copyright © 2018 Linda Hass

ISBN: 978-1-63492-736-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2018

First Edition

Table of Contents

FOREWORD	XI
INTRODUCTION	1
PART ONE: PROFILES OF COURAGE	9
CHAPTER ONE - HEARTS FULL OF LOVE	9
<i>April 8, 1854, Oak Openings, Concord Township, Jackson County.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>April 10, 1854, Oak Openings, Concord Township, Jackson County.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>April 11, 1854, Concord Township, Jackson County</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>April 12, 1854, Concord Township, Jackson County</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>1810-1832, Liverpool, England.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>1835-1837, Michigan Territory</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>April 12, 1854, Concord Township, Jackson County</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>April 13, 1854, Concord Township, Jackson County</i>	<i>24</i>
CHAPTER TWO - PARCELS OF GOODS AND CHATELS: THE ESCAPE.....	27
<i>March 19, 1854, Louisville, Ky.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>March 19, 1854, Jackson, Mich.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>March 20, 1854, Jeffersonville, Ind.</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>March 21, 1854, Jeffersonville, Ind.</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>March 21, 1854, Jackson, Mich.....</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>March 22, 1854, Jeffersonville, Ind.</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>March 26, 1854, Madison, Ind.</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>March 27, 1854, Madison, Ind.</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>April 12, 1854, Fremont, Ind.</i>	<i>49</i>
CHAPTER THREE - PARCELS OF GOODS AND CHATELS: JACKSON’S THOROUGHFARE	53
<i>April 13, 1854, Sheridan Township, Calhoun County, Mich.....</i>	<i>53</i>
<i>April 14, 1854, Parma/Sandstone townships, Jackson, Mich.....</i>	<i>56</i>
<i>April 17, 1854, Jackson, Mich.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>April 18, 1854, Jackson, Mich.....</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>April 19, 1854, Jackson, Mich.....</i>	<i>66</i>
CHAPTER FOUR - RICHARD NICHOLS’ STORY: A SPARK FROM FREEDOM’S ALTAR.....	69
<i>July 15, 1842, Richmond, Va.</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>1819, Richmond, Va.</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Nov. 13, 1833, Richmond Va.</i>	<i>71</i>
<i>Spring, 1841, Jackson, Mich.</i>	<i>73</i>

Hidden In Plain Sight

<i>Spring, 1841, Richmond, Va.</i>	74
<i>July 15, 1842, Richmond, Va.</i>	76
<i>July 16, 1842, Richmond, Va.</i>	78
<i>July 16, 1842, Jackson Mich.</i>	78
<i>July 25, 1842, Virginia</i>	79
<i>July 29, 1842, south of Chambersburg, Penn.</i>	81
<i>July 30, 1842, Chambersburg, Penn.</i>	82
<i>Sept. 1, 1842, Hillsdale County, Mich.</i>	83
<i>Sept. 2, 1842, Jackson County, Mich.</i>	84
<i>Fall 1850, Jackson, Mich.</i>	86
CHAPTER FIVE - RICHARD NICHOLS' STORY: JACKSON'S CIVIL WAR	91
<i>Day One, Summer 1853, Jackson, Mich.</i>	91
<i>Day Two, Summer 1853, Jackson, Mich.</i>	94
<i>Fall, 1853, Ontario, Canada</i>	96
<i>May 31, 1854, Jackson, Mich.</i>	97
<i>1854-1860, Jackson, Mich.</i>	101
<i>1861-64, Jackson, Mich.</i>	102
<i>1865-67, Jackson, Mich.</i>	103
CHAPTER SIX - THE PATCHWORK QUILT OF FREEDOM	107
<i>May 15, 1850, Virginia</i>	107
<i>May 16- June 5, 1850, Virginia to Canada</i>	110
<i>May, 1851, Sandwich, Canada</i>	111
<i>Aug. 25, 1851, Windsor, Canada</i>	113
<i>Aug. 25, 1851, Jackson, Mich.</i>	114
<i>1853-1860, Jackson, Mich.</i>	114
<i>1861-1869, Jackson, Mich.</i>	116
<i>1870-1916, Jackson, Mich.</i>	117
<i>March 9, 1916, Jackson, Mich.</i>	119
CHAPTER SEVEN - ROOTS	121
<i>March 1865, Rockingham County, N.C.</i>	121
<i>Summer 1858, Rockingham County, N.C.</i>	121
<i>April 12, 1861, Rockingham County, N.C.</i>	123
<i>Jan. 1, 1863, Rockingham County, N.C.</i>	124
<i>March 7, 1865, Rockingham County, N.C.</i>	125
<i>April 1865, Rockingham County, N.C.</i>	130
<i>July, 1866, Jackson, Mich.</i>	131
<i>1865-1890's, Fayette County, Tenn., and Rockingham County, N.C.</i>	132
<i>May 10, 2016, Jackson, Mich.</i>	134

The Underground Railroad in Jackson County

<i>Early 1900s, Wheeling, Ohio County, W. Va.</i>	135
<i>Oct. 8, 1939, Wheeling, Ohio County, W. Va.</i>	137
CHAPTER EIGHT - CHAMPION OF THE POOR.....	139
PART TWO: SELF-GUIDED WALKING TOUR	149
DISCOVER THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN JACKSON, MICH.....	149
INTRODUCTION	151
THE TOUR.....	153
1. <i>Jackson’s Amtrak Station</i>	153
2. <i>Bucky Harris Park/Jacksonburg Square Historical Marker</i>	155
3. <i>First Congregational Church</i>	157
4. <i>Under the Oaks Park</i>	159
5. <i>Mt. Evergreen Cemetery, 1047 Greenwood Ave.</i>	161
PART THREE: ADDITIONAL PERSPECTIVES.....	165
SANDWICH FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD.....	165
WHY A TRAP DOOR?	169
HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN JACKSON PROJECT.....	173
THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN ALBION, MICH.	177
WHY CELEBRATE THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD?.....	181
APPENDIX ONE: CODES USED ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD/QUIZ.....	185
APPENDIX TWO: QUILTS AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD.....	187
CHAPTER NOTES	189
BIBLIOGRAPHY	225
INTERVIEWS: PERSONAL, PHONE OR EMAIL	233
INDEX.....	235

PART ONE: PROFILES OF COURAGE

Chapter One

Hearts Full of Love

When I first got into the free states, and saw how every body (sic) looked like they loved one another, sure enough, I thought, this must be the 'Heaven of Love' I had heard something about.

Lewis Clark, *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clark*

April 8, 1854, Oak Openings, Concord Township, Jackson County

The quiet evening air explodes with noise as hooves pound the dirt road that leads to Oak Openings, Concord Township. Kentucky riders spur their horses and push hard, a flash of motion through a countryside tinged with the yellow green of spring. A pack of hounds races ahead, hot on a trail. The riders have traveled for many days and their hounds have led them to this clearing one mile north of the Village of Concord. (1)

In a nearby log cabin, Polly McGee prepares for supper. She and her husband, Thomas McGee, were among the first settlers in Concord. The couple has 10 children, but only the youngest, Willard, 8, still lives at home. The three-some sits down to a dinner of roast venison, baked beans and baked potatoes. The respite is sweet for these hard-working farmers, who are renowned for their willingness to help those in need.

Among a small circle of friends, the McGees also are renowned for using their home as a station in Jackson County's Underground Railroad. One of their sons, reflecting on this secret chapter of the family's life, wrote about their family's "station" and its responsibilities to the larger network:

. . . it required the keeper . . . to deliver . . . all passengers taken in by him to the next station in good condition at his own expense. It is true there were no regular hours for the arrival and departure . . . but the station was always open, both day and night, for business . . . the only class of persons permitted to . . . be transported on the road were the slaves from the South in search of an asylum from oppressors . . . (2)

Tonight, a runaway slave is searching for asylum in Concord. As riders push their panting horses along the dirt road, the fugitive sprints through tall grasses, wet with dew. He is drawn to a glowing lantern in the window of the McGee's cabin. Smoke rising from the chimney hovers over the roof like a shimmering halo. Is the cabin real, or a mirage? No matter. The fugitive forges ahead; pushed from behind by eager hounds and pulled forward by the hope of a lantern. Above him, distant lights illuminate the sky in the shape of a Big Dipper.(3)



Sketch illustrating early Jackson (author photo from Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Mich., 2017).

The connecting point for all these forces is the McGee's log cabin, where an unsuspecting family enjoys a hearty meal after a long day. The glowing embers in the hearth, lit candles and the aroma of roasted venison fill the cabin with delicious warmth and light. As the family begins to eat, a faint rap sounds at the door. Thomas cocks his head toward the door and pauses. Was that a knock? Silence.

The 64-year-old picks up his fork and continues eating. Another knock, this one unmistakable. The howls of hounds echo in the distance. No one needs to tell this family what *that* combination of sounds means. Forks are put down mid-bite. Thomas quickly answers the door. The frightened but hopeful expression on his visitor's sweaty face speaks volumes. In the background, horses race towards the cabin, kicking up a spray of dirt. Thomas ushers the nervous visitor inside and closes the door. Polly motions for him to follow her down the cellar stairs. At the bottom of the dank, semi-dark space, she points to a barrel that sits between a basket of

potatoes and a stack of canned goods. No sooner does the fugitive crouch inside the barrel than heavy pounds pummel the cabin's door, sending reverberations all the way down to the cellar. This is not a friendly knock—it is a resounding demand for entrance. (4)



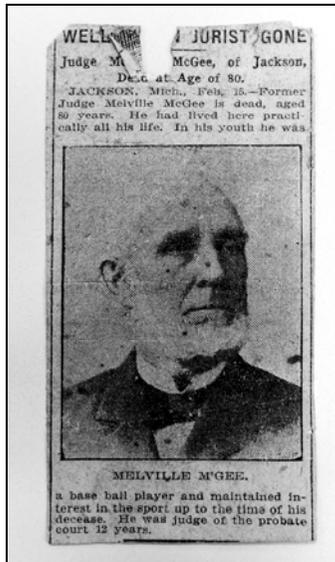
Photo of Polly McGee (author photo from Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich., 2017).

Polly slams the barrel lid shut, scrambles up the stairs and returns to the table, out of breath. Then she straightens her bonnet and calmly sits down. The corners of her mouth curve upwards ever so slightly, forming a grin as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa and as impenetrable as Fort Knox. Who can tell what she is really thinking . . . or hiding? Willard looks down at his plate, staring at his food. Thomas takes a breath and opens the door. Facing him are several flushed, angry faces. What they see, in return, is the serene face of a man renowned for his calm, cool demeanor, characteristics that would one day earn Thomas McGee a judgeship in Jackson County. A profile in the *Combination Atlas Map of Jackson County, Michigan, 1874*, sheds light on McGee's compassion and strong moral bearings:

He was a man of high moral integrity, great industry and a strong friend to the poor and oppressed. Believing that slavery was a crime against both the laws of the nation as well as of God, he was from his earliest year a strong abolitionist, and from the date of his settlement in Jackson County, became an agent of the so-called underground railroad. Many a poor hound-bound slave, coming to his door for shelter, food and protection, has

gone away blessing God that there beat within the breast of Thomas McGee a heart full of love and sympathy for the poor and oppressed. (5)

The silver-haired senior with the mutton chop beard also is a committed Christian who will not lie under any circumstances. Any circumstances. And on this night, the search party at his door wants to know the full circumstances that brought a fugitive onto his property. Seven feet below the very threshold they stand on, wedged in a barrel, crouches the nervous object of their search. Thomas pauses to consider his response to this inquisition. Remaining honest while upholding a conflicting moral good will be as difficult as walking a tight rope between two cliffs, but he will try.



Newspaper clipping of Thomas McGee (author photo from Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich., 2017).

“We demand to know if you have seen the fugitive for whom we are searching!” shouts the group’s leader, a spray of spit punctuating his words.

Thomas calmly takes a handkerchief, wipes his face, and without revealing a hint of emotion, simply says, “Yes.”

Stunned at his honesty, the search party stands in silence for a few moments. “In which direction was he going?” the leader finally asks, in a lower tone.

“North,” Thomas politely answers.

Taken aback at his honesty, the men jump on their horses and dash off in hot pursuit, headed north.

Years later, a Concord resident who knew Thomas personally wrote about the incident and about how the straight-laced Christian wielded truth like a weapon, confounding this particular search party. According to his account:

. . . on one occasion a slave arrived at the McGee 'station' only moments before the arrival of a search party. He had been hastily secreted in an empty barrel in the cellar when the posse was in the dooryard. The leader of the group demanded to know if Mr. McGee had seen the fugitive for whom they were searching. Being a very strict Baptist, McGee would only tell the truth and answered simply, 'Yes.'

This honest and straightforward answer took the officer somewhat aback and he then wanted to know in which direction the man had been going. Again McGee answered in his calm polite way that the man had been going "north" the last time he saw him. With this the posse immediately turned their horses back into the road and dashed off to the north in supposedly hot pursuit. The fact that saved Mr. McGee from the necessity of committing the sin of telling a lie was the fact that the stairway to the cellar in the McGee house slanted from south to north and it was the absolute truth that the man had been going north when McGee last saw him disappearing down the cellar stairs. (6)

April 10, 1854, Oak Openings, Concord Township, Jackson County

Who would have thought that a truthful answer could send a search party on such a wild goose chase? But it had, and a grateful fugitive bids the McGees farewell after hiding in their cabin for two days. The fugitive, whose name is Lewis, sets off on foot, guided by the stars and a rough map drawn by Thomas. His goal is to reach the safe house of William and Mary DeLand in Jackson, 20 miles east; then proceed to Detroit and ultimately, Canada.

Thomas had offered to arrange for wagon transport, but Lewis declined. Putting himself in the hands of a strange driver required more trust than this fugitive could muster. Another Kentucky escapee who felt the same way wrote: "I had long since made up my mind that I would not trust myself in the hands of any man, white or colored . . ." (7)

As Lewis disappears into the night, clouds obscure the moon's light. A haze disguises the rolling landscape, turning towering trees into ominous

Hidden In Plain Sight

overseers. Pine boughs whisper in the breeze as he passes through them, while downed branches crackle underfoot. After a mile of running, Lewis reaches a crossroads. He begins to turn east when he hears the faint sound of hounds. But from which direction? Maybe the search party is back in the area?

He is running now, from tree to tree, his breath leaving an erratic trail of white clouds in the chilly air. He's lost his bearings and doesn't know if he's headed east or west. Worst of all, he's lost his map. But the slave with the whip-scarred back *does* know one thing—he needs to hide his scent immediately.

As the dogs' howls get louder, he runs into Concord's mill pond. His feet sink into the muck but he continues wading deeper and deeper. Water wraps around his legs like ice cold fingers that swirl up to his chest and then his neck, until only his head is exposed. Above him stretches an endless expanse of darkness; around him flows a body of water that enfolds him in its icy grasp. He can see nothing and feel next to nothing, as numbness invades his body, but he can hear everything. In the background, dogs are snarling and men are shouting. Thanks to the water, Lewis' scent is untraceable, and thanks to the cover of darkness, his body is hidden in plain sight.

He isn't the only escapee to find refuge in water. Another fugitive wrote that a pond was the only thing that saved him: "I run (sic) about a mile off and run into a mill dam up to my head in water. I kept my head just above and hid the rest part of my body for . . . hours." (8)



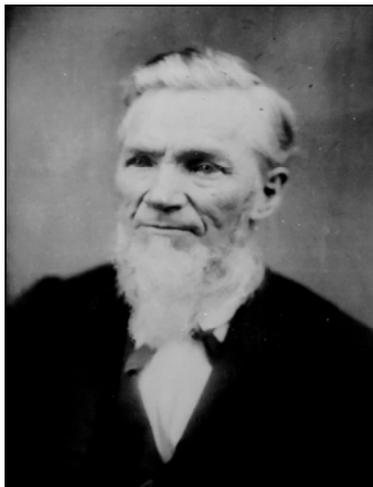
**Concord's mill pond in Jackson County
(author photo, Concord, Mich., 2017).**

April 11, 1854, Concord Township, Jackson County

One hour. One miserable hour in a cold pond at night. That's how long it took the confused dogs to leave the vicinity. Lewis crawls onto the muddy bank and hides under a pile of logs and bush, shivering and coughing. There's not enough time to reach the DeLand house before dawn. Which direction leads back to McGee's? He's all turned around now. One thing is abundantly clear: he needs to seek immediate shelter, and possibly medical help.

Another fugitive whose escape was derailed by poor health and daylight wrote: "Nothing but Providence saved me from freezing to death. I received a very severe cold, which settled upon my lungs . . . at last I resolved to seek protection . . . and secured myself behind some logs and brush, intending to wait there until someone should pass by . . ." (9)

As dawn illuminates the dewy countryside, Lewis spies a gentleman in a buggy. He looks too genteel to bother, so Lewis lets him pass. Twenty minutes later, a man on horseback rides by, but he is pushing his horse too hard to be hailed. At last, a man in a wagon passes by with bolts of material in the wagon's bed. The driver is a thin, slender-faced man with a gentle smile and white beard. Something about his persona emanates kindness. Perhaps it's his humble attire, or his soft touch with the horse. Lewis trusts him, and rushes out from behind the log to wave.



James Taylor (author photo from Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich., 2017).

Another fugitive used similar instincts to discern whom to approach:

The first person looked too genteel for me to hail him. Very soon another passed by on horseback. I attempted to speak to him, but fear made my voice fail me . . . As he passed, I observed an old man . . . As soon as I saw him, and observed his dress, I thought to myself, 'You are the man that I have been looking for!' (10)

The wagon driver stops and stares at the sneezing mud-covered mystery man near the pond. Providence has brought Lewis face-to-face with James Taylor, another Underground Railroad agent in Concord's network. The need for an African-American to hide in a pond at night needs no explanation for this humanitarian. He motions for the fugitive to hop in the bed of his wagon and holds up a burlap bag as cover. The offer brings Lewis face-to-face with an emotional crossroads more challenging than any physical one. Does he surrender control and accept transportation from a stranger, or does he continue his solo flight? Overcome by cold, he decides to surrender and take his chances. Lewis cautiously climbs in the wagon and pulls the bag over him. The rough burlap retains what little body heat he has left, and he presses the scratchy fabric close to his shivering body. (11)

Taylor jerks the reins. The wagon lurches forward, jostling over a gravel road. Lewis has no idea where he's headed or what he'll find when he gets there. Glimpses of the town parade before him as he peeks from behind the covering. A grist mill on the edge of the pond hums with activity. Shop owners flip signs in the windows from "closed" to "open" in the early dawn hours. Smoke billows from a blacksmith shop as metallic clangs ring through the air. Several minutes later, the wagon comes to a creaky stop in front of a lone house on the ridge above the north fork of the Kalamazoo River. The 44-year-old hops off the wagon and goes inside.

What is happening inside the house? Will someone emerge from the front door eager to collect a bounty? Another fugitive who experienced anxiety during a prolonged wait wrote:

After he was gone, I meditated whether to wait or not; being apprehensive that he had gone for some one to arrest me. But I finally concluded to remain until he should return . . . After a suspense of an hour and a half . . . he returned . . . He took me to his house, but it was some time before I could be induced to enter it; not until the old lady came out, did I venture into the house. I thought I saw something in the old lady . . . that told me I was not only safe, but welcome . . . (12)

The Underground Railroad in Jackson County

Several minutes later, James emerges from the house holding the hand of a woman. A sweet intimacy hovers over this couple like a gentle aura. One hundred and forty-four years later, a newspaper would describe the private letters between James and wife Rachael Taylor as “one of the oldest love stories in Jackson County.” At this moment, however, the warm impression they create is enough to put Lewis at ease.

The fugitive slowly pushes the burlap bag aside and slides out of the wagon. On either side of the path leading to the front door are garden beds prepared for the new growth of spring. Residents familiar with the family would later write: “In the summer, the charm of the place could be seen from the road to Jackson. It boasted a garden that grew vegetables and bright, colorful lady’s slippers. Pansies and clove pinks by the tree where the road curved . . . invited friends to come near.” (13)



Photo of the former Taylor house in Concord (author photo from Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich., 2017).

“The house on a hill,” as it is known, has a reputation for offering hospitality, joy and comfort. Among a smaller circle of friends, it also has a reputation for offering refuge. According to the family scrapbook and records, there were two places in the house where fugitives were hidden: in a cellar accessed by a trap door under the floor and in narrow space under the stairway. Fugitives were not always confined to these spaces, but if a stranger approached the house, they were usually ushered there. (14)



Example of hiding place under a stairway (author photo, National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2017).

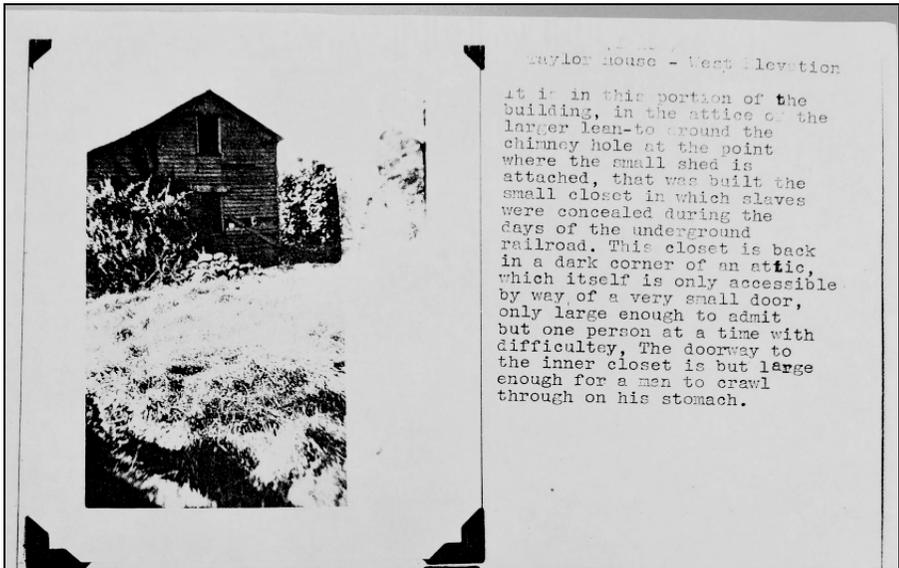
A third hiding spot was above a lean-to addition built around the original house. One Concord resident who lived at the time and was familiar with the spot in the Taylors' home, wrote:

Above this addition was a large, low attic that was reached through a small door at the top of the stairs . . . This attic was very dark and back under the eaves . . . I was told that this was where, in addition to the small one-room cellar under the older part of the house, slaves were hidden during the day when the railroad was in operation. I have explored this old attic many times and could see no other plausible explanation for such a closet having been built. It was built of rough sawed boards which exactly matched the other timbering in the attic and was probably indiscernable (sic) to the searcher who poked his head through the little door at the top of the stairs and had at best only the light of a lantern to aid him. It was a real feat for boys of 12 or 13 years to get back into that hide-away . . . (15)

Sue Brunner, Parma Township, the great-great-granddaughter of James and Rachael Taylor, said she had heard stories of her ancestors' participation in the Underground Railroad, and that their actions make her proud to be a descendant. A Taylor family scrapbook in the Bentley Historical Library not only authenticates the hiding places described by residents, but adds photos and details. One page of the scrapbook shows a building with a lean-to addition and provides this description:

The Underground Railroad in Jackson County

It is in this portion of this building, in the attic (sic) of the larger lean-to . . . that was built the small closet in which the slaves were concealed during the days of the underground railroad. This closet is back in a dark corner of the attic, which itself is only accessible by way of a very small door, only large enough to admit but one person at a time with difficulty, The doorway to the inner closet is but large enough for a man to crawl through on his stomach. (16)



Page from Taylor family scrapbook (author photo from Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich., 2017).

But Lewis' first impressions are not of hiding places or dark spots; they are of a house filled with life and love. James ushers him inside, where paper dolls and games on the floor evoke a spirit of playfulness. The aroma of vanilla and sugar emanates from the kitchen, where the couple's daughters bake sugar cookies. The oldest daughters flute the doughy edges of each cookie for decorative effect and the youngest plops a large raisin in the center. Rachael leads Lewis into the kitchen and hands him a freshly baked cookie. The warm treat sits in his cold hand like a slice of heaven. It is almost too much to comprehend. As one confused fugitive recalled:

I was not . . . prepared to receive their hospitalities. The only fault I found with them was their being too kind . . . the idea of a white lady waiting on me at the table was still worse! . . . The fact that I was a freeman—could walk, talk, eat . . . as a man, and no one to stand over me with the blood-clotted cow-hide—all this made me feel that I was not myself.(17)

And indeed, Lewis is not himself. Grateful, yes; but also confused and sick. He feels feverish and light headed. Lingering in a pond in nearly freezing conditions has taken its toll. The room feels as if it's spinning. He stumbles away from the kitchen, backs into a chair, and then falls to the floor. William W. Brown, another fugitive who suffered from exposure to cold, described his care under similar circumstances:

I was seized with fever, which threatened to confine me to my bed. But my . . . friends soon raised me, treating me as kindly as if I had been one of their children. I remained with them twelve or fifteen days, during which time they made me some clothing . . . (18)

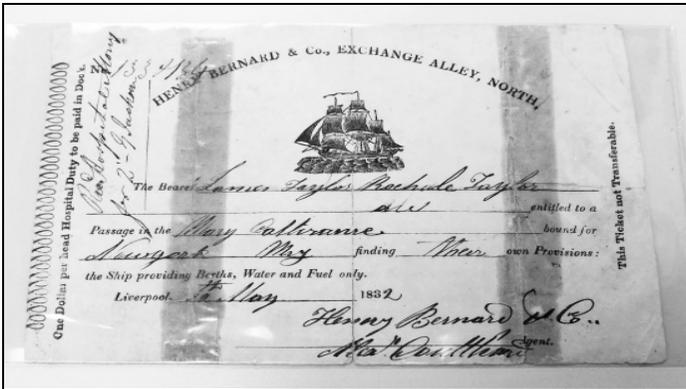
April 12, 1854, Concord Township, Jackson County

Lewis awakes on a bed of quilts in a small room. Beside him on the wood plank floor sits a plate of sugar cookies. A wool blanket is nailed over the window, preventing outsiders from seeing in; but a partially open door allows Lewis to view the next room where James, Rachael and their daughters sew by the fireplace, silhouetted by a golden glow. Family members laugh and talk freely as they transform patches of fabric into the shirts, slacks and dresses their neighbors would wear. The youngest daughter asks if her parents would describe, one more time, their trip to America. James puts down his sewing, looks out the window and smiles. His eyes glow with memories from a distant time and place across the Atlantic Ocean. (19)

1810-1832, Liverpool, England

James was born in England to John and Martha Taylor around 1810. In adulthood, the gentle soul worked as a tailor's apprentice in Macclesfield, England. In 1832, he married Rachel Seech, a milliner's apprentice, and on May 22 of that year, the newlyweds boarded the Mary Coteince, a trans-Atlantic ship that departed Liverpool for New York. As wedding trips go, the several-week trip across the Atlantic was anything but romantic.

The Underground Railroad in Jackson County



The Taylors' original passenger ticket (author photo from Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich., 2017).

An article in the *New-York Daily Times* shed light on the provisions and hardships common to trans-Atlantic travel in the early to mid-1800s:

From Liverpool each passenger received weekly 5 lbs. of oatmeal, 2 ½ lbs. biscuit, 1 lb. flour, 2 lbs. rice, ½ lb. sugar, ½ lb. molasses and 2 ounces of tea . . . sometimes they get nothing warm for days and nights when a gale of wind is blowing and the sea is mountains high and breaking over the ship in all directions. (20)

Like most working-class passengers, the Taylors probably stayed in the dimly lit lower decks of the damp wooden vessel, where the rocking motion of the Atlantic Ocean was most apparent. Vertigo would have been the least of their worries, however. Their sense of smell was probably assaulted by the combined odor of oil lamps, vomit and un-emptied chamber pots. Their sense of hearing would have been bombarded by the perpetually creaking wooden timbers of the hull and the chattering of rats. Head lice and bedbugs also were common in the narrow bunks of passenger ships, according to written accounts of the time.

Once in America, the newlyweds moved to Churchville, Monroe County, N.Y., where they likely resided in the cramped, poorly lit accommodations available to most new immigrants. After three years in the dismal lodging, their restless hearts pushed them toward the wide open spaces, fresh air and boundless opportunity of the Michigan Territory. (21)

1835-1837, Michigan Territory

James ventured to Michigan alone in the spring of 1835, wanting to spare Rachel and his newborn daughter from cold and unpredictable travel conditions. His destination was Spring Arbor Township, renowned for its abundant springs. James soon found work by sharing a shop with a shoemaker and in a few months, was able to purchase two lots of land in the village for \$36.50. Soon afterwards, he bartered with a farmer to dig a cellar for his new home in exchange for tailoring work.

Encouraged by the prospects of the growing town, James wrote Rachael about the challenging but rewarding life they could have in Jackson County. Although his letters are peppered with spelling errors, his affectionate sentiment rings through. A letter dated June 4, 1835, began:

Dear Wife, Companion, and Friend . . .

This place is now cald Spring Arbor on account of the meny springs round the vecsinety.

I think this a butiful country and with respecting to temprenc and morals, thes place eccels all for its size . . .

I was at a weden today and I aded the wedin cake I wish I could send you sum you would like it . . . your letter was so good I wanted more of it for my 35cents and please to write a litel more in the next . . . I remane your affecthacite husband until death. (22)

With a home built and a steady job as a tailor, James returned to New York to retrieve his wife and small daughter. Because of travel hardships and the costs of teaming, he urged Rachael to dispose of things they could not conveniently carry, writing: “. . . get redy as much as you can sel all the things you can that we can not conventley carey.” (23)

The family lived in Spring Arbor for two years before moving one last time to the Village of Concord, where they settled down. By 1837, their long journey, which began in England, had come to a pleasant stop. According to historians, James Taylor established the first tailor shop and owned the first sewing machine in Concord. Originally, the shop was part of his home. Later, James moved the shop to the west side of Main Street, part way up the hill, where it could attract more foot traffic.

Sewing was a family affair, and all participated in the craft. Their work ethic not only impressed Lewis, it disproved a fallacy that some plantation owners promoted among their slaves. According to one fugitive:

The slaveholders are continually telling us how poor the white people are in the free states and how much they suffer from poverty; no masters to look out for them . . . I see how it really is now; every man in the free states works; and as they work for themselves, they do twice as much as they would do for another. (24)

That is certainly the case with the Taylor family, who also finds time to minister to ailing fugitives, like the one lying on the floor in their spare room this evening.

April 12, 1854, Concord Township, Jackson County

Lewis watches the family laughs and jokes together, marveling at the affection between them. Another fugitive who made a similar observation about his hosts along the Underground Railroad road wrote:

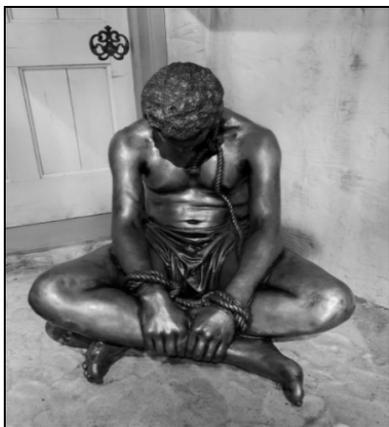
. . . now that I am where people look kind and act kindly toward me, it seems like a dream. I hardly seem to be in the same world that I was then . . . I thought, this must be the 'Heaven of Love' I had heard something about. (25)

Not that the North is perfect. Even on free soil, Lewis has seen glimpses of bigotry. Still, it's better than life in his native Lexington, Ky., where 40 slaves worked on his master's tobacco farm. Lewis never would have been allowed to rest this long to recuperate from an illness. His memories of his former life are draped in the coarse material worn by slaves and punctuated by the crack of whips and clang of bells.

A typical work day on his Kentucky farm began with the ringing of a bell at 4 a.m. Slaves were allowed half an hour to eat their breakfast and get to the field. At 4:30 a.m., when the overseer blew a horn, all had to be actively working; those who weren't, received 10 lashes from a whip made from a 7-foot-long cowhide lash attached to a 3-foot-long wooden handle. (26)

There were other forms of punishment, including what the slaves called "hanging between the heavens and earth," in which they were tied to a tree or a beam with their toes just barely touching the floor, and left there for hours or days.

Lewis' master, a tobacco farmer, also used a technique he called "smoking," in which he bound slaves with ropes, put them in his smoke house and made a controlled fire of tobacco stems, filling the air with noxious smoke that the slave was forced to inhale for as long as he or she was left tied there. (27)



**Slave figure displayed at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center
(author photo, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2017.)**

Once a year, slaves were given items of clothing that included a pair of pants and two shirts made from coarse material; one pair of shoes; and a thin jacket, which was inadequate for Kentucky winters. Another fugitive who felt the sting of winter wrote:

Many people think it so warm there that we are safe on this score. They are much mistaken. The weather is far too cold for our thin clothing; and in the winter, from rain, sleet and snow, to which we are exposed, we suffer very severely.

Tonight, however, Lewis feels the warmth of the quilt, smiles, and drifts back to sleep. (28)

April 13, 1854, Concord Township, Jackson County

Early the next evening, Lewis awakes again. The rays of the setting sun illuminate the edges of the blanket, turning the window into a glowing frame. Draped on a chair in front of him are a recently-sewn pair of pants and a freshly-washed shirt.

He moves a corner of the blanket aside and peeks out the window. Rachel and her daughters are clearing brush in the garden, silhouetted by the last glimmer of dusk. In the shadowy distance, a stranger approaches in a wagon. Normally, the family would move fugitives into hiding spots when visitors arrive. Curiously, they make no such move tonight.

Lewis watches as James greets the stranger. They linger in serious conversation until James points to the very window Lewis is peering from. Lewis drops the curtain instantly, plunging the room in darkness. Why would James tell strangers where he's hiding? Is it time to run again?

Lewis throws on his clothes and turns for the door when it swings open and almost hits him. For the third time in six days, the fugitive comes face-to-face with an Underground Railroad agent from Concord. David Smalley, a farmer, lives near the McGee homestead in Oak Openings and has agreed to transport Lewis to the next stop in Jackson.

A local historian and contemporary of Smalley's wrote about the farmer's industriousness and participation in the secret network, describing him as a "typical pioneer, full of hope and energy and with his family of boys soon had a clearing and a comfortable home. He was a strong anti-slavery and temperance man, and a member of the Baptist church. His house was at one time a refuge or station on the underground railway." (29)

As the setting sun drapes the countryside in dark shadows, James brings the wagon closer to the front door. Lewis stands in the doorway staring at both men—one a tailor; the other, a farmer—and wonders what occupation he will choose. Another fugitive overwhelmed at the choices freedom brought wrote: "My hands, my feet, were now my own. But what to do with them was the next question." (30)

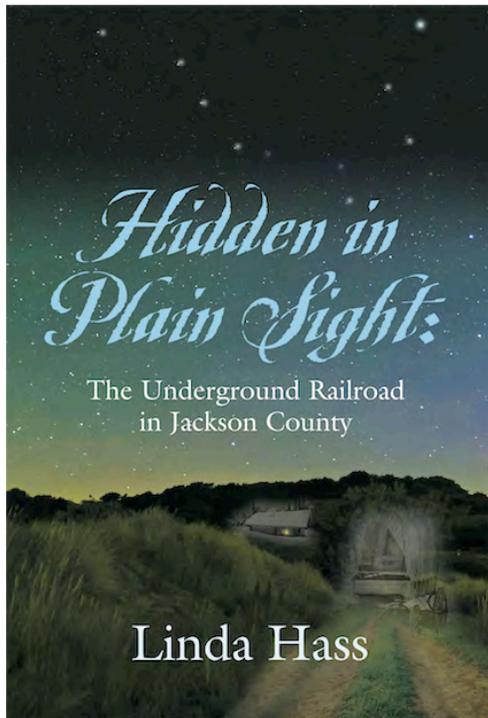
Lewis smiles at the possibilities ahead of him, nods his head in thanks to the men, then slips in the wagon's bed and burrows under the hay. In a few minutes, he hears a clucking noise and feels the wagon pitch forward, headed east towards Jackson. Normally, being transported by a stranger would alarm him, but not tonight. Some people, he decides, can be trusted; especially the Underground Railroad agents in Jackson County.

As the dark blue sky fades to black, a full moon rises in the east, sending rays of milky light that illuminate the way forward. It's a fitting sign, Lewis decides, for the setting sun of slavery and the rise of new possibilities ahead; possibilities enabled by loving hearts in Concord Township.

Hidden In Plain Sight



**Tombstones marking the graves of David Smalley and Thomas McGee
(author photos, Maple Grove Cemetery, Concord, Mich., 2017).**



This book takes an in-depth look at the dramas and personalities involved in Jackson County's Underground Railroad, including a male fugitive whose attempted recapture sparked legal battles, a female fugitive who escaped from a Virginian plantation, and Concord Township Underground Railroad agents whose love letters are immortalized in archives.

**Hidden In Plain Sight:
The Underground Railroad in Jackson County**

by Linda Hass

**Order the complete book from the publisher
[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/9613.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**