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In 13-year Saga, Neighbors Save Manhattan's Last Remaining Safe-house

By Fern Luskin

Fern Luskin is co-chair of Friends of the Hopper-Gibbons Underground Railroad Site and Professor of Art at LaGuardia College in New York City. She and co-chair Julie Finch were the 2009 winners of the Underground Railroad Free Press Prize for Preservation. The two have donated their archives on the project below to the New York Historical Society.

In April, 2007, while working on my laptop on the roof of my building, I saw that steel girders had been built atop 339 West 29th Street, a four-story row house. Alarmed at the aesthetic discordance of this sight, I delved into the history of the block. It was at the New York Historical Society that I found a fire insurance map from the 1870s that showed both the old and current building numbers for West 29th Street. The building in question, currently 339 West 29th Street, was earlier marked 19 Lamartine Place. I then looked at old New York City directories, also in the collection of the Historical Society, which listed residents' names and occupations. It was then that I realized that James Sloan Gibbons and Abby Hopper Gibbons, the prominent [father and daughter] abolitionists, once lived in 19 Lamartine Place. Months later, I discovered the document proving that the Gibbons's house was an Underground Railroad station.

I contacted the City Department of Buildings, Planning Commissioner Amanda Burden, and the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Ms. Burden wrote back and indicated that if [building owner] Nick Mamounas had violated any zoning laws in building the fifth story, that would be illegal. I calculated that the addition was, indeed, higher than zoning law allowed. With the help of Julie Finch, my co-chair of Friends of the Hopper-Gibbons Underground Railroad Site, whom I met in 2008, our electeds and photographs proving that Mr. Mamounas was a scofflaw, we fought against the illegal addition tooth and nail. He, in turn, bat-

Hopper-Gibbons House
restored to it historic state

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Key Player Tells How Project Went From Startup to Prize Winner

This invited article was provided by Cathy LaPointe, officer and board member of the Underground Railroad Society of Cass County, Michigan. The Society won the 2019 Underground Railroad Free Press Prize for Preservation. Edited for space.

The Underground Railroad Society of Cass County, Michigan (URSCC) is only ten years old. It's been quite a journey from literally nothing to preserving and restoring four Underground Railroad-related buildings, putting together a 19-site driving tour and annual events that attract thousands of visitors from all over the world, and gaining a sustaining membership of over 450 donors and grantors.

The Underground Railroad was well documented in Cass County histories from 1875 and 1882, and an extensive file of news clippings is housed in the Cassopolis Local History Library, but the story was not well known by the local community and was not taught in schools. Most younger descendants of free blacks and freedom seekers who still reside in the community didn't know their ancestors' history. Local anecdotes about Quakers on the Underground Railroad were fading from memory, even though their homes still exist. PhD dissertations and academic studies from the 1960s and 1970s were languishing in university archives. It was likely that the full story of what happened here in the Young's Prairie slave-catcher raid would never be told.

In 2005, the 1847 Kentucky Slave Raid and tri-

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Bonine House
in Cass County, Michigan

A Chance Meeting Can Be Typical to Learn of the Underground Railroad

The following first-hand account has been provided by John W. Davis of Athens, Alabama, a United States Army veteran and federal civil service retiree. Mr. Davis's first encounter with the Underground Railroad related here is typical of how Americans often first hear of the institution.

One particularly strange event stands out in my memory. I was a little boy at the time, and recall one fine Autumn day trip that ended with more than we'd ever imagined. My dad, like most St. Louisans, was proud of our fellow Missourian, Mark Twain. So, one day my family rode together up the 80 or so miles to Twain's Mississippi River home in Hannibal, Missouri, from ours in St. Louis.

Halfway there, along a state highway, we stopped at a small restaurant overlooking the Mississippi. My dad engaged the owner in friendly banter. The man looked at my two sisters and me saying, "Would you kids like to see a secret station on the Underground Railroad?" Remember, I was quite young, maybe seven or eight at the most. I pictured a railroad like the one at Union Station in downtown St. Louis, complete with blasting whistles and smoking engines, only underground!

Our guide, the owner, explained that leading up to the Civil War African-American slaves were always trying to escape to freedom. A new law had been passed, called the Fugitive Slave Law, which made it a punishable offense to aid in the escape of any person enslaved in the South. A $500 fine, which in those days would literally break any family, was only part of the penalty. For example, three friends discovered hiding some twenty people were sentenced to twelve years each in the Missouri penitentiary. Yet, many an escaped slave made it to the river through secret travel along various 'stations' on the Underground Railroad.

A white abolitionist family had lived in the house, now restaurant, where we were eating. They were secretly contacted by a wandering fellow white conspirator. The man would ask if they would be interested in buying abolitionist tracts. Of course, they responded. This was the clue needed to know this was the right house. That night, some half dozen blacks of varied age and sex would appear only to be quickly brought through a back door into the house. Then, the restaurant owner showed us, they were led behind the fireplace, still working, and taken down a narrow flight of stairs. Down the narrow staircase was a hollowed out room. There they found a dinner waiting, and mats placed around the floor for sleeping. They only stayed a day, or two at the most. This is because the wandering conspirator would go down to the river at night. A 'fisherman' in his boat would answer to a coded message that he was ready to take 'passengers' across the mighty Mississippi. That is how, with great exertion because the powerful river is hard to cross, the escaped slaves made it to Illinois, a safer route to Canada.

We stared in awe at the relatively tiny room, imagining what it must have been like to crowd together, waiting for passage over the water. A palpable fear must have caused shivers just thinking about what lay ahead. Water, betrayal, guns, and unknown roads were only a few of the horrors awaiting them. Packs of armed men searched all over the countryside for such escapees, for they too knew who the abolitionists were, and watched them carefully. A $500 dollar reward for a returned slave attracted the avarice of many men. Such money as catching slaves brought would exceed any amount gained in years of honest work.

Many routes led to Canada on the Illinois side of the Mississippi. Some of the 'conductors' who guided the slaves were indeed abolitionists. There were also conductors who were members of churches which did not agree with slavery, or had broken with their main church over the issue of Biblical texts which some said supported slavery, while others said did not.

Some of the 'conductors' or 'station masters' were themselves free African Americans who kept the stations open, the conductors prepared, and the passengers well tended to. Alas, many 'passengers' were recaptured, the conductors sentenced, and men, children, and women sent back in chains down the river. Slave catchers used black slaves to decoy escapees into traps, where all would be taken and returned south. False stations were created. Suspected real stations were surveilled by slave catchers day and night, for time was on the side of the chasers.

But not all the odds were on the side of slavery's defenders. The slavers were of-

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At Last

tled us every step of the way, but we won every decision at the Board of Standards and Appeals, the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and in court, largely because our attorney, Jack Lester, showed that Mr. Mamounas never had a legal building permit in the first place. The Landmarks Preservation Commission finally made Mr. Mamounas remove the addition in January, 2018, and on February 22, 2020, he removed the sidewalk shed and scaffolding that he had installed in 2005.

With the sidewalk shed gone, there is literally more sunshine on this beautiful landmarked block, and my neighbors and I are rejoicing but, much more importantly, its removal metaphorically lets the sun shine on the history of this house. And, with the illegally built fifth story removed, future generations will be able to visualize how, during the Draft Riots of 1863, the Gibbons family escaped from the mob, enraged by its abolitionist views, by walking over the roofs of the neighboring four-story row houses.

In these divisive times, the role the Gibbons and Hopper family played in sheltering runaway slaves, dining with and befriending, them conveys a positive message for New Yorkers and our country. And our long campaign to preserve this historic house shows the power of the word, specifically in the form of letters and petitions, and of persistence. It was a victory for history.

Success

al were commemorated with a Michigan Milestone Marker from the Michigan Bar Association. The marker says the site was chosen because the "Crosswhite Case" in Marshall, Michigan was already well known. Also in 2005, Western Michigan University presented its findings from an archeological dig to prove the existence of "Ramptown," an enclave of freedom seekers and free blacks on property owned by James E. Bonine, Quaker abolitionist, and his wife Sarah Bogue Bonine, whose father Stephen Bogue was well known as an early stationmaster on the Underground Railroad.

In 2008 when a group was meeting at the local college discussing the history of African Americans in the community, Ramptown and James E. Bonine were mentioned and talk turned to the decrepit Bonine House and its connection to the Underground Railroad. Some local historians disputed the connection because they claimed the house was built in the 1870s, their claim bolstered by the home's post-Civil War Second Empire tower. Two members asked architects to examine the house and they immediately saw that the original house was a standard "two over two" Greek Revival home built in the mid-1840s. There was an obvious extensive remodeling after the Civil War, adding the tower, porches, dining room, kitchen and four more bedrooms upstairs. The connection to the Underground Railroad was made.

As the property was on the market, next discussion centered around preserving and restoring Bonine House. The group was split, and a few members actually quit. Those remaining realized that, if they wanted to save the house, it had to be a community project. In April of 2009, a meeting at the local college was advertised and a flyer showing Bonine House with the caption "Can we afford to save this house? Can we afford not to?" was posted around town. Group members prepared presentations on the home as part of the Underground Railroad, the later home of State Senator G. Elwood Bonine, and the connection to Rainbow Farm, a local tragedy. We didn't know how many, if any, would show up. There were over one hundred, a standing-room-only crowd. They signed up as "Friends of the Bonine House" and pledged to participate in any way they could.

The core group and others met soon and adopted the name Underground Railroad Society of Cass County (URSCC). The new president and treasurer were experienced museum directors and historians. The vice president was African American, and two members were Quakers. The eight members had varied backgrounds and experience: one had restored his own Victorian home. I was a retired counselor with no experience in any of this. We immediately started our 501(c)3 tax-exemption application, granted in June of 2010, using seed money from Friends of the Bonine House. We created a website, urscc.org, and rudimentary stationary, and opened a small office in a local shopping center. We began working with a realtor to acquire Bonine House, not realizing it would take over a year, and three trips to the closing table.

During this time, we gathered information on known Underground Railroad sites in the area, ten to start, and developed a self-guided driving tour that included an overview of the Underground Railroad in Cass County and the Kentucky Raid. We gathered known resources and research, and started files in different categories. On December 1, 2010, our president and vice president resigned for family reasons. I took on the treasurer job, not even having balanced my own checkbook. The home restorer agreed to become president. The owners were finally forced to sell because of back taxes, and closing on Bonine House and its carriage house across the street was on December 29, 2010. It was a confusing, scary, exhilarating time. A member gave an interest-free loan to URSCC to purchase the properties.

The first months of 2011 were basic clean up. Friends called friends to help and our membership and email list grew. Our website expanded. Local and regional press came calling and Bonine House and the story of the Underground Railroad in Cass County became news staples. In September, several members hosted a cocktail party in Bonine House. They made lists of friends and sent them invitations and return envelopes for donations. The house was lit up for the first time in years, a wonderful evening giving URSCC a much needed infusion of cash and publicity. Many of those initial donors are still members.

Extensive structural repairs to the house during 2011-15 were overseen by an experienced general manager, excellent local craftsmen and preservationists. During this time, illustrated presentations on the Underground Railroad in Cass County and on the history and restoration of Bonine House were created and shown around the region. Later these were put on our website and made available for everyone to show as they liked.

Our current board of directors has been together since 2012, a cooperative, congenial, hard-working group. In addition to funding through annual membership renewal, URSCC has been awarded grants from local foundations, organizations, businesses, the State of Michigan and the federal government.

In 2010, the first annual Underground Railroad Days, a festival celebrating the Underground Railroad in this community, was held. The yearly event on the second weekend in July draws visitors from all over the region. In 2012, the first an-

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nual Cass County Underground Railroad Wax Museum was staged in Bonine House. Students researched local Underground Railroad characters, wrote a speech, dressed in costume and, when a button was pressed on their hand, told their story to friends, family and other visitors. This charming, educational event has done more than anything else to make the Underground Railroad part of the fabric of this community. The local school has made it part of the fifth grade curriculum. In 2013 our first annual "Christmas at Bonine House" was held. It's become a family tradition for many to celebrate the start of the holiday season.

In 2018, the Bonine House Research Library was opened. It contains the research of six local and regional historians, as well as that of URSCC. It documents those involved in the Cass County Underground Railroad—freedom seekers, free blacks, Quakers, and others. It tells the stories of the Kentucky Raid, the 102nd Colored Troops in the Civil War, Ramptown, and more. Over 9,000 documents are now digitized and on our website.

Docents started tours of Bonine House early on, and open the house to visitors from all over the world from June through September. In 2017, the 1850 Bonine carriage house that sheltered freedom seekers on its third floor was opened to visitors after extensive structural repairs from 2015 through 2017. In 2018, the Stephen Bogue House, an 1830 Underground Railroad station, was donated to URSCC, and also opened for tours during the season. In 2020, a one-room schoolhouse, integrated from the day it opened until it closed in 1957, was donated to URSCC.

Today, URSCC is strong and solvent. Bonine House will be completed this year, restoration work goes on in the Carriage House and Bogue House, and the Brownsville School project starts soon. We're in process of submitting several sites to the Michigan State and National Historic Registers, and the National Park Service Network to Freedom program.

Readers who would like to be part of the Cass County Underground Railroad journey may make donations at urscc.org. For a lasting legacy, URSCC has an endowment fund at the Michigan Gateway Community Foundation in Buchanan, Michigan. To keep informed, go to the website or follow URSCC on Facebook.

From top: Bogue House, Bonine carriage house, Brownsville School, board of directors of the Cass County Underground Railroad Society

Twain

ten stunned to discover that good people can be clever, too.

One story can stand for many to illustrate the ingenuity of 'conductors' on the Underground Railroad. Here is an actual account from those days in their own words.

"Three female slaves had run away from St. Louis because their masters were preparing to send them down to New Orleans for sale. Their pursuers were hard after them and had driven them out of their retreat among their friends in town and their friends had conducted them to an old hut in the corn field south east of my house."

A Mr. Turner was asked to aid the girls; he agreed and goes on to relate: "I started briskly off for the corn field and the hut. I found my frightened and trembling girls. I told them to follow me. One of the neighbors was a good Presbyterian elder, but an extreme pro-slavery man. I said to myself, 'That is it'. The Elder and his wife are a vast deal better Christians than they pretend to be. I shall take my prize right to their door and tell them the whole truth about it and throw the whole responsibility upon them, which I did, closing with the remark, 'Now you know, my dear Doctor, that I have done all I can do to shelter and defend these poor women whom I have brought to your door and I leave it wholly with you to shelter and provide for them at my expense, or to betray both of them to the public authorities as violators of the laws of our State.' 'We will not betray either you or them', said his wife.

"We afterward took them and hid them away in the hay loft of his barn with an abundant supply of quilts and coverlets and fed them there day after day for two weeks until their frozen feet had so far recovered that they could travel again. Then a good abolition friend took my horses and sleigh to Farmington, the next station, some forty miles away, and that was the last I knew of them."

Such stories happened in our country. I learned more about America here, at this strange 'station', than even during our later visit that day to Mark Twain's hometown of Hannibal. Never again would I think the same way about Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, and Jim after seeing this stop on the Underground Railroad. I like to imagine my family's unexpected visit to an actual underground station might have strangely been arranged by the great writer, who doubtless sat on this very riverside, wondering how to get across with 'Jim'.