

Underground

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Johnson. Some corrugated metal sheeting has been added to the exterior, but the interior is practically the same.

The old forge is the one in use at the time slaves were hidden in the Roberts house nearby, except that now it has an electric blower instead of a hand bellows.

Of the humans who figured in this part of Clark County history, only stone and memories mark their remains. Henry Roberts died shortly after he brought Matt Peters north—in 1855 at the age of 25.

He was buried in Pleasant Grove Cemetery on the so-called Ridge, north and east of Cortsville and Selma, on the old Springfield rd. His gravestone, worn from nearly a century of weathering, states, "An Honest Man the Noblest Work of God."

Behind Roberts' grave is a marker erected by Matt Peters to the memory of his benefactor. There is no date on this stone, but its excellent condition suggests that it is fairly recent.

After stopping at Cortsville, the slaves were transported to Springfield. Here there were several places for them to hide while awaiting the next lap of the trip.

One of the most legendary stations in Springfield was the old Hypes home in the 300 block on S. Lowry av. According to Miss Mary Johnson, sister-in-law of Senator Hypes, the family tradition held that slaves were brought there from Selma and distributed to a house across the street and probably another nearby at 260 S. Lowry av.

Local stories claim that the slaves were taken from the Hypes home through tunnels to the nearby basements where they were hidden, but such stories are impossible to check today.

The dwelling opposite the Hypes house was owned at the time by John Nichols, a Springfield editor and leader in the local abolitionist movement. Miss Johnson said that she knew of no tunnel connecting these two houses, but that she did remember a door built in the fireplace which opened on a secret entrance to the basement, where the slaves were hidden.

Today this house bears no signs of its functions nearly 100 years ago. But of the house at 260 S. Lowry av., Miss Lizzie Goodson says that her basement is constructed like a dungeon.

According to Miss Goodson, there are rooms and passageways now blocked up which might have well been used to hide runaway slaves.

Another reported UGRR station in Springfield was a house at 1507 Mound st., now the residence of Ralph Enoch. According to local

historians who inspected the house several years ago, it had a sub-basement in which the slaves were hidden.

Entrance to this sub-basement was gained through a trapdoor in the basement floor. There also was a tunnel leading from the sub-basement to an escape exit in the back yard.

Today, however, all traces of UGRR activity have been removed. Mr. Enoch recently filled in the sub-basement and installed a concrete floor in the basement. The tunnel also has ceased to exist.

After the slaves left Springfield, the next stop was reportedly Urbana. From that city it was a series of villages and farm houses to the Canadian border, where the fugitives were given their freedom.

The next stop after Urbana was probably the home of Judge and Mrs. Benjamin M. Piatt, in Logan County, according to historians. This old log structure, "opposite castle Piatt Mac-a-cheek, had 18 rooms, and its spacious loft probably was used to hide the slaves.

Mrs. Piatt at the time was an ardent abolitionist, but her husband was a federal judge entrusted with the enforcement of the U. S. fugitive slave laws.

As a result of this family difference, the Piatt UGRR station could operate only when the judge was away. According to members of the family, Mrs. Piatt utilized a little statue of a Negro to signal whether the slaves could be left safely at her home.

The statue, formerly used as a rope holder on a river steam boat, was placed on the road in front of the house. If the judge was away, an American flag was placed in the statue's hand. If he was present, absence of the flag signaled that the runaways had to go elsewhere.

Extensive historical research and surveys are under way now in an effort to record, before it is too late, the accomplishments of the UGRR. Operations which extend back to the 1820's must be credited with obtaining the freedom of many thousands of slaves.

The full extent of abolitionist efforts may well never be known, because they had to operate under the noses of federal officials enforcing the laws, southern officials searching for their slaves, and Indian bands helping either side, according as they were paid.

This much is certain, however—many abolitionists translated their ideals and principles into action on behalf of southern slaves.

Today a popular fad has produced business for a company which manufactures copies of the metal statues of the type which was used by Mrs. Piatt to indicate that her house was a haven to oppressed slaves.

The story behind the use to which she put her statue should make even more valuable today's replicas of the Civil War "statue of liberty."

