

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

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# An Underground Railroad Episode from Madison

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Author unknown

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An excerpt from *Negroes in and Around  
Jefferson County*, originally published in the  
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NEGROES  
IN AND AROUND  
JEFFERSON COUNTY

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UNDERGROUND RAILROAD, From Slavery To Freedom. Madison A Leading Station of The Line. An Exciting Episode Recalled. Courier 22 February 1899.

Madison was once the leading border station on the line of the Underground Railroad, and many a poor slave, seeking his freedom, crossed the river there and was passed along the lint to liberty, long before President Lincoln's immortal proclamation which emancipated the entire four millions of black men then in bondage. From time to time, the Courier has made mention of those who operated the Underground Railroad in this locality, most of whom have since paid the debt of nature. We notice in this week's issue of the Greensburg "Standard" a statement by Mr. Charles T. Powner, that a recent research among the early papers of Decatur County in the court house at Greensburg had brought to light an old document endorsed as follows; "George Ray's affidavit to arrest slaves. Filed November 3, 1847. Henry H. Talbott, Clerk, Andrew Davidson, Prosecuting Attorney". George Ray was a slave owner, whose home was in Trimble County, KY. Mr. Talbott was the first clerk of Decatur County, elected when the county was organized in 1822 and serving continuously thirty-eight years. Dr. Davidson was a prominent attorney and became well known as one of the judges of the Indiana Supreme Court. But, the interest of this old document is found in its relation to Mr. Ray, and his subsequent actions found on the affidavit contained therein and reads: "Indiana, Decatur County, Be it remembered that on this day personally appeared before me, the undersigned Clerk of the Decatur Circuit Court, George Ray of Trimble County, and state of Kentucky, who being duly sworn, on oath says that he has just claim to certain slaves or colored persons, of the names and descriptions following, to wit: Caroline, a negro woman of the age of about thirty years; Frances, a mulatto girl, of the age of about twelve; John, a mulatto boy of the age of about six years; Mandy, a mulatto girl of the age of about four years; and Henry, a colored boy about twenty months old. That this deponent is the owner of said above slaves under the laws of the said state of Kentucky, that the slaves deserted and escaped from his service and labor, and became fugitives from such service and labor, in the county of Trimble and state of Kentucky, foresaid, on the 30th day of October 1847, and are now fugitives from such service and labor. And that said slaves are all, at this time, as deponent verily believes in and within the county of Decatur and state of Indiana, and this deponent as the owner of said slaves is desirous of arresting said slaves and conveying them back to said Trimble County according to law and further he sayeth not. "Sworn to before me, the undersigned clerk of Decatur Circuit Court, this 3 Day of November 1847. Henry H. Talbott, Clerk.

The rapidity with which the passengers of the Underground Railroad were transported may be estimated by recalling the facts that this woman and her four children, the youngest less than two years old, had left their home in Kentucky on October 31, and were four days later in the extreme northern part of Decatur County, seventy-two hours later they were safe in Canada. The escape, capture, rescue and final escape of this colored woman lack no element of thrilling adventure; while the trial and conviction of the parties assisting her to freedom, from their high standing in social and religious circles, was one of the most interesting and exciting ever witnessed in southern Indiana. On their way north; Leaving the home of Mr. Ray, a few miles from Bedford, KY, Caroline and her children crossed the Ohio River at Madison, and were placed in care of a Mr. Wagner, who carried them to

Decatur County and placed them in the hands of Mr. Douglas McCoy, then a young man living at McCoy's Station and now a highly respected citizen of Greensburg. For many years there had been a colored settlement near Clarksburg in Decatur County, and near this settlement lived Mr. Luther A. Donnell, a man of wealth and a friend of the oppressed. Mr. McCoy received the fugitives about two o'clock in the morning and immediately started for the colored settlement some twelve miles distant, stopping, however, at the home of his friend Mr. William M. Hamilton, to inform him of his errand and secure his assistance. But it soon became evident that daylight would overtake them before they could reach their station, and prompt measures must be taken to conceal the fugitives. Near them was a cabin in which a colored man by the name of Pernell was living. In his care the fugitives were placed. Mr. McCoy returned to the home of Luther A. Donnell for advice and aid. Mr. Donnell proposed going himself to the colored settlement and sending some of the colored people after the fugitives. This he proceeded to do and Mr. Hamilton started to his own home. Pernell, the colored man in whose care the fugitives had been placed, having once been a slave himself, but lacking in the bravery necessary to jeopardize his own interests for the sake of the race, consequently fearing some calamity might befall him if the fugitives were found on his premises, he put them on horses and in broad day light, started for the colored settlement. They were met by Mr. Hamilton, who at once comprehended the danger. He advised that they hurriedly be taken to the home of a colored widow near by, who was known to be always willing to incur any risk in assisting her people. This was done, and Jane Speed received them kindly, concealed them in an old house and sent food to them by her boy during the day, which kindness later caused no end of trouble. The old house at some distance from her dwelling was nearer the residence of one Woodson Clark, a man who had the reputation of being a slave hunter.

Clark saw Jane Speed's boy enter and leave the old hut. His suspicions were aroused. He began to search and found the fugitives secreted in the hay. He assured them they were in imminent danger, and proposed conducting them immediately to the colored settlement. He led them to his own house, secreted them in the out buildings of his son, just across the road, and insisted he would send for the colored people to come and convey her northward immediately. The woman was suspicious of treachery. She knew that she was near people of her own race and as it was now night, she left her children and began to search for friends. Being a stranger in a strange land, she soon became bewildered, panic stricken, and an aimless wanderer on a pitch dark night. As soon as it was dark the colored people of the neighborhood assembled at the old hut of Jane Speed, discovered that the fugitives were gone, but by the aid of a lantern, succeeded in finding tracks which led to the premises of Woodson Clark. The place was surrounded, while Mr. Donnell and Mr. Hamilton were again called on to furnish the thought necessary to a successful rescue.

Every man's house is his castle. There could be no search of Clark's premises without due process of law. Hon. John Hopkins, an associate judge of Decatur County, was a neighbor of Mr. Donnell, and from him a writ of habeas corpus was secured, but the county seal was twelve miles distant, without which the writ was void.

The entire neighborhood was now aroused and arrayed on one side or the other and a conflict seemed imminent. One messenger was dispatched to Greensburg for slave hunters and another to secure the county seal and sheriff to serve the writ. The colored men, instigated by the whites, were armed with hatchets, knives, clubs, and firearms, determined that when the sheriff had served the writ and found the fugitives, they would defy the law, overpower him, rescue the mother and children

and place them beyond the reach of foes. But the search proved fruitless and the fugitives were lost to their friends. (Rest of article missing.)