

Nankin Mills and the Underground Railroad

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Rumors abound that this site or that site was a stop along the Underground Railroad. Nankin Mills is such a place. What was the Underground Railroad and was Nankin Mills a part of it?

The Underground Railroad was a clandestine system that was used to help runaway slaves escape into Canada. For many that "rode" on this railway the Detroit River was considered the River Jordan and the Canadian shore the Promised Land.

Prior to 1850, there was no organized plan to assist runaways. Runaways considered themselves safe as soon as they reached Northern soil. Everything changed in 1850 when Congress passed The Fugitive Slave Act.

The Fugitive Slave Act put the power of the Federal Government behind efforts to track down and return runaways to their masters. The only safe place for these former slaves was across the border in Canada. Under the Fugitive Slave Act it was illegal to assist runaways. It became necessary to carefully plan and execute these operations, maintaining the utmost secrecy. Because of this, much of the history of the Underground Railroad was never recorded.

The term "Underground Railroad" was coined because anti-slavery workers used railroad terms to describe their jobs.

The Conductor: the guide that led the escaping slaves along the route.

The Train: the group of escaping slaves. The "trains" only ran at night.

The Station: a safe place to hide during the day. These were the cellars and garrets of private homes, or a cave or the attic of a barn.

The Agent or Station Keeper: an anti-slavery proponent who provided shelter for the escaping slaves.

For a time the Underground railroad followed along the Lower and Middle Rouge River, through what was then Nankin Township. This would certainly mean that the Underground Railroad passed by Nankin Mills, but it does not mean it stop there. Since the Underground Railroad operated in secret, little documentation exists to support such allegations.

The current Nankin Mills building is the second mill on that site. The building of the first gristmill began by Noah Hull, an agent for General John E. Schwarz. Noah hewed the timber and raised part of the frame. After just a few weeks, Noah abandoned his work. In 1841 work on the mill resumed under the guidance of Rufus Swift. The gristmill began operations in February 1842.

The current Nankin Mills was built in 1863. Rumor has it that the first mill was burned to the ground. But that is just another rumor.