

Looking Back Marcus Swift and the Underground Railroad in Nankin Township

By Carol Clements

The Marcus Swift and William Osband families were the first to settle in what is today's Nankin township in 1825. Taking advantage of the almost completed Erie Canal, they made the long trip from New York to Michigan. The opening of the Erie Canal had a huge impact on settlement in Michigan, shortening the trip from months to just one week. It was still an arduous journey, as described by Melvin Osband, son of William, in his memoirs (*Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, Vol. 14):

“Michigan was not only thought to be, but actually was beyond the bounds of civilization...only inhabited by bears, wolves and Indians, and infested by rattlesnakes, musketoos (sic) and fever and ague. Under these circumstances, what wonder that the parting scene, when our party left their old homes, resembled friends standing over the open graves of their loved ones.

Detroit, at that time, was a little old French town, containing at most but a few hundred inhabitants. Our pioneers left their families in Detroit and proceeded to view their lands and provide means to get their families to them. Soon all were shipped aboard a small boat and were floated and rowed down the Detroit river to the mouth of the river Rouge. They were rowed and towed up this river to the Thomas settlement, about ten miles from Detroit. From thence they were transported by a wagon drawn by three Indian ponies...”

After settling in, Swift and Osband became involved in the development of the early community. Marcus Swift was a Circuit Rider (traveling preacher) for the Methodist Episcopal Church. It is said that, like other eastern “Yankees”, he brought with him strong convictions, including belief in the importance of education and opposition to slavery. Swift and Osband established the first school houses in the area, the Schwartzburg school at Wayne Road and Ann Arbor Trail and the first Perrinsville School, which was a wooden structure located on Marcus Swift's former property at Cowan Road and Warren Road. (This was not the same Perrinsville brick schoolhouse located in that area today, which was built on property owned by Isaac Perrin.)

Marcus Swift (at right) was described as an “ardent abolitionist” and “agitator”. Abolitionists were people who believed in abolishing slavery, and Marcus Swift spent seven years (1834 – 1841) trying to convince the Methodist Church to take a stand against slavery. It was an unpopular position for churches to take at the time, as their southern congregations were very much in support of slavery. Only the Quakers openly opposed slavery in the 1840s. Swift realized the church would not bend to his convictions, and left the Methodist Church in 1841. Along with Reverends Samuel Bibbins of Plymouth and Ebenezer Doolittle of Dearborn, he founded the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1843, with a strong anti-slavery doctrine. Marcus Swift refused to back down from his convictions that slavery was the “sum of all villainies” and an “evil institution”, even when his house was burned down under suspicious circumstances in 1843. Marcus Swift is shown in the photograph at the right.



Villages with Wesleyan Methodists, such as Swift, were known to have Underground Railroad stations, almost without exception. The Underground Railroad was an organized system of people helping others to escape slavery in the south to freedom north of the Ohio River. It began in 1829, after people realized the federal government would not abolish slavery, and lasted until the end of the Civil War in 1865.

The Ordinance of 1787, which created the Northwest Territory (today's states of Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and part of Minnesota), also had a clause declaring slavery illegal. This was the first time slavery was declared illegal in any territory, and it made the lands north of the Ohio River a place representing “freedom”. As enslaved people began to escape to free soil, the federal government enacted the Fugitive Slave Laws, the first in 1793, making it illegal to assist or harbor fugitive slaves.

By 1850, the southerners were frustrated that northerners ignored the law and continued to help fugitives, and a second Fugitive Slave Law was enacted, with much harsher penalties. Abolitionists were jailed, and had to pay fines up to \$1,000 per fugitive they had assisted, at a time when homes cost \$300. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law also required everyone to return fugitives to the south. The law essentially made Canada the only safe haven for fugitives. Slavery had been illegal in Canada since 1792. The Underground Railroad operated in 31 states, but when Canada became the destination after 1850, Michigan moved to the forefront of Underground Railroad activity in the country.

Of course, there was no “railroad”, and it wasn’t “underground”. The “train” was most often a farm wagon, or a boat in the Great Lakes area, and “conductors” were people who transported fugitives from one station to the next. “Stations” were safe houses, local mills, farmhouses or taverns where escapees could be hidden and given shelter, food, clothing, and other assistance. They were often hidden in barns, attics, secret rooms, haystacks, cellars, corncribs, wood lots, barrels, church steeples, or any other nook and cranny! Many Underground Railroad stations have been found to have hidden doors to secret rooms. Stations were usually located a day’s journey apart, about 15 – 20 miles, so that the conductor could make the trip there and back in one night. The “passengers” were the fugitives escaping slavery. “Agents” were the local farmers, ministers and other community people who took in the fugitives. Due to the harsh penalties of the Fugitive Slave Law, many abolitionists didn’t even tell their own families that they were involved in the Underground Railroad.

The folk history of Nankin Mills tells of its use as an Underground Railroad station by Marcus Swift. The first Nankin Mill was thought to have been burned down because of this connection, just as Marcus Swift’s house was burned. The current mill building is the second one on this site. Local family records and stories tell of other local “stations” on the Underground Railroad. Some of them are listed below:

- King Starkweather’s farm at Seven Mile and Beck Roads
- Jehial and Mary Davis’s farm at Five Mile and Beck Roads
- James Purdy farm at Sheldon Road, south of Five Mile, near Hines Drive
- Cabins on Reservoir Road between Five and Six Mile, near Hines Drive
- Mead’s Mill, Between Five and Six Mile, near Hines Drive
- McFarlane’s Tavern on the SE corner of Stark and Plymouth Roads
- Brink farm at Ann Arbor Trail and Ann Arbor Road
- Saxton Feed Company at Ann Arbor Trail and Penniman in Plymouth
- St. John’s Seminary at Five Mile and Sheldon Roads
- Fuller homesite at Schoolcraft and Haggerty Roads
- Glode Dugger Chubb home at NE corner of Venoy and Michigan Avenue
- James Pattison home at SW corner of Ford and Newburgh Roads
- General Schwartz’s home at Wayne Road and Ann Arbor Trail

Marcus Swift lived his life pursuing his convictions. When his life was drawing to a close at his son John’s house in Northville in February 1865, he felt some satisfaction in knowing that slaves had been emancipated and the Civil War was coming to an end. His final words were: “The great principles for which I have labored and fought amid reverses and persecution, are now the ruling sentiment of the people. I have lived in a glorious age, and my eyes have seen the powers of darkness give way before the coming of the glorious reign of liberty and equality”.