

## **UNDERGROUND RAILROAD NETWORK TO FREEDOM The Story of Georgetown District in Madison, Indiana**

### **Summary**

The Georgetown District, located in Madison, Indiana on the Ohio River became home to free African Americans as early as the 1830s, eventually developing into a network of Underground Railroad conductors and stations. The Ohio River located just five blocks from Georgetown District, became a place in which many freedom seekers found a community of safe houses and conductors willing to give them aid to reach the next station toward freedom. This neighborhood became the center for the Underground Railroad activity of Madison as well as the focal point for the Kentucky mobs who attempted to break-up this community. The unique feature about this neighborhood is that the homes, churches, and environment that the freedom seekers, conductors, and abolitionists saw still exist today. The two Underground Railroad associated churches still stand, as are the homes of UGRR leaders like Elijah Anderson, William J. Anderson, David Lott, and Archibald Taylor. The most unique aspect of the neighborhood is the integrity of the neighborhood from the period of significance; 70.5% of the original structures from the 1830 - 1865 are still extant.

### **The Story**

The town of Madison was laid out on a regular grid 1806.<sup>1</sup> Within the city blocks, alleys form a regular grid. Lots are evenly spaced in the oldest parts of town with a mix of commercial, institutional and residential buildings. In the northern part of the section of town platted in 1817 is the neighborhood known as Georgetown, which once was home to prominent African-Americans in the community, with evidence of free Blacks settling in this area as early as 1820. The community continued to grow with a number of African American businesses, organizations, churches, and schools.<sup>2</sup> Madison's geographic qualities help validate its claims as a nationally significant location for fugitives crossing the Ohio River to northern freedom. The river is shallow and narrow at Madison, and during the early nineteenth century it experienced seasonal lows. The modern river maintains a constant level due to a series of locks on the Ohio, enabling constant flow of river traffic. Before the locks, droughts often caused standstills in river traffic. In fact, an 1854 Madison newspaper account notes the river depth at less than four feet.<sup>3</sup> Several deep creek beds draining into the Ohio near east end of the town lead from the river into rural Indiana, allowing an easy route north.<sup>4</sup>

The Underground Railroad leaders in Madison either lived in the Georgetown neighborhood or were associated with those in the Georgetown area. The period of significance with regard to Madison's Underground Railroad is c.1820 to 1865. Nineteenth Century Madison hosted both ardent abolitionists and those with pro-slavery beliefs. However, Georgetown, a neighborhood within early Madison, was an important settlement of free Blacks who assisted hundreds of enslaved African Americans to freedom. In particular, it retains a significant collection of properties which are associated with important leaders in the Underground Railroad movement as well as an intact pre-Civil War neighborhood which provides context to this association. Evidence reveals ante-bellum Madison to be a relatively prosperous community for early black citizens and a point where fugitives escaped to freedom in the north. The

neighborhood known as Georgetown was home to several important free Black citizens who played active roles in the Underground Railroad. Ongoing research has identified eight sites in this small, compact neighborhood which can be associated with key African-American individuals and or organizations connected with the Underground Railroad:

- The home of Charles and George Hopkins at East Fifth Street
- The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 309 East Fifth Street, built 1849
- The second home of William Anderson, 313 East Fifth Street, (1867-1859).
- Home of Archibald Taylor, Northwest corner of East Fifth and Walnut Streets; presently a liquor store,
- Walnut Street Methodist Church, 711 Walnut Street
- The first home of William Anderson, 713 Walnut Street, 1838 to 1859
- The home of Elijah Anderson, 626 Walnut Street
- The home of David Lott, 624 Walnut Street

One of Indiana's earliest objectors to slavery was Benjamin Whitson, a Methodist minister who came to live in Jefferson County in 1809. He penned an anti-slavery pamphlet, "African Slavery Turned Upside Down" in 1815.<sup>5</sup> English traveler, E. S. Abdy, visited the United States to observe the conditions of free blacks and slaves, and published an account of his 1833-34 travels titled "Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States of North America, From April, 1833, to October, 1834." Chapter 23 recounts his stay in a thriving community of 129 blacks in Madison's outskirts, where he encountered active Underground Railroad operations amid the prosperous group of land-owning free black farmers.<sup>6</sup> In 1820, Madison had the third largest population of blacks in the state of Indiana.<sup>7</sup> Due to the core of free blacks living in Madison in the early years, recent Underground Railroad scholarship points to this time as the most active for fugitives escaping to freedom through the city proper. In 1830 George Evans, a free black, contacted a Jeffersonville anti-slavery group and offered his Madison home as a haven.<sup>8</sup>

In the latter years of the 1830s, several leaders important to the Underground Railroad operations located in or near Georgetown:

\*William Anderson (1811-1867) moved to Madison in 1836, owned land in Madison<sup>9</sup> and contributed greatly to Underground Railroad operations. Born in Hanover County, Virginia to a free black woman, Anderson was bound to a slaveholder as a child. He recalled having been sold or exchanged hands eight times. Despite his social status, he managed to learn to read and write, finally escaping slavery by writing his own pass.<sup>10</sup> He arrived in Madison on July 15, 1836 and began to work. He was soon able to build a house in town and purchase a farm in the country. This first brick house at 713 Walnut Street was his family's home from c. 1838 to 1859, next to the Colored Baptist Church he helped to found. William was a free black man and a minister who in 1849 formed Madison's African Methodist Episcopal Church at 309 East Fifth Street in Georgetown. When William J. Anderson moved into the Georgetown District, he started working in the "Colored Methodist Episcopal Church" and built the first church at 711 Walnut Street. Eventually this church group asked Anderson to stop his overt Underground Railroad activities, causing him to switch to the African Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>11</sup>

Anderson built the present AME building and then rented it to the congregation who also sponsored a school in the basement.

In December 1856 Anderson was arrested aboard the steamer *Telegraph* for a reward offered for him in Carrolton, Kentucky for running off slaves. He was tried and acquitted of the charges, but Anderson moved from this location after 1859, having sold the home and other property to pay court costs incurred by him.<sup>12</sup> In 1857 Anderson wrote a narrative of his life, where he recalled: “My two wagons, and carriage, and five horses were always at the command of the liberty-seeking fugitive.” His later home is located at 313 East Fifth Street, next to the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He died in 1867 in Madison and is buried in Springdale Cemetery.<sup>13</sup>

\* Elijah Anderson (1808-1861) ran a blacksmith shop on the corner of Walnut and Third Streets in Madison.<sup>14</sup> He arrived in Madison in 1837 and his 1840 two-story federal style was built at 626 Walnut Street. Not only is his home still standing, but also the homes of his neighbors.<sup>15</sup> He was known as an aggressive conductor who, because of his light skin, traveled fugitives to freedom in Canada via steamboats and trains, masquerading as a master traveling with his slaves.<sup>16</sup> He claimed to have brought 800 to freedom while in Madison and 1000 during the time he was in nearby Lawrenceburg, Indiana.<sup>17</sup> Kentucky citizens placed a \$1000 bounty on Anderson’s head.<sup>18</sup> He also worked with Chapman Harris at nearby Eagle Hollow and John H. Tibbets. Tibbets lived in the village of Lancaster and was associated with Eleutherian College. In the 1850s he moved to Missouri. In the 1870s, he wrote a fifteen-page journal of his work on the Underground Railroad and his knowledge of others who participated. His work collaborates the primary and secondary sources about the Georgetown neighborhood.

In December 1856 Anderson was captured on an Ohio River steamboat and arrested by Louisville police officers for taking a group of freedom seekers from Lawrenceburg, Indiana to Cleveland. He was found guilty of violating the Kentucky Law “Enticing Slaves to Run Away.” Anderson was sentenced to an eight year term in June of 1857.<sup>19</sup> The day Anderson was to be released from Frankfort, Kentucky prison on March 4, 1861 he was found dead in his cell.<sup>20</sup>

\*George DeBaptiste (1815-1875) settled in Madison in 1837 and immediately asserted his role as a powerful leader by contesting an 1831 Indiana law, which required a bond payment for a free black to settle in the state.<sup>21</sup> DeBaptiste challenged this law and refused to make payment. He was at first found guilty and ordered to leave. He enlisted the legal help of abolitionist Judge Stephen Stevens, who would become a member of Indiana Supreme Court. With Stevens’ legal arguments, DeBaptiste’s removal from the state was ruled “defective expulsion.” He then came to reside in Madison.<sup>22</sup> While here, he ran a wholesale shipping business between Madison and Cincinnati. In this venture, he met William Henry Harrison, who hired him to be “steward of the White House” during his presidency. After Harrison’s death, DeBaptiste returned to Madison and ran a barbershop for six years at the corner of Walnut and Second Streets.<sup>23</sup> During that time, his barbershop was the center for Underground Railroad activities in Madison.<sup>24</sup> DeBaptiste became one of the main conductors of freedom seekers in the Georgetown District and helped over 180 reach the next station in Lancaster, 12 miles north of Madison.<sup>25</sup> John H. Tibbets tells of his first adventure as a conductor on the Underground Railroad after moving to Jefferson County Indiana in August of 1845:

I received word from George DeBaptiste of Madison, Indiana, that there would be a lot of ten to leave Hunter's Bottom on Sunday night and he wished me to make arrangements to transport them on the underground road that I was acquainted with. After dark I drove to the place agreed upon to meet in a piece of woods one mile from the town of Wirt. I had been at the appointed place but a very short time when Mr. DeBaptiste sang out, "Here is \$10,000 from Hunter's Bottom tonight". A good Negro at that time would fetch from \$1,000 up. We loaded them in, drew down the curtains and started with the cargo of human charges towards the North Star.<sup>26</sup>

Although modern Highway 421 was built over the actual property, George DeBaptiste had a home in the area of North Walnut Street and Meridian Alley.<sup>27</sup>

\*John Carter lived in Madison for 40 years, before his death in 1878.<sup>28</sup> He was also active in the Underground Railroad in the area. Carter would pass information regarding a "cargo" he would be piloting up Crooked Creek to Tibbets who was located north on the Michigan Road on top of the hills above Madison.<sup>29</sup> Carter lived next to George DeBaptiste, but his home, like DeBaptiste's, no longer stands.

\*Griffith Booth was born a slave and lived in Madison for many years before he was forced to leave because of his Underground Railroad activities. Booth was born in Virginia in 1811.<sup>30</sup> By the late 1847s he was living in Georgetown where he became active in his community.<sup>31</sup> Griffith Booth's death notice reveals his Underground Railroad activities while living in Madison, Indiana.

Mr. Booth was for many years identified with the underground railroad during the days of slavery, and more than one colored man owes his escape from slavery and his safe arrival in Canada. He was himself born a slave and knew the burden of the yoke, and made him enthusiastic in assisting others to escape as he had done. He was made to suffer on more than one occasion by the pro-slavery advocates and hunters of runaway negroes from Kentucky. Griffith was saved by Marshal Amzi and John Sheets from a mob at the risk of their own lives, after Griffith had been taken to the river and ducked until he was almost dead in order to force him to divulge the hiding place of several slaves who had made their way from Kentucky to this side of the river to take the underground road for Canada and freedom under Griffith's guidance.<sup>32</sup>

Booth's Underground Railroad activities finally made it too dangerous for him to remain in Madison, Indiana, and in 1848 he moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan and then to Canada.<sup>33</sup> He took refuge in Canada from 1848 until 1865, when abolition allowed him to return to America. He died at the advanced age of nearly 90 at his home in Kalamazoo, Michigan.<sup>34</sup>

\*The African Methodist Episcopal Church located at Fifth and Jefferson Street became the worship place for many of the leaders of the UGRR movement. When William Anderson became too aggressive with his Underground Railroad work, the Baptist church he helped to build, asked him to cease his UGRR work or leave the congregation. He left to help build the

AME church.<sup>35</sup> Although Anderson is acknowledged as the builder, several important activists in the Madison Underground Railroad movement attended this church. On June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1849, the property on which the building stands was deeded to three trustees of the A.M.E. Church, which was organized after the split of the Baptist Church.<sup>36</sup> Historic Madison, Inc. recently purchased the AME Church and is facilitating further scholarship regarding its culturally rich history.

\*Colored Baptist Church, also know as the Walnut Street M.E. Church was built in 1839 when 78 members of the Wesley Chapel in Madison split to form this new congregation when the choir took seats originally meant for the African American members.

Those homes owned by individuals where evidence eludes to their work on the Underground Railroad:

\*David Lott built his home in 1845. This two-story brick federal built his home next door to the Elijah Anderson home. This house still stands today.

David Lott's home (on the corner) sits next door to the home of Elijah Anderson.

\*Jo Davis House is an 1845 federal home built across from the Colored Baptist Church.

\*Stephey Stafford home was near the former of Walnut and Fifth Street. This one story brick-vernacular.

\*Archibald Taylor's store, tavern and hotel was built in 1840 as frame commercial building, but later bricked in 1890. The building remains a commercial structure.

Leaders associated with Georgetown, but not living there:

\*Although he arrived in Madison in the fall of 1839,<sup>37</sup> Chapman Harris moved into Eagle Hollow, about one mile east of Madison, in 1840. His home, located on a high rise facing the river, was reputed to be a place of frequent crossings. He was instrumental in forming a communication network with abolitionists in the Ryker's Ridge and Lancaster areas.<sup>38</sup> The nearby community of Lancaster had formed an Abolitionist Society in 1839, calling themselves "abolitionist" when the term was still derogatory. By 1849, the Neil's Creek Anti-Slavery Society tired of talking about slavery's evils and decided to take action. They formed the Eleutherian College, an experiment dedicated to the education of blacks, whites, females, and males.<sup>39</sup> In the *Indianapolis Journal* in 1880, Aurette Hoyt, daughter of one of the Society's founders, recalled her memories of these times. Her account details her family's connections with Chapman Harris and various Underground Railroad activities, indicating the strong communication network across Jefferson County that aided fugitives.<sup>40</sup> Although he operated from his home, just east of Madison, his ties to the city were strong. In 1890, when he died at the age of eighty-seven, he is buried in Madison's Springdale Cemetery.<sup>41</sup>

Both oral traditions and later newspaper articles tell the stories of the mobs of Kentucky residents in the Georgetown District. During these mid-century years, Madison's political environment was tense, and there were several attacks on free blacks. Around 1849, a group of white Kentuckians attacked a Georgetown. According to newspaper reports, the attack was in response to slave losses in Kentucky. It culminated in the capture and near drowning of Griffin Booth, one of Madison's UGRR leaders.<sup>42</sup> Several other attacks led some of Madison's leading free blacks to flee the city. George DeBaptiste continued his work in Detroit, Griffith Booth moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan and then Canada, Louis Evans, and many others moved further north to Detroit or Canada in the latter years of the 1840s.<sup>43</sup> Madison's loss of free Black leadership pushed many of the Underground Railroad activities out of the city and into the surrounding areas, where Chapman Harris and the Neil's Creek group were still active. Madison's most active years in the Underground Railroad were the years before 1850. In that year, the United States enacted the Fugitive Slave Law, and there was a resulting influx of slave-hunters as well as an emigration of blacks to lands further north.<sup>44</sup> These men actively sought fugitives for capture and return for ransom.<sup>45</sup> This influx of bounty hunters into Madison indicates that contemporaries knew the town to be active in The Underground Railroad, as the men chose this area believing it to be a source of income. The loss of these leaders did not stop the Underground Railroad activity, but the movement changed and reduced in vicinity.<sup>46</sup> The Underground Railroad routes changed after George DeBaptiste, Elijah Anderson, and Griffith Booth left the district. John Carter, William J. Anderson and an Irishman, John Carr still carried on the work, but the routes moved to the far east and the far west of the town of Madison.

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