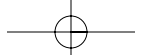
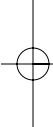
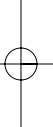


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Cast of Characters

William Frank Conner

Born in North Carolina in 1838. Came to Michigan in the early 1850s with his parents, William Bright and Elizabeth (Schrugs) Conner, his extended family, as well as Himebrick Tyler. Joined the Michigan First Colored Regiment, also known as the 102nd USCT, in 1863. Came to Covert in 1866 with his extended family, where he became a successful and wealthy farmer. Won numerous political positions in Covert, including Justice of the Peace, making him the first black man to hold that position in Michigan. Was one of the founders of Covert's Emancipation festival. Died in 1908.

Wife: Elizabeth Ann Shepard

*Children: John L. ("Johnny"), Letticia, Clara, Myrtie**

Nancy (Conner) Seaton

Born in North Carolina in 1845. Sister to William Frank Conner. When her husband returned from the Civil War they moved to Covert with her parents, brother, and extended family. Nancy and her husband moved briefly to Lawrence, Kansas, in 1871 and returned to Covert in 1872. Nancy died sometime during the 1930s after moving to Lansing, Michigan, in the 1920s.

Husband: Joseph Seaton

Children: Joseph, Emmaline ("Emma"), Ora

Cast of Characters

Himebrick Tyler

Born in 1833 in North Carolina. Came with the Conners to Michigan in the early 1850s. Joined the Michigan First Regiment with his brother and father-in-law in 1863. Moved with them to Covert after the war.

First wife: Zylphia Conner

Himebrick and Zylphia's children: Cornelius, Octavius, and James

Second wife: Louisa Mathews (widow, formally married to Allison Mathews, who died during the Civil War)

Louisa's children: Isadore, Mary Jane, Allison

Himebrick and Louisa's children: Almira, Alvin Sheridan, Julia Ann, Elvira, Arvena, Sherman Emery (In the mid 1890s Sheridan would be involved in a legal case that would go all the way to the Michigan Supreme Court.)

William Bright Conner

Born in North Carolina in 1812. Was a successful owner of a turpentine plantation in Greene County, North Carolina, before leaving the state for the North in the early 1850s. He died in 1901.

First wife: Elizabeth Schrugs (died before they moved to Covert)

William Bright and Elizabeth's children: Franklin, William Frank, Nancy, John, Zylphia

Second wife: Abigail

William Bright and Abigail's children: William Frank, Alexander, Theodore, Allen, Frederick Douglass, Sarah, Ulysses

Henry Shepard

Born into slavery around 1817 in Virginia and taken into Kentucky as a child. In his early twenties he fled bondage twice, succeeding the second time in getting to Canada. Returned to the United States shortly thereafter and settled in Cass County, Michigan. Henry was

Cast of Characters

a successful farmer in Cass County and began a secret career as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Although he was in his forties when the Civil War broke out, he enlisted in the Michigan First Colored Regiment, along with his son-in-law William Frank Conner. Henry and his wife moved to Covert in 1877. Henry died in 1884.

Wife: Martha Barton

Children: Henry and Martha had fifteen children, six of whom survived into adulthood, including Nancy, who would marry William Frank Conner and later persuade her parents to move to Covert.

Alfred Packard

Born in 1834 in New York. Came to Covert in 1868 from Ohio, where his family had been living for some time. He started the first successful logging and milling business in Covert. Nephew to William Packard, who with his sons (including William O. Packard) would join with Alfred in building three large mills in Covert, bringing a logging boom to the area. Before coming to Covert both Alfred and William Sr. had been active in their Congregational church in Chatham, Ohio, where they had been followers of a radically abolitionist minister. Once in Covert the Packard family was aggressive in its policies to hire an integrated workforce and recruit African American congregants to the Covert Congregational Church.

Dawson Pompey

Born between 1801 and 1804, birthplace unknown. By 1850 he was living in Indiana with his brother, Fielding, and their families. Two of his sons, Napoleon and Washington, came to Covert in 1866 and soon persuaded their father to join them. He was the first black man elected to political office in Covert, in 1868 (illegally).

First wife: Sina

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Dawson and Sina's children: Eliza, Lorenzo, Napoleon, Washington, Catherine, Susan, Dawson Jr., Elias

Second wife: Hulda

Dawson and Hulda's children: Sylvester, Grace

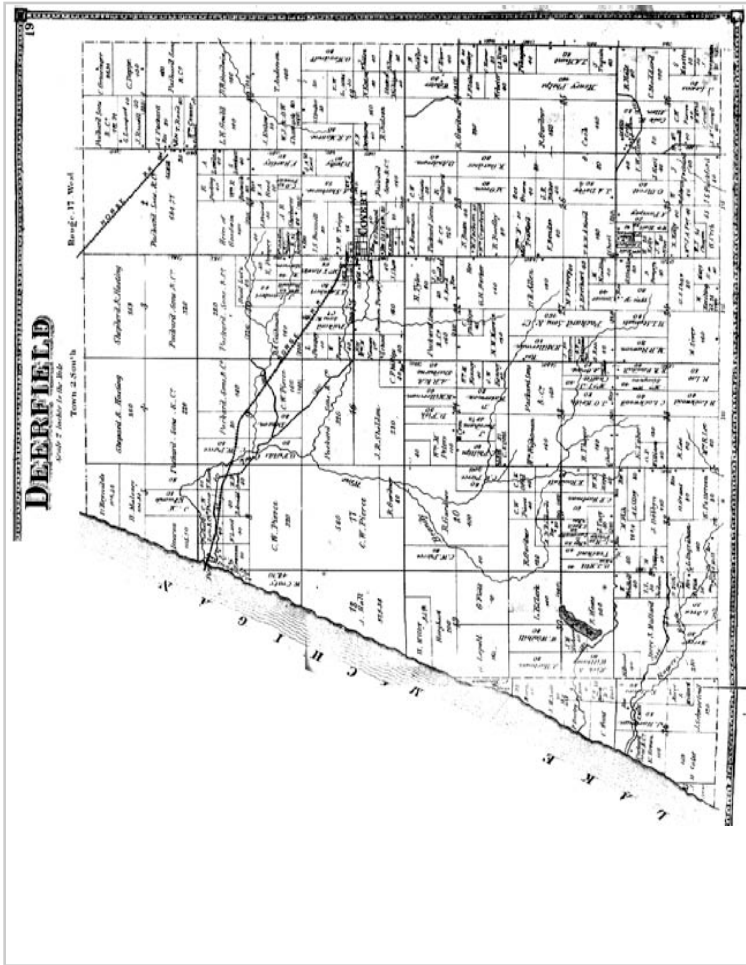
Frank Rood

Born in Michigan in 1864, Frank Rood grew up in Covert. The Rood family was distantly related to the Packards, who had also originated in Plainfield, Massachusetts.

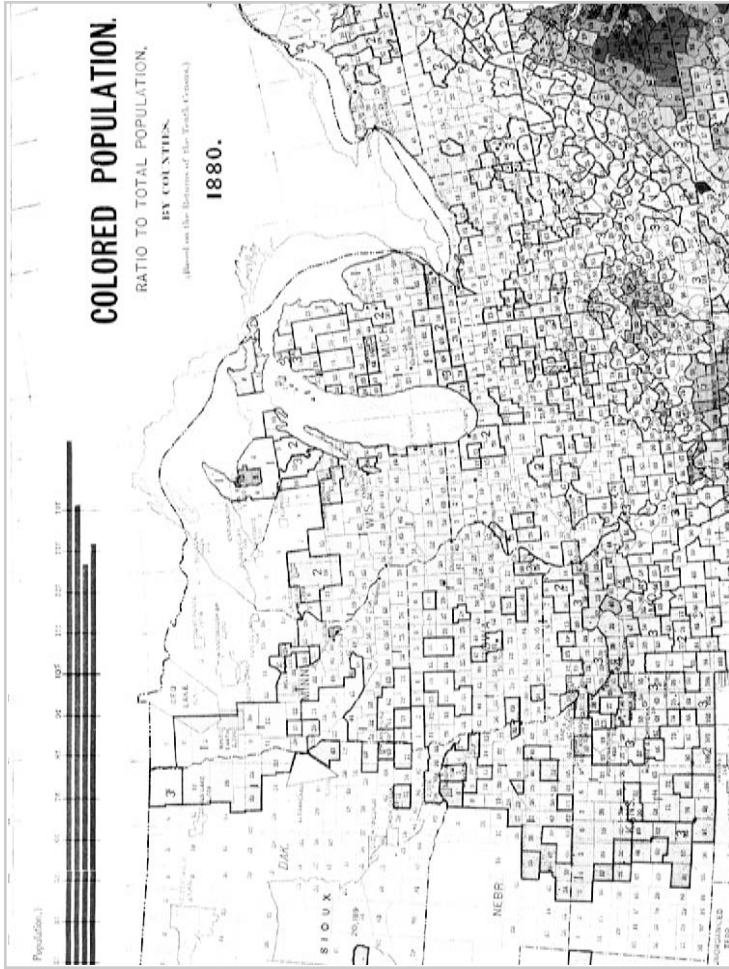
Parents: Edward and Flora (came from Plainfield to Michigan around 1864)

Frank's uncles in Covert: Thaddeus Rood (moved to Covert in 1869), David Rood (retired to Covert in the 1880s after decades of missionary work in Africa)

*All children mentioned are only those that survived into adulthood.

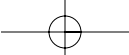
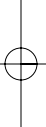


Plat map of Covert Township, Michigan, 1873. At the time, Covert was still called Deerfield. *Deerfield* was such a popular community name in that region of Michigan that the post office asked the residents to change their town's name. In the mid-1870s William Packard successfully petitioned the Michigan state senate to change the name to Covert. D. J. Lake, *Atlas of Van Buren County, Michigan* (Philadelphia: C. O. Titus, 1873)



The Midwest's African American population to the county level. Covert is in Van Buren County, which is in southern Michigan along Lake Michigan, where there is a large number 3 on the map. At the time Van Buren County had a black population of 2 to 10 percent.
 Plate 24: Population ("Colored Population"), Fletcher Hewes and Henry Gannett, *Scribner's Statistical Atlas of the United States* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1883). Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington, D.C.

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late 1830s.³ Although today many think of slavery as being exclusively associated with the South and large plantations, slaves worked and survived all over the United States, and slavery existed in one form or another in the North until the late 1840s.⁴ Importation of slaves was officially barred in the United States in 1808, but illegal importation continued all along the coast, from New England to South Carolina. More than thirty years later, President Martin Van Buren tried his best to strengthen the law against the importation of slaves, but in 1841 his successor, President John Tyler, bemoaned the fact that, if anything, the slave trade in the United States was increasing. Slave breeding was well accepted by the end of the eighteenth century, and plantation owners boasted to their friends of the particular fertility of certain slave women, even giving bonuses to those who had the most children. As one plantation owner delightedly admitted of the children born into his ownership, "Every one of them . . . was worth two hundred dollars . . . the moment it drew breath."⁵ Not surprisingly, slave families were torn apart when economics took precedence over their owners' respect for kin ties. Some states, such as Louisiana, passed laws forbidding slave owners to sell children until they reached the age of ten, while other states tried to keep the practice from becoming too common, but it was all too heart-wrenchingly real.⁶ No matter how loving some owners might have been, they were also farmers, and farmers were prone to bankruptcy and all the fluctuations of the market that farmers have always been vulnerable to, and when such disasters struck, all valuable goods in the ownership of

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the farmer had to be sold. Sojourner Truth, who would later become the great anti-slavery and feminist orator, lost all of her brothers and sisters to sale even though they were hundreds of miles from the South, living enslaved in New York. At the age of nine, Sojourner herself was sold, her heart-broken and devastated parents witnessing their last child being taken away from them. Later she felt the same pain her parents had suffered when her six-year-old son was sold to someone in Alabama. She fought his sale in the courts and had him returned to her, but it took a year, and by that time his tiny body was horrifically battered from the beatings he had endured.⁷

It was a terrible life. While stories of cruel masters were claimed as rarities by slavery supporters, the advertisements slave owners printed when their chattel escaped gave lie to their claim, for the vast majority of such announcements described the unique and terrible scars or even fresh wounds that the escaped carried on their bodies as testimony to the brutality of their treatment.⁸ Even Thomas Jefferson — himself a slave owner and deeply conflicted over slavery and the role of people from Africa in America — wrote, “The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions. . . . The most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other.” He was aware that this was a system that corrupted both the enslaved and the enslaver, a system that he saw, at the very dawn of the nineteenth century, as perpetuating its poisonous culture down through the generations. As he noted, “Our children see this, and learn to imitate it. The parents storm,

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the child looks on . . . and thus [they are] nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny.”⁹

Some of the largest plantations were in South Carolina, where great riches were created from the dank and dreadful work of growing rice. The swamps and lowlands so ideal for rice cultivation harbored snakes and alligators, although those might be deemed friendly when compared with the numerous deadly diseases rampant in the rank waters. Slave owners built majestic and beautiful homes and grounds, sometimes overlooking their vast watery domains. These plantation owners prided themselves on their paternal benevolence toward the human beings they owned. Those they owned had little chance to let their true feelings be known about their plight except by running away.

Although the popular vision of slavery is one of many slaves bending low over epic fields of cotton bushes, only a quarter of the almost four million people enslaved in the United States by 1860 were living on plantations that owned more than fifty slaves.¹⁰

Slaves working on small farms in the up-country South might have had the companionship of only one or two other slaves, a pattern very similar to rural slavery in the North in the early nineteenth century. There were urban slaves who were often highly skilled and worked in smaller groups, with much more contact with others, both slave and free.

Nevertheless, by 1855, much of what was considered the civilized portion of the nation, whether North or South, was deeply enmeshed in the plantation economy. Rice, sugar,

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tobacco, and cotton were cultivated by slaves in the South, while the North wove the cotton into cloth in its many mills, smoked the tobacco, sweetened its coffee and cakes with the sugar, ate and exported the rice. Meanwhile the South was hungry for the North's technology, buying machines ranging from cotton gins to plows, and was happy to borrow from Northern investors, hold money in Northern banks, and send its sons to Northern schools.

From the earliest days of the nation, there had been those passionate in their belief that the United States should allow freedom and equality for all, but by 1855 the efforts of many were forcing the nation to realize that this was an issue that had to be dealt with. Those who organized to end human enslavement in America called themselves abolitionists. Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, David Walker, George Moses Horton, Robert Purvis, Samuel Cornish, and Sarah Parker Redmond are just a few of the many who forced the issue. They and their white counterparts, including William Lloyd Garrison, Benjamin Lundy, Lydia Maria Child, Arthur Tappan, Lucretia Mott, and Henry Ward Beecher, organized important abolitionist groups and traveled throughout the North giving speeches and publishing important texts that moved many to their cause. There were also the foot soldiers, those who gave few speeches but through actions freed many long before the war freed all. Starting in the 1770s many Quakers in the South had renounced slavery and begun freeing their slaves. By the early nineteenth century, the Quakers had begun to move north, often to the Midwest, in order to create communities of freedom for all.

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Although anti-slavery and pro-slavery advocates spoke as if there were only a North and a South, sometimes it seemed that there was only the United States and the frontier, and in 1855 the frontier was the Midwest. The battle over whether the nation should be slave or free raged fiercely there. Those in the North who wished to actively fight slavery moved in great numbers to Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa, often encamping themselves along the rough and porous border between slavery and freedom. Their many stories of struggle, and the people they helped to free, have often been erased by the great flood of war that was soon to be unleashed upon the land, but these settlers were the first of the fighters for freedom for all races.

Soon other abolitionists began moving to the Midwestern frontier in the hopes that there they could create a new way of being. John Shipherd, one of the founders of the radical abolitionist community of Oberlin, which would produce Oberlin College, chose to relocate to Ohio from Vermont because he saw the Midwest as a place in which to create a culture that could improve “our nation and the empires of the earth.”¹¹ He thought of the Midwest as the heartland, but in a more metaphysical sense than the phrase is used today: Shipherd’s heartland was one of radical, and for him Christian, principles that insisted love was without bounds and all races and genders could live in equality and harmony.¹² Others started colleges that would follow in his integrationist path, including Antioch and Otterbein, but John Shipherd and the Oberlin abolitionists were some of the first to act on their beliefs. While the first African American men began receiving their

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BAs from New England colleges in the mid 1820s, Oberlin was the first to grant an African American woman a BA, in 1862.¹³ Shipherd's vision, and his college, would ultimately split the Presbyterian church asunder, a schism that proved to be a foreshadowing of what would occur in his nation.¹⁴

Numerous other small rural abolitionist communities were created throughout the Midwest during this time, including Wayne County, Indiana; New Athens, Ohio; Denmark and Salem, Iowa — to name just a few. Free African American settlements also grew up under or near the protection of Quaker and Congregational abolitionists, such as in Cass County, Michigan; the Beech and Roberts settlements in Indiana; and a myriad of others in Iowa, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Illinois. Others were founded strictly by people of African descent, such as New Philadelphia, Illinois; Brooklyn, Illinois; Westfield Township, Iowa; and Nicodemus, Kansas.¹⁵

Some of these communities, such as Oberlin, could be considered “utopian” — settlements deliberately created to make an ideal a reality. The first half of the nineteenth century saw a flourishing of such communities, from those based on new religions to those that turned their back on faith in anything but individualism. Covert was not utopian, but that did not mean that the radical racial realities that occurred there were not also held by classically utopian communities. North Elba, New York, probably came the closest to matching Covert. The ardent abolitionist Gerrit Smith gave thousands of acres to blacks in upstate New York toward his vision of a society where blacks and whites could live together in freedom. One of its most famous settlers, strongly pro-integrationist John

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Brown, made a point of befriending his black neighbors, often shocking his white visitors by seating them at the same table with his black guests. Although he later moved to Kansas, where he became famous for his exploits, his heart was in North Elba, where he would be buried. Unfortunately, like most utopian communities, North Elba did not exist for long. Few of the whites John Brown knew were willing to share in his integrationist vision.¹⁶

While abolitionist communities flourished, they were often embattled, for their very existence was an affront to pro-slavery supporters and white supremacists, who were also settling throughout the Midwest. Nevertheless, it was abolitionist communities like these that helped make possible the Underground Railroad (a series of shelters and safe homes that slaves could use to travel North undetected) and sometimes encouraged black settlement in the Midwest. Because many of those slaves who escaped made their way to Canada or refused to have themselves tallied in any federal census, their numbers are difficult to track. Slave owners in the South and abolitionists in the North alike had every reason to exaggerate the numbers of those escaping, but there is good reason to believe that around a hundred thousand traveled themselves free.¹⁷ Operating the Underground Railroad was a dangerous business. By 1850 a new, harsher version of the Fugitive Slave Act was passed that punished anyone who aided a person who was trying to gain freedom. These communities of abolitionists and blacks in the Midwest were now battlegrounds, for the lines were no longer along the borders between the slave and free states but as far as the slave raiders cared to travel.

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Recapturing “lost” slaves was a lucrative business, for slaves were of immense value. Whites would take out mortgages in order to own one, and by the 1850s owning a slave in the South was the equivalent of owning a piece of the American Dream. In reality only about a quarter of the Southern population owned slaves by 1860, but for many of the non-slave-owning Southerners, becoming a slave owner was a sign of success. No wonder so many Southern whites were willing to break away from their nation and fight for their state’s right to continue to hold people in bondage, for they were eager to preserve the promise that someday they too could become slave owners and enjoy the status that position entailed.¹⁸ If human property was “lost,” those who owned it would often offer high rewards for its return. These rewards bred hunters who were willing to go to great lengths to capture their human prey. Escaped slaves recaptured were often beaten, tortured, or maimed to terrify the other enslaved people around them who dreamed of freedom.

One such slave hunter went traveling through Ohio and Indiana to find abolitionist communities that might be harboring people he believed were chattel. Disguising himself as an abolitionist lecturer, he successfully sniffed out a number of his quarry, who were promptly taken back into slavery.¹⁹ Others were much bolder. Cass County, Michigan, had long been known to be home to a large community of African Americans, many of whom had been slaves before they left the South. The slave raiders must have envisioned a gold mine awaiting them there, so they rode North armed as if for war, with guns, ropes, and horses to capture and carry away as

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many as they could. When they arrived in Cass County, they must have been amazed. The township of Cassopolis alone had more than six hundred black residents, and the invaders were met with ferocious resistance from both blacks and whites.²⁰ (It is difficult to know what must have been more surprising, the whites who were willing to risk their lives for their black neighbors or the black people themselves, who rose up like the bravest soldiers to protect their kin and kind.) The slavers ended up taking their case to the courts.²¹ The abolitionists who had chosen to resist the raid paid a terrible toll, for the courts fined the Quakers of Cass County outrageous sums for helping their friends.²²

In direct opposition to the slave raiders were the conductors — male and female, black and white — who rarely came armed with anything but their courage and who traveled into the South to aid those refugees from slavery. Harriet Tubman is probably one of the most famous of these conductors, and justly so. Unlike many of the white conductors, she placed herself in terrible danger every time she went into the South, for as an escaped slave she would have been considered lost property found if she were ever discovered. Although she protected the people she helped conduct by rarely talking of how many she had led to freedom, it is known that she traveled into the slave lands almost twenty times, walking at least three hundred slaves to freedom.²³

White conductors had an advantage in that they could travel through the South freely, although they still risked great danger in getting people out of the slave states. Calvin Fairbanks, a famous conductor, ended up imprisoned for years,

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but before his capture he had helped many people into the North. He used numerous techniques, but one of the most ingenious he devised with a friend, Miss Webster, who posed as a teacher traveling with her chaperon and three of her slaves, who were in reality Fairbanks and three escapees.²⁴

For sheer audacity and imagination, John Fairfield had all the other white conductors beat. Fairfield had been raised in Virginia as the son of a slaveholder, but as he reached adulthood, he could no longer stand to live surrounded by a system that, though he had been raised within it, seemed barbaric and cruel. He decided to move North but took with him a friend who happened to be an enslaved black man. He was successfully able to flee the South with his friend, and emboldened by his triumph, Fairfield turned into one of the most successful conductors of all time. He was deeply familiar with all the ways and customs of the slave South, as well as bearing the correct accent for the region, and his ingenuity was astounding. He started bringing out only a few at a time, often pretending that they were his personal retinue. But in time he became bolder, traveling with up to fifteen slaves while disguised as a slave trader. One of his most extraordinary acts was to help twenty-eight slaves escape a plantation by convincing the whites around him that they were part of a funeral procession. Fairfield and his charges would often emerge in southern Indiana at the home of Levi Coffin, a Quaker who had personally helped more than three thousand escaping slaves, and there he would leave the people he had led out of states as far south as Louisiana and plunge back across the border to continue his aid. Just as it was with all conductors,

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every time Fairbanks left for the South, his friends feared they would never see him again. In 1860 those fears were realized when he did not return. Some time later reports came to them that he had been shot.²⁵

While many slaves were assisted by these conductors, uncounted numbers took their courage in their own hands and, rebelling against the idea that they were property, ran. When they did run, it was often the abolitionist communities across the Midwest that either helped them farther North or gave them a place to call home.

Slavery was a terrible system, yet many historians believe that it did not always entirely dehumanize or destroy slaves, who managed through various means of resistance to keep aspects of their culture, kinship, and courage alive.²⁶ Despite extraordinary difficulties, a substantial number of people enslaved in America still managed, against great odds, to have families and keep blood ties, and even facing the dangers of escaping, they bravely did all they could to keep together as kin.

One such slave was John Walker, and the community that aided him was Salem, Iowa. Salem had been founded by abolitionist Quakers close to the Missouri border. They made their community and homes open to slaves fleeing from Missouri and other slave states and often helped them to get to Canada, where they could be safe from those hunting them. In June of 1848 John Walker left the safety of Salem, which had harbored him in the months after his escape, and returned to Missouri to the farm of his old master, Ruel Daggs, who still held Walker's wife and children enslaved.²⁷