

## Myths obscure historic role of Underground Railroad



*Pictured above is the McFarland house in Mount Hope, McLean County. It was used as a haven for slaves escaping north on the Underground Railroad. (Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History)*

In the decades before the Civil War an untold number of fugitive slaves journeyed northward to freedom on the Underground Railroad, making the story of this movement one of the more dramatic chapters in American history.

Yet a proper understanding of the Underground Railroad is often marred by mythmaking, folklore and exaggerations. For instance, one of the more recent and stubborn myths is that of “freedom quilts,” which supposedly featured coded maps, warnings and messages to guide runaway slaves to safety. Historian Fergus M. Bordewich has noted that the quilt myth (which didn’t gain widespread currency until the 1980s, if not later) “is just the newest acquisition in a congeries of bogus, often bizarre, legends attached to the Underground Railroad.”

Likewise, most stories of escaped slaves hiding in false walls, cellars and secret rooms and passageways in countless old homes are likely the product not of historical truth but rather well-intentioned local and family folklore. According to Bordewich, in all the source material explicating the workings of the Underground Railroad, such as anti-slavery newspapers and slave narratives, there are no references to “quilts, tunnels or, with the rarest of exceptions, any hiding place more exotic than a barn or attic.”

All that said, the Underground Railroad was very real in McLean County. Mount Hope, a vanished town in southwest McLean County, was settled by Congregationalists from Rhode Island and Massachusetts. “They were, with scarcely an exception, rank Abolitionists,” noted the 1879 history of McLean County. “Indeed, if tradition is to be relied on, a regular station of the underground railroad, with agent and conductor, existed in the neighborhood.”

Late in his life, former Mount Hope resident Albert Robinson Greene recounted that in January 1848 his father Elisha escorted two escaped slaves to the Tazewell County community of Tremont.

As the historian Fergus Bordewich notes, the Underground Railroad was “the nation’s first great movement of mass civil disobedience” (excepting the American Revolution, that is). Furthermore, its success depended on the cooperation of slaves, whites and free blacks, making it the “first interracial political movement” in American history. Given the Underground Railroad’s demonstrable role in weakening the social, political and economic foundations of slavery, tales of quilts and tunnels seem beside the point. “Faked history serves no one,” said Bordewich, “especially when it buries important truths that have been hidden far too long.”

In September 1853, John Anderson, a Missouri field hand around twenty-two years old, passed through Bloomington on his six-week journey to Canada. The *Toronto Weekly Globe* published a lengthy account of Anderson’s escape in 1861, making it the only known narrative of a runaway slave coming through McLean County.

According to Anderson, it took him about two weeks to reach the Mississippi River, and though Illinois was a free state, “from the attempts made to capture him . . . he was convinced that he was almost in as much danger there as he had been in Missouri.” Once in Bloomington “he obtained some provisions” (though this account doesn’t say how or from whom) and then “availed himself of the railway track for a short distance north.” Once out of Bloomington, he took a circuitous route to Chicago before making passage to Windsor, Ontario.

What Anderson doesn’t say is that he had been accused of killing a slave owner-turned-slave tracker in Missouri. In a case that drew international attention, Canadian courts first found Anderson guilty of murder and liable for extradition. The appeal, however, was in his favor and he continued to live as a free man north of the border.

Perhaps the best account of Underground Railroad activity in McLean County comes from an 1899 history written by Erastus Mahan, whose father William Mahan was part of a family of anti-slavery activists who settled in Pleasant Hill, a community southeast of Lexington.

In the summer of 1854, Erastus Mahan recalled a runaway husband and wife from Missouri who found themselves in Lexington. They were mixed race (Mahan used the term “mulatto”) and “were fairly well dressed and attracted no unusual attention.” Mahan brought them to S.S. Wright’s home outside of Lexington, and after a week or so, led them to a man named Richardson, who lived nine miles south of Pontiac. From there the fugitive slave couple traveled to Chicago and then Canada.

During the Civil War, the local Underground Railroad was no longer “underground.” In March 1862, *The Pantagraph* excoriated a “miserable, low-lived” slave catcher from

Missouri who appeared in Bloomington to track down a “little mulatto boy” around twelve years old. “To the ‘Southern gent’ we would say, the sooner you make tracks from Bloomington the better,” the newspaper warned.