

Michigan's hidden history of slave ownership

By GRACE GROGAN

My interest in the history of slavery began after reading “Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad” in grade school. As a teen, I read books like “Black Like Me” by John Howard Griffin and “Roots” by Alex Haley and watched the 1977 “Roots” mini-series. I have visited slave plantations in South Carolina and read books containing plantation slave narratives. In “Slaves in the Family,” by Edward Ball, the author tells of discovering his ancestors were plantation slave owners. “Broken Shackles” is the re-issue of an 1889 book of the recollections of an African American born into slavery, escaping to freedom and then to Canada after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. I more recently purchased “The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits,” by Tiya Miles.

Born and raised in Michigan, I believed the state was slave free and essential for the Underground Railroad. Only part of that is true. You won't find Michigan's hidden history of slave ownership in our history or schoolbooks.

North American Indian slavery predated European slavery. Slaves were captured during battles and passed between tribes or traded with the French for goods. (“Slavery Was Central to Detroit's Expansion, Detroit 1967: Origins, Impacts, Legacies,” Wayne State University Press, May 18, 2017). After the French founded Detroit in 1701, European and Indian slavery mixed.

The first enslaved African Americans probably arrived as property of the British or French. The fur trade was active at Michilimackinac and Detroit; enslaved people were owned and traded in both locations. Detroit census records showed 73 slaves in 1773 and 170 in 1782 (“Detroit's Dark Secret: Slavery,” Michigan Today, University of Michigan, February 19, 2018). France condoned slavery in New France, which included some U.S. territories (the Great Lakes region, among others, per Britannica.com) and as well as Canadian land along the St. Lawrence River and elsewhere. A 1709 ordinance stated that “Panis (Indigenous slaves, mainly Pawnee from Mississippi, per the “Dictionary of Canadian Biography”) and negroes shall be owned by those who have bought them,” and that slaves were necessary for agriculture and other enterprises. (“Slavery in Early Detroit,” Tiya Miles, Michigan History, May/June 2013).

When the British transferred Michilimackinac and Detroit to the Americans in 1796, there were about 300 enslaved people in Michigan. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 prohibiting slavery was interpreted as barring additional slaves from being brought into the region while allowing existing slavery to continue. The 1810 census shows 24 and in the 1830 census there were 32 slaves in Michigan Territory. (“Black Slavery in Michigan,” David M. Katzman, Midcontinent American Studies Journal, vol. 11, no. 2, Perceptions of Black America, fall 1970, pp. 56-66).

In 2020, Governor Whitmer renamed the Lewis Cass Building in Lansing the Elliott-Larsen Building. This is the first time in history that a state building has been named after a Black woman. Former state representatives Daisy Elliott and Mel Larsen sponsored a bill banning several forms of discrimination, including race. Lewis Cass was a U.S. Senator for Michigan, U.S. Secretary of State, a presidential candidate in 1848, Secretary of War under President Andrew Jackson, and Governor of the Michigan Territory. His name was removed from the building because Cass was a slave owner, defended the expansion of slavery and advocated for “popular sovereignty.” This political doctrine promoted allowing



The eccentric Augustus B. Woodward, first chief justice of the Michigan Territory, decided two important cases which determined the status of slaves in Michigan. Woodward is credited with designing Detroit's wheel-like street pattern and was instrumental in establishing the framework for the Univ. of Mich., per the Detroit Historical Society. Photo: Public domain.



Slavery. Resolutions of the Legislature of Michigan, relative to the application of the principles of the ordinance of 1787 to all the territories of the United States. December 31, 1849. Laid upon the table, and ordered to be printed. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. No publisher identified.

whites in northern territories to decide whether to allow slavery. Cass implemented a policy under President Jackson known as the “Trail of Tears.” (“Whitmer strips name of slave owner Lewis Cass from state office building,” Detroit Free Press, June 30, 2020).

Ten other places in the state bear Cass's name, and Belle Isle honors Lewis Cass's daughter, Isabelle Cass. (“From Swan Island to Belle Isle: Land as it Changes Hands,” Chloe Hill, Clio: Your Guide to History, December 14, 2020). The National Statuary Hall of the U.S. Capitol contains a statue of Cass and a statue of President Gerald Ford, representing Michigan. (“Lewis Cass name is all over Michigan: 10 places named for the slave owner,” Detroit Free Press, June 30, 2020.)

Many roads, schools, and communities honor the names of prominent slave-owning families: Abbott, Beaubien, Beaufait, Brush, Campau, Dequindre, Gouin, Groesbeck, Hamtramck, Livernois, Macomb, McDougall, Meldrum, Rivard, Williams, and more. (“Slavery is Detroit's Big, Bad Secret. Why Don't We Know Anything About It?” Deadline Detroit, June 20, 2020.)

Detroit's first mayor, John R. Williams, was a slave owner; two streets honor him. Williams and John R. Joseph Campau held

several acres of land being worked by slaves at the time of his death. When he died in 1796, William Macomb was the wealthiest person in Detroit; his holdings included Grosse Ile, Belle Isle, and 26 slaves. (“Eleven Detroit streets named after slaveowners,” Black Detroit, February 1, 2017).

Most residents who could afford slaves owned one or two. Detroit slave ownership never exceeded 10% of the population, compared to 33% on southern plantations. (“Slavery is Detroit's Big, Bad Secret. Why Don't We Know Anything About It,” Deadline Detroit, June 20, 2020). Slaves represented capital and could be sold for money, traded for goods, or used as collateral and debt resolution. (“Slavery in Early Detroit,” Mapping Detroit Slavery, Michigan History, May/June 2013.)

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 banned slavery, but many Blacks remained in bondage for years, sometimes for life. Interpretation of the law was crucial to freedom. Augustus Elias Brevoort Woodward was appointed Michigan Territorial Judge in 1805 and decided two important slave cases.

In *Denison v. Tucker*, September 26, 1807, Woodward determined the legality of slavery. Mrs. Tucker's argument was that she was legally entitled to detain the five Denison slave children in her custody due to the Jay Treaty; Judge Woodward agreed. He ordered enslaved people alive “on May 31, 1793, and in possession of British settlers in the territory on July 11, 1796, to remain slaves for life; those born after May 31, 1793, before the establishment of the American jurisprudence system would remain slaves until age 25; children of slave mothers in the second category were free from birth unless the mother was a fugitive from another state.” None of the Denison children had protected status and remained Mrs. Tucker's slaves until they escaped to Canada.

On October 23, 1807, in *In re Richard Pattison*, Canadian Richard Pattison was seeking a legal means (namely a warrant) to return two slaves who had fled to Detroit. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1783 allowed slaves fleeing from slave-owning states to be captured and returned to their owners as “property,” but Judge Woodward rejected Pattison's arguments on several points. He ruled that there was no legal obligation to return the *human* property of foreign citizens, (British soldiers excepted, as noted previously.) Slavery was prohibited in Michigan Territory, and no reciprocal agreement regarding escaped slaves existed with Canada.

These rulings established the standing of enslaved people in Michigan Territory. It is ironic that Woodward owned slaves at the time of these rulings and until 1824. (“Slaves,” Judge Woodward, and the Supreme Court of Michigan Territory,” Edward Littlejohn, Michigan Bar Journal, July 2015).

Michigan's slave ownership history is slowly being recognized. One building name has changed, but it would not be feasible to change the names of numerous streets, counties and buildings, nor do I think we should. To prevent history from repeating, we need to acknowledge the wrongs of the past and move forward, just as our ancestors did. They promoted abolition and served as stockholders, conductors, and stationmasters of the depots and stations on the Underground Railroad. The Colored Vigilante Committee of Detroit helped over 5,000 runaway slaves reach freedom between 1850 and 1865 (“Code Word: ‘Midnight,’” Travel Through Time, July 31, 2019), but that is a story for the May 21 issue of the Freshwater Reporter.

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Exhibit spotlights women artists during Women's History Month

Edited from a news release

FRANKFORT — “She: Honoring Women in Art,” an exhibition exploring what it means to be a woman and an artist in today's world, is currently showing at the Oliver Art Center through March 28.

“She” focuses on aspects of female positivity, strength, resiliency and creativity and highlights women artists' ingenuity and ability to build community, generate support, creatively problem solve, and create and sustain life and beauty.

“We are thrilled to be highlighting exceptional women artists in this exhibit, but also that the focus of the work will be to celebrate and explore the diversity of women's roles and their impact,” OAC Executive Director Tamara Hoffbauer said. “In a time when being a woman can seem difficult, we want to show women of all ages that we recognize their strength, their creativity, and their relevance.”

An artists' talk will take place 2-4 p.m., Friday, March 28. The talk is free and is open to the public. Four Michigan artists are featured, and work by other women artists are included as well.

Judy Jashinsky, currently living in Arcadia, is an American contemporary painter known for highlighting historical events, narratives and personalities. Intertwined in her work are personal details and experiences, depicted in historical and fantasy environments, and across different eras and cultures. Her collection of portraits, “Women Saving America,” recently received recognition from two of its subjects: Stacey Abrams, a voting rights advocate, attorney and former Georgia congresswoman; and Ayanna Pressley, the first woman of color from Massachusetts to be elected to the U.S. Congress and a member of “The Squad,” four congresswomen of color advocating for “building a more equitable world.”

Melissa Jones is a Detroit-area art educator and multi-media artist. Her sculptures highlight the beauty and sensuality of the human form, often joined with objects that have highly textured, weathered and decaying surfaces, such as bones, rust, and other found items from the natural world. Her encaustic paintings layer rich colors embedded with objects and carved textures.

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