

Chicopee provided stop to help free slaves

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The Cpl. Roswell Chapin House, built in 1793, was purchased by Dr. Amos Skeelee in 1804. The root cellar served as a hiding place for runaway slaves. The Underground Railroad was a network of paths through the woods and fields, river crossings, boats and ships, trains and wagons, all haunted by the specter of recapture.

Photo courtesy of the Edward Bellamy Museum Archives

February is **Black History Month** in America's schools. During my 40-year teaching career, I always made certain my American history students understood that the **Civil War** was the most important event in our nation's history, Abraham Lincoln was the greatest of all our presidents and, above all, made certain they understood slavery was the only real cause of this terrible war.

One hundred and fifty years ago, a divided Congress approved the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Steven Spielberg's film, "Lincoln," is the story of the political battle to pass the amendment.

Spielberg's multi-million-dollar epic is a spectacular civics lesson, capturing the

political realities facing a president whose primary purpose was to hold the union together.

My personal fascination with the war began when I was in the sixth grade. My morning newspaper delivery route was the Springfield Street historic district in **Chicopee**, and every Saturday morning I made my collections visiting these historic houses.

I imagine some of my questions annoyed my customers. I wanted to know the names of the original owners and when the houses were built.

The tenant in the Ebenezer Hall house on Chapin Street told me that runaway slaves had used his barn as a station on the Underground Railroad. Many years later, I would discover that the barn was actually built in 1869, four years after the Civil War ended.

After telling me about the runaway slaves, he let me look inside the barn. That afternoon, I paid for my papers at Hastings News Stand and headed across the street to the library. The librarian took me to a glass case; she unlocked it and handed me a little green book: "The Annals of Chicopee Street," written by Clara Skeelee Palmer.

The book was published in 1899. Palmer was a widow who lived for many years in her father's house on Chicopee Street. Her grandfather, Dr. Amos Skeelee, had purchased the Roswell Chapin house in 1804.

In her book she writes that, in the 1850s, the homestead was a station on the Underground Railroad.

Palmer's father, Otis Skeelee, was a member of the Immigrant Aid Society in Springfield. The group organized in Boston by Charles Francis Adams was helping to finance free-soil settlers in Kansas.

The center of the Abolitionist Movement in Chicopee was the First Congregational Church on Chicopee Street.

I returned the book to the librarian and was out the door. I rode my bicycle down Chicopee Street to the old church. Perched on the old sandstone front steps, looking northward up the Connecticut River, I imagined flatboats carrying bags of grain and desperate human cargo.

The Skeelee house had burned down in 1894, and a radio station was now located on the site. I was convinced that 100 years before, runaway slaves hid in Otis Skeelee's root cellar on their way to freedom in Canada.

Black history's first heroes and heroines were runaway slaves. These young men and women emancipated themselves. The Underground Railroad was a network of paths through the woods and fields, river crossings, boats and ships, trains and wagons, all haunted by the specter of recapture. Its stations were the houses and the churches of men and women, all of them agents of the "railroad," who refused to believe that human slavery and human decency could exist together in the same land.

The runaways found the route through Connecticut to be the safest. Slave catchers were given a difficult time in the old Connecticut River Valley. The Connecticut route ran from Greenwich and New Haven to Hartford. From there, they were shipped by boat to Springfield and Chicopee where they were lodged overnight; the next morning they continued their trip upriver to Northampton, usually in parties of four.

The slaves reached the Jones Ferry landing under cover of darkness, spending the daylight hours in the safe houses near the First Congregational Church. The journey was resumed at nightfall.

In the 1850s, the old Puritan church was led by the Rev. Eli B. Clark. In 1839, he was ordained the church's fourth pastor. He coordinated the railroad's Chicopee Street station on the Underground Railroad. The majority of his congregation suspected, but only a handful knew for sure.

Even today, historians researching the story in the Connecticut River Valley's Congregational churches find that this atmosphere of secrecy endures. Remember these people were God-fearing, law-abiding citizens engaged in open defiance of federal laws. The fewer people who knew what was going on, the better.

No one knows how many people fled from bondage on its invisible tracks. Probably no one will ever know.

The black Americans who risked all for freedom on the road north never learned the names of their benefactors.

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