Springfield’s Black Community in 1850

In 1850 blacks had been a part of Springfield for approximately two hundred years. Records from the 17th century indicate the presence of blacks as servants or slaves to the leading families of Springfield - the Pynchons, Blisses and Dwights. Although much of the evidence concerning Springfield's black population in the pre-Revolutionary period is fragmentary, some blacks did quite well for the time period. Peter Swinke (his name had various spellings), for example, identified as a "colored servant of Captain (John) Pynchon," acquired various parcels of land and a seat in the meetinghouse.

Not all blacks fared as well as Peter Swinke, but Massachusetts seemed to be a place that attracted blacks. In the mid-18th century there was a large number of advertisements for runaway slaves in the issues of the Massachusetts Gazette.

By the mid 19th century the population of the black community in Springfield had doubled from the two prior decades to number 267 individuals. Of this group approximately one-half were born in Massachusetts. However, fourteen per cent of Springfield’s blacks had come from slaveholding states, as either free blacks, slaves who purchased their freedom, or fugitive slaves.

It was a relatively young community of blacks in Springfield in 1850, with almost three-fourths of the population under the age of thirty. There were more black females than males, but only two of the 72 women listed in the 1850 census were employed. One worked as a domestic, the other as a cook. Most of the black men of working age were categorized on the census as general laborers. They were employed at a variety of jobs, including janitors, bootblacks and well diggers, at a probable daily wage of less than one dollar for twelve hours work.

While blacks were relegated to menial employment, they were also physically separated, to a degree, from Springfield’s white community. There were three primary locations where blacks settled. Two of these areas, known as “Hayti” and “Jamaica,” were on the “hill.” Today “Hayti” encompasses the portion of State Street north to Bay Street and Catherine Street to Thompson Street. “Jamaica” was the name applied to the section north of State Street and east of Thompson Street, now known as the McKnight area. A third place for black settlement was close to their jobs in downtown Springfield. Here blacks and whites lived in the same rooming houses.

Downtown Springfield was also the site of a major influence in the lives of Springfield blacks - the Zion Methodist Church. Located on Sanford Street, where the Civic Center stands today, the church was known by a variety of names - Free Church, Zion Methodist and the Sanford Street Church, later becoming St. John’s Congregational Church.

This black house of worship was organized in 1844 by members of the Pynchon Street Society, a group of anti-slavery Methodists who split off from the First Methodist Society. At the first official board meeting of the society, their church meetings were opened to blacks. It was in this same year, 1844, that the first home for the Zion Methodist or Free Church was built with the help of members of the Pynchon Street Church.

Little information is available concerning the early ministers of Free Church. It is known that the church played host to many notable abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, William...
Wells Brown and John Brown. At mid-century the Springfield Republican reported that local blacks were very distraught and had begun to arm themselves. The cause for their actions was the passage by Congress of the Compromise of 1850 that included a new fugitive slave law. This new federal law provided protection for claimants attempting to recover their lost property. Another provision of the law stated that captured fugitives could be returned to slavery without a trial by jury or the opportunity to testify on their own behalf. Federal marshals and magistrates were sworn to uphold and enforce this law. The Springfield Republican for October 15, 1850 carried the following story:

"Our colored friends are getting considerably excited in regard to the new Fugitive Slave Law. We understand that most of them have armed themselves against any emergency that may arise and are determined to do valiant battle for their rights.

"The "soap pedlar" [possibly a reference to Eli S. Baptist who sold soap for R.M. Cooley] says that those who do not read the paper are more frightened than those who do . . . . One of our citizens who has a colored girl in his employ sends her every morning to open and sweep out his office. The other morning in her absence a butcher knife was missed. When she returned, she was asked if she knew anything about it, and answered the inquiry by pulling the savage weapon from one of those unlathomable pockets which ladies of all colors manage to lug around."

While fear may have gripped some in the black community, its leaders were urging their people to be prepared for any eventually. Shortly after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 the minister of the Sanford Street Church, Rev. Mars, preached a sermon based on Luke 23rd, 36: "and he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one."

The fact that blacks in Springfield were arming themselves was not just an immediate, emotional response to counter the Fugitive Slave Act, that disappeared after a short time. The black author and abolitionist William Wells Brown noted several instances where local blacks showed their self defense capabilities during a visit to Springfield in June, 1854. At the train station Brown observed a group of some ten or fifteen men "armed to the teeth and swearing vengeance" against anyone who should attempt to take them away. Brown also visited a most unusual house in Springfield, which he described as a "hothouse." Here several women continuously watched over a huge cauldron filled with boiling water. This scalding water was waiting for any slave catchers who happened into the neighborhood.

In reality it was only on rare occasions that federal marshals in search of fugitives came to Springfield. Yet the activities on the part of local blacks, such as those at the railway station and those who manned the "hothouse" dramatically show the tensions of being black in the United States in the antebellum period.
Abolitionism in Springfield

While the black community in Springfield made a definite stand to aid against the capture of slaves, the response from whites was more divided.

Early in the 19th century some members of the Springfield community demonstrated their abhorrence of slavery in the case of “Jenny,” the fugitive slave. Jenny was a slave in New York State who, with her young son, escaped to Springfield. On September 26, 1802 she was married by the Reverend Bezaleel Howard of First Church to “Old Jack”, reported to have been a slave in Longmeadow.

Several years later Jenny’s old master, Peter Van Geyseling of Schenectady, New York, arrived in Springfield with a warrant for Jenny’s arrest. Local citizens, both black and white, male and female, combined to buy Jenny from her former master. The price was $100.00. Among the subscribers were a number of prominent citizens, including the Reverend Howard, lawyer George Bliss, Judge Oliver B. Morris, Mrs. Worthington and Mrs. Pynchon. Also noted on the bill of sale, currently in the possession of the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, is the fact that “Simon Negro” contributed two dollars towards the purchase of Jenny’s freedom.

As the decades progressed, Springfield became a frequent stop for abolitionist lecturers such as Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Charles Sumner and others. Not all of these anti-slavery speakers were accorded cordial receptions, as the experience of George Thompson illustrates.

Thompson, a noted English abolitionist, had been invited to speak to a local scientific society, but, as he wrote in a letter to a friend, some “peculiar circumstances” developed. Once he arrived in Springfield, Thompson recorded in his correspondence: “At this moment (8 p.m.-February 17, 1851) the city is in a state of great commotion. The Hotel is surrounded by Irishmen, and other rowdies. . . . a bonfire blaze in front of my window . . .”

Eventually, the mob outside Thompson’s hotel hung an effigy of him from one of the trees in Court Square. One writer claimed that the rowdies were made up of Armory workmen who were in agreement with the Southern sympathies of their commandant. Despite the crowds’ actions, Thompson did make his speech.

Rowdies were not the only ones in Springfield to oppose the Englishman’s right to speak. The town’s only newspaper, the Springfield Republican advised its readers to “keep away” from men such as Thompson.

There was a similar division of public sentiment regarding the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Shortly after the passage of this new federal law some people in Springfield formed a new anti-slavery society.

The first meeting of this group, held on October 2, 1850, at the Town Hall was “densely crowded.” The Republican reported there were “Earnest speeches” by the Rev. Dr. Osgood of First Church, Dr. White, a local dentist, Mr. Elmer, a shoe dealer, and others.

As a result of these statements several resolutions were drawn up and published in the following day’s paper. One resolve stated the group’s “utter abhorrence” of the Fugitive Slave Act and added that “it shall have no effect to shut up our bowels of compassion toward the fugitive but we will aid and shelter him as heretofore.” Another resolution went even further in defiance of the new federal law -

“That we here pledge ourselves to our fellow citizens to stand by each other in determined resistance to this law and to fugitives from the South to protect them from their pursuers, and we will, if necessary, suffer the consequences.”

It was suggested at the meeting that whenever an attempt was made to arrest a fugitive, the alarm be given by ringing church bells. A Vigilance Committee of fifteen persons was established and Rufus Elmer was designated chairman of the assembly.

The Republican, in an editorial the next day, showed its disapproval of the meeting’s resolutions with the following statement:

“Many of the details of this fugitive slave law we hold in utter detestation, but we regard it as supremely silly and foolish to raise a hand in resistance to the execution of the law.”

The following week, after another meeting of the anti-slavery society, the Republican criticized “good citizens of the community,” most notably Mr. Elmer and the Rev. Osgood, for “array[ing] themselves with arms against the execution of the laws of the land.”

It is evident that there was a small group of “good citizens” from the white community who were committed, to the point of acquiring arms, to insuring that escaped blacks would not be returned to bondage.

Many of these white citizens combined with members of the black community to work as conductors on the
underground railroad. A tremendously varied group of individuals in Springfield provided refuge to escaping slaves, from doctors, dentists, hotel proprietors, and menial laborers, to former slaves and the fiery abolitionist, John Brown. The following sketches show the diverse careers of those involved in both abolitionism and the underground railroad in Springfield. Despite their diversity, there was unanimity when it came to helping slaves obtain their freedom.

Dr. Jefferson Church

Dr. Church, a native of Middlefield, Massachusetts, came to Springfield in 1827 to establish his medical practice. Church had learned his profession from Dr. Tully in Pitsfield. He originally settled in the “hill” area, where many local blacks lived. His office was located in the heart of Springfield’s business section, on Fountain Row, opposite Court Square, and very near the Free Church of the black community.

Church was well known for his medical knowledge and ability. In 1858, in collaboration with Dr. Edwin Seager, he published a work by his mentor, Tully’s *Materia Medica* in two volumes.

Dr. Church is probably best remembered for his anti-slavery activities. Church was one of those who invited George Thompson, the English anti-slavery advocate, to speak in Springfield. Parker Pillsbury, a noted abolitionist from New Hampshire, recalled that he relied on Dr. Church to call a meeting when there was some important anti-slavery business to conduct. The local newspapers described Church as an “intimate of John Brown.” In addition, Church’s residence was said to be a stop on the underground railroad in Springfield.

One of the escaped slaves who stayed at Church’s house supposedly served as a pall bearer at his funeral on April 14, 1885. The *Springfield Daily Republican* reported on April 15, 1885, that all the pall bearers for Dr. Church were “colored citizens.” Among them were leaders of the black community such as Thomas Thomas, J.N. Howard and Eli S. Baptist. The paper also noted there were “many colored people” at the funeral service, who had not forgotten Dr. Church’s actions on their behalf. It was a final tribute to a man who “defied public sentiment” and lost the practice of “many of the aristocratic families” in Springfield through his services to the cause of abolitionism.

Dr. George White

Another medical man who was involved in the underground railroad was Dr. George H. White. Dr. White, a surgeon and a dentist, had an office near that of Dr. Church’s at 2 Fountain Row. Although he only practiced here for a dozen years, from 1843-1855, Dr. White left his mark on the Springfield community.

He was one of a small group of people of anti-slavery sentiments who helped to form the North Congregational Church. Dr. White began the separation movement by holding independent Sunday School classes in the Goodrich Block, which was near the present day railroad arch. The classes were so successful-attracting approximately 100 people a week-that the need was seen for a church in the then rapidly expanding North End of the city. In May, 1846, a meeting was held in Dr. White’s office at which time articles of incorporation for Springfield’s fifth congregational society were drawn up. It was several years before North Church, as it came to be known, had a meetinghouse of its own, which was dedicated in March, 1849. In the interim members of the North Church met in a variety of locations, including the Free Church on Sanford Street.

Dr. White’s wife remembered their days in Springfield as being “stirring times” because of her husband’s involvement in the underground railroad. Indeed they must have been, for the attic above Dr. White’s office was used as a “dressing room.” As recalled by Dr. C.S. Hurlbert, a student of Dr. White’s in the pre-bellum period, the fugitive slaves would change clothes here before continuing north on their journey to freedom. In addition to aiding fugitive slaves on the underground railroad, Dr. White served as a officer in the local anti-slavery society which was formed shortly after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850.
Rufus Elmer

The acknowledged leader of this new anti-slavery society was Rufus Elmer, a local merchant. Elmer owned a shoe and boot store on North Main Street and was a noted spiritualist. Mr. L.C. Smith, a salesman in Elmer's store, testified that the shop served as a meeting place for supporters of the underground railroad. At these meetings, which were held after the store closed at 9 p.m., various conductors would compare notes and prepare for the future. Smith also stated that John Brown attended some of these gatherings during his sojourn in Springfield.

A local newspaper reported an interesting meeting that supposedly took place in Elmer's shop between John Brown and Charles Sumner, Senator from Massachusetts and equal rights advocate. Sumner had addressed an abolitionist gathering in the city and supposedly told Brown, "Slavery is doomed, but not in your day or mine." Brown reportedly replied, raising his hand to God, "I hope to die in the cause."

Eliphalet Trask

Another businessman who had abolitionist sympathies was Eliphalet Trask. Trask came to Springfield in 1834 and established a foundry at the Mill River. Two years later the foundry was moved to Court Street and several years later relocated to Water Street (now Columbus Avenue). Trask's business did much work for the Western Railroad and helped to fashion the first locomotive made in Springfield.

While a success in business, Trask's true interest was in politics. He began his political career as a Whig, but then he switched to the relatively short-lived Know-Nothing Party. The Know-Nothings were anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic and provided a haven for Whigs who did not want to associate with the Democrats or those newly formed Republican party. In 1851 Trask was a selectmen. By 1855 he was Mayor of the then young city of Springfield. Two years later he was elected Lieutenant-Governor of Massachusetts and re-elected to this position twice. Only one other Springfield citizen, William Haile, ever attained this high level state office.

Trask was one of a number of Know-Nothing politicians who supported abolitionist activities. He was a member of the group who invited George Thompson to give an address in Springfield. Trask, along with Rev. Osgood, was with Thompson while a mob gathered outside his hotel. Both Thompson and Trask were hung in effigy by the mob. Yet four years later Trask was elected Mayor of Springfield.

Eliphalet Trask was also a close friend of George Ashmun, the noted lawyer and confidant of Abraham Lincoln. Trask, like Ashmun, was present at the 1860
Republican Convention that nominated Lincoln for the presidency. The 6'2" tall Trask is supposed to have told Lincoln upon meeting him, "I am glad to find someone I can look up to."

Reportedly Trask was among a group of prominent Springfield citizens including George Ashmun, who supported John Brown's anti-slavery activities in Kansas with money and rifles.

George Ashmun

George Ashmun was a noted lawyer and politician, but he is best known for his close association with Abraham Lincoln. Ashmun met Lincoln when the latter was a freshman representative in the 30th Congress.

Ashmun was then a fairly powerful figure in the House of Representatives, one of many elected offices he held during his life. Mr. Ashmun served four terms in the Massachusetts House, two terms in the state Senate and three terms (1845-51) in the U.S. Congress. In reflecting upon his public service in 1854, Ashmun wrote:

"I have had too much of public life for my own good, and more than is good for any man who wisely seeks the happiness of himself or his family, and not enough to be of any service to anyone else.

Ashmun's political career was not over as his description from 1854 seems to indicate. A tribute to his leadership and powerful oratory was his selection as permanent chairman of the Republican Convention in 1860, that nominated Abraham Lincoln for the Presidency.

After Lincoln was elected President, Ashmun served as one of his advisors in Washington. Ashmun was primarily responsible for reconciling Lincoln and his political opponent, Stephen Douglas, after the capture of Fort Sumter in April, 1861. At Ashmun's urging, Douglas went to Lincoln and supported the Union's war efforts.

Also, George Ashmun might have prevented Lincoln's assassination, had he been more persuasive. Ashmun went to the White House on the night of April 14, 1865 to introduce the President to a friend. Lincoln was on his way to Ford's Theater and said he would meet with Ashmun in the morning. As history has recorded, Lincoln was shot and killed that night at the theater by John Wilkes Booth.

As a political associate of Lincoln's, Ashmun shared many of his beliefs regarding slavery. When another of Ashmun's associates, Daniel Webster, who supported the compromise of 1850 and stricter enforcement of the section regarding fugitive slaves, was castigated throughout Massachusetts, Ashmun refused to join in the denunciations of his friend.

"My tongue shall sooner cling to the roof of my mouth than it shall join in the temporary clamor which malignity has raised against him."

Yet Ashmun did not desert his abolitionist stand. In a speech delivered in the House on March 27, 1850 while debating the fugitive slave portion of the compromise of 1850, Ashmun said:

"But when a colored man is seized in Massachusetts upon a claim that he is the property of a citizen of a slave state and he claims to be a citizen of Massachusetts and invokes the protection of the laws of Massachusetts, is it to be said he may be summarily sent away by the decree of any one magistrate, without the privilege of vindicating his title to his citizenship before a jury of the country? Why sir, it couldn't be done in the case of a horse escaped from one State into another..."

Ashmun's passionate defense of the rights of blacks indicates the depth of his commitment to abolitionism.

Daniel Harris

One of the most prominent men in the Springfield community who was also involved in supplying the anti-slavery crusade in Kansas was Daniel Harris. An engineer by profession, Harris became involved with railroad work and served as president of the Connecticut Railroad for twenty-five years. Harris also occupied a number of elective offices from state legislator to
Mayor of Springfield in 1860.
Harris’ office was used to store arms for the settlers of “Bleeding Kansas.” The weapons were sent west in an unusual manner. Gun barrels were shipped at one time, while the locks were sent under separate cover. This was done so that if the “border ruffians” who supported slavery captured a shipment, they would not be able to use it.

There is also evidence to suggest that Harris served as a conductor on the underground railroad. James Osgood, son of the minister of First Church, recalled bringing several escaped slaves to Mr. Harris on his father’s order. The slaves were then placed aboard a Connecticut Railroad train bound for Bellows Falls, Vermont, where they were met by another conductor and sent on to Canada.

**Rev. Samuel Osgood**

Samuel Osgood, educated at Dartmouth and Princeton Theological Seminary, came to Springfield in 1808 as the pastor of First Church. For the next half century Rev. Dr. Osgood had a profound effect upon the course of the oldest church in Springfield and the community in general. The present edifice of First Church was erected early in Osgood’s pastorate (1818-1819). Osgood was also responsible for starting a Sunday school (1818), adding an organ (1848) and increasing the membership of the church by more than 1000 people during the time of his service. Rev. Osgood held many positions of leadership during his time in Springfield, but it is his involvement with the underground railroad that concerns us here.

The Osgood family lived in several locations, two of which are known to have been substations on the underground railroad: an earlier home on Main Street in the vicinity of the present day Hampden Street and later their house on Main Street, in between Howard and Union Streets. The Osgood’s daughter, Sarah Avery, recalled that more than fifty blacks stayed at the parsonage during one year alone. James Osgood, son of the minister, remembered seeing at least nine escaped slaves in their house on one night. The family renamed the reception room where many of the fugitives waited for further instructions on their journey, the “Prophet’s Chamber.” When the Osgood home could no longer contain all the fugitives, the overflow was sent to a neighboring house, owned by Dr. Henry R. Valle.

Not all the escaped slaves who stayed at the Osgood’s home kept traveling north. Testimony from a number of ex-slaves indicates quite a few stayed in Springfield, because of the help they received from Rev. Osgood.

James Lindsey Smith was one of the fugitives who received aid from the minister of First Church. Smith, who escaped from a Maryland plantation in 1839,
journeyed to Hartford through a series of underground railway stations. Three dollars was raised for Smith's benefit at the home of a Mr. Foster in Hartford. "Foster gave it to me and then took me to the steamboat and started me for Springfield." Mr. Foster also gave him the name of someone to contact in Springfield, Rev. Osgood. Osgood was "a true friend", in Smith's words, helping to find him employment as a shoemaker, and placing him in a school in Wilbraham. Eventually James Smith settled in Norwich, Connecticut as a shoemaker and pastor of a Methodist Church.

Another story, similar to Smith's is that related by William Green, in his autobiography published in Springfield in 1853. Like Smith, Green was also a slave in Maryland who decided to seek his freedom. After several harrowing episodes Green and a companion found their way to Hartford where...

"We were forwarded on to Springfield by some more of the friends in that place; we were directed to Dr. Osgood, who appeared to be pleased to see us. We remained with him for a few days, when we got us a place and went to work."*  
Green went on to become a respected member of the local community. He was a member of Free Church, owned a barber shop at the corner of Hancock and Union Streets and in 1851 became a member of the League of Gileadites.

Osgood's involvement in aiding escaped Southern slaves made him react strongly to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Along with other prominent citizens, Osgood was a very vocal member of the local anti-slavery society formed after the passage of this federal law.

There were other ministers in Springfield who were opponents of slavery. Notable figures included the ministers of the Sanford Street Church, such as the Rev. Leonard Collins and J.N. Mars; and the ministers of the Pynchon Street Church that helped to found the Free or Sanford Street Church, the Rev. Jonathan D. Bridge and Justin S. Barrows. Despite the activities of these men, there were few clergy who could challenge the involvement of Samuel Osgood in the anti-slavery cause.

Jeremy & Phoebe Warriner

One of the most likely places to hide transient fugitive slaves was a hotel and in Springfield the hostelry of "Uncle Jerry" and "Aunt Phoebe" Warriner was described by one writer as "the principal Underground headquarters in Springfield."

Jerry Warriner and his wife Phoebe began their innkeeping career in his father-in-law's establishment at the southwest corner of Main and State Streets. Known as Bates Tavern, it soon became "Warriner's Tavern," or as it was later known, "The U.S. Hotel." In 1844-45 a larger building was erected on Main Street near the corner of Cross Street, to provide for their increasing business.

The Warriner's played host to a number of well known Americans, from Daniel Webster and Henry Clay to showman P.T. Barnum. Our concern here is with the less well known figures who stayed at the U.S. Hotel, fugitive slaves.

In an interview for the *Springfield Homestead* in 1907, Mrs. Julia Lee, an employee of the Warriner's, recalled, "Uncle Jerry also harbored all the slaves, in fact our house was one of the underground stations and would have eight or ten hid away sometimes."

Since Jeremy Warriner mainly employed blacks as cooks, waiters, waitresses and porters, it was fairly easy to accommodate blacks escaping from the South for a few days. The U.S. Hotel was not always a safe place hiding place as the following incident related by Mrs. Lee, shows:

"Southern people used to be there (U.S. Hotel) and I never will forget one family and the time we had. It was this way: Mrs. Jerome Bonaparte of Baltimore had a head waiter, William Gordon, who ran away and came up north... Well, this Gordon was in our house, when who should appear but Mrs. Bonaparte and her family. They knew their waiter was up north

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*James Lindsey Smith, *Autobiography* p. 59

*William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, p.21.

somewhere and my, the fuss they made, but they
didn't get their slave. Uncle Jerry was too smart for
them.""

Apparently, despite protests from the Bonaparte
family, Mr. Warriner kept his new employee. Not all
fugitive slaves created the sensation Mr. Gordon did,
nor did they stay long at the U.S. Hotel. One writer
reports that favorite hiding places for escaped slaves
were under the kitchen stairs and in an empty shed in
the rear of the tavern that also served as a granary bin.
Mrs. Sarah B. Merrick, a niece and adopted daughter of
the Warriner's asserted in a letter written in 1896, that
"Uncle Jerry" "packed many a slave off as merchan-
dise."

Ethan S. and Marvin Chapin

Another hotel that served as a stop on the un-
derground railroad was the Massasoit House, run by
two brothers, Ethan and Marvin Chapin. In 1842, Marvin
Chapin bought the property of Judge John Hooker
which was situated south of Railroad Street on the west
side of Main Street. There, at a cost of $8000, he built a
hotel that came to be known as the Massasoit Hotel.
His brother Ethan came from the Cabot House in
Chicopee to help in the new endeavor.
The hotel opened on June 27, 1843 and over the
years acquired a tremendous reputation as an excellent
hostelry. The Massasoit Hotel always played host to
well known visitors to Springfield, from it's first guest,
Horace Mann, to later arrivals such as Presidents
Andrew Johnson and U.S. Grant, General William Tecum-
sah Sherman and the Prince of Wales.

According to Ethan Chapin's biographer, Edward S.
Hume, the Massasoit Hotel also entertained some less
well known figures. Hume relates that the Chapins fre-
quently concealed parties of fugitive slaves on the
premises. They were fed and cared for until
arrangements could be made to send them further
north.
The Chapins also had another frequent guest who
was associated with anti-slavery activities, John Brown.
When Brown returned to Springfield in the 1850's he
stayed at the Massasoit Hotel. A friend of Brown's

"Seibert, Underground Railroad, 92."
wrote to him in 1856 that the Messrs. Chapin were ready to give Brown from $50 to $100 "as a testimonial of their [Chapins'] admiration of your [Brown's] brave conduct during the war [a reference to Brown's activities out in Kansas]."

It is not known whether Brown accepted the money offered by the Chapins, but he did use the address of the Massasoit Hotel in a newspaper appeal. Addressed to the Friends of Freedom, the appeal appeared in numerous newspapers, including the Tribune in an effort to get funds for further activities in Kansas.

Thomas Thomas

On the death of Thomas Thomas in 1894, the Springfield Republican reported, "a really remarkable man passed away"...Remarkable is the word to describe the life of one of Springfield's most noted black citizens.

Thomas was born a slave in Maryland in 1817. When he was 17, Thomas proposed to his master to buy his freedom. It was two years before Thomas accumulated the agreed upon price of $400.00, through working at various odd jobs. For the next several years Thomas worked at a number of hotels and steamboats. In 1843 Thomas visited Springfield where his mother and sister had settled. Then, after spending some time in New York, Thomas returned to Springfield and found work at the Hampden House on Court Square, reportedly a station on the underground railroad. Shortly thereafter Thomas switched to a job at the Chandler House which was located close to the railroad station.

In 1847 Thomas became acquainted with a new resident of Springfield who was destined to become famous, John Brown. Thomas went to work for Brown's wool firm of Perkins & Brown on Main Street, situated near the railroad depot. When Brown returned to Springfield in 1851 it was Thomas, along with others, who joined his self-defense group, the League of Gileadites. Thomas was a close friend of Brown's but not close enough to join Brown's ill-fated venture at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Reportedly, Brown approached Thomas about joining his expedition, but Thomas had the foresight to say he was too busy to go along.

By the time of the Civil War, Thomas opened his own business - a restaurant that stood for eleven years on Main Street and then moved to Worthington Street, just off Main, where he entertained "many dignitaries, court officials, business and professional men."

While no primary evidence exists to involve Thomas Thomas directly in the underground railroad, his friendship with John Brown, his membership in the League of Gileadites and the Sanford Street Church, show that he was a leader of the black community and if the opportunity arose, he certainly would have taken the
chance to help free his brethren in the South.

Eli S. Baptist

Another leader of Springfield's black community was Eli S. Baptist, described by the Republican as "probably the most notable colored man in the city" at the time of his death in 1905 at age 65.

Unlike his contemporary Thomas Thomas, Baptist was born free in Pennsylvania. Beginning at age twelve, Baptist worked at a number of jobs. He came to Springfield in the 1850's and found a steady job peddling soap and candles for R.M. Cooley.

Like Thomas, Baptist came to know John Brown during his stay in Springfield. He also joined the League of Gileadites and was a member of the Free Church on Sanford Street. Baptist was closely identified with the development of the Sanford Street Church, serving as its treasurer for 20 years, the Sunday School Superintendent for a decade and a deacon for two years. Baptist was also one of the founders of St. John's Congregational Church.

Eli S. Baptist was also involved in the formation of civic organizations, including the Sumner Lodge of Masons, in which he occupied all the offices; and the Union Beneficial Association. The latter group, begun in 1856, provided services to the needy. Members of the society paid $3.00 a week so they could provide benefits to one another if individuals were unemployed or a member died. For example, death benefits in the amount of $30.00 were paid to the deceased member's family.

As one of the foremost blacks in Springfield, Baptist certainly would have been involved in the activities of the underground railroad, but any direct information regarding his participation remains buried.

Thomas Thomas and Eli S. Baptist are but two of the number of Springfield blacks who showed concern and involvement in the condition of blacks in both North and South. Certainly William Green, the ex-fugitive slave and local barber, could have used his knowledge of the underground railroad to help other slaves. Another black who joined the League of Gileadites and was an active member of the local community, was J.J. Howard. The city directory for 1855 lists Howard as a laborer living on Salem Street. In the post civil war period the directory shows that Howard and his wife moved to State Street to be closer to his job as sexton of South Church.

As the descriptions of Green and Howard indicate, only basic information - age, address and occupation is available for most blacks in Springfield in the antebellum period. Who were the people who ran the "hothouse" described by William Wells Brown? Who were the men "armed to the teeth" he saw at the railroad station? Who were those who hid fugitives in the homes? The secretive nature of the underground railroad prohibits our acknowledgement of their contributions. Surely the denial of abolitionist activities is understood. The known involvement of blacks in the movement could have been harmful not only to the black individual's wellbeing, whether a free black or fugitive, but also to their ability to continue to aid other blacks.

Springfield was definitely a stop on the underground railroad. The testimonials of numerous ex-slaves such as James Smith, William Green, William Hughes, Eli...
Thornton and Mrs. Bennett Adams who, with her two young children, escaped from a plantation in eastern Maryland to Springfield, show that it served as a major center for runaway slaves.

Yet much information concerning Springfield’s role in helping fugitive blacks cannot be documented. Some stories have been passed down through the generations and have probably been altered by the passage of time and the fallibility of human memory. Despite the lack of proof for some of these reminiscences, a few are included here to give the reader some idea of the temper of the times and the variety of personalities who may have been involved in helping fugitive slaves toward freedom.

In 1900, Mr. A. W. Davison, who resided in Springfield from 1855-1879, provided some information about his experiences with the underground railroad for the Springfield Republican. Mr. Davison recalled a yellow, L-shaped wooden building located on the southwest corner of Spring and Lyman Streets. The building was known as the carriage shop, but in reality it served as the workshop for two carpenters. Deacon Samuel Harris of the First Baptist Church and Samuel Davison, the latter writer’s father.

Mr. A. W. Davison remembered visiting the shop with his father and sitting on a box that would have been used for a coffin today. Much to his surprise a black head and fingers stuck out from the box, whereupon Davison’s father gave the hideaway some water. The younger Mr. Davison contended that runaway blacks were frequently hidden at this location and that the shop was set afire in October, 1860, “to burn up” any fugitive slaves that might have been kept there.

Among the various people involved in the underground railroad according to Aelia Green, who wrote a series of articles for the Republican on the subject at the turn of the century, were three somewhat disparate individuals: John Wood, Dr. E.D. Hudson and Amaziah...
Mayo.

Although John Wood is included in Green's list of abolitionists, no direct evidence has been found to link Wood with the underground railroad. Mr. Wood seems to be a rather shadowy figure. In 1846 he was partners with a Mr. Rupp in a printing firm at the corner of Main and State Streets. In the following year Mr. Rupp's name is gone from the firm, but Wood is still in the printing business at the same location. By 1848 Mr. Wood's business seems to be prospering, for he printed the City Directory in that year. Early in the following decade, the 1850's, no reference is found for Mr. Wood or his printing business.

It was in the decade of the 1850's that Dr. Erasmus Darwin Hudson came to Springfield. From 1850-1855 Dr. Hudson had an office in Burt's Block on Main Street near Pynchon Street. In addition to his medical practice, Dr. Hudson was known as an authority on and manufacturer of artificial limbs. Dr. Hudson contributed to William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* and the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, but little specific evidence exists regarding any abolitionist activities during his years in Springfield.

The same statement can be made regarding references Green made to the anti-slavery actions of Amaziah Mayo. The Springfield City Directory for 1858-9 lists Mayo as a carpenter living on Lyman Street. Thirty years later, Amaziah Mayo had greatly improved his situation. While he still lived on Lyman Street, Mayo was now a contractor, responsible for the first building of the City Library, the State Street grammar school and the State Street Methodist Church. While information is available on Mayo's business career, little specific knowledge exists regarding his abolitionist activities.

Whatever proof reporter Green had for the anti-slavery activities of Wood, Hudson and Mayo has vanished with passage of time. Such is not the case regarding the activities of a Springfield wool merchant by the name of John Brown.

**John Brown**

John Brown is the most famous abolitionist to reside in Springfield. From the years 1846-49, Brown lived and worked in Springfield as a wool merchant, but he was also engaged in planning anti-slavery activities, for which he later became well known.

A circular sent from Akron, Ohio on March 16, 1846, announced that Perkins & Brown of that city were going to set up a commission wool house in Springfield, Massachusetts. Springfield was chosen for their venture because it was centrally located and convenient for wool buyers. Perkins & Brown advertised they would store and sell wool for growers at a cost of two cents per pound.

Brown came East to manage and set up the shop several months later. His first location was in a "curious wooden building" at the corner of Water Street (now Columbus Avenue) and Railroad Row. Brown was extremely busy in these early months, as large consignments of wool, averaging 50-80 bales a day, arrived at the Springfield agency. In July, 1846 Brown added the following postscript in a letter to a friend, George Kellogg...

"I am so sleepy as scarcely to be able to keep my eyes open for want of rest."

Brown was driving himself so hard because he believed in what he was doing. An experienced sheep man, he felt that many Eastern wool houses had been making too much money off Western wool growers and with his partner and financial backer, Simon Perkins, Brown was determined to change this situation.

Varying interpretations exist regarding Brown's business acumen. It appears that Brown did fairly well in the first year that he was in Springfield. With the help of two of Brown's sons, John Jr. and Jason, the Perkins &
Brown company sorted some 500,000 pounds of wool during the year. A contemporary commercial report stated that "without being able to get at the precise basis of opinion, I learn from good authority that this firm is safe and good for all its contracts."

The first warehouse of Perkins & Brown in Springfield.

Brown's business must have been fairly profitable for he soon moved to a larger and more substantial brick warehouse on North Main Street opposite the Massasoit Hotel. Frederick Douglass, who first met Brown in Springfield in November, 1847, recorded a favorable impression of Brown's wool business. "This man was a respectable merchant in a popular, thriving city, and our first place of meeting was at his store. This was a substantial brick building on a prominent busy street. . . ." After seeing the fine store, I was prepared to see a fine residence. . . ."

The "fine residence" Douglass expected to see was in reality, a two story wooden home located at 31 Franklin Street then known as Hastings Street. [Brown's house was torn down in 1950 as part of the city's urban renewal program.] Douglass was taken aback by Brown's home: "Plain as was the outside of the man's house, the inside was plainest. Its furniture would have satisfied a Spartan. There was an air of plainness about it which almost suggested destitution."

Douglass was most decidedly taken by Brown's presence and manner. Douglass recorded his memories of their first meeting in his autobiography, published in 1882.

"In person he was lean, strong and sinewy, of the best New England mould, built for times of trouble, fitted to grapple with the flintiest hardships. And in plain American woolen, shod in boots of cowhide leather, and wearing a cravat of the same substantial material, under six feet high, less than 150 pounds in weight, aged about fifty [he was forty-seven but appeared older], he presented a figure straight and symmetrical as a mountain pine. His bearing was singularly impressive. . . . His face was smoothly shaved and revealed a strong square mouth, supported by a broad and prominent chin. His eyes were bluish gray, and in conversation they were full of light and fire. . . . Such was the man, whose name I had heard in whispers, such was the spirit of his house and family, such was the house in which he lived, and such was Captain John Brown, whose name has now passed into history, as one of the most marked characters, and greatest heroes known to American fame."

Brown's home life and his personal appearance, as remembered by another contemporary, did not mark him as a successful businessman. Brown was reported to be "careless about his dress and looked more like a farmer than a merchant. He dressed usually in dark brown woolen goods and when he bought clothes he would get a whole piece of cloth and have clothes for the whole family made up from the same material." With a wife and nine children to support, perhaps Brown's frugality is understandable.

The Brown family's years here in Springfield were not happy ones. A daughter Ellen, born here on May 20, 1848, died less than a year later, on April 30, 1849. In addition to this personal blow, Brown's business began to fail.

Historians have offered a number of reasons for the unsuccessful nature of Perkins & Brown, wool merchants. Import duties on European wool were reduced, thus making it more competitive with homegrown wool. The War with Mexico added to price fluctuations on the woolen market. The ability of John Brown as a businessman also contributed to the demise of his wool selling enterprise. Brown, according to a number of historians, failed to acknowledge letters and shipments. He priced some of his best wool way above market value, while he sold lesser grades way below fixed prices, thus giving western growers less of a profit. Brown was finally forced to borrow from local banks. By early 1849 he had more than 200,000 pounds of wool in his warehouse and a debt to one bank alone of $57,000. Brown traveled overseas to try to unload the wool entrusted to him, but without much success. By the time the partnership of Perkins & Brown was liquidated in 1850, debts amounting to over $4,000 remained.

While Brown may have been known to contemporaries in Springfield as an unsuccessful businessman, he is known to all students of history as a fiery abolitionist and activist. Brown's home in Springfield was said to be a sub-station on the underground railroad. When excavations were conducted where Perkins & Brown had an office, an underground cave was discovered. It was assumed that Brown's business was also a hiding place for fugitive slaves.
Points along the Underground Railroad

1 — Massasoit House
2 — Shop of Rufus Elmer
3 — John Brown’s Warehouse
4 — Pynchon Street Methodist Church
5 — Office of Dr. Jefferson Church
6 — Office of Dr. George White
7 — Free Church Sanford Street
8 — U.S. Hotel

Map of Downtown Springfield
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