The Chicago Area in Early 1800s

Before slavery was abolished in 1865, the growing city of Chicago was known as a center of assistance for freedom seekers. It is estimated that 4,000 to 5,000 people fleeing slavery passed through Chicago, or its south suburbs, between 1820 and the beginning of the Civil War in 1861. Here they found support from a community ready to assist with transportation, food, and hiding places. They moved from place to place along a network of assistance that came to be known as the Underground Railroad.

Main routes from the south into Chicago crossed the Little Calumet River at the Dolton Ferry, later the Dolton Bridge, at what is today Indiana Avenue. Freedom seekers might then proceed north into the city or turn east and continue into Indiana.

Some stayed in Chicago, sheltering within the city’s strong anti-slavery community. But most were bound for Canada, where their liberty was assured. To reach Canada, they could board a boat at Chicago and sail on Lake Michigan. Or they could follow a land route through northern Indiana and southern Michigan to Detroit, where they crossed into Canada.

1. George Dalton and his sons, abolitionists who settled in Calumet in the 1830s, were instrumental in building the Dolton Ferry, and later the Dolton Bridge. Here, freedom seekers crossed the Little Calumet River on their way into Chicago or east into Indiana.

2. The Osterhoudt Tavern, a stage coach inn built in the early 1840s north of the Dalton Ferry, was also part of the Underground Railroad network.

3. Jan Ton’s farm (1826 – 1896) was an important stopping point for freedom seekers on their way east to Indiana. They often stayed at Ton’s farm until safe passage to Hohman’s Bridge in Indiana could be arranged.

4. It is likely that Native Americans still living in the area shared survival skills and ecological knowledge with freedom seekers taking refuge in the wetlands surrounding Lake Calumet.

5. Once in Chicago, freedom seekers might go on to Canada on a steamship. Some captains took fugitives aboard in return for their service as firemen on the trip.

Calumet Water Trails

Routes and Stops on the Way to Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Little Calumet River

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Photos and pictures are from Wikimedia Commons. While they are not from the Calumet area, they were selected to give a general sense of what the sites along the Little Calumet may have looked like.
ESCAPING TO FREEDOM WAS DANGEROUS. REWARDS WERE OFFERED FOR THE RETURN OF SLAVES, AND THOSE WHO AIDED THEM FACED FINES AND IMPRISONMENT. MANY WORKED IN SECRET, AND THEIR ACTIVITIES will never be known. But what is known shows the diversity of peoples who offered assistance TO THOSE FLEEING BONDAGE.

Chicago was home to John Jones, a free black businessman and his wife Mary. Their home was a refuge for freedom seekers and a stopping place for abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass and John Brown. Even free African-Americans had to carry their certificate of freedom, or risk being sold into slavery, especially after passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

Many settlers in the area helped freedom seekers, including Dutch immigrants near the Little Calumet River, like Jan Ton and his wife Antje, whose farm was a refuge for many. A marker commemorating the Tons and the UGRR stands today at the Dutch Second Reformed Church of South Holland, of which they were members.

Cornelius Kuyper, a constable in Calumet, was often asked to help search for freedom seekers. His descendants tell that, although he “helped,” no freedom seekers were ever found. Once the slave hunters had moved on, Kuyper brought the freedom seekers out of hiding and transported them to the Ton farm for the next part of their journey.

What can you see today by paddling the Lower Little Calumet?

Once you have paddled about a half mile west of the boat ramp at Beaubien Woods, you will see a marina on the south side of the river. Look to the north side of the river and you will see woods, somewhat like these pictured here, that stand on the site of the former Jon Ton farm.

Crossing the Little Calumet River, like Jan Ton and his wife Antje, whose farm was a refuge for many. A marker commemorating the Tons and the UGRR stands today at the Dutch Second Reformed Church of South Holland, of which they were members.

Crossing rivers and traveling by boat were often important parts of escaping slavery. For this tour, you can start by getting into a boat on the Lower Little Calumet River at The Forest Preserves of Cook County’s Beaubien Woods boat ramps (pictured).

A photo of an historic trestle bridge. The original bridge at Indiana Ave. has been replaced more than once. Note the current bridge at Indiana Avenue as you paddle.

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