



## Slavery in Detroit and Downriver

By Kathy Warnes

That there were slaves in early Detroit and extending Downriver into Wayne County, and Oakland, Macomb and Monroe Counties, is an indisputable fact. The scholarship of historians including Milo Quaife, Brett Rushforth, Tiya Miles, Arthur Kooker, Marcel Trudel, and Grosse Ile historian Isabella Swan attest to that fact. Original documents from the Clarence Burton historical collection in the Detroit Public library and other sources establish the fact that early Detroiters owned and bought and sold slaves. Interpreting, analyzing and applying that knowledge becomes entangled in a morass of moral, social, and historical issues that create controversy, apologetic analyses and historical amnesia.<sup>1</sup>

Slavery existed in Detroit and Downriver, during Detroit's French, British, and early American eras- from the founding of the city in 1701 with a few slaves remaining up to the Civil War. In 1750, during the French period of Detroit, more than one-fourth of Detroit's citizens kept slaves. Early slaveholding citizens usually purchased their slaves from Indians who raided plantations in Virginia and other southern states or farms in New York and Indiana, and brought the slaves to Detroit where they sold them, sometimes for token prices.

Indians also had enslaved other Indians before the Europeans arrived, and the practice intensified during the early decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in French Detroit. Indian slaves were used as trade gifts and during negotiations as well as to replace dead warriors. Gradually, Indian and European slave systems combined to create a form of slavery that figured prominently in relations between Indians and Europeans in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Detroit. Some of these early historians of Detroit slavery interpret it as not as harsh and pervasive as Southern slavery, and contend that slaves in Detroit's French families were well cared for, comfortable, and valued family members. Others assert that Detroit slaves had to sleep on the floor and work long hours a day. Both interpretations have one common reality – Detroit slaves were not free. Even if they were slaves in the North, they were still slaves.

## **The Slave Owners**

Many of the names of the slave owners from New France which included Detroit until 1760, are listed in *Dictionnaire des Esclaves et de leur Proprietaires- Dictionary of Slaves and Their Owners-* by Quebec historian Marcel Trudel.

Dr. Trudel, who died in 2011, had the same diverse background as many of the French settlers in Detroit that he spent his career investigating. After completing post-doctoral studies Harvard University in the United States, Dr. Trudel returned to Laval University in Quebec City where had earned his doctorate and became head of the university's History Department. From 1955-1960, he published articles and books on subjects that scandalized the Catholic administrators of the university including "The Slaves of New France." He documented that most of the slaves in New France were Amerindian and some belonged to Catholic Church masters. After Laval University removed him as head of the history department, Dr. Trudel served as the Associate General Editor of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* from 1961-1995, collaborating with historian George Williams Brown from the University of Toronto. They published the 15 volume biography which is still ongoing and considered an important part of Canadian scholarship.

In 1965, Dr. Trudel left Laval University and Quebec City to live near Ottawa to teach at Carleton University and the University of Ottawa. After his retirement in 1982, he continued to write from his home near Montreal until his death. He published half of his 40 books on the history of New France during his retirement years. One of his important scholarly contributions to slavery in New France is a list of the names of its slave owners. <sup>2</sup>

### Forty Detroit and Downriver Slave Owners

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"A Little Flesh We Offer You. "Brett Rushforth.

<http://www.uvm.edu/~mlwalker/Panis%20Slavery%20by%20Brett%20Rushford.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Robin W. Winks. *The Blacks in Canada, A History*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997. p.9.

- James Abbott
- John Askin and John Askin, Jr.
- Jacques Baby Duperon
- Francois Baby Duperon
- Basile Belanger
- Alexis Bienvenu Delisle
- William Brown
- Joseph Campeau
- Jean-Baptiste Campeau
- Joseph Cardinal
- Lewis Cass
- Charles Chauvin
- Phillippe DeJean
- Pierre Descomps dit Labadie
- Pierre Drouillard
- Donald Fisher
- Jacques Godefroy
- Alexander Grant
- Jacob Harsen
- John Hay
- William Macomb
- Robert Navarre
- Louis Payet (priest)
- Jean-Baptiste Pellietier
- Jean-Baptiste Rivard
- William Saint Clair
- [Pierre Saint Cosme](#)
- Jacob Scheiffelin
- George Sharp
- Zacjarioe Sicotte and Jean-Baptiste Sicotte
- James Sterling
- Ignace Thibault
- John Thompson
- John Whipple
- John Whitehead
- John R. Williams and Thomas Williams
- Michael Yax

Major Joseph Campau, George McDougall, Judge James May, and James Duporon Baby are just a few of early Detroit slave holders. Major Campau, an early French settler and trader, owned at least ten slaves at different times in his career. The Major especially favored a young negro named Crow whom he had bought in Montreal and dressed in scarlet. As supple and elastic as a circus rider, Crow often climbed the old St. Anne's Church steeple and performed gymnastic

tricks to amuse Detroit citizens. Unfortunately, Crow drowned from one of Major Campau's bateaux.

Major Campau also purchased Hannah, an intelligent colored woman, at Montreal, and after she served him for several years she married Patterson, also a slave. The Major owned Mulo, a most honest and faithful slave, whom he often used as a confidential clerk. Mulo died at an advanced age, honored for his integrity and fidelity. Tetro, another of the Major's slaves, was faithful and honest.

[Judge James May](#) acquired a slave woman who served him faithfully for 25 years from a man named Grauchin who owned him a debt. In 1794, Judge May sold John Askin a Negro man named Pompey for the sum of forty-five pounds, New York currency.

“Sale of Negro Man Pompey Copy of Deed Furnished By W.W. Rackus of Detroit  
Know all men by these presents: That I, James May of Detroit, for and in consideration of the sum of forty-five pounds, New York currency, to me in hand paid by John Askin, Esqr., of Detroit, the receipt whereof I do hereby acknowledge to be fully satisfied and paid, have sold and delivered, and by these presents, in plain and open market, do bargain, sell, and deliver unto the said John Askin, Esqr., a certain negro man, Pompey by name, to have and to hold the said negro unto the said John Askin, Esqr., his heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns forever; and I, the said James May, for my heirs, executors, and assigns, against all manner of person or persons, shall and will warrant and forever defend by these presents.

In witness whereof, I have here unto set my hand and seal this nineteenth day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and ninety-four.

Signed,  
JAMES MAY”

In the presence of Robert Stevens <sup>3</sup>

In turn on January 3, 1795, John Askin sold Pompey to James Donnellson in Detroit for 50 pounds, New York currency.<sup>4</sup>

John Askin, one of Detroit's most successful traders, acquired a reputation for his aggressive and sometimes questionable business tactics which included plying Indians with alcohol. He had three children with an Ottawa woman named Monette, a slave that he owned and later freed. His papers in the Burton Collection in the Detroit Public Library reveal that during his career he

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<sup>3</sup> Michigan pioneer collections volume I [SLAVERY IN DETROIT](#)  
[BY J. A. GIRARDIN SEPTEMBER 27, 1872](#)  
[READ BEFORE THE DETROIT PIONEER SOCIETY](#)

<sup>4</sup> I do hereby make over my whole right, title, and interest in the above mentioned negro man Pompey to Mr. James Donnellson of this place for the sum of fifty pounds, New York currency, the receipt of which I do hereby acknowledge, as witness my hand and seal at Detroit, this third day of January, 1795.

Signed, JOHN ASKIN.

Witness, William McClintock. Michigan Pioneer Collections Volume I.

bought and sold several native and black slaves. Historian E.A.S. Demiers wrote that rum and sex helped make John Askin successful as well as his business acumen.<sup>5</sup>

On October 22, 1793, William Roe, acting auctioneer sold a Negro boy named Frank, 12 years old, to the Honorable James Duperon Baby, for a sum equal to \$532.50 American money. Frank was the property of Phillip Jonciere of Belle Fontaine, later Springwells, Mr. Baby was the highest bidder and Frank was adjudged to him to settle Mr. Joncier's estate.

Joseph Drouillard of Petite Cote, Canada, had two daughters and when one of the married the grandfather of J.A. Girardin, she received a farm. His other daughter received two slaves as her marriage dowry, and according to Girardin these transactions illustrated the fact that Negros in those days were considered chattels.

William Macomb who lived from about 1761 to 1796, bought Grosse Ile from the Potawatomi Indians in 1776 and owned Belle Isle and acres of other Detroit farmland. He also owned houses, livestock, tools, furniture - and people. His records in the Burton Historical Collections listed items like shovel tongs, saddle bags and goats. Along with these farm items, William Macomb tallied his 26 slaves including Scipio, Tom, Guy, Charlie, and Jim Girty, the only one with a surname. He estimated their total value as 1,655 pounds in New York currency.

In his will, William Macomb bequeathed to "my loving wife, Mrs. Sarah Macomb, for her own use, all my moveable estate ... my slaves, cattle, household furniture, books, plates, linen, carriages and my utensils of husbandry."<sup>6</sup>

General John R. Williams who gave his name to a Detroit Street, owned a slave called Hector, who was also faithful and loyal. Even one of Detroit's early newspapers has a connection to slavery. About 1831, Daniel Leroy, Olmstead Chamberlain, and Gideon Whittemore sold the newspaper called the *Oakland Chronicle*, transferred the office to Detroit, and put Hector in charge of it. Hector liked newspapering so well than when Colonel Sheldon McKnight finally took over the *Oakland Chronicle* Hector fought him so fiercely that Colonel McKnight felt obliged to retreat. Eventually, the *Oakland Chronicle* merged into the *Detroit Free Press*.

J.A. Girardin wrote that several French farmers on both sides of the Detroit River had one or more slaves whose kind masters cared for and educated them and that after enjoying the services of their slaves for many years generally would either free them or sell them to people outside of the northwest Territory.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Indian Slavery in Colonial America. Alan Gally, editor. University of Nebraska Press, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> [Governor and Judges Journal: Proceedings of the Land Board of Detroit](#)

<sup>7</sup> Michigan pioneer collections volume I [SLAVERY IN DETROIT BY J. A. GIRARDIN SEPTEMBER 27, 1872 READ BEFORE THE DETROIT PIONEER SOCIETY](#)

When it came to a slavery stance, Judge Augustus B. Woodward fought to protect the slave free status of Michigan Territory. The Congress of the Confederation of the United States passed the Ordinance of 1787 and extended it over the Northwest including Michigan, prohibiting slavery in the Northwest Territory. The Ordinance did include a fugitive slave law allowing slaves escaping into the Northwestern states from one of the original states to be reclaimed by their masters. Historical evidence indicates that Judge Woodward didn't believe in returning fugitive slaves. In 1807, as Territorial Justice, he refused to allow the return of two slaves owned by a man in Windsor, firmly declaring that any man "coming into this Territory is by law of the land a freeman."<sup>8</sup>

By the 1850s, Detroit had become an important station on the Underground Railroad, with Detroiters and others helping fugitive slaves from the South. After Canada had abolished slavery, many fugitive slaves crossed the Detroit River to escape slave catchers operating in the northern border regions.

## Historians and Detroit Slavery

In an August 27, 2012, story about the key role of slavery in early Detroit and Downriver, Journalist Bill McGraw of the Detroit Free Press named just a few of the historians who have written about slavery in Detroit and Downriver.<sup>9</sup>

In 1941, graduate student Arthur Kooker, who would later finish his career as a professor at the University of Southern California specializing in the anti-slavery movement, was writing his doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan about abolitionists in Michigan before the Civil War. In his preface, he noted his surprise at discovering that slavery had existed in Michigan and was deeply rooted in Detroit's past. The Michigan materials that he collected from a variety of sources including correspondence, notebooks, writings, and biographical material on Nathan M. Thomas, an anti-slavery activist are collected in the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan.<sup>10</sup>

For decades, Marcel Trudel's *Esclavage au Canada francais* served as the only scholarly study of Amerindian and African slavery in early Canada. His research in *Dictionnaire des Dscalves et de leur Proprietaires – Dictionary of Slaves and Their Owners*, lists many of the names of slave owners from the major settlements of New France, including Detroit until 1760.

More recent historians of slavery in Detroit and Canada include Professor Brett Rushforth from the College of William & Mary, who builds on the scholarship of Professor Trudel in his book, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France*, and Tiya Miles, University of Michigan History Professor. Professor Miles headed a public history project called *Slavery in Detroit*, that explored and shared the prevalence and practice of slavery in Detroit. Both black people and Indians were enslaved in Detroit, struggling to survive and thrive within the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> [Slavery Played a Key Role in Detroit's History](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Arthur R. Kooker Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan](#)

parameters of their slavery and several of them managed to escape before the War of 1812. Professor Miles and her students created an online website telling their stories.<sup>11</sup>

In her book, *The Deep Roots, the history of Grosse Ile from 1776-1876*, Isabella Swan, librarian and Grosse Ile historian, mentioned slaves and slavery several times. She described the 1796 property inventory of William Macomb who lived in a large house on Grosse Ile. A slave woman named Charlotte and her husband Scipio managed the house and were valued at hefty sums in New York pounds as were their three children.

### **Judge Witherell Helps Fugitive Slaves Ben and Dan Escape**

Isabella Swan tells the story of Ben and Dan, two fugitive slaves who used Grosse Ile as a stepping stone to Canada and freedom.

Ben and Dan didn't deliberately choose Grosse Ile as their route to freedom. Ben had escaped from his master Kentuckian James Jimson and Dan ran away from his master Ezekiel K. Hudnell. The fugitives made their way from Kentucky to Detroit, and were still there most likely waiting and working for safe transportation across the Detroit River to Canada when Ezekiel Hudnell arrived in Detroit on or about November 12, 1828. Former Wayne County Sheriff Thomas C. Sheldon told the story in his deposition appearing in Volume 12 of the *Territorial Papers of the United States*.

Sheriff Sheldon testified that on or about November 12, 1828, Ezekiel Hudnell arrived in Detroit in pursuit of Dan and Ben. After Hudnell discovered that the slaves were in Detroit, he appealed to Sheriff Sheldon to arrest them and the Sheriff told Hudnell to apply to a Justice of the Peace and take legal custody of the runaway slaves. Hudnell went to Justice of the Peace John McDonnell for the order and Sheriff Sheldon arrested the slaves and brought them before Justice McDonnell. Hudnell presented two certificates proving that Dan was his property and that James Jimson of Kentucky owned Ben and that Hudnell was acting as his agent. At Hudnell's request, Sheriff Sheldon took the two fugitive slaves into custody for safekeeping until he and his party of slave catchers could start for Kentucky the next day. He had secured passage on a ship traveling through Sandusky, Ohio,

Henry S. Cole, Ezekiel Hudnell's attorney, suggested that Lewis Cass, Michigan Territorial Governor, confirm the certificates because he needed approval to travel through the state of Ohio without being stopped. Governor Cass was out of town, so instead, Justice McDonnell sent his deputy Elias S. Swan to Secretary of the Territory James Witherell to sign the necessary papers.

Like his colleague Judge Augustus B. Woodward who didn't believe in returning fugitive slaves, Judge James Witherell stood on his principles. While he served in Congress from his native state of Vermont he supported the Act abolishing the slave trade which passed in 1808. President Thomas Jefferson appointed Witherell as one of the Judges of the Supreme Court of the Territory of Michigan and after serving twenty years Judge Witherell relinquished his judgeship to accept President John Quincy Adams appointment as Secretary of the Michigan Territory. Secretary Witherell upheld the section of the Ordinance of 1787 prohibiting slavery in

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<sup>11</sup> [Mapping Slavery in Detroit](#)



the Northwest Territory, which included Michigan, although he realized that Detroit slaveholders ignored that provision. He also knew that the Ordinance included a fugitive slave law allowing masters to reclaim slaves escaping into the Northwestern states from one of the original states.

Acting on his principles, Secretary Witherell delayed signing the papers while the Kentuckians waited impatiently and with growing alarm at the crowds gathering on both sides of the Detroit River, clamoring to free the fugitive slaves. Sheriff Sheldon noted that a “large number of runaway slaves” had gathered and some informants on the scene told him that several people had offered a large reward to anyone helping the slaves escape.

Fearing an armed rescue of Daniel and Ben, Sheriff Sheldon advised Ezekiel Hudnell and the Kentuckians to take the fugitives fifteen miles down the Detroit River where they could board the vessel bound for Sandusky, Ohio. The Sheriff is vague about exactly how Ben and Dad escaped, but the traditional story is that they escaped from Grosse Ile while Hudnell and his slave catchers were busy playing cards.

Sheriff Sheldon concluded his deposition by stating that “the slaves made their escape from the possession of the said Hudnell; whether from the inattention of said Hudnell or by the assistance of any person. I have never been able to satisfy myself, But I do verily believe that if the Secretary of the Territory, had promptly discharged his duty, & not suffered his feelings to have been enlisted in the popular cry, the said Hudnell would have succeeded in carrying said slaves out of our Territory.” Thomas C. Sheldon <sup>12</sup>

Another version of the story says that Secretary Witherell didn't sign the papers and on December 16, Hudnell decided to return to Kentucky without the Secretary's signature and took the slaves to a Detroit River Island about 18 miles Downriver from Detroit. While waiting for the ship, the slave catchers played dice and a party of black men attacked them. In the confusion, Dan and Ben escaped to Canada.

Whatever the extent of his involvement, Secretary Witherell paid a price for his part in Dan and Ben's escape. When President Andrew Jackson took office, he reviewed a petition against Secretary Witherell from some Michigan citizens who did not want James Witherell reappointed. The petition, dated January 29, 1830, protested his service because of his age, but the petitioners mainly objected to Witherell's role in the escape of Dan and Ben. Secretary Witherell's refusal to issue a required certificate indirectly contributed to Dan and Ben's escape. James Witherell continued to be Secretary of the Michigan Territory until May of 1830. President Jackson did not renew his appointment.

### **Brevet Brigadier General Thornton Fleming Brodhead**

Isabella Swan tells the story of Brevet Brigadier General Thornton Fleming Brodhead in *The Deep Roots*, an ironic story because the Colonel died fighting in the Civil War to free the slaves and a contraband –slave-brought his body back to Detroit for burial.

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<sup>12</sup> The Territorial Papers of the United States, Volume 12, p. 127-129



Like many Detroiters, Thornton Brodhead came from New England to settle in Michigan. Born September 22, 1822, in South New Market, New Hampshire, he graduated with a law degree from Harvard in 1845. After graduation he moved to Pontiac, Michigan, and quickly became Prosecuting Attorney and Deputy Secretary of State. At age 27, he was elected to the Michigan Senate.

The Mexican War provoked Thornton Brodhead's patriotism and in April 1847, he enlisted as First Lieutenant and Adjutant in the 15<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry and by August 20, 1847, he was brevetted to the rank of Captain and Full Captain by December 2, 1847. On July 31, 1848, the troops were disbanded and Captain Brodhead was mustered out.

Captain Brodhead owned and edited the *Democratic Free Press* and in 1851, he purchased the *Detroit Commercial Bulletin*. He enjoyed the distinction of owning the first steam printing press in Michigan. He was active in national Democratic politics and President Franklin Pierce appointed him Postmaster of Detroit in 1853, a post he held until 1857.

Along with his professional life, Thornton Brodhead's personal life prospered. He married Archange Macomb, a daughter of General William Macomb and they had six children, raising them in the family home on Grosse Ile.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Captain Brodhead raised the 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan Cavalry regiment, and on August 22 1861, he was appointed Colonel of his regiment. He led his regiment under Generals Banks, Fremont, and Pope and participated in many raids, skirmishes and battles. On August 30, 1862 he was brevetted Brigadier General of the U.S. Volunteers, and less than a month after his promotion he died of wounds received at the Second Battle of Bull Run on September 2, 1862.

According to Isabella Swan in *The Deep Roots*, Joseph Lockman, a young black boy who had served Colonel Brodhead, accompanied his body to Grosse Ile and he lived with the Brodhead family for many years. He might have begun his service to the Colonel as a contraband, an escaped slave attached to the Union Army, but he served the Colonel's family in Michigan as a free man. Isabel Swan included a photo of Joseph Lockman in her book with the comment that for years he gave people rides to Catholic worship services at the Brodhead house.

### **Isabella Swan, Grosse Ile Grande Dame and Historian**

Born February 9, 1900, Isabella was the oldest child of wealthy Detroit attorney James Swan and Emma Groh Swan, a descendant of one of Grosse Ile's early settlers. She and her brother Donald and sister Helen spent their winters in Detroit and their summers on Grosse Ile roaming the 555 acre Groh farm which included the entire southern part of Grosse Ile except for Hickory Island, Elba Island, and the quarry. The family also owned Snake Island which lay alongside Grosse Ile which they renamed Swan Island, purchasing the old Belle Isle Bridge which they used to connect Grosse Ile to Swan Island. The Swans developed their island with the goal of selling home lots there and accumulated a construction bill amounting to over seven million dollars in 21<sup>st</sup> century currency.

Most of the lot buyers defaulted on their purchases after the Stock Market crash of 1929, and the Swans couldn't pay their construction bill. They lost all but 3.5 acres of their island, and plunged into hard times with millions of their fellow Americans. Isabella, 29, resolved to help her family. She had attended Detroit public schools, learning French at Central High School. She went to the University of Michigan, majoring in physics and mathematics, graduating in 1922. In 1923, after recovering from a bout of appendicitis, she accepted a job at the Detroit Public Library, the first in her library career. In a 1989 *Heritage Newspaper* Interview, Isabella said that after her family sold their Grosse Ile farm in 1926, they thought they were financially stable, so she resigned from her Detroit Public Library position. Then came the Depression, the Swan Island construction bill, and the farm falling back in their hands with taxes due on it.<sup>13</sup>

In 1933, the Swan family decided to live on Grosse Ile year around, and Isabella took a job with the Wayne County Library System, managing the small Grosse Ile Library, now known as the 1911 Building owned by the Grosse Ile School District. She recalled that she made 33 cents an hour and "I was mighty glad to get that job. It fed my mother, father, sister, brother, niece and myself. It took some managing."

In 1937, Isabella transferred to the Trenton Library, then in the city's municipal building and in 1940, when she was 40 years old, Isabelle enrolled at Columbia University working on a degree in library science. Although she had reservations about going back to school at age 40, her lifelong love of learning motivated her to finish her degree.

During World War II, she worked at the Lincoln Park Library which made gasoline rationing a little easier for her. The Lincoln Park Library had been named the official outlet for wartime and civil defense information and the people in charge of the rationing considered Isabella an essential person. Isabella had a plentiful supply of gasoline.

Isabella's family took in fliers training at the Grosse Ile Naval Air Base and their families during the World War II and frequently entertained British Royal Air Force pilots training at the base, now the site of the Grosse Ile Airport. Besides working at the Lincoln Park Library, she managed advertising for the *Grosse Ile Camera*, which her friends Henry and Dorothy Hoch published.

After working at the Lincoln Park Library during the War years, Isabella transferred to the Wayne County Library System's administrative headquarters in Detroit, serving as assistant county librarian until her retirement in 1961. During her tenure as assistant county librarian, Isabella researched and wrote articles about Grosse Ile and Great Lakes maritime history. For the first six months after her retirement, Isabella traveled, but then she decided to start researching the first of the books she wrote about Grosse Ile history. Her first book, *Lisette*, is a biography of Elizabeth Denison Forth, one time slave who prospered enough to invest in steamboats and real estate and left an endowment for building St. James Episcopal Church Chapel in 1867. She published *Lisette* in 1965.

## **Elizabeth Denison Forth- Isabella Swan's Lisette**

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<sup>13</sup> Paula Evans Neuman. "Grande Dame" Downriver Historian Isabella Swan is Dead at 93. *Heritage Newspapers. News Herald*. November 24, 1993. P. 14A

Elizabeth Denison, or Lisette, born a slave in Macomb County, Michigan, won her freedom by escaping to Canada and then returned to Detroit to work for prominent families. Through shrewd investments and careful purchasing she became one of the first black landowners in America, bequeathing part of her fortune to help build the St. James Episcopal Church chapel on Grosse Ile where people of all colors could worship.<sup>14</sup>

Lisette was born in the 1780s or 1790s, the second of the six children of Peter and Hannah Denison who were the slaves of William Tucker. Tucker owned land on the Huron (later renamed the Clinton River) River in Saint Clair in Macomb County, and Lisette's father Peter worked the land and floated produce up and down the river for William Tucker while her mother Hannah served Catherine Tucker in the house.<sup>15</sup>

Lisette played with her brothers and sisters and with the white and Indian children who lived around her and although she never learned to read or write, she was keenly intelligent and quickly learned the Indian languages so well that whites and Indians often asked her to interpret for them. As she grew up, Lisette helped her mother with household chores, gardening, cooking, and caring for the silver and fine dishes.

William Tucker, the Denison's owner, died in March 1805, and the Denisons believed that all of them would be freed. Then they learned the provisions of Tucker's will which stipulated that the Denison parents would gain their freedom only when Catherine Tucker died and their six children were bequeathed to his brother as slaves. The Denison parents stayed with Catherine Tucker and their children were forced to live and work for William Tucker's brother.

Catherine Tucker died in 1806, and Peter and Hannah Dennison were freed and went to work for Detroit lawyer Elijah Brush who had just been accepted to practice law in the Michigan Territorial Supreme Court. He helped them sue for their children's freedom under the Northwest Ordinance which prohibited slavery in the Northwest Territory. Congress had already passed the Northwest Ordinance prohibiting slavery in its territory – modern Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin- but the ordinance only applied to new and not existing slaves. In 1807, the Michigan Supreme Court heard the case, and ruled that only the Denison children born after the Northwest Ordinance took effect could be freed.

Over the next few months in another Michigan Territorial Supreme Court decision, Judge Augustus B. Woodward ruled that the Michigan Territory was not obligated to return slaves freed by establishing residence in Canada to slavery, setting a legal precedent that opened the doors to freedom for many fugitive slaves. Quickly, Lisette and her brother crossed the Detroit River into Windsor, Canada to establish residency and win their freedom. Some accounts say that Lisette and her brother returned to Detroit in 1812, while others say they didn't arrive back in America until 1815. Whatever date they returned, they returned as free people and Lisette took a job as a free maid working in the household of Solomon Sibley in Detroit.

By all accounts Lisette got along well with her employers, so well that they gave her advice about investing her money in stocks and real estate. Although she couldn't read or write, Lisette had an aptitude for numbers and she kept careful records of all of her financial transactions. On April 21, 1825, Lisette bought 48.5 acres of land in Pontiac, Michigan, from Stephen Mack, Pontiac's founder and head of the Pontiac Company. This single purchase earned her the title of

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<sup>14</sup> [Historic Elmwood Cemetery Foundation](#)

<sup>15</sup> Notable Black American Women, Book II. Jessie Carney Smith, Editor. Detroit: Gale Books, 1996

first black property owner in the city and the country. She never lived in Pontiac; instead, she leased the property to her brother and in 1837, she sold it for \$930 dollars. Her property is now part of Oak Hill Cemetery, and a State of Michigan historical marker celebrates her former ownership of the property.

According to the records of St. Paul's Protestant Episcopal Church in Detroit, Lisette married Scipio Forth, the owner of a freight business, on September 25, 1827. The records are unclear as to exactly when, but it appears that Scipio Forth died around 1830.

In 1831, Lisette began working full time for the John Biddle family. John Biddle was the mayor of Detroit and founder of Wyandotte, Michigan, and she spent much of her time at Biddle's Wyandotte estate. She developed close ties with the Biddles, especially the mayor's wife, Eliza Biddle, and stayed in their employ for the next 30 years.

All of the time Lisette worked for the Biddle family, she continued to save and invest her money in things that appealed to her. She bought an interest in the steamboat *Michigan*, a popular cruise ship of the time and she acquired 20 shares in the Farmers and Mechanics Bank, a successful Detroit bank in the 1800s.

Grosse Ile historian, Isabella Swan wrote about Lisette's steamboat and bank investments. "Due to heavy passenger traffic during westward migration the Michigan earned enormous profits – as high as 80 percent in one year. The bank also prospered. Its stock soared to great heights in 1836 when a 30 percent dividend was paid."<sup>16</sup>

In 1837, Lisette decided to buy another piece of land, only this time in Detroit instead of Pontiac. On May 25, 1837, she bought a lot in Detroit, paying the mortgage off in installments. The historical record doesn't reveal much about Lisette's whereabouts between 1849 and 1854. She may have moved to Philadelphia with the Biddle family, but there is no definitive proof of this. The record does show that in 1854, Lisette was living at 14 Macomb Street at the edge of the business section in old Detroit. She had not been there long when the Biddle family contacted her asking her to join them in Paris to attend Mrs. Biddle who was ill and needed constant care. By now, Lisette and Eliza Biddle were close friends, sharing their Episcopalian faith and vowing to build a chapel.

Arriving in Paris in the late fall of 1854, Lisette quickly became proficient in French and gained fame for her buckwheat cakes. Although she enjoyed her time in Paris exploring the city and savoring its glamour, she longed to move back home. Returning to Michigan in 1856, Lisette began working for John Biddle's son, William S. Biddle, at his Grosse Ile estate.

Over the years, Lisette devoted much time and thought to the fate of her assets, since she was a childless widow, and she updated her will several times. Her friends appreciated her kindness and generosity to them, but they noted that as Lisette grew older, she pinched pennies with miserly fingers and worried that she would outlive her money. Lisette Denison Forth died on August 7, 1866, shortly after Eliza Biddle and is buried in Elmwood Cemetery.

When her family and friends learned the contents of Lisette's will, many of them were surprised that she had so much instead of so little money and more surprised at what she did with most of

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<sup>16</sup> Isabella Swan, Lisette. Grosse Ile, Michigan, 1965

it. Lisette willed part of her estate to her family, but the rest of it, about \$3,000, she earmarked to be used to build the Episcopalian chapel that she and Eliza Biddle had planned together.

Lisette had not specified where exactly the chapel would be built in her will, but William Biddle, her long-time employer decided that she would want it on Grosse Ile. Her money provided most of the funds for St. James Episcopal Church on Grosse Ile, but following his mother's wishes, William Biddle combined some of his own and his mother's money with Lisette's contribution. His brother James Biddle donated land for the chapel and the brother hired architect Gordon W. Lloyd to design the church. James also built an altar cross, a kneeling bench, and a reading stand for the minister. The construction began in 1867 and was completed in 1868, with the first service conducted by Reverend Moses Hunter in the spring of 1868. In 1958, another building was built with a hallway connecting it to the older chapel and the red doors leading into it are dedicated to Elizabeth Denison Forth.

Continuing in the St. James tradition, Isabella wrote, *The Ark of God*, published in 1968, for the church's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Next, came *The Deep Roots*, a study of the first 100 years of Grosse Ile history, which took Isabella 14 years to write. According to Isabella, she spent three days a week researching in the Burton Historical Collection at the Detroit Public Library and another three days a week transcribing her notes. She explored museums, libraries, and churches in Windsor and Amherstburg, Ontario and corresponded with researchers in the U.S. and Canadian national archives, the U.S. Library of Congress, and other public and private archives for more information.

*The Deep Roots* was published in 1976, in time for the bicentennial of the United States and counting from July 6, 1776 when William and Alexander Macomb bought Grosse Ile from the Pottawatomie Indians, the bicentennial of Grosse Ile as well.

In a 1989 interview, Isabella talked about *The Deep Roots*. "I'll never regret writing it. I have no regrets for the time I spent on that book. My, I had fun writing that book. A lot of people said I'd never finish it. They were wrong. I guess the ultimate accolade that my book received is that seven copies were stolen from the Trenton Library."<sup>17</sup>

Isabella Swan died on Friday, November 19, 1993, at her home in her beloved Grosse Ile. In addition to her career as a historian, her accomplishments included founder and life member of the Grosse Ile Historical Society, life member of the Historical Society of Michigan, and member of the National Historical Society and the American Association for State and Local History.

And, documenting the lives of Grosse Ile slaves who would have otherwise been lost to Downriver history.

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<sup>17</sup> Paula Evans Neuman. "Grande Dame" Downriver Historian Isabella Swan is Dead at 93. Heritage Newspapers. News Herald. November 24, 1993. P. 14A

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