

G. L. **Heaton**: the Underground Railroad and Lake Erie
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2013

Although the Underground Railroad conductor Eber M. **Pettit** was 83 when he died on 13 May 1885, his death came as a shock to Fredonians and brought them what the *Fredonia Censor* of 20 May described as a “painful sense of bereavement.” His unusually lengthy obituary included the reminder that “more than sixty years ago he [**Pettit**] became a prominent agent and conductor on the Underground Railroad.” The account adds that a good while after the Emancipation proclamation “he was importuned to write out the history of some of these most remarkable escapes.” The “history” appeared as a series of articles in the *Censor* and “some years later, in [1879], the sketches were published in a small volume.”

It cannot be a coincidence that after waiting a decent interval, Willard **McKinstry**, who had done the original “importuning” and the 1879 publishing, began running a small advertisement to say that the *Censor* still had some copies of the small volume on hand. The first of these ads appeared in the issue of 16 September, as follows:

UNDERGROUND R. R. SKETCHES

A History of the operations of the once celebrated “Underground R.R.” in aiding fugitives from Slavery to Freedom, the perils and adventures of the passengers and of those who aided them.

*BY EBER M. **PETTIT**, for many years a conductor on the line. A fascinating volume of nearly 200 pages. The publishers have a few copies left which they offer for 50 cents each, in paper covers, for \$1.00 handsomely bound in embossed muslin. Sent postpaid on receipt of price. Address, W. **McKinstry** & Son, Fredonia, N.Y.*

One response to the ad was a 5 November 1885 letter from F. A. **Redington**, then of Chicago, which **McKinstry** published on November 11, as follows:

*My Dear Friend:—I have received the copy of Dr. **Pettit**’s history of the U.G.R.R. for which I thank you. It enables me to live over again the days when slavery began to find a voice here and there bold enough to condemn it and endure the scoffs of popular opinion which proclaimed slavery a divine institution from both platform and pulpit. I am reminded of an incident which occurred in Westfield fifty-five years ago when Rev. D. D. **Gregory** gave notice from the pulpit that on Monday evening there would be a meeting in the conference room of the church to organize an “anti-Slavery Society.” At the time appointed a lad of sixteen winters and fifteen summers found the Rev. **Gregory** and another “contemptible abolitionist” standing at the door which had been locked by order of the deacons who “would not consent to such desecration of God’s House.” The lad crawled into an unfastened window and admitted the crowd of two persons.*

The society was organized and officers chosen consisting of President, Secretary and Treasurer. The society grew and multiplied; the U.G.R.R. was constructed; political parties were rent asunder; the rail road trains ran noiselessly whenever there were one or more passengers. Canada was the Ark of safety to which the slave ran for dear life, and those who abetted their escape were criminals in the eyes of the law.

What a lever that U.G.R.R. proved to be. It excelled the fancies of Archimedes. Three millions of broken yokes. Three millions of bondsmen set free.

*Forever sacred be the memory of Conductor **Pettit** and his co-workers.
Yours Truly.
F. A. **Redington***

Then, in the issue of 17 March 1886 appeared the following:

ON THE UNDERGROUND.

Recollections of an Old Conductor.— From Shore to Shore.— Tricking the Slave Catchers.

*Messrs. Editors. — An article appeared in the Censor some weeks ago from the pen of F. A. **Redington**, Esq., relative to anti-slavery days and the Underground Ry. That brings to our recollection many of the stirring incidents of those times. From the spring of 1852, until the fall of 1858, the writer was in the employ of the late Capt. E. B. **Ward**, the great steam boat owner of Detroit, as clerk on one of his steamers, forming the regular line between Cleveland and Detroit. From the opening of navigation until it closed at the setting in of winter, these boats run with almost as great regularity as a train of cars. They were for a long time the only connecting line between the South Shore railroads and the Michigan Central and were regarded as a railroad line. The line has always been a good paying one, and is kept up to the present period and is the only regular line on lake Erie that has for near thirty years past supported two large first class side wheel steamers. At the time spoken of, these boats, or at least one of them, formed a very important link in the Underground railroad. Capt. E. B. **Ward** was a radical on the question of slavery. Whenever the subject was broached in his hearing he did not hesitate to let his views be known. We have often heard him remark that if there was a human being on earth that he despised, that he had utter contempt for, it was the person who bought and sold human chattels. He was always ready to contribute liberally to any measure for the amelioration of that oppressed class. He was also one of the foremost ones in aiding those who had escaped from bondage and made their way to their haven of liberty — Canada. It is a well known fact that soon after the Dred Scott decision, there were secret organizations formed all along the Ohio river from Portsmouth to Pittsburgh, and in fact all through Ohio, for the purpose of aiding and helping all those fugitives from slavery who were fortunate to escape and succeeded in crossing the Ohio river from Virginia and Kentucky, on their way to Canada.*

*These organizations were wonderfully successful in helping the poor refugee through the state of Ohio, and never lost sight of him until he was landed in the colored man's land of freedom. It was the secret working of this anti-slavery band that gave the name of the Underground Railroad. Cleveland was regarded as one of the principal stations of the route and all who were fortunate enough to reach there felt quite sure that the principal difficulties of their journey were over. A large number of the native [?] workers of the organization at that point were colored men; although there were many of the anglo-saxon race that were sympathizers and contributed very largely of their means to pay all the incidental expenses of running the U.G.R.R. and keeping it in working order. Soon after we engaged in our position as clerk of one of Capt. **Ward's** steamers in the spring of 1852, while the boat was lying at the dock in Cleveland, we were approached by quite an elderly and venerable colored man who asked if Mr. **Williams** had been on board the boat within a short time. We inquired what **Williams** he referred to. It if was Joseph **Williams**, the Supt. of the U. G. Ry. The old man answered, “'zactly sir, he is de superintendant and I is de president of dat institution.” We replied that Mr. **Williams** had not yet favored us with a call. However, while we were in conversation the superintendent*

came up and presented us with a note from our employer stating that we should pass free from Cleveland to Detroit, all refugees or fugitives from slavery who should be brought to the boat by either of the individuals then present. After remarking that we should always gladly obey the instructions of the owners or proprietors of the line, Mr. **Williams** stated that he had never known my status on the question of slavery, but in order to have the cause in which they were engaged go on successfully, it was important that a person filling the position that I occupied on board the boat should be a sympathizer with them, or at least should not be opposed to them.

I replied that although I had never taken any active part in the cause of anti-slavery, I had my sympathy and I would gladly see the shackles knocked from every man in America, and that they could rely upon my assisting them in every way in my power that would not bring me amenable to the law. It was not long after this conversation before travel set in upon the Underground Railroad. During the summers of 1852 and 1853, there was hardly a week that we did not have a greater or less number of refugees escaping from slavery to their land of freedom. These were mostly from the border states of Virginia (now Western Virginia,) Kentucky and Tennessee and what surprised us most was the numbers in which they traveled. It was often the case that Mr. **Williams** would bring us ten or twelve at a a [sic] time and sometimes this number constituted a whole family. On one occasion in the summer of 1854, we had no less than thirty individuals escaping from bondage to the dominion of Great Britain [sic], where they could enjoy the inalienable rights endowed by their Creator. Among this thirty was one family of twelve persons, the head of which was a venerable, white haired patriarch of sixty years, and the youngest an infant but little over one year of age. After the boat was under way, so that the old man should have no fear of being molested, curiosity prompted us to question him how he could manage to travel so far with so many children and not be apprehended. The old man informed us that his former home had been in Kentucky, about seventy-five miles above Newport, and only about a mile back from the Ohio river; that his old Massa usually went to Newport and Cincinnati once during each summer which would keep him away from one to two weeks. On this occasion old Missus and their only son, a young man of twenty years, accompanied them. The party left home on a Saturday morning. Before they had gone an hour the old man began his preparations for leaving. He went to the Ohio river and procured two boats with which he knew he could take his whole family over at one trip. In the meantime his wife was baking all the corn meal they had in their quarters, and all he could find in old Massa's house into hoe cake. She also cooked by boiling and frying all the bacon they could lay their hands upon. This, with two or three fowls they cooked, constituted their stock of provisions for a week. It was about 12 o'clock at night when they were securely across the Ohio, ready to take up their march. The old man had formed his plans before starting to take the stars for his guide and avoid all greatly traveled roads. Soon after daylight the next morning they discovered a barn some distance from the road near a track of woods. The old man determined that this was just the place for them to rest through the day, providing there was no person about. He concluded they had not traveled more than twelve or fifteen miles and were not over ten miles from the river, and knew very well that the locality was not a very safe one for runaway niggers (as they were termed) if discovered. Leaving his family securely hid in a clump of bushes, a short distance back from the road, he started to reconnoiter the barn. He found everything favorable, not a living creature of any description around and a large mow of clean, dry hay. It was not long before he had his family well covered with the hay, fast asleep, while he took a secure place for a look out. The day passed and they were not interfered with. In fact, the old man said he did not see but one individual all day. About 10 o'clock in the morning a man went by on horse back, that he took to

be a Methodist minister going somewhere to preach. As soon as the sun was behind the hills in the west, and the stars began to glimmer, he marshaled his little band and started again northward. He arranged with his wife for him to take the next to the youngest child (a little girl two and a half years old) and keep some eighty rods or so in the advance, and if he should be interfered with so that he thought their safety was in jeopardy he would give a certain signal by which the others could secrete themselves. The night passed without any one troubling them. Daylight, Monday morning, brought them to a large woods, or a tract of timber land; there they remained securely through the day, and again at night fall they started towards the land of liberty. They had gone but a short distance before they fell in with a man of their own color. This proved a fortunate circumstance to them. He at once informed them that he would pilot them to the house of an old Quaker preacher who was a true friend to all who were fleeing from slavery. After a walk of about two hours or more, or about 12 o'clock at night, they came to a large unpretentious farm house and were told to seat themselves in the yard while their friend went to the house and awakened the Quaker and informed him who were there. It was but a short time before the preacher made his appearance and assured them of his friendship and willingness to aid them all in his power. He said to them that his wife had already commenced to get them a good warm meal, then turning to the colored man who brought them there said, "Jonas, you fill the wagon with good clean straw, hitch up the black and brown mares and take these people on their way towards freedom." He gave Jonas the route to take and ended by informing him to whom he should deliver us. Soon after sunrise the next morning we reached the residence of another Quaker who took us in and cared for us through the day and very soon after dark were again on our way. This mode of travel was continued until they reached a little town about seventy-five miles from Cleveland, when about 12 o'clock at night, they were put into a car attached to a freight train, and were taken into Cleveland before daylight the next morning. Mr. **Williams** and two of their color, met them at the cars and conducted them to a rendezvous of safety, when they found several others likewise, waiting for an opportunity to flee to Canada.

We inquired of the old man why he took to [sic] great a risk in getting away with his whole family; if he was ill treated or misused. He replied by saying, that old Massa was very kind and good, and treated them well until about ten years previous when he commenced drinking too much and oft times came home not himself; in other words, came home under the influence of whiskey. This had been growing upon him until there was hardly a week that he did not come home drunk, and when in that condition, if anything went wrong or did not please him, his fury and rage knew no bounds. He was liable to strike one of his people (he owned eight other slaves besides this family) with a club or any article he could lay his hands upon. The immediate cause of this family leaving, the old man said was, old Massa went away on a Thursday morning a few weeks previous and did not return until Saturday evening, when he was very badly intoxicated. Sunday morning he came to our cabin, which was near by the homestead, and asked for that girl, pointing to a young and rather delicate looking girl of probably about 12 or 13 years of age, and asked her why she did not work in the field hoeing corn with the other people the two days previous. She replied that she was sick and not able to work. The child's mother corroborated her story and said she was so sick she was compelled to lay in bed nearly all one day. Old Massa said it was a lie, he knew better, the girl was lazy, that he would teach her that she could not play off in that way as soon as his back was turned. He grabbed hold of her and took her out to the barn where he tied her to a post and whipped her until the blood run down her back nearly to her feet; her back still shows more than twenty marks of the lash. "I then resolved," added the old man, "that the first opportunity that presented itself I would take

all my family and make an effort, even at the risk of my own life, to reach a country where a man can protect his own children, even if they are of African decent [sic], against the brutality of an unprincipled licentious drunken white man.” We remarked to him that providing no accident happened, that soon after sunrise next morning, he would be safely landed in Canada, where the lash and club of the slave holder had no jurisdiction, and where a man has control over his own children regardless of their color or condition.

*The next incident in connection with the U.G.R.R. worthy of note, occurred in the early part of September 1856. On the day in question, Mr. **Williams** came to us soon after 12 o'clock at noon under a great excitement and stated that they had their men at the rendezvous who came in the night before. Two of them were brothers belonging to a near neighbor, all three were from near Lexington, Ky. That the detectives were already looking for them, and he was just in receipt of a dispatch which indicated that the man who claimed to be the owner of the brothers had left Cincinnati that morning, and would be in Cleveland about 3 o'clock p.m. of that day; also that there were detectives looking for the fugitives, and watching every move of his, hoping thereby to ascertain the place of rendezvous. He expressed great fear and thought it would be next to impossible to get the three men on board the boat even after the night had set in as the detectives would have one or two of their number watching the boat until she left her dock at 9 o'clock in the evening. After several plans were talked over we took the captain of the steamer into our confidence (who by the by was not a sympathizer in the cause, but knowing very well that his employer was an ardent worker, we felt sure that he dare not betray us.) He at once suggested a plan that worked successfully; which was for the fugitives to remain secreted until 8:30 o'clock, which would be but a half an hour before the time for the boat to leave. Then for them to be brought by a round about way to the opposite side of the river, from where the boat was lying, where there were some large piles of lumber which shaded the river, and for another person to secure and have a yawl boat at the place in readiness when at a given signal from the steamer with a lantern, all hands were to quietly step into the yawl boat and pull to the after gangway of the steamer on the opposite side from the dock, where they could easily slip into the aft steerage cabin which contained a state room that had been used a number of times previous by those who were fleeing from slavery to seek a land of freedom under a foreign power. We were quite sure that if we once had these men safely on board the boat, and the boat underway, the United States Marshals could not get them off, at least before we reached Detroit. The lines were cast loose before the men stepped on board so that it was but a moment before the boat was under way. As we passed a schooner a short distance below, a man with satchel in hand, jumped on board of our boat. We recognized him as being one that had been hanging around the dock with the U.S. Marshal for an hour or two before night fall. We also saw him in close conversation with one of the Irish firemen whom we knew would betray us in a moment if he could. When he came to the office to pay for his passage we inquired his name and place of residence. To the latter he replied Lexington, Kentucky. If we had any doubts before of his being the owner of these men and the one endeavoring to recapture them they were then all driven away and our hearts sank within us. For a time we could think of nothing but the arrest of these poor fellows as soon as we landed at Detroit and their being taken back to servitude in chains and irons. We knew that there was always one or two police officers and generally a deputy U.S. marshal on the dock when we reached Detroit and it was a question whether we could keep these men hid any length of time. Also knew the Kentuckian would probably have the ship searched if he could not find his prey without it. We finally retired for the night endeavoring to concoct some plan to checkmate the slave owner. We finally dropped to sleep and were awakened a couple of hours or so after, by*

some one tapping lightly on our office window. (Our sleeping room was directly back of the office) On opening the office window we saw the older one of the two brothers who was a man of at least three-fourths white blood, and of more than ordinary intelligence, especially for one who had been reared in servitude. As soon as we saw who it was we invited him into our office and closed the door. He informed us that their owner had been shown their hiding place in the cabin below by the Irish fireman, that the Kentuckian appeared to take great pleasure in telling them that he now had them as surely as though they were back on their native soil; that he telegraphed the U. S. Marshal at Detroit before leaving Cleveland to be at the dock on the arrival of the boat prepared to take them in charge. That they would be taken back to Kentucky in irons, and when once there they could make their calculations to receive one hundred lashes on their bare backs. After hearing his entire story we told the man to go back to his hiding place and to remain there until called for by us; that we would endeavor to think of some way to thwart this fellow who appeared to be so anxious to inflict personal punishment upon them.

*It so happened that Capt. E. B. **Ward**, the owner of the boat, was on board that night. He had been to Washington and returned Via Cleveland, consequently was there on his way home. Immediately after the man left us we formed our plan of action and only waited to have an interview with Capt. **Ward** to have it carried out. Soon after sunrise he came upon deck from his stateroom. We went directly to him and informed him of all the circumstances of the case. Without a word farther than saying I think we can thwart this slave holder's plans, he sent a boy, (an attaché of the boat) for the captain in command to come to him at once. We were then in the British Channel of the Detroit River and about 10 miles below that city. At the rate we were running would be there in from a half to three fourths of an hour. As soon as the master of the steamer reported himself, Capt. **Ward** directed him to run the boat to as near the channel bank as it would be safe for him to do so, stop his engine and let go his small anchor, to lower away a small boat with two good oarsmen in it and bring it to the after gang way on the land side. As soon as this was complete he directed us to have the men brought up from below and placed in the yawl, also directed us to give each of the men a dollar so that they should not be turned loose without means to obtain a breakfast. When the yawl was about halfway from the steamer the Kentuckian came out of his stateroom. He immediately took in the situation of affairs. About the same time he was seen by the fugitives who were rapidly getting out of his reach but they could not go without giving him a parting word. The elder one sang out to him "Good by Massa, when you gets back to Lexington tells them all we is safe in Canada." As soon as this man could find utterance he belched forth in language that would astonish the most depraved. No furious wild animal ever rared or tore around more wildly than he did. He was entirely frantic with rage. But all his swearing did him no good. On arrival at Detroit he sought legal counsel but whether he received any encouragement that he could sustain a claim against the boat for the loss of his property we never learned. We never heard anything further from him.*

G.L.H.

Silver Creek, N.Y.

March 4th, 1886.

The author of this account was Grove L. **Heaton**. He was born in 1820 in Camillus NY to Luther and Roxy (**Seaver**) **Heaton**. In June 1824 Luther **Heaton**, a carriage maker by trade, moved his family to Hanover NY. In April 1832 Mrs. **Heaton** died. All of this information is derived from a series of articles that Grove **Heaton** wrote about the early history of Hanover, the place to which he had returned after many years. The article in the 19 March 1884 issue of the

Censor gave details about Luther **Heaton's** early years. Next followed the 2 April 1884 article of 2 April 1884, which carried the story up to the death of Grove **Heaton's** mother in 1832 and Luther **Heaton's** death ten years later.

G. L. **Heaton** was characteristically reticent in writing about his family, never clearly stating his relationship to the people he was writing about. The same tendency can be seen in his consistent use of the editorial “we” when he describes his own actions in the Underground Railroad episodes. So, little is known of his life in the ten years from the time of his father’s death, when Grove was 22, until the 1850 Census finds Grove in Detroit, married to Sophia **Brown** with a two-year old daughter, Frances. Also living in the **Heaton** household in 1850 are James and Margaret **Brown** (Sophia’s brother and sister or sister-in-law). James **Brown** is identified as a Physician.

Two years later, **Heaton** began working for Capt. E. B. **Ward**. Some online genealogical entries refer to newspaper advertisements for the Michigan Central R.R. line in Detroit in 1856, which list **Heaton** as Freight Agent. He continued working for **Ward** until 1858, according to his own account. The online site notes that he became a post and freight agent for the Cleveland, Cincinnati and Chicago R.R. Co. in 1859. In 1860 he was Chief Steward of the Angier House hotel in Cleveland, then General Freight and Passenger Agent for the Pennsylvania Central R.R. in Cleveland. On 10 October 1862 he enlisted as a 2nd Lt. in the U. S. Army, thus ending any Underground Railroad activities he may have been involved in between 1858 and 1862.

The “Capt. **Ward**” to whom **Heaton** referred was Eber Brock **Ward**, born in December 1811 in Onondaga NY to Eber and Sally (**Totten**) **Ward**. The family moved to Ontario, Canada, to avoid the dangers of the War of 1812, then returned to their native Vermont. In 1817 Sally **Ward** died and Eber **Ward**, Sr. moved his family to Ohio. They were in Detroit by 1821.

Young E. B. **Ward** began his working career as a deck hand on lake boats from Marine City MI, where his uncle Samuel **Ward** was a prominent shipbuilder. E. B. **Ward** saved his money and soon became part-owner of the *General Harrison*, a lake steamer. In 1850 he relocated from Marine City to Detroit, where he was involved in shipbuilding. He then added timber lands, logging, mining, and steel manufacturing to his enterprises, and eventually became a multi-millionaire.

In a 2001 lecture by Tim **Moran** about historically prominent members of Detroit’s Fort Street Presbyterian Church, E. B. **Ward** was mentioned. **Moran's** lecture and online account focused on Zachariah **Chandler**, Mayor of Detroit, four-term Senator from Michigan and Secretary of the Interior under President **Grant**. “**Chandler** seems to have been a supporter of emancipation, and of the Underground Railroad’s efforts to free slaves,” **Moran** said. “... at Fort Street [church], **Chandler** was numbered a friend among members of the congregation dedicated to the effort to win freedom for escaping slaves; men such as Shubael **Conant**, Captain Eber B. **Ward**, Franklin **Moore**, Hovey K. **Clarke** and Samuel **Zug** agreed that **Chandler** funded and supported many of the efforts of the Underground Railroad.”

Another online account, “The Downriver Underground Railroad” by Kathy **Warnes**, noted that “The **Ward** line of ships and their crews generally sympathized with fugitive slaves and carried them to Canada.” **Warnes** added, “Eber and Samuel **Ward** built and operated many vessels that traversed the Great Lakes and deposited fugitive slaves in Canada. Their vessels included the *General Harrison*, *Huron*, *Detroit*, *Samuel Ward*, *Atlantic*, *Ocean*, *Arctic*, *Pearl*, *B. F. Wade*, *Planet* and *Montgomery*.” It is not clear which of these ships was involved in the two rescues that **Heaton** described, since with his typical reticence, he never named them.