

Headline: Detroit's Forgotten History of Slavery

Source: "Detroit 1967"

What: This is four pages of a 10-page article I wrote for a collection of essays on Detroit's racial history. "Detroit 1967," published by the WSU Press in 2017, the 50th anniversary of the 1967 rebellion, contained work by Thomas Sugrue, Kevin Boyle and Mike Hamlin, among many others.

Context: Detroiters owned both African and native American slaves from 1701 to the 1820s, but that era of Detroit history had been forgotten outside of academia. I began researching the subject in 1987 and wrote about it for the first time in 2000.

4 pages

By BILL McGRAW

Sitting in storage in the Detroit Public Library's Burton Historical Collection is a powerful relic of Detroit's long history: a ledger book that is more than 200 years old. Its cover is cracked and its pages are yellowed and brittle. The book holds an inventory of the estate of William Macomb, a wealthy farmer and land baron in early Detroit.

The book, prepared around the time of Macomb's 1796 death and written in flourishing penmanship, contains hundreds of entries for such possessions as goats, cows, shovels, furniture, saddle bags and books that he kept on his spread along the Detroit River, plus his vast real-estate holdings, which included Grosse Ile and Belle Isle.

The book also lists 26 names. Because along with his livestock, orchards and china, Macomb owned people. They were his slaves, and the ledger notes they were worth a total of 1,655 pounds in New York currency.

Macomb's will is also in the book: "I give and bequeath to my loving wife, Mrs. Sarah Macomb, for her own use, all my moveable estate wheresoever. My slaves, cattle, household furniture, books, plates, linen, carriages and my utensils of husbandry."

The people Macomb enslaved had only first names, except for one man, Jim Girty. Among the others were Scipio, Guy, Charlie, Tom and Lizette, Scipio's wife. There was also 7-year-old Phillis. She was valued at 40 pounds.

Macomb was unique in his large number of possessions because he was likely the wealthiest resident of Detroit at a time of his death. But he was not the only slave owner. There were 300 slaves in Detroit in 1796. Macomb just owned more slaves than anyone else.

Macomb, whose family name lives on as the name of a Detroit street and a suburban county, is one of numerous southeast Michigan pioneer families that owned slaves during the French, British and early American periods of city history. Many roads, schools and communities across metro Detroit carry the names of slave-owning clans: Campau; Beaubien; McDougall; Abbott; Brush; Cass; Gouin; Meldrum; Dequindre; Beaufait; Groesbeck; Livernois and Rivard, among many others.

Antoine Laumet de la Mothe Cadillac, Detroit's founder, owned one slave and was godfather to another. Detroit's first mayor, John R. Williams, the namesake of two streets in Detroit – John R and Williams – owned slaves. So did his uncle, Joseph Campau, whose namesake street is the main drag in Hamtramck, which happens to be the name of another slaveholder, Jean-Francois Hamtramck, a commandant of the Detroit fort who died in 1803.

The Catholic Church in Detroit was heavily involved in slavery: priests owned slaves and told the French residents to have their slaves baptized or suffer eternal damnation. The so-called "Father of Grosse Pointe," a British naval commander named Alexander Grant, owned several slaves. Lewis Cass, the Detroitier who served in the cabinet of President Andrew Jackson and ran for president during the national slavery debate of 1848, always denied he had been a slave owner. But his biographer, Willard Carl Klunder, discovered an 1818 letter that appears to show Cass – then the governor of Michigan Territory -- negotiating the sale of a servant named Sally -- with a member of the Macomb family.

Slaves in Detroit labored on the settlement's farms, served as servants and domestics and even worked as store clerks, blacksmiths and assistants to fur-trappers. One slave became a wedding present – given by her owner to the bride and groom on their big day. Another slave was sold for a horse.

Slavery was woven tightly into the fabric of early Detroit society. Toward the end of French period, 25 percent of the residents of Detroit owned slaves. Most residents who could afford slaves owned them, and the slave-holding era lasted from the city's founding in 1701 until the 1820s. Slavery, which has been called "America's original sin," is equally Detroit's sin. Slavery is as home-grown as Vernor's ginger ale, the automobile industry and the Red Wings.

Enslaved people walked on ground that two centuries later became the streets of the blackest big city in America, where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963 led 125,000 people in one of the largest civil rights demonstrations in the nation's history, and where such giants of local African-American history as Coleman Young, C.L. Franklin and Rosa Parks lived and died.

Yet for occupying such a significant place in Detroit history, slavery is largely forgotten in the early 21st Century. Few individuals know anything about it. It is not commemorated with statues or plaques.

What is well known, and constantly recounted, is the much more uplifting history of the Underground Railroad and the city's role in helping many escaped slaves from the south find freedom across the Detroit River in Canada from the 1830s through the Civil War, after Detroit's slave-holding days had ended.

Why do we know so much about how some of our forebears helped escaped slaves and not the fact that others owned slaves?

One of the reason for the imbalance is that local students learn about the Underground Railroad in school, but Detroit's slave history is rarely taught. When metro Detroiters talk about slavery, they talk about black men and women picking cotton in the sun-baked fields of Georgia and Mississippi because that is what students study in southeast Michigan.

Since the early 1970s, a small number of scholars have researched and written about slavery in Detroit in academic articles that are mostly read by other academics and advanced students.

One graduate student, Arthur Kooker, wrote his doctoral dissertation in 1941 at the University of Michigan on abolitionists in Michigan fighting slavery in the south before the Civil War. In his preface, Kooker related a familiar feeling for serious students of local history -- surprise and bewilderment at the moment when they realize that slavery existed in Michigan.

"As the work progressed one fact that seemed to require an exploration kept bobbing up," Kooker wrote. "Rooted deep in Michigan's past was the very institution which had called the antislavery movement into being."

Detroit was not South Carolina. The early settlement was busy with swashbuckling traders, soldiers, trappers and native Americans of many tribes. But the farms were small, hardly the sprawling plantations of the antebellum South, and Macomb, with his 26 slaves, was probably the leading slaveholder in Detroit history. Thomas Jefferson owned more than 600 slaves in his lifetime.

Despite the significant number of Detroiters who were slave owners, slaves never exceeded 10 percent of the population; in the south before the Civil War, slaves made up 33 percent of the all the residents. Jorge Castellanos, a former professor at Marygrove College, wrote that Detroit was not a "slave society," but a "society with slaves."

But the work of slaves helped build Detroit, just as the toil of slaves helped build America. And like in the South, slavery in Detroit was reinforced by violence. Slaves worked without any pay for their entire lives, under threat of the lash and death. And, just as in the south, slaves sometimes rebelled and attempted to flee when the chance arose.

In 1807, Nobbin, a black slave belonging to James May, chief judge of the common pleas court in Detroit, fled the May household and wound up on the Windsor side of the Detroit River. Nobbin refused to return to Detroit, "being apprehensive I would whip him on his arrival," May wrote in a letter.

Detroit's history of slavery is complicated by the fact that African Americans were not the only people held in captivity. Native Americans were also enslaved here, especially during the early decades of the 18th Century when the French ran Detroit.

Marcel Trudel, a Quebec historian who studied slavery in New France, which included Detroit, calculated that of 650 slaves he recorded in Detroit, 523 were natives; 127 were African Americans. Trudel cautioned, though, that his sample did not include the entire 120-year period of slavery in Detroit, and that many slaves were not listed in the records on which he based his research.

Indian slavery pre-dated the arrival of Europeans in the Great Lakes, and was a very different system than the form of black slavery that Europeans brought to North America. Indians enslaved other Indians, and they did not consider slaves property, but they believed that slaves possessed symbolic value. They used them as gifts during trade and negotiations, and to take the place of dead warriors....