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Detroit's Mariners' Church helped sailors, guided escaped slaves to freedom

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Mariners' Church, shown in 1934, originally stood on Woodward Avenue near the Detroit River. It was moved to make room for Hart Plaza. (The Detroit News)

The procedure was designed to look as ordinary as possible.

In the years before the Emancipation Proclamation, a wagon full of what looked to be free black laborers would on occasion pull up to Mariners' Church at its old location on Woodward Avenue close to the Detroit River. The group would dismount and start carrying goods back and forth from the wagon into the church sub-basement.

Had a spectator at the corner of Woodbridge and Woodward watched carefully, says Mariners' rector emeritus the Rev. Richard Ingalls Jr., reached at his home in Florida, he or she might have noticed that at some point all the workers disappeared into the church — and never came out.

What that witness couldn't know was that a door hidden in the sub-basement opened to a tunnel that led to the Detroit River and formed one of the last links in the Underground Railroad. Once they'd pushed through the shrubbery that hid the tunnel's mouth, women, children and men bent on escape would get into boats and push off for Canada and freedom.

"The Mariners' connection to the Underground Railroad was largely forgotten till 1955, when they moved the church from its original location and discovered the tunnel," Ingalls says.

He thinks there had been stories over the years about the church's involvement, but with no documentary evidence, those faded over time.

Until, that is, the massive urban-renewal project that created Hart Plaza moved the church 900 feet to the east, to its present location at the mouth of another, far larger tunnel to Canada.

Perhaps reflecting Anglican modesty, Mariners' role in the Underground Railroad hasn't been much advertised. The Rev. Jesse Roby Jr., the first African-American priest to serve at Mariners', thinks most black Detroiters are probably unaware of the church's link.

"I don't think it's widely known," Roby says. "But it's an honorable connection

— very much so."

Interestingly, Ingalls notes the original tunnel, long-since demolished, would have run right underneath the Underground Railroad monument in Hart Plaza.

By any measure, it was Second Baptist Church of Detroit, a black congregation, that masterminded local efforts, says Bob Smith, vice president for education and exhibitions at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit.

Ingalls points out that runaways were in constant danger of seizure by bounty hunters under the federal Fugitive Slave Act, even in a free state like Michigan. The law required local officials to return slaves to their owners. Helping slaves escape was a federal crime.

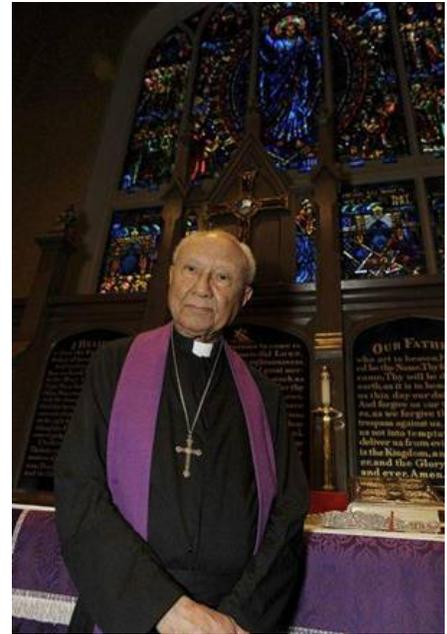
"Tracking down fugitive slaves was a big business before the Civil War," Ingalls says, "and Second Baptist knew they were under scrutiny. They had to get the runaways from their sanctuary to the river in secret."

But Second Baptist, where fugitives were often temporarily housed, was located at least half a mile from the water's edge, first on Fort Street and, after 1857, at its present location in Greektown.

"Mariners' was perfect because of its proximity to the water at the narrow part of the river," Ingalls says.

Mariners' also was perfect because it had been built, surprisingly, with rental space in the basement one floor beneath the sanctuary, and a sub-basement below that. For years before the Civil War, a grocer occupied that space. As a consequence, workers carting provisions in and out of the church roused little suspicion.

Detroit, of course, wasn't the only crossing point. Runaways also escaped through Port Huron, Smith says. Nor was the Mariners' tunnel their only possibility. Smith notes that when the river froze solid in hard winters, fugitives could try to make their way to Canada on foot.



The Rev. Jesse Roby Jr. was the first African-American priest to serve at ... (Clarence Tabb Jr. / The Detroit News)



When Mariners' Church was moved to its current location in 1955, a tunnel was discovered at the original Woodward Avenue spot that was part of the Underground Railroad. John T. Greilick / The Detroit News

Smith says many scholars peg the number of slaves who escaped through Detroit at about 40,000, though that number is in some dispute. Historians often have relied on historical counts of African-Canadians living in Ontario near Detroit, he says, but to assume they were all escapees may be wrong.

"Some argue they weren't all runaway slaves and that many might have been free blacks who fled to Canada to escape the restrictions they still faced in the U.S.," Smith says.

For his part, Ingalls is still a little astonished of the risk Mariners' and the grocery took in helping the slaves.

"Those lily white businessmen running that store cooperated to get those people away from oppression," he says.

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