



**SEEKING CHARLIE:
CONNECTING THE
DOTS LEFT BY A
FREEDOM SEEKER IN
ILLINOIS**

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**SHELDON PECK
HOMESTEAD**



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Seeking Charlie: Connecting the Dots Left by a Freedom Seeker in Illinois

“In an indictment for secreting a negro slave, it is not necessary to allege the name of the slave; it is a sufficient description to aver him to be ‘a certain negro slave, the property of one A B.’”¹

Old Charley, Old Free Charlie Wilson, Charles Green, Charles Farnsworth and at least three other Charlies without surnames in the historical record appear throughout Illinois in the 1840s and 1850s. Some are recorded as free people of color, and some are enslaved men seeking freedom by attempted escape to Canada. Any of them could have been working with known white radical abolitionist and folk artist Sheldon Peck who lived in Babcock’s Grove (Lombard, Illinois) and traveled throughout the region for his portrait painting business.

A remnant of the legacy of slavery in the United States is the obliterated identity of people considered property in the eyes of the law. The racist and dehumanizing efforts of slave owners to remove individual identity from enslaved peoples produced a contemporary challenge to telling complete stories, thereby continuing the ripple-effect of the legacy of slavery to modern day. The motivation for seeking Charlie’s story is to tell a more complete history of the Underground Railroad in Illinois, thereby recognizing that people of color were not invisible as Americans, despite historians’ failure to see them.

In every “Charlie” located in the historical record, anticipation and excitement was felt that a more complete story of Old Charley could be told, with evidence linking him to other stories of Charlie around Illinois. In the end, the records told a variety of Charlie stories, and those stories inspire perseverance and bravery in the face of crippling oppression. *Seeking Charlie* shares the Underground Railroad stories found throughout Illinois potentially linked to a common Freedom Seeker named Old Charley who lived and worked with radical abolitionist Sheldon Peck.²

Sheldon Peck was a politically active reformer from New England, a radical abolitionist, and an Underground Railroad conductor who aided Freedom Seekers northward.³ His associations in business, friendships, and family all link him to the anti-slavery movement in northern Illinois in the

¹ J. Young Scammon, Russell H. Curtis, Reports Of Cases Argued And Determined In The Supreme Court Of The State Of Illinois, volume IV. Chicago: Callaghan & Company. 1886. 496

² The authors will use “Charlie” to denote the men found in the historical record outside Peck family records and “Old Charley” to denote the known person to Sheldon Peck.

³ The Sheldon Peck Homestead is located in Lombard, DuPage County, Illinois, twenty miles west from Chicago’s loop. The wooden clapboard house was built in 1839 and functions today as a historic house museum of the Lombard Historical Society and is listed on the National Park Service UGRR Network to Freedom. The house remained in the Peck family until its donation in 1996.

decades prior to the Civil War.⁴ It is through Sheldon Peck that the central evidence of “Old Charley” is found, primarily in the memoir of Frank Peck, Sheldon’s youngest son.

In seeking evidence of Charlie across time and place beyond his connection with Sheldon Peck, key words were searched to attempt to link the Charlie stories together. The search included researching local Underground Railroad (UGRR) stories for men named Charlie and proven associations with Sheldon Peck or his family members. The geographic targets for research included known areas that Sheldon Peck worked and traveled and known stories of “Charlie” in the UGRR within that region. Research also focused on free settlements of color in the 19th century including New Philadelphia, Brooklyn, and Brushy Fork in Illinois, and Ballwin and Rocky Fork in Missouri. Archives were aided by oral interviews with enslaved descendants and local historians.

The research presented will include results from several stories of Charlie, some well-known with much detail and others with very little. The results center around Old Charley of Babcock’s Grove, the person we know through Sheldon Peck, and whether or not there is reasonable evidence to link Old Charley with the various other Charlies found in the records. Sheldon Peck’s life and family are well-documented due to his status as a white male in the 19th century and remains a vital link to discovering Charlie. Using his ideology, work, and travel, a strategy for finding Charlie was created.

Who was Sheldon Peck?

Sheldon Peck was born in Cornwall, Vermont and moved to Illinois from New York in 1837. In addition to being a painter and farmer, Peck was an active reformer for public education, temperance, and abolition. He was publicly considered a “radical abolitionist” and had numerous friends and business associates in the anti-slavery movement. In addition, several anti-slavery meetings were held at the Peck Homestead, and Peck was an agent for the *Western Citizen*, an anti-slavery newspaper published in Chicago.

It is evident from the journal of Frank Peck and from what we know of the Peck family that their attitude toward “fellow man” was benevolent and sympathetic. The children often socialized with their neighbors as well, attending parties and fiddling for dances.⁵ Frank recounted in his journal about his home and first days of his school:

⁴ In order to understand the impact of this historic property, it is vital to note that Sheldon Peck is an important artist in American Folk Art. It is worth noting that Sheldon Peck’s work is highly sought after by American art and history museums. His portraits are in the collections of (among others) Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum in Colonial Williamsburg, the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago History Museum, Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York, and the Whitney Museum in New York, and the American Folk Art Museum in New York. In addition, many of his subjects are also other abolitionists.

⁵ From the Filer letters, Polly to Lydia Filer, Feb. 4, 1852.

Only love ruled in our home. Chastisement and oprecion[sic] were unknown. Under these surroundings I grew and thrived until the fall term of school in 1857...then I started on my way to aquire [sic] knowledge.⁶

Harriet Peck, Sheldon's wife, was known for keeping a room and caring for her sick neighbors or passerby. The family was reared in an environment of love and acceptance, and it is evident that Sheldon Peck's children, especially John and Charles, shared his humanitarian attitude and became activists in the anti-slavery and peace movements. Furthermore, there is some evidence that John Peck was linked to the UGRR in Whiteside County, Illinois.

When Peck arrived in Illinois in 1837, there were many other New Englanders involved in the reform movement also settling the area. Peck came from an area of New York called the "burned-over" district because it was a hotbed for the reform movement. These settlers were particularly interested in temperance, women's civil rights, the abolition of slavery, and education reform.

The goal of the Reform Movement in the 1840s was for a more perfect society, and to obtain it meant ridding the public of societal evils including alcohol, neglected women and children, and human slavery. Reformers were focused on several primary goals that ranged from women's suffrage, public education, and temperance to universal peace and abolitionism. Sheldon Peck was a true reformer in his ideology; we have evidence that he was a temperance lecturer, he started a public school in his home, and he was a documented radical abolitionist.

The settlement of northern Illinois was inundated with "Yankees" primarily from Vermont, New York, and Ohio who left the discouraging economic situation of the east in search of cheap land and opportunity. Families emigrated to Illinois together and brought their ideals to a newly transplanted town. Many of the settlers during the 1830s and 1840s were from the "burned-over" district of New York, including Peck.

The temperance movement was fueled in the 1840s by the influx of German and Irish immigrants to the United States. Yankee settlers feared that the use of alcohol would degrade society and worked actively to stop its use entirely. The *Western Citizen*, the abolitionist newspaper in Chicago in the 1840s and 1850s, included articles on temperance in that city, and many of the same people involved in the temperance movement were also involved in the anti-slavery movement.⁷ Frequently, meetings of the anti-slavery movement were linked with the meetings on temperance and the Liberty Party. In 1852, a temperance meeting was held at the Red School House on Sheldon Peck's property in Babcock's Grove. The meeting was attended by Sheldon Peck, Charles Peck, Thomas Filer, Zebina Eastman, and several ministers⁸, all of whom were also involved in the local anti-slavery movement.

⁶Peck, Frank, journal, copy at the Lombard Historical Society, Lombard, IL, p. 1.

⁷ *Western Citizen*. "Temperance Meeting", Oct. 24, 1848.

⁸ *Western Citizen*. "Temperance Meeting At Babcock's Grove", March 16, 1852.

Sheldon Peck and his wife Harriet were known temperance advocates and it affected their relationships and outlook. Harriet blamed the poor health of a friend (Mr. Dodge) on “the drink” when a neighbor repeated, “Mrs. Peck says she believes if he had let liquor alone he would have not been sick.”⁹ The Pecks also hosted “temperance picnics at the Grove.” People could purchase a ticket for a train ride out to Babcock’s Grove for a day-long excursion with picnic and fresh air away from Chicago, entirely spirits free.¹⁰

Frank Peck, Sheldon Peck’s youngest son, recounted a meeting of temperance advocates at his boyhood home and the effect it had on him:

The temperance movement was much discussed...I am sorry to say that many of my friends and acquaintences (sic) have filled untimely graves from the effect of strong drink with deliriums (sic) and often troubles caused from it and I have helped care for some of them and have only one conclusion, it is a good thing to shun entirely.

Clearly, the temperance movement was an important part of the Peck family and aids in the case that Peck was a reformer in his mindset and activism.

Another reform movement of the 1800s, public education, was gaining ground by the time that Sheldon Peck settled in Babcock’s Grove. Prior to 1820, most Americans had not considered free public education to be a responsibility of the local governments. However, reformers began to work for state-supported educational systems as a way to keep the incoming population educated and protect democracy against ignorance.

From his arrival in Babcock’s Grove, it was evident that Sheldon Peck was a public education advocate. Peck established a school at his house and later built another building on his property, the “Red Schoolhouse”, to use as a school. In addition, Peck paid the first teacher, Amelda Powers Dodge, from his own pocket and invited all students in the area to attend school. Peck later took on the position of superintendent of the small Sabbath school, organized by Deacon Winslow Churchill of Babcock’s Grove.¹¹

Peck’s Anti-Slavery Activism

Although the national abolitionist movement was divided in 1840 due to separate factions with different strategies on how to defeat slavery, the abolitionists on the Illinois frontier were more worried about forming towns and settlements. They tended to use whatever means necessary to

⁹ Letter from Lydia Filer to Polly Filer, December 1852. Copies of the Filer Letters at the Lombard Historical Society, Lombard, IL.

¹⁰ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 30, 1855.

¹¹ Dorothy I. Vandercook and Blythe Kaiser, Glen Ellyn’s Story and Her Neighbors in DuPage, Dorothy I. Vandercook, 1976, p. 25.

keep slavery out of Illinois and worked to end it entirely.¹² By the mid 1840s, many county anti-slavery societies were formed all over Illinois, including DuPage, Kane, Will, and Cook. These groups used various means to further their cause, including guest speakers, newspapers and pamphlets, prayer and church sermons, fundraisers, and the Liberty Party, the political wing of the movement.

Sheldon Peck was not only anti-slavery, as many settlers in northern Illinois were during the 1830s and 1840s, but he was a radical abolitionist as well. As many historians note, there are varying degrees of anti-slavery and various motivations for being anti-slavery.¹³ Very few of the free-soilers were willing to entertain the notion of racial equality. In fact, as local Republicans stumped for Abraham Lincoln in 1858, many of them immediately denied their belief in racial equality when Stephen Douglas would accuse them of it.¹⁴

Although the population of anti-slavery men and women in northern Illinois was abundant, not everyone was involved in the UGRR. It was much more likely that a “radical” abolitionist would aid the UGRR than a person simply opposed to slavery. Peck was radical in his beliefs, which placed him in a different category of anti-slavery and one that was most likely to risk all to help an oppressed people. He was actively advocating for several reform movements, especially anti-slavery, from the time he arrived in Illinois in 1837 to the onset of the Civil War.

There are numerous accounts of Sheldon Peck’s anti-slavery activism in the well-known abolitionist newspaper of Chicago, the *Western Citizen* published by Zebina Eastman.¹⁵ He is frequently listed as a “voluntary agent” of the *Western Citizen* for Babcock’s Grove, which indicates he was disseminating anti-slavery viewpoints to his neighbors and collecting dues for the paper.¹⁶

In addition to being an agent, Peck was listed among the delegates for the Liberty Party Conventions in DuPage County.¹⁷ Furthermore, Peck’s home is also listed as a place in which anti-slavery and temperance meetings were held.¹⁸ Sheldon Peck was a member of the DuPage County Anti-Slavery Society, which was a chapter of the Illinois State Anti-Slavery Society, and there were documented meetings of the group at Peck’s home.

¹² Schultz Angel, Jeanne. *Friends of the Oppressed: An Investigation of the Kane County Anti-Slavery Society*. Illinois State University, Normal, IL, 2005.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "DeKalb in the Field" *Chicago Press and Tribune*, Sept. 25, 1858.

¹⁵ *Western Citizen*, Chicago, May 11, 1847,

¹⁶ *Western Citizen*, Chicago, "Receipts for the Citizen, from Jan. 11 to Jan. 18," January 18, 1848, n.p.

¹⁷ *Western Citizen*, Chicago, "State Convention of the Liberty Party of Illinois" Feb. 1, 1844, *Western Citizen*, Chicago, "A Call for a North-Western Liberty Convention at Chicago" May 6, 1846.

¹⁸ *Western Citizen*, Chicago, "Liberty Mass Meeting", January 18, 1848.

Chicago Press and Tribune, "Anti-Slavery Meetings" Oct. 3, 1859.

Western Citizen, Chicago, "Temperance Meeting at Babcock's Grove", March 16, 1852.

There are two known occasions of well-known African American speakers coming to Peck's house for anti-slavery meetings. Frank Peck recounted that the famous lecturer "Johnny Jones" came to his house for a meeting.¹⁹ "Johnny Jones was a temperance lecturer of these times...very many of our first citizens wer (sic) on the side of temperance."²⁰ Jones was a free, mixed-race person in Chicago and a successful tailor and businessman. John Brown was known to have been a frequent guest of his, and Jones financed a portion of the anti-slavery movement in Chicago.

Another well-known lecturer to travel to the Peck's for a meeting was H. Ford Douglass, an African American escaped slave who was a close friend of Frederick Douglass²¹. He was known for being highly intellectual and an impressive orator, as well as an outspoken opponent of Abraham Lincoln's racist viewpoint regarding racial equality. He arrived in Chicago in the 1850s and enlisted in the 95th Illinois Infantry (a white regiment) in 1862.

Perhaps the best evidence of Peck's political activism is an 1856 article in the *New York Times* entitled "Illinois State Abolition Convention - An Electoral Ticket Nominated".²² The article lists Sheldon Peck as the delegate from DuPage County. More telling is the first sentence of the article, which dubs the meeting "The Illinois State Convention of Radical Abolitionists". The convention resolved to support Gerritt Smith for president, stating, "Gerritt Smith is the full embodiment of the principles of radical abolitionists". Smith was indeed extreme in his views of racial equality in that he gave financial aid to Freedom Seekers and funded farms for them. By aligning with "radical" abolitionists, Peck is far more than just anti-slavery, but also promotes racial equality and aiding Freedom Seekers via the UGRR.

Many of the history books both published and unpublished in Lombard refer to the UGRR activity at the Peck and Filer houses. One of the community's first historians, Mildred Dunning, called Peck and Filer "ardent abolitionists" and stated that "Mr. Peck was wont to tell in later days of the time when as many as seven runaway slaves were sheltered at his home at one time."²³ Dunning also stated that the Freedom Seekers moved on to the Tremont Hotel in Chicago, across the street from Peck's Chicago studio. In addition, in a 1950 article in the *Lombard Spectator*, Alyce Mertz, the granddaughter of Sheldon Peck and daughter of Frank Peck, reported that the slaves were "hid in barns around the homestead, then carried away the next day in a load of hay on their way to the Canadian border and freedom."²⁴

Peck's Documented Anti-Slavery Associates in Northern Illinois

¹⁹ Peck, Frank, journal, copy at the Lombard Historical Society, Lombard, IL, p. 4-5.

²⁰ Peck, Frank, journal, copy at the Lombard Historical Society, Lombard, IL, p. 4-5.

²¹ *Chicago Press and Tribune*, "Anti-Slavery Meetings", Oct. 3, 1859.

²² *New York Times*, "Illinois State Abolition Convention-An Electoral Ticket Nominated", Aug. 11, 1856.

²³ Dunning, Mildred. *The Story of Lombard*. Lombard Historical Society, Lombard, IL.

²⁴ *Lombard Spectator*, 1950.

Eldest son of Sheldon Peck, John S. Peck was born in 1825 in Vermont and traveled first to New York as a child and then to Illinois to settle with his parents in what is now Lombard. It appears that when he reached the age of 18, he applied for a land patent and was granted two forty-acre parcels adjacent to his father's in Sec 5 and 8 in York Township, DuPage County. It is presumed that his adjoining parcel added to the Peck's farm and that it was worked in conjunction.²⁵

John Peck traveled to California with his brother, Charles, to the gold rush, beginning their journey in March 1849.²⁶ They started their journey with E. Wells and Israel P. Blodgett, Jr. of Downers Grove, whose father was a known abolitionist in the area.

While living in Babcock's Grove, John and Charles Peck were involved in abolitionist and temperance activities. According to an article in the *Western Citizen*, there was a Convention of the "Free Democracy" of DuPage County at which Zebina Eastman was present. John Peck, among others, was appointed to a committee to present business and resolutions for the action of the Convention.²⁷

An article in the *Western Citizen* asking for interested parties to sign a pledge for the Illinois League of Universal Brotherhood, an anti-slavery and anti-war organization, shows that both T. Filer (Tom Filer) and J.S. Peck (John S. Peck) wrote in their pledge to the league.²⁸ The League of Universal Brotherhood held to this pledge:

...I do hereby associate myself with all persons of whatsoever country, condition, or color, who have signed, or shall hereafter sign his 'League of Universal Brotherhood', whose object it shall be to employ all legitimate and moral means for the abolition of all war, and all the spirit and all the manifestations of war, throughout the world; for the abolitions of all restrictions upon international correspondence and friendly intercourse, and of whatever else tends to make enemies of nations, or prevent their fusion into one peaceful brotherhood; for the abolition of all institution and customs which do not recognise (sic) and respect the image of God and a human Brother in every man,

²⁵ Illinois Public Domain Land Tract Database, John S. Peck, DuPage County, Sec 8-39-II, Vol 811, pg 081, 10/23/45 and Sec 5-39-11, Vol 686, pg 176 5/3/1844.

²⁶ According to the *Chicago Daily Democratic Press*, 20 Sept 1853, *Western Citizen*, 27 April, 1852, pg 2. and the *Western Citizen*, "Mr. Charles Peck," Oct. 5, 1853, Charles was a painter like his father but most of his known works were landscapes. While on the journey to California, Charles sketched scenes of the trip, both on the way and of the fields of gold, the towns and natural landscapes. Upon returning to Illinois two years later, the scenes were put together in a panorama called an "Odeocamo", many yards long and exhibited it throughout the country. Although it was thought that only Charles was the author of the Odeocamo and John the Treasurer of the exhibit, one article purports him to be a draftsman and part author of the work.

²⁷ *Western Citizen*, October 5, 1853.

²⁸ *Western Citizen*, Chicago, "League of Universal Brotherhood," April 4, 1848.

of whatever clime, color, or condition of humanity.²⁹

John S. Peck again applied for a land grant, this time in Clyde Township in Whiteside County, Illinois in August 1853 and received a patent in 1855.³⁰ Whiteside County bordered the Mississippi River and was a frequent place of refuge for slaves on the UGRR. The “burned-over” area of Vermont and, more importantly, New York was repeated to some degree in Whiteside County, first with Methodist Circuit riders who preached fire and brimstone in homes and camp meetings and later with the Adventists and the River Brethren.

The possibility that John followed his father’s lead and aided slaves in Whiteside County must be considered; the research on this is ongoing. The fact that he was there alone with no family is suspect. In fact, it appears that he spent five years there, presumably building his farm, until he married on November 4, 1858³¹ in Whiteside County to Mary A. Drake. John and Mary lived there with their two children until sometime between 1870 and 1880 when they moved to Marshalltown, Iowa, where he died in 1884.

The abolitionists were active in Whiteside County, particularly in northern townships of Fulton, Ustick, Genessee, and Clyde, which is where John Peck resided.³² In addition to his first 40 acre purchase, Peck acquired another 240 acres in Clyde Township. Rock Creek flows through his property, a known refuge and UGRR route. Some of the stories cite runaway slaves being shuttled from Fulton on the Mississippi River by wagon and other means into Ustick Township to the farm of A. B. Abott. In other stories, runaways are shuttled from Clyde to Genessee Grove, to the homes of Ivory Colcord and George Dement, close to John Peck’s land.

Research links the Peck family indirectly to the written accounts in Whiteside County history through Frank Dodge. In a letter dated May 18, 1917 from J. M. Eaton to an unknown recipient, Eaton recounts the UGRR activity in Whiteside:

The U.G.R.R. had no organization and was not bound together by oaths, bonds, or written agreements. It kept no records other than what could be stored away in memory. No court could convict a [explicative] thief of being associated with others in running slaves to Canada. And there were no fixed stations or even fixed routes of travel, and no general manager or treasurer, no time table or compensation to conductors.³³

²⁹*Western Citizen*, Chicago, “League of Universal Brotherhood,” April 4, 1848.

³⁰ Illinois Public Domain Land Tract Database, John S. Peck, Whiteside County, Sec 11-22-5, Vol 714, pg 131.

³¹ Illinois Marriage Database, Doc #177, Whiteside Co, IL.

³² Interview from Orville Goodenough of Morrison, IL to Rita Schneider.

³³ Eaton, J.M. letter to unknown person, May 18, 1917, Hazelhurst, IL.

www.genealogytrails.com/ill/whiteside/underground.html.

Mr. Eaton recounts some personal knowledge of an event in 1855 when Frank Dodge, the village blacksmith, rendered aid to Eliza and George from Kentucky. Although Eaton only mentions Dodge, it is important to note that he states there were others involved as well and that Frank Dodge may be the same Frank Dodge from DuPage County and one of Peck's neighbors. Eaton writes in the letter, "Frank was big-hearted, had been a hard drinker, was an ardent follower of John B. Gough." As accounted earlier in this paper, Mrs. Sheldon Peck believed if "Mr. Dodge" had not been drinking, he would not have been sick.³⁴ It is not certain that Frank Dodge is the same one Mrs. Peck was referring to from DuPage, but if so, it was certain that John Peck and Frank Dodge knew each other in Whiteside County.

Many of the people Sheldon Peck associated with were other abolitionists that lived from the Fox River Valley to Chicago. Some of the associations can be linked as neighbors and friends, some as co-activists, and some are linked through his portrait-painting business. All of the people Peck painted were not abolitionists, but the majority of the subjects in his known work in Illinois were indeed linked to the movement. It took two weeks for a portrait to be painted and Peck would have been in residence with the family while it was in process. Listed below are the known associates of Sheldon Peck also involved in the anti-slavery movement.

Filer Brothers

The two Filer brothers lived east and west of Sheldon Peck along what is now St. Charles Road. Thomas Filer was a staunch abolitionist and ran for Sheriff of DuPage County under the Liberty Party in the 1840s.³⁵ J. W. Filer was also an abolitionist and was listed among anti-slavery supporters in the *Western Citizen*. The second volume of *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of DuPage County*, published in 1913, states:

As already indicated, our early settlers were largely Eastern people—many being Methodists, which church, more than any other, produced opponents of slavery of the most aggressive types. Among them were Sheldon Peck, a Methodist from Vermont and an artist by profession... Another was Thomas Filer, a most excellent man and deeply impressed with the evils of slavery. These two men were conductors on the "Underground Railroad" and carried many an escaping slave to Chicago, where Dr. Dyer and others forwarded them to Canada.³⁶

³⁴ Letter from Lydia Filer to Polly Filer, December 1852. Copies of the Filer Letters at the Lombard Historical Society, Lombard, IL.

³⁵ *Western Citizen*, "DuPage Sherriff", Aug. 1, 1848,

³⁶Newton Bateman and Paul Selby, *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of DuPage County*, (Chicago, Illinois: Munsell Publishing Company), 1913, p. 716.

Thomas Filer and his brother J. Walter Filer also appear in a list of delegates for the fifth anniversary of the Illinois State Anti-Slavery Society published in the *Western Citizen* on August 5, 1842.³⁷ As the evidence shows involvement of Thomas Filer in anti-slavery organizations, local historical accounts of Thomas Filer as a station conductor on the UGRR is well supported. We know that not only were Peck and Filer neighbors, Filer was the witness for Peck for his land patent and signed an affidavit to that effect.

Hiram Leonard

Hiram Leonard was a merchant and druggist in Warrenville, Illinois from the fall of 1835 to his death in 1878. Leonard was the Justice of the Peace and the Postmaster after the Civil War, as well. Leonard frequently associated with Peck as indicated by the Leonard diaries. The diaries include references to Peck attending anti-slavery meetings with other abolitionists.³⁸

Blodgett Family

Israel Blodgett was a well-known abolitionist and UGRR conductor from Downers Grove and one of Peck associates.³⁹ In 1849, two of Blodgett's sons left for California with John and Charles Peck, Sheldon's oldest sons. They traveled together as 49ers and later Charles and John returned to Illinois to settle permanently. The reminiscence by Israel Blodgett Jr. reads:

On the 16th of March, 1849, in company with E. Wells and John and Charles Peck of Lombard, I started from Downers Grove with three yoke of oxen and a wagon loaded with food and camping outfits for the long overland journey to California...About 20 miles this side of St. Joe, Missouri, owing to some slight disagreement, we decided to separate, and Mr. Wells and myself bought the wagon which was owned by the Pecks.⁴⁰

A cry to "Let Liberty men then come together" in the *Western Citizen* on Feb 1, 1848 lists Z. Eastman, Israel P. Blodgett, and N. S. Cushing (of Babcock's Grove) in its membership.

Philo Carpenter and Abel Carpenter

Philo Carpenter was one of the leading abolitionists in Chicago in the 1840s and 1850s and a neighbor of Peck when he first moved to Chicago. Peck was mentioned as meeting and traveling with Carpenter in the Hiram Leonard diaries. Philo Carpenter was reported to have guided not less than 200 Freedom Seekers to Canada.⁴¹ Philo Carpenter built his house not far from Peck's Chicago home and was a well-known UGRR conductor. He often traveled to DuPage County where the Pecks now lived. He and his wife would stay with his brother Abel E. Carpenter. Residents of the town of

³⁷*Western Citizen*, Chicago, "Minutes of the Fifth Anniversary of the Illinois State Anti-Slavery Society," August 5, 1842.

³⁸ Hiram Leonard Diaries, 1843- 1878. Warrenville Historical Society, Warrenville, IL.

³⁹Glenette Tilley Turner, *The UGRR in Illinois*, Glen Ellyn, Illinois: Newman Educational Publishing, 2001, p. 12. and *Western Citizen*, Chicago, "Liberty Mass Meeting," January 18, 1848, n.p.

⁴⁰Blodgett, Israel P. *Reminiscences of an Old Settler*, Downers Grove Historical Society, Downers Grove, IL.

⁴¹ Siebert, Wilber H. *The UGRR: From Slavery to Freedom*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968, 147.

Warrenville, where Abel Carpenter lived, often commented on the trips back and forth to Chicago. Both were known for abolitionist beliefs. Sheldon Peck was known to speak on the subject of temperance and abolitions in Warrenville, at the schoolhouse, and in private homes. He also commissioned a number of portraits in the area.

Stolp Family

Peter Stolp was a carpenter from New York and a member of the Kane County Anti-slavery Society and a subject in one of Peck's portraits. David Crane and Catherine Stolp Crane's portraits were also painted by Sheldon Peck. Catherine Stolp Crane, daughter of Frederick Stolp, was related to a Peter D. Stolp of Aurora as a cousin.⁴² Peter D. Stolp was known to have lived on Jericho Road, about three miles southwest of Aurora.⁴³ A copy of the *Western Citizen* held by the Illinois State Historical Library has a handwritten name of "Stolp" at the top of the paper.⁴⁴ As Sheldon Peck owned over sixty sheep in the 1850s and the Stolp family had a carding mill in Aurora, the families would have done business.⁴⁵

Wagoner Family

John Wagoner was a farmer in Aurora who came from New York, a member of the Kane County Anti-Slavery Society, and a known conductor on the UGRR.⁴⁶ Peck produced a portrait of his family. The group portrait of the Wagner family depicts John Wagner holding a folded newspaper with a half-exposed title reading "Citizen", clearly referring to the *Western Citizen*. Peck painted on the newspaper a hand-written word which reads "Liberty", referring to the Liberty Party, which the *Western Citizen* supported.

Gifford Family

Hezekiah Gifford was a farmer and tavern owner from New York who lived in Elgin and was a member of the Kane County Anti-slavery society. The Giffords of Elgin were associated by marriage to Dr. Charles Dyer, one of the leaders of the movement in Chicago. Peck painted the portraits of James T. Gifford (Hezekiah's brother) and Laura Raymond Gifford. James Gifford of Kane County was listed as an appointed member of the State Central Committee in an article in the *Western Citizen* entitled "Proceedings of the State Liberty Convention."⁴⁷

I.S.P. Lord

⁴² McCroskey, Sophronia. Stolp Genealogy, Oct. 1, 1943, Aurora Historical Society, p. 41.

⁴³ McCroskey, Sophronia. Stolp Genealogy, Oct. 1, 1943, Aurora Historical Society, p. 41.

⁴⁴A copy of the *Western Citizen* of Chicago dated April 18, 1848 is held at the Illinois State Historical Society Library. This copy has a hand-written name of Stolp at the top of the paper, suggesting that this paper was originally sent to the Stolp residence, possibly those of Aurora.

⁴⁵1850 U.S. Census, DuPage County, Illinois.

⁴⁶Glenette Tilley Turner, The UGRR in DuPage County, Illinois, Wheaton, Illinois: Newman Educational Publishers, 1978, p. 25.

⁴⁷ *Western Citizen*, Chicago, "Proceedings of the State Liberty Convention," July 26, 1842.

Dr. Lord was a homeopathic physician who lived in Geneva and was a member of the Kane County Anti-Slavery Society. Lord is mentioned in Hiram Leonard's diaries as an associate of Peck. Peck painted miniatures of the Lords, according to the Leonard Diaries.

Zebina Eastman

Zebina Eastman was arguably the leader of the anti-slavery movement in Chicago. As the publisher of the anti-slavery newspaper, the *Western Citizen*, Eastman had contacts with all of the active abolitionists in the area. Peck's studio was across the street from Eastman's publishing house for the *Western Citizen* on Lake Street in Chicago.

In addition, Peck was a voluntary agent for the paper, helping to spread its anti-slavery dogma. Eastman attended a meeting at the Peck farm, as well. A temperance meeting at Babcock's Grove in the Red School House on March 6, 1852, lists Wm Emerson (another resident of Babcock's Grove and neighbor of Sheldon Peck) who was chosen president, John Loy, as vice president, and Charles Peck as secretary. At that meeting a committee of Thomas Filer, Sheldon Peck, and David Christian were appointed to present business for the meeting. Later in the meeting, Zebina Eastman discussed a resolution presented by Peck and others. It shows a connection between Zebina Eastman, editor of the *Western Citizen*, and members of the Peck family.

Nathaniel Cushing

Nathaniel S. Cushing was Peck's neighbor who lived on St. Charles Road, less than a mile away from Sheldon Peck's house. An article in the *Western Citizen* dated July 26, 1842 lists Cushing as a delegate of the State Liberty Convention for Cook County.⁴⁸ As a delegate to the Liberty Party, Cushing would have had extensive contact with all of the previously mentioned members. Cushing also owned a house and sign painting company, which he advertised in the *Western Citizen*. The advertisement states that it is located on... "Dearborn Street, a few doors south of the Tremont House."⁴⁹ In an article written to call a mass meeting of the Liberty Party, Cushing was listed as one of many names at the end of the article.⁵⁰ He was the brother of Deacon Samuel Cushing of Crete, Illinois, who was once indicted for UGRR activities in Will County.

Preacher James McChesney

James McChesney was a circuit rider minister who preached at a Babcock's Grove church in the 1840s.⁵¹ J. E. McChesney's name appears in the *Western Citizen* as a pledged member of the League

⁴⁸*Western Citizen*, Chicago, "Liberty Nominations for President", July 13, 1848. John P. Hale was also a member of the Liberty Party who ran for president under the Liberty Party in 1848. Frank Peck's middle name, Hale, may or may not be a coincidence.

⁴⁹ *Western Citizen*, Chicago, "House and Sign Painting August 31, 1843, n.p. This citation refers to an advertisement in the *Western Citizen* newspaper, dated August 31, 1843.

⁵⁰*Western Citizen*, Chicago, "Liberty Mass Meeting," January 18, 1848, n.p.

⁵¹Harmon, Ada Douglas, The Story of An Old Town - Glen Ellyn, Glen Ellyn, Illinois: Anan Harmon Chapter D.A.R., 1928, p. 40.

of Universal Brotherhood.⁵² Frank Peck wrote in his journal, “Old preacher McChesney was a good friend of our family and with his old buckskin nag called Buck for short (would) often visit with us”.⁵³

It is important to note that although Peck was registered with the Methodist Church in Babcock’s Grove, his attendance drops considerably in the mid 1840s, and by 1847 he is removed from the register. It was also about this time that the Methodist Church split on the issue of slavery.

Who was Old Charley?

Sheldon Peck did not work alone in his anti-slavery and UGRR efforts. Family lore and a journal kept by his son Frank included evidence of Peck harboring Freedom Seekers on the UGRR in the 1850s. Frank’s journal tells of “Old Charley”, a Freedom Seeker who stopped at the Peck House, and included lyrics to a slave spiritual song that he taught young Frank Peck. *“In the days of the UGRR our home was a deapot [sic] and very many were the slaves sheltered here while on their way to freedom.”*⁵⁴ Frank Hale Peck was born in March 1853 and was the last child of Sheldon and Harriet Peck to live at the family homestead. Frank lived his life on the family farm, eventually dividing the property after the death of Harriet, his mother, in 1886.

There are numerous accounts of UGRR activity at the Peck Homestead from family members and local and regional historians. The facts include an eyewitness account from Frank Peck, the son of Sheldon Peck, and links between other UGRR activities in the region. Peck was a radical abolitionist and the detail provided by his son Frank Peck, including stories about his reaction as a youth to seeing a person of color and the slave spiritual song that made a great impression on him, verify the Peck Homestead as an UGRR site.⁵⁵

There are numerous accounts of Frank Peck telling the tales of the UGRR to the local newspapers in his later years and all of the details of the accounts remain consistent through every source. Frank recalls the events at his home for a local paper in 1931:

Back in my boyhood days, my father, who was an abolitionist, helped the Negroes escape from slavery in the South. Our home was used as headquarters for all opponents of slavery in this part of the country, a station for the underground railway. I can remember one

⁵²*Western Citizen*, Chicago, “League of Universal Brotherhood,” June 27, 1848, n.p.

⁵³Peck, Frank, journal, copy at the Lombard Historical Society, Lombard, IL, p. 6.

⁵⁴ Peck, Frank, journal, copy at the Lombard Historical Society, Lombard, IL.

⁵⁵ The unknown facts of the incidents include where the slaves stayed on the property, how many times Peck aided the effort, or when these events exactly occurred. However, through stories and known events some details have emerged. In addition, during the 1996-2000 restoration of the house, a small, hidden trap door was discovered near the front door that led to a small space under the house. In addition, there were at least two barns on the property during the time of the UGRR.

incident as clearly as if it was yesterday—when my father protected seven Negroes one night, when I was a small boy, helping them on their way to the Chicago district.⁵⁶

Frank recounted the events of his childhood in a personal journal he kept when an adult. The journal provides a first-hand account of some of the important history of the house and family. He recounted: "I have seen as many as 7 slaves sheltered under the roof I still own and still occupy that my parents were helping on to freedom...we found them a very orderly lot."⁵⁷ Frank does not indicate how long they stayed, but one of the Freedom Seekers clearly made a profound impact on the youth:

"Then came the Underground Railway and as a small boy I was sitting on the knee of old Charley and wondered why he was black and I white and I asked him if his skin was rubbed off would he be white too"

Frank's impression was a very innocent notion for a child who may not have seen very many people of color in his life. Frank Peck was impressed by the songs of the slave and continued to reminisce about them during his lifetime and to his children. Frank reveals more detail in his journal about the Freedom Seeker "Old Charley" including words from a slave spiritual song:

...we sat in the moonlight and sang some of his plantation songs together I in my baby way as he was a fugitive [sic] slave on his way to find his freedom[.] these are some of the words of the song as I remember them as I sang them.

*"Roll on tiber moon, guide the tabler not astray
Whilest the nightingale song is in full tune
While I sadly complain to the moon."*

The song recalled by Frank Peck told the tale of the "Tibler Moon." Could "tibler" mean "silver" and "tabler" mean "traveler"? "Tibler moon" was suggested by Frank to be the "traveling moon," the bright moon that shone to light the way of the escapees at night traveling on their way to freedom.⁵⁸ In addition, the song indicates that the traveler should travel at night "while the nightingale's song is in full tune," meaning late spring. These lines are not found in other slave spiritual lyrics and are an important contribution; further research needs to be completed.

Frank Peck further notes in another of his journals entitled *My First Day at School*:

In the days of the underground railroad our home was a deapot [sic] and very many were the slaves sheltered here while on their way to freedom. Only love ruled in our home. Chastisement and oprecion [sic] were unknown. Under these surroundings I grew and thrived until the fall term of school in 1857...then I

⁵⁶ *Lombard Spectator*, Lombard, Illinois, "Lombard's Oldest Born Citizen Busy on 'Reminiscences'", September 3, 1931.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, page 3.

⁵⁸ Peck, Frank, journal, copy at the Lombard Historical Society, Lombard, IL, p. 2-3.

started on my way to aquire [sic] knowledge.⁵⁹

Frank's recollection of the UGRR as an experience before his school years is important to note since it suggests that his father was involved with the UGRR before his schooling began in 1857. All of the rest of Frank's recollections of UGRR activity were not dated and cannot be attributed to a certain time period.

Charlie was a fugitive slave as black as the stove pipe on the outside and but as white as snow on the inside. When I was scarcely more than a babe I sat on his knee and sang his plantation songs with him. He staid (sic) with my parents till the war for freedom commenced between the north and south then he was amonge (sic) the first to inlist (sic) to help free his race from bondage. While with us he took lessons in all our schools studies learning to read write and various other studies. Burning the midnight oil in the chamber underneath the rafters after his days work was finished in the field. He also took up drawing and painting lessons from my father as he was an artest (sic) and he became quite efficient.

Such a character was hard to find. He was true blue. After he went we never heard from him again. He was probably buried on the battle field while fighting to free his people. This is Freedom though it costs a life.

Could there be a greater Slave than a man adicted (sic) to the use of strong drinks or a more cruel master than rum.⁶⁰

Although Frank Peck writes this to warn people away from spirits, the information he provides the reader about Old Charley remains critical. We know that Charley is literate and serves in some capacity during the Civil War. A person that Charley may have encountered at the Peck's was H. Ford Douglass, a black speaker and abolitionist. Douglass enlisted with the 95th Illinois Infantry in 1862 along with many other people of color.

Susan Peck was the daughter of Sheldon Peck and was born in 1843 and also was an artist like her father. Descendants of the family own a picture painted by Susan of an African American man with a guitar and a young round-faced girl standing beside him singing. Family members believe this to be a likeness of "Old Charley" based on the appearance of the individuals and the artist, Susan Peck.

"Charlie" from Western Illinois

⁵⁹ Peck, Frank, *My First Day at School*, (Personal Journal), not dated by author, copy held at Lombard Historical Society, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Peck, Frank. Journal, copy at the LHS, p. 6-7.

Old Charley of Babcock's Grove, described by Frank Peck as Sheldon Peck's associate on the UGRR, had several characteristics that can be seen in various other stories of "Charlie" throughout Illinois and reaching into Missouri.

According to author Owen Muelder's *Underground Railroad in Western Illinois*,⁶¹ "in Western Illinois, the runaway 'Charlie' appears as a noteworthy example of a slave, who once free, decided to return through the Underground Railroad again and again in effort to retrieve his family and others."⁶² In addition, Muelder indicates that Charlie has "become well-known to the agents of the route," and that "Charlie or Charley reappears several times in pre-Civil War stories as a fugitive who had escaped slavery in Missouri and traveled back and forth through western Illinois"⁶³ The stories of Charlie's travels include his struggle with bounty hunters and his quest to reunite with his family. The stories of Charlie are more than "a noteworthy example of a slave," however, and could feasibly help identify the same man who collaborated with Sheldon Peck on the UGRR.

There are at least six stories of "Charlie" in or around Quincy, Illinois. Throughout the sources exist several commonalities including mention of "Charlie's" wife, multiple escapes, emancipating others, intelligence and humor, and a violent confrontation. Some stories mention other conductors or families who provided aid but many of the people described remain nameless.

Source 1: Round Prairie and Plymouth

In the 1876 *A History of Round Prairie and Plymouth 1831-1875* by E. Horton Young, "Charlie" appears in the following sections:

A Lively Load and Lively Time

Mr. Y___ called at the house of Mr. W___ on his way home from a three day rip to Quincy, and found that a company of six negroes had just arrived, that they were to be sent on their way to freedom. There was a man and his wife, with two children, and a young man, all under the leadership of a negro called Charley, who had been over the line half a dozen times or more. He had become well known to the regular agents of the route. His various trips to and from the Missouri had been made for the purpose of getting his wife away; failing at which he would gather such friends as he could and pilot them to freedom.

Mr. Y___ detailed himself for the service of taking the party to Macomb, to start next morning, making a day trip. The party of six were stowed as well as possible at full length on the bottom of the wagon and covered closely with sacks of straw. These were so light that they showed a decided tendency to jolt out of place, and thus perhaps to make unwelcome revelations on the road. To remedy this, a rope was drawn down tightly over the sacks and fastened at the end of the wagon. This kept things in place and this went well until near the end of the journey. Here Mr. Y___ became doubtful as to the proper road to take, took the

⁶¹ Owen Muelder, *Underground Railroad in Western Illinois* (U of Michigan: McFarland & Co. 2008), 56.

⁶² Muelder, *Underground Railroad in Western Illinois*, 15.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 56.

wrong one and passed three young men getting out logs in a piece of woods through which his way led him. He did not dare stop and inquire the way of them, for fear they might pry into the nature of his load too closely. As he drove on he thought there was a striking family likeness in the young men, to the man he was looking for. He went on however until he came to a cabin a little off the road, where he thought it safer to inquire. As he went in, he confronted a man that he recognized only too well as the one he cared little to meet on such a mission. But it was a cold, snowy day, and his face was so concealed by his wrappings that he was not recognized by the occupant of the cabin, who gave him the information sought. Mr. Y____ found that he had gone too far, had to retrace his way to the woods and there turn off. Here again he came upon the young men who had been delayed with their load by getting “stalled” in a deep rut. Better satisfied now as to their identity, he inquired the way of them. Guessing his mission readily, they made free inquires about his load, which were answered freely. Finding “Charley” was in the company, one of the young men determined to frighten him, or at least have a joke at his expense. Calling his name in stern tones, he told him that he knew he had passed over the line several times in safety; “but,” said he, “I have caught you at last, you are my prisoner.” Charley, still in concealment with the others under the sacks, recognized the voice of an old acquaintance, did not turn white with fear, but enjoyed the pleasantry.

Soon all were safely housed at Mr.____’s. After supper “all hands” gathered in the parlor, where for a time there was a free intermingling of story, song, and mirth’ after which an old violin was produced and “operated” upon by some of the company while negroes “let themselves out” into a regular old-fashioned plantation “how down,” which lasted until all were ready to retire with aching sides from the excess of fun. This evening’s entertainment is noted as particularly bright spot in U.G.R.R. experience - brightened with genuine negro polish.

This version of “Charley” is consistent with Old Charley in Babcock’s Grove in a number of important ways. First, Charley is clearly a leader among the group, working as the conductor and attributed to being successful in multiple escapes. Secondly, Charley is described to be not only above average in intelligence, but also affable and generally good-natured. Third, this version of the story includes revelry as part of a somewhat uplifting ending, although to be fair we do not know the outcome of this group’s attempted emancipation. This version of Charley relies heavily on the cliché of the “benevolent white abolitionist” as the “savior” of Charley and his group.

Source 2: McDonough County

Another story of “Charlie” comes from the 1878 *History of McDonough County, Illinois* by S. J. Clarke. In addition to recounting the story “A Lively Load and a Lively Time,” Clarke describes Charley as having a profound realization about his own humanity and the moment he decides to emancipate himself.

“What Am I?”- Charley was a likely “boy,” the property of a man living near Hannibal, MO. He had been well treated in every respect and allowed many liberties not enjoyed by the race in general. The thought of his being a slave had never entered his mind and probably

never would had not a little circumstance occurred that presented it in a very forcible manner. Quite a number of slaves had escaped from Missouri, and the matter being generally discussed by all classes in the State, and at a gathering where Charley and his master were both present the subject was again discussed, when the master said: "If any of my slaves should escape I should never rest until I got them back. Now, Charley, here, if he should escape, I would not take a drink of whisky or a chew of tobacco until I had him safe." In narrating the circumstances afterward, Charley said; "the thought suddenly flashed through my mind, What am I? Am I, or am I not, a human being, with the power to feel, and think, and act? Have I a soul, or am I a machine to be set in motion and act in accordance with the will of one made in the same manner as I am, save a different color? Such thoughts never entered my mind before. I had plenty to eat and drink, and was well clothed, had a fair education, had been in company with men of talent, but of course without power to express my own thoughts had I the desire to do so. I thought I would give my master an opportunity to put his threat into execution, and I did so."

Having many liberties, as we have before remarked, with power to come and go as he thought best, a few days after, as evening approached, Charley gave out to his fellow slaves that he was going to Hannibal to attend a colored dance. Mounting a horse, he rode off in that direction, but, changing his course, he went north until nearly opposite Quincy, when, leaving his horse, he searched the river bank, and finding an old skiff, he crossed over, and landed at the general depot of the Underground Railroad. Here he secured passage for the colored people's Canaan, Canada, Coming from Quincy by way of Round Prairie, he made Blazer's Station, this county, early one morning, where he laid by to enjoy a little rest and secure the services of another conductor. Mr. Blazer took him in charge, keeping him that day, learning his story, and after dark took him to the next station on his journey. Thus he continued until he reached the terminus of the route. A few months afterward Mr. Blazer was somewhat surprised to see Charley back, and learned he was returning to secure, if possible, his wife and two children. Bidding him God -speed, he sent him on his way. When he arrived at Quincy he secured an excellent skiff from the general agent of the road at that point, and for some days endeavored to secure an opportunity of getting his family away. But all his efforts were without avail, and he was compelled to return without his dear wife and children, though he managed to run off several slaves from the neighborhood. A few months passed away and Charley again returned and made another attempt to get his wife and children, but again failed. A third attempt was made, this time with partial success, ending in failure. It was suspected by his master he would return for this purpose, and he kept a strict watch over the wife and children of his runaway slave, compelling them to sleep in a room above the one occupied by himself and wife and through which one was compelled to pass to reach the other. Charley learned the true state of affairs, but in some way unknown to us, got them out without alarming any one. The distance to the river where they could cross, was too great to make in one night they were compelled to lay out in the woods until another night fall. When night came they traveled on until they reached the river; when, getting in the skiff, they crossed over, landing some distance above Quincy, and on a little island a short distance from the main land. As the skiff reached the shore, two men stepped out, with guns in their hands, and ordered them to surrender. Charley

suddenly drew his revolver, and pointing it at the men threatened to shoot if they attempted to harm him. He then began to parley with them, while at the same time consulting with his wife as to what should be done. She urged him to save himself, stating it would be death or worse for him to be captured, but as to her, they would do nothing save placing a more strict watch over her person. Seizing the opportunity when the attention of the two men was diverted, Charley jumped into the river and swam to the main land, and thus escaped without being hurt by the shots fired at him. This time he returned without wife, children or friends; but he was not to be daunted or discouraged. In a few months he again returned only to find that his wife had been sold and taken down the river. Learning that she was living near St. Louis, he determined there to seek her, which he did, and this time met with better success, as he escaped with both wife and children, and succeeded in reaching Canada in safety. When Charley came through the third time, and reported his adventure with the slave-catchers, he was advised to abandon the attempt to get his wife and little ones, and the suggestion made that he marry some French Canadian woman. "No," said he, "that I will never do; I love my wife and children as much as any man, if I am black, and I intend to have them or die in the attempt!" This same Charley, as previously remarked, was instrumental in running off many others. We copy the following incident of him from Young's *History of Round Prairie and Plymouth: A Lively Load and Lively Time*.⁶⁴

This version of Charley's story is similar in theme to the others; he is intelligent, a leader, and tenacious. However, in this version, there is an enlightenment to his own existence as a person and not as a commodity. In addition, in all the Quincy stories except for Dr. Eells (see Source 6), Charley escapes and tries to return for his beloved wife only to find her out of his reach. However, this is the only version of the stories around Quincy in which Charley is finally successful in getting his wife and children to Canada safely. It also introduces a heroic empowerment to Charley in that he defended himself from trying to do him harm or profit from his escape without the aid from a "savior."

Source 3: N. C. Buswell, Neponset

In Wilbur Siebert's pivotal UGRR work of 1898, an account of "Charlie" was reported by N. C. Buswell of Neponset, Illinois:

Mr. N.C. Buswell of Neponset, Illinois, is as follows: A slave, Charlie, belonging to a Missouri planter living near Quincy, Illinois, escaped to Canada by way of one of the underground routes. Ere long he decided to return and get his wife, but found she had been sold South. When making his second journey eastward he brought with him a family of slaves, who preferred freedom to remaining as the chattels of his old master. This was the first of a number of such trips made by the fugitive Charlie.

⁶⁴ History of McDonough County, 269

N. C. Buswell settled in Neponset in 1857 and kept a hotel and livery stable. He was a colonel during the Civil War and had a “brilliant” military career.⁶⁵ As for Charley, the story follows the same pattern as the others with regard to his multiple trips and search for his wife.

Source 4: James Buswell, Neponset

Another letter from a James Buswell (father of N. C. Buswell of Source 3) in the Siebert collection elaborates on the story of Charlie:

The first I remember about this U.G. transportation line was when I was nine years old. I had never seen a negro [sic] prior to the morning I came down from the “loft” to find six full bloods sitting around the fire. Two men, one woman and three children. One of the men was the womans husband and father of the children. The other was the notorious “Charlie” a powerful built man of perhaps thirty years. I am sorry I cannot give you his full history. I may yet be able to refer you to some who can. The part that I remember is as follows. Charlie belonged to a Missouri planter, not very far west of Quincy, Ill. His master gave him a very severe whipping, and Charlie ran away taking another slave with him. After many exciting adventures they finally struck the U.G. and went through to Canada.

Charlie left a wife on the old plantation, and coming to the conclusion that he could not live without her, he took a return ticket to Missouri on the same line. His master knowing that Charlie was a bright and determined fellow, very fond of his wife and concluding he would be very likely to return and steal her away, sold her to a trader who took her south.

On his return to Missouri Charlie soon learned the fate of his wife; to avenge himself on his old master for this cruel wrong, he stole away this family of his slaves and was then on his way to Canada with them. Charlie continued in this slave exportation business, for several years, passing east and west frequently, until he succeeded in planting quite a large colony of his people in Canada. Charlie soon became famous all along the line, as also in Missouri, where he had many adventures and hair-breadth escapes, all of which he would tell us from time to time. He usually footed from station to station during the night or early morning.

About half way between our place and Chicago, he met a man with an ox team, returning from the shop with a number of plow-shares. The fellow concluded it would be a good thing to round Charlie up, take him in and hold him for such a reward as might be offered, so he sung out the double command of “Whoa, Halt there N___,” both commands were obeyed; yet Charlie refused to surrender, and the fellow went at him with a plow-share this Charlie took away from him and gave him such a wound with it that he came near dying. Charlie then took to the woods and got safely away from a hot pursuit.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ However, in his later years it would seem he suffered some mental health issues as evidence of two separate altercations where he was stabbed by others in 1875 and 1886. The incident in 1886 resulted in his death.

⁶⁶ James Buswell letter to Wilbur Siebert

Again, we see Charlie as the hero in an uplifting story with frequent trips along the UGRR, a desire to retrieve his wife, and the successful thwarting of villains trying to apprehend him. In addition, Charlie in this version is described in a powerful way as a large, formidable person. Charlie is also believed to have been the property of a planter in Missouri outside of Quincy, which may have been linked to the story of Dr. Eells.

Source 5: Blazer History

Another reference of "Charlie" is included in the Journal of Illinois State Historical Review from 1922. Although many of the themes are similar to the other stories, in this version of Charlie, he is owned by a man named Busch near the Missouri River:

The most interesting story connected with any negro that passed through the Underground Railroad of McDonough county was woven around Charlie, a very light colored buck, with a sharp nose, He probably was a quadroon, or quarter-blood and was the property of a man by the name of Busch, whose plantation lay back some miles from the Missouri river. It was customary with the planters when the wheat was threshed to go to town and stay while negro boys hauled it to market. Charlie and two others were hauling the Busch wheat. When "teed up" one night Busch and the other planters were discussing recent escapes of slaves from Missouri, when Busch turned banteringly to Charlie and asked him why he didn't try running away just for a little excitement. When Charlie went to M. quarters that night he was thinking, and before he went to sleep he had it all figured out how he was going to make a break for Yankeedom. Next morning Charlie was up early and on their way the boys scolded him for driving so hard. When they reached home Charlie, who was the boss when his master was not around, put the boys to loading the wagons with wheat for the next day's trip to the river. Charlie told the boys he was going to a dance across the way and went to an old mammy and asked for some bacon and pone. She gave it to him but said, "N--- what you up to? You know you would not need any bacon or pone if you were going to a n--- dance. You are up to some deviltry." Charlie struck out afoot, but not a word did he tell his wife for he said he knew it would break her heart. He had nearly forty-eight hours start, for the boys had to drive to the river and the master go back home to secure dogs and organize for the chase. When the pursuers reached the big river Charlie was housed securely with the Van Dorns and John Brown in Quincy.

The Blazers gave Charlie the credit of being the smartest negro that ever passed over the McDonough county route. After reaching Canada, Charlie got some Pennsylvania Presbyterians interested in trying to get his wife and two children to Canada. They sent an old Presbyterian minister through, who arranged with Busch for their freedom for \$800. The preacher went back and raised the money but when he returned with the cash Busch had raised to \$1200. He went back to Pennsylvania, secured the \$1200 but Busch had concluded he must have \$1500. This Charlie would not agree to, determining to go back, steal them, and take them to Canada. He made several trips. Twice he succeeded in getting his wife and children and making a start. After the first attempt Busch had the mother and two children sleep in the loft above his and his wife's bedroom, which was reached by a ladder and a

scuttle hole, but Charlie climbed to the top of the cabin, removed the clapboards and succeeded in getting nearly to the Illinois side of the Mississippi with his loved ones when the chase was so close it was evident they were going to be captured. On the advice of his wife Charlie jumped into the river and escaped in the dark.

A few days later he was at the Blazers on his way to Canada. Charlie by this time knew the road and did not require any conductor. Lodging and something to eat were his only needs and he always had a new and interesting experience to relate. One is worth a place here. Charlie was on his way to Missouri and left Dobbins, the Fulton county station, for the Blazer post, but he had not gone far when a fog arose and Charlie lost his way. He wandered around nearly all night, finally gave up and lay down to sleep. When he awoke it was daylight and two men were standing over him. They ordered him to get up, which he did, but Charlie jerked a big dirk knife and made a slash at one of them. Charlie escaped and arrived at my fathers that night. They fed him but decided he had better strike out for the next station immediately. Charlie said he cut the fellow's clothing but did not think he was hurt much. The fact that one of them carried an ox whip suggested that the men from whom Charlie escaped had been plowing prairie and were at the time of the encounter looking for their cattle which had been unyoked and turned loose to graze during the night. This guess proved to be true, for later one of the ploughmen was found laid up from a slight wound such as might have been caused by a knife. However, the ploughman did not mention any set-to with the fugitive negro, declaring that he had accidentally fallen against a ploughshare. Perhaps they thought it would not be of any credit to them to acknowledge that a negro was too much for two of them. Charlie did not succeed in stealing his wife and children but on the other hand they finally captured Charlie and sent him to the hemp works in Tennessee. There was only one place worse that you could and a negro and that was the indigo works in Florida. There he would lose his finger nails inside of two years and be a dead man in five years. But Charlie was too smart for them to keep him any place unless they kept him in chains. A few months later, just at the opening of the Civil war, Charlie crossed the Ohio river near Cincinnati and went up through Ohio, he told the Ohio people of his wonderful experiences, which they doubted, but he gave them, the address of Henry Dobbins. They wrote to him and he verified Charlie's story. After the emancipation of the slaves Charlie's wife and two children reached Canada, the Canaan of all negroes.⁶⁷

This narrative is extraordinary in its depiction of Charlie's self-determination and empowerment. The author describes Charlie as intelligent and capable, functioning as the "boss" when the master was not around. This version of Charlie describes an independent person who fought (physically and mentally) for his own freedom and the future of his family.

Source 6: Dr. Eells and Quincy

Abolitionist Dr. Richard Eells moved to Quincy, Illinois in 1833 and built his house at 415 Jersey Street in 1835. In 1839 he had been elected as president of the Adams County Anti-slavery Society.

⁶⁷ Blazer, DN. "The History of the Underground Railroad of McDonough County, Illinois." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 15 (1922) 585- 588.

In 1843 he would be elected president of the Illinois anti-slavery society. On the night of August 21, 1842, an enslaved person named Charley arrived at his house while sopping wet from his swim across the Mississippi River. A free person of color named Barryman Barnett who observed Charley crossing the river, led Charley to Eells. Charley had traveled about 30 miles to escape to Quincy by swimming across the Mississippi River where he encountered Barnett, a resident of Quincy and whitewasher by trade.

Eells provided him dry clothes and transportation in a wagon, presumably to the Mission Institute just west of town, a known station on the UGRR. They were soon stopped by a posse searching for Charley, and Eells urged him to flee from the wagon. Charley hid in a cemetery but was caught and returned to his owner in Missouri. The court records indicate that his owner was Chauncy Durkee of Monticello, in Lewis County, Missouri. Dr. Eells was arrested shortly after returning home and charged with aiding a fugitive slave. According to a local paper:

The second day after the occurrences alluded to above – which was Tuesday last – a warrant was issued for the apprehension of Dr. Richard Eells – an old and respectable physician of this city, a well known abolitionist; in fact, one of the principal head men of this misguided sect in this county, and one of their candidates for the Legislature at the late election, on the charge of harboring, secreting, and assisting the slave spoken of to run away from his lawful owner.⁶⁸

In a twist of fate, he relied on his fellow conductors in Illinois to help him travel to Chicago because the state of Missouri, a slave state, wanted him tried there. The case was eventually heard by Judge Stephen A. Douglas in April 1843, at which time Eells was fined \$400. His charges included that Richard Eells:

...a certain negro, the same being a slave of the State of Missouri, and owing service to one Chauncy Durkee, of said State of Missouri, then and there in said county of Adams, unlawfully did secrete,...then and there did harbor...and then and there unlawfully secrete a negro slave.⁶⁹

He appealed the verdict and lost his appeal to the Illinois Supreme Court. In a series of objections to the verdict was one profound in its simplicity of how the injustice of slavery was able to keep its strangle hold on America; by denying a person a right to a name and identity, they are susceptible to inhumane treatment: “In an indictment for secreting a negro slave, it is not necessary to allege the name of the slave; it is sufficient description to aver him to be ‘a certain negro slave, the property of one A B.’”⁷⁰ This speaks to the challenge in history of “Seeking Charlie” as we search for

⁶⁸ Quincy Whig, Saturday, Aug. 27, 1842

⁶⁹ J. Young Scammon, Russell H. Curtis, Reports Of Cases Argued And Determined In The Supreme Court Of The State Of Illinois, volume IV. Chicago: Callaghan & Company. 1886.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 496

evidence in records that do not respect “Charlie’s” humanity. In his dissenting opinion, Justice Lockwood stated:

The first objection which appears in the record, is the omission to insert the name of the slave in the indictment. He is described as “a certain negro slave,” the property of one Chauncy Durkee, a resident of Missouri, and it is objected that this description is not sufficient. This omission does not affect in any degree the rights of the defendant. Upon a second trial for same offence, he can give parol proof of the identity of the slave, and this proof would be equally necessary, in such case, if the name of the slave were inserted in the indictment. The description would be held sufficient in an indictment for larceny, and is there fore sufficient in an indictment like the present.⁷¹

The dissenting justice agreed that the name of the slave be included in the indictment. Although Dr. Eells had many allies and like-minded colleagues, the call for acknowledging enslaved people of color as first being people fell flat within his appeal. After a lengthy illness, Eells died in 1846 on a riverboat on the Ohio River prior to his estate’s appeal to United States Supreme Court, which also upheld the guilty verdict in 1852.

Chauncy Durkee, the owner of Charley, the Freedom Seeker that Dr. Eells was convicted for aiding, was born in 1802 and died in 1858. He married Lucy Ann Harris in 1828 and had five children. Although census records have him residing in Canton, it is also alleged that he lived in Monticello, both in Lewis County, Missouri and less than 30 miles from Quincy. Durkee was a slave owner and early settler of Lewis County, having arrived with his father in 1808. He was a surveyor and landowner and helped lay out the towns of Monticello and Canton.⁷²

Durkee had sent the “posse” to retrieve Charley after his escape with the hopes of his retrieval, as Charley was valued at \$800. It is unknown what happened to the enslaved person Charley after he was returned to Chauncy Durkee. The slave schedules for Lewis County do not include names, only gender and approximate ages of the enslaved.

The time period of the escape and the age of Charley indicate that there may be a link between the Charley in Dr. Eells case and Old Charley of Babcock’s Grove.

⁷¹ Ibid, 526.

⁷² History of Lewis, Clark, Knox, and Scotland Counties, Missouri. Vol. 2, St Louis, Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1887, 737.

Please add to the bib:

Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society, Number 23, 1917, Eighteenth Annual Meeting of the Society, Springfield, Illinois, May 10-11, 1917

Old Free Charlie Wilson, St. Louis Area

The book, *Malindy's Freedom: The Story of a Slave Family*, shares the story of a family near St. Louis with a complicated history of race, culture, and legal status. Authors Mildred Johnson and Theresa Delsoin researched the family's extraordinary story over decades to compose a narrative filled with grace and humanity in the face of injustice including the treatment of indigenous peoples and slavery. The story introduced us to Old Free Charlie Wilson, and our research included interviews with Theresa Delsoin to create possible links between this Charlie and the Charley of Babcock's Grove.

Old Free Charlie Wilson was a free person of mixed race that lived in the St. Louis area. He was born around 1813 and worked as a healer and salesman. Charlie married a kidnapped and enslaved Cherokee woman named Malindy (also known as Rose Dawn) in 1838. Although Charlie was always determined to free his family, Charlie and Malindy's five children were also enslaved. According to the family records and history, Charlie and Malindy instilled the importance of literacy, faith, honor, and culture to their children.⁷³

Old Free Charlie lived and worked within the free and enslaved circles of Missouri and Illinois around the St. Louis area. As a free person of color, Charlie was able to live and work openly, something that his wife and children were not able to do. He was also closely established within the enslaved population of the area and had connections to the Cherokee people as well. "While Charlie was traveling, the slaves on the plantation could not wait for their Old Free Charlie to come home. He was the man with the news."⁷⁴ Charley has some similarities to the other Charlie stories: devotion to his wife, repeated travel, literacy, and there may be a connection with "Burch," the name his son used. However, given the dates of travel and time periods involved, our research has determined that Old Free Charley Wilson is likely not the Old Charley of Babcock's Grove.

Charlies Associated With the Civil War in Illinois

According to the records of Frank Peck, Old Charley of Babcock's Grove went to "find his freedom" by joining the Civil War, and he was presumed dead because the Peck family had not heard from him again. There were several places for a person of color to enlist in Illinois. Among them was the 29th Regiment Infantry, Illinois, United States Colored Troops (USCT), and the 95th Illinois Infantry.

29th Regiment Infantry (USCT)

The 29th was organized at Quincy, Illinois 24 April 1864 by Lieutenant Colonel John A. Bross, formerly a captain of Company A, 88th Illinois Infantry. The commissioned officers of this new regiment were white while the troops and non-commissioned officers were black.

⁷³ Footnote 12

⁷⁴ 181

The 29th Illinois Regiment, USCT first moved to Annapolis, Maryland with a final move to Alexandria, Virginia beginning May 27, 1864. The unit fought in Virginia where they participated in siege operations against Petersburg and Richmond, from June 19, 1864 to April 3, 1865. After this, they marched in the Appomattox Campaign March 28, through April 9, 1865. The 29th Illinois USCT moved to Texas for duty on the Rio Grande starting in May 1865 and the muster out was November 6, 1865.

During the time of service, the 29th Illinois Regiment, USCT identified 3 officers and 43 enlisted as killed or mortally wounded and 188 enlisted men lost to disease. Of those men, 6 were named Charles or Charlie. Their names and information are listed below:

Allen, Charles age 18
29th Regiment Illinois, USCT, Company A
Enlisted at Quincy, Illinois 15 Nov 1863 with T. J. Brown
Mustered in 24 Apr 1864
Died at Farmersville (should be Farmville), Virginia 10 Jun 1865 (Prisoner of War)

Green, Charles age 29
29th Regiment Illinois, USCT, Company B
Residence: Barrington, Illinois
Farmer, born Kentucky
Joined in Chicago 16 Sept 1864
Died at New Orleans 10 Aug 1865 in hospital

Green, Charles age 18
29th Regiment Illinois, USCT, Company D
Residence: Quincy, Illinois
Enlisted Quincy, Illinois 6 Feb 1864 with T. Jeff Brown
Mustered in 24 Apr 1864
Missing in Action 30 July 1864 at Petersburg, Virginia (Battle of the Crater)

Lee, Charles age 18
29th Regiment Illinois, USCT, Company F
Residence: Milwaukee, WI
Farmer, born Kentucky
Enlisted Quincy, Illinois 24 Jun 1864 with B. F. McCormick
Mustered in 8 Jul 1864
Died near Petersburg, Virginia 28 Jul 1864 (Siege of Petersburg)

Morey (Murry), Charles age 18
29th Regiment Illinois, USCT, Company D
Residence: Chicago, Illinois
Joined Chicago, Illinois 19 Jan 1864 with W. E. Daggett
Mustered in 31 Jan 1864

Died at City Point, Virginia 2 Sep 1864 (site of the Depot Field Hospital)

Young, Charles age 19

29th Regiment Illinois, USCT, Company C

Residence: Bois D'Arc, Montgomery County, Illinois

Born Sangamon County, Illinois

Occupation: Barber

Joined Jacksonville, Illinois 2 Nov 1864

Mustered in 3 Nov 1865

Died of disease at Brownsville, Texas 7 Jul 1865

Of these six men named Charles or Charlie, two of them have affidavits for compensations from their slave masters in their military records. Charles Allen, Company A, who died at Farmville, Virginia as a prisoner of war, was claimed as the property of John W. Ayres of Ralls County, Missouri. In his military records is a power of attorney from Ayres assigning power of attorney to Isaac C. Dodge of St. Louis, Missouri for compensation from the US government "for the service of his slave Charles Allen."

Likewise, Catherine Inskeep of Marion County, Missouri claimed compensation for her property, Charles Mory/Murray. The Quincy, Illinois Recruiting Officer, T. Jeff Brown, signed a statement that he questioned Charles Murry about Catherine Inskeep's claim as owner of Charles Murry to which Murry admitted that her claim was correct. As part of the Charles Murry military records, the Affidavit of Ownership signed by Catherine Inskeep shows her claim as ownership through the estate of her father, Francis Brown (d. 1859).

The only records of these African American men from the 29th Regiment, Illinois, US Colored Troops appear to be their military records. To date, no markers or cemetery records have been found and none of the men in this paper have been discovered in the 1860 Federal Census or the 1860 Slave Schedule. In terms of a match to Old Charley of Babcock's Grove, more research needs to be done on 2-year-old Charles Green.

95th Illinois Infantry

Another unit in which people of color served was the 95th Illinois Infantry organized in Rockford, Illinois at Camp Fuller in 1862. The 95th Illinois Infantry Unit H was where H. Ford Douglass enlisted, as well as Albert Cashier (also identified as Jennie Hodges), a transgendered man that served as a soldier during the war. They traveled and fought through Cairo, Tennessee; Mississippi; and Louisiana under General Ulysses S. Grant's northern Mississippi campaign. The 95th fought in the following campaigns: Vicksburg, Red River, Brice's Crossroads, Price's Raid, Battle of Nashville, and various operations against the city of Mobile. The regiment suffered 7 officers and 77 enlisted men who were killed in action or who died of their wounds and 1 officer and 204 enlisted men who died of disease, for a total of 289 fatalities.

From the muster rolls, there are 64 men with the name Charles and 15 were known to have died during the war. Although we cannot be certain, most of those soldiers are assumed to be white.

However, we know that 19 men of African descent served as “Under Cook,” but none went by the name Charley. In addition, another 19 men were promoted to various units of the United States Colored Troops. This included both white and black service men. H. Ford Douglass, the abolitionist who spoke at Sheldon Peck’s house at the time that Old Charley was living there, was promoted from a private when he enlisted in Belvidere to Captain of the Indiana Company attached to 8th Colored Infantry. Douglass was a successful lecturer and a leader in the black community. Working closely with John Jones, he was instrumental in the formation of the State Convention of Colored Citizens of Illinois in 1856 and drafted the bylaws and constitution for the State Repeal Association for the Illinois Black Code.

Possible connections:

Farnsworth, Charles age 20

Residence: Spring Township, McHenry County

Join in Rockford 7 Dec 1863

Died Memphis 18 Sept 1864

Hitchcock, Charles H age 30; Sergeant

Born Chenango, Broome County, NY;

Residence: Greenwood occupation farmer

Joined in Rockford, 4 Sept 1862

Discharged; for promotion in USCT 25 Sept 1863

Story Attribute	Old Charley of Babcock's Grove	Round Prairie	McDonough	Blazer	N.C. Buswell	James Buswell	Dr. Eells
Multiple travels	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Seeking wife	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Intelligent	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	NA
Musician	Yes	Yes	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Conductor	No	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	NA
Violent altercation	No	No	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	NA
Description	"Black as stove pipe"	NA	NA	"Light skinned and sharp nose"	NA	"powerful built"	NA
Age	Older	NA	NA	NA	NA	"30 years"	NA
Literate	Read/write	NA	Yes	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dates enslaved	Before 1855	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	c. 1842
White owner	"from plantation"	NA	NA	Busch	"MO planter"	"MO planter"	Chauncy Durkee
Other conductors	Peck	NA	Dobbins	Blazer, Van Dorne	NA	NA	Dr. Eells Barryman Barnett
Locations	Chicagoland	Near Macomb	Near Macomb	Near Macomb	Neponset	Neponset	Quincy

Table 1: Stories of Charlies and Their Attributes

Story Attribute	Old Charley of Babcock's Grove	Charles Green	Charlie Fisher	Old Free Charlie Wilson
Multiple travels	No	Civil War soldier enlisted 1864	No	Yes
Seeking wife	No	NA	No	Yes
Intelligent	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes
Musician	Yes	NA	NA	No
Conductor	No	NA	No	No
Violent altercation	No	Yes (war)	Yes	Yes
Description	"Black as stove pipe"	NA	NA	Cherokee and black
Age	Older	29	NA	NA
Literate	Read/write	NA	NA	Read/write
Dates enslaved	Before 1855	Before Civil War?	NA	Not enslaved
White owner	"from plantation"	NA	MS planter	Wife owned by farming family near St. Louis- son changes name to Burch
Other conductors	Peck	NA	NA	NA
Locations	Chicagoland	Barrington	Leavenworth, KS	St. Louis

Table 1: Stories of Charlies and Their Attributes (continued)

Conclusion

There is not a definitive link with Old Charley from Babcock's Grove and any of the Charlies found throughout Illinois. We are better able to help identify who he is not. We do not believe he is Old Free Charlie Wilson, Charlie Fisher, or Charles Green. It seems there are similarities in the stories from western Illinois, except with regard to Dr. Eells.

The research changed our outlook of what we expected to find; we were looking for one person and found many voices with a common name. The work has been gratifying to share stories of “Charlie” in Illinois and realize that the stories provide identity for many that were forgotten or erased. Seeking Charlie is just the beginning of the story.



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