



Olmsted 200

Two Centuries and More History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township –
First Farmed in 1814 and Settled in 1815

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Olmsted's First Family Led Way to Freedom

Members of Olmsted's first family not only led the way in the settlement of the township but also were local leaders in the anti-slavery movement. That was in the



This is the type of image that Southerners used as they searched for persons who had escaped from slavery. This reproduction appeared in the Anti-Slavery Record, which the American Anti-Slavery Society published in 1837.

beginning of decades of Olmsted residents' opposition to slavery, which was not too surprising for a community in northeastern Ohio. But that doesn't mean Olmsted residents always had enlightened views toward African Americans.

Olmsted's first family was that of James Geer. In 1815, he built a cabin in the southeastern section of the township (which adopted the Olmsted name 24 years later) and moved his family in. Thus, they became the township's first settlers of European descent. (Although Olmsted Township and Olmsted Falls claim they were founded in 1814, the Geers still lived in Columbia Township then. Geer's only activity in 1814 in the township that became Olmsted was to grow some corn there. The Geers didn't move in until 1815.)

Just five years later, in 1820, James Geer took an active role in what became known as the Underground Railroad, a system of hiding places and safe houses used by anti-slavery advocates to help people who had escaped slavery in the South to flee to freedom in Canada. Here is how the Ohio History Connection explains the Underground Railroad:

White and African-American “conductors” served as guides from place to place for freedom seekers. It remains unclear when the Underground Railroad began, but members of the Society of Friends, who were also known as the Quakers, were actively assisting freedom seekers as early as the 1780s. Some people living in Ohio began to help freedom seekers by the 1810s.

An 1876 story in Berea’s *Grindstone City Advertiser* documented Geer’s role in the Underground Railroad. As reprinted in the January 6, 1939, issue of the *Berea Enterprise* under the headline, “When Jim Geer Was First Conductor On the Underground Railroad,” that story recounted what happened from the perspective of Columbia Township, even though Geer was living just outside of Columbia Township by then and the story failed to make that clarification. Here is what it said:



This map shows Underground Railroad routes, including the extensive network of “tracks” in Ohio. The map is from an 1898 book, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*, by Wilbur H. Siebert.

Among other distinctions, Columbia township is supposed to have given refuge to the first runaway slave ever to flee through the Western Reserve.

The famed Underground Railway system of antebellum days had its humble origin in 1820.... It was in this year that Columbia was thrown into a ferment when a fugitive slave came along a couple of jumps ahead of his master.

The owner, in fact, was even ahead of the slave, for he had reached Cleveland and set up watch at the harbor in anticipation of the Negro’s boarding a boat for Canada. Finally convinced that the slave had not reached Cleveland, the southerner retraced his route to Columbia, where the fugitive had found helping hands. Jimmy Geer and another man took their guns and conducted the Negro through the backwoods to Cleveland under cover of night. From there he was shipped to the safety of Canada.



No picture depicting James Geer seems to exist, but a commemorative plate issued in 1964 for the sesquicentennial celebration for Olmsted Falls, Olmsted Township and West View, includes this illustration of Geer's son, Calvin, and his wife, Jane.

Geer and some of his family moved in 1827 to southern Dover Township (which later became Bay Village, Westlake and part of North Olmsted) but he, and perhaps others in his family, returned at least by sometime in the 1840s to the West View area, where he died September 19, 1849. That reunited him with his son, Calvin (considered to be the first male child born west of the Cuyahoga River), who had remained a West View resident. In 1843, the Geers were among 16 or 17 people who founded the West View Wesleyan Church after they split with the Methodist Episcopal Church just south of there in Columbia Township because its governing body would not condemn slavery. (For more on that, see Issue 118 of *Olmsted 200* from March.)

In recent years of the late 20th century and early 21st century, many current and former residents of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township have passed on stories about Olmsted's role in the Underground Railroad, suggesting that one location or another was used to hide fugitives from slavery on their trek north. Some early histories of Olmsted indicate that the stone stable (now a residence) built in 1854 at the southeastern corner of Mill Street and Orchard Street might have been a stopover on the Underground Railroad.

In addition to certain houses, the cave that stretched from under the Water Street bridge all the way underground to near the intersection of what now is Columbia Road and Water Street has been mentioned as a hideaway spot. That might have been the case, but there is a lack of documentation to support those stories. Local newspaper items sometimes mentioned the adventures of boys who explored that cave and, on one occasion, heard hammering from above in W.W. Mead's harness shop (located where Schady's Shell and later Clint Williams Realty stood in recent times), but stories about its use to hide fugitives are lacking.

It's not surprising that newspapers failed to document exact locations for Underground Railroad hiding spots. One reason is that no local newspaper regularly covered Olmsted news until the *Advertiser* started doing so in 1870, and by then, the Civil War had been over for several years, so the Underground Railroad was no longer needed. But even if local news coverage had started before the war, participants in the Underground Railroad would have kept quiet about the locations of hiding spots because they wouldn't have wanted to tip off Southerners on where to look for the runaways. That's why it was referred to as an "underground" system.

However, at least one Olmsted Falls home still shows evidence of its role in the Underground Railroad. It's the home of Jan Kennedy at 9303 Columbia Road (across from the Olmsted Falls Fire Department). Near the back door is another small door that is barely noticeable when it is closed. It's not even rectangular but is angled on the left side so that it lacks a top left corner. Today, it's just a storage closet, but in the 1800s, the floor could be removed to reveal a below-ground space where individuals could hide. "We lifted it with a crowbar, and it's eight feet deep, so four or more people could hide there," Kennedy said.



This house at 9303 Columbia Road in Olmsted Falls could have been an Underground Railroad stopover.



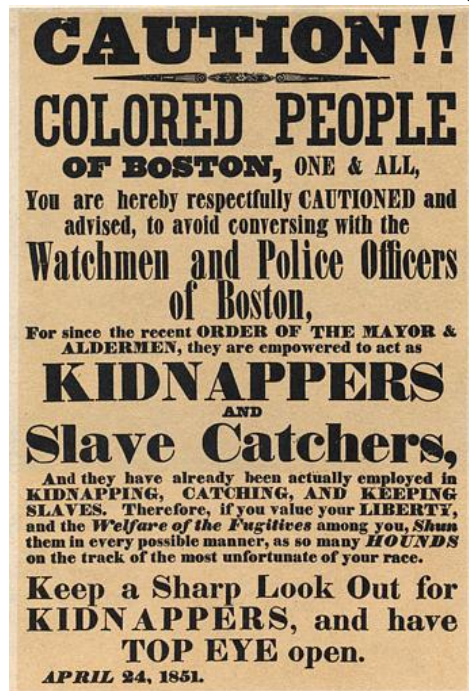
On the left, the odd-shaped door is barely noticeable next to the iron and ironing board in Jan Kennedy's home at 9303 Columbia Road in Olmsted Falls. On the right, it is opened. Its removeable floor leads to underground space where people could hide.

Kennedy said her property was once part of a larger piece of land owned by the Geer family that stretched from Rocky River to Plum Creek, but the house was built by a subsequent property owner in 1842. She said she believes the fugitives from slavery

passed through Olmsted by following the river. Unfortunately, she has been unable to find paperwork gathered from Western Reserve Historical Society records in Cleveland after her family moved to the house in 1976. Those papers have historical information about the house, including the identity of the people who initially lived there.

Olmsted's role in the Underground Railroad was a small part of about 3,000 miles of routes in Ohio that were used to help people who had escaped from slavery get to Canada. That was the most of any state, which made sense considering it had the shortest distance between slavery states and Canada. From the border with Kentucky or Virginia, people on the run had only 250 miles or less to go to reach Lake Erie.

Not far from Olmsted, Oberlin was one of the most active communities in the Underground Railroad and the anti-slavery cause in general. To the east, the trail that is now Pearl Road was the first Underground Railroad route that took escapees to Cleveland.



This poster issued several months after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 became federal law warned fugitives in Boston that policemen and others could take them into custody and send them back to the South.

Another example of opposition to slavery in Olmsted was that Edward S. Hamlin (who laid out the lots in downtown Olmsted Falls in 1843) founded *The True Democrat*, an anti-slavery weekly newspaper, in Olmsted Falls in 1846. But it didn't stay long. Hamlin, who was a member of the anti-slavery Whig Party, moved the paper to Cleveland and made it a daily newspaper in 1847. (It was a predecessor of the *Cleveland Leader*, which was one of Cleveland's top newspapers in the 19th century.)

However, even though Ohio was a free state that provided routes to freedom for many African Americans fleeing the South, the state did not welcome them. The legislature passed laws in 1804 and 1807 – shortly after Ohio achieved statehood in 1803 – that required all African Americans entering the state to post a \$500 bond to ensure their good behavior and to produce documentation that they were free.

Ohio residents were split over the issue of slavery with more sympathy for it in the southern part of the state close to the Kentucky and Virginia borders and less in the northern section. In some communities, anti-slavery activists were attacked by others who feared having African Americans come to Ohio. That's one reason why those engaged in the Underground Railroad kept their activities secret.

Another reason for secrecy was federal law. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 required the return of escapees from slavery to the slave masters who claimed them, but northern states tended to enforce it poorly, and some jurisdictions actively resisted it. However, Congress toughened the law with passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Under it, the penalty for providing food or shelter to a fugitive from slavery was imprisonment of six months and a fine of \$1,000. Officers who helped capture a fugitive could receive a bonus.

During the Civil War, 1861 to 1865, many Olmsted men and boys served in Union Army units, and some gave their lives to the cause. After the war, dozens of them joined Post 643 of the Grand Army of the Republic, a Union Army veterans' group, and proudly proclaimed their patriotism.

However, Olmsted's support for the war to end slavery did not translate into post-war hospitality toward African Americans. Judging by newspaper reports, they were rarely seen in Olmsted Falls or Olmsted Township, and when one was, it was newsworthy. One example is an item in the Olmsted column of the *Berea Advertiser* for February 27, 1874. Using terminology of the time that is no longer acceptable, the item indicated that the sighting of a black man around the community aroused suspicion:



In the late 1800s, members of the Union Army veterans group, the Grand Army of the Republic, met on the upper floor of this building owned by mill operator Tom Stokes. The building still stands as a residence at 7835 Columbia Road.

THERE has been a big darkey lurking around this vicinity of late, not seeming to have any particular business. He tried to break into a home about four miles west of this village one night last week, but he had been seen here once since, although he has done no damage here unless he was the lad that broke into [Nick] Nichol's saloon last Saturday night. We would advise everyone to give him a wide berth. Anyone meeting him can identify him by a white spot on the side of his forehead about three-fourths of an inch in diameter.

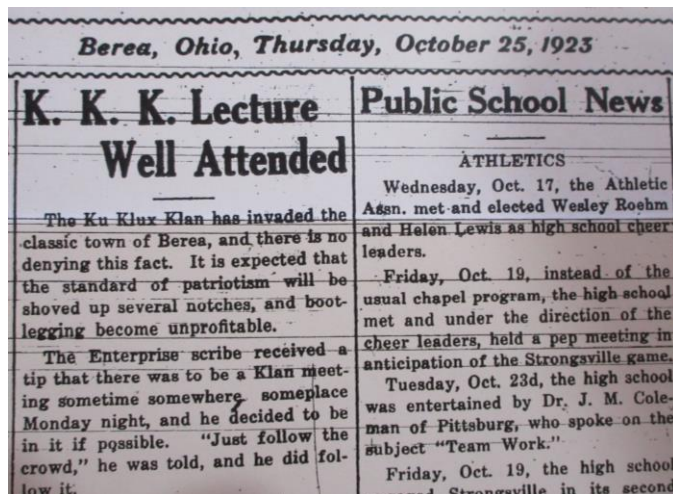
Almost 50 years later, newspaper reports from Berea indicated that attitudes toward African Americans had not improved in the area. A front-page story in the *Berea Enterprise* for October 11, 1923, headlined "Burn Fiery Cross in Berea," reported that someone had burned a cross at the corner of West Bridge and Prospect streets in Berea on the evening of Wednesday, October 10.

"A few minutes later reports came into the Enterprise office that crosses were burning at the Brook Park school house at Five Points, and in Olmsted Falls," the story said. "Whether the crosses were fired by the Ku Klux Klan or by others could not be positively ascertained, but it was the opinion of many that the Klan was doing it as a meeting was held in Berea last Friday evening."

The *Enterprise* added that it had received another report of a meeting of Klansmen in Brook Park on the same evening as the cross-burnings, but it couldn't substantiate it.

Two weeks later, the paper reported that a KKK lecture in Berea on Monday, October 22, had been well attended. This is how the story began:

The Ku Klux Klan has invaded the classic town of Berea, and there is no denying the fact. It is expected that the standard of patriotism will be shoved up several notches, and bootlegging become unprofitable.



The story of a Ku Klux Klan meeting in Berea was front page news in the Berea Enterprise on October 25, 1923.

man – “he would tip the scales at 300” – more than six feet tall came out and told him, “Fellow man, this is a 100% American meeting; No Israelites are admitted, and unless your looks greatly belie you, your father ran a clothing store within the corporate limits of Palestine.”

That indicates the Klan members’ concerns were more about Jews than African Americans, but surely, they would have greeted a black man no better and probably much worse.

The reporter again assured the Klan leader he was not Jewish, just a newspaper man. Although the leader expressed disdain for newspapermen, he eventually let the reporter into the meeting. The reporter wrote that at least 100 men attended the meeting, which began with the ringing of a gong three times and the singing of “America.” He described the leader as “an eloquent speaker” but did not give details of the speech. However, he said he heard men on all sides say, “Best patriotic address I ever heard.”

The story went on to say that an *Enterprise* reporter, after receiving a tip about the Klan meeting, tried to “follow the crowd” into it. However, at the door, a redheaded man turned him away by saying, “No Hebrews are allowed at this meeting.” Although the reporter denied that he was a “Hebrew,” the man told him he could “tell one a mile off” and suggested the reporter should leave.

Instead, the reporter asked to speak to the leader of the group. About five minutes later, a large

Klan activity continued for some time after that. On November 29, 1923, the *Enterprise* reported that Klan members had interrupted a Sunday evening service at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Berea. The story said they surprised the pastor, but some people apparently knew to expect them because “the church was crowded to the doors, when the garbed Kluxers appeared at the entrance” and asked to be admitted. The pastor approved.

The choir started singing “Onward Christian Soldier,” the audience rose and the Kluxers marched to the front of the pulpit and handed Rev. Boutall a package. It was presented by Mr. Karr, the Klan organizer, and contained \$75 – just a little remembrance by the members. The pastor thanked them and presented the speaker with a copy of the Episcopal Prayer Book, assuring him that he would find it 100% American. The robed figures all knelt in front of the pulpit and the speaker offered a prayer, and again, to the tune of their national anthem, “Onward Christian Soldier,” and they marched out.

The story also noted that many Klansmen were in the audience, but they could not participate because they didn’t have their robes. Newspapers elsewhere in Ohio reported similar church appearances by the KKK in that same period.

Such were attitudes among many people in southwestern Cuyahoga County 100 years ago. It’s hard to say how long such attitudes persisted, but times change and so do people. Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township never have had many residents from racial minorities – never more than small single digits as a percentage of the population. No community is perfect, but racial tension has not been much of an issue in Olmsted in recent years.



The KKK was active in many Ohio communities in 1923. This parade was held September 8, 1923, in Springfield.

Why Did the 1830 Census Suggest Slaves Were in Olmsted?

As noted in the previous story, Olmsted Township residents were largely opponents of slavery, and slavery was prohibited in Ohio. However, the 1830 Census shows marks in columns for “slaves” and “free coloured persons” that, at first glance, seem to indicate that several dozen of each lived in the township at the time. However, a closer inspection indicates that is not so.

The marks in the columns for slaves and free colored persons are like backslashes, but those in columns for free white persons are mostly regular numbers – mostly 1 or 2 with one 3. Some columns with numbers for free white persons also contain some of those backslash marks, often right next to numbers. That’s one indication that the

The 1830 Census form for part of Olmsted Township shows columns for free males and females on the left side and “slaves” and “free coloured persons,” male and female, on the right side. The right side includes backslashes in some squares that could seem to indicate there were slaves and free people of color in the township, but they are not like the numbers written on the left side, and they are not tallied in the totals the way the numbers on the left side are. The fourth row down is for the household of Vespasian Stearns.

backslashes are not meant to be considered as numbers. Another indication of that is they are not included in the number totals at the bottom of each column, as the regular numbers are.

If those backslashes would be counted as persons, they would indicate there were 64 enslaved persons in Olmsted Township – 11 males and 53 females – and 65 free colored persons. That would have been equivalent to half of the township’s total enumerated population of 259, but they were not included in that total. If they had been included, that would have been an incredible number of nonwhite residents for the township, especially for that time.

Furthermore, the presence of enslaved people in the township would have been at odds with not only the free state status of Ohio but also the known stances of specific Olmsted residents. For example, Vespasian Stearns was one of several Stearns brothers who were born in Vermont and moved to Olmsted Township in the 1810s. He was born June 3, 1798, so he was in his 60s by the time the Civil War broke out – a bit too old to be a soldier – but he showed his support for the Union cause by taking supplies to Ohio troops. While visiting troops in a hospital, he contracted an illness. He died on September 28, 1862, soon after being sent home.

However, in the 1830 Census, Stearns was one Olmsted Township resident who, if you count backslashes as numbers, seemed to be listed as having an enslaved person living in his house – a woman at least 36 years old but less than 55 years old. It also showed a female “free coloured person” in the same age range in his household. It’s hard to imagine that Stearns would have been a slaveowner in 1830 and then have been such a



This is part of the gravestone for Vespasian Stearns at Butternut Ridge Cemetery.

staunch opponent of slavery three decades later that he risked his life to support the Union cause. Plus, would such a man who was living on land that was not much beyond frontier status have had two, nonwhite women in his house, presumably as domestic help, when he had a wife and four children in the same home? It doesn't seem likely.

(Note: The census-taker left the "a" out of "Stearns" and spelled it as "Sterns." He also misspelled "Olmsted" as "Olmstead," putting an "a" in it. He would not have gotten an "A" in spelling.)

In addition, the final report on the 1830 Census, as presented by the clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, lists Cuyahoga County as having a total population of 10,373 (less than the current population of Olmsted Township), and none of those residents was an enslaved person. The entire state of Ohio is listed as having just six slaves, all in southwestern counties such as Hamilton and Montgomery, not far from the slavery state of Kentucky. They probably were brought over the border by slave masters in defiance of Ohio law. It took until 1841 for Ohio to pass a law establishing that any slave brought into the state automatically became free. Before then, it was not unusual for a Southerner to cross into Ohio accompanied by one or more enslaved persons. In that 1830 Census, Ohio also had 9,567 free, nonwhite persons out of a total state population of 935,884.

The 1830 Census was the first one for which the federal government printed blank forms. Thus, the same forms would have been used in slavery states and free states. The federal government provided them to the U.S. marshals, who provided them to the census-takers. The form included columns to register people by age groups and whether they were "free white persons," "slaves" or "free coloured persons," as well as whether they were males or females. For white persons, they were categorized into 13 age groups (ranging from under five years old to more than 100 years old), but the others were categorized into only six age groups.

There is no apparent explanation for the backslashes, but they also appear in the records for neighboring districts, such as Middleburgh and Strongsville townships. They might have been some sort of personal reference marks for the census-taker, but they don't seem to represent people counted in the population.

Thanks go to David Kennedy for helping with research for this story. He is not related to Jan Kennedy, who is mentioned in the previous story.

Train Tracks and an Old Barn Made News in 1898

Two items in the local newspaper 125 years ago note developments that bear some interest from the perspective of a 21st century reader.

The first was in the Olmsted Falls column in the *Berea Advertiser* for October 14, 1898: “We understand the council of Olmsted Falls passed an ordinance last night compelling the L.S.&M.S.R.R. to put a man on Columbia street crossing at night. Bully for the Olmsted Falls council.”

The initials stood for the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railway, the line that ran east-west through Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township (where the Norfolk Southern now runs). Presumably, the council wanted the railroad to put a man at the Columbia Street (now Columbia Road) crossing to warn people against going across the tracks when a train was coming. It took until the 20th century for the railroad to install automatic crossing gates. In the 21st century, the most common problem is not that crossings are unprotected but having the gates stay down too long because of many very long trains – or trains that stop and block the tracks.

The second item of interest appeared in the Olmsted Falls column in the October 28, 1898, edition of the *Advertiser*: “Messrs. Peltz and Simmerer has each built an addition to his residence. Now, gentlemen, tear down that old barn and build a new one in its place; then you will have the finest property in the township.”

The former residences of Joseph Peltz and Philip Simmerer, who ran the hardware store in the building now known as the Grand Pacific Hotel, are now part of Grand Pacific Junction. The Peltz house now contains Mary’s Hair Salon. The Simmerer house is where Treasure House of the Falls, a vintage resale shop, is located.



This is the old livery stable before Clint Williams restored it in the 1990s. Photo courtesy of Clint Williams.

That newspaper item from 125 years ago not only establishes when Peltz and Simmerer built additions onto their homes, but it also might help indicate the age of another Grand Pacific Junction building, the one containing Clementine’s Victorian Restaurant and Bakery and Falls Ice Cream. As indicated by the sign he put on the front of the building, the late Clint Williams, who developed Grand Pacific Junction, believed the original use of the building was as a livery stable. He also believed it was built before 1900, perhaps as early as 1895.

The 1898 *Advertiser* item suggests that Peltz and Simmerer had an old barn that was nearing the end of its useful life. If they tore it down and replaced it with a newer one, that might have resulted in the building that stands there today. Thus, it could have been built shortly before 1900, as Williams suspected. *Olmsted 200* has not found any newspaper item to confirm that, but such outbuildings as barns did not often get much attention from the newspaper.

Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will include stories about how Olmsted Falls honored a former mayor who got things done, renovations the federal government funded in 1938 for Olmsted's single school building, and the time when early Olmsted residents found a six-foot-long fish in Rocky River.

If you know of other people who would like to receive *Olmsted 200* by email, please feel free to forward it to them. They can get on the distribution list by sending a request to: wallacestar@hotmail.com. *Olmsted 200* has readers in several states beyond Ohio, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin, and as well as overseas in the Netherlands, Germany and Japan.

Your questions and comments about *Olmsted 200* are welcome. Perhaps there is something about Olmsted's history that you would like to have pulled out of *Olmsted 200*'s extensive archives. Or perhaps you have information or photos about the community's history that you would like to share.

If you have missed any of the past issues of *Olmsted 200* or want to share them with someone else, all of them can be found on Olmsted Township's website. Go to <http://olmstedtownship.org/newsletters/>. A list of *Olmsted 200* issues is on the right side. Click on the number of the issue you want to read. All of the issues of *Olmsted 200* also are available on the website of the City of Olmsted Falls. Find them at: http://www.olmstedfalls.org/olmsted_falls_history/index.php. A link to *Olmsted 200* can be found on the left side of the page.

Except where otherwise noted, all articles in *Olmsted 200* are written by Jim Wallace. Thanks go to Mary Louise King for help in proofreading and editing many issues. Thanks also go to David Kennedy for frequently contributing research and insight for some stories. Written contributions and photos, as well as comments and questions about items in this newsletter, will be considered for publication. Send any correspondence by email to: wallacestar@hotmail.com.

Olmsted 200 is written, researched and edited by Jim Wallace, who is solely responsible for its content. He is co-author (with Bruce Banks) of ***The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township***, published in 2010 by The History Press of Charleston, S.C. ***The Olmsted Story*** is available at the Berea Historical Society's Mahler Museum & History Center and through online booksellers.

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