

## Milton House

long, rectangular wing – the Goodrich Block – extended from the south side of the inn with a dual purpose. The top floor of the five-block structure was built for residential use. The bottom floor housed businesses, making the complex one of Wisconsin's earliest strip malls.

Through the years, the ground floor of the block was home for a multitude of enterprises common to the contemporary era. There were tin smiths, leather smiths, carriage builders and printing presses. Dry goods, mercantile and grocery stores also occupied business spaces. The complex housed Milton's first post office until the 1880s when it moved across the village square. For nearly 100 years, the second-story apartments were home to many, beginning with members of the Goodrich family upon completion of the block in 1849.

Ezra Goodrich, the only son of Joseph, inherited the complex following the death of his father in 1867. The younger Goodrich was thirteen years old when he arrived with his family to the Wisconsin Territory in 1839. Ten years later he was operating a busy mercantile store in the block with his brother-in-law Jeremiah Davis, who married Jane Goodrich, Ezra's sister, younger by two years.

Ezra Goodrich cared for the complex the remainder of his life, operating the hexagon as an inn through the mid-1890s. After Goodrich passed in 1916 at age 91, the property descended into a period of neglect and disrepair. Feeling the bite of the depression, the block was void of businesses by the late 1930s. In the spring of 1948, much of the south end of the Goodrich Block collapsed, displacing seven residents renting apartment spaces on the second floor.

The property was immediately purchased by the newly-formed Milton Historical Society, which just weeks prior to the collapse had begun acquisition discussions with the lone Goodrich heir remaining in town. Lois Goodrich, granddaughter of Ezra, sold the property to the Society and assisted with its transition to a museum. The museum opened to the public in 1954, complet-

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ing a cycle of roles for the building that included that of an inn and business and residential complex.

Perhaps the most unique and important role played by the Milton House during its 173-year existence was the function of which few were aware. From as early as 1845 to the mid-1860s, the Milton House was a refuge for fugitive slaves.

Joseph Goodrich came to the Wisconsin Territory in 1838 in search of fertile homesteading land. Goodrich and his Seventh Day Baptist followers represented an evangelical faction from western New York that in the late 1830s headed west with the zeal and conviction of a cavalry charge to spread their moral enthusiasm for abolitionism, temperance and benevolence. It was at a crossing of militia roads still worn from the Blackhawk War six years prior that Goodrich staked his claim, began platting a new community and building his inn. By 1844, Goodrich had completed his inn, formed the new community's Seventh Day Baptist Church and founded Milton Academy, which by 1867 received a state charter as Milton College.

While building the inn, Goodrich had a plan in mind for secretly moving fugitives in and out of the basement of the inn. At the time of construction, Goodrich dug a tunnel from the cabin located behind the building to the inn's root cellar, providing an opening in the basement's foundation. The 45-foot tunnel connecting the building was about three-and-a-half feet in height, necessitating an adult to crawl from the cabin into the basement.

Goodrich and his collaborators brought fugitives to the cabin where through a root cellar dropped into the tunnel and crawled its length to the basement of the inn where they could be fed and harbored until the journey's next leg. The tunnel survived the decades of time that passed from the era it was used to hide fugitives until the property's transition to a museum. In the 1950s the tunnel was dug deeper, braced and lighted, allowing it to be traversed upright by those who tour the museum.



The Milton House in the 1920s. (Photo submitted by Doug Welch)

The tunnel remains the most popular and unique portion of the tour. To many it represents a very specific path taken by those fleeing oppression on their way to freedom.

Pinpointing details about the role of the Milton House in the regional movement of fugitive slaves through southern Wisconsin is a difficult task. Since the late 1700s, assisting fugitive slaves at any level was a violation of federal law. That was especially true after passage of a more stringent and detailed Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. As a consequence, those involved with illegally assisting fugitives did so very secretly, leaving no written documentation. That was the case with Joseph Goodrich and the Milton House, which left behind little more than a few stories and scant written evidence of details of the Underground Railroad activity.

What manifests to the modern day is a lack of a "big-picture" understanding of the logistical workings of the movement of freedom seekers through southern Wisconsin more than 170 years ago. There are many documented and undocumented Underground Railroad sites in southern Wisconsin and northern and western Illinois. Each site, however, is virtually limited to tell its story in isolation of one another because it's unclear how any were directly connected.

One of the factors that has long complicated modern-day research of the Underground Railroad is what could be

considered a genuine scholarly indifference to the subject in the years following the Civil War. Little or no research or scholarly work was committed to the Underground Railroad until decades after the activity ended, losing precious stories and details to time. In the 1890s Wilbur Siebert of Ohio State University began interviewing people who were involved in the Underground Railroad.

Siebert interviewed hundreds of people over the course of a couple of decades. His work remains the standard-bearer for study of the Underground Railroad as Siebert compiled the single-largest collection of first-hand accounts from those involved with assisting fugitive slaves. Much of Siebert's research was focused in the eastern portion of the United States – places such as Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania and his native Ohio where the assisting of fugitive slaves dates to the 1600s.

One of the few people from Wisconsin interviewed by Siebert was Ahas P. Dutton, a well-known abolitionist who operated a warehouse on the Racine Harbor. Dutton told Siebert that his warehouse was the final land stop for more than one hundred fugitive slaves he helped to board abolitionist-friendly ships bound for Canada through Lake Michigan.

Dutton also noted that most of the freedom seekers he assisted were from

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