

Milton House has amazing story to tell

By Doug Welch of the Milton Historical Society

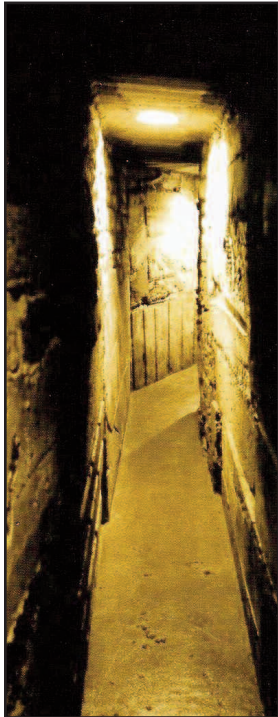
Since opening as a museum in 1954, the Milton House has shared the story of its role in the fabled and oft-misunderstood Underground Railroad during the country's dark slavery days leading to the bloody American Civil War.

The stagecoach inn built in 1844 by famed abolitionist Joseph Goodrich became the foundation of the pioneer hamlet of Milton, which emanated westward from the shadow of the building's unique architecture. By the early 1850s Milton, named for the English poet, became a busy stage and rail hub in the northeast portion of the newly-platted Rock County in the fledgling state of Wisconsin. Completed four years prior to statehood, the inn immediately took up its role in the secretive regional movement of fugitive slaves questing freedom from the oppression of slave-holding states of Missouri and Arkansas.

Since a disastrous collapse of a portion of the building's residential and business wing in 1948 and subsequent transition to a museum, the Milton House has grown in stature and historical significance as more information surfaces about the role the inn played in assisting fugitive slaves prior to the Civil War.

Those revelations continue with the unfolding of two key stories known to museum staff just since 2016. One tale new to the Milton House narrative comes via a 90-year-old Racine woman who as a child in the 1930s was told by her great-grandmother who claimed to have been a passenger on wagons that carried hidden fugitives to Milton from nearby Albion. Those wagons were driven by the elder woman's father, Varnum Hull, who served through the 1850s as pastor of Milton's Seventh Day Baptist Church, founded by Goodrich in 1842.

Another recent revelation to the Milton House narrative is the existence of an 1863 letter sent to Wisconsin Governor Edward Salomon by Andrew Pratt pleading for an exemption to allow a "colored man" to join the Union Army's fight against the Confederacy. Pratt was born into slavery in Arkansas before being moved to Missouri. He escaped bondage at age 23 to Illinois and was brought to Milton in 1861 by William Anson Goodrich, younger brother of Joseph. Pratt "was cared for in the underground passage" of the Milton House according to written documents long held in the museum archives. In his letter to Governor Salomon, Pratt argued his case for being allowed to



Connecting a tiny cabin to the cellar of the Milton House, this is the secret underground passageway some fugitive slaves utilized on their courageous cross-country journeys toward freedom. (Photo submitted by Doug Welch)

enlist saying he had "faithfully served in the House of Bondage all my life until 18 months within and I hope you will not blame me for deserving to be counted a Man."

The letter is a first-hand admission by Pratt that he was a fugitive slave who made his way to Milton, corroborating prior evidence in the museum's archives of Pratt's presence in the community.

These recent revelations serve as examples of how the narratives of local museums, and history in general, evolve and often change as new information, facts and perspectives are gleaned. The Milton House is not unlike most museums which experience changing narratives and educational emphasis as dictated by newly-discovered stories and documents.

That's especially true for Underground Railroad sites such as the Milton House, in which much of the history of the secretive workings and logistical details of the movement of fugitive slaves was lost to time or scholarly indifference, buried under the loam of prioritized historical narratives and writings chronicling the nation's period of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Not unlike rocks that poke their way through the soil of a farmer's field each spring, it's not uncommon for nuggets of previously unknown or unappreciated information to emerge into the garden of a museum's collection.

The Milton House has served many purposes and roles in the Milton community. It was built in the shape of a hexagon from lime gravel grout as an inn for travelers. A

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