

# John & Archie

by Galin Berrier

After the freedom seekers had accomplished the most difficult part of their escape unaided, they were often assisted by abolitionists, whose names have survived in the historical record. We know the names of over 100 white “agents” and “conductors”—but not the names of the runaways they helped.

Typical is the story told later in life by Christian S. Byrkit, a Quaker who as a teenager aided a fugitive slave near Fairfield in Jefferson County. Byrkit described an incident, meant to be amusing, in which his shotgun fell from his saddle to the ground and discharged, causing his horse to rear and throwing the freedom seeker he was transporting unceremoniously to the ground. We never learn the freedom seeker’s name, or even if he successfully eluded capture by the slave catchers who were pursuing him.

We also know the names of several white abolitionists in Clinton County like G. W. Weston, who sent the following note from Low Moor on May 6, 1859, to C. B. Campbell in Clinton:

“Dear Sir—By to-morrow evening’s mail, you will receive two volumes of the ‘Irrepressible Conflict,’ bound in black. After perusal, please forward.” But we know nothing more about the two freedom seekers so “forwarded.”

One exception to the rule of anonymity are two escaped slaves from Missouri named John and Archie, who made their way some 200 miles from central Missouri to the home of J. H. B. Armstrong, an Ohio abolitionist who settled at Cincinnati in southern Appanoose County in 1852, just a few miles from the Missouri state line. A neighbor who disapproved of helping fugitive slaves escape was being entertained at the time in Armstrong’s parlor, so Archie was hustled into a bedroom off the kitchen.

After the unsuspecting neighbor departed, Archie and John, who was camped in the woods nearby, were given some food and sent on to another neighbor, John Shephard, where they were given supper and stayed the night. The next day they were sent on, eventually making it to Canada. Archie

is said to have written to Armstrong to say that he and John were working there for a dollar a day and adding: “I hope the good Lord will bless you for your kindness toward us, and I hope the day will soon come when we will be a free people.”

In the 1850s there may have been as many as 15,000 freedom seekers from the United States living in Canada West (today’s Ontario), especially in and near such towns as Windsor and Chatham.

Rumors circulated in the States that many were in dire straits, living in abject poverty. Perhaps it was important, then, to let their abolitionist benefactors know that this was not in fact their condition. Otherwise, such rumors might have discouraged other freedom seekers from following in their footsteps. ♦

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Galin Berrier’s interest in the underground railroad grew from his volunteer work with the State Historical Society of Iowa helping students research topics for National History Day. He was the first individual member of the National Park Service’s Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program.