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HAMILTON AVENUE – ROAD TO FREEDOM

1. Hall of Free Discussion site - The Hall was so named by James Ludlow, son of Israel Ludlow (a Hamilton County abolitionist surveyor whose first home was built in Northside) who built it for the purpose of open discussion of controversial topics. After the Lane Debates, some abolitionist seminary students taught classes here to blacks, while others taught here and then moved on to Oberlin College. Abolitionist speakers such as Rev. Lyman Beecher and William Cary were popular.

2. Freedom Grove, Mill Creek Restoration project - Trees planted here memorialize “where slaves would exit using the Mill Creek as their guide.” Following a large waterway would confuse any dogs that were following them as well as providing cover.

3. Wesleyan Cemetery - Chartered in 1843, this was the first integrated cemetery in the Cincinnati area. This cemetery contains the remains of abolitionists Zebulon Strong, John Van Zandt and Rev. Henry Hathaway of Covington, Ky. Abolitionist Zebulon Strong had two homes along Hamilton Avenue that were stops on the Underground Railroad. John Van Zandt was caught in 1842 transporting a wagonload of escaping slaves from Walnut Hills to his home near Glendale, OH. He was defended by Salmon P. Chase to the Supreme Court. Van Zandt died a pauper due to court fees and fines in 1847 before the trial was over. It was one of Chase’s largest legal defeats. Van Zandt was immortalized as the character John Von Trompe in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Levi Coffin in his Reminiscence relates the story of John Hatfield, Deacon at the Zion Baptist Church, who assisted Coffin in transporting a group of 28 escaping slaves from Cincinnati. Hatfield procured a coach and disguised the group as a funeral procession of free blacks on the way to the Methodist (Wesleyan) Cemetery. Instead of going to the cemetery, the group traveled past to College Hill. Along the way a sick infant died and was buried in College Hill. The group made it to Canada. Rev. Henry Hathaway built his home, “Hathaway Hall,” on the banks of the Ohio River in West Covington. Said to have been an important stop on the Underground Railroad, a tunnel connected the house to the Ohio River, where fugitive slaves would be rowed to the Ohio side. Buried at Wesleyan are more than 600 Civil War Veterans of both races.

4. Spring Grove Cemetery – Here are buried the noted Quakers, Levi and Catherine Coffin. Levi has been attributed with helping over 3,000 slaves escape to freedom. Known as “The President of the Underground Railroad,” he moved to Cincinnati in 1847 from Indiana, opening a store which sold only items not produced by slave labor. Salmon Portland Chase also buried here, known as the “attorney general for fugitive slaves.” He defended pro-bono those slaves that were recaptured and the abolitionists that tried to free them. Chase served as Secretary of the Treasury under Pres. Lincoln and was a Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

5.6. Ravine to Freedom – On either side of Hamilton Avenue lie deep ravines which provided deep shadow and foliage. About the ravine in LaBoiteaux Woods Preserve, the Underground Railroad Freedom Center has called this the “only documented and undeveloped Underground Railroad slave route” in the area.

7. Zebulon Strong/Six Acres Bed & Breakfast – 5350 Hamilton Avenue. This was the second house built by Zebulon Strong, the first being a brick house at 5434 Hamilton Ave (Private Residence). The brick house was used as a safe house while 5350 contains several hiding places. The slaves would come up the east ravine, near where the old railroad line was located and would hide in a brush pile in the gully under some discarded sacks. The Strong children would play around the brush pile, leaving food. After dark Strong would take his wagon, with a false bottom, full of straw or produce and would transport the slaves out Belmont Avenue to the next station, a brick house at the corner of Colerain and Springdale Roads. The Strong were related to the Carys.

8. Twin Towers – The ravine ending at the stone wall of Twin Tower’s driveway was used in hiding escaping slaves during the day and moving them through College Hill after dark. A tunnel under the original retaining wall led to General Samuel Fenton Cary’s house (youngest son of Wm. Cary) which was located where the upper parking lot is now. The tunnel and wall collapsed shortly after Twin Towers was built, necessitating a new retaining wall.

9. Skillman/Strong Store site– The Skillman/Strong grocery store and house were built on the east side of Hamilton Avenue south of Hamilton and Hillcrest Avenues, near Zebulon Strong’s original home. The families intermarried and both were involved with concealing and moving escapees to the next station.

10. Farmers’ College – Some of the Quaker youths, along with the faculty, hid slaves in the bell tower. Dr. Robert H. Bishop, president of the college was an ardent abolitionist. The college was founded by Freeman Grant Cary, eldest son of William Cary, and a graduate of Miami University. Future president and abolitionist, Benjamin Harrison, studied here. Rev. Dr. John W. Scott, (see # 27) taught physics and chemistry.

11. “The Oaks” – 5907 Belmont Avenue This stately mansion was built around a smaller house. Behind the home was once an acetylene shed with a concealed hiding place. *Private residence.*

12. Daniel Flamm property - 5822 Belmont – An additional half floor basement for concealment was built into this frame building. *Private residence.*

13. Jonathan Cable – A Presbyterian minister, his family once lived north of 6011 Belmont Avenue. Levi Coffin wrote about the deeds of Cable, who procured clothing and gave slaves shelter in his house. He is seen in this photograph as the tall man in the back row. The man with the top hat is Levi Coffin; they are with some of those they helped to escape.

14. Samuel and Sally Wilson house – 1502 Aster Place – A staunch abolitionist family, the Wilsons moved to College Hill in 1849, purchasing land and a small log cabin from Freeman G. Cary. The current Greek Revival house was built around the cabin at that time. Their daughter, Mary Jane, was an original teacher at the Ohio Female College and two of their sons attended Cary’s Academy. Harriet Nesmith, Joseph Gardner, and Mary Jane Wilson Pyle all were very involved with the Underground Railroad and this house served as a station for at least four years. In 1892 Harriet wrote a letter to Professor Wilbur Siebert at Ohio State University detailing her family’s activities and those of other College Hill residents’ participation. This house is one of only two in Cincinnati that has a National Historic Place listing specifically for the Underground Railroad. The other is the Harriet Beecher Stowe house in Walnut Hills. *Private residence.*

15. Ohio Female College – Now demolished and the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center built on the site, Supreme Court Justice John McLean served as the first president of the Board of Trustees. Samuel F. Cary also served on the board. Judge McLean was anti-slavery and was a dissenting opinion in the infamous 1857 Dred Scott v. Sanford Supreme Court decision.

16. Jesse DeWitt Locker- 1210 Cedar Avenue – This is the site where Jesse Locker’s home stood. Jesse Locker was a much loved lawyer, and a six term Cincinnati City councilman. He was president of the Hamilton County Bar Association for Negro Lawyers. Appointed by Pres. Eisenhower in 1953 to be the U.S. Ambassador to Liberia. Locker died in Monrovia in 1955. His public funeral was the largest in the city’s history and he was the only person to lie in state at City Hall. Jesse’s father Rev. Laban S. Locker was the first black minister in Ohio to be ordained in the Christian Church. He was the pastor of the Christian Church of College Hill which stood at the corner of Cedar and Piqua Avenues. Nearby was College Hill’s Colored school which merged with the College Hill Public School in 1888. As you go further east on Cedar Avenue you will see small, wooden cottages which were built for the black servants who worked for the wealthy of College Hill. This was the center of the early black community which contained many free blacks and former slaves. Free black families were the primary group who helped escaping slaves. Their names and deeds are lost to history.

17. William Cary site/ Hodapp Funeral Home – 6041 Hamilton Avenue – William Cary was the primary land owner of College Hill. An abolitionist and one of the founders of the College Hill Presbyterian Church, Cary built a saw mill and brick kiln on his property. His was the first brick home in College Hill and contained hiding places. His well-educated sons were responsible for Cary’s Academy, Farmer’s College and the Ohio Female College.

18. John T. Crawford site – When Crawford died in 1880; he left his estate “for the sole uses of an asylum and home for aged and worthy colored men, preference to be given to those who have suffered slavery.” Crawford was a Union spy/soldier that had been captured, and was aided in escape by an elderly black man. In gratitude he willed his estate and 18.5 acre farm, which became the Crawford Home in 1888.

19. LaBoiteaux Cemetery – corner of Hamilton and Galbraith Roads - Buried here are the remains of several American Revolutionary War veterans and the neighbors of Christopher Cary, brother of William Cary.

20. Cary Cottage – 7000 Hamilton Avenue – This brick home was built by Robert Cary from land he purchased from his father after he returned from the War of 1812. Robert was the father of the Cary sisters, Phoebe and Alice, poets. Alice wrote stories for the National Era, an abolitionist paper which also published Harriet Beecher Stowe. The house is on the National Register of Historic Places and is open to the public.

21. Benjamin Hunt house – 1575 St. Clair – This brick house and its outbuildings served as a station, with hiding spaces in the attic and basement. *Private residence.*

22. Aiken house- 7280 Hamilton Avenue – No longer standing, the abolitionist Aikens had a tunnel leading from a nearby creek into their basement. Artifacts relating to slavery were found years later in the house.

23. Gilbert Lowe LaBoiteaux/Paul R. Young Funeral Home – 7345 Hamilton Avenue – This 1833 Greek Revival house was once the home of Gilbert LaBoiteaux - mailman, wit, poet, traveler, writer and abolitionist. The LaBoiteauxs of Mt. Healthy were one of this community’s founding families and held anti-slavery views. Gilbert was a patron of the painter Robert Seldon Duncanson.

24. Robert Seldon Duncanson was a self-taught mulatto artist specializing in scenic landscapes and portraits. Many of his works were commissioned by abolitionists: Rev. Charles Avery, William and Rebecca Cary, Freeman G. Cary, Dr. Robert H. Bishop and most importantly, Nicholas Longworth. He boosted Duncanson to national fame by having eight landscapes and two floral vignettes painted on the walls of his family home, now the Taft museum. Duncanson travelled abroad and won international fame, the first African-American artist to do so.

25. Nathan Hastings/Sampson house site – west end of McMakin Avenue. A native of Boston, Hastings hid

fugitive slaves in a tool house and wooden shed attached to his house.

26. Mt. Healthy Christian Church – 7717 Harrison Avenue – Founded by Pastor David S. Burnet, part of the Cincinnati Burnet family, this church was torn apart by the slavery question. It expelled Aaron Lane for his abolitionist views against the protests of other members and for six years the church stopped holding services.

27. Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon Scott – 7601 Hamilton Avenue – Built in 1840, this was a station for the Underground Railroad. Scott was a Presbyterian minister and professor who had taught at Miami University and moved to Mt. Healthy, where he taught at Farmers’ College in College Hill. His daughter, Caroline, married Pres. Benjamin Harrison. Still existing are traces of rooms or tunnels in the basement.

28. Anthony Nelson – In 1859 Nelson, a former Kentucky slave who bought his freedom brought his family to Mt. Healthy. He purchased land from Gilbert LaBoiteaux, and built his house which became a station, his family helping others on their way to Hamilton or Dayton. Rachel Nelson was his granddaughter.

29. Dr. Alexander B. Luse house site - 3206 Compton Road – Dr. Luse was one of the local physicians who would attend to the medical needs of the fugitives. They would stay with him until they were well enough to resume travel. Another local doctor so involved was Dr. Reuben D. Mussey

30. Charles Cheny site – Originally from Connecticut, Cheny believed the climate in Mt. Healthy was perfect for growing mulberry trees and cultivating silkworms. He founded the Mulberry Grove Silk Growing and Manufacturing Company and stayed in the business for seven years. During that time, he became friends with Salmon P. Chase and other anti-slavery advocates. Cheny’s home became a station and he would be seen driving a wagon with his son next to him and with fugitives hidden in the wagon bed behind them. A descendent of Cheny wrote to Prof. Wilbur Siebert about the recollections of Charles’s son Frank who often spoke of the freedman Jim who would misdirect any pursuers as to the direction the wagon had taken.

31. Mt. Healthy Historical Society Museum – 1546 McMakin – Built originally as a community meeting house, the museum contains artifacts of early Mt. Healthy life, including slave manacles.

32. Mt. Pleasant Cemetery - The resting place of Jesse Locker.

33. Lane Homestead – Hamilton Avenue and Mill Road – The Lane family were outspoken abolitionists and their home was a station. Pioneer John Lane was a blacksmith whose limestone workshop (1814) is still standing. His sons, Aaron and Clark, were very active in the Underground Railroad. Clark was successful in the blacksmithing trade and funded the Lane Library in Lebanon. *Private residence.*

Text and map provided by: Betty Ann Smiddy and Kathy Dahl. Information and photographs provided by: Betty Ann Smiddy, College Hill Historical Society; Kathy Dahl, Park Naturalist, LaBoiteaux Woods, Cincinnati Park Board; Mt. Healthy Historical Society; and with the support of the North College Hill Historical Society and Northside community residents; Sylvia Rummell descendant of Jonathan Cable; Arlette Merritt descendant of Anthony and Rachel Nelson.