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**Sparks from the Flaming Wheel by Joseph Rhodes**



# Confluence

Volume 19, Issue 3 - July 2012

*Truth or Legend?*

## Beloiters Aided Slaves on Way to Freedom

By Sue Kurth

"If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck."

While the old quote makes common sense to many, it can be disputed by others. Such is the case whenever the topic of an underground railroad arises in Beloit.

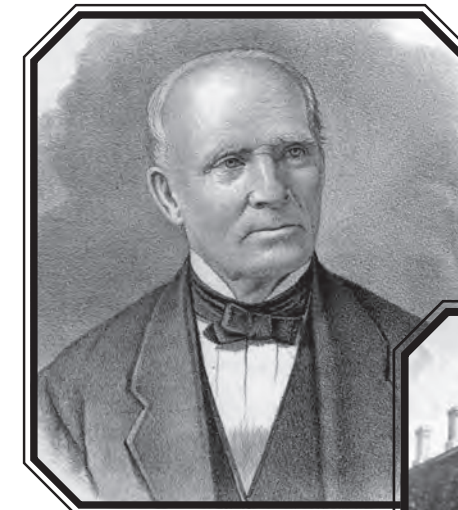
The Shepherd House had a secret room in the attic, the Loomis House had a loft with a false wall, the Carpenter and Loomis houses had tunnels. Owners of both the Loomis and Colby homes were abolitionists. What else could this information mean if not that slaves were hidden on their way to freedom? Below is a bit more information on each home.



**Shepherd House**

The Carpenter House, 1620 Shore Drive, is today an office and meeting headquarters for several unions. The 1853 home is said to have had a 40-foot tunnel, big enough for an auto to travel through, from the house to the barn, then to the river.

It has since been mostly filled in. Union member Henry Puttkemery was quoted in the 3/3/91 issue of the Janesville Gazette as saying, "My mother walked through the tunnel before part of it caved in. They had a speaking tube to the tunnel to warn against bounty hunters."



**A. B. Carpenter**

The home was owned by Alvin B. Carpenter whose family was allegedly Congregationalist.

According to the Gazette article, those who aided the fugitives were mainly Quakers, Presbyterians and Congregationalists.

On the other side of the issue, Earl Sonneson wrote to the Beloit Daily News, and his letter was published on January 5, 1988. He was part of a group of

men who did remodeling to the home in 1953, and he disputes the tunnel theory saying he only saw evidence of a small tunnel, large enough for an adult to crawl through. Today the entrance to what once was a tunnel is 10 by 10 by six foot high area, bricked closed in a rounded fashion.

Others have said that the tunnels would have been commonly used as a way of receiving shipments by way of the river, and keeping them dry while transporting to the house.



**Carpenter House**

Sonneson called those "speaking tubes" a forerunner of the intercom. The 1936 Book of Beloit indicated the house may have harbored runaway slaves.

According to local historian and Attorney Bill Bolgrien, the reference in that book may have started rumors.

Janice Baylis of Deal Beach, CA wrote to the Beloit Historical Society in 1998 that the "Shepherd House, located on the south side of Emerson, east of Milwaukee

*Continued inside*

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The Vision of the Beloit Historical Society is to make history a focal point of community pride and to serve as a constant reminder to the community of its great and diverse heritage.

Visit our web site at [beloithistoricalociety.com](http://beloithistoricalociety.com)

**Beloit Historical Society**

**Confluence**

**845 Hackett St.**

**Beloit WI 53511**

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## Beloit Historical Society

Founded 1910

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layout by Jen Scott.

Board meetings are the third Thursday of every month at 4:15 p.m. and are held at Lincoln Center, 845 Hackett Street.

The Newsletter, Confluence, is published quarterly for the membership of the Beloit Historical Society to inform readers of Society activities as well as educate them on the history of Beloit. The Beloit Historical Society manages two sites, Lincoln Center Museum with main offices at 845 Hackett St. and Hanchett-Bartlett Homestead, 2149 St. Lawrence Ave. For further information please call (608) 365-7835 or e-mail us at [Pkerr@beloithistoricalsociety.com](mailto:Pkerr@beloithistoricalsociety.com). Or see our web site at [beloithistoricalsociety.com](http://beloithistoricalsociety.com).

## From The Beloit Historical Society Files

In 1849 a branch of the Liberty Party was organized in Beloit by Horatio Burchard. Like the Union League, its intent was to speak against slavery, aid slaves escaping the south, and even “discipline” those who were in favor of slavery. Slaves who wished to leave this area were led out Liberty Avenue to Madison Road and northward to liberty. That is how Liberty Avenue got its name.

Charles Hansen started as a blacksmith in Beloit, and during the 1850s began making plows. His shop, on the corner of Third and St. Lawrence streets, achieved an enviable record throughout the Midwest as C. Hansen & Sons. They achieved an enviable record with their “Norway Clipper,” a walking plow. The patent was sold to John Deere Plough Co., Rock Island, IL. in 1890.

The first known automotive-type gasoline tractor built and sold for farm purposes was built in 1906-07 by John Sleeper Holmes on his property at 1105 Chapin St. It was designed so that present tools a farmer might have could be attached to the tractor. According to his grandson, Philip Holmes, John was not a good businessman and did not profit from his invention. He did not obtain a patent or legal protection to keep others from copying his work.

### 300 POUNDS OF AIRMAIL IS SENT ON INAUGURAL FLIGHT (11 SEPTEMBER, 1930)

Dark clouds gathering in the west did not hamper M.S. De Long, Northwest Airways pilot, from leaving the Rock County airport at 5:10 o'clock yesterday afternoon with Beloit's first consignment of southbound airmail for Chicago and points beyond.

The inauguration of airmail service out of Beloit was a successful event in every way. More than 300 pounds of mail was sent out. This poundage included approximately 17,000 pieces of mail. Cards and letters were addressed to every state in the United States, and some to provinces in Canada, Mexican states, South American countries, and to many European nations. The southbound consignment consisted of nine bags. Some mail was sent in the morning.

At the same time the special plane carrying mail was about to take off, the regular mail plane with Leslie Smith at the controls hove into sight with the cloud banks at his back. As soon as he picked up the Janesville mail, and W.R. Anthony, superintendent of mails at the Beloit post office, and Ben F. Myers, assistant superintendent of airmail in the middle west, found their seats, the regular plane was winging its way towards Chicago.

Mrs. Minnie McIntyre Wallace  
Daily News Publishing Co.,  
Beloit, Wisconsin

Dear Mrs. Wallace:

Yesterday at a meeting at the Board of Directors, it was decided to present to the Beloit Historical Society the letter to the citizens of Beloit which was dropped on June 17, from the Good Will plane carrying Major Dargue and Walter O. Lochner.

Inasmuch as this letter is the first official communication to the City of Beloit via the air from the United States Government, we feel that it has a historic value. The letter is enclosed.

We believe also that the pouch which contained the letter should be given to the Beloit Historical Society but there is a young man here in town who has asked that we give it to him. This boy, who is about nine years old, picked up the message after it had landed in the street and he has asked us for it so he could keep it for his children to look at. The lad's name is Charles Gardner and he lives at 417 Bluff St., this city. We are going to give this pouch to him with instructions that he shall give it in his own name to the Beloit Historical Society and deliver it to you.

Yours very truly,

Beloit Commercial Club  
McLellan Building

Fred A. Collinge,  
Exec. Sec 'y.

### *Wish List*

*Scissors (2 large pair)*



*Copy paper*

*Lawn edger*



## Beloiters Aided Slaves On Way To Freedom (continued)

kee Road was a station in the underground railroad. I lived in the house from 1937 to 1942.”

The house had what Baylis calls a “secret place in the attic, which was evidently planned when the house was built.”

Information from Robert Irmann of Beloit College (undated but found in Beloit Historical Society files) quoted Sally (Mrs. Eugene) Reitler, a resident of Beloit since 1900, as saying she recalled stories of fugitive slaves hidden in a very narrow stairway to the cupola of the Shepherd House.

The Loomis House, 155 St. Lawrence Ave., has since been torn apart and became the property of Beloit Corporation.

In a Beloit Daily News article of June, 1951, writer Blaine Hansen linked the home with the Underground Railroad. Here is what he wrote:

Authenticated local history places the Loomis house as a Beloit station of the so-called Underground Railroad system.... Old timers told later Beloiters, including my father, how strange Negroes, sometimes with children, would be seen for a day or two about the premises, and then disappear. They would come out at dusk for a breath of air.” He went on to say that “white folks of avowed abolitionist sympathies occupied the home.”

The Loomis House, according to Hansen, had a loft over the east wing with a false

wall on its north side, behind which slaves could hide. In addition, the author tells of being taken to the basement by the home's current owner to see the mouth of a tunnel big enough for a person to stand full height.



### Loomis House

In this article, Hansen also indicated that the Colby House on Colby Street (formerly 1838 S. Race St.) was a station on the Underground Railroad and Nathan D. Colby, a sailor in the War of 1812, served as the station “agent.” He was said to be an “avowed abolitionist” and was a leader of the Union League, a group active in the anti-slavery movement prior to the Civil War.

So, is it looking like a duck yet? Then read on.

Bolgrien refutes all rumors of underground railroads in Beloit, on the basis of hours spent doing research which included two histories of Rock County.

One of the books was written by Dr. William Fiske Brown in 1879. He was a

professor at Beloit College, minister, Civil War veteran, and a Presbyterian. Bolgrien asserts that Brown would have “told, in his history, about Beloit having an underground railroad – if it had been fact.”

The second book, by Dr. Thomas Waltermann, retired vice chancellor at UW-Whitewater, also found no evidence of an underground railroad in Beloit. And get this, Maurice Montgomery, former archivist for Rock County Historical Society, is said by Bolgrien to “have conclusively found there not to have been an Underground Railroad station” at the Tallman House in Janesville.

Montgomery was also quoted in a 2/7/83 Beloit Daily News article as saying that while some escaping slaves did come through this area, they would have not needed to take elaborate precautions because most of the residents were abolitionists.

In that same article, Richard Hartung, director of the Rock County Historical Society, indicated that there certainly is evidence of a few escaped slaves being helped, “but that doesn't mean Beloit was an important link in the system.”

Apparently, calling it an Underground Railroad indicates being part of a formal movement, while those slaves who passed through this area did so informally and infrequently.

So, is it a duck, or just a wild goose chase?

### UP-COMING EVENTS

The Beloit Historical Society plans an opening of its new exhibit entitled **Sparks of Beloit: Vignettes of a Collection** with a Business After Five Chamber event. This will transpire in late summer or early Fall and invitations will be mailed out. We hope you folks will join us for the occasion and enjoy an evening of refreshments and good conversation.

**Heritage Days** planning is underway. Join us at Hanchett-Bartlett Homestead and at Lincoln Center the 9th of September 2012 from 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. There is no cost and there will be some popcorn and lemonade to tempt your taste buds. Please take a look at the BDN for more details around the time of the event.