

Laura Smith Haviland (1808-1898)

Rather than merely supplying food and clothing for fugitives who hid in her husband's barn, Laura Smith Haviland operated out in the open and, often, alone. Her farm was located on the Raisin River in Lenawee County (near Adrian, Michigan). She was a Quaker and headed the local antislavery society.

She opened the Raisin Institute in 1837 where girls learned sewing and housework and boys learned how to farm. Her school was the first in Michigan to admit African-American children.

When an epidemic killed most of her family in 1845, Haviland began to take a more active role in the antislavery movement. Her highest priority was to help protect the fugitives and freedpeople living in or near the community. When confronted by slave catchers, she blew a horn which summoned help from sympathetic neighbors and scared off the interlopers. If necessary, she escorted former slaves to one of the state's many Underground Railroad stations.

At times she left the area and state in efforts to spring traps set by slave catchers. Eventually, Haviland made her way to Cincinnati where she nursed sick fugitives and taught African-American children at Underground Railroad stations. Often, she single-handedly took fugitives to Canada or brought enslaved persons out of the South.

Because of her work and the condemnatory letters she sent to slave owners, a \$3,000 reward was offered for her capture, dead or alive. Even in the North, she had few friends because many felt a woman's place was in the home.

She continued her work, establishing a school for escaped slaves in Windsor, Ontario in 1852. Ten years later she taught, clothed, and fed freed people ignored by most Civil War relief efforts. Before her death she also became involved in other causes: the need for orphanages, women's rights, and prohibition.

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