

# Laura Smith Haviland

The dogged independence of Laura Smith Haviland (1808-1898) ruffled feathers on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. She far overstepped the role of the typical female Underground Railroad worker concerned chiefly with rustling up food and clothing for fugitives hidden in her husband's barn. Furthermore, Haviland ignored the Railroad's usual *modus operandi*, in which it conducted its work collectively and in secret. Haviland operated out in the open and, usually, alone.

During the first three decades of her life, Haviland was busy marrying a farmer, moving from New York State to the Raisin River in Lenawee County, Michigan (near today's Adrian), and bearing eight children. She was still a young woman when the antislavery movement spread into Michigan in the early 1830s, after the arrival of abolitionist writer Elizabeth Chandler. The pair became friends, and Haviland headed Chandler's local antislavery society, the Logan Female Antislavery Society (the first of its kind in the state), when the writer died a few years later. Haviland's involvement with the group didn't sit well with her fellow Quakers. Although most of them were steadfast in their opposition to slavery, they believed it would end naturally, whenever other Christians got around to emancipating their slaves. Haviland eventually left the Quaker sect, but stuck close to its pacifist precepts.

Haviland next opened the Raisin Institute in 1837. There, girls learned sewing and housework and boys learned how to farm. Significantly, Haviland didn't distinguish between the races. Hers was the first Michigan school to admit African-American children.

In 1845 tragedy struck. An epidemic claimed much of Haviland's family, and afterward, she was haunted by dreams of a slave at her door, feet bloody from the shackles on his ankles. She became convinced that the dream was calling her to a more active role in the antislavery movement.

The new widow's first priority was to help protect the escaped slaves and freed-people living in and near the Raisin community. Under a system she devised, any lurking slave catchers were greeted by a blast from a tin horn, which summoned help from sympathetic neighbors. When the horns didn't scare these hunters away, she escorted former slaves to one of the state's many Underground Railroad stations. From there, they could escape to a safer spot in Michigan, or to Canada.

Haviland traveled even greater distances to take on slave catchers face-to-face. On one journey to Ohio, she ferreted out a trap set for a freedman who had farmed on her property.



She sprang the trap successfully and then stared down the angry, pistol-waving slave catchers on the train ride home.

Eventually, Haviland made her way to Cincinnati to work beside Levi Coffin, reputed president of the Underground Railroad. She nursed sick fugitives and taught African-American children in the basement of the Zion Baptist Church, a busy Railroad station. She often ventured alone outside the relative safety of those walls to take fugitives to Canada and lead slaves out of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Arkansas.

These exploits and her brazen, condemnatory letters to slave owners made Haviland so infamous in the South that Tennessee slaveholders offered a \$3,000 reward for her capture, dead or alive. She had a similar shortage of friends in the North, where some clergymen and others felt the place for a woman, even a Railroad woman, was in the home.

Undaunted, Haviland established a school for escaped slaves in Windsor, Ontario, in 1852. A decade later, she was immersed in teaching, clothing, and feeding the freed-people ignored by most Civil War relief efforts. And in the years before her death, still other causes<sup>3/4</sup> the need for orphanages, women's rights, and prohibition—captured the attention of the feisty little woman, remembered by Adrian residents as "Aunt Laura."

Taken from *For the Benefit of All: A History of Philanthropy in Michigan* by Joel J. Orosz (Ed.), Battle Creek, Michigan: W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 1997, p. 32.

