

**Antislavery Women in Ashtabula County
A Self-Guided Pilgrimage
Presented by Andy Pochatko and
The Hubbard House Underground Railroad Museum**

Saturday, October 3, 2020

Please note that owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, this pilgrimage is self-guided and designed to be no contact. Unfortunately as a result, we are unable to access the very buildings in which this history was made. Some of these sites sit on private property and you are encouraged to view them from a distance so as to not disturb the property owners. Still, it is our hope that the tour is educational and enjoyable for all.

Introduction (Track One)

The history of antislavery is filled with names now forgotten. From the very beginning, antislavery was a movement of the very people who were being enslaved, namely the African person. History records the attempted rebellion of an unnamed enslaved African woman who, in 1721, led an armed fight against the sailors of the slavery *Robert*. For this, this woman whose name is unknown was hanged by her thumbs, flogged, and her skin gashed until she was dead. It is because her story is so gruesome that it is remembered.

Antislavery, from its very origins, has always been an issue of both sexes. While most histories today focus on the male contributions to the antislavery movement, arguably women were making even more important strides in the abolitionist effort. This effort grew to be an international movement encompassing the countries surrounding the Atlantic Ocean, especially Britain and the United States. Far from this international scene, the women of Ashtabula County were making their own strides towards abolitionism. Despite lacking the ability to vote, Ashtabula County women were busy in the Underground Railroad, making handicrafts to aid the runaway enslaved person, organizing antislavery fairs and bazaars, and petitioning the various legislatures to abolish Black Laws limiting the movements of African-Americans and to abolish slavery itself.

Even in the small, bucolic towns of Ashtabula County, antislavery was not a homogeneous movement. Some people thought that a gradual emancipation of enslaved persons was best, while others—such as those followers of the firebrand abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison—insisted on the complete and immediate emancipation of all those held in bondage within the United States. Still others wished to remove all persons of African descent under the racist guise of colonization. Such is the complexity of the antislavery movement.

The goal of this tour is to explore some of that complexity as it played out in the lives of the Ashtabula County women. We begin this tour by visiting the resting place of Betsy Mix Cowles, arguably the most important female abolitionist to hail from Ashtabula County. Notably, she is buried across from the Cowles family homestead where she spent most of her life. Next we will visit the Giddings Law Office to learn about Cowles's counterpart, Lura Maria Giddings, the daughter of the noted antislavery congressman Joshua Giddings, who represented Ohio in the House of Representatives before the Civil War. After the Giddings Law Office, you have the option to visit Oakdale Cemetery where Giddings and her father are interred, along with Benjamin Wade, another antislavery Ohio politician, and Charles A. Garlick, an African-American who was born enslaved in Virginia. From Jefferson, we will then have a drive-by of the John Brown, Jr., house and learn about the women who aided

John Brown in his raid on the Harper's Ferry arsenal in 1859. Proceeding onto Rte. 193, we will stop in Cherry Valley and learn about the antislavery petition movement, in which many Ashtabula County women participated. Following on the petition movement, we will then visit Andover and learn about women's involvement in antislavery fairs and what exactly the significance of cheese is to the fairs. Lastly, we will head back north to visit the small hamlet of Farnham, originally known as South Ridge, which was home to the South Ridge Ladies' Aid Society.

Besty Mix Cowles (1810–1876) (Track Two)

Betsy Mix Cowles, for all intents and purposes, was the leading female abolitionist in Ashtabula County. Born in Connecticut, Betsy—barely a year old—moved westward with her family to the Ohio Western Reserve when her father became the Congregationalist minister in Austinburg, Ohio. The Rev. Giles Hooker Cowles brought with him a missionary zeal inspired, in part, by the New Light Divinity which embraced religious revivals throughout New England. This evangelical zeal, part of the Second Great Awakening, lit up the American population as religious revivals swept westward from New England, through New York's "Burned-Over District," and into the Western Reserve. Ministers like Cowles spread messages of progressive social reform: care for the sick, elderly, and poor; temperance, education, prison reform, and the eradication of slavery from American soil.

Rev. Cowles's message was instilled in each of his children, perhaps none more than his eighth child, Betsy. Besty considered herself first an educator. It was the principles she learned through her educational training, however, that led her to be one of the most effective antislavery organizers in the United States. Like most organizations, Cowles started small: she organized along with her sister Cornelia and 11 other Austinburg women the Young Ladies Society for Intellectual Improvement in 1834. This self-education group met biweekly to discuss domestic, scientific, and political topics. Inevitably, the topic of slavery arose. Within a year, this group was largely displaced when, in September 1835, the Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society was established. One of the stated goals of the society was "to unite our efforts to produce & diffuse a correct state of Christian feeling toward this suffering and neglected class of our community on the broad principles laid down by our blessed Savior himself." Under Cowles's leadership, the Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society came to boast several auxiliaries throughout the county with a membership of nearly 500, the largest such society in Ohio and among the largest in the United States.

Cowles's antislavery involvement crossed over into her teaching as well. At a time when African-Americans were considered intellectually inferior to whites, Cowles believed in educating persons of all backgrounds, whether female or male, black or white. The Black Laws, instituted in Ohio even before Cowles's birth, however, made it difficult for African-Americans to attain education within the state. It is likely while Cowles was teaching in Ashtabula County and its environs that she never taught an African-American student. Only when she took a teaching position at Portsmouth, Ohio—on the Ohio River, near the Kentucky border—was she able to teach to an interracial class. Unfortunately for Cowles and the African-American students, the people of Portsmouth began to harangue Cowles and withdrew their children from Cowles's classroom. Nevertheless, Cowles persisted for nearly a year before, exhausted by the emotional trauma, she resigned her position and returned to Northern Ohio.

Several years would pass before she taught another interracial class. The opportunity came in 1848 when she accepted a position at Massillon, Ohio. The Ohio legislature had recently passed a bill which allowed for education of African-American children, so long as there were no written objections to their presence. Again Cowles was heartbroken as several citizens of Massillon banded together to petition for the African-American students removal. Cowles fought back, but to no avail. The Massillon school board was forced to expel the students when the opposing side hired a lawyer. Most heart wrenching for Cowles was the sight of two female African-American students who, unaware of their dismissal from their school, stood "weeping most bitterly" in the school yard.

Scenes such as these only furthered Cowles's resolve for immediate abolition. Cowles saw education as an uplifting societal force. Indeed, Cowles thought, that through education—presenting the facts about slavery—and through moral suasion—appealing to slaveholders' ethos—that slavery could be abolished without political interference. In 1838, Cowles was among the first females to enroll in the newly-formed Ladies Course at Oberlin College. With Cowles away at Oberlin, however, the female antislavery movement she had helped to ferment in Ashtabula County largely waned. Even with her return to Ashtabula County to take a teaching position at Austinburg's Grand River Institute, Cowles chose not to rekindle her previous organization. Instead, Cowles had grown more radical in her views and instead lent her efforts to Ohio's Western Anti-Slavery Society, a society formed over disagreements over the long-term goals of abolition. The catalyst behind these radical views was a Boston antislavery newspaper editor named William Lloyd Garrison.

Cowles was a kind of anomaly among her Ashtabula County antislavery cohorts as a supporter of William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison, editor of the antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, was known for his unequivocal and unfaltering stance on the abolition of slavery.

While many around Garrison supported the conditional abolition of slavery, either through African or Haitian colonization or through apprenticeship programs, Garrison rejected these forms of abolition and argued that enslaved African-Americans should be freed without delay. To this end, Garrison also condemned any institution which upheld slavery, including church and state, even going as far to promote disunion under the motto “No Union with Slaveholders” to separate the free north from the slaveholding south. Garrison also promoted female involvement in the antislavery movement at a time when women’s involvement was still controversial.

Cowles, like Garrison, was direct in her condemnation of church and state for the propagation of slavery. Of churches who supported slavery under the semblance of Biblical authority, Cowles reprimanded them as having “clothed itself in the garb of selfishness, avarice & wickedness,” arguing further that these churches were “as deeply imbued in the sin of slavery as was Pilate in the murder of Christ. . . & in washing their hands, they make themselves as pure as he did.” Moreover, Cowles warned that if the nation continued in its support for slavery that it would “make a post-mortem of our government, its constitution, & its laws.”

Betsy Mix Cowles lived to see the end of slavery at the end of the Civil War. Despite having to retire from teaching due to cataracts, Cowles continued her advocacy for education and women’s rights in her last decade. She died July 25, 1876—four months before the contested presidential election and compromise that would usher in the Jim Crow era in the South—and was interred in the cemetery across from the family homestead.

Lura Maria Giddings (1825–1871) (Track Three)

Much of the history of Lura Maria Giddings is unfortunately overshadowed by the larger figures of Betsy Mix Cowles and by Giddings’s father, the abolitionist congressman Joshua Reed Giddings. It is, then, that for the most part we have only learned about Giddings and her contributions to Ashtabula County abolitionism literally through footnotes.

Lura Maria Giddings was the eldest daughter of Joshua Giddings. She was educated at Hartford Women’s Seminary in Connecticut. That Giddings valued his daughter’s insight was clear from the numerous letters that remain between them. He once wrote to her, saying that he would always have “confidence in the principles in which you have thus far been bred. . .” Other times, she would accompany him to Washington, D.C., and was with her father in Montreal when he died.

It was clear, however, that Maria Giddings added an important voice to her already abolitionist father. Maria Giddings was certainly more radical in her approach to the antislavery movement. While her father had to play politics to keep his congressional seat, his daughter was less unwavering with her views. By the late 1840s, Maria Giddings had associated herself with the Garrisonian abolitionists and the Western Antislavery Society in Ohio.

Maria Giddings acted as a conduit between her father and the Garrisonians. Garrisonian abolitionists often Joshua Giddings criticized Giddings for maintaining his party affiliations, which many Garrisonians rejected. Joshua Giddings was also not in favor of disunion as advocated by his daughter and the Garrisonians, although he did listen to her arguments. Perhaps, her biggest political contribution, according to Douglas A. Gamble is that “Congressman Giddings’ close association with Maria’s radical colleagues simultaneously allowed them to work with and through him to influence a wider public and gave Giddings contact with articulate radicals whom he respected and trusted.”

The Brown Family and Harper’s Ferry (Track Four)

Only a few weeks after his father was hanged for the Harper’s Ferry raid, John Brown, Jr., wrote to Besty Mix Cowles saying that he would likely have to leave Ashtabula County because “the hounds [are] baying at my back.” Brown was wanted by the U.S. Government for questioning about his role in his father’s raid (Brown later admitted to helping organize the raid, including retrieving and storing the Sharp’s rifles used to seize the arsenal). Yet, as the federal government searched for Brown, other key witnesses were free to move about without suspicion: the Brown family women.

Whether you consider him a fanatic or a martyr, there can be no doubt that John Brown was a persuasive person. He managed to convince 21 people (including two sons and two brothers of his son-in-law) to take up arms and attack a federal arsenal to instigate a widespread slave revolt in the south. We know, of course, that Brown and his men failed. Yet, the ripples of the raid were immediately felt in the south, as many Southerners felt that Brown’s raid was a part of a larger plot of the north to seize their slaves.

Yet, although the Brown family women did not take part directly in the fight at Harper’s Ferry, their roles were critical nonetheless. Brown’s daughter and daughter-in-law, Annie and Martha (whose husband Oliver was among those killed in the raid), respectively, joined Brown at the Kennedy Farm in Maryland to tend to the house and keep watch so that nosy neighbors did not discover their plans. Even Mary, Brown’s second wife, wrapped bandages

ahead of her husband's raid on the Harper's Ferry arsenal. It would be wrong to think that the women were mere passive instruments to an authoritarian Brown. Indeed, the Brown family shared in a larger rejection of the Garrisonian ideal of moral suasion as a means to end slavery. Instead, the Browns advocated for direct political action, going as far as murder to free the slaves in the south. As Brown's oldest daughter Ruth once proclaimed, "[moral suasion is a] verry mild means a plan which I think will do about as much good as it wold to try to pacify a raging tiger with the promise of a good meal by and by."

Moreover, the spouses who married into the Brown family were expected to share the same values. As with Martha Brown, so too was Wealthy Hotchkiss Brown, who married John Brown, Jr. Wealthy was born to a poor family in Trumbull County, Ohio, and married Brown, Jr., sometime between 1837 and 1840. Like most Brown women, Wealthy followed her husband as he sought work. She even followed him, along with her toddler John Brown III, to Kansas Territory in the 1850s to fight proslavery persons trying to manipulate Kansas's entry into the Union as a slave state. Of her husband's and in-laws' fight, she wrote back to her brother-in-law in the east, "We might as well die here in a good cause as freeze to death there. Even after Kansas, when the Browns moved to Ashtabula County, Wealthy continued to support her family's antislavery cause, as her husband aided his father in scouting out locations to help support the raid on Harper's Ferry. And even though Brown, Jr., did not participate directly in the raid, he was still wanted for questioning by the U.S government. Rather than acquiesce, Brown, Jr., went into hiding with the aid of the Independent Sons of Liberty, colloquially known as the "Black Strings," for the black piece of thread they looped through their buttonhole. Throughout her husband's absence, Wealthy continued to look after the household and farm, just as the other Brown women before her.

Cherry Valley Auxiliary and Petitioning (Track Five)

Betsy Mix Cowles's influence was county-wide, so much so that her Ashtabula County Female Antislavery Society counted nine auxiliary groups within a couple months after formation. One such group was in Cherry Valley. The roles the auxiliary groups played varied, but among their most important roles was that of petitioning. While a seemingly innocuous and passive act, petitioning was an effective measure to voice their opinion. Or, at the very least, rattle the passions of Southern politicians.

Indeed, petitioning had a history almost as old as the American nation itself. Petitioning arose with enslaved African-Americans around the turn of the 18th century and gained more momentum around the time of the American Revolution and Constitutional Convention. Enslaved persons criticized the new nation and their proclamations of liberty and freedom all the while condoning slavery and ignoring "yelps for liberty."

While these early attempts at mobilizing a manumitting force are important, they were few enough in number that they were largely ignored by the organizations to which they were sent. This changed in the 1830s. In 1834, the American Antislavery Society began a petition drive, directing antislavery societies to petition Congress for the abolishment of slavery. This drive led to nearly 415,000 petitions to be sent to the House of Representatives in 1838. Women made up a significant number of the signers with approximately 3 million women signing petitions between 1831 and 1861. The petitions were so disruptive to the House that in 1838 they implemented the controversial gag order, which blocked any debate or procedure with the petitions.

It must be remembered that although a national movement, petitioning originated at the local level. From his research for his dissertation, Chris Padgett counted no less than 18 petitions sent to the House of Representatives between 1834 and 1851 by Ashtabula County women. According to Padgett, these petitions "cover eight congresses, represent eight [Ashtabula County] townships and a county-wide female abolitionist organization, and contain more than fifteen hundred signatures penned by over eleven hundred women."

Numbers, too, can be deceiving at first glance. For example, in 1836 during a petition drive to challenge the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church's stance on slavery, Betsy Mix Cowles received word from Maria Kellogg of the Cherry Valley auxiliary that their drive yielded thirty signatures. These numbers seem small when compared to the eleven hundred women from Ashtabula County or the 3 million nationwide. Yet, when one looks at the population numbers for Cherry Valley, the signatures of thirty women represented nearly 17% of the female population of the township with ages over 20 years.

Ashtabula County Cheesedom and Antislavery Fairs (Track Six)

Between 1840 and 1850, Ashtabula County produced over 5 million pounds of cheese. Many of the surrounding counties each produced at least 1 million pounds of cheese. These high productions of cheese earned the Western Reserve area of Ohio the moniker of Cheesedom, a nickname it would hold until the early 20th century. Andover became the epicenter of Ashtabula County cheese production after the Civil War. So what does cheese have to do with antislavery?

Well, the answer is impressive; at least it was to the crowds of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society fair. For the Boston antislavery fairs in 1847 and 1848, the women of the Ashtabula County Female Antislavery Society donated a “stupendous cheese,” accompanied to Boston by Lura Maria Giddings, the second of which weighed in at 197 pounds. The fair goods, however, were not limited to cheese. Women plied their handicrafts among silks and flowers for the purchase of the crowds. As Betsy Mix Cowles described the 1846 antislavery fair in Jefferson, “the specimens of fancy and useful articles were fine, alike reflecting correct taste—good judgement and humane hearts.” The ideology of the fair was clear from a quilt embroidered with the motto of “Garrison and Liberty.”

Antislavery fairs were important in that they attracted people of different backgrounds and beliefs. As Cowles wrote, “Notwithstanding our different creeds and politics, every heart seemed joyous.” Indeed, the fairs offered more than goods for purchase. It was a space to engage those who may not have been won over to the antislavery cause. At these fairs, the ideological became tangible. Many of the items for sale were emblazoned with the image of enslaved African-America. Here the difference was striking: the items of the fairs were made of free labor, whereas that of the slaves was coerced under the constant threat of violence.

The antislavery fairs also allowed for networking and cooperation among different antislavery groups. As with the example of the Ashtabula County cheese at the Boston women’s antislavery fair, other antislavery organizations shared their wares with other organizations. Perhaps more importantly, though, they shared ideas and information on what worked and what did not with each fair. In this, the women through their fairs were able to fund different causes to help aid the abolition of the slave.

South Ridge Ladies’ Aid Society (Track Seven)

The Rev. Rufus Clark, who ministered for years at the South Ridge Free Will Baptist Church and served as a stationmaster on the Underground Railroad, left us the following description of the South Ridge Ladies' Aid Society:

December 11th, 1854, a colored man, Stephen Pharis and his wife were noticed on a cold snowy day, wading through deep drifts, along the road. . . As he traveled faster than she, when he had reached two or three rods in advance he would stop and wait for her to come up with him. They were thinly clad and foot-sore. They stopped for the night in an old forsaken house. . . It was the third house in which they stopped since they left Fredricksburg, Va., some three months before. Every other night, notwithstanding the severity of the weather, they had encamped in the woods, out-houses, or barns. Mr. Miles, seeing a light in his old shell of a house, went to learn the cause, and found these half-starved, half-clad, pitiable objects, who for liberty were enduring all this suffering. As the fugitive slave law – in full force – forbid any Ohio person harboring, feeding, clothing, aiding or abetting under severe penalties, Mr. Miles hardly dared to feed or make them comfortable for the night. He did, however, proffer his aid. The negro had broken some bits of rails to kindle a fire in the old fire place, and Mr. M. returned to his house where his wife filled a tin pan with provisions, and brought it half – way for the sufferers who were to come for it. This they were supplied for the night.

The South Ridge Ladies' Aid Society, that day convened. . . learning of the fact they set themselves to render the despised pair comfortable. They collected materials for making articles of clothing, with second-hand dresses, coats, etc., and visited them in the old house. When told that they laid themselves liable to be arrested and confined in jail, for violating the Fugitive Slave Law, they responded simultaneously that they should all go together, and would be most cheerfully suffer for deeds of mercy. If the government was going to punish them for obeying the divine law and dictates of their own consciences, they would like to know it immediately and they would be ready purposely to violate such law and accept of fines and imprisonments.

The colored man, Stephen, was born in Maryland, and at that time was twenty-six years old, but never knew who his parents were. The woman, Mary was twenty-three years. He had been a body servant, and she had been a chamber maid. The reason assigned for not crossing Niagara River at Buffalo, into Canada was, too many slaveholder were at that time watching slaveholders that passage, to render an attempt. Safe, Hence they turned their course towards Detroit, and were traveling the whole length of Lake Erie in the cold, bleak winds and snows of Winter.

What an undertaking this was for those poor ignorant suffers to leave the sunny south and attempt the passage from slavery to liberty!

Further Reading

I am especially indebted to the following scholars for the materials from which this presentation was synthesized: Chris Padgett, Stacey M. Robertson, and Linda L. Geary. Those wishing to delve further into the milieu of the abolitionist movement and Ashtabula County history are encouraged to consult the following sources.

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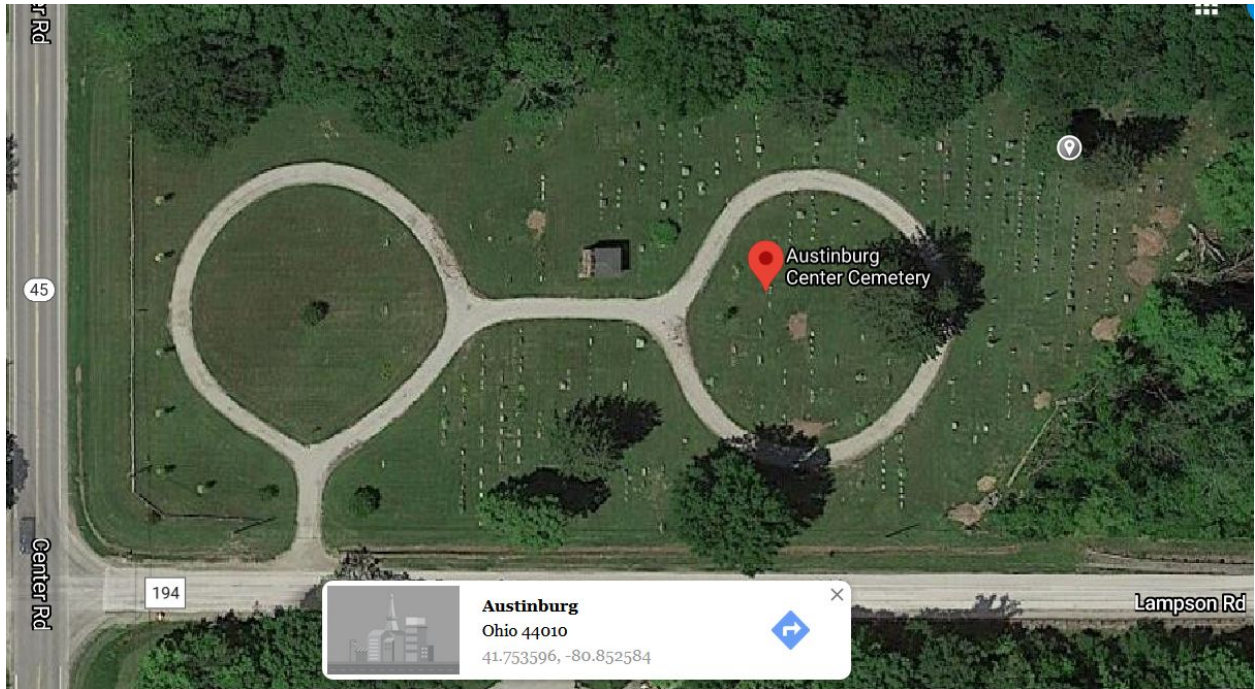
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Any further questions regarding abolitionism in Ashtabula County may be sent to Andy Pochatko at andy.pochatko@harbortopky.lib.oh.us or by calling Harbor-Topky Memorial Library at (440) 964-9645 ext. 1112.

Approximate Location of Betsy Mix Cowles's Grave



Approximate Location of Lura Maria Giddings's Grave

