

# The Underground Railroad



Alexander Nelson, my daughter-in-law's 6th great grandfather, was born in County Down, Ireland. He emigrated to America with his parents in 1759, when he was just ten years old. They first arrived in Philadelphia where he had the fortune to be patronized by Robert Morris, the celebrated financier of the Revolution. As he grew, he eventually moved to Virginia, purchased a plantation called "Poplar Grove" and became an influential member of the community.

He, as so many did in those times, built his success on the backs of the slaves he "owned." This had a profound effect on at least one of his children. John Mathews Nelson left Virginia and his family home out of disgust for the practice of slavery to which he was witness. He and his wife Mary Lewis Trimble Nelson moved to Ohio where they established a way station for the Underground Railroad. They were involved in aiding rescues for fleeing black slaves up until they retired. Their son, Marshall Telfair Nelson, took over where they left off, using the family home at Clear Creek, northeast of Hillsboro, Ohio, as a safe haven for those who could make the journey.

In 1842, James Nelson, John's brother, purchased a family retainer, 33 year old Lewis Morton, who bought the freedom of his ailing wife and three children. They reached the Nelson

safe house in a one-horse cart and set up a forge on Clear Creek where they continued to aid fellow refugees from slavery.

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## A Debt Repaid



It is always uncomfortable to come across family members who participated in the reprehensible practice of slavery but this story, passed down through the generations, is worth telling. Just prior to the Civil War, a young Georgian farmer named Thomas Reese, purchased a slave named Nathan to help him work his fields. A short time later, Nathan asked Thomas if it were possible for him to purchase another slave, a woman named Adeline, who worked on a neighbor's farm.

Thomas did and shortly thereafter Nathan and Adeline were

married. Thomas then presented Nathan with two sets of documents and told him to keep them safe. They were emancipation papers. Nathan couldn't read but believed what Thomas said so he locked them in a box he kept on his fireplace mantle. When told that they were free to go, neither Nathan or Adeline had that desire. "Where would we go? We don't know any other place." They chose to stay and work the farm alongside Thomas's family. The family referred to them as Uncle Nathan and Aunt Adeline. All this happened before Fort Sumter was fired upon, marking the beginning of the Civil War.

Nathan and Adeline remained on the farm throughout the entirety of the war. During its waning days, a group of Union soldiers under the command of General James Wilson was sweeping through the area, tasked with destroying any property that could be used by the Confederates. They came upon Thomas' farm while Thomas was away. As they prepared to set fire to the buildings, Nathan came out and asked why the soldiers were going to burn the place down. The officer replied that all slave-holders' property was to be destroyed.

"But we ain't slaves!" Nathan exclaimed and ran off to get the papers he had safely stored years ago. The officer read through the documents and then told his men to stand down and move on. Thomas' farm was one of the few places in the area that was spared destruction.

Thomas Clopton Reese was the great-grandfather of my grandaunt.

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