

Old Negro Burying Ground - Section 13

by Helen Richards

The history of Carpenter School, which was written in 1941-1942, starts with the following paragraph:

"The history of Carpenter School district dates back to a time before Lincoln was president of the United States. The Negro Slaves would come up from the South to get away from the horrible conditions there. Some of the slaves walked up to the southern part of Michigan. The slaves had established a post here called The Old Sweet Farm. This belongs to Mr. Owen Cady now. On this farm there is an old Negro burying ground."

These statements are confirmed by the following evidence, which will be found in the archives of the Pittsfield Township Historical Society and/or the Ypsilanti Historical Museum.

Jacob Aray was born 24 February 1767 in Holland, and died 19 September 1839 in Pittsfield Township. He married Berthena West and they came from Pennsylvania to Pittsfield Township. Their children were:

James A. - b. 12/23/1804

Asher - b. 9/23/1806

Harriet - b. 3/15/1809

Harvey - b. 5/11/1812

Jacob bought the NE 1/4 of Sec 34 in Ypsilanti Township and west half of NW 1/4 in Sec 13 of Pittsfield Township. This latter property is located south of Ellsworth Road and east of Carpenter Road. This property is listed on the 1836 Pittsfield Township tax roll as being owned by Jacob Aray.

According to Chapman's 1881 History of Washtenaw County, Asher Aray is described as "an efficient employee of the under ground railroad."

Looking at the half-section bordered by I-94 to the south, Ellsworth Road to the north, and Carpenter Road to the west -- successive ownership is as follows. Ownership is recorded starting at Carpenter Road and extending east.

1820/30s - Patentee map: Jacob Aray (80 acres); James Aray (80 acres); James Martin (80 acres); James Larzelere (80 acres)

1840 - Plat map: Jacob Aray estate (160 acres); George McQuam? (80 acres); George Shelman? (80 acres)

1856 - Plat map: E. Lesner (160 acres); Olds (160 acres)

1864 - Plat map: Reese (60 acres); Goodrich (100 acres); L.M. Olds (80 acres); name unreadable (80 acres)

1874 - Plat map: Olds Sweet

1895 - Plat map: Sweet

1915 - Plat map: H. Sweet

1920 - Plat map: Sweet

1939 - Plat map: Cady

Review of property ownership in this "Carpenter School attendance area" identifies properties referenced in the 1941-42 Carpenter School history. The succession of properties also reveals a relationship between the Arays, who were known to be supporters of the underground railroad and properties subsequently described as holding the old burying ground. Thus, there is some credibility in the reference to the "old Negro burying ground."

We do not know with any certainty that the burying ground actually existed. If it did exist, all evidence of it may have been destroyed with the construction of I-94 and/or the more recent housing developments that have been built south of Ellsworth Road? However, the potential of its existence should be taken seriously; and its possible location should be explored further.