

Leominster's stop on the Underground Railroad

By Christine M. Quirk
Staff Writer

It is easy to imagine that the Fugitive Slave Law made Shadrach Minkins nervous.

Minkins, an escaped slave from Virginia, had made his way to Boston where he found work as a waiter. The new law, passed in 1850 mere months after Minkins' flight, allowed federal agents to arrest runaway slaves — even those living in free states — and return them to their owners.

Minkins was captured on Feb. 15, 1851 but before he could be jailed, some 200 citizens, many of them free blacks, stormed the courtroom and rescued him. Two conspirators from the court took him as far as Concord, to the home of Francis Bigelow.

Bigelow didn't hesitate. Minkins was no longer safe. Freedom lay through the west, through the Leominster home of Jonathan and Frances Drake.

Ahead of her time

In a time when women were not allowed to vote or own property and were expected to acquiesce to the wishes of their husbands in all things, Frances Wilder Drake was an anomaly. A staunch abolitionist, she believed in equality — for blacks and for women — and with her husband's blessing, opened their home as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

"She was a tireless worker in this cause and she was an outspoken worker," Leominster Historical Society member Mark Bodanza said. "He [Jonathan Drake] must have been a fairly tolerant husband to support the actions for his wife for that period. A best, she was considered forward-thinking — at worst, a radical."

The Drakes welcomed Minkins warmly into their Franklin Street home, offering him food, shelter, and safe passage north.

"Most slaves came to the Boston area by water, then made their way west, through our area, out to where Interstate 91 is now, via the 5th Mass. Turnpike, into Vermont and into Canada," Bodanza said. "Once a black was in Canada, he was home free. Canada, under the rule of England, was a free country."

Minkins arrived in Leominster on the same day Judge Thomas Russell, who had sheltered the famous slave fugitive John Brown, was slated to give a lecture. Minkins borrowed clothing that had belonged to Frances Drake's deceased mother and attended the lecture disguised as a woman. The following day, he was off to the next Underground stop in Fitchburg.

Anti-slave sentiments were nothing new and support seemed to be growing; in 1855, abolitionists would form the Leominster Anti-Manhunting League. But what made the Minkins case significant, Bodanza said, was the idea that abolitionists were flagrantly ignoring the law.

"The Unionists were very alarmed by this case," Bodanza said. "The Fugitive Slave Law had the ironic twist of settling the more conserva-



Above, Frances and Jonathan Drake. Below left, their home as it looks today. Photos courtesy of the Leominster Historical Society.

tive people — it galvanized the more modern people."

An activist is born

Frances Drake was born Frances Hills Wilder on Oct. 24, 1814. Her ancestors, the Hills, Bodanza said, were a prominent family who brought comb-making to Leominster. She lost several siblings at a young age and thus had to step up to help take care of her family.

"She was pressed into adult roles early in her life," Bodanza said. "I suspect she was constitutionally a strong woman, and knew women were more than capable of dealing with difficult issues and should have the same rights as men."

This upbringing might have set the stage for Drake's strong abolitionist attitude. She married Jonathan Drake, a shoemaker from Lowell, in 1832, and in 1839, the couple settled permanently in Frances's hometown.

Though Frances seems to be the more outspoken of the couple, Jonathan Drake also held strong political opinions. After working to elect Andrew Jackson to a second term in 1832, he refused to vote in any election thereafter and after often said he was disgusted with politics.

The subject of slavery was the hot-button issue of its time, and even those on the same side of the fence did not always agree. In fact, in 1841, the abolitionists had a major split.

"History tends to view abolitionists as one group, but that's not true," Bodanza said. "They were all opposed to slavery, but they had very different ideas of how to get there."

Drake was a Garrisonian abolitionist, following the tenets of William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison, publisher of "The Liberator," an anti-slavery newspaper, not only wanted equality for blacks, he was also a proponent of women's rights.

"They were more zealous and had broader goals," Bodanza said. "The anti-slavery party, by comparison, believed that including women's rights would water

down their cause."

Drake was bold and vocal in her dedication to her cause. In 1843, Charles Lenox Remond, who was a free black abolitionist from Salem, came to Leominster to give a two-day lecture against slavery. Between the engagements, Drake and another woman escorted Remond about town.

"It was very forward for a man to escort a woman," Bodanza said. "Especially since she was a married woman and he was a black man. We may think abolitionists wanted to free the slaves because they believed in equality among the races, but many of them believed in separating [the blacks] after they were freed."

When Remond and Drake showed up for the evening lecture, they were pelted with vegetables, sticks and stones.

"One lady to test my principles asked me if I would marry a colored [sic] man," Drake wrote to her friend and fellow abolitionist Maria Chapman-Weston. "I answered very frankly (as my mother ever prompted), yes — if he was as worthy in every respect as a white man ought to be. You have no idea what a talk it has made all over town."

Drake's candor also earned her some enemies, even among those who were like-minded. Dr. Caleb Field, for example, himself a member of the Anti-Manhunting League, did not appear to be fond of each other.

"There was antagonism between them," Bodanza said. "It might relate to Mrs. Drake's belief that he was not doing enough for the cause."

In 1852, Field wrote an expose on the comb-making industry, and the health effects of comb-making on the workers and their families. He portrayed them as living in crowded tenements with poor ventilation, eating "heavy and ill-prepared food" and living "a feeble, imperfect and miserable existence."

As Drake was the daughter of a comb-maker, it is easy to imagine this raising her ire.

"It is perfectly astonishing to

hear really intelligent people ever saying, 'I wonder what those few women think they can do to abolish slavery,'" Drake wrote to Chapman-Weston. "There is another class which I consider by far the greater enemy to contend with. They are our clergy and our physicians and the most influential among our church members."

Drake held her own clergy, Reverend Rufus Stebbins, of the Unitarian Church, in low regard.

"The Unitarian Church in this place is by far that most popular and, could we only get the minister (who says he is an abolitionist of 12 years) standing right on this subject, all the people would be right," she wrote in 1843. "... Not a member of that church will do a thing except myself and I certainly don't wish to be a member of such a church, I feel it by duty to withdraw or stay away from it in view of all this opposition in high places."

She withdrew so thoroughly that almost two decades later, in 1860, then-minister Stephen Barker noted to his successor: "Mrs. Drake on Franklin Street, never at meeting."

Leominster's only stop

The Drake house still stands today, and it remains the only documented Underground Railroad stop in Leominster. The historical society and the house's present owner are working together to have it included on the National Register of Historic Places and to have a plaque erected noting the significance.

The stop was discovered serendipitously; Bodanza was trying to authenticate the claim

that the old Kendall Tavern was a stop, largely fueled by the federal style of the building and the tunnel underneath it to the outer barn. Though there was a lack of true substantiation, Bodanza said, he did uncover an unidentified document claiming the tunnel was for the escape of itinerant free black labor.

"This made sense," Bodanza said, "because the farmer who owned the tavern at the time did employ itinerant workers. Some of them might have been free blacks who were on their way to Canada, so it would have been plausible."

In doing that work, Bodanza discovered several documents about the Drake house. There were many references to letters, some of which were written by Frances Drake herself, and there was documentation from the Anti-Manhunting League.

Bodanza has been so taken by the local history he has written three plays on life in Leominster in the 1800s, including "The Coming Crucible" which recalls the anti-slavery history of Leominster.

"One of the reasons I wrote this play is that there's so little on the 1840s," Bodanza said. "Lots of people view history as a series of wars, but it's so much more than that. In terms of social movements, it's all integrated. It some ways, the military movements are predicated by the social movements."

The Leominster Historical Society can be reached at 978-257-5424 and is open Saturday mornings from 9 a.m. to noon. Christine M. Quirk can be reached at cquirk@cnc.com.



Above, Frances and Jonathan Drake. Below left, their home as it looks today. Photos courtesy of the Leominster Historical Society.

The Drake house today

The home of Jonathan and Frances Drake still stands (see photo above) and is currently owned by Debra and Peter Phillips.

"We had heard through the rumor that it might have an historical story, so we got pretty excited about it," Debra Phillips said. "When we walked into the house, I thought, 'Wow, I can feel history here.'"

The Phillipses are working with the Leominster Historical Commission to both erect a plaque in front of the home and apply for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. On Friday, Feb. 16 at 2 p.m. — the 156th anniversary of Shadrach Minkins' arrival at the Drakes' home — a commemoration will be held at the

house, 21 Franklin St., Leominster. A reception will immediately follow at the Leominster Historical Society, 17 School St., Leominster.

The society will be accepting donations toward the cost of the plaque, and members hope it will be installed in the spring.

The Phillipses are in the process of renovating and restoring the house, keeping as close to the original design and spirit as possible.

"There aren't too many homes that have that historical story behind them, and we want to be able to preserve that," Phillips said. "And how wonderful it is to have a home in the area that helped those slaves on their way to freedom."

— Christine M. Quirk