

*By Tiya Miles*

# Slavery

## IN EARLY DETROIT

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Fur trader John Askin owned eight. William Macomb, owner of Grosse Ile, possessed 26. Even John R. Williams, first mayor of the city of Detroit, was said to have engaged in the practice.

Slavery existed in Michigan—in Detroit and elsewhere—from its early French days to the writing of the state's first constitution.

Both Native and African

Americans were made to serve a significant proportion of the region's white residents—about 25 percent by

1760—without pay and with no promise of their release.



Above: Agriculture was the primary activity in which enslaved people were employed in the Detroit River region. From "Harper's Encyclopedia of United States History," edited by Benson Lossing. Below: Mayor John R. Williams was an American-born businessman thought to have held slaves. Courtesy of the Detroit Historical Society.

Michigan is a state that proudly celebrates its history of freedom. Across the Lower Peninsula's southern tiers of counties, stories are told about the Underground Railroad and its conductors who once sheltered fugitives from slavery. Of all the storied locations along Michigan's trails to freedom—among them Cassopolis, Battle Creek, Ann Arbor, and Adrian—the city of Detroit may be the most celebrated. Detroit was the home of towering African-American anti-slavery figures such as George DeBaptiste and William Lambert, who co-organized a secret society to aid freedom seekers. It was the location of the Second Baptist Church, a safe haven for fugitives with a membership that actively engaged in abolitionist deeds. It was also the site of a dramatic 1832 rescue in which captured slaves named Thornton and Rutha Blackburn were spirited away from a local jail and sent across the river to Canada by sympathetic supporters.

Detroit, however, was also a community that maintained a sizable slave population during its European colonial and early American history.

### Origins of the Practice

The riverside settlement first known as Fort Ponchartrain du Detroit was founded in 1701 by French explorer Antoine Laumet de La Mothe Cadillac. Cadillac's plan was to draw various groups of Native Americans—Pottawatomi, Ottawa, Huron (Wyandot), Miami, and Ojibwe societies—to settle around the new fort as committed trading partners. In this way, he hoped to extend and maintain

French control over the lucrative fur trade in the Great Lakes region and to undermine British competition in Canada. As the population grew at the fort that became known simply as "Detroit," it encompassed farms on both sides of the river. Settlers sought to take full advantage of the central waterway that flowed between Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie.

As an economic hub for trade as well as a food production center, Detroit needed a sizable labor force: people who could grow and process food, handle furs, assist in trade, operate boats, maintain domestic spaces, and other activities. From the perspective of French traders and merchants, some of whom were financially comfortable by the mid-1700s, that labor could be cheaply and adequately performed by slaves.

The French's first source for slave labor came from the Indians that surrounded them.



### Trading for Panis

Prior to French arrival, slavery already existed among Native Americans in the Great Lakes; captives taken during warfare with other tribes were often enslaved. Since most of these captives came from the Western plains, the French called them *panis* (derived from "Pawnee").

Panis were traded from the tribes to the French in exchange for manufactured goods, a practice viewed as acceptable to Detroit settlers because France had legally condoned slavery

in its New World colonies since the early 18th century. A 1709 ordinance stipulated that “the panis and Negroes who have been, and who will be bought shall be owned by those who have bought them.” It also acknowledged that slaves “are needed by the inhabitants of this country for agriculture and other enterprises.”

The leading French residents of Detroit, with names such as Campau, Beaubien, de Tonty, and Douville, obtained male and female slaves through Native-American brokers. The Indians also introduced the *habitants* to black slaves, whom they stole during raids on Southern plantations.

### The British and Black Slaves

As a result of the French and Indian War (or Seven Years’ War, 1754-1763), France lost its North-American territory to Great Britain. Nevertheless, French settlers remained in Detroit and were slowly joined by a handful of British military personnel and traders. Like their French neighbors, British settlers were known to acquire slaves. Those of African descent were obtained from brokers as far away as New York and as close as Mackinac Island. The enslaved laborers arrived in Detroit in shipments that included other goods.

Most of the economically elite families in Detroit owned at least one slave, and some had several. In 1773, there were 89 slaves in Detroit. By 1782, that number had doubled to 179, in large part because the disruption of the Revolutionary War led to increased opportunities for Indians—as well as British soldiers—to raid Kentucky settlements and capture black slaves for Detroit.

In the Treaty of Paris (1783) that formally ended the Revolutionary War, Great Britain ceded its lands south of the Great Lakes to the United States. In the northwest section of that region—which encompassed modern-day Michigan—the new country established a territory for settlement and drew up an ordinance specifying how the territory would be organized and governed. Though Article VI of the Northwest Ordinance clearly prohibited slavery, it did not emancipate those already held by settlers in the territory.

Neither did the Jay Treaty of 1794, which stipulated that British residents on American soil would retain their property—including human beings.

### The Slave Life

By the 1790s, the number of slaves in Detroit had increased to an estimated population of 300. Eight of those belonged to prominent British trader John Askin: two black men, one black woman with two children, one black woman without children, one black boy, and one panis man. Askin also owned an enslaved Native-American woman named Monette (or Manette), with whom he

fathered three children. British merchant William Macomb, the richest person in Detroit upon his death in 1796, owned Grosse Ile and Belle Isle as well as 26 slaves valued at 1,655 pounds in New York currency. British military captain Alexander Harrow recorded in his journal his many attempts to acquire slaves, especially boys, in this decade. An entry in the first volume of the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections notes that John R. Williams, who served as mayor of the city of Detroit on three occasions, engaged an African slave named Hector at his newspaper business.



The French and British obtained their slaves in a variety of ways, including the use of faraway brokers. From “Harper’s Encyclopedia of United States History.”

The majority of enslaved laborers worked on farms, laboring in fields and orchards and in domestic spaces. Some worked in shops and on the trade and transport vessels that navigated area waterways. Others were skilled in the blacksmith, basket-making, and likely fur-preparation trades. Just as important as their labor was the capital that these slaves represented in a principally mercantile settlement. They could be sold for cash, traded for goods, or even used as collateral for large purchases and debt resolution. In this way, they provided financial security to their owners and to the settlement at large.

No slave narrative penned by someone who lived through the experience has ever been found, making it difficult to know how Detroit’s slaves were treated by their owners. Physical abuse seems to have been less prevalent than in Southern plantation settings. However, in one recorded example, Judge James May revealed that his slave had run away because he had been whipped.

Some enslaved men and women attempted to flee their

lives of bondage by going east. But making it to Canada didn't ensure their freedom. Slavery would be legal in Canada until 1833, when Great Britain abolished the practice in its territories. As a result, the traffic of escaping slaves moved in both directions across the Detroit River up to that time.

### The Case of the Denisons

The British waited until 1796 to hand over authority for Detroit to the U.S. military. It was then that Detroit became an American settlement in more than name. The population changed little at that time, however. A handful of British residents like John Askin moved across the river and established farms in Ontario just as the first American merchants were venturing into the settlement. But, for the most part, Detroit remained a French and British city within American jurisdiction.

By the time the Americans incorporated Detroit as a town in 1802, slavery was part of the fabric of the place.

The story of an enslaved African-American family named Denison is the most prominent in the historical record, as theirs was the first case about slavery decided by the Michigan Territorial Court. Peter and Hannah Denison had been owned by the American farmer William Tucker until his death. In 1806, Tucker's widow, Catherine, indentured the Denisons to prominent Detroit attorney Elijah Brush for one year, with the promise that they would be freed after that period. Meanwhile, Catherine Tucker kept the Denison children—Elizabeth, James, Scipio, and Peter Jr.—as her property. During the year of their indenture, Peter and Hannah brought suit against Tucker, insisting that their children should also be freed. In September 1807, Chief Justice Augustus Woodward rendered a complicated decision in the case that



Above: A closeup of the International Underground Railroad Memorial in Detroit depicts black abolitionist George DeBaptiste pointing the way to freedom for escaping slaves. Below: Elizabeth Denison freed herself from bondage by escaping to Canada until the end of the War of 1812. Courtesy of St. James Episcopal Church, Grosse Ile.

drew upon both Canadian slave law and the Jay Treaty. He wrote:

“The Laws of France and Upper Canada ceased to have any effect in this Territory almost immediately after July 11, 1796, but under Jay’s Treaty settlers continue to enjoy their property of every kind. The term property as used in Jay’s Treaty includes slaves, as slaves were recognized as property by the countries concerned. Slaves living on May 31, 1793, and in the possession of settlers in this Territory on July

11, 1796, continue such for life; children of such slaves born between these dates continue in servitude for twenty-five years; children of such children, and all born after July 11, 1796, are free from birth.”

Because the eldest Denison children had been born before 1793, Woodward’s ruling consigned them to slavery for life. The Denison family could



not accept this dooming outcome. Siblings Elizabeth and Scipio escaped to Ontario to secure their liberty.

As the Denison's eldest children fled *from* Detroit, black and Native slaves owned by a Canadian merchant named Richard Pattinson were fleeing *to* Detroit. Jenny, a woman of African descent, and Joseph Quinn, an Indian slave, had made it to safety across the river and were now being sought by Pattinson, who asked the Michigan court to arrest them just one month after the Denison decision. In the Pattinson case, Woodward decided that the court had no responsibility to return fugitives from a "foreign jurisdiction." The Denison children had been relegated to slavery because their owner, Catherine Tucker, was on American soil and her property was protected by the Jay Treaty. Pattinson was British Canadian, however, and Woodward saw no legal obligation to forcibly return his slaves. He decided that Jenny and Joseph Quinn could remain in the city. (Records do not indicate what became of the pair after the case was concluded.)

The twists and turns of slavery in Detroit are evident in these two legal decisions. While slave ownership was legal in Detroit, freedom for fugitives was also possible there.

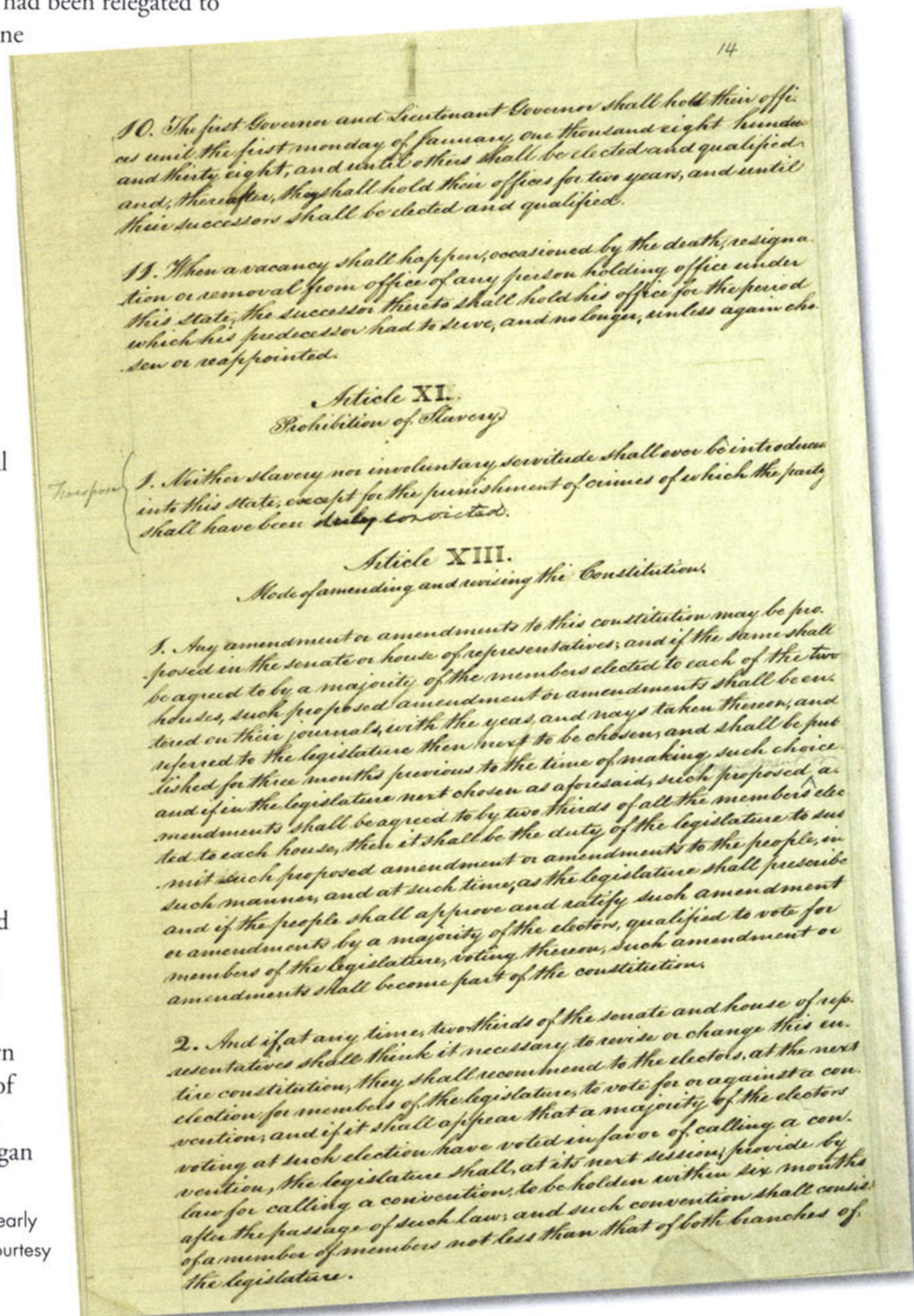
## A Constitutional Commitment

As the 1800s progressed, the practice of slaveholding in Detroit and the rest of the state began to sharply decrease. The Denison case and others decided by the Supreme Court of the Michigan Territory in 1807 limited the rights of French and British residents who had owned slaves prior to the Jay Treaty. And new American residents who moved to Detroit in the 1810s and 1820s had no clear legal right to buy or own slaves. Nevertheless, the institution of slavery would not be fully abolished until the adoption of the first Michigan

constitution in 1835. The language of the constitution's article XI was direct and to the point: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever be introduced into this state."

Inspired and empowered by this document, Michigan's abolitionist community began to blossom, leading to the Underground Railroad period that would bring Detroit renown as a "hotbed of liberty."

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Article XI of Michigan's 1835 constitution clearly prohibited slavery in the soon-to-be state. Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan.