

The Underground Railroad movement and abolitionist spirit were very much alive in southeastern Wisconsin even before 1848. Local newspapers from the time are riddled with articles spreading the abolitionist spirit, calling for anti-slavery meetings and carrying stories of interest from all over the country.

Documentation exists of numerous Racine County citizens who were outspoken in their hatred of slavery; those who chose to bravely and quietly became involved in the Underground Railroad risked everything – freedom, money, family and personal safety. Many of the heroes, both fugitives and abolitionists, will never be recognized because of the secrecy of the movement, but their mark on history is permanent.



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RESEARCH CENTER:
Tuesdays 1pm-4:30pm
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RHM EXPLORES...

THIS TRAIN IS BOUND FOR
GLORY: RACINE COUNTY'S
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

COLONEL WILLIAM UTLEY



Colonel William Utley

In 1862, politician William Laurence Utley was given command of the 22nd Wisconsin Volunteer Regiment. Although he had little direct combat experience, Utley was highly regarded in southeastern Wisconsin, having served in Wisconsin politics as Marshal of Racine, Adjutant Governor and had run for State Senator on the same 1860 Republican ticket as Abraham Lincoln.

Utley came to Wisconsin from Ohio in the 1840s as a Democrat, but later joined the Free Soil party that opposed the expansion of slavery into the western territories. He became well-known as a staunch abolitionist, even hosting a convention of town representatives of “all the Freemen of the county” (*Daily Morning Advocate*, May 23, 1854) in regards to the question of slavery in Nebraska.

During their service in Kentucky, Utley and his Regiment gained a reputation for their anti-slavery views, helping fugitives onto the Underground Railroad or offering some safety within his Regiment.

In March of 1863 the Regiment was involved in a battle near Thompson’s Station, Tennessee. Outnumbered, Utley and much of the Regiment surrendered. Three weeks later, the rest of the 22nd was captured. During these surrenders the rebels “took three negroes in our camp...Adam...John Hogan...and a black fellow who had been working in the hospital.” (Letter from Harvey Reid, 22nd Regiment, April 24, 1863). It is unknown what happened to these fugitives.

The Regiment’s men, including Utley, were exchanged for Confederate prisoners of war. However, the battle of Thompson’s Station caused a rift between Utley and Edward Bloodgood, second in command of the 22nd, each accusing the other of cowardice or incompetence. While it is unclear who was correct, both returned to the regiment, and Utley resigned a year later citing poor health.

William Utley returned to Racine and became a newspaper editor, and the 22nd continued their duty with Bloodgood at command. Bloodgood’s 22nd marched through Georgia and were among the first Union troops to enter Atlanta.



Colonel Utley and his horse

“the 22nd Regiment of Wisconsin Volunteers, which I have the honor to command, is not made up of a set of home sick boys. These men are possessed of intelligence and did not enter the service of their country, anticipating no hardships. They do not complain of sacrifices. They are not easily intimidated. They manifest a noble determination to stand or fall – to live or die with their country. But they are capable of weighing questions involved, and of feelings the force of principles at issue. They do claim the right of remaining men. They do most solemnly and earnestly protest against being degraded to the low, base and inhuman work of sending or returning guiltless fellow men [slaves] to cruel bondage. By them, such an institution as slavery is unknown – they recognize only two classes of men – loyalists and rebels”

Letter from Col. William Utley to President Lincoln, asking for his help protecting Kentucky’s Judge Robertson’s slave Adam who escaped into the Regiment and the 22nd against the Judge’s wrath, November 17, 1862.