



BICENTENNIAL BULLETIN No. 31 ***—Sheffield Celebrates 200th Birthday***

The Sheffield Bicentennial Commission will issue a *Bicentennial Bulletin* each Monday throughout 2015 that illustrates the rich heritage of our communities. **View them at — www.sheffieldbicentennial.org or sheffieldvillage.com**

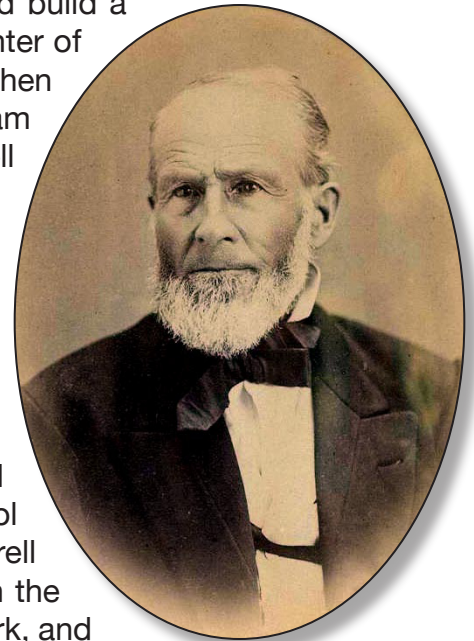
ROBBINS BURRELL (1799-1877) — abolitionist leader from Sheffield

Robbins Burrell was born in Sheffield, Massachusetts on September 21, 1799, receiving his given name from his mother's maiden name. In 1815 his father, Captain Jabez Burrell, purchased a tract of land in the Connecticut Western Reserve that would become Sheffield Township. In August 1816, Jabez, his wife Mary Robbins Burrell, and 8 children [Julia, Sarah, Robbins, Lyman, Soloma, Jabez, Eliza, & Mary Ann] arrived there by way of Lake Erie on the schooner *Black Snake* and came up the Black River to its mouth.

Robbins Burrell (1799-1877)

The family proceeded to clear the land, establish a farm, and build a red-brick home that still survives on East River Road. In the winter of 1823-1824 Robbins served as a teacher in the only public school then existing in the City of Cleveland. Robbins married Eliza Brigham (1801-1870) in 1825 and carried on the management of the Burrell Homestead after his father's death in 1833.

Robbins and his brother, Jabez Lyman, were founders and original trustees of Oberlin College demonstrating the family commitment to both work/study programs and to the abolition of slavery. The gender and racially integrated Sheffield Manual Labor Institute, a branch of Oberlin College, was established at the Burrell Homestead in Sheffield under the leadership of Robbins Burrell, who was appointed to the position of Practical Farmer for Oberlin College in March 1836. By June the school was ready to open and the first students attended classes in Burrell house front parlor and received practical agricultural training in the farm fields. The Burrell farm served as classroom, a place to work, and a dormitory. Educational appurtenances such as books, charts, papers, and other necessities needed to teach Greek, mathematics, and natural philosophy were obtained from Oberlin.



Oberlin College was a leader in agricultural experimentation. In 1836 the Trustees of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute embarked on a grand project to raise money for both Oberlin and Sheffield — the manufacturing of silk. Since silk is obtained from silkworms (*Bombyx mori*), and silkworms eat mulberry leaves, vast groves of mulberry trees were envisioned for both Oberlin and Sheffield. Caterpillars of this moth species produce a 1-inch cocoon that contains about 1,000 feet silk. Steaming and soaking in hot water softens the gum that binds the threads, permitting unrolling of the silk and its spinning into threads. This labor-intensive process yields about 1,000 miles of silk per pound of raw material. Early in the spring of 1836 some 39,000 mulberry trees were purchased from a grower New York and shipped in 20 boxes, each 6 feet long, 3 feet wide, and 3.5 feet high. Ten teams of horses were required to transport the boxes to the port at Buffalo; from there a schooner

carried them to Cleveland where they were transferred to a smaller boat for the short trip to the Black River. On June 3, 1836 the trees were landed only a mile from the *Sheffield Institute*. Oberlin sent a plow and yoke of oxen to Sheffield to help break the ground so the trees could be planted immediately. Some 17,000 mulberry trees were soon planted on the Burrell farm.

Robbins was active in the Abolition Movement by operating a station on the “Underground Railroad” and helping many runaway slaves obtain passage on boats that would carry them to freedom in Canada. No records were kept to protect the family from their illegal activity, but Tempe Garfield Burrell, Robbins’ granddaughter-in-law, recorded that, “...there were usually two or more slaves brought in at a time—and always at night—and they were hidden in the grain bins under the grain through the day while Mr. Burrell went to Lorain to contact a captain sailing for Canada who would risk taking them across. The granary foundation is still standing on the Burrell farm in Sheffield. When a boat

was ready, Mr. Burrell would take the slaves to Lorain in the bottom of a wagon with farm produce covering them. Then he would drive to the dock and unload the provisions ordered by the captain and the slaves would take the opportunity of concealing themselves on the boat.” Robbins was a close friend and confidant of Captain Aaron Root. Prior to the Civil War they shared a strong distaste for the notion of slavery. Working together they managed to smuggle many a runaway slave to freedom in British Canada.

Ohio Historic Marker at the Burrell Homestead



The following excerpt from Robbins obituary, written by his son Edward for the August 25, 1877 edition of the *Elyria Republican*, documents their collaboration:

From the first he was a red-hot anti-slavery man. His house was for years a station on the underground railroad, and many a fugitive slave from Kentucky who had reached Oberlin, was smuggled to him, concealed until Capt. Root reached the nearest port, and then set across the lake. He believed in “the higher law” heresy, and would have gone to prison or the stake before he would have aided in the return of a slave. Many a time lordly Kentuckians, with spurs, pistols, whips and hounds, visited his place in search of fugitives, and to “help them hunt” put them on the wrong trails, let them ransack improbable places, peek into holes, and devil and laugh at them, was delightful to him. It was just the mischief and adventure he craved.

Robbins and Eliza Burrell’s grave marker in Garfield Cemetery

