

CASS & BERRIEN COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES
By Jeannie Watson

PETER TRUITT

Peter Shockley Truitt was a pioneer of Milton Township, Cass County, Michigan, and Bertrand Township, Berrien County, Michigan. He arrived in the Territory of Michigan in June of 1831, before statehood or prior to those regions officially being surveyed as townships. Reaping the success of his hard work, he became one of the wealthiest, and most prominent of these areas' citizens, acquiring large tracks of rich farmland. Despite the demands of his business ventures, several severe set-backs, and his large family, Peter Truitt, involved himself in a number of humanitarian, community projects, and the Underground Railroad. By the time he had grown old, he was so revered that he was called the "Father of Milton Township."

Of English descent, Peter Truitt was born on February 2, 1801 in Slatter Neck, Sussex County, Delaware. His parents were Langford Truitt and Esther A. Shockley. Peter was raised on the family farm, as his father was "a very successful agriculturalist," and he learned through experience the ways and means of coaxing substantial yields from fertile soil. He was educated in Sussex County. Becoming a farmer like his father, Peter married, had children, and then at age thirty years decided to move to Southwestern Michigan.

On June 17, 1831, after a grueling forty-four day journey, Peter and his brood arrived in the Territory of Michigan with his friend Spencer Williams. The first thing he did was to buy eighty acres in what in now Milton Township of Cass County, Michigan. He built "a double wide, two story log cabin" to accommodate his progeny, and began clearing the forests for fields. This land was rich and the soil productive. He was delighted in his good luck.

Three years later, to his horror, Peter learned that the land upon which he built his home, and the planted fields he had yet to harvest, were on the wrong piece of property. The description on his deed was for an entirely different section than the one on which he resided, improved and homesteaded. Surveyors informed him that the haphazard description given to him, did not match the legally surveyed property lines. He did not own the land into which he had poured three years of sweat and hard labor, nor the crops waiting for harvest. This was the worst kind of financial disaster a pioneer could face; years of hard work, with nothing but poverty waiting to swallow it up, and hungry mouths to feed (his family).

A neighbor, heard of Peter's plight. Envious of the Truitt homestead, the neighbor gleefully set out for the nearest state land office to buy Peter's home, developed acreage, and growing crops, without his knowledge. A friend warned Peter about what was happening. The closest state real estate and deed office was in White Pigeon, St. Joseph County, Michigan, so in a panic, wasting no time, Peter began the race of his life. He traveled all night long, riding his horse hard; fearing he was already to late.

The next morning, arriving in White Pigeon, Peter discovered that his night ride had paid off; he was the first man to arrive at the deed office. He immediately bought his land, with the correct legal description and right matching survey, this time. Peter now owned two parcels of land. He then had the humble pleasure of watching his competitor, who was not at all honorable (to say the least), enter the deed office and realize that the "coveted prize was lost." Peter went home a happy man, knowing he had saved his family's livelihood. Of far more significance, however, was the fact that Peter realized something about himself. He came to understand

that large acreage land ownership was what he wanted, and vitally important to his way of life.

Peter's troubles were far from over, however. Early in this era, Peter opened a store and trading post in Bertrand Township (Berrien County, Michigan) close to the Indiana-Michigan state line. He sold dry goods, settler supplies, and items he had brought in from more developed regions by wagon. He then "moved his stock to Milton Township," set up a new store, and commenced business there to be closer to home. It was a mistake, and a "disastrous enterprise." Competition further north reduced his business, and the "decline in (the value of) goods" meant he lost money. The "tender" he was paid for what he did sell (paper money used during that time called "wild cat money") was deemed worthless, after he accepted it. His suppliers and creditors would not accept wild cat money. All of Peter's "property except his land was swept away" and he was financially ruined.

With unstoppable entrepreneur spirit and perseverance, Peter would not be discouraged by life's setbacks, and "he bravely set about repairing his fortune." He had his land, and in those days, property ownership meant great potential if exploited correctly. He built a tavern way-station on his property in Milton Township, called White Oak Tavern, where he was sure to get most of the stage coach business. He brought in "share croppers" to farm his land," and rented other acres to "recent arrivals" eager to try various business ventures. Surprisingly and swiftly, Peter leveraged himself back to financial solvency, and plowed every available penny into buying more land. By 1881, he owned fifteen hundred acres of prime Southwestern Michigan real estate, and was deemed the "richest man in the area."

Peter Truitt had four wives. At age 18, on February 25, 1819, in Delaware, Peter married Mary Cornwell Simpler (1802-1828), daughter of Milby Simpler, who was a veteran of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. The couple had five children: John M. (1822-1899), Henry P. (1824-1902), Elizabeth C. (1822-1902, she married a Tittle), David T. (born 1828), and Langford (born 1828). When Peter was 27 years old, his wife Mary died in April of 1828, leaving him with a new born baby and four youngsters to raise; a difficult predicament for any man in this era. In 1830, still in Delaware, Peter (now 29 years of age) courted and won the hand of "Isabel" Isabella Elizabeth McKnitt (1809-1841), daughter of James and Mary McKnitt. This second marriage produced two daughters, Mary J. (who later married a Butts) and Esther A. (who later wed a Griffith). When Peter's second wife Isabel Elizabeth passed away in 1841 (in Michigan), he was forty years of age. Pioneer life, and child birth, were very hard on women in the era. He then married, third wife Deborah McKnitt (1810-1835), the sister of Isabel Elizabeth (his 2nd wife). They had one son James A. (born 1837). When she was gone, Peter took a fourth wife, Sarah Lane; that marriage was childless. Loss of his first three wives would be an agony Peter would bear his entire life; however, his children brought him great comfort.

As a Methodist Episcopal Church member, Peter and his family were devote church goers. He helped plan the building of a church named after him, Truitt Chapel, which still exists today as the Bertrand Bible Church. "Early worship services were held in" Peter's home, until the Truitt Chapel was available. "Circuit Riders" (traveling ministers) preached to the congregation. The Truitt family is, also, credited with the founding of two local cemeteries; Berrien County's Truitt Cemetery, and Cass County's Truitt Cemetery.

Peter was a zealous humanitarian, and a devoted believer in human freedom. The degree of his moral fortitude, and the conviction of purpose in life went beyond financial success. Local historians (1951 research) are certain that Peter Truitt was an Abolitionist, member of Cass County's Society of Friends (formed to help slaves escape to Canada), and a conductor in the Underground Railroad. His White Oak Tavern way-station, in Milton Township, was a point-of-entry into Cass County, and a safe house for fugitive slaves.

Peter Truitt was wealthy enough to support this cause, sufficiently moral to feel obligated to do so, strategically located, and a wise strategist (a quality that helped him evade slave-hunters). His tavern's supply wagons, which brought goods to the White Oak Tavern for resale from Illinois, contained hidden secret compartments in the floors. in which slaves from the Illinois Line of the Underground Railroad arrived in Michigan. There was a stable behind the relay-station, that housed a fresh team of horses for the stage

coach that traveled from Chicago, across lower Michigan and up to Detroit. This stable had a lockable raised tack-room to store saddles, bridles, and leather supplies (to keep them dry and safe). It had a trap door in the wooden floor, giving access to a basement beneath, which was hidden by a layer of straw (the perfect place to hide fugitive slaves). His tavern, also, had an outdoor root cellar dug into the ground, with a concealed door, to store a season's worth of roots crops in the cool earth; another perfect hiding place for slaves.

Peter Truitt was deeply involved in his community. He helped build a road between Niles and Milton Township, held a number of public offices, was a Justice of the Peace, and performed weddings. He was Milton Township's first and only Postmaster. He was an organizer of community programs, and an active participant. Few realize that the township of his residence was named after his childhood home (Milton Farm) in Slatter Neck, Sussex County, Delaware. He was so revered that he was called "The Father Of Milton Township."

White Oak Tavern, Peter's "Stage Coach Way Station," was at one time a well known and popular location, drawing many customers. It had a large White Oak Tree standing outside with limbs pointing to the west, east and north, "as if welcoming visitors from those directions." The tavern was a traditional "double wide, two story, Michigan log cabin." The family lived upstairs, and the business was on the first floor. Two fireplaces in the center of the cabin, divided it into two parts, and warmed the uninsulated building. One was used for cooking meals for patrons, and the other was a warm spot where travelers gathered. Post office shelves with "cubby hole" mail slots stood flat against one wall in a corner, and a leather mail bag usually lay on the floor below. Locals from miles around would come there to mail letters and pick up packages that the stage coach delivered. It had a steep stairway that gave access to the family quarters on the second floor.

Peter Truitt, in his "old age lived amongst his children," with his "fourth wife, Sarah McKnitt Lane who died in 1882." Peter passed away on December 29, 1881 in Milton Township. He is buried in the Truitt Cemetery, Milton Township, Cass County, Michigan. Before his death, he distributed his fifteen hundred acres to his children. As time passed, his grave and Pruitt Cemetery were abandoned. Today, his headstone slowly sinks into weed covered ground, and "one family stone with the lone inscription TRUITT " is his last epitaph.

In conclusion, Peter Truitt was an original pioneer of Milton Township, Cass County, Michigan, and Bertrand Township, Berrien County, Michigan. He was an agricultural entrepreneur, large land owner, and stage coach way-station tavern keeper who overcame difficult road blocks, and became a wealthy investor. He owned the historic landmark, White Oak Tavern, built in the well known "Michigan double wide, two story log cabin" design. Peter was a humanitarian, abolitionist, and a Conductor in the Underground Railroad helping fugitive slaves escape to freedom. Peter and his family helped found Truitt Chapel, Milton Township's Truitt Cemetery, and Bertrand Township's Truitt Cemetery. He served as Milton Township's first and only Postmaster, was a Justice of the Peace, and helped build a road between Niles and his home area. Peter Truitt was known as "the Father of Milton Township," and earned his place in the archives of Cass and Berrien County, Michigan history.

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