

SHINE LIGHT ON A BUILDER OF THE CITY



# WILLIAM LAMBERT

Founder of The Colored Vigilante Committee  
Key figure of The Underground Railroad  
Founding member of the American Anti-Slavery Society

DEMOLISH THE LEGACY OF

ENSLAVERS

The Beaubien Family

Beaubien Street borders the former location of the Beaubien family farm. It is named for Antoine Beaubien, a prominent Detroit enslaver in the 1800s. Recognizing Beaubien's legacy overshadows other figures in Detroit who fought for liberty in the United States, such as anti-slavery activist William Lambert. Slavery of indigenous and African people in Detroit initially dates back to when Europeans settled the area in the early 1700s. Appointed as a colonel in the Detroit militia, Beaubien owned a large ribbon farm along the Detroit River. Ribbon farms were typically located in regions settled by the French, such as Detroit, and allowed for easy access to waterways. The Beaubien family farm comprised nearly 337 acres, with a quarter of a mile located along the river and running almost 3 miles inland. After Beaubien's death, the family eventually sold the farm. Although the land has since been developed, his house is still standing today at 553 East Jefferson Avenue. It is one of the oldest existing residences in the city, its history muddled with reminders of slavery in Detroit's past.

Beaubien Street should be renamed to Lambert Street to honor the legacy of William Lambert. As a founding member of the American Anti-Slavery Society and a key figure of the Underground Railroad, Lambert was an influential anti-slavery activist in the 19th century. Lambert arrived in Detroit at the age of twenty-three after working as a cabin boy on a steamboat. In Detroit he helped slaves to escape from Detroit into nearby Canada. As a prominent speaker and writer, Lambert also advocated for the abolition of slavery and for the rights of African Americans. He wrote several books and pamphlets on the subject, including *The Anti-Slavery Examiner* and *The Liberty Bell*.

# BEAUBIEN ST → LAMBERT ST

Furthermore, in 1831, Lambert helped to organize the first national convention of African Americans, put in place to discuss anti-slavery efforts. He also founded Detroit's first civil rights organization, The Colored Vigilant Committee, in order to secure suffrage for black men. In 1843, Lambert worked to arrange the first State Convention of Colored Citizens in Michigan.

Elected chair of the convention, he addressed both black and white male citizens of Michigan regarding the right to vote. Lambert also worked to bring public education to the black children of Detroit. Ultimately, a lot of his work had to be done behind closed doors as in Detroit African Americans were excluded from Detroit's Anti Slavery Society.

In the 1970s, construction of Detroit's Renaissance Center, partially located at the site of the former Beaubien farm, involved excavation of the property. This revealed artifacts dating back to the 1800s. Some of the artifacts found were likely owned by tenants who worked on the farm, possibly enslaved persons. What we remember is names like Beaubien, but the names and lives of enslaved people that helped to build the city of Detroit are largely forgotten. Beaubien Street is a remnant of Detroit's largely unacknowledged history of slavery. Although Lambert helped build the city of Detroit to what it is today, the street's namesake Beaubien, an enslaver of Black Americans, is recognized. Figures in Detroit's history, such as Lambert, deserve to be properly honored for the work they have done to fight for equality and justice for all Americans.

## Sources

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