

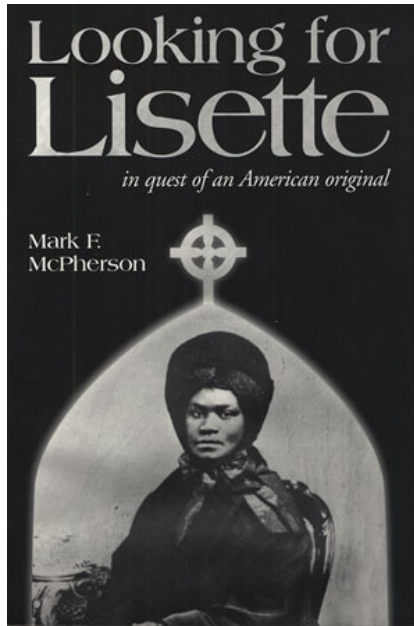
Blazing the Trail to Emancipation

Based on: *Looking for Lisette*, by Mark F. McPherson

In 1866, on an island, midway between the US and Canada, a chapel was dedicated.

During the ceremony, Episcopal Bishop McCoskry explained the donor's wish was for a chapel that: *might welcome into its pews any Christian, without regard of creed, race, color, or condition of servitude, who desires to adore Christ and take communion with his soul.*

Elizabeth "Lisette" Denison Forth was born into slavery in 1786. When she passed she had become the first person of color to own property in Detroit; she was the daughter of the first black militia leader of Territorial Michigan; she had long-lived her life in freedom and helped support the Underground Railroad to Canada; and she had accumulated enough wealth to build the chapel on Grosse Ile.



While little known today, Lisette Denison Forth ranks among America's heroes.

In 1807, Lisette and her siblings brought the earliest case of slaves suing for their freedom before an American court following the Revolutionary War. The legal decisions that followed her action made the road to freedom possible via the Underground Railroad to Canada.

Judge Augustus B. Woodward, Chief Justice of the Michigan Territorial Supreme Court, ruled against the Denison family's quest for freedom in 1807, but within a month he ruled to make it possible to open the door to freedom via Canada. The Denisons were among the first to travel that road and within a few years, Lisette returned — a free woman — to become one of the first black landowners in Detroit and Pontiac.

All of the above took place well before *Scott vs. Sanford*, the famous Dred Scott case, which was heard before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1857. (Chief Justice Taney ruled against Scott, the slave.)

Lisette had many brushes with Underground Railroad: the Denison family escaped to freedom and were among the first to utilize the Railroad to Canada; the wealthy Biddle family farm in Wyandotte was known to harbor fugitive slaves as farmhands, while she, a free woman, tended to the Biddle children; Lisette's husband, Scipio Forth, was connected to work in cartage and freight and called a "waggoner," he was suspected of being connected with the Railroad; she attended both Detroit's Second Baptist church and the Mariner's Church, known stops on the Railroad.

The Lisette Denison Forth story is one of a woman overcoming atrocious degradation. It is a true story of wealthy, powerful white men, the founders of the Detroit, doing the "right" thing — helping enslaved people gain their freedom. Lisette deserves recognition for her role dissolving the chains of slavery and replacing them with freedom via the Railroad and the hope that we might *all* be welcome into the pews of the Chapel, *without regard of creed, race, color, or condition of servitude.*



Transition... Transform... Thrive

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By way of Eliza Biddle's surviving correspondence, good friend and employer of Lisette, we know the Biddle family made their home in Wyandotte and sent their boys to a boarding school located on Grosse Ile. We know she spent time on Grosse Ile with the boys and that the Biddle farm was a haven and place of employment for slaves fleeing from bondage. Second, we speculate she made the Underground Railroad trek to Amherstburg via Grosse Ile and from there we know she went to John Askin's farm where she lived before returning to the US as a "free" woman. John Askin was Detroit Mayor Brush's father-in-law. Third, the Chapel was constructed on land donated by the Biddle family.

Yes, the Chapel is functioning today, an active part of St. James Episcopal Church. It is an attractive and special place.

Timeline

1754 – William and Joseph Tucker, living in Virginia, witness the murder of their father, taken captive by a band of Chippewas and forced to move to Michigan

1760 (circa) – William Tucker, becomes one of the first white landowners Macomb County, obtaining ownership of 3,300 acres close to Mt. Clemens, by virtue of a deed agreement with the Chippewas. He serves as an Indian scout and interpreter for the British. Eventually he becomes a prosperous farmer/business person and a colonel in the British army.

1780 – Tucker purchases Hannah, mother of Lisette and three additional children.

1783 – Tucker purchases a colonel's commission in the British army.

1784 – Tucker acquires Peter Denison, Lisette's father.

1787 – Northwest Ordinance of 1787 - slavery forbidden in Territory – but rights of former British slave-owners were protected if their holdings pre-dated the British surrender

1793 – Importation of slaves is forbidden in Canada by act of Parliament

1794 – Jay Treaty, protected former British loyalists' property rights, including ownership of slaves

1802 – Congress defeats an effort to repeal Article VI of the Ordinance of 1787, Michigan Territory is "preserved for freedom"

1802 – Detroit is incorporated as a town

1805 – Congress declares Michigan a Territory and Detroit is named the Territorial seat. 1805 – Detroit burns to the ground, voiding the original charter of incorporation. Detroit begins operation under a preexisting (1802) Act of Congress: *Rule of the Governor and Judges*. Gov. William Hull and Judge Augustus B. Woodward take charge of Detroit.

1805 – William Tucker dies. By virtue of his will, Peter Denison and Hannah, his wife, are to become free upon his wife, Catherine's death. The Denison children are to remain hereditary servants of the Tucker children.

1806 – Solomon Sibley appointed first Major of Detroit. He later resigns and Gov. Hull names Elijah Brush to succeed him.

1806 – Catherine Tucker loans Peter Denison to Elijah Brush to oversee Michigan properties formerly belonging to Brush's father-in-law, John Askin, a Tory, then residing in Canada

1807 – Elijah Brush is named Attorney General for the Michigan Territorial Supreme Court

1807 – Gov. William Hull names Peter Denison, Lisette's father, commander of a black militia unit, about 36 "African" enslaved or free men, some were former Canadian slaves, Peter Denison should be known as the first black leader of Detroit

1807 – Denison & al vs. Tucker – (Sept 26, 1807) Michigan Supreme Court Chief Judge Augustus Woodward rules against the Denison siblings and affirms them as the property of Catherine Tucker. (Note: Scott vs. Sanford, the Dred Scott case, was heard before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1857. Chief Justice Taney ruled against Scott.)

1807 – The Matter of Richard Pattinson – (Oct 29, 1807) Michigan Supreme Court Chief Judge Augustus Woodward rules against Pattinson, a Canadian, and refuses to order the return of escaped slaves, who had fled to the United States. With his precedence breaking decision, Woodward either knowingly or unknowingly opened the door to the Underground Railroad to freedom, by saying if those fugitives shall flee American shores, they cannot be brought back as enslaved persons.

The Denisons flee to Canada, with the help of Elijah Brush and take up residence on the farm of Brush's father-in-law, John Askin.

1817 – Lisette returns to Detroit area from Canada and is employed by Solomon Sibley

1825 – Lisette purchases land in Pontiac, later she rents property to Joseph Campau

1827 – Lisette marries Scipio Forth

1831 – Lisette joins the Biddle household

1834 – Lisette purchases stock in steamboat Michigan, share in the Farmer's and Mechanic's Bank, most likely under the direction of Major Biddle.

1842 – Lisette purchases land in Detroit, most likely under the direction of Major Biddle.

1842 – Lisette's friends Charlotte Ann Taylor and her sister Julia Ann Anderson bequeathed estates to build Mariner's Church, which was dedicated in 1849. Mariner's Church had known ties to the Underground Railroad.

1850 – Lisette begins working for the Campau family

1854 – Lisette goes to Paris works for the Eliza and Major Biddle family

1856 – Lisette returns to US and works for the William S. Biddle family, later takes leave to nurse Eliza Biddle who then is living in Philadelphia.

1859 – Major Biddle dies

1865 – Eliza Biddle dies

1866 – August 8 Lisette dies and is buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Detroit, in the "Strangers Ground" section of the cemetery; an area for single interments vs. multiple or family plots, according to Chancey P. Miller, Elmwood's general manager.

1868 – St. James Chapel Dedicated