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On the Waterfront

Erie's Jerusalem Neighborhood:
Industrialist Himrod was an abolitionist hero

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence

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Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. It was first published in December 2022.

William Himrod's gravesite at Erie Cemetery

Our parents called it Jerusalem in the 1950s. It was the African American neighborhood east of us and on Erie's bayfront. It was also the site of Bayview Baseball Field, now Pontiac Field at Bayview Park. Between our West Fourth and Cascade Street neighborhood and Jerusalem there was a mixture of Scandinavian families anchored by Westerdahl's Store, epicenter of the Swedish community at West Fourth and Poplar streets. But north and east of the Scandinavian district, the bayfront neighborhood was decidedly African American. Roots of the Jerusalem neighborhood and the explanation for its biblical name were connected to a local abolitionist named William Himrod, who ran a mission school near East Seventh and French streets.

From the late 1830s until the end of the Civil War, Himrod's mission school illegally sheltered runaway slaves, which was in direct defiance of the "Fugitive Slave Act of 1783." That law encouraged slave hunters to travel to northern states, including Pennsylvania, where they would kidnap Black people who were simply "suspected" of having been runaway slaves, as well as their children. According to federal law, both slaves and their children were the property of their "owners." Hundreds of free Black people were captured and taken to the South inappropriately.

Himrod was also an active participant in the Underground Railroad. The Erie Extension of the Pennsylvania Canal from Erie to Beaver was a major artery on the escape route of runaway slaves, beginning before the final leg of the waterway opened between Conneaut Lake and Erie. Runaways regularly walked the towpath after dark, which provided an almost direct and easy route to follow to freedom. Many of the towpath walkers were guided to the southern extremity of the canal

by helpful Underground Railroad conductors from Pittsburgh. After 1844 when the Erie portion of the canal was completed, the number of local Black runaways reached a new height. Once runaways reached town, Himrod took care of them, providing food, shelter and clothing while simultaneously educating their children. He had a network of locals who would help him find temporary living quarters for almost everyone who arrived in Erie.

Himrod managed to make himself into a "thorn in the side" of Erie's wealthy establishment. During the 1830s and 1840s, there were hundreds of slaves in Erie, many of whom were being treated perhaps as harshly as antebellum plantation slaves of the South. As Himrod's mission school grew, it took in all local Black children; sons and daughters of local slaves as well as the children of runaways. Local slave owners did not like the interactions that were occurring between the local slaves and runaways. Himrod advocated for local Black people, orchestrated the operation of the local Underground Railroad, and protected runaway slaves from the South who had fled north. Once they reached Himrod's network of supports in Erie, they were hidden, fed, and protected.

With the tacit approval of local slave owners, Himrod also regularly arranged for runaway and other Black people to book passage on schooners (not steamships) so that they could escape to Upper Canada (today's Ontario). On a typical Lake Erie day, the first tack to the west for a topsail schooner would take the sailing ship and its passengers (that Himrod had paid for) to the base of Long Point and the now gone town of Clear Creek. After departing their schooners, the escaping Black people would be met and escorted to the town of Dresden, Ontario, which was a major terminal on the Underground Railroad and the setting of the famous anti-slavery novel by Harriet Beecher Stow, "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Upper Canada (Ontario) did not allow slavery, so once an escaped slave reached there, he or she was "safe."

During the late 1820s and early 1830s, Himrod arranged an astonishing land deal that resulted in his most lasting contribution to Erie's African American community. After deciding that the greatest community need was for affordable housing for African Americans, he began purchasing land. If anyone had realized his intentions, he would have been blocked but William Himrod had slowly emerged as one of Erie's wealthiest industrialists. On the surface he seemed looking for land for business expansion as he was working with the Vincent family in the development of iron foundries and stove factories in downtown Erie. As he began to acquire land, the public impression was that he was planning to use it for industrial expansion.

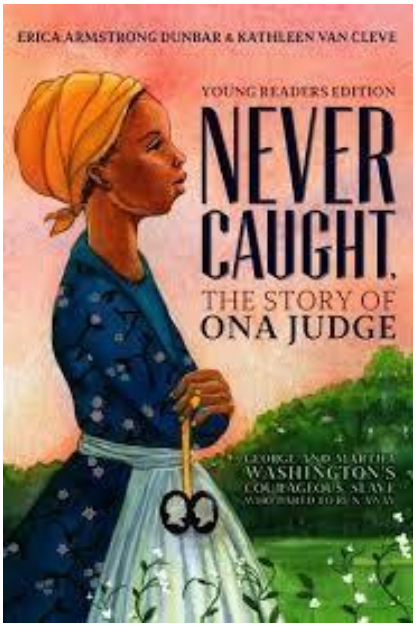
Himrod began by purchasing land along the bayfront and west of Lee's Run (the eventual path of the canal near the foot of Sassafras Street). The canal crossed West Sixth Street near today's Chestnut Street after locking its way up from the location of today's Bayfront Convention Center. Eventually he owned most of the

land north of West Fourth Street and between today's Sassafras Street and Cascade Creek. During the time that he was acquiring this huge tract of land, plans were proceeding for the construction of the new Cascade Docks, making the strip of property along the bayfront extraordinarily undesirable. During those pre-penicillin days, no one wanted to be near sailors, docks or ships since they were all perceived to be disease-ridden.

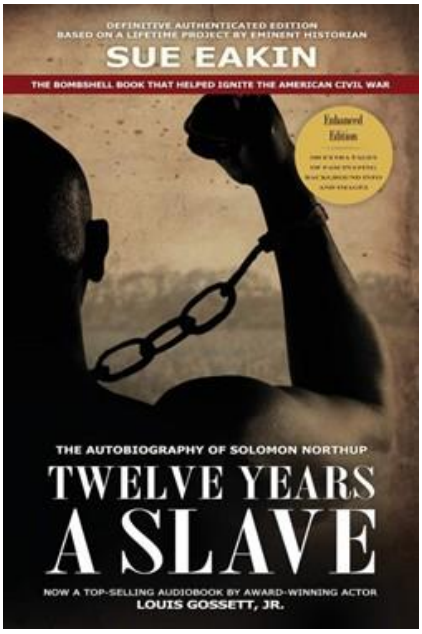
After he had accumulated the land, Himrod offered free building lots to African American families who would agree to move onto to the land within 18 months, begin construction of a dwelling within a two-year period, and be living there within 36 months. His ownership program was based upon ongoing British-Caribbean approaches that were common in the islands. Many of the building lots were of standard width but shorter than ordinary city lots. That is the reason for the common alleyways that are still prevalent in the neighborhood. A standard-sized city lot would be divided into two parts.

The Civil War (1861-65) ended slavery, but the emancipation process was gradual in the North. Pennsylvania became the first state to end slavery in 1780, but it remained conditionally until at least the 1840s. Many slaves earned their freedom gradually and over decades. Before the war, this meant that escaped slaves and their children (as well a free Black people who looked exactly like people who had escaped) were subject to capture and return to their owners. Slave catchers were famously indiscriminate in their choice of people to be kidnapped and retuned. Most cared only about the potential bounty.

One infamous case that symbolized the irony of gradual emancipation was the story of Martha Washington's personal slave, Ona Judge. Ona escaped and fled to New Hampshire, where she lived in terror for 50 years, fearing that George Washington would use his political power to find her and have her returned to him. President Washington hired people to hunt her down and return her to Martha but every time they closed in on her she uprooted her life and went into hiding again. She continued to be frightened by Washington's relentless pursuit of her until Washington died and all his slaves were granted their freedom. If Ona Judge had been captured and returned to Washington, they could have sold her children.



Fortunately for Erie's African American population, free Black people, local slaves, and transplanted runaways, William Himrod was able to use his wealth and power to protect them from such inhumane treatment. Slave hunters were not welcome here.

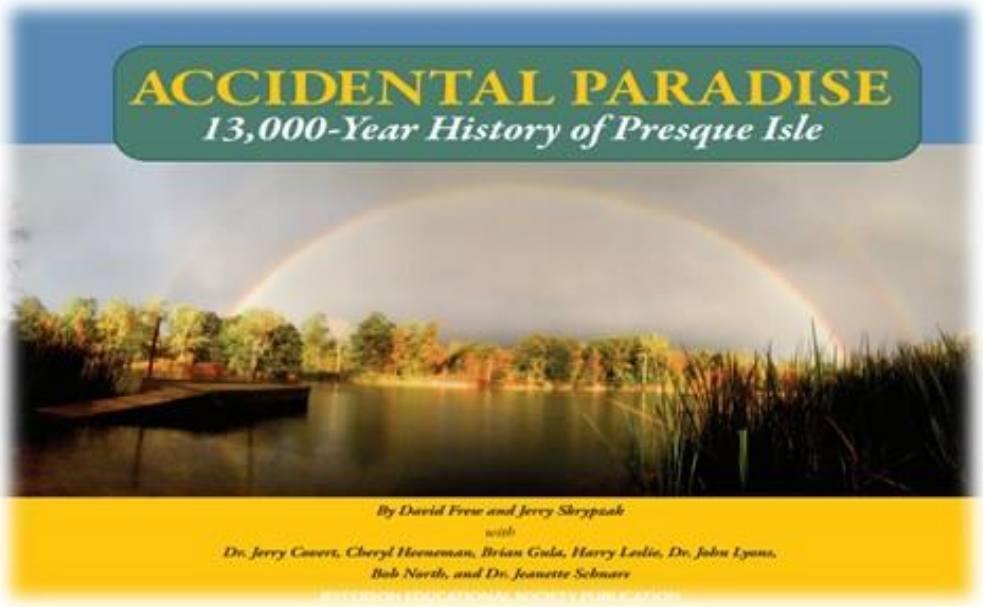


The terrible story of slave hunting was told eloquently in the book and film "Twelve Years a Slave."

When Himrod announced the opening of his newly acquired land at the Mission School, which originally maintained all of the property and ownership records, there was a rush to take advantage of the free housing opportunities. Naturally, some hopeful landowners were unable to fulfill their obligations after which the properties were returned to the "available list." But most of the new property owners were successful and a vibrant new neighborhood emerged. The new Black landowners named their neighborhood "Jerusalem," a biblical reference to the new Promised Land homes that were waiting for them. References to the biblical Promised Land were especially powerful for African Americans whose culture was rich with references to God's promise of a place to live.

While reactions among members of Himrod's Mission school and church were overwhelmingly positive, others in the community were not as positive. By the mid-1840s, local newspapers were filled with nasty, racist tomes regarding Himrod and his free, African American-only, land ownership program. And then there was "a predictable backlash." Local business leaders began to accuse Himrod of "reverse racism" for creating helpful programs for African Americans at the exclusion of other ethnic groups.

With several unclaimed lots in his large bayfront tract, Himrod responded to the objections by expanding his offer to any arriving immigrant groups that were financially distressed. And that was the beginning of the lower west-side Swedish neighborhood. Several newly arriving Swedish immigrants took advantage of the opportunity and accepted free lots along the northern bayfront.
William Himrod died in 1873. According to his wishes, his son continued to operate the Mission School and Church well into the 1880s.



The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – "**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**" – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center's gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales ***daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.***

For more information, send an email to **aperino@TRECF.org**.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.

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