

Armstrong Family Part 1 – Seeking Freedom

This month we will be highlighting a branch of the Armstrong Family, through a man named Thomas Armstrong. Thomas was born in 1826 in Louisville, Kentucky. He was the son of Lewis and Weeney Armstrong, who were freedom seekers. Weeney's story is told in the book *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*. Levi Coffin is often referred to as the "President" of the Underground Railroad. In the story titled "A Mother Rescues Her Children," Coffin writes, "While at Fort Malden, on Lake Erie, we heard of a brave woman named Armstrong, who had recently gone back to Kentucky and rescued five of her children from slavery. We were anxious to see her and hear the story from her lips and accordingly visited her at her home in Colchester, about ten miles below Malden. She was a portly, fine-looking woman, and we were much impressed with the noble expression of her countenance. She told us that about two years before she and her husband, with their youngest child, a babe a few months old, made their escape from Kentucky. Their home in that state was about ten miles from the Ohio River, at a point opposite Ripley, the home of the divine and noted abolitionist, John Rankin. After crossing the river, they found friends who helped them on their way to Canada."

Coffin continues, "They gained freedom for themselves, but were not happy; they had left seven children in slavery. The mother wept and prayed over their fate, and planned continually how they might be rescued. She felt that she must make some attempt to bring them away, but her husband thought of the risk and danger attending such an effort on her part and tried to dissuade her from going. She said: 'I inquired of the Lord concerning the matter. I prayed most all night, and the Lord seemed to say, 'Go.' Next morning I told my husband I was going, that the Lord would go with me and help me. I had all my plans laid; I dressed in men's clothing and started. I went to friends in Ohio and had all the arrangements made for a skiff to come over to

the Kentucky side. I took byways and through fields to old master's farm, and got there in the early part of the night. I hid myself near the spring, and watched for my children, for I knew some of them would come to get water. I had not been there long before my eldest daughter came. I called her name in a low voice, and when she started up and looked round, I told her not to be afraid, that I was her mother. I soon convinced her, and her alarm passed away. I then told her my plans, and she said she could bring the rest of the children to me when master and mistress got to sleep. The night was very dark and favored our plans. She brought all the children to me but two; they were sleeping in the room with old master and mistress, who had gone to bed, and she could not get them out without raising the alarm. I started with the five and hastened back to the river as fast as we could go in the dark. We found the skiff waiting for us and soon crossed. On the other side, a wagon was ready to take us in, and the man with it drove us a few miles to a depot of the Underground Railroad. Here we were secreted during the following day, and next night were forwarded on to another station, and so on from station to station till we reached Sandusky, where we were put on board the Mayflower – called the Abolition boat. We landed safely at Fort Malden two weeks ago and are out of old Massa's reach now. The Lord did help me, and blessed be his holy name!" She said she had made arrangements with her friends in Ohio, living near the river, to try to get her two other children and send them to her, and she had faith that they would succeed."

Whether all the remaining children did make it to Canada is unclear, but what we do know from this story is that Lewis and Weeney Armstrong escaped enslavement in Kentucky and came to Amherstburg. According to the 1851 Census, Lewis (a 50 year-old farmer), along with Weeney (45) and their children Charles (17) and Jane (12) were living in Malden Township, but later moved the family to Colchester Township.

What we publish is not a complete history of any family and is based on the documents that are available. We welcome photos and information to fill in the gaps. See you next week for part 2.