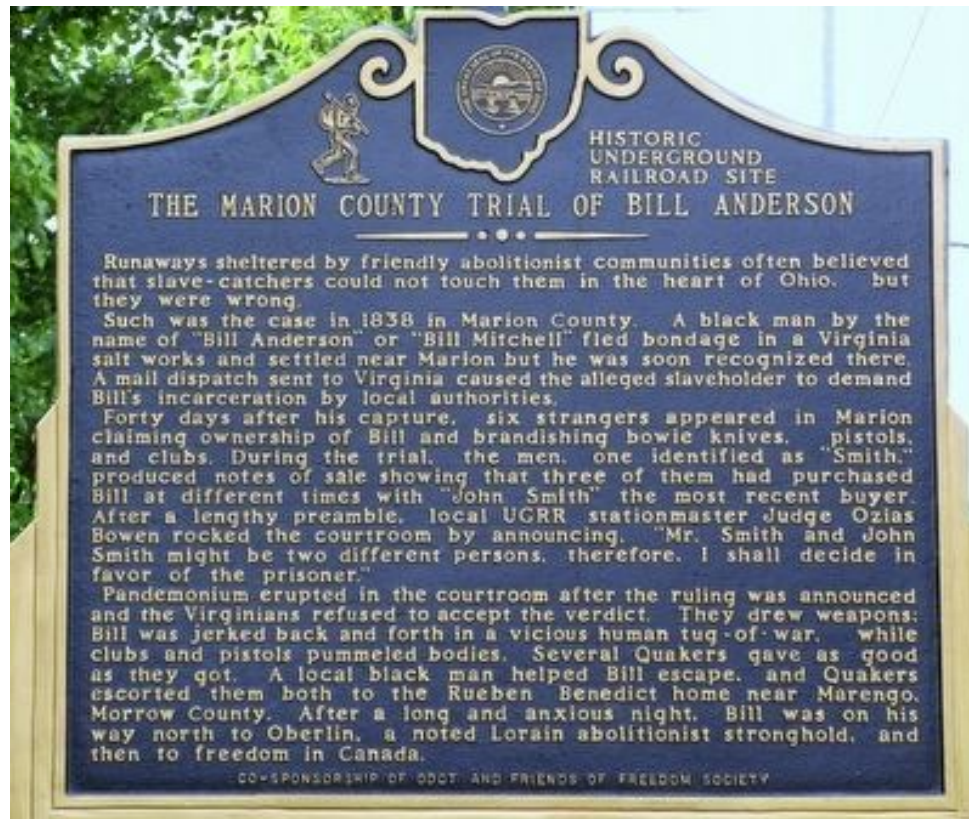


The Marion County Trail of Bill Anderson

Runaways sheltered by friendly abolitionist communities often believed that slave-catchers could not touch them in the heart of Ohio, but they were wrong.

Such was the case in 1838 in Marion County. A black man by the name of "Bill Anderson" or "Bill Mitchell" fled bondage in a Virginia salt works and settled near Marion but he was soon recognized there. A mail dispatch sent to Virginia caused the alleged slaveholder to demand Bill's incarceration by local authorities.



Forty days after his capture, six strangers appeared in Marion claiming ownership of Bill and brandishing bowie knives, pistols, and clubs. During the trial, the men, one identified as "Smith" produced notes of sale showing that three of them had purchased "Bill" at different times with "John Smith" the most recent buyer. After lengthy preamble, local UGRR stationmaster Judge Ozias Bowen rocked the courtroom by announcing, "Mr. Smith and John Smith might be two different persons, therefore I shall decide in favor of the prisoner."

Pandemonium erupted in the courtroom after the ruling was announced and the Virginians refused to accept the verdict. They drew weapons; Bill was jerked back and forth in a vicious tug-of-war, while clubs and pistols pummeled bodies. Several Quakers gave as good as they got. A local black man helped Bill escape, and Quakers escorted them both to the Ruebem Benedict home near Marngo, Morrow County. After a long and anxious night, Bill was on his way north to Oberlin, a noted Lorain abolitionist stronghold, and then to freedom in Canada.