

**John A. Van Zandt** (1791-1847) was a farmer, having a plantation in Fleming County, Kentucky. He was the son of Aaron and Margaret Vansant (as spelled in Aaron's will) of Fleming County. One night after a dream, John freed his slaves and moved to Ohio. He married Nancy Runyon in 1824, was ordained as a Methodist minister and was one of the first Trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Sharon (now Sharonville), organized in 1837 by Rev. Levi White. John also was one of the main 'conductors' in the Underground Railroad.

John and his family lived at *Mt. Pierpoint*, by Oak and Skillman Roads near Glendale. It was named for Rev. John Pierpoint, an abolitionist from Massachusetts. John built his two-story house that sat on a hill from bricks that had been made in Philadelphia and used to construct the first Presbyterian church in his community. The church had been razed to build a new one.

Van Zandt firmly believed that all men were created equal and that there was no such being as a slave. He followed his convictions and was shunned by many for them. According to tradition, his house was where Eliza Harris, the Eliza of **Uncle Tom's Cabin**, was sheltered on her trip to Canada. Van Zandt served as the model for John Van Trompe in the same book. The house was dubbed the *Eliza House* for many years. A sympathetic neighbor, Dr. Ross, attended to the slaves medical needs. Often Van Zandt or his son drove the fugitives by night to Lebanon or Wilmington, Ohio.

On April 23, 1842 Van Zandt took a covered wagon of produce into Cincinnati to sell. On his way back, he stopped in Walnut Hills at the home of a friend, Mr. Moore, who lived by Lane Seminary. John stayed there late into the night. While hitching the horses to the wagon, he saw a group of eight former slaves hiding in the shadows of the trees. They were on their way to Canada so he concealed them in his wagon letting one of this small band, a lad named Andrew, drive the team. As he drove through Van Zandt's own community, some pro-slavery neighbors heard the wagon pass in the wee morning hours. Knowing there was a reward for recaptured slaves, Messrs. Hargrave and Hefferman dressed and pursued them by horseback, overtaking the wagon south of Lebanon. Andrew was able to escape but the rest, along with Van Zandt, were captured. They were returned to their Kentucky owner, Wharton Jones, and Van Zandt was arrested under provisions of the Federal 1793 Fugitive Slave Law, imprisoned and fined \$1,200 which was the value of the escaped Andrew, a \$1,000 fine for harboring slaves and the cost of recapturing.

Salmon Portland Chase, along with Thomas Morris and William H. Seward, defended Van Zandt against these charges and two lawsuits. This was a case that showed the abilities of Chase, who defended his client to the Supreme Court - aiding his career and reputation, even though Van Zandt lost. Chase's argument was that ...the very moment a slave passes beyond the jurisdiction of the State in which he is held as such, he ceases to be a slave. Which meant, he argued, that slavery was confined to the laws of an individual state while freedom was national. Chase later became an Ohio Governor, Senator from Ohio, the War Secretary of the Treasury under President Lincoln, and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Chase defended so many fugitives that the African Americans of Cincinnati presented him a silver pitcher for ...zealous and disinterested advocacy of the rights and privileges of all classes of your fellow citizens, irrespective of clime, color or condition. Kentucky residents saw it differently, naming him 'Attorney General for Negroes.'

Friends contributed to help pay Van Zandt's fines and court bills, although the lawyers worked pro bono. He had to sell his farm and lands to pay his bills and fines. He was excommunicated by his church from their membership. Both Van Zandt and Jones died in 1847, never having seen the end to the case. Van Zandt was buried at the foot of the hill near the barn which had hidden so many. He was later exhumed and reburied in Wesleyan Cemetery where his wife and a daughter are also buried. On his tombstone erected in 1891, the centennial of his birth, his friends had carved:

In him Christianity had a living witness. He saw God as his Father and received every man as a brother. The cause of the poor, the Widow, the orphan and the oppressed was his cause. He fed, clothed, sheltered and guarded them. He was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. He was a tender father, a devoted husband and a friend to all. He is what is here described because he was a Christian philanthropist who practiced what he believed and he thus lived practicing his faith.

*Mt. Pierpoint* was later purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer Matthews who used it to house employees for their estate across the road. In an article appearing in the **Cincinnati Times-Star**, May 31, 1930, a ...huge tunnel in the basement of the house which is now cemented over... is mentioned. The Matthews also called the farm *Opekasit* an Indian name meaning "looking toward the dawn." Since then, the house is on the grounds of Landmark Baptist church.

Below, is an aerial photo of the Matthews estate main house, which still stands at the far east end of Oak Road, on the Landmark Baptist Church property. It now serves as offices for the church:



The Eliza House, which at one time, was across the road from Opekasit:

