



Marker Text

Henry D. Palmer, M.D. (1809-1877) located at this site in 1836. First physician in Lake County, he was also counselor to the pioneers for 40 years and member of the underground railroad aiding escaped slaves.

Report

Current IHB guidelines require primary source documentation to support all information on a marker. This marker is under review because IHB has inadequate sources on file and the title of the marker raises red flags. The undertakings that set Palmer apart and would make the topic marker-worthy, his involvement in the Underground Railroad and being the “first” physician in his county, are problematic. However, basic biographical details are supported by primary sources:

- Census records show that Henry D. Palmer was born in 1809.¹
- The Reverend T.H. Ball possessed an original, annually-updated list of settlers when he wrote his *Lake County, Indiana from 1834 to 1872*. Ball confirms that Palmer arrived in Lake County in 1836.²
- Cemetery records show that Palmer died April 22, 1877.³

IHB now avoids the use of subjective and superlative terms such as “first,” “best,” and “most.” Such claims are often not verifiable and/or require extensive qualification to be truly accurate. That is the case with this marker’s claim that Palmer was Lake County’s first physician. The evidence supporting Palmer’s status as the first physician in Lake County comes from Solon Robinson, a settler who predated Palmer. Robinson claimed that before Palmer settled in Lake County, the nearest physician resided in Michigan City.⁴ While believable, it is equally plausible that Robinson was unaware of another practicing physician in his area before he himself moved to Lake County, or that he overlooked French physicians or native healers that may have practiced in the area before Americans settled there. During the course of this review, additional sources were not found to corroborate or dispute Robinson’s claim.

Similarly, evidence regarding Dr. Palmer’s participation in the Underground Railroad is questionable. According to a single secondary source, Palmer hid several runaway slaves on his property one day, transporting them to Michigan at nightfall.⁵ The claim stems from a story told by Palmer’s son, who was young at the time of the incident and 80 years old when he shared his recollection with Palmer’s daughter, Hattie. Hattie’s account of her brother’s story lacks many important details, including when the incident occurred. Research based solely on reminiscence is neither solid nor complete. At the time of this review, no corroborating evidence has been uncovered regarding Palmer’s supposed Underground Railroad activity.⁶

The lack of other examples of Palmer being involved in the Underground Railroad, abolition, or antislavery further call into question the veracity of the claim. It also bears noting that the wording of the marker may perpetuate misconceptions about the Underground Railroad. It calls Palmer a “member.” The Underground Railroad was not a membership organization, but a [locally-organized and secretive network](#) of individuals and groups who were willing to aid fugitive slaves as they sought freedom.



45.1949.1 First Physician
Lake County
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Learn More

Researching the Underground Railroad can be difficult, due to the secret nature of the enterprise, but the National Park Service has some suggestions [here](#).

For more information about the Underground Railroad in Indiana visit [Indiana Freedom Trails](#) and the [Wabash Valley Visions and Voices Digital Memory Project](#).

Further Reading (all available in the IHB Book Shop)

Jeannie Regan-Dinius et al., *Underground Railroad Research in Select Indiana Counties* (2003).

Maxine Brown, *The Role of Free Blacks in the Underground Railroad Activities of Central Indiana* (2001).

Diane P. Coon, *Southeastern Indiana's Underground Railroad Routes and Operations* (2001).

Hurley Goodall, *The Invisible Road to Freedom Through Indiana as recorded by the Works Progress Administration Writers Project* (2001).

Marlene Lu, *Walkin' the Wabash: The Underground Railroad on the Wash River and Wabash & Erie Canal in Western Indiana* (2001).

Angela Quinn, *The Underground Railroad in Allen County and Fort Wayne* (2001).

Mills, Randy Ph.D., Mark Coomer, et al. *Underground Railroad Activity in Southwestern Indiana* (2001).

Dona Stokes-Lucas et al., *Interpretive Stories Associated with the Underground Railroad in the Indianapolis Area*.

¹ *Ninth United States Census* (1870), Schedule I, Ross Township, Lake County, Indiana, p. 34, accessed [AncestryLibrary.com](#).

² Rev. T.H. Ball, A.M., *Lake County, Indiana, from 1834 to 1872* (Chicago, 1873): 55.

³ Northwest Indiana Genealogical Society, *Ross Township and Winfield Township Cemeteries- Lake County, IN, "Merrillville Cemetery"*, (Valparaiso, IN, 1995): 6. The listing reads: "PALMER, Henry D. Dr. BORN: 67y, 10m, 3d, DIED: 4/22/1877..."

⁴ Solon Robinson, "History of Lake County, 1833-1847, reprinted in Lake County Historical Association, *A History of Lake County* (Gary, IN, 1923): 44.

⁵ Hattie Palmer submitted "A Pioneer Doctor, by the daughter of an Old Settler," for publication in *A History of Lake County*, and it appears on p. 115-116.

⁶ By IHB staff or colleagues at the Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology, which coordinates an initiative to catalog [Underground Railroad sites in Indiana](#). Note also that Palmer's account names an accomplice, "Jackson Cady, for whom Cady Marsh is named." This is the only detail of the account that IHB researchers were able to confirm was plausible using primary sources. Cady Marsh Ditch is located in Griffith, Indiana, near the Indiana-Illinois border, and a Jackson Cady was resident in Chicago, near Lake County, according to the *1850 United States Federal Census*.