

A group from Palmyra, Missouri, carried out their threats against Quincy's Mission Institute. Shortly after the extradition of Dr. Eells to Missouri was recalled, the Palmyra vigilantes rode across the frozen Mississippi and set fire to the institute's chapel. Much to everyone's surprise, gunpowder had been stored in the chapel. Its explosions lit up the night sky. Another group threatened to burn down the entire town of Mendon, the first stop north of Quincy on the Underground Railroad.

Dr. Eells showed special sympathy towards those who were suffering at the hands of the Missourians. He was especially responsive to the plight of two students and an older supporter of the Mission Institute who were captured in Missouri after assisting in an escape that turned into a trap. In 1841 Alanson Work, James E. Burr, and George Thompson were betrayed, arrested, and sentenced to twelve years in prison. They served five years of the sentence. Feeling the weight of his own troubles, Eells wrote the men in October of 1843:

Dear Brethern,

The cause for which you suffer is on the advance through the country. I have also been called to suffer in the cause, which has not been in vain . . . and we ought to be willing to lay down our lives if necessary. . . . The lover of liberty has more friends—the outcast finds a hiding place—the oppressed are delivered—light is breaking in—and the whole land feels a tremendous agitation. "May God speed the work," is the prayer of thousands in our country; and there is good evidence that the prayer is heard and answered. . . . The north star shines as brightly as ever, and is directing many to the land of the free.

R. Eells.

Dr. Richard Eells's case finally appeared before the United States Supreme Court in 1853. But events had taken their toll both physically and monetarily, and Dr. Eells retired to the Bahamas in hope of regaining his strength. During the December term, the case appeared before the high court, with Thomas Moore serving as executor for Dr. Eells.

Serving as Dr. Eells primary attorney was Salmon P. Chase, who served as Secretary of the Treasury under Lincoln and later was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Assisting Chase was William Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State, who was considered an expert in arguing the fugitive slave law. Even with such esteemed legal counsel, the Supreme Court did not waiver, concurring with the Illinois court in finding Dr. Eells guilty. Based on the same argument of "moral decision," there was also a split vote, with Justice Grier delivering the opinion of the court and Justice McLean the dissenting opinion. The ruling was a major blow to state sovereignty, since it maintained that the federal courts alone had jurisdiction in multi-state matters.

Dr. Eells died in the Bahamas just a short time before the hearing. Several people speculated that Chase was aware of the doctor's death but pursued the case for its importance, knowing it would otherwise likely be dropped. Dr. Eells was buried in a pauper's grave in the Bahamas.

The Mission Institute, like many stations on the Underground Railroad, has long since vanished. The site that is currently occupied by Madison School and the H.W.S. Cleveland-designed Madison Park are both being considered as additions to the Quincy East End Historic

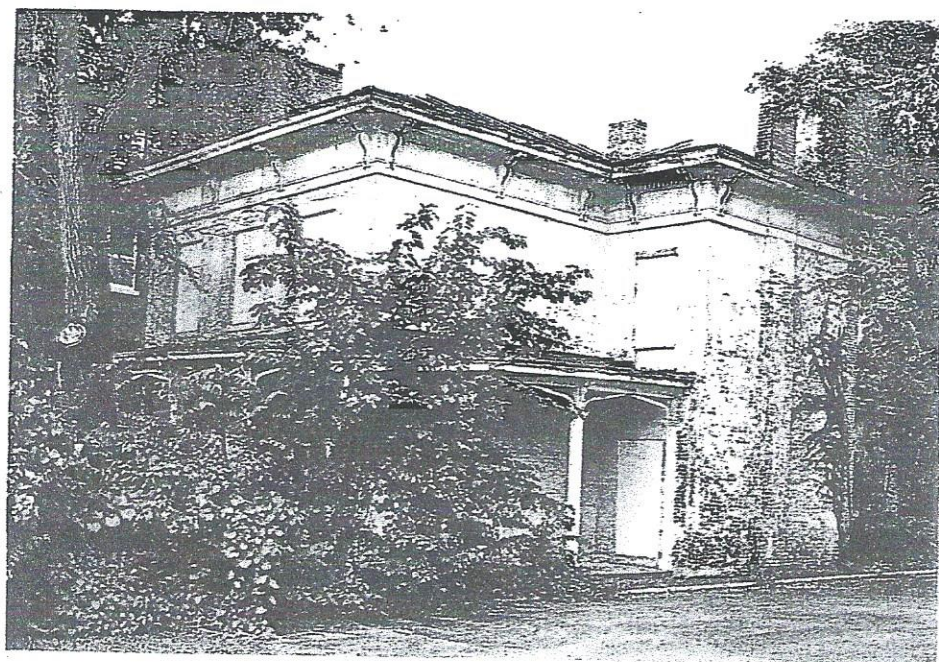
District. A large cast plaque at the northeast corner of the park and a small house on Prentiss Avenue are the only reminders of the abolitionist activities that took place on the early outskirts of the city.

Dr. Eells's house has changed as well. The house that Dr. Eells knew was likely a medium-sized brick Greek Revival, appropriate for the early neighborhoods just south of the town square. The design of the brickwork is American common bond, with the windows and doors highlighted by limestone sills and lintels. Interior woodwork remains intact from the early period, featuring pedimented openings and simple millwork, along with narrow halls and stairways. However, sometime during the 1850s the exterior was remodeled into its current Italianate design. Most likely that was the time that the roof was raised and double brackets, dentilwork, and a plain wooden frieze were added. The front porch was either added new or considerably altered. Its most notable feature is a series of depressed open arches and brackets that match those along the roof line. Front windows and a door were lengthened to floor level to complement the wrap-around porch. Also an addition to the rear is noted by the use of brick lintels as opposed to those of stone. A brick carriage house and a backyard that was the site of Dr. Eells's medicinal herb garden stand at the rear of the property.

Today the Dr. Richard Eells house at 415 Jersey is listed as a contributing structure in the Downtown Quincy Historic District, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1983. The former Eells property has been benignly overseen for many years by sisters Genevieve and Matilda Kline, but since 1989, long-time admirers of the house have been working on a plan to restore the house and grounds.

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The once-grand home of Quincy abolitionist Dr. Richard Eells awaits restoration. (Photo courtesy Bryan J. Butts)