

Introduction to the Underground Railroad

Almost 150 years after it faded away, the Underground Railroad endures as one of the more popular topics in American history, captivating the imaginations of the general public of all ages and prompting prolific research by academic, public and amateur historians alike.

Author Staughton Lynd offers his theory on the current interest in this topic: “History worth remembering is likely to have been made by men and women who cared about ideals and took risks for them. Nothing in the history of the United States more closely approaches this notion of history worth remembering than the Underground Railroad.”¹

Certainly, the dramatic tales of the Underground Railroad contain all the elements that keep audiences spellbound—ordinary people who became real-life heroes, clear-cut good and bad guys, tales of triumph and tragedy, secret codes and signals, examples of resistance and rebellion, life and death situations. All of these elements are underscored by lofty ideals of freedom and a time of interracial cooperation in American history that has seldom been seen since.



Most people know that the Underground Railroad was neither underground nor a railroad. Rather, it was a loose network of people who helped individuals held in bondage in the South escape from slavery. It lacked an organized national structure, instead functioning largely at the local level, with individual operatives acting in spontaneous and sometimes rather haphazard ways.

The use of the term “underground” is best understood as a metaphor for illegal or clandestine. The railroad terminology so often associated with the Underground Railroad first developed in the 1830s, as railroads began to crisscross the nation. Routes from safe house to safe house were called “lines,” and were typically 15 to 20 miles long. “Stations” were stopping places, homes or buildings where those opposed to slavery allowed slaves to stay temporarily and enjoy rest, food and a change of clothing. Conductors were individuals who risked their lives to go into the South and lead slaves to free territory. The fugitives themselves were typically referred to as packages or freight. It was the instinctive acts of courage and kindness from people who were virtual strangers that enabled the lucky ones to find safety and freedom and become hallmarks of the Underground Railroad.

Despite legend and popular tradition, it is difficult to trace the routes accurately that runaways took to reach safety. All of the major Underground Railroad routes began in the slave-holding South and snaked across the United States in different directions, often to the North, especially to cities with large numbers of free blacks, and sometimes ending in

¹ Staughton Lynd in *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism*, Harvard University Press, 1982.

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Canada. Many runaways found refuge in Spanish-owned Florida until it reverted to control by the United States. Escape routes also led freedom seekers into Mexico, the western territories and the Caribbean. Others headed toward the Dismal Swamp on the border between Virginia and North Carolina and established communities there. Cities such as Charleston, Savannah, New Orleans and Louisville were home to runaways who passed themselves off as free blacks. Generally, those escaping from the Upper South had more chance of success because they were geographically closer to the North. Those enslaved on plantations in the Deep South found it much more difficult to travel the long distances to freedom.

The terms used to refer to individuals who fled from slavery have changed over time. Even the word “slave” has evolved today into “enslaved” to reflect that slavery was a condition imposed upon individuals by society. Historically, slaves who escaped were called runaways, fugitives or escapees, terms that reflected the Southern slave owner mentality and indicating that the law was on their side. They implied that slaves were the same as criminals, and that they had done something wrong by escaping from their bondage. Today, the preferred term is freedom seeker, which puts the focus on the goal of liberty and looks at escape as a positive step

There are accounts of men and women escaping from slavery as individuals and in groups as early as the late 1600s and early 1700s. The precursors of the Underground Railroad movement date back to the late 1700s, when some Quakers and other religious groups founded early abolition societies. In the 1770s, blacks filed petitions in Massachusetts seeking emancipation, citing the moral tenet of the American Revolution that touted the equality of all men. By all accounts, the peak years for operation were from 1830, about the time several abolitionist groups came together to form the American Anti-Slavery Society and William Lloyd Garrison published the first issue of his abolitionist newspaper, to 1861, when the Civil War began. Though accurate numbers are hard to come by, estimates are that some 3,000 people worked in the Underground Railroad and

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40,000 to 50,000 enslaved men and women escaped from the South via the Underground Railroad by the start of the Civil War. Others place the number of successful freedom seekers as high as 100,000. Considerable exaggerations on both sides and a lack of record keeping have blurred the numbers. Whatever the total, in a population of 4 million enslaved, the percentage of those who escaped amounted to 1 percent to 2 percent at best.

The desire for freedom was the compelling motivation for the enslaved to attempt escape. They risked everything to gain personal freedom, which also meant the right to learn to read and write, be paid for working a job, and keep their families together. Choosing to seek freedom was accompanied by conflicting loyalties if it meant leaving family members behind or jeopardizing their safety. For this reason, many who had the chance to escape passed it up. In the beginning, most runaways escaped on their own, a step called self-emancipation. If they received help at all, it was from free blacks or other slaves. Over time, as the debate over slavery heated up, and with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850—which called for the return of runaway slaves—more Americans became willing to give aid to runaways. But the notion that it was largely whites assisting helpless slaves is false. The majority of those who helped runaways were



other slaves and free blacks, with Northern free blacks providing most of the financial support for the movement and shelters for runaways. White Cincinnati abolitionist James Birney, referring to the Underground Railroad in his newspaper, noted that such matters were almost uniformly managed by blacks. Levi Coffin, a noted conductor on the Underground Railroad, also made several references to the black Underground Railroad in his book of reminiscences. Native Americans, especially the Seminoles in Spanish Florida, sometimes provided sanctuary, too.

Until 1793, fugitives could find safe passage in key Northern states, especially in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Up to that time, no federal law dictated what happened to enslaved individuals who crossed state lines, though the Constitution made vague reference to returning those “persons held to service or labour” who escaped. But Southern slave owners, distraught over the loss of their investments and property, pushed for legislation that would force the return of their property. Congress passed the first Fugitive Slave Act in 1793, and replaced it with a much harsher law containing strong enforcement provisions in 1850. The effect of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was to make Canada the destination of choice for those freedom seekers desiring true safety and freedom. The act also galvanized the abolitionist and Underground Railroad communities to redouble their efforts.

The Fugitive Slave Acts raised the stakes for everyone involved with the Underground Railroad. Whites railed against the constraints imposed by the acts, which they felt limited their freedoms and mandated specific behavior. There was also increased danger

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for all, white and black. As slave catchers spread across the North, it seemed no place was safe in the United States for African Americans. Even free blacks were kidnapped off the streets and taken into slavery, and if free blacks were caught helping in the Underground Railroad, they could be sold into slavery. In response, free blacks in the North formed vigilance committees to protect fugitives and free blacks from the clutches of slave catchers and held a series of “colored conventions” in more than 50 cities across the country. At the same time, white abolitionists and Underground Railroad operatives faced being stoned or mobbed, jail time, large fines, even branding and execution in rare instances, if caught in Underground Railroad activity. But these penalties paled in comparison to what the enslaved faced every day in slavery and what happened to them if they were captured and returned to slavery after an escape attempt.

Despite the obstacles, the stream of freedom seekers emerging out of the South grew. Runaways hid in woods, swamps, caves, forests and weeds. They swam across rivers, shipped themselves in boxes, stowed away on boats and train baggage cars, disguised themselves as whites or the opposite sex, and hid in wagons. They found shelter in homes, barns, stables, basements, vaults, attics, belfries, cupboards and closets. They learned to recognize that a lit candle in a window or a blazing lantern in a front yard signaled a safe house in villages and towns like Ripley, Sardinia and Wilmington, Ohio, where they would find food and shelter while they made their perilous and brave journeys to freedom. They moved from place to place at night to decrease the chances of being caught and hid during the day. They navigated by using the North Star or looked for moss on the north side of trees to point the way north. Many avoided contact with all people, not knowing whom to trust. Freedom seekers endured hunger, harsh weather, exposure to the elements and illness, and constantly feared betrayal, discovery, dogs, slave catchers and night patrols.

Historian James O. Horton describes how black sailors became an important part of the Underground Railroad. Being mobile, they knew about other places outside the South, as the black roustabouts on packet boats plying the Ohio and Mississippi rivers knew



about Cincinnati. They willingly carried messages back and forth, serving as conduits for information from family members in the free communities to slaves in the South, as well as smuggling fugitives on board their vessels. Cincinnati was the sixth largest city in the nation by 1860, with one of the busiest steamboat ports and was a strategic location along the Ohio River. This elaborate “hearsay” network of black river boatmen passed the word about Cincinnati and the names of those in the local African American community who could be trusted. Blacks were only about 2.5 percent of the city’s population in 1860, and most lived in

an area of the city called Bucktown, on the east side of downtown. Bucktown was the backbone of the local Underground Railroad, the place freedom seekers sought out for safety when they arrived. Key leaders of Cincinnati's black Underground Railroad were members of Allen Temple AME, Zion Baptist and Union Baptist churches.

Ohio and Cincinnati played a prominent role in the mystique and reality of the Underground Railroad, especially in the 1820s and 1830s. Geographically and politically, the 150-mile long Ohio River separated the slaveholding states of Kentucky and Virginia from the free state of Ohio. Symbolically, the Ohio River was a dividing line between slavery and freedom, and freedom-yearning blacks often referred to it as the River Jordan. In the years leading up to the Civil War, the Ohio River turned into a skirmish line in the struggles between North and South over slavery and freedom, with free blacks from Ohio sometimes making raids into Kentucky to rescue slaves. On the northern border of Ohio is Lake Erie, directly across from Canada, where safety and freedom also beckoned. So on both its northern and southern borders, Ohio was a key state in the Underground Railroad.

There were no bridges over the Ohio in the early 19th century, but the river was so shallow that it often dried up in late summer and fall and froze in the winter, making it easy to cross by wading or walking across. When the water flowed, plenty of small boats lined the banks. Under cover of darkness, runaways or conductors untied the skiffs and paddled back and forth across the river, depositing or retrieving freedom seekers.



Rev. John Rankin

William Siebert, an Ohio State University professor, began in the 1890s to study and document the Underground Railroad in Ohio. His interviews with participants revealed about two dozen ports of entry along the Ohio used by fugitives. In those days, most of the riverbank on both sides was thickly wooded, offering excellent cover for runaways. The stretch of river between Cincinnati and Ripley, upriver on the Ohio side, was an active crossing point. In Cincinnati, Levi Coffin, often called the president of the Underground Railroad, operated a dry goods store at Sixth and Elm Streets and claimed to have helped 3,000 slaves to freedom. John Rankin and John Parker lived in and operated out of Ripley and were among the major figures in Underground Railroad history. Southern slave owners and slave catchers referred to Ripley as “the hell-hole of abolition.”

Cincinnati and Ripley are also connected to Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe lived in Cincinnati for many years and heard stories about slavery, runaways and the Underground Railroad during her time there. The pivotal scene in her novel—of Eliza crossing the river—is based on a true-life incident of a young woman who found refuge in Rankin's home after her perilous escape across the ice floes.

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Slavery was fiercely debated in Cincinnati by pro- and anti-slavery groups. By the 1830s, the city had become a stronghold for abolitionist and anti-slavery sentiment. For a time, James Birney published an abolitionist newspaper, *The Philanthropist*, before being driven from the city by pro-slavery citizens who threw his printing press into the Ohio River. In 1834, a series of heated debates about slavery were held at Lane Seminary in Walnut Hills, Cincinnati. The debates resulted in those present voting to end slavery. This fueled feelings on both sides of the argument. When they were prohibited from speaking further about slavery, there was a mass exodus of students. As elsewhere in the nation, there was some overlap between those involved with the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad.



In other respects, Cincinnati and Ohio were not hospitable to blacks, regardless of their legal status. Ironically, the same state that became a major haven for the Underground Railroad imposed the notoriously restrictive Black Codes in the early 1800s. These laws required that blacks carry freedom papers, precluded them from much of civic life, and imposed harsh restrictions on many activities. Cincinnati was also dangerous because of its proximity to Kentucky, where slave owners and slave catchers lurked just across the border. Both free blacks and freedom seekers had much to worry about.

What happened to the freedom seekers after they reached safety? Many settled in cities of the North, in vibrant African American communities where they could reestablish family connections. They raised money to purchase family members remaining in slavery. They struggled to find work in Northern cities and towns plagued with unanticipated levels of bigotry and racial violence. In Cincinnati, many became barbers and hairdressers, occupations that afforded a reasonable chance to succeed. In general, black communities became self-reliant—because they had to. Institutions such as churches, schools and newspapers were built separate from white ones. Many ex-slaves became speakers on the abolitionist circuit, greatly impacting audiences as they told their tales of slavery and escape. Many free blacks worked to end the slave trade and abolish slavery. Because of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, many blacks fled to Canada, and not all of them returned to the United States after the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery.

Historians face a challenge in their efforts to uncover the true history of the Underground Railroad and to separate myth from reality. Many authentic sites, especially in urban areas, have been destroyed. Most blacks of the time did not read or write, so they left few written records. The records kept by whites about black activity in the Underground Railroad often smack of paternalism. The biases and perspectives of those who wrote accounts distort many of the stories, as do exaggeration, over-romanticizing and idealization. Local pride has compounded the myths. Four communities claimed to be the place where the term “Underground Railroad” was coined, and sources refer to several men, in addition to Levi Coffin, as its president.

Historians rely largely on documents from the North; that is, from those who succeeded. They continue to pore over maps, diaries, letters and newspapers of the period. Little is known about escape attempts that failed because they usually ended in the South and were not well documented. Because the Underground Railroad was illegal and shrouded in secrecy, even most whites kept few records. John Parker notes in his memoirs that after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, most conductors and stationmasters got rid of any records. Much of what we know about the Underground Railroad has been gleaned from information recorded long after its existence, often from memories that were not always clear. Oral history interviews and written accounts such as memoirs kept tales of the Underground Railroad alive after the Civil War. These, of course, reflect only the experiences of those who succeeded. Those who lost their lives or were returned to slavery left almost no voice.

New sources of information have come to light in recent decades through the efforts of genealogists tracking ancestors and archeologists studying buildings thought to have been associated with the Underground Railroad. Other efforts have been made through use of high-tech methods such as infrared sensors to detect evidence. Much about the Underground Railroad remains to be found and analyzed. It is waiting—in family Bibles, census records, land transfer documents, diaries, church and lodge records, cemeteries and speeches.

Myths still abound about the Underground Railroad. Hundreds of property owners throughout the Northeast and Midwest claim, based on family tradition and rumor, that the cellars and tunnels in their homes or outbuildings were used in the Underground Railroad. The National Park Service (<http://209.10.16.21/TEMPLATE/FrontEnd/index.cfm>) has a staff devoted to researching Underground Railroad sites, and takes an active role in



trying to authenticate such claims, most of which remain unsubstantiated. Historians give virtually no credence to the current belief that quilts carried coded messages to guide fugitives from safe house to safe house, but this has not stopped the general public and school classes across the country from undertaking quilt projects, adding further to the myth. Another common myth holds that whites were the active leaders, and most of them Quakers, while the fugitives themselves were passive and helpless.

Time has not diminished the appeal of the Underground Railroad. So what lessons can Americans at the beginning of the 21st century learn from it? There is certainly deeper meaning in all the heroics and drama. If only for a brief time, the Underground Railroad helped break down age-old barriers of prejudice and racism, encouraging men and women of both races to work together for a common good. We can appreciate how those who joined in the work of the Underground Railroad made deep personal commitments, understanding that they were breaking the law in the name of a higher moral principle.

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Cincinnati historian Dan Hurley described its importance this way: “The story of the Underground Railroad turns out to be not on the fringe, but at the core of the experience defining the American identity. The determination of enslaved men and women to risk everything to claim freedom, coupled with the willingness of free people, black and white, to risk much to lend assistance, is central to what it means to be an American... Those freedom seekers, along with those they encountered who were willing to reach out a hand to a stranger in need, acted not at the fringe of the American experience, but at its vital center.”²

Inspired by the lessons of the Underground Railroad, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati has built a visionary learning center on the bank of the Ohio River, directly across from Kentucky and on the site where so much Underground Railroad activity took place 150 years ago. The Freedom Center incorporates the themes of freedom, cooperation, perseverance and courage in the stories it tells and it illustrates how people took on the roles of victim, freedom seeker, ally, oppressor or bystander—a framework that serves as a useful tool for looking at modern-day freedom struggles around the world.

Historian Charles Blockson discovered his own personal connection to the Underground Railroad through the stories of his ancestors. “As a historian attempting to research the Underground Railroad, I have found, with a mixture of admiration and chagrin, that this atmosphere of secrecy endures... What we do know is a fragment of the whole, but it is enough. Ordeals may have gone unrecorded and names may have been forgotten, but such records as have survived in the memories of men like my grandfather and in the memoirs of those who risked all for freedom and brotherhood make it clear that the flight to freedom on the Underground Railroad was an epic of American heroism.”³ The Underground Railroad was intimately wrapped up in the politics and cultures of the times—slavery and abolition, Civil War and Reconstruction—and helped start the tradition out of which the Civil Rights Movement developed. It brought together blacks and whites, men and women, young and old, Northerners and Southerners, rich and poor. Working together, they helped America fulfill its promise to the world.

Educators who discuss the Underground Railroad in their classrooms are well positioned to help dispel some of the myths and misconceptions and connect students to its lasting importance and meaning. In most school curricula, the Underground Railroad is a minor footnote squeezed between what curriculum designers deem as the more important topics of slavery and the Civil War. Yet this has not deterred teachers everywhere from finding ways to embrace the study of the Underground Railroad in considerable detail in



² “Cincinnati and the Underground Railroad,” by Dan Hurley, in *Friend of a Friend*, the newsletter of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, Vol. 2, No. 3, Winter 1999.

³ Charles L. Blockson, “The Underground Railroad,” in *National Geographic*, July 1984, pp. 3-39.

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their classrooms, especially in intermediate and middle school grades. Students respond enthusiastically to the Underground Railroad. The challenge is to avoid trivializing the subject of the Underground Railroad with the plethora of videos, websites, outdoor simulations, board games and children's books with their typical happy endings. Educators can help determine whether these resources will simply result in trendy projects or lead to a genuine reflective mood that focuses on the dignity of human spirit born and nourished during those troubling times.

The change in perceptions of the Underground Railroad, from something once reviled and illegal to something now seen as noble and uplifting, offers hope that we do indeed evolve as the human race. The Underground Railroad proves that people can change things, that individuals matter. Its stories persist as universal symbols of courage, perseverance, cooperation and struggle against oppression. Seek to instill these lessons in your students.

