



Nishnabotna Ferry House, Iowa, overlaid with an 1836 letter from a Mississippi slave owner listing the names and shoe sizes of the enslaved people on his plantation. Image courtesy of Stephen Marc.

The Underground Railroad refers to the efforts of enslaved African Americans to resist enslavement and gain their freedom by escape and flight through the end of the Civil War. Wherever slavery existed, there were efforts to escape. Early escapes led slaves to form maroon communities in rugged terrain away from settlements, and later to move across state and international borders.

While most individuals began and completed their journeys unassisted, active efforts to aid those escaping increased with each subsequent decade of legal slavery in the United States. Some may have decided spontaneously to assist a freedom seeker, but particularly following the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Underground Railroad was deliberate and organized. Freedom seekers went in many directions—Canada, Mexico, Indian Territory, the West, Caribbean islands, and Europe.

The Fugitive Slave Acts

Until the end of the Civil War, enslavement was legal in the United States. In contrast to the Revolutionary War era rhetoric about freedom, the new United States constitution protected the rights of individuals to own and enslave other people.

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 enforced these slaveholding rights, requiring the return to enslavement of any African American accused or suspected of being a freedom seeker. Denied access to an attorney or a jury trial, a freedom seeker stood alone against a white person making an oral claim of ownership to a magistrate. Those who assisted the freedom seeker or interfered with an arrest faced a \$500

fine. Clearly, the Underground Railroad was at work decades before it was given its name.

Increasing escapes sparked a tougher law, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which compelled all citizens to participate in the capture and return of freedom seekers with penalties of fines and prison sentences. For individuals in the North, watching African American re-enslavement on the slightest pretext and the sale of kidnapped free African Americans brought home the moral dilemma of slavery.

Freedom seekers and those who helped them to escape were part of the Underground Railroad.

Motivation of the Freedom Seekers

Conditions of enslavement varied based on time period, geographical region, the type of agriculture or industry, the size of the slaveholding unit, urban and rural environments, and even the temperament and financial stability of the enslaver.

Common to all of these experiences is the dehumanization of both the oppressed and the oppressor by a system that treated human beings as property. Perhaps more than any other factor, dehumanization explains why some people chose to flee and why often their

owners expressed such surprise. Many who fled were relatively favored people, who had more material comforts and privileges than field hands. Access to information and skills, even literacy, was the edge that helped many to escape.

Regardless of status, freedom seekers’ act of self-emancipation demonstrated that they had not internalized the status of “slave” imposed upon them. They resisted, although the system of slavery was designed to condition the enslaved to accept their status.

Geography of the Underground Railroad

Wherever there were enslaved African Americans, there were people eager to escape. There was slavery in all original thirteen colonies, in Spanish California, Louisiana, and Florida, and on all of the Caribbean islands until the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and British abolition of slavery (1834).

The Underground Railroad started at the place of enslavement. Routes of escape followed natural and man-made modes of transportation—rivers, canals, bays, the

Atlantic Coast, ferries, river crossings, roads, and trails. Location close to ports, free territories, and international boundaries prompted many escapes.

Using ingenuity, freedom seekers drew on courage and intelligence to concoct disguises, forgeries, and other strategies. Slave catchers and enslavers watched for runaways on the expected routes of escape and used the stimulus of advertised rewards to encourage the public to catch runaways.

Commemoration of Underground Railroad History

Commemoration is only possible once Underground Railroad participants and events are identified. Primary sources—period letters, court testimony, or newspaper articles—verify the history. Next, the protection of significant sites leads to public education and preservation.

Use of accurate history in heritage tourism, educational programs, commemorative sculpture, and museum and traveling exhibits

is critical to public understanding and commemoration.

Sites of significant events, though altered, can still be remembered. Where a site has been paved over, modified, or rebuilt, a brochure, walking tour, school curriculum, road marker, or plaque can explain the significance of the spot to members of the public. Local celebrations can increase public awareness of hidden history.

Uncovering Underground Railroad History

Despite years of claims that Underground Railroad history was secret and un-knowable, local historians, and other researchers today find that there are primary sources describing the flight to freedom of many enslaved African Americans. Coming to light are court records, memoirs of conductors and freedom seekers, letters, newspaper runaway ads, and military records, all of which testify to the determination of the enslaved to seek freedom for themselves and their families.

Documents from before 1865 reside in Federal institutions like the National Archives; state archives and historical society libraries; local libraries and special collections; and private hands. Researchers can assemble freedom seekers’ stories by looking at the start, end, and in-between points of a journey. Once a freedom seeker can be identified in a runaway ad or letter belonging to a slave master, newspaper accounts, diaries, or so-called slave narratives may fill in the story.

Unknown Underground Railroad Heroes

The Underground Railroad is frequently associated with Harriet Tubman, the “Moses of her people,” and Frederick Douglass, a freedom seeker who became the greatest African American leader of his time.

Both came from Maryland. Freedom seekers, however, came from all places where the law supported enslavement, including the northern colonies:

- **Harriet Jacobs** came from North Carolina after seven years spent hiding in her grandmother’s attic.
- Sixteen-year-old **Caroline Quarles** fled life as a house servant on a plantation in St. Louis and traveled 700 miles until she reached refuge in Canada.
- **Anthony Burns** stowed away on a ship in Richmond to enjoy a few years of freedom in Boston.
- **Lewis Hayden, his wife, and their child** escaped from slavery in Kentucky to Ohio with the help of **Delia Webster** and **Calvin Fairbanks**.
- In the middle of the Civil War, **Robert Smalls** and **other black crew members**

of the Confederate ship the *Planter* sailed from its dock in Beaufort, South Carolina, to surrender to a Union flotilla.

- In California, black businesswoman **Mary Ellen Pleasant** sheltered runaway **Archy Lee** in her San Francisco home, leading to an important state court case.
- **Levi Coffin** and **John Rankin** were white ministers and Midwestern conductors, who assisted freedom seekers.
- Based in Ripley, Ohio, freedom seeker **John Parker** helped numerous runaways to cross the Ohio River into free territory.
- Residents of Wellington and Oberlin, Ohio, both black and white, refused to let slave catchers take **John Price** back to enslavement in Kentucky.
- A biracial network in Washington, D.C., including **Thomas Smallwood**, **Rev. Charles Torrey**, **Leonard Grimes**, and **Jacob Bigelow** worked over years to help people such as **Ann Marie Weems**, the **Edmonson sisters**, and **Garland White** to seek freedom.
- Using a clever disguise, **William and Ellen Craft** escaped over one thousand miles from Georgia to Boston.

National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

In 1998, Congress established the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. See www.nps.gov/ugrr



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