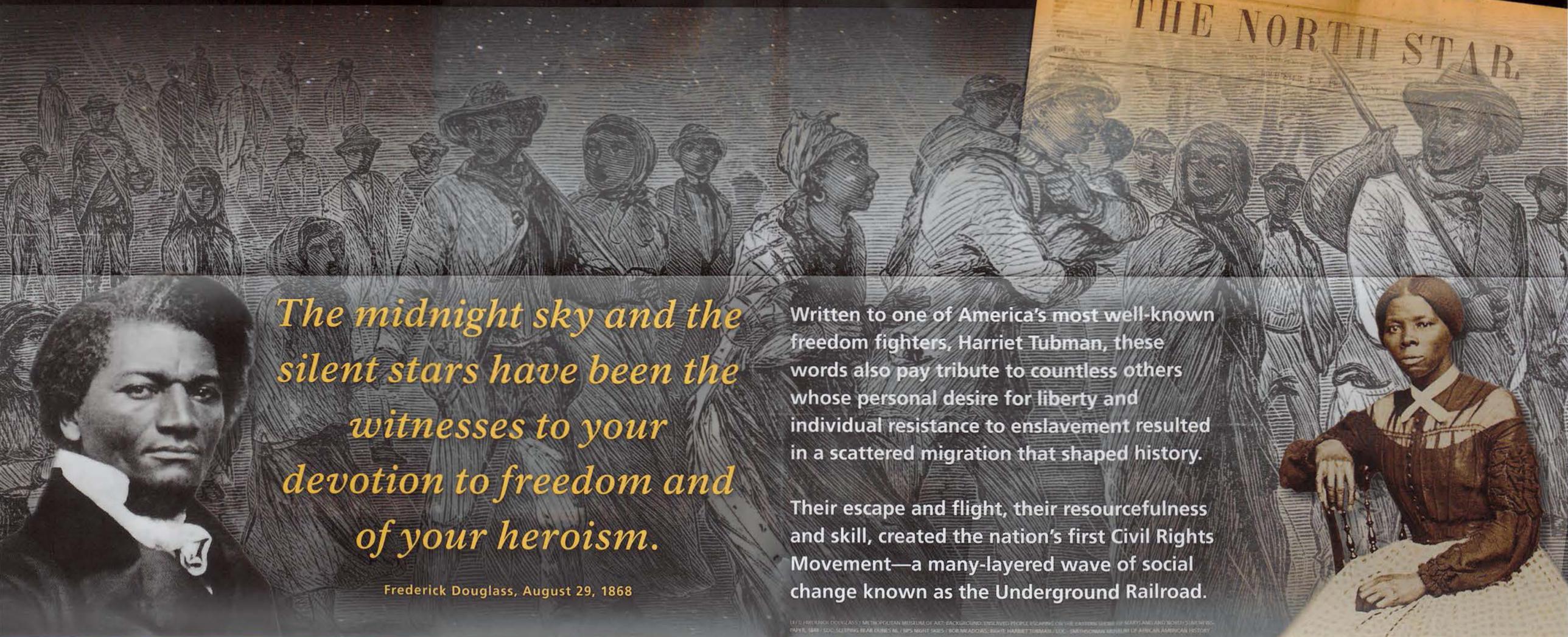


# National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



*The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses to your devotion to freedom and of your heroism.*

Frederick Douglass, August 29, 1868

Written to one of America's most well-known freedom fighters, Harriet Tubman, these words also pay tribute to countless others whose personal desire for liberty and individual resistance to enslavement resulted in a scattered migration that shaped history.

Their escape and flight, their resourcefulness and skill, created the nation's first Civil Rights Movement—a many-layered wave of social change known as the Underground Railroad.

## Emotional and Physical Freedom Denied



Auction platforms enabled inspection by bidders.



Enslaved family members suffered separation.

America's economic success from the colonial era to the Civil War depended on the institution of slavery. Enslavement kept people of African descent toiling on plantations and laboring in the homes and businesses of their owners. Such repression existed almost everywhere in the United States, including the North.

Bondage came in many forms for those enslaved in America. The inability to escape beating, branding, and brutal plantation work proved spiritually oppressive in itself. Being sold at auction was not only personally demeaning—

the act could be gut-wrenching as children were torn away from their parents and entire families were split apart forever. Captives in domestic situations also suffered emotionally from their unbearable lack of freedom. Even learning to read and write could result in merciless punishment.

Treatments varied, but were not always the reason to run away. The desire for freedom innate in all humans provided an undeniable incentive to flee. This common yearning refuted that enslavement was the natural status of people of African descent.



### Fugitive Slaves

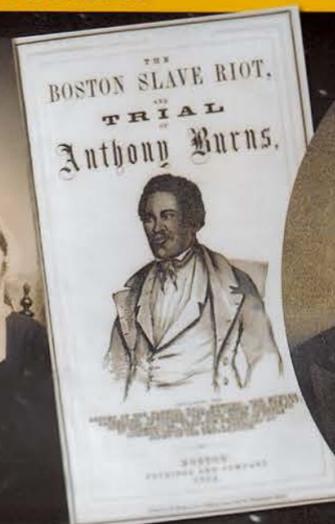
**ATTENTION.**  
The Slave-hunter is among us!  
**BE ON YOUR GUARD!**  
AN ARREST IS PLANNED FOR TONIGHT.  
**BE READY TO RECEIVE THEM,**  
**WHENEVER THEY COME!**

Top: An iron yoke collar cut from the neck of a young enslaved New Orleans plantation laborer who had escaped from her owner. Center: iron shackles with screw locks. Bottom: An undated broadside from an abolitionist community posted to warn fleeing freedom seekers—viewed either as a call to arms or a notice to help hide runaways.

## Allies and Opportunities



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As the nation extended west in the early 1800s, demand for enslaved laborers increased. Running away was a common strategy to escape. Harrowing stories involve solitary journeys through dark swamps, deceptive disguises in broad daylight, and hidden compartments in wagons. Most runaways fled on their own, but some found liberty aided by family, fellow freedom seekers, and abolitionists. Few acts of flight involved operatives venturing into the South to assist freedom seekers in their escape.

As individual acts of self-emancipation and resistance increased, a compromise meant to maintain the Union helped fuel antislavery. Tensions grew as many northerners opposed

the controversial Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which enforced the capture and return of refugees. Attempts to assist runaways increased and led to organized networks of "agents" and "conductors" aiding "passengers" along an expanding, but unseen, Underground Railroad.

The most unrestricted route to freedom finally opened up with the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Enslaved African Americans sought refuge with the advancing Union Army and many of the men were recruited as soldiers.

Left: People like John and Jean Rankin in Ohio aided thousands of freedom seekers from 1825-65. Left center: The 1854 Boston slave riot inflamed feelings against slavery in Massachusetts. Right center: Very active in the abolitionist movement, William Still was a free African American in Philadelphia who aided runaways and helped reunite families. Right: A broadside endorsed by Frederick Douglass and other leaders urged African Americans to enlist.

*There are no bonds so strong as those which are formed by suffering together.*

— Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861

TOP: MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
CENTER: WEST VIRGINIA DIVISION OF CULTURE AND HISTORY  
BOTTOM: BALUNER LIBRARY COLLECTION  
ABOVE LEFT: NPS / RICHARD SCHLECHT



Born enslaved, Underground Railroad agent Mary Ellen Pleasant fled Boston to avoid prosecution under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. She opened a boardinghouse in San Francisco during the Gold Rush and helped African American freedom seekers in both California and Canada. Pleasant supported abolitionist John Brown and advocated for civil rights and women's rights until her death in 1904.

SAN FRANCISCO HISTORY CENTER, SF PUBLIC LIBRARY



New York-born Anthony D. Allen fled slavery at age 24 for a life at sea. He eventually purchased his freedom and settled in Hawaii. Steward to Kamehameha the Great, Allen married a Hawaiian woman and acquired six acres in Waikiki. The successful business and property owner left a fortune to his family upon his death in 1835.

AMERICAN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTER HAWAII



No single site or route completely reflects and characterizes the Underground Railroad. The story and resources involve networks and regions rather than individual locations and trails.



Lewis Hayden was born to enslavement in Kentucky. In the fall of 1844 he met Methodist minister Calvin Fairbank and Delia Webster, a teacher from Vermont, who helped Hayden and his family escape to Ohio, and later to Canada. Fairbank and Webster were arrested upon their return to Kentucky and freed when Hayden raised money for their release.

COURTESY OF OHIO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



As the light-skinned daughter of an enslaved mixed race woman and her white owner, Ellen Craft passed as a white man in male clothing to escape by steamboat and train from Georgia to Pennsylvania with husband William in 1848.

IMAGE FROM "THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM" BY WILSON HENRY SEBERT



On St. Croix, escape from slavery and the cruelty enforced at Fort Christiansvaern made many flee to Puerto Rico. In 1759 enslaved Africans and free agricultural workers planned a rebellion against plantation owners on the island. Once exposed, the plot resulted in one suicide and the brutal torture and execution of 13 others.

ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATION BY KOSMIN WEDGWOOD

## Personal Journeys of Courage, Commitment, and Trust

The Underground Railroad was not defined by geographic boundaries. Anti-slavery activities and individual acts of liberation occurred wherever sentiments grew against bondage. People of African descent migrated in every direction away from captivity to free states, Spanish Florida, the Caribbean, Canada, and Mexico. Some escaped to "maroon" communities that were either remote or concealed near plantations where family members lived.

Neither *underground* nor *railroad*, the self-emancipation movement borrowed terms from the railroad, a new form of transportation at that time, to describe roles in the network. Word of mouth and coded mes-

sages guided refugees, not maps. Modes of transportation varied from foot and wagon to boat and actual train. Freedom seekers used various routes and traveled up to 20 miles each night, stopping to rest at "stations" during the day.

Some freedom seekers relied on hidden safe houses and diverse participants that challenged the notions of racism and sexism. Organized and loose systems of support involved enslaved people and operatives of African descent, and men and women motivated by moral, religious, economic, and political beliefs. Those who provided help performed acts of resistance—in their own way—along the many routes to freedom.

## Why do you want your freedom?

*Because I am a man.*

—Lewis Hayden to Calvin Fairbank



NATIONAL UNDERGROUND RAILROAD NETWORK TO FREEDOM

## A National Network of Communities and Commemoration

An increasing grass roots effort by communities and descendants across the country to preserve their Underground Railroad heritage helped lead to the enactment of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act in 1998.

Today the National Park Service collaborates with community initiatives around the country through the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program

(NTF). Work to coordinate preservation and education efforts nationwide helps integrate local historic sites, museums, and interpretive programs associated with the Underground Railroad into a mosaic of community, regional, and national stories.

Historic places, educational or interpretive programs, and research facilities associated with the Underground Railroad can belong to a net-

work of members eligible to use the NTF's unique logo and receive technical assistance. Members that are open to the public are eligible to participate in the National Park Service Passport Program.

The NTF also facilitates communication and networking between researchers and interested individuals, and helps develop statewide organizations for preserving and researching Underground Railroad sites.

The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program honors and commemorates the people of the nation's first Civil Rights Movement, their descendants, and all those who continue to explore and uncover even more self-emancipation stories.

Today this important network continues to unite people across racial, gender, religious, and class lines to promote social change.

**More Information**  
National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program  
National Park Service  
4068 Golden Hill Road  
Church Creek, Maryland 21622  
410-221-2290  
www.nps.gov/ugrr

To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities, visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

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Waterways served as primary routes to freedom for runaways while the Great Dismal Swamp provided refuge for enslaved African Americans. Today the Great Dismal Swamp Canal offers opportunities for remembrance, reflection, and recreation.

CAMDEN COUNTY TOURIST DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY