

Flight to Freedom

The Wayside and the Underground Railroad

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Underground Railroad
Network to Freedom



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Journal of A. Bronson Alcott, 1847





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The Wayside and the Underground Railroad

The Wayside has housed many residents over its more than three centuries of existence, from Samuel Whitney, Colonial-era minute man, to writers Louisa May Alcott (and parents Abigail and Bronson) and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Certain events that took place here vividly illustrate the momentous changes in the perception of slavery in New England over the seventy years following the American Revolution.

In late 1846, Abigail Alcott casually entered the following in her journal:

“This month has been full of interest- Preparations for the ‘Christmas tree’... On Christmas Day-The arrival of a slave named for the present John-an inmate in my family until some place where work can be provided an amiable intelligent man just seven weeks from the ‘House of Bondage.’”

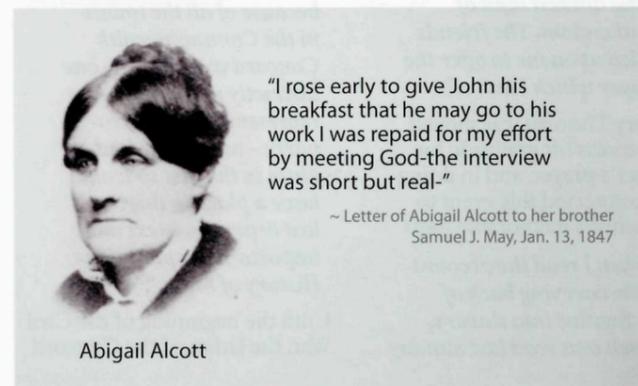
At the time, the Alcotts were living in the house known today as “The Wayside” in Concord, Massachusetts. Under the terms of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, they risked monetary fines, jail time and a possible lawsuit against them by the owners of the runaway slave.

They and a few of their neighbors were part of the Underground Railroad—the network of people who helped slaves along their path to freedom.

Concord: Cradle of Liberty?

Colonists made the first organized stand against British tyranny here in April, 1775. Speaking for many in Massachusetts, a committee in Worcester had written: “It is our opinion that mankind are by Nature Free, and the End and Designe of forming Social compacts, and entering into civil Society, was that each member of that Society, might enjoy his liberty.”

Yet even as these colonial patriots voiced their commitment to the fight for freedom, slaves worked in their fields and helped maintain their farms. This contradiction was not lost on everyone. In 1773, two slaves expressed their view on the subject by writing to the Massachusetts government “Sir, The efforts made by the legislative of this province in their last sessions to free themselves from slavery, gave us, who are in that deplorable state, a high degree of satisfaction. We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them.”



Abigail Alcott

“I rose early to give John his breakfast that he may go to his work I was repaid for my effort by meeting God-the interview was short but real-”

~ Letter of Abigail Alcott to her brother Samuel J. May, Jan. 13, 1847

Some slave owners, recognizing the hypocrisy of advocating for their own freedom while holding others in bondage, freed their slaves. Most, however, did not. As British soldiers marched on their way to and from Concord on April 19, 1775, they passed by The Wayside, owned at the time by Samuel Whitney, merchant, delegate to the Provincial Congress, muster master of the Concord Minute Men—and owner of two slaves.

In later years, Henry David Thoreau (of Walden Pond fame, and an outspoken abolitionist) recorded this story of Mr. Whitney’s slave, Casey:

“George Minott . . . told me how Casey was a slave to a man -Whitney, who lived where Hawthorne owns,- the same house,- before the Revolution, ran off one Sunday, was pursued by the neighbors, and hid himself in the river up to his neck till nightfall, just across the Great Meadows. He came back that night to a Mrs. Cogswell. . . and got something to eat; then cleared far away; enlisted,

and was freed as a soldier after the war. . . He may have been twenty years old when stolen from Africa; left a wife and one child there. Used to say that he went home to Africa in the night and came back again in the morning; i.e., he dreamed of home.”

Slavery was legal in Massachusetts until 1783. After that time, former slaves—even those who gained their freedom through military service during the Revolution—lived on the fringes of Concord, eking out a living as best they could.

In the first quarter of the 19th century, few Concord residents concerned themselves with the slavery issue. The Liberator, an abolitionist newspaper, reported that “. . . Concord people have so lost all sense of that sacred word liberty, that you may shout it as loud as you please in their ears, and they will turn and give

Name	Plac	Real Estate	Other	Personal	Slaves	Money at Interest	Sum of Trading Stock	Total
Timothy Weston	1	322	1	1	5	18		37:18
Samuel Whitney	1	504	2	1	3	88	20	150:0:0 138: 8
Martha Wheeler	2	5	2	1	3	0		13:6:8 6. 0
Abner Wheeler	2	21	2	1	2	10	6	20:0:0 31 6
Sarah Wheeler	2	1	1	1	1	4	10	20:0:0 4. 10
Samuel Wooley	4							4. 0
Domiah Williams	1	1	1	1	1	7		6. 0 1. 7

1771 tax assessment record showing that Samuel Whitney owned two slaves.

you a look, very similar to that of some superannuated person, from whose mind the memory of all those formerly dear has passed away.”

As the western territories began to apply for statehood, dissension arose over the possible expansion of slavery. By the 1830s, organized groups in the north began to promote abolition of “the peculiar institution.”

The Concord Lyceum hosted public debates over questions such as “Would it be an act of humanity to emancipate at once, all the slaves in the United States?” and “Are the intellectual qualities of the whites naturally superior to those of the negro race?” and by 1837, sixty-one Concord women formed the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. They communicated with surrounding towns, disseminated anti-slavery propaganda, circulated and signed petitions, and attended national conventions.

Over the following decade, this group of women worked tirelessly to gain local support for the abolition movement. Even though they faced racism, sexism, and sometimes even outright hostility, slowly momentum for the cause began to build.

The Alcotts and Abolition

While living at The Wayside in late 1846 and early 1847, the Alcotts (Bronson, Abigail and daughters, Anna (age 15), Louisa (14), Elizabeth (11) and May (6)) aided at least one runaway slave on his flight to freedom along the Underground Railroad.

In a letter to her brother, Mrs. Alcott described the experience:

“We have had an interesting fugitive here for 2 weeks-right from Maryland. . . His sufferings have been great his intrepidity unparalleled.”

Bronson Alcott recorded his impressions in his journal:

“Our friend the fugitive, who has shared now a week’s hospitalities with us, sawing and piling my wood, feels this new taste of freedom yet unsafe here in New England, and so has left us for Canada. We supplied him with the means of journeying, and bade him a good god-speed to a freer land . . .

He is scarce thirty years of age, athletic, dextrous, sagacious, and self-relying. He has many of the elements of the hero. His stay with us has given image and a name to the dire entity of slavery, and was an impressive lesson to my children, bringing before them the wrongs of the black man and his tale of woes.”

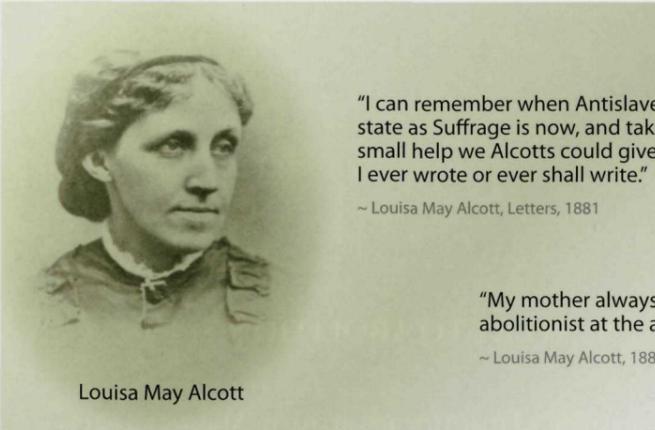


A. Bronson Alcott

Photo courtesy of the Concord Free Public Library

SLAVERY TO ABOLITION

- 1638 First Africans arrive in Massachusetts Bay Colony
- 1641 Massachusetts is the first colony in British America to legalize slavery
- 1780 Massachusetts Constitution states “All men are born free and equal”
- 1783 Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court declares slavery is incompatible with the Massachusetts Constitution
- 1793 U.S. Congress passes the Fugitive Slave Law
- 1808 International slave trade legally ends in the U.S.
- 1850 U.S. Congress passes a new Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850
- 1865 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolishes slavery in the United States



"I can remember when Antislavery was in just the same state as Suffrage is now, and take more pride in the very small help we Alcotts could give than in all the books I ever wrote or ever shall write."

~ Louisa May Alcott, Letters, 1881

"My mother always declared that I was an abolitionist at the age of three."

~ Louisa May Alcott, 1886

Louisa May Alcott

The Alcotts' involvement in the antislavery movement brought young Louisa and her sisters into contact with some of its most ardent champions of abolition: William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips and Theodore Parker to name a few. Abigail Alcott's family included Mays, Sewalls and Quincys—all early abolitionists. Her ancestor, Judge Samuel Sewall, wrote "The Selling of Joseph" in 1700, one of America's first published antislavery tracts. Abigail's brother, Rev. Samuel J. May, was an organizer of the American Anti-Slavery Society (1833) and a key figure in Underground Railroad activities in upstate New York. Even though the Alcotts moved from The Wayside to Boston in 1848, their commitment to abolition continued.

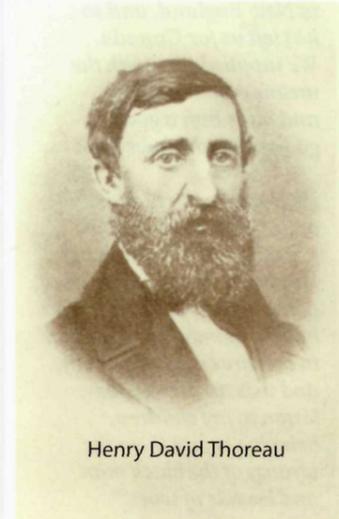
In 1850 Bronson joined the Boston Vigilance Committee, which attempted to rescue runaway slaves. And in a letter to her brother February 28, 1851, Mrs. Alcott wrote:

"I have sent 20 colored women to service in the country - where for the present they will be safe - [I] may yet to meet the penalties of the law - I am ready."

Other residents of Concord also played a significant part in the Underground Railroad and the Abolitionist movement. Many of its most illustrious citizens were active in the Middlesex County Antislavery Society, founded in 1830. After the Concord Women's Antislavery Society was founded in the 1830s, it gained about 70 members including Helen and Maria Thoreau (sister and aunt of Henry David Thoreau), Lidian Emerson (wife of Ralph Waldo), and Abigail Alcott. They contributed to the cause in many ways, even selling baked goods and using the proceeds to provide fugitives with food, clothing, and tickets for the real train to Canada.

Henry Thoreau's sister and aunt, and Lidian Emerson,

were known to provide food and shelter for runaways on more than one occasion. On October 1, 1851 Henry noted in his journal that he "Just put a fugitive slave, who has taken the name of Henry Williams, into cars for Canada."



Henry David Thoreau

"Nothing can be effected but by one man.... We must first succeed alone, that we may enjoy our success together... In this matter of reforming the world, we have little faith in corporations."

"Do we call this the land of the free? What is it to be free from King George the Fourth and continue the slaves of prejudice? What is it to be born free and equal, and not to live? What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom?"

~ Henry David Thoreau, Journal, 1851

CAUTION!!
COLORED PEOPLE
OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,
 You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the **Watchmen and Police Officers of Boston,**
 For since the recent **ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN,** they are empowered to act as **KIDNAPPERS** AND **Slave Catchers,**
 And they have already been actually employed in **KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES.** Therefore, if you value your **LIBERTY,** and the **Welfare of the Fugitives** among you, **Shun them in every possible manner, as so many HOUNDS on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.**
Keep a Sharp Look Out for KIDNAPPERS, and have TOP EYE open.
APRIL 24, 1851.

Newspaper ad to caution runaway slaves, 1851

Epilogue

The new Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required citizens to assist in the recovery of runaway slaves, and denied a fugitive's right to a jury trial. Slaves who had made it to freedom in the north faced capture and return to the south. Henry David Thoreau's response was clear:

"I hear a good deal said about trampling this law under foot- Why one need not go out of his way to do that - This law lies not at the level of the head or the reason - its natural habitat is in the dirt. It was bred & had its life only in the dust and mire."

Many who had previously been ambivalent about slavery now took a firm stand against the institution. Concord Society member Ann Bigelow remembered that the town became a more active affiliate of the Vigilance Committee after the law was passed. "Nearly every week some fugitive would be forwarded with the utmost secrecy to Concord to be harbored overnight and usually sped on his way before day light."

In 1851, fugitive slave Thomas Sims (one of many runaways traveling through Boston on their way to freedom) was captured "by the hellhounds of Boston in the employ of the slave power..." Sims had stolen into the city aboard a ship from Savannah. Daniel

Foster, an outspoken minister in Concord's antislavery efforts, met with others (including Bronson Alcott) to determine a plan to rescue him, but they were unsuccessful. Reverend Foster was present at dawn on the morning of April 12 when armed guards escorted Sims to the ship that would carry him back to slavery.

"Just as the moon set and before the day began to dawn Sims was brought out and placed in the center of this armed band. We saw him as he came out into the light of the lamp his face was bathed in tears yet he moved on as a martyr to his terrible fate. We accompanied the infamous band of Boston Tories who escorted a free man to slavery expressing our indignation and sorrow... By an impulse we were all moved to engage in some religious ceremonies to commemorate the departure of our missionary to the darkest land of heathendom. The friends called upon me to offer the prayer which I did..."

Henry Thoreau was moved to express his gratitude for Foster's prayer, and in doing so, connected this event to Concord's memorable past:

"When I read the account of the carrying back of the fugitive into slavery, which was read last Sunday



The Wayside today. The Wayside was home to writers Nathaniel Hawthorne and Harriet Lothrop (pen name Margaret Sidney). It is now a part of Minute Man National Historical Park.



The Alcotts bought the house in 1845 and named it "Hillside." Drawing from Recollections of Seventy Years by F. B. Sanborn (1909).

evening - and read also... that the man who made the prayer on the wharf was Daniel Foster of Concord I could not help feeling a slight degree of pride because of all the towns in the Commonwealth Concord was the only one distinctly named as being represented in that tea-party - and as she had a place in the first so would have a place in this the last & perhaps next most important chapter of the History of Mass."

Until the beginning of the Civil War, the ladies of the Concord

anti-slavery society would continue to support their cause, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and many others would compose and deliver lectures that kept the evils of slavery in the minds of their countrymen.

The Wayside still stands as a testament to those who lived there, and as a silent witness to these dramatic events.

The house was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1963 and became part of Minute Man National Historical Park in 1965. It is open to the public.



National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program is run by the National Park Service. This program commemorates and preserves the historical significance of the Underground Railroad in the eradication of slavery and the evolution of our national civil rights movement.

The Underground Railroad was a network of people and places that helped runaway slaves to reach freedom in Canada. "Conductors" facilitated the fugitives' movement from one "station" to another. The "stationmasters" cared for the fugitives until it was safe for them to move on. All operations were conducted with the utmost secrecy because it was illegal. Most accounts were recorded long after slavery ended in America. The Wayside is fortunate to have first-hand written material to document its role as a station on the Underground Railroad.

MORE INFORMATION:

The Wayside, Minute Man National Historical Park
 455 Lexington Road, Concord, MA 01742
 978-318-7863 www.nps.gov/mima/wayside

Minute Man National Historical Park Headquarters
 174 Liberty Street, Concord, MA 01742
 978-369-6993 www.nps.gov/mima

National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom:
www.nps.gov/history/ugrr

Underground Railroad, Official National Park Handbook
 Slavery: Cause and Catalyst of the Civil War, National Park Service booklet