# The Underground Railroad

National Park Service
Pacific West Region
Department of the Interior

## The Quest for Freedom Moves West

### 1848-1869

*A black placer gold miner shovels paydirt at Auburn Ravine in 1852.*
BANCROFT LIBRARY

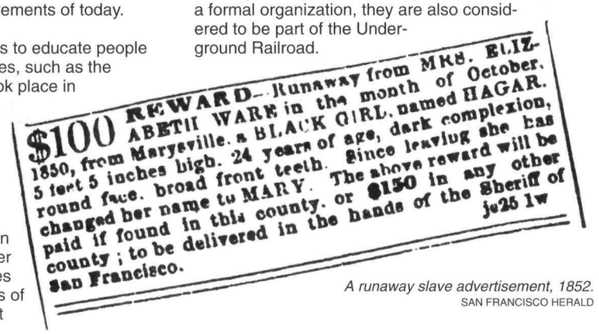
**THE DISCOVERY OF GOLD** at Sutter's Mill in 1848 sparked a worldwide migration of people that helped shape California and the American West. Often overlooked is the role African Americans played in the development of the rapidly transforming society. By 1852 about 2,000 blacks lived in the state, and although they represented only 1% of the total population, the lives of these pioneers stand as a testimony to determination and achievement in the face of adversity. Some free blacks from Northern communities hoped to strike it rich and return home in triumph, while the majority hoped to find high-wage jobs and settle permanently with their families in a society free from racial prejudice. It is estimated that approximately 600 enslaved African Americans were brought from Southern states to labor in the gold fields and the developing cities. Some were given the opportunity to purchase freedom for themselves and their families and remain in California, but others were sent back into Southern slavery by their owners.

Although many are surprised to learn of the existence of slavery in California, it was a defining issue in the early years of American control. When the state entered the Union as part of the Compromise of 1850, its new anti-slavery constitution failed to address specifics regarding the issue of slavery. Because of these omissions the state became a new arena in the national battle over slavery, with abolitionists, free blacks and runaways allied against the institution of slavery. Many of the structures and attitudes developed during this period still have effects in our contemporary society. The efforts of abolitionists and Underground Railroad operatives to ensure freedom for all evolved after the Civil War into the civil and human rights movements of today.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to educate people concerning anti-slavery activities, such as the Underground Railroad, that took place in California from 1848-1869. Information can be difficult to locate because of the illegal nature of slave escapes. The runaway feared recapture, physical punishment and death, and those who aided feared persecution, prosecution and imprisonment. Many former slaves concealed their identities by changing names and places of birth, so official records are not always the best sources of information. It is hoped that readers of this publication will be stimulated to seek new sources of information to expand on what is now known. It is possible that relevant material, such as newspapers, documents and photographs, will be located in attics, basements or garages. It is also hoped that family stories of the period can provide an oral history of people involved in battling slavery in California. The National Park Service is currently facilitating a program to commemorate and interpret the Underground Railroad. Those interested in learning more please refer to the information at the end of this brochure.

### The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was part of the most important civil and human rights movement of the 19th century–the abolition of slavery. Although trains and secret tunnels are part of the story, the Underground Railroad is a figurative term describing a loose network of people who helped escaped slaves to safety and freedom in the North, the West, Canada, Mexico, Europe and the Caribbean. Most often, the term is associated with formal escape networks that involved safe houses, secret codes, hiding places and secret passages. Free blacks were the prime organizers of these groups, especially between 1850-1860, and black churches often acted as Underground Railroad stations. Although assistance was also provided by whites (especially Quakers), Indians and Mexicans, some runaways received little assistance to their efforts. They relied upon their own wits and courage and occasional help from sympathetic individuals. Those who helped did so on a case-by-case basis, providing food, shelter, clothing and directions. Though they were not part of a formal organization, they are also considered to be part of the Underground Railroad.



$100 REWARD.—Runaway from MRS. ELIZABETH WARE in the month of October, 1850, from Marysville, a BLACK GIRL, named HAGAR. 5 feet 5 inches high, 24 years of age, dark complexion, round face, broad front teeth. Since leaving she has changed her name to MARY. The above reward will be paid if found in this county, or $150 in any other county; to be delivered in the hands of the Sheriff of San Francisco.
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*A runaway slave advertisement, 1852.*
SAN FRANCISCO HERALD

Whether rowboat across the Ohio River, coastal schooner, transatlantic steamer or Cape Horn whaler, maritime routes were most commonly used by escapees. Water allowed the runaway to put distance and a barrier between himself and recapture. Black seamen often assisted slaves to escape from Southern ports by bringing them onboard ships as stowaways on journeys to Northern ports. White officers, sailors, dockworkers and ship company representatives also helped runaways on their journey to freedom. Protection papers were important documents for black seamen in the 19th century. These certificates of proof of citizenship were carried by all American sailors and the physical descriptions listed on them were often vague and fit one man as well as another. Papers were often forged, stolen or traded. In 1838 Frederick Douglass, famous abolitionist leader, walked away from bondage in Baltimore, disguised as a sailor with a borrowed protection paper in his pocket.

### Bicoastal Connections

As well as being the world's whaling capital in mid-century, New Bedford, Massachusetts was a center of Underground Railroad activity in the years before the Civil War. It had one of the highest percentages of Southern-born African Americans, with an estimated 700 runaways living there during the 1850s. New Bedford's strong involvement in anti-slavery activity resulted from several factors. Quakers and other liberal religious groups dominated the political, economic and moral development of the community and anti-slavery sentiment was strong among them.

The city was part of an extensive coastal trading system that extended into Southern ports. Runaways took advantage of this transportation network by stowing away, often with the assistance of crewmen, on ships bound for New England. In New Bedford they found a network of black and white members of anti-slavery organizations. Black boardinghouses were open to runaways and a school was opened to educate their children. The city's need for labor was great and employment could be found in factories producing rope, sails, candles and whale oil.

The maritime trades historically allowed black participation at a time when opportunities ashore were greatly limited. Between 1803 and 1860 African Americans represented about 10% of the crew members on American ships. The whaling industry offered the greatest employment opportunities for blacks because of the hard work, poor pay, long sea voyages and the physical danger associated with the trade. Whalers were used to assist runaways to ultimate freedom because the long voyages at sea made recapture difficult. An article in the *New Bedford Mercury* in 1851 advised runaways to consider California a place of safety and suggested single men seek employment on whalers to the Pacific. By this period the primary whaling grounds were found in the waters of the Pacific. Ships bound for Hawaii, Japan or the Arctic often stopped in California ports for supplies and shelter during winter months.

So far, few runaways have been identified among whaling or merchant ship crews, or as passengers because it was important to hide their identity and origin through false names and documents. Further research is needed to develop the maritime connections of the Underground Railroad. By examination and careful comparison of crew lists, shipping articles, cargo manifests, ships' registers, protection papers and port records, the stories of these escapees can be developed. It is ironic that ships were critical for transporting Africans into slavery and that they later became as vital in transporting African Americans to freedom.

### Slavery in California

The existence of slavery in California and its importance to the development of the state has often been neglected in historical works. Many today believe that slavery was banned in California by the Compromise of 1850. However, a look at primary source material provides an abundance of proof that shows otherwise. Newspapers describe slave escapes, ads offer slaves for sale, and court records list freedom papers and cases involving enslavement. It is estimated that at any time there were between 200-300 enslaved African Americans in mining areas. In addition, California Indians also were held as slaves during this period. De facto slavery was still practiced for many years after its legal abolition. Some slaveholders tried to hide enslaved people in remote mining and rural areas to avoid possible loss.

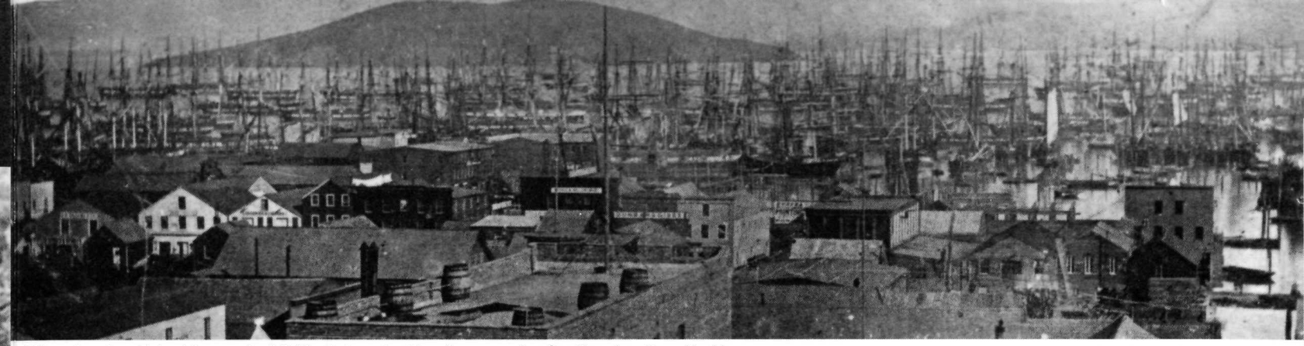
Many Southern slaveowners saw the Gold Rush as a chance to extend slavery into Western territory. They felt little risk in bringing small numbers of slaves to California because they believed that the National Fugitive Slave Law, passed as part of the Compromise of 1850, would support their claims. Some slaves brought to California were given the opportunity to gain freedom through arrangements with slaveholders. Some were allowed to purchase freedom for themselves and family members, while others gained release from bondage by working for a specific period of time. Self-liberation was chosen by the bold, who knew that in the early years no police system existed to keep them in servile roles, and they escaped, heading out for "parts unknown."

White miners feared competition from slave labor in the Gold Fields. They resented the idea of profit going to the master who did no work and they feared the wealth and control that Southern aristocrats would gain. As defenders of free labor, white miners were worried that slaves would be freed and represent a pool of cheap labor to compete with them. Free black miners sought to avoid conflict or harassment by working in partnership with white miners, especially New England anti-slavery men, or by working in areas that had Mexican or Chinese miners. In Yuba County an African American mining company likely found satisfaction by naming their operation the "Sweet Vengeance Mine."

### Legalization of Slavery in California

During the fall of 1849 delegates met at Colton Hall in Monterey and produced an anti-slavery constitution. Although Southern political power in California was strong at the time, there was a fear that the subject of slavery would complicate matters of admission to the Union. The new constitution left the status of slaves who arrived before and after admission undefined, and no provision was made stating how long blacks could be held in bondage in the "free state." These issues were left for the first legislature to decide when it was formed. In December the first state assembly passed an anti-Negro immigration bill, which would have banned all blacks from living in the state. David Broderick, a former New York Democrat, led opposition and the bill was defeated in the state senate. However, because of loopholes in the state's laws, both free and enslaved African Americans continued to arrive.

Fugitive slave cases were decided in courts on a case-by-case basis. Decisions depended on the judge's sympathies and both pro and anti-slavery forces found some success, until California passed a Fugitive Slave Law in 1852. Similar to the national



*African Americans joined thousands of California-bound gold seekers, crowding San Francisco Bay with ships.*
SAN FRANCISCO MARITIME NHP

### A Chronology of African American Firsts in the Development of Early California

**1579** Drake lands the *Golden Hinde* on the coast of Northern California. Four African slaves from Spanish colonies become the first in California.

**1776** Anza establishes future site of San Francisco, with 240 colonists and soldiers includes people of mixed African, Indian and Spanish heritage.

**1781** Spanish establish pueblo of Los Angeles. Over half of the original 46 settlers have African ancestry.

**1826** Black mountain man Peter Raney enters Southern California with Jedediah Smith's Rocky Mountain Fur Company party of exploration.

**1835** Black sailor Allen Light deserts brig *Pilgrim* in Santa Barbara. He later becomes a influential Mexican official of San Diego.

**1841** Black ship captain William Leidesdorff arrives in Yerba Buena, becomes an entrepreneur and civic leader before his death in 1848.

**1846** Slave "Mary" comes from Missouri with master and settles in San Jose, where she gains her freedom.

• The Bear Flag Revolt against Mexico includes African Americans Charles Gains, John Grider, Joe McAfee and Billy Gaston.

**1850** Black mountain man James P. Beckwourth discovers the lowest pass to cross the Sierra. He leads a party of settlers to Marysville.

• Census shows 962 blacks among 92,597 residents.

**1852** Two dozen slaves help Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints members establish San Bernardino.

• Passage of state Fugitive Slave Law protects rights of owners until 1855.

**1854** First school for black children in California opens at St. Cyprian AME Church in San Francisco.

• Biddy Mason and her family gain freedom through court decision against their former slaveowner.

**1860** California blacks total 4,086, with 118 residing in Marysville, 88 in Stockton and only 12 in Los Angeles.

**1865** Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolishes slavery.

**1866** Fourteenth Amendment gives African Americans equal protection under the laws of the country.

**1869** Fifteenth Amendment guarantees male citizens equal voting rights.

***Mary Ellen Pleasant,*** *a New England Underground Railroad agent, fled to California to avoid prosecution under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. During the Gold Rush she gave financial aid to escaped slaves and fought injustice through the courts.*

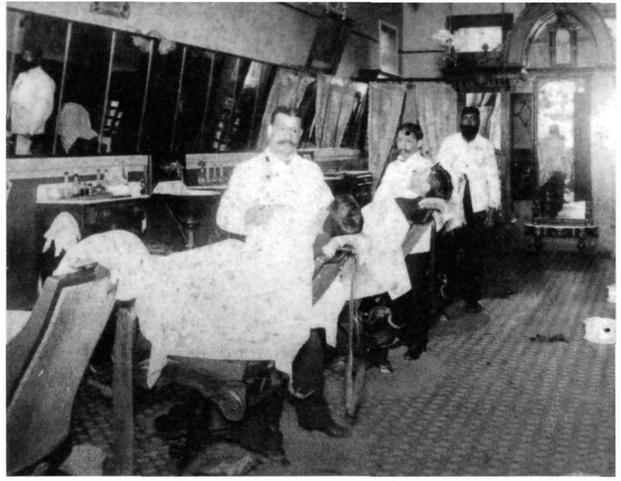
SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY, HOLDRIDGE COLLECTION

law, the California law protected the rights of the slaveowner. The law allowed for temporary residence of slaveholders, who could bring slaves to work in California, sell these slaves or return South with them. Anyone who arrived in California before statehood as either a slave or a runaway was still a slave. If an escaped slave was located he was subject to recapture. After passage of the law a highly organized effort was developed, with anti-slavery meetings held, funds raised and white abolitionist lawyers hired to prove the law unconstitutional. The Fugitive Slave Law was allowed to expire in 1855, but in three years many blacks were carried back into slavery. Eventually, a series of court decisions would uphold California African Americans' status as free from bondage.

## Anti-slavery Activity

Abolitionist leaders made California a battleground in the national movement against slavery. Literary societies, political conventions, church groups and civil rights organizations met to discuss the best way to help those held in bondage. African American churches, fraternal and political organizations provided assistance to runaways. Three colored conventions were held in the state between 1855 and 1857, the first two in Sacramento and the last in San Francisco. The delegates hoped to achieve basic rights, including those of testimony, franchise and education. The three conventions were an effective training ground for black leadership.

Among the convention delegates were Underground Railroad operatives Mifflin Gibbs from Philadelphia, Jeremiah Sanderson from New Bedford, David Ruggles from New York and William Yates from Washington, D.C. The Executive Committee of the Colored Convention was formed after the 1855 meeting. In *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (1919), author Delilah L. Beasley claims that activities of the Executive Committee were part of the Underground Railroad. In addition to raising money for legal cases and gathering signatures on petitions, the Committee assisted fugitives in a variety of ways. They provided temporary lodging, purchased food and medicine, gave jobs and small amounts of money and legal protection against kidnappers.



*Barbershops, such as the Mint in Oakland, served as important community information centers.* AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM AND LIBRARY OF OAKLAND

Beasley states that the Executive Committee formed a secret code system to transmit news around a state where there was no telegraph or rapid mail system. The agents of this secret system were African American barbers in almost all communities around the state. Coded messages were relayed around the state by land and by the inland waterways, which were the main highways of the day. Members of the Executive Committee traveled to isolated parts of the state and liberated blacks still held in servile relationships. After informing them of their free status they provided transportation and other aids to resettlement. Their efforts extended to areas, such as San Jose, Stockton, Napa and Red Bluff, where slavery is generally believed to exist.

## Departure for British Columbia

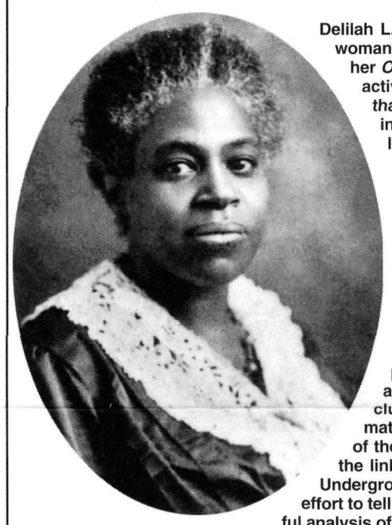
In 1858 California's last and most famous fugitive slave case took place. It revolved around Archy Lee, a young African American man who was brought in bondage from Mississippi in 1857. After several months his owner attempted to send Archy back South, but he refused to leave and lawyers were hired to defend his freedom. The chief attorney on his defense team was Edward D. Baker, a Republican leader in the state and a personal friend of President Lincoln from Illinois. Archy received his freedom from the court, but the case reminded African Americans that their freedom was still not secure in California. Meetings were held and discussion was raised concerning relocation to either Mexico or Canada.

News of discovery of gold on the Fraser River in British Columbia reached San Francisco in the spring of 1858 and gold fever hit the city. When the steamer *Commodore* departed San Francisco for Vancouver Island, it carried sixty-five members of the San Francisco African Zion Methodist Episcopal Church, including Archy Lee.

Over the next several months about 400 blacks from California joined them in Canada, drawn there by the lure of gold or the attraction of a new land where they could be free from prejudice and legal restrictions. The majority of these immigrants settled in Victoria and on Saltspring Island and their descendants may be found there today.

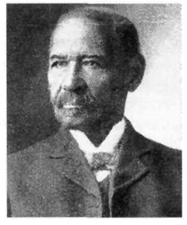
With the coming of the Civil War, the anti-slavery movement in California gradually evolved into a civil rights movement. After freedom from slavery was secured for all, efforts focused on gaining a broad range of political, economic and social rights.

## Delilah L. Beasley



**Delilah L. Beasley (1866-1934) was the first African American woman to write for a major metropolitan daily newspaper. In her *Oakland Tribune* column she wrote about the lives and activities of blacks, both locally and nationally. For more than ten years she traveled widely in California interviewing elderly black pioneers and examining documents in libraries, archives and local records offices. Her research resulted in the *Negro Trail Blazers of California* (1919), the first comprehensive work on the important role played by African Americans in the development of California. In addition to biographical sketches of notable people, she has listed the names of over 200 individuals, the year of their arrival and the location of their settlement. Although the lack of citation of sources has frustrated modern researchers, the value of her work cannot be underestimated. She has provided a list of clues that can lead to unexplored sources of information, such as black newspapers, photographs, journals, diaries, letters, family Bibles, and local records. As more information is collected, including family stories and oral histories, and existing material is reinterpreted, a more complete understanding of the early history of African Americans in California and the links to the present will be developed. The story of the Underground Railroad in the West is a work in progress and any effort to tell it in a comprehensive manner must begin with a careful analysis of Beasley's seminal work.**

*Forty Niner Alvin Coffey purchased his freedom through mining.*



*Mifflin Gibbs, an anti-slavery leader in California, who migrated to Canada.*

*Jeremiah Sanderson, leader of the three Colored Conventions of California.*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: OAKLAND TRIBUNE, AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM AND LIBRARY OF OAKLAND, BRITISH COLUMBIA ARCHIVES, SOCIETY OF CALIFORNIA PIONEERS.

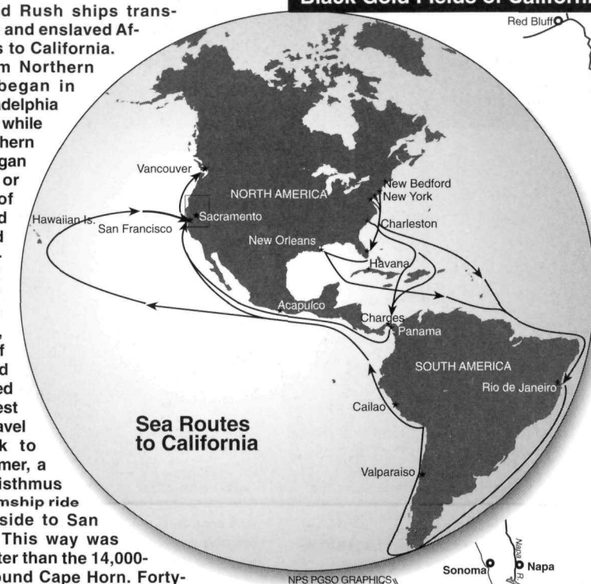
For more information on sites associated with African American history in California, look at the internet site **http://ww.cr.nps.gov/history/5views/5views6.htm**.

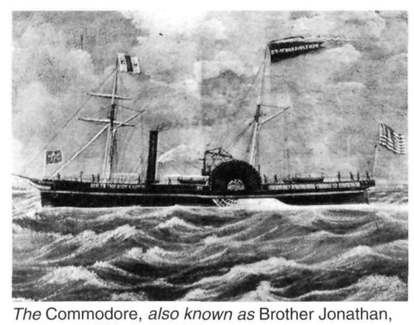
## On To California

**During the Gold Rush ships transported both free and enslaved African Americans to California. Sea routes from Northern ports usually began in New York, Philadelphia or New Bedford, while those from Southern ports usually began in New Orleans or the port cities of Virginia and Florida. Attracted by newspaper advertisements and because of their familiarity with maritime trades, the majority of free blacks and runaways migrated by sea. The fastest trip began with travel from New York to Panama by steamer, a trip across the isthmus and another steamship ride on the Pacific side to San Francisco Bay. This way was 8,000 miles shorter than the 14,000-mile journey around Cape Horn. Forty-two whalers and a great many other merchant ships were refitted to carry goods and passengers to California by way of the Horn. Companies were organized based on shares, vessels purchased and provisioned and the rush was on. Frederick Douglass claimed that 40 African Americans from New Bedford were in California by 1850.**

**From Southern ports, sea routes began with a trip to Cuba or New Orleans, where the steamers to Panama were based. Many slaveowners used the Panama route to reach California with their slaves. Slavery was illegal in Panama and native blacks often encouraged bondsmen to escape into local society. This loosely structured activity gives a new international element to the story of the Underground Railroad.**

**The overland routes required that journeys begin in the spring when the weather was favorable and fodder for stock animals was available. Journeys by land also needed to be completed by the onset of the next winter. Free and enslaved African Americans who traveled overland were always part of companies organized and led by whites. Slaves were put to work as cooks, servants or teamsters on the long and dangerous journey across the continent. Some slaves escaped and made their way through Texas to ultimate freedom in Mexico.**



*The* Commodore, *also known as* Brother Jonathan, *transported blacks to British Columbia from California. She was lost off the coast at Crescent City in 1865.* BRITISH COLUMBIA ARCHIVES

## Black Gold Fields of California 1848-1878


*The towns, bars, and diggings where African Americans actively engaged in gold mining. Many sites have just recently been identified. The derogatory names of some of these sites reflect the attitudes that prevailed during the Gold Rush period.*

JOE MOORE, SACRAMENTO AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURAL SOCIETY

## Selected Reading List


Beasley, Delilah L. *The Negro Trail Blazers of California.* Los Angeles: Times Mirror Publishing and Binding House, 1919.

Berwanger, Eugene H. *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1967.

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Goode, Kenneth G. *California's Black Pioneers: A Brief Historical Survey.* Santa Barbara, CA: McNally and Lofton, 1973.

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Williams James. *Life and Adventures of James Williams, a fugitive slave, with a full description of the Underground Railroad,* 4th edition. San Francisco: Women's Union Book and Job Printing Office, 1874.


## The Underground Railroad Network to Freedom


This brochure is a publication of the National Park Service, Pacific West Region. The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act of 1998 directs the NPS to facilitate an international effort to commemorate and interpret the Underground Railroad and to locate and preserve sites associated with this theme of American history. For more information on this project, contact: Underground Railroad Program Coordinator, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Fort Mason, Building 201, San Francisco, CA 94123, (415) 561-4485; or visit **http://www.nps.gov/undergroundrr/** on the internet.