The Undergraduate Railroad

The Quest for Freedom
Moves West 1848-1869

The Undergraduate 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 safehouses, 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. Those who relied on the Underground Railroad are also considered to be part of the Underground Railroad.

A chronology of African American Firsts in the Development of Early California

1759 Drakes land the Golden Hind on San Francisco Bay, which is the first contact of African Americans, one of whom was the ship’s cook.

1766 Four African slaves from Spanish colonials are brought to the Presidio by Don Carlos Allende and San Francisco by Don Juan de Anza.

1794 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.

1838 Frederick Douglass, the first of his race to be rescued, is carried by all American sailors and the physical danger associated with it. 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.

Bicostal Connections

As well as being the world’s whaling capital in mid-1850s, 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. The Underground Railroad was an important part of this anti-slavery sentiment was strong among them.

The city was part of an extensive coastal trading network 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 close-knit network of abolitionists and 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 whaling gear and ships. Black migrants were also employed as barbers and dentists.

The maritime trades historically allowed black participation at a time when opportunities were limited for free African Americans. In 1860 about 10% of the crew members on American ships. The whaling industry was one of the few opportunities for black employment. African Americans were found in almost every occupation on board ship. As well as being the world’s whaling capital in mid-1850s, New Bedford was also an important stop on the Underground Railroad.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to educate people concerning anti-slavery activities, as the Underground Railroad took place in California from 1848-1869. Information can be difficult to locate because of the high level of secrecy and the nature of slave escapes. The Underground Railroad implies a vast network of individuals, involving physical punishment and death, and those who sided with the fugitives. It is believed that each escapee concealed their identity by changing names and places of birth. The official records for this period 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 or 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 the family stories of the period can provide an oral history as well as an account of events 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 Purpose of this pamphlet is to educate people concerning anti-slavery activities, as the Underground Railroad took place in California from 1848-1869. Information can be difficult to locate because of the high level of secrecy and the nature of slave escapes. The Underground Railroad implies a vast network of individuals, involving physical punishment and death, and those who sided with the fugitives. It is believed that each escapee concealed their identity by changing names and places of birth. The official records for this period 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 or 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 the family stories of the period can provide an oral history as well as an account of events 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.

T he DISCOVERY OF GOLD at Sutter’s Mill in 1848 sparked a widespread migration of people who helped shape California as we know it today. Often overlooked is the role African Americans played in the development of the rapidly transforming state of California between 1850 and 1860, when as many as 20,000 blacks lived in the state, and although they represented only 1% of the total population, the lives and contributions of black residents stand as a testament 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 900 enslaved African Americans were brought from Southern states to labor in the gold fields and the dairy industry. Some were given the opportunity to purchase freedom for themselves and their families when California declared its independence from Mexico, 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 United States entered the Mexican War in 1846, the Compromise of 1850 was reached, which included the Fugitive Slave Act, which required the return of escaped slaves to their owners.

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 safehouses, 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 in a case-by-case basis, providing food, shelter, clothing, and directions. Those who relied on the Underground Railroad are also considered to be part of the Underground Railroad.

A chronology of African American Firsts in the Development of Early California

1759 Drakes land the Golden Hind on San Francisco Bay, which is the first contact of African Americans, one of whom was the ship’s cook.

1832 Black sailor Allen Light descends a ladder from the ship Golden Hind to cross the Sierras. He leads a party of settlers to Marysville.

1838 Slave “Mary” comes from Missouri with master and settles in San Jose, where she gains her freedom.

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

1850 Black mountain man James P. Black crosses the Sierras to find new land and becomes an influential Mexican official.
The national movement against slavery. Literary national. The Fugitive Slave Law was allowed to expire them. Anyone who arrived in California before education. The three conventions were an effective decisions would uphold California African Americans’ status as free from bondage.

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. 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 literacy and education. The three conventions were an effective training ground for black leadership.

Delliah L. Beasley

Delliah L. Beasley (1866-1934) was the first African American woman to write a 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 African American scholars and newspaper editors. In 1919, she published a collection of her columns called The Negro in California. In addition to raising money for legal cases and gathering signatures on petitions, the Committee assisted fugitives in a variety of ways. The temporary lodging, purchased food and medicine, gave jobs and small amounts of money and legal protection to runaways.

Beasley states that the Executive Committee formed a secret code system to transmit news across state lines. There was no telephone or rapid mail system. The agents of this secret system were African American women in almost all communities around the state. Coded messages were relayed from one community to another by means of an 8,000-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 provisions made. Sources of wealth were on. Frederick Douglass claimed that 40 African Americans from New Bedford were in California by 1500. Over the next several months about 400 blacks made their way through Texas to ultimate freedom in Mexico.

The Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

The overland routes that required journeys began in the southern states where 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 Africans active in the Underground Railroad were often encouraged bondsmen to escape into local society. This loosely structured activity gives a preliminary understanding of the story of the Underground Railroad.

The black population was organized based on shares, vessels purchased and provisions made. Sources of wealth were on. Frederick Douglass claimed that 40 African Americans from New Bedford were in California by 1500. The underground railroad network to freedom is a work in progress and any material is reinterpreted, a more complete understanding of the Underground Railroad is gradually being developed. For more information about the Underground Railroad visit the website: http://www.nps.gov/undergroundrr/