



The Underground Railroad at Fort Jefferson



Shortly after midnight on July 10, 1847, seven enslaved African Americans fled Garden Key. Over the lengthy construction of Fort Jefferson, large numbers of enslaved workers were employed by the Army. The conditions were harsh, and the hopes of escape virtually non-existent. Freedom seekers faced incredible odds. Surrounded by miles of open sea and treacherous reefs, perhaps no area in North America presented greater challenges to self-emancipation. Undaunted by these long odds, seven men set out to do the impossible.

Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program recognizes important efforts of enslaved African Americans to gain their freedom by escaping bondage. The Network to Freedom Program celebrates the heroism of freedom seekers, and acknowledges the people of all races who risked everything to make these dreams come true. Together, they endured the unendurable; together, they helped to change the future.

The courageous efforts of the seven men who fled from bondage at Fort Jefferson were honored by the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program. Their attempt offers proof that wherever slavery existed, even at the most remote military outposts, the thirst for freedom could not be quenched. Because of this dramatic 1847 self-emancipation attempt, Fort Jefferson is a proud member of the program.

Fort Construction

Built to protect the strategic Tortugas Anchorage, Fort Jefferson was a vital link in a chain of coastal forts that stretched from Maine to California. One of the largest coastal forts ever built, Fort Jefferson also ranked as one of the most remote. Its builders faced numerous hardships, including storms, shifting sands, and disease. The remote location often hampered the shipment of supplies and workers.

Enslaved African Americans played a key role in the construction of Fort Jefferson. Typically 20% of the workforce was comprised of African Americans, hired from owners in Key West. Owners were normally paid \$20 per month per slave, with the Federal government agreeing to provide food, shelter and medical attention for the slave workforce. One of these owners was Stephen Mallory, a U.S. Senator and future Confederate Secretary of the Navy.

Enslaved African Americans were responsible for some of the most difficult tasks at Fort Jefferson. They labored ten hours a day, six days a week. Using little more than wheelbarrows

they offloaded arriving ships. Ultimately, 16 million bricks were used in the fort's construction. Perhaps their most arduous task was collecting and transporting large quantities of coral rock from nearby islands. This coral material served as the main ingredient in forming coral concrete, a vital component in the fort's construction. Several of the enslaved men were permitted to bring their wives with them. These women often served as cooks and laundresses.

More than a dozen Federal fortifications along the Gulf Coast and South Atlantic employed slave labor. An estimated 687 enslaved laborers were employed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on these projects. Florida slave owners were assured that they would be given preference for the Fort Jefferson project. Anticipating profitable contracts with the government, local owners rushed to purchase additional enslaved workers. The work force at the fort reached its highest point in December 1857, with a total of 299 workers, including 58 enslaved peoples.

The Escape

Early on July 10, 1847, under the cover of darkness, seven freedom seekers named Jerry, Jack, John, George, Ephraim, Howard and Robert fled Garden Key. They took with them every vessel that could float, a brilliant move that greatly reduced the risk of being pursued and captured. Without being detected the seven men removed the schooners Union, Virginia, and Activa, and a small boat belonging to the Garden Key lighthouse keeper.

Soon after fleeing Garden Key and entering the Loggerhead Channel, they disabled and abandoned the Virginia, the Activa, and the lighthouse keeper's boat by cutting and

smashing their hulls. Their escape went completely undetected until daylight when the boats and enslaved workers were reported missing. Minutes later the Union was spotted from the Garden Key Lighthouse. By 7:00 AM, the freedom seekers had traveled fifteen miles, and were spotted three miles west of Loggerhead Key heading south.



The Pursuit

With Lieutenant H.G. Wright away on business in Key West, Dr. Daniel W. Whitehurst, his second in command, organized the pursuit. Because of the freedom seekers' thoroughness, only one old condemned vessel, the Victor, remained near the island. Work on refastening and caulking the Victor began immediately, and within two hours the vessel was repaired and outfitted.

By 9:00 AM the repaired Victor started in pursuit. On board were eight men led by lighthouse keeper Captain John Thompson. Since there was no wind, oars were hastily made and the men began an exhausting chase. Four hours later they had closed to within three miles of the Union. The freedom seekers, after making several course changes, hauled down

the jib of the Union, cut away both masts, and disabled the rudder. At approximately 2:00 PM they scrambled into a small boat from the Activa and began "pulling to the southward with great force." On board they carried a compass, clothing, spyglass, axes, and a small barrel of water.

Thompson and his crew continued the pursuit for several more hours until they lost sight of the lighthouse. Concerned because of a rapidly developing storm, the crew of the Victor returned to Garden Key by midnight. As the weather continued to deteriorate, Dr. Whitehurst waited and pondered the fate of the escapees. Understandably impressed with the careful planning and execution of the escape attempt, he speculated that their destination was the Bahamas.

The Capture

The seven freedom seekers survived the powerful storm, but their hazardous journey was only beginning. They traveled eastward through the Straits of Florida where they were spotted two days later by a local captain near the island of Key Vacas (present day Marathon), nearly 120 miles east of the Dry Tortugas.

An alarm was spread on Key Vacas, and several vessels began chase. The following day the boat was discovered on the beach at Long Key several miles to the east. Coming ashore, the pursuers began firing their weapons in an effort

to frighten the fleeing men. To avoid capture, the freedom seekers ran for the beach on the other side of the island, near Indian Key, and then desperately fled into the water. The chase finally came to an end as a boat from the sloop Key West picked the fleeing men from the water and took them to Key West.

After an exhausting journey, the men had ultimately failed in their quest for freedom. Two leaders in the group were returned to their owners, and the remaining five men were sent back to Fort Jefferson.

Freedom at Last

Enslaved African Americans endured countless hardships during the construction of Fort Jefferson. By 1863, with the arrival of hundreds of military convicts sentenced to perform hard labor, the use of enslaved peoples was discontinued at this remote outpost. African Americans returned two years later, not in bondage, but as soldiers. No longer denied their freedom, by 1865 African Americans had become the guardians of freedom.

