

# Network to Freedom

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Underground Railroad  
Network to Freedom



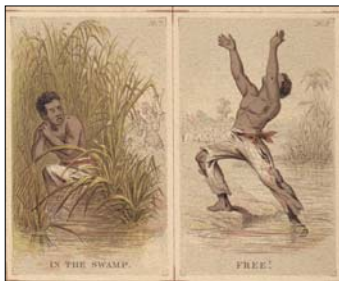
## Learn About the Underground Railroad



NATIONAL  
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD  
NETWORK TO FREEDOM

### Defining the Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad—the resistance to enslavement through escape and flight, through the end of the Civil War—refers to the efforts of enslaved African Americans to gain their freedom by escaping bondage. Wherever slavery existed, there were efforts to escape, at first, to maroon communities in rugged terrain away from settled areas, and later across state and international borders. Acts of self- emancipation made runaways "fugitives" according to the laws of the times, though in retrospect, "freedom seeker" seem a more accurate description. While most began and completed their journeys unassisted, each subsequent decade in which slavery was legal in the United States saw an increase in active efforts to assist escape. The decision to assist a freedom seeker may have been spontaneous. However, in some places, particularly after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Underground Railroad was deliberate and organized. Freedom seekers went in many directions – Canada, Mexico, West, the Caribbean islands and Europe.



"In the Swamp" and "Free!" are details from an 1862, illustration of the life of a slave-turned-soldier.

### The Fugitive Slave Acts

Until the end of the Civil War, enslavement was legal in the United States. In contrast to Revolutionary War era rhetoric about freedom, the new United States constitution protected the rights of individuals to own and enslave other people. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 also enforced these slaveholding rights, providing for the return to enslavement of any African American accused or even suspected of being a freedom seeker. Denied access to an attorney or a jury trial, a freedom seeker faced any white person making an oral claim of ownership to a magistrate. Those who assisted the freedom seeker, or merely interfered with an arrest, faced a \$500 fine, a clear acknowledgement of the impact of the Underground Railroad phenomena decades before it was given its name.

The increasing incidence of escapes caused enactment of a tougher law, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which compelled all citizens to participate in the capture and return of freedom seekers, or risk fines and prison sentences. The spectacle of African American reenslavement on the slightest pretext and the sale of kidnapped free African Americans south into slavery brought home the immoral dilemma to individuals in the North. Some opponents to slavery opted to change laws, while some recognized a higher moral law. Those who were freedom seekers or helped them to escape were part of the Underground Railroad.

### Motivation of the Freedom Seekers

Conditions of enslavement varied in degree, based on time period, geographical area, the type of agriculture or industry, the size of the slaveholding unit, urban and rural environments, and even the temperament and financial stability of the enslaver. What is common to all of these experiences is the dehumanization of both the oppressed and the oppressor by the demands of a system that treats human beings as property. This factor, perhaps more than any other, explains why some people chose to flee and why often their owners expressed such surprise. many runaways. Many of those who fled were, relatively speaking, favored people who had more material comforts and privileges than field hands. Access to information and skills, even literacy, was precisely the edge that helped many to escape. Regardless of status, however, by their act of self- emancipation freedom seekers demonstrated that they had not internalized the status of "slave" imposed upon them. They resisted although the slavery system was designed to condition them to accept.

"The Parting" is a detail from an 1862, illustration of the life of a slave-turned-soldier.



## Geography of the Underground Railroad



Underground Railroad routes

Wherever there were enslaved African Americans, there were people eager to escape. There was slavery in all original thirteen colonies, in Spanish California, Louisiana, and Florida, and on all of the Caribbean islands until the Haitian Revolution (1791- 1804) and British abolition of slavery (1834).

The Underground Railroad started at the place of enslavement. The routes followed natural and man- made modes of transportation – rivers, canals, bays, Atlantic Coast, ferries and river crossings, roads and trails. Location close to ports, free territories, and international boundaries prompted many escapes.

Using ingenuity, freedom seekers drew on courage and intelligence to concoct disguises, forgeries, and other strategies. Slave catchers and enslavers watched for runaways on the expected routes of escape and used the stimulus of advertised rewards to encourage public complicity in apprehension.

## Commemoration of Underground Railroad History

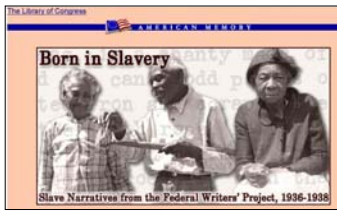


Underground Railroad events and programs

Commemoration is only possible once local Underground Railroad personages and events are identified. Primary sources, that is, period letters, court testimony, or newspaper articles are found to verify the history. The next steps are public education and preservation through protection of significant sites, and use of accurate history in heritage tourism, educational programs, museum and traveling exhibits, and commemorative sculpture.

It is not necessary that all sites of significant events survive untouched. Where a site has been paved over, modified or rebuilt, a brochure, walking tour, school curriculum, road marker, or plaque can explain the significance of the spot to members of the public. A local celebration can be created to bring the history to public awareness.

## Uncovering Underground Railroad History

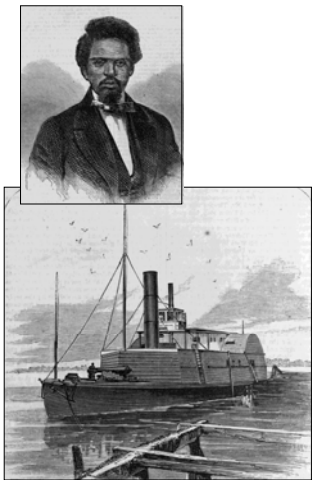


Library of Congress slave narratives can be found at [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)

Despite years of claims that Underground Railroad history was secret, local historians, genealogists, oral historians, and other researchers today find that there are primary sources describing the flight to freedom of many enslaved African Americans. Coming to light are court records, memoirs of conductors and freedom seekers, letters, runaway ads in newspapers, and military records which all testify to the determination of the enslaved to seek freedom for themselves and their families.

There are caches of documents from before 1865 in Federal institutions like the National Archive and its branches; in state institutions like state archives and historical society libraries; and at the local level in special collections in libraries and in private hands. Often no one has put together the pieces of the stories of freedom seekers by looking at their starting and end points, much less points in between. Once a freedom seeker is identified in a runaway ad or letter belonging to a slave master, newspaper accounts, diaries, or so- called slave narratives may fill in the story.

## Unknown Underground Railroad Heroes



Robert Smalls and his stolen Confederate gunship ship, 1862

Underground Railroad is associated with Harriet Tubman, the “Moses of her people,” and Frederick Douglass, a freedom seeker who became the greatest African American leader of his time. Both came from Maryland. Freedom seekers, however, came from all places where the law supported enslavement, including the northern colonies. From North Carolina came Harriet Jacobs after seven years spent hiding in the attic of her grandmother. Sixteen- year old Caroline Quarles fled life as a house servant on a plantation in St. Louis and traveled 700 miles until she reached refuge in Canada. Anthony Burns stowed away on a ship in Richmond in order to attain a few years as a free man in Boston. Lewis Hayden, his wife, and child, escaped from slavery in Kentucky to Ohio with the help of Delia Webster and Calvin Fairbanks. In the middle of the Civil War, Robert Smalls and other black crew members of the Confederate ship the *Planter* sailed from its dock in Beaufort, South Carolina, to surrender to a Union flotilla. In California, black businesswoman Mary Ellen Pleasant sheltered runaway Archy Lee in her San Francisco home, leading to an important state court case.

Levi Coffin and John Rankin are known as white ministers, Midwestern conductors, who assisted freedom seekers. Based in Ripley, Ohio, freedom seeker John Parker helped numerous runaways to cross the Ohio River into free territory. Residents of Wellington and Oberlin, Ohio, both black and white, refused to let slave catchers take John Price back to enslavement in Kentucky. A biracial network in Washington, D.C., including Thomas Smallwood, Rev. Charles Torrey, Leonard Grimes, and Jacob Bigelow worked over years to help people such as Ann Marie Weems, the Edmondson sisters, and Garland White to seek freedom. Using a clever disguise, William and Ellen Craft escaped over one thousand miles from Georgia to Boston.

## National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom



The National Park Service Underground Railroad program coordinates preservation and education efforts nationwide and integrates local historical places, museums, and interpretive programs associated with the Underground Railroad into a mosaic of community, regional, and national stories. The Network also serves to facilitate communication and between researchers and interested parties, and aid in the development of statewide organizations for preserving and researching Underground Railroad sites.