

Underground Railroad

Encyclopedia of the United States in the Nineteenth Century, 2001
From U.S. History in Context

The [Underground Railroad](#) offered freedom-seeking African American [slaves](#) assistance in escaping their masters. Fugitives, called passengers, traveled along a loose network of safe houses, called stations, operated by agents or station masters. Engineers or conductors transported the runaways from one station to another. Stockholders contributed food, clothing, and money.

Origin and Operation

Though linked most strongly with abolitionism in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Underground Railroad predates the organization of the American Anti-[Slavery](#) Society in 1833. In the era of the American Revolution, [Quakers](#) and others opposed to slavery provided covert support for refugees from the South's "peculiar institution." The runaway problem was significant enough that politicians from the slaveholding states argued for and got in 1793 a Fugitive Slave Law, which demanded the recapture of runaways.

Historians are unsure of the origin of the metaphor "Underground Railroad." Some point to the year 1831 when Tice Davids ran away, crossed the Ohio River near Ripley, Ohio, and took refuge with a white abolitionist. Frustrated in his attempt to recapture Davids, his owner complained that the slave had "gone off on an underground road." The story was repeated and, in an age when steam locomotives captured the popular imagination, the "underground road" became the "underground railroad" with a vocabulary of railroad terms such as depots, lines, spurs, stations, and conductors.

Underground Railroad routes ran through the northern states, with stations between ten and thirty miles apart. Some forty thousand fugitives are said to have made their way to freedom in Canada, particularly to present-day Ontario, known until 1841 as Canada West. There they set up colonies, such as Buxton and Dawn. Others settled in the northern states, where slavery had been abolished. Additional destinations included Spanish Florida, where some runaways were taken in by [Native Americans](#), secluded areas of the South, such as the swamps and bayous where there were colonies of "[maroons](#)," or fugitive black slaves, and the unorganized territory of the West. Most of the fugitives who escaped to the free states originated from the border states of the upper South. Underground operations relied on runaways' making the most difficult part of the road to freedom by themselves, though some agents operated below the Mason-Dixon line. Most runaways were men between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five.

Freedom Seekers

In the post-Civil War decades, Union veterans and supporters of abolition elaborated the legend of the Underground Railroad by making it appear to be more of an organized effort than it actually had been. The folklore about daring rescues, secret tunnels, hidey-holes, and runaways transported by dark of night or covered under a load of straw in a farmer's wagon also tended to minimize the importance of [African Americans](#) themselves. One of the most important black agents was the Philadelphian William Still, who for eight years secretly kept a record of his Underground Railroad labors while secretary of

the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee. Published in 1872, with a second edition in 1879 and a third in 1883, Still's book contained anecdotes, letters, and excerpts from newspaper articles, and ran to nearly eight hundred pages. Jermain Loguen of Syracuse and Frederick Douglass of Rochester, both of New York State, and the legendary Harriet Tubman, known as the "Moses of her people," also belong to the cohort of the most famous black conductors and station masters. Tubman ran away from the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1849 and thereafter made as many as nineteen raids into the southern states, bringing out an estimated three hundred slaves.

Tubman and others seeking freedom followed [the North Star](#), which they could find in the sky by locating the constellation called the Drinkin' Gourd, or Big Dipper. Old slave spirituals such as "Steal Away," "Sweet Canaan," and "Go Down, Moses" were encoded with messages about escaping slavery. A large oral tradition developed about hairbreadth escapes and ingenious devices, such as the box in which Henry "Box" Brown of Richmond had himself shipped by a white friend in Virginia to the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee. This friend later served time in prison after being discovered attempting to ship another slave north. William and Ellen Craft escaped in 1848 by disguising Ellen with bandages as an invalid planter and masquerading as master and slave.

Some of the most famous white agents and station masters included Harriet Tubman's collaborator Thomas Garrett of Wilmington, Delaware, a Quaker who aided more than twenty-seven hundred slaves to freedom; Levi Coffin, also a Quaker, of Newport, Indiana, credited with aiding two thousand runaways; and John Rankin, a Presbyterian minister whose farm on the Ohio River was a heavily frequented station. Gerrit Smith's mansion in upstate New York at Peterboro was a well-known stop. Scores of white [abolitionists](#) provided shelter to runaways out of humanitarian motives as well as political ones, especially after the passage of the [Fugitive Slave Act](#) of 1850.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

This law was designed to counteract the [Personal Liberty laws](#) northern states had passed to thwart southern slave catchers and mollify proslavery forces angered by the failure of the Supreme Court in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (1842) to provide a clear mandate that northern state officials must assist in the recapture of runaways. The Fugitive Slave Act authorized federal "commissioners" to issue warrants for the arrest of fugitives and prohibited interference with the rendition process. It also required private citizens to assist slave catchers.

Challenges to the Fugitive Slave Act involved fugitive slave resistance and rescues. On 11 September 1851, William Parker and other blacks fired on Edward Gorsuch and a party of slave catchers who had surrounded Parker's home near the village of Christiana, in southeastern Pennsylvania. Called the "Christiana Riot," the encounter resulted in Gorsuch's death and the arrest of thirty-six blacks. Parker and five others escaped to Canada. Abolitionists, including Jermain Loguen and Gerrit Smith, aided in the rescue of Jerry Henry, formerly of Missouri, on 1 October 1851 in Syracuse, New York. Rescuers stormed the police building, freed Henry, and spirited him to Canada. The arrest of Anthony Burns in 1854 in Boston sparked another contest with the Fugitive Slave Act. Abolitionists tried and failed to free Burns from jail, and authorities, with the aid of U.S. soldiers, shipped him back to Virginia. Friends would later purchase his freedom. In 1858 abolitionists living in Oberlin, Ohio, used force to free John Price. Known as the Oberlin-Wellington rescue, their actions led to imprisonment and a controversial trial that revealed how deeply divided the nation was. Among the Oberlin-Wellington rescuers was

John A. Copeland Jr., one of the five black participants in John Brown's Harpers Ferry raid. The Emancipation Proclamation and the defeat of the South in the Civil War put an end to Underground Railroad traffic.

Further Readings

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