

Roberson, Gloria Grant. "Underground Railroad." *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*. 2004. SAGE Publications. 16 Aug. 2011. <<http://www.sage-reference.com/view/blackstudies/n240.xml>>.

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The Underground Railroad was a secret order of people, homes, and strategic routes, formed by a continuous network of sympathizers that ushered runaway slaves north toward Canada. This tunnel-like system was operated by three classes of people (both black and white) who vehemently opposed slavery for social, religious, and humanitarian reasons; they were the Presbyterians, Quakers (most of whom were abolitionists), and free people of color. These courageous men and women, with dissimilar incomes, educational backgrounds, and occupational means, worked in concert within the Underground Railroad to aid the fugitive slaves. United in purpose, they shared a profound commitment to the goals of the Underground Railroad and provided the resources necessary to ensure runaway slaves safe passage from slaveholder states to free northern territories. Compassionate but realistic, they knew that their antislavery sentiments and meeting attendance were not enough to help the slaves, and that there had to be a distinct plan of action requiring networks of secrecy and extreme caution. Ironically, it was the valor and commitment of those graced with freedom that gave hope and opportunity to those oppressed by slavery.

CONFRONTING THE DIFFICULTY

However, to comprehend the mission to aid fugitive slaves that was shared by participants in the Underground Railroad, as well as the true impact of their efforts, it is necessary to first know something of the realities of slavery. In slavery, the enslaved experience how degrading it is for one race to be bound in servitude to another. For enslaved Africans, there were

daily reminders that as property without legal rights, all the decisions about their lives were made by the slaveholders who owned them. Being auctioned away from family and friends at a human market for the master's profit was a constant threat. There was also the harsh reality that any act perceived by the slaveholder as disobedience brought physical abuse, public humiliation, and savage beatings. However, although the bodies of Africans were enslaved, their minds longed for freedom. The mission of the Underground Railroad was to help enslaved Africans escape the horrors of slavery into northern, free territories.

Below the Mason-Dixon line, enslavement of black men, women, and children for whites' social and economic comfort was a way of life, and any haphazard attempts to alter or restrict the slaveholders' system of labor was dangerous. All phases of the Underground Railroad were carefully planned, because it had to be a well concealed and protected network of people, codes, and places—without flaws. All messaging within the Underground Railroad had to be of a serious nature, whereby the escapees could travel north through a tunnel of trust and charity. Failure to follow instructions or any misinterpretation of directives along the way could mean hanging or some other harsh punishment for the recaptured as well as for those dedicated to helping.

In the colonies, land was plentiful and cheap, but labor was scarce. Consequently, slave labor was a vital element in agricultural development in Southern states, and the slaveholders spared no expense in the employment of bounty hunters, bloodhounds, and printed notices to hunt down runaways to maintain their economic development. However, the tenacious and inhumane treatment of the slaves by these slaveholders fueled the commitment of those sympathetic to the plight of enslaved Africans. Ironically, in the folklore of the time, the first use of the term *underground railroad* is attributed to a frustrated and embarrassed slaveholder whose slave, Tice Davids, vanished into thin air right under his master's nose; to save face, his master told everyone that Tice had escaped on a mysterious "underground railroad."

THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW

The enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1793 gave slaveholders more authority to cross the Mason-Dixon line, into Northern states where slavery was illegal, to capture their runaway slaves. However, at about the

same time, the legislature in the Upper Province of Canada, Ontario, enacted laws to abolish slavery. The Lower Province, Quebec, followed suit in 1803. Before the Underground Railroad came into being, escape was likely to end in capture for those who dared to run away from the horrors of human bondage. After 1793, there was a destination called Canada where Africans would be free, outside of the United States. The awareness of Canada as a safe haven was knowledge that came to enslaved Africans as a direct result of communication from within the Underground Railroad.

The Ohio River was very important to the movement of runaway Africans, as it runs through Michigan to Detroit, where there were many Underground Railroad stations. Brave people of both races, often members of antislavery societies, were members of a secret society that provided information on checkpoints, signals, and confidants who responded to the phrase "friend of a friend" as they invited desperate and frightened people of color into their homes for shelter. Denied schooling, most of the enslaved Africans were unable to read or decipher written language, thus they traveled north blindly and had to be safeguarded within a system of coded signals (compatible with their way of life, social consciousness, and spirituality) and with maps marking natural elements such as trees, swamps, hills, and rivers as guides.

RIDING THE UNDERGROUND TRAIN

The word *railroad* in Underground Railroad refers not to masses of steel with locomotive power but to the courage and commitment of the tough-minded freedom fighters who helped the Africans escape. Gripped by fear and traveling under the cloak of darkness, the Africans who dared to risk their lives in search of freedom were hidden "underground" (i.e., away from danger) in everything from secret rooms to handmade coffins. The word *underground* in Underground Railroad thus referred to the secretive manner of travel as well as the coded communication in language, songs, and signals necessary for the survival of runaway slaves being chased by ruthless bounty hunters with bloodhounds. Railroad terminology was transformed into code words to encourage and relay messages to runaway travelers. A "station-master" was a keeper of safe house, "freedom train" and "gospel train" were code words for the Underground Railroad, and escaping slaves were called "baggage."

Slaveholders were stymied by the system of coded places and people that shielded the Africans in secrecy from station to station. Runaway Africans often traveled on foot in waist-high swamps, over mountains, and through forests toward "the promised land." Within the Underground Railroad, Africans' survival en route to freedom came only through trust; the fugitives put their lives in the hands of complete strangers and complete strangers opened their homes to runaway Africans. The slaveholder or slave catcher in pursuit of runaway Africans became a common enemy of everyone connected to the Underground Railroad.

Providing aid to runaway Africans was morally but not politically correct in the South and in some areas of the North. The strong religious doctrine of the Quaker movement yielded many abolitionists who defied laws by opening their homes to runaway Africans. As early as the late 1700s, committed and strong-willed people opposed to the legal exploitation of one race by another worked diligently to aid the fugitive Africans. Levi Coffin, a Quaker from Cincinnati, was proud to be known as the "President of the Underground Railroad."

However, the strengthening and refinement of the Underground Railroad and the migration north into Canada was accelerated by President Millard Fillmore's signing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which meant that any African escaping slavery could be recaptured and taken back into slavery even if he or she had crossed into a nonslave territory. In documenting the hopelessness of the enslaved, the restrictive legislation increased the sympathy of the abolitionists. Slaves had always attempted to escape, but now the influx of those wanting freedom required a systematic approach, and the Underground Railroad was further developed to accommodate the thousands of Africans fleeing northward. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison used his newspaper, the *Liberator*, to denounce slavery and report on the effectiveness of the Underground Railroad after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law. Canada was flooded with black people escaping lives of entrapment; the fugitive slaves often had left the South with only the clothes on their backs and without family or friends. Many Northern newspapers directly linked the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act to the success of the Underground Railroad. In a *Liberator* report in October of 1852, Garrison boldly bragged about the competence of the Underground Railroad conductors.

As news of the Underground Railroad spread throughout the plantations, slaves became optimistic

about their chances of gaining freedom in Northern cities. Harriet Tubman, who was affectionately called “Moses,” was an escaped slave from Maryland who returned to the South to be a conductor and aid many others to cross the Mason-Dixon Line on the Underground Railroad.

— *Gloria Grant Roberson*

FURTHER READING

- Finkelman, Paul. (Ed.). (1997). *Slavery and the Law*. Madison, WI: Madison House. This is a compilation of essays that deal with the legal ramifications of slave law and slavery itself.
- Hagedorn, Ann. (2002). *Beyond The River: The Untold Heroes of the Underground Railroad*. New York: Simon and Schuster. This is a well-researched, well-documented, and clearly written accounting of the Underground Railroad in the Southern Ohio and Northern Kentucky regions. It includes detailed notes and bibliographical entries useful for extended research on the Underground Railroad.
- Mitchell, William M. (1970). *Underground Railroad*. Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press. (Original work published 1860 as *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*). Mitchell presents views of fugitive slaves from a Canadian perspective.
- Preston, E. Delores, Jr. (1944). Genesis of the Underground Railroad. *Journal of Negro History*, 18(2), 144–170. This essay provides a historical overview of the Underground Railroad.
- Smedley, R. C. (1968). *Underground Railroad*. Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press. (Original work published 1883). This book recounts the history of the Underground Railroad through the voices of many unsung abolitionist heroes. Courageous in spirit and deed, their commitment to the cause of freedom and the Underground Railroad is documented here in many ways.