

# The Underground Railroad

American History

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“Slaves lose everything in their chains, even the desire to escape from them.” The Underground Railroad was a way that enslaved people of the South could escape to the “free” states of the North. The Underground Railroad helped thousands of enslaved people reach freedom from the horrors of slavery in the South. The Underground Railroad was the term used to describe a network of meeting places, secret routes, passageways and safe houses used by slaves in the United States to escape slave holding states to northern states and Canada. Many people were involved in the Underground Railroad and this essay will inform the reader about what the Underground Railroad was, who was involved, and how the Underground Railroad helped slaves reach freedom.

How the Underground Railroad got its name. The Underground Railroad got its name because its activities had to be carried out in secret, using darkness or disguise, and because railway terms were used by those involved with system to describe how it worked. Various routes were lines, stopping places were called stations, those who aided along the way were conductors and their charges were known as packages or freight. The Underground Railroad began to be used in the early 1830’s. In keeping with the name of the Underground Railroad system, homes and businesses that harbored runaways were known as “stations” or “depots” and were run by “stationmasters”. “Conductors” moved the fugitives from one station to the next. The Underground Railroad’s “stockholders” contributed money or goods and began contributing clothing so that the fugitives traveling by train or boat wouldn’t give themselves away with their worn work clothes. The Underground Railroad was a system similar to the newly established Trans Continental Railroad involving steam engines. Instead of steam engines and rail lines, people were being transported across state lines to achieve freedom. The Underground Railroad was similar to the Steam Rails because it was a system of organized “rails” that led from the

Southern “slave states” to the Northern “free states”. This system is how the Underground Railroad helped many slaves escape the horrors of slavery in the South.

Escaping from the plantations or slaveholders was not a simple task, there had to be a well-executed plan and perfect timing. Many people were involved, other than the slaves themselves that made the Underground Railroad possible. An organized system to assist runaway slaves seems to have begun towards the end of the 18th century. In 1786 George Washington complained about how one of his runaway slaves was helped by a "society of Quakers, formed for such purposes." The system grew, and around 1831 it was dubbed "The Underground Railroad," after the then emerging steam railroads. The system even used terms used in railroading: the homes and businesses where fugitives would rest and eat were called "stations" and "depots" and were run by "stationmasters," those who contributed money or goods were "stockholders," and the "conductor" was responsible for moving fugitives from one station to the next. Operators of the Underground Railroad faced their own dangers as well. The first step to freedom, was to escape from the slaveholder. For many slaves, this meant relying on his or her own resources. Sometimes a "conductor," posing as a slave, would enter a plantation and then guide the runaways northward. The fugitives would move at night. They would generally travel between 10 and 20 miles to the next station, where they would rest and eat, hiding in barns and other out-of-the-way places. While they waited, a message would be sent to the next station to alert its stationmaster. If someone living in the North was convicted of helping fugitives to escape he or she could be fined hundreds or even thousands of dollars, a tremendous amount for the time; however, in areas where abolitionism was strong, the “secret” railroad operated quite openly. Everybody who worked with the Underground Railroad took a big risk. If they were caught, they risked a serious punishment, even death. Free blacks, whites, and even some slaves

worked as conductors who helped escaping slaves in many different ways. Baltimore's large free black community and free blacks elsewhere provided hiding places for slaves who were running away. We will never know exactly how many people were involved with the Underground Railroad, because they worked in secret. They had to keep the secret to protect both the escaping slaves and themselves.

Men and women who operated Underground Railroad stations hid slaves in their homes, shops, churches, schools, and barns. Conductors drove slaves hidden in wagons or coaches to the next station. Some conductors led slaves through woods and fields on foot until they could reach a safe house. Some put slaves on boats that sailed north to freedom. Others put slaves on real trains heading north. People figured out very clever ways to smuggle people out of slave states to a place further north. Other volunteers employed escaping slaves so they could earn money to finish their journey to Canada. Many people offered clothing, shoes, bedding, and other things that the fugitives needed.

Although there were many people that helped the Underground Railroad be possible, there are a significant few that really made a difference. Many different kinds of people were involved in the Underground Railroad. There were black people and white people, men and women, people from "slave" states and people from "free" states. There were old people and young people. Many Quakers and other white people helped slaves because, even though they were white, they believed very strongly that slavery was wrong. Some key "conductors" were Harriet Tubman, a former slave who returned to slave states 19 times and brought back more than 300 slaves to freedom – using her shotgun to threaten death on anyone who lost heart or wanted to turn back. John Fairfield in Ohio, the son of a slaveholding family, made many daring rescues. Levi Coffin, a Quaker who assisted more than 3,000 slaves. Vigilance committees

sprang up in the larger towns and cities of the North, most prominently in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. In addition to soliciting money, the organizations provided food, lodging and money, and helped the fugitives settle into a community by helping them find jobs and providing letters of recommendation. Without these people the Underground Railroad wouldn't have been possible and there would probably still be a large number of slaves today. The people that helped the escaping slaves by providing food, housing, clothing, transportation and their utmost freedom, were very much appreciated by the escapees. It's amazing how many people were saved and given a second chance because of the Underground Railroad and all that were involved in its doing's. The "conductors" of the Underground Railroad gave slaves a way to freedom and second chances at a new life. The people involved did everything that they could in order to help the slaves be free, no matter what the risks were.

In conclusion, the Underground Railroad got its name as a result of how the system was organized, similar to the railroad that involves locomotives. Escaping slavery was not a simple task, there were many factors in which had to be accounted for in order to achieve the free states of the North. There were also many, many people who aided in the freedom for enslaved people. These people faced many risks of their own carrying out the tasks involved with the Underground Railroad and helping enslaved people achieve freedom. All of the people and the system itself helped thousands of slaves reach the north and escape the horrors of slavery in the south. Without the participants, many African American people would have been enslaved and wouldn't have had any chance of a free life without being abused, poorly paid, and over worked. "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."

# Works Cited

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Intro Quote: Jean Jacques Rousseau

Concluding Quote: Martin Luther King Jr.