

Timeline of the Underground Railroad

A 280-Year North American Moral Legacy

Many regard the Underground Railroad as the noblest endeavor in United States history, both in colonial times and after nationhood. The Underground Railroad existed for 280 years—more than a quarter of a millennium—from 1585 when the first enslaved people from Africa arrived in the New World at the Spanish settlement of Saint Augustine, Florida, to the end of the Civil War in 1865. Though it would not have a name for another 250 years, the inception of the Underground Railroad would have been when any enslaved person first escaped from the Saint Augustine colony and was aided by any other person, most likely a Native American.

Some historians count as the first written reference to what became known as the Underground Railroad the letter of George Washington of April 12, 1786, to William Morris of Philadelphia recounting Quaker assistance to a freedom seeker escaped from Washington's friend, Mr. Dalby, of Alexandria, Virginia. "In another letter, written to William Drayton on November 20, 1786, Washington complains that he had apprehended a runaway slave belonging to Drayton, but when he sent the slave under guard to Baltimore to be reunited with Drayton, the slave escaped and was aided in this by some sort of escape network." As a sign of the times and a harbinger of the Civil War, the man later called the father of his country, torn himself by the conundrum of slavery, was not only an enslaver himself but a slave catcher.

Beginning in 1688 with the Mennonites, followed in 1754 by the Quakers, and continuing through the late 1700s, Protestant denominations one after another condemned slavery. During the Revolutionary War, northern states rapidly began abolishing slavery. The remainder of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth saw wholesale formation of northern anti-slavery societies and vigilance committees which began actively aiding fugitives from slavery. The combination of these various forms of opposition to slavery—the abolitionist movement—lent renewed hope to enslaved people with the predictable result that more of the most daring of them attempted flights to freedom to the northern states and Canada, creating a growing wave of Underground Railroad freedom seekers beginning about 1800.

The long-lived, ubiquitous, illegal clandestine operation that came to be known as the Underground Railroad did not even have a name for a quarter of a millennium until the 1830s when participants in what then came to be known as the Underground Railroad started using the terminology of the new transforming technology, the railroad. Freedom seekers began to be referred to as passengers or cargo, their guides along the back ways and trails to freedom as conductors, and those who gave them shelter along the way as agents or station operators. By sometime in the 1830s, the entire operation, taking on the name of the new technology, became known as the Underground Railroad. The first known appearance in print of the term Underground Railroad was when Thomas Smallwood used the phrase "our new underground railroad" in his November 19, 1842, letter to the editor of *The Tocsin of Liberty*, a St. Louis newspaper.

Though actual railroads, especially the Baltimore & Ohio, were occasionally a means of transporting people to freedom, and the nature of the flight to freedom was "underground" by being clandestine, the Underground Railroad was not literally either a railroad or underground, a distinction actually lost on some adults today.

A signal event of the Underground Railroad occurring during the 1830s was the abolition of slavery by Canada in 1833 and by most of the rest of the British Commonwealth nations in 1834, resulting in Canada and the British Caribbean islands becoming magnets for freedom seekers from the United States. After the 1850 passage of the second Fugitive Slave Act, which required

that United States citizens anywhere assist in the apprehension of runaways, Canada became the main safe haven for freedom seekers through the end of the Civil War.

No reliable method has been developed for estimating of the number of enslaved people who attempted to flee for their freedom, with estimates running from the low five figures to seven and the true number very likely somewhere between, probably in the low six figures. Also unknown is what proportion of those who broke for freedom attained it.

The reason for existence of the Underground Railroad vanished at the end of the Civil War with the abolition of slavery, though many of the former Underground Railroad routes and safe-houses must have continued to be used by people migrating north. It is likely, too, that these migrants continued to be assisted after 1865 by some of those who had served as Underground Railroad conductors and safe-house operators before.

For 280 years, every American—Black, white, Native American and others—was aware of the institution of slavery, that every enslaved person wanted to be free, that some would risk all to flee for freedom, and that some free people would risk all to aid freedom seekers in their quest. All Americans and Canadians were vividly aware of these facts of their lives, which therefore formed a deeply rooted part of the very consciousness of the two nations and an integrally woven part of the fabric of daily life. Thus, the long contest between freedom and slavery, between good and evil in North America, was, as author Fergus Bordewich aptly put it, the war for the soul of America. Indeed, it was. It took 280 years—a very, very long time—to win this war, but won it was. The moral certitude, perseverance and courage of Underground Railroad safe-house operators and conductors but most especially of freedom seekers themselves delivered the continent from darkness.

Research shows that only three to four percent of claimed Underground Railroad sites today can claim conclusive documentation that they were indeed Underground Railroad sites. The overwhelming majority of what transpired on the Underground Railroad was never recorded, which makes the Underground Railroad of today especially dependent on the oral traditions handed down through families, property owners, and others. Because most involved in the Underground Railroad were illiterate, because the entire operation was illegal, because those who had assisted freedom seekers were still often persecuted after the Civil War, and because many families were divided over the issue of slavery, much of the history of the Underground Railroad has been forever lost, carried untold to the grave by the brave souls who had been the Underground Railroad.

What remains today through the oral traditions of handed-down accounts and, in many fewer cases, actual documentation almost entirely from northern states, is precious but dwindling as oral traditions continue to die out with the passing of descendants of freedom seekers, safe-house operators and conductors. Thus, it is vital to record and preserve intact Underground Railroad stories while they remain with us and to assure that they are not pushed to the back shelves of history to be forgotten by too much emphasis on the small fraction of Underground Railroad history and sites which are fortunate enough to be documented.

The following timeline lists some of the important events of the Underground Railroad and abolitionism.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Event</u>
1585	First Africans brought to North America and enslaved at St. Augustine, Florida
Shortly after this	Underground Railroad begins when some unknown aids first freedom seeker
February 18, 1688	Mennonites in North America oppose slavery, begin aiding freedom seekers
1754	Quakers in North America condemn slavery, require manumission among Quakers
1775	First abolition society formed in Philadelphia
1780	Methodist Church in America states that slavery contradicts laws of God and man
1780s	People assisting freedom seekers begin to find one another and cooperate in the dawn of Underground Railroad networks
1780 to 1786	Nine northern states abolish slavery and/or legislate emancipation
March 1, 1781	Articles of Confederation, the first United States constitution, sidesteps the issue of slavery
1784	A motion put forth by a congressional committee headed by Thomas Jefferson to abolish slavery fails by a single vote in the United States in Congress Assembled, the nation's first government
November 20, 1786	George Washington writes of his acting as a slave catcher
1787	Rev. Absalom Jones, Rev. Richard Allen form Independent Free African Society
July 13, 1787	Northwest Ordinance bans slavery in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin
1787	Presbyterian Church of America condemns slavery, begins promoting abolition
June 21, 1788	United States Constitution ratified, fails to deal with slavery
November, 1788	George Washington, an enslaver from Virginia, elected president
1789	Baptist Church of Virginia condemns slavery, urges abolition
November, 1796	John Adams, only abolitionist among main Founders, elected president
1808	United States outlaws further importation of slaves
June 14, 1811	Harriet Beecher Stowe, future author of <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> , born in Connecticut
1816	African Methodist Episcopal Church founded, opposes slavery, aids fugitives
February, 1818	Frederick Douglass, national hero, born enslaved on the Maryland eastern shore
Probably 1822	Harriet Tubman, national heroine, born enslaved on the Maryland eastern shore
1827	Black journalists John Russworm and Samuel Cornish publish <i>Freedom's Journal</i>
1828	Russworm and Cornish publish <i>The Rights of All</i> , first black abolitionist periodical
1830	James and Lucretia Mott form Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society
January 1, 1831	William Lloyd Garrison, 26, publishes first issue of his anti-slavery newspaper, <i>The Liberator</i> , continues publication until Thirteenth Amendment is passed in 1865
1831	First known reference to the Underground Railroad when the enslaver of Tice Davids remarks that Davids "must have gone on some underground road" when the enslaver could not find Davids after pursuing him across the Ohio River at Maysville, Kentucky.
August 21, 1831	Nat Turner Rebellion in North Carolina alarms South, emboldens abolitionists
1831	William Lloyd Garrison, others, form New England Anti-Slavery Society
1831	Arthur and Lewis Tappan form the National Anti-Slavery Society in New York
1830s	Vigilance committees formed in northern cities to prevent return of fugitive slaves

1830s	Network aiding freedom seekers first takes on the name Underground Railroad
June 17, 1833	Detroit Riots rescue Lucie and Thornton Blackburn from jail and slave catchers
August 1, 1833	Great Britain abolishes slavery in nearly all of its worldwide Commonwealth. Canada becomes magnet for United States freedom seekers
1830s, 1840s	Some other European powers abolish slavery at home and in their colonies
August 10, 1842	First known appearance in print of the term Underground Railroad when Thomas Smallwood uses the phrase "our new underground railroad" in his August 10, 1842, letter to the editor of <i>The Tocsin of Liberty</i> .
1849	Harriet Tubman escapes enslavement
Beginning in 1850s	Philadelphia businessman and safe-house operator William Still begins recording accounts of freedom seekers whom he assists
1850-1859	Harriet Tubman makes at least nine successful rescues of Maryland freedom seekers. "Never lost a passenger."
September 18, 1850	Fugitive Slave Act passed requiring US citizens to aid in capturing freedom seekers
April 1, 1852	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> by Harriet Beecher Stowe published, sells a record 500,000 copies in months, same number abroad in two years. First international best-seller.
September 11, 1851	Blacks in Christiana, Pennsylvania, run off slave catchers, kill leader, alarm South
1831 to 1865	Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Company sued for aiding freedom seekers
March 6, 1857	Dred Scott decision, authored by Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney, strips Black people, free and enslaved, of citizenship
October 16, 1859	Abolitionist John Brown seizes federal armory at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia
December 2, 1859	John Brown hanged in Charlestown, West Virginia (then Virginia)
By 1860	Of the 33 states, 18 no longer permit slavery
March, 1861	Abraham Lincoln inaugurated as 16th president. Southern states begin seceding
April 12, 1861	Fort Sumter fired on, Civil War begins
January 1, 1863	Emancipation Proclamation promulgated, abolishing slavery in Confederate states
July, 1863	Working as a Union scout, Harriet Tubman in a single week frees more than 750 enslaved people along Combahee River in South Carolina
May 26, 1865	Civil War ends
December 6, 1865	Thirteenth Amendment outlaws slavery, with Mississippi the only dissenting state
1872	William Still authors <i>The Underground Railroad</i> recounting 190 accounts of over 900 freedom seekers he had aided and interviewed
1876	Reconstruction ends when northern members of Congress swing deals with southern members to gain votes for northern interests. Eighty-eight years of Jim Crow pseudo-slavery, racial discrimination, lynchings and persecution ensue
February 20, 1895	Frederick Douglass dies
July 1, 1896	Harriet Beecher Stowe dies
1898	Wilbur Siebert authors <i>The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom</i> , the first extensive cataloguing of Underground Railroad safe-houses, routes and people
March 10, 1913	Harriet Tubman, national heroine, last living major figure of the Underground Railroad, dies at her home in Auburn, New York
1913-1960s	National memory of the Underground Railroad wanes seriously

1961	Larry Gara authors <i>The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad</i> , which recasts the Underground Railroad more into the experience of the freedom seeker
July 2, 1964	Civil Rights Act becomes law, outlawing major forms of discrimination against African Americans and women, unequal voter registration requirements, racial segregation in schools, the workplace, public accommodations and facilities serving the general public
August 6, 1965	Voting Rights Act becomes law outlawing discriminatory voting practices that had been responsible for the widespread disenfranchisement of African Americans
1960s	Teachers on their own begin introducing the Underground Railroad into their classes. School districts soon follow suit.
May 4 to July 6, 1996	Anthony Cohen walks Maryland-to-Canada route of his freedom seeker ancestor. October, 1996, <i>Smithsonian</i> article on walk sparks Underground Railroad interest.
1998	Congress authorizes creation of National Park Service Network to Freedom, program, first of three federal Underground Railroad programs
August, 2004	The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, a major nonprofit museum on the Underground Railroad, opens in Cincinnati
September 17, 2004	Friends of the Underground Railroad, Inc., a private international organization promoting Underground Railroad history and restoration, is incorporated
2006	Friends of the Underground Railroad, collapsed from board dissention and failure to hold board meetings, is dissolved
January, 2006	Bethesda, Maryland, cabin where Josiah Henson was enslaved and which lent itself to the title of <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> saved from developers by public purchase
July 15, 2006	<i>Underground Railroad Free Press</i> , first independent Underground Railroad news outlet, founded and first publishes <i>Underground Railroad Free Press</i>
2007	The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center launches extensive nationwide education programs for students, teachers and the general public
July 15, 2007	Results of the first-ever survey of the international Underground Railroad community conducted by <i>Underground Railroad Free Press</i> are published
2008	Congress authorizes funding for the National Museum of African American History and Culture to include the federal government's second Underground Railroad program within the Smithsonian Institution
January 15, 2008	<i>Underground Railroad Free Press</i> announces annual prizes for contemporary Underground Railroad leadership, preservation and advancement of knowledge
September 15, 2008	First <i>Underground Railroad Free Press</i> Prizes awarded. Visit the Prizes page here to see each year's winners.
2010s	<i>Underground Railroad Free Press</i> surveys show that awareness of the Underground Railroad increased from 10% of those who graduated from high school before the 1960s to more than 90% who graduated by the 1990s.
September 24, 2016	Opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall. The museum lacks any displays or programs on the Underground Railroad. <i>Free Press</i> inquiries go unanswered.
March 11, 2017	National Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Historical Park and Visitor Center opens in Church Creek, Maryland. National Park Service Network to Freedom program relocates its headquarters to the center.
April 10, 2017	Colson Whitehead's <i>The Underground Railroad</i> awarded the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for fiction
March 15, 2023	<i>Free Press</i> publishes its 100 th edition

