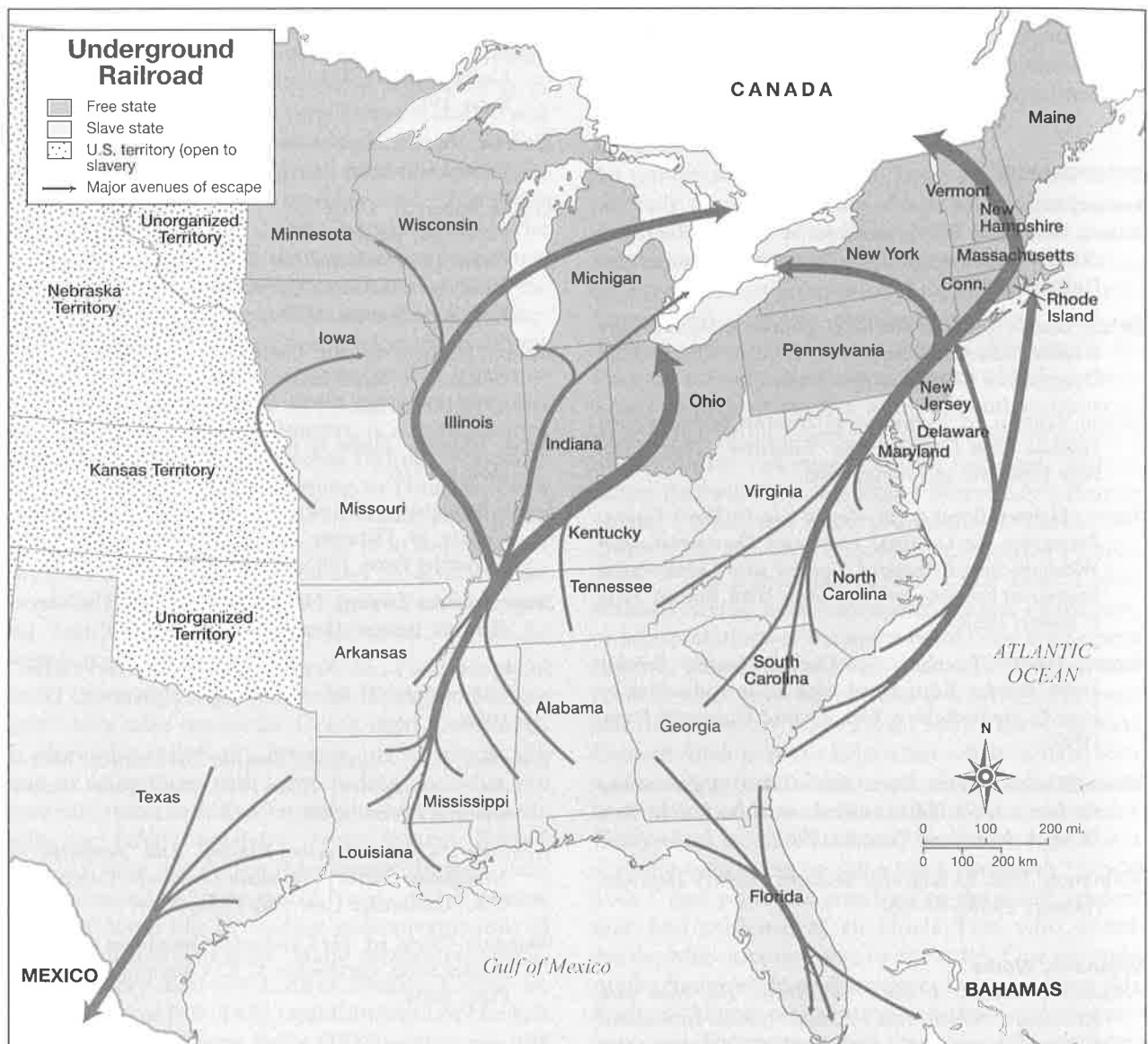


UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The Underground Railroad remains a central historical topic in both academic and popular knowledge. However, the idea of the Underground Railroad has become steeped in mythology, which obscures the historically accurate understanding of slavery, mainly in relation to escape as one form of rebellion against slavery. In part this is due to the necessary obscuration of the workings of the Underground Railroad during the antebellum period in published materials such as slave narratives. The disjunction between the facts of the Underground Railroad and the mythology built up around it deserve close study, as they are key to understanding slavery and freedom in America.

HISTORY OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The Underground Railroad was comprised of a network of people and places that assisted fugitive slaves with their escape from slavery. While the Underground Railroad was not a formalized nationwide system, as sometimes represented, it was also not a haphazard set of paths that slaves would passively follow. Both descriptions defy the loosely constructed networks that allowed escaping slaves to connect with those who desired to assist the fugitives in their quest for freedom. The Underground Railroad provided numerous stations where runaways could receive shelter, food, money, clothes, advice, and transportation to the next safe haven. John Michael Vlach suggests



that slaves were not hidden in elaborate tunnels and secret hiding places as popular imagination suggests but were instead given places within the homes and barns of those who helped them progress along the escape route. Runaways were also often housed within the African American communities of cities and transported by black guides whom runaways tended to trust.

Runaways traveled the route to freedom by various means, including by boat, foot, rail, or horse. Escapees used the most available, convenient, safe, and expedient means of transportation during their journey. As James Horton points out, the actual number of slaves that escaped is very difficult to enumerate, although "some estimates climb to a hundred thousand or more in the decades before the Civil War" (p. 176). Slaves chose a number of destinations for their journey, including maroon colonies (a community of fugitive slaves, often hidden in swamps and forests), Canada, Mexico, Britain, and the free states. The final destination was often based on contemporary political situations, the initial location of the slave, and the familiarity of the slave with the area that he or she would have to journey through. In the earlier antebellum period, northern cities such as Boston or Cincinnati were havens to escaped blacks; in the later period, when the north was bound by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 to return runaways, escapees began to move to Canada for greater safety. In fact, the Fugitive Slave Law, which ordered all citizens to assist in the recapture of fugitive slaves, forced participants in the Underground Railroad to shift tactics, particularly as it destroyed the safety of fugitives in northern communities. The law's passage spurred large communities of northern African American fugitives to leave for Canada for fear of recapture. Gary Collison, in *Shadrach Minkins*, notes that, "In the first month after the law took effect an estimated 2,000 blacks left the North for Canada" (p. 76).

The term "Underground Railroad" is not one that can be historically validated. There are a number of possible sources for the coinage, but all situate the origins of the word in the 1830s. One story suggests that when fugitive slave Tice David escaped from Kentucky to Sandusky, Ohio, a slave catcher commented that he "must have gone off on an underground railroad" (Blight, p. 3). Another story attributes the term to a tortured fugitive slave who revealed he was heading to where "the railroad ran underground all the way to Boston" (Blight, p. 3). Certainly by 1852 when Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896) writes that the "gals' been carried on the underground line," the term Underground Railroad was in play culturally (Stowe, p. 61).

The system took on the terminology of the railroad in the antebellum period, where those aiding the slaves were "conductors" and the escapees were "packages" or "passengers." It was this period, as well, that gave weight to the mythologized version of the Underground Railroad that depended on the heroic and moral white aiding the confused and passive escaping slave. However, new research rightly indicates that this mythologized version of the Underground Railroad incorrectly portrays the fugitive. In reality, African Americans were full and active participants. One such participant was the African American Lewis Hayden (1811–1889), who led two dramatic fights to shield escaped slaves traveling through Boston. In 1850 he protected escaping slaves William and Ellen Craft from slave catchers by putting gunpowder under his front porch and threatening to blow up the entire building should the slave catchers enter his home to retrieve the Crafts. He also led the armed group that attacked the Boston Courthouse in 1851 to successfully rescue and free fugitive slave Shadrach Minkins. Those who chose to run were generally young men traveling alone, and those involved with aiding the escapees were at times fellow African Americans, free and fugitive, as well as whites (Vlach, p. 99).

The runaways and conductors who participated in the Underground Railroad did so at a cost. For the runaways, recapture, abuse, and death were not unlikely. For conductors, arrest and fines were possible. For example, Thomas Garrett (1789–1871), a white abolitionist and Underground Railroad conductor, was fined a majority of his wealth in 1848 for assisting runaways. There are numerous additional examples of those who risked fines, imprisonment, abuse, and death working with the Underground Railroad.

Some of the other notable conductors of the railroad were Levi Coffin (in Newport, Indiana), Frederick Douglass (in Rochester, New York), William Still (in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), and Reverend John Rankin (in Ripley, Ohio). The white men involved with the Underground Railroad, such as Garrett and Rankin, tended to be more outspoken about their activities than African Americans, such as Still, as they were assured a more secure social protection by virtue of race. Much of what is known about the Underground Railroad and its conductors is due to the meticulous records kept by William Still (1821–1902), an African American conductor in Philadelphia, published as *The Underground Railroad* (1872), and the white Indianan conductor Levi Coffin (1798–1877), who published his *Reminiscences* in 1876. Both books provide crucial information on the Underground Railroad, including details of runaways, conductors, passage routes, and safe houses. One may



Fugitive Slaves Escape from the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Wood engraving from William Still's *The Underground Railroad*, 1872. The son of a former slave, Still assisted fugitive slaves on their journey to Canada and collected their stories in what became an important contribution to antislavery literature. THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

argue that the most famous conductor is Harriet Tubman (c. 1820–1913). Her own 1849 escape from slavery in Maryland led her to Wilmington, Delaware. Working with Garrett, Still, and others, Tubman, often referred to as “Moses,” made almost twenty trips to the South and rescued more than two hundred slaves.

LITERARY TREATMENTS OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Various slave narratives and fictionalized accounts of slavery in the antebellum period reference the Underground Railroad in some manner. The representations tend to follow two separate approaches. Texts written by fugitives often obscured the details of escape to protect themselves, those who assisted their escape, and the escape mechanism in hopes that others might find the same path to freedom. White-authored texts, such as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, provided far more detail about the Underground Railroad and often focused extensively on white participation and responsibility. In part this is due to the autobiographical nature of narratives and the fictionalization of white-

authored novels. But other factors also contributed to the difference.

Fugitive slave narratives seem the likely place to look for references to the Underground Railroad, and a number of authors do indeed discuss the impact of the Underground Railroad on their journey from slavery to freedom. However, many escapees, such as Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) choose to obscure the details of their escape to protect those involved and to allow other runaways to use the same escape path and support. Those that provide a few more details about their escape reveal that the escapee formulated and implemented the great portion of the escape, with some support from the loosely configured Underground Railroad along the way. For example, William Wells Brown (c. 1814–1884) notes that his escape plot and the majority of his journey was made on his own, and although he did receive help from whites who might peripherally belong to the Underground Railroad, he reveals that he was not following a formalized Underground Railroad.

Harriet Jacobs's (1813–1897) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) follows a strategy of

depicting the Underground Railroad typical of many slave narratives written in the antebellum period. Jacobs, writing pseudonymously as Linda Brent, notes, "I was to escape in a vessel; but I forbear to mention any further particulars" (p. 151). As Jean Fagan Yellin's biography *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (2004) points out, Jacobs's obscuration "kept the details of Jacobs's escape a mystery—as she wished" (p.63). While Jacobs chose to protect those who aided her on her trip to the North, she does critique their participation, stating that some participants' assistance is made for financial motivations. Her initial boat trip

accommodation had been purchased at a price that would pay for a voyage to England. But when one proposes to go to fine old England, they stop to calculate whether they can afford the cost of the pleasure; while in making a bargain to escape from slavery, the trembling victim is ready to say, 'take all I have, only don't betray me!' (P. 152)

Jacobs's comment serves to remind those who might view the conductors as heroes that there were other factors motivating some participants. It also leads the reader to focus on the heroism of the escaping slave, not the conductor.

The desire to mask the means of escape while still encouraging the activism of whites is made clear in a variety of texts written by Douglass. His treatment of the Underground Railroad pre- and post-abolition reveals much about the political conditions and the position of fugitives in America. Douglass published three versions of his autobiography during his life. The first two published versions of his life story, written before slavery is dissolved, reveal few details of his escape, while his 1881 *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* gives the details of his escape.

Douglass emphasizes in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) that it is his "intention not to state all the facts connected with the transaction" He goes on to note that there are two reasons for his refusal:

First, were I to give a minute statement of all the facts, it is not only possible, but quite probable, that others would thereby be involved in the most embarrassing difficulties. Secondly, such a statement would most undoubtedly induce greater vigilance on the part of slaveholders than has existed heretofore among them; which would, of course, be the means of guarding a door whereby some dear brother bondman might escape his galling chains. (P. 84)

He goes on to state that he has "never approved of the very public manner in which some of our western friends

have conducted what they call the underground railroad, but which, I think, by their open declarations, has been made most emphatically the upper-ground railroad" (p. 85).

In *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) Douglass reiterates the problems of revealing the methods of escape:

The practice of publishing every new invention by which a slave is known to have escaped from slavery, has neither wisdom nor necessity to sustain it. Had not Henry Box Brown and his friends attracted slaveholding attention to the manner of his escape, there might have had a thousand *Box Browns* per annum. The singularly original plan adopted by William and Ellen Crafts, perished with the first using, because every slaveholder in the land was apprised of it. The *salt water slave* who hung in the guards of a steamer, being washed three days and three nights—like another Jonah—by the waves of the sea, has, by the publicity given to the circumstance, set a spy on the guards of every steamer departing from southern ports. (P. 339)

Douglass's criticism is not reserved for whites who reported on the heroism of white abolitionists but is pointed at his fellow fugitives who published narratives relating the details of their escape.

Douglass chose to hide details of escape during the time when slaves were vulnerable to capture, but this does not mean that he discounted white participation in the rebellion against slavery. Douglass's fictional *The Heroic Slave* (1852) encourages whites to participate in the Underground Railroad due to his political agenda of spurring whites to participate in the rebellion against slavery. Furthermore, a fictionalized text offered no danger to fugitives or potential escapees. In *The Heroic Slave*, the white Mr. Listwell is moved by fugitive Madison Washington to offer help. He helps Madison run to Canada, regardless of the dire consequences of the decision, only to later find that Washington had returned to rescue his wife and become enslaved again. The detailed discussion of Listwell's aid to Washington serves to reinforce Douglass's message of aiding the escaping slave and seems to be the politically motivating factor behind the text.

A number of abolitionist authors highlighted and encouraged the participation of whites in the Underground Railroad through their writing. Certainly writers like Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) were outspoken in their support of the Underground Railroad. Thoreau helped to move various fugitives, such as Henry Williams, through Concord on their way to Canada and was stridently in support of abolition. Thoreau's support of the Underground Railroad

is clear in his "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1859). Thoreau states,

Suppose that there is a society in this State that out of its own purse and magnanimity saves all the fugitive slaves that run to us, and protects our colored fellow-citizens, and leaves the other work to the government, so-called. Is not that government fast losing its occupation, and becoming contemptible to mankind? . . . The only free road, the Underground Railroad, is owned and managed by the Vigilant Committee. They have tunneled under the whole breadth of the land.

Thoreau's statement, on the eve of the Civil War, indicates the importance of the idea of the Underground Railroad to the larger abolition project. The Underground Railroad comes to represent the right and moral organization, fast covering the land, working to end the scourge of slavery.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) grows out of the personal ties that Stowe had to the Underground Railroad. Stowe's abolitionist sentiment was formed early as her father, Lyman Beecher (1775–1863), spoke out against the Missouri Compromise, preaching fiery sermons against admitting the state as a slave state. When the Stowe family moved to Ohio, Stowe began to have contact with those who had experienced slavery. As Stowe indicates in a letter published by Douglass in his paper, "Time would fail to tell you all I have learned incidentally of the slave system, in the history of various slaves who came into my family, and of the workings of the underground railroad, which I may say ran through my barn" ("Letter," p. 1). Stowe gathered the stories of slavery from those whom she met, including numerous escaped slaves, such as Zillah, who worked as a servant for the Stowe family. During the time Stowe lived in Ohio, Stowe and a friend witnessed a slave auction in Kentucky a year before she met Reverend John Rankin, who told her the story of a young woman who escaped from slavery in 1838. The woman crossed a dangerous frozen river from the slave state of Kentucky to the free state of Ohio carrying a two-year-old child. These stories would resurface in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Stowe's depiction of the slave auction and Eliza's escape across the frozen river to freedom.

Uncle Tom's Cabin represents the Underground Railroad as central to the escape of slaves. The novel reveals the details of Eliza's escape, unlike slave narratives that conceal details. As soon as Eliza crosses the river, she is met by Mr. Symmes, a white man who starts her on her northern journey by guiding her to the Birds. The Birds provide Eliza and her child shelter and transport them to the next conductor. Both Symmes and the Birds, the novel implies, play a role in the Underground Railroad. The novel suggests that

the Underground Railroad plays a part in the escape of most slaves. In trying to determine Eliza's route, Haley, the slave catcher, notes that like other escaped slaves, Eliza "makes tracks for the underground" (p. 50). The importance of the Underground Railroad to a fugitive's escape is echoed in the comments voiced by the slave traders and catchers at the tavern. Tom, a slave catcher, says, "Suppose you want to lie by a day or two, till the gal's been carried on the underground line up to Sandusky or so, before you start." (p. 61).

Unlike the slave narratives, Stowe's novel shifts attention from the fugitive to the conductor, which contributes to the mythologizing of the Underground Railroad in popular imagination. Stowe allows little agency for the slaves in the text, instead focusing on the Christian duty of the whites. Eliza's decision to flee is caused by her "maternal love, wrought into a paroxysm of frenzy by the near approach of a fearful danger" (p. 43), rather than a carefully wrought plan of escape. Without the desperate circumstances, Stowe suggests, Eliza would never have turned to escape. And, without the helpful whites, allied against slavery, her escape would have been unsuccessful. It is this underlying theme, and the popularity of the ideas that Stowe voiced, that has contributed to the skewed understanding of black agency in the Underground Railroad.

See also Abolitionist Writing; Blacks; Compromise of 1850 and Fugitive Slave Law; *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*; Slave Narratives; Slavery; Transcendentalism; *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

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UNITARIANS

Unitarianism was a theologically unorthodox liberal religious movement. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, most notable New England literary figures (especially those who lived and worked in eastern

Massachusetts) identified themselves with Unitarianism, some throughout their lives, some as the faith they grew up in and left, some as the faith they joined. Unitarianism had few adherents when compared with the major forms of religion in America, evangelical Protestantism and Catholicism, yet it had a disproportionate influence on the New England "literary awakening."

Unitarian ideas had taken hold gradually in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century principally in the Puritan congregational churches of eastern Massachusetts. (The first Unitarian church in New England, however, was not Puritan congregational but Anglican: King's Chapel, Boston, became Unitarian in 1785.) In 1819 the Boston minister William Ellery Channing (1780–1842) laid out the original Unitarian platform in his best-selling sermon "Unitarian Christianity," and in 1825 the American Unitarian Association was founded, marking the effective creation of a new denomination.

Unitarians had no creed. They generally preferred to call themselves "liberal Christians" because they proclaimed the right of individual private judgment in matters of theology and held that theological differences should not prevent Christian fellowship, which they wished to be as broad as possible. Yet as a group, they rejected as unscriptural and irrational certain traditional Puritan articles of faith, in particular the Trinity (hence the name "Unitarian") and, most importantly, original sin. Unitarians believed that humans had at least some power to effect their own salvation through spiritual and moral self-culture, which they placed at the core of religious experience. Unitarians believed in the miraculous authority of the Bible, but they denied it was miraculously inspired word for word and insisted that it be read in a historical and critical, not literal, way.

Unitarianism appealed especially to highly educated and successful urbanites who had faith in their own abilities and in human reasonableness. It became the dominant religion of the eastern Massachusetts elite, made up of closely intermarried merchant, manufacturing, and professional families. This elite was decidedly conservative in its politics, favoring the Federalist and, later, Whig Parties. For most of the antebellum period, it strongly opposed the movement to abolish slavery. When the Unitarian novelist Lydia Maria Child published her influential antislavery tract, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), she was shut out of elite Unitarian society. Again, when the acclaimed Channing began to write moderate antislavery tracts starting in 1835, he alienated his own elite congregation. Although a