

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD: MYTH AND REALITY



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The intriguing story of the Underground Railroad is one of America's great legends, a mix of historical facts embroidered with myths. Traditionally the term refers to a multitude of routes to freedom taken by fugitive slaves. Typically the story focuses primarily on abolitionist operators and pictures fugitives as helpless, frightened passengers. The story, told in the context of a free North and a slaveholding South, often assumes that only by taking advantage of a well-organized national network of abolitionists could slaves have succeeded in escaping. Numerous accounts tell of daring rescues, ingenious underground hiding places, and tunnels connection nearby rivers to underground stations.

In fact, however, the North before the Civil War was not entirely free, either. By the end of the American Revolutionary era all Northern states had abolished slavery or had made provision to do so, but fugitive slaves were always in danger of being returned under federal law and in some cases

even under state law. Consequently, after Britain abolished slavery throughout its colonies in 1833, Canada became an important destination for fugitives who feared recapture and return to bondage. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which greatly expanded federal powers to protect the interests of slaveholders, posed a new threat to all fugitives in Northern states, and large numbers fled to Canada. Many stories about the Underground Railroad grew from events after passage of that law.

Ironically, while the 1840 law mandated Northern involvement in the return of fugitive slaves, it also led many Northerners to become moderate antislavery sympathizers. They already resented the power granted to the South in the U.S. Constitution whereby slave-holding states were allowed to count every five slaves as three persons for purposes of Congressional representation and the assignment of electoral votes. It was that power rather than slavery itself that many Northerners resented. The new law requiring that slaves be returned fueled anger and oppositions to Southern demands.

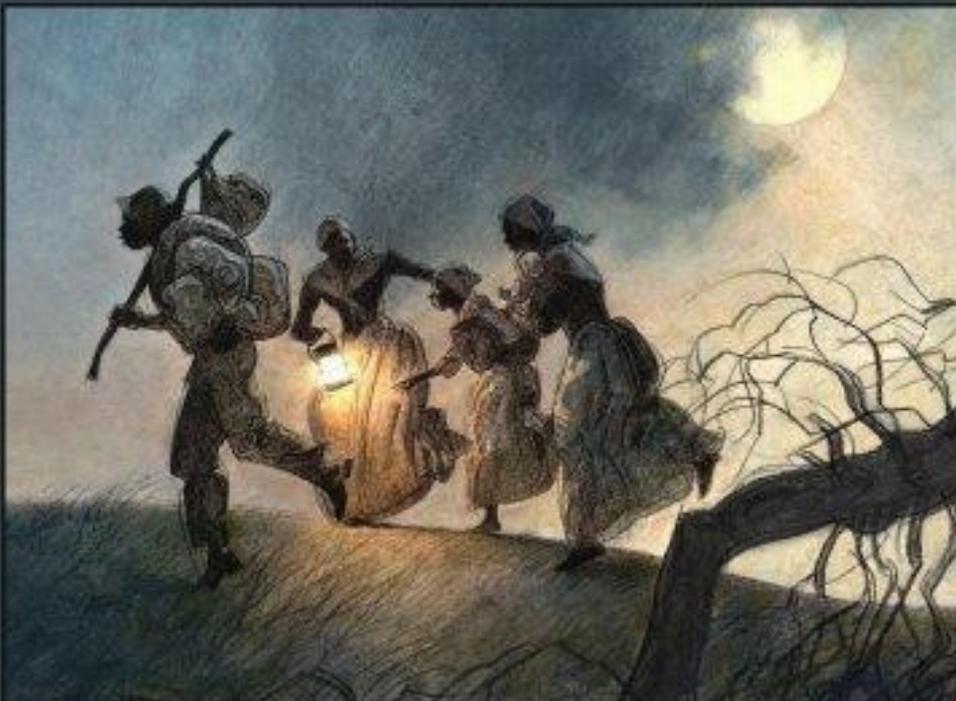
The mythical Underground Railroad became best known after the Civil War, but it had its roots in the antebellum period. Both abolitionists and defenders of slavery dealt in exaggeration; it was not a time in which individuals stuck to cold facts. Abolitionists boasted of their aid to fugitive slaves or announced their willingness to give such aid.

For their part, Southern politicians exaggerated the number of escapes and blamed them all on Northerners interfering with Southern property rights. Because of exaggeration and the lack of proper record keeping, numbers of escapes cannot be exact. While it is clear that there were more than the thousand annual slave escapes listed in census returns, any approximate number would fall far short of the total of one million suggested by several persons.

Because few contemporary documents concerning the Underground Railroad have survived, most of the sources are autobiographical accounts written years after the events occurred. The abolitionist memoirs are based on recollections of members of a much-reviled minority writing after they had

seen their cause triumph and their years of loyal service vindicated. While they vary in authenticity, most tend to relate events from one point of view. Little or nothing was written about the ingenious and daring escape plans carried out by the fugitives themselves.

In the years after the Civil War, stories about the Underground Railroad appeared in magazines and newspapers. Many of these accounts were based on the memories of aging abolitionists



and embellished by reporters. Even those close to the events had difficulty separating fact from fiction.

In the postwar years such terms as “passenger” and “conductor” of the Underground Railroad received wide circulation. What were only cellars, servants’ quarters, and storage rooms were assumed to have been constructed for hiding fugitive slaves. Legendary material was repeated in stories, novels, plays, and even historical monographs.

While there were always some individuals willing to provide food and shelter to fleeing slaves, the term Underground Railroad did not come into common use until the construction of actual railroads became widespread in the 1840’s. Passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 also led to more common use of the term and to increased aid to fugitive slaves.

The popular myth depicts a nationwide, centralized underground operation. One novelist pictures a highly organized, smooth-running operation with stations in both the North and the South, all of it masterminded by an elderly, invalid Quaker woman. In truth, there was some organized activity in certain localities, but none nationwide. Much of the aid to fugitives was haphazard.

One of the more persistent myths concerns tunnels or underground hiding places. One story, frequently repeated, described such a tunnel under St. John’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland, Ohio. The Western Reserve Historical Society conducted two separate investigations and concluded no such tunnels ever existed. In 1993 Byron D. Fuehling made on-site investigations of seventeen Ohio houses reputed to have had some kind of subterranean hiding places for fugitive slaves. He concluded that even though some of the buildings may have housed escaping slaves in the antebellum years, the fugitives hid in barns, attics, or spare rooms, not in underground hideaways.

The legend of the Underground Railroad has taken on a life of its own and become a major epic in American history. It recalls a time when white and black abolitionists worked unselfishly together in the cause of human freedom. Like all legends it is oversimplified, whereas historical reality is complex. Sorting out fact from fictions is the everyday work of historians.