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Underground Railroad and Harriet Tubman

The Underground Railroad

The Abolitionists (people opposed to slavery) organized a secret network of people, homes, and hideouts that helped slaves in the southern United States to escape to freedom in the Northern United States or Canada. This network was called the *Underground Railroad*.



The *Underground Railroad* wasn't really a railroad. It was a name given to the system that helped slaves escape. No one is sure where the name originally came from, but the "underground" part refers to its secrecy, and the "railroad" part refers to the way it was used to transport (move) people.

Railroad terms were used to refer to the people and places in the secret system. The people who led the slaves along the route were called *conductors*. The runaway slaves were called *passengers*. Hideouts and homes where slaves hid along the way were called *stations* or *depots*. And people who helped by giving money and food were sometimes called *stockholders*.

One of the organizers and heroes of the Underground Railroad was Levi Coffin, who is said to have helped around 3,000 slaves gain their freedom. His home in Indiana was called the *Grand Central Station* of the Underground Railroad.

Many people from different backgrounds worked as conductors or provided safe places for the slaves to stay along the route. Some of the conductors were former slaves who had escaped using the Underground Railroad and then returned to help more slaves escape.

Many white people, like Levi Coffin, felt that slavery was wrong and also helped. They provided hideouts in their homes as well as food, money and other supplies.

Traveling on the Underground Railroad was difficult. Slaves would often travel by foot at night. They would sneak from one station to the next, hoping not to get caught. Stations were usually around 10 to 20 miles apart. Sometimes, the slaves would have to wait at one station for a while until they knew the next station was safe and ready for them.

And it was extremely dangerous. Not only for the slaves who were trying to escape, but also for those trying to help them. It was against the law to help escaped slaves and, in many southern states, conductors could be put to death by hanging.

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In 1850 the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in the United States. It said that runaway slaves found in Free States had to be returned to their owners in the south. This made it even more difficult for the Underground Railroad. Now slaves needed to be transported all the way to Canada in order to be safe from being captured again, and Canada was often called the "Promised Land" by slaves.

Although the most common escape route for runaway slaves was north into Canada, some slaves also escaped to Mexico. (Mexico abolished slavery in 1829.)

The Underground Railroad ran from around 1810 until the 1860s. It was at its peak right before the Civil War in the 1850s.

Since the slaves escaped and lived in secrecy, no one is quite sure how many escaped. But it is estimated that more than 100,000 slaves escaped over the 50 year history of the railroad, including 30,000 that escaped during the peak years before the Civil War.

Harriet Tubman

The best known Underground Railroad conductor was Harriet Tubman. During the ten years from 1850 to 1860, she made 19 trips to the south and led over 300 slaves to freedom.

Harriet was born a slave on a plantation in Maryland. As a small girl, she lived in a one-room cabin with her family which included eleven children.

Life as a slave was difficult. When she was only six years old, Harriet was loaned out to another family as a house servant. She was sometimes beaten, and all she got to eat were table scraps.

Later on, Harriet worked on the plantation, plowing fields, loading produce into wagons, hauling logs and driving oxen.

At the age of thirteen Harriet received a horrible head injury. A slave owner tried to throw an iron weight at one of his slaves, but the weight hit Harriet instead. The injury nearly killed her and caused her to have dizzy spells and blackouts for the rest of her life.

In 1849, at the age of 30, Harriet decided to escape on the Underground Railroad. After a long and scary trip she made it to Pennsylvania and was finally free.

Now Harriet wanted to help others (including her own family) to escape to safety in Canada. She joined the Underground Railroad as a conductor.

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Harriet became famous as an Underground Railroad conductor. She risked her life and her own freedom to help others. She led nineteen different escapes from the south and helped around 300 slaves to escape. She was so successful that slave owners offered a reward of \$40,000 for her capture.

But Harriett was never caught, and she never lost a slave. She became known as "Moses" because, like the Moses in the Bible, she led her people to freedom.

1. What was the Underground Railroad?

Why was it called that?

2. A fugitive is someone who is trying to escape or to hide from the law. What was the Fugitive Slave Act?

How did it make it harder for slaves to reach freedom?

3. Who was Harriet Tubman?

4. Harriet became known as 'Moses'. Why was that a good nickname for her?