

Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway

What is the Underground Railroad and why did it exist in Maryland?

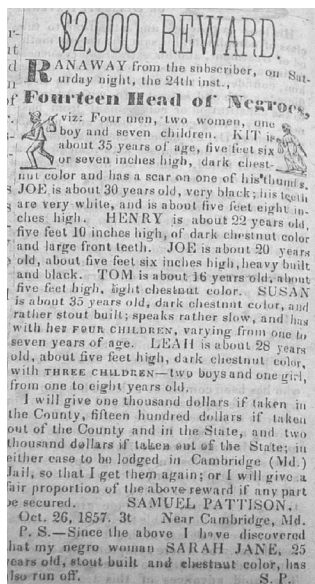
Despite what many people imagine when they hear the term, the “Underground Railroad” was not actually a train operating along hidden railroad tracks. Instead, it refers to the network of people—black and white, free and enslaved—who assisted enslaved African Americans in attaining their freedom by running away from slavery in the United States through the end of the Civil War.

From the earliest days of colonial settlement, when Africans were first forcibly brought to the colonies to labor as slaves, acts of resistance and escape occurred. Acts of defiance ranged from refusing to work, sabotage, poisonings, arson, to violence, and even murder. Some attempted to flee bondage by running away. It was illegal for slaves to flee from their masters, and those who did became known as fugitives from the law.

In the years following the American Revolution, sentiments of “equality and freedom for all” were strong, and slavery was gradually outlawed in the Northern states. But in the Southern states, where agricultural interests dominated the economy, slavery

remained and expanded. In resistance to slavery, communities, individuals, and small groups of like-minded people committed themselves to help end the institution of slavery. By the late 1700s a system provided support to runaways, also known as freedom seekers and self-liberators, though many completed their journeys without assistance.

Although secret networks to freedom had long been in operation, the name Underground Railroad first appeared in the early 1830s (with the arrival of rail transportation). People who participated in these illegal and clandestine operations were identified as agents, conductors, engineers, and stationmasters, terms that mirrored positions on actual railroads. They guided freedom seekers, hid them on their property, made arrangements for their next safe place to stay, purchased train or boat tickets, hid them in cargo, and transported them in wagons or in hulls of ships. The routes of the Underground Railroad followed natural and man-made modes of transportation—rivers, canals, bays, the Atlantic Ocean, ferries and river crossings, roads and trails.



Fugitive Slaves Fleeing from the Eastern Shore of Maryland in October 1857 and the newspaper ad for their return.

Enslaved people in Maryland were often sold to people in the Deep South, as Maryland's agriculture shifted from tobacco to grain, diminishing the need for numerous laborers. The threat of sale away from family and friends, which fractured families and separated parents from young children, motivated many to run. Harsh treatment and the intense desire for freedom drove thousands more to escape.

Freedom seekers faced enormous obstacles. Relentless slave catchers, armed with guns, knives and whips, hunted the fugitives with vicious attack dogs. Newspaper ads and "wanted" posters promised varying rewards for their capture, which tempted people to inform on runaways. Captured freedom seekers often received horrific physical punishment. They were whipped, branded with the letter "R" for runaway, and mutilated. To prevent the potential financial loss of a slave escaping again, slaveholders often sold captured runaways to slave traders in the Deep South.

Safety and security, for those who had escaped and were living in the North, diminished greatly in 1850 when Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act. Under this law, Northern police were bound to capture and return any suspected runaways within their jurisdiction. Citizens were required to inform authorities about runaways and aid in their capture. The fugitive slaves hiding in the North had become vulnerable to capture, and many fled to Canada, where slavery was illegal.

Meanwhile, abolitionists and Underground Railroad activists doubled their efforts to help self-liberated slaves. Vigilance committees in Northern cities stepped up efforts to protect freedom seekers and rescue those who were captured or kidnapped. Slave

escapes escalated. Frustrated over increasing losses, Southern slaveholders, especially in border states like Maryland and Virginia, tightened their grip on both free and enslaved African Americans.

As the Civil War approached and the number of freedom seekers increased, slaveholders were fully aware of the Underground Railroad, but unsure of its actual operations. In Maryland, as elsewhere in the South, local governments enacted laws to keep African Americans under the tightest control. Freedom seekers became deeply cautious, and rightfully so. Countless escapes were foiled by the betrayal of friends, family, and by vigilant whites in the community eager for the high monetary rewards.

It is impossible to determine how many people were assisted by the Underground Railroad. Some historians estimate 25,000 to 50,000, while some estimates are as high as 100,000 people. Historians do agree however, the majority of freedom seekers escaped from the border states of Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky.

The Underground Railroad ceased to exist after the Civil War and the end of slavery.

...rden—all yield to
used according to
...t which accompa-
by W.M. THOMAS,
Current.
Sept. 29, 1849.
Wheat is moderate
alteration during the
ne reds at 98a103c,
te at 103a108c, and
ur at 108a114c. A
esday at 106c.
large, and the mar-
60a61c for yellow;
5a57c for Va. mix-
and Rye at 58a60c

The Denton Journal will please copy 3 weeks, and charge this office.

THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD.

RUNAWAY from the subscriber on Monday the 17th ult., three negroes, named as follows: HARRY, aged about 19 years, has on one side of his neck a wen, just under the ear, he is of a dark chestnut color, about 5 feet 8 or 9 inches high; BEN, aged about 25 years, is very quick to speak when spoken to, he is of a chestnut color, about six feet high; MINTY, aged about 27 years, is of a chestnut color, fine looking, and about 5 feet high. One hundred dollars reward will be given for each of the above named negroes, if taken out of the State, and \$50 each if taken in the State. They must be lodged in Baltimore, Easton or Cambridge Jail, in Maryland.

ELIZA ANN BRODESS,
Near Bucktown, Dorchester county, Md.
Oct. 3d, 1849.

The Delaware Gazette will please copy the above three weeks, and charge this office.

ONE OF "ANTHONY & EMERSON'S

curtain lace
domestic cotton good
shirting cottons; long
drills; osnaburgs; lin-
ticks, &c. &c.
MEN'S WEAR
We can offer an entire
and other best make
CLOTHS; DOESKINS
or English cassime
from all the best
style) Cashmere, m-
INGS; wide black s-
and drab collar velv-
SEWINGS; paddings
generally; also, rich
handkfs. &c. &c.
We invite with cont-
our Stock from *Whol-*
sers, feeling satisfied
stock, choice selection
cessfully compete with
York or Philadelphia.
Many of our leadin-
importation, the balan-
sources, and on peculi-
the amount of our bu-
chase in ORIGINAL PA-
is to sell a large amou-
erence to a moderate
fits.

On 17 September 1849, Harriet Tubman, also known as "Minty," and her brothers, Ben and Henry, made a run for freedom. They stayed hidden nearby for approximately three weeks, but were overcome with fear and returned. Shortly thereafter, Tubman struck out alone, taking her own liberty and utilizing the underground railroad network.