



## STORIES OF ESCAPE

It is fascinating that so many **slaves** found their way to freedom on the Underground Railroad considering the fact that it had no formal organization. Some historians estimate that as many as 100,000 slaves escaped during the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War. The Underground Railroad was very widespread, too, with many escape **routes** linking southern states to the North, but also others extending to the west and south into Mexico and the Caribbean. Why did so many slaves risk death to gain freedom? What was it like to be a slave traveling on the Underground Railroad? These questions are best answered by true-life accounts either written or told by slaves themselves.

### Directions

Read the following dramatic accounts of real fugitive slaves who escaped with help from agents of the Underground Railroad. As you read, highlight or underline details which are particularly important to the story.

When everyone in the group has finished reading, discuss which story most fascinated you. Choose one story to retell. You will eventually retell this story to a group of three other students (one student from each of the other “expert” groups). You must include *at least three* important details in your retelling of the story. In your Stories of Escape “expert” group, practice retelling your story. Your group may wish to take turns, or work in pairs. You do not all have to choose the same story.

### “I Can’t Lose My Baby!”

The story of Eliza Harris was recounted and made famous in the book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Eliza was the property of a slaveholder in Kentucky, who lived near the Ohio River. Eliza said her master and mistress treated her kindly, but one day her master delivered some bad news. He was in some financial trouble, and was planning to separate Eliza and her young child, probably to sell one or the other, or both. She decided to try to “steal North.”

Eliza left at night, after everyone had gone to sleep, with her toddler in her arms. She headed straight for the Ohio River. At that time of the year, the river was normally covered with ice. Eliza planned to cross over on the ice, but when she got to the river, she discovered the ice was all broken up, in sheets floating this way and that. She went to a nearby house and was able to hide away for the daylight hours.

The next night, she bundled up her child and stepped out on the ice. As a sheet of ice would give way, she’d set her baby on the next one and follow the best she could. She continued going from one cake of ice to the next, wet and cold, and sometimes struggling not to drown.

When she was close enough to shore, a man who had heard the commotion reached out and pulled her out of the river. He directed her to the closest station on the Underground Railroad a few miles away. Eliza and her child then journeyed from station to station, sometimes joined by other fugitive slaves, they eventually reached Sandusky, Ohio, where she crossed Lake Erie to Canada.

**“Because I am a Man”**

The escape of the Hayden family is recounted in *Let My People Go (The Story of the Underground Railroad and the Growth of the Abolition Movement)*, by Henrietta Buckmaster and in *History of Black Americans*, by Philip Foner. Lewis Hayden and his family were owned by two separate masters. In his search to find someone to help his family escape to freedom, Lewis found a young Oberlin College student named Calvin Fairbanks and his fiancée, Delia Webster. When Calvin asked Lewis why he wanted his freedom he replied, “because I am a man.”

Mr. and Mrs. Hayden pretended to be Miss Webster’s servants so they could maneuver through Kentucky with little trouble. The young son of the Hayden’s hid under the seat of the wagon while they traveled. They took an unusual route because the Oberlin route was riddled with bounty hunters. Finally, the Haydens crossed the Ohio River and were delivered to other stations. Quakers in Sandusky, Ohio embraced the Hayden family and assisted in their final trek to Canada.

In 1848, Fairbanks was arrested for helping the Haydens escape. Lewis Hayden’s former master demanded \$650 for his release. Lewis, now a clothes dealer in Boston, began a campaign to collect monies to buy Calvin Fairbanks’ freedom. Lewis raised the money within 60 days.

Years later, Lewis Hayden was elected to the Massachusetts State Legislature.

**“I’ll Never Feel Safe Again”**

The story of Daniel Fisher’s escape was told in *The Underground Railroad: Dramatic Firsthand Accounts of Daring Escapes to Freedom*, by Charles Blockson. When Daniel was twenty years old, he was sold by his master at an auction in Richmond, Virginia for five hundred and fifty dollars, the highest bid. His new master took him to South Carolina where he stayed only seven months before he and another slave decided to try to escape.

They stole a horse and rode all the first night until daybreak, when they ran the animal off, knowing it would look suspicious if two slaves were seen with a horse. In Daniel’s words, “We kept on our way on foot, hiding by day and walking by night. We were without knowledge of the country, and with nothing to guide us other than the North Star, which was oftentimes obscured by clouds, we would unwittingly retrace our steps and find ourselves back at the starting point.”

The two eventually found their way to Richmond and found Daniel’s original home and master. Daniel begged to be bought back, but his former master was too poor and he advised Daniel to stow away on a boat going north. Daniel and his companion dug dens in the woods and lived in them for three months, foraging for food at night and hiding in the dens during the day.

Finally, they stowed away on a boat taking lumber to Washington, D.C. After four days without food, the boat reached Washington and the captain showed them which way to head. After three more days and nights of further wanderings, being chased by men and hounds, without food and near exhaustion, Daniel and his friend reached Philadelphia and were directed to people who would help them. Daniel ended up in Deep River, Connecticut, where he found work and freedom, “though always afraid of being taken by day or night and carried again to the South.”



## MAJOR ROUTES OF UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

### Directions

Read the following passage and study the map. Then, with your group, answer the questions found at the bottom of this page.

Although escaping **slaves** were undoubtedly eager to reach freedom, the **routes** they took could be very indirect. The individual **conductor** would choose which route to use, based on the degree of danger he or she felt was involved. Conductors and their followers would often zigzag back and forth, skip **stations**, or even go back to a station they had already visited to confuse anyone who might be following them. New routes were constantly being formed and old ones were frequently abandoned if slave catchers (known as **bounty hunters** or **patrols**) were known to be watching.

Routes usually ran from Kentucky and Virginia through Ohio, or from Maryland across Pennsylvania and New York to Canada. Ohio had many routes because it was well populated and because of the many **navigable** rivers in that state. Many Quakers and friendly Ottawa Indians also lived in Ohio. Several routes ran through Pennsylvania because of the large number of Quakers living there. Quakers were very kind to escaping slaves. Additionally, Pennsylvania was near New York which provided them with access to Canada.

One of the quickest ways to freedom was to escape by water. Slaves traveled by boat with Underground Railroad workers or as stowaways. Others swam or, in winter, walked across frozen rivers. Another favorite escape route was across Lake Michigan. Although “Underground Railroad” was a code name for the network of people and places offering help to **fugitive** slaves, some actually did escape on trains.

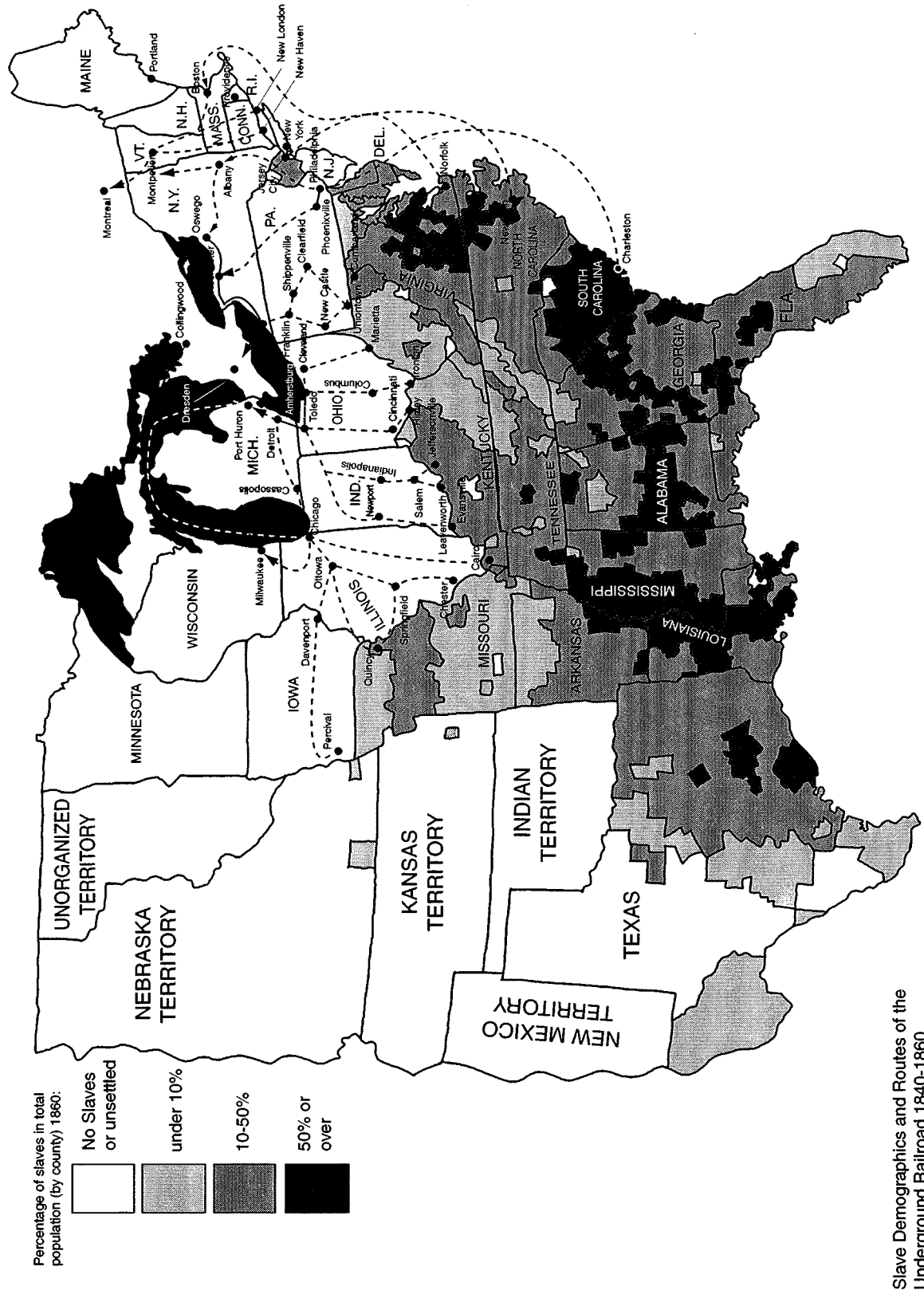
The Underground Railroad never really worked its way into the Deep South. However, if slaves could **escape** to the more northern of the slave states, like Missouri, Kentucky, and Virginia, there was a good chance of them finding their way further northward on the Underground Railroad.

Respond to the following questions on another piece of paper:

1. Suppose you were a slave on a plantation near Charleston, South Carolina. How might you escape? Describe a route you might take to reach Montreal, Canada.
2. Some slaves traveled by land to Lake Michigan where they got on boats and traveled by water to Canada. Use the map to make a list of states in which these slaves might have begun their journey.
3. Other slaves were unable to travel by water for any part of their journey. Ohio had many stations. Describe a land route a slave might have taken from Kentucky, through Ohio and other states to reach Canada.
4. Why might it have been harder for slaves from the Deep South (e.g., Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi) to find a way to escape on the Underground Railroad?



# MAJOR ROUTES OF UNDERGROUND RAILROAD





## AGENTS AND FRIENDS OF UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

### Directions

Read the following passages about people who became famous for their association with the anti-slavery cause and the Underground Railroad. Highlight or underline the most important information about each person. When you have completed your reading discuss these persons with your “expert” group. Be prepared to share this information with others.

### Harriet Tubman (1820?-1913)

The most famous **conductor** and an escaped **slave**, Harriet Tubman led more than 300 slaves to freedom. She had suffered as a slave on a Maryland plantation, beaten by her mistress nearly every morning. Luckily, she escaped when she was twenty-eight years old. She had all the characteristics of a good leader: courage, foresight, self-control and wisdom.

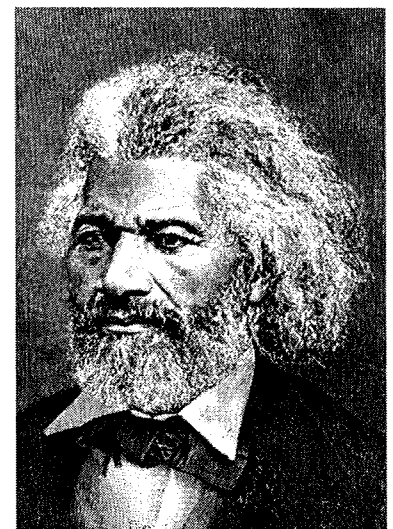
She became known as “Moses” to those who hoped she would deliver them from bondage as the Biblical character had done for his people. She was careful to call for slaves on Saturday nights, when many were allowed to leave their plantations to visit family on other properties and were not expected back until Monday. This always gave the group two days to get ahead of the hunting dogs.



Harriet Tubman used her best judgment in order to keep the group safe. She threatened to kill any passenger who endangered the others by wanting to quit. A woman of faith, she often prayed for miracles along the way, and once said, “On my Underground Railroad I never run my train off the track and I have never lost a passenger” (Blockson, 1987).

### Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)

Like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass was an escaped slave from Maryland. He had a talent for public speaking and for writing. He started one of the first African American **abolitionist** newspapers, called The North Star. Although careful to not reveal too much, Douglass mentioned the Underground Railroad in his paper, and used it to assist escaping slaves. Harriet Tubman often brought **fugitives** to his home where he and his wife, Ann, would offer help. He once had eleven fugitives hidden in his house, and provided them with food, shelter and money so they could move on to Canada (Blockson, 1987).





### Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896)

A teacher and the wife of a minister, Harriet Beecher Stowe had once lived in Ohio near the border it shared with Kentucky. On one side of the river were abolitionists, and on the other were her slaveholder friends. While visiting the Kentucky side, Mrs. Stowe saw and heard things that disturbed her. Later, after she and her husband had moved to Maine, she wrote a novel about a slave who is whipped to death by his master. This little book, called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, sold three thousand copies in twenty-four hours. Within eleven weeks, a hundred thousand copies were sold. It was the topic of discussion in restaurants, markets, and churches and convinced many people that it was time to **abolish** slavery once and for all. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* greatly furthered the Abolitionist cause; it was translated into several languages and distributed worldwide (Blockson, 1987).



### Levi Coffin (1798-1877)

Levi Coffin's house was known as the Grand Central Station of the Underground Railroad. He and his wife Catherine lived in a Quaker settlement where they ran a store. Together, they worked for over twenty years in Ohio and Indiana to help fugitive slaves get to Canada. Over 2000 slaves passed through their home in Newport, Indiana, where three routes of the Underground Railroad met. The Coffins claimed that no slave who came to them for help ever failed to make it to freedom. Levi donated much of his own income to his secret work and convinced many business people to do the same (Coffin, 1876).



### Lucretia Mott (1793-1880)

Lucretia Mott, a Philadelphia Quaker minister, put words into actions. She believed in equal rights for all people, and was a leader in the struggle for women's right to vote. She also founded the Pennsylvania Women's Anti-Slavery Society, which had both black and white members and raised money to hire speakers who would speak out on anti-slavery issues. She became one of the society's most famous speakers. She is believed to have been a station master on the Underground Railroad (Blockson, 1987).





## SECRETS AND DANGERS

### Directions

Read the following excerpts about the Underground Railroad and underline or highlight important or interesting details. Work together as a group to write five or six questions which can be answered from the passage. You will share these with others. Write the answers to your questions on another piece of paper.

### Secret Codes

There were secret phrases, songs, and codes used by those who conducted or those trying to reach the Underground Railroad:

- Workers on the Underground Railroad referred to themselves and each other as “brakemen,” “agents,” “firemen,” and other railway titles.
- The houses where slaves were hidden were called “stations” or “depots.”
- People who ran these houses sometimes called themselves “station masters.”
- Moving from one safe place to another was referred to as “catching the next train.”
- The person who guided the refugees from station to station was known as a “conductor.”
- Many workers had code names or nicknames. Harriet Tubman, a famous conductor, was called “Moses” because she led enslaved people to freedom like the Bible character.
- A message that the “good ship Zion” was coming was a signal that it was time to escape.
- The lyrics to the song “Follow the Drinking Gourd” told slaves to follow the North Star and gave other directions for reaching free territory.
- Fugitive slaves were called “passengers” or “cargo.”

### Dangers

#### “Bells and Horns”

One slave, John Brown, tried to escape but was captured. His master made him wear a circle of iron over his head which fastened around his neck and had rods, like horns, with a bell attached to each. The iron “hood” weighed twelve to fourteen pounds and prevented John from resting his head at night. In his words, John said, “I wore the bells and horns, day and night, for three months, and I do not think any description I could give of my sufferings during this time would convey anything approaching to a faint idea of them. Let alone that their weight made my head and neck ache dreadfully, especially when I stooped to my work...” (Blockson, 1987).

