

The Underground Railroad

It is said that sometime in 1831 a slave named Tice Davids was being chased by his owner. Davids reached the Ohio River, plunged in, and began to swim for his life. His angry master, who was not far behind, looked around for a boat. Finding one at last, he quickly set off after his slave. Davids, however, vanished from sight when he reached the opposite shore. His owner searched the countryside and the nearby Ohio town but found no trace of his slave. He finally gave up and returned home. "Tice must have gone off on some underground road," he told his friends.



As this story spread, it began to be told that Tice Davids had escaped on an "underground railroad." Soon this became the name for the network of secret routes that slaves followed north to freedom. Before long other railroad terms were used. The houses that hid the slaves became "stations." The owners of the houses became "stationmasters." The **fugitive** slaves were called "passengers," and those who guided slaves to liberty were called "conductors."

Most passengers on the Underground Railroad traveled at night, often using the North Star as their guide. Some rode in farm wagons with false bottoms, but many had to journey on foot. During the day they hid in swamps, forests, or stations in the free states in the North. It took **stamina**, determination, and courage. They were exposed to bad weather and were weakened by hunger. Even worse, they faced the constant risk of being found by professional slave catchers who could even operate in the northern states. That's why many runaways fled all the way to Canada. Once there, they couldn't be captured and returned to slavery.

Both whites and African Americans worked as stationmasters and conductors. Most acted in secrecy because they could be sent to prison or fined for helping slaves escape. The stationmasters hid passengers in attics, root cellars, false closets, and rooms concealed by trap doors. To identify their stations, they often used **prearranged** signals like a quilt hung over a porch railing. Runaways then announced their arrival with a special knock or a password. One of the most active stationmasters was a store owner named Levi Coffin. Known as the "President" of the Underground Railroad, he sheltered about 3,000 slaves over the years.

Conductors had the most dangerous job. They traveled to the South, helped slaves escape, and led them from station to station. Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave, was a fearless conductor. She made 19 trips to the South and guided over 300 passengers to freedom. At one time a reward of \$40,000 was offered for her capture.

In 1865, the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution brought an end to slavery. At last the brave efforts of the workers and passengers on the Underground Railroad were no longer needed.