ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Underground Railroad

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Because so much of the Underground Railroad's history was forgotten, or deliberately suppressed, its memory melted into myth like few other pieces of the American past. Mention of the underground typically evokes a thrilling but vague impression of tunnels, disguises, mysterious codes, and hairsbreadth escapes. The real history of the Underground Railroad is indeed an epic of high drama. But its political and moral importance both in antebellum America and as a forerunner of modern Civil Rights activism far outweighs its legendary romance.

Apart from sporadic slave rebellions, only the Underground Railroad physically resisted the repressive laws that held slaves in bondage. The nation's first great movement of civil disobedience since the American Revolution, it engaged thousands of citizens in the active subversion of federal law and the prevailing mores of their communities, and for the first time asserted the principle of personal, active responsibility for others' human rights. By provoking fear and anger in the South, and prompting the enactment of harsh legislation that eroded the rights of white Americans, the Underground Railroad was a direct contributing cause of the Civil War. It also gave many African Americans their first experience in politics and organizational management. And in an era when proslavery ideologues stridently asserted that blacks were better off in slavery because they lacked the basic intelligence, and even the biological ability, to take care of themselves, the Underground Railroad offered repeated proof of their courage and initiative. The underground and the broader abolition movement of which it was a part also fostered American feminism: women were for the first time participants in a political movement on an equal plane with men, publicly insisting that their voices be heard, sheltering and clothing fugitive slaves, serving as guides, and risking reprisals against their families.

The Underground Railroad's origins can be traced to Philadelphia. There, at the turn of the 19th century, perhaps slightly earlier, Quaker antislavery activists joined with free African Americans in moving fugitive slaves, sometimes in disguise, from safehouse to safehouse, and from town to town in the Pennsylvania countryside, establishing techniques that would be used by the underground for decades to come. Although no single figure created the Underground Railroad, its most prominent early activist was the Quaker Isaac Tatum Hopper, who was delegated by the local Society of Friends to assist newly freed slaves, and was soon collaborating with them to help still-enslaved men and women to freedom.

The origin of the term "Underground Railroad" remains unknown. A probably apocryphal tale attributes it to the spontaneous remark of an anonymous citizen in Ripley, Ohio who, when asked by slave catchers where a fugitive had gone, replied that he must have disappeared on "an underground road." More likely, the terminology developed naturally during the 1830s and 1840s when the development of the underground coincided with that of iron railroads, whose language of "stations," "lines," "trains," "passengers," and "conductors" lent itself neatly to what the underground had been doing for decades.

Underground activity spread from Philadelphia to other Quaker communities in the surrounding states. It speeded up dramatically after the establishment of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. Although this organization, founded by the abolitionist editor William Lloyd Garrison and New York businessman Arthur Tappan, officially confined itself to public activity, its agents fanned out across the northern states setting up local branches of the society, which in turn frequently became nurseries for the more radical activists of the Underground Railroad. In the North, white activism often centered in evangelical churches whose members rejected slavery on moral grounds. Black activism also developed within congregations of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and through individual efforts to liberate still-enslaved family members, as well as by secular networks of both free and enslaved men and women.

By the 1850s, the underground had evolved into a flexible and interlocking system with thousands of activists reaching from the upper edges of the South to Canada. The majority of fugitives who succeeded in reaching free territory came from three states that had long borders with the North: Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky. (West Virginia did not break away from Virginia to become a separate state until 1863.) Slave-owners commonly had an exaggerated idea of the underground's reach, however, often blaming it for the disappearance of virtually every slave who ran away anywhere in the South. In December 1859, Governor Henry A. Wise of Virginia complained the state legislature that the underground posed a greater threat to slavery than John Brown's raid, declaring, "our border slaves are so liberated by this exterior system, by this still, silent stealing system that they have no need to take up arms for their liberation."[1]

In an era when emancipation seemed subversive and even outlandish to most Americans, the men and women of the underground defied society's standards on a daily basis, inspired by a sense of spiritual imperative, moral conviction, and a fierce passion for freedom. In border areas particularly, underground agents faced the constant danger of punitive litigation, personal violence, and possible death. Those dangers increased with the enactment of a new, draconian Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850. The law provided severe penalties for anyone assisting runaway slaves, gave local officials the power to coerce ordinary citizens in recapturing fugitives, and established a network of federal commissioners to oversee the restoration of fugitive slaves to their masters. During the 1850s, approximately 1,000 fugitives were returned South under the law. However, the law was widely ignored in many parts of the North. Indeed, by

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[1] Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 105.

carrying the enforcement of the "slave power" so aggressively into Northern communities where fugitives were living the law converted many white Americans from political passivity into political abolitionists and underground activists.

As a result, by the middle years of the decade, the "underground" was an open fact of local life in the upper North. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, for instance, regularly published detailed reports on underground activity in articles that were signed by agents themselves. On November 5th, 1854, George DeBaptist, one of the underground's leaders in Detroit, reported, "We have had, within the last ten or fifteen days, fifty-three first class passengers landed at this point, by the Express train from the South. We expect ten more tonight." In December 1855, Douglass himself reported from Syracuse, that "three good bouncing fat Negroes stepped aboard the train on the Underground Railroad, and are now safe in the Queen's dominions. It is proposed by the directors of that road, to lay down a double track, as the business is getting to be very large -- more than can be done on a single one."[2]

In practice, the underground was a model of democracy in action, operating in most areas with a minimum of central direction and a maximum of grassroots involvement, and with only one strategic goal: to provide aid to any fugitive slave who asked for it. While the forwarding of fugitives was the central purpose of the underground, it also incorporated a broader infrastructure of itinerant preachers, teamsters, and peddlers who carried messages for the underground into the South, slaves who themselves never fled but provided information regarding escape routes to those who did, sailors and ships' stewards who concealed runaways on their vessels, lawyers who were willing to defend fugitives and those who were accused of harboring them, businessmen who provided needed funds, as well as an even wider pool of family members, friends, and fellow parishioners who although they might never engage personally in illegal activity, protected those who did and made it possible for them to continue their work. Where danger was immediate and proslavery forces strong, such as the Ohio River Valley, few who were involved in the underground knew the names of collaborators farther away than the next town or two. "The method of operating was not uniform but adapted to the requirements of each case," as Isaac Beck, an underground station master in southern Ohio, put it. "There was no regular organization, no constitution, no officers, no laws or agreement or rule except the 'Golden Rule,' and every man did what seemed right in his own eyes."[3]

Popular modern myths associate the Underground Railroad with the widespread use of tunnels to facilitate the movement of fugitives, so-called "quilt maps" by means of which freedom-seekers allegedly found their way to the North, and the use of songs as a common device to transmit messages to would-be freedom-seekers. There is no documentary evidence whatever for the use of quilts as maps; most, if not all, the quilt patterns alleged to represent secret directions have been shown to post-date the Civil

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[2] *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, November 17, 1854; Ibid., December 14, 1855.
[3] Isaac Beck, interview with Wilbur H. Siebert, December 26, 1892 in Wilbur H. Siebert Collection, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

War. Similarly, virtually no purpose-built tunnels have been found that can be shown to have been used by the Underground Railroad. A possible exception is the recent discovery of a short crawl space leading to a dry cistern at the home of radical abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens' home in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which suggests that it may have been used to hide fugitives. Harriet Tubman on occasion used snatches of well-known hymns to indicate her arrival to prospective "passengers." However the widespread use of songs in this way cannot be documented, and certainly was not universal.

It is frequently said that the Underground Railroad was not a "real" railroad. By the 1850's, in many cases, however, it was. Wherever actual trains were available, the underground used them. For example, the African-American lumber merchant William Whipper shipped fugitives from Columbia, Pennsylvania directly to the Canadian border hidden in special compartments in his fleet of freight cars, while in the West, fugitives coming out of Missouri could be put on a train in western Illinois in the morning, and be in Canada by nightfall the same day.

Surviving documents make clear that the flow of refugees could vary greatly from route to route, and from year to year. Thomas Garrett, the station master at Wilmington, Delaware, admitted in court, in 1848, to having assisted more than 1,400 freedom seekers since he began his underground work in 1822, an average of fifty-six per year. Between 1848 and 1854, he assisted another 450, an average of 75 per year, and by 1860, he claimed to have helped a grand total of 2,750, an average of 225 year before the Civil War brought an end to his work. Reports from various parts of the country, though fragmentary, suggest that underground travel approached a peak in the middle years of the decade. Between mid-1854 and early 1855, the all-black (and predominantly female) Committee of Nine, which oversaw underground work in Cleveland, Ohio, forwarded two hundred and seventy five fugitives to Canada, an average of one per day, while the Syracuse *Journal* reported in October 1855 that about 140 fugitives had passed through the city since January, an average of slightly less than one every two days. The Detroit Vigilance Committee, possibly the busiest in the United States, reported 1,043 fugitives crossing to Canada from May 1855 to January 1856, an average of 130 per month. Estimates of the total number of fugitives assisted by the underground between 1830 and 1860 range from 70,000 to 100,000, of whom perhaps one-third or one-quarter were delivered to Canada. (Although often said to be "on the Canada road," most fugitives settled in the northern states, wherever they felt safe and found work.) When the often neglected period from 1800 to 1830 is added in, the total must be increased somewhat, but it is unlikely that the underground handled more than 150,000 passengers at most, and quite possibly far fewer.[4]

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[4] James A. McGowan, *Station Master on the Underground Railroad: The Life and Letters of Thomas Garrett* (Moylan, PA: Whimsie Press, 1977), 27, 121; William Still , *The Underground Railroad* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing , 1970), 659; *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, September 8, 1854, January 26, 1855, October 12, 1855; C. Peter Ripley, *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 2:28.

It is similarly difficult to determine just how many Americans participated in the Underground Railroad. Its first historian, Wilbur Siebert, in his seminal 1898 work *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*, identified some 3,000 individuals by name, nearly all of them white men. But he failed to take into account the large numbers of African Americans — possibly the majority — who risked their lives to help fugitives, or the fact that women who provided refugees with food, clothing, and advice were as much a part of the system as were their husbands. There were, in addition, numerous support personnel, such as lawyers, businessmen, the suppliers of clothing, who may not have harbored or conducted fugitives, but were essential to the system's operation. Probably, several times the number estimated by Siebert actually worked intimately in the Underground Railroad.[5]

The best known Underground Railroad activist is, of course, Harriet Tubman, who led more than 70 men and women to freedom from the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Many other leaders of the Underground Railroad in addition to those already mentioned in this essay await full recognition. African-American journalist David Ruggles, born in Connecticut, created New York City's Underground Railroad in the 1830's. George de Baptiste, a barber and businessman, led a mainly African-American underground network in southern Indiana, and later helped create one of the underground's most successful operations in Detroit. Levi Coffin, a North Carolina-born Quaker, created networks in eastern Indiana and southern Ohio, and assisted thousands of fugitives in his 40-year underground career. Coffin often worked with Laura Haviland, a Michigan-based Quaker, who harbored and schooled fugitives in her home town, and secretly scouted Ohio River crossings. The fiery minister John Rankin anchored a network of Presbyterian churchmen in southern Ohio, and more than once defended his home on the Ohio River against attack by slave hunters. In upstate New York, Gerrit Smith, one of the wealthiest men in America, provided financing for much underground activity around the United States, and sheltered fugitives at his Peterboro home. Not far from there, Frederick Douglass, most famous as an orator and editor, also ran an underground station from his home in Rochester, New York.[6]

The importance of the Underground Railroad cannot be judged just by numbers, or even by the inspiring quality of its saga of dramatic escapes, recaptures, and feats of individual courage. The underground came into existence in an America in which democracy was the property of white men alone, and in which free as well as enslaved blacks lived under conditions that had more in common with what is today called totalitarianism than many Americans might care to admit. Along with the broader abolitionist movement, the Underground Railroad, forced Americans to think in new ways about the nation's history of political compromise with slavery, and to realize that *all* Americans — white as well as black — were, in some sense, shackled to the fate of the slave. Without the confrontational activists of the underground, the abolitionist

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[5] William H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Macmillan, 1898), 403-39.

[6] Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Random House, 2003), xvii.

movement might never have become more than more than a vast lecture hall in which right-minded white Americans could comfortably agree that slavery was evil.

Apart from the lives saved, the underground's greatest achievement may have been its creation of a truly free zone of interracial activity where blacks not only directed complex logistical and financial operations, but also, in some places, supervised support networks that included white men and women who were accorded no special status owing to their skin color. In the underground, blacks and whites discovered each other for the first time as allies in a common struggle, learning to rely on each other not as master upon slave, or child upon parent, but as fellow soldiers in a war that most Americans did not yet even know had begun.

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