



# All Aboard

## *the Underground Railroad*

***Escaping slaves often had to work their way through slaveholding states and live off the land before they reached safe stops on the Underground Railroad. These runaway slaves in Virginia's Great Dismal Swamp are being chased by dogs.***

**M**any myths surround the Underground Railroad. The two biggest misconceptions are that it actually was a system of tracks along which trains rode and that it ran below the earth. The Underground Railroad was neither.

### **Thousands Working for Freedom**

In reality, the Underground Railroad was a loosely organized group of people working simply but courageously *against* slavery and *for* the freedom of those bound to servitude. Involved in the

Underground Railroad system were those running away from their enslavement and those helping the individuals who chose to escape. It is believed that as many as 100,000 slaves escaped on the Railroad. They were helped by at least three to four thousand “conductors.” The system operated from the early 1800s through the start of the Civil War.

African Americans caught in the system of slavery were the key participants in this movement—most were young and male. They ranged from field

workers to house slaves to skilled craftspeople. But all shared the desire to be free.

## A Great Risk for Freedom

Escaping from slavery meant taking a tremendous risk. If successful, the runaways might never see their families or loved ones again. Leaving behind children or parents or siblings made the decision to escape a painful one.

And if an escape attempt failed and resulted in capture, **fugitive** slaves faced severe punishment. Slave owners sought to make examples of escapees as a way of discouraging others from trying to get free. Descriptions of the whippings given captured slaves or the devices put on them to prevent another escape are graphic and frightening.

In an attempt to make escaping to freedom in the North even more difficult, some runaways were sold to new masters who lived farther south.

**Fugitive** means running away or fleeing from the law.

**Biased** means marked by prejudice.

**Quakers** are members of the religious group also known as the Society of Friends, who reject violence.

**Refuge** is a place that provides protection from danger.

The people who chose to aid runaway slaves also faced great risks. Fugitive slave laws existed that supported the rights of slaveholders. Anyone found helping escaped slaves was given a heavy fine, had property taken away, and could be sent to jail. In fact, the system that put both runaways and helpers on trial was **biased** in that it paid judges more if the accused were found guilty.

## Actively Working for Justice

Yet, even with those discouragements, many people were active in the Underground Railroad, including free African Americans, abolitionists, other slaves, **Quakers** and other religious groups, and American Indians. All were opposed to the enslavement of human beings.

Their support came in many forms. Conductors on the Underground Railroad assisted with food, **refuge**, and instructions to the next safe stopping place. Homes, barns, and other buildings—referred to as stations or stops—often had hidden areas beneath floors or behind walls that allowed



**Attempting an escape involved great risks, but some slaves were willing to face them rather than remain in bondage.**

**As early as 1791, theologian Jonathan Edwards preached against the slave trade.**

runaways to rest and eat before they continued on their journey. When angry slave owners or slave catchers were in close pursuit, these secure havens hid the fugitives and made capture more difficult.

## Secrecy Meant Safety and Success

Contrary to popular belief, the Underground Railroad system was not run or operated by a strictly established organization. Nor was it a nationwide operation. Usually, individuals in a particular region knew of others to whom they could send the escaping slaves. Given the dangers of participating in the Underground Railroad, many people chose to keep their involvement secret or known to only a few others. This kept them safer, while making it harder for outsiders to understand how the system worked in their area. Secrecy played an integral part in

the success of the Underground Railroad.

Sharing the story of the Underground Railroad is significant because its participants offer a powerful example. Their courage, cooperation, and perseverance illustrate the impact individuals can have when they take a stand for what they believe is right. Members of the Underground Railroad highlight the importance of freedom as a basic American principle and the necessity of protecting it for all citizens. Their efforts made a difference in history and remind us of the differences we, too, can make today.



**Adapted from an article by Spencer R. Crew**

## DEFINING SPECIAL TERMS

Here are some key words used by those involved in the Underground Railroad system. As you read them, notice how the participants used train-related terminology in their own unique way. Railroad trains were new methods of transportation in the 1830s and 1840s. The terms associated with this new invention became useful code words on the Underground Railroad.



**Conductors** provided food, shelter, and directions to runaway slaves and led them from one station to another.

**Heaven**, the **Promised Land**, or **Canaan** referred to Canada.

**Passengers, cargoes**, or **packages** meant fugitive slaves.

**Routes** or **rails** were the many different paths—some by land, some by water—that escaping slaves took to reach freedom.

**Stations** or **stops** were safe houses, or hiding places, for the runaways. These included buildings such as churches, homes, and barns.

The **stationmaster** was the person in charge of the hiding place.