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

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