

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## The Underground Railroad

By USHistory.org  
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*In the 1850's and 1860's, the United States became even more divided on the issue of slavery. States in the South still practiced slavery, while many states in the North prohibited slavery. As a result, many slaves tried to run away to freedom in North. The Underground Railroad was established to provide a secret way for slaves to escape from slavery in the South to freedom in the North. As you read, take notes on how the Underground Railroad helped slaves to freedom in the North.*

[1] Any cause needs speakers and organizers. Any mass movement requires men and women of great ideas.

But information and mobilization are not enough. To be successful, revolutionary change requires people of action — those who little by little chip away at the forces who stand in the way. Such were the “conductors” of the Underground Railroad. Not content<sup>1</sup> to wait for laws to change or for slavery to implode itself,<sup>2</sup> railroad activists helped individual fugitive slaves<sup>3</sup> find the light of freedom. The Underground Railroad was not an actual railroad, but was instead a network of safe houses and routes slaves could take to escape from the South to freedom in the North.

The Underground Railroad operated at night. Slaves were moved from “station” to “station” by abolitionists.<sup>4</sup> These “stations” were usually homes and churches — any safe place to rest and eat before continuing on the journey to freedom in the North, sometimes as far away as Canada. Often whites would pretend to be the masters of fugitives to prevent their capture. Sometimes lighter-skinned African Americans took this role. In one spectacular case, Henry “Box” Brown arranged for a friend to put him in a wooden box, where he had only a few biscuits and some water. His friend mailed him to the North, where bemused<sup>5</sup> abolitionists received him in Philadelphia.



*"Harriet Tubman" by H. Seymour Squyer is in the public domain.*

1. **Content (adjective):** in a state of peace, happiness, or satisfaction
2. “Implode” in this sense means to self-destruct.
3. A fugitive slave was someone who ran away from the slave owner and went into hiding to avoid being taken back.
4. Abolitionism was a movement to “abolish,” or end, slavery.
5. **Bemused (adjective):** confused and also somewhat amused

Most of the time, however, slaves crept northward on their own, looking for the signal that designated the next safe haven.<sup>6</sup> This was indeed risky business, because slave catchers and sheriffs were constantly on the lookout. Over 3,200 people are known to have worked on the railroad between 1830 and the end of the Civil War. Many will remain forever anonymous.<sup>7</sup>

- [5] Perhaps the most outstanding “conductor” of the Underground Railroad was Harriet Tubman. Born a slave herself, after she escaped to Philadelphia, she began working on the railroad to free her family members. Throughout the 1850s, Tubman made 19 separate trips into slave territory. She was terribly serious about her mission. She threatened to shoot any slave who had second thoughts with the pistol she carried on her hip. By the end of the decade, she was responsible for freeing about 300 slaves. When the Civil War broke out, she used her knowledge from working the railroad to serve as a spy for the Union.

Needless to say, slave owners did not appreciate the Underground Railroad. Although they disliked Abolitionist talk and literature, the railroad was far worse. To them, these were simple cases of stolen property. Slave catchers often traveled to the North to try to recapture freed slaves. When Northerners rallied around freed slaves and refused to compensate<sup>8</sup> former slave owners, Southerners felt they were being robbed of property.

This disagreement over freed slaves lay yet another brick of the foundation for the South to eventually secede<sup>9</sup> from the Union and help spark the American Civil War.

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6. **Haven** (*noun*): a place of safety

7. **Anonymous** (*adjective*): not named or identified

8. **Compensate** (*verb*): to trade or give money as payment for something lost, stolen, or damaged

9. "Secede" refers to the South's decision to leave the Union at the start of the American Civil War.

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Why does the author choose to call the individuals who worked on the Underground Railroad “conductors”?
  - A. They were responsible for driving the trains that took slaves from slavery in the South to freedom in the North.
  - B. Even though it was not an actual railroad, the “conductors” were individuals responsible for helping slaves travel from the South to the North.
  - C. They conducted trains and boats that took fugitive slaves back to their masters in the South.
  - D. They carried pistols on their hips that were known by people in the North as “conductors.”
  
2. Which phrase from the text does the author use to support their argument that a wide variety of people worked for the Underground Railroad?
  - A. “Railroad activists helped individual fugitive slaves find the light of freedom.” (Paragraph 2)
  - B. “Often whites would pretend to be the masters of fugitives to prevent their capture. Sometimes lighter-skinned African Americans took this role.” (Paragraph 3)
  - C. “Most of the time, however, slaves crept Northward on their own, looking for the signal that designated the next safe haven.” (Paragraph 4)
  - D. “Perhaps the most outstanding ‘conductor’ of the Underground Railroad was Harriet Tubman.” (Paragraph 5)
  
3. How does paragraph 5 contribute to the ideas developed throughout the text?
  - A. The paragraph provides an example of a famous train conductor who shipped pistols to the North to help them win the war.
  - B. The paragraph is used to show that Harriet Tubman is the only true hero of the Underground Railroad.
  - C. The paragraph is used to provide an example of a famous woman who worked on the Underground Railroad and the great impact she had on history.
  - D. The paragraph is used to demonstrate that most of the slaves that escaped to the North were shipped to the North on boxes in trains.
  
4. Which phrase best describes the relationship between slave catchers and the “conductors” of the Underground Railroad?
  - A. They worked together towards a common goal.
  - B. They were united in trying to provoke a war.
  - C. They were in disagreement about the value of property.
  - D. They represent the opposite sides of the conflict.

5. What is the central idea of the text? Cite specific evidence from the text to support your answer.

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