

A Journey to Freedom: How the Underground Railroad Helped Settle  
Conflicting Racial Issues by Helping Slaves Escape

Lydia Huehnerfuss

Junior Division

Individual Paper

Word Count: 2,484

The start of my story is way before I was born. In 1619, the first slaves were brought to America.<sup>1</sup> Slaves were owned in all colonies of America when it was legal. Slaves were taken, sold, and traded like property.<sup>2</sup> Slavery was legal in many other countries at the time, but America let it last the longest.<sup>3</sup> The Underground Railroad was created because slaves wanted freedom. Every helper, safe house and slave that tried to run away was part of it.

The name may be deceiving. The Underground Railroad wasn't underground or a railroad. Underground meant it was a secret, while railroad meant it was a trail or path. In the early Underground Railroad, Spanish people helped slaves escape to Florida in agreement that slaves would fight for Spain and convert to their religion.<sup>4</sup> My grandmother told me that. We happened to live on the same plantation unlike many other families. It wasn't uncommon for families to be sold apart, so I was lucky.

When I was 8, I started going to gatherings with my mother and fellow slaves. It was 1850 and the government had a second and much harsher Fugitive Slave act passed.<sup>5</sup> This made it legal for slave catchers to go into the north and capture slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad.<sup>6</sup> This caused more slaves to be sent back south. I had heard whispers of the Underground Railroad between slaves. Words like stations, packages, conductors and rails were often used. My mother told me that rails were escape routes, stations were safe

---

<sup>1</sup> Tobin, Jacqueline, and Raymond G. Dobard. *Hidden in Plain View: a Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. Anchor Books, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Bordewich, Fergus M. *Bound for Canaan: the Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*. Amistad, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Savannah, and Lydia Huehnerfuss. "Interview with a Museum Professional." 28 Oct. 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Michaels, Susan. *Underground Railroad*. New Video, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Stearns, Dan. *Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad*. World Almanac Library, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Bial, Raymond. *The Underground Railroad*. Houghton Mifflin, 1999, 43.

houses, conductors were helpers, and packages were slaves trying to escape slavery.<sup>7</sup> She told me those words were secret. The next time I came to a gathering, everyone sang a song about following a drinking gourd. I looked over at my mother and hope had filled her eyes. I scanned the crowd. I still remember each person and their facial expressions as they sang. They put their souls into that song. This happiness was broken when the plantation owner rode over on a horse. I saw the whip in his hand. I wanted to run, but my legs wouldn't move. I was frozen, and I looked at the group again. All hope had vanished; the singing had stopped. Each one of us suffered 15 lashes. I still remember the terrible screams. The pleas for mercy did nothing but made the whips thrash down harder. Suddenly those songs of freedom meant more to me. They were not just chants and syllables that flowed out of one's mouth. Now, to me, they came from the heart.

I had just turned thirteen and I was put into the fields picking cotton. In the fields, slaves would sing songs to carry the message of escape to others.<sup>8</sup> I began daydreaming about life in the north. After long days in the field, my back ached and my hands were sore. I got to my small house, and my mother was weeping on our tiny bed. I was alarmed and immediately tried to comfort her.

"Our master informed me that I'm being sold further south tomorrow," she cried. My heart sank. I could see the heartbreak in her eyes. Tears swelled and poured out of my eyes. I couldn't lose her, but what could I do?

---

<sup>7</sup> Horton, James Oliver., and Lois E. Horton. *Slavery and the Making of America*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Bial, Raymond. *The Underground Railroad*. Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

I whispered, "We must escape tonight; it's our only chance to stay together."

"As much as this hurts me to say, you must go alone. He will expect me to escape and will be looking for me. Now come close. I have been planning and gathering information for awhile," she said. My mother whispered softly, "I heard from others in the field that the safest place to go is to Canada; slave hunters can't cross international borders. Also travel in water, because dogs that are used to hunt slaves can't follow your scent."<sup>9</sup> If a white man tugs his ear at you, it means to follow him; he will take you somewhere safe.<sup>10</sup> You might also hear bird calls or see lights in windows. This means you can hide there and you will be taken care of. You must not go until sundown. It's safer for you to go at night. There are black and white helpers on the Underground Railroad. Now, my daughter, this journey may seem impossible at times, but I know you can make it. I love you," and she finished with a genuine smile.

She swiftly got off the bed, grabbed a small piece of cloth, and filled it with leftover bread. She tucked it into my shirt pocket. It was dark at this time, and I turned to hug my mother. It felt as if I held on to her forever. "I will be okay," she whispered. With a last kiss placed upon her cheek, I headed out the door and swiftly made my way to the forest to start my journey.

The sun was almost all the way up, and I had been walking for hours. I was hungry, but I had to make my bread last. Suddenly, I heard barking. Fear struck me, and I started to run. I remembered what my mother had said about traveling in water. I ran even faster, despite my aching legs. I didn't dare stop; if I did, I was dead. I saw a gleam out of the corner of my eye. It was a river. I sprinted towards it and waded in. The barking had come closer. Then, two dogs

---

<sup>9</sup> Bial, Raymond. *The Underground Railroad*. Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Michaels, Susan. *Underground Railroad*. New Video, 2002.

popped out of some brush. Without hesitation, I grabbed some bread and threw it to the dogs. I prayed that they would eat it and run away. To my luck, that's what happened. I decided to continue my journey near the river, in case I needed it again.

I walked for days. I finally arrived at a small home. There was a small candle in the window. That meant the house was safe. I stepped onto the porch and put my hand up to knock. I was nervous, but at the same time excited. After I knocked, an eye peered out the window and quickly disappeared. The door opened, and I was ushered inside by a man. His wife was sitting by a fire. They were both white. I was scared because I had never known a good white person before. I followed the man despite my fears. He then took me to a bedroom and pulled a dresser away from the wall, revealing a small room. The man told me that I should stay there for the night and exit through the back in the morning. "Walk until you find a river," he explained. "Someone should be there to take you across the Mason Dixon line," he finished.

I didn't know at the time, but that's a line that separates free states and slavery states.<sup>11</sup> I thanked the man numerous times, and he pushed the dresser back into place. It was strange for people to be so kind to me when I didn't know them. My back ached, and I couldn't sleep all night.

The next morning I left and walked until I saw the river the man had talked about. It was very cold wherever I was, and it was a new feeling, since I had always lived in the south. There was a large sign stuck into the ground with large writing that I couldn't read. I was never taught to read; it was illegal.<sup>12</sup> My thoughts were abruptly interrupted by a shiny boat paddling to shore.

---

<sup>11</sup> Michaels, Susan. *Underground Railroad*. New Video, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Bial, Raymond. *The Underground Railroad*. Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

I broke out into a sprint. My legs carried me as though I was flying. Millions of thoughts were rushing into my mind. If I got on that boat, it could take me to a place I could only dream of until now. I finally reached the shore and was greeted by a friendly looking African American man. Trusting him was easier than with the white couple. He helped me climb into the boat.

He then said, "My name is John Parker; lay down so you're not seen." I lay down and stared at the sky. I felt the boat slowly start to move. I was too tired to ask any questions, and I forced myself to stay awake. I was starving. It had been two weeks since I left the plantation, and I longed for a hug from my mother.

Once we were across the river, I swiftly thanked him and got out of the boat. John then pointed northeast. I nodded and scanned the landscape. I started jogging the way he pointed. Trees and trees passed. After a while, I stopped to catch my breath. A noise came from where I had run moments before. Without thinking, I dropped to the ground and crawled behind a tree. I held my breath. I heard a rustle come closer and closer. I peered around the base of the tree. There stood a little old African American lady leading four other runaways. Then a thought popped into my mind that I couldn't ignore. That lady was... Harriet Tubman. Shock filled my body. I had heard stories about her on the plantation. Some people even called her Moses because she led people out of slavery like Moses led Israelites out of Egypt.<sup>13</sup> I slowly stood up. The group was startled at first but then realized I was a runaway too. I stood in place as the group walked over to me. Harriet reminded us that we must get moving.

---

<sup>13</sup> Stearns, Dan. *Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad*. World Almanac Library, 2006.

We walked for days. It had been weeks since I had left the plantation, but it felt like months. I was hungry and dirty. One day Harriet stopped and said, "Okay, we're at the border of Illinois and the new state of Wisconsin. Just keep moving north. I have to go. Best of luck to you all."

The other group members decided to go west in hopes of freedom as well. I decided to go north, as Harriet had said. I was on my own again. I set off on my journey once more. After days and days of walking, I arrived at a small town. There were blacks walking around freely. I was walking when a lady approached me. She softly said, "Slave hunters are near; go to the Milton House for safety. It's the next building on the right. Enter through the back door."

I followed her directions to a large hexagon shaped building with shops attached. I walked through a back door, and an employee guided me to a basement cellar. He said nothing except that I was to crawl through a tunnel, when I was ready, and pointed at an opening. He turned and left.

I spent the night sleeping on hay in a corner of the room. It was the first time I had slept in a long time. I felt as if I could sleep for the next three years, but I got up and walked to the tunnel. It was very short and dark, so I had to crawl. Thankfully, I wasn't very tall then, so I just fit in it. When I got to the end, I climbed up a ladder into a kitchen. I took a deep breath and scanned the room for an exit. There was a door to my left. I exited the kitchen and began my way to Canada.

I spent the next week walking until I made it to the freedom land. When I arrived, I fell on my hands and knees, kissing the ground. I was free. Happy tears spilled out of my eyes. My journey for freedom was over.

The Underground Railroad matters in American history because it brought many enslaved blacks to freedom, brought attention to the cruelty of slavery, and tried to fix the conflicts of slavery which disunified Americans, leading to even larger conflicts like the Civil War. Because of the lack of compromise from slaveholders, people created the Underground Railroad and did whatever they could to bring an end to slavery.

The journey on the Underground Railroad was rough and not all slaves who escaped were successful, but with the help of many, as many as 100,000 slaves escaped.<sup>14</sup> This number is not a fact because of the secrecy of the Underground Railroad.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, slaves relied on the Underground Railroad for hope and freedom.

Writings about the Underground Railroad caused more people to be aware of conflicts of slavery. For example, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in 1852.<sup>16</sup> This book told a story of mistreated slaves and runaways along the Underground Railroad. People were angered about

---

<sup>14</sup> "The Underground Railroad." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html).

<sup>15</sup> Bial, Raymond, and Lydia Huehnerfuss. "Interview with a Book Author." 25 Oct. 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Michaels, Susan. *Underground Railroad*. New Video, 2002.



the treatment of slaves, and more people joined the abolition movement against slavery.

The Underground Railroad tried to fix the problems of slavery that disunified many Americans. Most people in northern states believed slavery was morally wrong. Most people living in the south believed slavery was good because it was great for their economy.<sup>17</sup> There were conflicts such as fights and distrust between the two groups. Many attempts to compromise were unsuccessful, which created even more conflict. For example, the Fugitive Slave Law passed as part of the Compromise of 1850 caused many free slaves to be sent into slavery. This caused abolitionists to be outraged. Also the mistreatment of slaves by plantation or farm owners caused Northern people to be alarmed. This caused Americans to be separated. Abolitionists did what they thought was right to end these conflicts by trying to end slavery. They created the Underground Railroad, bringing many African Americans out of slavery. Some people wrote about the wrongs of slavery. For example, Frederick Douglass wrote an abolitionist newspaper called the *North Star*.<sup>18</sup> All of this led to the “Emancipation Proclamation,” officially ending slavery in southern states. Making matters worse, the disunity of Americans, which played a role in southern states seceding, caused the larger conflict of the Civil War.

Because of the lack of compromise, some hard core abolitionists created protests, rebellions, and the Underground Railroad to attempt to end slavery. For example, John Brown attacked Harpers Ferry with 22 men on October 16, 1859. Ten men from Brown’s small army were killed by Robert E. Lee’s troops.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Savannah, and Lydia Huehnerfuss. “Interview with a Museum Professional.” 28 Oct. 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Bial, Raymond. *The Underground Railroad*. Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Bial, Raymond. *The Underground Railroad*. Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

The impact that the Underground Railroad left short term was freedom for over 20,000 African Americans that settled in Canada.<sup>20</sup> Another short term impact was that it had a role in the start of the Civil War. A long term impact was that the Underground Railroad caused people to work together over something that they believed in, and they overcame racism. Whites and blacks all worked together because they believed slavery was wrong. Also, the Underground Railroad showed that people have an inner quest for freedom. Every slave that escaped was brave enough to go on a frightening and difficult quest for freedom. Lastly, the Underground Railroad brought out the good in people. It showed that people cared for one another, and that everyone is a human being.

---

<sup>20</sup> Michaels, Susan. *Underground Railroad*. New Video, 2002.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Bradford, Sarah H., excerpt from "Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman," Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/d9c34cd375c9e2586c3a4dbe7b04ea49>. This source helped me understand the impact Harriet Tubman had on others and the role she played in the Underground Railroad.

Craft, William, excerpt from "Running a thousand miles for freedom; : or, the escape of William and Ellen Craft from slavery," Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/f8f643b4f6937eee09391d483d6bfd78>. This source helped me understand the feelings of slaves that were going to make the journey on the Underground Railroad.

"Fugitive Slave Bill," Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/6b8f1395c43d9a18e26a21407ba7d260>. This source helped me better understand the terms of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

"Lear Green Escaping In A Chest, 1850s, By Underground Railroad," Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/36385df7705061c5f32a340243f00451>. This source helped me understand different ways slaves escaped and the feelings while they did.

May, Samuel, "The fugitive slave law and its victims," Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/2a8c4dcae9bc48e9da5bcd5e8269105a>. This source gave me a better understanding on how the Fugitive Slave law affected slaves.

Mitchell, W. M., excerpt from "The underground railroad from slavery to freedom," Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/3ca1588a9e90a3a9511818aaa976a037>. This source helped me understand feelings of runaway slaves and the obstacles they had to overcome.

Still, William. *The Underground Railroad*. Porter & Coates, 1871. *Project Gutenberg*. This source helped me understand the perspective of slaves about slavery and the way they were treated.

"Weekly Indiana State Sentinel." *Weekly Indiana State Sentinel*, 12 May 1853. *Newspaper Archives*. This source helped me understand people's feelings towards runaway slaves and people who helped on the Underground Railroad.

### Secondary Sources

Bial, Raymond. *The Underground Railroad*. Houghton Mifflin, 1999. This source helped me understand the condition in which slaves tried to escape. Also, this source taught me ways that abolitionists tried to bring attention to their cause.

Bial, Raymond, and Lydia Huehnerfuss. "Interview with a Book Author." 25 Oct. 2017. This interview helped me understand many of the long-term impacts the Underground Railroad had on us today. Also, it helped me gain a better understanding of how many people felt about the Underground Railroad during the time.

Bordewich, Fergus M. *Bound for Canaan: the Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*. Amistad, 2005. This source helped me gain a better understanding of who the helpers on the Underground Railroad were. This book helped me understand the way southerners reacted to slave auctions.

Foner, Eric. *Gateway to Freedom: the Hidden History of America's Fugitive Slaves*. Oxford University Press, 2015. I learned that many slaves actually escaped on boats on the east coast. This book helped me understand where slavery took place.

History.com Staff. "Underground Railroad." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2009, [www.history.com/topics/black-history/underground-railroad](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/underground-railroad). This source helped me identify some of the key people who helped with the Underground Railroad.

Horton, James Oliver., and Lois E. Horton. *Slavery and the Making of America*. Oxford University Press, 2006. From this book, I got 12 facts. This book gave me a better understanding of how the Underground Railroad got its name and who helped on the Underground Railroad.

Michaels, Susan. *Underground Railroad*. New Video, 2002. This source helped me understand the beginning of slavery in America. Also, this helped give me a better understanding of how slaves and helpers on the Underground Railroad communicated.

Pferdehirt, Julia. *Freedom Train North Stories of the Underground Railroad in Wisconsin*. Living History Press, 1998. This source helped me gain a better understanding of what people did to help on the Underground Railroad.

Savannah, and Lydia Huehnerfuss. "Interview with a Museum Professional at the Milton House." 28 Oct. 2017. This source helped me learn a few new ways that slave communicated with others. Also, this source helped me gain a better understanding of the effect the laws passed to stop slaves from escaping had on the Underground Railroad. I traveled to the Milton House in Milton, WI which is the only still-existing Underground Railroad station in Wisconsin. At the Milton House I had the opportunity to personally interview an employee.

Stearns, Dan. *Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad*. World Almanac Library, 2006. This book helped me understand the code used by slaves and conductors to keep their escapes secret. Also, it described strategies used by conductors to help runaway slaves.

Tobin, Jacqueline, and Raymond G. Dobard. *Hidden in Plain View: a Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. Anchor Books, 2000. This book helped me understand the earliest slavery in the United States. Also, it helped me understand the role of quilts in the escape of slaves.

"Underground Railroad." *Britannica School*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 1 Nov. 2017. [school.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Underground-Railroad/277499](http://school.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Underground-Railroad/277499). Accessed 5 Nov. 2017. This source helped me gain a better understanding of where the Underground Railroad ran through.

"Underground Railroad." Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History, edited by Thomas Riggs, 2nd ed., vol. 3, Gale, 2015, pp. 1358-1360. U.S. History in Context, [link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3611000925/UHIC?u=edg945&xid=702db06d](http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3611000925/UHIC?u=edg945&xid=702db06d). Accessed 30 Oct. 2017. This source helped me gain a better understanding of how the runaway slaves and Underground Railroad workers could avoid slave catchers.

"The Underground Railroad." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html). This source helped me better understand where the Underground Railroad took place and how runaway slaves were treated even after they escaped.