



THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The Underground Railroad was neither underground nor a railroad. It got its name because its activities had to be carried out in secret, using darkness or disguise, and because railway terms were used by those involved with system to describe how it worked. Various routes were lines, stopping places were called stations, those who aided along the way were conductors and their charges were known as packages or freight. The network of routes extended through 14 Northern states and “the promised land” of Canada beyond the reach of fugitive-slave hunters. Those who most actively assisted slaves to escape by way of the “railroad” were members of the free black community (including former slaves like Harriet Tubman), Northern abolitionists, philanthropists and church leaders like Quaker Thomas Garrett. Harriet Beecher Stowe, famous for her novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin, gained firsthand knowledge of the plight of fugitive slaves through contacts with the Underground Railroad in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The *Underground Railroad* was the term used to describe a network of persons who helped escaped slaves on their way to freedom in the northern states or Canada. Although George Washington had commented upon such practices by the Quakers as early as the 1780s, the term gained currency in the 1830s, as northern abolitionists became more vocal and southern suspicions of threats to their peculiar institution grew. The most active of the Railroad workers were northern free blacks, who had little or no support from white abolitionists. The most famous “conductor,” an escaped slave named Harriet Tubman, reportedly made nineteen return trips to the South; she helped some three hundred slaves escape. A number of individual whites also aided runaways, as did “vigilance committees,” often biracial in character, in northern cities.

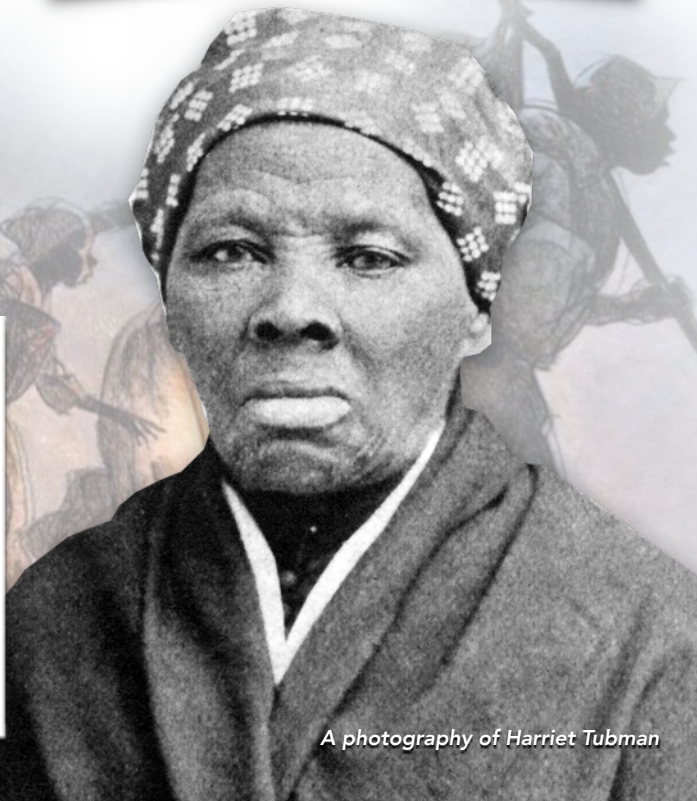
Estimates of the number of slaves assisted vary widely, but only a minuscule fraction of those held in bondage ever escaped. Few, particularly from the Lower South, even attempted the arduous journey north. But the idea of organized “outsiders” undermining the institution of slavery angered white southerners, leading to their demands in the 1840s that the Fugitive Slave Laws be strengthened.



Painting representing slaves escaping at night in the Underground Railroad



Map of the Underground Railroad



A photograph of Harriet Tubman

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1. Explain the name « Underground Railroad »
2. What was the destination of those using this system?
3. Name some famous active members to the system.
4. When did this system become very famous?
5. Who is Harriet Tubman?
 - What did she do?
6. What was the reaction of southerners slaveowners?