



THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN MICHIGAN

The period between 1820 and 1865 was a time when most abolitionists gave up their hope for gradual emancipation and actively worked to abolish slavery. Abolitionists became vocal about the evils of slavery and made speeches, wrote articles, and stirred the simmering pot. It was the work of the abolitionist movement that expanded the secret organization called the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad was neither a railroad nor was it underground. Instead, it was a secret group of anti-slavery supporters who housed, fed, and guided slaves from the South to Canada. The story of how this organization came to be called the "Underground Railroad" is this: A slaveholder was tracking a runaway slave to a small town where he lost all trace of the fugitive. Days later, the slave was spotted in Detroit. When the angry slave owner heard this, he exclaimed that the slave must have "boarded a railroad that ran underground".

The organization of abolitionists was generally called an "underground railroad" by the 1830s. The "underground railroad" was an activity that was organized among people in every small town and every large city, but it had no real center or manager. It operated somewhat openly in the North and just beneath the surface of daily life in the upper South and in the western territories.

Because Canada, a country that did not allow slavery, was very close to Michigan, Michiganders played an important role in making the Underground Railroad successful. Except for handbills, and newspaper ads that were written in code, the organization's participants and how it worked was secret. After the Civil War, diaries, letters, and personal accounts helped paint a picture of what went on.

A Quaker named Levi Coffin is given credit for starting the Underground Railroad effort. Levi opened his home in North Carolina to fugitive slaves and convinced other Quakers across the country to help. These people were called "stockholders" in the Underground Railroad Company. Stockholders were men and women of all races and religious beliefs that believed in freedom for all. They risked getting fines, imprisonment, sometimes their lives to hide slaves in attics, cellars, sheds, caves, secret paneled rooms, or under barn floors. Stockholders gave escaping slaves food and a place to rest before helping them along to the next safe place.

One of the most famous stockholders was Harriet Tubman. Harriet had escaped slavery in 1849 and then made 19 trips back to slave states to lead over 300 slaves to freedom. A Michigan Quaker woman named Elizabeth Chandler was living in Lenawee County. She persuaded other Quaker settlers to organize an anti-slavery society.

Another famous Michigan stockholder was George De Baptiste, a black businessman and member of the Second Baptist Church in Detroit. He bought a ship, the T. Whitney, to take runaways across the Detroit River to Canada. The Second Baptist Church at Beaubien and Monroe Streets in Detroit is a 160-year-old church that helped as many as 5,000 slaves escape to freedom.

Seymour Finney was a white Detroit hotel owner who allowed slaves to hide in his barn at the northeast corner of State and Griswold. Erastus Hussey, a white businessman and Quaker, fed and

sheltered more than 1,000 slaves in Battle Creek before sending them on to Marshall, which was the next stop on the line.

The Underground Railroad quickly became famous. Because it was a secret organization, no one was identified by their name. Instead, people who helped slaves escape took railroad titles like a conductor, a station manager, and a station agent. The word "stock" usually meant faith or belief in the abolitionist cause. So "hold your stock," meant, "keep the faith."

We can identify at least seven ways to travel through Michigan to end up in Canada. The first route was from Toledo to Detroit, and across the Detroit River.

The second route was from Toledo to Adrian to Morenci to Tecumseh to Clinton to Saline to Ypsilanti to Plymouth to Swartzburg to the River Rouge to Detroit.

Another Underground Railroad route ran along Old Sauk Road from Indiana; Niles to White Pigeon to Sturgis to Coldwater to Quincy to Jonesville to Somerset to Clinton to Saline to Ypsilanti to Plymouth to Swartzburg to the River Rouge to Detroit.

The fourth route took escapees on the Old Territorial Road from Indiana and Illinois; Niles to Cassopolis to Schoolcraft to Climax to Kalamazoo to Battle Creek to Marshall to Albion to Parma to the Michigan Center to Jackson to Dexter to Leoni to Grass Lake to Ann Arbor to Giddes to Ypsilanti to Plymouth to Swartzburg to the River Rouge to Detroit.

The fifth was the Grand River Trail from Indiana and Illinois; St. Joseph-Benton Harbor to South Haven to Holland to Grand Rapids to Lowell to Portland to Lansing to Williamston to Howell to Brighton to Farmington to Detroit.

Route six was from Detroit, Lansing, Saginaw, or Flint to Port Huron.

Route seven was from Chicago to Duluth to Mackinaw City, continuing on to Detroit or Port Huron via Saginaw, or to Canada through Sault Ste. Marie.

It is believed that Michigan had more than 200 "depots" on the Underground Railroad. A depot was a planned stop and included churches, homes, or any safe place to hide.

The Underground Railroad was closed on December 6th 1865 when the 13th Amendment was signed into law.