The Road to Freedom

People of African descent who were enslaved in the American South sought to escape to freedom through an informal network of secret routes and safe houses. Often an enslaved person’s flight was an individual effort. In other cases, runaway slaves escaped with the help of both white and black abolitionists—people who opposed slavery—and other allies who were sympathetic to their cause. Safe destinations included free states north of the Mason-Dixon line, Canada, Mexico, and other places overseas.

This network to freedom took its name and vocabulary from the revolutionary new mode of transportation that had sprung up in the 1830s—the railroad. Thus, the system became known as the Underground Railroad. People who housed the runaways in secret and gave them shelter and food were called “stationmasters,” and their hideouts were known as “stations.” A person who led the runaways to their next station was called a “conductor.” Famous conductors included Harriet Tubman, William Still, and Thomas Garrett. Well-known Michigan conductors were Erastus Hussey (Battle Creek), Nathan Thomas (Schooolcraft), Laura Haviland (Adrian), and William Lambert and George DeBaptiste (Detroit).

Methods of Escape

The Underground Railroad involved both African Americans and European Americans, but mostly the former. Because the system was against the law and had to be kept secret, most participants knew only of their local efforts to aid fugitives and not of the overall operation.

Running away to the North was very dangerous and required courage and resourcefulness. The first step was to escape from the slaveholder. This meant relying on one’s own ingenuity. While most fugitive slaves left plantations alone, sometimes a conductor—posing as a slave—would enter a plantation and guide the runaways northward. Escapees would move about at night and would generally travel between 10 and 20 miles a day to the next station, where they would rest, eat, and hide in barns, basements, cisterns, caves, and other private and secluded places. While they waited, a message would be sent to the next station to alert its stationmaster.

Travelling Costs

Money was sometimes needed to provide food, shelter, and transportation, or to improve the appearance of the runaways, because tattered clothes attracted attention. Individuals and various groups known as “vigilance committees” raised funds to assist the freedom seekers once they arrived in the North. Vigilance committees sprang up in the larger towns and cities of the North, especially in Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. In addition to collecting money, they provided food and lodging and assisted the freedom seekers to settle into a community by helping them find jobs and providing letters of recommendation.