

War and Conflict in America: Making a Way to Freedom

*Slave Communication
and
The Underground Railroad*

A History of Slavery – A Brief Timeline

Approx. 1619

Slavery of Africans begins in the British North American colonies

1641

Massachusetts ***legalizes slavery***

1793

First ***Fugitive Slave Act*** passed by Congress that allows the capture and return of escaped slaves (“fugitive” slaves)

1819

Canada denies America the right to pursue slaves across its borders

1831

The term ***“Underground Railroad”*** is believed to have been coined to mean the network of people working together to help slaves escape to freedom from the 1790s – 1860s

A History of Slavery – A Brief Timeline

1840s

Fugitive Slave Acts lead to **free** Blacks being captured and sold into slavery **illegally** (ex. Solomon Northup – free man, kidnapped, sold to slavery for 12 yrs)

1850s

Many slaves continue to escape to free states with the help of “conductors” like **Harriet Tubman**

1850

Another Fugitive Slave Act **requires citizens to assist capturing** runaway slaves

1857

US Supreme Court **denies citizenship** to all slaves, ex-slaves, and descendants of slaves in **Dredd Scott** case

1861

Civil War between the South (**Confederate States**) and the North (**The Union**) begins

1863

Emancipation Proclamation issued, which **freed slaves in confederate states**. Slavery is not abolished throughout the country until the **13th Amendment** in 1865

Dilemma of the American Slave

- Flee from slavery to go North where freedom “might” be possible?
- Leave family who may not be able to come and all that you know?
- Risk being captured and returned to slavery or even death?

Choosing to Flee: *Follow the Drinking Gourd*

- Since Canada did not allow Americans to travel across its borders to pursue slaves, many slaves tried to flee northward to Canada where they might be able to live free, without fear of being captured and enslaved again.
- Many slaves just wanted to get to the “free states” in the North that did not allow slavery at that time.
- “Follow the Drinking Gourd” refers to slaves looking to the North Star to help them find their way north. The North Star (known as the Big Dipper or Drinking Gourd) is a bright, constant star that helped slaves like a compass in the night.

Follow the Drinking Gourd – Spiritual

“Follow the Drinking Gourd is also a special song known as a “Spiritual.”

The song instructs slaves to leave at the time of year “when the sun come back”.

It also tells slaves how to follow an escape route from the South that leads to where the “little river” (the Tennessee river) meets the “great big river” (the Ohio river), and freedom lays beyond in the North.



Choosing to Flee: The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad:

- WAS a secret network of people (slaves and free people) who worked together to help runaway slaves find their way north
- Also refers to some of the routes travelled to get to freedom
- Used secret codes and messages to communicate
- Was most active between the 1830s – 1860s

The Underground Railroad:

- WAS NOT a railroad
- WAS NOT a complete highly organized system of specific routes and “stations”
- WAS NOT underground, although some of the places that slaves hid on their escape routes (called “stations”) were under floor boards or in cellars in houses, churches, and other buildings.
“*Underground*” refers to the secrecy used

The Underground Railroad: A Heroic “Conductor”

People who helped to lead efforts within the Underground Railroad were referred to as “**Conductors**”.

Harriet Tubman is the most famous “Conductor” of the Underground Railroad.

Born a slave herself, she is believed to have made at least 19 brave trips back to the South to help over 300 slaves to freedom.

Each time, she risked her own life and potential capture.

She inspired slaves to pursue their freedom and escape the bondage of slavery.



Communication at a Time of Distress

- English was a second language to the slaves brought from Africa to America. Therefore, they did not know how to read or write English
- It was illegal to teach slaves to read and write, so even many slaves who born in America were not allowed to learn to read and write.
- Those who did learn and those who taught others risked legal punishment and even death from slave owners.
- What other methods then did slaves use to communicate secretly?

Slave Communication

Methods used to communicate secretly included:

- *Spirituals* – songs that slaves used to express their sorrow, lift their spirits, and communicate important messages to other slaves
- *Poems* – some contained code words / secret messages
- *Stories* – The oral telling of stories helped to pass on history, share information, and also lift spirits in this time of sorrow and hardship

Slave Communication – Slave Art

Fact or Folklore?

- According to a story passed down over the years in the family of a woman named Ozella Williams (*the descendant of a slave*), fugitive slaves and those helping them, used slave “quilt squares” to communicate messages in code
- There is no current proof that slaves actually used or made coded quilt squares during the before the Civil War
- Even still, many fictional stories about quilt squares have been written over the years to share the “fugitive slave” experience with readers

Slave Art – Quilting in Code

- It was thought by Ms. Williams and her family that different symbols were used on quilting squares to communicate messages of danger, safe passage, and other information.
- The fictional story, *“The Patchwork Path, A Quilt Map to Freedom”*, tells about the journey of a young girl escaping with her father from slavery and her quilt map that accompanies her on this life or death journey.

What would you do?

- If you were enslaved and feared for your life, how would you communicate with others to escape?
- What kind of quilt square would you make if you were using it to convey a secret message to help others escape from slavery?

References

- “Slavery and the Making of America”, PBS.org
- “Who Really Ran the Underground Railroad”, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
- “Who Traveled the Underground Railroad?”, Cath Senker
- “Allen Jay and the Underground Railroad”, Marlene Targ Brill