

Underground Railroad ^[1]

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by Alex Coffin, 2006; Revised March, 2022.
Additional research provided by Wiley J. Williams.

See also: [Slave Codes](#) ^[2]



"The Underground Railroad, painted by Charles T. Webber, 1891." Image shows Levi Coffin and friends leading a group of slaves seeking freedom along with underground railroad. Photo courtesy of LearnNC.

^[3]The Underground Railroad was a secret system of individuals who assisted freedom seekers in their quest for freedom prior to the [Civil War](#) ^[4]. The term refers to the swift, "invisible" way in which the enslaved people traveled in an attempt to escape slavery. The freedom seekers and the people who helped them used railroad terms as code words: hiding places were "stations," people who aided the runaways were "conductors," and the freedom seekers themselves were "passengers" or "freight." In addition to white members of the Underground Railroad, freedom seekers relied heavily on fellow enslaved people and free black people. The most famous black leader in the movement was [Harriet Tubman](#) ^[5], a freedom seeker who was nicknamed "Moses" for leading people to freedom from slavery. She returned to the South, including the Blue Ridge Mountains, 19 times to help about 300 [African Americans](#) ^[6] escape to freedom.

The [Underground Railroad](#) ^[7] and the abolitionist movement in North Carolina, as elsewhere, was supported by the Society of Friends ([Quakers](#) ^[8]). In 1809 Quaker enslavers in [Guilford County](#) ^[9] deeded all of their enslaved people to the North Carolina Yearly Meeting, which over the next few years spent about \$13,000 relocating black people in northern states, Haiti, and Liberia, as well as manumitting, or freeing enslaved people through manumission. The [Greensborough Patriot](#) ^[10] ([Greensboro](#) ^[11]) was the state's only abolitionist newspaper. The state's first abolitionist organization was formed in [Guilford County](#) ^[9] in 1816; called the [Manumission Society](#) ^[12] and later the North Carolina Manumission Society, it soon had several chapters and 1,600 members. After legal and other pressures forced the society to disband in 1834, many of its members became active in the Underground Railroad.

As early as 1819, Vestal Coffin had established an Underground Railroad station in [Guilford County](#) ^[9]. His sons Alfred and [Addison](#) ^[13] carried on his work, as did his cousin [Levi Coffin](#) ^[14]. These four, but especially Levi, were unquestionably the best-known of Guilford County's abolitionists. In 1826 Levi moved to Newport (now Fountain City), Ind., where he received the unofficial title of president of the Underground Railroad. His home became known as "Union Station" because of the many freedom seekers who sought temporary refuge there.

The [Great Dismal Swamp](#) ^[15] was also an important hub for the Underground Railroad. Free and enslaved black people helped other freedom seekers in eastern North Carolina escape to the North and Canada as well as helped them evade enslavers and slave patrols in the Great Dismal Swamp. The complicated geography of the region allowed for transportation of people to the coast, where they could be boarded onto ships and potentially taken to freedom. Additionally, the Great Dismal Swamp already had a sizeable amount of freedom-seeking or already free black people living in maroon communities. [Maroon communities](#) ^[16] were communities formed by freedom-seeking enslaved people in geographically harsh areas, like swamps or mountains.

The [U.S. Congress's Compromise of 1850](#) ^[17], which admitted California to the Union as a free state, included the [Fugitive Slave Act](#) ^[18]. Southern states expected that this measure would be effective in returning enslaved people to their enslavers. This provided that private citizens as well as officers of the law would assist in apprehending and returning freedom seekers to their enslavers. It also called for imposing heavy penalties for failing to comply with the statute. But the act was widely disregarded by northerners. Many officials and individuals in the North not only refused to return the freedom seekers but also began to play active roles in the Underground Railroad. Before this legislation, North Carolina

already had a sizeable legal infrastructure in place that deterred enslaved people from leaving their enslavers and tightened restrictions on their social caste. Among these laws were the Slave Code of 1715, punitive taxes of 1723, and the 1741 legislation passed in response to the [Stono Rebellion](#) ^[19].

There were many strategies freedom seekers used to attempt to escape enslavement. "Free papers" or "Freedom Papers" were borrowed or falsified legal documents that detailed ones' legal status as a free person of color, and they were often used to help freedom seekers travel along the Underground Railroad. An enslaved person fleeing their enslaver(s) was subject to many punishments outlined in the aforementioned laws and more if captured. However, a "free" person of color traveling to the North was subject to less restriction. Though less risky than traveling openly as a freedom-seeking enslaved person, posing as a free person of color was still very dangerous. "[Runaway Slave Notices](#) ^[20]" or "Fugitive Slave ads," ads placed in newspapers by enslavers attempting to locate freedom seekers, often reported if an enslaved freedom seeker was knowingly using "free papers".

The number of enslaved people aided by the railroad has long been in dispute and subject to widely varying estimates. It is currently estimated that 100,000 people escaped slavery through the Underground Railroad; this number represents only a portion of individuals that attempted to escape enslavement, as many freedom seekers were unable to secure their freedom. And of the freedom seekers who traveled the Underground Railroad, many did so alone and without the aid of others. Additionally, escaping from slavery was not the only purpose of the Underground Railroad for freedom seekers; the Underground Railroad was also pivotal in reuniting formerly enslaved family members who had been dispersed across the country or state, either while enslaved or after obtaining their freedom.

Educator Resources:

Grade 8: "Stealing a Little Freedom" – Slave Runaways in North Carolina. North Carolina Civic Education Consortium. <http://civics.sites.unc.edu/files/2012/04/SlaveRunaways.pdf> ^[21]

Grades 5-8: "The Underground Railroad". National Geographic. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/underground-railroad/> ^[22]

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National Geographic Society. "The Underground Railroad." National Geographic Society. National Geographic, June 19, 2019. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/underground-railroad/>. ^[24]

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"The Underground Railroad, painted by Charles T. Webber, 1891." Image shows Levi Coffin and friends leading a group of slaves seeking freedom along with underground railroad. Photo courtesy of LearnNC. Available from <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/12126> ^[3] (accessed May 8, 2012).

Subjects:

[Enslaved People and Slavery](#) ^[25]

Authors:

[Coffin, Alex](#) ^[26]

[Williams, Wiley J.](#) ^[27]

Origin - location:

[Guilford County](#) ^[28]

From:

[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.](#) ^[29]

User Tags:

[Lesson Plans](#) ^[30]

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