Cuyahoga Valley

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Cuyahoga Valley National Park

The Underground Railroad

NPS Photos of Underground Railroad Programming.

Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP) preserves the stories of the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad (UGRR). As you travel through CVNP, you travel through a region where local and national abolitionists fought for what they believed. As you hike along the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail, a route likely used by runaway slaves traveling north toward Cleveland, you hike in the footsteps of those who hoped for freedom. The stories of CVNP are the stories of individuals who used their lives to make a difference.

The Law of the Land

Written into the Constitution of the United States, involuntary servitude -- slavery -- permitted people to own other people. Subsequent laws made it illegal to assist runaway slaves and stipulated where slavery could exist. The second Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850 stated that anyone assisting a runaway slave would be fined $2,000 and spend six months in a federal prison. It also required law enforcement officers to assist slave catchers and allowed these individuals to search homes for their bounty.

The Flames of Abolition

Abolitionists, those who believed that slavery should not exist, fought for an end to the institution of slavery. Northeast Ohio was a hotbed of abolitionist activities including the formation of antislavery organizations, the printing of abolitionist newspapers, lectures, and assisting runaways along the UGRR.

Resolved: That slavery violates the natural rights of humanity and subverts the government. That all patriots and Christians are bound to labor for the immediate overthrow of the institution of slavery. (American Anti-Slavery Convention, Cleveland, Ohio, October 23, 1839)

The Many Faces of Northeastern Ohio Abolition

Northeast Ohio witnessed men and women, black and white, free and enslaved, working together to end slavery. Many of these activists were entering the political arena for the first time. Their involvement was not always welcomed.

Women in northeast Ohio organized female anti-slavery societies, circulated petitions, served as delegates to state and national anti-slavery conventions, and drafted editorials that were published in local papers such as *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*. While many Ohioans frowned upon such behavior, others believed that the moral nature of the work made female involvement tolerable. Whether tolerable or not, many women became involved in the plight of the slaves. Eventually they turned to their own plight, and the women's suffrage movement grew from the ranks of the abolitionist movement.

Free blacks were a small, but active, abolitionist group in northeast Ohio. Here free blacks were active fighting for the abolishment of Ohio's Black Laws and segregation, and for the education of their children. Through organized meetings and petitions they slowly changed the laws of Ohio.

John Malvin was a free black abolitionist considered by some to be the founder of the civil rights movement in Cleveland. When Malvin refused to be seated in the colored section of his church, he set in motion a trend of activism. If blacks and whites could pray next to each other, it was also reasonable that they could live side by side. Malvin eventually became a canal boat captain on the Ohio & Erie Canal. While his autobiography does not discuss any role he played in the UGRR, it is plausible that he assisted slaves escaping along the canal.

The Underground Railroad

The UGRR is a mixture of historical fact and myth that functioned from the beginning of the Republic until the Civil War. The UGRR encompassed every slave who tried to escape, slaves who offered food and direction, runaway slaves who returned south to help others escape, and free blacks and whites who assisted others in their quests for freedom. Runaway slaves traveled using any means possible, including foot, wagon, railroad, and canals, often with little help.

The Ohio & Erie Canal as an Underground Railroad Route

The Ohio & Erie Canal was a likely route followed by runaway slaves. Not surprising for something that was meant to be secret, historians have not yet uncovered documents that conclusively demonstrate this role. Yet, documents have been found that indicate Ohio canals were used by runaway slaves traveling north.

The Ohio & Erie Canal clearly presented advantages to escaping slaves. This 308-mile canal was a well-marked route that connected the Ohio River to Lake Erie. Traveling under cover of night along the Towpath Trail -- the path mules walked as they pulled the canal boats -- runaways could journey north to Cleveland. Other runaways might have reached Cleveland hidden aboard canal boats. From Cleveland, escaping slaves would take the final step to freedom by crossing Lake Erie into Canada.

Preserving the Stories

In the 1800s, the individuals of northeast Ohio used their lives to change the world when they assisted those fleeing slavery. Some of their names fill history books; others are lost. Regardless of the footnotes they left in books, their legacy should never be forgotten.

In 1998 Congress passed the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act to ensure that the important stories of the resistance against slavery in the United States are shared and remembered. The story of abolitionism illustrates a founding principle of this nation: all human beings have the right to self-determination and freedom from oppression.

The Network to Freedom, coordinated by the National Park Service, recognizes historic sites, facilities, and programs that have a verifiable association to the UGRR. CVNP is proud that *Experience the Underground Railroad*, our experiential program offered each November to examine the Underground Railroad in this region, was honored by inclusion in this nationwide network striving to preserve the stories of America.

The Quest Continues

An estimated 27 million slaves live in the world today. They are found in almost every country of the world including the United States (Kevin Bales, 2000). Organizations such as those formed to abolish slavery in the 1800s continue the fight. Think you can't make a difference? What if those who fought to end slavery years ago thought the same thing? You have the power to write a letter, sign a petition, and shop responsibly.

Want to Learn More?

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NATIONAL UNDERGROUND RAILROAD NETWORK TO FREEDOM

Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad