



## Remembering the Underground Railroad

From the birth of our nation until the Civil War, the Underground Railroad transported runaways from slavery toward freedom. Not an actual train, the Underground Railroad was a system of secret routes fanning away in all directions from slave states. It involved many courageous people including each slave who tried to escape, slaves who offered food and direction, runaways who returned south to help others flee, and free blacks and whites who provided assistance. Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP) interprets Ohio's Underground Railroad heritage because the centerpiece of our park, the Ohio & Erie Canal, was a likely route traveled by runaway slaves.



COURTESY/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

### Trail to Freedom

Who do you love most in this world? Could you leave them behind and travel an Underground Railroad toward freedom? The decision to flee was not made lightly. A runaway was not just leaving behind the shackles of slavery but also cherished family and friends. Still, some chose flight.

Runaway slaves journeyed by any means possible—by foot, wagon, railroad,

and canal. Letters and oral histories conducted by historian William Siebert in the 1880s indicate that Ohio's canals were used to transport *cargo*, a common code word for slaves.

Although there is no definitive proof that canals were part of the Underground Railroad, the Ohio & Erie Canal clearly presented advantages to slaves trying to cross Ohio. This 308-mile canal was a well-marked route connecting the Ohio River to Lake Erie. It is highly likely that slaves walked or ran under cover of night along the canal's towpath—north to Cleveland. Other runaways might have reached Cleveland hidden aboard canal boats with assistance from a *friend of a friend*, a common code for sympathetic people along the way. From Cleveland, or *Hope*, escaping slaves would take the final step to freedom by crossing Lake Erie into Canada.



COURTESY/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

### Law of the Land

Written into the *Constitution of the United States*, “involuntary servitude” 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 \$1,000 and spend six months in a federal prison. It also required law enforcement officers to assist slave catchers and allowed them to search homes.



COURTESY/  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES

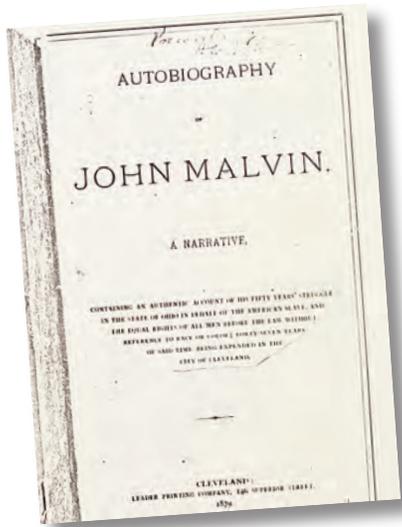


COURTESY/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

## A Hotbed of Abolitionists

Despite the dangers, people known as abolitionists believed that slavery should not exist and fought to end it. Northeast Ohio was a hotbed of abolitionist activity.

Men and women, black and white, free and enslaved, worked together for their cause.



COURTESY/UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARIES

Many were entering the political arena for the first time. Women in Northeast Ohio organized female anti-slavery societies, circulated petitions, served as delegates to state and national antislavery conventions, and drafted editorials that were published in local papers such as *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*. In time, growing political experience and awareness of the plight of the slaves, inspired women to consider their own freedom more critically; 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. They actively fought 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 state laws.

John Malvin (1795-1880), a free black abolitionist and canal boat captain, was considered by some to be the founder of the civil rights movement in Cleveland. When Malvin refused to be segregated in church, he set in motion a trend of activism. If blacks and whites could pray next to each other, they could also live side by side. Although he does not mention it in his autobiography, it is plausible that Malvin assisted slaves escaping along the canal.

## Preserving the Stories

In 1998 Congress passed the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act to ensure that stories of the resistance against slavery in the United States are shared and remembered. 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 Underground Railroad. CVNP is proud that *Experience the Underground Railroad*, our experiential program offered each November, is part of this national network.



©SARA GUREN



©SARA GUREN

## The Struggle Continues

Did you know that as many as 27 million slaves live in the world today? And they are found in almost every country including the United States according to Kevin Bales, consultant to the United Nations on human slavery and trafficking. We hope that the courage of slaves and abolitionists from past centuries inspires you to think more deeply about human rights and consider ways to create a more compassionate modern society. You

have the power to write a letter, sign a petition, and shop responsibly.

To learn more, attend CVNP's Underground Railroad programs listed in the quarterly *Schedule of Events*, available at visitor centers or online at the websites below. Have a dramatic flare and enjoy wearing historic costumes? Contact Park Ranger Pamela Machuga at (330) 657-1914 or [pam\\_machuga@nps.gov](mailto:pam_machuga@nps.gov) about becoming a program volunteer.



Cuyahoga Valley  
National Park

[www.nps.gov/cuva](http://www.nps.gov/cuva)  
[www.dayinthevalley.com](http://www.dayinthevalley.com)



NATIONAL  
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD  
NETWORK TO FREEDOM