

National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



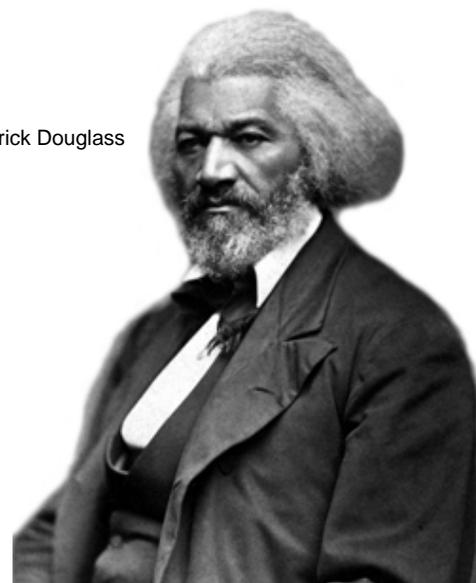
National Capital Region
Washington, D.C.

Underground Railroad in Washington D.C.



A slave coffle by the U.S. Capitol.

Frederick Douglass



“Underground Railroad” means resistance to slavery through flight. The City of Washington was created from two slaveholding states – Maryland and Virginia. Where there was slavery, there were freedom seekers. They sought to escape the impossible condition of slavery at any cost. They risked their lives, and punishment. Masters could sell them or their families South. They left behind loved ones and a familiar world. Their courage and initiative meant that they did not always turn to organized networks of accomplices.

Were there Underground Railroad stops in the DC Area?



William Chaplin

So far, there are no documented “stops” on the Underground Railroad in the area of Washington, DC. Instead, people used their ingenuity. Most freedom seekers began and completed their journeys unassisted. Freedom seekers hid in barns, fields, ships, and woods. They disguised themselves. They pretended to be freemen or forged travel passes from masters. They fled by foot, by water, by train, with and without formal help. They even mailed themselves in boxes from Baltimore and Richmond. They took chances stopping at the homes of black families. They passed as free in the free populations of Baltimore, Alexandria, and Georgetown.

Active efforts to assist escapes increased as the Civil War got closer. Assistance in Washington in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s was biracial. Leaders were often abolitionists.

Leonard Grimes was born a free black in Loudoun County, Virginia. In 1839 he was caught using his carriage to drive an enslaved family, Patty and her children, to Washington. As punishment, he spent years in a Virginia prison until pardoned. Unrepentant, he became pastor of a Baptist church known as the “Fugitives Church” in Boston. There he became involved in several famous “fugitive slave” cases.

White New Yorker William Chaplin helped desperate African Americans to escape slavery. A posse caught him and two freedom seekers on the border of Washington and Maryland. A gun battle followed. As a result, in 1850 Chaplin went to jail first in Washington and then in Maryland. Sympathizers raised a \$19,000 bond. He fled to the North fearing he would die in jail from tuberculosis like his predecessor Charles Torrey.

Were there routes to freedom?

The Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850 made the act of escape illegal. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 rewarded slave catchers, who were always on the lookout for freedom seekers. It was risky to use the same way to escape over and over again.

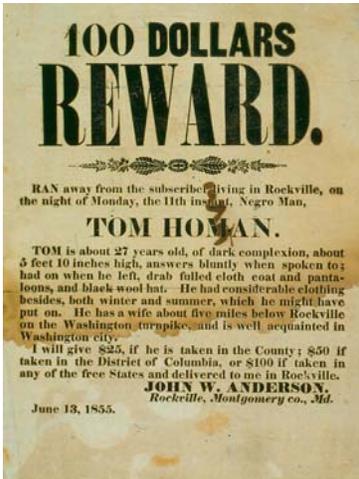
Freedom seekers escaped sites of enslavement. They left plantations – for example, Arlington House, Mount Vernon, and Sotterley. They left places of work like Gadsby’s Tavern, Catoctin Iron Furnace, and a boardinghouse in Harpers Ferry.

Those fleeing bondage followed common routes like the Rockville Pike or the

Chesapeake & Ohio Canal. They stowed away or passed as free seamen on northern- or European-bound ships. They attempted escape on the *Pearl* which left from the waterfront in Washington City with over 70 passengers. Using the railroad, William and Ellen Craft passed through President Street Station in Baltimore. At Harpers Ferry black boatmen on the Potomac and the Shenandoah Rivers helped those escaping slavery.

From Washington, freedom seekers often went north or west. As well as to Canada, they commonly went to Pennsylvania border communities, Philadelphia, and Boston.

How do we know about the Underground Railroad?



The Underground Railroad was not completely secret. Masters and abolitionists wrote and talked about escapes. Escapes and rescues were newsworthy, appearing in newspapers.

Slaveholders advertised for runaways from slavery. The ads often give first and last names, family relationships, and probable destinations. The name of the slaveholder often indicates the starting point of the escape.

William Still was a free black man in Philadelphia. He was an active leader in the Underground Railroad and kept records of those escaping. In 1872 he wrote a book The Underground Railroad. Many of those he helped came from the Washington, D.C., area. Wilbert Siebert taught at Ohio State University.

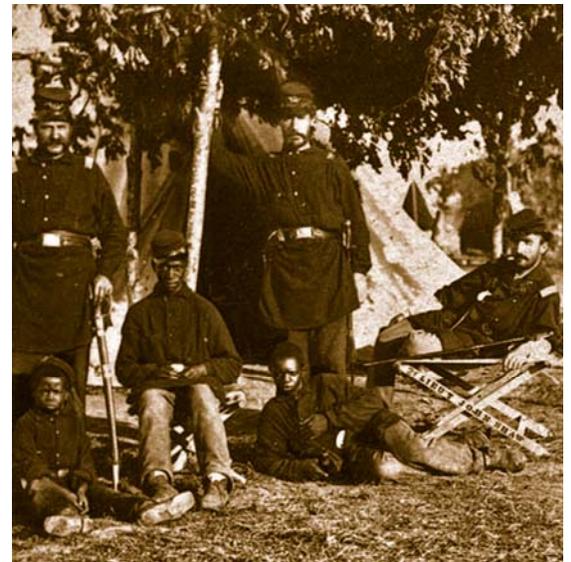
In the late 19th and early 20th centuries he and his students interviewed and wrote to those who had helped freedom seekers. His book The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom was published in 1898.

George Mason and George Carter both wrote letters about runaways. The Daniel Drayton case describes the escape of the *Pearl*. Slave narratives tell firsthand accounts of escapes like Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass published in 1845. Elizabeth Keckley, who worked for Mary Todd Lincoln, wrote a memoir, Behind the Scenes in 1868. It describes her work with refugees from slavery who arrived in Washington during the Civil War. Enslaved African Americans Michael Shiner and Adam Plummer kept diaries mentioning family captures.

When did the Underground Railroad end?

Flight from slavery only ended when slavery ended. Congress emancipated those enslaved in Washington in April 1862. Then, refugees from slavery poured into Washington. They came from slaveholding Maryland where it took a change in the state constitution to end slavery in 1864. Despite the Emancipation Proclamation, freedom seekers in Virginia had to seek refuge with Union troops to escape slavery. To shelter, feed, and provide medical care, military authorities set up refugee camps in Washington, Maryland, and within Union lines in Virginia. The most famous camp was Freedman's Village in Arlington.

During the Civil War freedom seekers joined the Union army and navy to free themselves and all enslaved African Americans. At Roosevelt Island in the Potomac River and Camp Stanton in southern Maryland, the First United States Colored Troops recruited and trained recently enslaved men.



Refugees working at an army camp.

How can we commemorate the Underground Railroad?

To learn and remember is to commemorate. Parks and museums often have tours and brochures. Actors reenact the powerful adventures of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Elizabeth Keckley. School programs teach children.

Sculptures are visual reminders. The African American Civil War Memorial records the names of all United States Colored Troops, including freedom seekers. A sculpture in Lincoln Park shows freedom seeker Archy Alexander with President Abraham Lincoln.

The African American Heritage Trail in Washington has put up markers to tell stories at places where Underground Railroad events occurred and important figures lived. State highway markers also designate sites.

To preserve Underground Railroad resources is to commemorate Underground Railroad history. Threats still exist to surviving buildings and objects.

National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

In 1998, Congress established the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program to commemorate, preserve, and document Underground Railroad history. The objective of the program is to educate the public about this important topic.



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UNDERGROUND RAILROAD
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