

The Underground Railroad

Sometimes when a people are under their most oppression, that is when they truly are at their best it seems. And that adage could certainly be applied to those who operated the Underground Railroad in the 19th century while slavery was still the law of the land in America.

The Underground Railroad was a means by which literally tens of thousands of slaves were able to escape their oppressors and make their way north to free states and a chance for freedom. It was so secretive that even to speak of it meant discovery and terrible punishment. But worse than that if it had been discovered by those who would stop slaves from finding their way out, it would have meant the end of hope for thousands of African Americans who were enduring the injustice of slavery.

The term "The Underground Railroad" was itself a code because that actual mechanism for moving slaves to freedom was not a railroad at all. It was a series of stops, connected by obscure routes that wound their way through the countryside. The routes were twisted and illogical so those seeking to catch slaves and return them to bondage would be hard pressed to figure out the ways those seeking freedom might travel.

There was no published route for the Underground Railroad. "Passengers" made their way from safe house to safe house taking refuge in homes, churches and other out of the way locations that became known as "stations" to those in the know. Very often, the people who ran the stations along the path had no idea how long the railroad was or anything about the whole route. They simply knew enough to receive their "passengers", do all they could for their health and care and send them along with instructions on how to reach the next station.

The routes were treacherous and difficult. Slaves trying to reach freedom usually walked the routes from station to station to avoid public gathering places where slave chasers might find them and send them back to their owners in the south. And just as there was no real "railroad" to the Underground Railroad, the routes themselves were not actually under the ground. However many times at the safe houses, the owners will secure their guests in tunnels under the house or under a farm building.

At one such safe house in Nebraska City, Nebraska, there is a tunnel from the house to the barn so that if the farmer was feeding a needy family, they could quickly "disappear" if slave hunters arrived without notice. There were also roughly dug out bedrooms and crude accommodations under those houses to provide as much comfort and opportunities to rest and recover as was humanly possible under such difficult conditions.

We cannot leave our consideration of this phenomenal network without recognizing the courage of those who ran the "stations" to take in slaves, harbor them, feed them and care for their needs and help them along the way to try to do what they could to strike back at this inhuman practice of human slavery. It is a

testimony to humanity that people would overcome their prejudices and reach out to strangers, putting their own homes and families at risk to help a downtrodden people in their time of great need.

And we must take a solemn moment and look back on a dark time in American and Black history when such measures were necessary. But the Underground Railroad spoke loudly that real Americans would not sit idly by and watch their fellow man suffer unjustly. There is no doubt that tens of thousands of lives were saved by these anonymous heroes who didn't do it for reward or recognition. They did it because it was the right thing to do and the thing God would expect them to do. It is an inspiration to us all in this day to lay down our own prejudices and bond together as brothers to resist prejudice, bigotry and mans cruelty to man because of these evils. If we do that we will know in our hearts, like those slaves on the railroad and the station owners knew, that there would come a better day.

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