



The Freedom Seeker

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The Underground Railroad Was No Fantasy

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No aspect of American history has been more saturated with myth than the Underground Railroad. Television viewers have been mesmerized, and perhaps shocked, by the 10-part series “The Underground Railroad” on Amazon Prime, based on Colson Whitehead’s 2016 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by the same name. Directed by Barry Jenkins, the series follows the odyssey of a young fugitive slave, Cora, through the grotesque cosmos of an America warped by antebellum slavery.

In an imaginative tour de force, the series and the novel render the metaphorical Underground Railroad as an actual railway, whose tunneled lines carry Cora on her flight from state to state. “The Underground Railroad” brilliantly reimagines the nation’s disturbing past to portray often unacknowledged truths about race and slavery. As a representation of the Underground Railroad, however, it is fantasy, not history.

In the absence of adequate information about the Underground Railroad’s real history, legends have flourished. For generations, tales of hidden tunnels, exotic hiding places, cryptic codes and secret maps abounded. These were usually the invention of white Americans who turned vague local stories into romantic sagas of kindly whites rescuing faceless blacks who were incapable of helping themselves.

In reality, from its beginnings in the early 19th century, the underground thrived by virtue of a dynamic partnership between blacks both free and enslaved and whites, first Quakers and later evangelical Christians and others. Black

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activists were most often motivated by a fierce desire to free family members or friends and by bitter personal knowledge of what the degradation of slavery meant. Whites were most commonly driven by a spiritual imperative that proclaimed slavery a sin that could be eradicated only by

personal action.

In practice, the underground was a diverse, flexible, interlocking system that operated with surprising efficiency but without central control beyond the county or town level, spanning the free states from Maine to Iowa. As Isaac Beck, a station master in Ohio put it, “There was no regular organization, no constitution, no laws or agreement or rule except the ‘Golden Rule,’ and every man did what seemed right in his own eyes.” It may have facilitated the escape of as many as 70,000 freedom-seekers over the six decades before the Civil War, but that is no more than a rough estimate based on the surviving records.

The underground was, of course, never an actual railroad, although when “conductors” deemed it safe they might occasionally take advantage of trains to speed fugitives’ travel. (Harriet Tubman took at least some of her “passengers” to Grand Central Station in New York City and bought them tickets to Albany.) The term caught on as a metaphor in the 1840s as iron railroads expanded across the northern states and the language of railroading lent itself readily to what underground activists were already doing, dubbing guides as “conductors,” volunteers who offered shelter as “station masters” and wagons in which fugitives might be carried as “trains” or “cars.”

Although many today believe that coded songs transmitted directions for the northbound routes that freedom-seekers should follow, no documentation for such “map” songs exists. For instance, the song most closely associated with the Underground Railroad, “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” was partly fabricated by an early-20th-century folklorist and then revised in the 1940s by the folk-singing group “The Weavers.”

Similarly, the now popular notion that quilts made by slaves contained secret “maps” to guide freedom-seekers on their flight dates only from the 1990s. Quilting historians have shown that most if not all the patterns alleged to compose the “maps” date from the late 19th and early 20th

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The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad Education Center, a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting knowledge of the 19th century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy in the Capital Region, in NYS, in the United States, and internationally, and relating that history with us today. This newsletter is published three times a year. Editorial inquiries can be sent to Underground Railroad Education Center, 194 Livingston Ave., Albany, NY 12210 or urhpcr@localnet.com.

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Freedom Seeker Corner



Elizabeth Castle was a dress maker. She, and a small group of others, escaped from Baltimore in the early 1840s. Their story was reported in the Tocsin of Liberty newspaper of the Liberty Association of Albany, New York. Elizabeth and her friends were followed

by agents from Baltimore. An escape to Canada was the path to freedom. Elizabeth and her friends settled in Dawn Mills in Upper Canada. Learn about Josiah Henson and the Dawn Mills settlement at josiahhensonbio.weebly.com/the-dawn-settlement.html

Follow Underground Railroad Education Center on Facebook for more Freedom Seeker Friday accounts.

The Underground Railroad Was No Fantasy *(cont'd from p.1)*

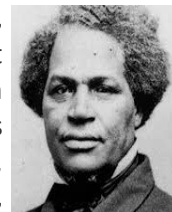
centuries and incorporate patterns so complicated that they would have been of little help to fugitives making their way across hostile and unfamiliar territory.

It is also commonly assumed that most freedom-seekers were traveling vast distances from the Deep South to the free North and Canada. But the great majority came from just three states where information was readily available about northbound routes and sources of aid: Maryland, Kentucky and Virginia, all of which had lengthy borders with the free states (West Virginia only became a separate state in 1863). Almost none escaped from the Deep South. There were a few much-celebrated exceptions, but Cora, the heroine of "The Underground Railroad," would probably never have made it out of Georgia.



William Still

Nor was the underground all that secret north of the border country. In New England, upstate New York and the upper Midwest, it was barely hidden at all. In the abolitionist hotbed of Syracuse, N.Y., stationmaster Rev. Jermain Loguen even advertised his home in local newspapers as the main underground station in the city. Abolitionist newspapers sometimes announced the arrival of freedom seekers, and local agents often kept tallies, some of which survive. William Still, the underground's leader in Philadelphia, for one, maintained a running account of the hundreds of fugitives his office assisted in the 1850s.



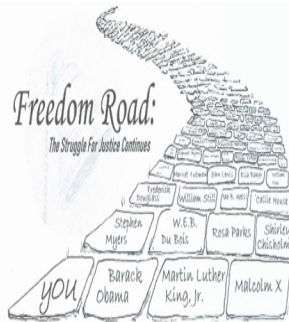
Jermaine Loguen

Why is the real history of the Underground Railroad so little known? A primary reason is that it was actively suppressed during the long years of Jim Crow, when Americans lost interest in the significance of a movement in which Blacks and whites worked together and which, in many areas, was organized by African-Americans such as Loguen and Still. Racial collaboration had no place in the triumphalist white narratives that dominated the post-Reconstruction "redemption" of the South from racial equality. Eventually, one of the most far-reaching grass-roots movements in the nation's history was turned into little more than a colorful folk-tale.

The myths may charm and thrill, but they do not help us to understand the realities of slavery or *(Cont'd on p.4)*

Looking Backward and Looking Forward with UREC

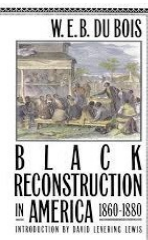
FreedomCon 2021 continues virtually once a month. Visit undergroundrailroadhistory.org/freedomcon-2021 for details on the enriching presentations offered by academic and independent scholars from around the country.



Young Abolitionist Leadership Institute begins on-site at The Myers Residence Campus on Monday, July 12. Forty teens will be learning Word Press, Economic Development, Entrepreneurship, and Educational Systems Analysis and the relationship of these to working for equity and justice. Please consider supporting this transformative teen program by donating today at www.gofundme.com and search for Young Abolitionist Leadership Institute.



Juneteenth: Remembering History and Celebrating Freedom - Young Abolitionist Leadership Institute teens created a memorable and lively experience for Juneteenth attendees with dramatic readings, historic information markers, tours, free food, and vendors. Over 300 visited The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence and Campus. All are looking forward to Juneteenth 2022.



UREC Reads continues to study W.E.B. Du Bois's analysis of the reconstruction period as laid out in *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*. Focusing on the role of African American agency, equality and freedom in order to achieve democracy, Du Bois's critical analysis and comprehensive evidence detail the real story of Reconstruction. Join this virtual conversation on the 2nd Friday of each month.

News and Notes

UREC MISSION STATEMENT

Underground Railroad Education Center researches and preserves the local and national history of the Underground Railroad movement, its international connections, and its legacy for today's social justice issues, thereby empowering people of all ages to be agents of change toward an equitable and just society.

Leave a Legacy with UREC - Maximize your tax deductions through charitable giving by leveraging one of many planned giving opportunities.

For more information call Mary Liz Stewart at 518-621-7793.



Liam Duell, an MPA student at Rockefeller College of Public Affairs of the State University of NY at Albany, is interning with UREC through November 2021. While with UREC Liam is working on drafting and implementing the many components of a fund development plan that will help expand UREC's growth and impact. Welcome, Liam!

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The Underground Railroad Was No Fantasy *(cont'd from p.2)*

the real experiences of fugitives, much less the underground's far-reaching political and moral significance. Beyond delivering thousands of men and women to freedom, it was the nation's first interracial mass movement that asserted the principle of personal, active responsibility for others' human rights, as well as the first movement of large-scale civil disobedience since the American Revolution.

It was also a seedbed for American feminism, the first movement in which Black and white women were participants on an equal plane with men. As the early women's rights advocate Elizabeth Cady Stanton put it, "Woman is more fully identified with the slave than man can possibly be." In all these respects, the Underground Railroad anticipated the great, transformative social movements of the 20th century.

The underground could not have succeeded as well as it did without trust, self-sacrifice and heroic collaboration between Blacks and whites. Both shared duties as conductors, station masters, local managers and fundraisers. And both shared risks that few other Americans were willing to undertake on behalf of their fellow human beings. The story of the underground has particular resonance today, challenging the desire of some Americans to discount the brutal historical toll of slavery and of others to see the nation's development as, fundamentally, a long tragedy of unrelieved racism.

If the disheartening history of slavery shows Americans at their worst, the history of the Underground Railroad shows them at their bravest and best. It vividly reminds us that our ancestors were capable of deep cooperation across the color line at a time when virulent racism was the pervasive norm. In our own era of sometimes acrid racial suspicions, we would do well to recall the legacy of risk-taking cooperation and mutual trust that they bequeathed to us.

Mr. Bordewich is the author of "Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement."