



## The Underground Railroad... Escape to Freedom

Despite the name, the Underground Railroad was not really a railroad, but was a network of people who assisted fugitive slaves. Neither actually underground nor a railroad, this informal system arose as a loosely constructed network of escape routes that originated in the South, intertwined throughout the North, and eventually ended in Canada.

By the early 19th century, the organization became so successful that it is estimated that more than 100,000 slaves escaped from the South through the Underground Railroad.

The abolition of slavery had been a concern for many churches and leaders in the north. The first abolitionist society was organized in 1775 in Pennsylvania. Thereafter, abolitionists actively tried to free slaves, inform the public about the evils of slavery, and promoted alternatives to slavery. In time, individuals who opposed slavery aided fugitive escapes. Soon advocates became aware of the others who were giving aid and a secret organization was loosely formed.

In 2013 the church created a **Museum** in the basement, open to the Public, where one may view the space most generally agreed to be the hiding place at First Presbyterian Church (the name which Covenant Church had in that day).

**To schedule a tour call: 724-287-7731  
(nominal donation requested)**

## *Origins of the Movement*

It is believed that the Underground Railroad system first started in the South in 1787 when Isaac T. Hopper, a Quaker, began to organize a system for hiding and aiding fugitive slaves.

Opponents of slavery allowed their homes, called stations, to be used as places where escaped slaves were provided with food, shelter and money. The various routes went through 14 Northern states and Canada. It is estimated that by 1850 around 3,000 people worked on the "underground railroad."

Some of the most best known of the people who provided help on the route included William Still, Gerrit Smith, Salmon Chase, David Ruggle, Thomas Garrett, William Purvis, Jane Grey Swisshelm, William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, Henry David Thoreau, Lucretia Mott, Charles Langston, Levi Coffin and Susan B. Anthony.

According to Walter Hawkins slaves constantly talked about the possibility of escape: "there arose in some an irrepressible desire for freedom which no danger or power could restrain, no hardship deterred, and no bloodhound could alarm. This desire haunted them night and day; they talked about it to each other in confidence; they knew that the system which bound them was as unjust as it was cruel, and that they ought to strive, as a duty to themselves and their children, to escape from it".

The main problem was having to leave family and friends. Henry Bibb wrote in his autobiography that it was "one of the most self-denying acts of my whole life, to take leave of an affectionate wife, who stood before me on my departure, with dear little Frances in her arms, and with tears of sorrow in her eyes as she bid me a long farewell." They also knew that there was the possibility that if they evaded capture, their closest relatives would be severely punished.

They also knew that successful escapes were rare. Slave owners used bloodhounds to trace their slaves. Problems of finding food and shelter in a hostile environment and the absence of maps were also other factors in understanding why most slaves failed in their bids for freedom. Moses Grandy explained the problems that runaways faced: "They hide themselves in the woods and swamps; they travel, crossing rivers by swimming, or by boats they may chance to meet with, and passing over hills and meadows which they do not know; in these dangerous journeys they are guided by the north-star, for they only know that the land of freedom is in the north."

“They subsist on such wild fruit as they can gather, and as they are often very long on their way, they reach the free states almost like skeletons.”

Within a few days of leaving the plantation most runaways were brought back and heavily punished. Francis Fredric was free for nine weeks but was captured and received 107 strokes of the whip. Moses Roper, received 200 lashes and this was only brought to an end when the master's wife pleaded for his life to be spared.

A study of runaway notices of local newspapers revealed that 76 per cent of all fugitives were under 35, and 89 per cent of them were men. Another study suggested that field slaves were more likely to try and escape than house slaves.

After 1831, the term "The Underground Railroad" was in popular use. The origin of the name is not certain... but believed to have come from a story about an escaped slave named Tice Davids. According to the story, as Davids tried to escape from Kentucky to Ohio, his master was not far behind. When he came to the Ohio River, he began to swim across. His master was determined not to lose sight of him, so he kept his eyes on him. The master followed Davids by boat and was careful to keep him in sight. But Davids made it ashore and within an instant, he disappeared. The master searched on shore, but was unsuccessful. When he returned to Kentucky, he reported that his slave “must have escaped by way of an underground road.” From thereafter, the Underground Railroad was used to describe the network of people who helped fugitive slaves.

It was not a coincidence that it was called the Underground Railroad. Steam railroads had just emerged and the terms used to describe the people who helped and the fugitives were related to the railroad line. Fugitive slaves were called "parcels" and "passengers", the helpers were the "conductors", the people who provided their homes as refuge were called "stationmasters," and the homes were referred to as "depots" or "stations."

### *Underground Railroad Routes*

The route used was an important part of a successful escape. A conductor could use numerous secret routes. The one used depended upon where the search parties and slave catchers were stationed.

Quickness was not the main concern. Instead, safety was most important. As a result, the routes often zigzagged in order to avoid capture. There were two main factors that determined the route that would be used-- the geographic location and the availability of Underground workers.

For instance, Iowa was bordered on slave territory, but it was newly developed so there were long distances between stations. As a result, there were fewer routes. On the other hand, Ohio and Pennsylvania had dozens of routes. The population was larger, so there was less distance between stops.

Another advantage was that in Ohio many of those involved in aiding runaways were Quakers, antislavery residents, and Ottawa Indians. In western Pennsylvania the Free Presbyterian Church was established especially for the purpose of aiding runaway slaves.



“Conductors” usually did not attempt to record the statistics, and those who did only calculated the number of runaways whom they personally helped. One of the most important of these was the former slave, Harriet Tubman. She made 19 secret trips to the South, during which she led more than 300 slaves to freedom.

Tubman was considered such a threat to the slave system that plantation owners offered a \$40,000 reward for her capture.

Stations were usually not far apart (perhaps only a few miles). Conductors sometimes used covered wagons or carts with false bottoms to carry slaves from one station to another. Runaway slaves *usually* hid during the day and travelled at night (but not always). Some of those involved notified runaways of their stations by brightly lit candles in a window, by “coded” quilts hung outdoors, or by lanterns positioned in the frontyard.

By the middle of the 19th century it was estimated that over 50,000 slaves had escaped from the South using the underground railroad. Plantation owners became concerned at the large number of slaves escaping to the North and in 1850 managed to persuade Congress to pass a Compromise to the Fugitive Slave Act (the original having been passed in 1793).

**Before 1850 any slave escaped to one of the “northern states” was considered to be “free.” After 1850, however, any person in any of the states (north and south) aiding a runaway slave by providing shelter, food or any other form of assistance was liable to six months' imprisonment and a \$1,000 fine.**

nyone suspected of being a runaway slave could be arrested without warrant and turned over to a claimant on nothing more than his sworn testimony of ownership. A suspected black slave could not ask for a jury trial nor testify on his or her behalf.

This law was strictly enforced. There is a story told of a farmer near Greensburg, Pennsylvania who was caught hiding runaways and he was warned once; the next time he was fined and jailed and his entire farm was put up for Sheriff's Sale. Some time later, having served his sentence, the man was released. He was met by his neighbors who expressed their amazement at his courage (and willingness to lose everything for the sake of the abolitionist cause—one with which they sympathized but could not bring themselves to bear, given the personal and financial sacrifice required). The good neighbors promptly informed the man that they had been present at the Sheriff's Sale and had purchased his farm... which they gladly gave back to him upon his return!

Fugitive slave laws failed to stop the Underground Railroad. Thomas Garrett, the Delaware station-master, paid more than \$8,000 in fines and Calvin Fairbank served over seventeen years in prison for his anti-slavery activities. Whereas John Fairfield, one of the best known of the white conductors, was killed working for the cause.



The Rev. Dr. LOYAL  
YOUNG

Born July 1, 1806

Died October 11, 1890

Buried at North Cemetery,  
Butler PA

Served as Pastor  
of the Congregation  
From (1833-1868)  
(During the time of the  
Underground Railroad)

Dr. Young was the third pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Butler, Penn., serving nearly thirty-five years from 1833 to 1868. It was under his leadership during this period that the church in Butler took on the courageous task of harboring runaway slaves at risk of severe sanction (jail sentence, loss of property and money, risk to family and church).

Loyal Young was the son of Robert Young and Lydia Young; the husband of Margaret Porter Young, and the father of Robert Johnson Young and Reverend Samuel Hall Young, who wrote in autobiographies much after the end of the Civil War to document the involvement of the Young family and of the Presbyterian Church.

It was Hall Young who wrote several years after the end of slavery, when it was safe to disclose the facts, that as a young boy he would on many occasions go downstairs to the kitchen at breakfast time to find his mother serving several black fugitives at the table. He was told by his father (Rev. Dr. Young) that this was something he was to "tell no one," for it would have grave consequences should they be discovered.

Runaways were given shelter at the Young home on Pearl St. in Butler, as well as in the church building (in a hiding space beneath the ground floor.)

The resting spots where the runaways could sleep and eat were given the code names "stations" and "depots" which were held by "station masters." There were also those known as "stockholders" who gave money or supplies for assistance. There were the "conductors" who ultimately moved the runaways from station to station. The "conductor" would sometimes act as if he were a slave and enter a plantation. Once implanted, the "conductor" would direct the fugitives to the North.

Each leg of the journey would be 5-8 miles or less. Groups were not large, often half a dozen or fewer. While resting at one station, a message was sent to the next station to let the station master know the runaways were on their way. Most people associated with the Underground Railroad only knew their part of the operation and not of the whole scheme.

Sometimes boats or trains would be used for transportation. Money was donated by many people to help buy tickets and even clothing for the fugitives so they would remain unnoticeable.

Some people (most of them, naturally, pro-slavery Southerners) were upset by this whole process. Resulting from many efforts to fix this "problem," a law was passed that allowed slave owners to hire people to catch their runaways and arrest them. The fugitive slave laws became a problem because many legally freed slaves were being arrested as well as the fugitives. This then encouraged more people of the North to become a part of the Underground Railroad. Oftentimes, "bounty hunters" would abduct free blacks, and sell them into slavery. The major motion picture *12 Years a Slave* (2013) recounts the fate of Solomon Northup, a New York State-born free African-American man who was kidnapped in Washington, D.C. in 1841, taken to Louisiana and sold into slavery. Northup did hard labor on plantations for 12 years before being released. As the following poster demonstrates, "free blacks" in Boston after 1850 had to be very cautious or they were subject to the same fate.



**CAUTION!!**

**COLORED PEOPLE**  
**OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,**  
 You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and  
 advised, to avoid conversing with the  
**Watchmen and Police Officers**  
**of Boston,**  
 For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR &  
 ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as  
**KIDNAPPERS**  
 AND  
**Slave Catchers,**  
 And they have already been actually employed in  
 KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING  
 SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY,  
 and the *Welfare of the Fugitives* among you, *Shun*  
 them in every possible manner, as so many *HOUNDS*  
 on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

**Keep a Sharp Look Out for**  
**KIDNAPPERS, and have**  
**TOP EYE open.**  
**APRIL 24, 1851.**

**Recommended Reading:**

--an excellent historical novel by Sue Monk Kidd,

***The Invention of Wings***

Writing at the height of her narrative and imaginative gifts, Sue Monk Kidd presents a masterpiece of hope, daring, the quest for freedom, and the desire to have a voice in the world - and it is one of Oprah's Book Club 2.0 selections.

Hetty "Handful" Grimke, an urban slave in early nineteenth century Charleston, yearns for life beyond the suffocating walls that enclose her within



the wealthy Grimke household. The Grimke's daughter, Sarah, knew from an early age she is meant to do something large in the world, but she is hemmed in by the limits imposed on women.

Kidd's sweeping novel is set in motion on Sarah's eleventh birthday, when she is given ownership of ten year old Handful, who is to be her handmaid. We follow their remarkable journeys over the next thirty five years, as both strive for a life of their own, dramatically shaping each other's destinies and forming a complex relationship marked by guilt, defiance, estrangement and the uneasy ways of love.

As the stories build to a riveting climax, Handful will endure loss and sorrow, finding courage and a sense of self in the process. Sarah will experience crushed hopes, betrayal, unrequited love, and ostracism before leaving Charleston to find her place alongside her fearless younger sister, Angelina, as one of the early pioneers in the abolition and women's rights movements.

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## Ancestor's work on Underground Railroad: an act of faith

by Patti Stone, published in the Ellwood City (PA) *Ledger* (August 7, 2013)

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George Hamilton Magee traveled in the sunlight, his cargo hidden from view in a wagon with a false bottom. Usually there were two or three of them, but sometimes, Magee took four or five.

The trip took four to five hours — time without rest or bathroom stops. Magee risked all that he had to transport the goods — human beings on the tenuous road to freedom. What kind of man would risk his own freedom so that others might walk in the light?

Meeting Roy Magee of Perry Township, great-great-grandson of George Hamilton Magee, the answer comes easily, for Magee exudes the warmth and kindness surely necessary for his ancestor to have helped others escape the bonds of Southern slavery along western Pennsylvania's Underground Railroad.

“When you transported these people, they trusted you totally with their lives — everything these people hoped to be. That’s an awesome responsibility,” Magee said.

George H. Magee was a Perry Township farmer with a wife and children and a house with a hidden room. According to definitions of those who helped fugitive slaves, he would be considered a “stationmaster,” someone who lent his home as a refuge. He may even be called a “conductor,” or someone who transported escaped slaves.

According to Roy Magee, there was “no such position per se.” Those who helped were just doing the right thing.

According to Roy Magee, George H. was doing what the Lord directed him to do. Providing shelter and transporting escaped slaves was for most a faith-based movement. Local churches aided the effort with their silence and the belief that in this case, God’s laws superseded those of the federal government. According to Roy Magee, “the pastor had to know what was going on. There was enough activity around here that the pastor knew to keep quiet.”

The consequences were dire for those caught helping a fugitive slave. According to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, signed into law by President George Washington, all fugitives were to be returned to a lawful authority and transferred back to their rightful owner. Anyone caught harboring a fugitive was to be charged \$500. The act was rarely enforced in nonslave states. The Compromise of 1850 altered the Fugitive Slave Act and required that citizens help in the recovery of fugitive slaves. It was this compromise that made it harder for fugitive slaves to make a life in the northern part of the United States, driving them into Canada. It also made the penalties for whites or free blacks helping a fugitive slave more prohibitive.

According to Magee, the penalties “would wipe them out.” Officials would come and arrest the man, leaving the family destitute. The government could take animals, belongings and farm equipment.

The mother didn’t usually have much of an education that would allow her to teach school or do work other than sewing, cooking or taking in washing. Any fear of punishment, though, took a back seat to the strong faith of G.H. Magee that he and his family were doing God’s work.

As a child, Roy Magee lived in his ancestor's Perry Township house, and he always wondered about a strange basement room without shelves or benches.

The room was where his ancestor hid fugitive slaves. In its time, the room had a fireplace with a crane and a kettle to boil water for the fugitives for tea or to bathe or wash clothes. Magee relates a story passed down to him of a night when, for four hours, slaves, slave hunters and the Magee family gathered together under one roof.

The fugitives hid in the secret basement room with G.H. Magee's wife, Sarah, while her husband entertained the slave hunters upstairs. One of the fugitives was a nursing mother. For four hours, in the small basement room, she nursed her child to keep it from crying. "The price she paid in pain was nothing compared to what it would have been had they been discovered," Magee said.

Another home in Perry Township used as a refuge along the underground railroad was at the corner of Stickle and Barkley roads — less than a mile from where Roy Magee now lives. The woman who had lived there told Magee that there was a step leading from the ground floor to the first floor with a loose tread. One day she pulled on the tread and found a narrow space about 18 inches wide—enough space for a person to stand and hide until it was safe to come out.

How did those who sheltered fugitives know that a "shipment" would be arriving? Communication was probably by word of mouth. The person at the previous shelter would send someone to let the next person know of the date and time of a fugitive's arrival.

G.H. Magee transported his human cargo to the next stop in New Castle in his special wagon during daylight hours. "My great-great-grandmother probably packed a lunch for them." Magee said. But he made clear that they couldn't take many provisions because there wasn't any room.

# RAN AWAY!



FROM THE SUBSCRIBER. My Mulatto Boy,  
GEORGE. Said George is 5 feet 8 inches in height, brown  
curly Hair, dark coat. I will give \$400 for him alive,  
and the same sum for satisfactory proof that he has been  
killed.

WM. HARRIS.