

Slavery and the underground railroad history essay



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Slavery was a big industry in the South but not all supported it. The Underground Railroad was a means for the slaves to escape to the free North. The system was made up of both blacks and whites who opposed the oppression of other human beings. The Underground Railroad was a very important part of US history that made freedom possible for many.

The Slave trade is centuries old. The Portuguese in the 15th century brought blacks from Africa to the new world. Three conditions made the slave trade thrive: a scarcity of labor, a cultivation of a certain type of crop that allowed strict supervision of slaves with simple methods and low prices for slaves.[1]

Slave traders could get blacks from Africa at a cost of \$20 per head at auction; they would fetch \$200 per slave. This made the business of slave trading very lucrative and soon many other European nations joined the slave trade.

The 1st slaves arrived in the New World in 1619, when 20 slaves were brought to Jamestown Virginia and exchanged for food. By 1776, the time of the Revolution, the number of blacks and whites in Virginia was roughly a 1: 1 ratio.[2]The plantation system raising tobacco, rice, sugar cane and cotton was ideal for slave labor. The demand for the crops in the north and Europe allowed for the demand of labor. At first, the southerners tried to use Native American and an indentured servant has workers but this did not make for good crops and profits. The plantation system and soil in the south made it easy to grow the crops. The solution was slavery to many plantation owners. As more and more slave's ships docked in U. S ports, the price of slaves dropped. Thus acquiring slaves was easy and cheaper. Even though in 1808

the trans-atlantic import of slaves was banned, the practice still continued as well as the internal selling of slaves from Border States to the Deep South.

[3]

The life of a slave depended on the master. The horrible life began when they were captured or kidnapped from their villages. They were cramped into damp, dark, stinky cargo holds as tight as possible. The ones that died on the ship were thrown overboard into the sea. Upon arrival into the port, the skinny ones were fattened up for auction. Grey hairs were plucked or painted to make the person look younger for sale. If anyone has been beaten or whipped and had wounds, they would be painted over to look clean. Auction occurred within the hours of arrival into the port. The slave would leave with new master to begin work immediately. Beatings and whippings were common; families were separated and sold without regard or compassion. Children born into slavery were commodities. They were worth \$200 dollars a head. Black women were forced to reproduce as rapidly as possible. Rape was very common occurrence. The children born were sold to other owners.[4] Fredrick Douglass describes the rations for clothes on his plantations for slaves. The yearly clothing allowances consisted of two linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, one pair of stockings, one pair of shoes. The whole items would cost no more than \$7 dollars. For children that were too young to work the fields they had no shoes, no stockings and no trousers. They had only 2 shirts per year. If the clothes were torn or too small the slave would have to go naked or nearly naked until the next allowance time.[5]

In Ripley Ohio, a free state, a slave named tice David's reached the Ohio River from Kentucky with his master in hot pursuit. David's swam the river and escaped into Ripley and disappeared. His master lost track of him and exclaimed " He must have disappeared on an underground road". This story spread and was embellished, the stories now being the slave escaped on the " Underground Railroad". Thus the name underground railroad became synonymous with escape and freedom.[6]It is widely believed that the system started in 1787 when Isaac Hopper, a Quaker began to organize a system for hiding, abiding and aiding fugitive slaves. Opponents of the slavery allowed their homes to be called stations and to be used as places where escaped slaves were provided with shelter, food and money. The various routes went through 14 Northern states including Canada. It is estimated that by 1850 more than 3, 000 people worked on the Underground Railroad. Some of the well-known of the people who provided help on the escape route included Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony.

The relief Stations were usually about twenty miles apart. Conductors used concealed covered wagons or carts with the false bottoms to carry slaves from one station site to another. Runaway slaves usually hid during the day time and travelled at night by using northern star in the sky. Some of those involved notified the runaways of their stations by brightly lit candles in the window or lanterns well positioned in the front yard. By the mid-19th century it was estimated that over 55, 000 slaves had escaped from the South by the Underground Railroad.

In 1793 the fugitive slaves act was passed and allowed slave owners to use any method to retrieve their slaves even if the slave was in a free state. The accused runaway was not allowed to speak on their behalf or to have a defense of any kind. The only thing the slave owner had to do was to orally convince the judge that the black person was his property. It also made it illegal to help a runaway slave. This year 1793 also was the year Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. Thus the demand for slaves was at peak. The same year Haitian slaves revolted against their masters. Fleeing white owners brought their remaining slaves to the Deep South. Those slaves spoke to the southern slaves about the bravery of their rebellion and the ingenious codes and plans made by their leaders. These three things moved slaves and encouraged more of them to attempt escape. This also fueled many people of different races and colors and religion to aid and help runaway slaves. An increasing network of safe havens and conductors began to join the Underground Railroad system.[7]

John Rankin a minister in Ripley Ohio spread the abolitionist's movement there. A famous story was a young woman slave with her 2 year old child escaping from Kentucky into Ripley across a frozen and cold Ohio River. The ice was breaking up in some spots and the young women kept falling in with her baby. Yet she continued to struggle to get to shore. The slave chaser moved by this sight, instead of catching her, he helped her to get to the Rankin's house. She and her child were helped by the Underground Railroad to get to Canada. This story was retold by Rankin to Harriet Beecher Stowe. She would later use this woman as her character, Eliza, in the book Uncle Tom's Cabin. Who would have thought this young lady with no name and

identity would be a character that fueled abolitionism and the antislavery movement.[8]

In 1839 Fredrick Augustus bailey escaped slavery dressed has a sailor back from duty at sea. He fled Baltimore on a train to New York to join his free wife Ann Murray. The free woman he had married in Baltimore had helped him with his escape. Bailey would go on to change his name Fredrick Douglass. He was 20 years old at that time of his escape and dedicated his life to justice, freedom and abolition of slavery.[9]Douglass would become the most famous orator on antislavery and freedom in his own lifetime.[10]

In 1793 Canada declared anyone entering their soil was free. The Underground Railroad took runaway slaves from Border States into Canada. In the U. S the northern free states still did not recognize blacks has citizens, denied them the right to vote, and they could not hold the property. Canada however gave blacks citizenship, right to vote, right to trial and to sue, right to education. They even had monetary system to provide blacks with some money to help them build homes, schools, and communities while they learned a trade. Thus Canada was a very appealing place to settle and many black communities were established there.[11]

The southern states were losing too many slaves to Canada and north they threatened separating from the union. In 1850 to appease the south the 2nd fugitive slave act was passed this allowed any black person free or slave to be accused of being a runaway and returned to slavery. It also tightened the fines and punishment for those who helped the runaway slaves.[12]Many free blacks escaped to Canada to avoid being captured and returned to

slavery. The Underground Railroad system had people known as conductors or guides who went to the south and helped guide and navigate slaves to safety. One of the most well-known of these was the former slave Harriet Tubman. She had made more than 19 secret missions to the South during which she led and helped more than 300 slaves escape to freedom. Tubman was considered such a major threat to the slave system that plantation owners offered a huge \$40, 000 reward for her capture. However Harriet Tubman escaped to Canada. She referred to Canada "the promise land" in turn she was called "Moses". For helping and assisting the slaves escape. Many slaves and conductors along the Underground Railroad used codes to send the messages to Each other. One was "Follow the drinking Gourd" which really meant follow the big dipper to the first river and meet the conductor and on to the second river and into a free state.[13]

However The Fugitive Slave Act failed to stop the Underground Railroad movement. Thomas Garrett the Delaware station-master paid more than \$8, 000 in fines, Calvin Fairbank served 17 years in prison for his anti-slavery activities and John Fairfield one of the best known white conductors was killed working for the Underground Railroad. The south continued to fight the union until the civil war broke out. President Lincoln in 1862 declared the emancipation proclamation declaring slaves in rebel states to be free. This would be put into effect Jan 1, 1863. The war ended in 1865 and with the 13th amendment slavery was abolished in the United States and its entire jurisdiction. This ended the need for the Underground Railroad, has all slaves were now finally free.[14]