

# The underground railroad, a perfect example of collaboration surpassing racial di...

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The primary source chosen was illustrated by Charles T. Weber and published in 1893. It depicts one of the semisecret, biracial networks, collectively known as the Underground Railroad, which helped African-American slaves during the 1800's to escape their owners and slave holding states. This term, written loosely at the bottom of the image, was a code name given to various routes for fugitive slaves to follow that led to freedom in the North or Canada. The artist included several visual points to exemplify his interpretation of this famous network.

One visual key point is the white folk seen helping the slaves and their possessions out of a wagon and towards some unknown destination. An educated guess would be that the slaves have just arrived at a 'station house' and are being helped by the 'station master' and his/her family or associates. The 'station house' could be the cabin located far left in the image or someplace off screen. And the 'station master' could be either one of the older woman located in the forefront of the image or even the gentleman with the top hat in the wagon. On the other hand, it is more likely that this man is a 'pilot', or lookout, based off his location and body language. But none of this can be certain, so all possibilities are considered.

Another key point is the season indicated in the image. The time of year is winter, as can be seen by the bare trees, snow, and frozen lake. Most Underground Railroad activity occurred during the winter because only then could slaves cross the lakes and rivers. The amount of snow suggests that they are located possibly far north or even Canada.

Surprisingly, the slaves vary in age and gender. The fact that the elderly and children are accompanying the able-bodied male slaves is unusual because they could very well jeopardize the entire venture. The elderly slave centered slightly to the right in the forefront of the image is especially compromising. He is seen holding his back, a cane, and being assisted by an elderly white woman. It appears that he is severely handicapped and that could not only have hindered the journey, but his own health as well. Perhaps, whoever organized the escape had compassion for the battered old man. Or perhaps, they are family members. But that would seem unlikely since most slaves were separated from their families at birth. A pleasant interpretation would be that the elderly slave, as well as the other aged slaves, insisted on coming because freedom meant that much to him. Nonetheless, further evidence is needed to determine the reason.

A final key point is the clothing and the amount of blankets worn and carried by the fugitive slaves in the image. Slaves, according to Frederick Douglass, were given only a yearly allowance and very minimal clothing, consisting of usually 2 linen shirts and trousers. Slave children were given even less and were often naked at a young age, regardless of time or season. Therefore, it is important to notice how well dressed and prepared the depicted fugitives are for the brutal weather. Two possibilities behind this are (1) that their last station master was very wealthy or generous or (2) that they have accumulated the clothing from several station houses before arriving at this destination. Both are fairly conceivable, but either way, it is certain they were able to survive the journey thanks to a few or more abolitionists.

In conclusion, this primary source does an excellent job of representing how white abolitionists assisted fugitive slaves in the Underground Railroad. It allows the viewer to take in the emotions, such as anxiety and relief, of slaves constantly on the run and then finally reaching a place to rest and be treated kindly. Charles T. Weber created this image most likely for those who doubted or could not envision the existence of the Underground Railroad or white folk's involvement in it. The image therefore testifies to the efforts of both races to combat slavery for the sake of emancipation and equality.