

The Underground Railroad in Indiana

While not comprehensive, this article attempts to place Indiana's Underground Railroad into the greater context of United States history. This is only a start of information and should not be seen as a definitive study of Indiana. As more research, and time, allows we will add to the information.

Slaves have been in America since the late 1500s. These Africans were captured, mainly in the western part of the continent, known as the Ivory Coast. Some were sold by their kings, others betrayed by rival tribes, and others simply kidnapped. They were sent to the New World, specifically the south of this country, the Caribbean, and South America. Every colony in the New World allowed for slaves and some of our most prominent leaders owned slaves: Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Chief Little Turtle, and Jesuit missionaries.

Slaves were brought into this country to help build farms and plantations, work in factories and also people's homes. Along with slaves there were also indentured servants doing some of the same work. An indentured servant is someone, usually white, required to work for a person for a set number of years. This servant was usually young, brought to the New World by the owner of their contract, and not paid for their work. They worked for free to pay off the travel costs and their room and board. Servitude lasted from several months to a life time, depending on circumstances. Years were added onto the contract for illegal actions, stealing from the kitchen, breaking items, or disobeying the contract holder.

Slavery prospered more in the south than the north for several reasons: the type of farming in the south meant more people were needed to get things done. They have a longer growing season, so farming is more profitable. In the north, the type of farming and crops did not require the large number of workers. Then also, the north had more factories. In these types of businesses, the owners made more money paying by the day than sheltering and feeding a worker. Also, more radical, religious groups opposed to slavery were based in the north. They influenced government.

By the time we became a nation, slavery was predominately in the south. Some northern states made it illegal to hold slaves, but the U.S. Constitution did not make it illegal to hold slaves. Even though the words slave and slavery do not appear in the Constitution, the convention included ten provisions dealing with slavery. The most serious dispute arose over how to assign House seats to Southern states. Known as the Great Compromise, it sparked a heated dispute over slavery. If seats in the House of Representatives were apportioned according to state populations. Southern states would gain an advantage because of their large slave populations. Northern states pushed to exclude slaves from the population calculations altogether. Southern states resisted, threatening to scuttle the entire Constitution. They agreed to the infamous clause in Article I that counted slaves as only three-fifths of a person and that barred Congress from ending the slave trade before 1808.

There have been people unhappy with slavery from the beginning, especially those people enslaved. From 1526 - 1861 there were insurrections in every decade. While none were successful, this did not stop the next group of slaves from trying. Other slaves protested their slavery in other ways. They broke equipment, had sit-ins, worked slowly, crippled farm animals, torched buildings and crops, maimed their own body, committed suicide, and many simply ran, but that does not imply it was a simple matter.

Think about how difficult it would be to leave your family and friends. It was much easier to run by yourself, without your mother, wife, children, and friends. If you were captured you might be branded, beaten, or even killed. The first Fugitive Slave Law allowing for the capture of slaves came in 1793, signed into law by George Washington.

When you ran you never knew who would help or who would capture you. Unescorted slaves found the topography hostile and wild animals. You had to run at night and rest what you could during the day.

Then the question comes, where do you decide to live? Do you travel south to live with the Seminole Tribe, go to Mexico, travel north to settle in the northern States, or do you need to continue to Canada?

Could you come to Indiana? We were a free state, right? There were free black settlements in Indiana. But their lives were not easy and free as you think.

In 1787 the Northwest Territory was created. Indiana was a part of this new territory. Article 6 of the Northwest Territory ordinance forbids slavery northwest of the Ohio River; this clause though did not free slaves of persons who had been residents of the territory before 1787.

We became a territory in 1797. William Henry Harrison, the first territorial governor, encouraged slavery in the state. In 1802 Indiana political and business leaders tried to get article 6 of the Northwest Ordinance repealed for 10 years and any slave brought into the Territory during these 10 years would still be a slave afterwards. Also, they wanted all children of these slaves to remain slaves. The Congress denied their petition.

So, in 1805 the Indiana Territory House of Representatives passed "an Act Concerning the Introduction of Negroes and Mulattoes into this Territory." It stated anyone who held or purchased slaves anywhere in the US could bring them into the territory and indenture them. The slave holder of persons of color would determine the number of years of the servitude. Children served their parents' households. Blacks either agreed to serve and signed the indenture contract or could be removed from the territory and sold back into slavery. What a nice way to circumvent article 6.

We became a state in 1816. In our Constitution we had a statement similar Article 6 of the Northwest Ordinance. Many pushed for the House of Representatives and State Senate to require free blacks coming into Indiana to have to post bond stating they would not be a nuisance or cause trouble. No white was required to do this. By 1831 all Blacks had to register with county authorities and give the bond. Others wanted to send all freed Blacks to the west to colonize there, or even better would be to send them to Liberia in Africa. So while there was no slavery in Indiana, that didn't mean everyone here would help a runaway slave.

In our 1851 Indiana Constitution, there were provisions requiring \$500 bonds to be posted for all African Americans, they could not vote, serve in the militia, nor testify in a trial where a white person was a party.

We do know that African Americans and fugitive slaves settled here. There is a court case of a plantation owner from Kentucky who in 1828 found Peter living in Wayne County. Peter had fled in 1822, moved to Wayne County, changed his name, and was living just north of Richmond. By 1828, his owner had found him. Peter was arrested and taken to jail to await his removal south. A violent mob freed Peter; we are not sure exactly what happened to him after that.

If a fugitive decided to run north, fugitives escaping through Kentucky could not reach free territory without crossing the Ohio River. The first step was getting across the river. Because of no bridges until after the Civil War, the river could only be crossed by boat or swimming.

Ferries crossed the river daily to get people and goods from one side of the river to the other. There are many accounts, both in oral and written form, about how fugitives used the ferry system to escape during the 1850s and 1860s when ferries were larger. Cases heard in the Louisville Chancery Court show that at times the ferrymen, either by design or error, permitted slaves to cross to the Indiana shore from Louisville without legitimate passes.

When winters were so cold that the Ohio River froze, you have to remember that the River is not the same today as it was in the 1800s, so at times it did freeze. The ferries were prevented from running, and slaves used the ice as a bridge. Slaveholders in northern Kentucky were said to have moved the slave inland at such times to prevent them from attempting to cross over the ice bridge.

Other stories tell of people rowing across the river. The owner of the boat could be an enslaved African who stayed in enslavement, but served as a conductor of people across the river. Other times, people came from Indiana across the river and took their passengers back across the river.

Patrols were stationed over the plantations and in the towns to see that all slaves were out of their homes had a pass. Slave hunters stationed themselves on the north side of the river waiting for someone to travel by the light of the moonlight.

Once across the river came the arduous move north. Many escaping slaves stayed in the African American communities. Sometimes permanently, other times just long enough to plan their trip north. They would have stayed in the AA community rather than stay with a white person for several reasons, one it is easier to blend in, second it would be difficult to know who to trust, and third many whites did not want these people living with them.

The first public call for emancipation of slaves was in 1831 by William Lloyd Garrison. He lived in Boston and called for the immediate and unconditional emancipation of all slaves. His views were very liberal. Others agreed with him, but still more found slavery wrong, but not wrong enough that every slave should be freed immediately.

Various factions of the anti-slavery movement developed. There were those who felt it was unconstitutional; that "all men are created equal" basically gave blacks their freedom. The more radical groups were those that felt that slavery was morally wrong, against God and the Bible. But this did not mean all religious people were against slavery. Slavery divided churches and religions.

Eventually a system developed to move slaves to freedom. We know this system to be the UGRR. The term is vague and no one is sure exactly where it derived. There is a tale of a Kentucky plantation owner, who with a bounty hunter, was following a fugitive. The fugitive was able to find a boat at the banks of the Ohio River, but the plantation owner could not find a skiff. After some time, they eventually found one, but by the time they had crossed the river at Ripley, OH the fugitive disappeared. In an exclamation of distress he said the fugitive must have escaped on some underground road.

It simply meant the system by which slaves found help and freedom from slavery. The UGRR is not a railroad, or a road, or a specific route. It's more of a group of unrelated people with the single cause of helping free slaves. We call houses where food and shelter could be found "stations;" those who went south to find potential slaves "pilots;" those who guided slaves "conductors;" and the slaves were called "passengers."

At first we thought three main routes were created: (MAP)

- 1) From Posey to Vanderburgh, to Gibson, to Pike to Vincennes to Terre Haute to Lafayette to South Bend. Then north into Michigan
- 2) Corydon to Jackson/Jennings to Salem to Bloomington to Mooresville to Marion County to Crawfordsville to Porter then onto Michigan
- 3) Madison to Fountain City to Fort Wayne to Dekalb onto Michigan

With extensive research, now we are finding there was not one route. It was more of a web of potential paths, hiding places, help, and betrayal. Those helping might have information about hunters up north, so they would go east, then back south, then north, then east into Ohio. It depended on the circumstances. So there was no one definite they went from house A to house B. Also, homes changed ownership hands. So a home in the 1830s might not have been a part of the UGRR, but in the 1850s would have.

In general, the UGRR was NOT tunnels, hidden rooms, or secret passages. They were people allowing Blacks into their homes and offering what assistance they could. People did not talk about their participation, nor did they keep great records of their work. This type of information sharing could easily get them arrested.

The best known Indiana Conductor or station master was Levi Coffin of Fountain City. He came to Indiana in 1826. While he is the most famous, he is by no means the only person in Indiana. (Photo)

Suppose you crossed the Ohio River by Madison, Indiana. You might encounter Rev. Chapman Harris. Born in Virginia to a free African American in 1802. At the age of 37 he left Virginia and by 1839 made it to Madison. With his arrival, along with Elijah Anderson and George DeBaptiste a major change occurred in Madison. The Madison route became more aggressive. Anderson had a bounty of \$1000 on his head. He eventually moved to Lawrenceburg where he continued his work as a UGRR conductor. He was captured in Carrollton, KY in 1856. He mysteriously died the day he was released from the state pen in Frankfort. Anderson is reported to have helped 800 people through the Madison area.

George DeBaptiste was born in Virginia about 1815, he moved to Madison, Indiana in 1838 and became involved in the Underground Railroad. Forced to leave because of his anti-slavery activities, DeBaptiste went to Detroit and conducted several successful businesses. On April 7, 1870, during a Detroit celebration of the amendment, George DeBaptiste, general manager of the Underground Railroad in Michigan, displayed a sign that read, "Notice to Stockholders - Office of the Underground Railway: This office is permanently closed."

What if you crossed at New Albany. We have evidence of people hopping on trains, real trains, and traveling north to Indianapolis. The New Albany-Salem Railroad was organized in 1847. At this point you may or may not have had help. You needed money for the ticket or maybe the conductor may have ignored your presence. The Louisville Courier in 1855 ran several stories about an incident where people were helping enslaved Africans run on the train out of New Albany.

Another incident was an escaping slave named Toney. He ran from the plantation in Kentucky and made his way north along the New Albany and Chicago Railroad as far north as Monroe County, where he was caught.

And still another event in 1856, the New Albany Daily Ledger reported the capture of two fugitives in Salem, IN who had fled from Louisville traveling on the New Albany and Salem Railroad all night.

In April 1860 a fugitive was shipped by rail in a box from Nashville, Tenn. He had passed through Louisville to Jeffersonville on the railcars and was as far as Seymour when he was discovered because of damage to the box. He was arrested and returned to Louisville.

Now onto the crossing in Evansville. A fugitive may encounter Ira Caswell, was born in 1814. Caswell served both as a conductor and also allowed his home to be a station. He was identified as someone participating in William Cockrum's book, family oral tradition, and the work of Siebert, where people from the time period identified him as a participant. There is also evidence that Caswell participated in a conspiracy to capture and torture a band of men who roamed southern Indiana kidnapping free Blacks and selling them south.

As people moved north, they would travel in various directions, depending on weather, bounty hunters, people willing to participate. You have to remember that people died, moved, changed their minds, or were not available at all times. For this reason, a "route" in 1850 may not be the same as in 1851.

North of Madison was Lancaster, IN home of Eleutherian College and the Neils Creek Anti-Baptist League. By 1839, an anti-slavery society was founded in the Lancaster area. A mix of ardent abolitionists and UGRR agents worked in this close knit community. The entire object of the anti-slavery society was the entire abolition of slavery in the United States. Reports were occasionally sent to the Philanthropist, an abolitionist newspaper out of Cincinnati. This group eventually established Eleutherian College, a school that taught Whites and Blacks, men and women all the in the same room. (PHOTO)

There were several children educated here on how to read and write. One young lady came with scars on her lips; she reported that her mouth had been sewn shut at one time by her owner.

One of the conductors was Lyman Hoyt. He lived just down from the college. His daughter later in life tells of things that happened in her home and the community. She reports that as a child she had heard rumors of bad men doing things in the community. Her father snuck out many nights; she knew this because she shared a room with her parents and often heard her mother cry when he left. She was convinced her father was one of these bad men. One morning, a noise awoke her. She went to the barn and found a family of Blacks there. She quietly left; her father saw her, questioning what she was doing. She stated only feeding the chickens. Later that day he set her down and told her what he was doing, why, and why she mustn't tell anyone of what she saw for there was grave danger in helping.

Many people from Lancaster had relationships with those in Madison. John Tibbets of the Neils Creek group worked with George DeBaptiste; one night in 1845, a lot of ten were needing transportation.

In Grant County, the Weaver Settlement was an African American community with strong oral traditions surrounding the UGRR. In Jonesboro there was a free labor store. These goods were made with no slave labor.

In Orland, several men were arrested for violating the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. In 1850 The Fugitive Slave Law was passed which made it easier to capture runaway slaves and punish those who helped. This forced many to stop participating; still others ran north to Canada to escape punishment. If a "slave" was caught, all the slave owner had to do was testify that the person was a slave. The Black person could not testify in their own defense. Captain Berry, Benjamin Waterhouse and three others were arrested. Waterhouse was the only one convicted of violating the Act. He got 1 hour in jail and a \$30 fine; makes you kinda wonder about the judge.

In 1853 John Freeman of Indianapolis was arrested for being a slave. He was a wealthy, Black business leader for years. A man from Missouri came to Indianapolis and identified Freeman as his escaped slave "Sam." Freeman was jailed and awaited trial. He hired Clavin Fletcher to defend him. His lawyers went south to Freeman's home and got testimonies of people who knew him, then to Kentucky where Sam was enslaved. The other enslaved African American told the lawyers Sam was in Ohio, so they went to Ohio. They found that in Ohio Sam changed his name and became a vocal abolitionist. After the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, he fled to Canada. The lawyers found him in Canada. With all of this testimony, Freedman was eventually freed and cleared of being a slave, but this scared many Blacks to leave Indiana for Canada.

As a result of this, Indiana passed "An Act to Prevent Manstealing." This required a warrant for the slave with a full description in the warrant and a trial to prove the person was a slave. The Black person could testify at these cases.

When you observe the map of major Underground Railroad routes in Indiana in 1848 you notice a sharp eastern turn in the route leading from Rensselaer north as if to avoid the Great Kankakee Swamplands. The southern border of Lake County, Indiana was occupied deep Marsh & Timber Islands. No roads traversed this area on the 1852 map. (MAP)

The proximity of northcentral & northwestern Indiana to the large African American population in Cass County, Michigan accounted for many experiences shared across the state line. One such shared experience was the South Bend Fugitive Slave Case of 1849. The

South Bend Fugitive Slave Case of 1849 concerned the capture of runaways residing in Cass County, Michigan by southern slave catchers. The capture was aborted in St. Joseph County, Indiana and tried in federal court in South Bend, Indiana.

James Washington and Matthew Sawyer were both African Americans who resided and maintained barber shops in South Bend before the Civil War. Both men were solicitors and conductors on the Underground Railroad. Aaron Webster relates that upon one occasion when passing Sawyer's barbershop Sawyer stopped him and whispered a few words, upon which Webster gave him some money. It turns out there was concealed fugitive whose master was in South Bend. Webster's money obtained a livery rig and that night, while his master slept, the slave was driven to Niles, put on a passing train, and was a free man.

The Bartlett family of South Bend played a pivotal role in soliciting funds for the Underground Railroad. Within a year after the completion of the Bartlett home in 1851, Uncle Tom's Cabin was published. Mrs. Bartlett soon organized a women's literary society to discuss the novel and raise funds for the Underground Railroad. No evidence exists that the Bartlett family transported runaways from the home. However, the aforementioned James Washington's barber shop was actually located above the Bartlett family's grocery and bakery. (PHOTO)

In 1857 Dred Scott sued his slave owner who had taken him north of the 36 degree line. Scott, a black slave from Missouri, claimed his freedom on the basis of seven years of residence in a free state and a free territory. When the predominately proslavery Supreme Court of the United States heard Scott's case and declared that not only was he still a slave but that the main law guaranteeing that slavery would not enter the new Midwestern territories of the United States was unconstitutional, it sent America into convulsions. The Court also said Blacks were not citizens of the US and that Congress had no power to regulate slavery. This sparked debate and violence.

In 1859 John Brown raided Harper's Ferry, a federal arsenal to spark a revolt of Virginia slaves. It failed and he was executed. Brown actually traveled through the State of Indiana trying to raise funds for his work. We are uncertain of how much money he actually raised.

In 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected president. In December of 1860 South Carolina seceded; others joined in January. On February 4, 1861 the Confederate States of America was formed.

In 1862 Congress abolished slavery in DC and all Territories. Notice how I did not say in any states.

Lincoln offered the south a plan. It led to the gradual emancipation with compensation by the federal government for all slaves to be free by 1900. The south ignored his plan.

To force the confederates back into the Union, Lincoln threatened to emancipate slaves in rebellious states. Notice I did not say everywhere. Kentucky allowed for slavery, but was not a rebellious state, so this threat would not have affected them. In September 1862, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. It state "On January 1, 1863 all persons held as slaves with in any state, or designated part of a state, the people where of shall be then in rebellion against the United States. Shall be the, henceforward, and forever free." But, if confederate state returned to the Union before January 1, 1863, slavery in those returning states would remain intact. This also did not affect Kentucky. Finally, think about who he really freed. He had no control over the southern states. He could not enforce his directive.

Obviously the southern states wanted nothing to do with this. The ware continued until 1865. Slaves in the rebel states were freed at this time. The Constitution had to be amended to make Blacks citizens of the country and have the right to vote. The 13th Amendment made slavery illegal. The 14th Amendment made all Blacks born in the United States citizens. The 15th gave Black men, the right to vote.

We don't hear much about the UGRR after this, for good reason. There was no need for it. Some historians were doing research as early as 1880s about anti-slavery, but since historians only talk to each other, most of us did not hear about this research.

In 1998 the US Congress decided that the National Park Service, who manages historic sites throughout the US, should establish the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program. The Park Service did preliminary research, established guidelines for research, and challenged the SHPO offices to do statewide research to begin to identify every Underground Railroad site. Indiana was the only SHPO to take up this challenge, because no money was offered to do the work. We created the Indiana Freedom Trails in 1999. Our office organized volunteers from throughout the state to begin research on this topic. Because the park Service has not offered us any money to do the work, we are relying on volunteers to do the work in their individual counties.

If you would like to volunteer to conduct research, contact us (my email) and we'll get you started.