

Chapter 162 - An “Underground Railroad” Assists The Runaways

Time: 1826 Forward

Abolitionist Levi Coffin Initiates The Underground Railroad



Map Showing Major Underground Railroad Routes

A critical challenge facing runaway slaves lies in settling on a route that will carry them to the North or to other safe havens such as Canada, Mexico or Cuba.

At first, this is a matter of sheer trial and error – scouting for backroads free of patrols, coming upon abandoned shelters and accessible sources of food, lucking into encounters with sympathetic travelers willing to offer hidden rides in wagons or boats. Over time, however, the “best” escape routes are identified and passed, by word of mouth, back to the Southern plantations, farms and towns.

The next stage involves the emergence of willing conspirators who risk their own personal safety by attempting to aid the runaways. Included here are both white and black men and women, bonded by a humanitarian desire to free the slaves. Their role will be to map out routes from various starting points in the South, find and maintain reliable rest stops along the way, and, in some cases, share the physical risks of guiding the runaways in person along the paths chosen.

As this clandestine support system takes shape, it is christened by slaves and sponsors alike as the “Underground Railroad.” The analogy is apt – with wagons serving as trains, the routes as tracks, guides as conductors and rest stops as stations.

Early western passengers on this “railroad” often begin their journey to freedom from Kentucky, making their way north to the Ohio River and from there into Indiana or Ohio. Many end up at the Quaker settlement of Newport, Indiana, at the home of Levi Coffin, who plays a central role from 1826 forward in setting up and running the Underground network.

Coffin is a North Carolina man by birth, and a cousin of the abolitionist leader, Lucretia Coffin Mott. His Quaker upbringing teaches him to abhor slavery, and in 1826 he moves his family to

Newport, where he founds a lucrative dry good business, and funnels much of his energy and wealth into ending slavery and assimilating blacks into white society. His efforts are opposed by locals who want to keep slaves and freedmen alike out of Indiana, and by bounty-hunters who are forever at his home hoping to retrieve hidden runaways. Coffin's efforts on their behalf earn him the early title of "President of the Underground Railroad."

But Coffin's fame for conceiving of the railroad system is matched by a host of others who play vital roles in making it operate successfully. Foremost among them is a youthful runaway named Harriet Tubman.

Sidebar: Levi Coffin's Recollection

Starting in 1826, Levi Coffin begins to harbor fugitive slaves at his home in the Quaker settlement of Newport, Indiana, thereby initiating an escape network that becomes known as the Underground Railroad. Over time an estimated 3,000 blacks pass through Coffin's residence, with its ten-person crawlspace hidden behind a maid's closet. In 1876 Coffin reflects on the inner workings of his "grand central station" in Newport.

I soon became extensively known to the friends of slaves at different points on the Ohio River, where fugitives generally crossed...heading toward Canada.

Three principal lines converged at my house, one from Cincinnati, from Madison and Jefferson, Indiana. The roads were always in running order, depots were established, the conductors active and zealous, and there was no lack of passengers. We knew not what night nor hour we would be roused from slumber by a gentle rap at the door...the signal announcing the arrival of a train, for the Underground Railroad locomotive did not whistle.

Outside in the cold or rain, there would be a two horse wagon, loaded with (2-17) fugitives. I would invite them to come in...then fasten the door, cover the windows and build a good fire. After my wife prepared victuals...they would rest on pallets before the fire the rest of the night.

I would accompany the conductor of the train to the stable, and care for the horses that had, perhaps, been driven twenty-five or thirty miles that night, through the cold and rain.

Fugitives often come in rags, footsore, toil-worn, and almost wild, having been out for several months, traveling at night, hiding in thickets during the day, often being lost and making little headway, nearly perishing, and afraid of every white person they saw, even after they came into the free state.

Time: 1849-51 forward

“General” Harriet Tubman Sets The Standard For Running The Railroad

If Coffin deserves the president’s title, it is Harriet Tubman who emerges as the leading field “General” in the Underground Railroad. She endures the greatest risks of all and exhibits the greatest courage – a runaway slave willing to venture back into enemy territory to act as personal “conductor” for others seeking freedom.

While Coffin is fifty-two years old in 1850, Tubman remains a young woman of 27-30 years, according to various records.

Her birth name is Araminta Ross and her parents are both slaves on a plantation in Dorchester County, Delaware, owned by Edward Brodess. As a child, she is handed around to several masters, all of whom prove to be stern disciplinarians and “Minty,” as she is called, is scarred for life by constant whippings. During her teen years, she also receives a severe blow to her head when accidentally struck by a heavy weight thrown at a fellow slave – a wound which leads to seizures the rest of her life.

Around 1844, she marries John Tubman, a free black, and assumes her mother’s name, Harriet (“Rit”), which some link to a broader religious epiphany at the time. Despite being the wife of a freedman, her status as a slave is unchanged. In early March 1849, a threat from Brodess to sell her leads to a prayer on her part:

O Lord, if you ain’t never going to change that man’s heart, kill him, Lord, and take him out of the way.

Edward Brodess does in fact die shortly, and in deep debt. Harriet is now owned by his daughter, Eliza, who puts her and two of her brothers up for sale. When she learns of this, she swears to escape.

There’s two things I got a right to and these are Death and Liberty. One or the other I mean to have. No one will take me back alive. I shall fight for my liberty, and when the time has come for me to go, the Lord will let them kill me.

The chance to flee doesn’t come until September 17, 1849, when all three siblings escape from a plantation in Caroline County, Maryland, where they have been working on loan to help pay off prior debts. The three hide out over the next few weeks, during which time, Eliza Brodess takes out an ad in the *Cambridge Democrat*, offering rewards of \$50 to \$100 apiece for their returns. Included is her description of Harriet:

Minty, aged about twenty-seven, is of a chestnut color, fine looking, and about five feet high.

The three runaways are terrified at this point, and actually return to the plantation; but the stay is brief before Harriet decides to set out again, this time on her own.

Her brothers did not agree with her plans and she walked off alone, following the guidance of the brooks which she had observed, to run North. The evening before she left, she wished very much to bid her companions farewell, but was afraid of being betrayed, so she passed through the streets singing, "Good bye, and I'll meet you in the kingdom," and similar snatches of Methodist songs.

While she never reveals the details of her escape, speculation is that her first stop is probably a Quaker community near the plantation, followed by a trek along the Choptank River into Delaware and north from there into the Free State of Pennsylvania. Her journey is roughly 90 miles long and lasts 2-3 weeks. She is aided along the way by good Samaritans manning outposts of the Underground Railroad.

Harriet settles into her newfound freedom in Philadelphia, working when she can, saving her money, keeping her head down in case of pursuit, and plotting ways to help the rest of her family to escape.

In December 1850, three months after the Fugitive Slave Act becomes law, she makes the first of her many courageous returns to the South, this time to Baltimore to shepherd her niece, Kessiah Bolley, and her two children, to Philadelphia. In the Spring of 1851 she repeats this same rescue routine on behalf of three more slaves, including her brother, Moses. She later brings out three more of her siblings and her parents.

With her own underground railroad network set up between Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania, Harriet Tubman will carry out some thirteen expeditions into hostile territory, involving the removal of seventy slaves.

She often brings a revolver with her, earning the nickname "the General" to go along with her "conductor" moniker as "Moses." The gun is both for defense and to encourage everyone to keep up the pace. When asked if she ever shot anyone, she mentions one incident involving a man in her party.

He gave out the second night, saying he couldn't go any further, and would rather go back and die...I told the boys to get their guns ready and shoot him. They'd have done it in a minute; but when he heard that, he jumped right up and went on as well as anybody.

Her escape plans, however, rely much more on deception than force. She favors winter months and Saturday night, when overseers and patrols are at an ebb. She teaches her charges how to react in public if they sense a threat – posing as servants, appearing to be able to read a newspaper, feigning demeanors unlikely to sound alarms. Days are for hiding; nights for travel, especially across high visibility bridges and cross-roads. The fewer that know of her plans, the better, and her trust is hard earned by consistency and reliability.

She is also able to wear whatever personal mask is demanded to make her way.

Her personal appearance is very peculiar. She is thoroughly negro and very plain. She has needed disguise so often that she seems to have command over her face, and can banish all expression from her features, and look so stupid that nobody would suspect her of knowing enough to be dangerous; but her eye flashes with intelligence and power when she is roused.

She finds the hand of the Deity at work in all her actions. Her visions are of the “mysterious Unseen Presence” and, when in danger, she relies on “drawing in my breath and sending it out to the Lord.” A friend observes, “I never met any person of any color who had more confidence in the voice of God, as spoken direct to her soul.”

As her “conductor” work continues and her fame spreads, she is thrown into contact with all of the leading black and white abolitionists of her time – including John Brown, with whom it’s likely she conspires in planning his 1858 armed raid at Harper’s Ferry.

When the Civil War breaks out, Harriet Tubman becomes an active participant, serving under General David Hunter in Hilton Head, South Carolina, first as a hospital nurse, then as a scout mapping backwoods trails, and finally as an armed guide for troops attacking local plantations. For her war service, she is eventually awarded a pension and is buried with full military honors in 1913 on the farm she bought from William Seward in 1859 at Auburn, New York.

Time: 1850’s Forward

The Underground Railroad Runs Across The North And Into Canada

While Harriet Tubman and Levi Coffin emerge as two towering figures in the Underground Railroad, its success depends on a host of other participants, across races and genders, who keep the trains running, often at dire risk to their personal safety.

The majority are forever nameless, especially the good Samaritans across the South who provide hidden transportation, food and other supplies, and encouragement between one “station” and the next. Their anonymity is shared with the local “conductors” and “station masters” who dodge the

“patterollers” and bounty hunters, and without whom, the runaways would never make it over the line to safe houses in the North.

Those whose records have survived tend to oversee “terminal stations” in cities scattered just above the Mason-Dixon line and the Ohio River. Their roles are also crucial, welcoming the frightened escapees, receiving updates on conditions within the routes, making fixes to “broken lines,” and helping the process of assimilation into new surroundings.

With the advent of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, the threat level at these terminals goes way up. Many homes and other shelters for runaways are widely known and become magnets for Southern “agents” eager to snatch up slaves and freedmen alike. In response, leaders of the Underground Railroad join hands with other abolitionists in forming local “vigilance committees” to hide runaways and fend off potential captors.

Between the 1820’s and the Civil War, thousands of slaves will work their way to safety and freedom, thanks to the heroic figures who operate the trains. A few are remembered below.

Some Of The Best Known Leaders Of The Underground Railroad

Names	Race	Dates	Station In:	Profile
Isaac T. Hopper	white	1771-1852	New York	Hicksite Quaker, Anti-Slavery Society in NY, depot work plus advisor to blacks on assimilating.
Thomas Garrett	white	1789-1871	Delaware	Quaker, abolitionist and RR depot in slave state, supports H. Tubman, expects violence to end slavery, fined repeatedly, heroic RR supporter.
Josiah Henson	black	1789-1883	Ontario	Md slave, escapes to Ontario in 1830 for rest of life, sets up black Dawn Settlement for runaways.
John Rankin	white	1793-1886	Ripley. OH	Presbyterian minister, link to Theo Weld at Lane, Rankin House right across Ohio R, \$3000 bounty on him, Garrison calls him “my anti-slavery father,” 35 years as RR conductor.
Levi Coffin	white	1798-1877	Indiana	Born in NC, Quaker, abolitionist, runs main depot in west, called “president of the Underground RR”
Stephan Myers	black	1800-1870	Albany	Ex-slave, freed at 18, journalist & founds North Star association, runs Albany station from 1842 on.
Abraham Shadd	black	1801-1882	Delaware	Born free, shoemaker, conductor in Delaware, moves to Ontario in 1850’s where welcomes runaways.

Laura Haviland	white	1808-1898	Michigan	Canadian Quaker goes to US, founds first Anti-Slavery Society in Michigan in 1832, goes South as “conductor,” run Underground RR in Michigan
Samuel Burris	black	1809-1863	Delaware	Born free, goes South as conductor, caught & jailed but backers “buy” him at auction, works with Hunn.
Robert Purvis	black	1810-1898	Philadelphia	Abolitionist leader married to Harriet Forten, heads Pa. Anti-Slavery Soc, and Vigilance Committee.
Lewis Hayden	black	1811-1889	Boston	Escapes from Ky through Ripley OH and to Canada, abolitionist lecturer in Boston, houses Ellen & Wm Craft.
Charles T. Torrey	white	1813-1846	Washington	Congregational minister, leads split with Garrison, political link to Smith, runs depot in DC, arrested and dies of TB in jail.
Jermain Loguen	black	1813-1872	Syracuse	Runaway from Tenn, studies at Oneida, opens black schools, bishop in AME, speaker, Syracuse depot.
William Lambert	black	1817-1890	Detroit	Born free, Quaker education, tailor biz in Detroit, Colored Vigilant Com, Canada route, link to radicals Henry G. Garnett and John Brown.
John Jones	black	1817-1900	Elmira, NY	Escapes from Va. to Elmira, from 1851 on funnels slaves to Canada.
John Hunn	white	1818-1894	Delaware	Quaker, farmer, works with Thomas Garret and Samuel Burris on the Underground RR, fined into poverty for abolition activities.
William Still	black	1821-1902	Philadelphia	Mother a runaway, joins Vigilance Committee in 1847, credited with saving 800+ via his Philly station.
Harriet Tubman	black	1822-1913	Philadelphia	Abused slave in MD, runs away, returns South as heroic “conductor,” called Moses and the General, linked to John Brown raid & abolitionists.