



Learning on the Great Lakes Seaway Trail

One of America's Byways

History Lesson #8

Subject: Social Studies - History of the Underground Railroad in Northern New York

Grade Level: 4 - 6

Name: Irene Sullivan

Anticipatory Set:

Ask the students what was slavery in the nineteenth century? As the students if they have ever heard of the Underground Railroad?

New York State Standards:

Social Studies:

Standard 1.1, 1.2 - History of the United States and New York

Objectives:

Students will learn about the Underground Railroad and how people in Northern New York participated. Students will read two books about the Underground Railroad and be asked to write a journal entry as if they helped and assisted escaped slaves in route to Canada. They will also create a quilt patch of their home.

Purpose:

Students will understand how the underground railroad worked and how important it was to have people in Northern New York play an active role in making the underground railroad so successful.

Summary:

In the nineteenth century slavery served as a vital economic base to southern landowners, who relied upon slavery as cheap labor. The slaves were considered very important in the cotton trade because a trained slave was worth about \$2,500 to a cotton plantation landowner. In 1787 the United States adopted in the Constitution a law to protect the rights of the slave owners to slave property through out the Union. In 1793 the first Fugitive Slave Act was passed. The law stated that slaveholders could retrieve their slave property from free states and territories. There was a \$500 fine for rescuing, harboring or hindering the arrest of fugitive slaves. This law was an attempt to discourage slaves from running away and also was to discourage anyone from assisting a fugitive slave from escaping his or her owners.

In 1819-1820 the state of Missouri needed to decide whether the state should enter the Union as a slave or free state. The free states were predominating with religious groups like the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) who were against slavery. Many of the abolitionists became part of the organized Underground Railroad between 1830 and 1861. Southerners were outraged that escaping slaves were receiving assistance from so many sources and that they were allowed to live and work in the North and in Canada.

In 1850 Congress amended the Fugitive Slave Act where it demanded that if an escaped slave was sighted, he or she had to be apprehended and turned in to the



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authorities for deportation back to the rightful owner in the south. The fine for assisting a fugitive slave went up to \$1,000 and six months in jail. People in the free states called this Act a “Bloodhound Bill”. The Act made it possible and profitable to hire slave catchers to find and arrest runaways. In some black communities in the North both fugitive slaves and legally free blacks were being taken back to the South. The kidnappings and seizures upset people in the North and persuaded those opposed to slavery to assist those who wanted to escape.

Underground Railroad:

As the Fugitive Slave Act went into law the abolitionists assisted slaves regardless of the consequences. The abolitionists consisted of primarily Quakers, ex-slaves and other liberal thinking citizens who established the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was a network of people who helped runaway slaves find freedom. The railroad stretched for thousands of miles, from Kentucky and Virginia across Ohio and Indiana. In the north it stretched from Maryland, across Pennsylvania and into New York and through New England. It brought together men and women of both races and gave them the opportunity to work together on issues of mutual concerns. The railroad was a complex communication system that consisted of individual acts of bravery and suffering.

The railroad consisted of safe houses. The houses had secret passageways, sliding wall panels and hidden rooms. They used wagons with hidden spaces for the slaves to hide. The average distance for a slave to travel from one safe house to another was about 10 to 15 miles. It is estimated that in the decade before the Civil War, the Underground Railroad was responsible for helping approximately 70,000 slaves escape and safely make it to Canada.

It is considered folklore that places that were safe houses would hang a quilt as a sign that their home was a safe house. It is also been said that some of the quilts had hidden messages for traveling slaves on where to go from one place to another. Since most of the Underground Railroad activities were not recorded it is hard to say if any of this was true.

William Still, a freeborn black was one of its legendary leaders of the Underground Railroad. He was a member of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society and also the director of the General Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia. He helped fund Harriet Tubman’s raids. He established a network of safe houses, maintained contacts along the routes from the upper South to Canada.

Harriet Tubman escaped a Maryland plantation in 1849 and moved to the province of Ontario; later she moved to Auburn, New York. Tubman made 19 missions into slavery strongholds to assist fugitive slaves out of the south traveling through a network of houses, businesses, and other hiding places throughout the north to freedom in Canada. She was known to have helped rescue over 300 slaves from the south.

Frederick Douglass was a famous ex-slave who used his own home in Rochester as one of the stations for fugitive slaves. He was the publisher of the *North Star* and the *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. He helped recruit African American troops for the Union Army.



William Lloyd Garrison was an abolitionist who worked on the paper founded by Benjamin Lundy; *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*. In 1831 Garrison published his own newspaper the *Liberator* until 1865. Garrison gave a number of speeches against slavery.

Gerrit Smith had an estate in Peterboro, New York. He played a major role in the operations of the Underground Railroad by using his estate as a safe haven for runaway slaves enroute to Canada.

John Brown owned a wool brokerage business in Springfield, Massachusetts. He heard of Gerrit Smith's plan to give parcels of land in upstate New York to free African Americans. Brown purchased land in Lake Placid, New York from Smith, he and his family moved there where he became an active conductor on the Underground Railroad. On October 16, 1859 Brown and 21 other men captured the U.S. arsenal at Harper's Ferry. This was his first step in liberating slaves. The next morning, Robert E. Lee and his men recaptured the Harper's Ferry. Brown was hanged December 2, 1859 for the crime of treason.

Underground Railroad houses in Northern New York:

Central and Northern New York was part of the Underground Railroad. The cities of Syracuse and Oswego were the hub of New York's freedom trail. Fugitives would head to Cape Vincent and other local areas to cross over to Canada.

John Johnson: Wool carder in Gouverneur and Hailesboro mills settled about 1830 on the Gouverneur Somerville Road. He worked the mills during the day and at night he was known to take passengers through Rossie to Hammond for a rendezvous along the St. Lawrence River.

David Aspinwall: Constableville, New York - Was said to have harbored slaves overnight as they were enroute to Canada.

Jonathan Collins: Constableville, New York- had a large room in his colonial home where it was concealed by thick wall planks to hide its short-term visitors.

Jesse Babcock: Dexter, New York, built his home in 1833. He was a cotton mill superintendent. Later he operated a linseed oil mill and converted it into a plaster mill. He then erected a flourmill. Babcock offered his home as a safe haven. He also contracted with the Union Army to feed recruits at Sackets Harbor.

Grenadier Island: According to Nellie Casler, a historian for the town of Cape Vincent, there was a house on the island that had a hidden room for fugitive slaves.

Point Peninsula: According to the late John Carlisle, there is a house out on the peninsula that was a safe haven for runaway slaves.

Benton-Bonaparte house: Oxbow, NY. The house was known to have cells in the basement to hide travelers and also had a tunnel that lead to the Oswegatchie River.

Webster house: South Hammond - In the house they found in the attic a book containing entries about the railroad.

Myron Cushman's house, Rock Island Road Gouverneur

Chauncey Doane's House (1831) Richville – He was a farmer and cheesemaker who provided hiding in a small room in the juncture above three fireplaces.



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Soloman Currie South Russell – Helped a group of slaves escape during a riot one Halloween night.

Temperance Tavern (Ralph Chamberlain house) Waddington – Ralph Chamberlain was said to have been a “Station master”. It has been stated that slaves hid behind furniture stored in closets under the eaves of a third floor ballroom.

David Ogden’s house Waddington – The house had hideaways in the archways and cellars of the house.

Station 206 – Constable - This led to land border crossings in the Fort Covington Region.

Underground Railroad Code Words:

Agent: coordinator, plotting course of escape, making contacts.

Baggage: Escaping slaves

Brakeman: Person in charge of making contacts to fugitive slaves.

Bundles of wood: Fugitives to be expected

Canaan/Heaven or Promised Land: Canada

Conductors: People who directly transported slaves.

Drinking gourd: Big Dipper and the North Star

Flying Bondsmen: The number of escaping slaves.

Forwarding: Taking fugitive slaves from one station to another.

Freedom Line: The route of travel for an escaped slave

Freedom Train/Gospel Train: The Underground Railroad

French Leave: Secret departure

Jumping Off Place: A place of shelter for fugitives

Load of Potatoes: Escaping slaves hidden under the farm produce in a wagon.

Moses: Harriet Tubman

Operator: A person who aided fugitive slaves as a conductor or agent on the Underground Railroad.

Parcel: Fugitives to be expected

Patter Roller: A bounty hunter hired to capture slaves

Pilot: A person serving as a guide for runaways.

Preachers: leaders, speakers of the Underground Railroad

River Jordan: The Mississippi

Scattered Way Wagons: A number of hiding places

Shepherds: people escorting slaves

Station: place of safety and temporary refuge, safe house

Station Master: keeper of the safe house

Stockholder: donor of money, clothing, or food to the Underground Railroad.

Phrases:

“The wind blows from the South today” A warning to Underground Railroad workers that fugitive slaves were in the area. Also, a warning of slave bounty hunters nearby.

“A friend with friends” A password used to signal arrival of fugitives with Underground Railroad conductor.



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“The friend of a friend sent me” A password used by fugitives traveling alone to indicate the Underground Railroad network sent them.

“The river bank makes a mighty good road” A reminder that the tracking dogs can't follow the scent through the water.

“The dead trees will show you the way” A reminder that moss grows on the North side of dead trees, just in case the stars were not visible.

“The river ends between two hills” A clue for the directions to the Ohio River.

“Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus” (words to a song) Was used to alert other slaves that an escape attempt was coming up.

Materials:

1. Two books the “Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt” and “Under the Quilt of Night” both by Deborah Hopkinson.
2. Construction paper
3. Markers and crayons
4. Glue
5. Other material to decorate their quilt patches

Teach:

1. Teach the students about the Underground Railroad and how it ran throughout Central and Northern New York.
2. Read the two books to the class. Discuss with the class how the slaves traveled from station to station. Discuss the risks that both the slaves and the people who helped them endured for their freedom.
3. Have the student take a piece of white paper and create a quilt patch of their home. The patches will be glued together to create a quilt. The quilt can be considered a map of safe houses for the runaway slave to use for guidance.
4. Instruct the students to write an essay or a journal entry of a time where the student helped a runaway slave. The essay or journal must contain the following:
 - a) Why are you against slavery?
 - b) Why you decided to help the runaway slaves knowing the danger you are placing your family in?
 - c) Where are you located? Do you live in Central New York? Do you live near the Canadian Border?
 - d) How did you help the runaway slaves? Do you go and guide runaway slaves to the North Country? Do you have a house with hidden rooms? Do you transport slaves from one station to another station? Do you help the slaves cross the Canadian Border?
 - e) What was it you gained from the experience helping runaway slaves?
5. The quilt can be displayed in the hallway with the essays and journal entries.

Guided Practice:

Assist the students in creating their quilt patch. Make sure students have a clear idea of the different roles people had on the Underground Railroad.



Closure:

Ask the students what was the Underground Railroad? What were some of the risks people faced on the Underground Railroad? Why were people willing to take these risks? Do you think the Underground Railroad had any influence on abolishing slavery in our country? What do you think the Canadians thought of the slavery laws?

Independent Practice:

Create an essay or journal entry of helping a slave on the Underground Railroad.

Extended Activities:

1. Take the students to a local Underground Railroad safe house if one is in your area. Take the students to a museum that may offer exhibits on the Underground Railroad.
2. Take the code words and create a word search worksheet for students to work on.
3. Have the students write a play about the Underground Railroad and perform it for other classes. Or use the play from the book "15 Plays About Famous Americans" by Carol Pugliano-Martin. There is a short play about Harriet Tubman in the book.
4. Have the students learn more about the constellations. The runaway slaves depended on the North Star as guidance on their way to the North for freedom. Have the students create their own constellations of animals or other objects.

Web Sites:

1. <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/ugrrhome.htm>
The web site gives a great summary on slavery and the Underground Railroad. On the "Lists of Sites" link you will find Underground Railroad houses that are listed by state. This site is great place for teachers and students to visit together.
2. <http://www.history.rochester.edu/class/ugrr/hor1.html>
The web site has a brief summary that is great for students to learn about how the Underground Railroad got started. The site also offers information on the Rochester's role in the Underground Railroad.
3. <Http://www.nyhistory.com/ugrr>
The web site has a number of things to check out. The site has a map of New York's Underground Railroad. The site gives a list of names of people involved in the Underground Railroad by town and county. The list contains mostly of people from the central part of New York.



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4. <http://home.earthlink.net/~lthorn/ugrr.html>
The Underground Railroad in Northern New York – The site is a lesson idea that I used for this lesson. The lesson asked students where would they hide a slave. The site shows samples of the students' work. The site also gives a list of other links to go to and a great list of books.
5. <http://www.antiquequilt dating.com/ugrr.html>
This web site is about how some believe that quilts were used as messengers for fleeing slaves. It talks about how quilts made with certain colors and patterns to give directions were hung on the porch. It is a great site for teachers to visit to find out more about the quilts and the Underground Railroad.
6. <http://www.macomb.k12.mi.us/ugrr/jhlesson1.htm>
This is a lesson plan that uses books and the idea of the quilt in the activity. It is a great lesson plan idea that is worth checking out.

Resources:

1. “15 Plays About Famous Americans” Carol Pugliano-Martin, Scholastic, Inc., 2002, ISBN – 0439323339 (Emergent Readers)
2. “Runaway Slaves Made Final Stops Here En Route to Freedom in Canada” Dave Shampine, Watertown Daily Times, March 5, 2000 G2
3. “Follow the North Star”, John Golden, Watertown Daily Times, February 17, 2002, G2
4. “North to Liberty, the Story of the Underground Railroad”, Anne Terry White, Arcade Books, March 1972, ASIN 081164801x
5. “Beyond the River: A True Story of the Underground Railroad” Ann Hagedorn, Simon & Schuster, Jan 2003, ISBN 0684870657
6. “Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom”, Catherine Clinton, Little Brown, Feb 2004, ISBN 0316144924

Books for Children:

1. “Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt”, Deborah Hopkinson, Dragonfly Books, Aug. 1995, ISBN 0679874720 (ages 4-8)
2. “Under the Quilt of Night”, Deborah Hopkinson, Atheneum Books, Jan 2002, ISBN 0689822278 (ages 4-8)
3. “Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky”, Faith Ringgold, J. Davis, Dragonfly Books, Dec. 1995, ISBN 0517885433
4. “The Secret to Freedom”, Marcia K. Vaughan, Larry Johnson, Lee & Low Books, May 2001, ISBN 1584300213 (ages 4-8)
5. “If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad” Ellen Levine, Scholastic, Feb 1993, ISBN 0590451561 (ages 9-12)
6. “Get on Board: the Story of the Underground Railroad”, James Haskins, Sagebrush Education Resources, Oct 1999, ISBN 0785755179 (ages 9-12)



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7. "The Drinking Gourd" F.N. Monjo, Sagebrush Education Resources, Oct 1999, ISBN 0808593153 (ages 4-8)
8. "Escape From Slavery; Five Journeys to Freedom", Doreen Rappaport, Jan 1999, ISBN 0064461696 (ages 9-12)
9. "Bound for the North Star: True Stories of Fugitive Slaves", Dennis B. Fradin, Clarion Books, Oct 2000, ISBN 0395970172 (young adult)