

Myths of the Underground Railroad

In school, we learn history through stories, and sometimes we find out that some of these stories are not true. They are myths. One example is that Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492. In fact, other Europeans, like the Vikings, had been to the New World years before. Another famous myth is story of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. It is a great story about how our first President was honest even as a child. But, there is no evidence that the young George ever chopped down his father's cherry tree. It's just a story. Not history.

The Underground Railroad is a great story in American history. People, both black and white, formed a secret network that helped enslaved African Americans escape to freedom. Unfortunately, a lot of what we learn is not true.

Myth: Most of the “workers” on the Underground Railroad were white abolitionists.

Truth:

In fact, most people who helped escaping slaves were free blacks or escaped slaves. And even though the whites who helped runaways were abolitionists who wanted to end slavery, not all abolitionists supported the Underground Railroad. Many abolitionists, in fact, were against helping slaves escape. They did not believe in breaking the law and wanted to find a legal way to end slavery.

Myth: The first “stops” along the Underground Railroad were found in the South.

Truth:

The Underground Railroad did not exist as an organization in the south. Slaves rarely received any help until they reached a free, Northern State. They had to reach freedom on their own, which they usually did by foot.

Myth: Many slaves escaped from the Deep South.

Truth:

Because runaway slaves could not expect any help until they got to a free state, it was more difficult for slaves in the Deep South like Alabama and Louisiana to make it to freedom. Slaves in the Deep South had much further to go, and they had to do most of the traveling on foot. As a result, most slaves who successfully escaped were from states in the upper south like Kentucky and Virginia, where they had a better chance of making it to bordering free states like Ohio and receive help from members of the Underground Railroad.

Myth: There were distinct routes along the Underground Railroad that slaves followed.

Truth:

The Underground Railroad was a loose network of houses and people, and slaves reached their destinations in different ways. If there had been one route that was used regularly, the slave catchers would have known about it and would have shut it down. There were likely almost as many routes as escaping slaves.

Myth: Most people in the North supported the Underground Railroad and welcomed runaway slaves into their states.

Truth:

Only a small minority of people in the North worked on – and even supported – the Underground Railroad. In fact, many did not welcome fugitives into their states. In 1804, Ohio passed a law prohibiting runaway slaves from entering the state.

Myth: Most slaves knew of the term “Underground Railroad.”

Truth:

Although slaves had been escaping since they were brought to the New World, the loose “network” of routes and safe

houses began to emerge in the 19th century. And the term “Underground Railroad” was not coined until about 1840. But this term was used mostly in the North. Most slaves in the South would not have been familiar with the term.

Myth: Enslaved African Americans depended on others, like Harriet Tubman coming to their plantation, to help them make their escape.

Truth: Enslaved African Americans were not passive in their escapes. They planned and carried out their own escapes, usually alone.

Myth: Slaves made quilts that had specific symbols – or codes – that helped slaves escape. Slaves used the quilts since many of them were illiterate.

Truth:

People in the 1800s, including slaves, made quilts. Sometimes these quilts had symbols in them, but they were not secret codes that helped runaway slaves. The story of the Secret Quilt Code began with a book called *Hidden in Plain View* published in 1999. Before then, there was no talk about a Secret Quilt Code. In all the interviews with freed slaves done in the 1930s, no one mentioned the Code, and since 1999, many historians have disputed the truth to the story. It is also unrealistic to expect that slaves could gather the material and make a quilt fast enough to help escaping slaves. Escaping slaves certainly did not carry quilts with them in their escape to freedom – they were just too heavy.

Myth: Enslaved African Americans had many spirituals like “Follow the Drinking Gourd” that contained coded information that helped slaves escape.

Truth:

While spirituals were passed orally from slave to slave, there is no evidence that the songs were used to help others escape. If a song had given slaves a route to follow to freedom, like the “Follow the Drinking Gourd” was supposed to have done, slave owners and bounty hunters could easily learn of it and promptly shut the route down. The truth is that the lyrics and the chorus were written by Lee Hays and first published in 1947 — well after the Civil War had ended.

Myth: Quakers were heavily involved in the Underground Railroad because slavery was against their religious principles.

Truth:

There were Quakers involved in the Underground Railroad, the most famous being Levi Coffin who later called himself the “Father of the Underground Railroad.” However, not all Quakers were involved in the Underground Railroad. Many Quakers did not believe that breaking the law to help fugitive slaves was a solution to slavery. Some Quakers had even been slave owners themselves.

Myth: A lantern in a window was a common sign used to identify a safe house along the Underground Railroad.

Truth:

The famous stationmaster John Rankin used this secret “sign” to signal that it was safe to cross the Ohio River to his home. However, this was not a common signal. If it had been, the slave catchers would have quickly learned of it, and used it to identify safe houses.

Myth: All slaves who escaped went to the North.

Truth: While many slaves ventured for free northern states and Canada, some escaped to places like Florida to rural, isolated communities of blacks in the South.

Myth:

A significant percentage of enslaved African Americans escaped on the Underground Railroad.

Truth:

While the number is often debated, some believe that as many as 100,000 slaves escaped on the Underground Railroad between 1800 and 1865. However, this is only a tiny percentage of the slaves living in the South during this period. For example, in 1860, there were nearly four million slaves in the South. Additionally, the majority of slaves who attempted to escape were caught and returned to their owners.

Just because some of the stories about the Underground Railroad are myths does not undermine the fact that thousands of slaves escaped to freedom. Many people put their own lives and their own freedoms at risk by helping slaves escape, and their only reward was the happiness of seeing a person free.