

The Underground Railroad

How the College Played A Role In Helping Runaway Slaves

By Anthony Hebron

At Dawn One morning in the mid-1840s, Ben Henderson of Jacksonville began preparing to deliver some cradles to Springfield. Henderson, a black man, was a former slave who paid his master \$250 for his freedom before settling in Jacksonville.

But before Henderson had loaded his wagon, two runaway slaves—a man and a woman—came to his home and asked for help on their journey to freedom. A bounty of \$1000 had been offered for the man.

Henderson put some hay in the bottom of his wagon and had the couple lie on it. He spread a wagon cover over them, then put more hay and his cradles on top.

During the day, Henderson drove around the Springfield city square, stopping and talking to people, before apparently taking the slaves to the home of a Springfield area man who could help them continue their daring journey to freedom.

No one ever suspected Henderson was risking his own freedom by breaking federal and state laws against harboring or assisting runaway slaves. His role was documented by Jacksonville author Julia Wolcott Carter in “The Underground Railroad”, a story of abolitionist activity in the area.

Henderson was just one of the hundreds of free blacks, Indians and whites who were allies in what came to be known as the “underground railroad”—an informal system that helped slaves flee to freedom.

The “railroad” network began sometime in the late 1700s, and continued until the late 1800s.

The goal for many slaves was Canada, but some settled in U.S. cities along the way, particularly Chicago and Philadelphia. Other slaves found refuge on Indian reservations in the Carolinas and elsewhere around the country.

The underground railroad “was the first civil rights, human rights and freedom movement for African-Americans in the country”, says Vivian Abdur-Rahim, founder of the Harriet Tubman Historical Society in Wilmington, Del. (Tubman was a legendary “conductor” on the underground railroad.)

“In that movement, just as in the second phase during the 1960s, we had all segments of the population involved working together for a common goal.”

As many as 100,000 runaway slaves may have used the underground railroad to reach freedom.

Traveling mostly at night, hundreds of slaves moved secretly through Sangamon, Adams, Menard, and Morgan counties and other parts of Illinois, historians say.

U.S. Rep. Peter Kostmayer, D-Pa. Has introduced legislation to establish a historic trail to preserve and link the houses and other structures used to hide slaves on their paths to freedom.

If that measure becomes law, several houses still standing in central Illinois would be on the trail. Those would include houses on Grove Street in Jacksonville, formally owned by Bezaleel Gillett and Asa Talcott; Jay Slater's rural Springfield residence; and Asa Cleaveland's Greenview home.

The term "underground railroad" is a bit of a misnomer. It originated in 1840, when a Kentucky farmer lost track of one of his fleeing slaves. He reportedly said the man must have gone "off an underground road."

The name changed to underground railroad because slaves escapes increased when railroads were built, and some underground railroad routes paralleled actual railroad lines.

Illinois was a major link in the underground railroad because of its location, and since by law it was a free state (although many slaves were held throughout Illinois and blacks could be kidnapped and enslaved at anytime).

Illinois was easy for slaves to reach because it was bordered by the slave states of Missouri, Kentucky and Tennessee. The state's boundaries are increased by the windings of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers.

An Article In The Western Citizen of Chicago on Nov. 16, 1843, for example, says a runaway slave from the state of Virginia followed the Ohio River to its mouth. He then went up the Mississippi River until reaching Alton, where he received "provisions" and was taken to Springfield.

Three to five underground railroad routes are believed to have existed in Illinois, stretching from Alton, Chester, Cairo and Quincy in zigzag lines to the Chicago area.

Many of the routes can be tracked by pinpointing the locations of African Methodist Episcopal and Congregational churches.

The Springfield and Jacksonville areas were heavily used by slaves traveling on the underground railroad, says Delores Saunders, author of "Illinois Liberty Lines (The History of the Under Ground Railroad)."

She says one route passing through Springfield began in Alton and linked up with Jerseyville, Waverly, Jacksonville, Springfield, Delavan, Varna and the Chicago suburbs. Other authors say a route passing through Springfield began in Chester, included Sparta, Silver Creek, and Reno, branching off from Springfield to cities like Galesburg and Ottawa.

It is said that there were underground railroad stations in Chatham, Rochester, Beardstown, Carlinville, Berlin and Waverly. Historians identify Luther Ransom, a white underground railroad agent, as being from Springfield. He is believed to have been the same man who platted Chatham.

Local Folklore has it that former houses in the vicinity of Rutledge and Carpenter streets were among many in Springfield where runaway slaves sometimes hid.

A freed black man called "Free", for instance, carried an unknown number of runaway slaves to Chicago by horseback on many occasions until he was shot and crippled while fighting three slavecatchers in Washington, Ill., Saunders says.

Samuel Pond of Greenview, called "Abolitionist Pond," used to pick up slaves from homes in Farmingdale by wagon and take them to his home. Pond hid the slaves in a barn until he considered it safe to take them by wagon to Forrest City in what is now Mason County. Asa Cleaveland, who, like his neighbor Pond, was white, reportedly kept runaway slaves either in his cellar or a barn until they could be taken by wagon to the next station to the north.

Slavemasters often hired slavecatchers or tried to recapture slaves themselves. Advertisements were placed in newspapers such as the Sangamo Journal (one of the State Journal-Register's predecessors) in search of runaways.

Underground Railroad operations in central Illinois, like their counterparts throughout the nation, used a variety of ruses to help slaves reach freedom.

Saunders says white abolitionists often drove runaway slaves from Springfield by dressing them up in fancy clothes and veils so no one could tell whether they were white.

Deacon Nathan Jones, a white man in Canton, had some friends help him create a mock funeral procession to take slaves from Canton to Farmington. Aware that he was being watched, Pomeroy Wilson of rural Farmington wrapped his wife and children from head to toe in blankets to pose as runaway slaves. While the pursuers followed the Wilsons to a neighbor's house, another abolitionist whisked several runaway slaves to another hiding place.

One night in February 1844, Julius Willard of Jacksonville served as a decoy so his son, an Illinois College student, could hide a vigorously pursued runaway St. Louis slave. As his son, Samuel Willard, wrote a friend later "... father sat in front of the house playing the violin so that the (slave) hunters might see that 'Old Willard' wasn't in mischief. Why didn't they look after me?"

But helping slaves was dangerous. A reward of \$1000 reportedly was offered for the "scalp" of Dr. John Lyman, who lived in what is today Farmingdale. His house was located about a block east of the Farmingdale Presbyterian Church.

If caught hiding or assisting runaway slaves, the penalties were stiff: fines of up to \$1000 and six months in jail.

In 1842, then-judge Stephen A. Douglas found Richard Eells, a white abolitionist from Quincy, guilty of harboring slaves and fined him \$400.

In June 1845, a Menard County grand jury indicted Marvin Pond of Greenview, Sam's brother, for harboring an escaped slave from Kentucky.

"This was the only time such a charge was made in Menard (County)," wrote Laura Isabelle Osburn Nance in her book "A Piece of Time (In Lincoln County)."

The Pond Family believed the indictment resulted from information given by Mentor Graham, Abraham Lincoln's teacher in new Salem, she says.

Although no proof exists, Nance suggests that Lincoln himself, one of only two defense attorneys in Menard County at the time, may have moved to quash the case. The only documented filed was a motion to dismiss the indictment signed by either Lincoln or the other defense attorney, and it is missing. In November 1845, Pond was acquitted for lack of evidence.

"Undoubtedly Mr. Lincoln could have heard the Pond case, because it drew so much attention," Nance wrote. "Perhaps he received impressions from there concerning the question of abolition which helped him decide (his stance on the slavery) question in later years."

Slaves aren't given enough credit for making it to freedom by their own wits. "Most of all, they (runaway slaves) did it on their own," says Charles Blockson, curator of the Afro-American Collection at Temple University in Philadelphia. Blockson tracked his ancestors' paths to freedom and wrote the book, "The Underground Railroad."

Runaways using the underground railroad network often received only directions from their hosts and had to make their way north alone as best they could on foot.

Ellen Craft, a light-skinned black woman, dressed as an invalid gentleman and her husband William posed as her black servant as the couple traveled from Macon, Ga., by coach, train, and boat. Sometimes they stopped in hotels on their path to freedom in Philadelphia.

Frederick Douglass borrowed a sailor's uniform and free papers and took the train from Baltimore to Philadelphia.

Sometimes it took slaves a year to reach a place they felt safe enough to call home. They traveled mostly at night, and ate roots and wild berries. Slaves from the South braved sub-zero temperatures and snow, often for the first time. In the woods, where they often traveled to avoid detection, they had to reckon with wolves and other perils.

Many slaves made careful plans for their escapes. In some instances, slaves from several plantations would work out plans together while visiting or attending religious gatherings. Sometimes they used certain code letters, and code words to spread the plan.

Escaped Slaves often returned to free relatives and friends. Thomas Jefferson Houston escaped from a plantation in Missouri to Illinois, but later returned to lead his relatives to freedom. The Houstons later moved to Springfield, where Thomas Jefferson Houston's brother helped organize Zion Baptist Missionary Church in Springfield, and Houston was one of its pastors.