

Underground Railroad Notes

Definition: The UGRR was a network of 1000s of unknown (and some famous) people who worked to help fugitive slaves escape to freedom and a new life. The movement was multi-racial and bi-gendered. Many slaves attempted escape, many failed and were returned to slavery, and some made it to freedom.

Slavery:

1. An economic system: A human stock market that created a pool of very cheap labor to grow staple cash crops like tobacco, rice and cotton. By 1840 cotton was the U. S.'s single most valuable export product, thus many slave owners made a LOT of money.
2. About 20 million people were enslaved in the U. S. before slavery was ended by the Civil War in 1865. Africans were involuntary immigrants, bound together by violence, poverty, illiteracy and legal bondage.
3. The ideas that justified this inhumane, but profitable, system continue to shape American culture and how we think about race, poverty and gender.
4. Legal in all 13 colonies, so in the North too. Gradually after the American Revolution northern states began passing anti-slavery laws, but slavery remained legal in many northern states until the mid-1800s. Slavery was retained in southern states because their climates made cotton agriculture possible.

UGRR Routes

1. South to Florida (to Native American communities) and the Caribbean, particularly Haiti after their anti-slavery revolution.
2. West to the Spanish colonies and then later, Mexico (which was founded as an anti-slavery nation).
3. North to the Northern states (after the Am. Rev.) and to Canada (where, like Mexico, slavery was illegal).

How did people know about the UGRR?

1. Coded slave songs, like "Follow the Drinking Gourd."
2. Textiles, like quilts, which often had secret messages in the blocks.
3. Marks on trees, lanterns in coded places, secret handshakes
4. The Slave Grapevine—an extremely effective work of mouth network to pass on information about escape routes and people who would help.

The Abolition Movement:

1. Dates to about 14 minutes after the first American slave. Anti-slavery goes hand in hand with pro-slavery ideas in American history. That's the good news!
2. Begun by a Free Blacks, though both Northern and Southern white Americans did enthusiastically join the movement.
3. Was America's first integrated (both race and gender) integrated social justice movement, and like the Civil Rights Movement in the 20th century became a kind of "mother" to many other social justice movements, including women's rights.
4. If UGRR "Conductors" were the Abolitionists Practical Abolitionists (people who were in the field helping slaves like Harriet Tubman and William Still) then people like Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison