

HGTV Special: Homes of the Underground Railroad Parts I and II

About “Homes of the Underground Railroad”

This HGTV special tells the story of seven remarkable homes along the routes of the Underground Railroad. For the African Americans who lived in the slave states prior to and during the American Civil War, the Underground Railroad was a secret network of homes where runaway slaves could find shelter on their way to freedom. While it was neither underground nor a railroad, the Underground Railroad was a secret, dangerous path to freedom made possible and facilitated by courageous men and women who believed in the right of all humans to be free. These men and women opened their doors in the 1800s to the slaves who were desperate to walk, row and climb their way to freedom. The homes in this episode range from modest dwellings to lavish mansions. Each one is a unique chapter in an amazing story of courage, fortitude, and determination.

Vocabulary

Abolitionist
beacon
bondage
bounty
Civil War
Conductor
escapee
fortitude
fugitive
haven
slavery
transport
underground

Discussion Questions

- At slavery’s peak, more than four million people were held in bondage. It is believed that about 1,000 slaves were able to escape each year during the Underground Railroad Movement. Have students discuss their knowledge and feelings about slavery in the early 1800s. In which states was slavery legal? What was the divide between the North and South? What might it have been like to be owned by another person and to work tirelessly with no wages or rights?
- Many men and women were conductors of the Underground Railroad, risking their homes, businesses and lives to help others to freedom. Talk with students about these risks. If they were slaves, would they have risked being captured and killed in an attempt to be free? If they had been free, would they have risked their own lives and freedom in order to help others?

Suggested Activities

The Road They Traveled (Social Studies, Math, Language Arts)

The majority of slaves attempting to escape from the South went to the North and many continued on to Canada. Have students look at a map of Underground Railroad routes at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/detailedroutes.htm> and a list of Underground Railroad stations at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/states.htm>. They have them imagine that they are runaway slaves in pre-Civil War times. Have them select a location from which they have just escaped as well as a final destination to which they hope to reach. At which Underground Railroad Stations could they stop along the way? Have them determine the

distance between the two points, how long they would likely travel each day, and the number of days their journey would take. What obstacles would they likely face? How would nighttime or seasonal travel affect their journey?

Breaking the Law (Social Studies, Language Arts)

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 made it legal for slave-owners and bounty hunters to chase runaways in states where slavery was prohibited, and illegal for people to help escaped slaves. A full copy of the text of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 can be found at <http://www.usconstitution.net/fslave.html>. The abolitionists who were conductors in the Underground Railroad clearly broke the law. Assign student groups one of the abolitionists featured in the video. Then have them research their role in the Underground Railroad, the estimated number of slaves they helped, the years that their home was open to slaves, and their specific feelings about slavery and the laws that relate to it. Finally, have them write a journal entry from the diary of their abolitionist that is based on their research.

Retrace the Underground Railroad (Language Arts, Social Studies, Visual Arts, Marketing)

The stations on the Underground Railroad ranged from modest dwellings to lavish mansions, from the cottages of former slaves to the mansions of wealthy politicians. Have students groups imagine that they are travel agents who have been asked to design a modern-day tour of five stations on the Underground Railroad that represent the diversity of the homes and the people who helped in this movement. Students must create a brochure that communicates to the prospective traveler about the five stations they've selected, their locations, their histories, and what travelers likely will learn from their visit. A list of sites can be found at <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/underground/states.htm>.

Extensions

- Have students research their own state's role in the Underground Railroad Movement. Was their state a slave state or a free state? If the former, when did it become free? If the latter, where were the Underground Railroad Stations located and who helped slaves on their way to freedom?
- Have students imagine that their home was a station in the Underground Railroad. Where would they hide slaves? How might they let slaves know their home was a safe haven?
- The men and women featured in the video chose to risk everything to help others and to fight for what they believe is right. They unselfishly paved the way for the generations who came after them. Have students look through the newspaper to read about other people who risk their safety and freedom for their beliefs. Then have them discuss the role they'd like to play in their own community and the legacy they hope to leave for generations after them.