

The Underground Railroad

Name: _____

Date: _____

“When my feet first touched the Canada shore, I threw myself on the ground, rolled in the sand, seized handfuls of it and kissed them and danced around, till, in the eyes of several who were present, I passed for a madman.” These were the words of Josiah Henson, a fugitive slave in the 1830's who became the model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom*.

The Underground Railroad, of course, was not underground nor was it a railroad. It was an original system of secure overland routes and safe havens for runaway slaves. There were established routes from the South to freedom. Many of these routes were through the states of Michigan and New York. There were “conductors” on this railroad, such as Laura Haviland of Michigan, Harriet Tubman of New York, and, of course, Levi Coffin, the unofficial president of the underground system who was responsible for overseeing the escape of at least 3,500 fugitive slaves over a period of 30 years.

Josiah Henson, immortalized in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, became the most famous of the fugitives. Born in the 1700's in Maryland, he was beaten by a master after daring to protect his mother. Later, the protective father of 12, Henson fled to Canada with two of his youngest children on his back in a knapsack. He eventually settled near Dresden, Ontario, in the 1840's, escaping the brutality of Southern slavery. It was in this new settlement called Dawn that Henson became an educated land owner.

Following are examples of dilemmas likely experienced by people involved in the Underground Railroad system. What do you think you would have done in the following situations?

1. You are aware of the fines or rewards of helping a fugitive. Your neighbor, a law-abiding citizen, knows fugitive slaves are en route to your home, which is a station of the Underground Railroad. He will likely report your assistance to the authorities. What do you do?
2. You are a Southern abolitionist educator. You know it is illegal to educate slaves, but you are aware the slaves need basic information or skills to escape to freedom in Canada. To teach or not to teach? — That is the question. Will you risk imprisonment to help the slaves?
3. You are a Quaker who is breaking the Fugitive Slave Law. Your faith and religion teach that you must oppose the enslavement of human beings, regardless of the law made by man. You are also aware of the fines and punishments of aiding and abetting runaways. What do you do?

4. You are a runaway slave from a large plantation in South Carolina. You know you would have more assistance in Michigan because of a large group of Quakers living along the route of the Underground Railway. However, you are closer to escape routes in New York. Do you select danger via the New York route or distance via the Michigan route to get to your final destination of freedom in Canada?
5. Traveling through an area known to return fugitive slaves, you are a runaway who does not speak for fear your dialect will give you away. The white conductor of the railroad to freedom tells everyone you are a deaf mute servant. Suddenly you are aware another runaway is about to be captured. Do you warn the other runaway, thereby risking your own discovery and capture?
6. You are an abolitionist living in a pro-slavery community in Michigan or New York. You have been approached by a group of Quakers who want to build two houses as stations on the Underground Railroad. This will mean a great deal of income to you, if you provide sanctuary for the fugitives. Yet you fear for your own family's safety if you work on the homes. Do you get the hammer and start pounding?

(Adapted from materials written by Dean June and Ruth Writer and published in Tolerance magazine. Available at www.tolerance.org.)