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Teaching with Primary Sources —
MTSU

**PRIMARY SOURCE SET
THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD**

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The underground railroad was a loose network of trails and shelters used by runaway slaves from the southern United States as they made their way to freedom in the North or Canada during the ante-bellum period. Anti-slavery activists, including many former slaves themselves, often “conducted” slaves along these paths to freedom. Other abolitionists opened their homes and barns as safe places. Passage of a stricter fugitive slave law as part of the Compromise of 1850 increased the dangers of both escaping and assisting runaways.

Harriet Tubman is undeniably the best-known underground railroad conductor; she made nineteen trips south after her own escape in 1849 and helped more than 300 people reach freedom, including her parents. William Still, a free black man who lived in New Jersey, assisted many escapees and later published *The Underground Railroad* (1872), now considered a classic. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s family in Cincinnati was involved in the underground railroad, and it was featured in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Others who contributed to the success of the underground railroad include detective Allan Pinkerton, social reformer Lucretia Mott, and future president Rutherford B. Hayes.

Enslaved people learned about the underground railroad through word of mouth. Thomas McIntire, a former Kentucky slave, claimed that all of his fellow slaves knew about the underground railroad. He also recalled the prominent role of Quakers.

During the Civil War, the underground railroad continued to be active, and Union soldiers used its routes when they escaped imprisonment within the Confederacy. After the war, the newly formed Fisk Jubilee Singers did their first national tour in 1871 along the former underground railroad.



[The underground railroad/Chas. T. Webber.](#)
[c.1893]

FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS:

- [The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920](#)
- [From Slavery to Civil Rights: A Timeline](#)
- [African American Odyssey](#)
- [The African-American Mosaic](#)
- [Slavery in the United States: Primary Sources and the Historical Record](#)
- [The Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress](#) (Collection Connections)
- [America’s Story from America’s Library](#) (Harriet Tubman)

ALSO SEE:

- [Underground Railroad](#) from the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area Web site
- [National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom](#)
- [National Geographic Online Presents the Underground Railroad](#)
- [National Underground Railroad Freedom Center](#)
- [Mission US: “Flight to Freedom”](#)

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

The necessity of secrecy and the extensive use of oral communication mean that some stories and details about the underground railroad will always remain unknown. One way to introduce students to the topic of the underground railroad is to ask them what kinds of sources they would expect to find (such as ex-slave narratives published in the North) and what types of sources they would expect to be very rare (such as maps of routes).

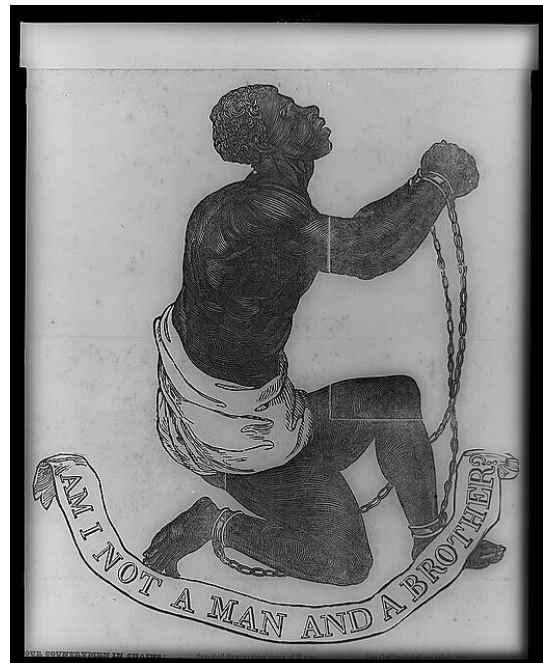
This source set includes photographs of underground-railroad activists and safe houses. Many of these come from *The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920: Selections from the Ohio Historical Society* because Ohio, bordering Kentucky, was such a key state within the underground railroad. African Americans played a prominent role in the underground railroad, and several of the items in this source set document their role. Overall, however, the majority of photographs of underground railroad activists are of white people, to the extent that many Americans still think of the underground railroad almost exclusively in terms of Harriet Tubman and white abolitionists. Discuss with your students possible reasons why there are more images of white activists and safe houses than black abolitionists and the shelters they provided.

Other sources in this set provide context for the abolitionism that motivated reformers. Runaway ads, anti-slavery songs, and prints of slaves in chains all provide a sense of what prompted people to help slaves escape. A few sources provide insights into the lives of former slaves after they had escaped.

Which visual source has the most anti-slavery power, in your opinion? Which areas of the South would have been the easiest to escape from, and why? The most difficult, and why? How did former slaves describe their experiences of escaping? What surprised you about the images of reformers and safe houses? How does your understanding of the underground railroad change when you think of activists as members of families rather than as individuals? What would you like to ask someone who had escaped via the underground railroad?



[Map showing the distribution of the slave population of the southern states of the United States. Compiled from the census of 1860](#)
[1861]

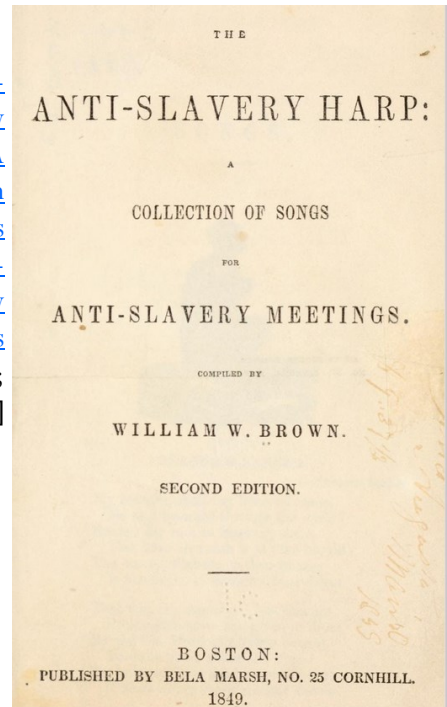


[Am I not a man and a brother?](#)
[1837]

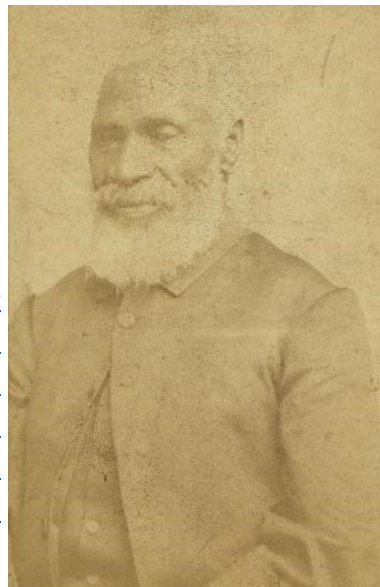


This Book tell man not to be cruel. Oh! that massa would read this Book.

[The Anti-Slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs for Anti-slavery Meetings](#) [1849; detail]



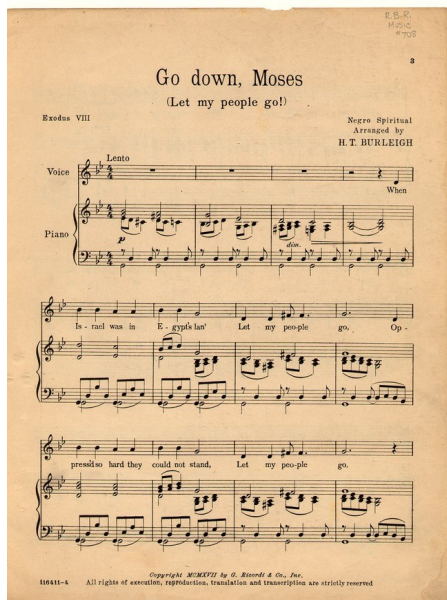
[The negro woman's appeal to her white sisters... Richard Barrett, printer, Mark Lane. \[London, 185-?\].](#) [detail]



[Rev. Josiah Henson, better known as Mrs. H. Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom", / Bradshaw & Godart, successors to the London School of Photography, 103, Newgate Street, E.C., London.](#) [1876; detail]



Harriet Tubman (1823-1913)
nurse, spy and scout



[Go down, Moses; Let my people go!](#) [1917]

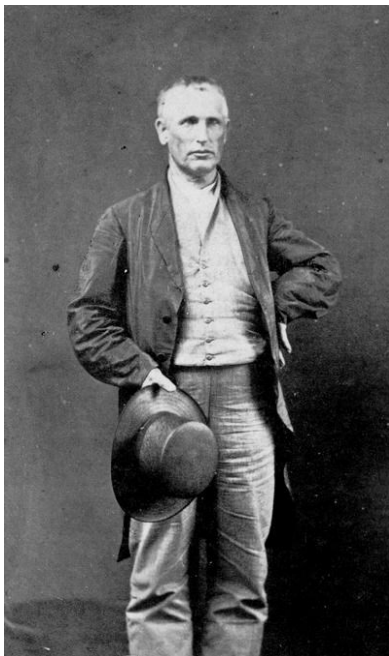
[\[Harriet Tubman, full-length portrait, standing with hands on back of a chair\]](#) [between ca. 1860 and 1875; detail]



[House of John P. Parker](#) [May 1910]
Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection



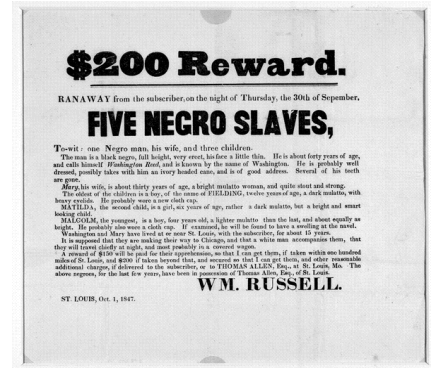
[Jason Bull and Family](#) Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection



[Aaron L. Benedict \(-1867\)](#) Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection



[Phebe Benedict](#) Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection



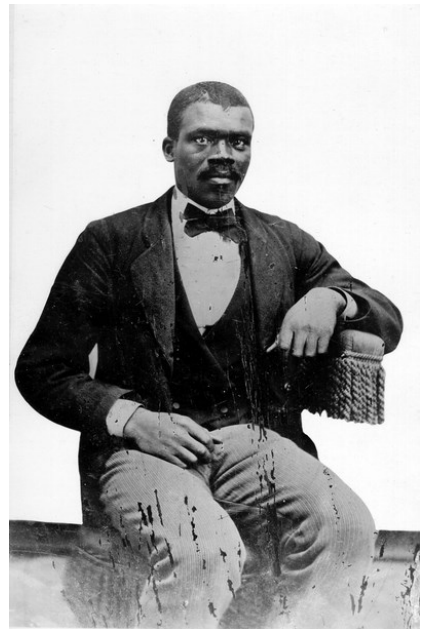
[\\$200 reward. Ranaway from the subscriber on the night of Thursday, the 30th of September. Five negro slaves ... Wm. Russell. St. Louis, Oct. 1, 1847.](#)



[Aaron L. Benedict's House and Barn](#)
Courtesy of the Ohio Historical Society



[Jesse L. Berch](#), quarter-master sergeant, 25 Wisconsin Regiment of Racine, Wis. [and] [Frank M. Rockwell](#), postmaster 22 Wisconsin of Geneva, Wis. / [J.P. Ball's Photographic Gallery](#), No. 30 West 4th St., betw. Main and Walnut Sts. Cincinnati, O.. [1862] (For more information about this image, see the [photo essay](#) on the Oxford African American Studies Center Web site.)



[Addison White](#) Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection

[“Freedom Stairway”](#)

Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection



[Restored Rankin House](#)

Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection

TEXTS:

- [The Fugitive Slave Law \[Hartford, Ct.? : s.n., 185-?\]](#)
- [“Uncle Tom’s Cabin”](#) [1852; adapted for children 1908]
- [The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters....](#) [1879]
- [Pioneer Gone \[from newspaper\]](#) [April 13, 1889]
- [Harriet, the Moses of Her People, by Sarah H. Bradford...](#) [1901]
- [Life, Including His Escape and Struggle for Liberty, of Charles A. Garlick, Born a Slave in Old Virginia, Who Secured his Freedom by Running Away from his Master’s Farm in 1843 \[pamphlet\]](#) [1902]
- [Thomas McIntire, Ex-Slave Narrative](#)



[Harriet Beecher Stowe](#) [1872]



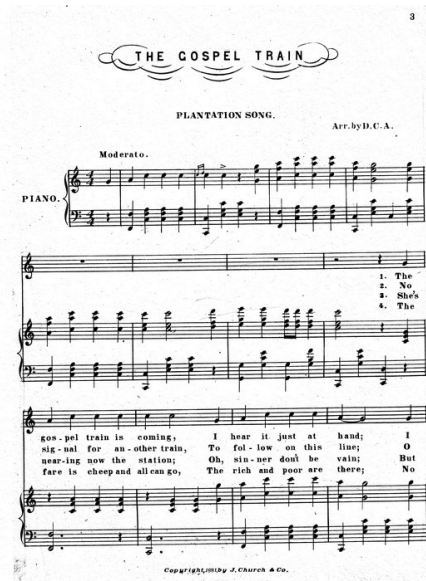
[Ashtabula Harbor](#) Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection



[Report for the year... / Mission to Fugitive Slaves in Canada, being a branch of the operation of the Colonial Church and School Society](#) [1859]



[George Peck's grand revival of Stetson's Uncle Tom's cabin booked by Klaw & Erlanger](#) [1886]



[The gospel train](#) [1881]

CITATIONS: The Underground Railroad

Teachers: Providing these primary source replicas without source clues may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations is supplied for reference purposes to you and your students. We have followed the Chicago Manual of Style format, one of the formats recommended by the Library of Congress, for each entry below, minus the access date. The access date for each of these entries is 5/6/15.

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"Am I not a man and a brother?" Woodcut. 1837. From Library of Congress, *Rare Book and Special Collections Division*. <http://www.loc.gov/item/2008661312/>

"The negro woman's appeal to her white sisters...Richard Barrett, printer, Mark Lane. [London, 185-?]." Broadside. London, 1850. From Library of Congress, *An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broad sides and Other Printed Ephemera*. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpebib:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(rbpe+06500800\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpebib:@field(NUMBER+@band(rbpe+06500800)))

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Bradshaw & Godart, publishers. "Rev. Josiah Henson, better known as Mrs. H. Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom", / Bradshaw & Godart, successors to the London School of Photography, 103, Newgate Street, E.C., London." Photograph/Print. London, Bradshaw & Godart, 1876. From Library of Congress, *Gladstone Collection of African American Photographs*. <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/html/pagecb35.html?ID=10058>

"House of John P. Parker [photograph or print]." Photograph/Print. May 1910. From Ohio History Connection, *The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920, Ripley (Ohio) Small Picture Collection*. <https://www.ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll32/id/14582/rec/1>

"Aaron L. Benedict (-1867) [photograph or print]." Photograph/Print. From Ohio History Connection, *The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920, Wilbur H. Siebert Collection*. <https://www.ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll32/id/10544/rec/2>

“Phebe Benedict [photograph or print].” Photograph/Print. From Ohio History Connection, *The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920, Wilbur H. Siebert Collection*. <https://www.ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll32/id/10545/rec/1>

“Aaron L. Benedict’s House and Barn [photograph or print].” Photograph/Print. From Ohio History Connection, *The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920, Wilbur H. Siebert Collection*. <https://www.ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll32/id/10546/rec/3>

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Ball, James Presley. “Jesse L. Berch, quartermaster sergeant, 25 Wisconsin Regiment of Racine, Wis. [and] Frank M. Rockwell, postmaster 22 Wisconsin of Geneva, Wis./J.P. Ball’s Photographic Gallery, No. 30 West 4th St., betw. Main and Walnut Sts. Cincinnati, O.” Photograph. 1862 Sept. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. <http://www.loc.gov/item/2008678814/>

“Addison White [photograph or print].” Photograph/Print. From Ohio History Connection, *The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920, Underground Railroad Small Picture Collection*. <https://www.ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll32/id/13605/rec/1>

“‘Freedom Stairway’ [photograph or print].” Photograph/Print. From Ohio History Connection, *The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920, John Rankin House (Ripley, Ohio) Small Picture Collection*. <https://www.ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll32/id/9308/rec/1>

“Restored Rankin House.” Photograph/Print. From Ohio History Connection, *The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920, John Rankin House (Ripley, Ohio) Small Picture Collection*. <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/html/page5aa1.html?ID=4632>.

“Harriet Beecher Stowe.” Photograph. Johnson, Fry & Co., 1872, after Alonzo Chappel. From Library of Congress, *Prints and Photographs Division*. <http://www.loc.gov/item/ody0318/>.

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