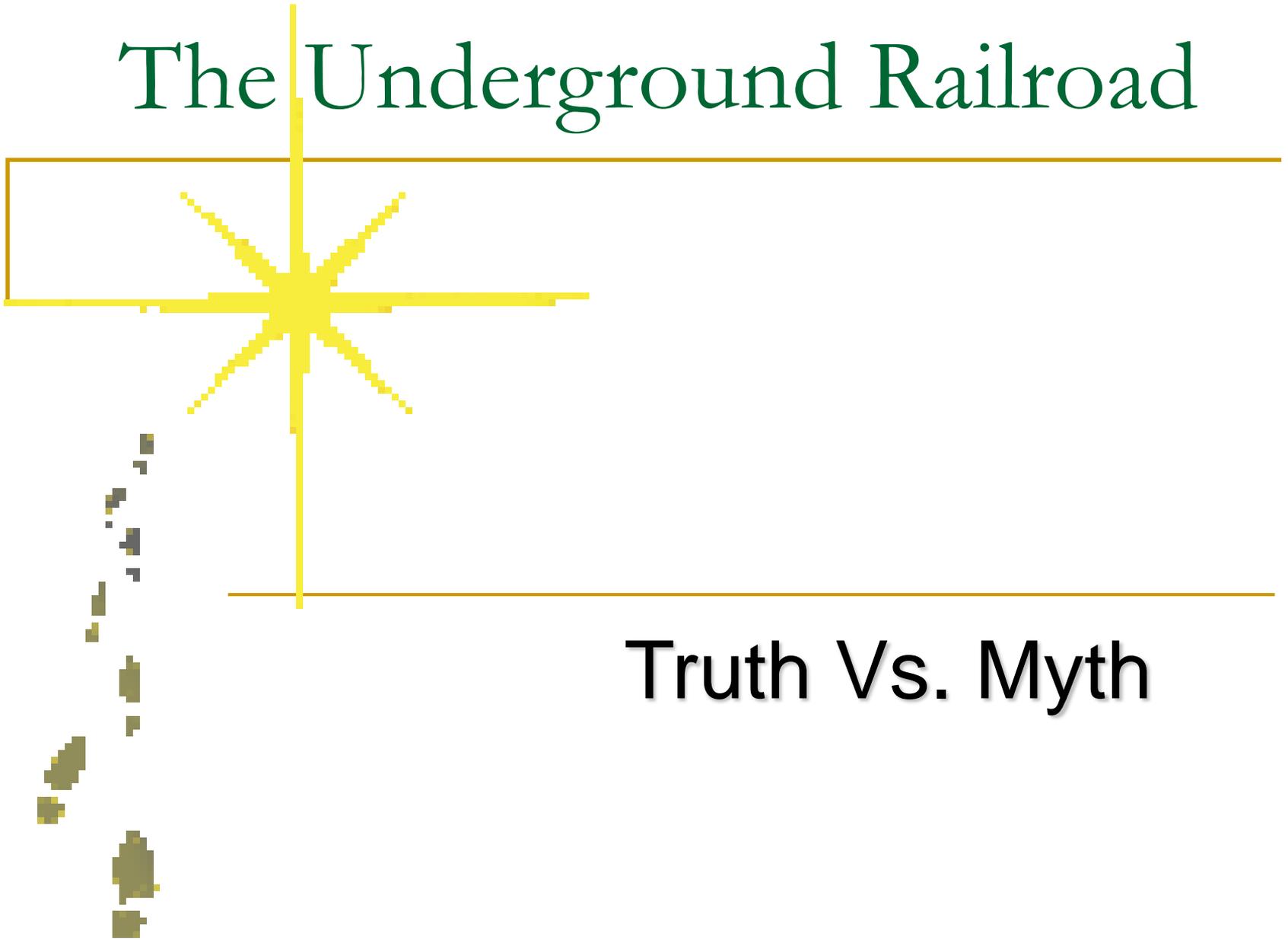


# The Underground Railroad



Truth Vs. Myth

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**The commonly held notion of the Underground Railroad is that it was a network of people, places and secret routes that spirited southern slaves from captivity to freedom.**

**Furthermore, it had been commonly believed that the network of people were primarily white abolitionist, mostly Quaker, and that most escaped slaves were transported to freedom via those secret places and routes.**

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**It can be surmised from the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, that slaves had escaped from prior to that time period. It is also obvious from the legal opinion of Upper Canada's Chief Justice, that some of those fugitive slaves had made their way to Canada.**

**However, there was a time when fugitive Canadian slaves were making their escapes into Michigan and Ohio. In 1807, a Canadian merchant Richard Pattinson, attempted to recover refugees from slavery who went to the Michigan Territory from Sandwich Upper Canada. His appearance before the Justice of the Peace for Huron/Detroit district was in vain. Judge Augustus B. Woodward denied the extradition.**

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- **By 1818, Upper Canada was refusing to extradite refugees of slavery who reached freedom in Canada.**
  - **News of the freedom available in Canada spread in the U.S. as a result of the war of 1812.**
  - **It has been estimated that as many as 30,000 fugitive slaves and free blacks sought refuge in Canada during the years prior to the Civil War. Consider how those fugitives came to Canada. How many came on their own, and how many received assistance? Although, we will never know the answers to these questions, we can by looking at first hand accounts and records, come to some conclusions as to the veracity of the information we have about the period and the system known as the Underground Railroad.**
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**Some say that a group of Quakers in the Philadelphia area began operating the Underground Railroad as early as 1786, to help fugitive slaves escape.**

**This version of the beginnings of the Underground Railroad, belies the involvement of Blacks in securing their own freedom and the efforts of many free blacks in securing the freedom of their brothers in bondage.**

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- **Another legend has it that in 1831, a runaway slave named Tice Davids, slipped into the Ohio River with his owner in hot pursuit. Tice swam for his life across the great river while the other man sought out a boat to row after him. Tice landed in Ripley, Ohio and immediately disappeared from view. The owner continued to search for Tice, but eventually gave up without a clue to his whereabouts. In frustration, the man concluded that it was as though Tice had “gone off on an underground railroad....”**
  - **This “legend” is typical of the romanticized accounts of the Underground Railroad. Is it fact or myth? It like many events related to the escape of slaves to freedom is unsubstantiated. This of course was of necessity. Secrecy was fundamental to the safety of the refugee slave as well as to any that assisted in their escape.**
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- **It is undisputable that the Underground Railroad was one of the most dramatic protests in North American History, a quest for freedom – clandestine in nature, and international in scope. It was neither underground nor a railroad, but rather a trackless trail that wound its way to freedom in the northern states and in Canada, for those fugitives who risked all in seeking an end to their bondage.**
  - **We will take a glimpse at the “Underground Railroad” from the viewpoint of those who were involved, the agents, conductors and the refugees who received their assistance in escaping freedom.**
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**Rev. Samuel J. May was a minister from Syracuse, New York. May's interests included international peace, temperance, equal rights for women and public education. He attended the organizational meetings of the American Anti-Slavery Society at Philadelphia in 1833 and acted as general agent and secretary of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. He strongly supported Black education, counselled resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, and was involved in the rescue of a fugitive slave and the court case that followed in Syracuse, New York in 1851. Samuel May was involved in the Underground Railroad in the Syracuse area, and made a trip to Canada West to judge for himself how the fugitives he helped fared in freedom.**

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**Rev. May wrote:**

***“Everybody has heard of the Underground Railroad. Many have read of its operations who have been puzzled to know where it was laid, who were the conductors of it, who kept the stations, and how large were the profits. As the company is dissolved, the rails taken up, the business at an end, I propose now to tell my readers about it.***

***There have always been scattered throughout the slave holding states individuals who have abhorred slavery, and have pitied the victims of our American despotism. These persons have known, or have taken pains to find out, others at convenient distances northward from their abodes who sympathized with them in commiserating the slaves. These sympathizers have known or heard of others of like mind still farther North, who again have had acquaintances in the free states that they knew would help the fugitive on his way to liberty.”***

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***“Thus, lines of friends at longer or shorter distances were formed from many parts of the South to the very borders of Canada – not very straight lines generally, but such as the fleeing bondmen might pass over safely, if they could escape their pursuers until they had come beyond the second or third stage from their starting point. Furnished at first with written “passes”, as from their masters, and afterwards with letters of introduction from one friend to another, we had reason “to believe that a larger portion of those who, in this way, attempted to escape from slavery were successful. Twenty thousand at least found homes in Canada, and hundreds ventured to remain this side of the Lakes.”***

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# **Underground Railroad Code Words**

- **Agent – coordinator, plotting course of escape, making contacts**
  - **Drinking gourd- Big Dipper and the North Star**
  - **Freedom Train/Gospel Train- The Underground Railroad**
  - **Heaven or promised land – Canada**
  - **Station – place of safety /temporary refuge/ safe house**
  - **Station Master- keeper of safe house**
  - **Stockholder – donor of money, clothes, food**
  - **Conductor – people who moved fugitives between stations**
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***“So long ago as 1834, when I was living in the eastern part of Connecticut, I had fugitives addressed to my care. I helped them on to that excellent man, Effingham L. Capron, in Uxbridge, afterwards in Worcester, and he forwarded them to secure retreats.***

***Ever after I came to reside in Syracuse I had much to do as a station-keeper or conductor on the Underground Railroad, until slavery was abolished by the Proclamation of President Lincoln, and subsequently by the according Acts of Congress. Fugitives came to me from Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Louisiana. They came, too at all hours of day and night, sometimes comfortably, - yes and even handsomely clad, but generally in clothes every way unfit to be worn, and in some instances too unclean and loathsome to be admitted into my house. Once in particular, a most squalid mortal came to my back-door with a note that he had been a passenger on the Underground Railroad. “O Massa,” said he, “I’m not fit to come into your house.” “No,” I replied, “you are not now, but soon shall be.” So I stepped in and got a tub of warm water, with towels and soap. He helped me with them into the barn. “There,” said I, “give yourself a thorough washing, and throw every bit of your clothing out upon the dung-hill.” He set about his task with a hearty good will. I ran back to the house and brought out to him a complete suit of clean clothes from a deposit which my kind parishioners kept pretty well supplied. He received each article with unspeakable thankfulness. But the clean white shirt, with a collar and stock, delighted him above measure. He tarried with me a couple of days. I found him to be a man of much natural intelligence, but utterly ignorant of letters. He had had a hard master, and he went on his way to Canada exulting in his escape from tyranny.....***

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Rev. May wrote:

***“I need give my readers but one more specimen of the many passengers I have conducted on the Underground Railroad. At eleven o’clock one Saturday night in the fall of the year, three stalwart Negroes came to my door with “a pass” from a friend in Albany. They were miserably clad for that season of the year and almost famished with hunger. We gave them a good, hearty supper, but could not accommodate them through the night. So at twelve o’clock I sallied forth with them to find a place where they could be safely and comfortably kept, until we could forward them to Canada. This was not so easily done as it might have been at an earlier hour. I did not get back to my home until after two in the morning. The next forenoon, after sermon I made known to my congregation their destitute condition and asked for clothes and money. Before night I received enough of each for the three, and some to spare for other comers. I need only add, that in due time they were safely committed to the protection of the British Queen.”***

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***“Other friends of the slave in Syracuse were often called upon in like manner, and sometimes put to as great inconvenience as I was in the last instance named above. So we formed an association to raise the means to carry on our operations at this station. And we made an arrangement with Rev. J.W. Loguen to fit up suitably an apartment in his house for the accommodation of all the fugitives, that might come here addressed to either one of us. The charge thus committed to them Mr. Loguen and his excellent wife faithfully and kindly cared for to the last. And I more than suspect that the fugitives they harboured, and helped on their way, often cost them much more than they called upon us to pay.”***

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# **Underground Railroad Code Phrases**

- **“The wind blows from the south today” – warning of a slave bounty hunter nearby**
- **“A friend with friends” – A password used to signal arrival of fugitives with UGRR conductor**
- **“The friend of a friend sent me” – a password used by fugitives traveling alone to indicate they were sent by the UGRR network**
- **Load of potatoes, Parcel, Bundles of Wood, packages, freight - fugitives or passengers to be expected**
- **Hardware- male passenger**
- **Dry goods – female passenger**

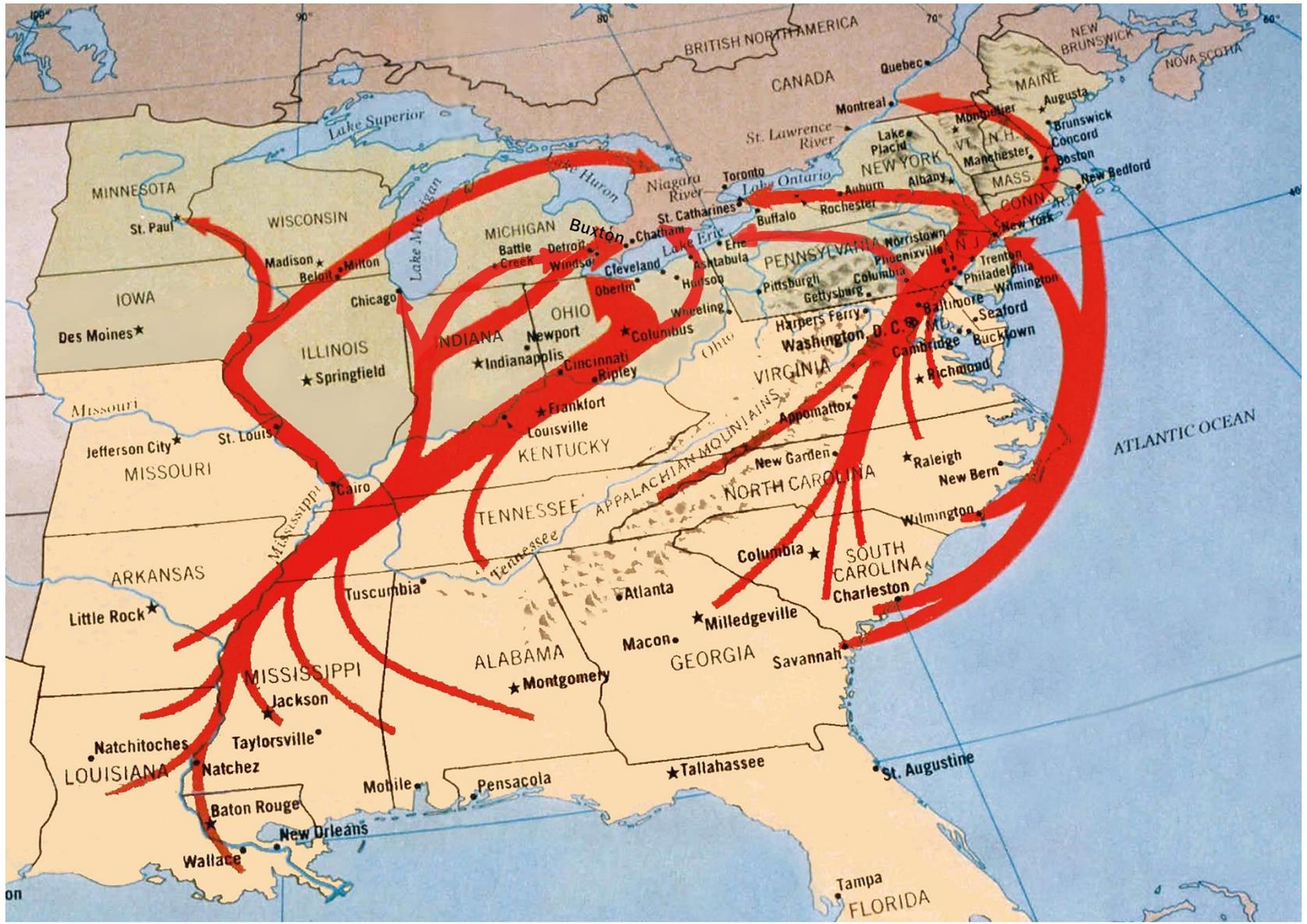


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**Rev. May concluded:**

***“It was natural that I should feel not a little curious and sometimes quite anxious, to know how those whom I helped into Canada were faring there. So I went twice to see; the first time to Toronto and its neighborhood, the second time to that part of Canada which lies between Lake Erie and Lake Huron. I visited Windsor, Sandwich, Chatham, and Buxton. In each of these towns I found many colored people, most of whom had escaped thither from slavery in one or another of the United States. With very few exceptions, I found them living comfortably, and without an exception, all of them were rejoicing in their liberty.....”***

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**Wherever possible, we will be looking at first hand accounts of “the Underground Railroad”, and determine for ourselves which information is reliable, and which information perpetuates the myths and romanticizes this important part of the history of African Canadians, and indeed of all Canadians, all North Americans, and citizens of the world!**

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