

Follow the path of the Underground Railroad to see how southern slaves escaped to free northern states.

Start – The Plantation

To escape from slavery, African-American slaves had to first escape from the plantation. This could be a challenge as many plantation owners had guards. Even if the slave escaped, he might be hunted down by bloodhounds and beaten or killed. Even if he was just spotted by someone else, they would know a black man in southern states was a runaway slave during that time.

First Stop – A House with a Safe Room

If the slave is able to make it to the first stop, he has a better chance of escaping to one of the free states or Canada. There were stops along the way to the free states, but the people at those stops did not interact with or know about each other in order to protect the entire network. A handful of organizers (called agents or shepherds) knew about the different stops and would send a coded message to the next stop when the slave arrived at one to let them know someone was coming their way. The stop might be a small room that is closed off from the rest of the house where the runaway could be hidden.

Second Stop – Getting a Map

Soon after beginning the journey, an agent would provide the runaway with a rough map of places where he could stop along the journey. Sometimes organizers transported runaways from one safe house to another by hiding them in the back of horse-drawn wagons. The stops along the way were called “stations” and the code used railroad terminology.

Final Stop – Freedom

Although the final stop would land the escaped slave in a free state and he would essentially be a free man, many plantation owners listed rewards in newspapers for escaped slaves, so he could never be 100 percent sure of his continued freedom. Some states were friendlier to runaway slaves than other states and some areas had more sympathizers.

