



## Clintonville Underground Railroad

### Historical Context and Overview

The abolitionist movement began in the late 18th century as several antislavery societies formed in the North. At great risk to their own lives, abolitionists created the Underground Railroad, a network of escape routes that provided protection and transportation for slaves fleeing north to freedom. The term railroad referred to the paths that African Americans traveled across the North-South border and eventually into Canada, where they would be outside the reach the federal Fugitive Slave Law. Underground meant that the operation was carried out in secret. Historians estimate that between 40,000 and 100,000 slaves escaped through the Underground Railroad.

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 stated that any black person suspected of being a runaway slave could be arrested without warrant and turned over to a claimant on nothing more than his sworn testimony of ownership. Any person aiding a runaway slave by providing shelter, food or any other form of assistance could be imprisoned for six months and fined \$1,000.

In Ohio, the Underground Railroad routes scattered throughout the state like a spider web. One of the major routes that ran through Central Ohio, including Columbus, followed a path that is today known as Route 23 (High Street in Columbus).

In spite of the penalties of the Fugitive Slave Law, Central Ohio had more than twenty documented Underground Railroad stations. In Clintonville, the Clinton (Methodist) Chapel at Weber and High Street became an important station on the Underground Railroad. The church's minister, Rev. Jason Bull, was a zealous abolitionist and served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Fugitive slaves were brought behind the chapel, hidden by the woods surrounding the Walhalla Ravine. His daughter, Cynthia, took food and water to runaways hidden in an interior room, often during the church services.

### Standards Alignment

#### Ohio's New Learning Standards: Social Studies

##### Grade 3

Content Statement 15: Both positive and negative incentives affect people's choices and behaviors.

##### Grade 4

Content Statement 7: Sectional issues divided the United States after the War of 1812. Ohio played a key role in these issues, particularly with the anti-slavery movement and the Underground Railroad.

Content Statement 14: Ohio's location and its transportation systems continue to influence the movement of people, products and ideas in the United States.

##### Grade 8

Content Statement 11: Disputes over the nature of federalism, complicated by economic developments in the United States, resulted in sectional issues, including slavery, which led to the American Civil War.

## Learning Objectives

- Analyze the impact of the Fugitive Slave Acts (1793 and 1850) on those who escaped from slavery, free blacks in the North, and whites in the North.
- Explain the work of the conductors on the Underground Railroad.
- Explain why the location of Ohio and Columbus were important to the Underground Railroad.

## Discussion Questions

1. Assisting runaway fugitive slaves was against the law. Why would some people (both whites and free blacks) in the North risk everything to be involved with the Underground Railroad and help fugitive slaves escape to Canada?
2. How did the geography of the Clintonville area (and Ohio) contribute to its prominent role on the Underground Railroad? What was the major route that ran through Columbus?
3. Jason Bull's own congregation was divided on the issue of assisting fugitive slaves. How could members of the same church see different viewpoints on this issue? How does this, in turn, represent viewpoints around the nation at the time?
4. How and why did the Fugitive Slave Law come about? Laws are supposed to protect the citizens' rights, provide benefits, and assign responsibilities. Did the Fugitive Slave Law meet these criteria? Why or why not?
5. In the video segment, Ed Lentz notes that there is a lot of mythology about the Underground Railroad in Ohio. What makes it difficult for historians to document and verify participation in the Underground Railroad?

## Extension Activities

- On a t-chart, work as a class to develop a "Pros" vs. "Cons" chart based on participating in the Underground Railroad network.
- Have students role play the parts of Jason Bull and his mother debating whether or not he should terminate his role as a conductor on the Underground Railroad.
- Have students map various Underground Railroad stations in Ohio and trace the routes that escaped slaves may have taken to reach freedom in Canada.

## Additional Resources

- Ohio History Central: Underground Railroad: [http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Underground\\_Railroad](http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Underground_Railroad)
- Underground Railroad Information Station: <http://ww2.ohiohistory.org/undergroundrr/>
- Teaching Columbus Historic Sites Archive: Clinton Chapel: <http://teachingcolumbus.omeka.net/items/show/131>