Downtown/Franklinton
The 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 spite of these laws, central Ohio had more than twenty documented Underground Railroad stations. James Poindexter, a barber and minister, led an active network of black conductors on the Underground Railroad. From Columbus, those seeking freedom moved north to Clintonville and Worthington along High Street and to Westerville along Harbor Road (Cleveland Avenue) and Sunbury Road.

Standards Alignment

Ohio's New Learning Standards: K-12 Social Studies

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.
Grade 4, 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 extent of the color line in early 19th century Ohio.
- Discuss the restrictions placed on African Americans living in Ohio.
- Explain the work of the conductors on the Underground Railroad.
- Describe the role of African Americans in Columbus in the Underground Railroad.
- Explain why Ohio's location was so important in the role of the Underground Railroad.

Discussion Questions

1. How free were African Americans in Ohio in the early 1800s?

2. What jobs were open to African Americans in Ohio?

3. What did freedom mean for African Americans living in Columbus?

4. Who were the majority of conductors on the Underground Railroad in downtown Columbus?

5. Why was the Underground Railroad considered dangerous work? What risks did Underground Railroad conductors take?

Extension Activities

Have students create a map showing the location of Underground Railroad sites in Columbus. Photographs, information, and addresses of remaining sites are available from the Teaching Columbus website: http://teachingcolumbus.omeka.net/items/browse?collection=13.

If more appropriate to your course, have students create a map showing the location of Underground Railroad sites and well-traveled Underground Railroad routes in Ohio. Use the Teaching Columbus website, the information at ODNR's website, and the information at the Ohio History Center's website, all listed below. If you have completed other lessons from Columbus Neighborhoods regarding transportation routes, overlay this new map over those maps to compare their locations and note proximity to rivers, houses, forests, farmland, etc.

Have students write a journal entry from the perspective of a conductor on the Underground Railroad. For older students, have them write from the perspectives of different key people involved in the Underground Railroad.

Additional Resources

Kelton House - http://www.keltonhouse.com/ugrrandohio.html

Hanby House - http://www.ohiohistory.org/museums-and-historic-sites/museum--historic-sites-by-name/hanby-house

ODNR - http://www.dnr.state.oh.us/parks/magazinehome/magazine/sprsum96/undergrr/tabid/299/Default.aspx

Ohio History Center - http://ww2.ohiohistory.org/undergroundrr/

National Geographic Education: The Underground Railroad - http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/multimedia/interactive/the-underground-railroad/?ar_a=1

Teaching Columbus - http://teachingcolumbus.omeka.net/items/browse/1?collection=13

Funding provided by: