

# Underground Railroad

## How “underground” was the Underground Railroad?

Runaway slaves headed north to gain their freedom and to escape intolerable situations. They needed courage and resourcefulness to evade law enforcement officers and professional slave catchers who earned rewards for returning them to their masters. Southerners bitterly resented those in the North who assisted the slaves. They coined the term “Underground Railroad” to mean an organized network devoted to keep slaves away from their masters, sometimes even crossing the border into Canada. There was no actual physical “railroad” with engines and tracks, but the term stuck. In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law that levied heavy fines on anyone guilty of helping slaves to escape. Many in the north resented the law that forced them to help sustain a system that they opposed.

### Underground Railroad “Stations” Develop in Iowa

Iowa shares a southern border with Missouri, which was a slave state. In the 1840s and 1850s, abolitionists (those who wanted to abolish slavery) developed a system of “stations” that could move runaways toward the Mississippi River to Illinois on their way to freedom. Members of two religious groups, the Congregationalists and Quakers, played leading roles in abolitionist activities. They were also active in the Underground Railroad in the state.

Because it had to be secret, we have few written records about the Underground Railroad in Iowa. One source has identified more than 100 Iowans involved in the effort. A main route across the state started in southwest Iowa near Council Bluffs where a free black, John Williamson, helped those fleeing slavery on their road to freedom. Hitchcock House in Cass County near Lewis is another known stop in one way or another with the Underground Railroad. Rev. George Hitchcock, a Congregationalist minister, passed along “passengers” to the next stop. James Jordan in West Des Moines and Josiah Grinnell in Grinnell were also leaders of the effort. Several of these sites are now museums open to the public.

It is impossible to know the numbers of blacks the Underground Railroad assisted. Individual families also responded when asked for help. Free blacks living in the state, particularly in southeast Iowa, were often involved. When the Civil War started and the Fugitive Slave Law could no longer be enforced in the north, many blacks escaped into the state and became permanent residents. In 1868, Iowa granted black men the right to vote. The Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools and discrimination in public accommodations were illegal in Iowa.

### Iowa: A Free State Complicit to Slavery

Slavery was a divisive issue for the United States from its very creation. The early conflicts were not about slavery in the South but its extension as new states joined the Union. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 established an east-west line along the southern border of Missouri that would forever divide free/slave settlement. States to the south could allow slavery; states to the north (with the exception of slave state Missouri) could not.

Settlers knew that Iowa would be a free state. Most Iowans were willing to let slavery exist in the South. Like most white Americans of the time period, they believed in the superiority of the white race and opposed granting equal rights or opportunities to African Americans. They passed laws attempting to discourage blacks from coming to the state. On the national level, they wanted most of all to find compromises that would keep the Union together. Iowa did have a small population of abolitionists who wanted to abolish slavery everywhere as a moral evil.

In 1854, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act that allowed the settlers in any new territory to decide the slavery issue there for themselves. This opened the possibility that Nebraska on Iowa’s western border could become a slave state. Most Iowans opposed that prospect. The Republican Party emerged strongly opposed to any further extension of slavery into western territories.

## Supporting Questions

### How dangerous was the Underground Railroad?

- [\\$200 Reward: Poster for the Return of Runaway Slaves, October 1, 1847](#)
- ["Effects of the Fugitive-Slave-Law" Print, 1850](#)
- [Fugitive Slave Law, 1850](#)

### How did runaway slaves rely on the help of abolitionists to escape to freedom?

- [Anti-Slavery Bugle Article - "William and Ellen Craft," February 23, 1849](#)
- [Anti-Slavery Bugle Article - "Underground Railroad," September 16, 1854](#)
- ["A Presbyterian Clergyman Suspended for Being Connected with the Underground Railroad" Article, November 8, 1855](#)
- [William Maxson Home in West Liberty, Iowa, 1890](#)
- ["Fugitive Slave Case Was Tried" The Daily Gate City Article, April 13, 1915](#)

### How did some runaway slaves create their own opportunities to escape?

- ["The 'Running of Slaves' - The Extraordinary Escape of Henry Box Brown" Article, June 23, 1849](#)
- [Henry "Box" Brown Song and the Engraved Box, 1850](#)
- ["The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia" Illustration, 1850](#)
- [Robert Smalls: "The Steamer 'Planter' and Her Captor," June 14, 1862](#)
- ["A Bold Stroke for Freedom" Illustration, 1872](#)

## [\\*Printable Image and Document Guide](#)

## Additional Resources

**[Harriet Ross Tubman Day](#)**: The website includes the statement made by the State of Delaware about the observance of Harriet Ross Tubman Day on March 10, 2017. The statement was signed by Gov. John Carney and Lt. Gov. Bethany Hall-Long.

**[Harriet Tubman - Online Resource Guide](#)**: This digital collections from the Library of Congress contain a wide variety of material associated with Harriet Tubman, including manuscripts, photographs and books. This guide compiles links to digital materials related to Harriet Tubman that are available throughout the Library of Congress website.

**[Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman](#)**: Available through the Digital Public Library of America, the website provides excerpts from the novel, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, by Sarah Bradford in 1869.

**[Pathways to Freedom - Maryland and the Underground Railroad](#)**: This website offers primary documents relating to Maryland and the Underground Railroad. This includes information from three former slaves, Samuel Green and Phoebe Myers.

**["The Secret History of the Underground Railroad" by Eric Foner](#)**: This article from *The Atlantic* focuses on the "secret history" of the Underground Railroad, including the fact that the network was not nearly as hidden as many presumed.

**[William and Ellen Craft Escape from Slavery](#)**: In this webpage from "Documenting the American South," the focus is on how slaves William and Ellen Craft escaped from Georgia to seek asylum and freedom in the North.

## \$200 Reward: Poster for the Return of Runaway Slaves, October 1, 1847

**\$200 Reward.**

RANAWAY from the subscriber, on the night of Thursday, the 30th of September,

**FIVE NEGRO SLAVES,**

To-wit: one Negro man, his wife, and three children.

The man is a black negro, full height, very erect, his face a little thin. He is about forty years of age, and calls himself *Washington Reed*, and is known by the name of Washington. He is probably well dressed, possibly takes with him an ivory headed cane, and is of good address. Several of his teeth are gone.

*Mary*, his wife, is about thirty years of age, a bright mulatto woman, and quite stout and strong.

The oldest of the children is a boy, of the name of FIELDING, twelve years of age, a dark mulatto, with heavy eyelids. He probably wore a new cloth cap.

MATILDA, the second child, is a girl, six years of age, rather a dark mulatto, but a bright and smart looking child.

MALCOLM, the youngest, is a boy, four years old, a lighter mulatto than the last, and about equally as bright. He probably also wore a cloth cap. If examined, he will be found to have a swelling at the navel.

Washington and Mary have lived at or near St. Louis, with the subscriber, for about 15 years.

It is supposed that they are making their way to Chicago, and that a white man accompanies them, that they will travel chiefly at night, and most probably in a covered wagon.

A reward of \$150 will be paid for their apprehension, so that I can get them, if taken within one hundred miles of St. Louis, and \$200 if taken beyond that, and secured so that I can get them, and other reasonable additional charges, if delivered to the subscriber, or to THOMAS ALLEN, Esq., at St. Louis, Mo. The above negroes, for the last few years, have been in possession of Thomas Allen, Esq., of St. Louis.

**WM. RUSSELL.**

ST. LOUIS, Oct. 1, 1847.

Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, W.M. Russell, 1 October 1847

### Description

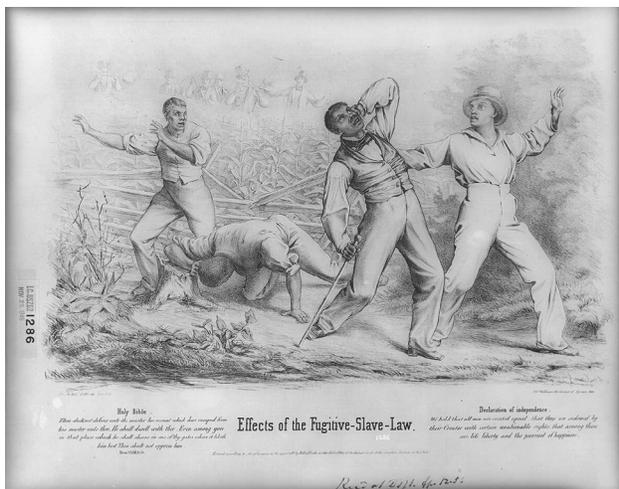
After a slave escaped from slavery, many relied on northern whites to lead them safely to the northern free states and to Canada. It was very dangerous to be a runaway slave. There were rewards for their capture, and advertisements like the reward poster here described slaves in detail. This reward poster from 1847 described five escaped slaves: a man, his wife and his three children. Whenever a northerner led a group of slaves to freedom, they placed themselves in great danger, too.

### [Transcript of the \\$200 Reward Poster for Runaway Slaves](#)

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Why was this document written? Provide evidence from the document supporting why you think the document was created.
- This document reflects the way slave owners viewed their slaves as property. Identify examples from the document that reflect this view.
- How would the specificity of the descriptions of slaves in the document make the work of the Underground Railroad more challenging?

## “Effects of the Fugitive-Slave-Law” Illustration, 1850



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Kaufmann, Theodor, “Effects of the Fugitive-Slave-Law,” Hoff & Bloede, New York, 1850

### Description

An impassioned condemnation of the Fugitive Slave Act passed by Congress in September 1850, which increased federal and free-state responsibility for the recovery of fugitive slaves. The law provided for the appointment of federal commissioners empowered to issue warrants for the arrest of alleged fugitive slaves and to enlist the aid of posses and even civilian bystanders in their apprehension. The print shows a group of four black men - possibly freedmen - who are being ambushed by a posse of six armed whites in a cornfield. One of the white men fires on them, while two of his companions reload their muskets. Two of the blacks have evidently been hit; one has fallen to the ground while the second staggers, clutching the back of his bleeding head. The two others react with horror. Below the picture are two texts, one from Deuteronomy: “Thou shalt not deliver unto the master his servant which has escaped from his master unto thee. He shall dwell with thee. Even among you in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates where it liketh him best. Thou shalt not oppress him.” The second text is from the Declaration of Independence: “We hold that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The print is unusually well drawn and composed for a political print of the period. The handling of both the lithographic technique and the figures betray particular skill.

### [Transcript from “Effects of the Fugitive-Slave-Law” Illustration](#)

### Text-Dependent Questions

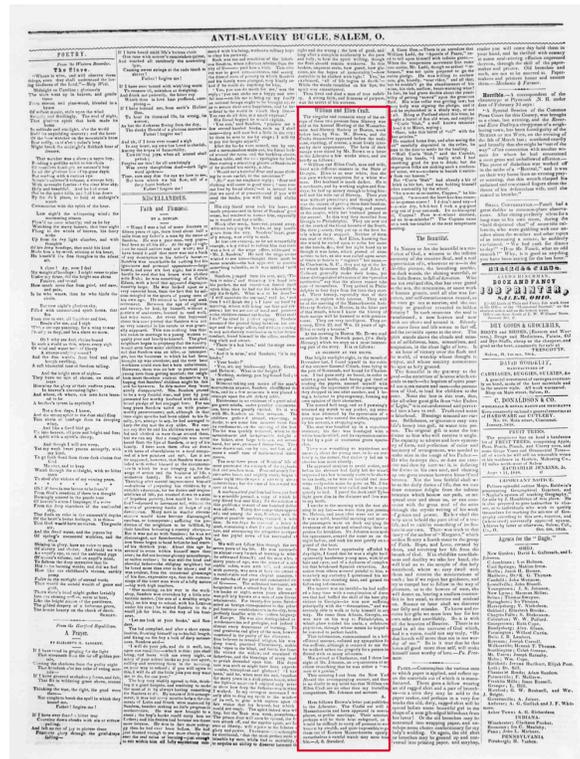
- Does this image depict the effects of the Fugitive Slave Act as being a positive or negative? Using the image as evidence, explain your answer.
- Explain the significance of the Bible verse below the image. Does the author believe the effects of the Fugitive Slave Law is God’s will? Explain your answer comparing the image to the meaning of the verse.
- Explain the hypocrisy of the image and the quote from the Declaration of Independence? What is the point the author is trying to make?

### Citation Information

Kaufmann, Theodor, “Effects of the Fugitive-Slave-Law,” Hoff & Bloede, New York, 1850. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)



# Anti-Slavery Bugle Article - "William and Ellen Craft," February 23, 1849



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "William and Ellen Craft," The Anti-Slavery Bugle, 23 February 1849

## Description

The article from the abolitionist newspaper, *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, recounts the story of Ellen and William Craft's escape from slavery. Ellen wore the clothes of a man to past as the master, while her husband, William, pretended to be her servant as they escaped from Georgia. *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* was based in Lisbon, Ohio, and was published from 1845 to 1861.

## [Transcript of Anti-Slavery Bugle Article "William and Ellen Craft"](#)

## [Printable Image of "William and Ellen Craft" Article](#)

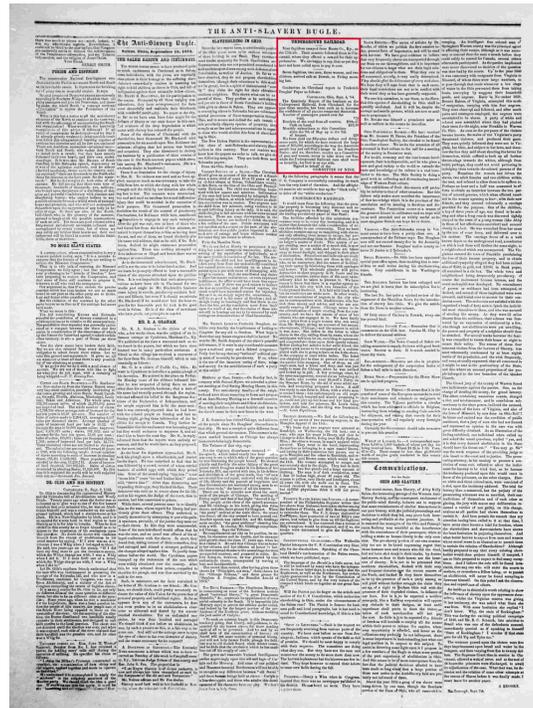
## Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe the escape of Ellen and William Craft.
- What does the article about the Crafts suggest about how people traveled on the Underground Railroad?
- How was the Craft's escape story similar to and different from other escape stories of the Underground Railroad?

## Citation Information

"William and Ellen Craft," *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 23 February 1849. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Anti-Slavery Bugle Article - "Underground Railroad," September 16, 1854



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Underground Railroad," *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 16 September 1854

### Description

*The Anti-Slavery Bugle* article reports the number of escaped slaves in northern cities in 1854. This included nine slaves from Boone County, Kentucky, who were seeking asylum. Their masters were described to be looking for them in Cincinnati, and were offering a reward for their capture, but they had not succeeded. *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* was an abolitionist newspaper based in Lisbon, Ohio, and was published from 1845 to 1861.

### [Transcript of "Underground Railroad" Article](#)

### [Printable Image of "Underground Railroad" Article](#)

### Text-Dependent Questions

- According to the article, how many fugitive slaves recently escaped to freedom?
- Did the author of this article keep their involvement in the Underground Railroad a secret or not? Explain and cite the article as evidence in your response.
- How does this article show that the Underground Railroad wasn't entirely underground?

### Citation Information

"Underground Railroad," *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 16 September 1854. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## “A Presbyterian Clergyman Suspended for Being Connected with the Underground Railroad” Article, November 8, 1855



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “A Presbyterian Clergyman Suspended for Being Connected with the Underground Railroad,” Fayetteville Observer, 8 November 1855

### Description

This newspaper article was published in Fayetteville, Tennessee, in 1855. The article describes how one clergyman in Indiana, Rev. T. B. McCormick, was suspended for being a member of the Underground Railroad. He is accused in the story of assisting fugitive slaves in their escapes to Liberia and Canada.

[Transcript of “A Presbyterian Clergyman...” Article](#)

[Printable Image of “A Presbyterian Clergyman...” Article](#)

### Text-Dependent Questions

- What were the two reasons that the Rev. T. B. McCormick suspended by the Presbyterian Church?
- Describe what the reverend did while visiting a friend in Kentucky in regards to his slaves.
- Did Rev. T. B. McCormick keep his involvement in the underground railroad a secret or not? Explain and cite the article as evidence in your response.
- How does this article show that the underground railroad wasn’t entirely underground?

### Citation Information

“A Presbyterian Clergyman Suspended for Being Connected with the Underground Railroad,” *Fayetteville Observer*, 8 November 1855. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## William Maxson Home in West Liberty, Iowa, 1890



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Jacoby, Charles, 1890

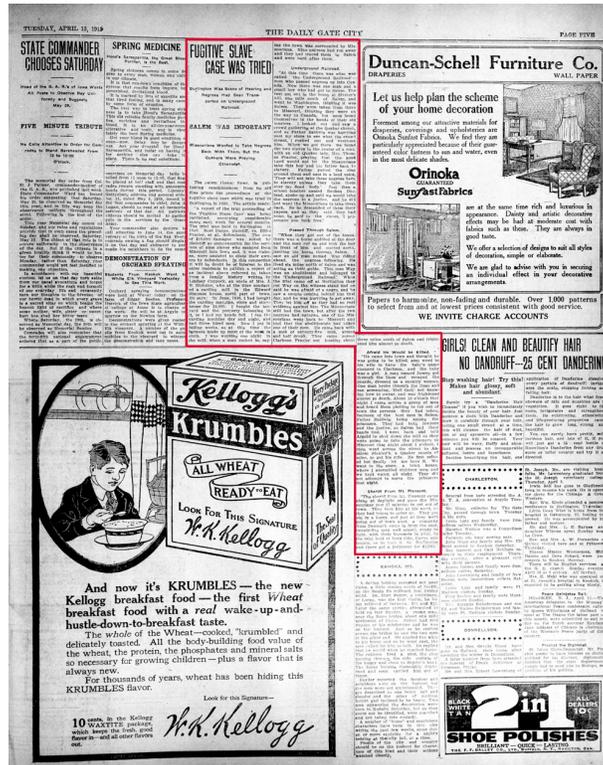
### Description

The William Maxson home, located in Springdale, Iowa, was an Underground Railroad station in the mid 1800's. The home was where abolitionist John Brown trained with his men for the raid on Harpers Ferry. The house has since been torn down, but was near Springdale, which was home to Quakers and a center of abolitionism.

### Text-Dependent Question

- How does this image reflect or refute the claim that the underground railroad was actually not underground at all?

# "Fugitive Slave Case Was Tried" - A Daily Gate City Article, April 13, 1915



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Fugitive Slave Case Was Tried," *The Daily Gate City*, pp. 5, 13 April 1915

## Description

This article was published in *The Daily Gate City* newspaper of Keokuk, Iowa, in 1915, about trial held in Burlington in 1850. The sum of \$10,000 in damages was asked by plaintiff, Buel Daggs, as compensation for the services of nine slaves who escaped from Missouri into Iowa and, it was claimed, were assisted to elude their owner by defendants. Specifically, Quakers of Salem, Iowa, were believed to have assisted the slaves through the Underground Railroad network.

## [Transcript of "Fugitive Slave Case Was Tried" Article](#)

## [Printable Image of "Fugitive Slave Case Was Tried" Article](#)

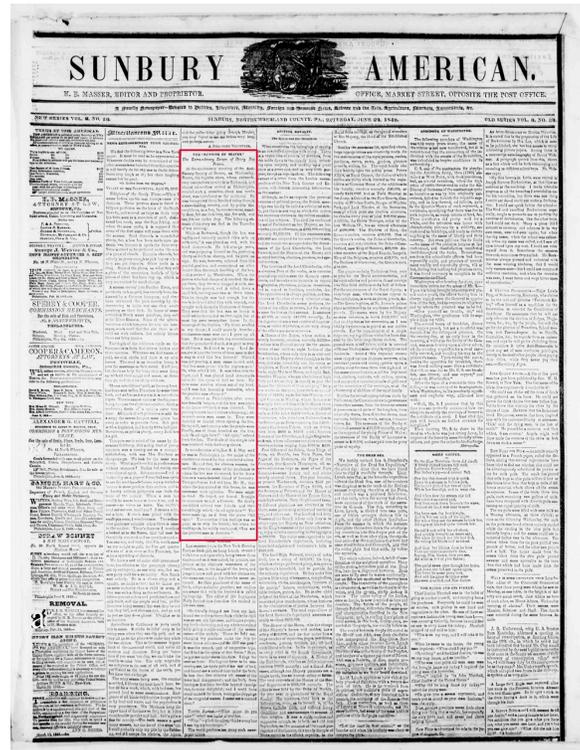
## Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe the scene at the Quaker Church. What was happening when Father Baldwin arrived?
- Describe what emotions the slaves must have faced that night, and provide evidence from the document supporting your descriptions.

## Citation Information

"Fugitive Slave Case Was Tried," *The Daily Gate City*, pp. 5, 13 April 1915. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## “The ‘Running of Slaves’ - The Extraordinary Escape of Henry Box Brown” Article, June 23, 1849



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “The ‘Running of Slaves’ - The Extraordinary Escape of Henry Box Brown,” *The Sunbury American*, Vol. 9, No. 12, 23 June 1849

### Description

The article from *The Sunbury American* newspaper in Northumberland County (Pennsylvania) focused on the escape by Henry “Box” Brown in 1849. Brown shipped himself in a wooden crate from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to a group of abolitionist who assisted in his journey for independence.

### [Transcript of “Running of Slaves” Article](#)

### [Printable Image of “Running of Slaves...” Article](#)

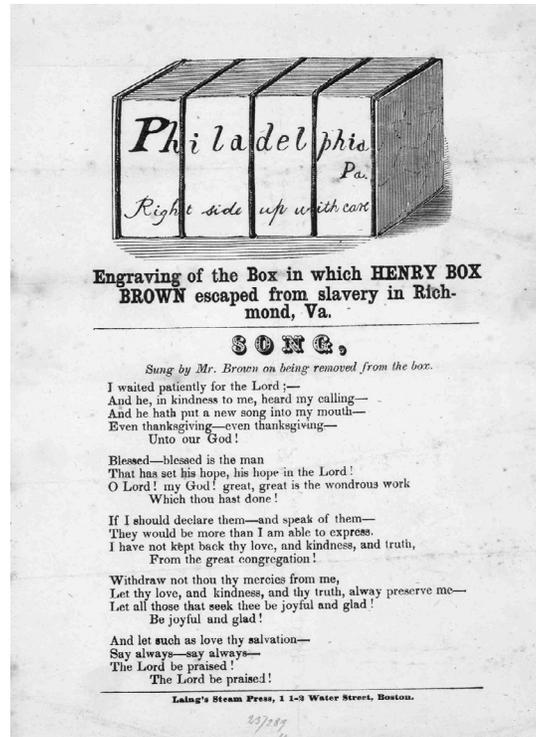
### Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe the escape of Henry “Box” Brown, and the moments when it appeared that the plan was not going to work.
- Explain how can this document be used as evidence that the underground railroad may not have been truly underground.

### Citation Information

“The ‘Running of Slaves’ - The Extraordinary Escape of Henry Box Brown,” *The Sunbury American*, Vol. 9, No. 12, 23 June 1849. [Courtesy of Libary of Congress](#)

## Henry “Box” Brown Song and the Engraved Box, 1850



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Brown, Henry, “Engraving of the Box in Which Henry Box Brown Escaped from Slavery in Richmond, Va. Song,” Boston, 1850

### Description

The image shows the engraving on the box that Henry “Box” Brown made and shipped himself in to freedom in Virginia. The box is marked “Right side up with care.” The attached song was sung by Henry “Box” Brown when he emerged from the box in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1849.

### [Transcript of Henry “Box” Brown Song Lyrics](#)

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Why did Henry “Box” Brown write “right side up with care” on the side of the box?
- How does the image of the box refute the notion that people who traveled on the Underground Railroad did so under the cover of darkness?
- Explain the significance of Brown singing the song after he emerged from the box. What is the song about? Who does he give credit for his escape to?

### Citation Information

Brown, Henry, “Engraving of the Box in Which Henry Box Brown Escaped from Slavery in Richmond, Va. Song,” Boston, 1850. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## “The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia” Illustration, 1850



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Brown, Henry, 1850

### Description

The illustration shows a somewhat comic yet sympathetic portrayal of the culminating episode in the flight of slave Henry “Box” Brown, “who escaped from Richmond Va. in a Box 3 feet long, 2-1/2 ft. deep and 2 ft. wide.” In the office of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, the young Brown is seen emerging from a crate as several figures, including Frederick Douglass (holding a claw hammer at left) look on. Brown shipped himself, via the Adams Express, from Richmond to Philadelphia to reach freedom. His story was widely publicized in a narrative of his ordeal published under his own name in 1849. The box itself became an abolitionist metaphor for the inhumanity and spiritual suffocation of slavery.

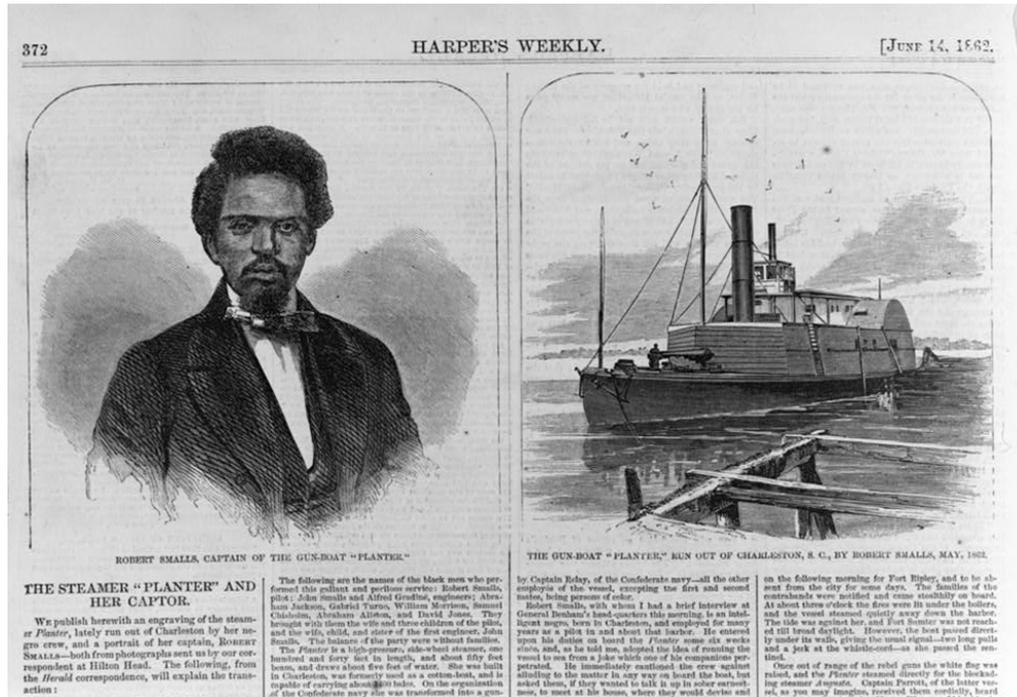
### Text-Dependent Questions

- How did Henry “Box” Brown escape from slavery?
- How does the image represent the inhumanity and spiritual suffocation of slavery?
- What does the image of Henry “Box” Brown suggest about how people traveled on the Underground Railroad?

### Citation Information

Brown, Henry, 1850. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## Robert Smalls: "The Steamer 'Planter' and Her Captor," June 14, 1862



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "The Steamer 'Planter' and Her Captor," Harper's Weekly, vol. 6, pp. 372, 14 June 1862

### Description

The article from *Harper's Weekly* described the escape of Robert Smalls and several members of his family and friends from slavery. Smalls was an enslaved African American who, during and after the American Civil War, gained freedom and became a ship's pilot, sea captain and politician. He freed himself, his crew and their families from slavery on May 13, 1862, by commandeering a Confederate transport ship, CSS *Planter*, in Charleston harbor, and sailing it from Confederate-controlled waters to the U.S. blockade.

### [Transcript of "The Steamer 'Planter' and Her Captor"](#)

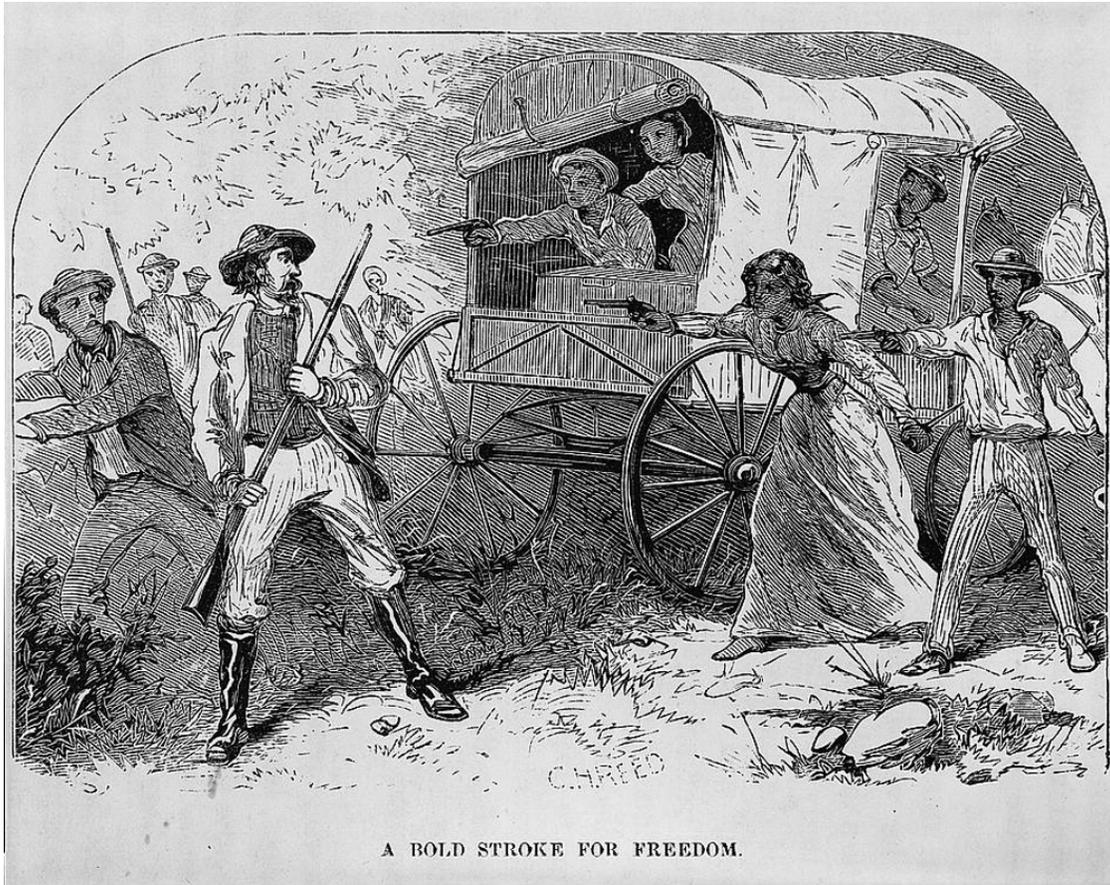
### Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe the escape of Robert Smalls, and all the passengers he took with him.
- What does the article about Robert Smalls suggest about how people traveled on the Underground Railroad?
- How was Robert Smalls' escape story similar to and different from other escape stories of the Underground Railroad?

### Citation Information

"The Steamer 'Planter' and Her Captor," *Harper's Weekly*, vol. 6, pp. 372, 14 June 1862. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

## “A Bold Stroke for Freedom” Illustration, 1872



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Still, William, “A Bold Stroke for Freedom,” 1872

### Description

The 1872 illustration shows African Americans, likely fugitive slaves, with a wagon pointing guns at slave-catchers. The cartoon is thought to depict Christmas Eve of 1855, when patrollers caught up with a group of teenaged slaves who had escaped by wagon from Loudon County, Virginia. But the posse was driven off when Ann Wood, leader of the group, brandished weapons and dared the pursuers to fire. The fugitives continued on to Philadelphia.

### Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe what is happening in the image. Who appears to be the aggressors?
- How did these fugitive slaves apparently travel on the Underground Railroad to freedom?
- How does this image show that the escape stories were both similar to and different from other escape stories of the Underground Railroad?

### Citation Information

Still, William, “A Bold Stroke for Freedom,” 1872. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)