

most common “liberty line” of the Underground Railroad, which cut inland through Delaware along the Choptank River.

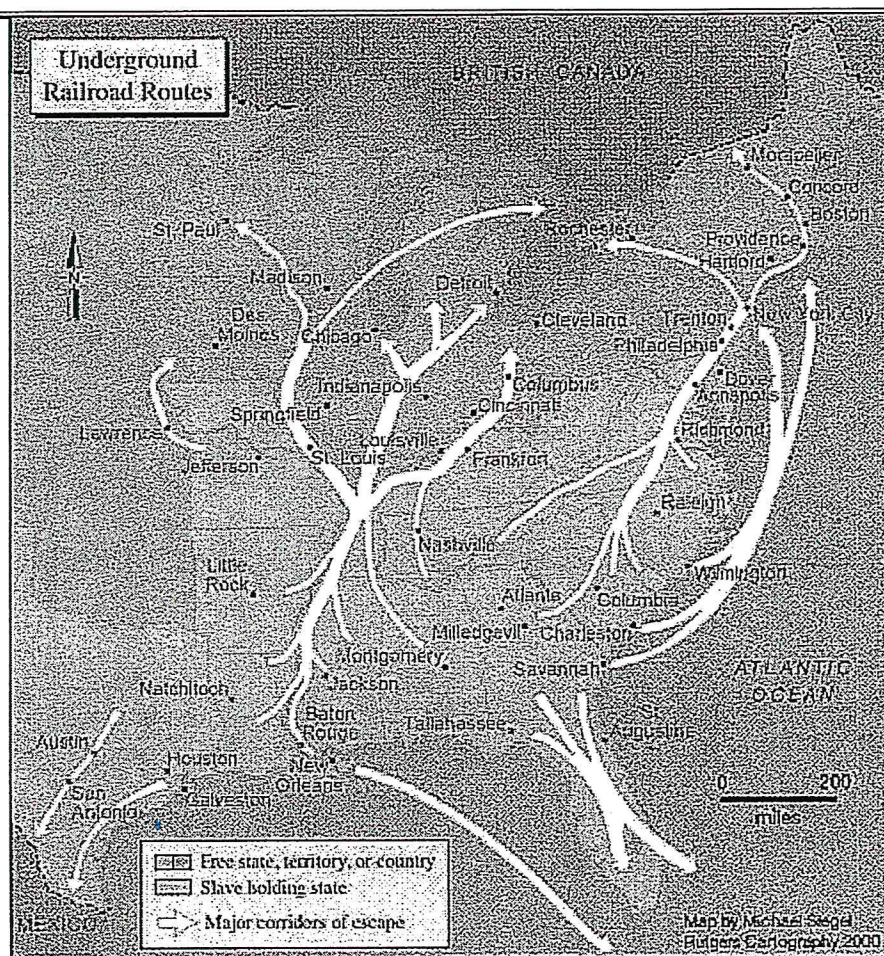
Fugitives, or runaways, on the Choptank liberty line traveled by foot at night and rested during the day, generally doing about 10 miles a night on the roughly 90-mile journey to the Pennsylvania state line. The trip usually took between 10 to 20 days.

Since it was called a “railroad,” many of its elements were known by common railroad terms. People who gave shelter to fugitives were called “stationmasters,” and their homes were known as “stations” or “depots.” The volunteers who guided fugitives between stations were “conductors,” and the fugitives themselves were called “cargo.”

The railroad was “underground” in the sense that it was clandestine. Its routes, safe houses, and the identity of participants were closely guarded secrets. Over time, the Underground Railroad developed an elaborate system of catchphrases, code words, secret knocks, lamps lit at night, and hymns to warn of slave catchers and to identify sympathizers.

The gateway for runaway slaves heading north was Philadelphia, which had a strong Underground Railroad network. The city attracted abolitionists and upwardly mobile African Americans. Here, free blacks formed their own businesses, schools, and churches. Tubman got a job and was able to live freely. She also likely expanded her network, meeting Underground Railroad members and activists.

But life in Philadelphia was not easy. Philadelphia was the last stop for recaptured slaves being shipped back south. Slave catchers raided black communities and were prominent in Philadelphia. Fear of recapture among fugitives was constant, and racial tensions ran



When Harriet Tubman first escaped, she probably followed the route that passes near Dover and leads to Philadelphia.

high. Tubman found herself feeling lonely and frustrated by the uncertainty of freedom.

By the late 1840s, slave owners claimed they were losing \$200,000 annually to the Underground Railroad. (This would be about \$4.5 million in today's money.) In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, which opponents dubbed the “Bloodhound Law.” The law gave federal authorities sweeping powers to seize fugitives and return them to the South. Without legal protection, even free blacks were at risk. As former slaves were plucked out of unlikely places like New York and Boston, anger grew in the anti-slavery community. The issue of slavery increasingly divided the nation.

The Abductor

Within the growing climate of fear and persecution, Tubman, most likely still in her teens, undertook her legendary career as an “abductor.” Abductors, true folk heroes of the Underground Railroad, ventured into slave states and led fugitives out. Prior to Tubman, most abductors were adventurous white men. Tubman was five feet tall, illiterate, and a fugitive, with little idea of geography and subject to frequent fainting spells.

Tubman's first rescue mission was prompted by news that her niece Keziah would be sold into slavery in the Deep South. Keziah's husband, John Bowley, sent word to Tubman in Philadelphia of the pending sale. In 1850, risking capture,