

# STORIES of New Jersey

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## THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN NEW JERSEY

### FOR SALE

A Negro Woman, about 35 years old, healthy, sober and honest, and understands all kinds of housework, will be sold with or without her child, a boy of two years old.

This advertisement, in a Trenton newspaper on December 15, 1811, was similar to many notices appearing in periodicals all over New Jersey during the early 19th century. It was no rare occurrence to have slave mothers separated from their children. It was no rare occurrence to have slaves beaten. Thousands of Negroes fled from bondage because of the harsh treatment they received or because they had a human desire for liberty. But the laws of the Nation and the various states insisted that slaves were property and had to be returned to the owners.

Every day during the early 1800's New Jersey newspapers published notices such as this:

### \$30.00 REWARD

Ran away on the 24th, of December last, a negro boy named Major or Charles... Said boy is about 18 years of age, 5 feet 11 inches high, and speaks low when spoken to... The above reward will be given to any person who will lodge him in any jail so that I may get him ... John Minor-- Hillsborough Township, Somerset County -- January 19, 1818

It is not known whether Major was ever returned to his master, but it is possible that some white persons, at the risk of a jail term, secretly assisted him to escape.

There were people who made a practice of forwarding slaves into freedom illegally; they shared the task of providing secret shelters, or "stations," at regular intervals for the fugitives. This escape system was known as the "Underground Railroad," and those who led the slaves from station to station were called "conductors." In charge of every station was another trusted accomplice, the "agent." As early as 1810 the Underground Railroad was doing a thriving business, but slaves had been fleeing from the time they were first brought to Virginia in 1619.

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By 1640 the Dutch and the English in America had agreed to return each other's escaped slaves. One of the purposes of the New England Confederation in 1643 was to arrange for an exchange of the fugitives. This action could not stop escapes, however, since there were always places to hide and persons willing to aid runaway slaves.

During the Revolutionary War some slaves found liberty with the British in New York. Others joined robber bands that terrorized farm districts on the edge of the Pine Barrens and other forest regions. Still others escaped to the Ramapo Hills in the northernmost part of the state and there mingled with Indians, deserting Hessian soldiers, Tory refugees and other outlaws.

Slaves were first recorded in New Jersey in 1680, when there were 60 or 70 on a plantation at Shrewsbury. Later slave ships were calling at Camden and Perth Amboy, and in 1762 slaves were still being sold on the block at Camden. At Perth Amboy, in 1776, there was but one household employing free white servants. Somerset County, in 1790, averaged one slave to every six free persons, and by 1800 the same average prevailed in Bergen County. There were then 12,422 slaves in New Jersey. With the exception of New York, no state north of the Mason and Dixon Line had so large a slave population.

But during the years that slavery was growing in New Jersey there was also springing up a movement against it. This was particularly strong among the Quakers. In two letters, written in 1786, George Washington pointed out the existence of systematic attempts to aid and protect fugitive slaves in western New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Washington, a slaveholder who advocated the gradual abolition of slavery, wrote that it was not easy to capture fugitives "when there are numbers who would rather facilitate the escape of slaves than apprehend them when runaways."

The Quakers of southwestern Jersey were members of the influential Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends, which had been against importing slaves since 1696. The campaign against slavery grew steadily stronger, until in 1776 the Philadelphia Meeting would not accept slaveholders as members. In 1780 the Quakers at Haddonfield disowned two members who refused to release their slaves. At last, in 1795, after a century of patient work, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting could boast that not one slaveholder worshiped in its large congregation.

The antislavery feeling among the Quakers spread gradually to other groups. This was brought about largely by John Woolman, a Jerseyman, and Anthony Benezet of Philadelphia. Woolman (1720-1772), a Mount Holly tailor and itinerant Quaker missionary, was born at Northampton in Burlington County. He was one of the first men to suggest publicly the abolition of the slave trade in America. Not only did Woolman speak at meetings all along the eastern seaboard, but he also wrote and published pamphlets attacking slavery. In time his ideas spread, eventually reaching New Jersey legislators, and in 1768 the special courts to deal with Negroes were abandoned; in 1769 a tax of £15 was laid on the purchase of each slave imported into the colony; and in 1778 the special criminal laws for Negroes were discarded.

Anthony Benezet crusaded for 40 years against slavery. His work in obtaining release of free Negroes who were being kidnaped into slavery led in 1775 to the organization of The Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage. Composed of members of various religious denominations, it was the first antislavery organization in America and the forerunner of the societies for the complete abolition of slavery.

New Jersey's first abolition society was organized at Trenton in 1786, and another was formed in Burlington in 1793. A year later the Abolition Society of Salem was active in the defense of kidnaped Negroes, purchasing their freedom if necessary. New Jersey had five representatives at the first convention

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of abolition societies in 1796. One of them was Joseph Bloomfield, who became president of the convention. As Governor of New Jersey in 1804, Bloomfield signed the hard-fought act which provided that every child thereafter born of a slave was free, but must remain as servant of the mother's master until 25 if a boy, 21 if a girl.

Soon waves of fugitive slaves were flowing over the borders of New Jersey and other northern states. The southern slaveholders fought the abolition societies; they had Congress pass the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, which punished anyone giving aid to fleeing Negroes, and sent spies and slave-catchers north to capture escaped slaves. Up from Chesapeake Bay, from the banks of the Susquehanna, across from the slave state of Delaware and from all along the Pennsylvania border came "trains" of fugitives, thousands of them, seeking transportation on the Underground Railroad in New Jersey.

There were three principal underground routes in this State. Each route had a number, and the stations were called by letters of the alphabet. The most important route followed the Delaware River for 18 miles from Camden to Burlington, known as Station A. At this stop horses were changed and the journey continued on through Bordentown to Princeton; another change of horses and then off to New Brunswick. The Salem Route was the second most popular system. Starting at Salem, it stopped at Woodbury, Mount Laurel and Bordentown, where it joined the Camden Route. The third system, known as the Greenwich Route, began at Greenwich and had stations at Swedesboro, Mount Holly and Burlington, merging there with the Camden Route.

At Camden the Quakers had a station in an old farmhouse now used as a clubhouse. Slaves who could not endure the hardships of flight are buried in Camden. A short distance east of Bordentown there were stations at Crosswicks and in the Imlay Mansion at Allentown. Occasionally, fugitives were taken from Allentown to Toms River, where they were put aboard boats going north.

Less traveled routes of the Underground continued from Pennsylvania through Trenton or Phillipsburg and New Brunswick or Somerville to Elizabeth and Staten Island. Sometimes they were switched north through Morristown and suburban Newark to Jersey City. There was also a route in Morris County that led through Dover and the mountains to Newburgh, New York. The runaways were sometimes hidden in boxes and transported in covered wagons. The Brotherton House at Pleasant Hill near Dover was a station on this road.

In Warren County the community called Quaker Settlement was a station on the route which followed the banks of the Walkill River through Sussex County into New York State.

New Brunswick was one of the most dangerous spots on the Underground Railroad because southern agents in search of fugitives had their headquarters there. All along the treacherous route between New Brunswick and Jersey City spies and agents of the Railroad watched for strangers and law officers. They were prepared to send swift warnings that would switch the "trains" with their passengers and conductors to other branches of the Railroad.

At the Raritan River bridge, just east of New Brunswick, "trains" were sometimes stopped by slave-catchers. To guard against this, one of the most daring of the Underground operators, Cornelius Cornell, took up the position of lookout man. At his warning the slaves were transferred to skiffs below the bridge or led by a side road to Perth Amboy.

During the 1850's, the Eagleswood Academy at Perth Amboy was an important Underground station and the meeting place of prominent abolitionists as well as advocates of women's suffrage. Situated on the Raritan River, the school was a natural hideout for fugitives who could be put on barges during the night and carried to Canada and freedom. Living at the Academy were the secret agents of

the Railroad, two elderly Quaker teachers, Sarah Grimke and her sister, Mrs. Angelina Weld, and Angelina's husband, Theodore.

If it happened that the road between New Brunswick and Perth Amboy was also being watched, the escaping Negroes were brought to Matawan and lodged by Quakers in a large, red brick house on the main street. Under a huge four-poster bed on the second floor a trap door, covered by a rug, led to a secret chamber, 9 by 15 feet. Runaways almost suffocated in the airless room while slave-catchers searched the vicinity and even the house itself.

When the crossing at New Brunswick was safe, passengers were brought directly to Rahway where fresh horses were waiting to start for Jersey City, the last station in New Jersey. In the event of danger north of the Raritan River, detour routes led around Metuchen and Rahway to Elizabethport, or around Newark to Jersey City. Along the way there were many barns to give shelter when warning came.

One barn off the main line outside of Newark was on the farm of Alexander McLean, a Jersey City newspaperman. McLean's place was used when the bridges over the Passaic and Hackensack Rivers were being watched. Fugitives came during the night, sometimes without notice. Early in the morning food was brought to them in the hay loft, where horse blankets had been provided in advance. A ladder at the rear of the barn was used for emergency exits. Children were taught to be silent about strange Negroes who came and went by night.

After spending the day in the barn, fugitives were sent on to the ferries at Jersey City by way of Newark or Belleville Turnpike and Newark Avenue. The fugitives were brought to New York City just in time to make the night trains for Albany and Syracuse. At the piers spies watched the wagons and coaches night and day. Many captures occurred here because drivers had to show how many passengers they were carrying when paying fares. When slaves were detected, Underground conductors who mingled with the crowd drew close to the frightened Negroes and led them to hideaways close by. Often the fugitives were hurried into a house by the front door and out on another street through the back. Then off to the waterfront they rushed to be hidden on Hudson River coal barges in which they almost choked to death from coal dust.

Some skippers risked taking on a slave to get extra help, for water had to be pumped constantly from the loaded canal boats. Small sloops and schooners were also used to ship the slaves to safe ports farther north. The Jersey City Underground station very often gave assistance to 25 or 30 runaway slaves in one night. This cost a hundred dollars for fares alone.

Contributors' names were kept secret, and an agent might not even know who his coworkers were in towns a few miles away. The protection of secrecy was especially necessary in the large towns of Trenton, Newark and Jersey City, where public opinion was unfriendly to abolitionists and escaped slaves. In 1848 a meeting of the Newark Abolition Society was broken up by a riot. A mob entered the meeting hall, broke all the seats and windows and burned all the books and papers. The City Marshal and other officers were present but did nothing to restore order or prevent the destruction of property.

In Jersey City, not only were there riots, but the antiabolition feeling grew so strong that the churches refused to permit anyone to speak from their pulpits against slavery or to condemn Congress for passing the harsh Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Later the abolitionists grew in number, and in 1857 the Congregationalists organized a church society where free speech was encouraged. Out of this society came the Tabernacle, the most popular church in Jersey City during the Civil War.



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In southwestern New Jersey, among the numerous Quakers, freeing the slaves was much more popular, but even at Salem and Woodbury drunkards and hoodlums harried the abolitionists. As late as 1860 an abolitionist was driven out of Haddonfield. On the other hand, the enemies of slavery were more active. At Swedesboro a group of Negroes wrecked a tavern where slave-catchers had brought a captured slave. At Burlington, in a Negro church, a colored man suspected of being a spy was set upon and stabbed. In two instances on record slave-catchers were either wounded or killed.

One dark winter morning, citizens of Salem were awakened by the terrible cries of eight Negroes, naked and chained in a wagon that was carrying them back to slavery. People stopped the wagon and took the slaves and their captor before the magistrate, who decided to hold the slave-catcher and free the slaves. The man drew a gun and rushed at the magistrate, only to be blocked. Trapped and wild with anger, he spun about, pulled out his dagger and lunged at the sheriff. A chair flew at his head but missed. He was finally overpowered and jailed.

One of the most appealing fugitives aided by the Quakers was Sidney Still, a young Negro woman. Sidney and her husband, Levin, were slaves in Maryland under different masters. Levin worked hard, bought his freedom and about 1810 went north to New Jersey. Sidney Still vowed that she and her children would be free too. Seizing the first opportunity, they fled one night and traveled north, guided by the North Star. In the daytime they hid in the woods, in tall grass or in fields of grain, living on whatever they could find along the way. At last they reached an Underground station near Smyrna, Delaware.

In the dark of night the fugitives were put on a boat that carried a blue light above a yellow light as identification. Out in the middle of Delaware Bay, the runaways were transferred to a New Jersey boat, lighted the same way. They finally reached a settlement of Negroes in a swamp district bordered by the farms of Quakers and other sympathizers. Today this neighborhood is the Negro community of Springtown, about a mile from Greenwich.

Among friends, Sidney Still found work and supported her family, but this freedom did not last long. Slave-catchers were on her trail, and Sidney and the children were taken back to their master. She was locked in her room at night for many weeks, until her happy singing and apparent contentment convinced her master that she had lost all desire for freedom. No sooner was the room left open than Sidney escaped again with her two little girls and by way of the Underground Railroad reached her husband at Mount Holly. In later years the Stills had many children. One son, William Still, wrote a well-known book on the Underground Railroad.

One of the early and most active white workers on the Railroad was Abigail Goodwin (1793-1867), who denied herself proper clothing so that she might have money with which to help the fugitives. Her entire adult life was spent working for the Negroes.

Another early worker on the Underground was the Reverend Thomas Clement Oliver, a Negro. In his youth Oliver helped to establish the routes that were used as long as the Underground lasted, and later he served as a conductor on both the Salem and Camden Routes. His later years were spent in Canada among the Negroes, many of whom he had led to freedom.

There were other New Jersey Negroes who gave their time and energy to the Underground Railroad. From the very start free Negroes had always harbored and assisted the fugitives of their race. Springtown was a haven for runaways, and after 1840 the settlement at Lawnside near Haddonfield became a popular refuge. There was also a small Negro settlement called Macedonia, not far from Shrews-

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ury, where fleeing slaves were sheltered. Most of the fugitives, however, traveled farther north.

After 1850 the number of Negroes working on the Underground increased rapidly. Each year about 500 escaped slaves returned from Canada to the southern states to lead their people out of slavery. Among these daring Negroes were two of the most fascinating figures of the Underground Railroad, John Mason and Harriet Tubman. For ten years these two not only operated a station at Greenwich but also ventured back into the deep South, back to their old neighborhoods, to lead others to freedom.

The career of General Tubman, as John Brown called her, began after her escape from a Maryland plantation in 1849. In all she is believed to have made 19 trips into the South, freeing more than 300 slaves. She used to start north with the slaves on Saturday night in order to have a head start before advertisements appeared on Monday. When posters did appear she hired a man to tear them down. If there were babies in the "train," she drugged them with a tincture of opium and hid them in baskets. To confuse her pursuers she often traveled southward by train, and if men were cowards, she aimed her gun and said: "You go on or die!"

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which provided severe penalties for those who aided runaway slaves or refused to assist in their capture, forced the Underground Railroad into darker secrecy, but its activity increased. Records, even those in code, were destroyed, and Underground spies watched the activities of groups of unemployed men who captured slaves for the rewards.

The Civil War ended the need for the Railroad; its aim was realized in 1863 when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. But before the war more than 50,000 slaves had been led to freedom by the New Jersey operators of the Underground Railroad.