The Underground Railroad – the Journey to Freedom

Good morning, ladies. This is our last meeting until fall and we are at the end of our journey – no pun intended! We've traveled far and wide on physical journeys as well as journeys of the mind and heart. We began lyrically with the poetry of journeys; were fascinated by the long and arduous scientific path that led to the development of the mRNA vaccine, which has been literally a life saver in this pandemic; and admired women who challenged themselves physically and mentally to walk in the wild, inspiring our own Janie McCrary to hike the Pennsylvania section of the Appalachian trail for six days! We've examined migration which has always been fraught with difficulties; marveled at the impassioned path toward the establishment of hospice care and were reminded of the importance of our rivers in our country's economy, growth, and recreation.

Today, you will hear about the Underground Railroad, which was to those traveling on it, the ultimate journey -- the road to freedom! As I share what I have learned about The Underground Railroad, I'll discuss the context of slavery that precipitated its emergence; explain what the Underground Railroad was, how it worked, and the nature of the journey; and mention a few key people associated with the railroad.

<u>Context: the difference between the north and south regarding slavery</u>

We can't talk about The Underground Railroad without talking about slavery in the United States in the late 18th and first half of the 19th Century, when the Underground Railroad was at its most active. If we remember our history, slavery started in the American colonies in 1619 when a Dutch trading ship carried about twenty Africans to Jamestown, Virginia, where they were sold, becoming the first slaves in colonial America. Initially, all 13 original colonies had slaves. As time went on, slavery took hold and grew particularly in the south, where the fertile soil and climate were favorable to an agrarian society. This required considerable human labor to toil the ground, plant and harvest the crops and take care of the large plantation households. Slavery and the slave market became an integral part of southern culture, and not a very pretty one.

Slaves were considered inferior or less than human and were treated as such. They performed demanding, back-breaking labor and were beaten if they were unable to perform or dared speak back to their masters. Children were separated from parents, brothers, and sisters, when sold to other plantation owners; slaves were not allowed to learn to read and many of the female slaves, if attractive to their masters, were sexually abused. There were exceptions, of course. Some masters treated their slaves kindly, but that was as precarious as the slave's ability to please the master or mistress; and it is true that the "house" slave was in a somewhat better position than a field hand. At the end of the day, however, they were not free, and many slaves would do anything to gain their freedom, even risk their lives. In fact, slaves who embarked upon the Underground Railroad, often did not fear death as much as being returned to their plantations. Death would be the ultimate freedom.

By the late 1700's and 1800's, things were very different in the north. The economy was not as dependent upon slavery. The climate was colder and land not as fertile, so shipping, banking, and manufacturing drove the northern economy. The Society of Friends or Quakers, a religious group that did not believe in slavery settled primarily in the north in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. In 1776, Quakers prohibited their members from owning slaves and became very vocal in the abolitionist movement, even petitioning Congress to abolish slavery. By the end of the American revolution in 1783, all the northern states began to ban slavery officially, and when the Northwest Territory was established in 1787 slavery was not allowed. In 1808, the United States banned the slave trade, and before the Civil War, Iowa, California, Oregon, and Kansas were admitted to the Union as free states. The country was deeply divided over slavery with slave states in the south and free states in the north and new territories. As a result, northern states were safe havens for African Americans. They could marry, own land, do business and raise families without fear of being mistreated or enslaved. Slaves who heard about this, wanted it and the fact they could escape their plantations and travel north to freedom contributed to the formation and growth of the Underground Railroad. There were some setbacks. In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act strengthening the Act of 1793. It required federal authorities to capture and

return runaway slaves; offered incentives to anyone who would turn them over, gave bounty hunters unchecked power and exacted strict fines and even jail time to those aiding fugitives. This act, intended to stop the Underground Railroad, instead heightened the urgency for slaves to seek freedom. No longer safe in the northern, they simply continued their journey to Canada, where slavery was abolished. Canada was known as “the promise land.”

I would not want to suggest that the history of slavery in the United States was as simplistic as the south being “heartless” and pro-slavery while the north was principled against it. Not all northerners were against slavery, rather slave labor simply was not needed to support their economy. In fact, many sympathized with their southern neighbors and assisted them in retrieving and returning their escaped slaves. Likewise, there were southerners who became uncomfortable with slavery some of whom assisted slaves on the Underground Railroad or, at the very least, turned their heads. Most were very secretive about their anti-slavery views for obvious reasons.

What Was the Underground Railroad

So, it was in this climate, the Underground Railroad was established, but what was it? To begin with, as most of us know, the Underground Railroad wasn’t a railroad at all, and it wasn’t underground. So, if you are picturing something like the subway system in New York, it certainly wasn’t that. Rather, It was a system of moving fugitive slaves from the south primarily to the north to their freedom. This system consisted of a network of individuals who aided the fugitives. The network included free slaves, abolitionists both black and white, particularly Quakers, whose religious beliefs, as earlier mentioned, instilled in them a strong objection to slavery. Slaves often traveled hundreds of miles on various routes, making it necessary to have a network of people to help guide the way. Slaves on the underground railroad usually traveled by foot or under bales of hay in horse drawn wagons and simply could not have made the journey without help.

What is known about The Underground Railroad began as oral history, so no one knows for sure how this network of moving slaves to freedom became known as the Underground Railroad. The story was told that in 1831, a slave, Tice Davids,

fled from Kentucky, a slave state, to Ohio. His master searched for him, high and low, to no avail saying, “he must have gone off on an underground railroad.” Whether true of not, the name stuck. It was a system of transportation, like the railroad, and it was “underground” in its secrecy. To move runaway slaves to freedom, again like the railroad, there were dozens of routes. Although most went to the northern states and Canada, some went south. Slaves in North Carolina or Virginia aimed toward New York City, Philadelphia, or Boston. Mississippi slaves went to Cleveland, Detroit, or Chicago. Slaves in Georgia might travel south to Cuba, Jamaica, or Haiti and those in Texas might go south to Mexico. A slave in Missouri might try to reach the territory of Kansas, where there were many abolitionists and a significant number of people ready to help.

The most amazing thing about the Underground Railroad was the intricate network of people who aided the fugitive slaves. The language of the railroad was used to describe this network. There were safe houses or ***stations***, where the traveling slave could rest and get food. The owners of these safe houses were ***station masters***. Slaves might hide in the attic or cellar of a ***station master’s*** home or the hay loft of the barn or in back rooms of the ***station master’s*** business. Also, important to safe travel on the Underground Railroad were ***conductors*** who would physically accompany slaves, serving as guides on the routes. The fugitive slaves were known as ***passengers or cargo*** and there were ***agents*** who made clothing, raised money for food and medicine, taught slaves to read and write, and made speeches to convince others that slavery was wrong.

As more slaves escaped, plantation owners became more watchful, feeling the financial loss of their slaves and sensing an impending change in their way of life. It was very dangerous for the slave to run, requiring ingenuity and “tricks of the trade.” The time of year was important, and slaves often began their journey around Christmas. Because they had time off for the holiday, they would get a good head start before their absence was noticed and slave catchers began searching for them. Also, in winter, nights were longer and rivers and lakes were more likely to be iced, making it easier to cross. The simplest instruction was to follow the north star and if it were cloudy, they looked for moss on the trees which typically grows on the north side.

Fugitives hid behind many disguises and songs were used for communication. For instance, very light skinned slaves could sometime go undetected dressed as plantation owners traveling with their slaves. Music was the secret language of the Underground Railroad. ***Follow the Drinking Gourd***, was sung among slaves instructing them to look for the big dipper to help locate the north star. ***Swing Low Sweet Chariot*** was commonly sung to tell slaves to run and hide (swing low) and that a "conductor" (chariot) was coming to take them home (to the north). Other songs like ***Wade in the Water*** told slaves to get into the water to avoid being seen and so dogs would lose the scent. ***Steal Away*** was sung to let the slave's relatives know they were about to run. Another reliable tool for communication were quilts made of familiar patterns and symbols that would provide critical information they needed. A *station master* would hang the quilt on the porch or on the clothesline to signal that it was safe to come in. Another signal was the use of the familiar "black sambo" yard jockey holding a lantern. If the lantern was lit, it was safe and if not, that was the signal to keep going. There were usually safe houses every 10-20 miles along each route. Danger lurked around every corner, both for the slave and those aiding them, but the determination of the slave and the goodness and conviction of the individuals assisting them was extraordinary.

One well-known story of ingenuity is about Henry Brown, who had himself shipped in a wooden crate to freedom. Although Brown's master was not harsh, he gave Brown to his son who took him to Virginia, separating him from his family. There Brown met another slave, Nancy. They fell in love, were allowed to marry, and had three children. All went well until Nancy's master fell on hard times and Henry's worse fear came to pass. The master sold Nancy and their three children. Henry was heartbroken knowing he would never see them again. Realizing this wouldn't have happened to a free man, Henry decided he could not bear to remain a slave. He had the idea to put himself in a crate and ship himself by rail from Virginia to Philadelphia where he would be free. He enlisted the help of a white abolitionist, Samuel Smith, and a friend, James Smith, a free African American dentist, to help implement his plan. He bought a box that was two feet by three feet and two and a half feet deep. The day before he was to leave, he

burned his own hand to the bone with acid to create a reason not to report to his work in the tobacco factory. Because of his injury, he was allowed time off and climbed into the box with a bag of food and water and with holes poked in the box, so he could breathe. Smith labeled the box "dry goods" and marked "this side up" on its top. Henry Brown spent 27 hours in route to Philadelphia and when the box was transferred to a steamboat to go up the Potomac River, it landed on its top, putting him literally upside down. The crate arrived at the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society and to the surprise of those receiving it, when the crate was opened, Henry Brown was alive. He became a vocal advocate for the abolition of slavery and was known as "Box Brown." This is just one story of many, each with its own peril, heartache, fear, and joy.

Key People in the Underground Railroad

Many people were associated with The Underground Railroad, some famous but most not. I'll mention a few briefly.

Let's start with the Quakers. The most accepted dates for the Underground Railroad are from around 1810-1860, with its peak in 1850, but Quakers, like **Isaac Hopper**, who is said to have had the first underground network, had been assisting slaves in their quests for freedom for decades before that. Believing it "un-Christian to own slaves, in the 17th and 18th Century, Quaker communities protected men and women who had decided to claim their freedom. Additionally, they were vocal abolitionists, raising the sensibilities of people who had not thought much about slavery and influencing them to their cause. A well-known Quaker, **Levi Coffin**, was a young child when he witnessed a column of chained slaves being driven to auction, and it forever changed him. His parents hid and fed slaves on their North Carolina farm and when Levi grew to be a very successful merchant, he took up the cause and was a prolific *station master* in Newport, Indiana and then Cincinnati. He claimed to have assisted at least 3300 enslaved people and said he and his wife rarely passed a week without hearing nighttime knocks on their side door. Publicly, he hosted abolition lectures and sewing circles which resulted in his being taken to court, but he remained defiant and never wavered in his beliefs and his actions. ***Thomas Garrett***, another Quaker heavily

involved in the Underground Railroad, was a *stationmaster* in Delaware and became a friend to Harriet Tubman. In fact, he sheltered many slaves she escorted to freedom. Garrett claims to have aided 2750 fugitives and did not stop at giving them shelter. He provided them with money, clothing and food and even escorted them himself to a safer place.

Another giant with the Underground Railroad was **William Still,** a free-born African American whose parents were former slaves. A successful businessman in Philadelphia, he was known as the "Father of the Underground Railroad." He chaired the Vigilance Committee of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and slaves came to his office in Philadelphia after their last stop on the railroad in Wilmington, Delaware, to get help. The Abolition Society was a one-stop social services shop for hundreds of fugitives, providing food and clothing, coordinating escapes, directing slaves to places to live and helping with jobs. After the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Still redirected his work somewhat to moving escaped slaves a step further to safety in Canada. The most important thing that William Still did was keep a personal record of every slave who came to his office. This was the only written record of slaves on the Underground Railroad during its history. He did this, so slaves might locate their kin, whom they knew had also escaped. One of the men whose history he took, turned out to be his elder brother, who was separated from his family before they were freed. His book, ***The Underground Railroad, Authentic Narratives and First-Hand Accounts*** was published in 1872 and is filled with stories of slaves who made the journey to freedom on the Underground Railroad. William Still helped more than eight hundred slaves escape to freedom, but his greatest contribution was his recording history through written stories of real people, their lives and their escapes.

Harriet Tubman was the best-known "**conductor"** on the underground railroad. Born Araminta Ross, she was a slave who escaped Maryland in 1849 to Philadelphia. As a little girl she worked taking care of plantation children. If the children couldn't sleep and cried, she would be whipped. She later worked in the field and was the victim of an iron weight which was thrown at another slave but hit her. This head injury caused Harriet to have "black outs," but Harriet, who was very religious, appeared to hear the Lord's voice during these "spells" and she

never failed to listen. Minta, as she was called, married a free man, John Tubman and she yearned to be free. Harriet's father was freed by his master and her original master, Edward Brodess, intended for her mother to be freed when he died, which would mean her children were free. Minta hired a lawyer to find the will documenting these wishes but when she presented it to his son, her present master, he threatened to sell Minta to prevent her troublemaking. Losing hope of freedom, Minta changed her name to Harriet, her mother's name, and decided she had to run. Fearing that if her husband went with her and was caught, he would lose his freedom, she headed out alone. She traveled over one hundred miles with the assistance of a Quaker *station master**, Hannah Leverton*** as well as others who provided her with wagon transportation, food, and direction. She doggedly followed the north star and found her way to freedom to the desk of William Still in Philadelphia. Mr. Still was amazed this small young woman had made the long journey alone. He directed her to a place to live, where she was cleaned up, given clothes and helped in obtaining a paying job as a maid. She was free, but lonely and she decided she had to return to Maryland to rescue her other family members. Between 1850 and 1860 she returned to Maryland 13 times and guided 70 family members and friends to freedom. Harriet Tubman was dubbed "Black Moses" and was highly sought by slave catchers, but she was never caught. She is known to have said, *"As a conductor, my train never came off the tracks and I never lost a passenger."* She received help in the form of money and supplies from William Still and the Vigilance Committee and most important, she was convinced she had direct help from God. She was extremely resourceful and employed a variety of strategies that contributed to her success. First, she developed her own network of collaborators she could depend upon. She traveled in winter when the nights were longer and headed north on Saturday since no runaway notices could appear in the paper before Monday. She relied on disguises as men, elderly women, middle class free blacks; and she carried a gun that she was not afraid to use. Harriet Tubman later became a nurse and helped lead an African American unit in the Union Army. I could do a whole paper on her.

The final person I'll mention is close to home. **Jacob Burkle**, was a livestock trader and bakery owner in Memphis, whose home on N. 2nd street is thought to have

been a *station* on the Underground Railroad. Mr. Burkle was a German immigrant who fled oppression and is said to have sheltered fugitive slaves in his basement and then guided them to the Mississippi River at night. The home was built in 1956 in what would have then been a remote area just a short walking distance from the River. It is now a museum called “Slave Haven” and although rudimentary, worth a visit.

The Underground Railroad stopped operations around 1862 when President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and many slaves joined the union army rather than flee to Canada. The end of the Civil War and adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment prohibiting slavery in our country, made the Underground Railroad unnecessary.

There are discrepancies among sources as to how many fugitive slaves successfully made the trip on the Underground Railroad ranging from a low of 30,000 to a high of 100,000. There were approximately 4 million slaves in this country when the Civil War broke out, so this is not a huge number, but it meant everything to those who rode the train.

In summary, The Underground railroad embodied several paradoxes. Although there wasn’t a centralized organization, *per se*, there was an intricate network of routes and individuals who worked in concert and aided the fugitives along the way. Most of the time they did not know each other. The routes were sometimes circuitous to fool the slave catchers, and yet it was as simple as following the north star. It was a silent journey and at the same time there were codes embedded in songs and displayed in quilts hanging on railings that provided the communication necessary for the escape. It was always dangerous and though each journey was predicated on hope, every slave who set out on this journey knew that it could end poorly. **The Underground Railroad was an illegal journey, for both the fugitive slave and those aiding them, yet it was a righteous journey.**

I chose this topic out of a personal interest. As a child in the 1950’s, when I was six years old or so, I remember asking my Mother about the sign at the back of my doctors’ office that said, “colored entrance” and a similar sign at a water fountain. My mother tried to explain as best she could, and I vividly remember saying to

her, “That’s not right, Mamma.” As I read about the railroad, I had so many thoughts. I grew up in a small town in Tennessee on the Mississippi River in a community where most of the wealthiest folks were large farmers. My father was an immigrant and we weren’t wealthy. He was an accountant and owned a “dry goods” store on the side. We would not have had slaves. I had to ask myself, if I had grown up in the 1850’s, what would I have done? Would I have simply thought slavery “wasn’t right” or would I have done more? Might my home or daddy’s small store and accounting office have become a *safe house*? Might we have been *station masters* or *agents* on the Underground Railroad, finding a way to help fugitive slaves? Although there is no way to know for sure, I certainly do hope so!