What was the Underground Railroad?

The Underground Railroad was a large network of antislavery sympathizers who helped slaves escape to freedom along different routes to the northern United States and Canada. It was organized in the 1830s by a group of abolitionists who believed in taking direct action against slavery. For information on the major escape routes, see the Underground Railroad Map in Chapter 10 of your textbook.

How did the Underground Railroad work?

More than 3,000 Americans who opposed slavery served as “conductors” on the Underground Railroad. Their job was to lead the runaways at night from point to point along a route until they safely reached freedom. Along each route were “stations”—places such as barns, stables, and houses of antislavery sympathizers—where escaping slaves could hide as they moved north.

The Underground Railroad operated in the North and in the South. Runaways were not truly safe until they reached Canada. Even in the northern states runaways could be recaptured and returned to slavery.

Was the Underground Railroad successful? Was it dangerous?

In all, between 50,000 and 75,000 slaves reached freedom on the Underground Railroad. Helping the escapees was dangerous work. Slaveholders often pursued their escaped slaves and tried to recapture them. Slaves were often chased by professional slave hunters using dogs. Escaping slaves who were caught were punished harshly as were any free African Americans helping them.

Escapes from the Lower South were especially difficult. The best routes were by water, either sailing up the Atlantic coast or traveling by steamboat up the Mississippi River. Because of the great distances and the difficulty of keeping hidden, very few runaways walked to freedom from the Lower South.

What role did free African Americans play in the Underground Railroad?

Many free African Americans operated stations and served as conductors on the Underground Railroad. This was particularly dangerous in the South, where free African Americans had few legal rights.

Those who took the greatest risks were former slaves who had escaped and later returned to the South to help other slaves reach freedom. These people risked being captured and made slaves again, or worse. Some former slaves, such as Harriet Tubman, ignored the dangers and became conductors on the Underground Railroad. Despite the huge rewards being offered for her arrest, Tubman avoided capture and slipped back into the South at least 19 times to lead more than 300 slaves to freedom.
REVIEW QUESTIONS

Directions: Write T for a true statement and F for a false one.

__ 1. The Underground Railroad was a way for slaves to escape by hiding in railroad cars headed north.

__ 2. Slaves were guaranteed safety and freedom once they reached the North.

__ 3. The people who helped guide escaped slaves along the Underground Railroad were called conductors.

__ 4. The places where slaves could hide when traveling on the Underground Railroad were called safe houses.

__ 5. Slaveholders often pursued their escaped slaves, sometimes with professional slave hunters and dogs.

__ 6. Because of the difficulty in staying hidden on a long journey through slave territory, most escaped slaves from the Lower South could not have walked to freedom.

__ 7. Free African Americans worked for the Underground Railroad, but escaped slaves did not because of the dangers involved if they were caught.

__ 8. Some Underground Railroad routes were water routes, traveling by boat up the Atlantic coast or the Mississippi River.

__ 9. Escaped slaves who returned to the South as conductors risked being returned to slavery if captured.

__ 10. Escaped slave Harriet Tubman returned to the South some 19 times to lead more than 300 slaves to freedom.