

# SECRET ROAD TO FREEDOM

Almost from the time when white people first came to America, Africans were brought to this land and sold as slaves. Slavery became a particularly strong **institution** in the South where it was most **profitable**, but existed in all the original thirteen states. Many people felt that slavery was **morally** wrong and that it contradicted the Declaration of Independence which guarantees “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In time the northern states abolished slavery. The South, however, had no intention of doing so. Vermont’s 1777 constitution declared slavery unlawful, providing every person on state soil with his or her liberty. In 1791 when Vermont joined the Union as the fourteenth state, it was the only state that prohibited slavery in its constitution.



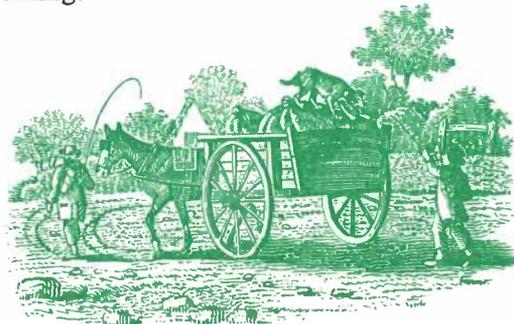
Naturally there was considerable disagreement between northern **abolitionists** and southern slaveholders regarding the slavery issue. **Controversy** grew regarding the admission of new states to the Union and whether or not they should be admitted as slave or free states. It was in this atmosphere that the Underground Railroad got its start.

During the first half of the 1800’s many a runaway slave traveled cautiously along the network of secret stations that ran from the south to the north. Most **fugitives** were on their way to Canada when they passed through the Green Mountain state, helped along their way by persons who **sympathized** with them. Contrary to what the name suggests, the Underground Railroad was not a **subterranean** series of passageways. It was the name given to the many homes of abolitionists who helped runaway slaves on their way to Canada.

Vermont writer Rowland E. Robinson describes this network of stations: “A line of the Underground Railroad held its hidden way through Vermont along which many a dark-skinned passenger secretly traveled, concealed during the day in the quiet stations, at night passing from one to the other helped onward by friendly hands until he reached Canada and gained the protection of that government....” (*Vermont: A Study of Independence*, 1892)

The Underground Railroad had two main routes through Vermont. One went north from Bennington past Burlington. The other wound from Brattleboro north to Montpelier and beyond. Slaves entered the state at five or more points and followed side routes which joined the North-South routes.

The slaves’ journeys were dangerous. The fear of capture was probably felt by all who fled the South. Without the help of the abolitionists many of the slaves would not have escaped. Slaves were hidden in many **ingenious** places. They were hidden in secret chambers behind chimneys or under removable floorboards where they stayed until it was time to move to the next station. Often the family who was hiding them would transport them to the next station. Sometimes the slave was sent on alone to the next station where secret word had been received of his coming.



Fugitive slaves were not free, even in Vermont. The federal government had passed the Fugitive Slave Laws. They said that slaves could be reclaimed by their masters even if they were captured in a free state like Vermont. Abolitionists felt, though, that they should help runaways in their flight to freedom even if it meant breaking the Fugitive Slave Laws. Many Underground Railroad workers risked arrest and trial for what they did. (Of course, Vermont did have some citizens who were sympathetic to the Southerner's pro-slavery feeling. However, the majority of Vermonters were opposed to slavery.)



The Vermont law was much kinder to the runaway slaves. In fact, the Vermont law **defied** the federal law. It required its officers and attorneys to protect and defend any fugitive captured within the state borders.

In 1836 there was a court case where a slave owner tried to claim his escaped slave. The Vermont judge, Theophilus Herrington, refused to return the slave to his old master without proper evidence of ownership. The judge said that he would accept nothing less than "a bill of sale from God Almighty" to prove the ownership. No slave was ever returned to his owner from Vermont.

Vermont's anti-slavery legislation made the Southerners angry. So did Vermont's **non-compliance** with the Fugitive Slave Laws. In 1857 the Georgia

Senate passed an act that asked the president of the United States to hire a group of men to dig a ditch around the state of Vermont and float it out into the Atlantic Ocean!

The Underground Railroad was one of the forces that led to the Civil War. It threatened Southern slave owners because their human "property" was escaping to the free north country. With the 1860 presidential election of Abraham Lincoln, who supported the abolitionist cause, the Southern states got ready to **secede** from the Union. War soon followed.

Vermont fought for the anti-slavery cause on the battlefield just as it had when helping refugee slaves within its borders. Vermont was the first state to send troops to fight in the south. **Proportionally**, Vermont had more men killed in battle than any other northern state. In the end it was the Civil War that decided the slavery question. The North won the war and Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves.

## VOCABULARY

**institution** - an established organization

**profitable** - beneficial

**morally** - in a manner reflecting values of right and wrong

**abolitionist** - a person working to end slavery

**controversy** - an argument between two sides with opposing views

**fugitive** - a runaway

**sympathize** - to express understanding

**subterranean** - beneath the earth's surface

**ingenious** - clever

**defied** - challenged

**non-compliance** - opposition

**secede** - to withdraw

**proportionally** - relative to size

