

The Underground Railroad: Paths and Routes in Illinois

Alex L. Lindqwister
Washington Gifted School, Peoria
Teachers: Mindy Juriga and Janelle Dies

Imagine crossing the country in the middle of the night with no food or shelter. Although this feat sounds impossible, many African Americans accomplished it in the 1800s. These African Americans were runaway slaves that traveled along some of the most secret routes in history, the Underground Railroad. Because it was established by abolitionists, the Underground Railroad was very important for the slaves' survival. Most of these routes led to large cities in Illinois, such as Chicago. As a result, because of the many Underground Railroad paths, routes, and influential people in Illinois, Chicago was an important city for freedom-seeking slaves, which resulted from its strong abolitionist movement.

Illinois was most heavily impacted by the five Underground Railroad routes passing through it. Because slaves had to escape from the southern states and head north, all Underground Railroad lines began in southern Illinois. The people of southern Illinois saw the tortures endured by African Americans. This sparked sympathy toward the runaways, causing Southern Illinois to become more abolitionist friendly. This brought problems as well. The slaves' "masters" eventually began searching for the runaways, and began demanding that the people of Illinois had to cooperate. This caused tension, which eventually led into fights along the border. This also caused anti-free state societies to begin. Despite all of this, slaves continued to escape through Illinois and reach their destination in Chicago.

Chicago had many abolitionist supporters and sympathetic people living there. Although they did not have full rights, slaves could hold jobs and were paid without the risk of discrimination. Chicago was geographically located in an ideal place for slaves. It was far north and out of reach from slave hunters and their former masters, and it was near other free states. Chicago also bordered Lake Michigan, which led to Canada, another safe haven for slaves. The Underground Railroad not only benefited slaves; it benefited Chicago as well. When the Fugitive Slave Act was issued, all slaves in Chicago were unsafe because this new law allowed slave hunters to capture slaves in free states, regardless of citizenship. This caused all slaves in Chicago to flee to Canada causing the people of Chicago to help slaves escape. They also refused to permit slave catchers to enter the city. Chicago had become a strong abolitionist city and was truly devoted to the anti-slavery cause.

Although a majority of the people in Illinois supported the abolitionist cause, some very influential people had to help the residents of southern Illinois understand the horrors of slavery. One important person that helped influence Illinois was Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy. Lovejoy hated slavery because of his religion. After he started protesting to the slave owners, who violently dismissed him, he began publishing an abolitionist newspaper. In 1836, Lovejoy moved to Alton, Illinois, a city that had many pro-slavery supporters living in it. He then began printing his religious newspaper despite the angry mobs that accumulated at his door. This newspaper spoke openly about the evils of slavery and explained that this was not the way civilized societies functioned. This caused many people, especially in Chicago, to understand the horrors of slavery and to become anti-slavery supporters themselves. Therefore, the pro-slavery supporters became

enraged. On a fateful night in November 1837, a large mob gathered around a pottery warehouse, the rumored location of Lovejoy's new press. Unfortunately for Lovejoy, the mob came to the correct location. Then, the fight began. It started as a fistfight, but evolved into a gunfight. Lovejoy's friends desperately defended his new press. When an abolitionist attempted to calm the crowd, the mob responded in gunfire. The abolitionists then threw pottery onto the mob. These makeshift projectiles discouraged the mob from storming the warehouse. Then the mob began igniting the building. While Lovejoy tried to extinguish these fires, he was shot to death. The abolitionist then ran to protect the body Elijah P. Lovejoy, while the mob destroyed the press and flung it into the Mississippi River.

Although this was a pro-slavery victory, it also had benefits for the northern abolitionists. The largest benefit was Chicago's stand. After Lovejoy's death, Chicago, inspired by his bravery, took a stand and openly declared itself an abolitionist city. Chicago's support allowed even more routes to be created.

After the death of Lovejoy, new, bold abolitionists emerged. One of which was Fredrick Douglass. Douglass was a free slave that wrote about the horrors of slavery in his abolitionist newspaper *The North Star*. These newspapers circulated throughout the free states' cities. Chicago and other heavily populated cities in Illinois were exposed to very strong abolitionist views, thus resulting in a change of heart for many once pro-slavery supporters. Although he used the power of the press to spread the views of abolitionists, Douglass also spoke in various cities. Some of his speeches were given in Chicago, which caused mixed reactions throughout the city. Abolitionists were interested in what he said, while pro-slavery supporters hated them. Despite the protests of angry

pro-slavery supporters, Douglass still spoke and spread the word of freedom. Eventually, most pro-slavery supporters in Chicago became heavy anti-slavery supporters. Due to these speeches, Chicago became an even stronger abolitionist center.

Because of the many Underground Railroad paths, routes, and influential people in Illinois, Chicago was an important city for freedom-seeking slaves, which allowed it to demonstrate strong abolitionist support. Chicago was never to be the same again. [From Raymond Bial, *The Underground Railroad; The History of Chicago: The Underground Railroad*, <<http://www.chicagohistory.ugrr.org.html>>. (Sept. 5, 2006); Kallen A. Stuart, *Life on the Underground Railroad*; Student historian's interview with Glennette T. Turner, Sept. 10, 2006; and Glennette T. Turner, *The Underground Railroad in Illinois*.]