

Megan Dedert

Lauren Hickey

Brad Salsman

Torie Selsor

Michaela Young

Dr. Collins

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Following the Unpaved Path

Imagine that you have just finished working another hard day out in the scorching heat, just as you have done for many excruciating days before. You are exhausted and hungry. All you have to look forward to is a tiny meal to nourish your body and a restless night's sleep on a hard, cold floor, which is too quickly interrupted by the light of day. Your family has been sold and you are now all alone to fend for yourself. Finally, one day you decide that you cannot take this anymore. You decide to make your great escape when darkness falls. Leaving your few possessions and friends behind, you quietly creep off into the darkness of the night. Your destination is freedom.

Slavery has been documented as existing since the 1500s. African Americans were taken from their native homes and sold to white people to do manual labor. Boatloads full of African Americans traveled everywhere to meet the demands of labor forces. All ages and genders boarded these boats to be sold and traded. Many families were divided among buyers. As long as slavery has existed, imprisoned African Americans have been seeking freedom. Many slaves, on their quest to be free, were recaptured, or even worse, killed for attempting to run away. As the years passed, more

and more African Americans were being bought and sold into this terrible way of life. By 1705, slaves began to be referred to as “real estate,” meaning that slave owners could bequeath their slaves (National Geographic Society). During this period, laws began to give permission to slave owners to “kill” and “destroy” their slaves whenever they saw fit (National Geographic Society). These laws made slaves into meager property controlled by their owners. This meant that the children born to slave mothers became slaves as well. Slave families began to be able to purchase their own freedom. Men typically bought their wives’ freedom first, which allowed their children to be free from slavery as well.

Slaves began to find better and more efficient ways of reaching their freedom. Soon many people were recruited for the process of aiding runaway slaves, leading to the success of many to escape to freedom. Blacks and whites alike began to join forces in the fight to abolish slavery and obtain freedom. A path was thus created to carry precious “cargo” or “goods” to “safe” places. The unpaved path that carried over 500,000 men, women, and children to safety was christened “the Underground Railroad” by 1831. More and more African Americans sought freedom as the years passed. In 1790, there were over 700,000 African Americans imprisoned and only 59,000 African Americans who were not slaves; only forty years later, in 1830, the numbers drastically increased, reaching 319,000 freed slaves. Then number of freed slaves continued to increase until 1860, but 488,000 African Americans were still living a life of slavery (Franklin 48).

Quincy played a major part in aiding runaway slaves. One part of Quincy that led to such success for runaway slaves was the extension of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad through Quincy in 1856. Many slaves would cross the Mississippi

River into Illinois, a free state, and board the train in Quincy, Illinois. This allowed runaway slaves the chance to travel on the cars that could take them all the way to Chicago and then allow them to escape to Canada (Railroad 1).

The numerous trips made along The Underground Railroad were anything but easy. Many slaves traveled over 250 miles to obtain their freedom. Some trips were made by foot or carriage, and others made solo or with companions. African Americans who were already free aided in helping these runaways reach their goals, but whites also risked their lives to help on the path to independence. People met along the railroad were referred to as “conductors” while the hideouts were dubbed “stations” or “depots.” At these stops slaves received money, food, clothing, and lodging. A Quaker man by the name of Levi Coffin assisted more than 3,000 slaves, making him a hero to the thousands that used the railroad (PBS). These “stations” or stops were found everywhere from deep in Louisiana and Arkansas through Iowa and along North Carolina. Runaways traveled as far north as they could go. Many went as far as Canada for fear of being recaptured and sent back into slavery. There were free states along the way where some runaways sought freedom but living freely in these societies was very difficult. Each safe house was slightly different. Whether someone was traveling in groups or solo, the atmosphere changed. Spaces were sometimes very limited, only allowing one or two slaves at once.

One such example of a safe house, located in nearby Quincy, Illinois, is called the Eells House. This house was an active stop on the railroad during the 1840s. Dr. Richard Eells and his wife took slaves in and helped to transport them to other safe houses. He established the first Underground Railroad station across the border of

Missouri (Eells House 1). Once a man by the name of Charlie attempted to leave the life of slavery behind and escape to the Free states by crossing the Mississippi River. After leaving Missouri, Charlie found himself in Quincy. He was found swimming across the river by Barryman Barnett, a freed black, who brought him to the house of Dr. Eells (Eells House 1). Dr. Eells then attempted to bring Charlie to a safer hiding place, Quincy's Mission Institute (Eells House 1). Dr. Eells had heard that the police were after Charlie so he recommended that Charlie flee. Unfortunately, Charlie was seen and traced back to Dr. Eells. Later, Dr. Eells was brought before Judge Stephen Douglas, where he was found guilty of violating the Fugitive Slave Act and thus had to pay a hefty four hundred dollar fine.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 stated that a slave owner had to convince a federal commissioner that a captive was his property. As long as the captive was proven to belong to the slave owner there was no need to go to court or to a trial. This in turn provided for the return of runaway slaves to their original owners. Even if the slave was caught in a free state, the slave still was required to be returned to his or her owner, making him or her a fugitive for life.

Stephan Douglas, the man who convicted Dr. Eells of violating this act, was also a debater in the famous Lincoln- Douglas debates. In 1858, Stephen A, Douglas and Abraham Lincoln were campaigning for the Illinois U.S. Senate seat. This sparked the Lincoln Douglas Debates, which happened all across the state of Illinois. The Debates took place in seven different places. Quincy is the home of the sixth Lincoln-Douglas debate, which took place during the 1858 campaign for a US Senate seat from Illinois. Held on October 13, in what used to be known as John's Square and is now called

Washington Park, this famous debate focused on the issue of slavery. Lincoln was pushing Douglas to admit that he wanted the states individually to determine whether or not they would allow for slavery (Quincy History 1). Douglas admitted what Lincoln wanted to hear. This led to Douglas winning the Senate election, because at this time people were not ready to abolish slavery altogether. More than 15,000 people came to the square that day to hear the debates between these two influential men (Quincy History 1). Douglas won the election to become the Illinois Representative on the U.S. Senate. He was reelected by a 54-46 vote (Lincoln Douglas Debates 1).

These Lincoln-Douglas debates, along with The Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act, the Dred Scott Case, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act led to a huge decade for African Americans. This was only the beginning for African Americans and their push to end slavery. All of these events helped create the freedom needed for African Americans to tell their stories in writing. During this time, many African American writers were able to emerge from the shadows and fears of slavery: many pieces of African American literature were written and published. Frances E. W. Harper, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Harriet Jacobs, and many more writers were able to get their works circulating at this time.

The beginnings of African American literature thus helped the push for freedom and also helped create to the passionate desire of African Americans to create a literature of their own, one that would reflect their unique heritage and experience. All slaves were denied the right to study literature or even learn how to read, which says even more about those who excelled at expressing their ideas through their writing. Only in the second half of the eighteenth century did African American literature become what we read today.

These beginning writings told about the everyday experiences of slaves at this time and the lives they lived before. They told not only about the trials and tribulations of working for their masters, but also the hidden lives of those who experienced things such as bearing interracial children or enduring domestic disputes that weren't exactly "domestic." It was a period when the slaves who escaped bondage were able to be truly free.

These slave narratives continued into the nineteenth century, when a man named Frederick Douglass was born. He would develop into one of the most important and popular African American voices of all time. His writings were very descriptive of the hardships that slaves faced during these times and the earlier years of their lives. Born into slavery, as almost all African Americans were, Douglass was the son of a white man. This was nothing new and in fact was often quite common at the time. Douglass writes that masters kept female slaves from saying anything about these encounters by threatening to sell the slaves' children. For these mothers, having children born into slavery but living close by was a much better situation than having them sold away to another plantation or home, or even to another state.

Douglass also writes about seeing his aunt being whipped so viciously that she bleeds to the floor. His aunt was called for while she was out seeing another slave. Douglass later found out that the plantation overseer found his aunt very attractive. He had told her not to go out with this man, and as a result, she was whipped. It was that easy back then to be punished so harshly. In another example, Douglass witnessed a slave who was getting whipped jump into a lake to lessen the pain. When the white man who had beaten him demanded that he come out, the slave did not move. The slave was shot

and killed, and the white man was not looked down upon or prosecuted. In fact, he was seen as a just plantation overseer. Douglass was rarely whipped, but suffered from the cold in the winter: “I was kept almost naked no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a coarse tow linen shirt, reaching only to be knees” (71).

In many historical books from this time period there are eloquent quotes from Fredrick Douglass: “The slaveholders themselves have saved our cause from ruin! They have exposed the throat of slavery to the keen knife of liberty, and have given a chance to all the righteous forces of the nation to deal a death-blow to monster evil of the nineteenth century” (Vorenberg 23). Here Douglass notes that the reality of slavery, ignored and disregarded for so long, has finally been brought out of the dark and before the eyes of all Americans, both white and black.

Like other writers of this period, Douglass worries about being put back into slavery. The former slaves’ stories discussed other fugitive slaves as well as the people who assisted them in running away, people who ran the risk of being accused of a major criminal offense at that time. They were not able to write as frankly as they would have liked to until slavery was abolished. During this time period, African Americans wrote about the struggles of their lives, but it they were also clearly still in a battle against slavery.

W.E.B. Du Bois also writes about his struggle for this new so-called freedom in his writings. He writes about how African Americans were still under pressure from the white landowners: “[He] pointed to the contrast between the amendment’s promise and its actual impact” (Vorenberg 244). Du Bois was a writer who was able to show that the Emancipation Proclamation and even the actual amendments were not enough to actually

free the African American race from slavery. There was still serious discrimination even for those who were free, trying to live in world where they were not accepted.

White Southerners from this time period were trying to get used to the new amendments to the Constitution. It would take a great deal of time and effort for everyone to accept African American's new-found freedoms. Not only were there literary changes in what African Americans wrote about, but there were also changes in how white Americans wrote about the newly freed slaves.

White Americans had to change the ways they viewed African Americans and treated them, and African Americans were changing as well. African Americans were now able to learn and think openly, which greatly expanded their possibilities for the future. It was like a domino effect; the slaves who were already speaking out and writing during slavery were now able to help those who were not as bold to put their ideas and struggles into words. They were able to become critical thinkers about the situations that they had gone through and what they were currently experiencing. More and more people were able to realize that they truly would not be slaves forever.

With the help of President Abraham Lincoln, the political system began to acknowledge slavery as unjust. The Emancipation Proclamation and the amendments to the Constitution moved the nation toward the process of ending of slavery. Although everyone knew it would take time and more enforcement, slavery would eventually be gone forever. As Fredrick Douglass declared about the influence of the Emancipation Proclamation, "Its meaning to me was entire abolition of slavery" (Franklin 143).

The Underground Railroad and work of Dr. Eells, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the African American literature of this time were all major factors that contributing to slavery's being finally abolished.

Now imagine that you have just escaped the life you want so badly to forget, and you are crossing the border to freedom, when suddenly you are spotted. Luckily for you, the man staring back at you wants nothing more than to help you escape and fight for the freedoms that you know are yours. Gradually but steadily, this was becoming the reality for African Americans and their fight against slavery.

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