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Kansas Was Active in the Underground Railroad

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Sidney "Charity" Still
Sandra Scott-Revelle

KANSAS WAS ACTIVE IN THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

NOT JUST A WAY STATION — ALSO A DESTINATION

In the Civil War era, Kansas gained a reputation for its willingness to fight against slavery and its active participation in the Underground Railroad, a system begun in the South that helped fugitive enslaved people escape to antislavery states and Canada.

As the state's reputation spread, freedom-seeking slaves increasingly came to Kansas, not only for a safe haven on the way to parts farther north but also to live in a place where they believed they would be treated equally. This migration contributed to the rich cultural history Kansas now enjoys.

Journeys on the Underground Railroad were dangerous for both the freedom seekers and the "conductors," those who helped the freedom seekers along the way.

In organizing the Underground Railroad out of Kansas Territory, John Brown and others realized that the overland route used to bring supplies from Iowa to Topeka, Kansas, (the Lane Trail) would be an effective route to spirit fugitive slaves northward out of Kansas. Freedom seekers traveled from Lawrence to Topeka and then north on the Lane Trail through Holton, Albany, Sabetha and Plymouth to Iowa.

When extra caution was necessary, the route detoured west up the Wakarusa River valley to safe houses at Bloomington and Auburn, then on to Harveyville, Mission Creek and Wabaunsee.



The Exchange
Sandra Scott-Revelle

This route included the portion of the Topeka Fort Riley Road that crossed over Mount Mitchell in the Flint Hills. That portion of the road is now recognized by the National Park Service as a Network to Freedom site commemorating the Underground Railroad. The Capt. William Mitchell farmstead was a station on the Underground Railroad.

Walking the trails of Mount Mitchell Heritage Prairie allows visitors to experience the open prairie that freedom seekers crossed on their way to the next stop.

The Underground Railroad was active elsewhere in the Flint Hills as well. For

example, stations in southern Lyon County fed stations in Wabaunsee County, which fed stations in towns including Manhattan.

An estimated 900 to 1,000 fugitive slaves moved north out of Kansas along the Underground Railroad from 1856 to 1860. Most were sent in the traditional way of one or two people at a time, but sometimes these small groups remained at a safe locality until the funds could be obtained to send them on or until a large group could be put together. These large groupings of fugitives are one feature of what developed in Kansas, where a group of Underground Railroad workers escorted the fugitives all the way to Iowa or beyond.

William Least Heat-Moon poetically and powerfully wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1991 issue, "Because [the Flint Hills] belong to the open world of grasses, they dominate if not the sky then surely the horizon with their symmetrical and flattened tops, their trapezoidal slopes, and (at dawn and sunset) their shadows that can stretch unbroken and most visibly for a prairie mile."

Let us never forget the travels (and travails) of so many African American individuals and families who sought a pathway to freedom and self-determination across the Kansas prairie and through those "shadows that can stretch unbroken and most visibly for a prairie mile." We should likewise never forget those who served as conductors on the Underground Railroad. As Kansans, whatever our race or heritage, we can take great pride in the heroism

of individuals such as John and Mary Ritchie, Samuel and Florella Brown Adair, John Brown, Henry Ward Beecher, William Mitchell and so many unnamed others. Their bravery, commitment and deep understanding of the importance of freedom and the future of our country (and its citizens) should forever be respected, appreciated and treasured.

At the Kansas African American Museum in Wichita, we are honored to assist in telling the story of the journey to freedom for so many African Americans as they ventured through Kansas on their way to Canada and other northern destinations.

At the museum, we are also proud of the heritage of Kansas as a preeminent "home of freedom," and we feel privileged to help celebrate this historic pedigree and those brave individuals who invested so heavily in this heritage.

Denise Sherman has served as executive director for the Kansas African American Museum since 2018. During her tenure, the museum has elevated the African American story and African American art, experiences and contributions to society. In the past, Denise held positions in higher education and owned several businesses. She has a Master of Science in organizational development. She is married to Don Sherman and has one daughter and one grandson.

Ted Ayres has served on the board of directors of the Kansas African American Museum for six years, twice serving as board president. Ted is also an executive committee member of the Kansas Historical Foundation's board of directors. He retired from Wichita State University in 2018 as vice president and general counsel emeritus. He has been married to Marcia Busselle, formerly of Cottonwood Falls, for 46 years. They have three sons and four grandchildren.