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The Underground Railroad in Kansas

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TORNADO
Kelly Hartman

The Underground Railroad in Kansas

By 1854, when the Kansas-Nebraska Territories were opened for settlement, underground railroads had been in operation for decades and had helped tens of thousands of fugitive slaves escape to freedom. Whether highly organized or loosely planned, these men and women assisted slaves northward to escape the bonds of slavery. When these territories opened, not only did they offer new opportunities for underground railroad operations, they created a pivotal moment for the expansion of slavery on the frontier.

As settlers moved into the territory and elections were held, many settlers were outraged as they discovered that proslavery men from Missouri had crossed into Kansas and fraudulently voted for a legislature that favored slavery. Although most settlers were interested in cheap land, small groups of radicals on both

sides helped fuel animosity, and sporadic violent acts broke out that gave the territory the nickname Bleeding Kansas.

1856 proved to be the pivotal year of small battles and skirmishes between the Free-state and proslavery forces. The situation threatened to erupt into civil war and federal troops were often called

out to keep the two sides apart.

While the Underground Railroad conjures all kinds of romantic visions of fugitive slaves eluding slave patrols by hiding in swamps, and station masters hiding fugitives in secret rooms and tunnels, the truth behind its frontier

It is estimated that as many as 900-1000 slaves were helped out of Kansas along underground railroads from 1856-1860.

version was not all that simple. Because Kansas was a new frontier, farms and towns were fewer and farther between and it was increasingly difficult to send fugitives on quickly. The greater distance therefore contributed to a layover that might last a few days, weeks, or even months before transportation and expenses could be provided. Further, one must appreciate that a majority of the successful escapes were done by the slaves themselves with

no help from anyone connected with the Underground Railroad. The largest percentage of escaping fugitives made the choice to escape and then struggled, despite a lack of food, adequate clothing, and challenging elements to make it, sometimes hundreds of miles, to a place where they might then find assistance by an underground railroad.

In reality, although most of the fighting in Kansas was over by 1857, it remained to be seen how the political situation would resolve itself. A few Free-state men made efforts to organize an underground railroad out of the territory. John Brown, already experienced in underground railroad activities, helped pull things together, assisted by Ira Blanchard near Civil Bend, Iowa. These men realized that the overland route bringing supplies from Iowa to Topeka, later known as the Lane Trail, would be an effective route to spirit fugitive slaves northward out of Kansas. This trail led north from Topeka, through Holton, Albany, Sabetha, and Plymouth. Leaving Kansas, the route cut



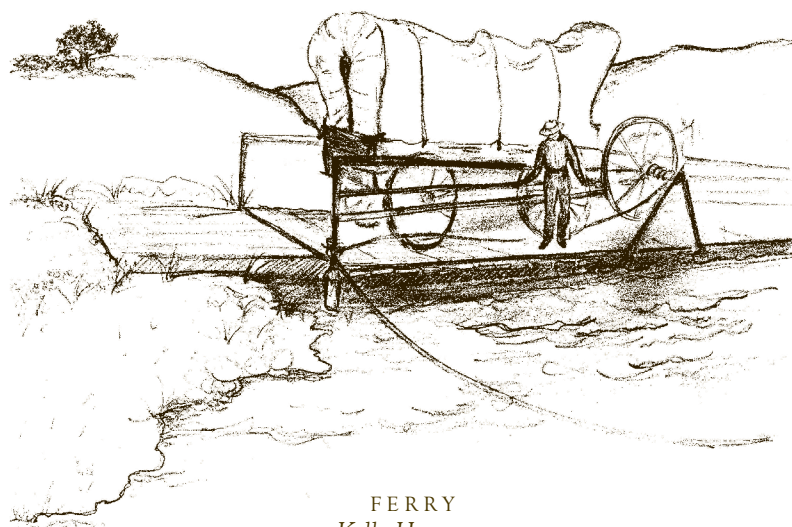
UNLOADING AT A STATION
Kelly Hartman

through the southeast corner of Nebraska, providing an all-important bypass of Missouri. In Nebraska, stations were established at Falls City, Brownville, and Peru. Next was the important town of Nebraska City. It was there that several ferry boats operated that could safely transfer fugitives across the Missouri River. From there, the way led eastward and north eastward across Iowa to the Quaker villages of Springdale and West Branch, Iowa.

Fugitive slaves generally came

to Kansas from northern Arkansas, western and northwest Missouri, or the Cherokee lands to the south where some Indians owned slaves. Underground Railroad stations in southern Kansas could be found near Fort Scott, Mound City, and Moneka. Moving northward, other stations could be found near Shermansville, Berea, Osawatomie, and Lawrence. Fugitives crossing the Missouri River could find assistance at Quindaro.

These were just a few of the places where



FERRY
Kelly Hartman

freedom seekers might find help, and they extended from the eastern border of Kansas as far west as Wabaunsee County.

It is estimated that as many as 900-1000 slaves were helped out of Kansas along underground railroads from 1856-1860. Most were sent in the traditional way of one or two, but sometimes these small groups remained at a safe locality until the funds could be obtained to send them on, or until a larger group could be put together. These large groupings of fugitives are one feature of what developed in Kansas, where the

same group of underground railroad workers escorted them all the way to Iowa or beyond. This mode of travel was referred to as a “train.”

The most well-known of all the Underground Railroad trips of this type began in December 1858. On the night of December 19, John Brown led a group of men into Missouri where they split into two groups and raided farms, taking away eleven fugitive slaves, a wagon, horses and other stock, and numerous household items. One of the slave women taken was over eight months pregnant. While Brown

stayed behind in southern Kansas, his men took the fugitives along the underground to Osawatimie. From there, other local underground railroad workers, realizing their hiding place would surely be watched, moved them to an abandoned cabin on the prairie between Greeley and Berea, Kansas. There they stayed for approximately twenty-eight days while Brown watched the border. It was during this time that the woman, Mrs. Daniels, gave birth to a son. This child, conceived in slavery, entered the world on the cusp of freedom. While slave catchers patrolled the timber belts along the Pottowatomie River, the fugitives remained secreted in the cabin on the prairie. Brown returned near the end of January 1859, gathered up the fugitives, and set out for Lawrence. Arriving there, he made preparations for a trip that followed the Lane Trail north to Nebraska. After a minor delay close to Holton, where a proslavery posse attempted to stop Brown and apprehend the fugitives, the group continued crossing into Nebraska and then Iowa a few weeks later. Resting at the

Quaker villages near Springdale, the group reached Chicago and was provided passage in a boxcar headed north to Detroit. From there they made it into Canada on March 12, 1859, eighty-four days since being liberated in Missouri.

Another large group of fugitives had left Lawrence about the same time as Brown’s group, this one led by Dr. John Doy, but they were apprehended only a few miles north by slave catchers. The group was taken to Missouri where the fugitives were sold back into slavery and Doy and his son put in prison. Eventually his son was released, but Doy was sentenced to five years of prison. Had it not been for a daring, late-night rescue by a group of Lawrence men, dubbed the “Immortal Ten,” Doy would have found himself in a Missouri prison for years.

One of Doy’s rescuers, the Rev. John E. Stewart, also known as the Fighting Preacher, had transformed his cabin a few miles south of Lawrence into one of the busiest Underground Railroad stations in Kansas Territory. By the spring of 1860,



THE IMMORTAL TEN: KANSAS ABOLITIONISTS
AFTER THEIR RESCUE OF UNDERGROUND RAILROAD
CONDUCTOR, DR. JOHN DOY, 1859
Wayne Wildcat

slave catchers from Missouri were more emboldened than ever and raided his farm, capturing one young lad whom they took back to St. Joseph. Stewart, with a growing number of fugitives to protect, borrowed a local cannon, known as “Old Sacramento,” and brought it to his fortified farmstead. His information proved correct as slave catchers again attacked his farm. This time, Stewart and his men were ready, and with the help of cannon fire, drove the raiders off. Realizing he was now a target, Stewart made plans to take his own train of

fugitives out of Kansas.

On the evening of June 9, Stewart left his farm near Lawrence with three borrowed wagons, fifteen fugitive slaves, and nine Underground Railroad workers as protection against slave catchers. Because the route northward from Topeka had become well known, the group traveled west up the Wakarusa valley. Stopping at a station near Auburn, they found four more fugitives awaiting them. Another wagon and driver were found, and the group, now totaling nineteen, set

off again for the Harvey settlement in southwestern Wabaunsee County. From there they headed northwest to the Kaw River, where Samuel Weed helped them cross near Wabaunsee. This detour west, approximately forty-five miles further than the normal route, made this trip in all probability the most western of any organized Underground Railroad trip in U.S. history. Traveling by night and resting by day, the party wove its way through the upper reaches of the Flint Hills and closer to Nebraska Territory. A participant noted “we would spend a whole day among these beautiful ravines to avoid a few obnoxious proslavery places and wait for our guides of the ‘Night Express’ and thence travel again till daylight.”

Once into Nebraska, they continued making good time until a severe thunderstorm and funnel cloud overtook them and they hurried toward a valley seeking cover. As they raced for protection, the storm pelted them with rain. Suddenly the fury of the wind capsized one of the wagons threatening

to blow its occupants away! One of the men succeeded in crawling to the terrified folks and tucked one of the babies into his overcoat and dug his hands into the earth while a sibling and their mother clung to him for dear life. After the storm passed, the group spent several days recovering their horses and drying provisions before resuming their journey.

Days later, the party reached Nebraska City. Eluding slave patrols, they were ferried across the Missouri River. After resting near Tabor, Iowa, they resumed their journey angling east and northeast across the state until they reached the Quaker settlements near West Branch and Springdale, after being on the trail for sixty-six days. A few of the fugitives found homes nearby while the remainder were sent along the Underground Railroad to Canada. The brave Rev. Stewart continued on to Boston to further his work in the cause of freedom.

Todd Mildfelt teaches special education for the Southeast Kansas Education Service Center. He published his first book, The Secret Danites Kansas’ First Jayhawkers in 2003.