The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was neither underground nor a railroad, but a system of loosely connected safe havens where those escaping the brutal conditions of slavery were sheltered, fed, clothed, nursed, concealed, disguised, and instructed during their journey to freedom. Although this movement was one of America's greatest social, moral, and humanitarian endeavors, the details about it were often cloaked in secrecy to project those involved form the retribution of civil law and slave-catchers. Ohio's history has bene permanently shaped by the thousands of runaway slaves passing through or finding permanent residence in this state.

This text is seen on one side of all four Ohio Turnpike UGRR Historical Markers.

Escaping Slavery in Eastern Ohio

On their perilous journey north to freedom, enslaved people encountered a diverse mix of allies in eastern Ohio motivated by deeply held religious beliefs. The Quaker communities in Stark, Carroll, and Wayne counties provided refuge and offered assistance. The implacable Congregational mind-set of the Connecticut Western Reserve translated into fierce antislavery activism of residents in Medina, Portage, and Summit counties.

John Brown of Harpers Ferry fame is one example. He lived in Summit and Portage counties. Many Underground Railroad sites in that area are a testament to his dedication and that of his family, especially his father, Owen Brown. After John Brown's public hanging by authorities in Virginia on December 2, 1859, communities across the Reserve tolled their church bells in outrage the minute the telegraph brought news of his death.

J. Ridgeway Haines, a prominent member of the Quaker Community in Alliance, Stark County, was one of the most active conductors on the Underground Railroad. He stood guard at night when freedom seekers sheltered in an upper room in the rear of his house. Haines was acquainted with many figures of the national antislavery movement, including Abby Kelley Foster. She and other like-minded abolitionists were frequent house guests of Haines. Today, this house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

This text is seen on the markers located at Portage Service Plaza.

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Escaping Slavery in North Central Ohio

Having fled the brutality of bondage, enslaved people were terrified of betrayal and capture by slave catchers. They found themselves north in an uncertain and dangerous environment. The sparse population and geography of counties, Wyandot, Crawford, Seneca, Huron, Sandusky, Erie, and Ottawa, helped alleviate some worry. The numerous villages, Native American missions and waysides were located seven to ten miles apart—the average distance for a male runaway to find sanctuary within a night's trek. The area's flat topography with no hills and few ravines enabled runaways to quickly reach Sandusky Bay where they hoped for quick passage across Lake Erie into Canada. Trails leading into Clyde, Sandusky County, followed what is now State Route 101.

Local lore tells of an escaped slave woman and her child found hiding in a shed on the farm of Loomis Ames. He attempted to take them into his house, but they suspiciously cringed in a corner, refusing to leave. The woman wore no shoes and had only a few possessions in a cloth bag. Loomis and his wife left plates of food until finally she was enticed from her hiding place. The Ames family hired her as their housekeeper, and she remained in Clyde for the rest of her life. Elizabeth "Lizzie" Anderson died February 11, 1911 and is the only former slave buried in Clyde's McPherson Cemetery.

This text is seen on the markers located at Commodore Perry Service Plaza.