

WHAT WAS THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD?

The Underground Railroad was a network of individuals, homes, and hideouts that helped enslaved people in the United States escape to freedom. It was not a physical railroad, but rather a term that described this network of people helping people escape slavery. "Underground" captured the secrecy of the movement and "railroad" referred to transporting people to freedom.

The Underground Railroad often used railroad terms. People who guided the enslaved were called **conductors**. Hideouts and homes where the enslaved hid along the route were called **stations**.

WHO WERE CONDUCTORS?

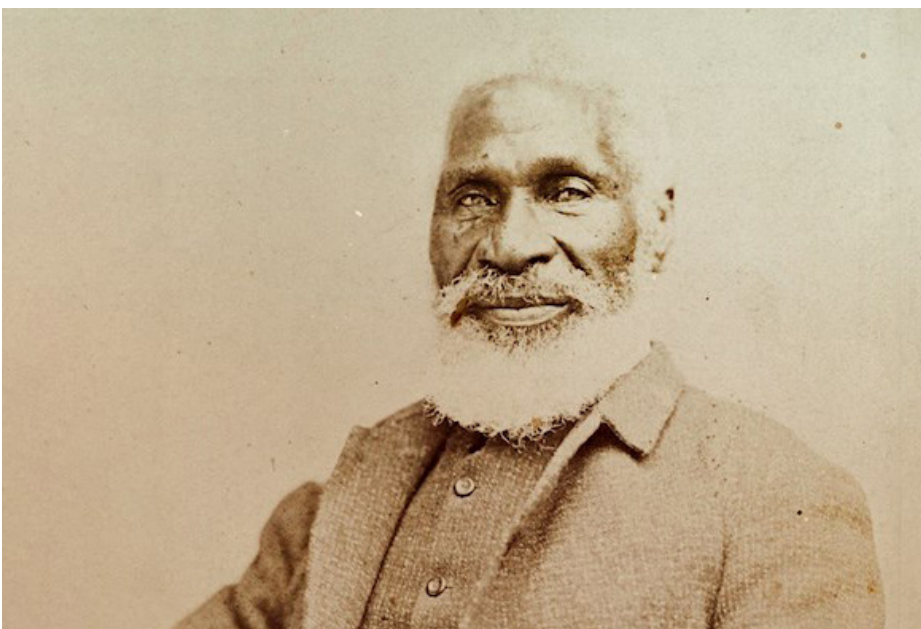
Many people from various backgrounds worked as conductors and provided safety for the enslaved along the route. Some conductors were formerly enslaved such as Harriet Tubman and Josiah Henson who escaped using the Underground Railroad and then returned to help others escape slavery.

Traveling on the Underground Railroad was difficult and dangerous.

Passengers would often travel by foot at night. They would sneak from one station to the next, being careful to not get caught by **patrollers**. Stations or depots were usually around 20 miles apart. Sometimes they would have to wait at a station for awhile until they knew it was safe to travel again.

“I was the conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can’t say - I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger.”

- Harriet Tubman, 1896



Portrait of Josiah Henson, June 17, 1876 | Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute

JOSIAH HENSON

Born into slavery, this preacher and Underground Railroad conductor was the inspiration for the character Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ESCAPED?

Since the enslaved escaped in secrecy, no one is quite sure how many escaped. There are estimates that say over 100,000 escaped, including 30,000 during the peak years before the Civil War.

The Underground Railroad operated quietly, by word-of-mouth. Very few people kept written records to protect both the conductors and the passengers seeking freedom. If captured, enslaved persons would be forced to return to slavery. People caught helping escaped enslaved persons faced arrest and jail. This applied to people living in both slave states and free states.

WHAT IS THE FUGITIVE SLAVE ACT?

In 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in the United States. The act made it law that any escaped enslaved persons found in free states had to be returned to their owners. The act also made the federal government responsible for finding and returning escaped enslaved persons. This law made it even more difficult for the Underground Railroad. This new law created a greater need to transport passengers all the way to Canada to be sure they were safe and truly free.



Underground Railroad: Routes to Freedom

A BOLD CONDUCTOR

Samuel Burris helped guide escaped enslaved persons through the free black community in Delaware, often sending passengers on to Philadelphia. In 1847 he was caught helping an enslaved woman named Maria Mathews. He was arrested and jailed in Dover, Delaware. He was found guilty and sentenced to be sold into slavery as punishment.

At the auction block, Burris was sold to Isaac A. Flint. Though he didn't know it at the time, Flint was actually an **abolitionist** posing as a **slave trader**. After the sale, Burris was freed. In 1852, Burris and his family moved to California. Although he stopped working with the Underground Railroad at that time, he continued to support the abolition cause in California.



Samuel Burris

VOCABULARY

Abolitionist: a person who speaks out against slavery

Conductor: a person who helped enslaved persons along their route to freedom

Passenger: a person escaping slavery

Patroller: a person who captured escaping enslaved persons and returned them to their owners

Slave Trader: a person who purchased and sold enslaved persons

Stations: a safe house where escaping enslaved persons could rest

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1) Who was Josiah Henson?

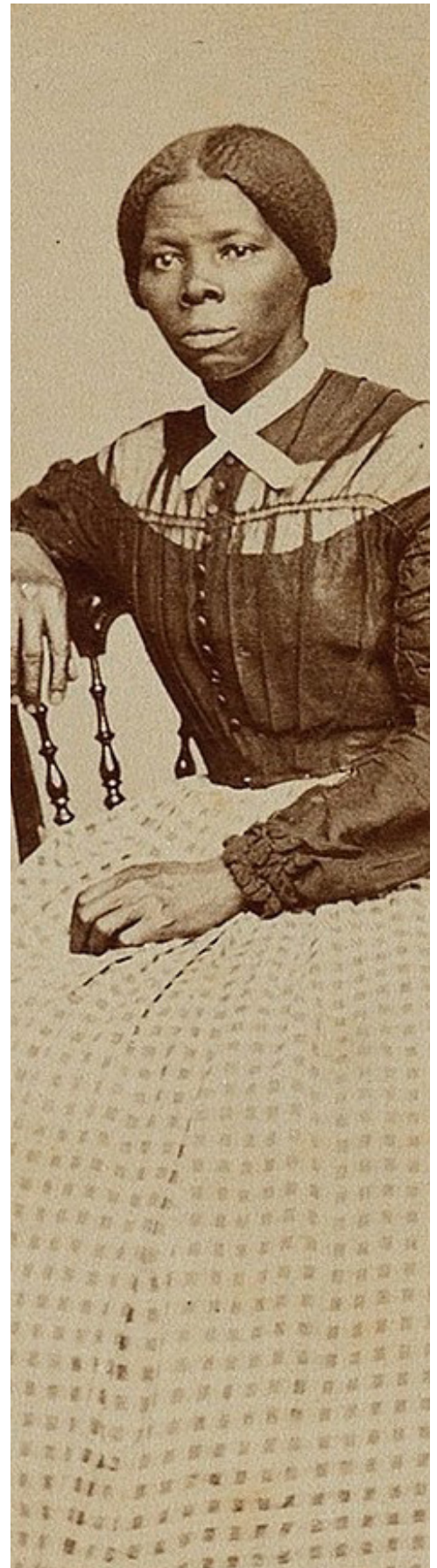
- A. a patroller
- B. a conductor
- C. a slave trader

2) What was a “station”?

- A. a slave pen
- B. an auction block
- C. a safe house

3) What did the Fugitive Slave Act do?

- A. it made it illegal for people to help enslaved persons to freedom
- B. it made slavery legal in Ohio
- C. it allowed escaping enslaved persons to be free



Harriet Tubman, late 1860's

WORD SEARCH

Y I M S T W O M K L A T P
R W U O J U V J D W W F A
E B B U D S B B U B F C T
V R M P I E S M K V O A R
A G O R A O E R A N A G O
L P R O T S H R D N B P L
S U R T K R S U F F B S L
B Z V V Z T C E Z G A Y E
A B O L I T I O N I S T R
R K F S O T K V L G Z V S
N P Y R X R L I P B E E R
S N O I T A T S J T J R S
R H E N S O N T Z L G B S

Abolitionist
Burris

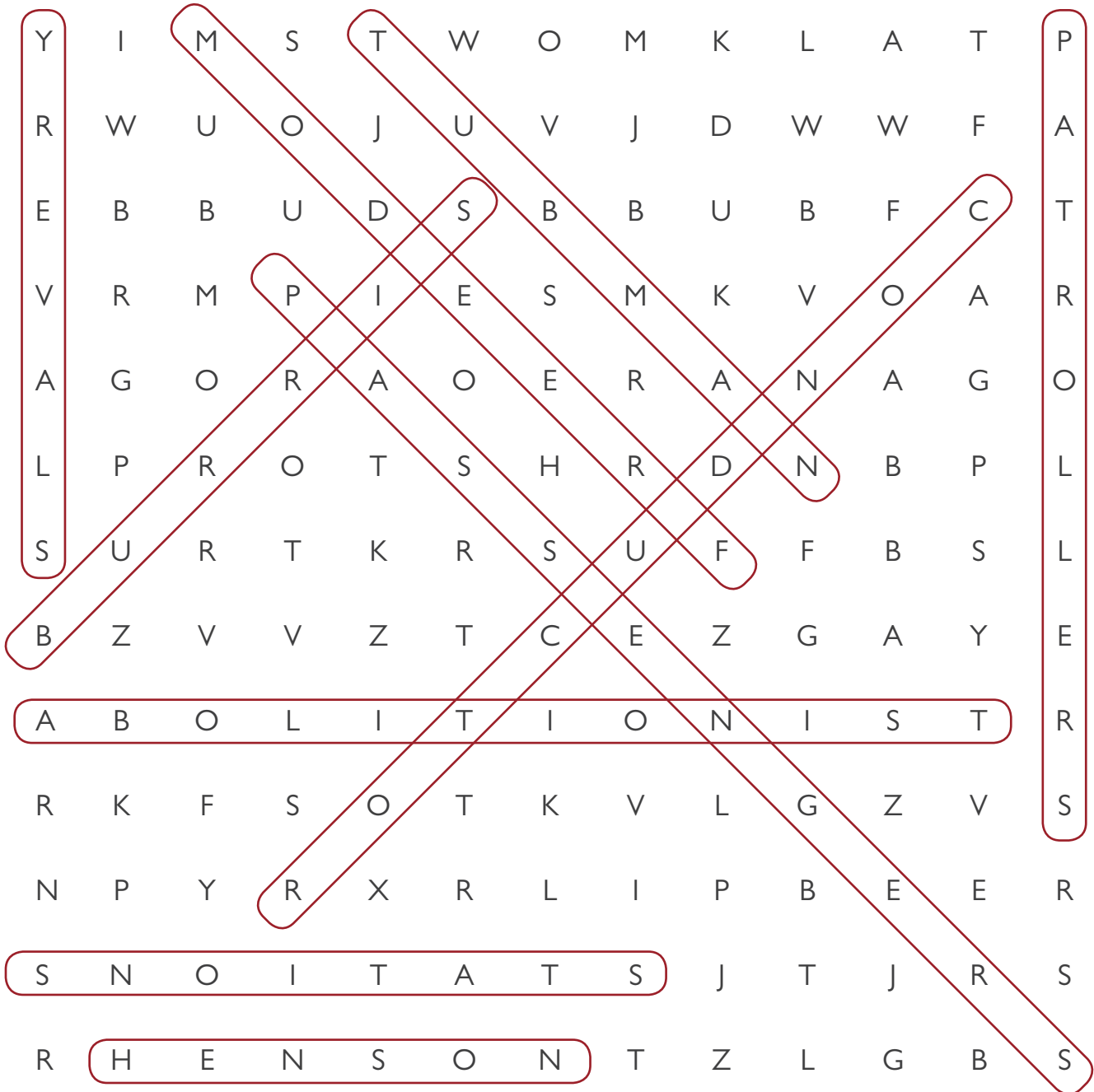
Conductor
Freedom

Henson
Passengers

Patrollers
Slavery

Stations
Tubman

ANSWER KEY



Abolitionist

Conductor

Henson

Patrollers

Stations

Burris

Freedom

Passengers

Slavery

Tubman