

Fugitive Slave: A Memoir

Background

The United States Census of 1830 recorded nearly 2,000,000 people held in slavery. These African American men, women, and children endured brutal treatment. They lived in conditions of extreme poverty. They had no rights, and were legally considered property. Their owners literally worked many of them to death. Slave owners could and did break up families to sell individual members, and disobedience was punished with severe beatings and even murder.

Given these conditions, slaves sometimes tried to escape. Yet the path to freedom was not an easy one. Alone and with few resources, fugitive slaves faced hunger, exposure to the elements, and the constant threat of capture. They also had to leave their families behind. For these reasons, relatively few slaves tried to escape. Most of those who did were young men without families of their own who could survive the hardships of the fugitive life.

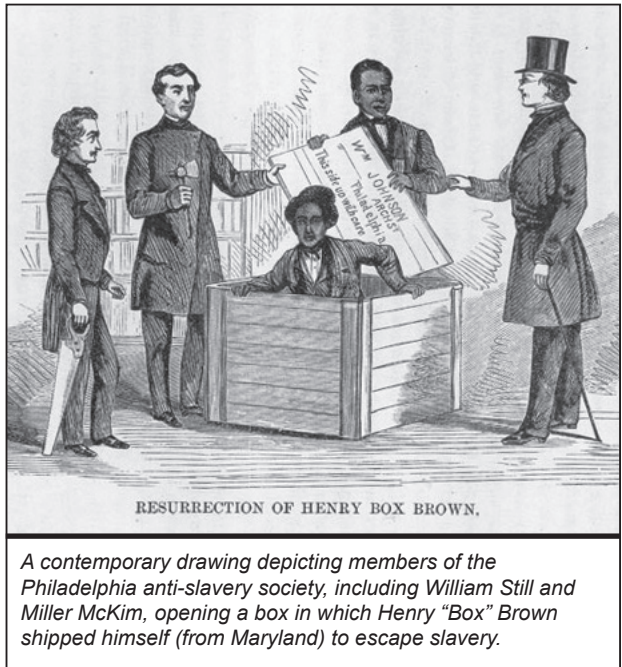
Given the opportunity, slaves escaped by any means they could. Those who lived in a coastal city like Savannah, Georgia, might stow away on a ship going north. Those who lived near a city with a free black population might go to the city and try to blend in. One man, Henry “Box” Brown, even had himself sealed in a wooden crate and mailed to freedom.

Most slaves who escaped did so with the help of other African Americans. Yet white opponents of slavery played a key role in the Underground Railroad, a secret network of “conductors” and “stations” that helped escaped slaves travel without detection.

Vermont was one route on the Underground Railroad. In 1777, Vermont became the first state to outlaw slavery. In the 1830s and 1840s, the Vermont Legislature passed several antislavery resolutions. The Federal government passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. Under this law, citizens could be forced to aid in the capture of escaped slaves. In response, Vermont passed a law making it difficult for slave catchers to retrieve and hold escaped slaves in Vermont. Vermont’s rural landscape provided secluded travel routes for fugitive slaves. It bordered Canada, where slavery was outlawed. Vermont’s population included antislavery activists willing to provide food, shelter, and transportation to escaped slaves.

About This Segment

Produced and directed by Burlington, Vermont filmmaker Rob Koier, this segment combines quotes from four primary source documents (diaries of escaped slaves) to create a narrative of one enslaved man’s



journey to freedom.

Escaping from a Southern plantation in the 1830s, the young man knows little of what awaits him, or even a route by which to travel. When he reaches Vermont, he finds work at a farm but realizes the wages are unfair. After he complains to the farmer, he flees again, worried that the farmer will turn him in for a reward. Later, the man finds shelter amongst antislavery activists, with whom he finally feels secure.

Before Viewing

- What conditions did enslaved African Americans live under in the South?
- What were the risks and rewards of trying to escape slavery?
- What was the Underground Railroad? What methods and routes did escaped slaves use to reach freedom?
- What role did Vermont play in the campaign to end slavery?

Vocabulary

abolitionist: a person who worked to end slavery

Underground Railroad: a loose network of routes, safe houses, and people who helped enslaved people escape to freedom in the 1800s

Fugitive Slave Act of 1850: an act passed by the Federal government that established federal agents to capture escaped slaves and required citizens to assist in their capture. Federal agents were paid \$10 for ruling that a captive was an escaped slave, and \$5 for ruling that a captive was free.

After Viewing

- What tone did the man use to describe his escape?
- What were his worries when he began his journey?
- What obstacles did he have to overcome?
- How did the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 play a role?
- What support did Vermonters provide to help him escape?
- Were all Vermonters as supportive? Why or why not?

Grades 4-5

Follow the Star Escaped slaves navigated their way north using the North Star. Do research to find out more about this celestial body. How can you find it in the sky? How would you use it to navigate? How accurate is the North Star compared to using a compass or a GPS? Share your findings with the class in the form of a demonstration.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (3-4:1; 5-6:1); Design research (3-4:3; 5-6:3); Conduct research (3-4:4; 5-6:4); Communicate findings (3-4:7; 5-6:7); Interpret geography/solve geographic problems (3-4:11; 7-8:11); Human interaction with the environment (3-4:12; 5-6:12)

Diary of a Fugitive Imagine you are a slave who has escaped and is headed north to Vermont. Find out more about what life was like for runaway slaves. Then write entries in a diary telling what happens during a few days (and nights) of your journey. What are your challenges? What landmarks do you pass along the way? What is the landscape of Vermont like? What do you worry about? How does the culture and landscape of Vermont differ from that of the South? In what ways are North and South the same? You may wish to draw a map of your journey in your diary.

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Grades 6-8

Build Your Escape Kit Imagine you are a slave on a plantation in Virginia in 1850. You are planning to escape, but have only a small knapsack in which to carry your belongings. What would you take with you and why? Remember that you will need some items to ensure your survival, but you may wish to take some personal possessions as well. Compile a list of what you would take. Then compare your list with those of your classmates. Why did you choose each item on your list? What do your lists have in common? How are they different? Would an actual slave's escape kit contain a lot of items? Why or why not? Having heard everyone's ideas, decide as a class what you would bring along.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (5-6:1; 7-8:1); Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Communicate findings (5-6:7; 7-8:7); Human interaction with the environment (5-6:12; 7-8:12); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (5-6:17; 7-8:17)

Your Own Adaptation Do research to find diaries or books written by slaves who escaped to freedom during the 1800s. Choose one of the memoirs to create your own video, radio play, or podcast version of a chapter or scene from it. Remember that more than one person can tell a piece of the story. You can include not only the escaped slave, but people who may have helped—or opposed—him or her along the way.

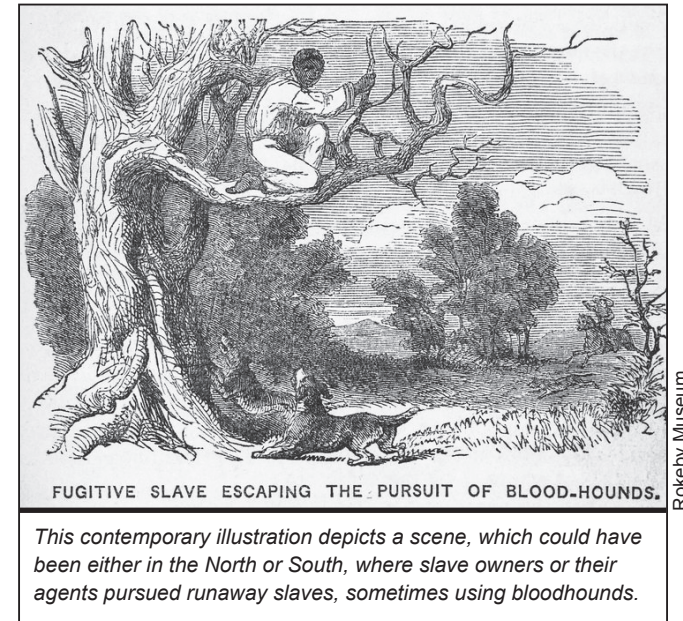
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Local Stations Visit your local historical society to find out about Vermont communities and the Underground Railroad. If possible, visit sites that were known or suspected to have been “stations” on the railroad. Take photographs or shoot video of these places. Compile what you found into a short video or photo essay.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

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People and Populations Explore the University of Virginia Historical Census Browser online at fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/. There, you'll find figures for the United States Census from 1790 to 1960. The census is a count of the US population taken every ten years. You can search the Census Browser to find the population of slaves, by state, for each census from 1790 to 1860. Which states had the most slaves in 1830? Which had the least? How did populations change from 1830-1840? From 1850-1860? From 1860-1870? Why do you think these changes happened? Express your findings in the form of graphs or charts that will give other people a clearer picture of slavery at the time.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (5-6:1; 7-8:1); Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (5-6:5; 7-8:5); Communicate findings (5-6:7; 7-8:7); Understand how humans interpret history (9-10:9; 11-12:9); Understand how cultures change (5-6:13; 7-8:13); Understand issues of human interdependence (5-6:16; 7-8:16); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (5-6:17; 7-8:17); Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (5-6:18; 7-8:18)

Grades 9-12

Graphic Design Imagine you are a book designer. You have been given the job of designing the front and back covers for a book that tells the story of the fugitive slave shown in the video segment. Design a cover for the book. You can choose your own title, images, and even quotes from reviewers that explain the memoir's significance. When your cover design is finished, "publish" it on a bulletin board or online. Use art supplies and paper or a computer graphic design program to create a cover. Share it with your classmates or online, and explain why you made the design choices you did.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (9-10:1; 11-12:1); Develop a hypothesis (9-10:2; 11-12:2); Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (9-10:5; 11-12:5); Understand how humans interpret history (9-10:9; 11-12:9)

An Abolitionist's Opinion The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made it illegal for anyone to aid a slave in escaping to freedom. Do research to find out more about the act—why it was passed, what it said, and what its effects were. Then write a newspaper editorial in the voice of an abolitionist who opposes the act. To support your opinion, you can cite the facts of the law, the stories of people affected by it, and even the United States Constitution. If you do choose a Constitutional defense, be sure not to cite Amendments made after 1863—the year that of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which set the stage for slavery's extinction in the United States.

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Speaking Out for Justice Some of the most powerful arguments for ending slavery were made by former slaves who delivered powerful public speeches about the horrors of the practice. Do research to find out more about the life of an enslaved person in either the Southern states or the Northern states before slavery was banned in them. Then write a speech giving details about your life, what you have seen, and why you

feel slavery should be ended. When your speech is finished, deliver it to a group of your classmates. Have them provide feedback on the effectiveness of your speech.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (9-10:1; 11-12:1); Develop a hypothesis (9-10:2; 11-12:2); Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (9-10:5; 11-12:5); Make connections to research (9-10:6; 11-12:6); Communicate findings (9-10:7; 11-12:7); Understand how cultures change (9-10:13; 11-12:13); Understand issues of human interdependence (9-10:16; 11-12:16); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (9-10:17; 11-12:17); Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (9-10:18; 11-12:18); Interconnectedness of government and economy (9-10:19; 11-12:19)

On The Road

The Rokeby Museum in Ferrisburgh, Vermont is one of the best-documented Underground Railroad sites in the United States. It is the former home of Rowland Thomas Robinson and Rachel Gilpin Robinson, devout Quakers and radical abolitionists who harbored many fugitive slaves during the 1830s and 1840s. The site includes a house fully furnished with family belongings spanning more than 200 years and eight outbuildings, all of which are open to view. Rokeby is open from Memorial Day weekend to Columbus Day weekend each year, and there are several different ways for you to see it. Offerings for schools include tours of Rokeby, classroom visits, and educational kits that tell the story of Rokeby's role in the abolition movement. For more information, visit rokeby.org.

Career Corner: Director of Photography

If you like to take pictures or shoot video, this might be the job for you. The director of photography, or DP, is in charge of making sure that a movie looks great. The DP works closely with the director. DPs direct a crew that sets up the lighting and positions the cameras that will capture a scene. The DP is also in charge of framing each shot. Good framing makes sure that the subject is positioned correctly within the camera's lens. A DP may work with either a movie camera that records action on film or on digital video. In some films, a cameraperson does the shooting. But in many films, the DP shoots using the primary camera.

RESOURCES

Links

The Rokeby Museum: rokeby.org

The Underground Railroad Project:

vermonthistory.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=86&Itemid=88

Information and classroom activities related to the Underground Railroad in Vermont from the Vermont Historical Society

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center: freedomcenter.org/

Virginia Historical Census Browser: fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/

Searchable data from the United States Census, 1790-1960.

Abolitionist Leader Frederick Douglass: history.rochester.edu/class/douglass/home.html

The Time of the Lincolns: pbs.org/wgbh/amex/lincolns/ This PBS Web site provides detailed information about life in the North and South during the years before and during the Civil War.