

The Underground Railroad & DuPage County

Institutional slavery of people of African descent occurred in the United States of America from the time of settlement to the end of the Civil War in 1865. The slave trade stretched from West Africa to South America to southern New England and an estimated four million slaves existed in the United States in 1860. While many slaves were unable to escape this oppression, between 1820 and 1860 thousands sought their freedom using the “Underground Railroad.” Situated in the middle of the Fox River Valley and Lake Michigan, DuPage County played a role in the Underground Railroad and several sites can be verified as “station” stops for freedom seekers.

What was the Underground Railroad?

The Underground Railroad refers to the effort to assist freedom seekers (enslaved people) to escape from slavery. “Underground” means that the help was done in secret, and “railroad” refers to the network of people and places along the way. Sometimes the help was spontaneous, and sometimes it was well-planned. Once a freedom seeker was able to connect with a conductor or arrive at a safe house, food, extra clothing, water, shelter, and most importantly, information was given to help the person to the next stop.

Who were the conductors?

People who were willing to aid a freedom seeker were called “conductors”. The majority of conductors were other slaves or free people of color who assisted with the care and transportation of travelers. In addition, some white abolitionists aided the efforts as well. After the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 that allowed bounty hunters to enter free states to kidnap people of color, many anti-slavery men and women gained a deeper understanding of the horrors of slavery and became more willing to aid freedom seekers.

Myths about the Underground Railroad:

- Myth: There were underground tunnels from the south to Canada that the slaves used. Fact: “Underground” does not actually mean under the earth. It means “secret.”
- Myth: Every stop has a trap door or tunnel. Fact: Aiding freedom seekers was dangerous, especially after it became illegal in 1850. While it was often necessary to hide people, not every safe house had a trap door or false wall.
- Myth: They all used the same routes from the south to the north. Fact: Freedom seekers used any means they could to escape slavery. There was not a set route that was needed to travel, but rather a series of places that were known to be safe. Not every safe house was used in every escape.
- Myth: Slaves bought a ticket and boarded an Underground train to Canada. Fact: It was not an actual railroad and not all freedom seekers fled to Canada. Canada was a destination for many because they were safe and openly free there, but many freedom seekers fled south to Mexico or west to the territories as well.
- Myth: White abolitionists helped all the freedom seekers. Fact: While many radical abolitionists were willing to risk life and property to help freedom seekers, the majority of the aid was given by free people of color who were highly organized and effective in places like Cincinnati and Chicago.

- Myth: All abolitionists were conductors on the Underground Railroad. Fact: There were many types of people who were anti-slavery and most of them were not willing to aid freedom seekers. Some people were anti-slavery because they did not want slavery to spread west of the Mississippi- they wanted it for free white settlements. Some were anti-slavery because they believed it to be wrong, but they were not willing to take “property” away from southerners. Few people were radical abolitionists, who thought that slavery should be abolished everywhere, immediately, and provisions should be made for people of color to enter into society. These were the most likely to help a freedom seeker.

Verifiable Stops in DuPage County

1. Blodgett House: Israel Porter Blodgett, Sr. a blacksmith in Downers Grove, was active as an abolitionist, helping to form the Liberty Party in DuPage County, serving as a delegate to the Liberty Party, and subscribing to the *Western Citizen*, an anti-slavery newspaper published in Chicago. Several members of the Blodgett family were active in the abolitionist cause. The 1846 Blodgett House itself is documented as an active stopover on the Underground Railroad that led from slavery to freedom. *The Western Citizen* was a principal news source about anti-slavery activities in the middle of the 19th Century. Pieces of this newspaper were found behind the lath and plaster during restoration. The Downers Grove Heritage Preservation Corporation, "1846 Blodgett House", owns the 1846 Blodgett House which was relocated near its original site.
2. Sheldon Peck House: Built in 1839, the house was home to Sheldon Peck, a nationally-known folk art painter, who was involved in the Underground Railroad. Peck's Underground Railroad activity was documented in a memoir kept by his youngest son Frank. It included accounts of Peck harboring Freedom Seekers on the Underground Railroad in the 1850s. Frank's memoir describes Old Charley, a Freedom Seeker who stopped at the Peck House. It also included lyrics to a slave spiritual song that Old Charley taught Frank. In addition, a painting by Sheldon's daughter Susan is believed to be of a Freedom Seeker that stopped at the Peck House. Peck was publicly considered a “radical abolitionist” and had numerous friends and business associates involved in the Underground Railroad. In addition, several anti-slavery meetings were held at the Peck Homestead and Peck was an “agent” for the *Western Citizen*, an anti-slavery newspaper published in Chicago. Since 1999 the Peck Homestead has been a public museum and is operated by the Lombard Historical Society, a 501 (c)(3) not-for-profit.
3. Guild House
4. Strong House: Deacon William Strong of Aurora was visited by a freed slave who had been trying to buy his family's freedom. Deacon Strong took the man to the home of Israel and Avis Blodgett of Downers Grove where they discovered the freed man's wife and children inside, freed by the actions of the Underground Railroad.
5. Filer House: The two Filer brothers lived east and west of Sheldon Peck along what is now St. Charles Road. Thomas Filer was a staunch abolitionist and ran for Sheriff of DuPage County under the Liberty Party in the 1840s.¹ J. W. Filer was also an abolitionist

¹ “DuPage Sherriff,” *Western Citizen*, 1 Aug 1848.

and was listed among anti-slavery supporters in the *Western Citizen*. The second volume of *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of DuPage County*, published in 1913 by Bateman and Selby, states:

As already indicated, our early settlers were largely Eastern people—many being Methodists, which church, more than any other, produced opponents of slavery of the most aggressive types. Among them were Sheldon Peck, a Methodist from Vermont and an artist by profession... Another was Thomas Filer, a most excellent man and deeply impressed with the evils of slavery. These two men were conductors on the “Underground Railroad” and carried many an escaping slave to Chicago, where Dr. Dyer and others forwarded them to Canada.²

Thomas Filer and his brother J. Walter Filer also appear in a list of delegates for the fifth anniversary of the Illinois State Anti-Slavery Society published in the *Western Citizen* on August 5, 1842.³ We know that not only were Peck and Filer neighbors, Filer was the witness for Peck for his land patent and signed an affidavit to that effect.

6. Wheaton College: Wheaton College was born out of the struggle to eradicate slavery from the United States. The founders of the Illinois Institute (later Wheaton College) fought for the abolition of slavery. Before becoming president of Wheaton College, Johnathan Blanchard had been an ardent abolitionist as he put his life at risk traveling throughout Pennsylvania as one of Theodore Dwight Weld’s “Seventy Disciples.” Afterwards he attended the abolitionist stronghold, Lane Seminary, in Cincinnati, Ohio. When Blanchard was asked to assume the leadership of the floundering Wesleyan Methodist’s Illinois Institute they asked that he uphold their commitment to abolitionism. The Illinois Institute/Wheaton College was one of the earliest institutions in Illinois to admit African-American students. Mary Barker, the daughter of free blacks from southern Illinois attended in the late 1850s and sought to teach among the “contrabands” during the Civil War. Wheaton struggled to stay open during the Civil War as its male population was off fighting for the Union. While many students enlisted for short periods (100 days), many others enlisted for the duration, some to never return home. Wheaton College sent over 65 men off to war. One such enlistee was Edward B. Sellers, an African-American student who graduated from Wheaton College in 1866 and went on to Andover Theological Seminary.

Other possible sites

There are several places in DuPage County that local lore suggests could have played a role in the Underground Railroad. Listed in this booklet are the sites that can be verified through historical resources. Researchers can verify sites based on information such as:

How old is the site? Who were the abolitionists that lived there? What is the evidence?

³⁵Newton Bateman and Paul Selby, *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of DuPage County*, 716.

³⁴“Minutes of the Fifth Anniversary of the Illinois State Anti-Slavery Society,” *Western Citizen*, 05 Aug 1842.