

Civics & Society

Black Settlers and the Underground Railroad

Deep in our history of struggle for freedom, Canada was the North Star.

—Martin Luther King, Jr., CBC Massey Lectures, 1967

Slavery had been abolished in the British empire in 1834. Anti-slavery laws had been introduced in Upper Canada as early as 1793. But slavery was still in force in the United States until 1865.

Between 1840 and 1860, about 30 000 Black slaves from the United States escaped to British North America by way of the

Underground Railroad. This “railroad” was not a real railroad. It was the name given to the network of safe houses and people who helped escaped slaves from the US come to Canada.

Black fugitives considered British North America a safe haven. Several Black folk songs refer to Canada as “the Northern Star” that runaway slaves should follow. Well-travelled underground railroad routes ran through Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the New England states. Runaway slaves crossed into Canada at Detroit, Niagara Falls, or Québec. Others sailed across Lake Erie to present-day Ontario.

One of the most important settlements was the Elgin Settlement near present-day Chatham, Ontario. Descendants of these settlers still live there today. People of colour have a long history in British North America.



Slaves travelled mostly at night and hid during the day. The people who helped them used railroad terms as code words. The houses that hid the runaway slaves were called “stations.” The path they followed to Canada was called the “route.” “Conductors” were the people who gave the slaves food, directions, and places to hide. A woman named Harriet Tubman was one of the best-known conductors.