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## Station to Freedom or Illegal Secrecy

by Heidi Scheleski

(English 1102)

Now in modern day, Illinois is often thought of as cornfields that contain only one place worthy of mention: Chicago. But back when it became a state in 1818, there was a hint of promise to the air. Fast forward even a few decades, the middle of the century, and Illinois was viewed as one more step closer to freedom. Or rather, one more station closer to freedom would be a little more appropriate. It is not often mentioned, but this state was a strikingly accurate example of the country's state of mind at that point in history: the upheaval of old society, the conflict that arose between them and those moving toward a new one. Part of this conflict resulted in the Underground Railroad, which had stations in Illinois. That is right, Harriet Tubman was not the only person involved. The danger of participating, the dirty conscience of those who believed in anti-slavery life who did not, the joy that resulted from finally abolishing bondage: this all truly happened in Illinois too. If the old society of southern Illinois had won, if these hidden pathways had not been successful, the country too would be socially unacceptable due to its separation in clinging to the past and not embracing an all-encompassing future.

Just like many other bordering states between the north and the south in the United States of America during the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Illinois faced contradictions in both its state and its nation in terms of politics and social climate. Multitudes of farmers in surrounding southern states such as Missouri and Kentucky migrated to Illinois for its fertile land (Harris 227). They brought with them their pro-slavery ideology. Thus, the Illinois residents eventually split into two distinctive ideals: Confederacy empathizers and abolitionists. Geographically, this is simple. Those who favored the ideals of the south were mostly concentrated below Springfield and those who gradually grew towards the ideals of abolitionism were above. This is a matter that it not to be seen in black and white, nor necessarily in terms of geography. The Underground Railroad that made its path in the state shows how this is an unclean cut. For it to work, there were undoubtedly abolitionists in the south.

To understand this concept, it must be understood that few accounts may be deemed truly accurate. For eventually, when the Union would win the war, people who may not have sided with them prior wanted credit and recognition in its glory. The Underground Railroad was covered up throughout the years so as to not leave a traceable trail, and thus there are seldom any verified accounts of the experience in Illinois. In historian Glennette Tilley Turner's *The Underground Railroad in DuPage County, Illinois*, she offers created trails and some accounts that have led to whatever evidence that can be assessed as the most accurate, but she also details these exact sentiments of authentication (7).

With historical accounts and the analysis by these historians, the atmosphere of the time can be collectively explained. In the *History of Negro Servitude in Illinois* by Norman Dwight Harris, it is explained that the presence of [any person of color] had continually been a source of discomfort to those in Illinois, particularly those below Springfield (228). Of course, being farmers and traders with their Southern neighbors was imperative business (Harris 241). In the eyes of these people, the social climate was irrelevant to their society. Whether slavery was abolished or not was irrelevant to their existence. If anything, these folks were pro-slavery, and the most that came of this was irritation. The non-Illinois southern slave owners that would

travel up north attempting to retrieve their “property”, as well as the "free Negroes" who caused friction in the economy, were the bane of their existence.

Actually these slave owners who traveled into Illinois primarily on the hunt for their “property” became a nuisance to both Confederacy empathizers and abolitionists in Illinois. Author of *The Valley of Shadows*, Francis Grierson, was just a boy living in the Illinois prairie when his parents were participating in the Underground Railroad themselves. They were more of an emergency stop if needed, but they always assisted local stations and neighbors in their efforts regardless. Grierson accounts, in meticulous detail, a night in which thick-accented southerners were hunting down their slaves, a few in a large group that the Griersons had momentarily assisted in moving on to the next stations for safety (Grierson 98-105). Luckily for the slaves, Grierson's father was an intimidating man with a shotgun, but the overarching issue is the intense amount of violence and terror these laws and ideals had imposed on people throughout Illinois, and the rest of the country.

Unfortunately for the southerners in Illinois, all of those in the area of Naperville and above were gradually convinced of abolitionism. Norman Dwight Harris also acknowledged that there were "strong abolition centers in the North," (232-233). Over the course of the Civil War there had been this reinforcing mindset and the interest of dissolving slavery, but these centers are coincidentally also about the known Underground Railroad stations in the north. As stated prior, the abolitionists were sneaky in avoiding a noticeable trail. In fact, very few artifacts or evidence have been left so that even experienced historians, such as Glennette Tilley Turner, can only speculate on most of their original locations. She discusses the stops that follow the Illinois River and most lines which were aimed to reach Chicago to head further north (Turner 14-22).

Of course, as far as many of the southerners of Illinois were concerned, there was no such thing as the Underground Railroad in their state. They wanted no ties with this secret railroad system due to its consequences. In the Compromise of 1850, there was a Fugitive Slave Act passed, which was quite controversial for its time. It resulted in large fines of one thousand dollars, a significant amount at that time, if involved and that involvement could result in paying the entire value of the slave. Those assisting the slaves could have also been imprisoned for six months. And these were just the terms that involved the "federal agent(s)" who assisted; the slaves were given no representation, no defense, no trial by jury, and returned immediately to their owners (Turner 10-11). There was too much to risk in the minds of much of these southerners: their livelihood, reputation, business. It was easier to sympathize with the Confederacy.

In *Escape Betwixt Two Suns* by Carol Pirtle, there is mention of more legalities passed that changed lives for slaves. Early in Illinois history, Black Code happened to be one that did nothing of the sort. It was implemented in 1819, which was put in place to see that fairer accommodations were given to slaves. It was never truly enforced (Pirtle 8). Just as the southerners chose, northerners at the time did not want to metaphorically rock the boat when on the verge of a civil war. They allowed this treatment, but eventually retaliated in form of participation in the Underground Railroad. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 encouraged the urgency of such an endeavor to continue (Turner 11). Things became a little tricky in later years for those conducting, as representative John A. Logan pushed for the Act of 1853, which led to fined crime if any person of color was brought into the state (Pirtle 109). As Norman Dwight Harris also pointed out, this act was soon deemed unconstitutional (Harris 236). Still, southern Illinois was no place safe for any person of color, and even near and in Chicago was a difficult situation.

Matt McCall of the *Chicago Tribune* does discuss and account for more of the situation in Chicago, at least with how the abolitionist's point of view goes. The account is that of both John Ton and Cornelius Kuyper, recorded by historian George Brennan in 1923. These "new"

Americans were settled in the south-side of Chicago, and were two stops on the railroad leading to Detroit. Kuyper would be first, hiding slaves in his cellar and barn, denying any known whereabouts if the master(s) would come looking, and would even feed the refugees if he could. He would conceal them under corn in his wagon and swiftly bring them over to the Ton farm, the next stop on the railroad, in which Ton would take them three blocks to the Hohman Bridge in Hammond where another man would take them to the stop in the Indiana Dunes. These men and their families knew the risks, but they "believed in absolute freedom for all," (McCall).

This was a common belief for abolitionists. They saw slaves as people, whereas those who sided with the Confederacy mainly understood the view of slaves as property. Others simply concerned it with a legal matter, something that was not to be toyed with due to its repercussions. It was accepted that there were stations in Illinois, primarily those in Chicago and up north. For well over 30 years, this Underground Railroad in the Midwest was alive until it no longer required service: The Union had won in 1865 and slavery was, well, history so to speak. Another *Chicago Tribune* writer, Ron Grossman, in "Exodus to Freedom", brings the modern irony of moving north after the war to life. There was the Great Migration-in which 5 million blacks moved north to start anew between 1940 and 1970, but well before then they had been coming to Chicago for opportunity. Spurts of a past prejudice had continued throughout the years. The riot in 1919 distinguished the "imaginary but deadly real boundaries" of the social classes and races, the Great Depression slowing migration that picked up again with World War II, and from then on leaving these migraters in the lowest fields of employment and opportunity that could be offered. To this day, there is an imbalance in these classes and these races, perhaps not as prominently as it had been less than a century after the Civil War (Grossman).

Although the Underground Railroad was an illegal task, it was an honorable one. Although the social climate in Illinois in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has only changed minimally and gradually, it is on a positive path. People are people, they are not property. Even those in southern Illinois had come to terms with this perspective eventually. Change may be slow, but the steps to endorse it are imperative, which is why the Underground Railroad was necessary in Illinois. Even today, it is clear that Chicago is still facing the racial inequality that had plagued the state before. It is in this awareness that the people of the city need to begin more steps yet again to overcome them. Part of this inequality was seen in the American Civil War, where there was a major issue with unity versus separation, just as Illinois had branched off into two mindsets. Inevitably, they had come to the same conclusion: that unity is the primary goal. As Carol Pirtle states in her book about the history of slavery and its effects after the war, "It is a legacy of shame that haunts men and women of conscience" (110). The American people have to live with the ugly pieces of their country's history, but for what it is worth, perhaps some of those who have unrecorded accounts on their participation in the Illinois Underground Railroad can sleep soundly in their graves yet.

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