FRIENDS OF FREEDOM

The Vermont Underground Railroad
Survey Report

by

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for
The State of Vermont
Vermont Department of State Buildings
and
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was authorized by the Vermont State Legislature in 1995 to gather, analyze, and evaluate information about the Underground Railroad in Vermont under the auspices of the Vermont Department of State Buildings and the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation. The aim was to identify and substantiate claims made regarding sites, identify any buildings still remaining that could be documented to have been a part of the Underground Railroad, and provide general cost estimates for the preservation of these buildings.

Vermont played a major role in the national movement to abolish slavery in the antebellum era. This study finds well-substantiated incidents of Underground Railroad activities in Vermont from the mid 1830s to the Civil War. A small, undetermined number of Vermonters--Quakers, clergy, free blacks, temperance activists, anti-masons, Liberty party members, and a Secretary of State among them--provided food, shelter, clothing, work, transportation and contacts for fugitives attempting to establish free lives in the Northeastern United States and Canada. In Vermont, in the 1840s, these activities, whether premeditated and planned or 'random acts of kindness,' were popularized as the Underground Railroad. The best known and documented site in the state is Rokeby, the Ferrisburgh farm of the Rowland Thomas Robinson family.

Some 174 nineteenth century individuals and sites from around the state were examined for this survey. Scanty documentation, the illegal nature of the Underground Railroad movement, and the pervasive influence of popular legend, focused what was essentially a site survey towards identification and documentation of the activists as a preliminary stage to locating sites.

This survey concludes that 25 individuals can be documented as acting directly to shelter and aid fugitive slaves. For nine of these, there is compelling evidence of fugitives staying on their premises or in an outbuilding that still stands. There is persuasive evidence of strong connection with Underground Railroad activities for another 32 individuals, families, and structures, including 16 existing historic buildings. Most of the surviving buildings are private residences, though five sites belong to non-profit organizations, a nursing home, and the University of Vermont. Almost all well-substantiated sites are located on the western side of the state, in urban, rural, and some village locations. This study updates and brings together what is known of the Underground Railroad and places Vermont activists within the context of new research by the National Park Service and Heritage Canada.

Vermont's Underground Railroad sites are important in local, state, and national history because of their associations with direct action against the national policy of slavery in the antebellum period. They show that a wide spectrum of Vermonters acted individually and locally, and verify that fugitive slaves found a safe haven here. Taken together the surviving buildings testify to the compassion, moral courage, and commitment to equal rights of Underground Railroad activists, and symbolize Vermont's major contribution to the broad pattern of abolition history.

INTRODUCTION

During the antebellum period, black American slaves, who had no vote in the great national debate on slavery or the constellation of sectional issues bound up in it, continually 'voted' with their feet by running away from their owners. This action was a continual embarrassment and reproof to the those Americans who maintained that blacks benefitted from and, indeed, were content with their lot as slaves.

Some, but by no means all, fugitives came north with the aid of the direct-action abolition movement known as the Underground Railroad. In the years since the end of the Civil War, the reality of the Underground Railroad has receded and a legend has evolved to take its place. The legend is one of false doors, secret panels, dark tunnels and covert movements in the dead of night. The stock characters are terrified fugitives, righteous Yankee yeomen, and implacable slave catchers.

Was there an Underground Railroad in Vermont? If so, how did it function? Are there buildings and abolitionists whose Underground Railroad record can be documented? Is there any truth to the notion of secret tunnels and special rooms where fugitives were hidden? How substantial is Vermont's Underground Railroad heritage? This study was initiated by the State legislature to research all these questions, with the goal of preparing a list of authentic Underground Railroad sites.

A word about terminology: the phrase "Underground Railroad" surfaces in Vermont in the 1840s; brief newspaper accounts note fugitives traveling north alone or in small groups. As far as can be determined, the extended railroad analogy was not in use in the state until after the Civil War, and may date from the 1880s or later. Antebellum newspapers occasionally refer to the Underground Railroad, but correspondence from Vermonters who aided fugitives does not employ special terminology. In the belief that the 'railroad' metaphor may be misleading, this survey avoided these terms where possible, and uses admittedly awkward, but more neutral language, e.g. activist for conductor.

A list of 174 potential sites and Underground activists was assembled from the available documentation, and the long process of research and review began. After gathering information, a decision was made as to a building or person's likelihood of having sheltered and otherwise aided fugitive slaves in Vermont. Finally the buildings, individuals, and sites were divided into five categories, with the A list being those that can be proven to be directly connected with the Underground Railroad.

As with any attempt to survey and categorize using scant evidence and oral tradition, decisions are to a degree subjective, though based on a close reading of the available resources. People and buildings that are "low" on the list await further documentation. New evidence may be uncovered. Also, it is important to note that buildings not found to have firm Underground Railroad connections, are not rendered 'unhistoric,' thereby. The very nature of the popular application of an Underground Railroad tradition to older homes--often by virtue of cubby

holes, hidden rooms, massive chimney spaces, and knee wall areas--assures that these are almost always historic and significant structures, as does the popular association of local abolition figures with the Underground Railroad movement.

Finally, this study suggests that a trade be made in terms of Vermont history: The state's abolition record is clear and Vermonters are justly proud of it. But this tradition is built in part on a legend. It is past time to barter the romantic myth of white paternalism, of false doors, secret panels, dark tunnels and covert movements in the dead of night for another story in which black slaves escaped their masters, crossed to freedom, and employed a variety of survival strategies, including the aid of Vermont abolitionists, to stay free.

CONCLUSIONS

Fugitive slaves escaped from bondage during the Colonial and antebellum periods, and employed a variety of strategies, including use of both spontaneous and premeditated aid to gain safety and security.

Between 1830 and the 1860s, an undetermined, but small number of Vermonters--Quakers, clergy, and free blacks prominent among them-- provided food, shelter, clothing, work, transportation and contacts for fugitives attempting to find safety and to establish free lives in the Northeastern United States and Canada. In Vermont, beginning in the 1840s, these activities, whether premeditated and planned or 'random acts of kindness,' were popularized as the Underground Railroad.

In Vermont, this survey concludes that twenty-five individuals can be documented to have acted directly to shelter and aid fugitive slaves. Twelve sites, located and still standing, can be documented as directly involved with the sheltering of fugitive slaves. For nine of these, there is compelling evidence of fugitives staying on the premises or in an associated outbuilding. For another thirty-two individuals, families and structures, for which sixteen structures have been located and still stand, there is persuasive evidence of association with the Underground Railroad in Vermont.

The Vermont Underground Railroad was not an organized movement. Abolitionists met and planned aid to fugitive slaves in Philadelphia, New York City, and Boston. These 'vigilance committees' gave form and organization to an effort already long in place in their regions. Had traffic or need been greater, this might have occurred in Vermont, but there is no persuasive evidence that it did. Individuals, families, and small groups of friends sheltered runaways, and passed them on to others who would do the same. Fugitives also traveled through Vermont following their own itineraries.

Vermont's main transportation routes--stage roads, steamer routes, and, by the 1850s, railroads, were traveled by fugitives, sometimes accompanied by Vermont activists as guides. Trips longer than several miles typically required horse-drawn transport. Fugitives also

traveled Vermont roadways alone and on foot, sometimes with letters of introduction to sympathetic households along their way.

The notion of trunk and side routes is the work of historian Wilbur H. Siebert, based to a great extent on the unsubstantiated testimony of Joseph Poland of Montpelier. There were, as far as can be determined, no organized "routes" in Vermont. Siebert's use of "routes," "stations," "conductors," and other railroad nomenclature implies a greater degree of organization than existed here. What contemporary sources survive show that Underground Railroad activists did not employ this terminology to refer to themselves and their activities.

Evidence suggests strong involvement of free black Vermonters with the Underground Railroad.

Many fugitives settled in Vermont for good or as a stop along the way to Canada. Contemporary Vermont newspapers might assume any fugitive passing through to have a Canadian destination, but there is firm evidence of many fugitives settling in this state or staying with sympathetic households for extended periods.

Architectural features--false doors, hidden closets, knee-wall areas, attic spaces, chimney accesses, and cellar rooms--do not stand as evidence of Underground Railroad activity. Presently no credible model for assessing physical phenomenon in the context of the Underground Railroad exists. In addition, fugitives appear to have been generally safe and secure at large.

Primary source documents--newspapers, letters, and recollections--support the assertion that Vermont was safe for fugitives and activists. There is scanty evidence of slave catchers or recapture, and but one documented incident of slave recapture in Vermont between 1830 and 1865. Some Underground Railroad activists did act in relative secrecy, but generally they sheltered, rather than hid, fugitives.

The legend and folklore of the Underground Railroad in Vermont is a unique and important social phenomena. It shares, of course, common roots with historic Underground Railroad events, but is significant and worthy of study in its own right.

The actions of Vermont Underground Railroad activists exemplify compassion, moral courage and commitment to equality. However, elements of Underground Railroad activities and ideology are racist by many standards. More importantly, the legend of the Underground Railroad has been used by white Americans since the Civil War to reinforce self-congratulatory attitudes and assumptions about black Americans.

LIST OF VERMONTERS DOCUMENTED
TO HAVE SHELTERED FUGITIVE SLAVES

Reverend Kiah Bayley
Hardwick Street, Hardwick, Caledonia County

Professor George W. Benedict
Ferrand-Benedict House
University of Vermont, 31 South Prospect Street, Burlington, Chittenden County

Lucius H. Bigelow
272 Church Street, Burlington, Chittenden County

Simon Bottum
Shaftsbury, Bennington County

Lawrence Brainerd
160 North Main Street, St. Albans, Franklin County

Samuel A. Chalker
Chalker Farm, New Haven, Addison County

John K. Converse
272 Church Street, Burlington, Chittenden County

Zenas C. Ellis
South Main Street, Fair Haven, Rutland County

Erastus & Hervey Higley
Castleton Historical Society Building
Castleton, Rutland County

Nathan C. Hoag
Baldwin Road, Charlotte, Chittenden County

Rowland Thomas Robinson
Rokeby Museum, US Route 7
Ferrisburgh, Addison County

Salmon P. Wires
118 South Willard Street, Burlington, Chittenden County

Reverend Joshua Young
98 South Willard Street, Burlington, Chittenden County

The following people are also documented to have sheltered fugitive slaves but associated buildings either have not been located or are no longer standing:

	Town	County	
Davis, William	St. Albans	Franklin	
Griswold, Howard	Randolph	Orange	
Hicks, Charles	Bennington	Bennington	
Hicks, Henry	Bennington	Bennington	
Johnson, Oliver	Middlebury	Addison	(active at large)
Knapp, Chauncy L.	Montpelier	Washington	
Langley, Loudon S.	Hinesburg	Chittenden	
Miller, Col. Jonathan P.	East Montpelier	Washington	
Stevens, Stephen F.	East Montpelier	Washington	

LIST 1 - TOTAL UNDERGROUND RAILROAD ACTIVISTS AND/OR SITES SURVEYED

	Town	County	
Aldis, Asa O.	St. Albans	Franklin	
Aldrich, Joshua M.	Weathersfield	Windsor	
Alexander, Elijah	Charlotte	Chittenden	
Allen, Emery	Montpelier	Washington	
Anthony, Tony	Burlington	Chittenden	
Anti-Slavery Soc.	Rupert	Bennington	(at large)
Arms, Dr. D.V.	Waterbury	Washington	
Bailey, Rev. Kiah	Hardwick	Caledonia	
Baker, Rev. Reuben	Morristown	Lamoille	
Barber, E.D.	Middlebury	Addison	
Barker, Samuel	Vergennes	Addison	
Barnes, Rev. Standish D.	Montpelier	Washington	
Barrett, John	Grafton	Windham	
Barrett, Edmond	Hartland	Windsor	
Barrows, Philbrook Jr.	Wallingford	Rutland	
Batcheller, Lyman	Wallingford	Rutland	
Benedict, Prof. Geo. W.	Burlington	Chittenden	
Bigelow, Lucius H.	Burlington	Chittenden	
Boardman, Stephen C.	Norwich	Windsor	
Bottum, Simon	Shaftsbury	Bennington	
Bowen, B. D.	Reading	Windsor	
Boynton, Deacon	N. Springfield	Windsor	
Brainard, Lawrence	St. Albans	Franklin	
Bridge, Bezeleel	W. Windsor	Windsor	
Bridgeman, Dorman	Hardwick	Caledonia	
Briggs, William P.	Richmond	Chittenden	
Burr, Joseph	Manchester	Bennington	
Butler, Deacon	Waterbury	Washington	
Byington, Amson	Williston	Chittenden	
Caldwell, A.W.	Johnson	Lamoille	
Carpenter,	Bennington	Bennington	
Chalker, Samuel A.	New Haven	Addison	
Clark, John & Mary	Rockingham	Windham	
Clement, Joshua	Thetford	Orange	
Comings, Andrew	Berkshire	Franklin	
Conant, John	Brandon	Rutland	
Converse, Rev. John K.	Burlington	Chittenden	
Converse, E. H.	Charlotte	Chittenden	
Crafts, Sen. Samuel C.	Montpelier	Washington	
Crain, Eleazar / Henry F.	Springfield	Windsor	
Dail, Deit C.	E. Montpelier	Washington	

Davis, Asa	Chester	Windsor	
Davis, William	St. Albans	Franklin	
Dean, Prof. James	Burlington	Chittenden	
Dearborn, Franklin	Chelsea	Orange	
Dearborn, Wilder	Chelsea	Orange	
Denisen Family	Reading	Windsor	
Dodge, Jonathan	Johnson	Lamoille	
Dodge, Nathan	E. Montpelier	Washington	
Edgerton, Lebbeus	Randolph	Orange	
Ellis, Zenas C.	Fair Haven	Rutland	
Felton, Charles	Franklin	Franklin	
Fletcher, Gov. Ryland	Cavendish	Windsor	
French, William H.	Williston	Chittenden	
Frost, Rev. Timothy P.	Weston	Windsor	
Frost, Willard	Brattleboro	Windham	
Fuller, R. D.	Middlebury	Addison	
Gleed, Rev. John	Morristown	Lamoille	
Gordon, Joseph	Middlebury	Addison	
Granger, Sanford	Rockingham	Windham	
Greeley, Horace	Poultney	Rutland	
Green, Rev.	Montgomery	Franklin	
Green, Rev. Beriah	Middlebury	Addison	
Griswold, Howard	Randolph	Orange	
Groce, Taylor	Hartland	Windsor	(at large)
Guindon, Nicholas	Ferrisburgh	Addison	
Hazard	Bennington	Bennington	
Hicks, Charles	Bennington	Bennington	
Hicks, Henry	Bennington	Bennington	
Higley, Erastus	Castleton	Rutland	
Higley, Hervey	Castleton	Rutland	
Hinckley, Dea. Lyman	Thetford	Orange	
Hoag, Nathan C.	Charlotte	Chittenden	
Holly, Joseph C.	Burlington	Chittenden	
Hotchkiss, J.M.	Waterville	Lamoille	
Howard, Arthur	Shaftsbury	Bennington	
Huntington, Samuel	Burlington	Chittenden	
Hutchinson, Hon. Titus	Woodstock	Windsor	
Hutchinson, Ocamel	Chester	Windsor	
Ide, Rev. John	Middlebury	Addison	
Jacob, Judge Stephen	Windsor	Windsor	
Johnson, Col. Leonard	Peacham	Caledonia	
Johnson, Oliver	Middlebury	Addison	(active at large)
Kendall, Col. Samuel	Enosburg	Franklin	
Kimball, F. W.	Barton	Orleans	

Knapp, Chauncy L.	Montpelier	Washington	
Langley, Loudon S.	Hinesburg	Chittenden	
Lee, Dr. L	Troy	Orleans	
Lord, Charles	Woodstock	Windsor	
Marsh, Rodney V.	Brandon	Rutland	
Martin, Jefferson	Montgomery	Franklin	
McNeil, Charles	Charlotte	Chittenden	
Miller, Col. Jonathan P.	E. Montpelier	Washington	
Moore, Dr. L. C.	Troy	Orleans	
Morris, Dea. & Mrs. Sylvester	Norwich	Windsor	
Murray, Orson	Brandon	Rutland	(at large)
Nicholson, D. E.	Wallingford	Rutland	
Northrup, Solomon	Hartland	Windsor	(at large, Glens Falls, NY)
Paddock	Bennington	Bennington	
Parker, Deacon	Waterbury	Washington	
Parmalee, Simeon	Hartland	Windsor	
Peck, Addison	E. Montpelier	Washington	
Peck, Edward	Burlington	Chittenden	
Perkins	Bennington	Bennington	
Pingree, Hon.	Weathersfield	Windsor	
Poland, Joseph A.	Montpelier	Washington	
Powell, Hon. A.G.	Troy	Orleans	
Powers, Col. Thomas	Woodstock	Windsor	
Prindle, Rev. Cyrus	Middlebury	Addison	
Putnam, Rev. George	Albany	Orleans	
Ramsey, Arian T.	Brandon	Rutland	
Ramsey, Capt. James	St. Johnsbury	Caledonia	
Ransom, Richard	Woodstock	Windsor	
Rice, Mark	Burlington	Chittenden	
Richardson, D. E.	Wilmington	Windham	
Roberts, Daniel Jr.	Manchester	Bennington	
Robinson, Rowland T.	Ferrisburgh	Addison	
Rogers, Joseph & Morah	Charlotte	Chittenden	
Rogers, Aaron & Dinah	Rutland	Rutland	
Rowell, Hon. A.J.	Troy	Orleans	
Sabin, Rev. Alvah	Georgia	Franklin	
Safford, Madison	Cambridge	Lamoille	
Safford, Noah & Nancy	Springfield	Windsor	
Seely, Rev. Jacob	Montpelier	Washington	
Shafter, Oscar L.	Townshend	Windham	
Shafter, Hon. William R.	Townshend	Windham	
Skinner, Gov. Richard	Manchester	Bennington	
Slade, Sen. William	Montpelier	Washington	

Smith, 'Lame' John	Hartland	Windsor
Sowles, Hon. William	Swanton	Franklin
Stanbury, E. A.	Richmond	Chittenden
Stevens, Stephen F.	E. Montpelier	Washington
Stranahan Family	St. Albans	Franklin
Thompson, C.F.	Brattleboro	Windham
Thrall, R.R.	Rutland	Rutland
Warren, John	Middlebury	Addison
Webster, Delia	Vergennes	Addison, (at large, active Kentucky Ohio)
Weider, C. W.	Ferrisburgh	Addison
West, John	Morristown	Lamoille
Wheeler, John	Burlington	Chittenden
Wickers, Cyrus W.	Ferrisburgh	Addison
Wilcox, Dr. S	Bennington	Bennington
Willard, John	Hartland	Windsor
Wires, Salmon P.	Burlington	Chittenden
Woodworth, Daniel	Royalton	Windsor
Wright, Rev. Chester	Hardwick	Caledonia
Wright, Fletcher	Cavendish	Windsor
Young, Rev. Joshua	Burlington	Chittenden

Misc. Sites:

Bassett House	E. Montpelier	Washington
Bullard Inn	Swanton	Franklin
Currier House	Berlin	Washington	(current owner)
Douglas House	Woodstock	Windsor	(current owner)
Ellis-Brown House	Royalton	Windsor
Fessenden-Hanks House	Royalton	Windsor
Goodwillie House	Barnet	Caledonia
Gove Family	Rutland	Rutland
Hathaway House	St. Albans	Franklin
"Haunted House"	Albany	Orleans
Heilman House	Manchester	Bennington	(current owner)
Hildene cave site	Manchester	Bennington
Houghton House	St. Albans	Franklin
James Kinney House	Shelburne	Chittenden
Old Weeks Taveran	Bennington	Bennington
Post House	Brandon	Rutland
Solomon Place	Woodstock	Windsor
Stage House	Hardwick	Caledonia
John Strong House	Addison	Addison
Three Pines Farm	Hartland	Windsor
Twenty-three High St.	Brandon	Rutland

Warren Place	Weathersfield	Windsor	
Walker Farm	Hartland	Windsor	
Ward Library	Canaan	Essex	
Whip Inn	Stowe	Lamoille	(current owner)
Zeicher House	Rutland	Rutland	(current owner)