

The Underground Railroad in the Upper Peninsula

In the three decades leading up to the American Civil War, there existed a loose network of people who helped slaves escape from the southern states, where slaveholding was legal, to the relative freedom and safety of the northern states and Canada. Called the Underground Railroad, this network was comprised mainly of free black people and Quakers. The Underground Railroad was most active along the Ohio River Valley, where slaves from Kentucky and Virginia could escape across the river into Ohio and neighboring states.¹ They would often continue north into Michigan or across the Great Lakes, especially Lake Erie, into Canada. In the majority of maps of the Underground Railroad in Michigan, activity is clustered in the southeast corner of the Lower Peninsula, along with a water route running up from Chicago, through the Straits of Mackinac, and down again to Collingwood, Ontario.² A few, however, show this route from Chicago heading north instead of south after passing through the Straits, and then crossing the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Lake Superior on the way to Duluth, Minnesota.³ The most significant of these maps is located in the Second Baptist Church in Detroit.⁴ The Second Baptist Church was a major station on the Underground Railroad, especially once the Compromise of

¹ "Enabling Freedom: History," *National Underground Railroad Freedom Center*, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://freedomcenter.org/enabling-freedom/history>.

² Wilbur Henry Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1898), p. 112-113.

³ Bruce A. Rubenstein and Lawrence E. Ziewacz, *Michigan: A History of the Great Lakes State*, 4th ed. (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2008), p. 89.

⁴ "The Underground Railroad: Tours," Second Baptist Church of Detroit, accessed December 12, 2018, <http://www.secondbaptistdetroit.org/ugrr>.

1850 made it necessary for escaped slaves to cross over to Canada. However, historical evidence does not support the claim that the Underground Railroad was significantly present in the Upper Peninsula.

There is only one documented case of someone escaping from slavery making their way to the Upper Peninsula. In 1848, Noel Johnson, an escaped slave from Missouri, discovered copper deposits outside of Ontonagon, Michigan, while he was prospecting in the woods.⁵ In one version of the story, Johnson, along with his wife Mary Ann and their infant son, first went to Cleveland, Ohio, where they sought help from the Quaker Cyrus Mendenhall. Mendenhall had mining interests in the Porcupine Mountains region of the Upper Peninsula, and he helped the family reach this isolated spot. When Johnson made his discovery, Mendenhall contacted the Missouri slaveholders who claimed ownership of the Johnson family and negotiated their freedom. Noel Johnson was then able to lay claim to the copper deposits, eventually selling the rights to the Mass Mining Company.⁶ A local historian and journalist, Graham Jaehnig, has pieced together another version: instead of escaping with his family, Johnson was accompanied by an unnamed man, who also traveled to the Ontonagon area, and he met and married Mary Ann after he gained his freedom.⁷ A brief note in the United States Geological Survey's online record about the Old Mass Mine states that "Cyrus Mendenhall bought Noel Johnson (discover—slave) freedom for 250\$ then paid Noel 18,000\$ for rights to mine his claim."⁸ The details are debated, but there are enough verifiable facts to confirm that Johnson, and possibly one or two companions, escaped from slavery and sought safety in the Upper Peninsula with the

⁵ Walter Romig, *Michigan Place Names* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), p. 357.

⁶ Marilyn Turk, "The Runaway Slave Who Found a Copper Mine," *Heroes, Heroines, and History*, August 22, 2015, <https://www.hhhistory.com/2015/08/the-runaway-slave-who-found-copper-mine.html>.

⁷ Graham Jaehnig, research notes for an article run October 17, 2018 in *The Daily Mining Gazette*, from an email to the author, dated October 28, 2018.

⁸ "Old Mass Mine," USGS: Science for a Changing World, accessed December 12, 2018, https://mrdata.usgs.gov/mrds/show-mrds.php?dep_id=10080398.

help of Cyrus Mendenhall. There are no other documented cases. The only other named person was a man named Richard Kenney, who in 1860 was living in Munising, Michigan with his family. Along with being wealthy by local standards, he was rumored to be a runaway slave.⁹ While there were other black people living in the Upper Peninsula at this time, some born free and some former slaves, there don't appear to be any further reports of people who were actively hiding.

However, people who don't want to be found are unlikely to advertise that they are hiding out, and everyone involved in the Underground Railroad was committing a crime, as Wilbur Siebert points out in his 1898 book *From Slavery to Freedom*:

It is not surprising, in the view of the Underground Railroad service, that extremely little in the way of contemporaneous documents has descended to us even across the short span of a generation or two... These sources of information are as valuable as they are rare: they would no doubt be more plentiful if the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 had not created such consternation as to lead to the destruction of most of the telltale documents.¹⁰

So the question of how active the Underground Railroad was in the Upper Peninsula should be approached more indirectly. Cyrus Mendenhall helped at least one person escape from slavery; is it possible that he helped others? Born in Ohio in 1810,¹¹ Mendenhall first came to the Upper Peninsula as a trader with the American Fur Company in the 1830s and 1840s,¹² and in 1843 he

⁹ Betty DeRamus, *Forbidden Fruit: Love Stories from the Underground Railroad* (New York: Atria Books, 2005), p. 101.

¹⁰ Siebert, p. 7.

¹¹ Haverford College Alumni Association, *Biographical Catalogue of the Matriculates of Haverford College: together with lists of the members of college faculty and the managers, officers and recipients of honorary degrees, 1833-1922* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Alumni association, 1922), https://archive.org/stream/biographicalcata22have/biographicalcata22have_djvu.txt.

¹² *Congressional Series of United States Public Documents, Volume 378* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1841), <https://books.google.com/books?id=x39HAQAIAAJ&pg=PA73&lpg=PA73&dq=cyrus+mendenhall&source=bl&ots=5XDbEF8b8n&sig=HAtO5Wk44UifBskiWZLdsfEc8RU&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi1sMiC3JrfAhXpqIMKHVLjCSE4FBD0ATADegQIAxAB#v=onepage&q=cyrus%20mendenhall&f=false>.

was one of the original claimants for the right to explore and mine Isle Royale.¹³ He was the managing owner of the schooner *Algonquin*, built in 1839 and portaged over the St. Mary's Falls for service in Lake Superior.¹⁴ A Quaker associated with the Methodist Episcopal Mission Society, in 1850 he petitioned President Zachary Taylor against the removal of the Ojibwe of La Pointe, Wisconsin,¹⁵ and in his later career in Ohio politics he advocated for more humane treatment of prisoners.¹⁶ Mendenhall therefore had the means to seriously contribute to the Underground Railroad, and it is reasonable to assume that he had the desire. However, there doesn't appear to be more conclusive documentary evidence. No accounts of his relationship with Noel Johnson suggest that Mendenhall had helped anyone else, no obvious hints exist in his business records or in the records of the *Algonquin*, no journal has been found detailing further exploits. While likely willing to help if someone happened to come to his attention, Cyrus Mendenhall appears to have been primarily concerned with his business interests and with the Native American tribes of Upper Michigan and Wisconsin.

But Mendenhall was not the only person in the Upper Peninsula, and it is possible that there were others sympathetic to escaping slaves. The people most likely to help were free black people. Even aside from naturally feeling for their fellow man and not wanting much to do with slavecatchers, who sometimes didn't care if they brought back the right person, escaping slaves were more likely to approach free blacks for help. The established Underground Railroad only helped about one percent of the people who escaped from enslavement in the American South.¹⁷

¹³ Pat Martin, "Mining on Minong: Copper Mining on Isle Royale," *Michigan History* (May/June 1990): 19-25, <http://www.industrialarchaeology.net/IAWeb/pmartin/images/MartinIsleRoyale.pdf>.

¹⁴ "Algonquin (Schooner), 1 Nov 1839," *Maritime History of the Great Lakes*, accessed December 12, 2018, <http://images.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/36492/data>

¹⁵ "United States Bureau of Indian Affairs Documents," *Wisconsin Historical Society*, accessed December 12, 2018, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/tp/id/62211>.

¹⁶ Haverford College of Alumni Association.

¹⁷ Valerie Bradley-Holliday, *Northern Roots: African Descended Pioneers in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan* (United States: Xlibris Corporation (self-published), 2009), p. 20.

Slaves were intentionally discouraged from communicating with each other and with outsiders. Once they had gotten away, they were unlikely to know which white people were safe, and may have been unwilling to associate with any white person. It was also easier for them to blend in with established black communities.

There were few black people living in the Upper Peninsula in the decades leading up to the Civil War. From an article from the Archives of Michigan Technological University in Houghton:

Though a slave receipt was found in the archives collections, as far as can be established reliably, all African Americans who came to the Keweenaw, even before 1865, had either been freed previously or were born free. According to a census summary published in the *Portage Lake Mining Gazette* from February 21, 1863, there were 37 “free colored” men, and 25 “free colored” women in Houghton County in 1860, when it still included Keweenaw and Baraga Counties, out of a total population of 18,468 in the same area, meaning ~ 0.3% were black.¹⁸

More generous estimates put the number of African Americans in the Upper Peninsula at around .89 percent, a smaller proportion than what was found in 1990,¹⁹ and much smaller than the estimated 14.1 percent nationwide.²⁰ The Upper Peninsula was difficult to reach, but with such a low population in general, and an even lower population of African descent, it would not have been possible to go unnoticed.

On the other hand, external communication was poor, people in rural areas traditionally dislike talking to outsiders, and it was prohibitively difficult to check anyone’s story. The Upper Peninsula, especially the northern shore, was difficult to reach until the opening of the Soo Locks

¹⁸ “Early Mining Era (1850s to 1920),” *Black Voices in the Copper Country*, accessed November 16, 2018, <http://blackvoices.lib.mtu.edu/community.html>.

¹⁹ DeRamus, p. 107.

²⁰ Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States,” *U.S. Census Bureau*, September 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141224151538/http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/twps0056.html>

in 1855 allowed ships to travel from Lake Huron to Lake Superior. Prior to 1855 everything had to be portaged around the St. Mary's River Falls, including Cyrus Mendenhall's *Algonquin*. There were no roads or railroads until after the Civil War began and the rising value of copper, iron, and lumber made infrastructure investments a priority. Until then, travel was by foot, by dogsled, or by boat. This would seem to make the Upper Peninsula an ideal place to hide from slavecatchers. It was hard to get news of what was happening there, Michigan had laws enacted to counteract the Compromise of 1850; it was hard to get in and it would have been even harder to get out with a captive in tow. Slavecatchers were usually motivated by profit, and there were easier targets. There were also easier destinations. Canada would have been a more practical end point for any hypothetical freedom seekers; anyone crossing from Lake Huron to Lake Superior would have been a stone's throw away from Ontario.

Not all practical considerations are shown on a map. Though it was not a slave society, Canada was not entirely friendly towards people of African descent. It is also possible that escaped slaves made personal connections or found work they liked on their journey, or individuals may have been more comfortable constantly on the move. They often found work on the docks along the Great Lakes. Loading and unloading ships in the mid-nineteenth century was tedious and back-breaking: grain, for example, had to be shoveled into baskets that were then hoisted out of the hold. It was low-paying and intermittent work, and it was not unusual for cargo ships to exchange passage for help with the loading and unloading. Ships that transported stone from quarries in Amherstburg, Ontario to Detroit and then to Sault Ste. Marie for building the canal were often owned and operated by black Canadians, and they ferried many people to freedom.²¹ There were sympathetic owners, captains, and crews of shipping vessels from Racine,

²¹ Kathy Warnes, "The Downriver Underground Railroad," *Meandering Michigan History*, accessed December 12, 2018, <https://meanderingmichiganhistory.weebly.com/the-downriver-underground-railroad.html>.

Wisconsin to Buffalo, New York.²² It is reasonable that some people would prefer to stay with a friendly crew than to stop in Canada, and when the shipping season closed in November or December at least one set of deck hands preferred to remain in the Upper Peninsula rather than return to Detroit. An excerpt from the 1859 journal of Captain John G. Parker mentions that the deck hands of the boat he was piloting, the steamer *Burlington*, were African American. It was the last trip of the season, and when they arrived in Ontonagon “the deck hands went to work chopping wood for the Minesota Mine.”²³ Parker remained in Ontonagon, and the rest of the crew, went overland back to Detroit. When the weather had first pushed them further west to Wisconsin, the deck hands’ plan had been to walk to Superior to find work for the winter. Neither place is an especially pleasant location to spend several months chopping wood; Parker does not mention anyone’s motivations for staying or leaving.

Superior is adjacent to Duluth, Minnesota, the purported end of the Underground Railroad route that ran from Chicago through Sault Ste. Marie and the Upper Peninsula. In the 1850s there were eleven black residents of Duluth, most of them in the same family,²⁴ which would point to it not being a preferred stop on the road to freedom. There is no reference to the Underground Railroad in local histories, or to a significant African American presence in the Minnesota or northern Wisconsin extraction industries of the nineteenth century. There is Captain Parker’s brief mention of deck hands thinking about spending the winter there, and not much else.

²² Siebert, p. 82-83.

²³ James K. Jamison, *This Ontonagon Country: The Story of an American Frontier, Copper Country Edition* (Calumet: Roy W. Drier, 1965), p. 120.

²⁴ Tony Dierckins and Maryanne C. Norton, “African Americans in Duluth,” *Lost Duluth: Landmarks, Buildings, Homes and the Neighborhoods in Which They Stood* (Duluth: Zenith City Press, 2012), <http://zenithcity.com/archive/duluth-history/african-americans-in-duluth/>.

Lack of evidence is not conclusive; records from that time period could lead one to believe that there were no women in the Upper Peninsula, and very few in the state of Michigan as a whole. Women were there, if not quite in equal numbers to men, but it did not occur to the records-keepers to mention them. Itinerant people of color were also, most likely, beneath notice, except as a line in the expenditures accounting. There was the added motivation on all sides of not writing down actions that could lead to hefty fines, prison time, death, or a return to enslavement. However, there is so little evidence, or even rumor of evidence, that the hypothesis that the Underground Railroad had a presence in the Upper Peninsula cannot be supported. There is nothing to suggest an “official” route, though a willing mind could find enough to imagine the possibility of further discovery. Even well-run archives can have considerable backlogs of uncatalogued material, relatively little has been digitized or transcribed, and even material that is easily available can be difficult and time-consuming to sift through. Documents are lost and not always found again, and many never make into a historical collection.