

Synthesis Essay Materials for Students

Underground Railroad 101 - The Basics

Slavery in the United States

- ended in 1865 with the end of the Civil War.
- provided the laborers essential for the plantation owners to make a living from their land.
- classified the slaves, not as independent human beings, but as property of their masters.
- enabled masters to buy and sell slaves without concern about keeping families together.
- provided only minimal food and shelter for the hard-working slaves.
- exposed slaves to harsh punishments, including whipping, for breaking any rules.
- prohibited slaves from reading or writing - kept them illiterate by law.
- kept slaves closely supervised to make it very difficult for them to escape.

The Underground Railroad

- was secret (“underground”) because it was illegal to help slaves escape.
- used a wide variety of transportation and hiding places to move slaves north to Canada.
- used the term “railroad” to indicate the speed with which runaways were moved along.
- used very few written communications, as these could be used as evidence in court.
- depended on the good will of strangers who believed that slavery was wrong.
- was no longer needed after 1865, when slaves were legally freed at the end of the Civil War.

The “players” in the Underground Railroad were:

Slaves who were seeking freedom

- encouraged by desire to make their own decisions and live as free citizens.
- hampered by lack of education and limited knowledge of life off the plantation.
- used code words, songs and signs to communicate their intentions and destinations.

Pursuers trying to recapture the runaways and return them to their masters

- were enforcing the law, since runaway slaves were considered “stolen property.”
- worked for the master or as free-lance bounty hunters working for cash reward.

Free citizens, black and white, who chose to help the runaways

- were breaking federal law, but believed their consciences directed them to civil disobedience.
- risked being imprisoned and paying fines so large that they might have to sell their homes and farms to pay them.
- used code words and secret plans to help the runaways without attracting the attention of law enforcement officers or other citizens who believed that the laws should be upheld.

Underground Railroad Research Essay

Background:

Before slavery ended in 1865, there were many instances of historical slaves who ran away from their masters to find freedom in the Northern states and in Canada. Many people, mostly strangers who believed that slavery—though legal—was wrong, helped them in their flight. Because it is located on Lake Erie, Cleveland was a frequent destination for many fugitives who hoped they could sneak onto a ship that would take them to Canada.

This secret network of fugitives and helpers became known as the Underground Railroad, with “underground” meaning “secret” and “railroad” referring to how quickly “passengers” were moved along, whether they were riding on a real railroad or in a wagon or even walking.

Assignment:

You will research and write an essay on the importance of a specific person or site on the UGRR, using and documenting information from at least one primary source and two secondary sources. You want to give background about the person or site, tell about the activities and involvement, and relate this to the larger picture of the UGRR across the North.

Topic: _____

Sources

Primary Sources:

First-hand accounts; these can include documents from the time period, letters, diaries, photographs, autobiographies, newspaper accounts of the event when it happened, speeches, eyewitness accounts.

Secondary Sources:

Accounts and reports researched and written by another person who was not directly involved or present.

Cornell Notes:

Keep a separate Cornell sheet for each of your sources. Record the source information at the top, take notes on the lines, mark primary/secondary at the bottom. Use the back or a separate sheet if you need more room for notes. You will use this information to write your essay and your Works Cited list.

MLA (Modern Language Association) Format for Citation

Books

Last name, First name. *Title of Book*. City of Publication: Publisher, Year of publication. Print.

Newspapers and Magazines

Author(s). “Title of Article.” *Title of Periodical* Day Month Year : pages. Print.

Web Pages

Author (if available). “Title of Web Page.” *Name of Site*. Name of sponsor of page, date of creation (if available). Day Month Year accessed. Internet.

Underground Railroad Topics to Research

UGRR Conductors:

- Harriet Tubman (Fugitive, Turned Conductor)
- William Still (Pennsylvania)
- Levi Coffin (Indiana)
- Frederick Douglass (New York) (Fugitive, Turned Conductor, Outspoken Abolitionist)
- Thomas Garrett (Delaware)
- John Rankin (Ripley, Ohio)
- John Parker (Ripley, Ohio)
- Horace Ford and his Family (Cleveland, Ohio)
- John Malvin (Cleveland, Ohio)
- John Brown, The Barber (Cleveland, Ohio)
- Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Famous Fugitives:

- Lucy Bagby (Cleveland, Ohio)
- Henry "Box" Brown

History Topics:

- Fugitive Slave Law of 1850
- Secret Codes on the Underground Railroad

Documented Underground Railroad sites still standing today:

- St. John's Episcopal Church / Station Hope (Cleveland, Ohio)
- Pomeroy House (Strongsville, Ohio)
- Unionville Tavern (Madison, Ohio)
- Rider's Inn (Painesville, Ohio)
- Hubbard House (Ashtabula, Ohio)
- Oberlin (Ohio)