

Governors State University

## OPUS Open Portal to University Scholarship

---

OPUS

Library

---

11-13-2017

### Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad

Larry A. McClellan

*Governors State University*, [mcclellan.larry@gmail.com](mailto:mcclellan.larry@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://opus.govst.edu/library\\_opus](https://opus.govst.edu/library_opus)



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

McClellan, Larry A., "Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad" (2017). *OPUS*. 22.  
[https://opus.govst.edu/library\\_opus/22](https://opus.govst.edu/library_opus/22)

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Library at OPUS Open Portal to University Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in OPUS by an authorized administrator of OPUS Open Portal to University Scholarship. For more information, please contact [opus@govst.edu](mailto:opus@govst.edu).

**Freedom Seekers and the  
Underground Railroad  
by  
Larry A. McClellan  
Governors State University – 2017**

*From the beginnings of slavery, those enslaved sought to be free. American history was shaped significantly by the tensions in slavery and freedom and then the deep struggles to understand what it is to be free and what it is to be equal. The struggles continue. This is a brief introduction to that part of the struggle for freedom that came to be known as the Underground Railroad in Illinois – whites and blacks engaged in networks to support freedom seekers.*



Sponsored by:



From the onset of statehood in 1818 and into the Civil War years, more than 8,000 freedom seekers moved into and through Illinois. They traveled up the Illinois River Valley and overland from the Mississippi River towns of Cairo, Chester, Alton, Quincy, Galena and innumerable smaller places. Some came north through Indiana, some by foot, coach and horseback from Iowa and Wisconsin, and starting in the mid - 1850s, by train. Throughout, the vast majority came from Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee. A limited number came up the Mississippi River valley from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas, and a few from eastern states.

An estimated 3,600 to 4,500 freedom seekers came into northeastern Illinois over these years. These numbers appear reasonable not only estimating from local accounts, but also in relation to the current estimates that 35,000 to 45,000 persons found freedom in Canada through the Underground Railroad.

Over time, a significant number of freedom seekers saw themselves as refugees, remaining in Chicago due to a relatively open and safe environment. Often, places of safety in Chicago and in the Calumet region south of the city also served as places of decision for those heading for Canada. From northeastern Illinois, the major goal was Detroit, where movement to Canada was relatively easy with significant bases for support both in Detroit and in free settlements across the Detroit River in Ontario, Canada.

Many traveled overland through northwest Indiana and southern Michigan to reach Detroit. By the mid-1840s, an increasing number went through Chicago and other Lake Michigan towns to obtain passage or to be assisted in being placed on vessels going to Detroit. After the mid-1850s, travel by train was of growing importance, from Cairo, other Illinois towns, and Iowa.



Major routes of travel for freedom seekers included movement from communities in the Mississippi River valley, up the Illinois River valley, east out of Iowa and Missouri, and going overland including north on the old Vincennes Trace/Hubbard's Trail.

Significant points of response and assistance emerged across the state in the 1830s, and these networks grew until 1861. Communications across northeastern Illinois grew rapidly in the early 1840s, and those assisting freedom seekers were, by this time, self-identified as the Underground Railroad. In Chicago, by the late 1840s, the work of receiving, assisting and sending fugitives on their way or settling them in the city was led in large measure by leaders in the African American community.

After 1845, the work of white activists and black activists in Illinois was at times integrally related and at times parallel. From the late 1840s into 1861 and the Civil War years, there were growing bi-racial collaborations and some enduring friendships across racial lines, especially in Chicago.

In the telling and re-telling of incidences involving the Underground Railroad, it was inevitable that the great images of total secrecy true to some parts of this national story would be applied to activity in the Chicago region. Yet, across northern Illinois, the UGRR was a fairly public process. Perhaps the stories of secret hiding places, tunnels, and collaborations kept deeply hidden were experienced in other parts of Illinois and in other states. However, in Chicago and northern Illinois, in large part because of broad based abolitionist sentiments, activists needed to be discrete but not totally secretive. Stories in the Chicago region are compelling

enough and it is a distraction to force romanticized images of the situation.

In a similar way, the railroad imagery and the language of “conductors,” “lines,” and “stations” acted to *impose* a kind of order and organization where it rarely existed. From the late 1830s, writing about the Underground Railroad used the railroad language but also usually noted that it was never really so formal. Those involved with and reacting to the movement of freedom seekers picked up on the most compelling new language of the day, the new technologies and terms associated with the coming of the railroads.

However, by the 1850s in Illinois, collaboration among those assisting freedom seekers was fairly well-developed. This was helped by common interests and communications for whites through anti-slavery societies and for blacks through AME churches and the occasional “colored conventions.”

In any accounts involving freedom seekers and the Underground Railroad in Illinois, it crucial to see that there were changes over time.

**Prior to 1837** -- In this period of state formation and the emergence of early communities, almost all evidence points to freedom seekers acting on their own, receiving some *ad hoc* assistance from individuals and settlements with strong anti-slavery opinions. Several black settlements like Brooklyn and New Philadelphia had been established and direct assistance was being provided. It is probable that the encounter with freedom seekers in predominantly white farming regions and small towns helped to encourage those holding anti-slavery opinions to get organized, both for providing assistance when needed, but also to form anti-slavery societies and other groups for political and public response.

**1838 – 1844** – State-wide anti-slavery societies were now functioning across the Midwest, with these were a multitude of local groups in Illinois. Along with the independent movement of freedom seekers and the activity of some fairly isolated black settlers and communities, now there were networks of assistance, predominantly involving white abolitionists. They were connecting through old friendships and the new anti-

slavery groups, and understanding and talking about what they were doing as part of the networks of the Underground Railroad.

**1845 – 1854** – The patterns outline above continued, but now with clear and visible leadership being provided by people of color. The black community of Detroit, in conjunction with black activists in Canada, was well-organized to receive, support and settle freedom seekers. The work of John and Mary Richardson Jones, Henry and Susan Wagoner, and others in the Chicago region paralleled and connected with the work of other African Americans across Illinois. This included black churches and leadership in Springfield, Alton, Jacksonville, Galesburg, Aurora, Joliet, and other locations. In Illinois, the completion of the I & M Canal in 1848 enlarged the options for movement through the Illinois River Valley. In Michigan, railroads were being completed from Detroit to Chicago and becoming an option for far more rapid movement.

**1855 – 1861** -- Although other forms of travel continued, increasing numbers of freedom seekers were moving across the region, both coming into the Chicago region and onto Detroit and other destinations using the network of rail lines in operation in the late 1850s. The stunning exemplar of this was the journey of James and Narcissa Daniels, the Samuel Harper family and others in the escape from western Missouri engineered by John Brown. After reaching Iowa, they came into Chicago on the Rock Island line. Then, they traveled on to Detroit and Canada by train.

A great deal of work is yet to be done to fully explore and report on the documentation related to freedom seekers and the Underground Railroad in Illinois. To date, only a handful of sites have been fully researched. The National Park Service Network to Freedom program has received site reports on activity in 16 Illinois communities, with the potential for 3 to 4 times that number. In northeastern Illinois, current research suggests at least 40 communities can be identified as places reflecting the movement of freedom seekers and the activities of Illinois residents to provide assistance.

## **For Further Reading**

**Bound for Canaan, The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America.** Fergus Bordewich.

New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005.

**Gateway to Freedom, The Hidden History of the**

**Underground Railroad.** Eric Foner. New York: W. W.

Norton & Co., 2015.

**The Geography of Resistance, Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad.** Cheryl J. LaRoche.

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014.

**The Underground Railroad in Illinois.** Glennette Tilly

Turner. Glen Ellyn: Newman Educational Publishing, 2001.

**The Underground Railroad in Western Illinois.** Owen W.

Muelder. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2008.

**The Underground Railroad in De Kalb County, Illinois.**

Nancy M. Beasley. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2013

**Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad in Will**

**County, Illinois.** Larry A. McClellan. Lockport:

Will County Historical Society, 2011.

**See also materials at <[illinoisundergroundrailroad.net](http://illinoisundergroundrailroad.net)>**

## **The Underground Railroad South of Chicago**

A significant number of freedom seekers traveled into northern Illinois and Chicago, often through Will County and southern Cook County. They found assistance in Wilmington, Joliet, Lockport, Mokena, New Lenox, Park Forest, Crete, and other settlements. Passing through these areas, many then traveled toward Chicago or east into Indiana. Many others had made their way to Chicago by other routes and means and then passed through the south region on their way to Indiana, Michigan and Canada. 3,600 to 4,500 freedom seekers passed through Chicago and northeastern Illinois from the 1820s until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861.

Coming into communities like Wilmington, Joliet and Plainfield, many freedom seekers followed the Sauk Trail corridor heading east, eventually traveling to Detroit and into Canada. They were assisted by families in Lockport, Homer Township, and along the Sauk Trail. There they were assisted by the Havens family in New Lenox, the Batchelders in Park Forest, and the McCoys in Sauk Trail Woods. Further east, the settlement of Bebee's Grove was a center point for radical abolitionists. These included the Cushing, Cook, Beebe and Breach families and later on the Saffords.



McCoy Family Farm

McCoy Campground Marker

At the extreme southern edge of present-day Chicago was a confluence of old trails that led to and from Chicago for travelers from the east and the south. After 1837, the main branch of the “Chicago Road,” connecting with Detroit, crossed the Little Calumet River at a point that was served by Dolton’s Ferry and later a toll bridge. The family of George and Olive Dolton settled here in 1835, followed in 1836 by the family of J. Clark Matthews, just to the west. In 1836, Dolton and Matthews established a ferry crossing. Within a few years the Osterhoudt family settled just north of the river and in 1842, Osterhoudt and Dolton worked together to build a toll bridge at the same place.

In 1848, settlers from Holland arrived in what is known today as Roseland. This included Jan (John) Ton, Antje (Angie) Vander Syde, (whom Jan married in 1850), and Cornelius Kuyper. Kuyper opened the first store in the settlement in 1848. Additional Dutch families created homes in Roseland and south along the “Chicago Road.” In 1853, Jon and Antje Ton purchased forty acres from George Dolton on the north side of the Little Calumet River.

Evidence suggests that the Doltons and Matthews had direct contact with and provided assistance to freedom seekers. By 1850, leaders of the Dutch community in

Roseland and along the Chicago Road were passionate about assisting freedom seekers. Cornelius Kuyper had contact with freedom seekers traveling overland and in the late 1850s, with those who had traveled north on railroad lines. Because of the proximity to the bridge over the Little Calumet River and with the collaboration of the Kuypers and Doltons, after 1853, the Ton farm became a regular stopping point for the Underground Railroad. On occasion, Jan Ton would have to wait until nightfall to take fugitives by wagon to the next stop on the way to Detroit. This was “Hohman’s Bridge” in nearby Hammond, Indiana.



Ton Underground Railroad Memorial (Boy Scout Eagle Project)

Going north from the Tons and Kuypers, roads led to the center of the growing city of Chicago. There were the homes and businesses of John and Mary Jones and other African American activists, and those of Dr. Charles V. Dyer, Philo Carpenter, and other white Abolitionists involved with the Underground Railroad.

## Photo Gallery

### Mt Glenwood Memory Gardens:

Walter Barnes 1905-1940 – Jazz Musician. First black musician to play on radio out of Chicago



Elijah (Poole) Muhammad 1897-1975. Founder of the Nation of Islam’s Temple in Chicago. (“Black Muslims”)



Frederick Wayman "Duke" Slater – 1898-1966. Football Great, Civil Rights pioneer. University of Iowa All Big Ten. Assistant District Attorney.



Major Marshall Walter Taylor 1878-1932 – American Championship Cyclist, considered "fastest bicycle rider in the world."



Edith Wilson 1896-1981 – Singer and actress. One of the first African American actresses allowed to perform on the white Vaudeville circuit.



Altgeld Gardens – One of the first public housing developments ever built in the United States



Shaffer Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church – Oldest African American church in suburbs



## Resources on the South Suburbs and the Underground Railroad:

***Encyclopedia of Chicago*** – see articles for each of the south suburbs [25 by Dr. McClellan]

**Local History Museums** in Park Forest, Robbins, Blue Island, Tinley Park, Orland Park and others.

**Glennette Tilly Turner, *The Underground Railroad in Illinois***. (Glen Ellyn: Newman Educational Pub. Co., 2001).

### Dr. McClellan's materials:

***Local History South of Chicago: A Guide for Research in the Southern Suburbs***. Chicago: Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, 1987.

***Park Forest South/University Park: A Guide to Its History and Development***. University Park, IL: Village of University Park, 1986.

“**Green Futures, African-American farming in Pembroke Township, Kankakee County,**” *Illinois Heritage*, September-October, 2016, Vol., 19, No. 5, pp 23-26.

“**Time Frame,**” *Star Newspapers* in suburbs south of Chicago, monthly regional history column – 1993-2003.

“**The Final Ministry of Amanda Berry Smith,**” *Illinois Heritage*, Winter, 1998, Vol. 1, No. 2, 20-25.  
(Written with David Bartlett)

***Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad in Will County***, Will County Historical Society, 2011.

“**Crossing the Little Calumet River: First Settlers and the Underground Railroad,**” *Where the Trails Cross*. South Suburban Genealogical and Historical Society, TBP.

Dr. McClellan maintains >[illinoisundergroundrailroad.net](http://illinoisundergroundrailroad.net)<

## Dr. Larry A. McClellan

After graduate work at the University of Chicago, in 1970 Larry helped create Governors State University and served with the University for 30 years. For many years, he was University Professor of Sociology and Community Studies, and six years Executive Director of the South Metropolitan Regional Leadership Center. In the mid-70s, he was mayor of University Park (then Park Forest South). After retiring from GSU, he spent four years as a senior consultant with the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission. Throughout his career, he also served as pastor with diverse congregations. He was selected by the Illinois Humanities Council for 2013-14 as an Illinois "Roads Scholar" lecturer on the history of Illinois highways.

His consulting, research and writing focus on historic highways, the Underground Railroad in Illinois, and on African American and regional history south of Chicago. Major publications include 25 articles in the *Encyclopedia of Chicago* [2005]; *The Pontiac Trail, Route 66 and the Early Chicago to St. Louis Roads* [2013]; co-author of a chapter on freedom seeker, Caroline Quarlls, in *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Freedom and the Underground Railroad on the Detroit River Borderland* [2016]. Since 2006, he has presented 3 research papers on the Underground Railroad at the annual symposia of the Illinois State Historical Society. For the annual National Park Service Network to Freedom conference, 2010 "*Freedom Seekers in Illinois*," 2014 "*Women in Chicago working with the Underground Railroad*." He serves on the boards of the Illinois State Historical Society, the Will County Historical Society and Union Street Gallery in Chicago Heights.

He is currently completing book manuscripts on "*To the River, the Remarkable Journey of Caroline Quarlls*" [freedom seeker from St. Louis], "*Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad in Northeastern Illinois*," and on regional history south of Chicago. For ten years, he wrote a monthly regional history column for *The Southtown/Star* newspapers. Larry graduated from Occidental College in Los Angeles, with a year at the University of Ghana in West Africa.