

The Underground Railroad in Middletown



The Underground Railroad was a network of routes by which African slaves in the 19th century United States attempted to escape to free states, or as far north as Canada, with the aid of abolitionists. Other routes led to Mexico or overseas. At its height between 1810 and 1850, an estimated 30,000 to 100,000 people escaped enslavement via the Underground Railroad, though Census figures only account for 6,000.

The escape network was "underground" in the sense of underground resistance but was seldom literally subterranean. The Underground Railroad consisted of clandestine routes, transportation, meeting points, safe houses and other havens, and assistance maintained by abolitionist sympathizers. These individuals were organized into small, independent groups who, for the purpose of maintaining secrecy, knew of

connecting "stations" along the route but few details of their immediate area. Escaped slaves would pass from one way station to the next, steadily making their way north. The diverse "conductors" on the railroad included free-born Blacks, white abolitionists, former slaves (either escaped or manumitted), and Native Americans. Churches and religious denominations played key roles, especially the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Congregationalists, Wesleyans, and Reformed Presbyterians as well as breakaway sects of mainstream denominations such as branches of the Methodist church and American Baptists.

In 1820, 97 slaves and 7,844 free people of color lived in Connecticut. According to the 1830 census, Middletown's population was 6,892. Of these residents, 209 were people of color, all of them free. Freedom, however, did not automatically bring basic rights. Education and voting rights were hard to come by in Connecticut in the early 19th century. Although there were no more slaves in Middletown by 1830, slavery was not fully abolished in the state until 1848.

Slavery was a burning issue in New England in the 1830s. In 1831, the same year that Jehiel Beman, first regular pastor at the A.M.E. Cross Street Church, brought his family to Middletown and Wesleyan University was founded, William Lloyd Garrison began publishing his anti-slavery paper, *The Liberator*. Garrison was indeed heard in Middletown. The New England Anti-Slavery Society (later known as the American Anti-Slavery

Society) was founded in Boston in 1832, and the cause spread throughout the North in response to Garrison's call. Within just five years, there were twenty-nine anti-slavery societies in Connecticut alone.

Jehiel Beman was tireless in his fight against slavery. A founding member of the Middletown Anti-Slavery Society in 1834, he became one of its five managers. Both of his sons, Amos and Leverett, were also active in the cause. Clarissa Beman, Leverett's wife, was one of the founders of Middletown's Colored Female Anti-Slavery Society in the same year. This group was one of the earliest women's abolitionist societies in the United States. Cross Street Church was so closely allied with the anti-slavery movement that it was known as "Freedom Church" in this period.

A more hidden aspect of the abolitionist movement was the underground railroad. Several Middletown citizens, both white and Black, served as underground railroad conductors, sheltering slaves who were fleeing the South in search of freedom in Canada or elsewhere. With the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, the need for the underground railroad increased. Along with prominent white citizens Jesse Baldwin and Benjamin Douglas, Jehiel Beman and his second wife, Nancy, served as underground railroad conductors after they returned to Middletown in 1854, and perhaps before. Cross Street Church was very likely a way station on the railroad.

Middletown was home to abolitionists, both Black and white, as well as to pro-slavery factions, and to those who believed that Black emigration to Africa held the answer to ending racial strife. In 1835, Cross Street was the scene of an anti-Black, anti-abolitionist riot. Leverett Beman wrote that Cross Street was "crowded with those worse than Southern bloodhounds." Wesleyan's first President, Willbur Fisk, a member of the mostly-white Colonization Society, believed that slavery was wrong, but maintained that the solution to the problem of slavery lay in the voluntary emigration of Blacks to Africa, rather than in the abolitionist movement. Most Black Americans, including the Bemens, deplored the activities of the Colonization Society. In the summer of 1831, Black people gathered at the Cross Street Church to protest colonization. Amos Beman was elected secretary of the group, and wrote, "Why should we leave this land, so dearly bought by the blood, groans and tears of our fathers? Truly this is our home, here let us live and here let us die."



Harriet Tubman, famous conductor on the Underground Railroad