

History of the Underground Railroad:

The Underground Railroad was a network of secret paths and safe houses that helped slaves escape to the free states. The Underground Railroad wasn't necessarily underground nor was it a railroad; rather it was many routes kept secret. The runaways would travel up to thirty miles at night and would stay at the safe houses during the day. The series of houses or stations along the routes gave the runaways a safe place to stay and eat and would direct them on their way. People could recognize these safe houses by specific signs. Songs and quilts helped people navigate the pathways and identify safe places. The main travel was by foot, but other ways were by wagon, boats, and railways. Historians estimate that between 40,000 and 100,000 slaves escaped through the Underground Railroad in the years 1810 to 1850. The Underground Railroad had several notable people who aided in the transportation including ex-slaves themselves. One of the most famous persons was Harriet Tubman who helped escort runaways to freedom along the Underground Railroad after she used it to escape herself.

Forms of Communication

Slaves used variety of ways to communicate. They used songs, quilts, and codes.

Extension Activity: Discusses where the name railroad came by using the site below.

Student can explore the use of quilts, songs, and codes used and how the term railroad came from.

Site: <http://pathways.thinkport.org/secrets/>

An extension activity would be to discuss how hobos used signs during the depression era. In their travels for work, hoboes made marks with chalk, paint or coal on walls, sidewalks, fences and posts. The signs were meant to let others know what was ahead.

Website for Hobo signs: <http://www.cyberhobo.com/signs/hobosigns.html>

Student can create their own code systems as a class and use them throughout the year.

Extension activity (math): Many ancient societies have used symbols as a way to communicate.

Codes and symbols used as the number system for the Mayans and Egyptian number system.

Sites:

Mayans: <http://mayas.mrdonn.org/numbers.html>

Egyptian: <http://egypt.mrdonn.org/math.html>

Extension Activity: Introduce sign language as a form of communication. The teacher can introduce the alphabet and other basic signs.