

Canada: Terminus of the Underground Railroad

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Description:

This lesson describes how 30,000 runaway slaves, who traveled the Underground Railroad north in their search for freedom, settled the northern shore of Lake Erie in what is now the Canadian province of Ontario during the nineteenth century. Students will learn why escaped slaves became free men and women in Canada and how they were threatened by slave catchers emboldened by the United States Runaway Slave Act. Students will be encouraged to explore the Canadian connection to famous figures such as Underground Railway conductor Harriet Tubman, abolitionist John Brown and author Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin. This lesson will direct them to the information necessary to pursue this subject further, both in Canada and in their own communities.

Grade Levels:

9-12

Subjects:

Social Studies, History, Geography

Duration:

This lesson plan could be completed in two 50-minute sessions. It would be most suitable as part of a unit on slavery and the Underground Railway.

Goal:

To recognize and understand the connection between the American Underground Railroad and the Canadian destination where communities of freed slaves were established.

Objectives:

- \$ Identify the geographic location where escaped slaves reached freedom.
- \$ Understand why they were safe in British Canada and not in the United States
- \$ Explore the forces they had to overcome, including slave catchers who followed them across the border
- \$ Discuss the events of their early years in Canada and the choices that some freed slaves made to return to the United States after Emancipation.

Standards:

This lesson plan meets the Washington State EALRs.

Background:

Understanding of slavery and the role of the Underground Railway in the lives of runaway slaves.

Materials:

A United States map that shows the north shore of Lake Erie.
A timeline of important dates in the history of American and British slavery
Websites, books and articles. (See bibliography)

Procedures:

1. Choose a U.S. map that includes the covers the eastern half of the United States. Ask students to trace the routes that American runaway slaves took on their travels north, including the north shore of Lake Erie. Ask students to identify the Canadian crossings between the U.S. cities of Detroit and Niagara Falls. This activity should emphasize the geographic difficulties presented by crossing Lake Erie and the Detroit River.

2. Give students a timeline that shows important events related to slavery, with an emphasis on the period between the American Revolution and the American Civil War. Discuss the time difference between the abolition of slavery in British colonies like Canada, which occurred between 1793 and 1834, and the abolition of slavery in the United States, where the Emancipation Act freed slaves after the Civil War. Students should discuss the reasons why these different events and laws lured runaway slaves across the 49th parallel into Canada.

3. Offer a choice of interesting, true stories that relate events in the United States to events in Canada during this time period. These might include:

a) Harriet Tubman, one of the most famous Underground Railway conductors of the time, who helped 300 slaves across the border into Ontario, then known as Upper Canada.

b) John Brown, the most notorious American abolitionist of his time, who gathered freed slaves around him in a church that still stands in Chatham, Ontario. Assign reading on the attack on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859, where Brown was captured and hanged. This attack was planned in Chatham and many Black Canadians accompanied Brown. Your students may want to hear the song that begins "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the lord...@; it was once sung as "John Brown's body lies a-moldering in its grave...@

c) The novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, written by American writer Harriet Beecher Stowe, which galvanized Americans into action during the nineteenth century. Her story was based on (Elijah Henson) who led blacks to a community that he created in the town of Dresden, Ontario. Buildings and artifacts of that community are still open to the public in Dresden.

d) Hundreds of stories are available through museums, churches and other sites along the north shore of Lake Erie. Many of them are posted on Ontario's "Black Trail," which leads tourists to specific sites in southern Ontario.

Assessment:

Students should be asked to write essays that focus on one of these stories, or on the historical events overall.

Additional Notes:

Information about Harriet Tubman, John Brown and Uncle Tom's Cabin will be found in any American encyclopedia, as well as in the many books in your school and community library. Canadian information is readily available on the web and from sites listed in the accompanying bibliography. Since a large percentage of these freed slaves returned to the United States after the emancipation of slaves in America, some of your student may some of their stories from family or community sources.

Information Sources:

Hill, Daniel G. The Freedom Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada. Book Society of Canada. Agincourt, Canada: 1981. Published in 1992 by Stoddart Publishing Co., Ltd., 34 Lesmill Road, Toronto, Canada, M3B 2T6

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. Uncle Tom's Cabin. Siegel-Cooper Co. New York, Chicago.

Walls, Dr. Bryan E. The Road That Led to Somewhere. Olive Publishing Co., 1307 pelissier St., Windsor, Ontario, Canada. 1980.

WEBSITES:

* The Underground Railroad Years
<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/freedom>

* "Escape!" - a game where you travel as one of 5 fugitive slaves along real routes to freedom
<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/freedom/game.htm>

* Canadian Studies Center at the University of Washington: Black Canadian History
<http://depts.washington.edu/~canada/black.html>

* "The Complex Face of Black Canada" article by George Elliot Clarke
www.mcgill.ca/alumni/news/w97/black.htm

* Multiculturalism in Canada: African Canadian Heritage
www.geocities.com/multi_cultural_99/afr.html