

The Underground Railroad in the Western Reserve

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The Western Reserve is known to have contained over three hundred antislave societies, an impressive amount even for a state such as Ohio, which contained between twenty-eight hundred and three thousand miles of Underground Railroad interconnecting escape routes. Ashtabula county and Lorain county boasted over hundred miles each, with the latter being the home of Oberlin, a town nationally known in the mid-1800's as an abolitionist stronghold. In fact, the indictment and jailing of thirty-seven Oberlin abolitionists, involved in the freeing of runaway slave John Price in 1858, proved to intensify national debate and tensions regarding state's rights, civil rights, and the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

Oral traditions about the Underground railroad frequently allude to places of concealment allegedly constructed by abolitionists for the use of fleeing slaves who were making their way toward Canada. The primary emphasis in these traditions is on the clever deception of opponents and the large numbers of fugitives that have been assisted. Persons who had no direct knowledge were often eager to attribute to abolitionists' houses and other buildings a specialized function in this romanticized picture of the Underground Railroad.

Although archaeological evidence found does not and cannot, prove that participants in the Underground Railroad in the Western Reserve never constructed special places of concealment for fugitive

slaves, it suggests that if such constructions existed at all they must have been extremely rare. Although we certainly can be proud of our rich abolitionist heritage, knowledgeable examination of buildings alleged to have features constructed for the concealment of fugitives slaves constitutes a useful check on the claims of oral tradition. Investigation of this kind is particularly important, when an increasing number of putative stations on the Underground Railroad are being registered, remodeled and opened to a paying public, sometimes replete with guided tours that feature secret compartments or passages. The risk of creating places and events not as they were but as they exist in faded memories and romantic imagination is a continuing danger in the reconstruction of the history of the Underground Railroad.