

# PATHS TO FREEDOM

## TRACING THE HARROWING AND HEROIC JOURNEYS OF SLAVES IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM ON OHIO'S UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

By Rich Warren



*National Underground Railroad Freedom Center  
Courtesy of National Underground Railroad Freedom Center*

One of the most stunning views of the Ohio River unfolds on a hilltop high above the town of Ripley in Ohio's Brown County. From this vantage point, many miles of the wide river can be seen amid verdant forested hills and meadows on either side, with a sharp bend in the west as the river flows toward Cincinnati.

Other than its sheer beauty, however, there's another reason to visit this spot: No place better illustrates a poignant contrast in American history. On the south shore in Kentucky, African Americans were held in bondage prior to the Civil War, while on the Ohio side, slavery was forbidden. It's sobering to consider that only the ribbon of water below once separated such divergent ideologies.

When asked why southern Ohio was such a hotbed for activity along the Underground Railroad, the network of routes and safe houses used by escaping slaves, Carl Westmoreland, senior historian at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, has a one-word answer: geography. Ohio provided the shortest route to Canada. Once fleeing slaves crossed the river, only 250 miles separated them from freedom. For that reason, of the 100,000 slaves who historians estimate escaped on the Underground Railroad, nearly a third passed through Ohio.



*Courtesy of National Underground Railroad Freedom Center*

### **Let Freedom Ring**

Offering vivid illustrations of that history is the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, a towering 95-foot-tall structure with undulating walls of travertine stone on the banks of the Ohio River in downtown Cincinnati. Exhibits in the center range from the blueprints of a slave ship to a wagon with a false bottom where fleeing slaves could be concealed. There's ample use of storytelling, films, murals and hands-on activities, illustrating both the introduction and abolition of slavery and how injustice has persisted to the present.

Visitors can take part in "The Rosa Parks Experience," donning virtual-reality glasses to see a simulation of Parks' famous refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus in 1955. The experience invites visitors to imagine the encounter through Parks' eyes by putting them on the bus in Parks' seat as both the bus driver and the policeman literally got in her face and white passengers disdainfully looked on. Other exhibits show how slavery exists even today through forced labor, bonded indenture and sex trafficking.





*Parker had been born into slavery but managed to purchase his own freedom.*

*Photo by Rich Warren*

Most striking of all, the museum's Slave Pen was an actual holding place where slaves were imprisoned in Kentucky's Mason County prior to being moved farther south for sale. Preserved because a tobacco barn had been constructed completely around it, the Slave Pen was dismantled and reassembled inside the Freedom Center's grand hall. The two-story log structure has shackle rings embedded in its walls, somber reminders of the misery its occupants once suffered.

**If these walls could talk**

Across town in Cincinnati's Walnut Hills neighborhood, the Harriet Beecher Stowe House is where the famous author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* resided when her family moved to Cincinnati in 1832. Although the incendiary novel was composed after the author returned to New England, its plot elements are a direct consequence of her experiences in Cincinnati, which at the time was a boiling cauldron of both pro- and anti-slavery sentiments. During her time in Ohio, Stowe visited a slave plantation in Kentucky and was profoundly disturbed by witnessing a slave auction. The stories she heard, such as the one of a slave woman crossing the icy Ohio River with her baby clutched in her arms, were woven into the novel. Exhibits inside the Stowe House give details on the abolitionist community in Cincinnati, on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and on the life of Stowe and her immediate family.

Fifty miles upriver, the tiny town of Ripley is where many of the most moving stories on the Underground Railroad took place. Described by Southerners as a "hellhole of abolitionists" before the Civil War, Ripley's townspeople assisted escaping slaves by the hundreds even though the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made doing so an act punishable by fines, imprisonment and seizure of property. John Rankin and John P. Parker were among the most notable of the Underground Railroad "conductors," and visitors can tour both of their homes.

The simple red-brick John Rankin House sits on the hilltop above the town, where that sweeping view of the river can be had. Escaping slaves knew to look for a lantern in the window of the Rankin residence, signaling that it was safe to approach the house under cover of night. The famous "Hundred Steps to Freedom," a stone stairway coming up the hill, has been replaced by a wooden staircase, but it's still possible to imagine the desperation and the hope so many must have felt as they ascended those steps.



*Escaping slaves knew to look for a lantern in the window of the Rankin residence, signaling that it was safe to approach the house under cover of night.*

*Photo by Rich Warren*

That hope was amply rewarded by the fast assistance of Rankin and his large family. Because of the danger of their staying any length of time, most escaped slaves were quickly passed along to the next "station" on the Underground Railroad. Presbyterian minister Rankin estimated in his autobiography, *The Life of Reverend John Rankin*, that he and his family assisted more than 2,000 slaves. Perhaps the most famous was Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Eliza," the woman who fled over the icy Ohio River with her baby. Eyewitnesses saw Eliza fall through the ice into the shallow river at least twice, holding the child aloft. She was no doubt warmed and fed by the stove in the Rankins' parlor before proceeding north.

In downtown Ripley, the home of John P. Parker offers other compelling stories. Parker had been born into slavery but managed to purchase his own freedom. He established a thriving iron foundry in town, where he worked by day and aided escaping slaves by night, often rowing across the river in a narrow skiff to transport slaves to freedom. A replica of that skiff can be seen inside the house, along with artifacts such as tools from Parker's foundry and colorful murals depicting incidents in Parker's life, such as the time he was marched in chains as an eight-year-old child.

Afterward, a stroll along Ripley's riverside Front Street takes visitors past a dozen other homes with fascinating stories to tell. A plaque identifies the site of the former home of Dr. Alfred Beasley, a staunch anti-slavery sympathizer. According to the plaque, "In a night encounter at the Ripley ferry landing, both a master and a slave were severely wounded. The slave escaped but lay in a barn of Theodore Collins for several months. The doctor attended each without the other knowing it."

"Ripley is a living museum," says Westmoreland. "The kind of courage those people showed there is a testament to humanity."

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