



ALONG THE TOWPATH

A quarterly publication of the

Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Association

Concerned with the conservation of the natural and historical environment of the C&O Canal and the Potomac River Basin.

The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal and the Underground Railroad

by Timothy R. Snyder

It has long been said that the C&O Canal was a part of the Underground Railroad used by slaves to escape from bondage during the American Antebellum Era. Take, for example, the below quote from a travel brochure issued to Baltimore & Ohio Railroad passengers, circa 1923:

An interesting chapter in the history of the C. & O. Canal was in the slave days preceding the Civil War, when it was secretly utilized as a part of the famous "Underground Railway" system. Along its route were stations maintained by abolitionists and their friends, whose bribing of canal boatmen enabled many a slave to be smuggled into the free states.¹

Although rumors of the canal being utilized as a part of the Underground Railroad have persisted, definitive proof has been difficult to find. In 2001, however, the Maryland State Archives began an effort to locate records in its collection that documented resistance to slavery, including use of the Underground Railroad.² One outcome of this research was the creation of a website called, "Beneath the Underground: The Flight to Freedom and Communities in Antebellum Maryland."³ Recently it gave the public access to some of its primary documents over the internet, utilizing a "Search Our Database" function.⁴

A search of slave jail records shows that in 1829 a Baltimore County jail held twelve fugitives, all of whom were charged with being a "runaway servant" or a "runaway indentured servant" to the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Company. The runaways were brought to the jail in small groups between October 29 and November 4.⁵ Rather than being African American slaves, however, it is likely that this group of canal workers were runaway indentured servants from the British Isles. Because of labor shortages in America, in 1829 the Canal Company sent an agent to England to obtain one thousand English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish workmen. The canal company agreed to pay their transportation costs in exchange for a fixed term of labor. The agent began sending men over in August 1829, with the last contingent to arrive in America in late October. In his book, *The Great National Project*, Walter S. Sanderlin wrote that the canal company had difficulty with many of its indentured servants and that dissatisfied workers often "deserted the line of the canal and disappeared into the neighboring countryside."⁶

A search of runaway slave advertisements in newspapers yields a small sample of 31 cases of runaway slaves associated with the canal in some manner from 1829–1860. Twenty-seven of the ads were published during the early construction period of the canal's history, from 1829–1839. In the case of twelve runaways, it is explicitly written that the escapees had at one time been, or were actively engaged in, working on the canal.

Interestingly, Sanderlin also writes that because of the difficulty that the canal company had with indentured servants, its board of directors refused to purchase slaves.⁷ Therefore, any slaves who worked on the waterway must have been hired out by their owners to contractors that the company engaged to do work on the canal. Based on the runaway slave ads, it can be concluded that the canal company utilized slave labor indirectly by hiring contractors who employed slaves.

In all the cases of runaway slaves, the escapees were males. The physical demands of flight, lack of child rearing responsibilities, and more relative freedom of movement may help explain why all of the fugitives were men. The sample also illustrates that running away was usually a young man's activity. Six runaways were under the age of 20 (the youngest was sixteen); sixteen of the escapees were between age 20 and 29; four from age 30 to 39; two between 40 and 49; and one was 60-year old. Two ads provided no age.

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In seven of the twelve examples of slaves who worked on the canal, the slave owners indicated that their bondsmen had worked on the canal in the past; four ads indicate that the slave absconded while employed on the canal. Owner Levin J. Wilson submitted a runaway slave ad to the *Frederick Town Herald*, published on January 2, 1830: "Fifty Dollar Reward. Ran away from the subscriber on the 18th instant [December 18, 1829], a Negro man, named BEN ADDISON, about 21 years of age, dark color, 5 feet 9 or 10 inches high, sulky when spoken to, stout built, and is left handed. He has been working on the canal in Georgetown for the last three months."⁸

The canal company lodged workers near the line of the canal, which may have made escape particularly tempting, given its relative remoteness from population centers.

In eighteen cases, slave owners wrote that their runaway slaves were headed for the canal or suspected that they were headed for the waterway. It is likely that because slaves and free black laborers already worked on the canal, escapees felt more secure from capture and expected to receive comfort and support from African American laborers as well as from any abolitionist networks that may have existed in the region. The remoteness of the Potomac River Valley, and the nearness of Pennsylvania as a runaway moved farther up the river, likely also drew escaped slaves to the canal. Runaways were drawn to the canal for another reason: the opportunity to earn money. Perhaps claiming to have been born free, or with borrowed, stolen, or forged manumission papers, some slaves sought employment on the canal as a means to support themselves and, presumably, their families. Contractors unconcerned with strict compliance with existing laws may have been willing to overlook a runaway's lack of papers because of labor shortages during the period. Working on the canal may have provided slaves with more freedom of movement and less oversight than they had experienced doing agricultural labor on their owners' property. Take, for example, the case of Henry, who escaped from his Charles County, Maryland, proprietor on September 22, 1839. His owner, Sylvester F. Gardiner, wrote that Henry had run away before and had been apprehended in Washington: "It is probable he may make for the Canal, as he has worked there, and has expressed a wish to work there again."⁹ In other examples, the escapee may have sought employment on the canal as a means to finance his later flight to the free states. George Duvall of Prince Georges County, Maryland, whose slave Bill escaped on February 14, 1830, wrote "when last heard of he was making towards Washington city, where he may now be, but more likely attempt to get employment on the canal, and then make his way to Pennsylvania."¹⁰

In only two cases did owners believe that their slaves stowed away on canal boats, which the B&O Railroad brochure indicated was the means used by slaves to escape to the north. On August 31, 1860, for example, Rufus Jackson's owner, William H. Benson of Montgomery County, wrote of his slave: "I have every reason to believe that he is making his way off on a canal boat."¹¹ In a third case, when the slave John Nevil escaped on April 28, 1830, his owner wrote that he believed his bondsman escaped "in some of the long boats trading up and down the Potomac River," which was during the period when the Potomac Company's river improvements were still being utilized by shippers.¹²

From an analysis of these data, two significant findings come to light: 1) that to some extent, slave labor was indeed utilized on the canal; and 2) that slaves sometimes fled to the canal to find work, which provided more relative freedom, including an opportunity to earn money. Still, the runaway slave ads leave unanswered at least one important question: was the canal a part of an organized network—the Underground Railroad—to aid a slave's escape, as written in the B&O Railroad brochure? The small number of the runaway slave ads limits the conclusions that can be drawn. If runaway slave ads from additional newspapers along the line of the canal—especially those in print just prior to the Civil War—can be added to those obtained from the collection at the Maryland State Archives, a more complete picture of the canal's role in the Underground Railroad will come into focus. In the absence of memoirs or other first person accounts, however, we may never have a complete picture of the canal's role in the veiled Underground Railroad.

¹ *Along the Picturesque Potomac on the Baltimore & Ohio* (n.p., c1923) 11-12.

² <http://www.mdslavery.net/html/links/ugrrwebsiteoverview.html>

³ <http://www.mdslavery.net/ugrr.html>

⁴ <http://www.mdslavery.net/>

⁵ Baltimore County Jail (County Docket), 1827 - 1832, 2/72/1/11, Dockets 359-370 <http://www.mdslavery.net/>

⁶ Walter S. Sanderlin, *The Great National Project: A History of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946), 71-74, 76.

⁷ Sanderlin, *The Great National Project*, 78.

⁸ *Frederick Town Herald*, Jan. 2, 1830, "Beneath the Underground: The Flight to Freedom and Communities in Antebellum Maryland," <http://www.mdslavery.net/>

⁹ *Washington Daily National Intelligencer*, Oct. 2, 1839, "Beneath the Underground," <http://www.mdslavery.net/>

¹⁰ *Ibid*, Feb. 24, 1830, "Beneath the Underground," <http://www.mdslavery.net/>

¹¹ *Rockville Montgomery County Sentinel*, Sept. 7, 1860, "Beneath the Underground," <http://www.mdslavery.net/>

¹² *Washington Daily National Intelligencer*, May 5, 1830, "Beneath the Underground," <http://www.mdslavery.net/>