

CHAPTER 2. SLAVERY IN AMERICA: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to have the necessary foundation for the understanding and pedagogy of coded message songs, a brief historical context of slavery in America and the Underground Railroad must first be addressed. My intent is not to provide an exhaustive historical record, but rather to offer a concise report to provide context before proceeding to the music. This chapter can serve as a useful source for conductors to relate to their singers. Of course, a deeper study is recommended for a full understanding of the subject.

Slavery in America

The first slave ships that came to the New World arrived in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies of South and Central America in the late fifteenth century.⁸ About one hundred years later, the institution of slavery began in North America in 1619, in the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia. The first “slaves,” about twenty African Americans brought to the Jamestown Colony by the Dutch, were actually indentured servants, sent to the New World to pay off their debt owed through their time and labor. Although largely undocumented, most historians believe that after their contracted time had ended, they were allowed to live freely off the land given to them by their former masters.

However, as the New World began to grow and flourish in population and territory, so did the need for labor and materials. Out of this need grew a new, triangular trading scheme, firmly linking the distant shores of the Atlantic Ocean (Europe—Africa’s West Coast—The Americas) through goods, currency, and a brand new and richly profitable commodity: *people*. Near the end of the 17th century, indentured servitude faded in favor of slavery—more specifically—race-based slavery.

The economy of the three geographical areas of this triangle (through the workings of private companies and agents) operated as follows: America produced raw goods such as sugar,

⁸ James Walvin, *History Files: The Slave Trade* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 22-31.

cotton, and tobacco, Europe received these raw goods and manufactured textiles and luxuries from them, and Africa provided a force of enslaved labor to work and produce these raw materials in America. The Atlantic Slave Trade Triangle was extremely lucrative—so much so, that it flourished for nearly two centuries, from 1619 to 1808.⁹ The *Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves* was enacted in 1808, prohibiting the importation of any new slaves to the United States.¹⁰ Slavery in America persisted, even beyond the *Emancipation Proclamation* of January 1, 1863. On January 31 that same year, the thirteenth amendment to the United States Constitution abolished slavery and indentured servitude. However, the news of emancipation traveled slowly, especially in the southern states. “Juneteenth” celebrates the anniversary of the Texas emancipation on June 19, 1865, more than two years following the 1863 proclamation.

The Slave Trade Triangle led to the capturing (in Africa) and forced relocation (in the Americas) of over twelve million Africans, including more than one hundred unique African ethnicities.¹¹ Enslaved labor was purchased and subsequently relocated in all of the new American colonies. It was concentrated most heavily in the southern states, where the cash crops of cotton, tobacco, and sugar were burgeoning, but also occurred in the north until the American Revolution. It was made possible through the labor of enslaved Africans, who were purchased (or bred), and treated as a commodity by slave traders and American plantation owners. This development of chattel slavery (fueled by their racial, social, and economic beliefs) was a sinister move forward from the older Colonial (indentured servitude) model.¹²

As human “property” (rather than human beings), slaves were simultaneously valued and ignored, cared-for and punished. They were brought across the Atlantic (the great “Middle Passage”) against their will, and in deplorable and inhumane conditions. If they survived the

⁹ Ibid, 7-31.

¹⁰ Although the *Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves* was enacted in 1807, it did not go into effect until 1808. Interestingly, Congress had already enacted the *Slave Trade Act* of 1794, but did not enforce its mandates, resulting in rampant international slave smuggling.

¹¹ Walvin, *History Files*, 7.

¹² Chattel slavery indicates a system where people are sold as commodities, or personal property. Furthermore, any children born to slaves automatically assumed the same status.

journey, they were often separated from their loved ones and forced to live lives of burden, risk, and pain. Conditions on the plantations were brutal. Much has been written describing the great cruelty and savage violence of the slave masters toward their workers.¹³

Reaction from the enslaved to this brutal and inhumane treatment was to be expected. “While the determination to regain freedom was constant, the strategies employed were highly dependent on the specific realities of enslavement in a given time and place.”¹⁴ Through uprisings and revolt, enslaved workers bravely fought in outright rebellion on the plantations. These rebellions were usually met with equal or greater opposing force, often resulting in bloody violence and cruel punishment, even death. Because slave owners and masters feared revolts, they advanced management strategies that became increasingly harsh. Some went so far as to import African slave masters who were champions of physical cruelty and psychological manipulation.¹⁵

The response to slave rebellion varied. Abolitionists were pivotal in their support of and aid to enslaved people, becoming more subversive in their efforts. In light of rampant rebellion, Congress passed laws to placate the south, such as the *Fugitive Slave Act* (1793) to try to preserve the “business interests” of the South by guaranteeing an owner’s right to recover any escaped slaves.¹⁶ This was only partially effective, as the some in the northern states continued to harbor and assist those seeking freedom.¹⁷ To solve the pesky abolitionist problem (and appease southern wealthy slaveowners), Congress passed *The Fugitive Slave Law* in 1850 to ensure that any escaped slaves, upon capture in *any state*, were to be returned to their plantations under penalty of law.

¹³ Most of the scholarship I have consulted discusses the savage treatment of enslaved Africans on American soil. A particularly succinct description of the period, with images can be found in James Walvin’s *History Files: The Slave Trade*, 72-83.

¹⁴ J. Blaine Hudson, *Encyclopedia of the Underground Railroad* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 1.

¹⁵ Walvin, *History Files*, 87-94.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁷ It’s important to remember that slavery also persisted in the north.

How did the enslaved respond and resist? How did they cope with inhumane and vicious treatment? They did so through rebellion and escape, yes. *But more importantly*, they worked collectively to retain their own identity and culture. They stole away to worship as they pleased. They spoke in terms that masked true meaning. They were storytellers and poets. They used music. They sang together, in community, to soothe and repair their battered spirit. Singing provided them not only much-needed hope, but it also offered a sparkling sliver of opportunity through secret communication. They dreamed of the day when they would be set free—and until that day, they looked for opportunities to escape, to join in a subversive movement that led north to freedom: The Underground Railroad. This story of hope and resilience inspires an entire body of compelling repertoire for conductors, singers, and listeners.

The Underground Railroad

The slavery industry in the United States was a tangled web of people, profits, and politics. Because of the profit-mentality of slavery, both “sides,” North and South, were inextricably bound up in the tradition and institution of slavery, whether directly or indirectly. As historian Tom Colarco has put it, “The Underground Railroad is primarily a story of good Samaritans helping their fellow brothers and sisters along various routes to freedom. To say that it was merely the good guys (abolitionists) against the bad guys (slave owners), however, is oversimplifying a very complex situation.”¹⁸

The Underground Railroad was an intricate network of escape routes, safe houses, coded language, and secret information, stretching from Mexico north to Canada.¹⁹ Workers on the Underground Railroad could be any color or social status, Abolitionist, free, or fugitive, and they could provide a variety of services to the cause. This included sharing the location of secret

¹⁸ Tom Colarco, *Places of the Underground Railroad: A Geographical Guide* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), xix.

¹⁹ David Blight, *Passages to Freedom : the Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2006), 3. “The origin of the term ‘Underground Railroad’ has several versions. One story says that in 1831 a fugitive slave named Tice Davids escaped from Kentucky to safer ground in Ohio. When his master looked in vain for him in Ripley, just across the Ohio River, he is said to have commented, “he must have gone off on an underground railroad.”

meeting points, hosting fugitives, or by offering supplies. Please see Appendix B (page 104) for a glossary listing of common codes and phrases used during this era. The Underground Railroad system began as a grass roots humanitarian effort:

“The Underground Railroad started slowly at the local level, developing networks that expanded regionally, and eventually reached out across states and into Canada. Beginning with individualized efforts to aid fugitive slaves around the time of the American Revolution, it came to involve generations of some families....”²⁰

It was a nationwide affair and a polarizing political debate. More than that, it was a problem of humanity—of being human, and recognizing that humanity in others. This issue (not only slavery, but, more importantly, the profits of slavery) was a pivotal spark in igniting the Civil War.²¹

The Underground Railroad, a subversive humanitarian movement, was born as a response to the seeming perpetuity of slavery, offering enslaved workers the opportunity to escape the plantation and find a new life, free from shackles. Inevitably, this called for illegal action, placing those who tried to escape (and those who assisted them) in great danger. “Urban slaves,” or, those that had much more freedom by working for masters (or were hired out) in cities and towns, also sought escape on the Underground Railroad.

Although there were several famous figures of the Underground Railroad—Levi Coffin (1798-1897), Thomas Garrett (1789-1871), and Sojourner Truth (1797-1883)—perhaps the most notorious was Harriet Tubman (c. 1822-1913), the Grand Conductor. Tubman was a “fugitive, and a friend of the fugitive.”²² She is credited with having assisted over 300 escapees in their

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Colarco, *Places of the Underground Railroad*, xxv. Colarco has assembled a useful timeline of the Underground Railroad including dates, pivotal figures, and locations of the operation.

²² Hudson, *Encyclopedia of the Underground Railroad*, 220.

quest for freedom.²³ She was so clever that the rewards for her capture became staggering.²⁴ In the music of the Underground Railroad, she was referred to as “Moses.” In the book of Exodus we read that Moses lead the Israelites out of bondage and out of Egypt. Moses, then, was a fitting moniker for Harriet Tubman, who risked so much to deliver her people to freedom. One of the most effective tools of communication Tubman and other Underground Railroad workers used was coded messages.

Although the “language” of the Underground Railroad was also promulgated by word of mouth, print messages, and even in specially designed quilts hanging on the wash line to dry,²⁵ the primary vehicle of communication was music. Singing was tolerated on the plantations (and even encouraged), as slave masters considered it a method to increase productivity in their plantation workers, coordinating the rhythm of their physical work. Also, the music would keep the workers’ minds occupied, resulting in less chance of subversive complaining and plotting. Little did slave masters know that coded messages for escape were being exchanged right under their close supervision. Unbeknownst to the masters, words of these simple songs contained coded messages as signals for escape. Some songs contained longer phrases or even entire bodies of lyrics devoted toward that effort. The enslaved sang together, in community, to soothe and repair their battered spirit. The signal songs became the “fight songs” of the South, spreading a message of hope to all who had ears to hear its message.

²³ The exact number of fugitives that Harriet Tubman assisted is in debate. Blaine Hudson, in *Encyclopedia of the Underground Railroad* (p. 221), reports 300, but Catherine Clinton, “Slavery is War” from *Passages to Freedom* speculates that the number is open for debate, and lists numbers between 200-400. Due to the clandestine nature of the operation, it is difficult to confirm these numbers.

²⁴ Catherine Clinton. “Slavery is War,” in *Passages to Freedom*, ed. David Blight (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2006), 208. The reward for capturing Harriet Tubman was \$40,000, a staggering amount of money at that time.

²⁵ Jacqueline L.Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 48-50. This source contains several color photos of coded quilts that survive from the era.