

Audio file

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Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1 *Kimberly Inman, host*

What was the Underground Railroad and how did it operate within the Appalachian tri-state Region of Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia? Welcome to connecting classrooms, a podcast for educators and their students that brings experts at Shawnee State University directly to your classroom. I'm your host.

Kimberly Inman, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at SSU. In this series, you will hear from my colleagues who love to share their passion for teaching and research.

We seek to support teachers with supplemental resources for their lessons and to inspire their students to want to learn more.

In this episode, Networks of Flight Escape and Freedom: Exploring the History of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio, Kentucky, West Virginia Tri-state Region, we will meet Doctor Andrew Feight, Professor of American History and director of the Center for Public History at Shawnee State University.

Currently, Doctor Feight is also serving as the Director of Research and Outreach for the Appalachian Freedom Initiative, an Appalachian Regional Commission POWER Grant project that seeks to document and mark Underground Railroad historical sites in the tri-state region of Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

He and his collaborators will be shining a light on important historical events that happened right here in our region.

Now let's connect with Doctor Feight and learn about Networks of Flight, Escape and Freedom.

00:01:31 Speaker 2 *(Dr. Andrew Feight, presenting "Freedom and the River" during the Time Out for Me Inc. 2nd Annual Family Riverboat event aboard the Belle of Cincinnati, July 27, 2023.)*

I know that we've often heard of the Underground Railroad, and we're going to talk about the Underground Railroad, but one of the sort of distinctive aspects of the Underground Railroad here along the Ohio River was that you actually did have steamboats and steamboat captains. You had other members and workers on board the steamboats that helped freedom seekers get from Kentucky across the river right here to Portsmouth where they were then delivered to those who were working on the Underground Railroad. So that's that's part of the story we're going to be looking at tonight, really.

Every county along the river here, every town of any significance - there were Underground Railroad connections, particularly in the towns that had African American populations - where there was an African American community.

So that's one of the things that that, that I'll be emphasizing here is that the Underground Railroad was at its heart was an African American run movement, really the beginnings of the civil rights movement in

what becomes the United States. And yes, there were white residents of Ohio and Kentucky and other places that helped out.

Ultimately, it was an interracial operation. Sometimes whites working with African Americans, sometimes working alone.

But in cities like Portsmouth and cities like Ironton, Gallipolis. OK. You had African American communities there and that was the main hub for the Underground Railroad.

You know, Portsmouth is a growing river town in the 1840s. It's not yet connected to the actual railroad network, okay, so all the traffic really is coming along the river.

But imagine if you were an escaping Freedom Seeker, how do you get across the river? Right, so you know there are - there are all kinds of stories and people getting on the ferry and somehow getting across the river, maybe paying their way across, paying the ferryman to take them on. There's stories of people slipping into the water secretly and then holding on to the ferry from the water and then being taken across here to Portsmouth. And then, of course, as we'll see, there are stories of Freedom Seekers that got on board steamboats that then came to Portsmouth and then they would disembark just like we're going to disembark here after we get back from our little excursion.

They would disembark right here in Portsmouth and then they would quickly be taken by workers on the Underground Railroad and placed into different hiding places before being moved into the first station, which was about 7 or 8 miles north of Portsmouth at a place today known as Houston Hollow.

00:04:27 Speaker 2 *Dr. Andrew Feight*

A good place to start when thinking about the Underground Railroad is a definition. The National Park Service defines the Underground Railroad as resistance to enslavement through escape and flight, which includes freedom seekers and those who assisted them in their efforts to escape from enslavement.

By studying the Underground Railroad, we are studying the origins of the Civil War. We're looking at the abolition of slavery in the United States. We're looking at resistance ultimately to slavery and what many historians call the first civil rights movement.

Another key concept that I'd like to emphasize is that you can learn American History through studying local history. That American History happened here. American History continues to happen here. We need not travel to Maryland or to New York to learn about the history of slavery. We don't need to, you know, go to Philadelphia to learn about the abolition movement or the operations of the Underground Railroad. We can study this history right here in our own backyard.

And we can do that using the Scioto Historical projects mobile app and its website to study the history of the Underground Railroad.

So the Scioto Historical app and website which is being developed here at Shawnee State at the Center for Public History. It uses smartphone technology to explore the local history of Portsmouth, Scioto County and the surrounding region. With over 100 virtual story markers - virtual historical markers, you could say the project offers users curated historical tours which can be completed virtually on a computer or in a classroom, or on one's own smartphone or tablet.

The app can be used for walking and driving tours, including a walking tour of Underground Railroad history here in downtown Portsmouth OH.

So you can learn about the operations of the Underground Railroad by learning about the Freedom Seekers and the local Underground Railroad workers that help them escape and find freedom here in Ohio or further north in Canada.

00:07:06 Speaker 2 (*Dr. Andrew Feight, presenting "Freedom and the River" during the Time Out for Me Inc. 2nd Annual Family Riverboat event aboard the Belle of Cincinnati, July 27, 2023.*)

This is another story. I think that that, that can shed light on how the Underground Railroad actually operated in Portsmouth.

This is a story of a woman named Harriet from Greenup County, just across the river, from 1854. And what we know about Harriet comes from the advertisement that her enslaver put in a Portsmouth newspaper. OK? So this showed up in a Portsmouth newspaper - in the Portsmouth Daily Evening Tribune on the 10th of January 1854.

And it was placed by a woman named Hannah Warner. So Hannah Warner was a widow. She owned Harriet.

And so when Harriet ran away – escaped, she placed this ad offering a \$100 reward for the capture of Harriet. So it says, "Ran away from the subscriber on the Tuesday before New Year December the 27th, 1853, the Black woman named Harriet, aged about 19 years. She's about 5 feet 8 inches high. Tolerable dark. Speaks pretty quick and is quite smart and talkative. The above reward will be given for the return of said girl or a liberal reward for information that may lead to her recovery."

So when this appeared in the paper in Portsmouth, there was a Columbus newspaper editor who saw it, and so he wrote an editorial criticizing the Portsmouth editor for placing this ad. Like what kind of guy would profit off of this? This was what the editorial was saying.

The editor of the Portsmouth paper must have got it under his skin because he replied in his own editorial trying to defend himself for having put this ad in the paper. But one of the things that it did was it provided more information about Harriet and what her story was. And so if you look at this date here Tuesday before New Year December the 27th, that's the day after Christmas.

00:09:21 Speaker 3 (*Audience member*)

Two days.

00:09:24 Speaker 2 (*Dr. Andrew Feight, continues*)

Two days after Christmas. Thank you. OK so what we learned from the editorial is that Hannah Warner gave her a pass for the holidays so that Harriet could go to Portsmouth and visit. Family? Friends? We're not really sure. 2

But she was given a special pass, so she came to Portsmouth for New Year's and for the holidays and she never came back.

She never came back and she was never captured as far as we know, because there's no record of it, okay? So I like to believe that Harriet got away.

00:10:07 Speaker 2 (*Dr. Andrew Feight*)

So let's connect to local stories of resistance to slavery of the Underground Railroad, to that larger story of American History. So the Underground Railroad is considered part of the first civil rights movement which aimed to abolish slavery in the United States.

The Underground Railroad was interracial in its operations with whites and African Americans working together at times and at other times working separately.

In many Ohio communities, the local African American community was key to its successful operation.

Ultimately, the Underground Railroad involves the stories of Freedom Seekers and those who assisted them in their efforts to escape from enslavement.

By learning about their lives and their involvement in the Underground Railroad we can gain a more powerful and historically accurate understanding of how the Underground Railroad operated.

Teachers can use the Scioto Historical website in class, demonstrating the map interface and locating stories in our own backyard.

While also you can assign virtual visits to historical markers, these virtual historical markers as homework to be completed out of the classroom. And of course the app could also augment a traditional field trip experience where one takes one's class on an actual field trip to actual historical locations.

And this will allow the teacher and students to then access historical content on the Scioto Historical website or through the mobile app, thus having basically a virtual historical marker right there with you while visiting a physical location.

Here's the tour description from Scioto Historical for the Underground Railroad in Portsmouth, OH tour.

“Explore the hidden history of the Underground Railroad in Portsmouth OH. Located at the confluence of the Ohio and Scioto rivers and serving as a gateway to the Virginia Military Tract, lands reserved by Congress for Revolutionary War veterans from Virginia, Portsmouth emerged as the largest American settlement between Gallipolis and Cincinnati. With white settlers from Pennsylvania, New England mixed with white and black settlers from Kentucky and Virginia, Portsmouth developed a black community early in its history. And this community would be key to the operations of the city's Underground Railroad.”

The history reminds us that some of the most important chapters in American history happened here.

Portsmouth's story is the American story.

We did not travel far to uncover stories from the days of slavery.

When the Union of the States was threatened by secession. When pro-slavery and anti-abolition forces sought to silence their opposition by denying them a Free Press, blocking their right to peaceably assemble, and refusing to consider their congressional petitions that called for a redress of their grievances.

The region was home to a network of whites and blacks who served as railroad conductors and station masters, providing food and shelter and assistance, and transporting fugitive slaves who crossed the Ohio River and landed on the northern shore of America's Jordan.

So to learn more about Freedom Seekers who escaped from Kentucky, who crossed the Ohio River and found assistance in Scioto County by workers on the Underground Railroad – The Network to Freedom.

This history is right before us, right here in our backyard, and it's all explorable through the Scioto Historical project.

Scioto Historical is an educational mobile application and website that puts the history of Portsmouth, OH, and the surrounding Appalachian region in the palm of your hand.

Learn about American and local history through map based interactive multimedia presentations and experienced professional and curated historical tours on your laptop, tablet or on a screen in your classroom.

With its free mobile app Scioto Historical can guide you to historical locations and augment any walking or driving tour.

00:14:51 Speaker 1 (*Kimberly Inman*)

You've been listening to Connecting Classrooms brought to you by the College of Arts and Sciences at Shawnee State University for show notes and extended classroom activities related to this episode, please visit www.shawnee.edu/connecting.

For this episode, audio engineering was provided by T. R. Berry with technical support from Doctor Michael Barnhart.