



# UNSPOKEN

A STORY FROM THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

HENRY COLE

# Unspoken

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*Take a second look at the book and work with your group members to answer the questions below.*

What is the setting including the time period?

Did the runaway deliberately choose this farm for a reason? How do you know?

Who helps the runaway?

What is the significance of the final page?

*Be prepared to discuss and defend your answers to the class.*

# The Narrative of Henry Bibb

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*Read the excerpt from the Narrative of Henry Bibb. It has been modified for modern readers. Consider the questions below.*

What are the risks he faces by running away?

What is the opportunity cost of freedom? In other words what is he losing to gain freedom?

*Be prepared to discuss and defend your answers to the class.*

# Myths of the Underground Railroad

- **Myth 1: Most of the “workers” on the Underground Railroad were white abolitionists.**
- **Truth:** In fact, most people who helped escaping slaves were free blacks or escaped slaves. And even though the whites who helped runaways were abolitionists who wanted to end slavery, not all abolitionists supported the Underground Railroad. Many abolitionists, in fact, were against helping slaves escape. They did not believe in breaking the law and wanted to find a legal way to end slavery.
- **Myth 2: The first “stops” along the Underground Railroad were found in the South.**
- **Truth:** The Underground Railroad did not exist as an organization in the south. Slaves rarely received any help until they reached a free, Northern State. They had to reach freedom on their own, which they usually did by foot.
- **Myth 3: Many slaves escaped from the Deep South.**
- **Truth:** Because runaway slaves could not expect any help until they got to a free state, it was more difficult for slaves in the Deep South like Alabama and Louisiana to make it to freedom. Slaves in the Deep South had much further to go, and they had to do most of the traveling on foot. As a result, most slaves who successfully escaped were from states in the upper south like Kentucky and Virginia, where they had a better chance of making it to bordering free states like Ohio and receive help from members of the Underground Railroad.
- **Myth 4: There were distinct routes along the Underground Railroad that slaves followed.**
- **Truth:** The Underground Railroad was a loose network of houses and people, and slaves reached their destinations in different ways. If there had been one route that was used regularly, the slave catchers would have known about it and would have shut it down. There were likely almost as many routes as escaping slaves.
- **Myth 5: Most people in the North supported the Underground Railroad and welcomed runaway slaves into their states.**
- **Truth:** Only a small minority of people in the North worked on – and even supported – the Underground Railroad. In fact, many did not welcome fugitives into their states. In 1804, Ohio passed a law prohibiting runaway slaves from entering the state.
- **Myth 6: Most slaves knew of the term “Underground Railroad.”**
- **Truth:** Although slaves had been escaping since they were brought to the New World, the loose “network” of routes and safe houses began to emerge in the 19th century. And the term “Underground Railroad” was not coined until about 1840. But this term was used mostly in the North. Most slaves in the South would not have been familiar with the term.

- **Myth 7: Enslaved African Americans depended on others, like Harriet Tubman coming to their plantation, to help them make their escape.**
- **Truth:** Enslaved African Americans were not passive in their escapes. They planned and carried out their own escapes, usually alone.
- **Myth 8: Slaves made quilts that had specific symbols – or codes – that helped slaves escape. Slaves used the quilts since many of them were illiterate.**
- **Truth:** People in the 1800s, including slaves, made quilts. Sometimes these quilts had symbols in them, but they were not secret codes that helped runaway slaves. The story of the Secret Quilt Code began with a book called *Hidden in Plain View* published in 1999. Before then, there was no talk about a Secret Quilt Code. In all the interviews with freed slaves done in the 1930s, no one mentioned the Code, and since 1999, many historians have disputed the truth to the story..
- **Myth 9: Enslaved African Americans had many spirituals like “Follow the Drinking Gourd” that contained coded information that helped slaves escape.**
- **Truth:** While spirituals were passed orally from slave to slave, there is no evidence that the songs were used to help others escape. If a song had given slaves a route to follow to freedom, like the “Follow the Drinking Gourd” was supposed to have done, slave owners and bounty hunters could easily learn of it and promptly shut the route down. The truth is that the lyrics and the chorus were written by Lee Hays and first published in 1947 — well after the Civil War had ended.
- **Myth 10: A lantern in a window was a common sign used to identify a safe house along the Underground Railroad.**
- **Truth:** The famous stationmaster John Rankin used this secret “sign” to signal that it was safe to cross the Ohio River to his home. However, this was not a common signal. If it had been, the slave catchers would have quickly learned of it, and used it to identify safe houses.
- **Myth 11: A significant percentage of enslaved African Americans escaped on the Underground Railroad.**
- **Truth:** While the number is often debated, some believe that as many as 100,000 slaves escaped on the Underground Railroad between 1800 and 1865. However, this is only a tiny percentage of the slaves living in the South during this period. For example, in 1860, there were nearly four million slaves in the South. Additionally, the majority of slaves who attempted to escape were caught and returned to their owners.
- **Source:** [http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/bhistory/underground\\_railroad/myths.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/bhistory/underground_railroad/myths.htm)

# Narrative of Henry Bibb

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Henry Bibb was born into slavery, in Kentucky during the year of 1815. He made many failed attempts to escape slavery; yet, he still had the courage and perseverance to continue in his fight for freedom after every capture and punishment. His perseverance paid off when he made a successful and much anticipated escape to the northern states and then on to Canada with the help of the Underground Railroad. The following is an excerpt from his narrative in which he discussed one of his many escapes and the challenges he had to overcome.

**The following excerpt is adapted from *The Narrative of Henry Bibb***

*“In the fall or winter of 1837 I decided that I would escape if possible to Canada, for my Liberty. I started from that hour to make preparations for the dangerous task of breaking the chains that bound me as a slave. My preparation was to save a little money, perhaps not more than two dollars and fifty cents and a set of clothes which no one had seen me wear before.*

*On the twenty-fifth of December, 1837, it was time to put my plan into action. I had to bolt for Liberty or agree to die a slave. I confess that it was one of the hardest things I did in life to leave a loving wife who stood before me with dear little Francis in her arms, and with tears of sorrow in her eyes as she told me farewell. It required all my courage to suppress my feelings while leaving my little family.*

*Had my wife known that my intention at the time, I could not have got away. I had many reasons to run away and be free; and the voice of liberty was thundering in my soul, “Be free, oh, man! Be free!” I was struggling against my attachments to friends and family, and with my love for my home. These twined about my heart and were hard to break. I also feared being killed or captured and taken South to live out my days in hopelessness on some cotton or sugar plantation. But I had to count the cost, and I was prepared to make the sacrifice. The time for fulfilling my promise was here. I had to leave my friends and neighbors, wife and child, or consent to live and die a slave.*

*These kind friends gave me something to eat and started me on my way to Canada with directions to another friend on my way. This was the start of what was called the underground rail road to Canada. I walked with bold courage, trusting in the arm of God; guided by the unchangeable North Star by night, and inspired by the thought that I was fleeing from a land of slavery and oppression, saying goodbye to handcuffs, whips, thumb-screws and chains.”*

Source: [http://www.eiu.edu/eiutps/underground\\_railroad.php](http://www.eiu.edu/eiutps/underground_railroad.php)

# \$150 REWARD



**RANAWAY** from the subscriber, on the night of the 2d instant, a negro man, who calls himself *Henry May*, about 22 years old, 5 feet 6 or 8 inches high, ordinary color, rather chunky built, bushy head, and has it divided mostly on one side, and keeps it very nicely combed; has been raised in the house, and is a first rate dining-room servant, and was in a tavern in Louisville for 18 months. I expect he is now in Louisville trying to make his escape to a free state, (in all probability to Cincinnati, Ohio.) Perhaps he may try to get employment on a steamboat. He is a good cook, and is handy in any capacity as a house servant. Had on when he left, a dark cassinett coatee, and dark striped cassinett pantaloons, new--he had other clothing. I will give \$50 reward if taken in Louisville; 100 dollars if taken one hundred miles from Louisville in this State, and 150 dollars if taken out of this State, and delivered to me, or secured in any jail so that I can get him again.

WILLIAM BURKE.

Bardstowen, Ky., September 3d, 1838.

MAXEY, M'CLURE & CO.  
Marketstreet, Nashville. Ten.

## \$50 Reward.

**RANAWAY** from the undersigned on the night of the 7th July, last., a NEGRO WOMAN named PHERIBA, copper color, about 6 feet high, well formed, her apparel not recollected except a green sun-bonnet; full head of hair nearly straight. She has a husband living with Cyrus Hallum in Columbia. Said woman is about 22 years of age and very likely.



Also, a small girl named Nancy, about 10 or 11 years of age, spare make, likely, often smiles when spoken to. She was raised by Jno. W. Walker of this city. When they left they carried their bed and clothing.

I will give fifty dollars for the Negroes, or \$25 for either of them delivered to me, or to Williams & Glover, Nashville, Tennessee

LANGDON HARRISON,

Five miles south of Nashville.

Jy 18.

### **Assignment:**

Select one of the advertisements. Taking into account what you have learned about slavery and the Underground Railroad, create a short narrative for the person described. Your narrative should answer the following questions:

Why has this person chosen to run away?

What is he or she risking by running away?

What is the opportunity cost of running away? (What is he or she giving up by running away?)

How has he or she prepared to run away?

Your narrative should be: a minimum of 12 sentences

Written in 1<sup>st</sup> person ( I, we, me, my)

The authors of the two best narratives from each class will receive a pass for 20 extra credit points on a quiz.

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