

on their way to the next station, safe—at least temporarily—from further harassment.

Hiding Places

In the various stations along the way, agents of the Underground Railroad found ways of making their homes and businesses effective and clever hiding places for their illegal guests. Secret compartments were built in which slaves could stay for days, weeks, even months. Fake walls were installed. Holes were dug in the shafts of wells. Churches and abandoned buildings were converted to safe places where slaves were harbored.

Tunnels and other escape routes were used to move fugitives quickly but invisibly. One well-known Ohio abolitionist, Colonel William Hubbard, had a tunnel dug from his barn to the edge of nearby Lake Erie. Boat captains would wait there to usher run-aways across the lake and into Canada. In Underground Railroad mythology, this station was sometimes known as Mother Hubbard's Cupboard.

Sometimes even the peculiar way a house was built made it a surprisingly effective station. In Pennsdale, Pennsylvania, an abolitionist named Edward Morris owned the Bull's Tavern. It was also known as the House of Many Stairs because there were seven staircases in the two-story building. Secret panels at the top of each staircase hid the fugitives, who could quickly disappear behind them should slave hunters suddenly arrive at the tavern.

Like the actual railroads that were beginning to revolutionize American life and commerce, the Underground Railroad was an awe-inspiring product of energy, courage, ingenuity, creativity, finesse, and brute force. It, too, would transform the landscape of the United States, eventually making it a more fair and free country, one that more closely mirrored its stated ideals.