

a tree at the gate of a stationmaster's property. The chimney of a railroad station might be identified by the white bricks used in its construction. In the middle of the night, conductors who worked with Levi and Catharine Coffin would gently rap at their door to signal that fugitives had arrived. Passwords were often used to identify those who were friendly to the cause. A certain handshake between a conductor and a stationmaster would also be a signal that the other was to be trusted.

MOTHER HUBBARD'S CUPBOARD AND OTHER PLACES TO HIDE

In the various stations along the way, agents of the Underground Railroad found ways of making their homes and businesses effective and often clever hiding places for their illegal guests. Secret compartments were built where slaves could stay for days, weeks, and 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 and all 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 runaways 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



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Visitors to the Lewelling Quaker House Underground Railroad Museum in Salem, Iowa, can crawl into this slave hideaway hidden under the house's floorboards. (The handrails are not original.)

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.

Some of these hiding places can still be seen today. They are a physical reminder that, for many Americans, freedom came at great risk. Not only were escaping slaves subject to recapture and punishment, but those agents of the Underground Railroad who helped them along the way were putting a lot on the line. White agents could be fined or put in jail for aiding and abetting. Black agents in the North risked being caught and sold into slavery despite their freedom. And those in the South risked their lives.