

# **The End of the Road: Canada as Refuge for U.S. Slaves**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Slavery in the American colonies began during the 1600's. Most blacks worked on plantations and were exposed to hard labor, harsh discipline, and isolation. To defend the institution of slavery, Southerners rationalized that the South's economy depended on the labor provided by slavery. Moreover, they argued that slavery was positive because slave masters met the material needs of their slaves. Defenders of this institution manipulated scientific arguments and Biblical scripture to show that slavery was an acceptable practice. Other proponents suggested that the slaves were content in bondage. The array of slave rebellions contradicts this notion. The vibrancy of the Underground Railroad also contradicts the idea that slaves were content in their enslavement. The Underground Railroad, a clandestine system of trails and safe houses, enabled an estimated 100,000 slaves from 1810-1850 to escape the South to slave-free northern states and Canada. However, as many among the northern U.S. population were averse to assisting escaped slaves, Canada provided the most secure safe-haven in North America for black fugitives. In Canada, slavery was denounced in 1793 and was formally abolished in 1834. This paper will examine the role of Canada as a safe-haven for escaped slaves from the U.S. It will deconstruct three territorial perspectives on the institution of slavery: Southern U.S., Northern U.S., and Canadian. This historical examination will expose the foundation of a North American paradox: how neighboring regions have been fundamentally different in their ideologies and perspectives on human rights.

## **The North American Paradox**

I don't want anything of *your* country, except to be let alone, -- to go peaceably out of it; and when I get to Canada, where the laws will own me and protect me, *that* shall be my country, and its laws I will obey.  
--*Uncle Tom 's Cabin*

Canadian civility has been historically contrasted by American brutishness. The past can be seen in the present. Canada's participation as the "end of the road" for fugitives escaping slavery from its southern neighbor speaks to an admirable Canadian mindset. The U.S.'s historical posture of promoting liberty and democracy while practicing the opposite is a part of the American story. The ostensible dichotomy between the Canadian mindset and the American mindset, however, is oversimplified. Canadians were brutish in their treatment of their First Nations population but have evolved into a progressive and likeable nation. The U.S. has seemingly been stunted in its evolution and progressiveness in its treatment of the "other". Irrespective of the historical image of the Ugly American there has always been a substantial population of Americans who have shared a likeminded civility of the Canadians.

America has always consisted of those who have fully embraced the noble principles of the Constitution and those who have not. Staunch dichotomies have always existed in American society: abolitionists vs. non-abolitionists, segregationists vs. integrationists, hawks vs. doves.

The foundation of American society was built on contradictions. The founders of the American Democracy were great men with extraordinary vision but were also flawed and contradictory. In 1787, while outlining a new constitution that espoused egalitarian principles of justice and equity, many founding fathers owned slaves. There were those

delegates at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, however, who were opposed to sanctioning “Negro slavery” in the Constitution. They felt that officially sanctioning slavery contradicted the noble spirit of the Declaration of Independence. Writer R.C. Smedley states the *Declaration of Independence*, “inspired, encouraged and supported them during their long and arduous struggle for liberty--‘that all men were created equal; that they were endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable right; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’”(Smedley, 1968, p.25).

Those who were opposed to slavery felt that this ignoble institution was

...inconsistent with the principles of free government they were about to establish, to hold any class of people in a bondage more oppressive, more degrading, and more tyrannical than that from which they had just emancipated themselves through the trials, vicissitudes and privations of a seven years’ war (Smedley, 1968, p. 26).

After much passionate discourse and fiery debate, those who defended the institution of slavery and those who opposed it agreed to the official sanctioning of the practice. Beyond the sanctioning of slavery, delegates at the Constitutional Convention, with resistance from the northern delegates, agreed that a slave would count as 3/5ths of a person in the context of representation in the lower house in the national legislature. This pattern of the Beautiful American compromising or caving to the draconian wishes of the Ugly American is an integral part of the American story.

### **Slavery & Abolitionism**

"I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears,

no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from his bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood clotted cowskin" (Douglass, p.28).

Large numbers of slaves did not begin arriving in the American colonies until the latter part of the seventeenth century. Slavery flourished in the southern colonies. Unlike the North, the Southern states depended on slave labor to cultivate cotton, tobacco, and other valuable crops.

We cannot forget that America was built on Africa. From being a mere stopping place between Europe and Asia or a chance treasure house of gold, America became through African labor the center of the sugar empire and the cotton kingdom and an integral part of the world industry which caused the industrial revolution and the reign of capitalism (W.E.B. DuBois in Meltzer, 1993, p.127).

By 1860, the slave states of the United States had about four million slaves. During this period, slaves accounted for approximately one-third of the South's population. As Baron states, approximately one-fourth of whites either owned slaves or were of families that owned them. About 45,000 planters owned over half the slaves. These planters exerted significant influence over the political and economic landscape in the southern states (Baron, 1979, p.416).

Slavery, on every dimension, was dehumanizing. Most slaves worked under harsh conditions. Lurking over their daily lives was the threat of arbitrary physical punishment. Slaves could not learn to read. Marriages were not legal. Slaves were forced

to endure the sale and separation of family members and loved ones. As famed historian John Hope Franklin states, “Most slaves were sold at one time or another during their lifetime, and often it was when they were young and would bring the highest price. Seldom were families sold together in units of father, mother, and children. The separation of family members was commonplace after 1820” (Franklin, 2007, p.30).

To defend the institution of slavery, Southerners rationalized that slave labor was necessary to fuel their economy. Moreover, many in the South argued that slavery was a positive experience for the slaves because it provided for their basic material needs such as food and shelter. One Southerner expressed the thoughts of many when he stated, “The slaves are well fed, well clad, have plenty of fuel, and are happy. They have no dread of the future—no fear of want.” Finally, defenders of this institution manipulated scientific arguments and Biblical scripture to show that slavery was an acceptable practice (Bragdon, McCutchen, and Ritchie, 1994, p.431).

Based on the “slaves are happy and well-treated” argument there should never have been a vibrant Underground Railroad, which enabled tens of thousands of slaves to escape from happiness. It was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s classic book, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that exposed the cruelty of slavery for all Americans to see. The publication of this book had a significant impact on the galvanization of the abolitionist movement in the U.S. Stowe candidly depicts the gruesome inhumanity of slavery through the daily life of characters Mr. Legree, Uncle Tom, Quimbo, and Sambo.

Mr. Legree, the white overseer, is depraved. On a whim, he tortures his slaves physically and verbally. He overworks them. He pits them against each other to create chaos and distrust. He emasculates the men by beating them and making them totally

submissive. He rapes the slave women at will. Stowe uses Mr. Legree to embody the evil of slavery. She vividly puts us in the mind and body of the slave when she writes,

But to live, -- to wear on, day after day, of mean, bitter, low, harassing servitude, every nerve dampened and depressed, every power of feeling gradually smothered, -- this long and wasting heart-martyrdom, this slow, daily bleeding away of the inward life, drop by drop, hour after hour, -- this is the true searching test of what there may be in man or woman (p.552).

The slave hymnal that was composed by “Uncle Tom” was sung by thousands of departing slaves from their loved ones gives us a glimpse into how slaves persevered despite dreadful conditions.

My brethren, fare ye well,  
I do you now tell,  
I'm sorry to leave you,  
I love you well.

I shortly must go,  
And where I don't know;  
Wherever I'm stationed  
The trumpet I'll blow.

Strange people I'll find;  
I hope they'll prove kind;  
Neither places nor faces  
Shall alter my mind.

Wherever I'll be,  
I'll still pray for thee;  
And you, my dear brethren  
Do the same for poor me

(Winks, 1969, p.175).

What is striking about these words is the humanity that is embraced in the face of appalling inhumanity.

People who participated in the cause of freeing slaves and stopping the institution of slavery were called abolitionist. There were abolitionist associations in the U.S. at the founding of the nation. As early as 1786, *The Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society* fought to end the practice of slavery. This group's members included notables such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Marquis de LaFayette. Later, there would be more active abolitionists such as John Brown, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Still, Thaddeus Stevens, Alan Pinkerton, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Henry David Thoreau. These courageous freedom fighters exposed the glaring contradictions regarding America's noble principles and ignoble practices

(<http://education.ucdavis.edu/NEW/STC/lesson/socstud/railroad/Abolit.htm>).

By the mid-1800s there were many prominent anti-slavery societies in the U.S. north. One of the most prominent antislavery associations was founded in 1833 in New York City, the American Anti-slavery Society. After the association was created it immediately published a "Declaration of Sentiment," which declared, "The right to enjoy liberty is inalienable. To invade it is to usurp the prerogative of Jehovah. Every man has a right to his own body, to the products of his own labor, to the protection of law, and to the common advantages of society" (Austin, 1969, p.54). Indeed, it was the commitment of people in these types of associations that provided the philosophical justification for the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad was an informal network of white abolitionists, sympathetic Natives, and free blacks that secured safe and clandestine travel routes for escaping slaves that primarily extended from the South to the North. There were also

outlets in Mexico and California. Scholars state that 40 percent of slaves crossed the Ohio River from the South, which made Ohio one of the most traveled states for Underground Railroad routes (Carter, 2005, p.23).

Passages about the secretive trails used by abolitionists guiding slave fugitives to freedom first appeared in writing during the 1840s. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 publicity about the mysterious route became more frequent. The Underground Railroad consisted of secret safe houses called “stations” that were peppered throughout the U.S. Persons who were willing to hide slaves put ads in the abolitionist press (Gara, 1961, p.143). The Underground Railroad was remarkable in its cryptic communication process.

<b>RUN AWAY SLAVE ADS</b>
<p>\$300 REWARD.—RAN AWAY from the subscriber on Saturday, the 30<sup>th</sup> of August, 1856, my SERVANT WOMAN, named EMELINE CHAPMAN, about 25 years of age; quite dark, slender built, speaks short, and stammers some; with two children, one a female about two and a half years old; the other a male, seven or eight months old, bright color. I will give the above reward if they are delivered to me in Washington. --Mrs. Emily Thompson, Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C.</p>
<p>\$200 REWARD.—Ran away from the service of the Rev. J.P. McGuiness Episcopal High School, Fairfax county, Va., on Saturday, 10<sup>th</sup> inst., Nero Man, Oscar Payne, aged 30 years, 5 feet 4 inches in height square built, manila color, thick, bushy suit of hair, round, full face, and when spoken to have a pleasant manner—clothes not recollected. I will give \$200 for his recovery if taken out of the State, or \$150 if taken in the State, and secured that I can get him. --T.D. Fendall</p>
<p>From William Still's <i>Underground Railroad</i></p>

Frederick Douglass, the eloquent and tireless advocate of social justice, spent his entire adult life fighting to abolish slavery. He was significantly influence by the writings and activism of the great abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass subscribed to Garrison's provocative weekly news journal, *The Liberator*. Garrison,

along with Wendell Phillips, wrote supporting prefaces to Douglass's autobiographical also spoke highly of Douglass in *The Liberator* and introduced his autobiographical narrative in his journal. After the publication of his narrative, Douglass continued his antislavery campaign by publishing the weekly *North Star* (Colaiaco, 2006, p.16; Andrews, 1996, p. 9).

There were those who eloquently advocated the abolition of slavery in their speeches and those who were on the front lines actually helping slaves to escape. Each of these efforts was necessary in order to raise the consciousness of the issue and to ultimately dismantle the institution.

### **The American-Canadian Spirit of John Brown**

Of all the courageous abolitionists John Brown was the most controversial. He embodied the fiery aggressiveness of the American and the fair-mindedness of the Canadian. The American-Canadian spirit is evident in Brown's legacy. Unlike many Northern abolitionists who believed in the non-violent protest of slavery, Brown advocated armed insurrection as a strategy to abolish slavery. Brown was notorious for capturing and imprisoning whites while he freed slaves. While spending time at the home of Frederick Douglass, Brown wrote his "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States." The preamble of Brown's constitution begins, "Whereas, slavery throughout its entire existence in the United States, is none other than the most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war of one portion of its citizens upon another portion..."(Reynolds, 2006, p.251).

The following account of Brown's attempt to take slave fugitives to Canada gives us a clear description of Brown's legend:

While pursuing his journey through the northern part of Kansas, he was menaced with an attack from a party of Missourians, of about three times his own number. After retreating from them a day or two, he came to a halt, took four of them prisoners, and put the rest to flight. The prisoners were lectured soundly on the evil of their ways, and then dismissed, minus their arms and horses. No other interruption was met with on the way to Canada De Witt, 1859, p.13).

Brown's aggressive attempt to liberate slaves at Harper's Ferry, Virginia is of historical importance. Brown's idea was to start a guerilla movement from the hills of Virginia. He wanted make armed attacks against slave owners so deadly that they would be compelled to abolish slavery. He trained insurgents in Iowa and recruited more Harper's Ferry raid participants from an antislavery convention that he organized in Chatham, Ontario, Canada (Reynolds, 2006, p.258).

The Canadian Negroes, for instance, were men who knew what slavery meant. They had suffered its degradation, its repression and its still more fatal license. They knew the slave system. They had been slaves. They had risked life to help loved ones to escape its far-reaching tentacle. Their little homes were clustering about—they had their churches, lodges, social gatherings, and newspaper (Gates, 2007, p.149).

Brown recruited the ex-slaves in Canada for his insurgency. These former slaves had risked their lives escaping and helping their family members escape. Brown wanted these slaves to put their lives on the line once more for his raid. Although the majority of these Canadian former slaves said no to Brown there were those who walked away from their relatively stable lifestyle in Canada to join Brown. "Yet despite all this and despite the terrible training of slavery in cowardice, submission and fatality; the

systematic elimination, by death and cruelty, of strength and self-respect and bravery, there were in Canada and in the United States scores of Negroes ready for the sacrifice” (Gates, 2007, p.149).

Brown tried to recruit Frederick Douglass for his Harper’s Ferry raid. Douglass, who wrote so passionately about the injustices of slavery in his narrative, did not team with Brown in Harper’s Ferry. He lauded Brown but criticized the raid. Some wondered why? “Because, first, he was of an entirely different cast of temperament and mind; and because secondly, he knew, as only a Negro slave can know, the tremendous might and organization of slave power.” Douglass felt that only way slavery would be dislodged was to appeal to the national conscious of the people” (Gates, 2007, p.148).

Some historians suggest that Brown’s uprising made the Civil War inevitable. As writer De Witt explains, “The madness of the attempt, the boldness—amounting to heroism—of the handful of men who were concerned in the movement, and especially the romantic history and personal character of the chief actor, have awakened in the public mind an ardent desire to know more of the man and his intentions” (1859, p.1). Brown’s intentions were clear. He wanted to end the institution of slavery by any means necessary. Although he was charged with treason and hanged for this offense millions of Americans viewed his actions as heroic.

Author Benjamin Quarles points out the distinction between John Brown and other white abolitionist. Whereas other white abolitionist would preach antislavery rhetoric and equality in theory in their personal lives they did not see blacks as equals and did not desire to be in contact with them. As Quarles states, “...despite their high principled hostility to slavery, anything smacking of social equality with black was

distasteful and painful...”(p.ix). Literary accounts going as far back as 1849 document Brown’s treatment of blacks at the supper table with surprising kindness and equality. Brown welcomed his black dinner guests to sit at the “long” table and introduced them with the prefixes of Mr. and Mrs. with their last names (p.ix). “Brown was a different mold. To him the color of a man’s skin was no measure of his worth. Whites were not innately superior, blacks innately inferior. By the time he reached manhood Brown has divested himself of color prejudice, if indeed he had ever harbored any (p.ix).

The title of David S. Reynolds’ book summarizes John Brown’s historical impact in America: *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*” (2006). Some 147 years prior to the publication of Reynolds’ book, writer Robert De Witt characterizes Brown by stating, “He has elements of character which, under circumstances favorable to their proper development and right direction, would have made him one of the great men in the world. Napoleon himself had no more blind and trusting confidence in his own destiny and resources; his iron will and unbending purpose was equal to any man living or dead” (1859, p.13).

### **Canada as the Promised Land**

In Canada, slavery was denounced in 1793 and was formally abolished in 1834.

Some 75,000 black lived in British-Governed Canada West, most of them ex-slaves who had fled there to enjoy their freedom. By all accounts, their resettlement was success. A large majority of the blacks who settled their, especially Toronto, Buxton, and Chatham, led productive lives. They established schools and churches. They entered trades and also became doctors, lawyers, ministers, and business people (Reynolds, 2006, p.259).

John Brown's beloved comrade, Harriet Tubman "Moses", was the most important person in the Underground Railroad. Tubman was born into slavery but later escaped. She was rooted in Christianity and never wavered from her strong her faith in God. As a slave it was the story of the exodus of the Children of Israel being held captive in a foreign land that inspired Tubman and other black slaves to escape. As writer Sarah Bradford states, "Already in her mind her people were the Israelites in the land of Egypt, while far away to the north somewhere, was the land of Canaan" (1961, p. 26).

Canada was the biblical Canaan. When slaves were forbidden from talking, song became the primary form of communication "...their communication was often made by singing and the words of their familiar hymns, telling of the heavenly journey and the land of Canaan..." (Bradford, 1961, p.27).

Go down Moses! Way down in Egypt land!  
Tell ol' Pharoah let my people go!

After escaping from slavery, Tubman is said to have led nineteen missions back to the Upper South and freed more than three hundred slaves using the Underground Railroad to eventually to get the fugitives to Canada (Rodriguez, 2007, p.52). She helped John Brown recruit people for his raid on Harper's Ferry. There were plenty rewards for Tubman but authorities could not identify her. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law had a widespread impact on escaping slaves. Tubman responded to this law by guiding slaves to Canada. Just as Tubman was the Moses of her time Canada was considered the "Promised Land."

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 required those in free states to return slave fugitives to their masters. This law was based on Article IV, Section 2, of the U.S. Constitution, which provided the legal authority for the return of fugitive slaves.

Southerners complained that this law was not being enforced. Consequently, a stronger Fugitive Slave Law was passed in 1850, which flared already heated tensions between the antislavery North and proslavery South. The Southerners felt there was a constitutional obligation to return fugitive slaves back to their rightful owners. Northerners felt the Act was degrading and contradictory to the egalitarian spirit of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence (Rodriguez, 2007, p. 301). The stringency of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made the desire for runaway slaves to escape to Canada more intense. It is this law that uniquely made Canada the “Promised Land” for fugitives

The black slave preachers preached sermons about the Old Testament in the Bible—about the “other side” of the Jordan River represented the “Promised Land”—the land of milk and honey, a place where the wicked shall cease from troubling and the weary shall be at rest.”

Canada represented the “Promised Land” that many black slaves had learned about through Biblical teachings. Canada, like the *Promised Land* of the Bible, was an idealized place that was remote and heavenly. Canada, however, was real. Indeed, it was a reachable place that represented the *Promised Land* on “this side” of the Jordan River.

Slaves contrasted the idealized heavenly nature of Canada with the hellish nature of their plight in America. Slaves internalized the hell versus heaven dichotomy. Not only does Stowe paint a picture of the horrors of slavery in America she describes Canada as a special place of liberation and freedom in the slave imagination. There are many instances in which Stowe’s characters give us a sense of the importance of Canada in the slave imagination.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Canada as the Promised Land in Uncle Tom’s Cabin</b></p>
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"Going, George! Going where?" "To Canada," said he, straightening himself up; and when I'm there, I'll buy you; that's all the hope that's left us" (p.64).

Tell him how I went, and why I went; and tell him I'm going to try and find Canada (p.91).

And where do you mean to go, my poor woman?" said Mrs. Bird. "To Canada, if I only knew where that was. Is it very far off, is Canada?" said she, looking up, with a simple, confiding air, to Mrs. Bird's face. "Poor thing!" said Mrs. Bird, involuntarily. "Is 't a very great way off, think?" said the woman, earnestly (p.151).

"And when we get to Canada," said Eliza, "I can help you. I can do dress-making very well; and I understand fine washing and ironing; and between us we can find something to live on" (p.285).

"But yet we are not quite out of danger," said Eliza; "we are not yet in Canada" (p.285).

"What does make you so sober?" said Eliza, kneeling on one knee, and laying her hand on his. "We are only within twenty-four hours of Canada, they say. Only a day and a night on the lake, and then -- oh, then!" (p.545)

### **The North American Mindsets**

The proslavery Southerners are the progenitors of the Ugly American. They were devoid of sensitivity and humaneness. In rationalizing their superiority they justified the institution of slavery and the subhuman treatment of slaves. Embracing a twisted morality the Ugly American has always seen evil as goodness and wrong as right—always turning away from the truth. The truth always sounds cantankerous and feels cold to those without warmth. The horrors of slavery, not only highlight a troubling episode in American history, but reflects a troubling American mindset that has embraced by a significant fraction of the U.S. population.

The abolitionists from the North were noblesse oblige, which is the belief that people that are born privileged have a responsibility to help those that are underprivileged. Scholars would agree that many Northerners supported the egalitarian

principles of the Constitution but did not see blacks as equals. Although many in the North opposed slavery there was still widespread racial discrimination in the North during the 1800s. Nevertheless, many Northerners (Beautiful Americans) fiercely fought to dismantle the institution of slavery. Their embrace of the Underground Railroad enabled an estimated 100,000 slaves from 1810-1850 to escape the South to slave-free northern states and Canada.

Canada provided the most secure safe-haven in North America for black fugitives. John Brown connected with the Canadian mindset. He felt so strongly about the goodness of the Canadian that he recruited there and used it as a strategic base to free U.S. slaves.

During the Harper's Ferry raid episode, Brown cultivated a relationship with the heroic and like-minded Canadian Dr. Alexander Ross. Ross, an Ontario-born physician and natural scientist, turned vehemently against the institution of slavery after reading Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1852. Traveling as an ornithologist, Ross went to the South to arm and free slaves. He directed hundreds of slaves to the Underground Railroad and to freedom. Although largely forgotten in history, Ross was heralded and given distinction by many of the prominent abolitionists of the day including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Wendell Phillips, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Phillips told Ross, "No higher exhibition of heroism or chivalry was ever displayed, than by in your humane and daring raids into the slaves states, to let the oppressed go free. Emerson stated, "My brave Canadian knight is not only the deliverer of the slaves, but a lover of flowers, birds and old English poetry" (Reynolds, 2006, p.257). Indeed, the essence of the Canadian is captured in Emerson's description of Ross.

Harriet Tubman connected with Canada because the country embraced her mission. “Canaan” enabled Tubman to liberate her people. Abolitionists saw in Canada their dreams of America. Fugitive slaves saw in Canada, “The Promised Land”—a place of warmth, humanity, equality, and justice. Canada allowed 75,000 former U.S. slaves to freely settle in its territory during the 1800s. Canada has ultimately been a place of refuge for those escaping persecution because it has consistently been on the right side of history.

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