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### STEPS TO FREEDOM

Uncover America's past when you visit these Underground Railroad sites  
along the Ohio River.

By Kate Harold

The Ohio River harbors untold number of secrets from the days of the Underground Railroad. Some will remain undisclosed forever, washed away with the swirling waters into the Mississippi. Others are exposed in these sites that dot the river starting in Cincinnati and heading along Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia's borders.

Whether you explore one of these spots or several, visiting in person provides a perspective that can't be found in books. With the Civil War's 150-year anniversary upon us, it's the perfect time to take in these pieces of America's history.

Many sites are run by volunteer staff and have limited hours, though several open outside regular hours by appointment. Be sure to call before visiting.

Sitting atop one of Cincinnati's many hills just a short distance from downtown is the ***Harriet Beecher Stowe House***. Stowe lived here from 1832 to 1850 as a young wife and mother, before moving to the East Coast where she would later write her groundbreaking anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Guided tours tell the story of the Beecher-Stowe family and the role they played in the abolitionist movement.

Three miles away, perched right on the riverfront, is the ***National Underground Railroad Freedom Center***. This museum celebrates those in our history who fought slavery and sought freedom, while also addressing forms of modern-day slavery, including human trafficking. Underground Railroad exhibits include a timeline following the events leading up to the Civil War and an actual slave pen found on a nearby Mason County, Kentucky, farm. A film titled "Brothers of the Borderland," narrated by Oprah Winfrey, follows the lives of two men who were integral to the Underground Railroad, John Rankin and John P. Parker, whose homes can be visited in Ripley, Ohio.

A drive about an hour east along the Ohio River takes you to Ripley. This town gained such a strong anti-slavery reputation in the early 1800s that Confederate officers called it an "abolitionist hellhole," according to Betty Campbell, site manager for the ***Rankin House***. This museum was once the home of John Rankin, a Presbyterian minister and active abolitionist.

The Underground Railroad, a secret network of passages to freedom in the northern states and Canada, consisted of a code all its own. "Conductors" moved slaves to the next safe haven, slaves were "passengers," and "stations" were the safe houses and hiding places where slaves sought cover on their journeys. Rankin was a conductor.

Campbell says his autobiography and other family records indicate that he helped at least 2,000 slaves move through his station.

The home contains period furnishings and a few of Rankin's belongings. It overlooks the river with steps leading from the riverbank to the home's door. Passengers were hidden in the attic and cellar, while a light in the front window served as a beacon to escaped slaves.

Five minutes away is the ***John P. Parker House***. Parker was a former slave, sold and separated from his mother at age 8, who eventually bought his freedom. He worked closely with Rankin to help escaped slaves make their way north. A tour of the house offers paintings and a display showing events from Parker's life — he was an iron foundry worker by day and an Underground Railroad conductor by night — as well as artifacts and examples of his foundry work. Both the Rankin House and Parker House are National Historic Landmarks.

Just south across the river, the town of Maysville, Kentucky, offers an ***Underground Railroad Tour*** in its Old Washington historic neighborhood. The walking tour, typically led by a costumed tour guide, takes visitors to points of interest related to the anti-slavery movement, including the ***Harriet Beecher Stowe Slavery to Freedom Museum***, located in a former residence.

“Newspaper reports show that Stowe came and visited the family who lived here and spent the night in the home,” says tourism director Duff Giffen. While there, Stowe witnessed a slave auction in town on the courthouse lawn, also a tour stop. Giffen has sources showing that Stowe called upon that experience when she wrote about a slave auction in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Add-ons to the regular tour include the ***National***

***Underground Railroad Museum*** located in the Bierbower House in Maysville, as well as the aforementioned Ripley homes.

Continuing two hours east and across the river into Ceredo, West Virginia, brings you to the ***Z.D. Ramsdell House***, dating to 1858. Ceredo was founded in 1857 to show that a town could prosper without slave labor. The Ramsdells were Quakers and abolitionists, and reportedly hid slaves in this home's cellar. Here you'll find historic documents, furnishings in keeping with the time of the Civil War and period artifacts.

Another two hours northeast near Marietta, Ohio, is ***Belpre Farmer's Castle Museum Education Center***, which offers an Underground Railroad exhibit featuring research by historian Henry R. Burke. "The display also includes photos and artifacts from that period, including a set of leg irons," says Nancy Sams, president of the Belpre Historical Society.

To gain a fuller perspective of life in the 1800s, round out your trip with a visit to ***Henderson Hall***, a former slave-owning plantation just outside of Williamstown, West Virginia. While this Victorian-era Italianate mansion was not part of the Underground Railroad, it illustrates how slave labor was used to maintain large plantations. Family records show paperwork related to the keeping and selling of slaves, and receipts for bounty hunters hired to return escaped slaves. Many of the family's original possessions remain in the home's 29 rooms, which can be viewed during a guided tour.

### **When You Go...**

For more information, visit these websites.

OHIO

**Harriet Beecher Stowe House**

stowehousecincy.org

**National Underground Railroad Freedom Center**

freedomcenter.org

**The Rankin House**

ohiohistory.org

**John P. Parker House**

johnparkerhouse.org

**Farmer's Castle Museum Education Center**

belprehistory.com

KENTUCKY

**Washington Underground Railroad Tours**

cityofmaysville.com

**Harriet Beecher Stowe Slavery To Freedom Museum**

cityofmaysville.com

**National Underground Railroad Museum/Bierbower House**

bierbower.org

WEST VIRGINIA

**The Z. D. Ramsdell Historic House**

townofceredo.net

**Henderson Hall**

304/485-5446

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