

# Schoolbooks Teach Falsehoods and Feel-Good Myths About the Underground Railroad and Harriet Tubman

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## Fake "facts" and bogus maps in American-history texts



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Among all the American legends that are touted as history in schoolbooks, none is promoted more extravagantly than the story of the Underground Railroad. In textbook after textbook, students read that, in the time before the Civil War, abolitionists established an extensive network of secret routes and hideouts for conducting fugitive slaves to freedom; and in text after text, students find elaborate descriptions of this network and of some of the people who allegedly were associated with it. Unfortunately for the students, very few of the "facts" that appear in schoolbook accounts of the Underground Railroad have any historical foundation, and most of the "facts" are demonstrably false.

I recently have analyzed the material about the Underground Railroad in five so-called history textbooks that are being used in American schools, and I have found that all five tell the same tale -- a mess of feel-good myths masquerading as historical information. These myths, ranging from imaginary conceptions of the Railroad itself to patently fictitious claims about the exploits of Harriet Tubman, are delivered to students in sentences, paragraphs and illustrations that often are interchangeable from book to book. It seems that all the writers have tried to imitate one mythic model while diligently ignoring real history.

The texts that I have inspected are *History of a Free Nation* (1998; published by Glencoe/McGraw-Hill), *The American Nation* (2000; Prentice Hall), *America: Pathways to the Present* (2000; Prentice Hall); *America's Past and Promise* (1998; McDougal Littell); and *The American Journey* (1998; Glencoe/McGraw-Hill). The first three are high-school books, the others are middle-school books.

All of these texts give students the false impression that the Underground Railroad was a vast, formal system of escape routes, secret signs and safe houses by which fugitive slaves could travel to destinations where slavery no longer existed -- and four of the books contain maps that purport to show this system's trunk lines and branches. *The American Journey* has two such maps; *Free Nation* and *Pathways* and *Past and Promise* have one map apiece. All the maps are ludicrous. They convey much misinformation, and some of them are so detailed that they resemble diagrams of today's interstate highway system.

The map in *Past and Promise* is unusually foolish. It shows escape routes originating in the Deep South -- in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina -- and running all the way through the Upper South and into the free states and Canada. Amazingly, the same map shows a route running from southern Georgia into Florida, where it splits into three branches. One of the branches is labeled "To Bahamas." No doubt the slaves who followed that branch used submarines to complete their journeys. The Underground Railroad evidently was an Underwater Railroad as well.

The map in *Pathways* affirms that slaves in the South used the Underground Railroad to travel to Florida,

and an inset on the *Pathways* map declares that "Seminoles in Florida offered safe havens for escaped slaves." The Seminoles also appear in material that accompanies the map in *Past and Promise*, where students read that "Florida's Seminole Indians welcomed escaped slaves." Neither *Pathways* nor *Past and Promise* tells that the Seminoles themselves practiced slavery and owned slaves.

The notion that the Underground Railroad had routes which ran throughout the South, and which were manned by kindly Southern abolitionists, is a fiction. To the extent that the Underground Railroad operated at all, it operated in the free states of the North. It was a hazy, informal alliance of Northern abolitionists, many of them free blacks. It was established to assist fugitive slaves who, by their own efforts and without any help from friendly Southerners, had reached free territory. To the extent that the Underground Railroad had any practical importance, it acquired its significance after the adoption of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 -- and by 1850 the population of abolitionists in the South was inconsequentially small. Southern abolitionism had never been strong, and it had practically ceased to exist after 1831, when slaves led by Nat Turner staged a short-lived but bloody rebellion.

Fugitive slaves who went northward typically tried to reach free territory by crossing the Ohio River and entering Ohio or Indiana or Illinois, or by crossing the borders that separated the slave states of Delaware and Maryland from the free state of Pennsylvania. If they succeeded, they then might receive aid from agents of the Underground Railroad. These agents hid the fugitives from professional slave-catchers and local policemen, and they shuttled the fugitives farther northward to destinations (in the free states or in Canada) that offered greater safety from capture.

## "President" Coffin

In three of the texts that I have read -- *The American Nation* and *The American Journey* and *Free Nation* -- students find interchangeable reproductions of a romantic painting in which runaway slaves are arriving at a "station" on the Railroad. *The American Nation* and *Free Nation* tell nothing whatever about the painting's origin. *The American Journey* identifies the painting as "*The Underground Railroad* by Charles T. Weber [sic]" and says that it dates from the "1850s." In fact, *The Underground Railroad* is one of four pictures that were painted by the American artist Charles T. Webber (not "Weber") for exhibition in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition [[see note 1, below](#)]. *The Underground Railroad* was intended to commemorate the hiding and shuttling of escaped slaves by a group of Ohio abolitionists, the best-known of whom was a man named Levi Coffin -- and indeed, two of the figures shown in *The Underground Railroad* represent Levi Coffin and his wife, Catherine. *The American Journey*, however, doesn't explain this.

Though *The American Journey* fails to link Webber's painting to Levi Coffin, the second of the two Underground Railroad maps in *The American Journey* has two references to Coffin. One is a quotation from a memoir that Coffin issued in 1876. The other is an inset that shows a picture of Coffin over this caption: "Levi Coffin was known as 'President of the Underground Railroad.' A Quaker born in the South, he moved to the North in 1826 and became an active abolitionist. For 33 years he received more than 100 enslaved persons a year."

A shorter version of the same tale is told in an inset on the Underground Railroad map in *Pathways*: "Levi Coffin, a Quaker, helped more than 3,000 slaves to escape."

The claim that Coffin gave help to more than 3,000 fugitive slaves is nothing more than that: a claim. There is no evidence to support it, and it seems to be based chiefly on Coffin's boasting. Coffin liked to brag that he was helping slaves to flee northward after they reached Ohio, and for this reason he acquired a

widespread reputation as a friend to runaways. For the same reason, he and his real estate were often watched by the police and by slave-catchers -- a circumstance that hardly could have favored his effectiveness as the "president," or even as an ordinary agent, of the Underground Railroad.

## Tales of Tubman

Even more important than Coffin in schoolbook accounts of the Underground Railroad is the figure of Harriet Tubman. All five of the books that I have examined show at least one photograph of Tubman, some show her twice, and all five present interchangeable medleys of "facts" about her:

- In *Past and Promise*, the text on page 395 says this: "Harriet Tubman, a slave who had escaped to freedom herself, was one of [the Underground Railroad's] most famous conductors. Tubman risked her life and freedom at least nineteen times by returning to the South to help others escape. She helped more than 300 slaves gain freedom." On the same page of *Past and Promise*, a boxed article about Tubman says: "After she escaped from slavery, she became a legend on the Underground Railroad. She risked her life on her many rescue trips, but she never was caught. One of her most famous trips took place in 1857 when she rescued her aging parents from slavery. At one time, the rewards for her capture totalled \$40,000."
- *The American Nation* proclaims: "One daring conductor, Harriet Tubman, had escaped slavery herself. Risking her freedom and her life, Tubman returned to the South 19 times. She led more than 300 slaves, including her parents, to freedom. Admirers called Tubman the 'Black Moses,' after the ancient Hebrew leader who led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Slave owners offered a \$40,000 reward for Tubman's capture."
- *Pathways* says that Tubman escaped from slavery in Maryland in 1849, then "returned just the next year to rescue family members and lead them to safety," and then "made frequent trips to the South, rescuing more than 300 slaves and gaining the nickname 'The Black Moses.'" *Pathways* also states that "Enraged slave owners offered a \$40,000 reward for Tubman's capture."
- *Free Nation* tells, on page 343, that "Harriet Tubman, the 'Black Moses'" escaped from slavery and then "returned to the South many times, liberating more than 300 enslaved people . . . despite a reward of \$40,000 offered for her capture." Later, on page 397, *Free Nation* has a more elaborate version of the same story. Here students see that Tubman escaped from slavery, then "made 19 trips back into the South during the 1850s . . . assisted more than 300 African Americans [sic] -- including her aged parents -- to escape bondage," and became known as "the 'Moses' of her people," despite "huge rewards offered in the South for her capture and arrest."

- In *The American Journey*, Tubman tales appear in three places. On the first of the book's two maps of the Underground Railroad (page 419), an inset says that "Harriet Tubman returned to the South 19 times to help several hundred enslaved African Americans [*sic*] flee." Then, on page 421, a section of text says: "Harriet Tubman escaped from slavery to become the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad. She made many dangerous trips into the South and guided hundreds of enslaved people, including her parents, to freedom. Slaveholders offered a large reward for Tubman's capture or death." Then, on page 446, the book's second map of the Underground Railroad has an inset that says: "Born into slavery in Maryland, Harriet Tubman escaped to the North where she became the most celebrated leader of the Underground Railroad. Called the Moses of her people, she made more than 19 trips back to the South to conduct hundreds of other slaves north, . . ."

Those sing-song accounts of Tubman are antihistorical and are trebly wrong:

- By making explicit or implicit connections between the Underground Railroad and Tubman's trips, and by depicting Tubman as an Underground Railroad superstar, the textbooks imply that the paramount purpose of the Underground Railroad was to launch slave-stealing expeditions. That is false. The Underground Railroad was not in the business of staging raids, and Tubman's excursions were idiosyncrasies at best. Very few abolitionists, whether black or white, ever accompanied fugitive slaves on journeys that began in slave states and ended in free states.
- The salient points that occur again and again in the textbooks' accounts of Tubman -- such as the claim that she made nineteen trips to liberate slaves, and the claim that slave-owners put a huge price on her head -- are not historical facts. They are inventions.
- When students read that Tubman "returned to the South" or made "trips to the South" to snatch slaves, the students surely will conjure images of Tubman skulking through the strongholds of slavery in, say, Mississippi or Georgia. The images will be quite false, but the students will be blameless. The textbook-writers have carelessly and misleadingly used the phrase *the South* as if it were a synonym for *slave states*, and they have failed to distinguish the classic slave states of the Deep South from the border states (such as Maryland and Delaware) where slavery existed in a rarefied form and where slave populations were sparse. During her time as a slave, Harriet Tubman had lived in the border state of Maryland, close to free territory. And after her escape from slavery she settled in Philadelphia, got a job in a hotel, and made short slave-rescuing trips from Pennsylvania into Maryland or Delaware. She did not venture into the interior of "the South."

Readers who want some reliable information about Tubman should look at two recent books written by historians: Kate Clifford Larson's *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (published in 2004 by Ballantine Books) and Jean M. Humez's *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* (published in 2003 by the University of Wisconsin Press). Larson presents a detailed, comprehensive biography of Tubman. Humez examines various accounts of Tubman -- most of them composed, after the Civil War, by abolitionists and suffragettes -- and tries to separate the real Tubman from the fabulous image that was constructed around her.

The number of slave-snatching trips that Tubman made, and the number of slaves whom she shuttled to freedom, will never be known with certainty. Larson estimates that Tubman made about thirteen trips (and took about seventy slaves). Humez thinks that Tubman made eight or nine trips by the summer of 1860, then made her final trip in December of that year.

It isn't surprising that Larson and Humez disagree about the number of trips that Tubman made. Neither is it surprising that Larson's and Humez's scholarly inferences don't agree with claims that have appeared, over the years, in popular stories about Tubman. Tubman herself didn't write any accounts of her adventures -- she was illiterate -- nor did she dictate any such accounts. In any case, it is hard to imagine that she would have kept records even if she had been able to write, for such documentation could have served to incriminate her and her associates. Yet schoolbook-writers have seized (from some unnamed source) the notion that Tubman made nineteen trips [note 2], and they have turned it into a "fact." Only in *The American Journey* is there any room for doubt -- and only because, as I have shown above, the writers of *The American Journey* contradict themselves. On page 419 they say flatly that Tubman made nineteen trips, but on page 446 they say that she made "more than 19" trips.

Neither Larson nor Humez nor any other researcher has ever found a poster, a newspaper advertisement, or any other evidence to suggest that anyone put a price of \$40,000, or any other huge amount, on Tubman's head. (The sum of \$40,000 in the money of the mid-1800s would have been equivalent to more than \$2 million in the money of today. Such an amount might be offered now for a major terrorist or perhaps for a serial killer.) The only evidence of any reward for the capture of Harriet Tubman is an item that ran in a Maryland newspaper in October 1849, soon after Tubman made her own escape from slavery. The reward that was offered was \$100.

To believe that slave-holders offered an extravagant reward for Tubman, one must believe that they knew of her, knew that she was taking slaves, and attributed their losses specifically to her. There is no evidence to support any of those notions, and the notions don't even make sense. How would slave-owners know whether their slaves were being spirited away by Tubman, or were being taken by some other individual or individuals, or were simply fleeing by themselves?

The textbooks' references to Tubman's rescuing her parents are needlessly dull. They would be livelier if they included the information that Tubman's mother complained about the poverty and the bitter cold that she had to endure, in the small town of Auburn, New York, after Tubman liberated her.

## Slaves as Astronomers

Some of the books allege that escaping slaves used celestial navigation to keep themselves headed northward.

*Pathways* merely hints at this, in one puzzling sentence which says that runaways made their way from Chicago toward Canada by "following the North Star as it marked their way to freedom." The *Pathways* writers don't tell why the North Star was used only by slaves who were leaving Chicago, and the writers don't tell how the slaves found the North Star in the nighttime sky. Perhaps they had been trained in astronomy by their kind owners. Or perhaps they had attended astronomy classes at some Chicago institution.

*The American Journey* and *Past and Promise* provide fancier versions of the North Star story, trying to combine romantic lore with an astronomical fact. The astronomical fact is that there is a simple way to find the North Star (provided that the sky is cloudless and clear) by first finding the Big Dipper -- a very prominent and readily recognizable asterism consisting of seven stars. If one finds the Big Dipper and imagines a line connecting the outboard pair of stars in the Dipper's bowl, the imaginary line will point to the North Star, and the distance from the lip of the Dipper's bowl to the North Star will be about one-and-a-half times as great as the length of the Dipper's handle.



According to *The American Journey*, slaves knew and used this information, and they even had a song which told them to look for the Big Dipper and reminded them that it resembled a gourd. *The American Journey* says, on page 421:

*Songs such as "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd" encouraged runaways on their way to freedom. A hollowed-out gourd was used to dip water for drinking. Its shape resembled the Big Dipper, which pointed to the North Star.*

*The American Journey* then purports to quote four lines from the slaves' song:

*When the river ends in between two hills,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd,  
For the Ole Man's waitin' for to carry you to freedom.  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.*

*Past and Promise* goes further and gives twenty lines! These appear in an illustration on page 396:

*Follow the drinking gourd!  
Follow the drinking gourd!  
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd.  
When the sun comes back, and the first quail calls.  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd.  
The riverbank makes a very good road,  
The dead trees will show you the way.  
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
The river ends between two hills,  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
There's another river on the other side,  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
When the great big river meets the little river,  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd.*

Students may wonder about the meanings of such phrases as "When the sun comes back" and "Left foot, peg foot," and they may wonder what a quail's call had to do with escaping from slavery, and they may wonder how a riverbank (with its dense vegetation, fallen trees, and venomous snakes) could be "a very good road," but they won't find any answers in *Past and Promise*. They will, however, find this caption

beside the illustration that shows the twenty lines:

| At left is a song that escaping slaves used to guide them. The "drinking gourd" is the Little Dipper, whose handle contains the North Star.

The writers of *Past and Promise* have confused two asterisms. The Little Dipper lies close to the Big Dipper, but it is smaller and dimmer than the Big Dipper is, and it is harder to find -- even on favorable nights -- unless one finds the Big Dipper first! The notion that slaves navigated by simply looking for the Little Dipper is senseless.

Astronomical phenomena aside, is the notion of a "drinking gourd" song based on fact or is it just a fantasy? With this question in mind, I have consulted four books of musicology: *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*, by Miles Mark Fisher (1953); *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, by Eileen Southern (1971); *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*, by John Lovell, Jr. (1972); and *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*, by Dena J. Epstein (1977). I have not found any support for the claim that slaves had a "drinking gourd" song and used it to guide themselves to free territory.

## Betraying Students

All five of the textbooks that I have considered here give false impressions of the nature and effectiveness of the Underground Railroad, and all five mislead students by dwelling on Harriet Tubman and on fictitious accounts of her deeds. None of the books can give students any realistic idea of what the Underground Railroad was. None makes clear that most of the activities of the Underground Railroaders took place in the brief period between the enactment of the Compromise of 1850 (which included the Fugitive Slave Act of the same year) and the start of the Civil War. None conveys how hard it was for slaves to escape from bondage, particularly in the interior of the South. And none of the books enables students to appreciate that very few slaves ever tried to escape and that far fewer succeeded.

## Notes

1. Held in Chicago, the World's Columbian Exposition was a fair that celebrated (a year too late) the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the New World. [[return to text](#)]
2. Though we cannot identify the particular publication from which the textbook-writers have copied the claim that Tubman made nineteen trips, we can note that this claim was popularized by Sarah H. Bradford, a 19th-century writer who cobbled pseudobiographical narratives about Tubman. Bradford's stories, written with much imagination and embroidery, have no standing as sources of historical information. [[return to text](#)]

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What was the Underground Railroad and how did it operate? Why was Harriet Tubman successful in helping slaves escape to the North? Learn more about the life of Harriet Tubman from these selected articles from *Chronicling America*, this *BackStory* interview with Rochelle Bush, a trustee and historian at Salem Chapel Church in St. Catharines, Ontario, and from this Biography video. Students may consider the following questions as they learn about Tubman. This interactive website details what enslavement looked and felt like, as well as explains the consequences and trade-offs that enslaved persons constantly had to negotiate in their effort to resist oppression. A list of Underground Railroad preserved sites in each state is provided below under Lesson Extensions. The Underground Railroad is a great story in American history. People, both black and white, formed a secret network that helped slaves escape to freedom. Unfortunately, a lot of what we learn is not true. Just because some of the stories about the Underground Railroad are myths does not undermine the fact that thousands of slaves escaped to freedom. Many people put their own lives and their own freedoms at risk by helping slaves escape, and their only reward was the happiness of seeing a person free. Sources and More Information. Books Blight, David W. *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*. Collins, 2006. Harriet Tubman: *The Road to Freedom*. Back Bay Books, 2005. Gara, Larry. The Underground Railroad, described in "Harriet Tubman," was so named because homes on the route were like stations. Why did Harriet Tubman tell the fugitives stories of others who had escaped to freedom? In "Harriet Tubman," what main idea do the details about William Still's records support? Information about escaping slaves had to be kept secret until slavery was abolished. What causes the author of "Harriet Tubman" to think the eleven runaways stayed with Frederick Douglass?