

From that time down to the close of the Secession War may be considered the period of the secret modes of rescuing the slave, culminating in the well organized Underground Railway with its many routes and branches. The fugitive slave laws were from time to time made more severe in their penalties, involving not only heavy fines, but severe imprisonment. These laws became more and more obnoxious to the abolitionists as violations of primal human rights, of the instincts of liberty, and the principles of the Declaration of Independence. The benign provisions of the ancient Hebrew law of divine origin, "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee," were cited as good reasons for violating the man-made law which virtually made all northern citizens accomplices in the crime of slave catching.

A considerable number of slaves in the far south escaped to Mexico or to the deep recesses of the Dismal Swamp, and some to Great Britain; but to most of them the true land of liberty was Canada. The stimulation of the increased scope and value given to slave labour by the Louisiana Purchase and the invention of the cotton gin and consequent vast extension of cotton culture made the task of the slave more bitter and increased his passion for liberty. Virginia, the mother of Presidents, became also the mother of slaves, as expressed in the pathetic poem of Whittier on the Virginia Slave-mother's Lament for her Daughters. The southern tier of slave states became a great mill in which were ground out the lives of bondmen; and new grist must be supplied, after the foreign slave trade had been abolished, by slave breeding in the northern tier of slave states. This stimulated the activity of the slave marts in Baltimore, Washington, Charleston, Richmond, New Orleans and St. Augustine. The dread of being "sold south," with the utter and irrevocable severance of the dearest and tenderest ties of kinship and love hung like a nightmare over the souls of myriads of our fellow-beings. The value of slaves became greatly enhanced and led to the systematic pursuit of fugitives and sometimes to the kidnapping of free negroes in the north.

Yet, in many parts of the far south the very existence of such a place as Canada and the succour which it proffered for the fugitive were unknown. The war of 1812-15, and the return of the southern soldiers to their homes, made that place of refuge known and predisposed the negroes to seek liberty among the enemies of their masters. It was not long before tidings from the fugitives in Canada found their way back to their old homes. Before the Secession War it is estimated that five hundred negroes annually travelled between the land of freedom and the land of slavery to rescue their kinsmen.