

## Reconstructing the Stories of the Underground Railroad Movement

Despite the difficulty in uncovering the facts concerning the clandestine activities of the Underground Railroad movement, researchers must resist the temptation to compromise the verification process. The following outline summarizes various ways, including the use of oral accounts, through which much of the story of the Underground Railroad can be substantiated. Additionally, the outline provides guidelines for synthesizing evidence from oral sources that are often ignored and written sources that are often accepted without question.

### WRITTEN SOURCES

#### *Strong Evidence*

##### Primary Evidence

###### Examples

- Original official records and sworn affidavits based on eyewitness accounts.
- Diaries, journals and autobiographies.
- Authenticated narrative accounts by eyewitnesses to the event (oral histories).

###### Factors impacting the reliability of primary evidence.

- Credibility of informant (reputation for honesty, probable bias or ulterior motives, mental capacity).
- Time elapsed before the data was recorded.

##### Secondary Evidence

###### Examples

- Reminiscences that are written at a point in the informant's life when his/her ability to remember details may be impaired.
- Uncertified copies of official records and transcripts of testimony.
- Accounts derived from interviews with eyewitnesses to the event (such as a period newspaper article).
- Documented biographies and local histories.

###### Factors impacting the reliability of secondary evidence.

- The credibility of informant
- The conditions under which copied documents were reproduced.
- The proportion of direct quotes contained in data gathered through interviews.

##### Direct/Indirect Evidence

Evidence derived from a primary or secondary source will carry more weight when it is direct (complete and presented in a clear unambiguous manner). Indirect evidence is inconclusive due to the manner in which the evidence is presented or the absence of an important detail. For example, the following two statements provide no specific direct evidence that John Doe was an Underground Railroad conductor until they are used in combination.

- John Doe's home at 645 Main Street was used as an Underground Railroad site.
- An Underground Railroad conductor operated a station out of his home at 645 Main Street.

### Circumstantial Evidence

Evidence that establishes a connection between the people, places and events that are being researched and people, places and events known to be connected to the Underground Railroad story.

### Weak Evidence

- Evidence that would be considered strong evidence were it not for the informant's lack of credibility.
- Evidence that would be considered strong evidence were it not for the fact that it was recorded long after the time of the referenced event.
- Evidence from accounts that cannot be attributed to a particular informant (hearsay).

### Contradictory Evidence

If only a single piece of reliable evidence contradicts established presumptions, a researcher must be prepared to question all supportive evidence no matter how reliable it may otherwise seem.

## LOCAL ORAL TRADITIONS\*

Underground Railroad research requires careful evaluation and analysis of the family and community stories that have been passed down by word of mouth. Oral traditions are often sources of indirect rather than direct evidence.

### *Strong Evidence*

#### Primary Oral Traditions

Oral histories first told by credible informants near the time of the referenced event.

#### Secondary Oral Traditions

- Reminiscences that were first told by an eyewitness who may no longer possess a clear memory for details.
- Second-hand accounts that were first repeated by an investigator or associates of an eyewitness soon after the referenced event.

### *Weak Evidence*

- Oral traditions that are unsupported by any documentation or a preponderance of circumstantial evidence.
- Underground Railroad lore that does not meet the oral tradition criteria listed below.

## WHAT CONSTITUTES SUFFICIENT UNDERGROUND RAILROAD VERIFICATION?

### *Sufficient*

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\* Oral Traditions are those local oral accounts that meet the following criteria:

- The oral account has survived the death of its originator by at least one generation.
- The surviving oral account is widely known in at least one group closely associated with the originator.
- The oral account survives primarily through vertical transmission from one generation to the next, rather than horizontal transmission among contemporaries.
- The surviving oral account has preserved its integrity as evidenced by its accuracy, completeness, and retention of the originator's values.
- The details of the surviving oral account are believed by its contemporary carriers to be accurate.

- A written source of direct primary evidence that is not contradicted by other strong evidence.
- At least two written sources of indirect primary evidence that corroborate each other and are not contradicted by other strong evidence.
- A local oral tradition supported by a written source of direct primary evidence that is not contradicted by other strong evidence.
- A local oral tradition supported by at least two written sources of indirect primary evidence that corroborate each other and are not contradicted by other strong evidence.
- At least two written sources of secondary evidence that corroborate each other and are not contradicted by other strong evidence.
- A preponderance of circumstantial or weak evidence that is not contradicted by other strong evidence.

***Insufficient***

- Underground Railroad lore.
- Uncorroborated weak evidence.
- Uncorroborated circumstantial evidence.
- Uncorroborated oral traditions.
- Evidence contradicted by equally strong evidence.

**WHY ARE INTERPRETIVE GUIDELINES FOR THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD JUST AS IMPORTANT AS VERIFICATION GUIDELINES?**

The current effort to verify Underground Railroad accounts will have little value if, when presenting the findings, the following conditions are not met:

- Verified Underground Railroad accounts are placed in their proper historical, geographical and social context.
- A clear disclaimer is provided when artistic license or unsubstantiated claims impact the presentation of a verifiable story of the Underground Railroad.

Note the following examples:

- While talking about punishments for an Underground Railroad conductor operating during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, an interpreter should be careful to make a distinction with the well known, harsher penalties imposed by the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law.
- While it is true that most fugitives fled to the North, interpreters should not generalize by suggesting that all whites encountered by freedom seekers in the South were hostile while all those encountered in the North were friendly.
- While the fact that a site was used as an Underground Railroad safe house is verifiable, the interpreter should avoid embellishing the story by making unsubstantiated claims about features of the house such as trap doors, cellars or crawl spaces.
- While the fact that an individual was an Underground Railroad agent is verifiable, interpreters should not make an unsubstantiated claim that his or her home was used as a safe house.