

The Story of the Underground Railroad in Southern Preble County, Ohio

~a coloring book of history for all ages~

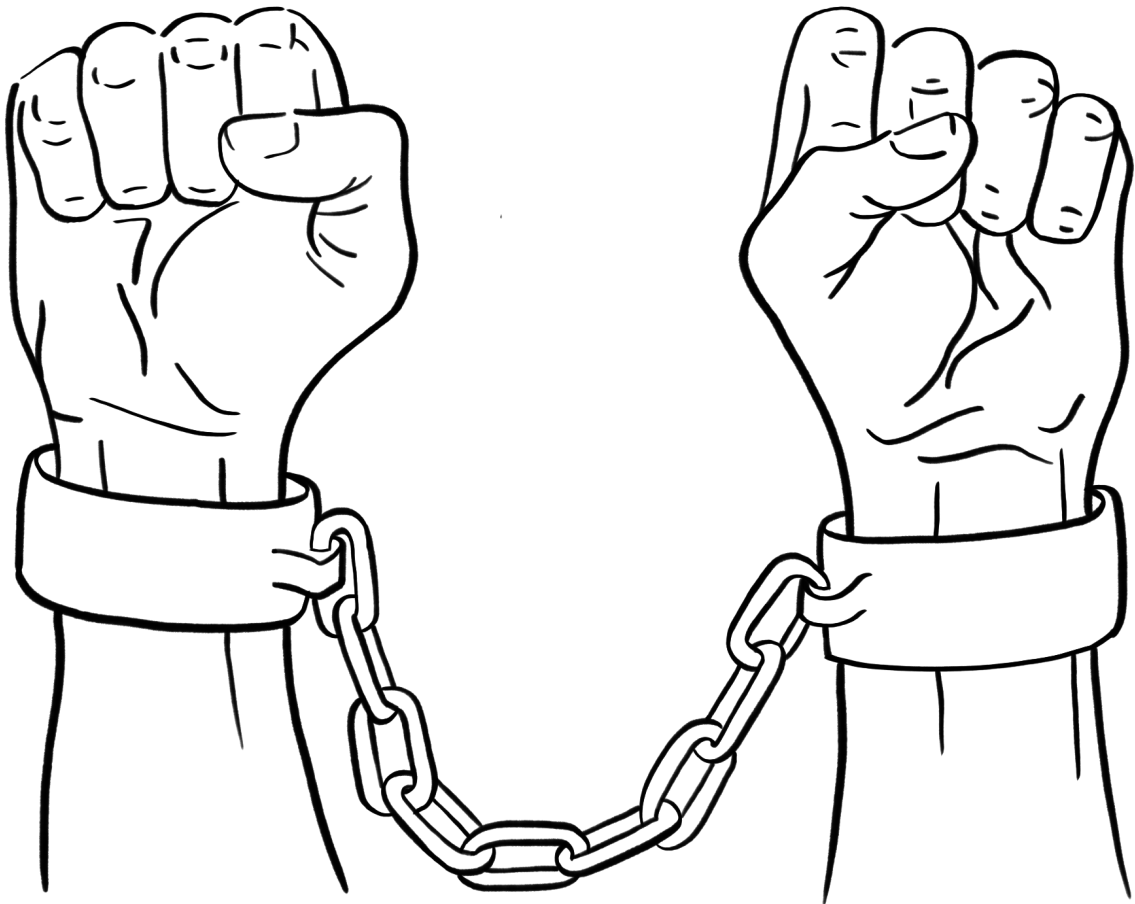
Written by Shannon E. Steele
Illustrated by Mackenzie E. Steele

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Beginning in the 17th century, people from Africa were kidnapped and put on slave ships bound for North America. Upon arrival in North America, those who survived the trip were put into slave pens and kept locked up until they were sold as slaves.



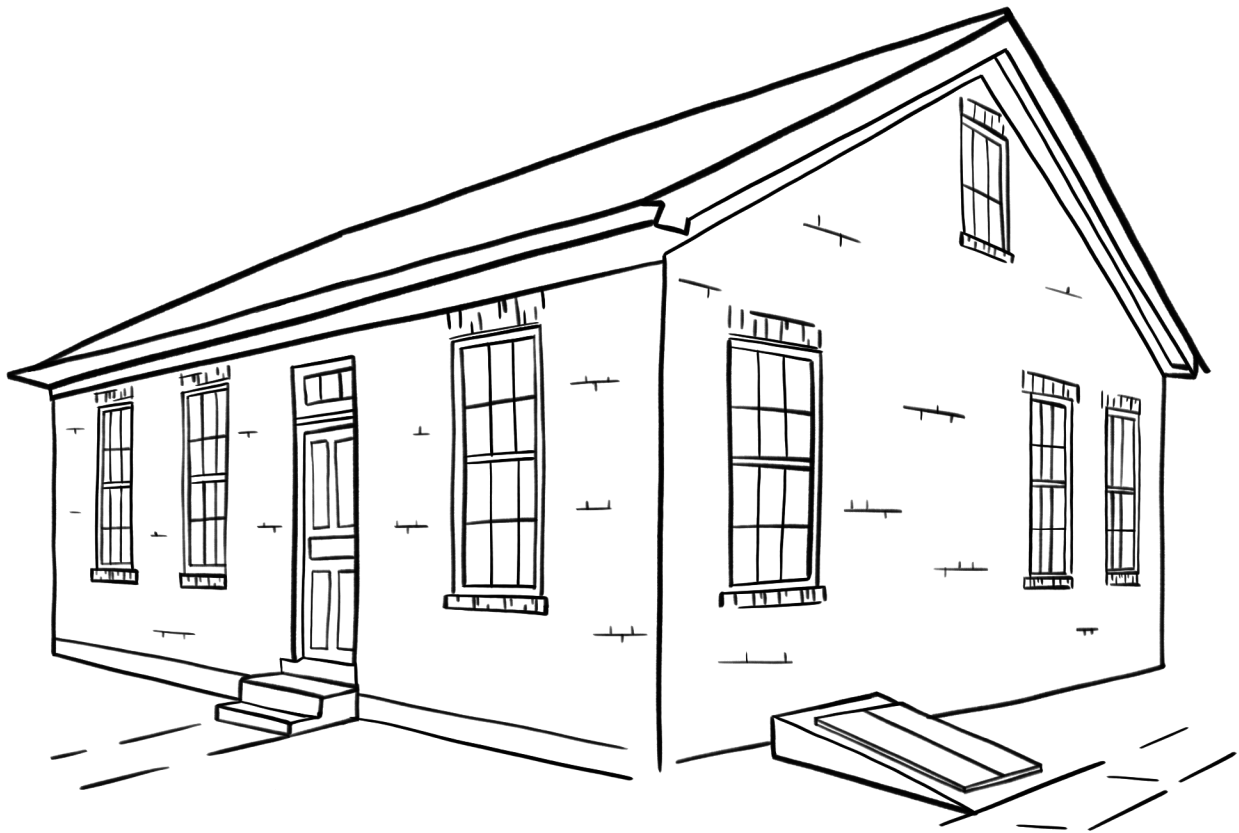
Slaves were usually sold at slave auctions to owners of very large farms (plantations) on which cotton, sugar cane, or tobacco were grown. Slaves were forced to perform hard labor for long hours with no pay. Slaves were often separated from their families and beaten.



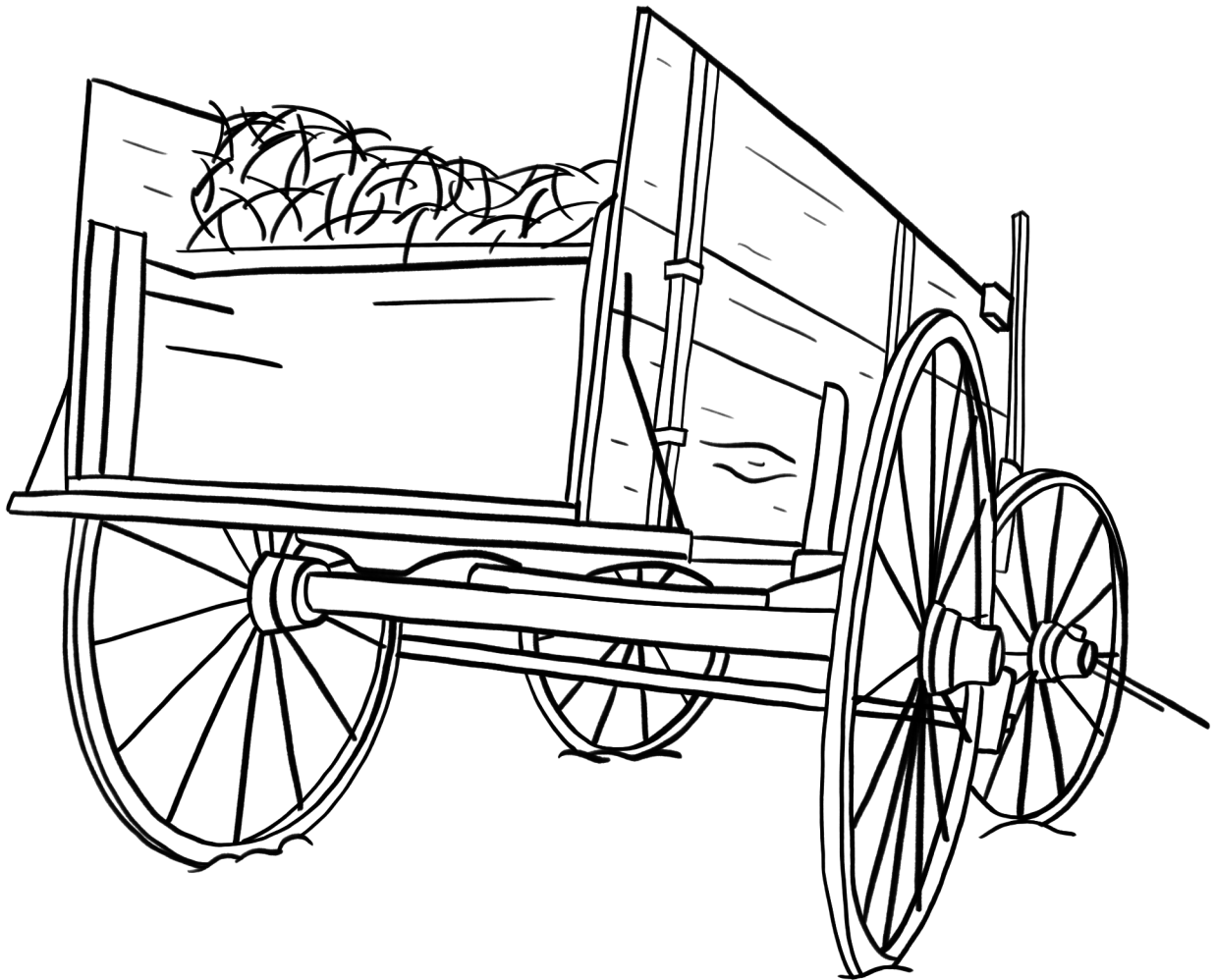
Many slaves tried to escape from their owners. Slaves were worth a lot of money to their owners, so the owners went to great lengths to get escaped slaves back. They hired slave catchers and they trained dogs to find their runaway slaves. Many slaves died while trying to escape.



Many people – a lot of them belonged to the Quaker Church – felt slavery was wrong and risked imprisonment or death to help slaves escape. They were referred to as “abolitionists.” In the 1820s, some of these brave helpers began to organize themselves into a group known as the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was not a train, but rather a network of safe houses and people who opposed slavery and led slaves north to Canada where they could gain their freedom.

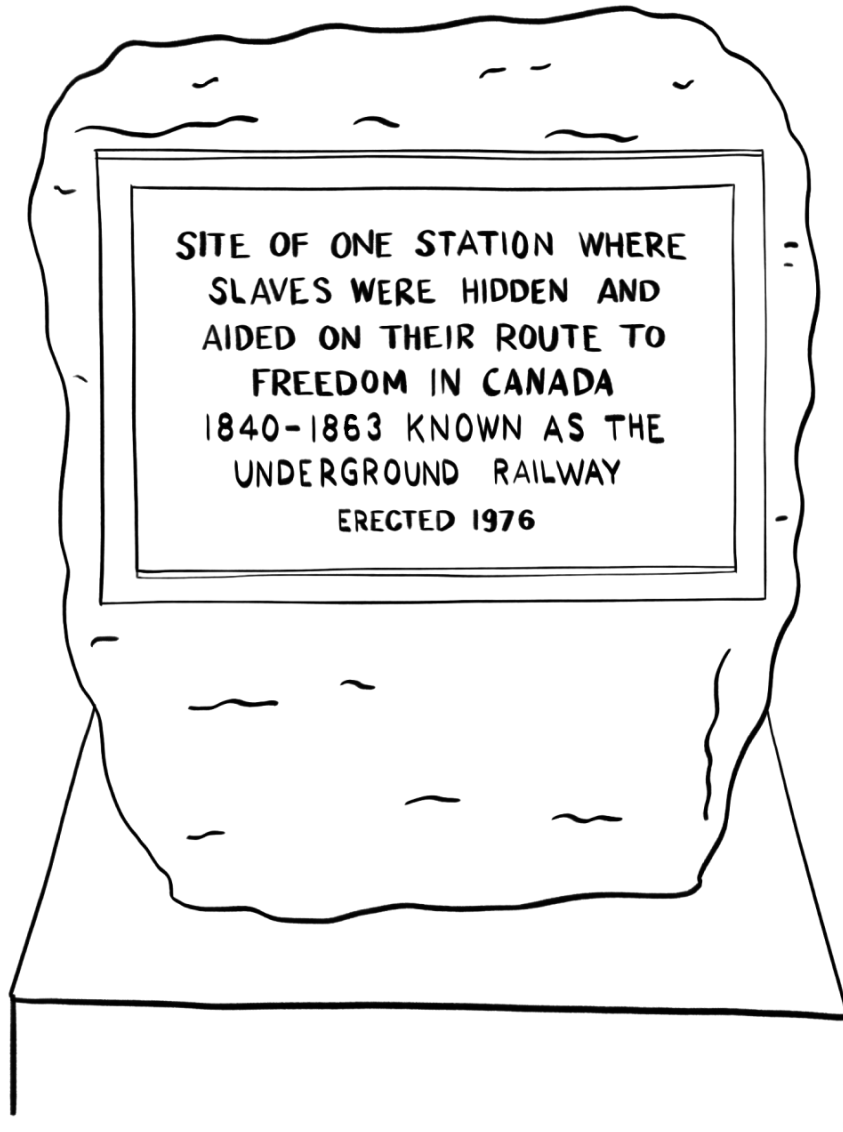


Slaves would travel from one place to the next on the Underground Railroad with the help of people called “conductors.” Slaves would stay at safe houses, which were called “stations.” The owners of the safe houses were called “station masters.”



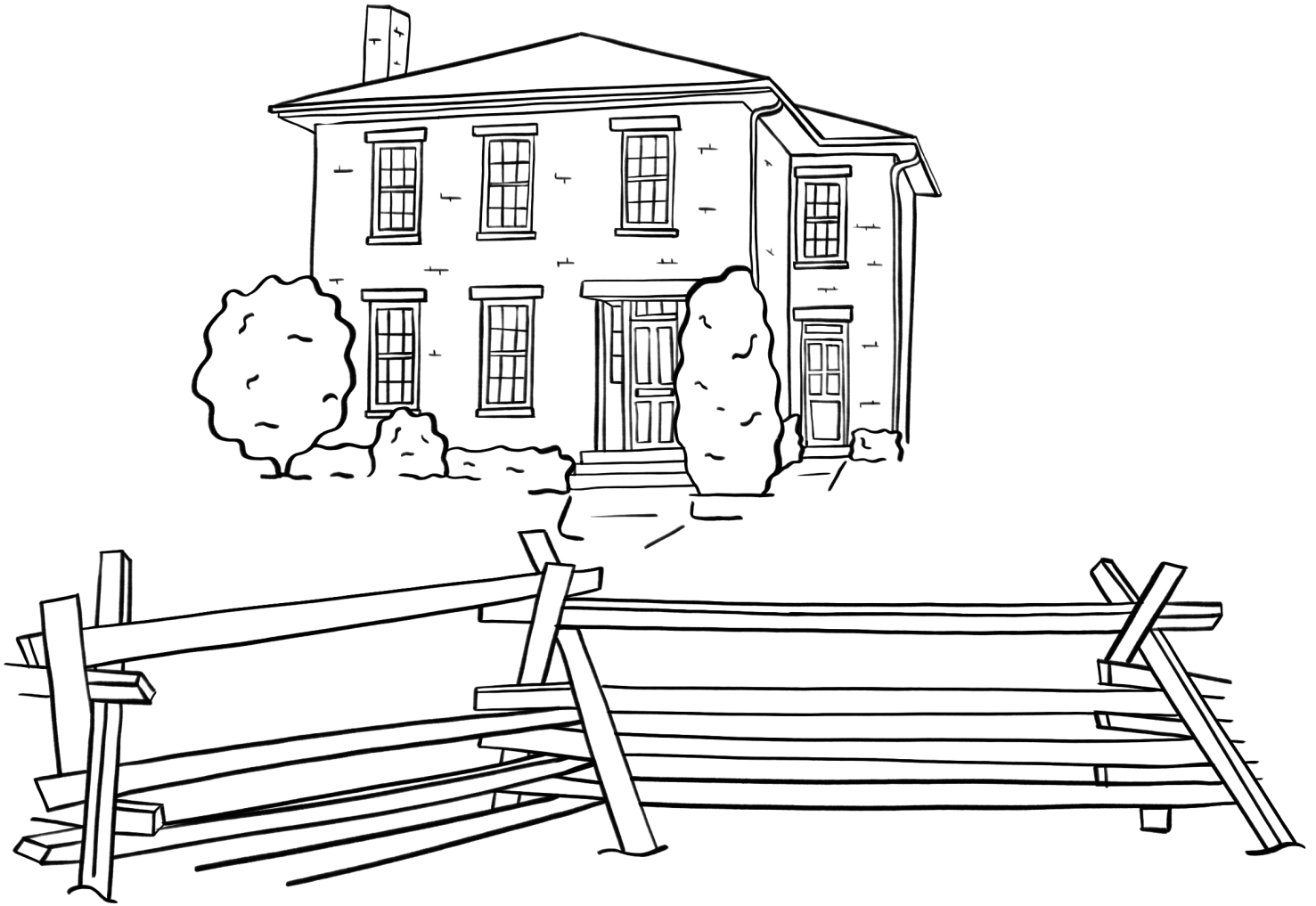
After slaves crossed the Ohio River from the South – usually from Kentucky – one route led them from Cincinnati to West Elkton. West Elkton was one of the principal stations of the Underground Railroad. West Elkton's most well-known conductors were Elijah Mendenhall, Solomon Talbert, Jesse Stubbs, Lorenzo Stubbs, and Newton Stubbs. In 1847, Solomon Talbert and James Smith opened a free labor store in West Elkton which stocked only goods that had not been made with slave labor.

The illustration above represents a false-bottomed wagon. Escaping slaves rode in a secret compartment in the wagon.



On the edge of the parking lot of the Methodist Church in West Elkton, there is a rock with a plaque that marks the spot of the site of a hotel – the Mendenhall Building – that provided food and lodging to many runaway slaves. In this hotel, the slaves stayed in a secret loft across the west side of the building. The entrance to the loft was through a sliding door hidden in the back of a clothes closet.

This historical marker was donated in 1976 by a West Elkton United Methodist Church class.



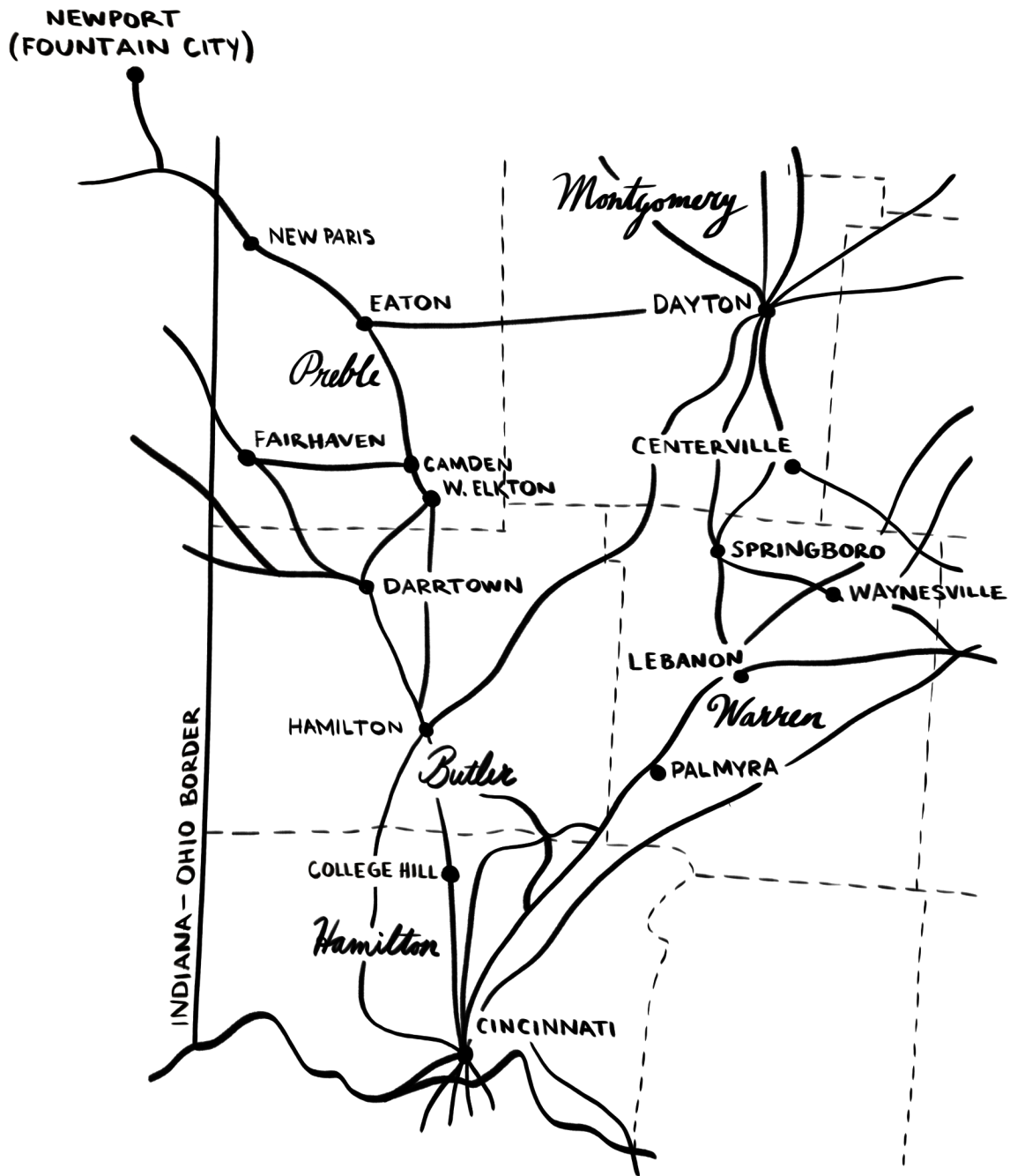
Jesse Stubbs was a conductor and station master who lived just outside of West Elkton on what is now Camden-West Elkton Road. He risked losing his money and farm and being jailed to help slaves escape. The slaves stayed in secret areas of his home – usually the attic. With the help of his wife, Mary, Jesse fed the slaves and transported them by horse and buggy to the next stop on the Underground Railroad.

In 1858, Jesse Stubbs traveled to Kentucky to buy the freedom of the wife and seven children of a former slave by the name of Craig Langford whom Jesse had befriended. Mr. Langford is thought to have paid Jesse Stubbs back with the full amount of \$5,062 not long after Mr. Stubbs returned from Kentucky with Mr. Langford's family.

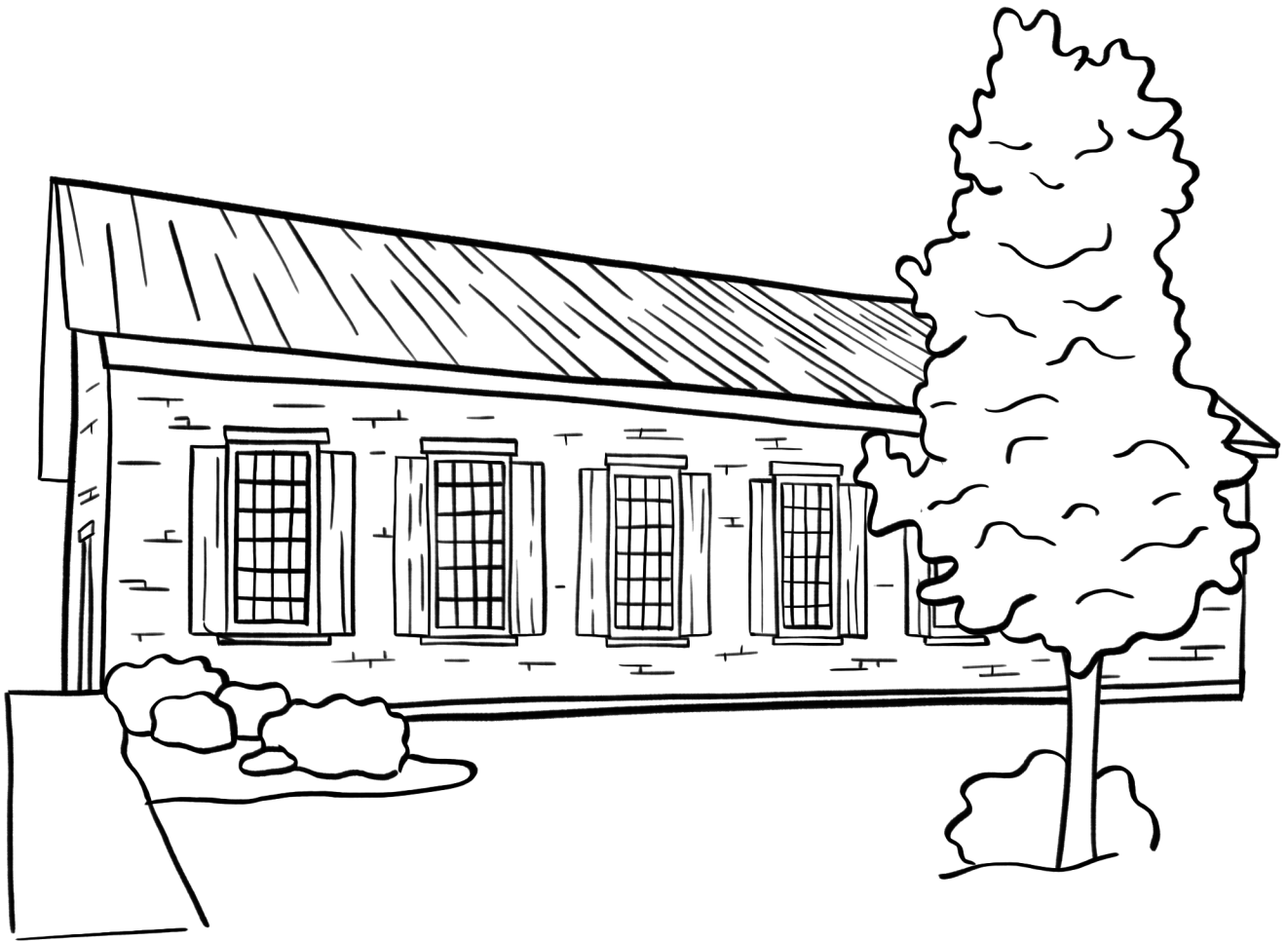
\$5,062 is equivalent to \$183,217 in 2023 dollars.



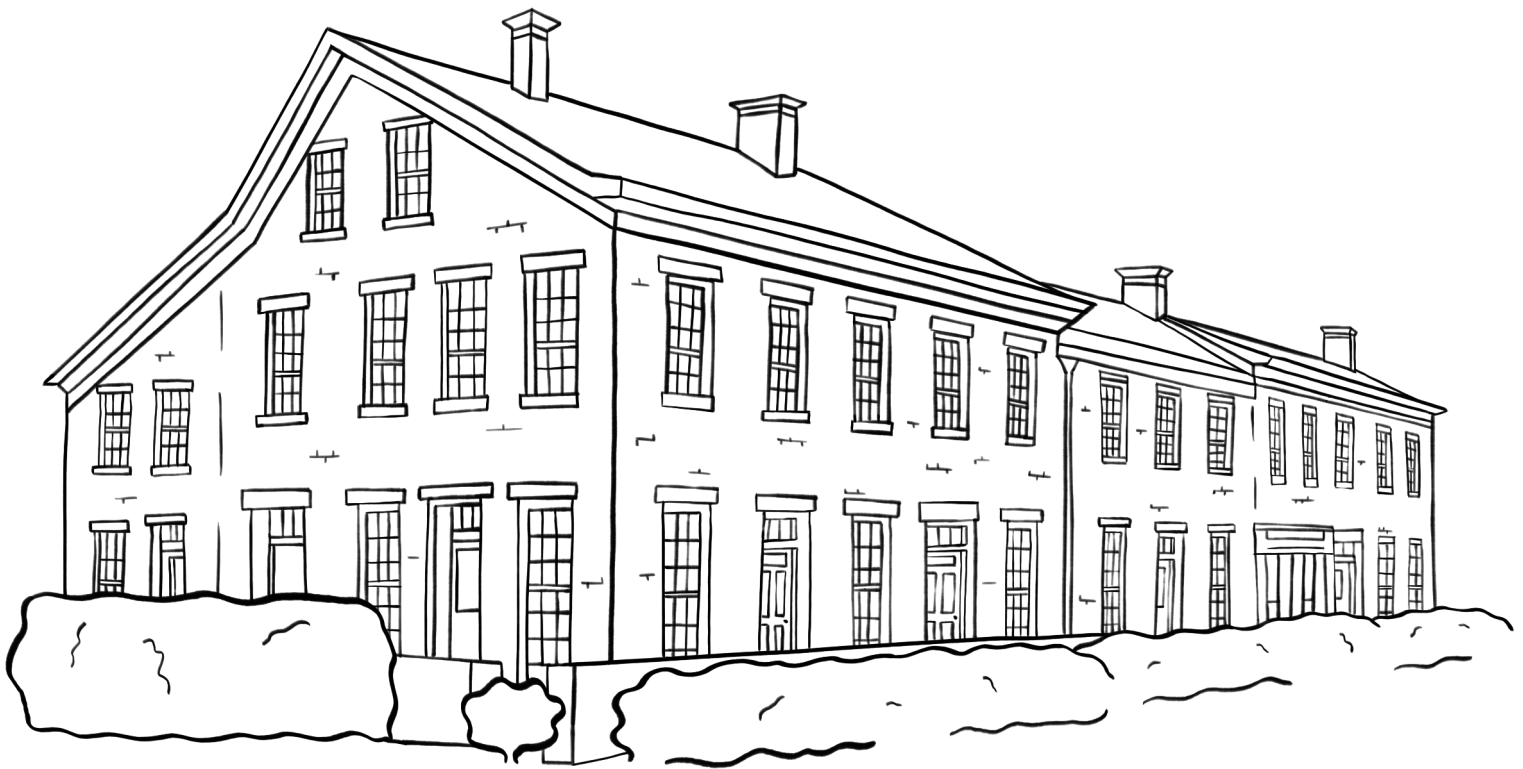
The Friends Meeting is a church in West Elkton, Ohio, still active today. It was once a Quaker Church, but because of the congregation's anti-slavery views, the West Elkton church was banned from the Quaker Church and it became the West Elkton Friends Meeting. Anti-slavery meetings took place in the church, and many runaway slaves were given lodging in the church in secret hiding spaces. In 1838, Frederick Douglass, a national abolitionist movement leader, spoke at the church.



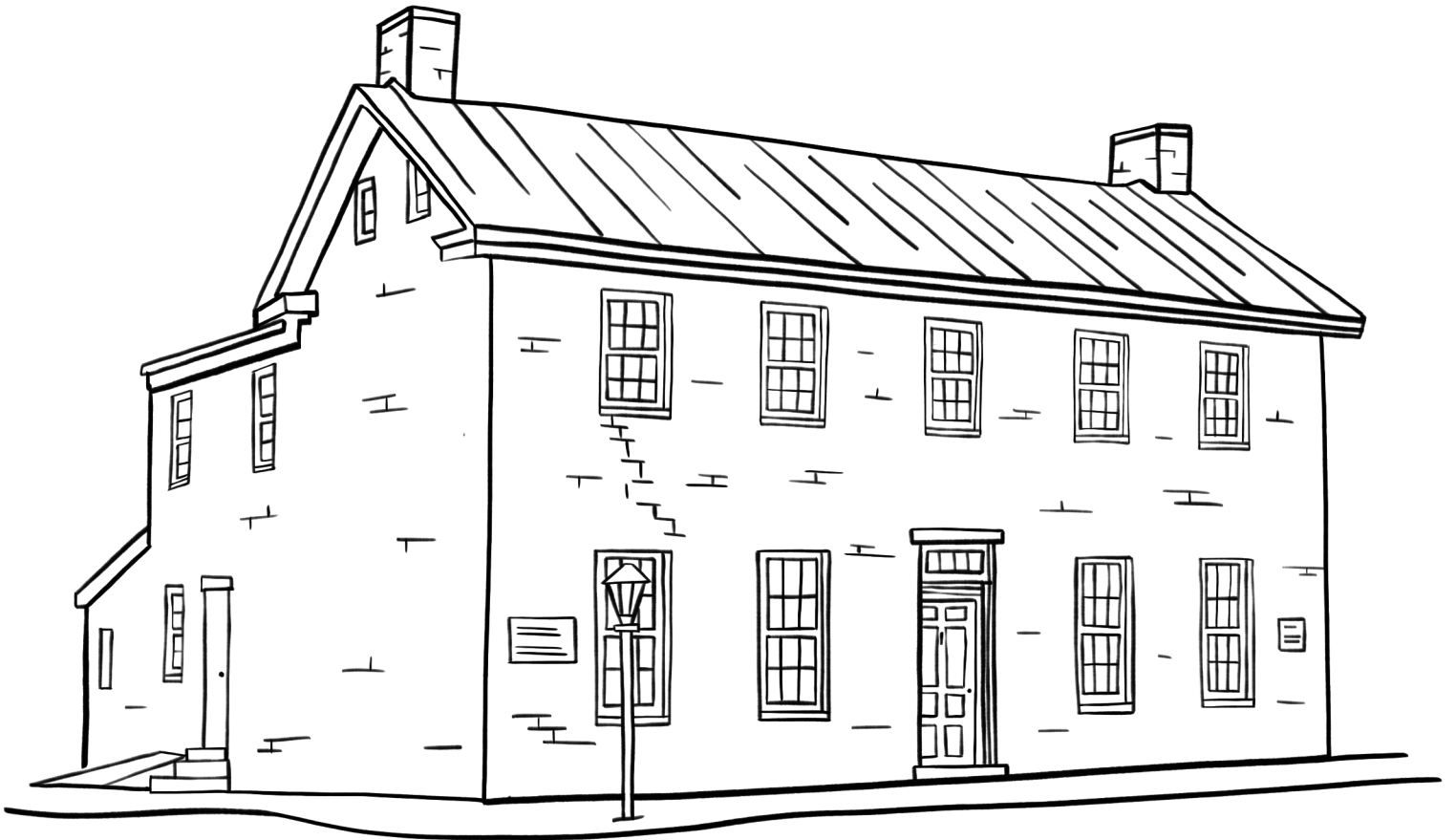
From West Elkton, the slaves were often transported through Camden to Fairhaven in Israel Township. Sometimes slaves had to flee on foot from West Elkton when it was not safe to travel by horse and buggy. Although details about Camden's involvement in the Underground Railroad cannot be found, Camden is mentioned as an important thoroughfare in Levi Coffin's autobiography, *Reminiscences*.



Slaves not only came to Israel Township from West Elkton on the Underground Railroad, but also from College Hill near Cincinnati. Well-known station masters and conductors from Israel Township were Ebenezer Elliott and his son, Hugh, and Nathan Brown. They are buried at the Hopewell Church near College Corner. At that time, the Hopewell Church was led by Reverend Porter who refused to let anyone join his church who had ever owned slaves and had not freed them.



In Fairhaven, one safe house was the Bunker Hill House. A former slave named Gabriel Smith, known as Old Gabe, kept an eye out for escaping slaves from his living quarters under the stairs in the kitchen of the Bunker Hill House. He would direct escaping slaves into the hotel where they were given food and lodging. The escaping slaves stayed in the servants' quarters. If there was imminent danger of being caught, the slaves hid in the cellar underneath the summer kitchen and in an attic behind the second-floor servants' quarters. Old Gabe was known all over the country, and he was a popular Preble County singer and fiddler. Old Gabe played music for dances in the Bunker Hill House's ballroom. In addition, he was a music teacher and saddler by trade. Because he was Black and a former slave, Old Gabe risked being returned to slavery if he was caught helping slaves escape.



Levi Coffin is one of the most famous participants in the Underground Railroad. He is known as the "President of the Underground Railroad," and his house in Newport, Indiana (now known as Fountain City, Indiana), was referred to as "Grand Central Station." The Coffins are said to have fed and housed more than 2,000 slaves on their route to freedom. Levi's wife, Catharine Coffin, organized a sewing club in their home in Newport. The ladies in the club secretly made new clothes for the slaves. After a stay at the Coffins' house, the slaves went to the next stop on the Underground Railroad in their quest for freedom.

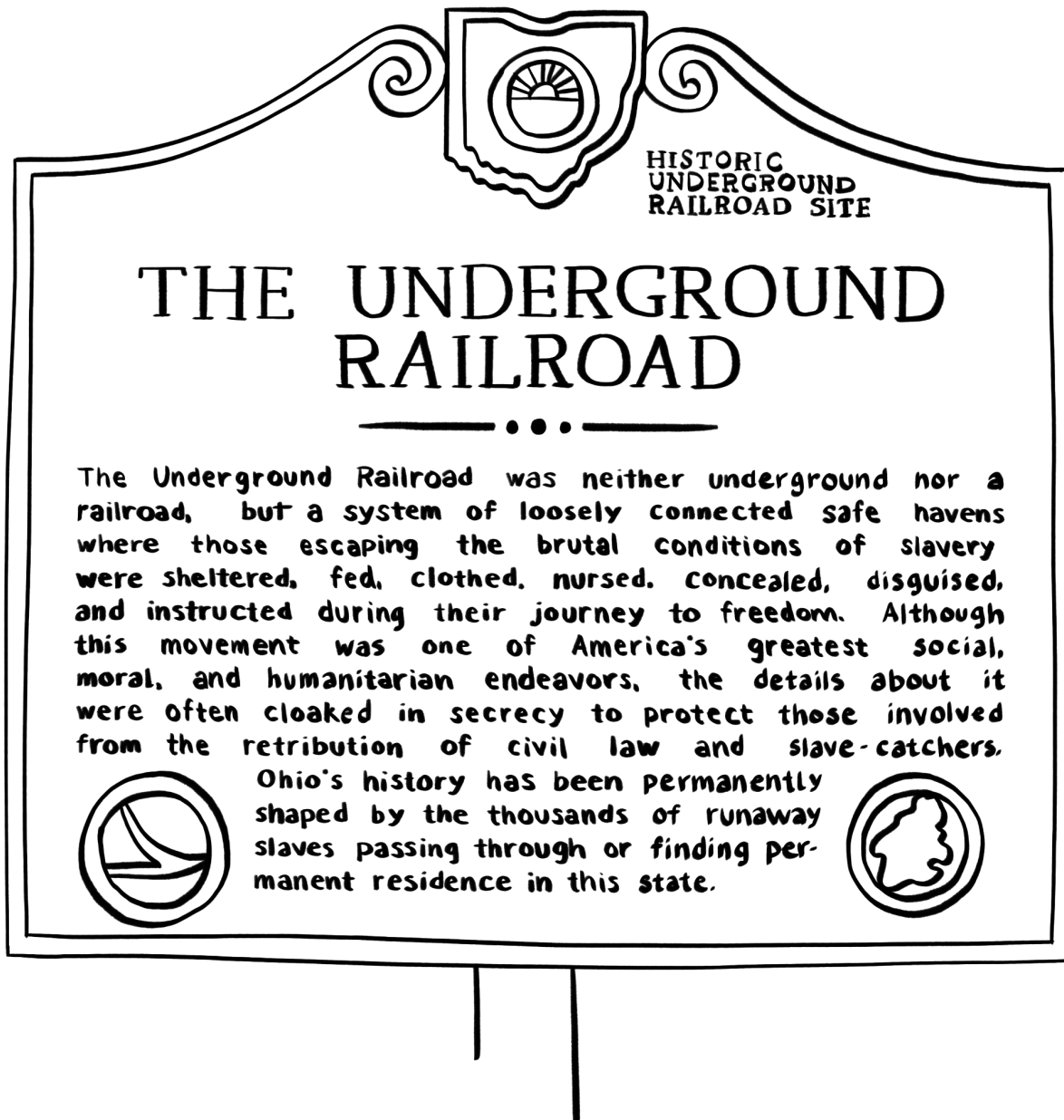


By the 1860s, there were more than 4 million slaves in the United States. The Civil War started in 1861 between the anti-slavery North and the slave-owning South. More than half a million lives were lost in the war. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln wrote and signed the Emancipation Proclamation which freed all the slaves in the slave-holding southern states. In 1865 the war ended and slavery was abolished in all of the states in the United States by the 13th Amendment.

Lots of soldiers from southern Preble County fought and died in the Civil War.



The story of the Underground Railroad teaches us that ordinary people working together for a common cause can make a positive difference in the lives of many. May we never forget the words made famous in the Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal."



It is estimated that 100,000 slaves ran away from the South, and 40,000 of them traveled through Ohio on the Underground Railroad.

This sign can be found on the East Plaza (Third Street) of the Statehouse in Columbus, Ohio.

Appendix A

Famous people associated with the Underground Railroad routes through southwestern Ohio

John Rankin - Station Master and Conductor - a Presbyterian minister from Ripley, Ohio.

John Parker – Station Master and Conductor - a former slave from Ripley, Ohio, who had been able to purchase his freedom. He invented a device to harvest cotton to help eliminate the need for slave labor.

Levi and Catharine Coffin - Station Masters and Conductors - lived in Newport, Indiana, and assisted thousands of slaves in their escape to Canada. They later moved to Cincinnati and sold fabric made without using slave labor.

Harriet Beecher Stowe - Cincinnati Author - wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* about the struggles of a fugitive slave based on information she learned after a visit to the Rankin's home in Ripley, Ohio. Abe Lincoln is said to have told Harriet that her book started the Civil War.

Frederick Douglass - Author, Anti-Slavery Activist, and Public Speaker - was born in Maryland into slavery and later escaped from slavery. He was an advisor to President Lincoln during the Civil War. He wrote several books. The most famous is his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass - an American Slave*. He also gave many speeches, including one in West Elkton.

Appendix B

Area Places of Interest

West Elkton Friends Meeting – West Elkton, Ohio

Stone at southwest corner of 503 and Camden Avenue – West Elkton, Ohio

Jesse and Mary Stubb's House on Camden-West Elkton Road – West Elkton, Ohio

Hopewell Church – College Corner, Ohio

Bunker Hill House – Fairhaven, Ohio

Levi and Catharine Coffin's House – Fountain City, Indiana

Levi and Catharine Coffin Quaker Meeting House – Fountain City, Indiana

Preble County Courthouse – Eaton, Ohio (see quilt which features Old Gabe)

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center – Cincinnati, Ohio

Harriett Beecher Stowe's House – Cincinnati, Ohio

John and Jean Rankin's House – Ripley, Ohio

John Parker's House – Ripley, Ohio

This coloring book was made possible by:

Camden Comeback – a nonprofit in Camden, Ohio, determined to make Camden a better place to live, work, and play

Camden Archives – a nonprofit in Camden, Ohio, working to preserve Camden's history

W. E. Smith Family Charitable Trust – a charitable trust that funds history-related projects and programs

Walter Mast – owner of Bunker Hill House in Fairhaven, Ohio, and collector of history

References

- *Preble County Ohio* Published by Preble County Historical Society, 1992
- *History of Preble County, Ohio with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches* by H. Z. Williams & Bro., 1881
- Research by Walter Mast located in Bunker Hill House in Fairhaven, Ohio
- Research by Shirley Belcher located in Camden Archives in Camden, Ohio
- *Reminiscences* by Levi Coffin, 1880
- Nps.gov/UGRR
- Marilyn Ballard Crawford's writings located in Camden Archives in Camden, Ohio