

A Bike Trail That Traces the Way to Freedom



Tom Uhlman for The New York Times

MEDITATIVE PACE Cyclists head through Ripley, Ohio, where residents were well known for assisting escaping slaves.

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AMID the farmland just north of the Ohio River, thickets of sumac and maple trees hem the edge of a one-lane road, just as they might have lined the way to freedom two centuries ago.

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Back then, before concrete paving and electricity transformed the countryside, it was along roads like these that runaway slaves were silently escorted through the shadows by kindly strangers. The sound of dogs barking often punctured the silence, signaling that their furious owners had crossed the

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Adventure Cycling Association

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river from [Kentucky](#) to recapture them. If they were lucky, they would find shelter in a safe house to the north by the time dawn's light crept over the tobacco fields.

In an effort to help modern-day visitors understand this cardinal chapter of America's past, the Adventure Cycling Association, a nonprofit organization that promotes bicycle touring, put together a 2,000-mile Underground Railroad Bicycle Route, which roughly traces the network of paths and hideouts that were used by slaves seeking freedom and the abolitionists who ferried them along.

Working with the Center for Minority Health at the [University of Pittsburgh](#), a research and educational institute, the cycling association mapped the route from [Mobile, Ala.](#), to Owen Sound, [Ontario](#), with stops along the way that illustrate the story of the internal slave trade and its complex escape arteries.

More than 4,500 maps of the route have been sold since it was released in 2007, indicating what planners say is cycling's growing popularity not just as recreation but as a dynamic way to experience history.

"Even though you might stay at a bed-and-breakfast or a campsite with a tent, you're in tune with nature and the elements," said Ginny Sullivan, routes coordinator with the cycling association. "Especially with the Underground Railroad, cycling makes it more real."

For those without the time or stamina to [bike](#) 2,000 miles, the group has begun promoting day trips along the way, starting with an area around the Ohio River, which was the pivotal demarcation between the slave state of Kentucky and the free state of [Ohio](#).

The verdant valley about an hour southeast of [Cincinnati](#) was among the most heavily trafficked corridors of the Underground Railroad, in part because the Ohio River there was then particularly narrow and shallow, thus possible to cross. Residents of Ripley, Ohio, in particular, were so well known for assisting slaves who crossed the river there that slaveholders disparaged the town as an "abolitionist hellhole."

Pedaling through Ripley one morning in early spring, I gazed on crumbling churches and warehouses, a quiet 19th-century Main Street pocked with empty store windows, and a row of handsome Federal-style houses that line the riverfront like soldiers at attention. Now a sleepy town of about 1,700, Ripley was once twice that size with a booming pork trade and busy boatyards.

Perched high atop a hill overlooking the town is a small, isolated brick farmhouse where John Rankin, a Presbyterian minister who was among the most legendary “conductors” on the Underground Railroad, lived from 1829 to 1863 with his wife and 13 children. Rankin’s house is preserved as a monument to his legacy of having sheltered approximately 2,000 runaway slaves who sought refuge there.

“The bulk of Rankin’s work was done up here, and his older sons did much of the physical work of moving slaves to the next station north,” said Betty Campbell, a lifelong Ripley resident and a trustee of Ripley Heritage, the group that operates the Rankin house, as she walked through its six modest rooms.

From Ripley, I biked about five miles north on a gentle incline toward Redoak, a speck of a town with little more than a cemetery and an 1817 stone church that was frequently used for abolitionist meetings and to harbor runaway slaves. The church is still active although its membership has dwindled to only 21 people, some of whose names appear on its yellowed old registers.

Mary Howelett, a 61-year-old retired health aide whose family has lived near Redoak for five generations, unlocked the church for me to peek inside. For many in the area whose ancestors worked on the Underground Railroad, details of their doings were seldom passed along in family lore, an omission that bespoke the secrecy that surrounded the highly dangerous enterprise.

“My brother thinks that my grandfather’s house was on the second leg of the Underground Railroad after Ripley,” Ms. Howelett said. “But my dad’s cousin said that some things are better left unsaid.”

From there it was about 10 miles to Georgetown, not known for Underground Railroad activity but significant as the childhood home of [Ulysses S. Grant](#). The two-story brick house where Grant lived until age 17 is now a museum, and the schoolhouse where he studied is just down the road.

The swatch of northern Kentucky on the other side of the river is as dense with historic sites as the Ohio side, so on my second day of biking in the area, I started out three miles south of the river in the old town of [Washington](#).

[Harriet Beecher Stowe](#) visited Washington in 1833 and witnessed a slave auction on the courthouse lawn there, an experience thought to have inspired her lurid description of a slave auction in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

From there, I biked 20 miles northwest on narrow roads winding through expanses of velvety green grass. There were old plantation houses and silos topped with rusty weather vanes.

I arrived at the town of Augusta, a pristine riverside gem, and there saw White Hall, the 1809 mansion of Arthur Thome, a local mill owner who freed his own slaves before becoming a vocal abolitionist accused of harboring runaways. I also saw the town’s 1811 jail where fugitive slaves were imprisoned.

As I returned eastward along the river, at the point opposite Ripley, I stopped to behold the town dappled in late afternoon sunshine. There was John Rankin’s house, set high above the river like a watchtower, a vivid reminder of the beacon it once was.

IF YOU GO

Maps and information about the **Underground Railroad Bicycle Route** are available on the Web site of the Adventure Cycling Association (www.adventurecycling.org/ugrr). Day trip maps and information about three cycling loops in [Ohio](#) that range from 10 to

30 miles are available at www.freedomslanding.com.

Ripley and the surrounding Ohio River Valley are about 60 miles from [Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky](#) International Airport. Information on Underground Railroad sites in the area, including the house of **John Rankin**, right, is available from the Brown County, Ohio, Department of Tourism (937-378-1970; www.browncountytourism.com).

Cincinnati is home to the **National Underground Railroad Freedom Center** (50 East Freedom Way, Cincinnati; 513-333-7500; www.freedomcenter.org).

For advice about [bike](#) routes on both the Ohio and Kentucky sides of the river, contact Michael Hart, the owner of **Mycle's Cycles** (106 East Cherry Street, Georgetown, Ohio; 937-378-5700; www.myclescycles.com). He also arranges guided bicycle tours of Underground Railroad sites, support van transportation, bicycle rentals, sales and repairs.

The French Quarter Inn (25 East McDonald Parkway, Maysville, Ken.; 606-564-8000; www.frenchquarterinn.com) has rooms and suites that begin at \$89.