Hardships on the Underground Railroad

Helping slaves to escape was a crime under the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. This did not stop people in Kansas Territory from helping slaves escape to freedom. Some of them were part of the Underground Railroad, a network of people working together secretly to help escaping slaves. Several routes ran through Kansas Territory. Secret safe houses existed along the routes so travelers would have a place to eat and sleep.

Not much is known about the Underground Railroad network. Those who were part of it knew only a small section, usually from one safe house to the next. This secrecy preserved the identity of the people and of the routes, and made the Underground Railroad a bit safer. Sometimes people wrote about it in letters to their relatives and friends, such as John E. Stewart did in January 1859. Newspapers articles sometimes told about people who were caught working with the Underground Railroad, especially if they were captured helping slaves escape. It is from these records that the hardships and dangers of working and traveling on the Underground Railroad are known today.

John E. Stewart was involved in the Underground Railroad in Kansas. He was a New Hampshire minister and abolitionist who moved his family to Kansas Territory in 1854. Stewart wrote to Thaddeus Hyatt, president of the National Kansas Committee, about raising money to help slaves escape. In the letter Stewart also described some of the difficulties he faced on the Underground Railroad.

Fliers were posted to promote meetings for the antislavery cause. This one announced that abolitionist John Brown, who was quite active with the Underground Railroad, was to be executed.
Wakarusa, Dec 20, 1859
Thaddeus Hyatt Esq

My Dear Sir,

About two hours since I arrived at home after an absence of eight days, [during] which I have [suffered] more than I can describe to you, my hands & feet are froze, ... & what is worse I have only a few hours for rest today, as I must start on the road again at night fall to seek a place of safety for two of my black [brethren] that I have brought this far from the land of bondage. ... I have spent a great portion of my time on this & have brought away from Mo. fourteen, including one unbroken family of which I feel rather proud & very [thankful] that I have been able to do so much good for the oppressed, and so much harm to the oppressors. ...

We have two [difficulties] to contend with. First, poverty, we have to find our own [wagon] & horses, pay our own traveling [expenses], etc., & in many cases to find something for the slaves we [rescue], who are nearly always destitute of everything. ...

[During] my last trip the only horse I had fit for such a trip gave up the ghost after traveling 63 miles in less than 10 hours, he was a good horse & have no doubt is gone to the land where all good horses go. But his loss will seriously hinder me in my future [operations].

For I am in the habit of taking my team into [Missouri]. under the pretence of buying something, say pigs, ... get into conversation with some slaves, find out some who wish to escape, appoint a meeting, stow them in the bottom of the [wagon] give them some [weapons] to defend themselves with ... & sometimes our success depends upon the fleetness of our horses ...

You know sir that my means are very limited, my family gets none of the luxuries, & but [few] of the comforts of this life but they do not [complain], & if you can get me a little of the needful among your numerous friends I promise you to spend it economically in carrying forward the irrepressible conflict.

Our second [difficulty] is what to do with the slaves when we get them. There is something wrong in Nebraska & Iowa I am [fearful] that some have been captured, there & sent back. Is there [any] organization that can be brought to bear so as to take charge of [fugitives]? ... I will do all I can in this great cause feeling satisfied that the day is not far distant when the final triumph of Freedom will be complete ...

Yours in the Irrepressible Conflict

John E Stewart