

The Language of Slavery

Slave: This word refers to someone who is forced to work for someone else against their will. If you did not do what you were told to do, you could be beaten or killed! In our research project, “slave” means those people originally kidnapped from Africa and brought to America to work. It also means anyone whose parent was a slave, (even if they were born in America).

Slaveholder: A slaveholder was anyone who owned a slave. Early in our history there were slaveholders both in the North and in the South, although by the time of the UGRR (1830-1860) most of the slaveholders were in the South. A slaveholder was allowed to bring his property (slaves) into free lands (those areas that weren’t states yet), especially after the Dred Scott Decision in 1857.

Freedom seeker: Even though African American slaves were owned by others (enslaved), their minds and spirits were free. The term “freedom seeker” describes those people who were willing to take risks to achieve their dream of freedom, both in mind AND in body.

Fugitive: This word was used to describe a freedom seeker and suggests that you were a criminal if you attempted to escape from bondage (captivity). “Fugitive” was used in the description of a law “The Fugitive Slave Act” of 1793, which made it illegal for a slave to try to get to freedom. Other terms that gave the same negative impression of freedom seekers were “runaway” and “escapee”.

Station: A station was a place where a freedom seeker could rest and get some food. It could be in a basement, a home, a barn, or even a cave – any shelter that the stationmaster provided.

Conductor: This word means someone who guided freedom seekers between stations or safe houses. A conductor did not have to be a member of an organized part of the UGRR, just someone who was helpful to freedom seekers.

Stationmaster: A stationmaster was someone who gave shelter or a hiding place to freedom seekers. The hiding place didn’t have to be in the house of the stationmaster, but the stationmaster was responsible for providing a safe place to hide. The stationmaster also knew if anyone was looking for the freedom seekers to return them to slavery. He or she had to coordinate with other stationmasters and conductors to make sure that there would be a safe route to the next station.

Abolitionist: Someone who wants to end human slavery.

Adapted from: National Park Service National UGRR Network to
Freedom Program

http://www.nps.gov/ugrr/TEMPLATE/FrontEnd/learn_c.cfm