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# SECTION V

## The Crisis Decade (1850-1859)

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### Lesson 16

### Reimagining the Underground Railroad

**Grade Level:** Middle & High School

**Objectives:**

Students will

- Examine their preconceptions about what the Underground Railroad was and how it functioned.
- Understand that the Underground Railroad was a highly sophisticated network of people.
- Create a web displaying the network of people who helped Ann Maria Weems escape to freedom.

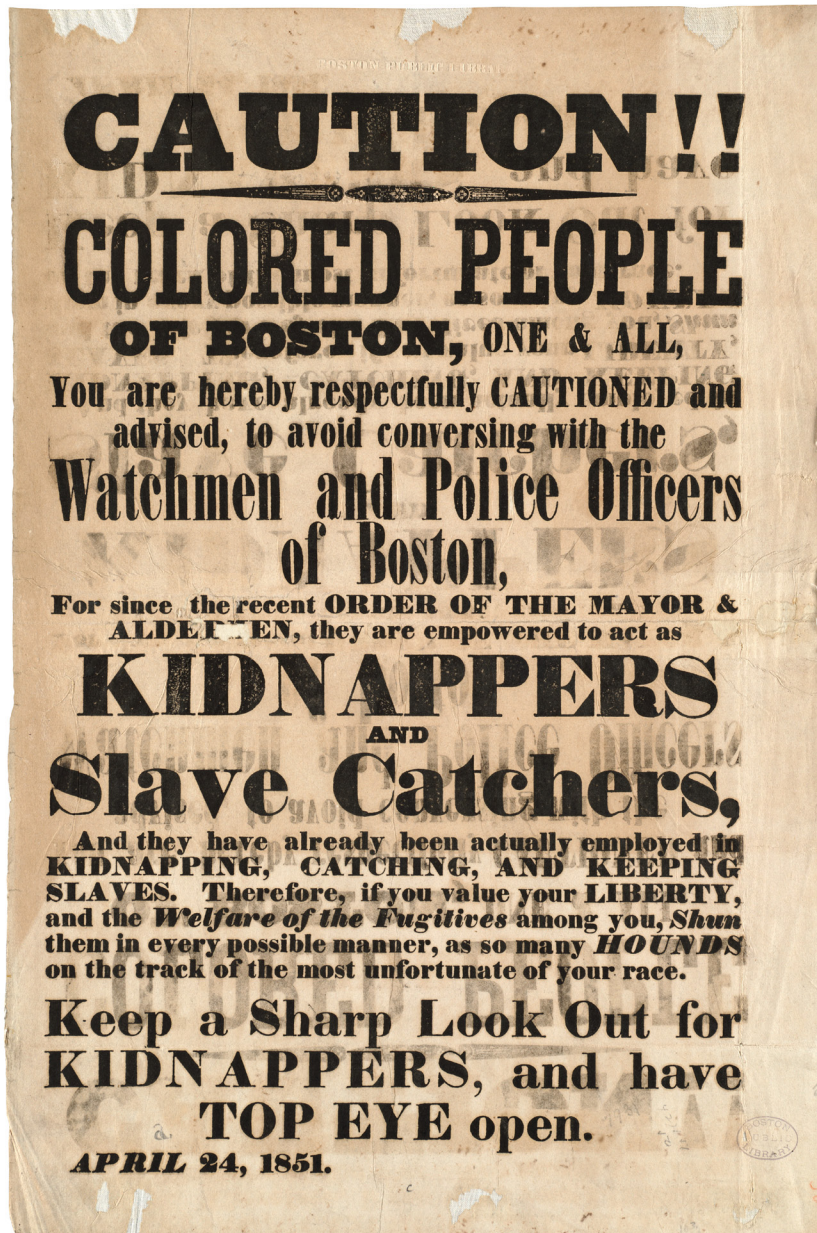
**Time:** One 50-minute class period

**Materials:**

- Worksheet 1: From Brooklyn to England - The Story of Ann Maria Weems

**Background:**

The Underground Railroad is frequently romanticized and associated with attics, tunnels, and hiding places. However, as historians have often noted, the Underground Railroad was neither a railroad nor was it underground. Instead, it involved a highly sophisticated and informally organized network of people and brought together various fundraising efforts in order to assist men, women, and children to safety. They sought freedom in a variety of locations, not just Canada. Brooklyn was among the many destinations.



Caution! Colored People of Boston, One and All,  
*Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books.*

Following the Fugitive Slave Law, African-American communities were on high alert. Posters such as this one warned Boston's community that the police were also slavecatchers.

**"Quite free from terror, I now feel that my bones are a property bequeathed to me for my own use, and not for the servitude or gratification of the white man, in that gloomy and sultry region, where the hue of the skin has left my race in thralldom and misery for ages."**

—Thomas H. Jones, a fugitive who escaped to Brooklyn,  
writing to Massachusetts abolitionist Daniel Foster, May 5, 1851.

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# LESSON PROCEDURES

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1. Write the words “Underground Railroad” on the board and ask students to raise their hands if they have ever heard the term before. Have students take a blank piece of paper and draw the Underground Railroad. Ask students to share their drawings with the rest of the class and explain what they drew. Record some of the common images, ideas, or characteristics from the students’ drawings on the board to revisit later.

2. Tell students that contrary to the name, the Underground Railroad was neither a railroad nor was it underground. Instead, it involved a highly sophisticated network of people who helped fugitives from slavery escape to the North and to Canada. Ask students to make a list of the needs a fugitive escaping to the North would have along the way. Who would provide assistance? How would they communicate with those assisting them?

3. Distribute **Worksheet 1: From Brooklyn to England - The Story of Ann Maria Weems**. As students read the story of Ann Maria Weems, a fugitive who escaped to Canada with the help of an international network of abolitionists, ask them to make annotations on the text by underlining each mention of a person who assisted her to freedom.

4. Ask students to share their annotations. Make a list on the board of all of the people involved in helping Ann Maria Weems escape to Canada. Discuss the potential risks that these people faced in helping Ann Maria Weems.

5. Ask students to use an online tool like [bubbl.us](http://bubbl.us) or [popplet.com](http://popplet.com) to organize a web that displays Ann Maria Weems’ network of helpers. Each bubble should contain the helper’s name, location, and how they provided assistance. In addition, you can also have them track the network of support on an online or wall map to give a sense of its geographic reach (downloadable outline maps are available at: <http://www.eduplace.com/ss/maps/>)

6. Have students reflect on their initial understanding of the Underground Railroad with the reality that they experienced through Weems’ story and discuss what they’ve learned.

## Linking Past and Present

- Have students consider how difficult it must have been to establish an international network before the age of telephones or the Internet. Have a class discussion about how enslaved people and anti-slavery activists would have used social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to coordinate their activities along the Underground Railroad. Could they communicate without being detected?
- Human trafficking is believed to be one of the fastest-growing criminal industries in the world. With New York City as a major transportation hub, it is known as a primary transfer point for international human trafficking. Ask students to develop a second web to map a modern-day “Underground Railroad” of activists working to abolish human trafficking. Visit [www.nyc.gov/endhumantrafficking](http://www.nyc.gov/endhumantrafficking) and <http://stophumantraffickingny.wordpress.com/human-trafficking-manual> for more information.