

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## Underground Railroad

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the [Heritage Minute, "Underground Railroad."](#) Between 1840 and 1860, thousands of American slaves fled to Canada using the organized secret network of people and safe houses called the "Underground Railroad."

### Aims

After careful examination of the "Underground Railroad" Heritage Minute, students will examine the broader theme of refugees. They will discuss Canada's role in providing refuge, and research the history and experiences of refugees from several countries.

Students will research the origins of Black communities in Canada and analyze the level of acceptance and discrimination that Black Canadians have faced in the past and present. Students will also research the government's policies and processes for admitting refugees into Canada.

### Activities

#### 1. Understanding the Characters

The drama of the one-minute film comes from the intense emotions of the characters and the uncertainty of their situation.

- Liza, the main character, is terribly upset. Imagine what she must be feeling and thinking. Remember what she has probably gone through during her life as a slave and on her escape to Canada, as well as her position as a stranger in her new country.

- Describe the reactions of the other characters. What do they reveal about themselves?

- The filmmaker could have told the story of the Underground Railroad in many ways. Why is focusing on this particular moment in the life of a fictional family an effective way of telling about the Railroad in a single minute?

## **2. Refugees**

The escaping slaves would be called refugees today. Canada has a long history of providing refuge for people fleeing their homelands. In fact, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees awarded Canada its prestigious Nansen Medal in 1986 for our role in this regard. Not all of our history has been honourable however.

- Have students define "refugee." How is it different from "immigrant"? You may want to discuss whether refugees should be treated differently by our government than others seeking to come to Canada, and what the differences should be.

- Discuss the proposition "Refugees are not our problem."

- In groups, have students research the reasons these groups came to Canada, and their experiences here: Doukhabours (early 1900's); European Jews (Second World War) Hungarians (1956); Czechs (1968); Ugandan Asians (1972); Vietnamese (late 1970s); Chileans (1970s); Salvadoreans (1980's).

- Collect current newspaper and magazine articles about refugees and make a display, with a world map, in the classroom.

### **3. Watching carefully**

The Heritage Minute incorporates some interesting details about the Underground Railroad that you might not notice on first viewings.

- The white woman's clothing, as well as the setting, indicate important facts about some of the active agents of the Underground Railroad. What hints are there in the Minute that the woman is a Quaker, the religious group that led the anti-slavery movement?

- What clues are there that the Underground Railroad was a very organized movement that involved many individuals in helping the refugee slaves? Pay close attention to the way the father is brought across the border, and to the confidence of the Quaker woman.

### **4. Black Canadians**

Because the Underground Railroad is a famous story in Canadian history, many people assume that all African Canadians are descendants of escaped slaves, which is far from true.

- Research the origins of the Black populations in Nova Scotia, Québec, Ontario, as well as the historical settlements in Western Canada.

- Draw some conclusions about the treatment Black men and women experienced in Canada, and continue to experience today.

## **5. Refugees**

The escaped slaves were fleeing an oppressive government and social system. Refugees have come to Canada throughout our history.

- What are some recent examples of oppressive conditions in the world that have led refugees to seek asylum in Canada.

- Learn about the stories of recent refugees either from personal interviews or from written accounts.

- What is the governmental process for accepting refugees into Canada? What is controversial about government policies? What changes have been made in refugee applications? What should Canada's role be?

- Look at Canada's historical role in accepting refugees. At times, it has been praised by the United Nations; at other times, it has drawn harsh criticism. Find examples for both.

## **Resources**

- [Heritage Minute: Underground Railroad](#)

- [The Black History in Canada Education Guide](#)
- [The Black History in Canada Education Portal](#)
- [The Canadian Encyclopedia: Underground Railroad](#)
- [Heritage Minute: Maurice Ruddick](#)