

# Summary of Civil War and Underground Railroad

## Iowa and the Civil War

Enslavement was the most divisive issue the United States has ever faced and it led to a bitter Civil War. The early political conflicts were not about enslavement in the South but its extension as new states joined the Union. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 established an East-West line along the southern border of Missouri that its supporters hoped would forever divide free and enslaved settlement. States to the South could allow enslavement; states to the North (with the exception of Missouri) could not.

### Iowa: A Free but Complicit State to Slavery

Iowa was considered a free state, but most white Iowans of the time were still willing to let enslavement exist in the South. Most opposed granting equal rights or opportunities to African Americans. They passed laws attempting to discourage Black people from coming to the state. Iowa did have a small population of abolitionists who wanted to abolish enslavement everywhere as a moral evil.

In 1854, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act that allowed the settlers in any new territory to decide the this issue there for themselves. This opened the possibility that Nebraska, on Iowa's western border, could become a state that enslaved people. Most Iowans opposed that prospect. The Republican Party emerged strongly opposed to any further extension of enslavement into western territories.

### The Election of Abraham Lincoln and the Dawn of the Civil War

In 1860, Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln was elected president. Several southern states seceded (withdrew) from the Union, formed the Confederate States of America and took over federal forts and other buildings. In April, southern cannons opened fire on Ft. Sumter in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina, and the Civil War began.

Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to enlist for three months to put down the rebellion. Iowa quickly exceeded its quota. The war did not end quickly, as most expected and hoped, but instead dragged on for four very bloody years. Iowa soldiers fought mainly in the western battles, including Shiloh and Vicksburg. Disease took a fearful toll on the troops. By the end of the war, 3,000 Iowa soldiers had been killed and around 8,000 had died from diseases.

### Women Take Charge of the Home Front

On the home front, women had to shoulder the workloads of husbands, brothers and sons who had left to fight. Their burdens were especially heavy on the farms. Women also organized to provide the troops with clothing, food and medical supplies. Annie Wittenmyer of Keokuk became a national leader in improving conditions for the sick and wounded in Union hospitals. General Grenville Dodge proved his skill as a railroad builder and created an efficient spy network.

The war had a huge impact on the political landscape. After southern surrender in 1865, the state became strongly Republican. Democrats were tarred as the party of the South. A constitutional amendment in 1868 granted the right to vote to African-American men, though women could not vote until 1920.



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People who had escaped their enslavement headed North to gain their freedom and to escape intolerable situations. They needed courage and resourcefulness to evade law enforcement officers and people who purposely tried to catch them to earn rewards for returning them to their enslavers. Southerners bitterly resented those in the North who assisted enslaved people. They coined the term "Underground Railroad" to mean an organized network devoted to help people escape enslavement, which meant sometimes even crossing the border into Canada. There was no actual physical "railroad" with engines and tracks, but the term stuck. In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law that levied heavy fines on anyone guilty of helping enslaved people to escape. Many in the North resented the law that forced them to help sustain a system that they opposed.

## Underground Railroad "Stations" Develop in Iowa

Iowa shares a southern border with Missouri, which did allow enslavement. In the 1840s and 1850s, abolitionists (those who wanted to end enslavement) developed a system of "stations" that could move freedom seekers toward the Mississippi River to Illinois. Members of two religious groups, the Congregationalists and Quakers, played leading roles in abolitionist activities. They were also active in the Underground Railroad in the state.

Because it had to be secret, there are few written records about the Underground Railroad in Iowa. One source has identified more than 100 Iowans involved in the effort. A main route across the state started in southwest Iowa near Council Bluffs where a free black, John Williamson, helped those fleeing enslavement on their road to freedom. Hitchcock House in Cass County near Lewis is another known stop in one way or another with the Underground Railroad. Rev. George Hitchcock, a Congregationalist minister, passed along "passengers" to the next stop. James Jordan in West Des Moines and Josiah Grinnell in Grinnell were also leaders of the effort. Several of these sites are now museums open to the public.

It is impossible to know the numbers of Black people the Underground Railroad assisted. Individual families also responded when asked for help. Free Black people living in the state, particularly in southeast Iowa, were often involved. When the Civil War started and the Fugitive Slave Law could no longer be enforced in the North, many people escaped into the state and became permanent residents. In 1868, Iowa granted Black men the right to vote. The Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools and discrimination in public accommodations were illegal in Iowa.