

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 2: "Flight to Freedom"

John Parker on the Challenges of Running Away

Nearly everything we know about John Parker comes from his autobiography. According to the memoir, Parker was born in 1827 in Norfolk, Virginia. His father was a wealthy white man; his mother a slave like Parker. He spent the first 18 years of his life as a slave and earned a reputation as a troublemaker for regularly trying to escape. In 1845 he purchased his freedom. In 1848 he married and moved to Ripley, Ohio the next year. It was in Ripley, a center of abolitionist activity, that he began his work on the Underground Railroad. By his own count, he helped over 400 slaves to freedom. In addition to his abolitionist work, Parker was a successful iron worker and businessman; in 1865 he purchased an iron foundry, and he patented several popular inventions. John Parker's autobiography was transcribed by the journalist Frank Moody Gregg in the 1880s.

Every precaution was taken to prevent the fugitive from successfully passing through this forbidden land. The woods were patrolled nightly by constables, and any man black or white had to give a good account of himself, especially if he were a stranger. Every ford was watched, while along the creeks and river, the skiffs were not only pulled up on shore, but were padlocked to trees, and the oars removed. There were dogs in every dooryard, ready to run down the unfortunates.

Once word came from further south that runaways were on the way, the whole countryside turned out, not only to stop the fugitives, but to claim the reward for their capture. Everything was organized against the slaves' getaway.

But in spite of the odds against them, there were a surprising number who did make good their escape. This must be said for the slaves who took to the woods, they were above the average slave in intelligence and courage, otherwise they would never have started. Once they were started, no obstacle was too great for them to overcome.

Source: John P. Parker, *His Promised Land*, reprint, edited by Stuart Seely Sprague (W.W. Norton, 1996).