

NORTH Glossary Terms

Abolitionist – a person who sought to end the practice of slavery in the United States during the 19th century. A majority of early abolitionists were white, but the most prominent leaders of the movement were escaped or freed black men and women, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. Other famous abolitionists include William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Brown.

Border ruffians – a group of proslavery Missourians who used to cross the border into Kansas to vote illegally, raid towns and intimidate anti-slavery settlers. The term originated after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, which allowed local voters to decide whether Kansas would be a free or slave state. Border ruffians, or “bushwackers,” clashed with anti-slavery groups through the outbreak of the Civil War, prompting the name “Bleeding Kansas” due to years of violent civil disturbances.

Conductor – a person who guided runaway slaves from place to place along the routes of the Underground Railroad. Perhaps the most famous conductor was Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave who helped hundreds to freedom over the course of eight years.

Free people of color – people of black heritage who were born free or escaped the bonds of slavery before its practice was abolished in 1865. The rights of these individuals varied by state, but many enjoyed a high level of acceptance and prosperity, though still set apart from their white neighbors.

Freedom seekers – an enslaved person who takes action to obtain freedom from slavery, either by attempting escape on their own or through the Underground Railroad. Another common term is a “runaway slave.”

Maroons – formerly enslaved black people and their descendants who gained their freedom by fleeing for cover in remote mountains or dense tropical terrains, particularly in the marshes of the lower South. They developed their own culture, government, trade and as ranks grew, often took to guerrilla warfare against their oppressors.

Mulatto – a person of mixed white and black ancestry, usually the first-generation offspring of black and white parentage. While this was a common term used during the time of the Underground Railroad, today the term mulatto is considered to be a dated and offensive term with many preferring to identify themselves as biracial, mixed or simply “other.”

Negro or Colored – a term historically used to denote a person of black heritage, usually classified according to black ancestry and physical traits such as dark skin pigmentation. In the past these words were commonly used, though in the late 1900s there was a push toward a preference for “black” and “African American.” In 2016, President Barack Obama [signed a law](#) pushing to modernize some 1970s-era laws and calling for the removal of these terms on federal forms.

Plaçage – a contract relationship between a white man and a free woman of color, in which the man agrees to take care of the young woman and any children she may bear him by providing housing and a form of income.

Plantation owners – a person who owned an estate in the American South on which crops such as coffee, sugar and tobacco were generally cultivated by the exploitation of slave or indentured labor. Prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, most plantation owners owned 20 or more slaves.

Quadroon – a person of one-quarter black ancestry and three-quarters white ancestry. Following the accomplishments of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s, this term is now considered to be a dated and offensive term.

“Sound on the goose” – a phrase used during colonial America to signify commitment to the pro-slavery cause in Kansas.

Stations – the places on the Underground Railroad that sheltered runaway slaves, often these were homes, barns, churches and businesses of anti-slavery sympathizers.

Underground Railroad – a network of routes, places and people that helped enslaved people in the American South escape to the North. The name was used metaphorically as it was not located underground nor was an actual railroad instead operating through “safe houses” and properties of anti-slavery sympathizers. Routes took freedom seekers in many directions and was often not a direct line to northern states. Between 1810 and 1850, it is estimated to have helped guide 100,000 slaves to freedom.