

Aunt Polka

by Galin Berrier

Keosauqua, seat of Van Buren County in southeastern Iowa, has about 1,000 residents today. In 1873, it had a population of 772, of whom 102 were African Americans, down from a high of 211 in 1870. No black people live in Keosauqua now, but in the 1870s the African American community supported three or four churches, as well as an active Masonic organization.

Most of Keosauqua's blacks probably came from Missouri during or after the Civil War, but a few may have come earlier, as fugitive slaves. One such was "Aunt Polka," found hiding in a cornfield by five elders from Keosauqua's African American churches who had searched for and found her in the snow. Thinking at first that her rescuers were slave catchers, she was said to have leaped on a tree stump, pulled a long knife, and threatened the deacons with it. She had her baby in her arms and a toddler at her side.

Aunt Polka told a remarkable tale of having fled from Mississippi with her 14 children. She said the two oldest boys and two oldest girls had been left with a black family along the way. Eight others had died from lack of food, sickness, or exposure, only the baby girl and the toddler having survived to reach Iowa.

I told this story once at a meeting of a county historical society and expressed more than a little doubt that it could be true. It seemed improbable to me that

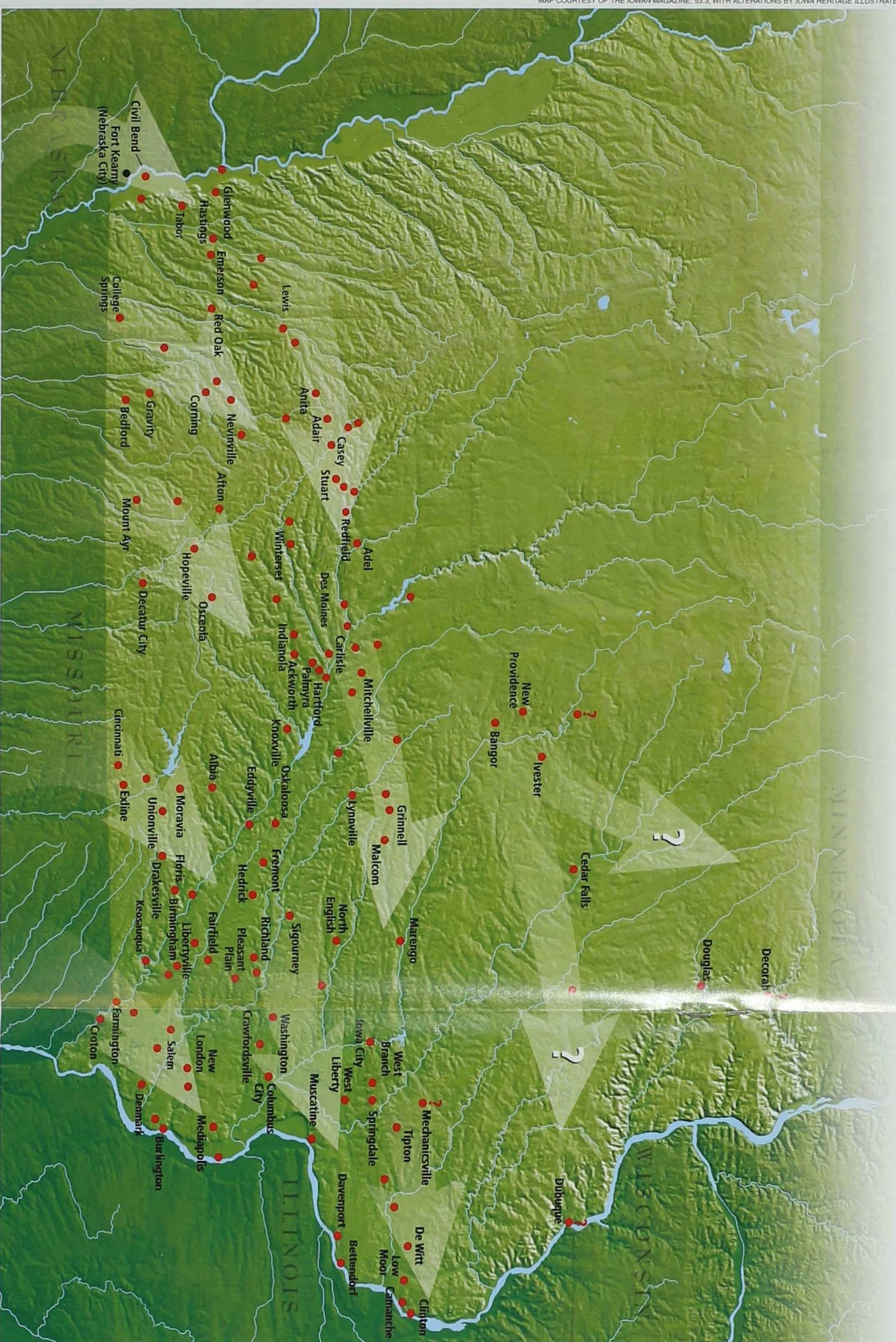
the two youngest and most vulnerable children were the ones who survived. A woman in the back spoke up, saying, "I can tell you've never been a mother," and I couldn't deny that! She argued that Aunt Polka would have been especially protective of her youngest children.

That may be, and there are a few documented cases of such long escapes from slavery succeeding. William and Ellen Craft traveled 1,000 miles to freedom from Macon, Georgia, to Philadelphia in four days in December 1848. Josiah Henson (said to be the model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom") escaped from Kentucky with his wife and children in 1830 and eventually reached Canada. But such well-publicized escapes were very unusual.

We now know that the great majority of runaways—about 75 or 80 percent—were young men, healthy and strong, either unmarried or at least without any children. Young slave women were less likely to run away because by their late teens or early twenties they had often begun to raise a family. Running away as a family, especially with children, was very risky and usually unsuccessful. ♦

Galin Berrier is an adjunct instructor in history at Des Moines Area Community College in Ankeny. He wrote the underground railroad chapter in *Outside In: African American History in Iowa, 1838–2000*. He volunteers with Iowa History Day, serves on the Humanities Iowa Speakers Bureau, and conducts interactive sessions for school classes for Iowa Public Television.





Tracking Down the Underground Railroad

The underground railroad was spread across southern Iowa. The large white arrows suggest the general direction. Fugitives usually tried to reach Chicago; from there, some went on to Canada. Red dots indicate “stations.” The system was loosely organized and often functioned based on connections between individuals in a locale. Most local conductors probably knew of the next two or three stations; few would have known the stations in all parts of the state.

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