

# THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

*escape from slavery*

## REACHING SAFETY: HEROES FOR THE CAUSE

As dawn breaks I see a brick house high up on a hill. Lindsay – the man in the woods – told me about it, when he took me to the boat we have used to cross the river. He said the house belongs to a man who has helped many black folks to freedom.

Lindsay brings the boat to the far bank of the river. He tells me to knock at the house and say I am “a friend of a friend.” I do as he says, and an old white man cracks the door and looks me over, sending a chill down my spine. But then he extends his hand and says, “My name is John.”

He invites me in and sits me down at a table, where his wife gives me the finest meal I can remember. John’s children gather round me like I’m a curiosity. “Haven’t you ever had rhubarb pie?” a little girl asks me. I tell her slaves don’t eat so good. We were allowed less than half a bushel of cornmeal per week for every four of us, and almost no meat and vegetables, save for some fatback. The word “fatback” makes her screw her face up in disgust.

After dinner John tells me about Ohio. It is a free state, he says, but that doesn’t mean I’m safe. I am what he calls a “fugitive,” and there are laws against me being here. Even folks who don’t approve of slavery might turn me in, because they can be punished for helping me. It’s not even safe for me to sleep in the main part of the house – he takes me instead to a cellar in his barn, where I rest until evening.

That night John gives me a rough map of places I can stay, and tells me I should travel through Cleveland. From there, he says, I can cross Lake Erie into Canada. His wife packs me food for my journey, and I set out again, wondering how I will make it across the whole state of Ohio, and if there will ever be a time when I don’t have to hide or fear the sound of dogs barking.