

GAMMON HOUSE

DISCOVERY TRAIL



SAFE HOUSES & SECRET CODES
on Route 68



From The River to The Lake

Underground Railroad Trail Guide · Springfield, Ohio



NOTE: Small difference may exist between the audio and
print versions; the print version is most accurate.

About this Booklet

This booklet is your companion guide to the **Gammon House Discovery Trail**, an experience honoring the courage of those who traveled the Underground Railroad in their journey toward freedom. Each stop along the trail represents a real community that played a vital role in this secret network stretching from the Ohio River to Lake Erie — from Ripley to Toledo, along historic Route 68.

How To Use This Guide

- **On the Trail:** Follow the numbered stops in sequence. Read each stop's story as you encounter its marker on the trail.
- **To Learn More:** Use this booklet as a reference — each stop connects to a real Ohio town with its own rich history.
- **Share the Story:** The Gammon House at 620 Piqua Place, Springfield, Ohio is one of only three UGRR stops in Ohio both owned and operated by free people of color.

The 15 Stops on This Trail follow the historic Route 68 corridor — known as Yellow Springs Street — from the banks of the Ohio River all the way to Toledo on Lake Erie. Ohio was the northern trunk line and the heart of the Underground Railroad



Trail Overview



15 Stops

From the River to the Lake

Route 68

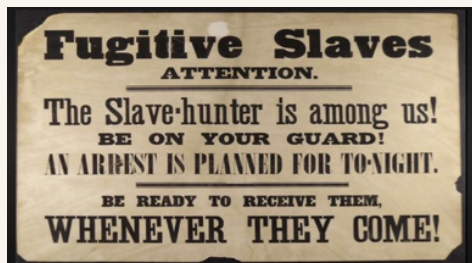
Ohio's Underground Railroad Corridor

01	Ripley	<i>The beacon on Liberty Hill — John Rankin House</i>
02	Georgetown	<i>Home of U.S. Grant & UGRR conductor Dr. Dunlap</i>
03	Wilmington	<i>Quaker courage and Caesar Creek's secret refuge</i>
04	Xenia	<i>Where railway commerce hid freedom seekers</i>
05	Wilberforce	<i>Nation's first private HBCU and seven active stations</i>
06	Yellow Springs	<i>The Conway Colony & Wheeling Gaunt's legacy</i>
07	Springfield	<i>The Gammon House — our home UGRR stop</i>
08	Mechanicsburg	<i>The 'black abolitionist hole' stood its ground</i>
09	Urbana	<i>Peter Byrd & St. Paul AME Church</i>
10	West Liberty	<i>Elizabeth Piatt's white flag signal of safety</i>
11	Bellefontaine	<i>Wheeler Tavern — first brick structure in the area</i>
12	Kenton	<i>The Big Woods and an integrated schoolhouse</i>
13	Dunkirk	<i>Natural swamp refuge in Hardin County</i>
14	Findlay	<i>The Great Black Swamp as nature's shield</i>
15	Toledo	<i>Gateway to Lake Erie — and freedom in Canada</i>

The Journey Begins

Safe Houses & Secret Codes on Route 68

Imagine, going back in time, in the late 1850's when the Underground Railroad was at its peak just before the Civil War. You have traveled hundreds of miles after escaping from a plantation in the deep south.



Warning poster, ca. 1850

You have now reached the great Ohio River. Ohio is one of the free states where you will find even more help on your journey to freedom.

As you walk along the trails receiving help from time to time, you discover it's called the Underground Railroad (UGRR). Your ancestors were forbidden to talk about this trail and the secret codes that could lead you to freedom, but through church songs, passed-down stories, oral family history, and hearsay you now have an understanding.

The night is heavy with silence as you reach the banks of the Ohio River after traveling hundreds of miles. Your body aches, but you cannot stop now. Across the river and on a large hill, you see a light in the window of a house (John Rankin House).

Before you, the river stretches wide and dark—a final barrier between slavery and the hope of freedom. You recall the whispered stories, the hidden meanings in church songs, and the secret knowledge taught, guiding you here. A man in a rowboat sees you and offers to give you a ride to safety.

From the shadows, he approaches quietly. "My name's Arnold," he whispers. "Arnold Gragston (conductor). I've been waiting." You realize this is no chance meeting. This is the Underground Railroad in motion. Not tracks and trains, but people. Brave people. He gestures toward the canoe.

"We don't have much time. Patrols come through here. You ready?" He motions to a concealed canoe. An enslaved conductor risking everything to help others escape. With urgency, he guides you in, pushing off into the current. The river feels endless, cold, and dangerous. Fear grips you, but the light remains constant, leading you onward. At last, you reach the Ohio shore. "Go quickly," he whispers.

You step onto free soil and begin climbing toward the light, leaving behind the life you were forced to live—and moving closer to freedom at your first stop in Ripley, Ohio.



"Uncle Tom's Cabin" Illustration

Uncle Tom's Cabin was an anti-slavery novel about life among the lowly that woke America up to its inhumanity and brutality.

An illustration of a man with a whip standing next to an African American slave from the novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, by American novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1852.

STOP 1

RIPLEY

In the quiet bend of the Ohio River, where the water narrows and the Kentucky hills loom close, sits the village of Ripley, Ohio. Established in 1812, this town once hummed with the industry of iron foundries and tobacco warehouses, but its true soul was forged in the flickering light of a lantern.

High on Liberty Hill, the modest brick John Rankin House stood as a literal beacon for those escaping bondage. Reverend John Rankin and his family assisted between 400 to 1,000 Freedom Seekers.

Down by the river, John P. Parker, a formerly enslaved man and brilliant inventor, rowed into the dark waters of the South to guide others across, never losing a "passenger" to the slave catchers who prowled the banks.

Today, the village's 55-acre historic district invites a slower pace. You can walk the Freedom Stairway—the same 100 stone steps used by runaways—to reach the Rankin House and look out over seven bends of the river. Along Front Street, Federal-style homes with wide porches face the water, their quiet dignity belying a time when this was a haven for abolitionism.

Between the annual Ohio Rural Heritage Festival and the unique Ohio Tobacco Museum, Ripley remains a place where the weight of American history is felt in every river breeze and cobblestone.

These photos are from the book, "Freedom Seekers in Ohio & the UGRR".



*John Rankin House
Ripley, Ohio*



*The John P. Parker
House
Ripley, Ohio*

STOP 2

GEORGETOWN

In the quiet village of Georgetown, Ohio, the legacy of American freedom is etched into the very landscape of Brown County. This historic community served as the foundational setting for Ulysses S. Grant, who lived in his boyhood home from 1823 until 1839. It was here, amidst the rigorous chores of his father's tannery and the local schoolhouse, that the future 18th President and General of the Union Army developed the quiet determination that would eventually lead Northern troops to victory in 1865.

Dr. Milton Dunlap, a prominent physician born in Brown County, was a vital "conductor" on the Underground Railroad. Operating with immense courage, Dr. Dunlap is famously credited with hiding the real-life inspirations for Eliza and George from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. While Eliza famously crossed the icy Ohio River at nearby Ripley, her husband found refuge in a barn behind Dunlap's property in Greenfield as they recuperated for their journey toward Canada.

Today, Georgetown preserves these intersecting histories of leadership and liberation. Visitors can stand in the same rooms where a young Grant dreamt of a life beyond the tannery, or reflect on the clandestine networks supported by men like Dr. Dunlap.



A candle in the window told Freedom Seekers they had arrived at a Safe House.

STOP 3

WILMINGTON

In the rolling hills of Clinton County, Wilmington, Ohio, stands as a testament to the profound conviction of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). This region's commitment to liberty was rooted in its very soil, long before the first brick of Wilmington College was laid in 1870.

The land itself bore the name of Caesar, a Black man and former slave who, in the late 1700s, found sanctuary among the Shawnee. Whether as a scout, an interpreter, or a fugitive who warned the tribes of approaching armies, Caesar's presence transformed the creek into a symbol of defiance against bondage.

By the mid-19th century, that spirit of resistance flourished through the Underground Railroad. The Quakers and the Caesar Creek Friends Methodist community turned their farms into a vital nerve center for freedom seekers. These "Friends" did not merely pray against injustice; they organized sophisticated networks of sanctuary. The Caesar Creek settlement became a key waypoint, where fleeing individuals were sheltered in barns and hidden cellars—often on the very banks where Caesar once walked—before being moved north toward Canada.



Wagon or false-bottom wagons were often used to transport Freedom Seekers to Safe Houses.

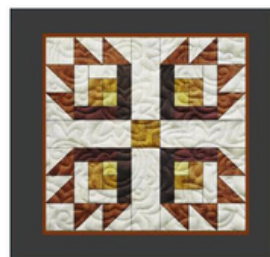
STOP 4

XENIA

In the mid-1800s, Xenia, Ohio, served as a critical crossroads where the engine of American commerce collided with the secret machinery of the Underground Railroad. The arrival of the Little Miami Railroad in 1845 changed the landscape forever. By 1846, iron rails connected Cincinnati to Xenia, bringing wealthy Southern planters to the fashionable Xenia Springs Resort and the Tawawa House Hotel in nearby Wilberforce.

Beneath this veneer of high-society tourism, a courageous network of Quaker families operated in the shadows. Valentine and Jane Nicholson established their home as a premier station on the road to liberty. Driven by their "Inner Light," the Nicholsons provided food and medical care to freedom seekers, often coordinating with David and Elizabeth Smith. These families transformed the Xenia area into a sanctuary, turning barns and cellars into safe havens for those moving toward the Canadian border.

The proximity of the Xenia Springs resort created a surreal tension. In this unique geography, the enslaved were sometimes hidden just miles from where their former masters vacationed. Through the tireless work of these families, Xenia evolved from a mere railway stop into a beacon of defiance.



Bear Paw
~Leads to fresh water
and food~



The Bear Paw Quilt Pattern meant that Freedom Seekers could follow it to fresh water and food.

STOP 5

WILBERFORCE

Deep in Greene County, Ohio, there is a stretch of land where the echoes of freedom still resonate more loudly than the modern hum of traffic. While many historical tours follow the straight line of Route 68, those who know the true map of liberation look toward U.S. Route 42 and the village of Wilberforce. In the mid-19th century, Wilberforce was more than just a settlement; it was a sanctuary. Before it became the home of Wilberforce University—the nation's first private HBCU—the area was known as Tawawa Springs, a critical crossroads for the Underground Railroad with at least seven active stations tucked away in its rolling hills.

The irony of Wilberforce was its visibility. Southern slaveholders often brought enslaved people to the local health resort for "relaxation," unaware that the very ground they walked on was being used to funnel others towards Canada. Conductors and agents in the community turned quiet farmhouses into beacons of hope.

Colonel Charles Young: Born in 1864, the Colonel purchased a home in Wilberforce, built in the 1830s, that had served as an active Underground Railroad stop. His life—military leader, diplomat, educator—became a continuation of the same struggle for dignity and self-determination.



Shoo-Fly
~Nickname for
Harriet Tubman~



*The Shoo-Fly
Quilt Pattern
referenced the
nickname for
Harriet Tubman.*

STOP 6

YELLOW SPRINGS

During the Underground Railroad era, Yellow Springs, Ohio, served as a vital beacon for freedom seekers. Many traveled north from the Ohio River along the Bullskin Trace, a historic path now known as U.S. Route 68. This route provided a direct artery through the state, guiding "passengers" toward Lake Erie and the eventual promise of safety in Canada.

The village's reputation for progressive ideals was cemented in 1862 by the arrival of the Conway Colony.

Led by abolitionist minister Moncure Daniel Conway, this group of over 30 men, women, and children had been enslaved on his father's Virginia plantation. Braving Confederate troops and treacherous weather, they found a permanent home in the village, with families like the Gwinns becoming pillars of the community and the local First Baptist Church—known as the "Anti-Slavery Baptist Church."

Among the notable figures of this era was Wheeling Gaunt, a former slave who became a local landowner and member of the Central Chapel AME Church. Upon his death, he bequeathed his land to the Village of Yellow Springs, with rent proceeds used annually to purchase flour and sugar for the village's widows and those in need at Christmas time—a tradition that continues today.



Jacobs Ladder
~An UGRR Symbol~



*The Jacob's
Ladder Quilt
Pattern
communicated
the direction of
an escape route.*

STOP 7

SPRINGFIELD

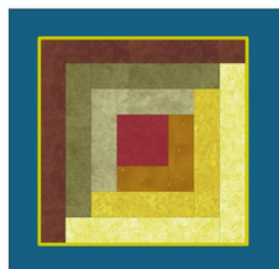
The George & Sarah Gammon House stands as symbol of resistance and agency within the African American community. Built in 1850 at 620 Piqua Place—the same year the oppressive Fugitive Slave Act was passed—the house is exceptionally rare: one of only three existing Underground Railroad stops in Ohio that was both owned and operated by free people of color.

George, a successful entrepreneur born in Champaign County, and Sarah (Bradley) from Ross County, both had families deeply rooted in the movement and chose to risk their own freedom to secure it for others. Despite the threat of heavy fines and imprisonment, they transformed their modest brick home into a "station," providing food, clothing, & shelter to those navigating the perilous journey north.

This legacy extended to the battlefield. Eldest son Charles Gammon enlisted in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry—the North's first all-Black military unit. He tragically gave his life during the 1863 James Island, South Carolina assault, days before the regiment's charge on Fort Wagner.

Springfield is also home to Ferncliff Cemetery, containing one of the largest burial sites of United States Colored Troops in Ohio. Due to efforts of local resident Art Thomas, the Gammon House was saved from demolition in 1998, and began the preservation process which led to its landmark status.

You are here! The Gammon House at 620 Piqua Place is one of only UGRR stations in Ohio both owned and operated by free people of color.



Log Cabin
~ A Safe House ~



The Log Cabin Quilt Pattern meant you had reached a Safe House.

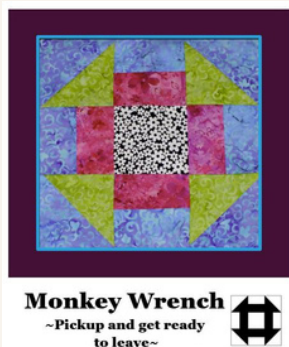
STOP 8

URBANA

Peter Byrd was a dedicated Black abolitionist in Urbana who devoted his time and resources to aiding freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad. Committed to education, he also served on the first board of trustees of the Urbana Colored School, founded in 1853, helping expand opportunities for Black children.

George and Rebecca Gammon's parents, John and Rebecca Gammon, were charter members of Urbana's St. Paul AME Church. Founded in 1824, St. Paul AME became a spiritual and strategic center for the Black community. Beyond worship, the church supported the Underground Railroad, offering guidance, coordination, and refuge for those escaping slavery. Its members sustained a network of trust and resistance.

In 1852, a notable civil suit alleged that the Adams family created a disturbance to aid Louis Adams and others in their escape toward freedom. Louis Adams, the third great-grandfather of Art Thomas, was part of an effort that echoed through generations, as Thomas later became one of the original founders of the Gammon House, preserving Urbana's legacy of courage and cooperation.



Monkey Wrench
~Pickup and get ready
to leave~



*The Monkey Wrench
Quilt Pattern meant
you need to get
ready to leave!*

STOP 9

MECHANICSBURG

Mechanicsburg, Ohio, stood as a quiet but powerful force during the era of the Underground Railroad, proving that influence was not limited to the better-known Route 68 corridor. Positioned along Route 29, the village became an essential link in the broader network of resistance to slavery, offering shelter, secrecy, and courage to those seeking freedom.

One of its most remarkable stories is that of Addison White, a freedom seeker from Kentucky. When slave catchers attempted to reclaim him, the citizens of Mechanicsburg—Black and white alike—rallied in and ultimately secured his freedom. This bold defiance underscored the village's moral conviction.

So strong was its anti-slavery stance that Mechanicsburg was reportedly labeled a "Black abolitionist hole"—a term used by critics but worn as a badge of honor by its residents. In this small Ohio village, collective action turned principle into protection, making it a vital and courageous stop in the Underground Railroad network.



Drunkards Oath

~Danger, slave hunters
are near, backtrack~



*The Drunkards Oath
Quilt Pattern meant
"Danger! Slave
hunters are near!
Backtrack!"*

STOP 10

WEST LIBERTY

West Liberty, Ohio, played a quiet but vital role during the Underground Railroad era, where courage often lived behind ordinary doors. Among its most remarkable figures was Elizabeth Benjamin Piatt, whose home became a beacon of hope for freedom seekers traveling north.

Her 17-room log residence, known as "Pioneer House," stood as both a family home and a place of refuge. Within its walls, those escaping slavery found shelter, warmth, and protection from those who sought to capture them. Elizabeth's work required both bravery and careful secrecy, especially when her husband, Judge Piatt, was away from home.

During those times, she devised a simple but powerful signal: a white flag placed within a metal statue outside the house, indicating it was safe to enter. To freedom seekers, it was a silent message that help awaited them inside. In a landscape filled with danger and uncertainty, West Liberty transformed into a place of resistance and compassion where quiet defiance helped guide many toward freedom.



The White Flag was Elizabeth Piatt's signal of safety.



Oil Lamp
~A Safe House symbol~

The Oil Lamp was a Safe House symbol.

STOP 11

BELLEFONTAINE

Bellefontaine, Ohio, played a meaningful role in the Underground Railroad as a key stop along Route 68. One important figure was Captain Amos Wheeler, a Civil War veteran who served in the 82nd Ohio Volunteer Infantry. His family constructed the "Wheeler Tavern" in 1836—a well-known station on the Underground Railroad and the first brick structure in the area. The tavern stood along the historic Sandusky Trail, a major pathway used by freedom seekers moving north. Its location made it a strategic and supportive stop within this secret network.

Today, the Logan County Museum preserves this history, highlighting local contributions to the Underground Railroad. Notably, the museum features an exhibit on the Williams family station, a documented safe haven where escaping individuals received shelter & assistance.

Through these sites and stories, Bellefontaine's legacy reflects courage, cooperation, and the quiet resistance that helped many on their journey to freedom.



The Carpenter Wheel Quilt Pattern told Freedom Seekers that they should travel west to northwest to find the next Safe House.

STOP 12

KENTON

In the quiet landscape of Kenton, the Underground Railroad moved not by tracks, but by courage, secrecy, and shared humanity. Just beyond town, the dense Lawrence Woods ("Big Woods") provided natural refuge. Its thick cover concealed freedom seekers traveling north, often guided by local abolitionists who risked much to offer shelter and direction.

As they approached Kenton, freedom seekers found more than temporary safety. A small free Black community offered support, food, & guidance. In a remarkable act of unity, local African Americans established a schoolhouse welcoming both Black and white children. At a time when segregation dominated much of the nation, this integrated school reflected values of cooperation and shared progress.

Kenton's role in the Underground Railroad was defined by ordinary people making extraordinary choices. Farmhouses, wooded paths, and trusted neighbors formed a network of resistance. Though much of this history survives through oral tradition, its legacy remains woven into the town's identity as a place where freedom was protected and equality began to take root.



The North Star Quilt Pattern told Freedom Seekers that they should follow the North Star to get to Canada.

STOP 13

DUNKIRK

Dunkirk in Hardin County, Ohio, played a small but meaningful role in the Underground Railroad.

The swampy area near the forks of Flat Branch Creek (now drained) created a natural refuge—dense, mosquito-filled, and difficult terrain that discouraged pursuers. Freedom seekers could hide on small patches of higher ground (“islands”) within the swamp before continuing north toward safer routes.

Elsewhere in Hardin County, assistance came from sympathetic residents, many influenced by anti-slavery beliefs. Though the county was not a major hub like routes closer to Lake Erie, it functioned as a quiet link in a larger chain leading toward places such as Findlay, Ohio, and onward to northern Ohio. Conductors often guided small groups at night, using back roads, wooded areas, and waterways for concealment. Oral histories and local traditions suggest that barns, attics, and even churches occasionally served as temporary safe havens.



Bow Ties
~Bringing a change
of clothing~

*The Bow Tie Quilt
Pattern told Freedom
Seekers to change
into nice clothing to
blend in with the
local community.*

STOP 14

FINDLAY

Findlay, Ohio played a quiet but meaningful role in the broader network of the Underground Railroad. In the early 19th century, the region was part of the dense and marshy “Great Black Swamp,” a landscape that naturally shielded those seeking freedom. The thick forests, muddy ground, and winding waterways created both danger and protection, making it harder for slave catchers to pursue escapees.

Beyond geography, the human element was just as important. Local settlers, many of whom held strong anti-slavery beliefs, risked legal punishment to provide food, shelter, and guidance. These individuals formed informal but coordinated routes that connected safe houses across northwest Ohio. By 1818, the involvement of Native American groups such as the Shawnee and Ottawa added another layer of support, as their deep knowledge of the land made navigation through the swamp more manageable.

Findlay’s location also placed it along routes leading north toward Lake Erie and ultimately into Canada, where slavery was abolished. While not as widely recognized as larger hubs, the area’s contribution reflects the collective courage of small communities that quietly resisted injustice and helped shape the path to freedom.



*The Flying Geese
Quilt Pattern told
Freedom Seekers that
it was time to go
north.*

STOP 15

TOLEDO

In the mid-19th century, Toledo was a crucial gateway to freedom. Along the Underground Railroad, Route 68 guided freedom seekers north through Ohio's interior, connecting farms, churches, and safe houses. By the time they reached Toledo, they were close to liberation but still faced danger from slave catchers watching border cities.

The journey converged near the banks of the Maumee River. Under cover of darkness, some escapees found passage in small boats or canoes, navigating into Lake Erie. From there, Canada and freedom lay just across the water.

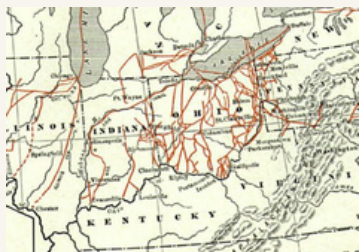
Toledo's free Black community played an essential role. In 1858, they established Warren African Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the city's first Black churches. It became both a spiritual center and a source of support for those fleeing bondage. Beyond organized routes, Toledo's network depended on conductors, abolitionists, and families who risked everything to shelter strangers. Though the city appeared unassuming, its riverbanks and homes held stories of bravery, sacrifice, and the pursuit of freedom.



The Crossroads Quilt Pattern told Freedom Seekers that they were finally at the last Ohio stop before boarding a boat to Canada.

BEYOND THE BORDER

Hope & New Beginnings: Canadian Settlements



*Ohio's
Underground
Railroad routes —
the northern trunk
line to Canada
Crossing to
Canada —
freedom at last*



By the time many Freedom Seekers reached the Toledo area, they had already endured long, dangerous journeys north from the Ohio River. Though weary, they were close enough to sense the promise of freedom on Lake Erie's winds. Some remained briefly, sheltered by allies who risked everything, while others continued to Sandusky (aka "Sunrise"), a name reflecting hope.

From there, paths divided. Some moved along the lakeshore, while others traveled to Detroit, code-named "Midnight," a key crossing point. Under cover of darkness, many crossed into Canada, where freedom was protected by law. The 1793 act in Upper Canada ensured that any enslaved person who reached its soil would be free.

Across Lake Erie and the Detroit River, settlements grew in Windsor, "Glory to God," Chatham, Lakeshore, and Dresden, Ontario, where formerly enslaved people built new lives. Some journeyed farther to Birchtown, Nova Scotia. The Canadian government offered opportunities for education and improved living conditions. During Reconstruction, some educated Black leaders returned to the U.S. as lawmakers and state representatives.

A VOICE OF FREEDOM

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was an escaped slave from Maryland who became one of the most important historical figures in American history. Through immense personal courage, she conducted numerous missions to rescue enslaved people via the Underground Railroad. She played a vital role in the Civil War as a spy and scout for the Union Army, and was deeply involved in the women's suffrage movement. Per historical records, it appears she traveled to northeast Ohio, but not the Gammon House.



*Harriet Tubman,
ca. 1868–1869*

"I looked at my hands to see if I was still the same person now that I was free."

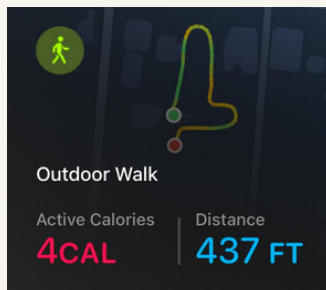
"If you hear the dogs, keep going. If you see the torches in the woods, keep going. If there's shouting after you, keep going. Don't ever stop. Keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going."

— Harriet Tubman

ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY

Statistics & Trail Facts

The following health data was collected from an Apple Watch while walking the Gammon Discovery Trail:



Trail Length: 437 feet

Active Calories : ~4 calories

*Apple Watch
437 ft · 4 cal*

Passes to complete 1 mile: ~13 times (5,280

÷ 437 = 12.08)

Calories burned walking 1 mile on trail:

~49.23 calories

Avg. distance per day — freedom seekers:

10 to 20 miles

Factors affecting a freedom seeker's pace: Terrain, weather, physical health, traveling at night to avoid detection, and limited food and water resources all influenced how far they could travel each day.

There are **15 towns** on this trail from the Ohio River to Lake Erie. Route 68, also known as Yellow Springs Street, was a major trail that passed through Springfield, near the Gammon House.

Ohio was the northern trunk line — the heart — of the Underground Railroad.

THE GAMMON HOUSE

620 Piqua Place · Springfield, Ohio

*One of only three known
Underground Railroad stations
in Ohio owned and operated by
free people of color.*

“If you hear the dogs, keep going.”

— Harriet Tubman



George & Sarah Gammon

Image generated using photo of their daughter Cornelia.

Gammon House Discovery Trail

Preserving the Legacy of Courage

gammonhouse.org

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