An Unbroken Thread: Abolition and Mutual Aid from the Quaker Divide to the Streets of Des Moines

“Thee ought to know he won't find any slaves here.”

This statement of defiant truth, uttered by a Quaker grandmother while hiding two fugitive sisters in 1860, captures the spirit of an abolitionist legacy. In the moral reality of that Iowa home, they were not property, but human beings. This infographic traces the unbroken thread of that witness, connecting the direct action of the Underground Railroad to the modern abolitionist work of Des Moines Mutual Aid.

A Heritage of Conscience

The Bear Creek Friends & The Abolition of Slavery

Foundations of Faith

The abolitionist convictions of the Bear Creek Friends were not a political stance, but a direct consequence of their core theological belief in the Inner Light—the presence of "that of God in every man." This principle made the ownership of another human a profound spiritual transgression, compelling them to act.

> **"We cannot therefore unite with or sanction any measure of our nation taken for the purpose of unjustly discriminating between man and man on account of race or color of skin."**
>
> - Synopsis of Doctrine, Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative)

Migration as Protest: A Journey to Free Soil

The very existence of the Bear Creek settlement was an act of protest. For decades, these families participated in a multi-generational migration, deliberately fleeing the slave-holding South to establish communities on "free soil" where they could live according to their conscience.

North Carolina → **Ohio & Indiana** → **Iowa**

Original Homes | Early 1800s | Settled from 1853

The Mysterious Road: A Link in the Freedom Chain

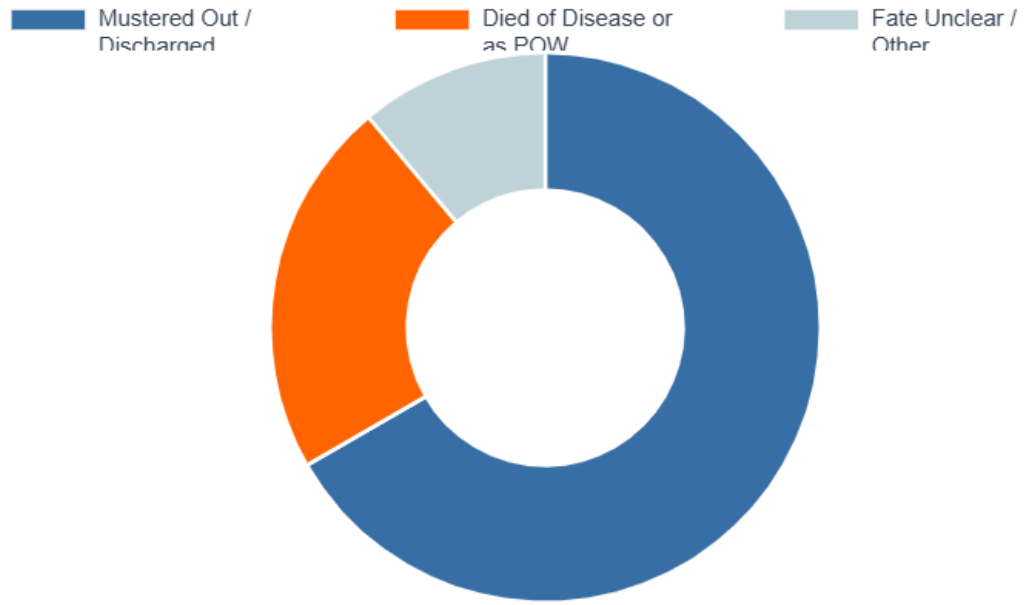
On free soil, the Friends did not remain passive. Their settlement became a vital station on the Underground Railroad. Homes became safe houses, and community members became conductors, risking their own safety to guide freedom seekers toward Canada.

The Iowa Route

This organized network, involving conductors like Harmon Cook and the radical abolitionist John Brown, funneled countless individuals toward freedom.

A Crisis of Conscience

The Civil War created a profound spiritual crisis, pitting the Quaker Peace Testimony against their commitment to abolition. For many young men, the moral imperative to end slavery outweighed their pacifist principles, and they chose to fight.



This chart shows the documented outcomes for 18 Quaker men from the Bear Creek community who served in the Union Army, highlighting the significant personal cost of their conviction.

A Continuing Testimony

After the war, the work was not finished. The community's focus shifted from liberation to elevation, providing education and aid to formerly enslaved people to help build a new, more just society.

2,000+

Students Taught

By Bear Creek missionaries Darius & Rebecca Bowles in schools for freedmen.

2

Families Welcomed

The Anderson and Bell families, formerly enslaved, settled in the Bear Creek community after the war.

This sustained effort demonstrates that for the Bear Creek Friends, abolition was a long-term moral project that extended far beyond the end of the war.

An Unbroken Thread

From 19th Century Abolition to 21st Century Mutual Aid in Iowa

Two Winter Nights, One Story

Over 160 years apart, two acts of radical solidarity in Iowa—a Quaker conductor on the Underground Railroad and a Des Moines Mutual Aid volunteer—reveal a continuous legacy of direct action against state-sanctioned harm and a profound commitment to community care.

A Theology of Defiance

Quaker abolitionism was born from the belief in the "Inner Light"—that of God in everyone. This radical egalitarianism made slavery a theological crime and defined defying the Fugitive Slave Act not as a choice, but as a sacred duty.

1688
First formal protest against slavery by Friends in Germantown, PA.

1754
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting issues a powerful statement against slavery.

1770s
All American Yearly Meetings prohibit slaveholding for members, making them the first denomination to do so.

Iowa's Highway to Freedom

A major route of the Underground Railroad ran through Iowa's "Quaker Divide." Bear Creek Friends Meeting in Dallas County was a critical station, providing shelter and transport for freedom seekers at immense personal risk.

Tabor ▶ **Summit Grove** ▶ **Bear Creek Station** ▶ **Des Moines**

The Price of Principle

$1,000 Fine

The penalty under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 for aiding a freedom seeker—a fortune at the time, equivalent to over $35,000 today.

The Abolitionist Present in Des Moines

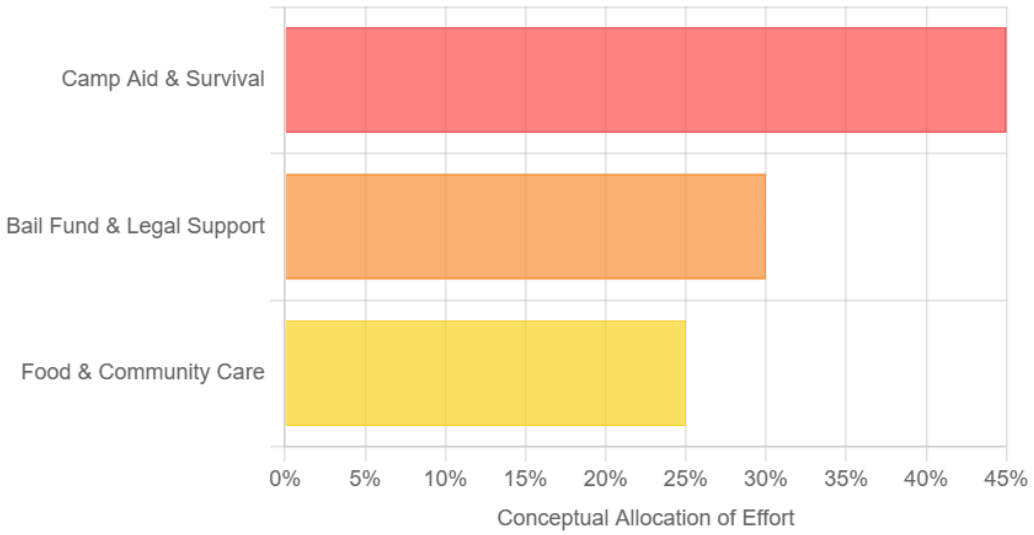
A Revolutionary Vision

Founded in 2019, Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA) is an abolitionist collective providing direct support to oppressed communities. Their work is guided by core principles aimed at building community autonomy and making the state's violent systems obsolete.

- 🤝 **Solidarity, Not Charity:** A horizontal fight for collective liberation.
- 🏠 **Community Autonomy:** Building self-sustaining communities independent of the capitalist state.
- ⛓️ **Police & Prison Abolition:** Making police obsolete through community care.
- ✊ **A Revolutionary Goal:** The abolition of the state and social classes.

Direct Action in Practice

DMMA's programs are the modern equivalent of the Underground Railroad, providing direct aid to bypass and defy a hostile system. This chart shows a conceptual breakdown of their focus areas.



Part II: The Abolitionist Present in Des Moines

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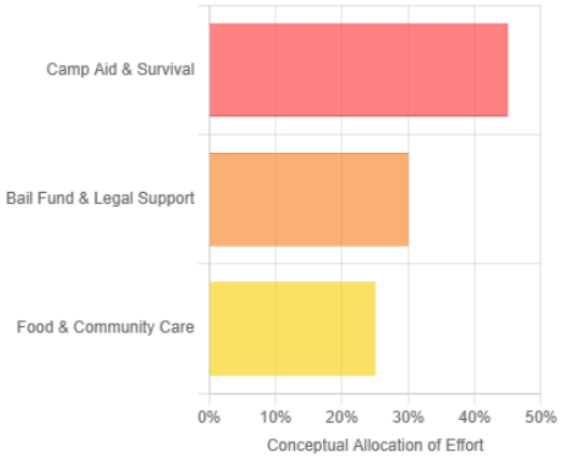

Radical Equality & Universal Human Worth

19th C. Quakers:
Based on the theological belief in "That of God in everyone."

21st C. Mutual Aid:
Based on the political belief in "Solidarity with all oppressed communities."

Defiance of Unjust State Power

19th C. Quakers:
Willful violation of the Fugitive Slave Act.

21st C. Mutual Aid:
Defying anti-homeless ordinances and rejecting the carceral state's legitimacy.

Direct, Unmediated Material Aid

19th C. Quakers:
Providing food, shelter, and transport directly to freedom seekers.

21st C. Mutual Aid:
Providing propane, tents, and bail money directly to those in need, with no gatekeeping.

Building Alternative Structures

19th C. Quakers:
Creating the Underground Railroad, a clandestine community network.

21st C. Mutual Aid:
Building "dual power" through bail funds, pantries, and camp support.

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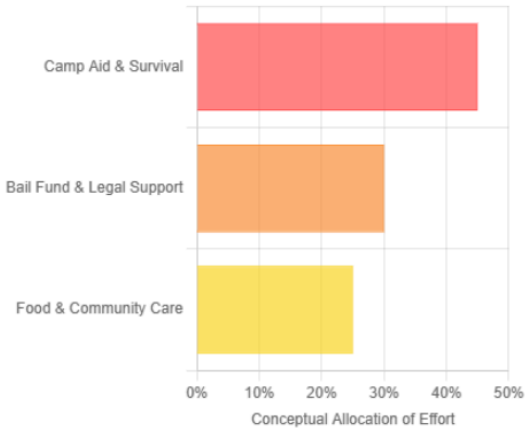


Foundations of Witness: Then & Now

19th Century: Quaker Conviction

The abolitionist work of Iowa Quakers was not political, but a spiritual necessity. It grew from core theological beliefs that demanded action against the profound evil of slavery.

The Guiding SPICES Testimonies

The testimonies of **Equality** (that of God in everyone) and **Integrity** (acting on one's beliefs) made complicity with slavery an intolerable contradiction, compelling Friends to risk their safety for a higher moral law.

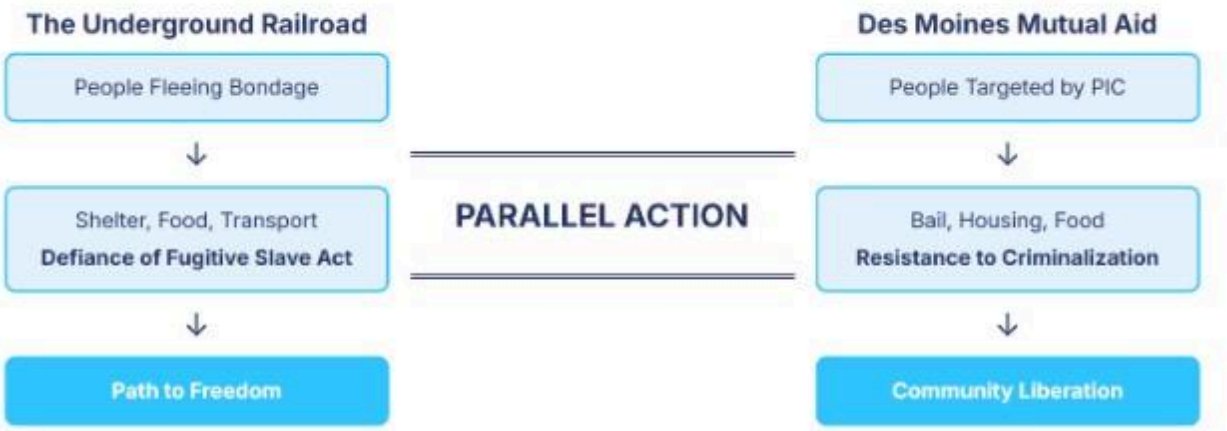
21st Century: Mutual Aid Principles

Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA) operates on a modern abolitionist framework, articulated in their "Points of Unity." Their work is explicitly political, aimed at dismantling systems of oppression.

Their core tenet of **"Solidarity, Not Charity"** creates a horizontal relationship, recognizing that all liberation is collective. This echoes the Quaker belief in universal equality, framed in the language of modern social justice.

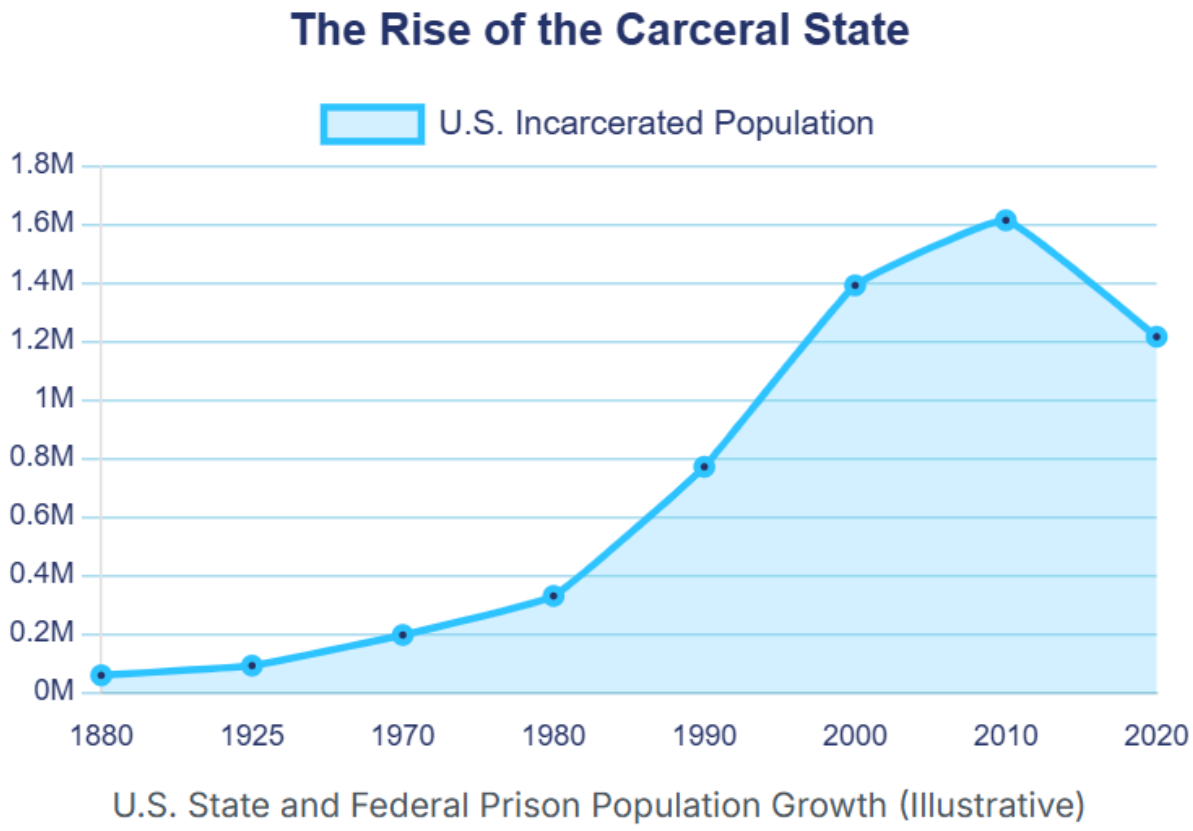
Networks of Defiance

From clandestine routes to freedom to open networks of community care, the structure of abolitionist work shares a common DNA: direct, material support for those targeted by state-sanctioned violence.



From Slavery to the Carceral State

Modern abolitionists argue the 13th Amendment didn't end slavery, but allowed it to evolve. The clause abolishing slavery **"except as a punishment for a crime"** created a loophole for re-enslavement through the legal system, leading to today's Prison Industrial Complex (PIC).


The Rise of the Carceral State
U.S. Incarcerated Population
1.8M
1.6M
1.4M
1.2M
1M
0.8M
0.6M
0.4M
0.2M
0M
1880
1925
1970
1980
1990
2000
2010
2020
U.S. State and Federal Prison Population Growth (Illustrative)

Building the New World: DMMA in Action

Abolition is a constructive project. It's about dismantling harmful systems by building community-based alternatives that provide care, safety, and support, making police and prisons obsolete.

Bail Fund & Court Support

Liberating people from cages by paying bail and supporting them through the legal process.

Camper Solidarity

Providing material and court support for unhoused neighbors, resisting the criminalization of poverty.

The Panther Pantry

A weekly free grocery re-distribution that addresses food insecurity outside the capitalist state framework.

Expungement Program

Helping people delete criminal records to remove barriers to housing and employment created by the carceral state.

Forging a Collaborative Future

To make this unbroken thread a tangible force for change, a path for collaboration between faith communities and modern abolitionists can be built on shared history and mutual respect.

1. Joint Education

Build a common vocabulary and shared purpose through workshops on Quaker history and modern abolitionist theory.

2. Material & Spiritual Witness

Offer concrete support: financial contributions to bail funds, food collections, and offering meeting houses as spaces for activist respite and planning.

3. A Joint Reparative Project

Establish a joint "Abolitionist Futures Fund" to provide grants for community-led alternatives to policing and prisons, making a tangible commitment to repairing historical harm.

4. Inter-visitation & Shared Discernment

Build personal relationships through shared experience: attending a Meeting for Worship, volunteering on a mutual aid project, and holding joint "Meetings for a Concern for Abolition."

The work is not over.

The unbroken thread of abolitionist witness calls for the courage to answer the demands of conscience in this century, just as our ancestors did in their own.

Introduction: Two Winter Nights

The Iowa winter of 1859 bites deep. On a moonless night, the only sounds are the crunch of frozen earth under carriage wheels and the anxious breathing of the passengers huddled within. At the reins is Harmon Cook, a young man from the Bear Creek Friends settlement in Dallas County. He is a conductor on a railway with no tracks, its cargo human beings fleeing the "national evil" of slavery. Inside his carriage are two sisters, fugitives from Missouri, their own father their master. They have been on the run for seven weeks, guided by the North Star and a clandestine network of allies. Tonight, Harmon's task is to deliver them from one station—Summit Grove—to the next: the home of his family at Bear Creek, a known sanctuary in the Quaker Divide. Every snap of a twig, every distant bark of a dog, carries the threat of capture, of violence, of being dragged back south into bondage. Harmon is breaking federal law, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which criminalizes his every action. Yet for him and his community, this is not a crime; it is an act of faith, a moral imperative dictated by a law higher than any passed in Washington.[1]

More than 160 years later, another Iowa winter descends on Des Moines. The wind is just as sharp, but the landscape is one of concrete and asphalt. A volunteer with a group called Des Moines Mutual Aid navigates the city streets, their car filled not with people, but with the tools of modern survival: propane tanks, tents, batteries, food, and water. Their destination is a small, unsanctioned encampment of houseless individuals, huddled together against the cold on a piece of land from which they face imminent eviction by the city. The volunteer is delivering life-sustaining supplies, a direct response to what the group calls the "continued violence" of the state against its most vulnerable people. They operate without grants, without government approval, and often in defiance of municipal ordinances that criminalize the very existence of their houseless neighbors. They are not breaking a federal law as momentous as the Fugitive Slave Act, but they are consciously and deliberately working outside of and against a system they see as fundamentally unjust, a system that creates the very needs they are trying to meet.[4]

These two winter nights, separated by more than a century and a half, are not isolated acts of compassion. They are expressions of a single, unbroken abolitionist tradition in Iowa. This book argues that the thread of radical solidarity connects the faith-driven civil disobedience of the Bear Creek Quakers to the revolutionary praxis of Des Moines Mutual Aid. The language has evolved from the theological to the political, the methods have adapted from secret farmhouses to social media fundraising, but the

fundamental commitment remains unchanged. It is a commitment to direct action in the face of systemic oppression, a belief in the inherent dignity of every person, and the conviction that when the state fails to protect life—or actively threatens it—the community must create its own systems of care and liberation. This is the story of that unbroken thread.

Part I: The Quaker Conscience and the "National Evil"

Chapter 1: "That of God in Everyone": The Theological Roots of Quaker Radicalism

The radical actions of the Bear Creek Friends were not born of political theory but were the inevitable outgrowth of a unique and demanding theology. At the heart of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) is a belief that shattered the religious and social hierarchies of the 17th century: the doctrine of the "Inner Light." George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, experienced a revelation that "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition".[6] This meant that the love and power of God were directly and immediately available to every single human being, without the need for an intermediary priest, a formal church, or outward sacraments like baptism.[6] This belief in direct, unmediated communion with the divine was the theological bedrock of a profound and radical egalitarianism.

This core belief manifested in a series of "testimonies," lived expressions of faith that guided Quaker life. Often remembered by the acronym SPICES, they include Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, and Service/Stewardship.[7] While all are interconnected, it was the Testimony of Equality that ultimately compelled the Quakers into the abolitionist struggle. If every person, regardless of race, gender, or social standing, possessed the Inner Light—"that of God in everyone"—then all people were "equally precious to God".[9] The institution of chattel slavery, which treated a human being as property, was therefore not just a social injustice but a profound theological crime, a blasphemous denial of God's presence in the enslaved. As Quaker thought developed, this conviction became absolute. Christ, they believed, "died for all, both Turks, Barbarians, Tartarians and Ethiopians; he died for the tawnys and for the blacks, as well as for you that are called whites".[12] To hold another in bondage was to violate the very essence of their faith.

This conviction, however, was not immediate. The Quaker journey to abolitionism was a long, complex, and often painful internal struggle. Paradoxically, in the 17th and early 18th centuries, many Quakers, particularly in the American colonies and the Caribbean, were themselves slave owners and traders, profiting from the very system their theology would later condemn.[13] The dissonance between their beliefs and their economic practices created a moral crisis within the Society of Friends that took

nearly a century to resolve. The first stirrings of organized protest came in 1688 from a group of German Friends in Germantown, Pennsylvania, who issued a petition "against the traffick of men-body." Their local meeting, finding the matter "so weighty," passed it up the chain, where it was effectively shelved for decades.[12] This initial hesitation reveals a community wrestling with the immense social and economic implications of their own beliefs.

It took the "gentle and relentless witness" of a new generation of activists, most notably John Woolman and Anthony Benezet, to force the issue. Traveling tirelessly from meeting to meeting, they appealed to the consciences of fellow Friends, arguing that slaveholding endangered their immortal souls.[12] Their efforts gradually turned the tide of opinion. By 1754, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting issued a powerful statement against slavery, and by the 1770s, all American Yearly Meetings had reached the position that holding slaves was incompatible with Quakerism. They began to systematically disown members who refused to manumit their enslaved people, making the Society of Friends the first religious denomination to take a collective, institutional stand against slavery.[14] This hard-won conviction, forged through a century of internal debate and moral reckoning, demonstrates that their abolitionism was not a simple, inherited dogma but a deeply held principle for which they were willing to sacrifice economic interest and internal harmony.

This uncompromising principle led directly to a theology of civil disobedience. Quakers had a long history of persecution for defying state power when it conflicted with their faith, refusing to pay church tithes, swear oaths, or serve in the military.[6] They drew a sharp distinction between the laws of man and the laws of God. When confronted with the conflict between rendering "unto Caesar, the things which are Caesar's" and obeying the higher moral law of the Golden Rule—"whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do you so even unto them"—the choice was clear.[18] As Pennsylvania Quaker William Jackson wrote, "No one is under any moral obligation to lend himself as a tool to others for the commission of a crime, even when commanded by his government to do the wrong".[18] The Fugitive Slave Act, which legally mandated complicity in the crime of slavery, was to them an illegitimate law. To obey it would be a sin; to defy it, a sacred duty.

Chapter 2: A Community of Conviction on the Iowa Frontier

The theological convictions forged in the eastern states and in England found fertile ground on the American frontier. Beginning in the 1830s, a significant migration of Quakers moved into the newly opened territory of Iowa. Many came from Indiana and Ohio, but a substantial number were motivated to leave southern states like Virginia and the Carolinas to escape an economy and society built on slave labor, an institution they could no longer abide.[6] They established settlements that became centers of Quaker life and, consequently, hubs of anti-slavery sentiment, first in southeastern Iowa at Salem and Pleasant Plain, and later moving westward.[8]

By the early 1850s, this migration reached the fertile plains of Dallas and Madison counties, an area that became known as the "Quaker Divide." Here, three Friends Meetings were established: Union, North Branch, and, in 1854, the Bear Creek Friends Meeting.[19] These communities were intended to be places where Friends could live out their testimonies in peace. However, the community at Bear Creek was not a placid or monolithic entity. Its history is marked by a profound internal conflict that reveals the very character that made its members such stalwart abolitionists.

In February 1877, years after the height of the Underground Railroad, a major schism fractured the Iowa Yearly Meeting, and Bear Creek was at its epicenter. The conflict erupted over the introduction of new, evangelical-style revival meetings, a departure from the traditional, unprogrammed silent worship of the Quakers. During a four-day revival at Bear Creek, visiting ministers called for sinners to come to the front seats to be saved. When about twenty people went forward, the more traditional, "conservative" members were "shaken to their core," rose as a group, and walked out.[19] Three months later, this conservative faction issued a declaration of independence, condemning the new practices and organizing a separate meeting. The split was so contentious that it led to what one historical account describes as "violent scenes that transpired at both Bear Creek and Salem".[22] Ultimately, the Bear Creek Meeting was composed mostly of these conservative members, so uncompromising in their beliefs that they were willing to break fellowship rather than bend on a matter of principle.[19]

While this event post-dates the Civil War, it provides a powerful retroactive insight into the community's temperament. A group that would shatter its own meeting over the proper form of worship possessed an unyielding commitment to what they believed was right. This same moral certitude, this same refusal to compromise on core principles, is precisely what was required to defy the full force of the federal

government and risk life, property, and freedom to aid fugitive slaves. The passion was a constant; its target simply shifted from internal religious procedure to the external "national evil" of slavery.

The Bear Creek Meeting was not acting in a vacuum. It was a key station in a broader network of faith-driven resistance across Iowa. The state, being a free territory bordering the slave state of Missouri, naturally became "a highway for the Underground Railroad".[1] Other Quaker settlements, like Salem in Henry County and Springdale and West Branch in Cedar County, were famous abolitionist strongholds, frequently visited by the radical abolitionist John Brown, who found willing recruits and safe harbor among the Iowa Friends.[20] The community at Bear Creek, therefore, was part of a well-established, ideologically aligned network, ready and willing to play its part in the great struggle for liberation.

Chapter 3: "A Highway for the Underground Railroad": The Bear Creek Friends in Action

The Underground Railroad was not a physical railway, nor was it primarily underground. The name was a powerful metaphor for a clandestine network of people and places dedicated to guiding enslaved people—referred to as "passengers" or "freight"—to freedom in the North or Canada.[25] Those who provided shelter were "station masters," and those who guided the fugitives between safe houses were "conductors".[3] In central Iowa, this railroad had a clearly defined route. One major line started in Tabor in the southwest corner of the state, crossed Adair County, and reached Summit Grove (near modern-day Stuart). From there, the path forked. One branch continued east, down the "Quaker Divide," passing directly through the Bear Creek settlement in Dallas County before continuing on toward Des Moines and points east.[1]

At the heart of the Bear Creek station were the members of the Cook family. John Cook and his second wife, Anna Sumner George Cook, moved to the settlement in 1854 and their home immediately became a key depot on the line. Their sons, Martin and Harmon, were deeply involved as well, serving as courageous conductors who transported freedom seekers under the cover of darkness.[3] Their commitment was absolute, rooted in their Quaker faith and a profound respect for human rights that led them to defy the law and risk everything for strangers.

Table 1: Key Figures in the Bear Creek Underground Railroad
Name
John Cook
Anna Sumner George Cook
Martin Cook
Harmon Cook
Darius B. Cook
Joshua & Dianah Cox Cook Newlin

Personal accounts passed down through generations bring the perilous work of the Bear Creek Friends to life. Harmon Cook recounted being asked one Friday evening if

he would drive a carriage to Bear Creek, saving him a walk. In the carriage were two young women, sisters who had fled from Missouri after discovering that their master—who was also their father—was planning to sell them "down south." They had been on the road for seven weeks before arriving at the Quaker Divide, where Harmon transported them to the safety of his family's home.[1]

Another dramatic story, recounted by Darius B. Cook, tells of the day a slave master and his men arrived at the Cook house, demanding to search it. John Cook refused, but his wife Anna, thinking quickly, intervened and agreed to the search. While the men argued at the door, Anna warned the two fugitives inside and hid them beneath a mattress on a bed, which she then made up neatly. The master searched the house but found nothing, and the freedom seekers were saved.[3] These were not abstract acts of charity; they were intimate, high-stakes confrontations requiring immense courage and ingenuity.

The risks were extraordinary. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 imposed severe penalties—fines up to $1,000 (a fortune at the time) and six months in jail—on anyone caught harboring or assisting fugitives.[1] Beyond the legal threat was the physical danger posed by armed slave catchers from Missouri, who frequently rode into Iowa communities, threatening to burn the homes of suspected abolitionists.[20] The famous abolitionist John Brown, a frequent collaborator with the Iowa Quakers, understood these dangers well. After a young Darius Cook had a close call with slave hunters, Brown met with him and angrily admonished him: "I am responsible for the track of the Underground Railroad and I wish my conductors to be more careful in the future as things are coming to a head and somebody is going to get hurt".[3] This was not a game; it was a deadly serious struggle, and the Quakers of Bear Creek were on its front lines.

Part II: The Evolution of Abolition

Chapter 4: "Except as a Punishment for Crime": From Chattel Slavery to the Carceral State

The abolitionist project of the 19th century achieved its primary goal with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865. Yet, the victory was tragically incomplete. Embedded within the amendment's text was a fatal loophole, a clause that would allow the spirit of slavery to endure under a new name: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, **except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted**, shall exist within the United States".[28] This exception clause became the legal and ideological foundation for a new system of racial and social control. It created a direct, unbroken line from the plantation to the penitentiary, transforming the "national evil" of chattel slavery into the modern crisis of mass incarceration.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, this clause was immediately exploited through systems like convict leasing, which allowed states to lease out prisoners—overwhelmingly Black men arrested on flimsy pretexts—as forced labor to private corporations, effectively resurrecting slavery.[28] As author Michelle Alexander argues, slavery was not truly abolished but rather "rebranded" time and again, evolving into the Jim Crow system of segregation and, ultimately, into the contemporary carceral state.[29] This new system is what modern activists and scholars term the "prison-industrial complex" (PIC): a vast, interlocking network of police, courts, prisons, and corporations that profits from surveillance, policing, and incarceration.[28] Like the military-industrial complex, the PIC operates on a perverse logic where the proposed solution—imprisonment—creates and sustains the very problems it purports to solve, becoming a self-perpetuating market in human cages.[30]

This historical continuity has given rise to a new abolitionist movement, one that sees itself as the direct ideological successor to the 19th-century struggle. Contemporary abolitionism, championed by thinkers like Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, is not about tinkering with or reforming the system of policing and prisons. It is not a call to make prisons more humane or policing less biased. Instead, it is a call to envision and actively build a world without them.[30] Abolitionists argue that the system is not

broken; it is functioning precisely as it was designed—to manage social problems, control marginalized populations, and protect property and capital.[30] From this perspective, reformist efforts that give more money or legitimacy to police and prisons only strengthen the system of oppression.[31]

The abolitionist vision is therefore twofold. It is a negative project: the dismantling of the PIC. But it is also a positive project: the creation of new structures of community safety and well-being. This means addressing the root causes of what is labeled "crime"—poverty, housing insecurity, lack of access to mental and physical healthcare, and systemic racism—and building robust, community-led systems of support, conflict resolution, and accountability.[30] The popular call to "defund the police" is not an end in itself, but a practical strategy within this framework: a demand to divest from systems of punishment and invest in the resources that actually create safe and healthy communities.[30] By focusing on the 13th Amendment's exception clause, this new movement redefines the original abolitionist project as unfinished business, a struggle that continues as long as a single person's freedom can be legally transmuted into a form of bondage.

Chapter 5: "Solidarity, Not Charity": The Philosophy and Practice of Mutual Aid

As the abolitionist project evolved to confront the carceral state, it found its most potent expression in a practice known as mutual aid. Defined by organizer and scholar Dean Spade, mutual aid is "collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them".[33] This practice is fundamentally different from institutional charity. Charity is often a top-down, hierarchical relationship where those with resources decide what the "deserving" poor will receive, a dynamic that can reinforce power imbalances and strip recipients of their dignity. Mutual aid, by contrast, is horizontal, participatory, and built on a core principle of "solidarity, not charity".[33] It is a relationship between equals working together for their collective survival and liberation.

The intellectual framework for modern mutual aid was most famously articulated by the 19th-century anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin. In his seminal work, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, Kropotkin challenged the Social Darwinist notion that life is defined solely by brutal competition. He argued that cooperation is an equally powerful, if not more important, factor in the evolution and survival of species, including humans.[37] His work provides a political philosophy for mutual aid that is inherently anti-state and anti-capitalist, envisioning a society organized around voluntary, decentralized, cooperative associations rather than coercive government and competitive markets.[35]

Crucially, however, the *practice* of mutual aid has a history that long predates Kropotkin and is rooted not in European philosophy but in the survival strategies of oppressed peoples. In the United States, the most powerful historical precedent comes from the Black communities of the 18th and 19th centuries. As Black Americans gained freedom, they were systematically excluded from white-run charitable organizations and social safety nets. In response, they built their own. Beginning in the 1780s with groups like the African Union Society in Newport and the Free African Society in Philadelphia, they formed extensive networks of mutual aid societies.[38] These organizations, funded by the meager dues of their members, provided essential services: burial assistance, unemployment aid, support for widows and orphans, and even funding for schools.[38] These were not just social clubs; they were radical acts of self-determination and community defense. Furthermore, these societies were often deeply involved in the abolitionist movement, creating networks that linked urban Black communities and actively worked for the emancipation of those still enslaved.[38]

The modern mutual aid movement is a confluence of these two historical streams. It

draws its political analysis from the anarchist tradition of Kropotkin, with its critique of the state and capitalism. But it draws its spirit and practical lineage from the long-standing traditions of Black and other marginalized communities who have always had to rely on each other for survival. The core principles of today's mutual aid groups reflect this dual heritage. They are explicitly abolitionist, insisting that "the systems are to blame, not the people".[41] They center the knowledge and leadership of those most affected by oppressive systems.[33] They operate through non-hierarchical, consensus-based decision-making, seeking to build "dual power"—alternative institutions that meet people's needs so effectively that they make the violent and inadequate systems of the state obsolete.[37] This practice is the living embodiment of the new abolitionism, a direct challenge to the carceral state through the creation of caring communities.

Part III: The Abolitionist Present in Des Moines

Chapter 6: "A Response to Continued Violence": The Revolutionary Vision of Des Moines Mutual Aid

In 2019, a collective of activists in Des Moines formed a new organization with a clear and urgent purpose. Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA) was founded as a direct "response to the city of Des Moines continued violence to our houseless relatives".[4] From its inception, its mission was not to perform charity or to supplement existing social services, but to engage in a political struggle. They defined themselves immediately as an "Abolitionist Mutual Aid Collective," positioning their work within the long tradition of resistance to state-sanctioned harm.[4] Their work is a direct challenge to a system that criminalizes poverty and displaces the unhoused, providing material aid and solidarity where the state offers only surveillance and repression.

The group's radical vision is most clearly articulated in its "Points of Unity," a public declaration of principles that serves as a manifesto for modern abolitionism in Iowa.[43] This document reveals a sophisticated political analysis that connects their daily work of providing food and shelter to a larger revolutionary goal.

- **Point 0: Solidarity, Not Charity.** DMMA explicitly rejects the "top-down model of charity," which they call "dehumanizing and colonizing." Instead, they practice "horizontal mutual aid," seeing their work as a "fight for our collective liberation" alongside all oppressed communities.
- **Point 1: Community Autonomy.** They assert that "Capitalism is fundamentally unable to meet people's needs" and that the communities they serve are intensely policed but excluded from state support. Their goal is therefore to "build self-sustaining communities that are independent of the capitalist state."
- **Point 2: Police and Prison Abolitionists.** The connection is made explicit: "Abolition and the mutual aid that we practice are inextricably linked." They do not rely on police or state institutions, aiming instead to build resilient communities that "make police obsolete" through their own systems of accountability and care.
- **Point 3: Raising Political Consciousness.** Their work is not just about material aid; it is about political education. They seek to connect people's lived experiences of struggle to a broader analysis of systemic failure, recognizing that

it is "difficult to organize for future liberation when someone is entrenched in day-to-day struggle."

- **Point 5: A Revolutionary Organization.** DMMA does not mince words about its ultimate aims. They state plainly, "We are a revolutionary organization," with a goal of "the abolition of the state and of social classes." Consequently, they reject participation in electoral politics, seeking instead to develop mutual aid as a widespread, alternative institution.

These points represent the explicit political articulation of the principles that were *implicit* in the actions of the Bear Creek Quakers. Where the Quakers acted on a theological belief in the universal dignity of all people who possess the "Inner Light," DMMA acts on a political belief in the necessity of collective liberation. Where the Quakers defied the Fugitive Slave Act, a key institution of the 19th-century state, DMMA explicitly calls for the abolition of the state itself. The language has evolved from the vocabulary of faith to the vocabulary of revolutionary political theory, but the underlying commitment to radical equality, direct action, and the creation of an alternative community of care in the face of an oppressive system remains identical. DMMA is a key node in a larger ecosystem of solidarity, working within the Iowa Mutual Aid Network alongside groups like The Supply Hive, the Iowa Trans Mutual Aid Fund, and the Des Moines Abolition Coalition, all collaborating to change the material conditions of oppressed communities in the state.[36]

Chapter 7: Propane, Bail, and Groceries: Mutual Aid as Modern-Day Abolitionist Work

The revolutionary vision of Des Moines Mutual Aid is not an abstract theory; it is put into practice every day through concrete programs designed to keep people alive, free, and supported. These projects are the modern-day equivalents of the Underground Railroad's stations and conductors, providing direct, community-funded aid that bypasses and defies a hostile system.

Table 2: Des Moines Mutual Aid Programs and Activities
Program Name
Camp Aid Fund

Bail Fund
The Panther Pantry
Criminal Records Expungement Program

The Camp Aid Fund is perhaps the most direct expression of DMMA's founding mission. Volunteers deliver life-sustaining supplies directly to encampments, bypassing the bureaucratic gatekeeping and eligibility requirements of traditional charities. This work is a direct act of resistance against a city that actively seeks to displace its unhoused residents through sweeps and ordinances that criminalize survival.[4] The Bail Fund is an even more explicit abolitionist intervention. By paying bail, DMMA literally frees people from cages, disrupting the cycle of pretrial detention that disproportionately harms poor people and people of color.[5] The Panther Pantry and the Criminal Records Expungement Program are projects of community building and repair, creating alternative systems of support and working to undo the lasting damage of the carceral state.[4]

Within this work lies a profound ethical and strategic dilemma that directly echoes the struggles of 19th-century abolitionists. When DMMA pays bail, it is giving money directly to the court system it seeks to abolish. This pragmatic act of freeing an individual financially sustains the very institution of cash bail. This tension is identical to the one faced by earlier abolitionists who debated the practice of "buying freedom." Many, like the American Anti-Slavery Society, argued on principle that paying an enslaver for a person's freedom was a "surrender of the great fundamental principle that man cannot hold property in man".[45] Yet, when faced with the immediate reality of an individual's lifelong bondage, many activists, including the formerly enslaved themselves, resorted to purchasing freedom as a necessary, life-saving measure. Harriet Jacobs, whose freedom was purchased by friends, expressed this conflict perfectly, cherishing her liberty but disliking the bill of sale that symbolized it, a testament to a system where human beings were trafficable goods.[45] This shared struggle—navigating the tension between immediate, pragmatic liberation and the ultimate goal of dismantling the oppressive system entirely—is one of the most powerful and humanizing links connecting these two movements across the centuries.

Conclusion: A Caring Community, Then and Now

The journey from a clandestine carriage ride on the Quaker Divide to a propane delivery in a Des Moines encampment traces an unbroken thread of abolitionist commitment in Iowa. The Bear Creek Friends, acting on a theological mandate of radical equality, defied the law of the state to create a "highway for the Underground Railroad." They believed in a higher moral law that affirmed the sacred worth of every individual. Des Moines Mutual Aid, acting on a political mandate of revolutionary solidarity, defies the logic and laws of the capitalist state to provide for the survival of their neighbors. They believe in a higher ethical principle of collective liberation that holds systems, not people, accountable for harm. Though separated by 160 years, both groups answer the same fundamental call: to actively dismantle systems of oppression by building, in their place, structures of direct, community-based support.

This shared lineage is not merely a matter of superficial resemblance. It is a deep, structural, and philosophical continuity. The core principles that animated the Quakers are the same principles that animate the mutual aid activists of today, translated from the language of faith into the language of political struggle.

Table 3: A Comparative Framework of Abolitionist Principles
Core Abolitionist Principle
Radical Equality & Universal Human Worth
Defiance of Unjust Law & State Power
Direct, Unmediated Material Aid
Building Alternative Structures of Support
Commitment to a Higher Principle

The abolitionist writer Fay Honey Kapper famously argued that the ultimate goal of the movement is to build a "caring community," a society where oppressive systems are not only dismantled but replaced with relationships of mutual respect and support.[32] This is precisely what the Quakers of Bear Creek sought to create in their small corner of the Iowa frontier. It is what Des Moines Mutual Aid, through its "Points of Unity" and its daily work, strives to build in the city's streets and encampments today.

This Iowan story is more than a historical curiosity. It is a powerful testament to the enduring nature of radical hope and the practical possibility of prefigurative politics—the act of building the world you want to see in the here and now. It demonstrates that the work of abolition is not a single event but a continuous process. It did not end in 1865, and it is not a utopian dream for a distant future. It is the difficult, necessary, and life-affirming work of showing up for one another, of sharing resources, of defying injustice, and of weaving, day by day, an unbroken thread of solidarity. The legacy of the Bear Creek Friends lives on, not in a museum, but in every act of mutual aid that affirms the preciousness of life and the possibility of a world where, as the abolitionists have always known, freedom cannot be bought because it is the birthright of all.

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