



thru-hiking and
cross-country
cycling with the
'blackalachian'

Daniel White didn't flinch at the fact that he hadn't ridden a bike since he was a kid.

In 2018, he rode Adventure Cycling's Underground Railroad route, which follows the historic network of clandestine passages, thruways, and safe house waypoints used by African American slaves escaping to free states. It runs 2,007 miles from Mobile, Alabama, to Owen Sound, Ontario.

As White says, he has "a borderline psychotic confidence" in himself. And he was compelled to ride the Underground Railroad. As a black man who has been in the prison system, the journey was especially poignant.

"Riding through cotton fields ... it's a lot to process," said White. "It's an amazing and humbling experience.

Even though I've been through a lot, I know it's nothing like slavery, children sold away from you, dogs chasing you. Still, there is a correlation between prison and slavery. Not everyone might see it like that. But to me the system just evolved into something else."

In New Albany, Indiana, White followed a whim and headed a couple blocks off course. It's a sleepy little town and a mere husk of what it once was during the city's heyday as a shipbuilding center in the nineteenth century. Mansions and row houses from that period reside a block or two away from squat, one-story brick buildings with fading paint and cardboard in the windows.

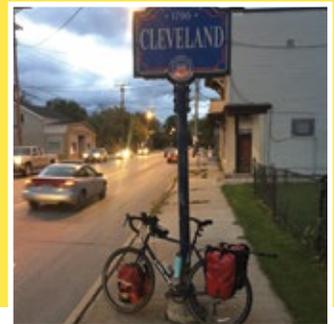
White stopped in front of Second Baptist Church, a Greek Revival-style

building with shallow gables and long, stately windows. It stood out next to deserted dirt parking lots, a tired-looking mobile home supply shop, and railroad tracks. The reverend happened to be outside.

Reverend LeRoy Marshall and White struck up a conversation. White learned that the church, once called Town Clock Church, and its steeple were visible across the Ohio River in Louisville, Kentucky. It was an important connecting point on the Underground Railroad on the border of a slave and a free state. Marshall brought him through the church and down into a musty basement where the slaves hid and accessed an underground tunnel to reach the bar (formerly a Red Cross building) across the street.



story by
ellee thalheimer
photos by
daniel white



“I ran my hand through the dirt of the tunnel and it was a different kind of feeling,” said 33-year-old White, recounting one of the most powerful moments of the trip.

Riding the Underground Railroad was only the second of White’s big outdoor adventures. The first was a year earlier hiking the Appalachian Trail, which spans Georgia to Maine. He started with no hiking experience, inspired by a random Facebook comment.

He shares a similar story with many newly minted long-haul outdoor adventurers. He felt ground by the grind. Working 60 hours per week as an electrician, he was exhausted. So he cut loose from his own life and headed out into the unknown.

“I just needed a break,” said White.

“Maybe because of the drain of social media, politics, race relations, and division in our country. I can see why things are the way they are, but it’s bad to see everyone going at each other’s neck all the time. I just needed a real break.”

Many adventure stories start with gleefully giving notice, but White’s story diverges in a number of ways. He served seven months in prison when he was 24 for breaking parole on a charge of drug possession. During the following years, he painstakingly pieced his life back together, focusing on his career as an electrician and rapping in his free time as Logo.

“Prison kills all your creativity,” said White. “You have to be mindful and alert all the time because all the

stuff you see on TV really happens. On lockdown days, you can be in your cell 23 hours per day, and you feel dead to the world. I realized one wrong decision could mean the rest of your life. And I knew I wasn’t supposed to be there.”

Also, White came from a community in Asheville, North Carolina, where no one he knew did things like ride their bike across the country or hike along a mountain range, sleeping in the middle of nowhere on the ground.

“Even though she wanted to be supportive, my mom was nervous,” said White. “She had reservations about bears, snakes, and racists. My friends didn’t understand and still don’t. People didn’t believe I could do it except for my mom and brother.”

Despite everyone thinking he was crazy, he headed out on the Appalachian Trail with a too-heavy backpack and a goal to finish 600 of the 2,200 miles. Instead he finished the whole thing, wearing a svelte 30-pound pack, and took the trail name “Blackalachian.” Along the way, he uploaded YouTube videos of his journey that went gangbusters with views, over 100,000 total at the time. To fund the last part of his trip, he started a GoFundMe campaign that was meant to raise \$500 but ended with \$3,530.

White was astonished by the support. He was also shocked by the lack of diversity on the trail, describing himself as the first gold-mouthed rapper to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail.

“It’s a different experience to hike and bike as a black person,” said White. “After a while, answering ‘Why aren’t more black people out here?’ gets annoying. No one else has to answer that kind of question. It’s like I became an unofficial ambassador. One time, a black hiker stole from a hostel, and all along the trail I got mixed up with him. One guy who thought I was him wanted to punch me.”

“Nature doesn’t deal in race and class. In it, we can see each other in our humanity. We can lift each other up.”

Rue Mapp, the founder and CEO of Outdoor Afro, has made it her mission to inspire African American connections and leadership in nature. She suggested that question posed to White so many times is an oversimplification and not especially fair.

“There is an American legacy of black bodies hanging from trees,” said Mapp. “Historically, the outdoors has not represented a place of relaxation and recreation for African Americans.

TIDBITS ABOUT DANIEL

What is your favorite snack while riding?

A Clif Bar.

What is your favorite piece of gear?

My fishing pole. People told me not to bring it, but I caught tons of fish.

What most surprised you about bike touring?

It was easier than I thought. It’s easier than backpacking. At least this trip.

What music do you listen to while riding?

Bob Marley and Kevin Gate, and for podcasts Joe Budden and the Brilliant Idiots.

What is your favorite section of the Underground Railroad route?

The Ohio to Erie Trail. There are lots of points of significance and some of the most beautiful terrain of the trip.

If you could bike tour anywhere, where would it be?

South Africa to Morocco.

What’s your next trip?

Backpacking Scotland coast to coast with my sponsor Zpacks, then exploring Europe afterward for a couple of weeks. I’m trying to find me the right sized kilt.

Who was the most interesting person you met along the way?

Dave Troyer in Ohio or Pennsylvania. He was the retired maintenance man at a baseball field. He let me camp out in the concession stand.

Thing you are most scared of along the way?

Owls (bad omens in Southern black neighborhoods).

Number of YouTube subscribers?

4,050.

We are trying to create a new narrative. But also, let’s look at a trip to Yosemite from Oakland. It’s a four-hour drive, requiring months-in-advance reservations during summer. It is hard for anybody, especially people without tradition, support, or know-how.”

After White finished the Appalachian Trail, he was a changed man. He knew he couldn’t go back permanently to the day-to-day rut of work being the axis of his life. So he bided his time and worked as a contract electrician to save up money to go on the Underground Railroad Bicycle Route.

But for this trip, White deftly rode the wave of his own popularity and had a little help from his friends. He ran a successful GoFundMe campaign again. REI sponsored his bike, Zpacks his tent, Liberty Bicycles in Asheville a few odds and

ends, and Patagonia a puffy jacket. And he became a Mountain House freeze-dried-meal ambassador.

“I love the freedom of it, to get up and not have a destination,” said White. “And I like to kick it with the locals and see different parts of the country from a bike. It’s hard to explain to people who haven’t done it.”

Over the course of White’s two adventures, he’s experienced the valleys and peaks of it all, so to speak. He and a white woman were camping right by the Mason-Dixon Line, and at night a group of white men surrounded them in a circle not speaking. The men left and then came back with dogs. “Those aren’t dogs to be patting,” one of them said to White’s clueless hiking partner. They were forced to leave.

Another time, right outside Erie, Pennsylvania, old white guys on a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 57

fishing trip invited him over for food, and they spent the whole weekend together. In Tennessee, White was riding with a bunch of folks from California. A group of young local guys chatted with the group, then brought only White a nice plate of brown-eyed beans and cornbread, something only a Southerner would appreciate.

Overall, the trail and the road have been a source of what White describes as “love and light,” and he sends it to folks at the end of his YouTube missives.

“People find freedom, healing, and connection through nature,” said Mapp. “Nature doesn’t deal in race and class. In it, we can see each other in our humanity. We can lift each other up.” **AC**

Ellee Thalheimer is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.

OUTDOOR AFRO

In 2009, Rue Mapp had enough with the underrepresentation of black people in the outdoors.

“I didn’t see people who looked like me, and I wanted to do something about it,” said Mapp, an African American woman and outdoor enthusiast who lives in Oakland, California.

So Mapp started a blog called Outdoor Afro. Ten years later in 2019, she is the CEO of Outdoor Afro, a national nonprofit with a presence in 30 states. The organization creates and trains networks of volunteer

leaders who take people out hiking, biking and camping, as well as facilitate environmental education and conservation stewardship.

Their trips and events reach about 30,000 people annually, and those experiences are amplified through social and traditional media to reach millions more. The goal is to not just get more kinds of people outside, but to change the visual narrative of outdoor recreation and the face of conservation.

Learn more at outdoorafro.com.



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