

FOREWORD TO THE 2005 EDITION

When William Still's *The Underground Rail Road* first appeared in 1872, it created an immediate sensation. At seven hundred and eighty pages, his collection of fugitive interviews, personal correspondences, and abolitionist biographies was impressive—the largest tome published by an African-American up until that time. However, notwithstanding its hefty size, fine binding, and striking illustrations, period readers probably estimated as considerably more worthy of their attention its piquant offering—the firsthand stories of individuals who escaped slavery by way of the Underground Railroad, which between the 1830s and 1860s had grown in scope and efficiency under the darkest possible cover.

Although the institution of slavery had been abolished by the time Still's book first rolled off the press, most Americans remained hungry for details. Those who had seen the reward posters for the return of runaways wanted to know how the so-called Underground Railroad, with neither tracks nor visible stations, had succeeded against powerful forces of wealth and government. Consequently, many of Still's contemporaries purchased the "tell-all" book to satisfy their curiosity, while others, especially former slaves, bought it for personal and historical reasons.

The book, first published by Porter and Coates—a Philadelphia company whose reputation for excellence was bolstered by their printing of the popular Horatio Alger stories—sold briskly. The inevitable depletion of the first edition occurred while public demand continued. In 1878, Still, a savvy businessman who had negotiated for ownership of the printer's plates, turned to a competing publisher, the People's Printing Company, to produce a second edition. Five years later, having gained valuable publishing experience through his dealings with the two publishing houses, Still self-published a third edition (1883).

Until Still's book made its boldfaced appearance in the marketplace, few who had lived inside the charged climate created by prowling slave catchers and the fierce prosecution of both runaways and their liberators would have imagined that someone connected with the Underground Railroad would keep records of its inner workings. In accordance with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, both freeing oneself from bondage and assisting fugitives to freedom were serious crimes. Still's contemporaries must have wondered why he risked keeping detailed records and how he safeguarded them.

Part of the answer to the "why" logically relates to the argument Still advanced in the preface to the 1878 edition, wherein he posited the idea that a people with access to well-documented stories of a heroic past are greatly sustained by them, with a benefit that reaches across time into the futures of generations yet unborn. Placing the triumphs of runaways in the same light as the "deliverance of the children of Israel" and the "martyrdom of millions of Christians" during the Inquisition, Still concluded that the descendants of slaves should have memories of their brave ancestors preserved as testimony to the mettle of the race. Indeed, as Still conceded, "but for the hope I have always cherished that this work would encourage the race in efforts for self-elevation, its publication would never have been undertaken by me."

There was, however, another powerful motivation for William Still to keep and publish the records: the anguish of families torn apart by the heartless trade and barter system called chattel slavery. Still's own family had suffered both a devastating separation and, ultimately, a remarkable and unforeseen reunion. As he wrote in his 1878 preface, the marvelous coincidence of that reunion had influenced him "to preserve the matter found in the pages of this humble volume."

A decade before William Still's birth, his mother, Sidney Steel, fled slavery by way of the Underground Railroad. Inspired by her husband Levin's success in purchasing his freedom,

she made up her mind to take her children and join him in southern New Jersey, where he was living in a free black community. It took two dangerous flights through the treacherous backwoods and swamplands of three states for her to partially accomplish this goal. Her first run for freedom was aborted when slave catchers tracked her and the children (two boys and two girls, all under the age of 8) to New Jersey and recaptured them before they could reach Levin, and safety.

Sidney's second escape attempt followed closely on the heels of the first. It was made possible by her playing the role of a contented slave so convincingly that her master let down his guard. As soon as she had regained his trust, she devised a new plan in collusion with an Underground Railroad agent and prepared to flee North once again with her children. Sadly, this time the success of the mission depended on her agreement to leave two of her children behind, in the care of their grandmother. Realizing this might be her last chance at escape, Sidney made the heart wrenching decision to leave her boys, Levin, Jr., age 8, and Peter, age 6, vowing that soon, from the stronghold of a free black community, she would devise a plan to free them. It was the most difficult choice a mother could make, but she believed that securing freedom for her daughters, while she had the opportunity, would be preferable to leaving all four children in slavery.

Soon after Sidney and the girls reached Levin Steel, Sr. in New Jersey, she changed her name to Charity to avoid recapture, and at about the same time Levin changed the family name to Still—presumably to rid himself of his slave name and sever all ties with the past. When Sidney's master failed in his efforts to track and reclaim her, he retaliated by selling the two boys, intending that they would be lost to their mother forever.

In the years that followed, Charity Still, living undercover on a family farm in southern New Jersey with her husband and daughters, brought fourteen more children into the world. Her eighteenth and youngest child, William, was born in 1821. Through discipline and hard work, Charity and Levin Sr. supported their children and instilled in all of them a strong work ethic.

As the "baby of the family," William must have benefited from a profusion of siblings available to play with him, teach him, and protect him; yet, based on his own testimony, a dark cloud hanging over the family did much to shape his character and outlook: the matter of Charity and Levin's two lost sons, Levin Jr. and Peter. Young William was close to his mother, and keenly aware of her constant anxiety over the boys she had left behind. The mystery of their whereabouts and condition plagued her like a wound that would not heal, and thus it is not surprising that William would be attracted to work that could help both to transform slaves into free persons and to repair fractured families.

In 1844, at age twenty-three, William Still left the family farm to seek his fortune in the city of Philadelphia, bringing with him little more than a positive attitude toward work, strong moral values, and a desire to make something of himself. For three years he supported himself as a handyman while learning, apparently with little or no tutoring, to read and write.

One day in 1847, Still stopped at the office of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society to read a help-wanted advertisement in the window. The organization needed a clerk, which must have seemed to him a fitting occupation for a literate black man, as he immediately went inside to apply. He probably felt his temperament was well suited to working for the cause of freedom and justice, for nothing engaged his sympathies more, as the son of two former slaves, than the plight of the fugitives he saw passing through Philadelphia on their way further north to safety. He could not have imagined, however, that in a few short years he would emerge as one of the most effective Underground Railroad "conductors" in the nation.

Still's capable entry level work soon recommended him for a position of greater responsibility. The wheels turned so quickly that by 1851 he was serving as Chairman of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, an active sub-group of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. His territorial responsibilities extended from Delaware and Maryland, located directly below the Mason-Dixon Line, into the Virginias and farther south through North Carolina and Georgia. In 1850, the federal legislatures passed the Fugitive Slave Act, aimed directly at stopping the Underground Railroad movement. Under the terms of the law, an

ordinary citizen's mere failure to report suspected runaways was a criminal offense, and the punishment for those caught aiding fugitive slaves was severe, including imprisonment. Observing that the act was helping slave owners to regain their human property, Still countered with greater organization, improved networking, and more effective fundraising. In spite of the increased danger, the fugitives continued to come to his office, and he continued to assist them and record their stories.

Certainly, no one had more to lose than William Still if the anonymity of the Underground Railroad passengers and their benefactors had been penetrated, but determination and the will to succeed made him confident he could serve as guarantor for many precious lives. His answer to the question of "how" he might safeguard his potentially explosive records was through concealment in a tomb. One can only imagine the stealth with which Still walked into the shadows of a graveyard, on his way to the crypt he had chosen as a hiding place. Like an undercover agent in enemy territory, he must have felt that the danger of discovery lurked at every turn. Yet, each time he left home with a new package of secret writings, he kept his composure, accomplishing his mission without incident.

As the illicit collection of stories grew within the crypt, the last thing on Still's mind was how they might ultimately be woven together. The presentation of the material was a task he consigned to a child of providence who would uncover the mysteries of the crypt in a "Brighter Coming Day." For, as Still admitted, before the miracle of emancipation, he had not foreseen an end to slavery and therefore never imagined the publishing of a single fugitive story. Consequently, when fate opened the gate for him to make public the stories he had so carefully recorded and protected, he had yet to decide how and where to begin the saga. As it turned out, he was a more-than-capable editor.

The Underground Rail Road opens with a riveting account of the attempt of a white abolitionist, Seth Concklin, to rescue the family of Peter Still—second oldest son of Charity and Levin Still, Sr., and William's long lost brother—from slavery in Alabama. This is a fitting point of departure in that it reveals Still not only as an anti-slavery operative with stories to tell, but also as an active participant in the drama. As he recounts the astounding facts leading up to the attempted rescue of his brother's family, his reporting style—clear, informative, and detached—belies the depth of his emotional involvement in the story.

The reader may first note this restraint on the part of the author when reading about Peter Still's separation from his (and William's) mother more than forty years earlier. Yet the reader may also recognize a subtext of pain when William Still writes of a six-year-old boy separated from his mother, holding fast to the memory of her tearful promise to send for him, and the name of her planned destination: Philadelphia.

Peter Still believed that one day he would find his mother and sisters. During the long interim, he married and had three children of his own. He also buried his older brother in a slave's grave. Finally, forty years after his mother escaped with his sisters from slavery, he became able, through his own industry, to purchase his freedom and make his way to Philadelphia in search of his family.

In one of life's wonderful ironies, upon his arrival in the city the first person Peter approached to inquire about his lost relatives was William Still, a younger brother he had never met. Peter only knew of two siblings other than Levin, Jr., but his memory of his sisters and mother was so clear that, as he spoke of them, William realized a miracle had occurred—a miracle that was validated when one of the sisters joined them, confirming information from Peter that only her brother could know. Subsequently, Peter learned that his mother was still alive, and a joyous family reunion followed.

The story of Peter Still and his reunion with lost family members appeared in the *Philadelphia Freeman* under the title "The Kidnapped and the Ransomed." Seth Concklin, a Quaker of great Christian fervor, was among those who read the newspaper account. He was greatly moved by Peter's success in finding the family from whom he had been long separated, and saddened that his success had created another source of pain: separation from his wife and children, whom he had left enslaved in Alabama. Apparently, the tragedy of Peter's situation weighed so heavily on Concklin's mind that he grew determined to act as a deliverer and bring Peter's wife and children out of slavery so that the family could be united in freedom.

Concklin's rescue attempt had all the ingredients of a grand, tragic play. The odds were arrayed against his mission, yet he was resolute and confident. Recognizing that negotiating the family's release was not an option—Alabama law forcefully prohibited the purchase of slaves for the purpose of setting them free elsewhere—Concklin willingly chose the direction filled with the greatest danger: direct physical intervention.

After learning “how deadly opposed to the spirit of freedom” (p. 2) was public sentiment in Alabama, Concklin devised a plan to get Peter's wife and children passage on the Underground Railroad. He arranged to spirit them away from the state aboard a chartered steamboat. They would work their way to the Ohio River by whatever means he could obtain and, from there, board a waiting boat that would take them to the free state of Indiana.

Concklin arrived in Alabama in January 1851, under the guise of a miller, and quickly arranged to meet Peter's wife, Vina, and the couple's three children, two sons and a daughter. After learning of Concklin's sincere desire to help them reach Peter, Vina and her children became willing accomplices in the escape plan. Through the mail, Concklin kept Peter and William Still apprised of his labyrinthine movements and his dealings with Christian “wolves.” Nothing came easy. Money was tight and few people could be trusted. Nevertheless, Concklin persevered until he achieved his goal. After three months of watching and waiting, moving backward and forward, dodging obstacles, and taking chances on land and water, he brought Peter's family safely into an Indiana harbor.

When Peter learned of his family's safe arrival on free soil, he was indescribably happy. His joy was short lived, as Concklin subsequently wrote to report that slave catchers had captured his wife and children and put them in an Indiana jail. Delight turned to despair as Peter considered the danger his family now faced. He was also concerned for Concklin, who had not been arrested with Vina and the boys.

Believing he had found a safe place to leave the mother and children, Concklin had already departed by the time they were captured and incarcerated. Upon hearing the news, he rushed to the jail to seek their release on a writ of Habeas Corpus. No sooner had Concklin shown his face than he was himself seized and imprisoned. When the boat arrived to take Peter's family back to their master, Concklin was also put onboard, bound for Alabama to stand trial in the state where his offenses to the legal codes of inhumanity had been committed.

In the telling of the story, Still delayed divulging Concklin's fate to his readers. As one wonders how Concklin could have possibly extricated himself, a series of letters appear from Concklin sympathizers to William Still that speculate about his capture and even report a successful escape. Finally, a letter from Levi Coffin leaves no doubt that Concklin was brutally killed as he tried to get away. Still's remorse for Concklin's death colors the story with great poignancy, and the reader senses that, for Still, this episode resonated as a deep personal tragedy. Clearly, Still struggled to come to terms with the fact that Concklin undertook the ill-fated mission on behalf of his family.

While Concklin's tragic death was a personal matter for William Still, the story had broader implications. Still believed the vicious attack on Concklin illustrated the depth of human depravity in the same way that Concklin's effort represented the height of selfless sacrifice. On one level, Still no doubt wished to memorialize a man of “noble and daring spirit,” while on another he wanted to acknowledge the white abolitionists who willingly risked their own lives to free the unjustly enslaved African-Americans.

Although the facts motivating escapes were uniformly grim and the conditions fugitives and their liberators faced were uncompromisingly harsh, Still packaged his collection of stories as a rousing and inspirational volume in which, he promised, not a word of fiction ever escaped his pen. Still recognized that human struggle holds a special fascination for readers, and that examples of ordinary people triumphing against great odds are uplifting. Between and around the astonishing events he documented, he wryly scrutinized the irrational system that had damaged the soul of victim and oppressor alike.

Still at times infused the narratives with his subtle, ironic humor. Among the stories that give the reader a chance to appreciate his wry wit is a narrative he entitled “Ex-President Tyler's Household Loses An Aristocratic ‘Article.’” Here, Still represents the fugitive giving the interview as “a remarkable specimen of the ‘well-fed....’” When the reader first learns that

this particular runaway departed the home of an ex-president, was related by blood to the family the ex-president had married into, and was not poorly treated, she may believe that Still felt the man less deserving of sympathy than some other fugitives. This conclusion seems to be bolstered by Still's mentioning that one of the vigilance members sitting in on the interview characterized the runaway as "one of that class so commonly referred to by apologists for the Patriarchal Institution" (p. 40). However, what might at first seem to be Still's lack of empathy for a pampered slave is turned on its head when the author opines that bestowed kindnesses and advantages by a master to a slave can never effectively protect a slave from the ravages of a system which is inherently corrupt. According to Still, an "aristocratic" slave faced the same injustices suffered by the most abject field slave: the inability to choose a life partner and raise a family, and the possibility of being sold into a darker, more brutal form of slavery. These were precisely the risks that motivated the "well-fed" fugitive from the Tyler household to seek his freedom through the Underground Railroad, and they prove Still's conclusion that "the struggles and hardships [the runaway] had submitted to in escaping, as well as the luxuries he was leaving behind, were nothing to be compared with the blessings of liberty." (p. 40). Of course, Still did not fail to document the fugitive's references to Tyler's cruelty to slaves (other than the house slaves, who were protected by their mistress); he also reported the man's uncomplimentary assessment of Tyler as a cross, poor man who had gained 29 slaves and the greater part of his wealth through marriage.

Stories of "well-treated" slaves are relatively rare in Still's book. Most narratives describe violent treatment and hairbreadth escapes fraught with danger, physical hardship, and night-long treks through swamps and thick forests. It is therefore not surprising that some fugitives decided to stay above ground and hide in plain sight: Still relates a number of stories of men and women masquerading as members of the opposite sex in order to avoid slave catchers.

Many fugitive stories that have become part of American folklore were recounted in *The Underground Rail Road*, though the book is only rarely credited or referenced. For example, one better known story in today's African-American community is that of Ellen Craft, a fair complexioned house servant who escaped from an intolerable situation in the guise of a white male being accompanied on a business trip by her dark skinned butler—a role played by her husband, William. More than a few modern readers will recall Ellen Craft as dressing up like a man, with a scarf wrapped around her throat, feigning a sore throat so that her "servant" might acceptably do all the talking for "him." However, many who pick up this book will be surprised to find Ellen Craft's story documented by William Still, who was among the first individuals to interview her about her harrowing journey to freedom.

As a number of Still's other narratives show, it was not unusual for slaves to arrive in the Philadelphia harbor packed in a variety of crates, boxes, and baskets. Among these desperate stowaways was the legendary Henry "Box" Brown, whose ride to freedom from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia was touted in anti-slavery newspapers and graphically depicted in *The Underground Rail Road*.

Another intriguing story memorialized by William Still (and recently retold in Henry Louis Gates's bestseller, *The Bondswoman's Story*) is that of Jane Johnson. Still details how in 1855 he helped to liberate Johnson and her two sons from John Hill Wheeler in Philadelphia. Still describes the rancorous court battle that ensued when Wheeler, a U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua, fought to have his human property returned. Jane Johnson went free due to a legal loophole in the Fugitive Slave Act.

The numbers of slaves escaping captivity began to increase with the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, an event that highlighted the fundamental contradiction between the nation's practice of slavery and its aspirations to become a proud democracy. By the 1830s, the institution of slavery had become localized in the South where the dependence on agriculture contributed to the system's intransigence. The only northern exception was New Jersey, where slavery continued almost up to the start of the Civil War. As the nineteenth century marched forward, the growth of free black communities in the North picked up significantly and the growth in the Southern population of free blacks spiked to a lesser extent,

fueling dissatisfaction among those still trapped on plantations. Aiding this dissatisfaction were sentiments aroused in a segment of the white community that participated in the Second Great Awakening, a religious movement that pricked the conscience of some professed Christians. This movement encouraged many who were counted among the faithful to extend aid and kindness to fugitives. It was at this point in time that William Still, a man well suited to ride the high currents of change, stepped into the stream of time. He assisted untold numbers of fugitives bound for the high shores of liberty, and, in recording, preserving, and publishing many of their stories, he assured that their legacy will serve to enlighten and inspire future generations.

Now that *The Underground Rail Road* has been republished after many years of neglect and unavailability to the general public, twenty-first century readers have regained primary accounts of an important chapter in American history, vividly colored by the players whose deeds created the script. The book offers a wide lens through which modern readers may see clearly, as did Still a hundred and fifty years ago, that the true heroes of the Underground Railroad were the fugitives themselves. The sacrifices made to gain basic human rights were ennobling—not only for those who had been denied those rights, but for all humanity.

The stories contained in *The Underground Rail Road* have the power to help us overcome obstacles in our lives, to become agents of change for the betterment of our society, and to uplift the disadvantaged. In essence, the triumphs of those who lived these stories prove that an idea that is inherently right will always prevail; the question is not if, but when.

SARAH SMITH DUCKSWORTH

Sarah Smith Ducksworth is a Professor of English at Kean University, Union, New Jersey, and author of “Stowe’s Construction of an African Persona and the Creation of White Identity for a New World Order” in *The Stowe Debate: Rhetorical Strategies in Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (University of Massachusetts Press, December 1994).

The contributions of Kean University faculty members James Conyers, Melodie Toby, and Barbara Wheeler are gratefully acknowledged.