

PREFACE TO THE 1878 EDITION

Like millions of my race, my mother and father were born slaves, but were not contented to live and die so. My father purchased himself in early manhood by hard toil. Mother saw no way for herself and children to escape the horrors of bondage but by flight. Bravely, with her four little ones, with firm faith in God and an ardent desire to be free, she forsook the prison-house, and succeeded, through the aid of my father, to reach a free State. Here life had to be begun anew. The old familiar slave names had to be changed, and others, for prudential reasons, had to be found. This was not hard work. However, hardly months had passed ere the keen scent of the slave-hunters had trailed them to where they had fancied themselves secure. In those days all power was in the hands of the oppressor, and the capture of a slave mother and her children was attended with no great difficulty other than the crushing of freedom in the breast of the victims. Without judge or jury, all were hurried back to wear the yoke again. But back this mother was never resolved to stay. She only wanted another opportunity to again strike for freedom. In a few months after being carried back, with only two of her little ones, she took her heart in her hand and her babes in her arms, and this trial was a success. Freedom was gained, although not without the sad loss of her two older children, whom she had to leave behind. Mother and father were again reunited in freedom, while two of their little boys were in slavery. What to do for them other than weep and pray, were questions unanswerable. For over forty years the mother's heart never knew what it was to free from anxiety about her lost boys. But no tidings came in answer to her many prayers, until one of them, to the great astonishment of his relatives, turned up in Philadelphia, nearly fifty years of age, seeking his long-lost parents. Being directed to the Anti-Slavery Office for instructions as to the best plan to adopt to find out the whereabouts of his parents, fortunately he fell into the hands of his own brother, the writer, whom he had never heard of before, much less seen or known. And here began revelations connected with this marvellous coincidence, which influenced me, for years previous to Emancipation, to preserve the matter found in the pages of this humble volume.

And in looking back now over these strange and eventful Providences, in the light of the wonderful changes wrought by Emancipation, I am more and more constrained to believe that the reasons, which years ago led me to aid the bondman and preserve the records of his sufferings, are to-day quite as potent in convincing me that the necessity of the times requires this testimony.

And since the first advent of my book, wherever reviewed or read by leading friends of freedom, the press, or the race more deeply represented by it, the expressions of approval and encouragement have been hearty and unanimous, and the thousands of volumes which have been sold by me, on the subscription plan, with hardly any facilities for the work, makes it obvious that it would, in the hands of a competent publisher, have a wide circulation.

And here I may frankly state, that but for the hope I have always cherished that this work would encourage the race in efforts for self-elevation, its publication never would have been undertaken by me.

I believe no more strongly at this moment than I have believed ever since the Proclamation of Emancipation was made by Abraham Lincoln, that as a class, in this country, no small exertion will have to be put forth before the blessings of freedom and knowledge can be fairly enjoyed by this people; and until colored men manage by dint of hard acquisition to enter the ranks of skilled industry, very little substantial respect will be shown them, even with the ballot-box and musket in their hands.

Well-conducted shops and stores; lands acquired and good farms managed in a manner to compete with any other; valuable books produced and published on interesting and important subjects—these are some of the fruits which the race are expected to exhibit from their newly gained priveleges.

If it is asked "how?" I answer, "through extraordinary determination and endeavor," such as are demonstrated in hundreds of cases in the pages of this book, in the struggles of men and women to obtain their freedom, education and property.

These facts must never be lost sight of.

The race must not forget the rock from whence they were hewn, nor the pit from whence they were digged.

Like other races, this newly emancipated people will need all the knowledge of their past condition which they can get.

The bondage and deliverance of the children of Israel will never be allowed to sink into oblivion while the world stands.

Those scenes of suffering and martyrdom millions of Christians were called upon to pass through in the days of the Inquisition are still subjects of study, and have unabated interest for all enlightened minds.

The same is true of the history of this country. The struggles of the pioneer fathers are preserved, produced and re-produced, and cherished with undying interest by all Americans, and the day will not arrive while the Republic exists, when these histories will not be found in every library.

While the grand little army of abolitionists was waging its untiring warfare for freedom, prior to the rebellion, no agency encouraged them like the heroism of fugitives. The pulse of the four million slaves and their desire for freedom, were better felt through "The Underground Railroad," than through any other channel.

Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, Wm. Wells Brown, Rev. J. W. Logan, and others, gave unmistakable evidence that the race had no more eloquent advocates than its own self-emancipated champions.

Every step they took to rid themselves of their fetters, or to gain education, or in pleading the cause of their fellow-bondmen in the lecture-room, or with their pens, met with applause on every hand, and the very argument needed was thus furnished in large measure. In those dark days previous to emancipation, such testimony was indispensable.

The free colored men were as imperatively required now to furnish the same manly testimony in support of the ability of the race to surmount the remaining obstacles growing out of oppression, ignorance, and poverty.

In the political struggles, the hopes of the race have been sadly disappointed. From this direction no great advantage is likely to arise very soon.

Only as desert can be proved by the acquisition of knowledge and the exhibition of high moral character, in examples of economy and a disposition to encourage industrial enterprises, conducted by men of their own ranks, will it be possible to make political progress in the face of the present public sentiment.

Here, therefore, in my judgment is the best possible reason for vigorously pushing the circulation of this humble volume—that is may testify for thousands and tens of thousands, as no other work can do.

SEPTEMBER, 1878.

WILLIAM STILL, AUTHOR.
PHILADELPHIA, PA.

PREFACE TO THE 1872 EDITION

Whereas, The position of William Still in the vigilance committee connected with the "Underground Rail Road," as its corresponding secretary, and chairman of its active sub-committee, gave him peculiar facilities for collecting interesting facts pertaining to this branch of the anti-slavery service; therefore

Resolved, That the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society request him to compile and publish his personal reminiscences and experiences relating to the "Underground Rail Road."

In compliance with this Resolution, unanimously passed at the closing meeting of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society held last May in Philadelphia, the writer, in the following pages, willingly and he hopes satisfactorily discharges his duty.

In these Records will be found interesting narratives of the escapes of many men, women and children, from the prison-house of bondage; from cities and plantations; from rice swamps and cotton fields; from kitchens and mechanic shops; from Border States and Gulf States; from cruel masters and mild masters;—some guided by the north star alone, penniless, braving the perils of land and sea, eluding the keen scent of the blood-hound as well as the more dangerous pursuit of the savage slave-hunter; some from secluded dens and caves of the earth, where for months and years they had been hidden away waiting for the chance to escape; from mountains and swamps, where indescribable suffering from hunger and other privations had patiently been endured. Occasionally fugitives came in boxes and chests, and not infrequently some were secreted in steamers and vessels, and in some instances journeyed hundreds of miles in skiffs. Men disguised in female attire and women dressed in the garb of men have under very trying circumstances triumphed in thus making their way to freedom. And here and there when all other modes of escape seemed cut off, some, whose fair complexions have rendered them indistinguishable from their Anglo-Saxon brethren, feeling that they could endure the yoke no longer, with assumed airs of importance, such as they had been accustomed to see their masters show when traveling, have taken the usual modes of conveyance and have even braved the most scrutinizing inspection of slave-holders, slave-catchers and car conductors, who were ever on the alert to catch those who were considered base and white enough to practice such deception. Passes have been written and used by fugitives with their masters' and mistresses' names boldly attached thereto, and have answered admirably as a protection, when passing through ignorant country districts of slave regions, where but few, either white or colored, knew how to read or write correctly.

Not a few, upon arriving, of course, hardly had rags enough on them to cover their nakedness, even in the coldest weather.

It scarcely needs to be stated that, as a general rule, the passengers of the U. G. R. R. were physically and intellectually above the average order of slaves.

They were determined to have liberty even at the cost of life.

The slave auction block indirectly proved to be in some respects a very active agent in promoting travel on the U. G. R. R., just as Jeff. Davis was an agent in helping to bring about the downfall of Slavery. The horrors of the block, as looked upon through the light of the daily heart-breaking separations it was causing to the oppressed, no pen could describe or mind imagine; hence it will be seen that many of the passengers, whose narratives will be found in this work, ascribed their first undying resolution to strike for freedom to the auction block or to the fear of soon having to take their chances thereon. But other agencies were at work in the South, which in various ways aided directly or tacitly the U. G. R. R. cause.

To refer in detail to any considerable number of these agents would be impossible, if necessary. Some there were who nobly periled their all for the freedom of the oppressed, whose sufferings and deeds of bravery must have a fitting place in this volume.

Where in history, modern or ancient, could be found a more Christlike exhibition of love and humanity, of whole-souled devotion to freedom, than was proven in the character of the hero, Seth Concklin, who lost his life while endeavoring to rescue from Alabama slavery the wife and children of Peter Still?

So also do the heroic and faithful services of Samuel D. Burris demand special reference and commemoration, for his connection with the U. G. R. R. cost him not only imprisonment and the most barbarous treatment, but likewise the loss of his freedom. He was sold on the auction block.

Here too come the overwhelming claims of S. A. Smith, who at the sad cost to himself of many of the best years of his life in the Richmond penitentiary, boxed up Henry Box Brown and others in Richmond, and committed them to Adams' Express office, to be carried in this most extraordinary manner to freedom.

We must not omit from these records the boldness and the hazard of the unparalleled undertakings of Captains Drayton, Lee, Baylis, &c.

While the Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia was in no wise responsible for the suffering incurred by many of those who helped the slave, yet in order to show how men were moved to lend an ear to those hungering and thirsting for freedom, and to what extent the relentless spirit of Slavery would go in wreaking vengeance upon them—out of the many who were called upon to suffer thus, the individual cases here brought forward must suffice. Without introducing a few of such incidents the records would necessarily be incomplete.

Those who come after us seeking for information in regard to the existence, atrocity, struggles and destruction of Slavery, will have no trouble in finding this hydra-headed monster ruling and tyrannizing over Church and State, North and South, white and black, without let or hindrance, for at least several generations. Nor will posterity have any difficulty in finding the deeds of the brave and invincible opposers of Slavery, who in the language of Wm. Lloyd Garrison, declared without concealment and without compromise: "I am in earnest, I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard."

While this resolute spirit actuated the hearts of all true abolitionists, it was a peculiar satisfaction and gratification to them to know that the slaves themselves were struggling and hungering for deliverance. Hence such evidence from this quarter never failed to meet with hearty sympathy and aid. But here the enemy was never willingly allowed to investigate.

The slave and his particular friends could only meet in private to transact the business of the Underground Rail Road ground. All others were outsiders. The right hand was not to know what the left hand was doing.

Stockholders did not expect any dividends, nor did they require special reports to be published. Indeed prudence often dictated that even the recipients of our favor should not know the names of their helpers, and *vice versa* they did not desire to know theirs.

The risk of aiding fugitives was never lost sight of, and the safety of all concerned called for still tongues. Hence sad and thrilling stories were listened to, and made deep impressions; but as a universal rule, friend and fugitive parted with only very vivid recollection of the secret interview and with mutual sympathy; for a length of time no narratives were written. The writer, in common with others, took no notes. But after the restoration of Peter Still, his own brother (the kidnapped and the ransomed), after forty years' cruel separation from his mother, the wonderful discovery and joyful reunion, the idea forced itself upon his mind that all over this wide and extended country thousands of mothers and children, separated by Slavery, were in a similar way living without the slightest knowledge of each other's whereabouts, praying and weeping without ceasing, as did this mother and son. Under these reflections it seemed reasonable to hope that by carefully gathering the narratives of Underground Rail Road passengers, in some way or other some of the bleeding and severed hearts might be united and comforted; and by the use that might be made privately, if not publicly, of just such facts as would naturally be embraced in their brief narratives, re-unions might take place. For years it was the writer's privilege to see many travelers, to receive from their own lips the most interesting and in many cases exceedingly thrilling accounts of their struggles for liberty, and to

learn who had held them in bondage, how they had been treated, what prompted them to escape, and whom that were near and dear to them they had left in chains. Their hopes, fears and sufferings were thus recorded in a book. It scarcely need be added with no expectation, however, that the day was so near when these things could be published.

It is now a source of great satisfaction to feel that not only these numerous narratives may be published, but that in connection therewith, for the completeness of the work, many interesting private letters from fugitives in Canada, slaves in the South, Underground Rail Road conductors and stockholders, and last and not least, from slaveholders, in the bargain—all having a direct bearing on the mysterious road.

In the use of these various documents, the writer begs to assure his readers that the most scrupulous care has been taken to furnish artless stories, simple facts,—to resort to no coloring to make the book seem romantic, as he is fully persuaded that any exaggerations or additions of his own could not possibly equal in surpassing interest, the original and natural tales given under circumstances, when life and death seemed about equally balanced in the scale, and fugitives in transit were making their way from Slavery to Freedom, with the horrors of the Fugitive Slave-law staring them in the face.

Thousands were either directly or indirectly interested in this enterprise, and in all probability two generations will pass away before many who are now living witnesses to the truth of these records will cease to bring vividly to mind the hour and circumstance when for the first time they were led to resort to this road to escape the “barbarism” of Slavery.

Far be it from the writer to assume, however, that these Records cover the entire Underground Rail Road operations. Many local branches existed in different parts of the country, which neither time nor limit would allow mention of in this connection. Good men labored and suffered, who deserve to be held in the highest admiration by the friends of Freedom, whose names may be looked for in vain in these pages; for which reason some may be inclined to complain. With respect to these points it may here be remarked that in gathering narratives from unwritten sources—from memory simply—no amount of pains or labor could possibly succeed in making a trustworthy history. The writer has deemed it best, therefore, to confine himself to facts coming within his personal knowledge, and to the records of his own preserving, which, by the way, are quite too voluminous to be all used in this work. Frequent abridgements and omissions must be made.

The writer is fully conscious of his literary imperfections. The time allotted him from other pressing duties is, moreover, exceedingly limited. Nevertheless he feels that he owes it to the cause of Freedom, and to the Fugitives and their posterity in particular, to bring the doings of the U. G. R. before the public in the most truthful manner; not for the purpose of amusing the reader, but to show what efforts were made and what success was gained for Freedom under difficulties. That some professing a love of liberty at this late date will be disposed to criticise some of the methods resorted to in aiding in the escape of fugitives as herein recounted, may be expected. While the writer holds the labors of Abolitionists generally in very grateful appreciation, he hopes not to be regarded as making any invidious discriminations in favor of the individual friends of the slave, whose names may be brought out prominently in this work, as it is not with the Anti-Slavery question proper that he is dealing, but simply the Underground Rail Road. In order, therefore, fittingly to bring the movements of this enterprise to light, the writer could not justly confine himself to the Acting Committee, but felt constrained to bring in others—Friends—who never forsook the fugitive, who visited him in prison, clothed him when naked, fed him when hungry, wept with him when he wept, and cheered him with their warmest sympathies and friendship. In addition to the names of the Acting Committee, he has felt constrained to beg the portraits of the following stockholders and advisers of the Road, whose names will be found on the next page [xxxix], and in thus presenting a brief sketch of their labors, he feels that the true friends of the slave in recognizing them in this connection with many of the once Fugitives (now citizens), will regard it as a tribute to the Anti-Slavery cause rather than the individuals themselves.