

"Philadelphia County" from *The Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, by Charles L. Blockson.
Jacksonville, NC: Flame International, 1981, 8-32.
Reproduced with permission from Charles L. Blockson.

Nestled between the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers, Philadelphia was an early urban center of commerce from which the people came to settle the rest of Pennsylvania. Strongly based religiously, the county was the place of the "Holy Experiment." Philadelphia was an early and important publishing and cultural center in which blacks had the best chance to benefit from the strong anti-slavery impulses of concerned white citizens. Free blacks soon developed leaders from among themselves, men and women who were never willing to forget the plight of their fellow blacks.

PHILADELPHIA

Anti-slavery roots were planted and nurtured in Philadelphia's soil many years before the 1800's when the Underground Railroad is believed to have been "organized." Noted advocates of manumission such as Francis D. Pastorius, Anthony Benezet, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Rush, John Woolman and George Bryan were all dead when the branches of the invincible train were laid by a new breed of fiery abolitionists. Yet it was these early personalities who first popularized and lobbied in the white community for total abolition. Also, Philadelphia's black community, as early as 1787, formed the Free African Society, an organization for mutual aid. Out of this Society grew two important churches: the African Methodist Episcopal Church or "Mother Bethel," and the African Church of St. Thomas. The former church was headed by the ubiquitous Rev. Richard Allen, and the latter by the resourceful Rev. Absalom Jones. These two churches became the center of the spiritual as well as the political life of the antebellum Philadelphia black community.

After the American Congress was formed, the outlook for blacks still remained bleak. They were confronted by an increasing number of segregation laws issued by Northern whites. Black Philadelphians were frequently kidnapped by hired slave stealers who would turn them over to slave holders for a reward.

In 1793, Congress passed a fugitive slave law which permitted slaveholders to recapture their fugitive slaves without having to secure a warrant for arrest. However, once the slaves were recaptured, the slavemaster or his agents were required to go before the courts of the state in which the slaves were taken and secure permission to take them back to the state from which they had fled. This provision was designed for the protection of free blacks living in the North.

Kidnappers, encouraged by the law of 1793, were particularly bold in southeastern Pennsylvania. Slavemasters used black decoys to lure free blacks into slavery. On September 23, 1819, *The Philadelphia Gazette*, reported a case of a black decoy in Philadelphia who courted and married mulatto women and then sold them as slaves. The *Gazette* reported an incident on June 24, 1825, in which a mob of infuriated blacks beat two black decoys at York. *The Pennsylvania Freeman* of June 10th, 1841 reported that

the city of Philadelphia was "infested with kidnappers." These villains were called "keener than bloodhounds on the track of the Negro."

During the 1820's certain citizens of Philadelphia devoted attention to the sordid condition of black residents. Joseph Watson, the mayor of the city, received a letter dated February 15, 1826, from Thomas Wright, Cannon Ferry, Delaware. The letter details a slave kidnapping ring operating in Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland. Philadelphia seems to have been the center for a group of scoundrels that were stealing household servants and transporting them to Alabama and other states further south.

One group of kidnappers was headed by the notorious slave stealer Patty Cannon of Sussex County, Delaware. A tall, attractive woman with auburn hair, Patty possessed a personality of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. She would kidnap blacks and later sell them for profit. She committed some of the most brutal and inhuman crimes of the day, torturing, maiming and bringing horrible suffering on her victims.

On the whole, anti-black feelings were widespread in antebellum Philadelphia. Since many members of the Philadelphia business community had relatives living in southern states and others had extensive connections with the slave planters, anti-slavery agitation was not usually well received by them. Racial hostility also existed in head on confrontations between blacks and poor whites, particularly Irish immigrants.

The esteemed black American scholar W. E. B. DuBois has described the deep racial antagonism in pre-Civil War Philadelphia. In his pioneering study, *The Philadelphia Negro*, DuBois stated:

"Five social developments made the decades from 1820 to 1840 critical for the nation and for the Philadelphia Negroes; first, the impulse of the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century; second, the reaction and recovery succeeding the War of 1812; third, the rapid increase of free Negroes and fugitive slaves, especially in Philadelphia; fifth, the rise of the Abolitionists and the slavery controversy."²

After 1820 the stream of foreign immigration to this county began to swell. Thus, the free blacks and their fugitive slave brethren presented a disturbing factor to the northern social and economical system. The fierce economic struggle between these blacks and the white immigrants along with the continuous agitation by abolitionists, resulted in repeated outbreaks of popular indignation against the abolitionist and the black community.

DuBois described a serious racial conflict that occurred in 1829. Mrs. Fanny Wright Darusmont, a Scotch woman, gave a number of speeches in Philadelphia in which she boldly advocated the emancipation of blacks and social equality of the races. This created great excitement throughout the city. Late in the fall, occasioned by some personal quarrel, the first riot occurred. The confrontation continued to mount. Resentment and unrest led to mob violence. At the height of this violence, a black church at Seventh and Bainbridge Streets was burned. White mobs also burned the Shelter of Colored Orphans at Thirteenth and Callowhill Streets. Numerous other dwellings were attacked and burned.³

A recurrent wave of apprehension as well as deep sorrow swept through the anti-slavery forces of Philadelphia during the 1830's and 1840's. On May 17, 1838, three days after its opening, Pennsylvania Hall was burned to the ground. The hall was built on Sixth and Hamies Streets. The sharp tongued abolitionist Theodore Weld called the hall a "Temple of Freedom." The burning had begun shortly after his wife Angelina had addressed a mixed audience of black and white, as well as male and female. Some reports state that this act was one of the reasons why the hostile mob attacked the majestic building. The city's police refused to provide adequate protection. The Pennsylvania Hall Association was awarded \$33,000 in damages under a state law which made county governments responsible for damages imposed by mob violence. The check was presented to Daniel Neall, the Hall's president. Ironically, Alvan Stewart, an abolitionist from Utica, New York, hoped that the hall would be a "moral furnace in which fires of free discussion would burn day and night."

So severe was the agitation against blacks that in the decade after 1849 there was an actual decrease in the city's black population. On August 1, 1842 a mob of whites attacked a black temperance organization parading in celebration of the abolition of slavery in the West Indies.

William Wells Brown, the black anti-slavery author and agent on

the Underground Railroad, in the early 1850's returned from Europe and visited the "City of Brotherly Love." After he was refused a ride on the omnibus on Chestnut Street, he had these comments: "The omnibusses of Paris, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Liverpool had stopped to take me up, but what mattered that? My face was not white, my hair was not straight and, therefore, I must be excluded from a seat in a third rate American omnibus." The forceful anti-slavery agitator, Frederick Douglass, echoed Brown's frustration when he visited the city in 1862. "Colored persons, no matter how well dressed or well behaved, ladies or gentlemen, rich or poor, are not permitted to ride on any of the many railways through that Christian City."⁴

Perhaps it was the shared experience of exploitation and the constant necessity to struggle for their own civil rights that made the anti-slavery cause of paramount importance to Philadelphia blacks. The combined strength of black abolitionists and sympathetic whites made the city the key center of anti-slavery activities in the state and perhaps the nation. The Underground Railroad in Philadelphia encompassed numerous fugitive aid and abolitionist organizations and churches, as well as prominent and little known black and white conductors. There were dozens of groups and hundreds of spirited individuals that provided the life blood for the Underground Railroad in the "nation's birthplace."

ROUTES AND CHURCHES

Due to the increasing number of runaway slaves arriving in Philadelphia and vicinity, it became necessary to establish several routes of travel. The city was a key receiving and shipping center for the Underground Railroad and connected routes which led into New Jersey and New York. Fugitives who came to Philadelphia were often forwarded to designated points along the Reading and Pennsylvania Railroads, and placed aboard trains traveling through the New England states. Many were forwarded by William Still to the homes of prominent black abolitionists David Ruggles, Rev. Jermain Loguen and Frederick Douglass, all living in New York state.

The most vigorous organizers of networks "to freedom" were black churchmen. Black ministers felt that organized assistance to fugitives and the overthrow of slavery directly challenged the prevailing religious dogma of many white churches that a truly religious man was one who was patient even with slaveholders. As

early as 1831, the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church held the first black political convention in Pennsylvania to protest slavery. Delegates encouraged the use of churches as sanctuaries for runaway slaves, an idea which would be carried out by nearly all black churches in Pennsylvania and elsewhere. As a result, throughout the slavery period runaway slaves felt safer inside their own "Houses of the Lord."

By 1838 many of the black clergy in Philadelphia permitted abolitionist and fugitive aid meetings and activities in their buildings, and even joined these efforts themselves. For example, on April 16, 1838, the Zoar A. M. E. Church in Northern Liberties held a public meeting to solicit contributors and increase membership for the Vigilant (Fugitive Aid) Association and Committee. Rev. Walter Proctor, an agent on the Underground Railroad and pastor of Mother Bethel Church, belonged to the militant Vigilance Committee. Mother Bethel Church served as the most important station on the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, located today on Sixth Street below Pine. The church occupies the oldest piece of ground in the United States continuously owned by black people. The Rev. Stephen H. Gloucester of the Central Presbyterian Church of Color, the Rev. Daniel Scott of the Union Baptist Church, the Rev. William Douglass, and the Rev. Charles W. Gardiner were all members of an Underground connection in Philadelphia. The St. Thomas and the Hurst Street Churches also participated in the Railroad. Members of the Central Presbyterian Church, founded in 1844, were among the most ardent workers on the Underground Railroad.⁵ William Still, a major conductor, was a member of this church. The members of the Presbyterian Church organized its own anti-slavery society and sponsored numerous affairs for the cause of slave freedom.

The Campbell African Methodist Church (or, as it was popularly known, "Second Bethel") was founded in 1807 when twenty-eight worshippers met at Sarah Congo's house on Bowner Street. Located in the Frankford section of the city, members of this church established a reputation for offering assistance to runaway slaves. Rev. William Henry Furness, pastor of the city's Unitarian Church, joined the Underground Railroad movement after the burning of Pennsylvania Hall and won the respect of blacks, both slave and free. *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, February 12, 1852, stated that the Daughters of Clayton Durham and the Porters

Beneficial Society contributed funds to the Underground Railroad. members of the First Colored Presbyterian Church aided and sheltered fugitive slaves.

Germantown, a large enclave of northwestern Philadelphia, provided an appropriate setting for escaping slaves. It had been the home of blacks since 1683, and it was here that the first written protest against slavery in America was issued in 1688 by the German Quakers. Here also Anthony Benezet, the devoted friend of blacks, published several of his most famous pamphlets against slavery in the late seventeen hundreds.

However, Germantown offered no paradise for blacks. As late as 1832, Amos Bronson Alcott, father of the noted author Louisa May Alcott, was forced to leave his post as school master at an area private school because he insisted on educating a black girl.⁶

Recorded information reveals that the Underground Railroad forwarded many passengers over cobblestone streets into homes of Germantown conductors. A Philadelphia newspaper, *The Beehive*, according to Robert F. Ulle, a Germantown Mennonite historian, reported:

"Lost Cave Sought in Germantown, Tradition relates in Germantown...that such a cavern existed and was used in Civil War times as a hiding place for many runaway slaves, who came in on the Underground Railway. These fugitives were taken to Flat Rock Dam on the Schuylkill, thence over Domino Lane, Livezy's Lane and Township Line to Blue Bell, then secreted in the cavern and there cared for by the Mennonites and Friends."⁷

Another account of Underground Railroad activity in Germantown, recorded in *The Beehive*, reads in part:

"About the years 1835 to 1840 the agitation of the slave question became quite animated, and the Quakers in Germantown and Montgomery and Chester Counties commenced to secretly assist slaves to escape from their bondage...Many a barn, and many a house too, would be used for sheltering these people. I remember one night a dozen darkies were brought into our house. I was in bed at the time and two of them were put in bed

alongside of me and kept there until the next night, when they started off on their journey towards Canada.

On one occasion there was a meeting here in Germantown of the secret officers of the Underground Railway. I happened to be home that night and my father introduced me to the big guns. Among the number was William Still...another prominent director at that meeting was Harriet Tubman...The heads of many Quaker families in Germantown were at that meeting, and gave substantial aid to help along the good work...All these men and women were not only abolitionists, but they were all temperance people, and everyone a church member. These meetings were opened with prayer and closed with a blessing."

Germantown today has many homes and sites that are reputed to have served as stations. The property adjoining the Friends Meeting House where William Penn Charter School now stands once was used as a station by Abraham L. Pennock, a prominent Quaker abolitionist on the Underground Railroad. Thomas Garrett frequently sent fugitive slaves to his cousin, Samuel Rhoads, a local Underground Railroad receiver. Also, in 1847, John Button of Germantown organized the Building Association which was open to non-whites, and later commonly called the Abolition Association. Its members provided food, clothing and shelter for runaways.

THE VIGILANCE COMMITTEE

The Vigilance Committee offered tremendous help in sending fugitive slaves north during the times of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia. During the 1850's in particular, hundreds of blacks had to be helped and safely hidden until they could be sent elsewhere, for the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 spurred on Southern slave hunters to search aggressively throughout the city. Many legal battles were fought to secure the freedom of fugitives. Even free blacks sometimes had to wage legal fights to prove their rights to liberty. This committee was the first formal effort to organize the Underground Railroad on a business-like

basis.

It was not until the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 that the anti-slavery societies began to realize the necessity for helping escaped slaves from the South. By 1852 the policies of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society had evolved to include openly supporting and passing along fugitive slaves. But before that, in August 1835, the more militant black and white abolitionists had created the Philadelphia Vigilance Association "to fund aid to colored persons in distress."⁸ The Association elected three black officers at its initial meeting: James McCrummel, president; Jacob C. White, secretary; and James Needham, treasurer. A few weeks later, it chose Charles Atkins, a black, to be the authorized agent to solicit funds for the Association. Philadelphia's black community figured prominently in the formation and activities of the Association. It is recorded that a secret room with a trap door was used by Association members to hide fugitive slaves.

The minute books of the Philadelphia Vigilant Committee for 1839-1854 are recordings of more than meetings. Each is a case book of its operation as well. An example: Record of Cases included in the "Minute Book of the Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia" reads: No. 10. July 17th, Man from Eastern Shore of Myd. Sent to P—S, Willow G(rove) expense 50 cts reported by Healy. No. 15, 15th, Woman from Del. May,d reported J. G. Bias, sent to N.Y.

The Vigilance Committee assisted destitute fugitives by providing board and room, clothing, medicine, and money. It informed fugitives of their legal rights, gave them legal protection from kidnappers, and frequently prosecuted individuals who attempted to abduct, sell or violate the legal rights of free blacks. Moreover, it helped runaways set up a permanent home or gave them temporary employment before their departure to Canada. The Vigilance Committee sent bondsmen to the North via other contacts to the Vigilance Committee of New York, since these two groups maintained a close working relationship.

At every juncture of its history, a majority of the officers of the Association were black. In 1839, for example, nine of the sixteen members of the Vigilance Committee were black, including James McCrummel, Jacob C. White, James Needham, James Gibbons, Daniel Colly, J. J. G. Bias, Shepherd Shay and Stephen H. Gloucester.⁹ Other blacks included William Still, Robert Purvis, Charles H. Bustill, Charles Reason and Joseph C. Ware. There was a dramatic change in tone and membership of the Committee

beginning in 1840. The black community and the Vigilance Association of Philadelphia criticized the weak stand on fugitive aid and the protection of free blacks by the white dominated anti-slavery societies. From this time on the membership of the Vigilance Committee was composed almost entirely of blacks and reflected the critical stance of Philadelphia's black community towards the anti-slavery societies. It is safe to say that the operation of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia was carried out predominantly by black conductors after 1840. Black residents of Paschall's Alley located at Fifth and Coates Streets aided and sheltered more fugitive slaves than any other section of the city until the Civil War.

The Vigilance Committee received fugitives sent by agents who operated in the South. Robert Purvis explained how the Southern Underground Railroad connected with Northern agents:

The funds for carrying on the enterprise were raised from our anti-slavery friends as the cases came up and their needs demanded it. Many of the fugitives required no other help than advice and directions how to proceed. The most efficient helpers or agents we had were two market women who lived in Baltimore, one of whom was white, the other colored. By some means, they obtained a number of genuine certificates of freedom which were afterwards returned to them and used again by other fugitives.

Another most efficient worker was a son of a slaveholder who lived at New Bern, North Carolina. Through his agency, the slaves were forwarded by placing them on vessels engaged in the lumber trade which plied between New Bern and Philadelphia."⁹

John Fairfield, a courageous and daring Virginian, forwarded hundreds of slaves from plantations all over the South including those of his relatives. Fairfield, with the help of Levi Coffin, the famous Cincinnati, Ohio station master, sent runaway slaves to conductors in Pennsylvania. During one period in Fairfield's career as an agent on the Underground Railroad, he came to the Vigilance Committee for funds. The members of the Committee had not known of him or his vital aid to runaways, so they wired

Coffin in Ohio for additional information on Fairfield. Coffin wired back with the blunt message: "If John Fairfield needs money, give it to him."¹⁰

Samuel Smith, the white Virginian friend of Henry Box Brown, probably received more national attention than any other Southern conductor of the Underground Railroad. He had constructed the box that Brown used for his celebrated escape to freedom. The box was addressed to a member of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, William H. Johnson, and sent to the Adams Express Office.

Smith was betrayed when he attempted to repeat the daring feat with two other slaves. The fugitives were captured and Smith was sentenced and served eight years in the state penitentiary.

Northern peddlers played a vital role in creating sympathy for the Underground Railroad cause. For years they had been selling their products throughout the South. Usually traveling by wagon, they sold their wares from door to door in cities, towns, and on farms and plantations. Many of these peddlers often converted white Southerners to aid slaves who attempted their foray for freedom. Some peddlers even transported fugitive slaves to the North by hiding slaves among their goods.

Prominent members of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee also included Charles Atkins, Robert B. Ayres, G. B. Bolivar, William A. Burleigh, Rev. Alexander Crummel, Robert B. Forten, Charles W. Gardiner, Limas Johnson, Rowland Johnson, Peter Lester, Rev. Daniel A. Payne, Rev. Walter Proctor, John D. Oliver, George Rice, Daniel Scott, and Jonathan Tudas. The black female members were: Elizabeth White, Sarah McCrummel, Hetty Reckless, Mary Proctor, Elizabeth Colly, Elizabeth Bias, Emily R. Bustill and Margaretta Forten. By 1853 the membership also included these other blacks: Henry Gordon, Rev. William Douglass, Charles Wise, William Still, Isaiah Ware, William Forten, John Burr, Samuel Nicklass, Nathaniel W. Depee, Morris Hall, Basil N. Goines, and Stephen Smith.¹¹ Mary Duttrille, representing a well known catering firm, served in 1853 as the only woman member.

Members of the Vigilance Committee and other agents and conductors on the Underground Railroad sometimes had to deal with spies. According to Joseph A. Borome's study of the Vigilance Committee records, Samuel Williams from Columbia, Pennsylvania was an imposter. The Minute Book for 1839 states that this man was led to E. H. Coates and "feigned himself deaf

and dumb, but not succeeding to his satisfaction, he made a second call representing himself as a slave." Later this imposter was "detected and finally acknowledged the fraud, but from the statement made by him, believing him in want, we (the Committee) gave 20 cts to help him on his way and furnished him with some food."

As a deterrent to infiltration, members of the Committee questioned the runaway slaves who came to them for assistance:

"Do you say you are a runaway slave?"

"Where did you escape from?"

"Who sent you here?"

"How do I know that you are a slave?"

"Who's your master?"

"How am I to know that you are the slave of the gentleman you named?"

"Where was your master when you started to run away?"

"Have you come this far without trouble?"

After being convinced that the runaway slave was telling the truth, the agent or conductor explained to the slave the reason for the severe questioning: the Underground Railroad had to be protected from imposters who would expose its secret operation for money.

The Underground Railroad in Philadelphia was well organized, contrary to the statements made by some historians that it was operated only by individuals or spontaneously. The records kept by the Vigilance Committee offer clear evidence.

FEMALE ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETIES AND ANTI-SLAVERY FAIRS

The Female Anti-Slavery Society was organized on December 9, 1833, with Lucretia Mott as its leader. The Society consisted of about sixty women, both white and black. Among the black members were Sarah, Harriet and Margaretta, the daughters of wealthy abolitionist James Forten. Margaretta was chosen as the recording secretary. Harriet married Robert Purvis. She was skilled in the culinary arts and handicrafts. She participated in the Society's annual fund raising bazaar where fancy goods were sold.

Other black members were Grace Douglass, Lydia White, Charlotte Forten and Hetty Burr.

Spirited Sarah M. Douglass held the position of principal of the preparatory department of the Institute for Colored Youth, where she also substituted as a reading teacher. Although Sarah was born a Quaker, she later refused to attend meetings because a special bench was designated for blacks. Among her closest friends were two aristocratic Southern sisters, Sarah M. and Angelina Grimke. These two women left their large slave holding family in Charleston, South Carolina in the late 1820's and settled in Philadelphia. They joined the Quaker faith and later fought against slavery and for women's rights with the Female Anti-Slavery Society. This organization's influence was so profound that similar societies were organized throughout the eastern seaboard. The Society existed until after the Civil War, then occupying itself with the fate of the black freedmen.

Two years prior to the Female Anti-Slavery Society's founding, however, the black women of Philadelphia had already organized at Mother Bethel Church the Colored Female Free Produce Society of Pennsylvania, with Judith James as president and Laltita Rowley as secretary. The Society's main function was to promote the boycotting of goods made from slave labor. Many blacks supported this organization, while others continued unwittingly to buy slave products sold in Philadelphia stores.

The efforts of the anti-slavery movement were enhanced by the brilliant black humanitarian lecturer, poet and Underground Railroad agent, Frances Ellen Watkin Harper. Born of free parents in Baltimore during 1825, Frances Harper resided in Philadelphia for several years and was involved in the Underground with her close friend, William Still.

Singer and songwriter, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, the noted "Black Swan," supported the anti-slavery cause by giving benefit concerts. On November 9, 1855 she gave a concert at the Shiloh Church in Philadelphia to raise money for Mary Ann Shadd's abolitionist newspaper, *The Provincial Freeman*.

Philadelphia women abolitionist crusaders were also ardent supporters of the Anti-Slavery Fairs which were held in the city from 1835 to 1861 just before Christmas day. The fairs were an excellent means for raising funds to replenish the continually exhausted treasury of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Due to the agitation from the pro-slavery forces in the city, when the plans for the fairs were first proposed, there was

considerable debate. As late as 1842 the Society of Friends still did not completely approve of its members participating in these fairs. Minister Lucretia Mott was scolded by some Elders from the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting for offering to hold the fair at her home, "Roadside," in 1842.

In 1859 the mayor of the city issued an order to take down a flag suspended across fashionable Chestnut Street by the fair organization. This display was deemed illegal even though it was a common practice for charitable and benevolent associations to string together flags and banners across the street without any objection being made. The Anti-Slavery forces felt that they were being harassed by the city's administration due to the fact that their hero John Brown made his attack on Harper Ferry and was executed a few weeks before. A leading newspaper, the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, asked its readers if they planned to permit the fair to be opened. Its December 16, 1859 edition makes reference to Mary Grew, a member of the fair organization.

"She supposed it was the cause in which they were engaged that frightened the people of Philadelphia and they could not stand it. The flag contained a representation of a large bell with the inscription 'Proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all the inhabitants thereof.' The officer informed her that they might hang out an American flag and no one would object."¹²

The fair members later transported their goods to the salons of the Assembly Building. The fairs were held at a number of public halls and private estates throughout the city, and a great variety of articles were offered for sale such as fruits and nuts, ice cream, pies, cakes, lemonade and jellies. Though similar fairs were being organized in other states, the Philadelphia fair was the largest and was known internationally. Celebrated anti-slavery speakers were invited and writers publicizing the anti-slavery cause were permitted to sell their works.

WILLIAM STILL

As one of the most remarkable and major agents in the clandestine operations of the Underground Railroad, William Still

collected and recorded some of the authentic events of Underground Railroad history. Still kept these important historical documents locked in a building loft located at the Lebanon Cemetery. Historian and librarian Edwin Wolf II has written a summary which is quoted here at length of Still's deeds as well as an insightful account of Still's invaluable journal.

"William Still was the most energetic and adventurous of the many Philadelphians who operated the Underground Railroad. He had been born free, but his parents had undergone hardships of escape, his father being forced to work for many years to purchase his freedom from the master who had recaptured them. William Still spent his life helping other escapees, with such effect that, it was said nineteen out of every twenty fugitives passing through Philadelphia stopped at his house. His 'Journal' is an incredible manuscript! In it Still set down sketches of all the escaped slaves who came under the care of the Vigilant Committee, designated in the front of the volume as 'Station No. 2 U. G. R. R. ' The 'Journal' supplemented by oral narratives, letters and pamphlets, formed the basis of Still's classic work on the Underground Railroad; the accounts he used in his text have been lightly crossed through in the manuscript. But, there are others he did not include, such as: 'Oct. 21/54 Arrived Chas. Thompson, age 40 Chestnut color, active, well informed Exe. Bad treatment had driven Chas. to the necessity of making his escape. Adding to the natural prompting of his heart for liberty, he had recently been much stimulated by the reading of Uncle Tom's Cabin.' Still further noted how Thompson made his escape, and recorded the fact that he had left a wife and two children in Richmond. In some instances he stated who had brought the person or investigated the case. Among the intermediaries were Harriet Tubman and most frequently Jacob C. White. One extraordinary aspect of the day by day record is the careful listing of escapee's name,

together with the new name given to avoid discovery. Can there be a more dramatic document of the road from slavery to freedom? When Still turned his experience into a book, he filled it with tales of crated escapees, murdered agents, soft knocks on side doors, and a network as clandestine and complicated as anything dreamed up by James Bond."¹³

Still's *Underground Railroad* won endorsements from many prominent friends and former Anti-Slavery Society members. For example, Charles Sumner wrote the following letter of praise:

Senate Chamber 3rd March, 1872

My Dear Sir: *The Underground Railroad* has performed its part, but it must always be remembered gratefully as one of the peculiar institutions of our country. I cannot think of it without a throbbing heart.

You do well to commemorate those associated with it by service or by benefit—the saviours and the saved. The army of the late war has its "Roll of Honor." You will give us two rolls, worthy of equal honor—the roll of the fugitives from slavery, helped on their way to freedom and also the roll of their self-sacrificing benefactors. I always hesitated which to honor most, the fugitive slave or the citizens who helped him, in defiance of unjust laws. Your book will teach us to honor both. Accept my best wishes, and believe me, my dear sir.

Very faithfully yours,
Charles Sumner

U.S. Senator from Massachusetts.

Perhaps the Underground Railroad agent whom William Still respected the most was Harriet Tubman. This amazing freedom fighter used several routes when transporting her passengers to Canada. However, she generally traveled from Philadelphia, through New Jersey, then into New York, through New York City, Troy, Syracuse and Rochester, and finally across the suspended bridge at Niagara Falls into Canada. Still stated that Tubman was

a "woman of no pretensions, indeed a more ordinary specimen of humanity could be found only among the most unfortunate-looking farm hands of the South. Yet in point of courage, shrewdness and disinterested exertions to reassure her fellow-men, by making personal visits to Maryland among the slaves she was without equal."

In 1851 William Still celebrated a joyful reunion with his brother Peter, who had been kidnapped from his home in New Jersey and sold into slavery for forty years. Peter Still was aided by the heroic efforts of two Jewish brothers, Joseph and Isaac Friedman of Alabama, who made contacts for him and his wife Vina to escape to the North on the Underground Railroad.

Peter was taken to the Anti-Slavery Office in Philadelphia where he related his story to William Still who was overcome with emotion as he heard the dramatic tale from the fugitive slave who was his lost brother.

JAMES FORTEN

James Forten was one of the most respected black leaders in antebellum America. He was born in Philadelphia September 6, 1776 and died March 4, 1842. Forten was a sail-maker by trade and acquired considerable wealth. With the assistance of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, he helped to raise 2,500 black volunteers for the protection of the city of Philadelphia when it was threatened by the English during the War of 1812. Forten was also a warm friend of William Lloyd Garrison. He supported the *Liberator* with a number of personal contributions.¹⁴ Among his many commitments to black America, Forten was active with his family in the Underground Railroad.

Among other Underground leaders in the city was David Bustill Bowser. He was a well known artist and a member of two prominent Philadelphia black families (Bustill and Bowser). He painted a portrait of John Brown from life. Brown, while working on the Underground Railroad, stayed in Bowser's home which was an important station.

Bowser's father, John, owned and managed a fashionable merchant tailor shop in the city, and was a delegate to the first black political convention held in Philadelphia in 1830.

Another faithful Underground worker was Mammy Pleasant, a subject of burning intrigue during her day. This mysterious figure once was a so-called "Voodoo Queen." Her second husband,

James Henry Smith, was fair enough to "pass" for white. Smith was a Philadelphian who possessed considerable means from his work as a carpenter and contractor. Mammy and her husband demonstrated their sympathy with runaway slaves by participating in anti-slavery activities by providing money and hiding slaves. She moved to San Francisco and made a fortune by operating a boarding house for white men of wealth.

Historian Wright said, "without the presence and assistance of the free blacks in Pennsylvania, that great mysterious system known as the Underground Railroad would never have operated so successfully." He pointed out that the homes of blacks were the stopping places for runaways. "When whites dared not keep a Negro in their homes for fear of discovery," Wright wrote, "Negroes could hide the escaping slave among those of his own race. Not only did Negroes do work of sheltering, but much of the actual work of rescuing was largely done by Negroes. Some of them were able to go into the very heart of slave territory and bring their brethren out."

Among the most brave and adventuresome of these Underground Railroad workers was Mrs. Hester Reckless. Her story is recorded in Dr. Smedley's *Underground Railroad*. It reads:

"Mrs. Hester Reckless, a colored woman, born at Salem, New Jersey in 1776, died at her residence, No. 10, Rodman Street, on the afternoon of January 28th, 1881, aged nearly 105 years. The mother of the deceased also attained the age of one hundred years. Mrs. Reckless resided in Philadelphia for sixty-five years, and was an earnest worker in the anti-slavery movement. She worked with the late Lucretia Mott in the Female Anti-Slavery Society, and cherished with great affection two relics of the organization. One was a photograph of its members, and the other was a flag with inscriptions upon it which expressed the strong feelings of anti-slavery people in the subject. Her memory was good to the last, and she frequently told, with a good amount of satisfaction, the fact that she had several times seen George Washington. One daughter, seventy years old, is the only near relative who survives the old lady."

Hester Reckless served also as a member of the Philadelphia Female Vigilant Committee.

Anti-slavery agitator Mifflin Gibbs was actively connected with the Underground Railroad. Born in Philadelphia in 1823 and the son of a Methodist minister, Gibbs was persuaded at age twenty by Frederick Douglass to lecture around the country. Gibbs recorded his Underground activities in his autobiography, *Shadow and Light*.

Robert Purvis was one of the greatest and most active agents of the Underground Railroad. Besides lecturing and writing, working in a number of anti-slavery societies and operating his farm in Bucks County, Purvis sheltered hundreds of fugitives in his home in the Byberry section of Philadelphia. His previous home, located at Ninth and Lombard Streets, had a secret room, entered only by a trapdoor, for hiding runaway slaves. Purvis once kept a record of the fugitives he aided. However, later he was forced to destroy the records.

On one occasion Purvis harbored so many fugitives that the authorities became suspicious. After appraising the situation, Purvis hurried all the fugitives under cover of darkness aboard a friend's small steamer which plied up and down the Delaware River. An hour before schedule, it sailed away, leaving regular passengers stranded but bearing slaves to freedom.

OTHER BLACK CONDUCTORS

The West Chester Local News reported on May 5, 1900 that the noted black conductor Isaiah C. Ware had died. Before his death in his Philadelphia home, Ware was one of the few remaining black activists of the Underground Railroad. Ware was born in Maryland in 1821 and evinced a constant interest in the welfare of his people held in slavery throughout the South. Among his close friends were such anti-slavery agitators as William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Sumner and poet John Greenleaf Whittier. Ware became wealthy from his real estate investments throughout Philadelphia. Once he made a dangerous trip to Maryland and formed a regiment of black soldiers for active service in the Civil War. After the war, Ware lived quietly at his home and on occasion delivered a lecture on matters relating to his race. He appeared one or more times in West Chester.

Another active conductor on Philadelphia's Underground

Railroad was Robert Douglass, Jr., brother of outspoken abolitionist, Sarah, and the foremost black artist of his day. Douglass served as a delegate to abolitionist conventions, and as a convention officer.

Jacob C. White, a barber and hairdresser, aided and forwarded hundreds of fugitives from his home located at 100 Old York Road, Philadelphia.

Mary Meyers, the black proprietor of a cake shop, aided fugitive slaves. Once a woman was delivered to her store in a box. After conferring with J. Miller McKim and William Still, a decision was reached to hide the woman in the store until arrangements could be made for her journey to Canada. Knowledge of Mrs. Meyers' Underground Railroad activities was common among the black students from the Lombard Street Public School who frequently purchased cakes from the store.

John Lewton, a prosperous black chimney sweep who lived in the same community, was instrumental in assisting numerous fugitive slaves. As he prepared for his work early in the morning, Lewton concealed fugitives by using them as his helpers until he was able to forward them to the next station.¹⁵

A barber, William Henry Johnson, was a very active worker. His house sheltered many fleeing bondsmen. Born of freed parents in Alexandria, Virginia, Johnson's parents sent him to Philadelphia to learn his trade. When the city's authorities began to question his Underground Railroad activities, he moved to Connecticut and later to Albany, New York continuing his work on the Railroad. Johnson was the agent whose name appeared on the box in which Henry "Box" Brown made his daring escape from Richmond to Philadelphia. Siebert records him as white in his list of Philadelphia conductors.

The nation's attention focused upon Philadelphia when an immense gathering took place at the city's Court House on April 4, 1859. Every seat was taken. A solid mass filled the galleries and the stairways. The corridors of the Court House were lined with officers of the law. The cause of the excitement was the trial of Daniel Dangerfield who was appearing before Judge John Cadwalder.

Dangerfield, a former Virginia slave, had escaped from his master and made his way to Harrisburg. His master located Dangerfield and seized him on a farm where he was employed. Dangerfield was brought into the Philadelphia courts and tried as a fugitive slave. Prominent attorneys George H. Earle, William S.

Pierce, Edward Hopper and Edward Longstreth represented the ragged Dangerfield. The well known Virginia attorney, Benjamin H. Brewster, represented the slave owner. Among the audience that remained throughout the all night proceedings were Lucretia Mott, Mary Grew, Sarah Pugh and Mary Earle, and a large segment of the city's black Underground Railroad workers. Despite the large number of well-wishers, the legal status of Dangerfield remained precarious. However, a technical error in the writ of accusation concerning the fugitive's height was discovered, and Dangerfield was acquitted and freed.¹⁷

The Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, as elsewhere, had its tragedies as well as its triumphs. One of these tragedies involved a Philadelphia Quaker by the name of Passmore Williamson. He hid Jane Johnson and her two sons, Daniel and Isaiah, slaves of United States Minister to Nicaragua, John H. Wheeler, who was traveling through Philadelphia enroute to New York City on July 18, 1855. When Williamson refused to reveal the location of the three, whom he had persuaded to escape, he was arrested and became involved in a notorious trial. During the four months Williamson was in the Old Moyamensing Prison, he received widespread support from abolitionists, as evidenced by the following account which appeared in *The Anti-Slavery Advocate* of November 1, 1855:

"The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania has refused to issue a writ of Habeas Corpus in behalf of Mr. Williamson. He therefore lies in jail at the mercy of Judge John K. Kane. A large spirited Anti-Slavery Convention was held at Norristown, Pennsylvania on the 1st inst. The proceedings mainly had reference to the case of Passmore Williamson, the outrage of Judge Kane, and the supineness of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, in protecting the liberties of her citizens. A resolution was adopted, commending to the friends of freedom everywhere, the circulation of petitions to Congress for the impeachment of Judge Kane, and a committee was appointed to prepare a form of petition and distribute it for signature through the state. Jane Johnson was present at the meeting, and by her presence and her simple narrative, produced a deep impression

upon the audience."

James Miller McKim, writing to the editor of the *Anti-Slavery Standard* stated: "It was a great meeting. The hall was packed full, and, the enthusiasm was unbounded. The condemnation of Judge Kane was unanimous and unqualified. The people would not only not listen to any apology for the man, but they would hear nothing that might be construed into an apology."

The *Anti-Slavery Advocate* went on to describe the trial scenario:

"Jane Johnson (the colored woman) whose liberty, with that of her two sons, was produced by the timely interference of Passmore Williamson, was present, and appeared on the platform. This itself produced a deep impression; but when by request she rose and told her story, there was not a dry eye or an unmoved heart in the audience. That such a woman, so intelligent, so lady-like in every way, so respectable, should have been the subject of such base treatment, was more than could be endured with patience. The speaker boiled over with feeling, and the people responded to her utterances."

William Still and his two black accomplices, John Ballard and Curtis, received jail sentences of one week for attacking the slave owner, John Wheeler. Williamson was acquitted for his participation in this famous fugitive case.

Some skippers risked taking fugitive slaves on their small sloops and schooners transporting them to safe ports further north.

Among them was Daniel Drayton, captain of the schooner, "Pearl." After much prompting, Drayton was persuaded to transport a group of seventy-five slaves aboard his ship while it lay ties to a Washington, D.C. wharf in 1843. The plans were revealed by a black man and Drayton was arrested. For this conspiracy, his fines amounted to over ten thousand dollars, and he spent more than four years in jail for his unsuccessful rescue attempt. Drayton, a resident of Philadelphia, had previously thought "Negroes were fit only for slavery."

A common practice among Philadelphia's black undertakers was to hide fugitive slaves in caskets in their funeral parlors until it was safe to transport the fugitives out of the city.

THE ESCAPE OF WILLIAM AND ELLEN CRAFT

One of the boldest and most ingenious events in Underground Railroad history occurred in 1848 when William and Ellen Craft made their daring escape. Runaway slaves living in the deep South rarely had contacts with the Underground Railroad. The young couple from Georgia had determined that no matter what the danger, they would make their escape to freedom. Their escape received national attention and was later recorded in Still's book, *The Underground Railroad*.¹⁸

"William, a slave cabinet maker, hired himself out in his spare time until he had enough money to purchase his light-skinned wife a fine set of clothes. Ellen, being fair enough to pass for white (Ellen's father was her master), of necessity would have to be transformed into a young planter. William, her dark skinned husband, acted as her servant. She dressed in a fashionable suit of male attire and had her hair cut in the style usually worn by young planters. Since Ellen was beardless, the young couple decided to cover a portion of her face with a scarf as though she was suffering from a toothache. In order to prevent the method of registering at hotels, Ellen put her right arm in a sling, put on green spectacles, and pretended to be hard of hearing and dependent upon the faithful servant. They stopped at first-class hotels in Charleston, Richmond and Baltimore, and arrived safely in Philadelphia, where the rheumatism disappeared, her right arm was unslung, her toothache gone, and the beardless face uncovered; the deaf heard and spoke, and the blind saw.

The Crafts received maximum exposure in Pennsylvania when the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee arranged for them to tour the anti-slavery circuit. After their short visit to Philadelphia, the Vigilance Committee sent the Crafts to Boston.

The desperation of the persons involved in aiding in the illegal enterprise is demonstrated in this case by Lewis Hayden, the black conductor in whose house in Boston William Craft was hiding from

the slave catchers. Hayden had implanted two kegs of gunpowder and stood watch with a candle with the grim determination to blow up his house, Craft and himself, rather than surrender his charge if the man-hunters came. The Crafts lived and worked in Boston until 1850 when their masters discovered their whereabouts and sent slave hunters to recapture them. An aroused group of citizens drove the slave hunters away and the Crafts were sent to England until after the Civil War.

John Greenleaf Whittier, the Poet-Laureate of New England, who displayed an early passion for the abolition of slavery, came to Philadelphia in December 1833 as a delegate from Massachusetts to organize the American Anti-Slavery Society. The convention of fewer than seventy-five people met at the Adelphi Building on Fifth Street below Walnut. Serving as one of the convention secretaries, Whittier, along with Garrison and Samuel J. May, drafted the now famous Declaration of Anti-Slavery Sentiment. The document was written principally at night in the attic of black abolitionist James McCrummel.

Although his Quaker coat had been pelted with eggs and the office of his newspaper the *Pennsylvania Freeman* burned, Whittier used to remark to visitors to his home, Oak Knoll, near Danvers, Massachusetts, "I set a higher value on my name as appended to the Anti-Slavery Declaration in 1833, than on the title page of any book."

Personal heroism was also displayed by the lion-hearted Philadelphia Quaker, Isaac Hopper, who would not be intimidated by the rage of slaveholders. Long before he joined the Philadelphia Manumission Society, Hopper, since the age of nine, had fought for black freedom. The Society offered advice and legal protection for blacks who were subjects of kidnappers. Hopper was instrumental in forwarding hundreds of fugitives on the Underground Railroad. "He always worked within the confines of the law, and in a long and spectacular career was never known to make a conspicuous mistake," writes Henrietta Buckmaster. In her biography of Hopper, Lydia Marie Child, the prolific anti-slavery author wrote: Friend Hopper's quickness in slipping through loop-holes, and dodging around corners rendered him exceedingly troublesome and provoking to slaveholders."

James Miller McKim, a promoter of the Philadelphia Underground Railroad, also stood out as an eloquent abolitionist leader. McKim was born in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1810 and was exposed to the anti-slavery movement by the black abolitionist

barber John Peck of that same city. McKim graduated from Dickinson College in 1828. William Still says in his book that McKim, as one of the earliest, most faithful, and ablest abolitionists in Pennsylvania, occupied a position of influence, labor and usefulness scarcely second to Mr. Garrison. He never failed the fugitive in the hour of need." McKim was ably assisted by the untiring and eloquent Mary Grew. McKim accompanied Mary Brown, widow of John Brown, to Harper's Ferry and brought the slain martyr's body to Philadelphia. William Wells Brown stated that McKim knew more about the Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania than any one else except William Still.

REFERENCES

1. The Abolitionist, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 10.
2. The Abolitionist, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 10.
3. The Abolitionist, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 10.
4. The Abolitionist, Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 10.
5. The Abolitionist, Vol. 1, No. 5, p. 10.

6. The Abolitionist, Vol. 1, No. 6, p. 10.
7. The Abolitionist, Vol. 1, No. 7, p. 10.
8. The Abolitionist, Vol. 1, No. 8, p. 10.
9. The Abolitionist, Vol. 1, No. 9, p. 10.
10. The Abolitionist, Vol. 1, No. 10, p. 10.