

# Philadelphia Network

Philadelphia was at a pivotal point on the Eastern Route of the Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania. Fugitives coming from the South arrived there over land and sea routes. In addition, many of the routes of the Southeastern Corridor converged on the city. It was also a dispersal center from which fugitives were sent northward to New York City and the towns of New England. Within the city itself, slaves had been escaping their masters on a regular basis since the mid-1700s. Without Philadelphia, the Eastern Route network would not have been as successful as it was.

Philadelphia was one of the older cities in the American colonies. Laid out by William Penn in 1683, it was the place where some of the greatest events in early American history took place. During the Revolutionary War and the early national period, the city was host to the Continental Congress, which signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776; the convention that ratified the United States Constitution in 1787; and the first capital of the country under the Constitution in 1790.<sup>1</sup>

The political, economic, and cultural center of the colonies, Philadelphia's population grew rapidly from 24,000 in 1765 to 70,000 in 1800. Among those living there were people from northern Europe, Africa, and the West Indies. English, German, Scots-Irish, Irish, and refugees from France and Haiti flocked to this city with its reputation for religious and political tolerance.<sup>2</sup> Clement Biddle gives one of the earliest descriptions of the city in *The Philadelphia Directory*, published in 1791:

The ground plot of the city is an oblong square, about one mile North and two miles East and West, lying in the narrowest part of the isthmus between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers about five miles in a right line above the confluence.<sup>3</sup>

Biddle gives a picture of the rich religious diversity of the city, listing many churches, meetinghouses, and a synagogue with active congregations there. He

says that the Quakers openly aided the black inhabitants of Philadelphia by operating a free school for blacks of all ages and sexes, both free and slave.<sup>4</sup> Conspicuously absent from Biddle's list is the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the church founded by Richard Allen in Philadelphia to address the religious needs of the black community, which were not being met by the other organized churches. By 1816, this church had grown prodigiously.<sup>5</sup> Biddle's oversight is attributed to the fact that this church did not really begin to operate until shortly after he had completed his work.

Blacks made their appearance in Philadelphia very early in its history. In 1639, a few Africans were slaves to the Swedish, Finnish, and Dutch settlers along the Delaware River Valley.<sup>6</sup> In 1684, the ship *Isabella* landed in Philadelphia with a cargo that included 150 African slaves. The Quakers purchased them to help clear the land in and around the city. Between 1682 and 1705, one in every fifteen families in the city owned slaves. After 1730, the slave trade tapered off, and indentured servants from Great Britain, Ireland, and Germany began to arrive in great numbers. After 1756, however, there was an upswing in buying African slaves again because they were cheaper to maintain than indentured servants. In 1754, 100 slaves were purchased, and that number increased to 500 in 1762. Tax assessor reports for Philadelphia show that there were 814 slaves between the ages of twelve and fifty in the city in 1767. By 1775, the estimated slave population of Philadelphia was 672 out of a total of 19,650 inhabitants.<sup>7</sup>

Not all of the black residents of Philadelphia were slaves, however. Records show that free blacks were living there as early as 1717. These records also show that the number of free blacks in the city stood at 150 in 1770 and 250 by 1776. The children of free blacks were attending Anglican and Quaker schools, and between 1756 and 1775, 68 free blacks were baptized into the Anglican Church.<sup>8</sup> By 1830, the black population had grown to 15,000, and of these, 1,000 were considered to be fairly wealthy.<sup>9</sup> By 1860, there were 57,000 blacks living in Pennsylvania, and 30 to 40 percent of them lived in Philadelphia.<sup>10</sup> The combination of a large black population, a rising wealthy middle class among these blacks, an organized social structure centered around the A.M.E. Church, and a number of sympathetic whites among several of the churches in the city produced a climate in which the Underground Railroad could rise and flourish in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia was a place where slaves were fleeing their owners as early as the mid-1750s. In George Washington's April 12, 1786, letter to Robert Morris, he wrote of the escape of a slave owned by a fellow Virginian and said that Philadelphia, with antislavery Quakers living there, was not a desirable place for Southerners to visit if they were accompanied by any of their slaves.<sup>11</sup> A review of the court records in the late 1700s shows that Philadelphia was



becoming a goal for runaways. For example, in 1795, between January 3 and September 5, there were nine cases in which fugitive slaves were apprehended and detained for reclamation by their masters. In 1791, there was one case, and in 1793, four cases.<sup>12</sup> Another indicator that Philadelphia was becoming a magnet for runaways may be seen in the number of advertisements for escaped slaves that appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* between 1795 and 1796. There were no less than twenty ads offering rewards for the apprehension of runaways. The following is a typical example of these notices:

January 21, 1795

Twenty Dollars Reward

RAN away from the subscriber, living in Nottingham, on Patuxent river, Prince George's county, Maryland, a lively, active Mullato slave, called HARRY, who since his departure has assumed the name of FLEET. He is about 22 or 23 years of age, and 5 feet 10 inches high: has grey eyes and sandy coloured hair, which he wears turned up before, and very short and straight behind. He appears confused when spoken to, but when closely examined, much embarrassed. His cloathing cannot be particularly described, as he has been gone ever since July. By a letter from him to his father, dated the 17th of Sept. last, it appears that he was then in Philadelphia, and he says he expected to sail for London in about two months. All masters of vessels are hereby cautioned against carrying off the said slave at their peril. Whoever takes him up, and secures him in gaol, so that I get him again shall receive the above reward, and all reasonable charges for bringing him home.

MATHEW EVERSFIELD<sup>13</sup>

Note the warning given to masters of seagoing vessels that they should not aid runaways. This was a stock warning that appears in most of the advertisements. Each year, the number of fugitive slaves passing through the city grew. One researcher estimated that by 1860, almost 9,000 runaways had entered and departed from Philadelphia.<sup>14</sup>

Philadelphia's Underground Railroad developed over a period of years. It had its roots in the various antislavery societies that had formed in the late 1700s and early 1800s in the city. The earliest of these was the Independent Free African Society. Founded in 1787 by Rev. Absalom Jones and Rev. Richard Allen, it originally was designed to provide assistance to free blacks who were in economic difficulties. It soon became a source of aid for fugitive slaves and was the first attempt at an Underground Railroad system in Philadelphia.<sup>15</sup>

The early 1800s saw the birth of several other organizations that helped solidify an Underground Railroad presence in the city. In 1830, James Forten



helped organize the Convention of Free Negroes in Philadelphia. Its goal was the abolition of slavery as an institution and the granting of full citizenship to all former slaves in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Another early group in the fight against slavery was the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Formed on December 9, 1833, by Lucretia Mott, it initially had sixty female members, both black and white, including the wife and daughters of James Forten.<sup>17</sup> Two years later, in August 1835, the most effective of the societies that aided runaways was formed. This was the Vigilance Committee. Its purpose was to help fugitive slaves who arrived in Philadelphia reach safety. Three of the first officers of the committee were prominent members of the affluent class of the black community: James McCoummel, president; Jacob C. White, secretary; and James Needham, treasurer.<sup>18</sup>

The number of runaways passing through Philadelphia became so great by the 1850s that a need arose to reorganize the Underground Railroad network there. Under the leadership of Robert Purvis and William Still, the old Vigilance Committee was reconstituted as the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee on December 9, 1852. It was to be an umbrella organization coordinating the activities of all the other antislavery groups in the attempt to aid escaped slaves. Purvis was elected as the overall chairman of the group, and Charles Wise was its first treasurer. The names of the general steering committee reflected the leading members of the abolitionist movement in the city. A special committee, called the Acting Committee, was chosen to carry on the everyday work of helping fugitives find safety in the city. It consisted of five members: chairman William Still, Nathaniel W. Depee, Jacob C. White, Passmore Williamson, and Charles Wise.<sup>19</sup> The homes of these individuals were already serving as stations in Philadelphia. Over its existence, the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee helped over 800 escaped slaves find freedom.<sup>20</sup>

The three individuals who were most instrumental in organizing and seeing to the operation of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia were James Forten, Robert Purvis, and William Still. Forten served in the fledgling U.S. Navy during the Revolutionary War. While aboard ship, he became adept at repairing sails. When the war ended, Forten opened a sail repair business near the docks in Philadelphia. His business grew, and in a short time, he became the wealthiest black person in the city. Not content with accumulating wealth, and possessing a true social conscience, Forten spent his fortune on a variety of causes, including women's rights, temperance, peace, and equal rights for blacks.<sup>21</sup> He was also an ardent opponent of any attempts to send blacks back to Africa. He felt that their home was now in America.<sup>22</sup>

Robert Purvis was the son of a wealthy white businessman and a black mother. Although his skin color was light enough that he could pass as white, he preferred to identify with his African ancestry. He received an excellent

education, graduating from Amherst College, and entered the world of business. He married the daughter of James Forten and joined his father-in-law in the fight against slavery. Purvis was instrumental in founding both the American and Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Societies. Most of his time was spent helping run the Philadelphia Underground Railroad network.<sup>23</sup>

The third member of this group was William Still. Born in New Jersey, he was the son of an ex-slave father and an escaped-slave mother. He developed his hatred for slavery from the stories his mother told him about her life under bondage. In 1844, Still moved to Philadelphia, where he taught himself to read and write. When Forten and Purvis realized his talents for organization and leadership, they saw to it that Still was given a position of importance in the Underground Railroad system within the city.<sup>24</sup> Later, in the 1870s, Still decided to record and publish his recollections of the escape network in the city.



The Underground Railroad in Philadelphia consisted of a myriad of agents, conductors, stations, and means of transportation. The basic modes of transportation used were by rail, water, and overland. Fugitive slaves arrived daily from several different directions and in various ways. They came from the town of Darby in Delaware County, from Peart in Valley Forge, from Pennypacker in Phoenixville, from Bustill in Harrisburg, from Reading, from Garrett in Wilmington, from Baltimore by train, and from various coastal towns along the Southern seaboard in steamboats and schooners. Between 1830 and 1860, Philadelphia became a great rail center and port, especially for ships and steamboats traveling northward from the Southern states of Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware.<sup>25</sup>

Rail travel was used to a surprising degree to bring runaways to Philadelphia. This was the favorite way of sending fugitives to William Still in the city from Harrisburg and Reading. The following letter from Joseph Bustill in Harrisburg details how this took place:

Harrisburg, May 26, '56

Friend Still:—I embrace the opportunity presented by the visit of our friend, John F. Williams, to drop you a few lines in relation to our future operations.

The Lightning Train was put on the Road on last Monday, and as the traveling season has commenced and this is the Southern route for Niagara Falls, I have concluded not to send by way of Auburn, except in cases of great danger; but hereafter we will use the Lightning Train which leaves here at 11½ and arrives in your city at 5 o'clock in the morning, and I will telegraph about 5 o'clock in the afternoon, so it may reach you before you close. These four are the only ones that have come since my last. The woman has been here some time waiting for her child and her beau, which she expects here about the first of June. If possible, please keep a knowledge of her whereabouts, to enable me to inform him if he comes.

*I have nothing more to send you, except that John Fiery [a slave catcher] has visited us again and much to his chagrin received the information of their being in Canada.*

Yours as ever,  
Jos. C. Bustill<sup>26</sup>

The train from Harrisburg and Reading arrived in Philadelphia at the railway station located at Eleventh and Market Streets. Members of the Acting Committee of the Vigilance Society would meet them there and take them to a safe house in the city.<sup>27</sup> Thomas Garrett made use of the railroad that ran between Wilmington and Philadelphia to convey runaways to William Still.<sup>28</sup>

Frederick Douglass speaks of runaways hiding on trains that came to Philadelphia from Baltimore.<sup>29</sup> And William Whipper forwarded fugitives to Philadelphia hidden in special lumber-carrying boxcars from Columbia.

According to Douglass, many escapees boarded steamboats coming along the coast to Philadelphia. Sympathetic steamboat captains either hid them aboard their boats or tolerated their presence among the vessel's cargo.<sup>30</sup> Thomas Garrett made use of this mode of travel, as is evident from the following letter he sent to William Still:

Wilmington, 7th mo. 19th, 1856

Respected Friend, William Still:—I now have the pleasure of consigning to thy care four able-bodied human beings from North Carolina, and five from Virginia, one of which is a girl twelve or thirteen years of age—the rest all men—After thee has seen and conversed with them, thee can determine what is best to be done with them. I am assured they are such as can take good care of themselves. Elijah Pennypacker, some time since, informed me he could find employment in his neighborhood for two or three good hands. I should think that those from Carolina would be about as safe in that neighborhood as any place this side of Canada. Wishing our friends a safe trip, I remain thy sincere friend.

THOS. GARRETT

After conferring with Harry Craige, we have concluded to send five or six of them tonight in the (rail)cars, and the balance, if those go safe, tomorrow night, or in the steam-boat on Second day morning, directed to the Anti-Slavery office.<sup>31</sup>

Other runaways hid aboard schooners and oceangoing steamships that plied the coastline to Philadelphia and New England. Still tells the story of three men, James Mercer, William H. Gilliam, and John Clayton, who hid in a coal hopper of a steamer. The ship sailed from Richmond and reached Philadelphia with the three fugitives, who were barely alive by the time the ship docked. Those coming aboard schooners usually got off near League Island, at the foot of Broad Street.<sup>32</sup> Runaways hidden on steamships disembarked at the Arch Street wharf.<sup>33</sup>

Underground Railroad conductors also brought runaways overland to Philadelphia, as in the case of James T. Dannaker, who brought runaways to the city over the roads linking it with Marple Township and the town of Darby. Frederick Douglass also speaks of fugitive slaves traveling by turnpike from Baltimore to Philadelphia between 1830 and 1850.<sup>34</sup> Another letter from Thomas Garrett to J. Miller McKim, one of William Still's associates,



describes runaways walking, and possibly taking a carriage, from Maryland to Philadelphia, in this case led by Harriet Tubman:

Wilmington, 12 mo. 29th, 1854

ESTEEMED FRIEND, J. MILLER McKIM:—We made arrangements last night, and sent away Harriet Tubman, with six men and one woman to Allen Agnew's, to be forwarded across country to the city. Harriet, and one of the men had worn their shoes off their feet, and I gave them two dollars to help fit them out, and directed a carriage to be hired at my expense, to take them out, but do not yet know the expense. I now have two more from the lowest county in Maryland, on the Peninsula, upwards of one hundred miles. I will try to get one of our trusty colored men to take them to-morrow morning to the Anti-slavery office. You can pass them on.

THOMAS GARRETT<sup>35</sup>

These same modes of transportation were also used to move fugitives from the city. Siebert speaks of William Still sending runaways by train to Elmira, New York.<sup>36</sup> This escape method is supported by a letter to William Still sent by John W. Jones, an Underground Railroad agent in Elmira:

Elmira, June 6th, 1860

FRIEND WM. STILL:—All six came safe to this place. The two men came last night, about twelve o'clock; the man and woman stopped at the depot, and went east on the next train, about eighteen miles, and did not get back till to-night, so that the two men went this morning, and the four went this evening.

O, old master don't cry for me,

For I am going to Canada where coloured men are free.

P.S. What is the news in the city? Will you tell me how many you have sent over to Canada? I would like to know. They all send their love to you. I have nothing new to tell you. We are all in good health. I see there is a law passed in Maryland not to set any slaves free. They had better get the consent of the Underground Rail Road before they passed such a thing. Good night from your friend,

JOHN W. JONES<sup>37</sup>

Blockson's research shows that Still also sent fugitives from Philadelphia to New York City and New England via train.<sup>38</sup>

Ships were also employed to convey runaways from the city to safety. When James T. Dannaker brought fugitives to Philadelphia from James Lewis, he often took them to the wharf at the end of Arch Street. There he



would hand them over to Captain Whildon, who would hide them aboard his vessel. The ship then sailed for Trenton and Bordentown, where the runaways would disembark.<sup>39</sup> Still speaks of sending many fugitives to Boston by ship.<sup>40</sup>

There were two main highways over which the Vigilance Committee could move slaves from Philadelphia northward. One was the West Chester Pike, by which escapees were taken from the city to Phoenixville and Elijah Pennypacker. The other was the Bethlehem Pike, built in 1763, and the major highway linking Philadelphia with the Lehigh Valley.<sup>41</sup> This roadway became the main way to conduct escapees northward toward New York.

A great number of agents and stations were active in Philadelphia. The majority of these tended to be in the southern section of the city, especially on or near Lombard Street. The cornerstone of the agents and stations in Philadelphia was the active participation of many churches and ministers. While this included both whites and blacks, the black ministers viewed participation in the cause as a holy crusade. Blockson states that "the most vociferous organizers of networks . . . were the churchmen. This was because many black ministers felt that organized assistance to fugitives, and the commitment that meant to freedom, challenged the prevailing religious dogma of many white churches that a truly religious man was one who was patient."<sup>42</sup>

At the heart of the black church involvement in Philadelphia's Underground Railroad was the First African Methodist Episcopal Church. Known as Mother Bethel, this church was founded by Richard Allen. In 1831, the first black political convention in Pennsylvania to protest slavery met in the church. Delegates to the convention, most of whom were members of the clergy, were encouraged to use their churches as sanctuaries for escaped slaves. By 1838, most of the black clergy in the state were doing just that. Rev. Walter Proctor, pastor of Mother Bethel Church, became the role model for the clergyman-agent on the Underground Railroad.<sup>43</sup> The other two A.M.E. churches in Philadelphia, the Zoar A.M.E. and Wesley A.M.E. Churches, also served as stations and safe havens.<sup>44</sup>

It was at the Wesley A.M.E. Church that the Committee of Philadelphia Blacks met on October 14, 1850, to discuss the recent passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The group passed several resolutions. The most noteworthy of these were "to resist the law at any cost and at all hazards," and "never to refuse aid and shelter and succor to any brother or sister who escaped from the prison-house of Southern bondage."<sup>45</sup>

Other black churches in Philadelphia not affiliated with Mother Bethel Church also opened their doors to runaways. Rev. Stephen H. Gloucester, pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church of Color, the home church of William

Still, used his church as a sanctuary. Rev. Daniel Scott of the Union Baptist Church did the same. The Campbell African Methodist Church in the Franklin section of the city was a station, as was the First Colored Presbyterian Church.<sup>46</sup>

White churches and religious groups also played a role in the Philadelphia branch of the Underground Railroad. The Society of Friends congregation in Germantown readily helped runaways. Three members of their group, Abraham L. Pennock, John Button, and Samuel Rhoads, converted their homes into safe houses for fugitives.<sup>47</sup> William Still singles out the work of Rev. Dr. William H. Furness, the minister at the First Congregational Unitarian Church, as being instrumental in the success of the Philadelphia network.<sup>48</sup>

Many nonclergy individuals also played an essential role as agents and conductors in the city. William Still, as the chairman of the Acting Committee, was by far the most important of these. He was the person who received and dispatched fugitives arriving in the city and who arranged for the sheltering and transporting of the runaways as they passed through Philadelphia. He even hid fugitives in his house on Twelfth Street.<sup>49</sup> James Forten and Robert Purvis also hid runaways in their homes. Purvis and his brother, Joseph, frequently used the home of their mother, Harriet Judah Purvis, on Ninth and Lombard Streets, as a refuge. Later, after they had inherited a large amount of



money, they purchased a farm in Byberry, Bucks County, located about fifteen miles from Philadelphia, and used the house and barn there as a station.<sup>50</sup>

Many ordinary people in the city also helped in the cause. Blockson lists several people who acted as agents and conductors: Mifflin Gibbs; Isaiah C. Ware; Jacob C. White, a black barber and hairdresser who hid fugitives in his house at 100 Old York Road; William H. Johnson; John Lewton, a black chimney sweep; and Mary Myers, a black woman who owned a cake shop on Lombard Street. Apparently the entire neighborhood known as Paschall's Alley, situated between Fifth and Coates Streets, served as hosts for run-aways.<sup>51</sup> The family of the famous Cyrus Bustill worked for the railroad. One of the more fascinating agents in Philadelphia was Henrietta Bowers Duterte, who, in 1858, became the first black female undertaker in the city. Her unique way of transporting fugitives was to hide them in caskets.<sup>52</sup> Another professional who aided fugitives was James McCrummel, a successful black dentist who opened his home to escapees.<sup>53</sup> Finally, there were two major conductors who transported dozens of fugitives to and from Philadelphia: Still speaks of the untiring efforts of Samuel D. Burris, a black man, who regularly led escaped slaves from Wilmington to Philadelphia.<sup>54</sup> The other was Rev. Thomas Clement Oliver, who lived in Camden, New Jersey, but made regular trips to Philadelphia. This was a cover for leading fugitives from Philadelphia to Camden, Jersey City, and at times, New York City.