

# **William Still and the History of the Underground Railroad**

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## Introduction

"Among historians," one scholar suggested just a few years ago, "the underground railroad has become a dead issue."<sup>1</sup> As if to confirm that judgment, the most important recent study of runaway slaves contains only two index entries for the Underground Railroad. The authors of that widely acclaimed monograph, John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, are candid about the reasons for this decision.

"Although historians continue to disagree about various aspects of the Underground Railroad," they write, "few deny that even today it is shrouded in myth and legend."<sup>2</sup>

*"Shrouded in myth and legend."* This is a conclusion that probably would have saddened William Still. He was a free black resident in nineteenth-century Philadelphia who orchestrated many of the city's Underground Railroad operations during the 1850s and later published a best-selling book based on the meticulous records kept by his committee. When he died in 1902, obituaries memorialized him as the "Father of the Underground Railroad," acknowledging both his efforts as stationmaster and historian. Still worked for the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, which like other vigilance operations in northern cities, provided the most organized core of the so-called Underground Railroad network

Since the introduction of slavery in the Americas during the sixteenth century, there had always been secret escapes and examples of covert assistance offered to runaways, but an organized fugitive aid effort (or vigilance movement) --the one that

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Harrold, "Freeing the Weems Family: A New Look at the Underground Railroad," *Civil War History* 42 (December 1996), 290.

<sup>2</sup> John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 336n.

emerged in the 1830s amidst the furor over Garrisonian abolitionism and reignited after the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act-- was never shy about its intentions to help destroy slavery by helping actual slaves escape. Some of those militant abolitionists who were also ex-slaves actually grew concerned about the openness of this defiance. By 1856, Frederick Douglass was writing that he had "never approved of the very public manner, in which some of our western friends have conducted what they call the 'Underground Railroad,' but which I think, by their open declarations, has been made, most emphatically, the 'Upper-Ground' railroad."<sup>3</sup>

The story of how this "Upper-Ground railroad" of the 1850s somehow became a system "shrouded in myth and legend" by the 1990s is a complicated one. Part of the issue is the lingering effect of racism. Black participants such as Still have not had their stories fully preserved. The Philadelphia Vigilance Committee was a bi-racial organization, but African Americans, or those of mixed races, clearly dominated its active leadership. This was true for most antebellum vigilance or Underground Railroad committees. Yet it was the white abolitionists, particularly Quakers, who dominated the outpouring of post-war reminiscences and shaped the story of the movement as one of secrecy and covert coordination. The first great scholarly work on the Underground Railroad, by Wilbur Siebert, was built on over 2,500 recollections from a largely white pool of former participants.<sup>4</sup> William Still's 1872 contribution was an exception to this trend, but even he was compelled to hire his own agents to sell the book, relying heavily on African Americans to boost sales.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (orig. pub. 1961; Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 147-148.

<sup>4</sup> Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1898).

Predictably, the result was a skewed popular tradition that emphasized the role of whites and Quakers in the Underground Railroad at the expense of many participants from northern free black communities. Meanwhile, the passage of time and urban development projects steadily destroyed the homes and churches of antebellum northern blacks, erasing most of the physical monuments bearing witness to their side of the dramatic story. By the time modern revisionists, led by Larry Gara's pioneering work The Liberty Line (1961), finally made efforts to restore racial balance to the interpretation, it was practically too late to alter public sensibilities.

But the revisionists did succeed in bringing the black fugitive to the center of the Underground Railroad metaphor. Over the last forty years, once legendary Quaker stationmasters such as Levi Coffin or Thomas Garrett have given way in the popular mind to African American figures such as Harriet Tubman, who escaped from slavery and then returned to help others find freedom. But in the process of reminding Americans what the Underground Railroad was really about for most blacks, the revisionists have fueled a new set of misperceptions.

The modern definition of the Underground Railroad has become quite expansive - essentially incorporating escapes from slavery in any region at any time in U.S. history. The emphasis on the fugitive here works against a focus on particular committees or time periods. The National Park Service website, for example, includes links to Spanish North America, the Intermountain West, Pacific West and even Alaska. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, currently under construction in Cincinnati, spends as much space in its website on freedom stories after the Civil War as it does on

the antebellum period.<sup>5</sup> The breadth of this new definition naturally complicates the analytical meaning of the famous metaphor. To a degree, it also diminishes the success of specific vigilance groups such as the one that William Still led in the 1850s. It also uproots the Underground Railroad story from its principal historic achievement --helping to accelerate the coming of the Civil War.

The purpose of this profile is not to settle this question of definitions but rather to explore them by focusing on the man and the committee at the center of the organized Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania in the years before the Civil War. The work of William Still and the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee is not at all "shrouded in myth and legend," but stands as a historical moment that can be verified with physical evidence and contemporary documents. This is clearly not the only Underground Railroad story worth remembering, but it is probably the one most easily documented and thus perhaps the one story that offers the most promising platform for scholarly understanding.

### **"I go for Liberty and Improvement"**

As a free black child growing up on a farm in the Pine Barrens region of southern New Jersey, William Still had only intermittent opportunities to obtain an education. Like other rural children of that era, he had to wait for itinerate teachers to pass through his community, offering their rudimentary instruction in makeshift, unregulated schools. Older brother James Still later recalled that some of the untrained teachers of their youth "taught us how to pronounce everything improperly," noting, "we knew no better."<sup>6</sup> Of course, in the case of William Still and his numerous brothers and sisters, they faced the

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<sup>5</sup> National Park Service, "Learn About the Underground Railroad," [www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr/learn\\_b4.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr/learn_b4.htm) (February 1, 2003). National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, [www.undergroundrailroad.org](http://www.undergroundrailroad.org) (February 1, 2003).

added obstacle of race prejudice. William recalled for an early biographer that after a group of white boys had attacked him on the way home from school, pushing him off a bridge into a swollen creek, his teachers were compelled to dismiss the black children early in order to avoid danger.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes, however, it was the teachers in the Quaker-dominated community who exhibited distaste for instructing African Americans. Once forced to wear a pair of leather goggles as punishment for some imaginary offense, the young Still endured abuse from his schoolmates until his father miraculously appeared and saved him, delivering a ferocious verbal rebuke to the teacher.<sup>8</sup>

For William Still, both his father and his mother loomed large as examples of African American strength and defiance. Levin Steel was originally a slave on the eastern shore of Maryland who had purchased his freedom and left his wife and children to establish his own farm in New Jersey. Levin's wife, Sidney Steel, eventually followed him, escaping from her master Saunders Griffin with her children and making it all the way to New Jersey, before being betrayed and recaptured. Undaunted, she made the wrenching decision to attempt a second escape, but this time leaving behind her two oldest boys, Levin and Peter, having found it too difficult on the first journey with four young children. Once settled in the remote region of Burlington County along the Delaware River, the Steels changed their names and became known as Levin and Charity

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<sup>6</sup> James Still, Early Recollections and Life of Dr. James Still, 1812-1885 (orig. pub. 1877; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 19.

<sup>7</sup> James P. Boyd, "William Still: His Life and Work to this Time," in William Still, Still's Underground Railroad Records (orig. pub. 1872; Philadelphia: William Still, 1883), viii.

<sup>8</sup> Boyd, "William Still," in Still's Underground Railroad Records, viii.

Still. They lived on their own farm and raised more children. William Still, born on October 7, 1821, was the youngest in a family that Charity Still numbered at eighteen.<sup>9</sup>

In his zeal to survive in freedom, father Levin Still became a hard, unyielding figure in the family folklore. He repeatedly told his children that he would rather die than return to slavery and drove them rigorously to improve themselves. James Still later recalled ruefully that he believed his father's "whole soul" was "wrapped" in the biblical verse: "He that spareth his rod hateth his son; but he that loveth him chastiseth him betimes."<sup>10</sup>

It is not surprising therefore, that a turning point in William Still's early life came when his father died in December 1842. Just barely turned twenty-one, Still felt as if he was unprepared for life on his own terms. "I found myself painfully conscious of the fact that I had, up to that time, turned a deaf ear to the 'still small voice,'" he recalled, "which had so often admonished me to 'seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.'" The young man experienced a conversion to Christ and began thinking seriously about religion.<sup>11</sup>

With a new sense of faith and purpose, William Still decided in the spring of 1844 to cross the Delaware River and try his fortunes in Philadelphia. He remembered having only three dollars in his pockets and hardly any clothes, but his ambition burned hotly. The city was then home to the nation's second largest concentration of free blacks (after Baltimore), and Philadelphia's African American community was arguably the best established and most prosperous in the North. Free black residents in Philadelphia

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<sup>9</sup> Boyd, "William Still," in *Still's Underground Railroad Records*, iv-vi.

<sup>10</sup> James Still, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Boyd, "William Still," in *Still's Underground Railroad Records*, x-xi.

community supported 14 churches, two public halls, and over 60 benevolent associations.<sup>12</sup>

If anything, however, the success of the city's blacks had only exacerbated underlying racial tensions. During the late 1830s and early 1840s, there had been repeated riots against blacks and against the emerging network of Garrisonian abolitionists who had organized the first national conference of the American Anti-Slavery Society in the city. Jacksonian-era Philadelphia was often a violent place, racked by social disorder and political ferment. In fact, just days after Still's arrival in May 1844, violent riots against Irish Catholic immigrants ripped the city apart and sent the new arrival from New Jersey cowering in a wooden shack on Fifth Street.

When the violence finally subsided, Still ventured out to find work. He discovered his prospects to be more limited than he had anticipated. For three years, he struggled, bouncing from job to job without much financial reward or security. He worked as a bricklayer, clam-thresher, dock hand, teamster, oyster-peddler, second-hand clothes dealer, hotel waiter, and domestic servant before finally landing an opportunity in 1847 to serve as a clerk in the offices of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society.

J. Miller McKim, a white abolitionist and Dickinson College graduate who was head of the office, decided to test Still's literacy by asking the young black man to put his request into the form of a letter. With fierce dignity and somewhat awkward elocution, Still wrote that he had "come to the conclusion of availing myself of the privileg [sic], esteeming it no small honor, to be placed in a position where I shall be considered an intelligent being, notwithstanding the salary may be small." He concluded his short note

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 101n.

with an affirmation that was representative of the self-made ethos of the age and would become his lifelong credo. "I go for liberty and improvement," he wrote solemnly.<sup>13</sup> The job paid \$3.75 per week.

## **Vigilance in Philadelphia**

The Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society was an abolitionist organization that had been created in 1837 as part of the "immediatist" antislavery movement inspired by the legendary abolitionist editor William Lloyd Garrison. In the year of its founding, some members of the society had also established a "Vigilant Association of Philadelphia" that existed to help protect the free blacks from kidnapping and escaped slaves from recapture. This vigilance organization was modeled after one that had been put together by activist David Ruggles two years earlier in New York. They had a standing committee of fifteen, a small group of three officers, and a paid agent. This was, in the opinion of its founders, the first organized Underground Railroad effort in Philadelphia.<sup>14</sup>

The Vigilant Association soon fell under the leadership of Robert Purvis, an extraordinary figure with an eclectic family background. His maternal grandmother was a Moor, or black North African, who had survived the "Middle Passage," won her freedom at nineteen, and subsequently married a German-born Jew in South Carolina. His mother, born in Charleston, eventually fell in love with and married a white Englishman. William Purvis was an abolitionist and wealthy businessman who moved his mixed race family to Philadelphia in 1819. He soon died, however, leaving his sixteen-year-old son Robert a large inheritance. Robert Purvis attended Amherst College

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<sup>13</sup> William Still to J.M. McKim, Philadelphia, September 21, 1847, in Boyd, "William Still," in Still's Underground Railroad Records, xviii.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Purvis recollection, n.d. in R.C. Smedley, History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania, (Lancaster: Journal, 1883), 355.

and returned to Philadelphia where he married Harriet Forten, the daughter of a prominent local black family. Described by one scholar as "tall, handsome, and articulate," Purvis soon became one of the city's dominant figures and served as chairman of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society at the time of William Still's hiring.<sup>15</sup>

As a vigilance leader in the late 1830s and early 1840s, Purvis established the first comprehensive journal documenting the kidnapping and fugitive slave cases in the city. The most complete records come from the last seven months of 1839 and show more than fifty cases of assistance. The committee recorded only eight of the fugitives' names -- most were referred to simply as "man" or "woman" or even just "case." The journal never appeared to use any railroad terminology such as "passenger" or "conductor." Out of the 45 records with gender information, there were 33 male escapees and 12 female, including an "elderly" woman from Blue Ridge, Maryland. There were also 45 fugitive records with place of origin data: 24 came from Virginia (including one "very interesting" family of eight travelling together), 18 from Maryland, one from Delaware, one from Louisiana, and one (imposter) from Pennsylvania. In several cases, the records indicated the fugitive's complexion (dark, light, pockmarked, etc.) --an important fact emphasized in runaway advertisements. Generally, however, the information provided in the records was very sketchy, usually including only references to the agent handling the case, the destination (often Canada by way of New York) and how much the relocation

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph A. Borome, "The Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 92 (January 1968), 320-23. Roger Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia and Ours: On the Past and Future of the Black City in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 99-100.

effort cost. Typically, the committee spent a few dollars per fugitive, usually to pay for travel expenses such as carriages and tolls.<sup>16</sup>

The appearance of a strong organization was misleading, however. Within six weeks after Purvis took control, two members had resigned and a third followed shortly thereafter. The committee then forced another resignation by rescinding the salary of its full-time agent in 1840. Some of the tension appeared to be driven by race. Eventually, the members voted out all of their white colleagues. The black or mixed race vigilance leaders then created a special "Acting Committee" of three people who were supposed to rotate every frequently. Record-keeping soon practically ceased.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the 1840s, Philadelphia vigilance efforts grew increasingly haphazard and undocumented. Nevertheless, abolitionists scored some spectacular successes. Not long after William Still took over his position as clerk at the Anti-Slavery Society office and began helping with the fugitive aid effort, the Vigilance Committee assisted in two of the most dramatic escapes of the age. Henry "Box" Brown literally arrived in Philadelphia from Richmond inside a box in 1848. His "resurrection" at the anti-slavery offices was a miraculous scene that Still witnessed himself. One year later, William and Ellen Craft, a slave couple who took advantage of Ellen's light skin to travel in disguise as master and servant all the way from Georgia, received critical help from Still and the vigilance community once they arrived in the city.

But it was in the 1850s that a renewed sense of urgency about Underground Railroad operations became apparent, both for the members of the Vigilance Committee and for William Still personally. The general catalyst was the passage of a much tougher

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<sup>16</sup> The full minutes and records of the committee are republished in Joseph A. Borome, "The Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 92 (January 1968), 331-51.

federal fugitive slave law, as part of a national compromise over the admission of California as a free state in 1850. Subsequently, the new fugitive recovery process implemented during the succeeding years exacerbated sectional tensions and led to sporadic violence in northern border states such as Pennsylvania and in key port cities such as Philadelphia and Boston.

But for William Still, the catalyst was far more personal and, if possible, even more dramatic. Still was in the offices of the Anti-Slavery Society working alone during the summer of 1850 when a local man brought into his presence an escaped slave from Alabama. The fugitive, who called himself Peter Freedman, wanted help from the antislavery community in reuniting with his parents. He remembered their names, Levin and Sidney, and knew they had once lived with him on the Eastern shore of Maryland under the control of a master named Saunders Griffin. The details sounded immediately familiar to the young clerk from New Jersey whose parents had fled from Maryland. "My feelings were unutterable," William Still recalled shortly after the encounter, "and I was obliged to exert all my mental powers in order to conceal them." Still was overcome because he realized that Peter Freedman was actually his older brother, Peter Steel, left behind by his mother over forty years earlier when she made her final escape to New Jersey.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, an already nervous Peter Freedman had grown agitated. The obviously intense interest of the clerk had unsettled him and he recalled in his own memoir that he "could not shake off the idea that some snare was here laid to entrap

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<sup>17</sup> Borome, 325n.

<sup>18</sup> William Still to James Miller McKim, Philadelphia, August 8, 1850, in C. Peter Ripley, ed., The Black Abolitionist Papers: Volume IV, The United States, 1847-1858 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 55.

him." His suspicions grew even stronger when Still dismissed the local guide who had brought Freedman to the Anti-Slavery office, with the intention of revealing the truth to him in private. "Suppose I should tell you than I am your brother?", Still had asked after the man departed. "Supposin' you should?" Freedman answered cautiously and then refused to believe Still when he related their family story. Freedman figured that his brother was simply repeating what he had just been told. When Still explained that their mother was alive and living in New Jersey, his fugitive brother finally exploded: "*New Jersey!* Where could that be?"<sup>19</sup>

For William Still, the reunion offered a startling epiphany. The profound tragedy and blessing of that moment convinced him that only "by carefully gathering the narratives of Underground Rail Road passengers" might at least "some of the bleeding and severed hearts ... be united and comforted."<sup>20</sup> He vowed that if given the chance he would help others reconnect with their families as he and his brother had finally done. Not long after, he became his habit of taking meticulous notes of his interviews with runaways.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 also brought the impact of slavery's evil closer to home in states like Pennsylvania. Local abolitionists feared that the new federal requirements would force northerners to literally help southern slave catchers hunt down and return their runaways. This fear grew exponentially after the so-called Christiana Riot of September 1851 that resulted in the death of a Maryland slave master and a federal manhunt and treason trial for fugitives and those who had helped them resist capture in southern Lancaster County. Still and others in the Philadelphia vigilance

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<sup>19</sup> Kate E.R. Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and His Wife 'Vina' After Forty Years of Slavery* (New York: Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1856), 248-251.

movement had helped warn the fugitives in Christiana that Edward Gorsuch was crossing into the state. After the tragic confrontation, and during the run-up to the treason trials, the Vigilance Committee also launched a successful fundraising campaign on behalf of the accused. It was a turning point for the organization.

The Pennsylvania Freeman, an abolitionist newspaper, reported on December 9, 1852 that the Vigilance Committee, meeting in the rooms of the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society, had been reorganized once again. According to the report, J. Miller McKim claimed "that the friends of the fugitive slave had been for some years past, embarrassed, for the want of a properly constructed, active, Vigilance Committee." He added that "the old Committee, which used to render effective service in this field of Anti-slavery labor, had become disorganized and scattered,

and that for the last two or three years, the duties of this department had been performed by individuals on their own responsibility, and sometimes in a very irregular manner; and this had been the cause of much dissatisfaction and complaint and that the necessity for a remedy of this state of things was generally felt.

Several members of the audience then concurred with McKim's harsh assessment. The group agreed to form a General Vigilance Committee of nineteen members, with Robert Purvis serving as the official chairman, and an Acting Committee, "to keep a record of all their doings, and especially of the money received and expended on behalf of every case claiming interposition."<sup>21</sup>

Those present decided to name thirty-one-year-old William Still to hold the key position as the chairman of the Acting Committee. For the next several years, Still spearheaded Philadelphia's Underground Railroad efforts with extraordinary energy and

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<sup>20</sup> William Still, The Underground Railroad (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in William Still, (1872), 611-12.

persistence. He corresponded widely with a network of agents and supporters, conducted interviews with arriving fugitives, handled the committee's finances and even traveled to Canada to view conditions of the resettled ex-slaves.

The documentation available from the Acting Committee of the Philadelphia Vigilance group is quite impressive. Within his 1872 monograph, Still reproduces nearly 250 contemporary letters related to Underground Railroad operations from the committee's files. The correspondence reflects the far-reaching scope and organizational abilities of the vigilance effort in the 1850s. Still's network was both national --with reports pouring in from about 15 states-- and even international, as he solicited information from ex-slaves in Canada and money from abolitionists in Britain. Still's invaluable book also includes dozens of newspaper accounts, everything from runaway advertisements to rare clippings from abolitionist journals. There are also hundreds of case narratives that are based upon --or taken directly from-- interview reports prepared in the Vigilance Committee offices at 31 North Fifth Street. And finally there are about 25 profiles of active agents, usually written from recollections, and sometimes provided first-hand by the participants. Taken together, this is most striking collection of evidence available anywhere about the nature of the Underground Railroad.

Despite the apparent danger of their operations, Still received nearly 100 letters directly from his agents in the field, often commenting quite openly about operations in progress. A free black man from Norristown named John Augusta, whom Still described as a "first-rate hairdresser" and "trustworthy Underground Rail Road agent" wrote in 1857 that he had "Six men and women and Five children making Eleven Persons." If you are willing to Receve [sic] them," he scribbled urgently to Still, "write to me imediately

[sic]."<sup>22</sup> The notes to Still did not typically invoke railroad metaphors. Joseph C. Bustill, a free black teacher and agent in Harrisburg, sent a one-line note that read, "I have sent via at two o'clock four large and two small hams."<sup>23</sup> Other notes referred elliptically to "packages," "shipments," "travelers," or "guests."

Some of the most memorable letters that Still received came from Thomas Garrett, a Quaker living in Wilmington, Delaware. In 1848, Garrett had been convicted under the 1793 fugitive slave statute for aiding and abetting runaways, resulting in a fine exceeding five thousand dollars --a judgment that threatened to destroy him financially. Yet he remained openly defiant. "Friend, I haven't a dollar in the world," he reportedly said after the verdict, "but if thee knows a fugitive who needs a breakfast, send him to me."<sup>24</sup> He wrote Still and other members of the Vigilance Committee on several occasions about the activities of famed conductor Harriet Tubman, reporting on her need for new shoes, money and other material aids on her legendary rescues.

For all of his efforts in the Underground Railroad, William Still was arrested only twice and threatened with imprisonment once --but in that case for libel and not for violating fugitive slave laws. He was briefly detained along with another member of the Acting Committee in 1855 when they tried to secure the release of a slave who was traveling through Philadelphia with John Wheeler, the U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua and a slaveholder. But Still only got into serious trouble for his activities during this period as a result of a lawsuit filed by a fugitive. In 1860, a former slave named Ellen Wells successfully sued him for libel, earning the operative a sentence of ten days in jail and a

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<sup>22</sup> John Augusta to William Still, Norristown, October 18, 1857, quoted in William Still, (1872), 110.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph C. Bustill to William Still, Harrisburg, May 31, 1856, quoted in William Still, (1872), 218.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Judith Bentley, "Dear Friend" Thomas Garrett & William Still: Collaborators on the Underground Railroad (New York: Cobblehill Books/Dutton, 1997), 21.

fine of one hundred dollars. The woman had apparently been traveling across the North claiming to raise funds to purchase the freedom of her family still kept in bondage. For some reason, Still suspected her story and wrote a letter to a Boston abolitionist implying that she was a fraud and even a prostitute. Although the chain of events is not exactly clear, somehow Wells received custody of the letter, which doomed Still once he faced the charges in court.<sup>25</sup>

As the Civil War approached, Still felt pressure from several directions. His name had been discovered in a note found on one of John Brown's co-conspirators in the aftermath of the notorious 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry. The clerk feared for his life and his Underground Railroad records, arranging to hide the Acting Committee materials at a local black cemetery. He also worried about money. Still and his wife Letitia now had four children and despite several increases of his clerk's pay since the days of his \$3.75 per week salary, he still needed to earn additional income. In 1861, he decided to leave his job at the Anti-Slavery office and launch a new business as a coal supplier. After nearly fourteen years of work on the Underground Railroad, William Still once again remade himself, now as a man of above-ground commerce.

### **William Still and his Legacy**

Still's coal business soon grew more profitable and his reputation as an honest businessman attracted attention in a city rife with corruption during the Civil War. In the middle of the conflict, Union army officials asked Still to become the sutler, or private supplier, of Camp William Penn, the main training facility for black soldiers in the North. He instituted several reforms designed to impose more order on the chaotic system.

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<sup>25</sup> The episode is described in Larry Gara, "William Still and the Underground Railroad," Pennsylvania History 28 (January 1961), 37-8.

Among other measures, he broke a ring that supplied unsuspecting soldiers with counterfeit currency.

During the war, Still did not abandon his interest in political issues. He continued a fight he had begun in 1859 to integrate the city's streetcars. In December 1863, he wrote a spirited letter to local officials complaining that Philadelphia was "the only city of note in the civilized world where a decent colored man cannot be allowed to ride in a city passenger-car."<sup>26</sup> He and other black leaders in the city finally won their struggle for integration of streetcars in 1867.

Historian Roger Lane notes, however, that this achievement marked an ambivalent milestone for William Still. His political time had clearly passed. At an event commemorating the integration victory, Still spoke in almost bitter terms --not against whites but against younger African Americans in the community who had challenged his leadership or who had, in his opinion, wasted their energies on "idle and frivolous society."<sup>27</sup>

In some ways, the post-war years were surprisingly difficult ones for Still and his values. On the one hand, he had become prominent and financially secure. A leader of his church, the Berean Presbyterian, Still was active in numerous charitable causes. He helped found the city's first black Young Men's Christian Association and devoted himself to various causes for the aged and infirm. His children were also making exceptional progress in their own careers. Daughter Caroline became a medical doctor. Ella, another daughter, was a school teacher. William W. Still was an attorney and son Robert emerged as leading editor and political activist.

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Boyd, "William Still," in *Still's Underground Railroad Records*, lii.

<sup>27</sup> Roger Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia*, 106.

Yet Still's stubborn independence and stern demeanor fueled resentment. He endured harsh criticism when he advised against the creation of a Freedmen's Bank in Philadelphia --arguing that the city's black residents were not yet ready for their own financial institution. The subsequent failure of the Freedmen's Bank in Washington did little to alleviate the bitterness caused by Still's apparent betrayal of his fellow black residents. Still proved to be a political independent as well, endorsing a Democratic candidate for mayor in 1874 during an era when almost all blacks supported the Republican Party. Following this decision, he received a vicious anonymous letter addressed to "Mr. Nigger" that historian Roger Lane concludes almost certainly came from another member of the black community.<sup>28</sup>

By the time of his death in 1902, at the age of eighty-one, Still was in many ways a forgotten and underappreciated figure. Though obituaries of the time noted his successes as an Underground Railroad operator and as a chronicler of the great movement, his place in history had been eclipsed. In many ways, despite greater respect for his achievements, Still remains overshadowed by other figures from his era

In this fashion, Still's story stands as an embodiment of the underappreciated role of free blacks in the Underground Railroad. African American northerners like William Still were the vital element in the organized network that existed for about 25 years prior to the Civil War. This loose collection of vigilance committees and fugitive aid societies helped runaways and defied slave catchers across the North. Their reach extended not just from major urban centers like Philadelphia but through agents in smaller communities such as Columbia, York and Harrisburg as well as into southern cities like Norfolk, Washington and Richmond. Without these unsung heroes, there would have

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<sup>28</sup> Roger Lane, William Dorsey's Philadelphia, 104-6.

been no effective network to freedom. There also might not have been a Civil War, or at least not one coming when and how it did. The fugitive controversy deserves a place alongside the slavery extension question as a primary cause of the sectional conflict.

Focusing on William Still's life also reminds us that the history of the Underground Railroad appears so heroic and improbable at least in part because the story is populated by such ordinary people. Blessed as he was with great determination, faith and courage, Still appears nonetheless in retrospect as just another example of the nineteenth-century self-made man. He was a classic middle-class striver --ambitious, orderly, determined and sometimes a little too narrow-minded in his moral certainties.

Yet if Still's outlook and daily habits could seem mundane to some of his contemporaries, they do offer one particular advantage for posterity. In his clerk-like zeal to keep the accounts straight, Still recorded much of what we can know about the process of aiding fugitive slaves. The insights suggested by his book are numerous. From Still's account of the Underground Railroad, it becomes clear that there was an organized, national network of free blacks and white abolitionists in place during the 1850s. His meticulous journals emphasize the often overlooked role of money in financing the various escapes and relocations. His experiences demonstrate that while dangerous, most Underground Railroad activities in northern states like Pennsylvania were not life-threatening and were undertaken with an impressive degree of open defiance. Ultimately, we must conclude that William Still's interviews, letters and recollections are the stuff of history and can help us rescue the Underground Railroad from the shroud of myths and legends.