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In 1870 and 1871, *Harper's Weekly* featured an advertisement for plaster statuary suitable for display in genteel parlors. The piece pictured, created by the popular sculptor John Rogers, was called "The Fugitive's Story" and featured a female fugitive slave recounting her adventures to several well-known abolitionists, including John G. Whittier and William Lloyd Garrison, who had posed for the artist. Rogers had proven to be very successful at producing small plaster groupings on subjects that attracted middle-class buyers. In 1859 he had appealed to antislavery sentiment with his piece "The Slave Auction." After enjoying success with many Civil War pieces during the war, he returned to an antislavery theme to capitalize on the sympathies of genteel Americans who wanted art in their homes. "The Fugitive's Story" cost \$25 and could be shipped without charge to any railroad station in the country.¹

The interest in the fugitive story had also been apparent at the final meeting of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. William Still, an African American member of the Society, showed one of the relics of exciting days now past: the wooden box that had concealed a fugitive slave. Still had also entertained the audience by presenting a paper on Henry "Box" Brown and several other fugitives. As a member of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, which had helped escaped slaves who had reached the city, Still had been active in the Underground Railroad network and had firsthand knowledge of fugitives and their stories. His paper fascinated his listeners. According to the *National Standard*, "The mournful tales thus unfolded were like the thrilling fantasies of romance, but more harrowing because of their reality." In one of its last actions, the society passed a unanimous resolution asking Still to "compile and publish his personal reminiscences and experiences relating to the Underground Rail Road."²

The resolution seemed to call for personal recollections, perhaps along the lines of Samuel May's book. Still's own life was certainly noteworthy enough for a conventional autobiography. Born free in New Jersey, Still had migrated as a young man to Philadelphia, where he eventually found a job with the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery. When the Fugi-

tive Slave Act was passed in 1850, he became a key figure in the Vigilance Committee's work. During the war he moved into the coal business, which he made into a flourishing concern. Despite his successes, particularly impressive for a free black man, Still chose not to tell his own story. His narrative thus differed both from a conventional autobiography and from May's memoirs. Perhaps the audience's enthusiasm encouraged him to highlight the tales of fugitives rather than his own experiences in the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society office or as the chairman of the Acting Vigilance Committee. Certainly he believed that stories demonstrating the widespread desire of black people for freedom ought to be told.³

The book that resulted represented another form of historical memory about abolitionism and suggests that there was a racial divide in the construction of the past. Still's account had a different purpose, message, and cast of characters than May's book and its tone contrasted sharply with that of the effusive memorializing statements made as antislavery societies dissolved. In this narrative, white abolitionists were marginalized. Blacks became the engine of their own liberation, a theme that other black abolitionists would also highlight in their autobiographies published later in the century. Still's story made clear not only the basic humanity of black slaves but also the justice of emancipation and citizenship. Many black men and women had seized the opportunity for freedom under the most difficult of circumstances. Their actions symbolized blacks' commitments to core American values and offered proof that they deserved the fundamental political rights associated with freedom.

Still's massive book (almost 800 pages long) appeared in March 1872. Its principal title, *The Underground Rail Road*, suggested Still's strategy of receding into the background of the narrative. Clues about Still's work and character, however, appeared in letters written by and to him included in the narrative. Of the two, the letters to Still were the more revealing, showing his kindness, his thoughtful treatment of fugitives in Philadelphia and in Canada, and his involvement in Underground Railroad operations. Through the voices of others, readers might gain a faint inkling of the kind of man that Still was. John Hall, an escaped fugitive, wrote to Still in 1856, "As for your part that you done I will not attempt to tell you how thankful I am, but I hope that you can imagine what my feelings are to you. I cannot find words sufficient to express my gratitude to you. . . . No flattery, but candidly speaking, you are worthy all the praise of any person who has ever been with you." With these sorts of secondhand comments readers would have to be content.⁴

While Still remained a shadowy figure, his book provided a firsthand

account of the Vigilance Committee. Scattered throughout the book were vignettes of the committee listening to and recording stories of fugitives, sympathizing with their sufferings, and gathering information and giving them advice and funds. But despite these vignettes and the inclusion of pictures of four colleagues on the Acting Committee, members remained blurry and indistinct. Still did nothing to personalize individuals or the group by revealing their positions or feelings. Still described the moments when emotions ran high in the most general terms. A comment like “Never before had they witnessed a sight more interesting, a scene more touching” was typical. Who said what was rarely clear. Not until more than three-quarters of the way through the book did Still offer basic information about the committee’s organization and its original members. Like Still himself, committee members hovered at the fringes of the narrative.⁵

Although Still remained mostly in the background, he wanted no challenges to his authority. Unlike slave narratives like Frederick Douglass’s that relied on validation from whites for acceptance, Still felt no need for testimonials. The title page fixed his position as observer and interpreter, noting that the book contained “Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters &c.” drawn from firsthand accounts or “witnessed by the author.” Lower on the title page, in a different typeface to attract attention, Still’s credentials appeared: he had “for many years” been active in the antislavery office and was “chairman” of Philadelphia’s Acting Vigilance Committee. Opposite the title page a portrait of Still with his large and graceful signature appeared. His signature, of course, established his literacy, while the portrait showed him in impeccable middle-class attire, staring out, not at the reader, but into the distance, as if recollecting some of the events and people that he would include in his book. Further highlighting his credibility, the preface began with a direct quotation of the resolution unanimously passed by the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society requesting him to undertake this project.⁶

Still went to some length to establish the historical nature of his work. Although he stated that he vividly remembered many of the events included in his book, he emphasized that memory alone could not make “a trustworthy history.” His narrative drew upon facts known to him and records that he had created and preserved. Although initially he had not taken notes of interviews with fugitives, he eventually realized the personal and historical value of documenting information that one day might help unite family members separated by the flight north. He carefully pointed out gaps in his records and explained that his narrative kept true to the evidence. Assuring readers that he had not embellished his material, he declared that he had taken “the most scrupulous care . . . to furnish artless

stories, simple facts,—to resort to no coloring to make the book seem romantic.” Similarly, he vouched that the stories he included were true. The Vigilance Committee, he explained, was not easily taken in. “When charges or statements were made by fugitives against those from whom they escaped,” for example, “particular pains were taken to find out if such statements could be verified; if the explanation appeared valid, the facts as given were entered on the books.” Accuracy was “doubly” important because “it was barely possible” that fugitives described in the book might “still be lost to their relatives, who may be inquiring and hunting in every direction for them,” and might “turn to these records with hope.”⁷

At the outset, Still differentiated his work from the kind of general anti-slavery history that May had so recently published. As he compiled his book, he seemed to have been hopeful that later generations would be able to learn about the existence and destruction of slavery and “the deeds of the brave and invincible” men and women who had opposed it. Even though his intention was not to describe abolitionists and their accomplishments, Still courteously acknowledged the “labors” of abolitionists and honored friends of the slave, particularly “the Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Societies and Sewing Circles of Philadelphia” and abolitionists like Lucretia Mott and William Lloyd Garrison. But his book did not describe antislavery meetings, lectures, pamphlets, or detail antislavery fund-raising or antislavery mobs. The persons he was introducing to his readers would hardly merit a place in a treatment of “the Anti-Slavery question proper” and held very different views from well-known abolitionists. The people who crowded his pages did not subscribe to the nonresistance embraced by Garrison and others; one, Daniel Gibbons, after reading the constitution of an antislavery society, had actually refused to join it. “He said that he could not assent” to the rejection of force, that “he had long been engaged in getting off slaves, and . . . had always advised them to use force . . . he did not see how they could always be got off without the use of some force.” Nor were all of those included in Still’s book disinterested reformers. Some actually received pay for their dangerous work, which was “no more than fair,” considering the risks their efforts involved.⁸

At center stage in Still’s history were the black fugitives themselves, while the white and black friends and “agents,” like Gibbons, who sometimes assisted them, remained on the sidelines. The runaways were heroic actors who seized freedom for themselves instead of waiting for abolitionists to free them and then tell their story. They stood at the front line of the battle against slavery, a battle that was often physical, violent, and deadly. To the Vigilance Committee, the fugitive slaves who appeared in Philadel-



This dignified portrait of William Still appears at the beginning of his account of the Underground Railroad. Still's clothes and signature help to establish his authority and respectability. (Courtesy Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

phia in increasing numbers were the human evidence that freedom was making great strides among those still enslaved. The inspirational accounts fugitives gave of their trials in slavery and their flight from it had a unique power that put abolitionist rhetoric in its place. Even Senator Charles Sumner's "great and eloquent speech on the Barbarism of Slavery," Still wrote, "seemed almost cold and dead," compared to the bearing and speech of escaped slaves. "Their love of liberty, and of the determination to resist Slavery to the death, in defence of their wives and children — this was Sumner's speech enacted before our eyes."⁹

While Still's narrative differed from the more familiar story of antislavery, at its heart stood the shared emphasis on freedom that abolitionists were now insisting was so central to understanding slavery and the coming of the Civil War. Freedom was what abolitionism was really all about and what the fleeing slaves were seeking. Just as their masters did, slaves insisted they had a right to individual liberty. Even lowly field hands harbored "the spirit of Freedom, so natural to man." Furthermore, they acted upon that belief. "Where could be found in history a more noble and daring struggle for Freedom" than the efforts of Robert Brown — or many others of the fugitives whose stories Still told? Indeed, properly understood, the individual accounts of the fugitives and of their "Friends" were central to grasping the significance of abolitionism. All had helped to weaken slavery and thus contributed to the story of its abolition. From this perspective, emancipation was not the result of a military necessity but of the innate urge for freedom. It was "the grandest event in modern history." As he ended of his preface, Still expressed the hope that the "true friends of the slave" would recognize that his book was, in its way, a "tribute to the Anti-Slavery cause." Many did, for after the book was published, abolitionists praised it as part of the antislavery narrative. James McKim, a prominent Pennsylvania abolitionist, hailed the book as a contribution to both antislavery history and literature and saw one of its chief values as the characterization of those who labored to overthrow the institution of slavery.¹⁰

The stories Still told were important not only because these courageous men and women deserved "the applause of . . . liberty-loving citizens" but also because he believed that the personal memories that illiterate slaves passed down orally would not last more than two generations. Using committee records, Still was preserving deeds of black heroism that belonged on the pages of history that, so far, were empty of black achievements. The inclusion of supporting materials like newspaper articles, runaway slave advertisements, private letters, and copies of legislation were all part of this historic record. Still inserted the Fugitive Slave Bill in full, for example.

Without it, people would “hardly be able to believe that such atrocities were enacted in the nineteenth century” under an enlightened, Christian government.¹¹

Still’s desire to ignite an interest in the past took on urgency as 1871 and 1872 unfolded. The Enforcement Acts (1870–71) and the Ku Klux Klan Act (1871) helped curtail antiblack violence in the South. But as Amos T. Akerman, the attorney general who enforced these laws, realized, the situation had “revealed a perversion of moral sentiment about the Southern whites which bodes ill to that part of the country for this generation.” In 1872, at the same time that Still’s book was in production, a group of liberal Republicans broke from the party to form the Liberal Republican Party. They nominated Horace Greeley to run for president; their choice won the endorsement of the Democrats. During the campaign, Greeley and his supporters attacked southern Reconstruction as corrupt and pressed for reconciliation with the South. Although Greeley lost the election, the reformers’ bolt from the party left the Republicans more conservative and more conscious of the political appeal of reconciliation.¹²

In 1873, Still must have understood the significance of such events as he reflected that “the future looks very dark to me for the colored man both North + South.” This was a view he had held “for a long time.” Faced with this dark future, Still hoped to influence public opinion by selling thousands of copies of his book. “What a grand monument this would be to the heroism of the late Slaves & what encouragement and credit to the colored men of this country,” he declared. Garrison shared this goal. “I hope that the sale of your work will be widely extended,” he wrote, “for the enlightenment of the rising generation as to the inherent cruelty of the defunct slave system, and to perpetuate such an abhorrence of it as to prevent all further injustice towards the colored population of our land. It is a book for every household.”¹³

Still’s central themes appeared at the very beginning of his narrative. In what turned out to be one of the book’s longest sections, he described the heroism of Seth Concklin, a white, “Christlike” man of action, who gave his life for the cause of freedom. Having read a newspaper article describing how a slave, Peter Still, with an “undying determination to be free” bought himself, traveled north, where he was reunited with some of his relatives, but was unable to forget his wife and children still in bondage, Concklin determined to rescue the slave family living thousands of miles away in Alabama. In this bold attempt Concklin lost his life, and subsequent attempts to buy the black family failed.¹⁴

The story nicely paired a white northerner and a black southerner both

motivated to heroic action by their love of freedom. Both white and black families suffered from the blight of slavery: the Concklins because their beloved brother, Seth, lost his life, the other because beloved family members remained enslaved. But while there was racial symmetry in the text, the inclusion of a portrait of the former slave and his mother but the absence of any picture of Concklin suggested that the book would emphasize fugitives rather than their white helpers.

As Still pointed out, the public already knew something of these events because they had appeared in print during the days of slavery. But many details had necessarily remained "hidden." Now Still was in the position to furnish the missing information since his own records contained letters and newspaper notices that were pertinent to the case. In addition, since the former slave was his brother, the author was perfectly placed as observer and narrator to provide new and interesting material.

While the book's opening suggested Still might have some overall plan in mind, it soon became clear that he did not. The nearly 800-page book was repetitive and disorganized, with a narrative that jumped around chronologically. The lack of structure prevented any dramatic buildup and made it difficult for readers to identify turning points in the antislavery struggle. Since Still submitted parts of the manuscript to the printer as he went along, he had no opportunity to correct or add to sections of the book already written. Thus people and events that should have appeared together did not. As Still explained, an account of an incident about a young fugitive had already been handed to the printer and "was in type" when the story of the fugitive's mother was "discovered . . . among the records preserved. Under changed names in many instances, [fugitives often took new names] it has been found no easy matter to cull from a great variety of letters, records and advertisements, just when wanted, all the particulars essential to complete many of these narratives." While it was impossible to put the relevant material in "its proper place, yet, since it has been found," Still decided, "it is too important and interesting to be left out."¹⁵

Still struggled between his need to control the length of the narrative and his inclination to include everything. On the one hand, he wanted to captivate readers with tales of thrilling adventures and escapes and keep the book to a reasonable length. As the book progressed, comments about the necessity "to economize time and space" became more frequent. On the other hand, he also considered it important to give "an account of as many of the travelers as possible." Still piled story upon story, filled with information about fugitives' original names, their new names, their ages and physical appearances, even the slave advertisements calling for their recapture. The

result was an unwieldy *mélange* of material, a problem he sensed but failed to correct. It is likely that, like many writers, Still had difficulty leaving out material that he had painstakingly collected. But his strong commitment to detail and inclusion also stemmed from his sense of justice, that all of those who had risked so much should receive proper notice and his hope that all the particulars might help family members long separated find one another again. He understood the tradeoffs. "Some lost ones, seeking information of relatives, may find comfort," he explained, "even if the general reader should fail to be interested." Still's interest, however, was unflagging. One senses his regret, after he had written 600 pages, about the fugitives' stories that he had to abandon to turn to the Underground Railroad agents and other friends of the slave. "With this interesting case, our narratives end," he wrote. "A large number on the record book must be omitted . . . although there are exceptional cases even among those so omitted, that would be equally as interesting as many which have been inserted, time and space will not admit of further encroachment."¹⁶

Unwieldy as the final product was, Still's book occupies an interesting place in the emerging field of abolitionist memorials written during Reconstruction and in the tradition of slave narratives so popular among abolitionists before the Civil War. Like the slave narrative, Still's book contained accounts of the sufferings of black men and women under slavery and their determination to escape at all costs rather than descriptions of the trials and triumphs of mostly white abolitionists. Like the slave narrative, the book was rooted in the South rather than the North, the focus of Samuel May's recollections and others that followed. And like the slave narrative, Still highlighted the flight from masters and slave hunters. But unlike the slave narrative, Still provided details that had been too dangerous to publish in the antebellum period. Even such a popular tale as that of Henry Box Brown, which had been widely reported in antislavery newspapers and by the fugitive himself, was actually "very little . . . known." Thus Still "briefly" was able to offer his readers the "facts . . . never before . . . fully published." Still's book was one that filled in the blanks.¹⁷

One of the reasons for the popularity of slave narratives was the claim that they offered authentic witnesses of the evils of slavery. Even though white abolitionists often surrounded the former slave's story with testimonials about its veracity, and even though the narrative itself was shaped for a white audience, the voice was supposedly that of the black slave. In Still's book, that voice did appear in letters from fugitives in Canada, in occasional passages where a slave was "allowed to speak for himself," and in excerpts from fugitives' interviews with the Vigilance Committee. Still

recalled one such incident when the committee had listened to a “thrilling tale”: “Wishing to get it word for word as it flowed naturally from his brave lips, at a late hour of the night a member of the Committee remarked to him, with pencil in hand, that he wanted to take down some account of his life.” But while this technique provided a direct transcript, the resulting story was scripted not by the fugitive but the committee. “‘Now,’ said he, ‘we shall have to be brief. Please answer as correctly as you can the following questions.’”¹⁸

For most of the book, Still himself was the medium through which the stories came to life. As the portrait at the book’s beginning made clear to any reader who might not know, Still was black. In a curious way, the black author assumed the validating role that white abolitionists had played in their testimonials for prewar slave narratives. Often pointing to his role as listener and record keeper, Still established his credentials as the intermediary between slaves and readers whose judgment about the truth of what he heard could be trusted. Not only had Still been in a position to evaluate slaves’ narratives, but he took his responsibility of transmitting their stories seriously. In recounting the escape of Charles Gilbert, for example, Still assured his readers of the essential truth of his account: “As to the correctness of the story, all that the writer has to say is, that he took it down from the lips of Charles, hurriedly, directly after his arrival, with no thought of magnifying a single incident. On the contrary, much that was of interest in the story had to be omitted.” Still made it clear that he regretted not taking more copious notes. Had he done so, “a far more thrilling account of his adventures might have been written.”¹⁹

While Still claimed his stories accurately reflected fugitives’ experiences, as the writer, he shaped and controlled their histories. Still suggested that often fugitives were inspired as no others could be when they told their stories. He noted the pleasure the committee derived from Gilbert’s “remarkable” story, “narrated so intelligently.” But Still inserted Gilbert’s “own language” only here and there, primarily to add drama to the story. It was Still who must have added many of the vivid touches, describing Gilbert as “drunk with joy” once he had boarded the steamer that was to carry him to freedom, praising Gilbert’s “inventive intellect” that “led him to enrobe himself in female attire” when officers searching for him boarded the vessel. It was also Still, acting on his sense of propriety and regard for the readers’ possible response to “harrowing” or “painful” details, who chose what material in the records should be included and what should be left out. It was also Still who made it clear to his readers what the slave might not have realized. Frequently, the important points emerging from the nar-

rative were so obvious that Still was content to let the reader “interpret for himself” or used heavy irony to underline the point. But in other cases, he acted as a corrective. Thus when Isaac spoke kindly of his former mistress, Still made sure that readers were not deceived: “His view was a superficial one, it meant only that they had not been beaten and starved to death.”²⁰

One scholar has estimated that around sixty-five slave narratives were published before the Civil War. Here, Still provided hundreds of cases that reinforced and elaborated the antebellum narratives. Although the voices of slaves came primarily through Still, the repetition of stories revealing the cruel nature of slavery and slaves’ desire for freedom had a power that individual slave narratives could not. The book literally overwhelmed readers with information, refusing to let anyone who took up the book dismiss slavery as unimportant, benign, or morally acceptable. As Still had made clear in the preface to *The Underground Rail Road*, his purpose was not to amuse his readers. Slavery might be over, but its cruelties and crimes should not be forgotten by Americans as they wove their historical narratives to explain the coming of war and its meaning.²¹

Nor should one forget the very real slaves themselves. Still often commented on the rewards that masters offered for the return of runaways or the prices for which slaves had been sold. By contrasting the dollar estimates of worth with the physical details that he provided for fugitives, Still suggested the insubstantiality of economic valuation as a primary way of understanding human beings. His emphasis on appearance also differentiated his account from antebellum slave narratives, which gave only indirect information about a fugitive’s looks. Still drew the physical descriptions of fugitives not only from the Committee’s records but also from runaway slave ads, which often provided small details: a fugitive may have had a goatee, for example, or bowed shoulders, or a certain color hair. If the ad contained inaccurate information, Still corrected it. Thus Still commented that “Theophilus is twenty-four years of age, dark, height and stature hardly medium . . . [h]is bearing is subdued and modest,” while “Stepney was thirty-four years of age, tall, slender, and of a dark hue.”²²

Still almost always noted skin color. The wide range of skin tones he described revealed the common intermingling of the races and the inadequacy of bipolar racial classifications. His attention to color also highlighted the individuality of each fugitive. One might be chestnut colored or yellow, another gingerbread or dark orange, others merely light or dark.

In a dramatic departure from white abolitionist literature, Still rejected the preference for the light-skinned slave. This popular stereotype implied that white blood fostered intelligence and that beauty consisted in light skin

and white features. Still directly challenged this common view by turning the scheme on its head. Far from finding light skin desirable, Still suggested that it diminished a person, revealing that he or she had been “bleached” by the patriarchal institution. At best, a fugitive might look “none the worse for having so much of his master’s blood.” But for Still, whose own coloring was dark, beauty consisted of a jet-black complexion with no signs of racial mixing. His descriptions made it clear how blackness added to beauty: “John was about nineteen years of age, well grown, black, and of prepossessing appearance”; Thomas was “well made, wide awake, and of a superb black complexion.” While Still realized that some might still consider deep black “not . . . a fashionable color,” in *The Underground Rail Road* a black “hue was perfect, no sign of white.”²³

Descriptions of fugitives provided a sense of individuality and variety, but Still assured his readers that all the fugitives shared common characteristics. Most important and emphasized over and over from the dedication and the preface through the hundreds of pages of text was the bravery of those fleeing slavery. Young heroes, men ready to throw “off the yoke, even if it cost them their lives,” abounded. They were ready to suffer hardships that would daunt many a brave man or woman. “If such sufferings and trials were not entitled to claim for the sufferer the honor of a hero,” Still asked, “where in all Christendom would one be found” with a better claim? They were also physically courageous, ready to use firearms and other weapons if necessary. Still described four slaves who arrived together in Philadelphia with two butchers’ knives, three pistols, and two other knives between them. The pluck and bravery of such men was evident in their stories. Betrayed by a man posing as an Underground Railroad conductor, Henry Predo and those who were with him found themselves not in a safe house, as they had expected, but at the Dover jailhouse. When they realized their plight, they fought their way back down the jail stairs, despite the efforts of the sheriff, who had “revolver in hand,” “plunged into the sheriff’s private apartment,” where his family was sleeping, tossed live coals over the room, and headed for the window. “Our hero Henry, seizing a heavy andiron, smashed out the window entire” and with the others jumped out to the ground twelve feet below. Black men like Henry were examples of “determined manhood.”²⁴

Still explained at the outset that most of the slaves who escaped were “physically and intellectually above the average order of slaves.” Most were not field hands on large plantations; they worked for small or medium farmers, or in urban areas; many hired themselves out. They were in the best position to understand their situation and the possibility of changing it. In

a curious way, rather than robbing them of intelligence, slavery had made many slaves deep thinkers, capable of reasoning for themselves. One should not be misled by appearances, Still argued: "Those who would have taken this party for stupid, or for know-nothings, would have found themselves very much mistaken. Indeed they were far from being dull or sleepy on the subject of Slavery at any rate." Fugitives not only understood the risks involved in planning their escapes, but they also proved to be ingenious in plotting them out. "In very desperate straits," Still explained, "many new inventions were sought after by deep-thinking and resolute slaves determined to be free at any cost." Some escaped unaided; others succeeded in locating Underground Railroad agents to help them, despite secrecy surrounding the Underground Railroad operations. Surprisingly, even slaves kept in darkest ignorance had the mental ability to recognize their intolerable situations. Uneducated as one slave named Charles was, wrote Still, "he was too sensible" to believe his master "had any God-given right to his manhood."²⁵

Still and the committee were surprised when a party arrived with more women than men. Most fugitives were male. As Still pointed out, women faced more obstacles in escaping and were more likely than men to fail in their attempts. His own mother fled with her four children, but slavecatchers discovered them in New Jersey and carried mother and children back into slavery. But "she was incurable." Having lulled her owner into a false sense of security, she bided her time and made another "bold strike for freedom." This time she determined to leave the boys behind, and this time she succeeded. Other women disguised themselves as young men, probably thinking males attracted less attention than females, and slipped away from slavery in that way. Because of the difficulties and perhaps because of his own family history, Still paid special tribute to women, deeming them worthy of "double honors."²⁶

Still's mother was not the only woman who left her children behind, although the most common pattern Still noted was men who deserted their wives and families in the South. This raised a delicate but important issue. Abolitionists had condemned slave owners for ripping families apart and argued that slaves felt the same strong bonds of affection for spouses and children as middle-class northern whites. How did the pattern Still depicted square with the familiar abolitionist rhetoric about the force of family ties among slaves? How did it square with the southern claim that free black people lacked the moral values that bound white families together? What did abandonment say about those who escaped? Why did Willis Redick, one of the escaped slaves in the book, and many others leave their spouses without a word?

Still was clearly uneasy with such questions. At one point in the narrative, he acknowledged that some fugitives forgot their southern families. At another, he admitted that a number of fugitives found new wives in Canada: "It is more than likely, that there are white women in Canada to-day, who are married to some poor slave woman's fugitive husband." The range of explanations he presented suggested he was casting about for a convincing rationale for what seemed to be heartless behavior. So he insisted that men had to tear themselves from their wives and found the separation extremely painful. Though parted, husbands continue to love and pine for absent wives, hoping that they would one day follow them to freedom. Having emphasized that fugitives did not lack family feelings, Still insisted that slavery (and thus white owners), not husbands, were responsible for desertion. For example, he pointed out that the runaway slave Joe did not "let affection . . . keep him in chains." However, it was not Joe but "the slave lash" and cruel treatment that "widowed and orphaned" his family. In any case, slave husbands were powerless to do anything for their wives and children. While the decision to flee might look "exceedingly hard . . . what else could the poor fellow do? Slavery existed expressly for the purpose of crushing souls and breaking tender hearts."²⁷

When Thomas Jones fled to the North, he took with him a daguerreotype of his wife and locks of her hair and of their four children. The reason for Jones's flight was his master's decision to sell "the wife of his bosom" for rejecting his sexual advances. The specter of sale was one of the most common reasons motivating slaves to escape, Still believed: "The slave auction block indirectly proved to be in some respects a very active agent in promoting travel on the U.G.R.R."²⁸

Somewhat surprisingly, the first section of the book did not provide the usual abolitionist picture of savage whippings and other physical cruelties. But as the stories piled up, there were plenty of examples of violence sparking the determination of a slave to escape at any cost. While Still spared readers many of the gory details, he succeeded in highlighting the brutality of the slave system that was fundamental to explaining the Civil War. One of his favored approaches was to contrast a fugitive's testimony about a good owner, a statement for example that he or she "'had not been used very hard' as a general thing," to the gruesome details provided in the ensuing interview. Sheridan Ford, who spoke "rather kindly" of his mistress, revealed that he had been "stretched up with a rope by his hands" and "whipped unmercifully." Still did not set up these contrasts to suggest that slaves were stupid but rather to show that the system was so vicious that

slaves did not always see violence as extraordinary or any cause for “special complaint.” In other cases, while Still suggested some fugitive testimony was “too horrible to relate,” he included enough of the fugitive’s own words to convey the reality of brutality. Finally, he emphasized that these accounts were not unusual. The master who flogged his female slave naked was “the representative of thousands in the South using the same relentless sway over men and women.” Such tales of violence suggested not only that violence was a constant in southern life, no matter what whites might now say, but also that constant vigilance was necessary to control it.²⁹

Still’s narrative raised broad questions about southern veracity as slaves revealed how their masters had duped them. In several cases, fugitives reported that their masters had promised to free them in their wills. But when these masters died, their wills were either missing or said nothing about manumission. Another fugitive thought he had an agreement with his master that he could buy himself. After paying \$600 over the agreed-upon price, and then not given his freedom, that slave “concluded to bear the disappointment as patiently as possible and get out of the lion’s mouth as best he could.”³⁰

What was most surprising and what made the condemnation of slavery so crushing was how many fugitives had found slavery intolerable even though it had not brutalized them. Many just wanted to earn their own living; like their white counterparts, they realized the value of their labor and believed they deserved its rewards. Others, like Daniel, had not “had it very rough as a general thing; nevertheless, he was fully persuaded that he had ‘as good a right to his freedom’ as his ‘master had to his.’” Indeed, the many comments indicating that there was no special reason for flight were surprising. Luther Dorsey, for example, “was prompted to escape purely from the desire to be *free*.” Such stories suggested that the love of freedom was innate and, despite any good treatment, slaves found their condition intolerable.³¹

The stories of favored slaves provided dramatic evidence that even the best of treatment did not make slaves content or compensate for the loss of freedom. When Maria Joiner arrived from Norfolk, she bore no “visible marks of ill usage.” It was the attractive and fresh appearance of such slaves that had led many visiting the South to conclude that slavery was benign. But close questioning always revealed that there was no such thing as a “‘comfortable’ existence in a stage of bondage.” Too many uncertainties lurked. A mistress might die and leave her slave to an abusive heir. Children might be sold away. While owners might never resort to using a whip, slaps

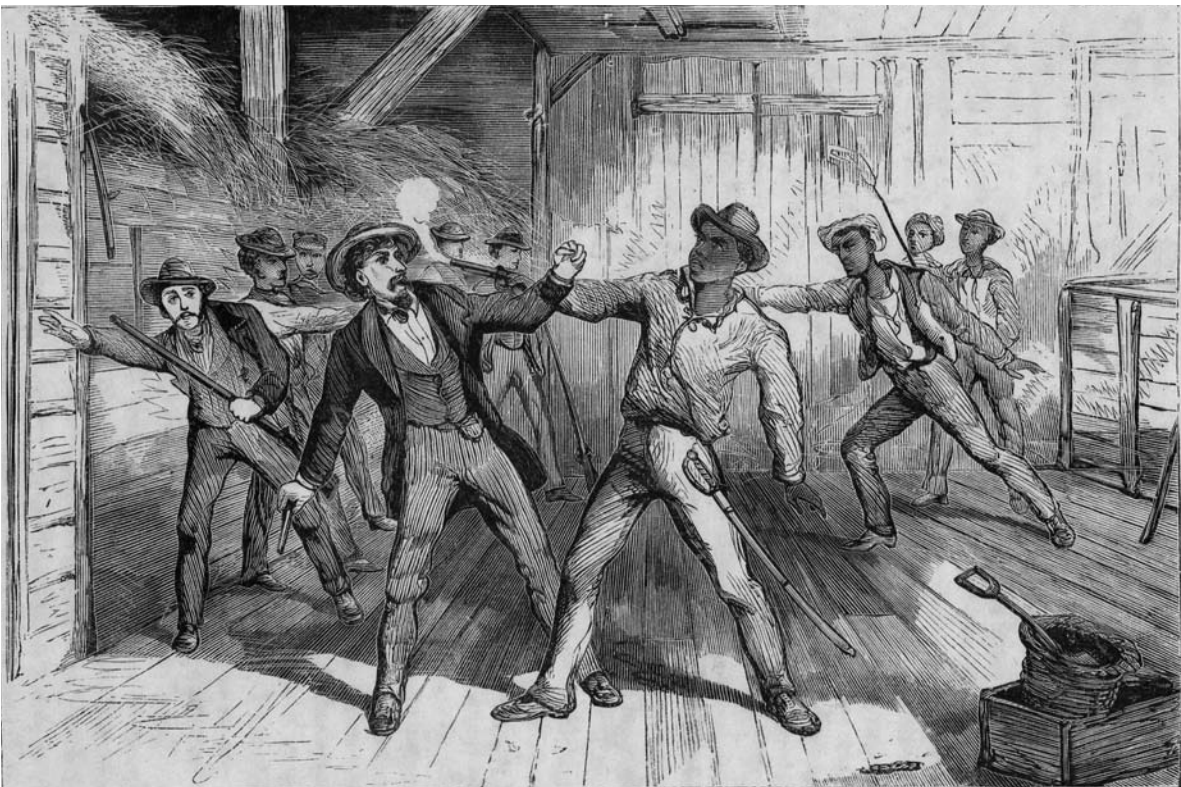
and blows that left no marks were all part and parcel of slavery. Such cases made it “evident that even the mildest form of slavery was abhorrent,” rendering any claim that slaves loved their owners unbelievable.³²

Still's choice of illustrations (engravings as well as portraits painted from photographs) reinforced the messages of the text. Only three images depicted slaves in passive roles. Two showed a master, armed with a knife, attacking a young black male slave. The third exhibited a slave hanging by his wrists, his toes barely touching the floor. Most illustrations revealed slaves in action, carrying out their thrilling, dangerous, and ingenious escapes. One picture showed over twenty fugitives, men, women, and children, stalwartly marching through the driving rain toward freedom. Another placed in the foreground two horse-drawn carriages (stolen from the master) filled with escaping slaves, boldly driving through a town, with white men in the background looking quizzically on. Many focused on a battle between fugitives and their pursuers. One, titled “Desperate Conflict in a Barn,” showed on one side of the picture black men armed with pitchforks, guns, and swords advancing on their white opponents, who were retreating. Text and illustrations together highlighted the driving force of the love of liberty and implicitly endorsed the necessity and importance of emancipation.³³

The portraits included mostly white “friends of the slaves”; some were well known, like Lewis Tappan and Thomas Garrett, while others less so. The blacks whose portraits appeared were former fugitives who had attained positions of importance or respectability. One portrayed Mary Milburn, who had escaped from Norfolk in men's clothes. Milburn's picture showed a handsome, mature black woman with an elaborate hairstyle, large dangling earrings, and an opulent jacket with fringe and braid trimming. Her richly decorated but tasteful clothing and ladylike appearance demonstrated that Milburn had risen in the world. The text revealed that Milburn had an “excellent character” and had succeeded as “a fashionable dressmaker.”³⁴

Contemporary messages were embedded in the historical narrative. They ranged from the ability of black people like Milburn to work hard in nonslave occupations and rise in the world to the burning desire of black people for a life in freedom. The determination to grasp freedom forcibly and to resist enslavement in all its forms provided an inspiring example for free people who faced many challenges in their new lives. The messages also presented the rationale for whites to ensure that blacks continued to enjoy their rights as free citizens.

Toward the end of his book, Still included a speech by William Lloyd Garrison in which Garrison declared that he had “never deemed it neces-



“Desperate Conflict in a Barn.” This illustration suggests slaves’ determination to be free, the theme of William Still’s account. The fugitives clearly have the best of the situation as the whites retreat from their assault. Pictures such as this one helped to sell Still’s book. (Courtesy Picture Collection, The Branch Libraries, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

sary to go down into the Southern States . . . for the purpose of taking the exact dimensions of the slave system.” What Garrison and other abolitionists had failed to do in their speeches and tracts before the war, and May, as a northern abolitionist, could not do in his book, Still was now accomplishing. Centered in the South, the book offered a damning and particularized picture of southern society. As readers learned about hundreds of former slaves, they also found out about hundreds of slaveholders, furnished with names, geographic locations, and personalities. Here was the specificity, the details, and the numbers missing not only from many prewar abolitionist tracts but also from individual slave narratives that could only depict a small slice of the slave system. The volume of information was overwhelming and guided readers to the conclusions Still intended.³⁵

Still introduced the South at the very beginning of the book with the story of his brother, Peter, and Seth Concklin. After Concklin's effort to free Peter's family had failed and they were returned to slavery, the owner sent Peter a letter offering to sell him his wife and children. As Still emphasized, that letter was "inserted [in his book] precisely as it was written, spelled and punctuated." After Still's fluid prose, the letter offered a shocking example of an untutored slave owner who bore little resemblance to the flattering image of the chivalrous, cultivated master beginning to emerge in literary fiction. "I will take 4000 for 4 culerd people," the letter read, "& if this will suite him & he can raise the money I will delever to him or his agent . . . said Negroes but the money must be Deposeted in the Hands of some respectable person . . . let me Know his viewes amediately." It was Peter Still's response that bore the signs of refinement: "To say that it [your letter] took me by surprise, as well as afforded me pleasure, for which I feel to be very much indebted to you, is no more than true."³⁶

Slaveholders of all kinds appeared in these pages. There were examples of the genteel and supposedly noble large plantation owners, but more frequently there were vignettes of small or medium farmers with only a few slaves. At the middle or bottom of the slaveholding hierarchy, these men and women were often poorly educated, brutal, and intemperate. Their power rested neither on racial superiority nor on the affection of their slaves but on physical force. In the comparison of masters and slaves that the narrative presented, the owners were put to shame.

In several telling incidents, armed fugitives clashed with owners, slave hunters, or other defenders of the racial status quo. The possession of weapons leveled the playing field and revealed that when blacks faced whites in an equal contest, they were perfectly capable of routing their white opponents. In one such clash, six white men and a boy tried to stop a group of black men and women whom they suspected were fugitives. The blacks pulled out their pistols and dirks and cried out that they would not surrender. When one of the whites aimed his gun at one of the black women, she cried out "Shoot! Shoot!! Shoot!!!" while waving her own pistol in one hand and a long knife in the other. Faced with the determination of the fugitives, the cowardly whites "prudently" backed off. Still commented with heavy irony, "As chivalrous as slave-holders and slave-catchers were, they knew the value of their precious lives and the fearful risk of attempting a capture, when the numbers were equal."³⁷

Especially singled out for criticism were mistresses. They belied the stereotype of the affectionate, generous, and sensitive southern lady who supposedly exhibited restraint in her personal relations. In typical accounts,

James reported that his mistress, a widow, “‘upwards of eighty, [was] very passionate and ill-natured,’” while Nancy commented that her owner frequently gave “way to unbridled passions.” Many were so stingy that they stinted on food. They did not hesitate to exploit their slaves so they could enjoy “leisure, comfort, and money” wrung from the “sweat” of their slave’s brow. Charles delivered a common opinion: “the despotism of his mistress was much worse than that of his master, for she was all the time hard on the slaves.”³⁸

The vignettes of the occasional good masters or mistresses highlighted the corrupting influence of slavery. Oscar had been the “pet” of Elizabeth Gordon, a young lady who had taken care of the slave since he had been a child, even having him sleep in her bedroom. Oscar had no hard words about his mistress and described her “character as the lady would have been pleased with in the main.” Nonetheless, his efforts to buy himself failed because, pet or not, she knew that she might get as much as \$1,500 if she sold him. When Oscar asked her price, she initially said \$800. When Oscar tried to bargain her down to \$700, “after reflection,” she raised the sum to \$1,000.³⁹

As Oscar pointed out, Elizabeth Gordon was a member of the Southern Methodist Church and “‘strict in her religion.’” One of the details Still almost always included when possible was a slave owner’s religious affiliation. While Still did not denounce the churches for their involvement in slavery, as did Samuel May or Mary Grew, he did not need to. The descriptions of the excesses of slaveholders’ behavior combined with their religious affiliations made the point. “Outwardly they were good Christians,” as Still put it, but the reality of their lives demonstrated that Christianity was dead within. The ways in which slave owners treated those in their care proved they “were strangers to practical Christianity.”⁴⁰

Southerners and most northerners believed black skin symbolized savagery and lack of civilization, a view supporting both slavery and race prejudice. Still’s book inverted this conviction and challenged softening views of the prewar South by reaffirming the abolitionist characterization of white southerners as uncivilized and barbarous. The slaveholding class was composed of “perfect savage[s],” and its slave-catchers were “hyena-like.” In many stories, the brutality of white southerners stood in vivid contrast to the humanity the fugitives demonstrated over and over again. Still’s vivid depiction of masters and mistresses made it difficult to believe they might have a serious change of heart after losing a war and their slaves.⁴¹

Despite the disorganized, repetitive, and lengthy nature of his narrative, Still succeeded in hammering home his points. As he turned over early sec-

tions of the book to the publisher, he seemed to have realized that he had insufficiently dealt with some important matters. Increasingly he emphasized the ability of black men and women to flourish in freedom, the qualities they needed to succeed, and the obstacles they might face in their new lives.

Some of Still's points were basic. The four slaves who executed a daring escape in a skiff across the Chesapeake Bay were courageous examples of "the rising mind of the slaves of the South." But, like many other fugitives, they were also very dirty. The filth and the odors were not their fault, as Still pointed out. As slaves, few had had any changes of clothes, and their slave cabins had been "incentives to personal uncleanness." Owners never encouraged their slaves to wash and were responsible for their slaves' squalid condition. Nonetheless, fugitives needed and received "practical lessons" on how to keep themselves clean. Often delivered in "a very gentle way," these lessons were obviously fundamental to flourishing in freedom then as well as in the 1870s. Do "not forget from this time forth to try to take care of yourself," &c., &c."⁴²

When Still praised certain fugitives, he signaled the attitudes and behaviors associated with worldly success, attitudes, and behaviors that he feared many blacks had not yet acquired. In recounting the meeting between the Vigilance Committee and Robert Jones, Still informed readers that the committee found him "among the most worthy and brave travelers" passing through Philadelphia and was confident that he "would do credit in Canada" to himself and "his race." Still added that Jones was literate and determined to "do something to lift his fellow-sufferers up to a higher plane of liberty and manhood." Jones, he explained approvingly, was convinced that black men needed to throw themselves fully into a variety of occupations and prove that they could rise in the same way as white men. Still recalled that the committee had found Jones's letters so inspiring that they had often shared them and even had some of them published.⁴³

Particularly in the second half of the book, Still sketched out "a brave, intelligent class, whom the public are ignorant of." Even with no advantages, fugitives exhibited their "smartness" that "if properly cultivated" would allow them to "fill any station within the ordinary reach of intelligent American citizens." Noting with approval those who were literate, he pointed out that, in some cases, slaves had actually taught themselves to read or had criticized their owners for preventing them from learning. Above all, he praised those bent on self-improvement. He provided success stories, describing, among others, the former fugitive who acquired a restaurant, the ambitious man who "successfully" sold kerosene and lived

near Boston in “a comfortable home,” and Sam, who transformed himself into Dr. Thomas Bayne by doing “just what every uncultivated man should, devoted himself assiduously to study, and even . . . hard subjects,” and who eventually became a member of the New Bedford City Council.⁴⁴

Still acknowledged that not all fugitives were as capable as these men. But few were hopeless. John, “a sturdy-looking chattel,” was among the least intelligent of those whom Still encountered. But “he was not too old . . . to improve.” Another, John Smith, who was “rough” in appearance and demeanor and had “deficiencies” caused by “the poorest kind” of nourishment, was bright enough to discover how he could escape. “As green as he seemed he had succeeded admirably in his undertaking.”⁴⁵

Still’s discussion of the challenges of freedom were drawn not only from his long-standing concern with the possibilities of fugitives but also from his observation of contemporary events. Increasingly he pointed to obstacles facing people of color. His extended account of an unsuccessful effort to end racial discrimination on Philadelphia’s railways showed the continuing power of prejudice in the North. As one of the freedmen who had worked to overturn discriminatory practices had warned, “this prejudice was akin to slavery.” John William Dundy, who returned from Canada to Richmond after emancipation highlighted the pressing educational needs of freed people. Still passed along Dundy’s description of the absence of educational and religious institutions for freed people in the Shenandoah Valley and pointed out, “There is still need of efficient laborers.”⁴⁶

The final 150 pages of Still’s narrative contained vignettes about abolitionists, supporters of the Underground Railroad, and some of its leading figures. On the title page, the notice that the book would contain “sketches” of these individual appeared in much smaller print than the statement that the book would feature the “hardships Hair-breadth escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in their efforts for Freedom.” The size of the print indicated that, in Still’s opinion, these men and women, many of whom were white, were far less important than the slaves themselves, a point Still conceded once in the text. “Such hungering and thirsting for liberty,” he wrote, “made the efforts of the most ardent friends, who were in the habit of aiding fugitives, seem feeble in the extreme.” This view, of course, implicitly challenged white narratives in which white abolitionists assigned themselves a central role in the antislavery struggle.⁴⁷

Despite the fact that these activists (most of whom were white) had engaged in daring exploits, they never came to life. In the absence of the kinds of physical details Still provided about the fugitives, these twenty-four men and women appeared generic rather than specific. Not even the inclusion

of twenty pictures, four to a page, could make them real. Cast against a white background, the heads and shoulders of each man and woman floated eerily in space, disconnected from one another and their earthly exploits. The lack of pictorial drama was especially striking when compared to the illustrations earlier in the book of fugitives engaged in vigorous action scenes.⁴⁸

That Still was less interested in this section of the book is suggested by the way in which he handled the text. When his subjects were dead, Still padded the account by including selections from newspaper articles “breathing a . . . spirit of respect,” descriptions of the funeral service, and letters written in praise of the dead man or woman. These eulogistic materials established the worth of the deceased but gave little sense of their vitality. The inclusion of often hastily written letters to Still did suggest some of the character of their work and hinted at their personalities but not to the extent that they established them as forceful presences in the narrative.⁴⁹

When he could, Still had someone else write the vignettes. He solicited submissions from former abolitionists but was often refused. However, Lewis Tappan agreed to provide a “few reminiscences,” but they revealed more about fugitives he encountered in New York than they did about him. John Hunn also included some material about fugitives but not about himself. He explained that he did not deserve any credit for what he had done nor did he consider that he had made any sacrifices for following a course of action that brought him peace of mind: “Would it be well for me, entertaining such sentiments, to sit down and write an account of my sacrifices? I think not. Therefore please hold me excused.” While such a response was a credit to his modesty, his reticence contributed to the lack of vigor in the book’s conclusion.⁵⁰

The appearance of this somewhat motley group did, however, convey some sense of Still’s understanding of the abolitionist movement. Still set his sketches in the context of a cause that had triumphed, largely due to the efforts of the men and women whom he memorialized. In the last years before emancipation, “the force of events” had overwhelmed the leadership of abolitionists and reunited “them with their countrymen in the irresistible flood which no man’s hand guided, and no man’s hand could stay.” While perhaps antislavery activists could not claim credit for emancipation, those who were still living had the satisfaction of knowing that their work had borne fruit. Men like Elijah Pennypacker, who had been active in his local and county antislavery society as well as the Pennsylvania State Anti-Slavery Society, could look “abroad over his beloved country” and see “millions of enfranchised men beginning to avail themselves of its pecuniary,

education and political advantages, and beholds them starting on a career of material and spiritual prosperity.”⁵¹

This upbeat assessment, however, collapsed at the end of the book. Still included a lengthy section on Frances Watkins Harper, a black poet who had been active in the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad before the war and was now lecturing to white and black audiences throughout the South. Still wanted to feature Harper because, aside from slave narratives, he knew of no portrayal of the contributions of women of color in any written account of the antislavery crusade.⁵²

Still provided ample examples of Harper’s talent, including letters and lectures as well as some of her poems. He revealed that her four “small” books had sold at least 50,000 copies, a feat that, as an author, he hoped to emulate. The fulsome treatment he accorded to Harper made clear how successfully she had spoken and written for her race. “May we not hope,” Still wrote, “that the rising generation at least will take encouragement by her example and find an argument of rare force in favor of mental and moral equality, and above all be awakened to see how prejudices and difficulties may be surmounted by continual struggles, intelligence and a virtuous character?”⁵³

Among the letters and lectures included were those written as recently as 1870 and 1871. While Harper refused to be discouraged about the realities of black southern life, she described incidents that did not bode well for the future of freed people: the shooting of a young black man who had married a white women, the casual beating of a black women in her own house by a group of white foxhunters, poverty, and the desire of “this old rebel element” to rob blacks of the vote. The conclusion readers might draw from such information might be Harper’s hopeful one or one that saw how a still unreconstructed South threatened black people. Whatever the conclusion, the message that work remained to safeguard black freedoms was the same.⁵⁴

Still’s awareness of the realities of black life encouraged him to view the completion of his manuscript as merely one step in a larger project. The new phase of overseeing the production of his book and then in fostering its sales contributed to his goal of making black achievement more visible in society at large.

His publisher, Porter & Coates, was one of the subscription publishing houses located in Philadelphia. The firm published many popular books, including Horatio Alger’s series for boys. For Still, the contract with Porter & Coates was a good arrangement. His book was long, with many illustrations, and would be expensive to produce. Regular publishers, like Ticknor

& Fields, Samuel May's publisher, were wary of taking on the costs associated with books like Still's, fearing that it would be impossible to make any profit. Subscription houses were willing to produce expensive books that would not be handled by bookstores but marketed directly to buyers. Canvassers solicited individual sales by allowing a potential buyer to examine a few pages or the entire book, if it were already in print, select a binding, and then pay for the book. Later, the canvasser would return with the book itself. This method of producing and selling books matched supply and demand and channeled cash to the publisher as books were printed or bound. The system of canvassing brought books to people who might own few or no books and have little contact with bookstores. Literary magazines considered buyers of subscription books innocents who made unsystematic and bad choices. Snobbery aside, such comments suggest that Still's book reached a humbler and more racially mixed audience than May's book, whose readers picked it up in a bookstore.⁵⁵

As Still recalled later, the book had cost many thousands of dollars to produce, but, in preparing it for publication, he had determined to spare no pains or expense. In the arrangement worked out with Porter & Coates in January 1872, Still agreed to furnish the publisher with the electrotype plates and the woodcuts for book. The publisher agreed to produce the book "in first-class style" with a good quality of paper and several different bindings. If either side was dissatisfied, the supplemental agreement made it possible to terminate the legal agreement.⁵⁶

After the year named in the contract was up, Still and the publisher agreed to end the arrangement. Still took over the responsibility of publishing the book as well as the sales operation. Still explained that, while Porter & Coates had valuable expertise in the subscription business, he was eager to provide a personal example of a successful black entrepreneurship. "When the great problems connected to our present and political status are being brought under constant review," he remarked, "I could not forgo the opportunity of endeavoring to add one more permanent enterprise to the few existing among us." With 10,000 copies of his book in print by 1873, he first set a very ambitious goal of selling between 50,000 and 100,000 copies over three years.⁵⁷

One of Still's most important tasks was the recruitment of capable canvassers. Although he preferred black agents, Still was aware that he needed aggressive men and women, black or white, to sell the book. He sought canvassers who were "first-rate," energetic, willing to devote substantial time to pushing the book, and knowledgeable about "the art of selling books to all classes of people." A point in favor of black agents was Still's

conviction that an agent who had personal experience of oppression could use it to advantage in persuading people to buy the book.⁵⁸

Still corresponded with applicants, asking them about their experience, the time they expected to spend as agents, and whether they could furnish him with a reference. His “Confidential” circular offered financial arrangements that Still claimed were more generous than those of most subscription houses. “Experienced” agents were to receive 40 percent of their sales, while “persistent canvassers” would receive 50 percent. The difference between what agents paid to Still and received from their customers was their profit. Still told one canvasser that one of his very successful agents earned up to \$100 a week. With these generous terms, Still hoped to encourage black men and women to improve themselves and rise in society. In a letter Still wrote to the *New National Era* in 1873, he claimed that one black man had done well enough with canvassing that he was able to attend Oberlin College.⁵⁹

Once Still had accepted a person as canvasser, he assigned him or her a territory to cover, and sent a kit costing the agent \$3.75. The kits contained free posters, circulars with the agent’s name and address printed on them, a copy of Still’s book in one of the possible bindings, and the canvassing book. Still often provided agents with two extra copies of the book to give to newspapers for review along with examples of the different bindings buyers could choose. The cheapest was English cloth, which could be ordered in green or red (or some other color if the purchaser desired) for \$4.50. The paneled style (also called gilt) cost \$5.00, while the sheepskin edition was priced at \$5.50. No matter what the style, the books were expensive. May’s *Recollections* had cost \$1.50, much cheaper than any versions of this volume; many other books could be acquired for as little as fifty cents.⁶⁰

Still was determined that his book sell and peppered his agents with advice on how to market the book most effectively. They needed to read the book, of course, and become so familiar with it that they could easily open it to “thrilling” incidents and images to dazzle a possible buyer. The first potential buyers an agent should approach in any community were influential people like ministers, to whom Still suggested offering a special discount that would be offset by increased sales. If an agent could show that well-known and respected people had signed up in the canvassing book to receive a copy, others would be impressed and place an order. It was also important to give some evidence that early subscribers had actually received the book. Still urged agents to get books to those who wanted them as fast as possible, knowing how people might change their minds about paying for the book if the delay between ordering and receiving the book was too

long. Never lend the book to a potential buyer and never give credit and demand cash before handing over the book, he told his sales agents. Knowing that many could not come up with a lump sum for the book, however, Still did advise allowing people, especially blacks without much cash, to pay for the book in installments.

Arousing interest before trying to sell the book was important. Still advised his agents first to leave circulars for people to read before encouraging subscription. Getting a review in the newspaper was helpful because, even if it was negative, it got the book noticed. Still himself placed advertisements for the book, furnished with laudatory comments, in various newspapers. Securing testimonials was normal practice in the subscription trade, and Still used his antislavery contacts to get prominent antislavery figures to praise his book. Senator Charles Sumner, for example, noted approvingly that “the army of the late war has had its ‘Roll of Honor.’ You will give us two other rolls, worthy of equal honor . . . fugitives from slavery . . . and . . . self-sacrificing benefactors.” Fifteen “prominent members of the Anti-Slavery Society” expressed their “confidence” in Still’s “ability to present to the public an authentic and interesting history of this enterprise.” Agents doubtless used these statements in their sales pitches. In contrast to another book that had no “high endorsement, and no illustrations,” Still’s agents would easily “awaken an interest” among potential buyers as they listed the words of praise for *The Underground Rail Road*.⁶¹

Agents wrote to Still and described how they did their jobs, but most of that correspondence seems to have disappeared. In a communication to the *New National Era*, however, Still provided excerpts from agents’ letters that gave some idea of how they went about canvassing. One agent in Delaware described visiting several black communities where people remembered some of the incidents featured in the book. At one place, the recognition of the book’s veracity led one person to exclaim, “‘Well! Well! Well! I do think that is the greatest book I ever read in my life.’” At another place, when the agent read from the book at a religious meeting, a member of the meeting attested to the story’s truth. As a result, nine people subscribed to the book. In Schenectady, New York, the female agent reported that her subscribers were “first-class whites,” including the president of Union College, a Catholic priest, and even the Democratic mayor. Although the mayor ordered the book merely out of respect to her, after reading it, he said everyone in the country should read it. Such praise obviously helped generate more buyers.⁶²

Still’s desire to sell more than 50,000 copies of his book was not merely a matter of personal ambition but part of his larger effort to reform race

relations and the realities of black life. As he told one agent, having granted emancipation and suffrage, whites now needed to see their effects on black people, “some striking proof” of black “business capacity,” and of their literary, artistic, mechanical, and intellectual abilities. There were thousands of books in libraries around the country, but only a few slender volumes here and there bore the names of black authors. As the content of his book made amply clear, slavery had prevented people of color from competing in the world of arts and literature. His book’s success would provide critical evidence that black men, like white men, now had the competence and drive to succeed and would open a “wedge” to allow others to try their hand at writing. As far as business went, blacks were only “meagerly” represented in “productive enterprises.” Indeed, his intention to highlight black enterprise had been a major reason for taking over from Porter & Coates. By managing the book’s publication and sales, Still intended to demonstrate that blacks could succeed and to inspire others to follow his example. As a publisher, he hoped to represent his race at the upcoming Centennial Exhibition, anticipating “that our black citizens of Phila[delphia] shall be found in no mean place among the publishers and merchants.”⁶³

Still’s conviction that his efforts aided race reform explained why he preferred to engage black agents. His sales operation offered an important opportunity for young black men and women, both in the North and South, to succeed in a business occupation, to move beyond the inferior manual jobs that blacks had held in both slavery and freedom. In seeking a reference for a black man who wished to become a canvasser, Still asked whether the applicant realized the need for blacks to work their way up in order to gain respect and a proper regard for black manhood. This was the big challenge. White canvassers knew how to stick to the work of selling books and make a business of it. Blacks had to learn the same skills. If blacks did not improve as a result of their changed conditions, they would lose the public’s respect.⁶⁴

Still also believed his book could have a transformative effect on those who bought it. The history of the Underground Railroad needed to “be kept ‘green’ in the memory of this and coming generations for the lessons which may be learned.” One lesson emphasized the crushing impact slavery had had on black life and culture. The white nation must understand that blacks recognized “the long years of hard struggles and gross wrongs that have been inflicted upon us.” Implied was the message that whites should not abandon blacks because change did not come overnight. The nation should remember and honor the black drive for freedom so amply documented in fugitive stories. For black people, an awareness of the his-

tory of oppression made the vital point for “our children and posterity” that “the causes of being behind” were not black inferiority but enforced servitude. Furthermore, the heroism and bravery of the fugitives provided an inspiring example for black people as they faced the challenges of their new lives in freedom.⁶⁵

Still anticipated reaching thousands of people with his uplifting history. He donated two copies of the book to the Library of Congress and selected his canvassers. By the summer of 1873, he had over forty agents in the field and was shipping orders to states as diverse as California, Massachusetts, Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee, Texas, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. He encouraged agents to target whites, especially Republicans, who might be disposed to buy the book and who needed to remember the history it detailed, especially after the Liberal Reformers had urged reconciliation with the South. Agents should, of course, seek out blacks, and perhaps even a few Democrats. He anticipated healthy sales in the South, telling one of his canvassers in North Carolina that he thought it was not unreasonable to expect 5,000 purchasers over a three-year period. “Rebells” would presumably not want the book or welcome its message, as one anonymous letter to Still, seemingly written by a white southerner, attested to. “mr nigger which I can’t cal you ar for you nante as good as me,” the letter writer proclaimed. “Such a man as that ought to be put back in slavery. I could drive such a nigger as that.”⁶⁶

As part of his marketing strategy, Still not only urged his canvassers to supply local papers with review copies but also, in addition to securing testimonials, solicited reviews himself. He contacted Oliver Johnson, a former abolitionist associate who worked at the *New York Tribune*, asking if he would write a book notice. While reviews were not Johnson’s responsibility, he provided Still with the name of the appropriate reviewer, remarking that even a brief review was worth hundreds of dollars in sales.⁶⁷

The fact that many newspapers and even some journals noticed Still’s book in a favorable way is a credit to his tenacity and to interest in the subject of his book. In a number of ways, Still had violated some of the standards usually deemed essential for a good autobiography. It was not a “pleasant” story, nor was it well constructed or well written. But as several reviewers pointed out, the book was exciting. The *New York Tribune* spoke of its “narratives of audacious and almost hopeless enterprise, romantic adventure, and wonderful incidents,” a perspective with which the *Lutheran Observer* agreed. The “thrilling personal dramas and tragedies” that caught the attention of reviewers led some to compare it to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Others noted that the book provided historical insights, one of the

approved functions of a good autobiography. The volume gave readers a “precise knowledge . . . of a peculiar epoch that was not [even] understood by most who lived in it,” and revealed details that illuminated the workings of the Underground Railroad. This information was timely, for some reviewers realized how few Americans had known much about the Underground Railroad operations, while others noticed how quickly people were forgetting the recent past. The *New York Times* considered that one of the book’s contributions was its reminder of the existence of the Underground Railroad. Most people no longer associated that term with fugitives from slavery, the paper claimed, but with rapid transit.

The editor of *Harper’s*, like others, commended the book’s simple style and forgave its lack of literary qualities because Still had acknowledged his literary deficiencies and never attempted “fine” writing. Surprisingly, *Harper’s* did not find the narrative “diffuse.” Of course, Still’s self-effacing posture came in for praise. “There is not the least savor of egotism in his pages,” noted the reviewer approvingly. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* agreed that the narrative’s “great simplicity and natural feeling . . . cannot but make a deep impression.” The book should “have a place in every comprehensive library, private or public,” concluded the *Friends Review*.

“It is a big book in manner, matter and spirit,” said one commentator. That bulk, though, was a problem for the *Times* critic, who thought the book was too long. The narrative certainly could have been condensed. But Still himself seems to have considered the book’s heft a good thing, writing one canvasser that the book was the “largest” ever from a black author. The size of the book may also have proved to be a good selling tool; more pages justified the book’s high price.⁶⁸

During the summer of 1873, reports of healthy sales made Still confident that he would meet his sales target of 50,000. By early October, however, he was beginning to realize that the financial panic that had started the previous month would probably weaken sales. By December, he had stopped placing ads in papers or encouraging canvassers to go out to sell the book. By spring he was intending, if things improved, to take up the sales operation “with renewed vigor.” Despite the continuing serious economic downturn, Still began to push the book actively again the following spring, placing ads in black papers like the *Christian Recorder* and recruiting enterprising young people as canvassers. He continued to enlist agents over the course of the decade.⁶⁹

How many copies of the book canvassers managed to sell is not known, but it is likely that Still’s vigorous sales efforts got his book into far more hands than May’s. The book was displayed at the Philadelphia Centennial

Exhibition, just as Still had hoped. Still continued to exploit various strategies to move the book along. In 1877, the *New York Times* reported that a consignment of Still's book would be offered the last day of the fall trade sale in the city. The next year, the *Christian Recorder*, a black newspaper, announced that it would give a copy of *The Underground Rail Road* to anyone who signed up five subscribers to the newspaper. While these two pieces of evidence could suggest that the book was no longer selling well on its own, it is more likely that Still was trying to get rid of the remaining copies of printed books before he came out with another edition. In 1883, his third edition appeared, and it was this edition of the book that Mark Twain acquired. In 1886, Still presented a copy of the book to President Grover Cleveland, perhaps thinking it would be a good influence on him. The continued sales of his book suggest that, despite their growing indifference to the actual fate of southern blacks, Americans enjoyed reading stories, conveniently set in the past, about fugitives who freed themselves.⁷⁰

Still's effort to illuminate an important part of the struggle against slavery and to place black people, if not himself, firmly in the center of the story suggests how clearly he understood the need to get his version of the past into public consciousness. Black men and women had not just received freedom but had actively sought it. By doing their part to undermine slavery's power, they had prepared the way for its end. On the one hand, the heroic struggle of black fugitives demanded respect from the nation. On the other hand, the legacy of slavery could not be easily or quickly overturned. Thus the laudable efforts black people were making to improve themselves called for praise and patience. Still was proud to declare that the country had no other book like his.⁷¹

The sheer heft of Still's book and its success made it unusual, but other blacks wrote and published similar stories, hoping to contribute to the construction of a memory of the past that honored their place in history and clarified the evils of southern slavery. Two former slaves produced modest narratives of their escapes from slavery and lives in freedom at about the same time that Still's book appeared. John Quincy Adams was only twenty-seven when he published his autobiography in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Like authors of traditional slave narratives, he included personal testimonies from white men about his character, intelligence, and honesty. William Webb dictated his life to his wife and had it printed in Detroit. It appeared without personal testimonials. Like many authors of slave narratives, however, Webb assured readers that his book, though written down by his wife, was "composed by himself."⁷²

Neither Adams nor Webb could have anticipated the large readership to

which Still aspired, and certainly neither could have contemplated sending his story to a mainstream publisher. A Houghton Mifflin reader's evaluation of a manuscript titled "From Slavery to Freedom: The Story of Archer Alexander" suggests why one leading publisher had little interest in the sorts of stories Webb and Adams produced. The reader remarked that Alexander's narrative (written by a white minister) was too short to be profitable. While interesting, the account had "no such singular features as to attract any considerable audience; and . . . the form of the narrative, while personal and unaffected," had "no special felicity."⁷³

Like other humble writers before them, ranging from beggars and convicted convicts to Civil War prisoners, Webb and Adams found local presses or newspapers willing to publish their work. They probably paid all the costs themselves and produced only a few copies of their books. But the fact that they decided to publish their work at all suggests a strong desire to circulate their views. Webb may have only expected a black readership, but Adams, like Still, intended to get his story into white hands. He thought that some white gentlemen and ladies would acquire his book if only to show they supported his efforts to improve himself.⁷⁴

The narratives emphasized many of the themes central to Still's work: the oppression and inhumanity of slavery, the longing for freedom, the desire for and importance of education, and the importance of honest industry that was properly recompensed. Unlike Still, both Adams and Webb carried their stories well into their life of freedom. Adams addressed his book to "friends of progress and elevation," describing not only his life as slave and his escape but also his experience as "a citizen." "Nothing is more glorious than to know I am a free man," Adams declared. "My country is much dearer to me than my life." Webb also included his "views of the present time" and indicated that he was writing his book in order to earn money to pay for his education.⁷⁵

Both attacked racist stereotypes, especially the view that blacks were ignorant, a perspective that justified whites' denial of social, civil, and political rights. As Adams pointed out, "They took my labor to educate their children, and then laughed at me for being ignorant and poor, and had not sense enough to know they were the cause of it." Webb said much the same thing: "If they look at it right, [they] will see that we never had a chance." Both suggested their determination to rise in the careful way in which they listed their jobs. "I am one of those that is trying to rise up," Adams stated simply.⁷⁶

In his preface, Adams claimed that his book was not "published to create any excitement or accuse any one wrongfully." Despite the disclaimer,

Adams provided a scathing view of the slave-owning class. In the past, blacks had provided “that class all their pleasure” — the handsome parties and the splendor and style. “Since the Negroes are all free,” Adams said, “that style is broken up,” and former masters and mistresses lamented its disappearance. “How the aristocracy of the South has fallen since slavery has ceased. I say let them go to work.” Toward the end of his autobiography, Adams described returning to visit his former owners in Virginia. Things did not look so good as they had under slavery, and neither did his master’s family. He had little sympathy for their situation. “It was negro ancestors that kept them up,” Adams exclaimed. Recording the death of his former master, Adams assured readers that he had forgiven him for his actions during slavery as Scripture taught. “But believe I cannot forget,” he confessed, and neither should his readers.⁷⁷

Both men were sensitive to the perils of freedom. Adams warned about false friends, and Webb discussed in detail the politics of the postwar period, Andrew Johnson’s perfidy, and the government’s failure to provide slaves with any help “to make a living.” But both reminded readers of the legal protections with which they had been furnished. Adams included the preambles to the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as well as the postwar amendments at the conclusion of his narrative to highlight the promises made, and he asserted his confidence (or perhaps just his hope) that the government would continue to protect blacks. Webb praised the Republicans as wise men for giving blacks “all the privileges of other men,” encouraged the second election of Grant, and dismissed the Democrats as having no “good feeling for the colored people.” He looked forward to the day when the party “would grow weaker, and . . . finally die out and be forgotten.” If black men “are only faithful, they will reap the benefit of that law” that gave them equality. On paper, at least, Webb was as hopeful as Adams.⁷⁸

In these two life stories, Adams and Webb documented their transformation from individual slaves to free men by escaping during the Civil War. As Adams pointed out with some pride, “I stole John Q. Adams . . . they valued me at \$2,000. At that rate I stole \$2,000.” But they did not attribute the larger change, the emancipation of a race, to human agency. Unlike white abolitionists and Still, they had little if any awareness of abolitionism’s lengthy struggle for immediate emancipation. Webb did meet some abolitionists during his wanderings and reported that he had “a great liking to talk to them. I found that they all talked the one thing, I found they had no proud heart for themselves but had kindly feelings for other people.” But Webb had little sense that abolitionists did anything beyond talking.

Politicians, in Webb's view, were vehicles through which God acted. Adams agreed that "God . . . made us free men and free women." These narratives placed emancipation and freedom into a sacred framework that minimized human agency in favor of the divine, an interpretation that increasingly was confined to the black community.⁷⁹

The appearance of Still's massive book and these two slender ones suggest the attraction of the fugitive theme. The 1873 publication of a novel titled *John and Mary*, first serialized in the *Lancaster (Pa.) Inquirer*, points to the appeal of local fugitive stories. But the white author, Ellwood Griest, brought a very different perspective to his subject than black writers publishing in the same decade. In Griest's novel, white abolitionists are the main characters, and blacks play subsidiary roles. Although the author acknowledges the bad treatment of freed people during Reconstruction and hopes his readers will find both "pleasure and profit" in his story, he gives little sense of the necessity for urgent action on behalf of former slaves.⁸⁰

Griest portrays whites and abolitionism in a flattering light. Members of the Brown family are simple Pennsylvania Quakers who unexpectedly find themselves sheltering two escaping slaves and their infant. This experience introduces the Browns to "the righteousness of the[ir] act and its probable consequences." Years later, the recollection of the fugitive mother encourages the Browns' son, Frank, to oppose slavery. At least one other member of their community who assisted in helping the fugitive mother becomes a brave and stalwart defender of abolitionism in the days when "the vials of pro-slavery wrath were emptied on the heads of all who countenanced 'abolitionism.'" After the account of the fugitive family's escape concludes, the story jumps thirty-five years to postwar Florida, where the noble Frank Brown, now an army captain, is stationed. Brown and the author are highly critical of the unrepentant southerners who have not improved since the days of slavery. Whites are lazy and complaining. They "hated the negro because he had obtained his freedom" and "the same legal rights with themselves." The situation is a bad one, and some northerners are part of the problem. Brown bravely opposes antiblack violence that a few federal officers, who have more in common with rebels than with northern abolitionists, shamefully tolerate. The author notes approvingly that Brown's blood boiled as he contemplated the injustice: "His education had been anti-slavery, and his sympathies were all with the oppressed race. Besides, he thought this action on the part of a Federal officer was an outrage."⁸¹

In the course of the story, Brown rescues Sergeant Evans, a black former soldier who has been casually shot by a member of a white gang composed of "as worthless a set of fellows as there is upon the face of the earth."

Brown's ability to sympathize with Evans is a credit to both of them. Brown's attachment to Evans is one "a man will form . . . regardless of rank, color, or caste" for one "who shows in his daily acts those true qualities of manliness that are as rare as they are valuable." Unfortunately Evans's wound proves serious, and his mother, Mary, is summoned from Pennsylvania to be with her son. When the mother tells her story, Brown realizes that she was the fugitive who had appeared at his home so many years before. This amazing discovery does nothing to reverse her son's decline. Before long, he dies and is buried "with the flag of his country wrapped around him." Shortly afterward, his mother follows him to the grave. Rather than returning to the unpunished perpetrators of the crime or the venality of northern army officers and offering some resolution to this part of the story, Griest ends his novel with a burst of sentimentality and two dead blacks: "Through turmoil and trouble, through perils and dangers, with hearts untainted, happy rather as the victims than the doers of wrong, they have reached HOME AT LAST."⁸²

The portrayal of mother and son as victims dovetails with Mary's characterization early in the book. Far from being the brave and courageous fugitive of Still's narrative, Mary is timid and fearful, concerned only with her child. When outsiders approach the Brown's house, Mary grabs her baby and runs down into the cellar, "a picture of absolute, perfect terror," of "dumb, speechless agony." Later, after almost being retaken by slave-catchers, Mary runs back to the Brown homestead with her son in her arms. She totters feebly in the door "with eyes distended, great clusters of foam gathered about her mouth, and blood streaming from her nostrils." Although the abolitionist doctor declares her a heroine, her heroism consists primarily of mother love.⁸³

While some of the black characters have a certain nobility, many are scoundrels. Mary's husband, John, is a lazy sort, declared "'wuthless'" by one of the other black characters in the book. The pair is almost caught by slave-catchers due to the inability of one black character to stay sober and keep a secret and the treachery of another. Davy Jones, a mulatto man of around seventy, is one of the few black men in the book positively depicted. Davy helps fugitives because he hates slavery. He is "shrewd, quick-witted and cool headed . . . equal to any emergency." The black miller is also an admirable character, but it is apparent that Griest, unlike Still, was ambivalent about the miller's blackness. Griest explains that the miller has a full-blooded African appearance, thick lips, kinky hair, and a large head. The narrator is amazed and puzzled that whites treat a man with these physical characteristics as if he is white, "but such is the undeniable fact."⁸⁴

This novel was unusual in its selection of abolitionists as admirable central characters. Its condemnation of unrepentant southerners certainly conveyed dismay at the continuing hostility of southerners to Reconstruction, but the book demonstrated little commitment to changing the status quo. The way in which the story fizzles out at the end suggests that any commitment Griest might have had to black Americans and Reconstruction was fizzling out too. Further, his failure to conceive of blacks as active agents in their struggle for freedom and to portray blacks in freedom primarily as victims gives the impression that blacks had only minor roles in their own liberation or were never even part of the story. The novel, of course, was fiction, but fictional views of the past have a way of shaping collective memory just as much as historical accounts.

In 1872, after the Liberal Republicans had nominated Greeley and Democrats had decided to support that nomination, *Harper's Weekly* criticized the call for reconciliation: "The earnestness of its appeal to forget the past should arouse the suspicion of all thoughtful men. For history cannot safely be forgotten." With this general sentiment, Still, Webb, Adams, Rogers, Griest, and former members of antislavery societies would all have agreed. All had attempted to ensure that their version of history should inform the present. As the *New National Era* observed about Still's book, the incidents appearing there "become historical when thus placed on the record."⁸⁵

Still, Adams, and Webb had insisted upon the centrality of black people's role in their own liberation, and this perspective would survive in autobiographies written by African Americans. In accounts by Still, Adams, and Webb, flight offered the most powerful example of slaves' resistance to servitude. This theme of resistance was one that was less powerfully expressed in reminiscences penned by white abolitionists, who, not surprisingly, tended to focus on their own activism. Indeed, before long, the idea of resistance disappeared altogether from the formal historical record, only to be rediscovered by historians during the second half of the twentieth century.⁸⁶

In 1872 with the call for reconciliation, *Harper's Weekly* was concerned about the pertinence and power of the historical record that Still and others were trying to preserve. "Instead of forgetting, this is the very moment to remember," the paper insisted. "Why is the past to be forgotten? Has it no lessons?" While the specific lessons that the writers and abolitionist speakers had provided were not all the same, all had accepted the necessity of emancipation and saw it as a central and defining moment in the nation's history.⁸⁷

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