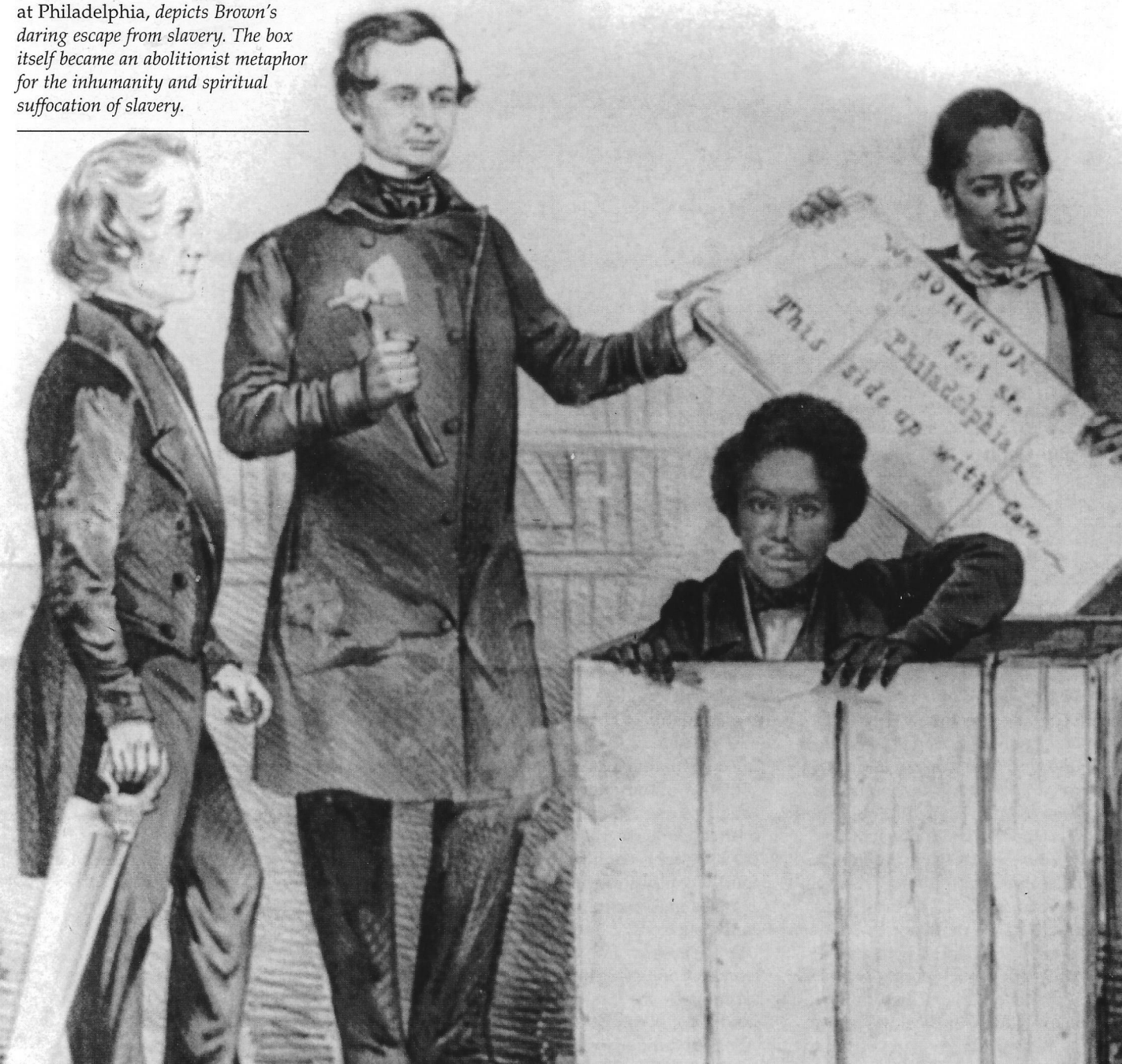


# TWO STATIONMASTERS OF THE UNDERGROUND

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*Peter Kramer's 1849 lithograph, The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia, depicts Brown's daring escape from slavery. The box itself became an abolitionist metaphor for the inhumanity and spiritual suffocation of slavery.*

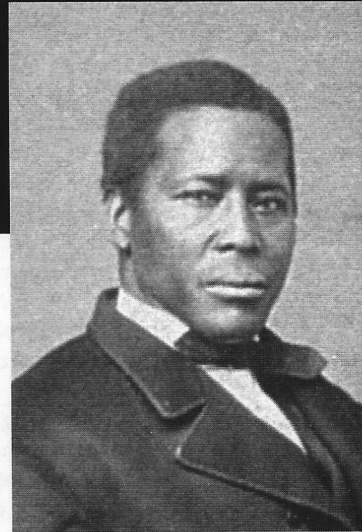
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# RAILROAD



Thomas Garrett



William Still

## *A Tale of* **BLACK AND WHITE**

by William C. Kashatus

**A**s clerk of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society's General Vigilance Committee, William Still (1821-1902) had grown accustomed to surprises. Not only did the young, free black abolitionist coordinate the Eastern Line of the Underground Railroad by finding shelter and escape routes to the North for fugitive slaves, but also he recorded their heart wrenching stories of inhumane treatment and brutality by callous owners, painful family separations, and their passionate desire for freedom. Few of the stories, however, were as remarkable as the one that unfolded north of the Mason-Dixon Line on a crisp autumn morning in 1848.

Shortly after opening the doors of his office at 31 North Fifth Street in Philadelphia, Still received a wooden packing crate bound with five hickory hoops. Measuring nearly three feet deep, two feet wide, and three feet long, the box was sent from Richmond, Virginia, and marked, "This side up with care."

Suspicious, Still closed and locked the doors, shuttered the windows, and rapped on the box, inquiring, "All right?"

An answer came from within: "All right, sir!"

Still cut the hoops and out stepped Henry "Box" Brown, a thirty-three-year-old slave who, with the aid of a Richmond shoemaker Samuel Smith, had himself freighted to Philadelphia. After the grueling twenty-six-hour trip, partly spent upside-down in the crate, Brown emerged with only a headache and was passed safely on to Boston, Massachusetts. The daring escape caused a sensation and deluged Still with pleas for assistance from others wanting to make similar trips.

Just across the state line, in Wilmington, Delaware, Thomas Garrett (1789-1871), an elderly, white Quaker abolitionist, was also besieged by requests for help. A stocky man who favored broad-brimmed hats and long, dark waistcoats, Garrett projected a genial disposition, unless provoked to defend his anti-slavery stance. When challenged, he could become outspoken, if not abrasive. Because he was much less circumspect in his activities than Still, Garrett found himself embroiled in a legal dispute of his own making in 1848.

Found guilty of harboring a family of fugitive slaves, Garrett was heavily fined and warned by the court "not to meddle with slaves again." He grew defiant. "I have assisted over fourteen hundred runaways in twenty-five years on their way to the North," Garrett retorted, "and I now consider the penalty imposed upon me as a license for the remainder of my life." He astounded Judge Roger B. Taney (1777-1864). Although Taney, author of the famous *Dred Scott* opinion ten years later, did not personally believe in slavery, he did defend the right of slaveholders to their property. To make matters worse, the elderly Quaker turned to the spectators and added, "If any of you know of any slave who needs assistance, send him to me, as I now publicly pledge myself to double my diligence and never neglect an opportunity to assist a slave in obtaining his freedom."

Thomas Garrett and William Still made an unlikely pair, differing in temperament, background, and age, but their fierce opposition to the moral evil of slavery bound them together as co-conspirators on the Underground Railroad. For thirty years, between 1830 and 1860, the two directed some four thousand runaways to contacts along routes from the upper South to Canada. They corresponded steadily to provide food, clothing, shelter, and funds for fugitive slaves.

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*Longwood Progressive Friends Meeting House, Chester County, June 1865. From 1855, it served as a headquarters for abolitionist Quakers and a podium for humanitarian causes, with speakers such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Susan B. Anthony.*

Underground Railroad was the popular name for a clandestine movement of African American slaves escaping the antebellum South through an informal network of abolitionists who ushered them to freedom in the North. Adopting the vocabulary of the railroads to explain their duties, Underground Railroad activists referred to themselves as "station masters," individuals who gave shelter to runaways in their "stations," or residences, or "conductors," individuals who traveled through the southern states encouraging and guiding escapees and fugitives. Less common but equally important, "stockholders" contributed money for feeding, clothing, and transporting fugitives. Runaways escaped to the North using a loosely organized network of routes through the southern border states. Escaping slaves traveling in the West headed to Ohio, Illinois, and Michigan. In the East, runaways fled to cities such as Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Some fugitives continued on to Canada, where slavery was outlawed and authorities rebuffed requests from the United States for the return of fugitives.

Southeastern Pennsylvania, in particular, was a critical center of Underground Railroad activity. Located north of the Mason-Dixon Line, its influential Quaker population had brought about a gradual abolition of slavery by state law in 1780. Nevertheless, the region was not a safe haven for fugitives because spies and slave hunters patrolled it, particularly after the strict federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 replaced a vague and loosely enforced 1793 fugitive statute.

Because the Underground Railroad operated in secrecy, many basic facts are shrouded in myth. Traditionally, the story assumes that white abo-

litionist operators were unified in their opposition to slavery and credits them with the success of the clandestine enterprise, while the fugitives are depicted as helpless, frightened passengers, who took advantage of a well-organized national network. The history of the Underground Railroad has become a rich—and often fanciful—mix of historical fact and legend, embellished by more than one hundred and fifty years of folklore.

# STATION MASTERS

divided over the Underground Railroad, most considering it illegal and, therefore, a threat to themselves. The free black community overwhelmingly supported abolition, and so it was more aggressive than the Quakers in conducting runaway slaves to freedom.

Thomas Garrett was not a typical Quaker. The Quaker progressive theology emphasized the spiritual equality of all human beings, but Garrett took that belief to extremes. Born August 21, 1789, at Upper Darby, Chester (now Delaware) County, he was the son of Thomas and Sarah Price Garrett, whose farmhouse was a station on the Underground Railroad. Young Garrett had assisted his Quaker parents in their work. By 1813 he had become much more committed to the cause. At that time a free black woman who worked on the farm had been kidnapped. Garrett sped off to rescue her and on the way experienced a spiritual revelation about the “utter sinfulness of slavery.” Vowing to assist any fugitive slave, he joined the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society and dedicated himself to the Underground Railroad. So zealous was he that he chafed under the Quaker principle of non-violence when acts of force seemed the only way to win freedom for the slaves. Although he never physically took up arms, he supported the Union’s war effort. He also joined freely with the free black community whose Underground Railroad activities sometimes resulted in scuffles and riots, and he counted many of the zealots among his intimates.

While most Quakers may have considered African Americans their “spiritual equals,” they did not welcome them into the Religious Society of Friends as brethren. Abolitionism had been a movement of individuals within the Society of Friends until 1776, when Philadelphia Yearly Meeting made slaveholding a cause for disownment of members. Even then, Friends tended to limit their abolitionist involvement to boycotting goods produced by slave labor and calling on non-Quaker neighbors to free their black field hands. They were more concerned about their own salvation and the spiritual integrity of the Yearly Meeting, than with welcoming blacks into their fold. Nor were Quaker abolitionists unified in how they opposed slavery.

Civil war, for example, was not an alternative for the overwhelming majority, who saw pacifism as fundamental to the Quaker faith. Many Friends feared that the illegal nature of the Under-

ground Railroad compromised the integrity and legal status of all Quaker religious practice. Some of these Friends were in Chester County’s Kennett Monthly Meeting, which in 1853 dis-



*Stationmasters Dinah and Isaac Mendenhall (1869) provided shelter in their Chester County home to runaway slaves.*

owned members who felt otherwise. Not only did Garrett circulate among these dissident Quakers, many of whom were later involved in establishing the Longwood Progressive Friends Meeting, but he also mobilized them as the nucleus of his Underground Railroad network in Chester County.

By the 1820s, Garrett had a base of operations in Wilmington, Delaware, where he owned and operated an iron and hardware business. Wilmington, which was growing rapidly, was a popular destination for many industrious Quakers who wanted to take advantage of the community’s agricultural trade and industry. Wilmington was also a hotbed of Underground Railroad activity, being the northernmost town in a slaveholding state. Fugitives from southern Delaware, Maryland, and northern Virginia flocked to Wilmington in hope of being channeled to freedom. Joining the Delaware Anti-Slavery Society in 1822, Garrett and his wife, Rachel Mendenhall Garrett, opened their house on Shipley Street as a station on the Underground Railroad. Over the next forty years, they would maintain contacts with conductors throughout Chester County, just over the border in Pennsylvania. A loosely organized network of routes devel-

oped, radiating from their home in Wilmington. Often the first stop across the Pennsylvania border was “Oakdale,” the home of Isaac and Dinah Mendenhall near Kennett (Square). Distinguished by two stone gateposts, the commodious brick house and an adjoining barn sheltered many fugitives until nightfall, when they would be escorted further northward. Garrett completely trusted the Mendenhalls. Not only were they family members, related to his wife Rachel, but they were also founders of the Longwood Progressive Friends Meeting, after having been disowned by the Kennett Monthly Meeting for refusing to cease working with the Underground Railroad.

To confuse slave hunters, Garrett would send fugitives alternatively to the homes of Allen and Maria Agnew, John and Hannah Cox, or Abraham Pennock, all of whom lived in the Kennett area and belonged to the Longwood Meeting. From Kennett, at least three routes crisscrossed Chester County in order to confound the pursuers. Whatever the route, Garrett had contacts, both Quaker and non-Quaker, black and white, in nearly every community. Free blacks Severn Johnson, Joseph Hamilton, George Wilmer, Harry Craige, and Comegys Munson were especially helpful, enabling Garrett to channel some twenty-seven hundred fugitives through Chester County. It could not have been accomplished, however, without William Still, who coordinated the Eastern Line from Philadelphia.

William Still was the youngest of eighteen children of a slave family. His father, after purchasing his own freedom, resettled in New Jersey and became a farmer. William’s mother eventually rejoined her husband after a successful escape. In 1844, at the age of twenty-two, William Still left his family and moved to Philadelphia. With only five dollars to his name and no friends, he met J. Miller McKim, editor of *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, an abolitionist newspaper. With McKim’s assistance, Still learned how to read and write. Three years later, he took a job as clerk with the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. When the Society organized a Vigilance Committee to assist runaway slaves—in direct



William Lloyd Garrison  
(1860)

opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850—Still was named the director of a committee of four individuals.

Vigilance committees organized in many northern cities to provide financial and

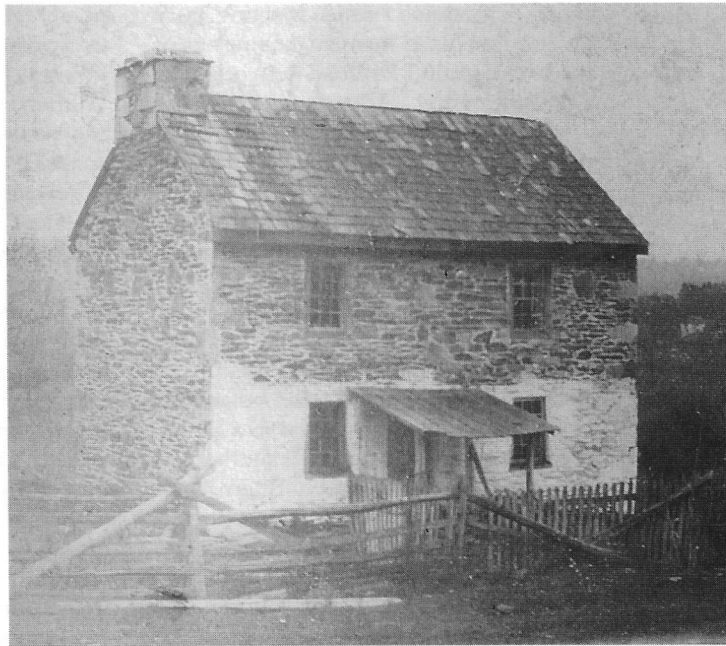
legal services and maintain contacts between abolitionists throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. These committees were the most structured aspect of the Underground Railroad. Just as important, however, was the loosely coordinated network of thousands of

individual blacks who acted from a sense of personal obligation to their enslaved brethren. In Philadelphia, working-class blacks served as the backbone of the vigilance committee by sheltering and transporting fugitives, and gathering and relaying crucial information. Others kept watch for suspicious whites they observed in the hotels and boardinghouses or on the streets of the city. Philadelphia's Mother Bethel Church, organized by the Reverend Richard Allen, a former Delaware slave, sheltered fugitives, many of whom had been passed on from other African Methodist Episcopal churches in Chester County. Together with black benevolent societies, church-affiliated auxiliaries raised the bulk of committee operating funds. Such an extensive network, however, relied heavily on a central figure to organize it. Still possessed the intellect, energy, and personal inspiration for the job.

Shortly after his appointment, a man using the name Peter Freedman, who had recently purchased his own freedom

called on Still. Freedman was searching for his parents, from whom he had been separated in slavery. As Still listened to the man's story, he came to realize that this was the older brother he had never met, his mother being forced to leave Peter in bondage when she made her escape. "I could see in the face of my

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The Parker family home (above) was a station on the Underground Railway. Garrison (top), was a New England abolitionist and editor of *The Liberator*.

new-found brother the likeness of my mother," he would write years later. "My feelings were unutterable."

The incident not only strengthened Still's resolve to help his brother gain freedom for his enslaved wife and children, but also to assist other fugitives who longed to be reunited with their families. Still raised funds, corresponded with stationmasters and conductors along the eastern routes of the Underground Railroad, and coordinated their movements. He stocked food and clothing for runaways at his office and aided in many daring escapes, including that of William and Ellen Craft, two illiterate slaves from Georgia. Ellen Craft, the daughter of her master and one of his slaves, was so light-skinned that she easily posed as a frail, white slave owner. Carrying her arm in a sling so she didn't have to write, Ellen disguised her lower face with a poultice, hid her eyes behind darkened glasses, and wore a top hat. William played the role of attentive slave, accompanying his "owner" to Philadelphia for medical treatment. They traveled without incident, and Still sent them safely on to Boston.

William Still and Thomas Garrett put themselves at greater risk after the passage of the federal Fugitive Slave Act. Passed as part of the Compromise of 1850, the act aimed to tighten a 1793 measure against runaway slaves seeking sanctuary in the North. One provision denied a jury trial to the alleged fugitive. Another compelled all northern citizens to assist enforcement of the act by hunting down and returning runaway slaves. The law angered many northerners because it brought the evils of slavery onto free soil, forcing them to deal directly with slave owners and the agents that owners hired to recapture fugitives. Garrett believed that the new law would have a minimal effect. "Slaveholders will hardly think it worthwhile to risk the expense and mortification of sending agents from the South to Boston to look up their runaway slaves," wrote Garrett to the New England abolitionist William Lloyd

Garrison, editor of *The Liberator*. "The slave population who have escaped to the free states have been very much alarmed by the passage of this infamous bill, but I very much doubt whether on the whole



Rev. Richard Allen

there will be more arrested under the new law because there are so many more who feel an interest in affording fugitives shelter and protection." While Garrett was correct about black fears, he did not

anticipate the violence that would result from the new law. At Christiana, Lancaster County on September 11, 1851, a Maryland planter was killed attempting to retrieve his slaves. Accompanied by a federal marshal, the slave owner's party assaulted a free black's cabin that sheltered several runaways, but the attackers were repulsed and the slaves and their stationmaster escaped to Canada. This Christiana Riot emboldened black and white abolitionists. Frederick Douglass (1817-1895), a runaway slave himself, argued the "rightfulness of forcible resistance." In an 1853 address, Douglass exhorted free blacks to arm themselves, insisting, "the only way to make the Fugitive Slave Law a dead letter is to make a half dozen or more dead kidnapers."

Angry mobs of abolitionists emerged to prevent the forcible return of blacks to the South, and lobbied their state legislatures to adopt personal liberty laws that prohibited the involvement of state officials and institutions in the recovery of fugitive slaves. William Still stepped squarely into the crossfire in July 1855, when he rescued a female slave from North Carolina, Jane Johnson, who was being taken through Philadelphia with her two sons by her owner, Colonel John Hill Wheeler (1806-1882), recently appointed United States ambassador to Nicaragua. They were enroute to New York from which they would sail to his diplomatic post. Under Pennsylvania's personal liberty law, the Johnsons were free once they entered the Commonwealth, and Jane Johnson enlisted the help of Still and Passmore Williamson, a

young white lawyer serving on the Vigilance Committee. As Still and Williamson walked toward the party, a group of black men surrounded Wheeler and one of them touched him—the grounds for the colonel alleging assault. Still was able to move the Johnsons to safety in Boston, but he and the other blacks were arrested for assault and kidnapping. Still was acquitted, but Williamson served three months in jail for contempt of court.

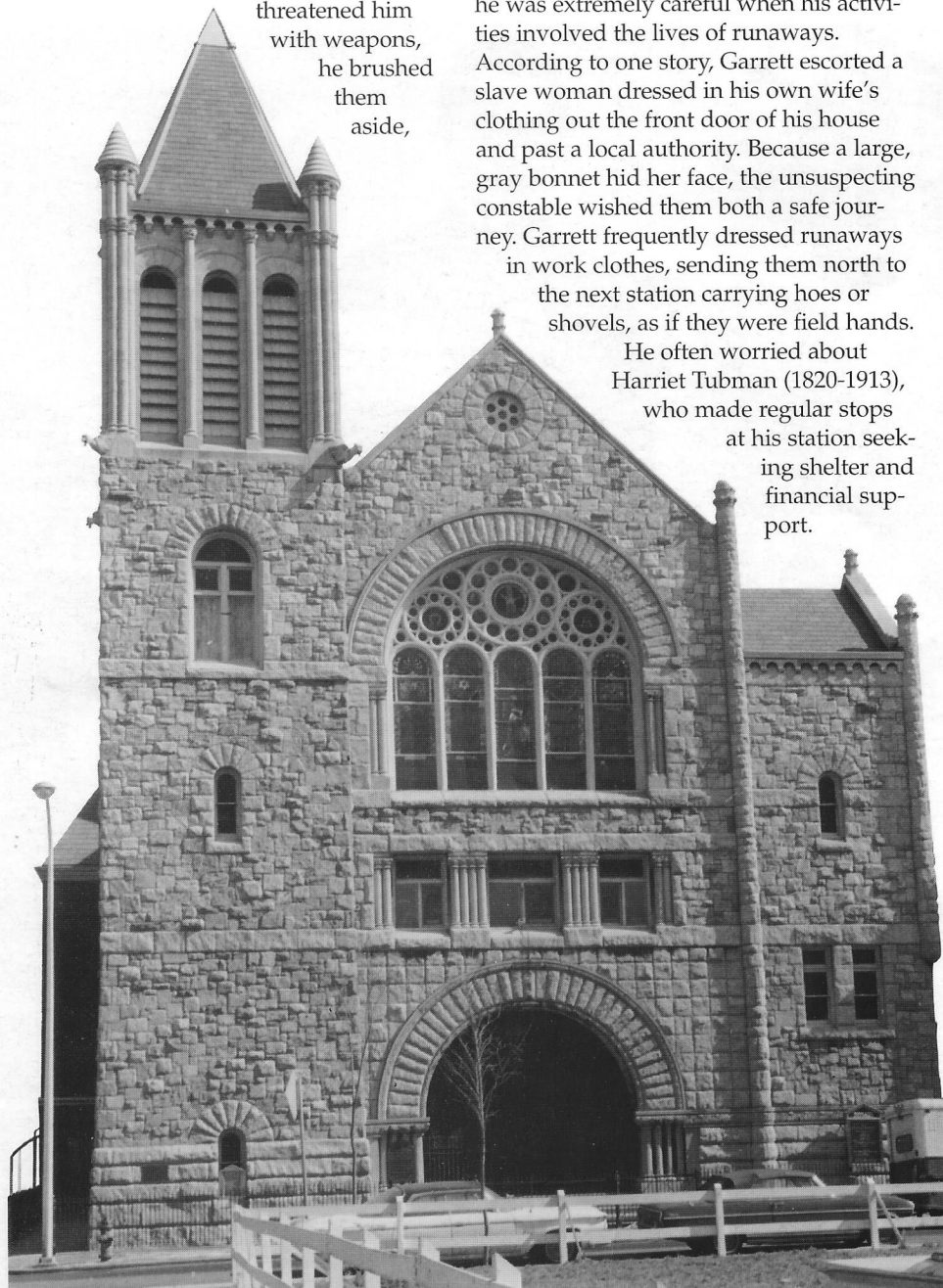
Abolitionists everywhere were inflamed by the court's action and redoubled their efforts. When slave hunters tried to intimidate him, Garrett met them placidly, never denying that he had aided fugitives. If they threatened him with weapons, he brushed them aside,

commenting that, "none but cowards resorted to such means." Garrett retained a wonderful sense of humor in dealing with slave owners. When an owner threatened to shoot him if he ever traveled South, Garrett replied calmly, "Well, I think I will be going that way before long and I will call upon thee."

Garrett experienced reprisal only once. In 1853, "two or three culprits" tried to throw him off a train for attempting to save a free black woman from being carried South. He emerged with only a slight bruise.

Thomas Garrett was forthright about his activities, but not reckless. Moreover, he was extremely careful when his activities involved the lives of runaways. According to one story, Garrett escorted a slave woman dressed in his own wife's clothing out the front door of his house and past a local authority. Because a large, gray bonnet hid her face, the unsuspecting constable wished them both a safe journey. Garrett frequently dressed runaways in work clothes, sending them north to the next station carrying hoes or shovels, as if they were field hands.

He often worried about Harriet Tubman (1820-1913), who made regular stops at his station seeking shelter and financial support.



Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, Philadelphia, was founded by former slave Richard Allen (above) in 1794 in a former blacksmith's shop. The church was rebuilt on the same site in 1805, 1841, and 1890, with restoration begun in 1991.

# STOCKHOLDERS

Tubman, perhaps the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad, was an escaped slave. Vowing to help her family and others, she returned South several times to guide others to freedom. For

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*Harriet "Moses" Tubman (far left) with a group of slaves she led to freedom on the Underground Railroad. Despite the hazards, Tubman succeeded in freeing more than three hundred slaves, prompting Southerners to offer a reward for her capture.*

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escorting so many out of slavery, she became known as the "Moses of her people." Garrett was taken by her deep and abiding faith. If he didn't hear from her for any extended period, he would write William Still that he was "anxious to learn of [his] heroine's whereabouts." He was careful to write in secret code when he corresponded with Still, using "God's poor" as a synonym for "fugitives" and "Moses" for Harriet Tubman. After reading Still's letters, he would destroy them to eliminate any possible incriminating evidence. Nor did he "keep any written

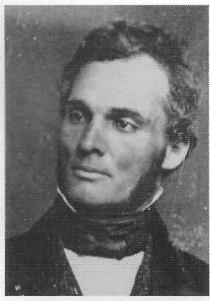


*Frederick A. Douglass in 1848*

word of his own labors, except in numbering those of God's poor whom I have aided."

The adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment ending slavery, in 1865, removed the necessity for the remarkable partnership of William Still and Thomas Garrett. Still saved much of his correspondence with Garrett, which he used, coupled with personal interviews given by fugitives, as a primary source for his 1872 book, *The Underground Rail-*





Robert Purvis,  
stationmaster

his death in 1871, he had turned his attention to ensuring voting rights for blacks. "While I rejoice that the colored people by law, have equal privileges with the most favored," he wrote to a fel-

road, the most accurate treatment of the subject. One of the book's greatest contributions is recognizing that the slaves themselves were active participants in their own exodus. Garrett continued working for human rights. Just a year before

**"While I rejoice that the colored people by law, have equal privileges with the most favored, much needs to be done before they can fully enjoy the great boon granted them by the Fifteenth Amendment."**

low abolitionist, "much needs to be done before they can fully enjoy the great boon granted them by the Fifteenth Amendment." After his funeral service, eight black men carried his body through the streets of Wilmington to his final resting place near the Friends' Meeting House where he had worshipped. ❖

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GOD'S