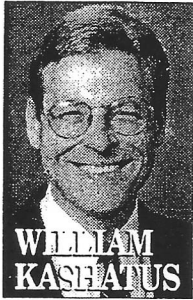


# Phila. blacks had lead roles in Underground Railroad

**F**ew legends in American history have captured the social conscience of the nation like the story of the Underground Railroad — a loosely organized network of abolitionists who assisted fugitive slaves in their search for freedom during the antebellum period.

That story reminds us of the potential we possess as a nation when we are able to transcend the color barrier and work together for a common cause.

It is an important story for our children to learn and for adults to revisit, and it is being told in cities like Detroit with a magnificent Museum of African American History, and Cincinnati, which is preparing an \$82 million National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.



Not only will these museums enhance our understanding by distinguishing historical fact from the popular mythology surrounding this clandestine route to freedom, but honor the contributions of African-Americans which, until quite recently, have been neglected.

In Philadelphia, the story of the Underground Railroad has, too often, been told from the perspective of white abolitionist operators who are largely credited for its success, while blacks are depicted as helpless runaways or frightened passengers who took advantage of the network.

In fact, James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton in their book, "In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860" (Oxford University, 1997), explain that Philadelphia was home to a sizable free black community that was much more aggressive in conducting runaways to freedom than the white Quakers who are most often credited for doing so.

The free black community's empathy for their enslaved brethren as well as their "propensity for self-help" inspired their involvement on the Underground Railroad as it was based on the bonds of "blood, of culture, of common experience, and a common world view that recognized the injustice of American racial inequality." At the center of black activity was William Still, director of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society's Vigilance Committee.

Settling in Philadelphia in 1844, Still, whose mother escaped slavery, had been an illiterate New Jersey farmer. Three years later, he had taught himself to read and write and took a job as a clerk with the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. When Philadelphia's white abolitionist community organized a Vigilance Committee to assist runaway slaves, in direct opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Still was named director of the committee.

Shortly after his appointment, a man by the name of Peter Freedman who had recently purchased his own freedom, paid Still a visit. Freedman was searching for his parents, from whom he had been separated in slavery.



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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 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 wife and children still in slavery, but in assisting other fugitives who longed to be reunited with their families.

Still stocked a veritable storehouse of food and clothing for runaways at his office at 31 N. 5th St. in Philadelphia. He sheltered many fugitives at his home at 224 S. 12th St., and aided in many daring escapes, including that of William and Ellen Craft, two illiterate slaves from Georgia.

Ellen, the daughter of her master and one of his slaves, was so light-skinned she 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 dark green glasses and wore a top hat. William played the role of an attentive slave, accompanying his owner to Philadelphia for medical treatment. Their deception was so effective that they traveled to Philadelphia by train without incident. Once in the care of Still, the Crafts were safely conducted on to Boston.

Perhaps even more remarkable was the daring escape of Henry Brown, a Virginia slave, who freighted himself by rail to Still in a wooden crate 2 feet wide, 3 feet long and 2 feet 8 inches deep. After a grueling 26-hour trip, some of which was spent upside-down in the crate, Brown emerged with only a headache. News of his success earned him the nickname Henry "Box" Brown as well as similar attempts which were not as successful, some even resulting in death.

Still's extensive contacts with station masters along routes from the upper South to Canada allowed him to assist some 4,000 runaways between 1850 and 1865. Realizing the historical significance of his efforts, he interviewed many of the runaways inquiring about every detail of their lives: their motives for escaping, their treatment as slaves, the nature of their journey North. In 1872, he used those interviews as the primary source for his work, "The Underground Railroad," still considered the most accurate treatment of the clandestine route to freedom ever written and one that can help us better appreciate the significant role Philadelphia's free black community played on the Underground Railroad. ■

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