

A database sheds light on those who fled slavery.

By William C. Kashatus

Over the past decade, popular interest in the Underground Railroad has resulted in renewed appreciation for William Still, the free black Philadelphian who was clerk of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. With the assistance of a loosely organized network of abolitionists, Still coordinated the movement of hundreds of slaves escaping bondage in the South to freedom in the North. Between 1853 and 1861, in violation of the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, he assisted some 996 runaway slaves.

Less known, however, is the important role Still played as a historian of the Underground Railroad's Eastern Line, which began in northern Virginia and ran through Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and New England, and on into Canada.

Still personally interviewed and cataloged the backgrounds of all the fugitives who came under his care. Hoping to reunite them with their families after the Civil War, he compiled the information in a 780-page book titled *The Underground Railroad*.

Historians consider the book, published in 1872, the most authentic source on the clandestine route to freedom. But while it describes dozens of daring escapes and dramatic rescues, Still's meticulous attention to detail and 19th-century prose make for difficult reading. And until recently, few researchers had gone beyond the escape stories to explore the important patterns that existed among the fugitives.

James McGowan, an African American historian who died in 2008, spent the last six years of his life sifting through Still's voluminous work to create a database of the 996 fugitives. Organized by more than a dozen fields — including name, age, gender, skin color, date of escape, place of origin, means of transportation, and literacy — the database offers some fascinating insights.

Most of Still's runaways were lone men between the ages of 17 and 32, with an average age of 25. This seems logical given that undertaking such a long, arduous journey might require physical stamina and a lack of family responsibilities. In fact, other studies of the Underground Railroad have identified a high incidence of young male runaways who escaped alone.

But the Eastern Line saw more female runaways than was previously believed. Of the 968 runaways whose gender is known, 24 percent were female, and 63 of those women had the courage to run away alone. Thus, while female escapes were not as common as male, a significant number did occur.

In addition, 66 percent of the fugitives Still documented had originally escaped in groups with one or more family members, while only 34 percent escaped alone. That suggests that family ties were an important factor even for many of those who ended up alone.



Chester County Historical Society
William Still took careful note of the identity and backgrounds of nearly 1,000 fugitives who escaped to the North.

Another corrective to the historiography on the Underground Railroad can be found in the means of escape, which were largely determined by the available opportunities. Studies that concentrate on Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan have found that the overwhelming majority of runaways escaped over land on foot, horseback, wagons, or trains. But Still's fugitives were almost as likely — 44 percent — to escape on boats, schooners, or steamships, since water passage to Philadelphia and other northern destinations was more readily available along the Eastern Line.

These patterns suggest three important points: both male and female fugitives were active participants in their escapes and not totally dependent on the generosity of abolitionists; nuclear and extended family relationships were a strong motive for running away; and the patterns of escape differed depending on region.

Until the late 20th century, historians ignored William Still's book. Instead, the white abolitionists who wrote early accounts of the Underground Railroad tended to emphasize their own heroics, omitting the contributions of the free black community. Often, these accounts were further embellished in later novels, plays, and histories.

More recent studies focus on the interracial nature of the Underground Railroad. But a statistical examination of the runaways of the Eastern Line suggests further complexity, emphasizing the role not of white or black abolitionists, but of the fugitives themselves.

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