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Source: *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, January, 1961, Vol. 28, No. 1 (January, 1961), pp. 33-44

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27770004>

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WILLIAM STILL AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

BY LARRY GARA*

THE writer of a popular account of the underground railroad in Pennsylvania stated in his preface that "it required the manhood of a man and the unflinching fortitude of a woman, . . . to be an abolitionist in those days, and especially an Underground Railroad agent."¹ He was referring to the noble minority who stood firm when the abolitionists were being "reviled and persecuted" in both the North and the South. Other underground railroad books—some of them written by elderly abolitionists—put similar emphasis on the heroic conductors of the mysterious organization. They reflected the history of the underground railroad from the vantage point of the abolitionist conductor. They also contributed to the growth of a favorite American legend, which is as much a part of folklore as of history. Two of the forgotten characters in the popular legend are the Negro members of various vigilance committees and the fugitives themselves. If it required strong character to be an abolitionist, it took even more courage to become a hunted fugitive or one of his colored abettors. William Still's work with the Philadelphia vigilance committee called attention to both of these neglected groups.

William Still's parents were both born slaves, and they left slavery at considerable personal sacrifice: his father purchased his freedom, and his mother, after one unsuccessful attempt to escape, finally ran away with two of her four children. They later farmed a forty-acre plot in the New Jersey pines near Medford. William was born there on October 7, 1821, the youngest of eighteen chil-

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¹Robert C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, Pa., 1883), preface, xv.

dren. With a bare minimum of formal schooling he continued his own education by extensive reading. When he was twenty he left home, and three years later he moved to Philadelphia. He held a number of jobs before joining the staff of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in the fall of 1847.²

Still began working with the abolition society as a combination janitor and mail clerk. After several years, both his duties and his salary were increased. He took a special interest in the society's efforts to assist slaves who had run away from the South. They were often boarded at his home before resuming their journey towards Canada. For fourteen years Still served the society. During that time he worked with such well known anti-slavery advocates as Robert Purvis, who was also colored, Lucretia and James Mott, Sarah Pugh, Thomas Garrett, and J. Miller McKim, who was the agent in charge of the Philadelphia office.³

In 1838 Philadelphia abolitionists had organized a vigilance committee to assist fugitives coming into the city. There was some underground railroad activity in the area. Thomas Garrett of Wilmington, the more militant anti-slavery Quakers of Philadelphia and the neighboring counties, and the vigilance committee were primarily responsible for the work. Although there was a semblance of organization to these efforts, much of the aid given the fugitive slaves was on a haphazard basis. By 1852 even the vigilance committee had disintegrated. In December of that year a group of abolitionists reported that the old committee "had become disorganized and scattered" and that for several years its duties "had been performed by individuals on their own responsibility, and sometimes in a very irregular manner," causing "much dissatisfaction and complaint." The group decided to organize a new vigilance committee, with an acting committee of four members, which should have the authority to attend "to every case that might require their aid," to raise necessary funds, and "to keep a record of all their doings," and especially of their receipts and expenditures. They appointed William Still chairman of the acting committee.⁴

² James P. Boyd, "William Still: His Life and Work to This Time," in William Still, *Still's Underground Rail Road Records* (3rd ed., Phila., 1883), iii-xvii. The title page varied somewhat in each edition of Still's book, but the pagination of the text remained the same.

³ Boyd, "Still," in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, xviii.

⁴ Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 611-612.



WILLIAM STILL

Taken from his book, this picture probably shows Still as he looked in 1872.

One of the principal activities of the new Philadelphia vigilance committee was to extend financial aid to fugitives. The committee provided money to board fugitives with families of free Negroes, sometimes for as long as thirteen days but usually for only a few days. As a Negro, William Still easily gained the confidence of the new arrivals and knew where to find them board and lodging among the colored population of Philadelphia. The committee also

purchased clothing, medicine, and the fugitives' railroad fares to Canada. It advertised anti-slavery meetings in the newspapers and on one occasion spent twenty dollars for handbills and other expenses of a meeting. Mostly, the committee spent money in small amounts; very few items in its financial reports involved more than five dollars.⁵

At times William Still and other members of the acting vigilance committee were very busy with their labor on behalf of the fugitives. Late in 1857 J. Miller McKim wrote another abolitionist, "Other rail-roads are in a declining condition and have stopped their semi annual dividends, but the Underground has never before done so flourishing a business." He further reported, "Exactly fifty—men, women and children—have passed through the hands of our Vigilance Committee in the last fortnight."⁶ It was a dramatic time and a most unusual amount of work for the vigilance committee. According to the committee's journal it assisted approximately 495 fugitives between December, 1852, and February, 1857. In his later published account, covering eight years of vigilance committee activity, Still listed approximately eight hundred fugitives, including about sixty children, who had received aid from the committee.⁷

Although a great deal of William Still's work was of such a routine nature as answering correspondence or meeting new arrivals at the railroad station, he had some moments of high adventure too. One arrival from the South, who had purchased his freedom, contacted Still for information about his family. Upon investigation he proved to be Still's own brother, left in slavery forty years earlier when his mother fled to the North. Still also witnessed the arrival of the famous Henry "Box" Brown, who had literally had himself crated and sent north via the Adams' Express Company, and of the clever William and Ellen Craft. The Crafts had traveled all the way from Georgia with the nearly-white Ellen disguised as an ailing planter and William playing the part of the faithful servant. Still observed a number of other unusual and

⁵ Journal of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, 1852-1857, in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁶ J. Miller McKim to Mrs. M. W. Chapman, November 19, 1857, in the Weston Papers in the Boston Public Library. McKim's letter was published in the 1858 edition of the *Liberty Bell*.

⁷ Journal of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee; Still, *Underground Railroad*, *passim*.

interesting cases, though none got the public attention given to Henry "Box" Brown and the Crafts.⁸

One of William Still's duties was to ask the newly arrived slaves their names, the names of their masters and where they had come from, and to question them about their escape experiences and the severity of their servitude. In part the interrogation was meant to protect the vigilance committee from the impostors who not infrequently found the abolitionists easy prey for a handout. Still not only recorded the data but carefully preserved the records. In his book he wrote that he had kept the documents for possible use in helping to reunite relatives and friends.⁹ In 1884 he told a meeting of aged abolitionists that he had kept them because they were interesting, and because his family had been connected with the underground railroad.¹⁰ Possibly, too, the records were a protection for him in case any of the Philadelphia abolitionists had requested a detailed accounting of Still's work for the anti-slavery society. To Still the vigilance committee was synonymous with the underground railroad. In 1893 he informed historian Wilbur H. Siebert that his "were the only records that were kept of the U.G.R.R.," and that when he collected them he had never dreamed that they could be published in his lifetime.¹¹

Still's voluminous record books were a rich source of indisputable evidence had the government been inclined to invoke the Fugitive Slave Law against him or the vigilance committee. He hid the records after the Harpers Ferry fiasco and for a while they were stored in the loft of the Lebanon Cemetery building.¹² In a number of instances he faced possible prosecution. It was Still and others at the anti-slavery office who had warned the Negroes of Christiana that warrants were out for two slaves hiding there. The slave hunt resulted in a mob scene in which the slaves' master was murdered and his nephew seriously wounded.

⁸ Lucretia Mott to Joseph and Ruth Dugdale, March 28, 1849, in the Lucretia Mott MSS in the Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College; Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 81-86, 368-377.

⁹ Still, *Underground Rail Road*, preface; Boyd, "Still," in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, xxxiv.

¹⁰ *Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Organization of the American Anti-Slavery Society, in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1884), 39-40.

¹¹ William Still to Wilbur H. Siebert, November 18, 1893, in scrapbook "The Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania, vol. 3," in the Wilbur H. Siebert Papers in the Ohio Historical Society.

¹² Boyd, "Still," in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, xxiii, xxxiv.

Several abolitionists and thirty-four Negroes were indicted for treason but none were convicted.¹³ Still was not indicted with the Christiana rioters but the government brought charges against him for helping to entice Jane Johnson away from her master, Colonel John H. Wheeler, the American minister to Nicaragua. Still was acquitted, but two of five other Negroes indicted were sentenced to a week in jail on a charge of assault and battery, and Passmore Williamson, a Philadelphia Quaker, spent three months in jail for contempt of court.¹⁴ John Brown had confided his plans to William Still six months before his raid on Harpers Ferry and a memorandum found among the papers of Brown's lieutenant, John Henry Kagi, seemed to implicate Still in the scheme.¹⁵ In all these cases Still avoided punishment, but when a woman sued him for libel in 1860 he was not so fortunate.

The woman, a Mrs. Ellen Wells, who was a former slave from St. Louis, was traveling throughout the country raising money to purchase her mother, her children, and several other relatives from slavery. She stayed at William Still's rooming house in Philadelphia, but he did not encourage her project. When a Boston abolitionist wrote for information about Ellen Wells, Still answered that she was an impostor and a prostitute. The letter fell into Mrs. Wells' hands and she sued Still for scandalous and malicious libel. He pleaded guilty to having written the letter and the court sentenced him to ten days in jail and fined him a hundred dollars. Boston abolitionists supported Still and paid the fine from the treasury of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.¹⁶

A year later, with the Civil War in progress, Still resigned his position with the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society.¹⁷ He had already ventured into some real estate transactions, and he then bought and managed first a stove store and later a very successful retail coal business. In 1872 he published *The Underground Rail Road*. The book was another of William Still's contributions to the progress of his race. His work with the fugitive slaves had impressed upon him the need for Negroes to take the initiative

¹³ Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 348-368.

¹⁴ Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 86-95.

¹⁵ Boyd, "Still," in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, xxii-xxiv.

¹⁶ J. Miller McKim to R. S. Webb, June 23, 1860, and Samuel May, Jr., to McKim, May 23, 1860, in the Garrison Papers in the Boston Public Library; New York *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 28, May 5, 1860.

¹⁷ Boyd, "Still," in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, xxx.

to improve their condition. In August of 1860 he told a Negro audience at Kennett Square celebrating the anniversary of West Indian emancipation, "The hundreds of heroic fugitives who yearly throw off their yokes, . . . seem to cry aloud in our ears—'Hereditary bondmen! know ye not who would be free themselves must strike the blow?'"¹⁸

In 1855 William Still had visited the former slaves who had settled in Canada, and he later wrote a strong defense of their conduct and achievements, answering those who maintained that slaves could not meet the responsibilities of free citizens. In 1859 he initiated a successful eight-year campaign to secure equal service for Negroes in the Philadelphia streetcars. In 1861 he helped organize an association for the purpose of collecting and disseminating accurate information about the American Negro population in order to improve its position.¹⁹ These and many other activities stemmed from Still's determination to help improve the status of the colored people.²⁰ So did his book. He wanted to make the underground railroad "a monument to the heroism of the bondmen under the yoke." Their "heroism and desperate struggles," said Still, as well as "the terrible oppression that they were under, should be kept green in the memory of this and coming generations." He also believed that books written by Negroes would prove their mental ability and provide an effective answer to those who argued that the colored people were inferior. "We very much need works on various topics from the pens of colored men to represent the race intellectually," he wrote.²¹

He received added encouragement from the Philadelphia abolitionists. At a meeting in May, 1871, the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society passed a resolution requesting Still to publish his reminiscences relating to the underground railroad. That same year there was a seven-months coal strike in Pennsylvania which

¹⁸ New York *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, August 18, 1860.

¹⁹ Boyd, "Still," in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, xxv-xxviii, li-lvii; Harrod G. Villard, "William Still," in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, 18:23.

²⁰ For Still's other activities see Alberta S. Norwood, "Negro Welfare Work in Philadelphia, Especially as Illustrated by the Career of William Still, 1775-1930," unpublished thesis in the Library of the University of Pennsylvania (1931).

²¹ William Still to Dr. Henry Charles, June 6, 1873, to J. W. Jones, November 4, 1873, and to J. C. Price, June 3, 1873, in the William Still Papers in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

made his business very dull but gave him the leisure he needed to prepare his material for publication. Still worked diligently in the preparation of his book, a task which was made more difficult by the bitter division in the anti-slavery movement. He corresponded with old acquaintances, put his own records in order and collected material from others. The Philadelphia abolitionists with whom he had worked were all Garrisonians, but he included the political abolitionist Lewis Tappan among those whom he asked for information. One of the difficult tasks was to write a sketch of J. Miller McKim, his superior in the anti-slavery office. When McKim asked Still to outline the material concerning him, Still tactfully replied that "it would not be just to confine [McKim] to any special department of the work but to represent [him] as a general laborer," with many services in the anti-slavery cause.²² Frederick Douglass, however, got no mention in Still's book, except in material reprinted from a British pamphlet. In 1893 Douglass boasted of his long service in the underground railroad and claimed that Still had omitted him because he had criticized Still's conduct toward the fugitives.²³

William Still's book on the underground railroad is unique in that it emphasized the courage and ingenuity of the fugitives. White conductors are the heroes in the accounts which the abolitionists recorded for posterity; in Still's account, the daring fugitives are the heroes. Scattered throughout the volume are legal documents, letters, and newspaper items, but the focus of the narrative is always on the slaves themselves. Still placed his sketches of the abolitionist conductors at the end of the book, after the great bulk of material on the passengers. The book's numerous illustrations also focus the spotlight on the absconding slaves and on their heroic struggle for freedom.

In Still's book the vast majority of the fugitive slaves came from the neighboring border states. Most of them were young men, of more than average intelligence, though there were some women and children too. Although they were all considered

²² Boyd, "Still," in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, xxxv; William Still to J. Miller McKim, November 10, 1871, in the J. Miller McKim Papers in the New York Public Library.

²³ Frederick Douglass to Wilbur H. Siebert, March 27, 1893, in scrapbook, "The Underground Railroad in New York, vol. 2," in the Siebert Papers in the Ohio Historical Society.

underground railroad passengers, many of them had received little or no assistance before they contacted the vigilance committee. Some passed as white or as free Negroes, some traveled on foot at night, some adopted clever disguises, and more than a few hid or were hidden on steamers running from southern ports. Much of the escape drama was a self-help affair.

Although never a slave himself, William Still hated the South's peculiar institution. Not only did he have the zeal of the abolitionists, but as a Negro he was able to identify himself emotionally with the bondsmen. "The half will never be told of the barbarism of Slavery," he wrote. He described one fugitive as a "decided opponent to the no-pay system, to flogging, and selling likewise." Still said he had taken care "to furnish artless stories, [and] simple facts," and had resorted "to no coloring to make the book seem romantic." He took great care to be factual but his bias was apparent throughout the book. In his preface Still commented that those who sought information regarding "the existence, atrocity, struggles and destruction of Slavery" would have no trouble finding the "hydra-headed monster ruling and tyrannizing over Church and State, North and South, white and black, without let or hindrance for at least several generations."²⁴

The fugitives whom Still and the vigilance committee interviewed had confirmed his prejudice against the slave system. Although a few maintained that they had been treated well, the great majority testified to many hardships. Some were probably aware of the committee's preference for cruel and libertine masters. One slave from Maryland said that he had been "treated as bad as a man could be," another had been "allowed no privileges of any kind, Sunday or Monday," and a woman had "endured all outraged nature could endure and survive." The fugitives described their former owners with an abundance of such terms as "always a big devil—ill-grained," an "ill-natured man," and "a notorious frolicker." One described a cruel master who "made a common practice of flogging females when stripped naked." Still and the other committee members were also temperance advocates and duly noted in their records when a master was described as "given to 'intemperance'" and to "gross 'profanity,'" "a gambler

²⁴ William Still, *The Underground Rail Road* (Philadelphia, 1872), 144, 290, preface, 3, 5. This preface appears only in the first edition.

and spree'r," and a man "devoted to card playing, rum-drinking and fox-hunting."²⁵

Occasionally the committee sharply questioned fugitives whose stories did not seem plausible, but they sometimes took obviously exaggerated statements at face value. After trying to dispute her testimony, the committee gave "the benefit of the doubt" to Amarian, a good-looking girl of twenty-one who said she had always been treated very well. Similarly, they doubted Washington Somlor's description of inhuman treatment at the hands of a master who "believed in selling, flogging, cobbing, paddling, and all other kinds of torture. . . ." Yet they accepted the statements of William Jordon who said that he had lived three months in a cave "surrounded with bears, wild cats, rattle-snakes and the like." Theophilus Collins testified that he was brutally punished for attending a Sunday night religious meeting. His master called him in for a whipping and when he refused to remove his shirt, gave him twenty blows on the head with the butt of a cowhide, struck him on the head with fire-tongs, beat him with a parlor shovel until the handle broke, jabbed the shovel blade at his head with all his might, and, when the slave tried to make for the door, stabbed him in the head and stomach with a pocket knife. Nevertheless, Theophilus escaped and ran sixteen miles carrying a part of his entrails in his hands for the whole journey.²⁶

William Still believed that a book containing such thrilling tales as the one Theophilus told to the vigilance committee should certainly sell many copies. His previous business experience enabled him to plan and promote the sale of his book to good advantage. He decided to sell it only by subscription and carefully supervised his sales campaign.²⁷

Prospective agents for a particular territory had to apply personally to Still. If no suitable person applied, Still preferred to leave the area temporarily unsolicited. He had two editions, one in plain English cloth which sold for five dollars, and a sheepskin edition priced at five-fifty. Still prepared a full set of instructions for his agents and sold each of them a kit with sample copies. He gave them forty or fifty per cent of the purchase price as

²⁵ Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 185, 260, 307, 383, 388, 416, 480, 519, 533, 754.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 130, 304, 435, 495-496.

²⁷ Boyd, "Still," in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, xlvii-xlix, lxi-lxii.

commission, but they had to adhere strictly to his terms. During the financial panic of 1873 he permitted them to sell on the installment plan, but they were not to deliver the book until the last payment had been made. All of his agents had to submit weekly reports.²⁸

Still preferred to hire colored men to sell his book, but he realized that few of his race had the necessary experience. He was confident it would be well received among the Negroes and among the Republicans, if the agents did their part well. "The book only needs to be presented by a man who appreciates and comprehends the value and importance of having our heroes and Martyrs under Slavery well represented in the history of our times—to make the work take exceedingly well," he wrote a representative in Kansas in 1873.²⁹ And the work took well indeed. A salesman in Pittsburgh cleared about a hundred dollars a week for six weeks. His best agent followed five others who had sold only a few copies in Baltimore, and at the end of six weeks he had more than three hundred subscriptions. In 1873 Still reported, "Agents are doing well with the U.G.R.R. this summer. East, West, North and South, wherever competent persons are presenting it." He first printed ten thousand copies but hoped to sell a hundred thousand before the demand ceased.³⁰ The first edition sold out completely, as did a second edition of 1879. In 1883 Still published a third edition with a new title, *Still's Underground Rail Road Records*, and with a sketch of the author written by James P. Boyd.

William Still's book undoubtedly circulated more widely than any other firsthand account of the underground railroad. In writing and distributing it Still proved that a Negro author could produce a creditable book and sell it on a large scale. He proudly exhibited it at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. It was a fitting tribute to his race. He hoped it would inspire other Negroes to greater efforts until they could exhibit such fruits "of their newly gained privileges" as "well-conducted shops

²⁸ Still to T. L. W. Titus, January 7, 1874, to W. D. Teister, June 10, 1873, to Robert Furnas, June 18, 1873, to James E. Thompson, July 9, 1873, and to J. C. Price, June 23, 1873, all in the Still Papers.

²⁹ Still to Thomas E. Franklin, April 9, 1874, and the Rev. J. C. Embry, October 14, 1873, in the Still Papers.

³⁰ Still to W. H. Jones, June 3, 1873, the Rev. Jones, November 12, 1873, and to E. Sanborn, June 11, 1873, in the Still Papers.

and stores; lands acquired and good farms” well-managed, and “valuable books produced and published on interesting and important subjects.”³¹ It is not possible to evaluate the book’s effect on American Negroes, but in one respect it failed to make its mark. William Still put the courageous fugitive slaves at the center of his stage. His book provided an excellent corrective for the many abolitionist-centered accounts. Yet in the popular mind, the white conductor of the underground railroad remains the leading figure in the drama. Despite Still’s financial success, his message has been hidden under a mass of literature written by the abolitionists, their descendants, and admirers.

³¹ William Still, *The Underground Rail Road* (Philadelphia and Cincinnati, 1879), preface. This preface appears in the second and third editions.