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Author(s): Larry Gara

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## THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD: LEGEND OR REALITY? <sup>1</sup>

LARRY GARA

Professor of History and Chairman, Department of History and  
Political Science, Grove City College

(Read November 11, 1960)

FEW stories in our national history are more familiar to Americans than those of the underground railroad with its legendary heroes. Generations of youngsters have thrilled to the account of Eliza Harris eluding the slave-catchers and their bloodhounds by leaping from ice cake to ice cake on the thawing Ohio River, and to her later adventures as a passenger on the underground line. Along with Paul Bunyan and Mike Fink, Eliza and some of the underground railroad conductors have become figures of American folklore. Much of the underground railroad story has been handed down by oral tradition with its inevitable mixture of fact, fancy, and exaggeration. Writers of popular accounts and local histories, journalists, antiquarians and scholars have all been influenced by the legend and have repeated some of its unproved assertions in their writings.

Like most legends, that of the underground railroad is vague and indistinct. However, in the minds of many people there is an image of the mysterious institution with which they associate certain general characteristics. One of these is the existence of a highly organized network of underground railroad lines, with stations literally dotting the North and penetrating into the South. In the popular mind, at least, a board of directors managed the road's affairs and gave it the benefit of centralized control.<sup>2</sup> The author of a semi-fictional account claimed that for more than twenty years the underground railroad "extended its great trunk lines across all the northern states

from Mason and Dixon's line and the Ohio River to the Queen's Dominion, and its ramifications far into the southern states."<sup>3</sup>

Another characteristic of the legendary underground railroad was secrecy. According to a 1936 newspaper account, it was "the most successful secret organization that ever existed in this country."<sup>4</sup> In the legend most of the fugitive slaves, like Eliza, are only a jump or two ahead of their would-be captors, but the adroit conductors outwit the slave-catchers through the use of secret code signals and numerous hiding places. They had, said a popular book on the subject, "false closets through trap doors in kitchens or parlors, false cupboards over brick ovens, sliding panels by fireplaces where wood was stowed, secret rooms without windows."<sup>5</sup> There is also a persistent belief that the need for secrecy led to the destruction of all the records and documents concerning the work of the underground. Publicly, "there was no Underground Railroad," said a student of the Pennsylvania branch. "Had the existence of it even been suspected, the Government or the kidnappers would have wiped it out."<sup>6</sup>

In the context of the popular legend the underground railroad was a very busy enterprise, running its numerous trains nearly every night. There is a distinct impression of an extremely heavy traffic on the underground line. A Pennsylvania newspaper story of underground railroad activity in the state commented, "Thousands of slaves

<sup>1</sup> The author is indebted to the Research Committee of the American Philosophical Society for a grant from its Penrose Fund which made possible an extensive research trip to gather material for this study. This article partially summarizes the findings presented in a book-length study entitled *The liberty line: the legend of the underground railroad* to be published by the University of Kentucky Press.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent example of the use of this concept in fiction, see Stern, Philip Van Doren, *The drums of morning*, 325-432, New York, Doubleday, 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Homer U., *From Dixie to Canada: romances and realities of the underground railroad*, 12-13, Orwell, Ohio, H. U. Johnson, and Buffalo, C. W. Moulton, 1894.

<sup>4</sup> Clipping from the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 8, 1936, in the Wilbur H. Siebert Papers in the Ohio Historical Society. (All Siebert Papers hereafter cited are in the Ohio Historical Society.)

<sup>5</sup> Buckmaster, Henrietta, *Let my people go: the story of the underground railroad and the growth of the abolition movement*, 199, Boston, Beacon Press, 1959.

<sup>6</sup> William Hutchinson Smith to Wilbur H. Siebert, December 28, 1933, in the Siebert Papers.

passed through these stations for thirty years.”<sup>7</sup> When a writer recently sent out a questionnaire requesting several hundred people to guess at the number of slaves who ran away from the South between 1851 and 1860, the average answer was two hundred and seventy thousand, or twenty-seven thousand each year. Several answered a million.<sup>8</sup>

In the romanticized legend it is the abolitionist, or underground railroad conductor, who stands in the spotlight. He is the hero. The operators of the underground railroad, as described in a recent book, lived in a time that called for greatness, “and they had the greatness within them.”<sup>9</sup> They were willing to risk all for the cause they served. The stereotype of the heroic abolitionist is matched by that of the ignorant and helpless fugitive. Although the fugitives of the legend are determined to be free, they lack the necessary knowledge and skill to reach the Promised Land without the assistance of the underground transportation system.

The legend of the underground railroad is a combination of fact and fancy. Many of the stories handed down by word of mouth had a factual basis, but frequent repetition has led to exaggeration and sometimes, in the annals of local history, fantasy has become fact. Far too much of the underground railroad’s history rests upon the reminiscences of aged abolitionists written many years after the events had transpired, and after their cause had become respectable. The underground railroad of historical reality existed, but it was markedly different from the institution of the popular legend.

There was no nationwide conspiracy to spirit fugitive slaves to Canada. It was largely a matter of sheltering and assisting fugitives who had already escaped. Abolitionists held different opinions concerning the importance of underground railroad activity. Only a very few of them approved of enticing slaves from their masters or taking them from the southern states. Some thought that such activity was unethical and most believed that it was unwise. Even the extremist Oberlin anti-slavery reformers refused to sanction the program of three of their group who ventured into the South to guide slaves to freedom.

<sup>7</sup> Clipping from the *Upper Darby News*, August 5, 1954, in the Chester County (Pa.) Historical Society.

<sup>8</sup> Furnas, J. C., *Goodbye to Uncle Tom*, 239, New York, William Sloane Associates, 1956.

<sup>9</sup> Breyfogle, William, *Make free: the story of the underground railroad*, 35, Philadelphia and New York, Lippincott, 1958.

Members of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee also disapproved of sending agents south to assist slaves to run away, although in a few instances they did abet such escapes from southern bondage.<sup>10</sup>

When abolitionists provided assistance to the absconding slaves in the form of food and other necessities, temporary lodging, and transportation, it was often on a haphazard basis. Some abolitionists who took a special interest in this phase of anti-slavery activity organized underground railroad work in certain local areas, but at no time did such efforts become centralized. Levi Coffin, for example, introduced a semblance of order into the underground railroad efforts in the parts of Indiana and Ohio where he lived.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Thomas Garrett took the initiative in the Wilmington-Philadelphia area, where he had the active cooperation of a group of militant anti-slavery Quakers in Delaware and neighboring counties of Pennsylvania and of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee.<sup>12</sup>

The vigilance committees, organized in a number of northern cities, assumed special responsibility for giving assistance to the bondsmen fleeing from slavery. Those committees which were founded before the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 were sometimes brought into being by free Negroes who, in certain communities like New York City, worked wholly on their own, without ties to any abolitionist society. The New York committee reported in 1837 that it had protected 335 persons from slavery. David Ruggles was the competent and energetic Negro secretary of the New York committee. In 1845 a group of New England Negroes formed a Freedom Association with the object of extending “a helping hand to all who may bid adieu to whips and chains, and by the welcome light of the North Star, reach a haven where they can be protected from the grasp of the manstealer.”<sup>13</sup>

After 1850 the abolitionists created a number of

<sup>10</sup> Report of an interview between Wilbur H. Siebert and James H. Fairchild, August 3, 1892 in the Siebert Papers; Still, William, *The underground rail road*, 177, Philadelphia, Porter and Coates, 1872.

<sup>11</sup> Coffin, Levi, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the reputed president of the underground railroad. . .*, passim, Cincinnati, R. Clarke and Co., 1880 (hereafter cited as *Reminiscences*).

<sup>12</sup> Drake, Thomas E., Thomas Garrett, Quaker abolitionist, in *Friends in Wilmington, 1738-1938*, 75-86, Wilmington, Del., n.d.

<sup>13</sup> Aptheker, Herbert, ed., *A documentary history of the Negro people in the United States*, 162-163, 253-254, New York, Citadel Press, 1951.

new vigilance committees. Among the best known were those of Philadelphia, Syracuse and Boston. Their object was to give aid to the fugitives, to protect free Negroes from kidnappers and to obstruct the Fugitive Slave Law. Those committees would have been unnecessary had there been in operation a centralized network of underground railroad stations. The rescue of alleged fugitives from slave-catchers or from officers of the law provided exciting diversion for a number of the vigilance committees. One of the most famous rescues was that of the slave William Henry, or "Jerry," in Syracuse in 1851. Celebrating the anniversary of the Jerry Rescue became a regular event with the abolitionists and provided effective propaganda for the anti-slavery cause. An announcement of one such celebration said that the rescue had been "the heroism of the Right" which "stirred the hearts, and quickened the pulse, of the Friends of Freedom throughout America."<sup>14</sup>

Although most abolitionists used the fugitive issue for propaganda purposes not all of them took an active part in the underground railroad. Some even questioned the validity of such work. The major objective of the abolition movement was to end slavery rather than to assist a few fugitives to escape from it. Abolitionists made a distinction between the two efforts and they deplored any tendency of the lesser cause to divert energy and attention from the greater. Mrs. Sarah Otis Ernst of Cincinnati, for example, feared that the abolitionists' "energies and funds would be so frittered" away by such things as a colored orphan asylum and the running off of fugitives that they would have no means left for their "higher and more important work."<sup>15</sup> For the abolitionists the propaganda aspects of the fugitive issue were even more important than the fate of an individual fugitive. In 1850 a Chicago abolitionist newspaper suggested that it might be "expedient for some fugitives to suffer martyrdom . . . and consent to return awhile to slavery as propagandists of liberty, and as a standing appeal to the humanity of the North."<sup>16</sup>

Those abolitionists who emphasized working with the fugitive slaves often carried on their underground railroad activity with very little attempt at secrecy. Levi Coffin recalled that slave-catchers frequented Cincinnati but that none ever

bothered him, even though his reputation as an underground railroad conductor was no secret to anyone in the area.<sup>17</sup> Thomas Garrett openly boasted of the large number of fugitive slaves he had helped to freedom.<sup>18</sup> Although anyone who refused to obey the Fugitive Slave Law was legally liable for punishment, the government seldom prosecuted violators. In 1853 an anti-slavery newspaper in Ohio commented, "not even one of the thousands who have refused obedience to this law, has yet been condemned."<sup>19</sup> Actually, there were probably fewer than a dozen prosecutions under the act during its fourteen-year existence, although in most of those cases there were a number of defendants.

Moderation also characterized the use of the law to return individuals to slavery. Only fifty alleged slaves had been arrested by the spring of 1853 when the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society commented in its annual report that the law "was but an electioneering trick, not designed nor expected to be of material advantage to the Slaveholders."<sup>20</sup> Not all the runaway slaves were pursued, and very few were pursued by their masters. The expense involved in tracking down a fugitive slave was often greater than the value of one known to be addicted to running away. A few dramatic incidents involving slaves who had been pursued have given a false impression of pursuit as a common occurrence.

The abolitionists sometimes advertised their underground railroad services in newspapers. As early as 1844 the Chicago *Western Citizen* published a cartoon captioned "Liberty Line" which pictured the underground train chugging its way to Canada with a full cargo of jubilant fugitive slaves. Under the drawing was a humorous description of the "improved and splendid Locomotives" and "best style" passenger accommodations for those "who may wish to improve their health or circumstances, by a northern tour."<sup>21</sup> This was only one example of a number of similar notices. In 1856 a Syracuse paper carried an item telling of eight fugitives who passed through on their way to Canada. The Reverend J. W. Loguen, a former slave, was a key person in the Syracuse Vigilance Committee. "Brother Loguen," said the article, "talks of keeping a Hotel

<sup>17</sup> Coffin, *Reminiscences*, 118.

<sup>18</sup> Boston *Liberator*, May 22, 1857.

<sup>19</sup> Salem, Ohio, *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, March 19, 1853.

<sup>20</sup> *Twenty-first annual report presented to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society by its board of managers, January 26, 1853*, 43, Boston, 1853.

<sup>21</sup> Chicago *Western Citizen*, July 18, 1844.

<sup>14</sup> New York *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, September 16, 1852.

<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Sarah Otis Ernst to Miss Weston, February 6, 1852, in the Weston Papers in the Boston Public Library.

<sup>16</sup> Chicago *Western Citizen*, November 5, 1850.

Register, after the manner of aristocratic establishments, for the purpose of recording the names of his guests, and having them published.”<sup>22</sup>

There was a great deal of underground railroad material in the anti-slavery press. Abolitionist editors reported all stories of slave escapes that came to their attention. On occasion they notified the slaves' owners that their chattels had crossed the border into Canada where they were safe from all fugitive slave laws. In March of 1856 the New York *National Anti-Slavery Standard* reprinted an advertisement from a Richmond paper offering rewards for the return of Henry and Tazewell. The *Standard's* editor commented that the owners could save themselves the expense of further advertisement. “Tazewell and Henry,” he wrote, “both passed over ‘tother side of Jordan,’ one day last week, ‘shouting happy.’”<sup>23</sup> In reporting such stories the reformer editors seldom distinguished between fugitives who had received assistance from the abolitionists and those who had accomplished their flight wholly on their own resources.

The publication of underground railroad stories was of no practical benefit to the fugitive slaves, and neither were the pronouncements of the anti-slavery politicians. The anti-slavery faction in Congress found the fugitive slave issue an especially useful one. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 brought forth a flood of speeches. Anti-slavery congressmen used the unpopular law to arouse pride in the North's free institutions, to criticize the South's violation of civil liberties, to challenge the power of southern leadership and to attempt to strike fear into the hearts of the slaveholders. They used strong language in condemning the legislation. “In the long catalogue of public crimes among civilized nations, there is none more cruel and barbarous than the fugitive slave law . . .” said Wisconsin's Representative Charles Durkee. Congressman A. P. Haskell of New York maintained that the law had “no parallel for its monstrosity since the time that the English wrested Magna-Charta from their monarch, . . .”<sup>24</sup>

In 1852 Congressman Joshua R. Giddings of Ohio assured his colleagues who talked of enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law that “it cannot be

done.”<sup>25</sup> In 1860 New York's Congressman Charles B. Sedgwick said, “It must have been expected that so infamous a law would have been evaded by underground railroads, and by all other honorable methods.” He denied that there was any difference of opinion on the issue in the North. “All parties wink at its evasion,” he commented, “and all sympathy is with the fugitive.”<sup>26</sup>

Repetition of such material helped to create a false impression concerning the number of passengers on the underground railroad. Complaints of southerners about extensive losses suffered by their constituents because of the abolitionist underground railroad strengthened the impression. Southern spokesmen tended to take the propaganda statements of the abolitionists and the anti-slavery politicians at face value. Extremist defenders of southern rights found underground railroad rumors valuable for their criticism of the North. Delegates to the Nashville Convention of 1850 listed among their grievances against the northern people the forming of organizations “to carry off slaves from the South,” and protecting them from recapture.<sup>27</sup> Early in 1861 Tennessee's Governor Isham G. Harris charged that northern opponents of slavery had “run off slave property by means of the ‘under-ground railroad,’ amounting in value to millions of dollars.”<sup>28</sup> Such statements could not be proved; like the propaganda barrage of the abolitionists, they were meant to sway men's minds, not to provide them with accurate information.

Many years later those abolitionists who wrote reminiscent accounts of their underground railroad service added immeasurably to the legend of the mysterious road. The aged crusaders wrote of the stirring times when they alone had opposed the minions of slavery. With the emancipation of the slaves their cause had triumphed and the abolitionists became the heroes of their own thrilling narratives.<sup>29</sup> One of them wrote, “Considering the

<sup>25</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 32 Congress, 1 session, appendix, 740, June 23, 1852.

<sup>26</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 session, appendix, 179, March 26, 1860.

<sup>27</sup> Resolutions and address of the Nashville Convention, in the *New York National Anti-Slavery Standard*, June 27, 1850.

<sup>28</sup> *Message of His Excellency Isham G. Harris, to the General Assembly of Tennessee, in extra session, January 7th, 1861*, 8, Nashville, 1861.

<sup>29</sup> Autobiographical accounts of underground railroad conductors include: Coffin, *Reminiscences*; Fairbank, Calvin, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank during slavery times*, Chicago, Patriotic Publishing Co., 1890; Butler, Marvin Benjamin, *My story of the Civil War and the under-*

<sup>22</sup> *New York National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 5, 1856, quoting the *Syracuse Journal*.

<sup>23</sup> *New York National Anti-Slavery Standard*, March 29, 1856.

<sup>24</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 32 Congress, 1 session, appendix, 886, August 6, 1852, and 585, May 17, 1852.

kind of labor performed, the expense incurred and the danger involved, one must be impressed with the unselfish devotion to principle of the men and women thus engaged."<sup>30</sup> Another said that he "had no apology to make for his book." He thought it right "that the young people should know how things were carried on during the fifties by the pro-slavery people who had control of the government."<sup>31</sup>

The reminiscers seldom included statistics but in retrospect their underground railroad became greatly magnified, both in terms of the number of slaves they had assisted and in terms of the importance of that service to the fugitive slaves. It was a matter of distance lending enchantment to the view, as one of them admitted.<sup>32</sup> Yet the underground railroad epoch, as seen from the perspective of the abolitionists, is basically the one which has found popular acceptance. It has been repeated in newspaper articles, local histories, works of fiction, and even in some reference works and scholarly monographs.

Usually there was a grain of truth in the underground railroad stories. They are exaggerated rather than wholly false accounts. Because of the romantic nature of the material it easily lent itself to exaggeration. In some localities, at certain times, the underground railroad was a flourishing institution. In 1856 J. Miller McKim of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee wrote an Irish friend, "The 'Underground' is becoming a great institution. We had 25 arrivals last week, all within the space of 48 hours."<sup>33</sup> Such a dramatic event made a lasting impression on the abolitionists and those who read about their exploits. Yet, even for the active Philadelphia committee, it was an unusual amount of business. When William Still published his documentary account of his eight years of service with the committee he listed

*ground railroad*, Huntington, Ind., United Brethren Publishing Establishment, 1914; Cockrum, William Monroe, *History of the underground railroad as it was conducted by the Anti-Slavery League*, Oakland City, Ind., Press of J. W. Cockrum Printing Co., 1915; and Pettit, Eber M., *Sketches in the history of the underground railroad . . .*, Fredonia, N. Y., W. McKinstry and Son, 1879.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, *My story of the Civil War and the underground railroad*, 180.

<sup>31</sup> Cockrum, *History of the underground railroad*, foreword v.

<sup>32</sup> Sloane, Rush R., The underground railroad of the firelands, *The Firelands Pioneer*, new ser. 5: 35, 1888.

<sup>33</sup> J. Miller McKim to Richard D. Webb, April 4, 1856, in the Garrison Papers in the Boston Public Library.

only about eight hundred fugitives who had used its facilities.<sup>34</sup>

Actual figures of underground railroad traffic are difficult to compile. Scholars have mistrusted the census statistics which indicate that about a thousand slaves a year escaped from the South, even though some contemporaries, including some of the abolitionists, accepted those figures as substantially correct. For example, Gamaliel Bailey, editor of the abolitionist newspaper *The National Era*, cited the census of 1850 as proof "that the number of fugitive slaves in the North has been greatly exaggerated."<sup>35</sup>

Certainly a very small percentage of the millions of slaves in the South escaped or attempted to escape to the North or to Canada. Temporary running away was much more common and should not be confused with escape from slavery. When slaves disappeared, those responsible for finding them seldom assumed that they had fled to the North. The runaways often returned voluntarily after hiding out for a time in the woods, in a nearby swamp or at a neighboring plantation. In truth, the great majority of slaves had no alternative but to accept their situation. They had practically no accurate information about other parts of the country. Furthermore, the status of free Negroes, both in the North and the South, was probably not attractive enough to inspire the average slave to undertake the highly dangerous plunge for freedom. The slaves who ran away permanently were unusual individuals, either constitutionally incapable of adjustment to the slave system or so sensitive and intelligent as to make the break regardless of the heavy odds against them.

The slaves who absconded from bondage were generally self-reliant individuals who planned and carried out their own escapes. Some literally walked away from slavery, traveling by night and hiding and resting by day. Many slaves knew about the north star and they also obtained directions from other slaves, free Negroes and sympathetic southern whites. One group of fugitives from Virginia traveled only at night for three weeks before they reached Pennsylvania.<sup>36</sup> A fugitive slave from Tennessee journeyed five

<sup>34</sup> Still, *The underground rail road*, *passim*.

<sup>35</sup> Washington, *The National Era*, June 19, 1851.

<sup>36</sup> Smedley, Robert C., *History of the underground railroad in Chester and the neighboring counties of Pennsylvania*, 228, Lancaster, Pa., Office of the Journal, 1883.

weeks to reach Michigan.<sup>37</sup> Some made good their escape from the deep South, alone and unaided.

Slaves heading north often took advantage of available water transportation. Steamships running from southern ports sometimes carried fugitive slaves, either as stowaways or as passengers hidden with the consent of the ship captain or crew members. Despite the risks involved, some ship captains made extra money carrying such cargo. They were not necessarily abolitionists, but were willing to carry whatever kind of freight would bring them the best profit.<sup>38</sup>

Some of the escaping slaves devised ingenious methods to implement their desire to reach free soil. Mulattoes often passed as white travelers. Fugitives sometimes posed as free Negroes, carrying forged free papers to prove their status should it become necessary. The famous ex-slave Frederick Douglass used a sailor's free papers in his flight from Maryland. Disguises were common. Men posed as women, and women as men. When William and Ellen Craft escaped from Georgia, Ellen, who was nearly white, posed as an ailing planter and William as his trusted servant. They traveled by train and had little difficulty along the way.<sup>39</sup> Henry "Box" Brown was only the most famous of a number of individuals who escaped or attempted to escape by having themselves crated and shipped to the North.<sup>40</sup>

When the fugitives did somehow find themselves on the underground railroad it was usually

only after they had already completed the most difficult and dangerous stretch of their journey without such assistance. One fugitive from Virginia located the underground railroad in Ohio after getting that far by himself.<sup>41</sup> Another, from Nashville, Tennessee, reached Ottawa, Illinois before contacting an abolitionist who helped him get to Chicago.<sup>42</sup> Still another arrived in New York after a three-week ordeal of "sleeping in the woods and caves by day and traveling at night."<sup>43</sup> The assistance given these fugitive slaves by the abolitionists was helpful but not necessarily essential for the success of their flight from slavery.

The fugitives themselves deserve more recognition than they have received in the popular legend of the underground railroad with its emphasis on the abolitionists and their role in the exciting drama. The legend has contributed to the popular idea that large numbers of slaves traveled to freedom on the underground line, and it has presented later generations with a distorted view of the workings of the underground railroad itself. Based partly on the writings of aged participants, the legend of the underground railroad has been further entrenched in the popular mind by the addition of countless local folk tales and unproved traditions. Elements of it have been repeated by some scholars as well as popular writers and journalists. Yet the over-simplified picture of the past as presented in legendary accounts should not be accepted as history. The actual history of the institution is much more complex and even more interesting than the legend itself.

<sup>37</sup> Haviland, Mrs. Laura Smith, *A woman's life-work*, 213, Chicago, 1889.

<sup>38</sup> Still, *The underground rail road*, 74-75, 166, 263.

<sup>39</sup> Still, *The underground rail road*, 368-377; *Running a thousand miles for freedom; or the escape of William and Ellen Craft from slavery*, London, 1860.

<sup>40</sup> Stearns, Charles, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*, . . . , 59-62, Boston, 1849.

<sup>41</sup> New York *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, February 3, 1853, quoting the *New York Tribune*.

<sup>42</sup> Drew, Benjamin, *The refugee: or, the narratives of fugitive slaves in Canada*, 314-320, Boston, J. P. Jewett; New York, Sheldon, Lamport and Blakeman, 1856.

<sup>43</sup> Boston *Liberator*, December 2, 1859, citing the *Taunton (Mass.) Republican*.