

BOOKS

Whither Underground Railroad Historiography?

John David Smith

Until recently, the history of the legendary underground railroad has been mired in mystery and mythology. In 1961, historian Larry Gara exposed the legend of the underground railroad for what it was: part fact, mostly mythology. In his pathbreaking book, *The Liberty Line*, Gara argued that blacks, not whites, orchestrated the escape process. He also concluded that white abolitionists exaggerated both the number of slaves who absconded and the number of railroad “lines” to freedom. Previous scholars, drawing heavily on memoirs of white abolitionists, generally ignored the contributions of blacks. Gara, however, concluded that fugitive slaves were the key players in the underground railroad. He correctly identified Wilbur H. Siebert as the historian most responsible for perpetuating the romanticized view of the underground railroad. “He accepted the elderly abolitionists’ statements at face value,” Gara explained. “The romantic stories of the abolitionists were apparently difficult for him to reject, and he did not modify his early impressions in any of his later writings.”¹

To what extent have modern scholars taken heed of Gara’s revisionist interpretation? Have they underscored the importance of blacks like William Still, leader of the General Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia, who personally assisted many fugitive slaves to freedom? Have they de-emphasized the role of white abolitionists and credited the slaves with playing a more significant role in their self-emancipation? This brief overview examines recent treatments of the underground railroad from different genres with an eye toward assessing the impact of Gara’s thesis.

In the documentary history *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, for example, C. Peter Ripley described the underground railroad as “a loosely linked web of northern vigilance committees and groups of southern blacks who smuggled fugitives and rescued slaves from the upper South. It operated without much white aid beyond that provided by a few dedicated Quaker abolitionists like Levi Coffin and Thomas Garrett.”² In a recent encyclopedia article, Donald Yacovone commented that “The Underground Railroad never freed as many slaves as its most vocal supporters claimed, and far fewer whites helped than the mythology suggests. Undeniably, however, the existence and history of

the system reflect the African-American quest for freedom and equality.”³

In *Delia Webster and the Underground Railroad* (1996), Randolph Paul Runyon has written a meticulously-researched book about the underground railroad in Kentucky.⁴ He examines the complex relationships between Delia Webster, a white Vermont abolitionist; Calvin Fairbank, a white New York clergyman and abolitionist; Lewis Hayden, a slave employed at Lexington’s Phoenix Hotel; and Newton Craig, a planter who served as keeper of Kentucky’s Penitentiary in Frankfort.

In September, 1844, Webster, who taught at Lexington Female Academy, and Fairbank, rented a carriage and drove Lewis Hayden, his wife Harriet, and their son Jo, from Lexington to Maysville. From the northern Kentucky town the slaves made their way across the Ohio River to free soil. The abduction of the Haydens occurred unabashedly, openly challenging Kentucky’s slave code and the Commonwealth’s gender, class, and racial etiquette.

Upon their return to Lexington, Webster and Fairbank were arrested, jailed, and tried for assisting runaway slaves. Their trials attracted attention throughout Kentucky and nationwide. Webster was convicted and sentenced to two years in the state penitentiary. Fairbanks was sentenced to hard labor for 15 years. Much of Runyon’s book untangles the post-trial relationships between Webster, Fairbank, Hayden, and Craig.

Runyon’s exhaustive detective work revises the account of Webster, Fairbank, and Hayden in J. Winston Coleman’s *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (1940). But aside from getting the facts straight, and for unearthing the destructive relationship between Webster and Craig, his book adds little to the history of the inner workings of the underground railroad in Kentucky. Like previous writers, Runyon accepts abolitionist lore at face value. Unfortunately, he ignores Gara’s book.

So too does Charles L. Blockson in his *Hippocrene Guide to The Underground Railroad* (1994), the first guidebook to the underground railroad’s historic sites. Blockson identifies more than 200 landmark houses, institutions, buildings, and markers believed to have been associated with the underground railroad. Arranged geographically, this reference describes “stations” in 32 states and in Canada. Each entry contains a description of the

site with detailed information pertaining to its history, visitor information, directions, contact addresses, and telephone numbers. The amply-illustrated volume includes a chronology, a glossary, a bibliography, a listing of songs of the underground railroad, a suggested underground railroad tour, listings of underground railroad tour organizations and African-American antislavery newspapers, and indexes of sites and towns. While Blockson argues that the role of the Quakers in the underground railroad has been exaggerated, he fails to inform readers of other debates that historians have waged over the movement of the escaped slaves to freedom. Like historians who wrote a generation ago, Blockson often accepts uncritically the numerous pre- and post-Civil War legends of the underground railroad—its inflated scale, alleged organization, and white abolitionist leadership. To be sure, Blockson credits the slaves and their free black allies with playing a major role in the drama of the underground railroad. But modern scholarship interprets the underground railroad as having been more spontaneous and less systematic than Blockson suggests.⁵

Gary Collison realizes this in his fascinating Shadrach Minkins *From Fugitive Slave to Citizen* (1997). Recognizing Gara's caveat, Collison remarks that in the writings of Siebert and others on the underground railroad, "fact and legend were inextricably intertwined."⁶

In May, 1850, Minkins, a Virginia house slave, ran away from his Norfolk owner and made the perilous way by sea northward to Boston. There, thanks to support from Boston's free black community, he established himself as a waiter. Minkins' fears of recapture and being remanded to his owner were made real by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, part of the Compromise of 1850. Under the law, federal marshals were empowered to assist in returning fugitive slaves to their owners. From the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 until 1854, masters and their agents made several hundred attempts to recover their slaves throughout the North. Many fugitives had lived there for years.

Under the new Fugitive Slave Law, Minkins and other slave refugees were denied basic civil liberties (habeas corpus, trial by jury, the right of the accused to testify) accorded white citizens. The U.S. Supreme Court confirmed this in 1857 in the famous Dred Scott case. Collison falls short, however, by failing to delineate what constitutional rights blacks possessed in 1850 and the implica-

tions of their changed legal status by the new Fugitive Slave Law.

He is more successful, though, in narrating Minkins' February 1851, arrest and hearing in Boston's U.S. court room. While most fugitive slave cases occurred in the border states, Boston, because of its high abolitionist profile, was targeted by owners of fugitive slaves. During Minkins' hearing, a small band of Boston blacks broke into the courtroom, shoved the officials aside, and seized Minkins. A network of blacks spirited him through Boston's streets. Blacks not only coordinated Minkins' dramatic rescue from Boston's federal courtroom, but orchestrated the successful defense of those accused of aiding in his flight. One of the more surprising of Collison's conclusions is the number of rank-and-file white Bostonians who assisted Minkins indirectly by establishing alibis for his black rescuers.

Interestingly, when reflecting recently on his book, 35 years after *The Liberty Line* first appeared, Gara remarked:

Were I to write the book again, I would give more recognition to the [white] abolitionists, many of whom risked a great deal to help escaping slaves.

But, he insists, "the slaves themselves actually planned and carried out their runs for freedom." Gara also now interprets the underground railroad as "a nearly perfect model of nonviolent action"—an insight he missed when he first wrote the book.⁷

But Gara stands by his original thesis. Despite historical and archeological evidence that challenges the mythology of the underground railroad, he says, "elements of the legend persist, describing a well organized national network with imaginative hiding places and tunnels, and painting an oversimplified picture of helpless fugitives being carried, literally, to freedom." Local traditions and memories indeed die hard. Gara's important book remains an essential revisionist work, one that is important to keep students of the underground railroad on track.⁸

Notes

- ¹ Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961), 190.
- ² *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (5 vols.; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985-1992), 3:39.
- ³ Yacovone, "Underground Railroad," in *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, eds. Jack

- Salzman, David Lionel Smith, and Cornel West (5 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1996), 5:2701.
- ⁴ Runyon, *Delia Webster and the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).
- ⁵ Blockson, *Hippocrene Guide to The Underground Railroad* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994). In *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987), 199-200, Blockson mentions Gara and his thesis in passing.
- ⁶ Collison, *Shadrach Minkins From Fugitive Slave to Citizen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 43.
- ⁷ Gara, "Preface to the 1996 Edition," *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), xii.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, xiii. See Byron D. Fruehling and Robert H. Smith, "Subterranean Hideaways of the Underground Railroad in Ohio: An Architectural, Archaeological and Historical Critique of Local Traditions," *Ohio History*, 102 (August, 1993): 98-117.

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Book Reviews

Shadrach Minkins: From Fugitive Slave to Citizen. Gary Collison. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. 1-294.

Reviewed by Marie Tyler-McGraw, historian, National Conference of State Historic Preservation Offices, NPS History Program.

On a February morning in 1851, while Frederick Minkins was serving breakfast at the Cornhill Coffee House in Boston, he was arrested by federal officers as a fugitive slave from Norfolk. He was the first fugitive slave to be seized in New England under the new Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and his arrest drew national attention. This stringent law was a part of a package of legislation known as the Compromise of 1850 enacted to try, once more, to keep the United States united despite intense internal differences over the morality and legality of slavery. The Fugitive Slave Law was designed to please the South through a vigorous effort at recapturing runaways from slavery.

If the Congress believed that the Fugitive Slave Law would resolve the differences between North and South, it could not have been more mistaken. Shadrach Minkins was rescued by a group of Boston's black citizens from the courtroom where he was about to be transferred to the custody of slave-catcher deputies and returned to Virginia. This daring rescue was the first of many public confrontations between antislavery advocates and those who, armed with a warrant or simply a description, sought fugitives among the North's free blacks. Few Congressional acts did

more to make the evils of slavery public than the Fugitive Slave Law.

Hustled out of Boston and stopping permanently in Montreal, Shadrach Minkins became as unknown to history as he had been before the spotlight found him. This was not because informed speculation was impossible, but because such minute attention to one obscure person has only recently been a primary interest of scholars. Collison's study is useful both for the story of Shadrach Minkins and for the examples of research techniques in social history that he offers.

In this study, Gary Collison creatively used a variety of primary and secondary sources to construct the life of Minkins before and after his arrest. While a slave in Norfolk, Minkins appeared in the decennial census only as a nameless check mark in a category: male slaves between 14 and 21, for example. Vital records of births, marriages, and deaths are usually not available for slaves. But Collison was able to use the document presented to the Boston court to learn the names of Minkins' recent owners. With this as a base, Collison found the several persons who had owned Shadrach Minkins in Norfolk, Virginia.

Minkins fit the profile of the typical runaway. He had been sold several times; he had been hired-out at a specialized trade or business in a town; he was a young male. He was also in a port city where escapes by water were rather frequent. Although the details of Minkins' escape are not known, Collison was able to use William Still's *The Underground Railroad* to identify slaves in Norfolk who regularly aided fugitives and the ship's cap-

tains who would take money to transport escapees. Whether he was known to the captain or hidden by crewmen, alone or with a companion, Minkins left Norfolk on May 4, 1850 and arrived successfully in Boston.

His experience in working with the public helped him get employment at the Cornhill Coffee House and he boarded in a hotel under an assumed name. Within a few months, the Fugitive Slave Law was passed and, shortly after that, Minkins was seized at his work and carried to the Court House. Boston's black community was possibly the best organized in the United States and, while the Vigilance Committee sought legal representation for Minkins, word spread rapidly of his arrest among all African Americans.

Usually fugitives were given a brief summary hearing and hustled off to a ship, but Minkins' experienced abolitionist lawyers got a three-day reprieve. When the hearing convened, a large crowd of black men, denied access to the courtroom, waited just beyond the door and, in mid-afternoon, pried the door open and grabbed Minkins from the small force of guards. He was last seen disappearing around the corner of the street. The dramatic impact of this rescue was incalculable in both the North and the South. Those who wanted to maintain the national status quo railed against mob rule. Antislavery advocates rejoiced. Many whites who had managed not to think much about slavery were forced to consider its meaning.

Collison follows Minkins' path to Canada, carefully picking through various testimonies and

accounts, some recorded many years later, to find the ones closest to the actual occurrence.

His narrative illustrates the spontaneous contributions of many people to Minkins' escape and suggests that Minkins went to Montreal, rather than Toronto, because the Vermont Central Railroad, in which his Norfolk owner had stock, had a new direct line to that city.

In Montreal, Shadrach Minkins followed the urban entrepreneurial life he had known in Norfolk and Boston by operating several restaurants in Old Montreal. One of his first ventures was the West End Lunch; a later restaurant was called Uncle Tom's Cabin. By the end of the decade, Minkins had become a barber. Minkins was traced through the census, tax records, city directories, advertisements for his business enterprises, and the records of the Protestant cemetery where two of his children were buried. A petition in the National Archives in Ottawa revealed that Minkins was part of a group that, in 1860, requested permission to form "The Colored Company of Montreal Volunteer Rifles." Minkins died in Montreal in 1875 and the memory of the fugitive slave era faded.

In this book, Shadrach Minkins has a life, but, because he left no letters or papers, he has no voice. His one powerful decision — to run away from slavery — precipitated all the later events in his life and we must ultimately assess his hopes and plans by that act. But Collison has gathered up the many strands of Minkins' life and times and woven together a context that allows the reader to see Shadrach Minkins traveling through a perilous time to his destination as a free man.

Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol.

Nell Irvin Painter. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996; 370 pp.

Reviewed by Rachel Franklin-Weekly, historian, NPS Midwest Regional Office, Omaha, Nebraska.

Sojourner Truth, the anti-slavery crusader, is a familiar figure in American culture, but few know the real person behind the image. Through *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, Nell Irvin Painter brings the two together. The masterful work examines the life of Isabella, the slave who became

Sojourner Truth, and explores the evolution of this paragon within appropriate 19th-century contexts. Painter illustrates the cultural need and use for Truth, in Sojourner's era as well as our own.

Painter presents three versions of Truth; beginning with the life of Isabella Van Wagenen, her rebirth as Sojourner Truth, and the broad contributions of the anti-slavery crusader. Isabella, born c. 1797, lived among the Dutch in upstate New York. Hers was not the stereotypical world of southern slavery, but it held similar cruelties of physical and sexual abuse, disintegration of family, and lack of personal autonomy. Through New York's program of gradual emancipation, Isabella claimed her freedom in July 1827. Religion pro-

vided an empowering force in her life and, through faith, Isabella transformed herself into Sojourner Truth, itinerant preacher.

Isabella embraced a pentecostal strain of Methodism, known as “perfectionism,” during the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s-1830s. Sojourner Truth, born of Isabella’s faith, held a strict millenarian view of society, warning white Americans of God’s vengeance for their sins of slave-holding and racism, and decrying freedmen who relied on federal relief. Ever the skilled communicator, Truth couched her rebukes with wit and humor in messages that her audiences could accept.

Painter brings us a very personal understanding of the woman who was Sojourner Truth. She illustrates the best of the historian’s craft by piecing together a life bridging sociological cohorts that often elude analysis; the illiterate, former slaves, African Americans, women. Early biographers, essayists, and personal correspondents provide the framework on which Painter builds her documented history of this complex individual. Although illiterate, correspondence, photographs, and the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* supply Sojourner’s voice. It is that of a strong feminist crusader who railed against slavery, racism, and discrimination against women.

Nell Painter has written a much-needed biography which reveals the woman behind the symbol and explains why the symbol predominates our collective memory. Isabella’s metamorphosis was first honed by Truth, herself, and marketed through *cartes-de-visite* photographs, public appearances, and the publication of her *Narrative*. Painter carefully tracks the devolution of the famous and falsely attributed “ar’n’t I a woman” speech and fraudulent descriptions by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frances Dana Gage. Calling Sojourner Truth one of the “invented greats,” Nell Painter fashions her as a timeless Strong Black Woman, admitting that cultural iconography often is more relevant than historical scholarship.

Painter’s meticulous research and analysis deserves high praise; however, the deconstruction of Truth as cultural symbol becomes tedious and repetitive. Awe for her subject seems to hinder full analysis of Truth’s motivations despite a well-balanced presentation. Lack of documentation accounts for some of this, but Painter barely pursues some contradictions in Truth’s life, particularly her reliance on white benefactors and efforts to acquire a home and gather a family which she leaves. Perhaps by relinquishing these questions to the reader, Painter offers the greatest contribution, that of humanity, by presenting Sojourner Truth, A Person.

Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America. Wilma King. Bloomington, Indiana. Indian University Press. 1995.

Reviewed by C. James Trotman, Professor of English and Director, Frederick Douglass Institute, West Chester University, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Children and childhood have never been very far from the influential studies on slavery in the United States and indeed around the world. John Blassingame’s *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1979) and Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1977) in historical studies, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs in autobiography are just a few of the writers who have reminded us of the particularly profound human

toll enacted in chattel slavery by eliminating much of childhood from normal human development.

Nevertheless, as Wilma King points out in the introduction to this well documented, readable study, “few historians have stressed this aspect of slavery. . . because they [the children] were silent and invisible.” The author sets out to explain and outline what is important for us to see and hear in a stolen childhood. Conceptually speaking, “silence” and “invisibility” are terms which are part fact-based evidence of the world in which slaves existed and survived. But they are also metaphors, unwrapping the sounds of history and its ordinary folk so that chattel slavery’s muted voices and disfigurements can be heard and seen.

In our time, when “parenting” is very much a part of the social discourse, this compelling book moves us to imagine what it must have been like to raise offspring who could not exercise the natural child-like behavior of curiosity and play for fear that the child would be in danger or, worse, inno-

cently endanger adults. There were no limits to the danger, from children being sold, stolen, or assaulted. The injuries, both physical and psychological were virtually endless. Some of the book's important chapters illustrate the grim realities of growing up black on a southern plantation and the absence of childhood in slave community. However, while *Stolen Childhood* depicts familiar images of plantation life, the intriguing parts of the book belong to its narratives of first-hand witnesses and the resources the author assembled.

Some of the best of these individual stories of course come from classic slave narratives such as the famous 1848 story by the great patriot Frederick Douglass. Perhaps because others are not so well known, we get a renewed picture of the "bonded" children and the legalities of plantation life which further locked them into the chains of a system with no beginning and no end, with only work defining one's existence.

Even under these circumstances, King documents the timeless moral authority of parents. In 1853, for example, one father on a gold field in

California wrote back to his wife in California to "Rais your children up rite," perhaps unaware of his pun. But this book is full of documentation like this which puts more and more evidence before today's readers about the moral life of slaves themselves.

Stolen Childhood represents an important addition to our understanding of slave culture by its extensive focus on children and childhood in southern slave communities. A reading of the book leaves one with a clearer understanding of how childhood and other forms of human development were lost or distorted on southern plantations under the ideological falsehoods that slaves were not human. The book is worth reading. However, it is only a prelude to more studies. We need studies of "childhood" in the North, for example. Did one lose childhood and children in the North the same way they were lost in the South? Since labor differed, did that mean that one's status changed too? Future studies responding to these and other questions will build upon the contribution made by *Stolen Childhood*.

In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks 1700-1860. James Oliver and Lois E. Horton, Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Stephen Balyea, Re-enactor Coordinator, Centennial Celebration, Shaw/54th Massachusetts Memorial.

In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks 1700-1860, by James Oliver and Lois E. Horton, weaves a tapestry of life that we of the late-20th century have largely forgotten. The authors have breathed life into this history. It is impossible not to feel the pain and experience the frustration of those persons held in bondage by either slavery or (in the case of freed blacks) by the mores of white society.

Most interesting are the chapters dealing with the Colonial North. Crispus Attucks is the one black man of the Revolution that most people recall. Sometimes he seems to be the only black man who fought for freedom. The reader is introduced to strong black women and citizen soldiers who fought for liberty and those who stood with the British interracial bands of soldiers such as the one commanded by William Hunt. Hunt was a

man of color who worked independently as well as with the Crown forces in South Carolina. These "backcountry Tories" raided fortifications and plantations sometimes freeing slaves and indentured servants. The Continental Army had its share of black troops in integrated regiments and, in the case of Rhode Island, an all black regiment. Many slaves were able to gain their freedom at the end of the war even though slavery continued.

In Hope of Liberty takes the reader through the early years of the Republic. The populations of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia are charted in depth including information on marriage patterns and the struggle for jobs in competition with Irish immigrants. African Benevolent Societies, Prince Hall Masons, the black churches, and the abolitionist movement are included in a well-rounded and detailed narrative. Each chapter covers a catastrophic event of the 1850s and '60s. The growth of the anti-slavery movement, African-American identity, and the question of colonization are given ample treatment in the last chapters.

In Hope of Liberty is the story of real people worth remembering. It is a work that should be in the library of any one who wants to understand the foundations of slavery in America.

Frederick Douglass purchased his final home in 1877, and named it Cedar Hill. He expanded the house from 14 to 21 rooms and purchased additional land to expand its acreage. Most of the furnishings at Cedar Hill, located in Washington (Anacostia), DC, are original from Douglass' time. Numerous items from his personal possessions are on display, and the home is decorated with many reminders of his reformist career and of his fellow reformers. Douglass died here in February 1895. His second wife, Helen Pitts Douglass, preserved the home as it was when Douglass lived there. She formed the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association, which was largely responsible for maintaining the home until it became a unit of the national park system. NPS photo.



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