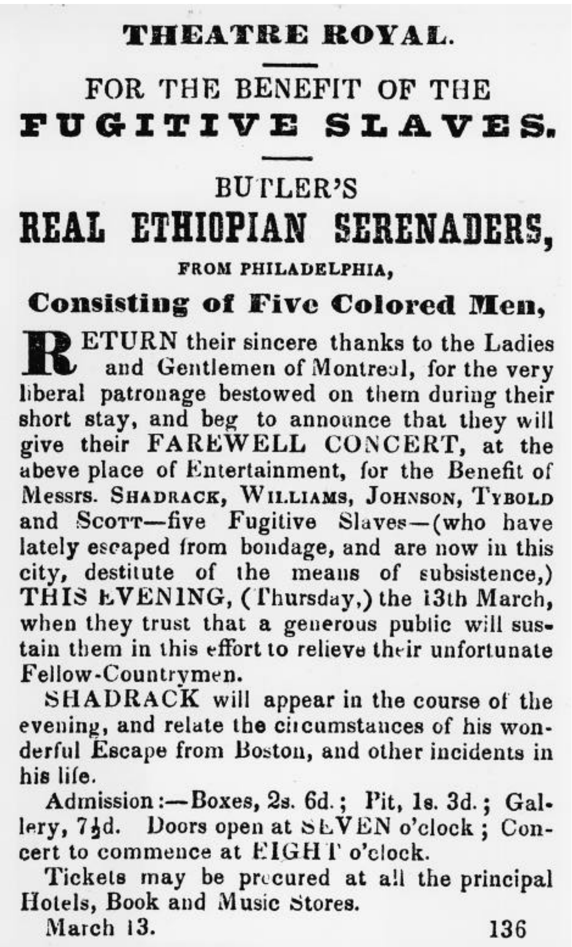
Gary Collison

Revisiting the Underground Railroad

The underground railroad, with neither capital nor revenue, has matched or exceeded the spectacular stock market performance of overground railroads in recent years. Interest in this elusive railway network has never been higher. Dozens of web sites describe its history and chart its lines. Booksellers on the web list over a hundred “underground railroad” or “fugitive slave” titles, many of them recent books for children. Chambers of commerce and visitors bureaus are actively promoting underground railroad tourism. There are motor coach tours in southern Ontario and the U.S., including the Rosa Parks Institute’s “Pathways to Freedom” tour, and home-grown museums have sprung up in Canada and the U.S. Bibliophile and amateur historian Charles Blockson is leading a drive to identify and give historical status to “stations.” As part of a new mandate, the National Park Service is making a concerted effort to develop the underground railroad component of as many of its sites as possible. A pamphlet guide to the underground railroad has already been produced and a guidebook is promised for 1998. When a proposed $80 million dollar underground railroad museum opens in Cincinnati early in the next century, the nation will have a major museum devoted to the topic and to slavery in general. Many would say that it is about time. But time for what? And why the current interest in the underground railroad?

The second question is easier to answer than the first. America is searching for ways to recognize and celebrate its multicultural heritage, and no experience of the American past is quite as attractive for this purpose as the underground railroad. It is a wonderfully hopeful story of interracial cooperation coming from a time when most Americans accepted, or at least were neutral toward, the great injustices of slavery and racial prejudice. The underground railroad put meaning back into the words “liberty” and “equality,” words that had echoed hollowly ever since the Constitution had recognized slavery. The underground railroad was America’s best early effort at multiculturalism. It brought black and white together and momentarily spanned the yawning racial divide that rendered African Americans an outcast and despised race. Underground railroad sites are naturally a source of local, regional, and national pride. They offer a hopeful vision of American experience as well as partial absolution for our nation’s sins.

The last surge of interest in the underground railroad took place in the decades following the Civil War, when the anti-slavery army was growing gray and settling into retirement. Like the present era, it was a period when America was struggling, often unsuccessfully, with its legacy of racism. A host of rambling reminiscences as well as several solid works told of blacks and whites working together to save the brave members of a derided and exploited race. The two most notable and useful 19th-century productions are William Still’s enormous compilation, based on records he kept for the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee in the mid-1850s, and Wilbur Siebert’s end-of-the century attempt at a comprehensive account. Still was the only one to truly understand that the real story was the story of the fugitives, not of their helpers.



THEATRE ROYAL.

FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE

FUGITIVE SLAVES.

BUTLER’S

REAL ETHIOPIAN SERENADERS,

FROM PHILADELPHIA,

Consisting of Five Colored Men,

RETURN their sincere thanks to the Ladies and Gentlemen of Montreal, for the very liberal patronage bestowed on them during their short stay, and beg to announce that they will give their FAREWELL CONCERT, at the above place of Entertainment, for the Benefit of Messrs. SHADRACK, WILLIAMS, JOHNSON, TYBOLD and SCOTT—five Fugitive Slaves—(who have lately escaped from bondage, and are now in this city, destitute of the means of subsistence,) THIS EVENING, (Thursday,) the 13th March, when they trust that a generous public will sustain them in this effort to relieve their unfortunate Fellow-Countrymen.

SHADRACK will appear in the course of the evening, and relate the circumstances of his wonderful Escape from Boston, and other incidents in his life.

Admission:—Boxes, 2s. 6d.; Pit, 1s. 3d.; Gallery, 7½d. Doors open at SEVEN o’clock; Concert to commence at EIGHT o’clock.

Tickets may be procured at all the principal Hotels, Book and Music Stores.

March 13. 136

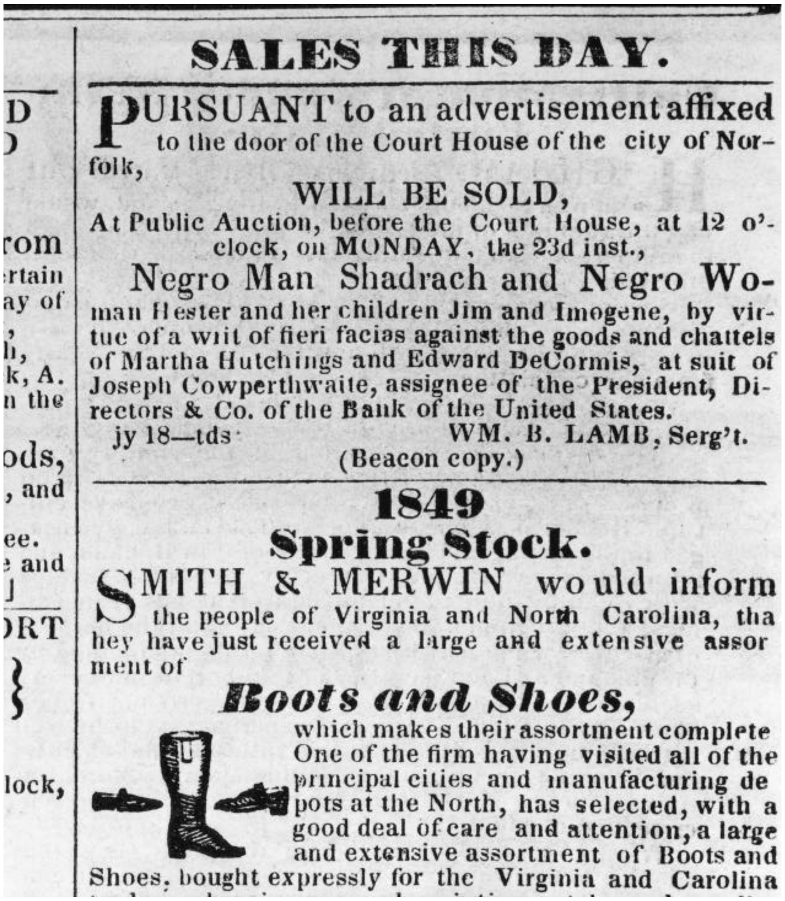
Advertisement for a benefit concert for “five Fugitive Slaves,” March, 1851, one of the few pieces of evidence that fugitive slaves were arriving in Montreal in the early 1850s. Courtesy National Archives of Canada.

In his volume, he not only gave names, origins, and dates (the year of flight, at least) of hundreds of fugitive slaves, but provided brief biographies of many of them. Siebert's was the only 19th-century attempt at a comprehensive account. Drawing on correspondence with hundreds of aging anti-slavery activists, surviving family members, newspaper accounts, and documents, he created maps of "lines" and compiled a directory of "station masters."

Unfortunately, only William Still's work is based on extensive records created during the fugitive slave era. Almost all other works are seriously flawed in several respects. Created without benefit of contemporary records and documents and set down 20, 30, 40, or more years after the actual events, dozens of these recollections drew on memories which had grown faulty or fanciful. Underground railroad memoirs generally lack specific names, dates, or corroboration. They also throw little light on African-American assistants or the fugitive slaves themselves.

Historian Larry Gara tried to set matters straight in regard to these memoirs in his 1961 *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad*. "There is probably at least a germ of truth in most of the stories," Gara concluded, but "unprovable assertions and questionable data" made it impossible in many instances to separate truth from fiction, especially at this distance in time. Acknowledging that romanticized accounts populated with secret passageways, narrow escapes, disguises, secret signals, and the like were so widespread that there was little hope that "any amount of critical scholarship will modify the legend in the popular mind," Gara set out to explore the myth-making process. "Perhaps the legend itself reveals something of the American character and aspirations, and as such is worthy of its own history," he wrote.

Norfolk, Virginia, sale notice for Shadrach Minkins, 1849. He was to escape to Boston within a year. Courtesy Library of Congress.



SALES THIS DAY.

PURSUANT to an advertisement affixed to the door of the Court House of the city of Norfolk,

WILL BE SOLD,

At Public Auction, before the Court House, at 12 o'clock, on MONDAY, the 23d inst.,

Negro Man Shadrach and Negro Woman Hester and her children Jim and Imogene, by virtue of a writ of fieri facias against the goods and chattels of Martha Hutchings and Edward DeCormis, at suit of Joseph Cowperthwaite, assignee of the President, Directors & Co. of the Bank of the United States.

jy 18—tds WM. B. LAMB, Serg't.

(Beacon copy.)

1849

Spring Stock.

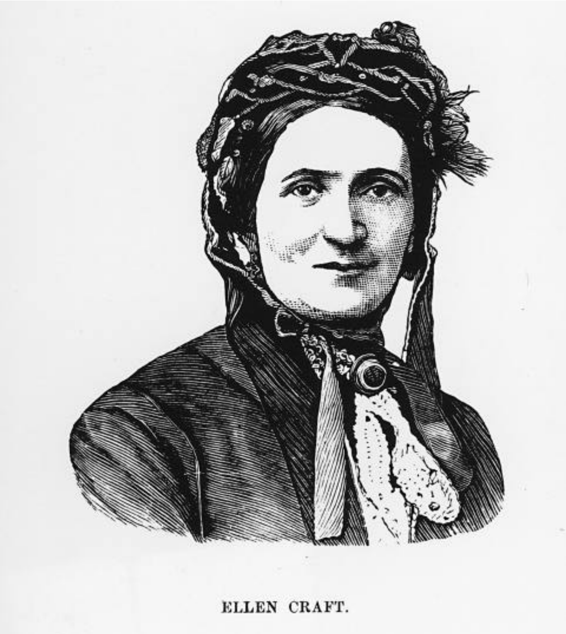
SMITH & MERWIN would inform the people of Virginia and North Carolina, tha hey have just received a large and extensive assor ment of

Boots and Shoes,

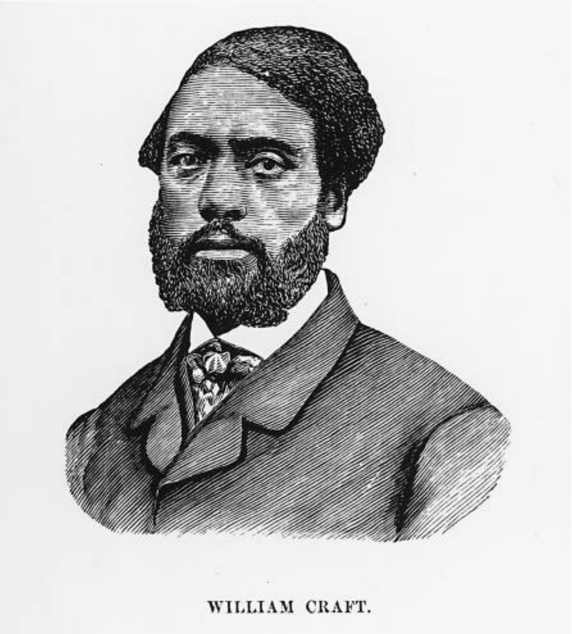
which makes their assortment complete One of the firm having visited all of the principal cities and manufacturing depots at the North, has selected, with a good deal of care and attention, a large and extensive assortment of Boots and Shoes, bought expressly for the Virginia and Carolina

In my own research into the life of Shadrach Minkins, a Norfolk, Virginia, fugitive slave rescued from the Boston Court House in 1851, again and again I encountered the intertwining fact and fiction, legend and exaggeration, that Gara uncovered. The story of Minkins' rescue by African-American Bostonians and of his flight to Canada existed in dozens of versions, some of them quite contradictory. Although Minkins' escape from Boston through the Massachusetts towns of Cambridge, Watertown, Concord, and Leominster was documented, this factual itinerary had become the nucleus for the fanciful and the fantastic. One story claimed that during his flight, Minkins attended an anti-slavery meeting disguised in women's clothes. Another recounted how neighbors flocked to share bread and water with him, transparently grafting the story of the Last Supper onto the actual events of Minkins' escape. His publicized 1851 arrival in Montreal, Canada, helped create the city's reputation as a major terminus of the underground railroad (which Harriet Beecher Stowe assisted by giving her fictional family of fugitives, George, Eliza, and Harry Harris, a Montreal home at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). Yet the Canadian census and other records debunked the legend: fewer than 100 U.S.-born African-American adults lived in Montreal at any time before 1880.

As an underground railroad story, the story of Minkins and of Montreal's other African-American refugees proved to be a flop. Clearly, the underground railroad had assisted Shadrach Minkins to reach Montreal. Presumably other African Americans arrived in Montreal through its assistance, yet it is impossible to confirm this. Research revealed nothing but vague surmises about the routes by which African Americans traveled from the Massachusetts border northward to the city. No "stations" or "station masters" emerged from research in Montreal records either. In fact, only a handful of Montreal's African Americans could be clearly identified as fugitive slaves. Some African Americans had been born free in the North, and at least one family had arrived from the South (Annapolis, Maryland) carrying free papers.



ELLEN CRAFT.



WILLIAM CRAFT.

Fugitive slaves William and Ellen Craft, of Macon, Georgia. They escaped on their own by rail, she disguised as a white master, with WIlliam Craft playing her loyal servant. (Still, Underground Railroad*).*

The history of Montreal's African-American refugees may not make a neat underground railroad tale, but it certainly makes an important story of African-American independence, determination, resourcefulness, and perseverance. Montreal records revealed that African-American refugees, some of them married to African-American wives who accompanied them but most of them single young men, found security and work in the city. Many of the small group of men took up semiskilled and small entrepreneurial occupations such as barbering, the most common male occupation. The economic and social benefits of barbering made barbers the most stable group as well. By the time the Civil War broke out, many of the unmarried men had married and had children. The signatures of fellow refugees on marriage, birth, and burial records revealed a developing pattern of friendships and shared responsibilities. In 1860, the group even petitioned to form an all-black militia company and began commemorating the August 1, 1834 emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies. Given this evidence of community and acculturation, it is hardly surprising to find that after the Civil War ended, many refused to return "home" but remained to become the foundation of Montreal's modern African-American community.

The story of Montreal's African-American refugees revealed to me that the history of the underground railroad must be multifaceted and open and, often, tentative, and it must be connected in every possible way to the larger fabric of African-American life. This means understanding the underground railroad as part of the story of African-American migrations in the 19th century. To tell that story fully, many questions about the fugitives who traveled north and their black and white assistants need to be reconsidered. Where did the fugitives and free migrants come from and where did they settle? What conditions did they encounter and how did they fare? What successes did they have, and what failures?

Unfortunately, these abiding questions are the very questions that have tended to be pushed aside by earlier works that have attempted to tell the story of the underground railroad. Many of these works inevitably threw the spotlight on white assistants, while black assistants and fugitives themselves often remained in a shadowy limbo. Fugitive slaves who followed their own homemade underground railroad to freedom in the North, and free blacks who left the South in search of equality, disappeared entirely. Even Wilbur Siebert, the professional historian among the early chroniclers, failed to search vigorously for the stories of both fugitive African Americans and their free African-American counterparts and assistants.

The mistakes of Wilbur Siebert and other 19th-century writers need not be repeated endlessly, but proper care has to be taken. This means maintaining a healthy skepticism toward early underground railroad accounts as well as pursuing the broader story simultaneously on many fronts. First and foremost, African-American testimony and evidence need to be examined thoroughly, and new leads need to be followed. Secondly, the fugitives themselves, as well as free black migrants, need to be identified and tracked in the census and vital records of births, deaths, and marriages. They may have to remain faceless, but there is no need for them to remain nameless. Census records for both the northern U.S. and Canada identify household members by race and birthplace at 10-year intervals, making it possible to track patterns of movement and settlement and to begin to document the lives of African-American free and fugitive migrants and their communities. From these records, the rich history of fugitive slaves and free African Americans in thousands of towns and cities of the North and in Buxton, Sandwich, St. Catharines, Niagara, Coburg, Toronto, Montreal, and a host of other Canadian havens can emerge.

Some help is already coming, generally from the social-history revolution in the historical profession and specifically from the genealogical revolution spurred by Alex Haley's *Roots*. The wealth of information that African-American genealogists have been discovering in the census and other public records contains invaluable pieces of a complex puzzle that, as yet, exists mostly as isolated fragments. Added to other materials, these family histories may not illuminate much of the underground railroad directly, but they will certainly help to map the African-American experience in slavery and freedom, and thus indirectly aid efforts to understand the underground railroad. Examples include a current Historical Society of York County (Pennsylvania) exhibit chronicling the "chain migration" of African-American families from Bamberg, South Carolina, to York, and back. The exhibit begins to explain the motivations of the Bambergers, including a desire for freedom and the allure of jobs, that led them from the deep South to York. It illustrates the welcome transfusion of multiculturalism into local historical societies and local history. In this case, the exhibit includes a tantalizing but unsupported reference to the role played by the underground railroad in this improbable connection between two cities, one North and one South.

The answer to the first question posed at the beginning of this article, "Time for what?" is complicated by the varied character and limited reliability of the 19th-century accounts that represent the main body of underground railroad materials. Clearly, the underground railroad and its sites should be preserved and honored. To let them disappear would be to turn our back on a precious part of our collective heritage. As a nation we need them more than ever. Yet, tending the memory of the underground railroad is hazardous. The underground railroad can be reduced to a network of shrines and a cluster of romantic stories if museums and historical societies and sites do not approach the topic armed with the historian's skepticism of source materials. Warnings such as "according to local legend," need to be employed liberally when describing many sites and actual sources named whenever they exist. What is not known needs to be explained as clearly—maybe more clearly—than what is known.

Moreover, by focussing too narrowly on underground railroad sites, too much of African-American experience can be diminished or lost entirely. But by noting local homes in which slaves lived or worked before and after the Revolution, by identifying black refugees from the South and exploring the condition of local blacks in the decades before the Civil War, and by identifying the spots on which fugitives were betrayed, seized, beaten, or murdered, the significance of an underground railroad site and the underground railroad as a whole will be enlarged. The goal should be to tell the rich African-American story by forging a multidimensional African-American history rooted in local settings and individual as well as collective experiences. Only then will the true story of the underground railroad and its part in African-American history and life finally be told.

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