

Jane Williamson

A Private Museum Confronts the Underground Railroad

Just off US Route 7, the major north-south artery on the west side of Vermont's Green Mountains, midway between Burlington and Middlebury, sits Rokeby Museum.¹ Perched on a gentle rise, the imposing Federal Style house looks over the Champlain Valley to the Adirondacks beyond. Behind the house and sheltered by it is an intact 19th-century farmyard with eight agricultural out-buildings and associated structures. An open field and acres of former orchard and pasture stretch east to the hills. It was here that the Robinsons, a remarkable family of Quakers, settled in the early days of Vermont statehood, prospered during Vermont's "golden age" of sheep farming, and, ultimately, suffered economic decline in the mid-20th century. This prosperous farm was owned by Rowland Thomas Robinson and worked by him and many hired hands, some of them African Americans escaped from bondage.

Robinson was "progressive" in both his farming practices and his social views. An outspoken Garrisonian abolitionist, he was a founder of both the Vermont and Ferrisburgh Anti-Slavery Societies, a regular reader of *The Liberator*, and a participant in the Underground Railroad. Robinson was a devout Quaker and a highly respected elder of his Meeting; his antislavery attitudes and activities were informed by his religious views.

In the decades after the Civil War, his children and especially his grandchildren passed on stories of the fugitive slaves at Rokeby. These stories, primarily oral,² reflected the prevailing mythology of the Underground Railroad: fugitives at Rokeby were in flight, they were hidden in the east chamber or "Rokeby Slave Room," the entire enterprise was laden with risk and cloaked in secrecy. When the site became a museum, this oral tradition was integrated into house tours and all programming. In the mid-1980s, this interpretation came into question when research into family documents began to suggest a very different story.

Rokeby has incredibly rich paper documentation in the form of family letters (10,000+) as well as account books, diaries, receipts, and other records. Seven letters in the Rokeby collection, to and from Rowland T. Robinson, make specific reference to fugitive slaves. From these letters, as well as other sources, we have pieced together a

picture of fugitive slaves living and working on the Rokeby farm in relative safety.

The farm operation at Rokeby was at its height during these years, and the Robinsons had quite small families, so the need for hired hands was probably constant. It is this need and the relative safety of Vermont—that brought Rokeby to mind as a potential home for certain fugitives. Johnson and Beale both tell us that Vermont is safe, but that fact is implicit in the proposal that Simon and Jeremiah will work on the farm, something that cannot be done in secret.

In 1837, Robinson wrote to Ephram Elliott, a slave owner in Perquimans County, North Carolina, on behalf of Jesse, a fugitive living at Rokeby. Jesse wanted to purchase a freedom paper, and Robinson wrote to negotiate the price. In his reply, Elliott admitted that Jesse's "situation at this time places it in his power to give me what he thinks proper...as he at this time is entirely out of my reach."³ (Elliott held firm in his request for \$300, a sum beyond Jesse's means.) Elliott clearly states that Jesse is beyond the reach of the bounty hunter, Robinson would certainly not have undertaken it if he thought it would put Jesse at risk.

Robinson knew that Vermont's Constitution of 1777 outlawed slavery outright—the first state constitution to do so. And, in case there was any doubt about its intentions, the state legislature announced in 1786 that attempts to transport fugitives out of the state would be "in open violation of the laws of the land."⁴ Always ready to confront the federal government, Vermont passed a variety of personal liberty laws in response to the Fugitive Slave Laws of 1793 and 1850. These made recapture of fugitives on Vermont soil extremely difficult, if not impossible, in the few cases that arose.⁵

Vermont's proximity to Canada and distance from the slave states was a powerful deterrent to bounty hunters. The sheer distance to be travelled—coupled with the possibility of failure—meant few slave catchers found their way to the Green Mountain state. Although research on Vermont's Underground Railroad is still being conducted,⁶ the evidence indicates that fugitives were rarely pursued inside Vermont's borders.

Also important was Vermont's infrequent economic, familial, or other ties to either slavery or the slave states. David Ludlum says that, "Of all the northeastern states Vermont was {least} suited for the employment of slave labor...An area of small farms, little capital, and hard winters, it could fit none but freemen into its economy. There arose, therefore, no vested interest to come to the defense of the 'peculiar institution' when subjected to attack by abolitionists after 1830."⁷

Slavery was subject to increasing attack by Vermont abolitionists in the 1830s and 1840s. Vermont formed the first state auxiliary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, with the help of Rowland T. Robinson, and by 1837 had more local societies—89—than any other New England state, despite its relatively smaller population.⁸

This interpretation of the Underground Railroad at Rokeby—and, by extension, Vermont—is not what visitor expect. For many, the romance of the Railroad is inextricably tied to notions of danger and secrecy. At Rokeby we have come to see the Robinson's contribution in a new light. Rather than providing mere shelter for a night, Rowland and Rachel Robinson took former slaves into their home, gave them employment on the farm, taught them to read and write, and gave them the chance to start life anew. Fugitive slaves escaped with little more than their own courage and determination; at some point they had to stop running and begin new lives as free men and women. This was the opportunity offered by the Robinsons and Rokeby.

References

- ¹ "Rokeby" was the name the Robinsons gave to their family home and farm. The private Museum was named for it.
- ² Robinson's son Rowland Evans Robinson was a popular Vermont author at the turn of the century.

He wrote one or two Underground Railroad stories that include the usual themes of pursuit, hiding, and the need for extreme secrecy. These have generally been assumed to be factual, given his family background, even though he was a child during the 1830s and 1840s (he was born in 1833), and his tales are not supported by the historical record.

- ³ Joseph Beale to Rowland T. Robinson, July 12, 1844, Rokeby Collection.
- ⁴ David Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*. New York, 1939, p. 135.
- ⁵ Marion Gleason McDougall says in *Fugitive Slaves, 1619-1865* (New York, 1967, p 36), that "The risk and trouble of transporting slaves across free states were so great, that up to 1850, we seldom hear of kidnapping cases, and rarely of the capture of a genuine fugitive in the New England states."
- ⁶ A Vermont historian, Ray Zirblis, was, at the time of this writing (September 1996) just finishing a major research report on the Underground Railroad in the state.
- ⁷ Ludlum, 135.
- ⁸ Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860*, New York, harper & Brothers, 1960, p. 67.

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The John Brown Fort African-Americans' Civil War Monument

The armory engine house, which later became known as the John Brown Fort, is the structure in which Brown and his men took refuge during their failed attempt to capture Harpers Ferry. While John Brown's raid failed, his efforts were revered by abolitionists and he became a martyr in the fight against slavery.

Today, the John Brown fort is a well preserved structure that sits in the heart of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. It is well situated in the landscape and it can easily be seen by visitors who enter the downtown district of the park. Its placement seems intentional, positioned in the midst of a monumental landscape. Without knowing the structure's history one can easily believe that its appearance and symbolic meaning is timeless, rooted in the abolitionist cause for equal

rights. But this is not necessarily the case. The structure was not always revered by the majority of Americans. It has taken refuge at several oases in its 150-year existence, for display and for reverence, only to be moved again.

After the Civil War, the structure stood neglected on the abandoned armory grounds in Harpers Ferry. It was transformed into a major tourist attraction, as visiting Civil War sites became a major American leisure time activity beginning in the late 19th century. In 1892, the fort's owner sold it to the John Brown Fort Company for display near the Chicago exposition. The exhibit opened with only 10 days left in the exposition. With only 10 paid admissions at 50 cents a piece, the company lost about \$60,000 on this venture. The John Brown Fort Company deserted the structure.¹