

CROSSING THE “DARK LINE”: FUGITIVE SLAVES AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN LOUISVILLE AND NORTH-CENTRAL KENTUCKY

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The Underground Railroad (UGRR) was an important part of the larger history of self-emancipatory efforts initiated by enslaved African-Americans and was particularly important along the Ohio River border between slavery and freedom. After the American Revolution, state laws permitted slavery and the U. S. Constitution protected it in the southern states. In particular, article IV. section 2. and the 1793 fugitive slave act gave slaveholders the right to pursue fugitives into “free” territory—the status of “slave” remained attached to the fugitive throughout the United States. Those who aided fugitives were likewise criminalized—even more severely after the passage of the fugitive slave act of 1850. Consequently, the Underground Railroad “was a form of combined defiance of law . . . and the unconstitutional but logical refusal of several thousand people to acknowledge

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that they owed any regard to slavery.”¹ This willingness to break the law implied not only commitment but the conviction, which many white abolitionists did not share, that the United States could and should become a multiracial democracy. For these reasons, the UGRR stands, even today, as one of the most powerful and sustained multiracial human-rights movements in American and world history.²

The types of assistance most valuable to fugitive slaves at various points in their journey determined the range of corresponding roles available to Underground Railroad workers. The most important of these roles—and the purposes they served—were: field agents, who provided information regarding where to go, who to contact, how to travel, and signs and signals along possible routes; station-keepers, who provided shelter and provisions for fugitives; and conductors, who guided or transported fugitives through slave or free territory.³

After the War of 1812, escapes that depended to some appreciable extent on the assistance of other enslaved or free African-Americans became commonplace. Many enslaved African-Americans had some limited opportunity to travel and interact with other blacks, slave and free, as a consequence of being hired out or being given

¹ Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967; originally published in 1898), viii-ix.

² Charles Blockson, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987); William M. Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad, As It Was Conducted by the Antislavery League* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969; originally published in 1915); Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1876); Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1961); National Historic Landmarks Survey, *Underground Railroad Resources in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of the Interior, 1998); Siebert, *Underground Railroad*; William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1970; originally published in 1872); Vincent B. Thompson, *The Making of the African Diaspora in the Americas, 1441-1900* (New York: Longman, 1987), 373-76.

³ Siebert, *Underground Railroad*, 87.

other work that removed them from the isolation of rural slavery. Information gleaned from such experiences could be shared, which often provided the crucial facts needed by those contemplating escape.

Money played a crucial role as well. It was possible for enslaved African-Americans to escape slavery with "empty pockets." However, most escapes did cost something—for food, clothing, a hiding place, weapons, transportation, forged "free papers," and other necessities. Where aid might not be offered freely, it could sometimes be secured at a price.⁴ In other words, one was often required to pay to ride the Underground Railroad.

Beyond monetary rewards for slave-catchers, there were severe penalties for whites and African-Americans convicted of "assisting" or "enticing slaves to escape" or "harboring fugitive slaves."⁵ Those who willingly risked imprisonment or worse by defying the law seldom acted through highly structured organizations but rather through a loosely structured network. Some people played decidedly passive roles, such as setting signals and refusing to divulge information. Others committed their lives to clandestine groups, such as the Antislavery League that operated in south-central Indiana in the decade before the Civil War.⁶ Moreover, available evidence suggests that, while northern antislavery groups with Underground Railroad involvement may have been multiracial in their composition, UGRR activity in or near slave territory was based in racially separate networks whose members coordinated, collaborated, and cooperated with one another.⁷

⁴ Stanley Harold, "Freeing the Weems Family: A New Look at the Underground Railroad," *Civil War History* 52 (1996): 289-306.

⁵ R.C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Arno Press, 1969; originally published in 1883), 381-87.

⁶ Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 9-28.

⁷ Still, *The Underground Railroad*, xi-xv.

In fact, on the “slave side” of the Ohio River, free African-Americans, through their small settlements and communities, may have managed the only true UGRR networks. Through these networks fugitive slaves were “passed on” to the more organized white or multi-racial networks that existed from central Indiana and Ohio northward. In contrast, it may be more accurate to describe white UGRR workers in the border region as either largely anonymous local persons motivated by personal conviction or other interests or as agents dispatched into the south by more formally structured networks based in free territory.

Of course, from the standpoint of the fugitive seeking assistance, technical considerations related to origin and organizational affiliation, if any, were wholly irrelevant. Not so with some modern historians, however, who have argued that if the Underground Railroad was not a highly and formally organized affair, then it, in essence, did not exist at all outside the imaginations of many aging men and women in the late 1800s and early 1900s who were often determined to romanticize the past and often their role in it.⁸ Perhaps simply considering the Underground Railroad a “movement” rather than an organization is more faithful to the historical evidence.

Given this background, the “invisible” UGRR south of the “Dark Line” of the Ohio River was complemented by a more visible antislavery presence to the north—creating in Kentucky unique opportunities for escape as well as unique constraints. As Coleman conceded:

Even though slavery in Kentucky was known and described as being of the mildest form that existed anywhere in the United States, freedom and liberty were often the bondman’s uppermost thoughts . . . For a

⁸ Gara, *Liberty Line*, 1-18.

distance of over six hundred miles the Ohio River bounded Kentucky on the north, separating her from the free states of Ohio, Illinois and Indiana. Once the slaves crossed the Ohio River, they were not only in free territory, but they had placed that river between themselves and their pursuers. Most important, however, they were in a region where, for the most part, they could find citizens who sympathized with them and were eager to help them.⁹

THE UNDERGROUND LEADERSHIP
OF THE UGRR IN THE LOUISVILLE REGION

For reasons as much geographic as demographic, the role of Louisville was critical both to the passage of fugitive slaves and to the operations of the UGRR in the trans-Appalachian west. The city was the only major urban center between Baltimore and St. Louis on the "slave side" of the border. Louisville was also home to the largest free-black community in Kentucky with smaller free-black settlements in southern Indiana.¹⁰ As Cockrum concluded on the basis of his own experience:

There were probably more negroes crossed over the Ohio river and two or three places in front of Louisville than any place else from the mouth of the Wabash to Cincinnati. The reason for this was that the three good sized cities at the Falls furnished a good hiding place for runaways among the colored

⁹ J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1940), 218.

¹⁰ Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1-14, 244-45.

people. Those crossing at these places were all conveyed to Wayne county, Indiana, and thence on to the Lake.¹¹

This study also reveals a rich vein of evidence, both circumstantial and substantive, that the people most instrumental in establishing and leading the free-black community of Louisville were also major figures in—if not the moving forces behind—UGRR activity in the region. Thus, understanding the setting, structure, and leadership of this community is critical to understanding the operations of the UGRR, not only in the region but in the state itself.

The population of enslaved African-Americans in Louisville and Jefferson County peaked by 1850 and remained virtually unchanged thereafter. In contrast, the free African-American population of the region continued to grow. To illustrate, in 1830, there were only 232 free persons of color in Louisville and another 29 in Jefferson County. However, by 1860, there were 1,917 free African-Americans in the city and 90 in the county. Viewed somewhat differently, the number of free people of color increased by 669 percent, from 5.4 percent of the total black population (city and county) in 1830 to 16.3 percent in 1860—with virtually all of this growth occurring within the city limits of Louisville.¹²

Growth in this segment of the African-American population, coupled with the presence of smaller but relatively stable free-black communities in the Indiana towns facing Louisville—in 1860 there were 757 African-Americans in Floyd County (New Albany) and another 520 in Clark County (Jeffersonville and Clarksville)—made

¹¹ Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 21.

¹² Curry, *Free Black*, 244-45; J. Blaine Hudson, "Slavery in Early Louisville and Jefferson County, Kentucky, 1780-1812," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 73 (1999): 253; *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), 8-15.

the Louisville region a major refuge and crossing point for fugitive slaves." However, free people of color were an anomaly—people who were black but not enslaved. As such, they were objects of both fear and scorn, as reflected in the memorable language of a consistently racist, occasionally incoherent, but profoundly revealing, 1835 Louisville newspaper editorial entitled, "Local Evils":

We are overrun with free negroes. In certain parts of our town throngs of them may be seen at any time—and most of them have no ostensible means of obtaining a living. They lounge about through the day, and most subsist by stealing, or receiving stolen articles from slaves at night. Frequently, they are so bold as to occupy the side-walks in groups, and compel passengers to turn out and walk round them. Their impudence naturally attracts the attention of slaves, and necessarily becomes contagious. In addition to this, free negroes are teaching night schools. Slaves are their pupils and, to the extent of the tuition fees, are induced, in most instances, to rob their masters or employers . . . and our city protectors seem to be, as yet, as ignorant of the fact, as if they were the guardians of Constantinople . . . We are not alarmists—but we do believe prompt measures to drive the vagrant negroes from among us, to prevent servants from hiring their own time, and to subject the entire slave population to rules sufficiently rigid to preserve order and insure perfect subordination, are necessary to our security.¹⁴

¹³ Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 21; Emma Lou Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana: A Study of a Minority* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1957), 41-45.

¹⁴ *Louisville Public Advertiser*, 30 November 1835.

Against the backdrop of such attitudes, the Louisville free-black community underwent a fateful transformation around 1830—a transformation in which two persons figured most prominently. One was Shelton Morris (1806-1889). He and his family crossed the boundary between slavery and freedom by virtue of the will of Richard Morris of Louisa County, Virginia, entered in Jefferson County records on 2 April 1820. The implied biological relationship, of the “Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings” variety, is rather obvious.¹⁵

Shelton Morris, as the eldest of the six Morris progeny, assumed responsibility for his younger brothers, John and Alexander—both of whom were apprenticed as barbers. Morris, who was also a barber, invested his small inheritance in his barbershop, a bathhouse, and in real estate.¹⁶

The other person was Washington Spradling, Sr. (1802-1868). He and his family were freed by the will (2 September 1814) of William Spradling which also implied a biological relationship.¹⁷ Like Morris, Spradling was also a barber and used his inheritance to speculate in real estate. Significantly, the Morris and Spradling families soon became linked by marriage when Shelton Morris married Evalina Spradling, Washington’s younger sister, in 1828.¹⁸

William H. Gibson, Sr., a free person of color who migrated to Louisville from Maryland in June 1847, remembered both Morris and Spradling. By the time Gibson arrived in Louisville, Morris had “closed out business and moved to Cincinnati, O., in the forties, being accused of voting for Gen. Harrison for President; from

¹⁵ Jefferson County Will Book, 2: 146.

¹⁶ Ruth Morris Graham, *The Saga of the Morris Family* (Columbus, Georgia: Brentwood Christian Communications, 1984), 15-19; Ernestine G. Lucas, *Wider Windows to the Past: African-American History from a Family Perspective* (Decorah, Iowa: Anundsen Publishing Company, 1995), 88-97.

¹⁷ Jefferson County Will Book, 2: 17 (signed 12 September 1814).

¹⁸ Jefferson County Marriage Register Book, 2: 18.

Cincinnati he moved to Xenia or Wilberforce, where he engaged in farming.” Still, Morris maintained his ties to the community through his brothers, who inherited some of his local business interests, and the children of his first marriage, Horace and Benjamin, who returned to Louisville in the 1850s and were among its most influential leaders (particularly Horace Morris) through the next generation and beyond.¹⁹

Gibson’s memories of Spradling were based more firmly on first-hand knowledge and, consequently, were far more vivid. He observed, for example:

Washington Spradling was the leading colored man in business and the largest real estate holder. He was a barber by trade, but made his mark as a businessman by trading and brokerage, in connection with his shaving. His mode of making money consisted in buying and leasing lots in different parts of the city and building and moving frame cottages upon those lots. He also built several brick business houses on Third Street. Mr. Spradling had many peculiarities, his dress was very common, as he exhibited no pride in that direction. He loved to converse on law, and, though he was uneducated, was considered one of the best lawyers to plan or prepare a case for the court. He was very successful, and nearly every colored person who was in trouble (more or less) first consulted Washington Spradling; he selected the lawyer and prepared the case²⁰

¹⁹ William H. Gibson, Sr., *Historical Sketches of the Progress of the Colored Race in Louisville, Kentucky* (Louisville, 1897), 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

As noted, although Morris eventually left Louisville, Spradling remained and became the first African-American—probably in the state of Kentucky—to amass significant wealth. His wealth was based largely on appreciation of the value of his land holdings as Louisville grew into a major city and, by 1860, approached \$100,000. For example, the unimproved land that Spradling and Morris bought cheap in the late 1820s and early 1830s became the eastern section of the Russell neighborhood and parts of the “east end” near downtown Louisville.²¹

Important beyond his obvious business acumen, however, was how he used his wealth. Free African-Americans, such as Morris, Spradling, David Straws, Henry Cozzens, and others, were responsible for forty-eight, or 9.4 percent, of all emancipation actions in antebellum Louisville and Jefferson County. While the vast majority of slaves owned and manumitted by African-Americans were family members of the owner, “the same process used to free family members could also be employed to assist other African-Americans in their pursuit of freedom.”²² In this respect, purchasing and then emancipating enslaved African-Americans was one of the more important, but lesser known, strategies of the antislavery movement and was often attempted before slaves risked escape and UGRR operatives risked assisting them outside the law. That this strategy sought to circumvent rather than challenge slavery raised legitimate questions regarding both its ultimate efficacy and its ethical validity but made little difference to those seeking freedom.²³ Further, freedom

²¹ Marion B. Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation*, volume 1 of *A History of Blacks in Kentucky* (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 112-13; Henry C. Weeden, *Weeden's History of the Colored People of Louisville* (Louisville, 1897), 54.

²² J. Blaine Hudson, *A Guide to African-Americans in the Records of Antebellum Louisville and Jefferson County Kentucky: Court Order Minutes and Wills, with Special Reference to Slave Emancipations* (Louisville: Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives, 1998), 43, 49.

²³ *Ibid.*, 49; Harold, “Freeing the Weems Family,” 289-306.

through legal manumission was often attractive to enslaved African-Americans as it allowed them to remain in or near familiar territory—and family and friends—rather than face the certain prospect of separation through flight.

In theory it was simple to put this strategy into operation. Upon reaching terms of agreement, an enslaved African-American would “borrow” funds from a free person of color. The funds would be applied (by the free person of color) to the purchase of the slave. The new “owner” would then emancipate the slave with the understanding that the loan would be repaid, usually in installments over time. A number of emancipation actions document the existence of this loophole in slave law that allowed for the evolution of a legal Underground Railroad channel in the midst of slavery and indicate how this channel was employed by community leaders. For example, deeds of emancipation from Shelton Morris to Savira,²⁴ from Washington Spradling to Maud²⁵ and to Fanny Hedges,²⁶ from David Straws to Claiborne and John.²⁷ When interviewed in 1863 by the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, Spradling stated that he had bought and freed thirty-three enslaved Louisvillians. Some had repaid him but most had not, and he was still owed a total of \$3,337.50.²⁸

Thus two of the consequences of the steady growth of Louisville’s free African-American population were, on one hand, the emergence of a class of free-black property-owners, personified by Morris and Spradling, and, on the other hand, African-Americans who used the

²⁴ Jefferson County Court Order Minutes, Book 17: 129 (5 November 1835).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19: 532 (11 March 1850).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19: 551 (13 May 1850).

²⁸ Interview with Washington Spradling, 26 November 1863 in American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, 1863.

law and their own resources to assist slaves to freedom. Those who belonged to one group usually belonged to the other.

Equally intriguing, although more difficult to document fully, is the strong probability that, apart from using these legal paths to freedom, Spradling and other free African-Americans were deeply involved in the movement of enslaved African-Americans along the illegal path as well. For example, when Morris moved to Cincinnati, he went into business with Michael Clark, the husband of his sister Eliza and the African-American son of Louisville's William Clark (of the Lewis and Clark Expedition). Morris worked as a barber in Cincinnati and on the steamboats that plied the Ohio and Mississippi rivers before moving to Wilberforce in central Ohio. Both he and his oldest son Horace were active in the antislavery movement in Ohio and became important UGRR links between Louisville and Cincinnati.²⁹

Spradling died in 1868, but when Wilbur Siebert was researching his major study of the Underground Railroad in the 1890s, he found former fugitives who, a generation after Spradling's death, recalled that, "At Louisville, Kentucky, Wash Spradley, a shrewd negro, was instrumental in helping many of his enslaved brethren out of bondage."³⁰ Not only was he a leader among African-Americans, but his work as a barber brought him into regular contact with whites—a role well suited to UGRR information exchange, planning, and coordination.

Finally, the development of churches and other civic and fraternal organizations in Louisville after 1830 created new institutional structures and produced new leaders. There is some evidence that these organizations, particularly the Masons (in the 1850s) and the

²⁹ Lucas, *Wider Windows*, 94-95; Weeden, *Weeden's History*, 35.

³⁰ Siebert, *The Underground Railroad*, 151.

independent A.M.E. churches—Quinn Chapel A.M.E., the “Abolition Church”—may have provided aid to fugitives as well.”

“ASSISTING” AND “ENTICING SLAVES TO ESCAPE”:
FIELD AGENTS AND CONDUCTORS

Under Kentucky law, “assisting” or “enticing slaves to escape” was a criminal offense often committed by persons associated with the UGRR. “Assisting slaves to escape” encompassed the full range of acts by which free people might help fugitives through and from slave territory. The use of “enticing” in the wording of the law implies, of course, that enslaved African-Americans—who were generally content with bondage—could be tempted to escape by presumably nefarious characters.³¹ In other words, had there been no enticement, there would have been no escapes. The records pertaining to Kentucky and the Louisville region suggest, however, that enslaved African-Americans required no enticement but did seek, value, and use information and other forms of assistance in planning and executing escapes. Those who provided such information, described previously as “field agents,” did so at great risk and were directly involved in the initial and often the later phases of many escapes.

Even in early Kentucky, enslaved African-Americans were often assisted in their flight toward freedom by other African-Americans and sometimes by whites. Nothing yet existed that was analogous to

³¹ Thornbrough, *Negro in Indiana*, 42-43; Iris L. Cook, “Underground Railroad in Southern Indiana,” unpublished notes, around 1936, for Federal Writers’ Project given to author in 1999 by Mrs. Cook’s grandniece; Ben Hershberg, “Hoosier is Tracking Underground Railroad,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 30 March 1998; Pam Peters, “A History of the Afro-American Community in New Albany,” unpublished manuscript, 1998, pp. 3-7.

³² William Littell, *The Statute Law of Kentucky* (5 vols.; Frankfort, 1819), 2: 5-6; Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation*, 61-62.

the UGRR, but the antislavery sentiments of the Revolutionary era persisted in the thinking of a minority of whites and the *Kentucky Gazette* reported occasionally the type of "aided" escape normally associated with the later antebellum period. For example, Robert Clarke of Clark County advertised for "a Negro Boy, about seventeen or eighteen years old...his name Britain, but originally called Ned... the said boy was some weeks past taken up by a gentleman on the North side of the Ohio River, and made his escape...."³³

Along with whites who sometimes aided fugitive slaves, there were whites who fled with them, whites who were not benefactors motivated by antislavery ideals but rather whites who were fellow fugitives and "co-conspirators." Typically, whites willing to make common cause with African-Americans were those who had little or no "stake" in the system of wealth and privilege evolving in early Kentucky, such as bound apprentices and criminals. Thus, much as strong bonds existed between African-Americans and Native Americans under certain conditions, interracial class-alliances often existed between African-Americans and poor whites—under certain conditions. These alliances were rare and were usually short-lived, but the fugitive slave advertisements referring to whites and blacks escaping together substantiate that they were forged occasionally.³⁴

Numerous examples of "enticement" can be found in newspapers and court records from the generation before the Civil War. One of the more interesting concerns the following incident. On 14 September 1829, Henly escaped from Abraham Hite of Louisville. Four horses and two saddles also disappeared on the same night. The advertisement continued:

³³ *Kentucky Gazette*, 30 July 1796.

³⁴ J. Blaine Hudson, "References to Slavery in Early Kentucky Newspapers: The *Kentucky Gazette*, 1787-1805", manuscript forthcoming in *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*.

There were two white men on foot, seen on Monday, at different times, in company with the negro, and in the evening, about dusk, were seen lurking about the farm, who, it is presumed, stole the horses and enticed the negro away. A reward of 150 dollars will be paid for detecting the rogues and securing the negro and horses, so that I get them again, or 100 dollars for the negro alone.³⁵

Assistance from other African-Americans was often reported. On 22 May 1831, an unnamed "likely negro woman . . . far advanced in pregnancy" ran away from Robert Nicholson in Louisville, to whom she had been hired-out by her owner, J. W. Thornberry. The advertisement stated further that:

Circumstances make it probable she has been conveyed away by some free negro, with whom she may attempt to pass as his wife, and possibly she may have free papers with her, as I understand she learned to read and write in Louisville.³⁶

Needless to add, the circumstances of her pregnancy, having to flee late in her pregnancy, already having "connections" in Louisville, and having become literate, all make this a case that leaves many tantalizingly suggestive questions unanswered and probably unanswerable.

After 1830 and particularly after 1850, fugitives were often assisted and directed more systematically. The "field agents" and "conductors" who rendered such aid were the most vulnerable of all UGRR workers. As one with firsthand experience noted:

³⁵ *Louisville Public Advertiser*, 10 October 1829.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8 July 1831.

The most hazardous work . . . was on the south side of the Ohio river, and in many cases far to the south . . . those who were regarded as the most careful men were sent into that section and only those who volunteered . . . They took up many occupations such as would bring them into contact with the negroes . . . After gaining thorough knowledge, they would select an intelligent negro and approach him on the subject of gaining his freedom . . . Finally, it would be suggested that the negro work for pay, by going after night to those likely to be glad of an opportunity of escaping from bondage.³⁷

As suggested above, the success of the agent often depended on his finding an African-American, usually enslaved in the area, who was willing to work as his assistant or partner. Ultimately, a few escapes would be arranged in the surrounding region and, before too much suspicion was aroused, the white agent would move on and the African-American agent would escape himself with his family.³⁸

The agents themselves might work as peddlers, itinerant preachers, geologists, and the like. For example, Thomas Brown and his family moved from Cincinnati to Henderson County in 1850. Brown's wife operated a "millinery shop" and Brown peddled his wares in the countryside from a small horse-drawn wagon. The wagon was "heavily curtained," ostensibly "to protect his goods from the weather." However, Brown used his peddling as a means to identify enslaved African-Americans interested in reaching free territory, dispensing information, and often transporting fugitives in his wagon. Unfortunately, after slave escapes escalated steeply in Daviess, Union, and Hancock counties in 1854, Brown was arrested

³⁷ Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 24-25.

³⁸ Ibid., 24-25; Thornbrough, *Negro in Indiana*, 41-42.

and sentenced to the penitentiary in April 1855.³⁹ Unlike Brown, who operated in close proximity to free territory, other agents often ventured deep into the south. For example, in 1844 Ben D. Harris of Madison County, Alabama, advertised for the return of Mary, who escaped from him a few days after he had hired her. Harris believed that Mary would traverse Kentucky en route to free territory as she had been “decoyed off by some villain.”⁴⁰

Free people of color were often accused of “assisting” or “enticing” their enslaved brethren to escape. For example, on 7 January 1854, two cases were heard in Louisville Police Court. In the first, “Sam Able, a free man of color” was found not guilty “of the charge of enticing Peter, a slave of R. G. Anderson.”⁴¹ In the second:

Sarah Lucas, a free woman of color, sometimes a resident of New Albany and occasionally of this city, was arraigned on the charge of attempting to entice away Amanda, a yellow woman, slave of Ben J. Adams. They had been to New Albany, and Amanda registered her name over there as Mary Jackson at the clerk’s office, representing themselves as from Ohio. The court concluded to waive the felony in the case and hold Sarah Lucas to bail for her good behavior.⁴²

The tendency to describe fugitives in less than flattering terms was carried to extremes when describing those who assisted them. For example, in November 1855 Betty Foy, described as “dark, fat and forty,” was tried for assisting in the escape of her son.⁴³ In July 1856, a brief news item appeared, noting that, “A huge free negro was

³⁹ Coleman, *Slavery Times*, 215-16.

⁴⁰ *Louisville Daily Courier*, 3 June 1844.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 9 January 1854.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5 November 1855.

arrested Saturday on the suspicion of tampering with slaves”⁴⁴ Similarly, Charles Smith, who was convicted of “attempting to run off a slave girl in the employ of Ben Rust,” was described as bearing “a very suspicious character.”⁴⁵ A few months later, another “sinister figure” was brought to court:

William Gray was arrested by Officer Seay as a suspected felon. The chief of police testified that he consorts with free negroes and is said to be part negro himself, and was suspicioned for being concerned in an attempt to run off slaves, and was in some way connected with the murder of Mullen on the wharf.⁴⁶

UGRR activity was necessarily regional, not local. In the north-central Kentucky region, there were many linkages between UGRR workers in Louisville, the Indiana towns facing Louisville across the Ohio, and small towns on either side of the river in both directions. In October 1855, another and more complex case was heard in Louisville Police Court over the course of several days. The facts of the case were particularly revealing and warrant being quoted at length as they illuminate the complex “underground” network in the region:

John C. Long, the crippled dyer and scourer, was again on examination on the charge of aiding a slave of Mrs. Butler to run away, and obtaining a gold watch from the slave, knowing the same to have been stolen . . . Mrs. Pierce Butler testified that her boy, or man Alfred, ran away about the 5th of September . . . Suspicion, through the indefatigable exertions of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 14 July 1856.

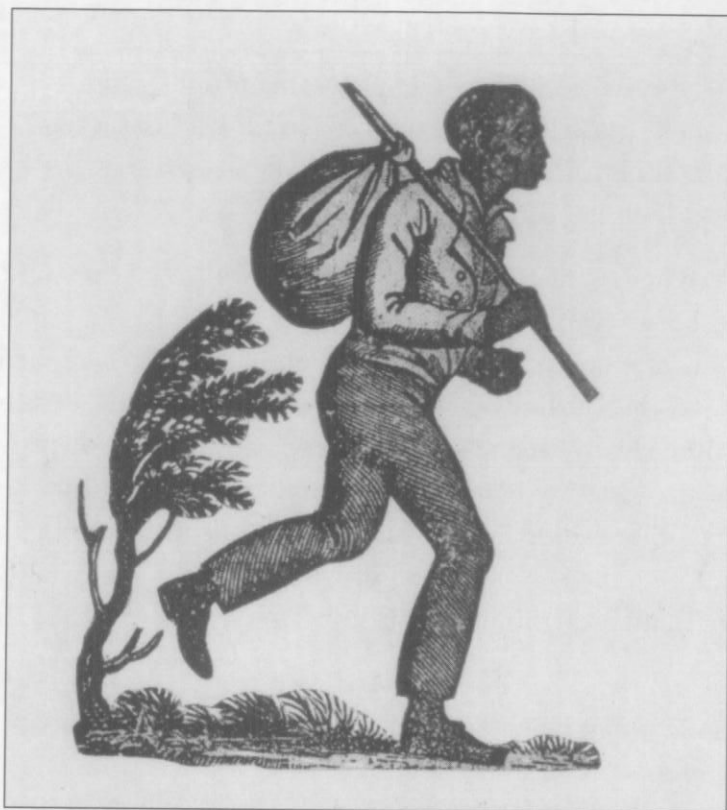
⁴⁵ Ibid., 26 January 1858.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 7 October 1856.



The Runaway
Filson Historical Society

Officer John Lamborn, assisted by John Williams, had fastened upon Long, and on examining his house . . . a cigar box filled with old letters was found. The wife of Long stated that these were old letters and papers of her first husband, but Mrs. B., glancing her eye over one or two of them, saw that they were dated, one from Westport, and others from Chillicothe, Ohio. The letters from Chillicothe were written by a brother of Long's, asking about some one, evidently a



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runaway, requiring a description, &c, in order that the writer could have free papers made out for him by the county clerk of the district. On the back of the letter was written in pencil a full and most accurate description of the boy Alfred.”

Alfred had, in fact, escaped, reached Canada, and then returned (or had been returned) to Louisville. However the gold watch was obtained, its value was used to defray Alfred’s expenses on the journey to Canada. The link between Alfred, Long, and Long’s brother in Chillicothe clearly facilitated this escape and reflects, interestingly, how the mail was used in its planning and coordination.

As another example, Chapman Harris, one of the most important figures in the UGRR at Madison, Indiana,⁴⁸ was apprehended in Louisville and brought into police court in November 1856. The report stated:

Chapman Harris, a huge free negro, black as the ace of spades, was found in this city by Officer Ray under very suspicious circumstances. He arrested him, and, on searching him, he was found to be armed with a deadly bowie knife, a pistol, lucifer matches and powder and ball in abundance. The fellow is a preacher from some where back of Madison, Ind., where he is said to be an active member of the Freedom party. Though professing to be a preacher, he is certainly guilty of lying to the officer, and lied again by saying he came down on a boat, the Emma Dean, to land at Charleston Landing, Ind. but the high wind Friday

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7, 12, 16 October 1855.

⁴⁸ Diane P. Coons, “Underground Railroad Crossings at Madison, Indiana,” unpublished manuscript, 1998, Department of Pan-African Studies, University of Louisville.

blew the boat over to this shore . . . He was merely held to bail in \$200 for his good behavior 6 months, and that he shall leave the state in five minutes."

In a region where whites were accustomed to the presence of both free and enslaved African-Americans, deception could often be used to effect slave escapes. For example, on 13 August 1856 an article appeared entitled, "An Abolitionist and Runaway Captured," stating:

A man named Ed. Williams was arrested on the ferry boat yesterday with a negro belonging to Mr. J. W. Ferris of Memphis Tenn. They had travelled all the way by stage, the expenses being paid by the negro, who was flush with funds. After the arrest Williams made a full confession, and both were lodged in jail to await a requisition from the Governor of Tennessee.⁴⁹

The following 1857 Louisville Police Court case offers yet another illustration of the effectiveness of deception:

John Knight, said to be a free man of color, was in arrest on the charge of running off a slave of Mr. L. Thompson . . . His name was John William, and he stated that some time last July he met the accused on Brook Street. The latter had a couple of white-wash buckets and a brush, and asked witness if he wanted a job. He said yes, and then the other told him to come along with him, and they went across the river together on the ferry, took the plank road to New Albany, and there he staid all night under a beech tree.

⁴⁹ *Louisville Daily Courier*, 25 November 1856.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 14 August 1856.

The next morning they went to the depot, the witness having the whitewash buckets. The accused then went away somewhere, and in the meantime a white man came along and arrested the witness and brought him over to Kentucky. The accused is a slave of Dr. Knight's, but being of no account was turned loose over in Indiana to root for himself.⁵¹

Although UGRR networks created by African-Americans in the south and border states could operate with or without the involvement of whites, the reverse was seldom true. Collaborative, although informal, interracial relationships often evolved. Two other police-court cases serve as useful examples. On 1 February 1858:

Keziah Carter, a free-woman of color, and an old one at that, was in arrest on the charge of trying to run off Harriet, a slave of Hugh Brent. Said Harriet is old enough to stay at home and would assuredly starve in a free state, said old Keziah had been talking to her old man about aiding slaves to runaway. She was telling him, and her too, that she knew a white man who was engaged in getting slaves off. His name was Grant and he makes it his business to run off slaves. . . .⁵²

In the second case, two white men, Samuel Cole and James Armstrong, were accused of "attempting to run off Jack, a slave of William C. Kidd." The court record is revealing:

that notorious rascal, Alex Hatfield, a free negro gave information that these men were to meet at his house to wait for Jack, who was to run off with him and his

⁵¹ Ibid., 5 October 1857.

⁵² Ibid., 5 February 1858.

wife. Alex made all the arrangements . . . The white men assured Hatfield, who pretended to fear that he would be caught, that they could get off safe and clear. They would cross the river at Second street in a skiff, and then the road would be plain and easy.⁵³

Cole and Armstrong denied any wrongdoing and claimed that Hatfield got them drunk. The judge was unconvinced and had them returned to jail.⁵⁴ This is merely one of many cases in which Alex Hatfield appears—many attesting to his “rascality” (e.g., for drunkenness) but others to his strange propensity for “being around” fugitive slaves.

At times, information alone was sufficient enticement. As an illustration, Alexander M. Ross was a young abolitionist who ventured into Kentucky, or what he termed “the land of darkness and slavery.” Upon reaching the Bardstown area, he learned that the wife of a particular enslaved African-American had been sold to someone in Covington. Ross approached the distraught husband and informed him that, if he could reach Cincinnati, Ohio, by a certain time and find the house of a certain free person of color, arrangements would then be made for the rest of the northward journey, which included the rescue of his wife. Although how the fugitive reached Cincinnati is not stated, he did, in fact, arrive, and he and his wife did reach Canada.⁵⁵

Many of the lawsuits for the recovery of the value of lost slave property referred to assistance received by the fugitives. For example, *Edwards v. Vail* (April 1830) involved a suit for the value of a “negro” who came on board from Jeffersonville, Indiana, with a white

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 22 September 1856.

⁵⁵ Alexander M. Ross, *Recollections and Experiences of an Abolitionist From 1855 to 1865* (Toronto, 1875), 110-13.

woman, and left the boat upon its arrival in Cincinnati.⁵⁶ Similarly, in *Graham v. Strader* (October 1844), Graham sued “to recover damages for the unauthorized transportation of his three slaves, Reuben, Henry, and George, on board the steamboat *Pike* from Louisville to Cincinnati, whence they escaped to Canada. The slaves were described as:

three yellow men between nineteen and twenty-three years of age, well trained as dining room servants and as scientific musicians. Complainant allowed the slaves to go to Louisville to live with Williams, a free man of color, to learn music, and afterwards gave them written permission to go to the State of Ohio . . . it appears that the boys, while under the care of Williams, were with him once and perhaps twice in Madison, Indiana, and two or three times in New Albany, Indiana, playing as musicians.⁵⁷

In *Tunstall v. Sutton* (September 1846), Tunstall sued for the payment of a reward for capturing “George, a negro boy slave about six years old, who had been taken from the owners in Kentucky by his father and conveyed to Cincinnati.”⁵⁸

UGRR workers in Kentucky were often forced to escape across the Ohio River themselves. One of the more notorious Kentucky cases, *Kentucky v. Dennison* (December 1860) involved the denial of:

A motion . . . for a rule on the Governor of Ohio to show cause why a mandamus should not be issued by this court, commanding him to cause Willis Lago, a

⁵⁶ Helen T. Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* (Washington, D.C., 1926), 315.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 365-68.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 426.

fugitive from justice, to be delivered up, to be removed to Kentucky . . . The grand jury returned indictment against Lago, free man of color, of the crime of assisting a slave to escape . . . The Governor of Ohio refused to arrest or deliver up the fugitive. The motion was denied.⁵⁹

Even after the Civil War, attempts to recover damages for lost slave property (and to oppose the concept, if not the fact, of emancipation) continued. For example, at issue in *Commonwealth v. Palmer* (October 1866) was a felony indictment against General John Palmer, commander of the Department of Kentucky (stationed at Louisville) for "aiding Ellen, a slave of Womack, to escape from her owner in Kentucky to the State of Indiana . . . the slave went to Jeffersonville, Indiana, under cover of a passport issued for that purpose." The court found Palmer guilty and added, in a statement that reflects Kentucky attitudes following the Civil War:

President Lincoln's proclamation of emancipation, whatever else might be said of it, excepted Kentucky from its operation, and applied exclusively to the seceding States. That portentous document, therefore afforded no semblance of pretext for a claim to freedom by the slaves of Kentucky. The unlawful intermeddling of General Palmer inciting a spirit of servile insurrection, and encouraging escapes from servitude, by assuring military protection, invited slaves to crowd Camp Nelson and other encampments of his army . . . until but few were left at home, and farmers generally, and many residents of cities and towns, were suddenly left without their

⁵⁹ Ibid., 441-42.

accustomed and necessary help, the long-established system of labor terribly disturbed, and citizens excited almost to revolution.⁶⁰

Finally, in one of the most poignant accounts, a fugitive slave family, determined not to risk betrayal by asking for any assistance, was rescued, ultimately, by the UGRR. The husband Henry Morehead escaped from bondage around 1854 and was interviewed in Canada in 1856, indicating that he had been “born and bred a slave” in Louisville, but that:

I left slavery a little more than a year ago. I brought my wife and three children with me, and had not enough to bring us through. . . I left because they were about selling my wife and children to the South. I would rather have followed them to the grave, than to see them go down . . . so I took them and started for Canada. I was pursued—my owners watched for me in a free State, but, to their sad disappointment, I took another road. A hundred miles further on, I saw my advertisements again offering \$500 for me and my family . . . I was longer on the road than I should have been without my burden: one child was nine months old, one two years old and one four. The weather was cold and my feet were frostbitten, as I gave my wife my socks to pull on over her shoes. With all the sufferings of the frost and the fatigues of travel, it was not so bad as the effects of slavery.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ibid., 451-52.

⁶¹ Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: Or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Boston, 1856), 180-81.

Although Morehead eventually “took the Underground railroad” to complete his journey to Canada, his escape was unaided until its final phases—a tribute to his courage and that of his family.

HARBORING FUGITIVES: STATION-KEEPERS

Harboring fugitive slaves was another act in defiance of state and federal law that facilitated the operations of the UGRR. Whether in private urban residences, in rural farmhouses, barns, other outbuildings, or even in caves and other natural hiding places, fugitives sought and were given sanctuary by sympathetic whites and African-Americans. Louisville combined the advantages of a major river crossing point and the site of a larger free-black community, with smaller free-black settlements across the river. Thus, as with the “crime” of “enticing slaves to escape,” there are numerous examples of the “crime,” actual or implied, of “harboring fugitive slaves” in Louisville and the surrounding region.

As early as the 1820s, when Louisville was a very small town with a very small free-black community, both fugitives and those who wished to overtake them understood these attractions. For example, in July 1822, Udorah “ran away, or was stolen or coaxed away” from George J. Johnson, to whom she had been hired, of Newcastle, Kentucky. Since her mother was enslaved in Louisville, her owner supposed that thirteen-year-old Udorah would find her way into the town and had “made diligent inquiry respecting her”—to no avail.⁶² On 25 January 1823, Ellick ran away from John Hagan of Washington County. Hagan stated that Ellick “was raised by a Mr. Lightfoot, near Louisville, who sold him to Mr. Richard Payne of Washington County, and it is probable he will endeavor to make his way back to

⁶² *Louisville Public Advertiser*, 2 November 1822.

Louisville and cross the Ohio River.”⁶³

On 17 September 1825, Reuben escaped from Francis Taliaferro of Oldham County. Taliaferro offered a fifty-dollar reward and added that Reuben, somewhat paradoxically:

is an artful fellow, calculated to do a great deal of mischief, by roguishness, which he is much addicted to. He has a wife at Mr. Fitzhugh Thorton’s in this county and, no doubt, will make the principal part of his stay in that neighborhood, being uncommonly fond of his family.”⁶⁴

On 1 June 1830, Lewis fled the farm of Samuel Lawless near Louisville. Lewis was believed to be hiding “in or about Louisville, where his mother and sisters live.”⁶⁵ In a particularly revealing advertisement, William Talbut of Louisville sought the return of Charlotte, a sixteen-year-old young woman. Talbut stated:

I purchased her in April, 1829, of Mr. Wm. Godwin, of Maryland, and it is my opinion, founded upon good circumstantial authority, that she has been persuaded off, or concealed in this city by some white person. She was raised in the State of Maryland, and it is probable that she will endeavor to make her way back—perhaps by the aid of some white man.”⁶⁶

Similarly, on 27 February 1831 William escaped from M. Langhorne of Louisville, who stated that “it is probable he is lurking about the city.”⁶⁷ Hiram, who ran away from George Triplett of Spencer

⁶³ Ibid., 19 February 1823.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 25 September 1825.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 16 July 1830.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 21 March 1831.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

County in September 1831, was also believed bound in the direction of Louisville because “his mother lives somewhere about” the city.⁶⁸ Sealy, who was “quite likely” thirteen or fourteen years old, escaped from James Prather of Louisville on 12 December 1831. She, too, was believed “lurking somewhere about the City.”⁶⁹ Sam fled Henry Robb of Jefferson County on 27 May 1832, and Robb believed that, “It is probable that he is in the City of Louisville.”⁷⁰

Perhaps most important with respect to these early examples is that they antedate both the development of the UGRR and the expansion of Louisville into a major city. Who harbored these fugitives cannot be known, only that they sought and quite probably received sanctuary for some period of time.

The reputation of Louisville and the surrounding area for being “helpful” to fugitives was secure by the 1840s. When Melinda escaped from John Price of Louisville on 9 July 1845, he assumed that “she is lurking or concealed in the city.”⁷¹ When Harriet “ran away from Mrs. E. Castleman of Louisville on New Year’s Day” of 1851, it was assumed that she was “secreted in this city.”⁷² Similarly, when John “ran away from Henry Norton, residing 6 miles South of Louisville, on Saturday, 27th September,” the advertisement stated that, “He is probably somewhere in Louisville.”⁷³

By the 1850s, criminal charges were occasionally brought against those accused of this “crime.” For example, on 2 June 1855, Stephen and Fannie Latapie, both free people of color, were charged with “harboring runaway slaves.” Testimony was heard on 13 July to the effect that:

⁶⁸ Ibid., 28 September 1831.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 16 December 1831.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 1 June 1832.

⁷¹ *Louisville Daily Journal*, 12 July 1845.

⁷² *Louisville Daily Democrat*, 25 February 1851.

⁷³ Ibid., 13 October 1851.

This was an indictment for harboring and concealing a slave of Mr. Hornsby, of Shelby County, Ky., in June past. To this indictment the defendant plead [*sic*] not guilty. The evidence produced substantiated that the negro girl was concealed in the hackhouse of the defendant and was there found by her owner, but it was not perfectly clear that defendant knew she was a runaway, and had harbored her for the purpose of concealing her from her master . . . the Jury found him not guilty.⁷⁴

Whether Latapie was actually guilty or not, William Jeter, tried the same day on the same charge, did not fare as well. Jeter was indicted:

for harboring and attempting to conceal a slave, the property of Col. George Young, of Shelby County, Ky . . . The proof was conclusive that he had taken the slave to an obscure portion of the city and there obtained temporary lodging for her, but subsequently removed her to his own home . . . He was found guilty and sent to the Penitentiary for the term of three years.⁷⁵

In a rather amusing but illuminating case, a white woman, Mrs. Amanda Hedges, perhaps "protested too much" and had "that indomitable police officer," Wash Ragan, arrested "on the charge of entering her house illegally"; however, "Mr. R. had done so in his capacity as an officer, and he proved that Mrs. H. harbored negroes and other individuals of not the brightest color . . . The case was contin-

⁷⁴ *Louisville Daily Courier*, 14 July 1855.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

ued.”⁷⁶

Although most “stations” were temporary “stops” on the UGRR, free African-American communities, such as that in Louisville, afforded fugitives the rare opportunity to “hide in plain view”—to “blend in,” at least for awhile, with free African-Americans and often urban slaves who were faceless and invisible to whites. Thus, in many respects, the free African-American community itself was a “station” of sorts, where many people were capable of making various arrangements for the short- or long-term concealment of fugitives. This was yet another reason why a sizable free-black community, while such an asset to African-Americans, was considered a “problem,” if not a menace, by whites.⁷⁷

To address this perceived problem, laws were enacted to prohibit the “migration” of free African-Americans into the state and to establish formidable barriers to manumission, such as posting bonds and requiring that freed blacks leave the state.⁷⁸ To enforce these laws, there were periodic police roundups to purge Louisville’s free African-American community of free people of color with no legal right to reside in the state. Those caught and found guilty of “illegal migration” were given the option of posting bond to leave the state or of being “hired-out” (which meant being sold into virtual slavery) by an agent of the court. Of course, these roundups were also an effective way of identifying fugitive slaves who, if apprehended, were jailed and either returned to their owners or sold.⁷⁹

As some references indicate, sympathetic whites often harbored fugitives as well. Many did so out of conviction. However, in a city as large and complex as Louisville in the 1850s, the “color-line” was not

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ *Louisville Public Advertiser*, 30 November 1835.

⁷⁸ Julie E.K. Walker, “The Legal Status of Free Blacks in Early Kentucky, 1792-1825,” *Quarterly* 57(1983): 382-95.

⁷⁹ Hudson, *A Guide to African-Americans*, 37.

always as well defined as most would assume. Specifically, poor and working-class whites (particularly the Irish and German immigrants who flooded Louisville beginning in the 1840s), free African-Americans, and hired-out slaves often lived and worked in close proximity. Furthermore, because local ordinances prohibited African-Americans from engaging in a range of business activities, white businesses developed, such as groceries, grog-shops, etc., that catered to and often depended on trade with African-Americans, even when such trade was illegal.⁸⁰ This “blurring of the color line” created several opportunities for fugitives to secure sanctuary. For example, if they had money or “friends” with money, they could simply rent a room.

SLAVE ESCAPES AND INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Although a clearly defined “color-line” existed in American law, relations between African-Americans and whites could not be limited or proscribed so easily by statutes or even the deeply embedded prejudices of the majority of white Americans. Particularly in urban areas, people interacted across racial and status lines—enslaved African-Americans interacted with whites and free African-Americans who, in turn, interacted with one another.⁸¹ In other words, the color line was more a construct than a fixed barrier, and many of the interactions across racial and status lines produced relationships that violated, to varying degrees, the accepted racial norms of antebellum American society.

Some of these were “business” relationships. Others were “personal” in the sense that the African-American party was viewed and

⁸⁰ *A Collection of Acts of Virginia and Kentucky Relative to Louisville and Portland* (Louisville, 1839), 69, 128.

⁸¹ Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 143-79.

treated as a "person," an "equal," not as a "servant" or an "object" unequal in power and value. In contrast to relations between whites and favored slaves which had the character of relations between pet-owners and beloved pets, when truly human relationships developed, it became difficult to think of someone as a person, equal to oneself, and then treat that person as chattel. Thus, when such relationships did become personal—and often sexual as well—the color line would often be breached, and either the law or the accepted standards of racial etiquette, or both, would be violated.

On 20 February 1856, an article entitled "Elopement Extraordinary" appeared in the local press that illustrated how such relationships often led to slave escapes. The article stated:

Yesterday between the hours of breakfast and dinner, a runaway couple were captured in New Albany. One of them was a likely black woman, the cook of Mr. Newland, in this city, and the other a white gentleman from the East somewhere, bearing the name of Elisha Hillyer. It was a regular love match . . . The particulars of this romantic negro stealing affair are these: The white man was deeply enamoured of the black cook, and, no doubt, persuaded her to run away, having before hand provided a couple of through tickets over the New Albany railroad to Michigan City . . . The woman, after getting breakfast for her master's family as usual, packed up her duds, took the omnibus to Portland, where she joined the white man, and together they crossed the river on the ferry boat. The woman was closely veiled, and excited the suspicion of Mr. Conner, the ferryman, who noticed her pretty closely, and after she entered the ladies' room on the ferry boat, saw the man go up to her, raise her veil, and imprint a sweet kiss upon her

pouting lips, when to the great surprise of the ferry master, he discovered the woman to be a negro.

The woman, twenty-two-year-old Mary Jane, was arrested and returned to her owner. Hillyer, described elsewhere as a "big fellow, and good looking, with bushy whiskers," escaped but was soon captured hiding in a New Albany cellar.⁸²

Similarly, in a July 1857 case in which a personal relationship is suggested, J. R. Sprinkle, "a light complexioned and chunky man . . . a genteel looking fellow from Memphis" was arrested on the charge of attempting to "runoff" Caroline, an enslaved woman from the Federal Hill (My Old Kentucky Home) plantation of Bardstown. Along with a police court report, an accompanying article entitled, "Negro Stealing" stated that:

Officer Bligh last evening arrested a chap who is suspicioned very strongly for an attempt to steal away a negro woman, the property of Dr. Buchanan. The man was seen before 5 o'clock yesterday morning at the Jeffersonville ferry landing, on this side of the river, in close confab with the woman. One of the officers of the ferry boat sent for a watchman, and the woman was taken to jail. The man dodged off, but was subsequently taken.

The ferryman, Henry Cooney, "was convinced from their talk and actions that they met by agreement, for the purpose of traveling through Indiana together."⁸³

In an even more memorable case, on 27 August 1857, "George Cope, a grocer, on the corner of Chestnut and Preston streets, was taken into custody on a charge of assisting a mulatto slave of Mr.

⁸² *Louisville Daily Courier*, 21-22 February 1856.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 7, 10 July 1857.

Wetherly to escape to Canada." Rachael, the "mulatto slave," escaped in October 1856 and, after "receiving information," Wetherly traced and followed her to Chatham, an African-American settlement in Ontario, Canada, across from Detroit. Because Rachael was no longer in the United States, the fugitive slave law did not apply, and Wetherly could not claim his "lost property." He did obtain (from Rachael), however, two letters from Cope. One was addressed to Mr. Gilchrist, Chatham, Canada West, and read, in part:

From the relationship existing between Rachael and myself, I feel afraid that some unfair means will be adopted against me to cause a separation, and then she will lose the only and best friend she ever had or ever will have again . . . I think that I shall be in your city towards the latter end of this month, and then, sir, I can thank you in person for your kindness . . .

Cope added in a postscript that he was "on the rack of excitement about that dear girl . . . She is my wife before High heaven and our sacred vows are registered there before God."⁸⁴

In a follow-up article, the Mr. Gilchrist to whom Cope addressed his first letter was identified as a free negro or mulatto, well known here as a sort of steward on the river. It would be well enough for the police to have an eye, if not a hand, on him on his next visit. We heard of five runaways last week, including a likely woman with two children.⁸⁵

The second letter was addressed to Rachael herself:

⁸⁴ Ibid., 29 August 1857.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 31 August 1857.

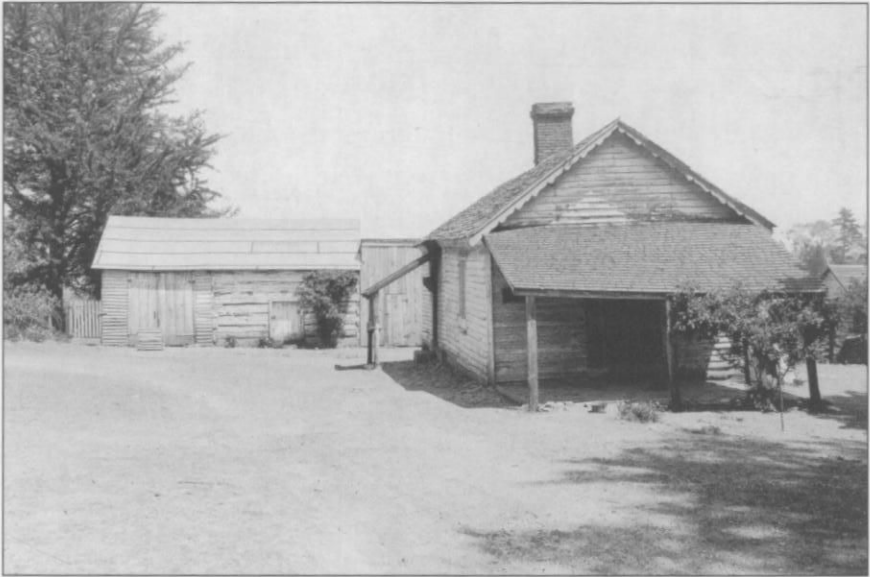


Slave quarters at Springfield, home of Zachary Taylor
Filson Historical Society

My Own Dear Rachael: — It afforded me a great deal of pleasure to hear that you have arrived safe and in good health at Chatham, and God grant that it may prove a pleasant and happy home for you and me both, when I come out, and hope that the time will be short so I can see my dear wife Rachael, as I am so very lonely without you . . .

Cope was hastening to sell his business and remove to Canada, but the discovery of these letters brought his plans to naught. In the end, he was jailed for having committed a felony, and Wetherly, who could not recover Rachael, sued to recover her value from Cope, which resulted in the attachment of Cope's property.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Ibid., 29 August 1857.



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⁸⁶ Ibid., 29 August 1857.

COORDINATED ESCAPES

Many assisted slave escapes entailed elaborate planning and sustained effort on the part of both fugitives and UGRR operatives. The records of such escapes reveal the existence of an extensive local and regional network that could be called into service under favorable circumstances. It was this degree of coordination and collaboration that distinguished escapes with true UGRR involvement from those that were either unaided or nearly so.

In the Louisville region, coordination within the city or with UGRR workers in the region facilitated crossing the Ohio River and the movement of fugitives through Indiana and Ohio. This coordination was not always evident and, certainly, was seldom reported. However, there are several important accounts that offer a revealing glimpse at the inner workings of the UGRR network. For example, on 31 December 1849, John Cain, "a free man of color was arraigned for enticing Mary, a slave girl of Mr. Thomas J. Read's, to attempt to runaway." Testimony in Louisville Police Court included the following:

The girl stated that Cain had been talking to her on the streets about freedom; and said that he could take her clear off without any danger . . . She also said that a colored man by the name of Whiting brought her to town and she stopped at Cain's house until he could take her across the river.

However, Edward Trueman, another fugitive, who had crossed the Ohio River on the ferry and had been captured in Jeffersonville, also testified that "Cain had been in the habit of running off slaves and

had succeeded in many instances." Trueman's interrogation produced the information that led the police to Cain's house, where they found Mary.⁸⁷

While Mary's point of origin is not mentioned, it is clear that there were means by which she reached Louisville with Whiting, found sanctuary in Louisville (possibly with Cain), was able to cross the Ohio River (one or both with Cain)—and probably made a connection in Jeffersonville. Had Trueman not been arrested, Mary might never have been discovered.

New Albany, Indiana, was one of the most important crossing points and sanctuaries on the northern side of the Ohio River as indicated in an 1855 article entitled, "Daring Attempt of Five Negroes to Runaway." The newspaper account stated that in May 1855:

Sunday night a bold and systematic, though unsuccessful attempt was made by five slaves in this city to runaway . . . Henry, a very likely negro man belonging to Mrs. Cocke, who had been permitted to hire his own time and had been the same as a free man for years . . . Violette and her two children, slaves of Mr. Jack . . . and a slave man the property of Judge Nicholas.

Violette was a "favorite servant" and Henry's wife. Henry had a "room on Mr. Jack's property." Their escape was well planned, as:

The whole party had taken a hack about midnight, first providing themselves with all their good clothing and a supply of eatables. The negro of Judge Nicholas acted as hackman, and with his load proceeded to

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1 January 1850.

Portland, or rather below the lower ferry, designing to cross the river in a skiff.

Unfortunately, they attracted "the attention of the Portland watchmen" and all were arrested, except for Henry. However:

At this juncture, a skiff was seen rapidly nearing the Kentucky shore, apparently from New Albany. The occupant became alarmed and fled back again to the other side of the river before any effort could be made to catch him.

Violette, her children, and the other fugitive were all lodged in jail. Henry remained at large and was able to return to his "room" unobserved, where "a pair of boots, all bespattered with mud, were found. . . ."⁸⁸

This foiled escape attempt required considerable planning and coordination. Supplies and a hack had to be obtained. Arrangements with someone in New Albany were necessary as were communications between parties on both sides of the river throughout the enterprise. In other words, Henry, Violette and company had to arrange to reach a certain point, "below the lower ferry," on a certain day and at a certain time. Someone from New Albany had to secure a skiff and cross the river on the same day, at the same time, and, presumably, someone would be waiting to receive the fugitives and conceal them in New Albany and then "pass them on" to the north or east.

The lower ferry (which connected Portland with New Albany below the Falls of the Ohio) was located at the foot, more or less, of Thirty-Sixth Street in present-day Louisville. North of the foot of present-day Market Street was an early subdivision, "West Louisville." However, between the western limits of Portland, which was

⁸⁸ Ibid., 15 May 1855.

essentially the lower ferry, and "West Louisville" was a large tract of forested and rather marshy land, including much of the Shawnee golf course and the northwestern riverfront area of the city today. This area figured as a crossing and hiding place for fugitives on several occasions. For example, in October 1855:

We learn that one of two slaves who escaped from Mr. Arterburn a few nights since, was discovered by a hunter Saturday evening in a hollow log, well provisioned, in the wards of lower Portland. The hunter had a double barrelled gun and ordered the negro to come out and surrender. He came out promptly, and just as promptly seized the gun from his capturer and started off in the direction of Salt river, with the speed of a quarter horse, carrying the gun with him. The hunter returned to the city, gave the alarm, and soon after a posse went in pursuit of the runaway, with what success we did not learn.⁸⁹

Again, in 1857, another news account focused on an escape that made use of this section of the county:

Four Negro men suddenly disappeared from the city, and it was soon ascertained that they had runaway. Liberal rewards were offered for their apprehension, and on Saturday they were captured over in Indiana, between Hanover and Madison. . . . A couple of white men, it was ascertained, had taken them across the river below the falls to New Albany, where they were received by a third white man, who planned their escape. Two of the runaways belonged to parties in

⁸⁹ Ibid., 1 October 1855.

Bardstown, and the others to Warren Mitchell and Mr. Ballard of this city.⁹⁰

Both primary source evidence and the recollections of elderly African-Americans interviewed in the 1930s for the Federal Writers' Project attest to the importance of this crossing point. Thornbrough adds yet another dimension:

Slaves also crossed the river at New Albany and Jeffersonville . . . In Portland, on the outskirts of Louisville, was a colored Masonic lodge, where many plans for aiding the escapees were hatched. After being carried across the Ohio in skiffs, the slaves took refuge with Negro families on the Indiana side⁹¹

There were few African-Americans, slave or free, in Portland, and no record of an African-American Masonic lodge—at least as a physical structure—in or near Portland during this period. However, this northwestern section of Jefferson County, where the Ohio River bends to the south, was largely below the floodplain and, consequently, was sparsely settled. Thus, this unusual area had the significant advantages of being forested and marshy, relatively close to local African-American centers of population, and directly across the river from New Albany. Given these factors, it is reasonable to assume that the Masons, organized in Louisville in the 1850s, may well have used this unfrequented area as a meeting place and possibly a staging area for escapes.

The regional UGRR network extended both east and west of Louisville. The following article, reprinted in the *Louisville Daily Courier* from the *Harrison County Democrat* [Corydon, Indiana], is

⁹⁰ Ibid., 14 September 1857.

⁹¹ Thornbrough, *Negro in Indiana*, 42-43.

an example of how this network was structured in the Brandenburg, Kentucky, area:

A month or two ago, Mr. H. A. Ditto, of Brandenburg, lost a negro boy, Charles, and it is charged that a negro of this place, Oswald Wright, assisted him in his escape and carried him as far as Brownstown, in this State, where he took the cars for parts unknown . . . Oswald, at Brownstown, made a confidante of a fellow by the name of Johnson . . . Johnson states that he had a conversation with Oswald, and learned from him that he had two white confederates, David Bell and Charles Bell, his son, who reside on the Indiana side of the Ohio, opposite Brandenburg . . . Johnson says he went to the house of the Bells, and after laying around for several days, drinking whisky and telling big tales about running off negroes . . . Bell confessed that he had assisted the boy Charles in getting off, and . . . expressed a willingness to assist in procuring the liberty of Charles' wife. This is Johnson's statement. He said he communicated these facts to Mr. Ditto, whereupon a posse of Kentuckians crossed the river and kidnapped and carried the two Bells across the river together with the negro Oswald, and lodged them in the Brandenburg jail.⁹²

An equally well organized network existed east of Louisville in the Trimble County and Madison, Indiana, area. Significant research is being conducted on the UGRR in this area, where both free people of color and antislavery whites in Madison assisted hundreds of

⁹² *Louisville Daily Courier*, 19 November 1857.

fugitives through the 1840s and 1850s.” One of the keys to understanding the UGRR in this region was found in the recollections of one of its key operatives, Freman Anderson, as an elderly man. In September 1891, Anderson was interviewed at his home in Hanover, Indiana, and recounted how, as a slave in Trimble County, he guided fugitives to the Ohio River and ferried them across “the Dark Line” to Indiana “where they would be taken charge of by underground agents and ultimately conducted to Canada.” His recollections are both colorful and fascinating.

For example, he recalled spending the night in the top of a tree with a fugitive man and wife from Bourbon County with bloodhounds and slave-catchers passing underneath. He spoke of how he himself killed a slave-catcher whose dogs had killed a runaway young woman from Lexington. Anderson even recalled meeting John Brown in Madison before the raid on Harper’s Ferry (October 1859) where Brown dissuaded him and other discontented African-Americans from launching an uprising until Brown’s general revolt had begun.

While some portions of Anderson’s reminiscences may seem to be inventions or exaggerations of a old man, Anderson mentions several people, places, and events that can be verified, lending greater credibility to his account. For example, he identifies quite accurately the African-American leadership of the UGRR in the area—Simon Gray, Elijah Anderson, Chapman Harris, John R. Forcen, and Mason Thompson. He also mentions the arrest and incarceration of Elijah Anderson in the 1850s for aiding several fugitive slaves. Each of these statements can be confirmed through other sources.⁹⁴

⁹³ Coons, “Underground Railroad Crossings,” 12-14.

⁹⁴ *Indianapolis Freeman*, 31 October 1891; Gwendolyn J. Crenshaw, *Bury Me in a Free Land: The Abolitionist Movement in Indiana, 1816-1865* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1993), 31; *Antislavery History of Jefferson County* (Madison, Indiana: Jefferson County Historical Society, 1998), 1-4.

Peters's research on the UGRR in New Albany and southern Indiana is also producing important insights—an example of which concerns the relationship between the UGRR and the actual railroad in the 1850s.⁹⁵ In September 1855, this relationship stirred up considerable controversy in Louisville when one of the conductors on the New Albany and Salem Railroad, a Mr. James Haynes (or Hines), was accused of “endeavoring to assist in the escape of a runaway slave.” The article presented the following facts:

Officer Meeker and another New Albany officer had arrested the runaway negro at the cars; that the man acknowledged he was a runaway; that some Abolitionist and a big negro attempted to rescue him, and that he succeeded in getting away from the officers and getting in the cars; that the officers attempted to re-arrest him, when Conductor Hines, backed by the Abolitionists, got on the platform, declared that the cars were theirs and the officers should not enter it, and forcibly prevented them from doing so; that they heard the big negro, who had assisted in his release, give the fugitive directions how to proceed in order to escape successfully, and that the cars moved off with the runaway on board.*

Officials of the New Albany and Salem Railroad assured irate Louisvillians that “employees of the N. A. & S. R. will not be permitted to aid runaway negroes to escape.” However, they defended the conductor, prompting the following response:

⁹⁵ Peters, “Digest of Newspaper References to the Underground Railroad in New Albany, Indiana,” unpublished paper, 1998, p. 3.

⁹⁶ *Louisville Daily Courier*, 10 September 1855.

We know there are plenty of nigger stealers about New Albany, for the repeated escapes of slaves from here, recently, abundantly shows it. No one will be more rejoiced than ourself to hear that the N. A. & S. R. has relieved itself from all suspicion of having employees who aid negroes to escape from their masters.⁹⁷

Thus, it is possible to imagine the UGRR in the Louisville region as two-layered and largely nonhierarchical structures, one black and one white, on both sides of the Ohio River—connected at several specific points by pairs or small groups of participants. To ensure “plausible deniability” and minimize the vulnerability to incrimination, few persons probably knew the identity of more than a handful of their co-conspirators.

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD SITES

As discussed previously, available documents indicate that fugitive slaves, with or without assistance, crossed the Ohio River on the Jeffersonville ferry in downtown Louisville (above the Falls) and on the New Albany ferry from western Portland to New Albany (below the Falls). The historical record also mentions the area west of Portland as a favored rendezvous point for clandestine escapes, and there is suggestive evidence of similar crossing points at other less well guarded locations along the river east and west of the city. These sites are or should become readily identifiable.

More problematic is the task of identifying specific sanctuaries—houses and other structures—occupied by UGRR workers or used by fugitives. To understand why this is so, one must first

⁹⁷ Ibid., 13 September 1855.

understand something of the evolution of the community through which fugitives passed and by which they were often harbored and assisted.

In the early 1800s, Louisville was only one of several small communities situated near the Falls of the Ohio on either side of the river. For example, by 1815, Shippingport (1806), New Albany (1813), and Portland (1814) had joined the earlier settlements in the area. Although the Indiana towns retained their separateness, Louisville's rapid growth after 1830 eventually brought the incorporation of Shippingport and Portland.⁹⁸ Along with growing east and west along the river, Louisville also grew inland and, by the 1850s, much of the area bounded by Barrett Avenue on the east, Fifteenth Street on the west, and Prather Street (now Broadway) on the south was settled to some degree.⁹⁹ This was the Louisville of the antebellum period. However, because of continuing growth through 1900, virtually nothing of the "core" of antebellum Louisville has survived—unlike some of the historic plantations and farm buildings of the surrounding county.

In southern Indiana, it is possible to identify whites who played public roles in the antislavery movement and reasonable to assume that some of these people or the institutions, such as churches and the Nell's Creek Antislavery Society, with which they were affiliated were involved in UGRR activity.¹⁰⁰ In contrast, on the Kentucky side of the river, the numbers, names, and locations of their white counterparts remain largely unknown to date, although further research

⁹⁸ George H. Yater, *Two Hundred Years at the Falls of the Ohio: A History of Louisville and Jefferson County* (Louisville: The Filson Club, 1987), 31-37.

⁹⁹ John B. Jegli, *Directory for 1845-1846* (Louisville, 1845) and Jegli, *Directory for 1851-1852* (Louisville, 1851).

¹⁰⁰ *Antislavery History of Jefferson County*, 1-4; Peters, "A History of the Afro-American Community in New Albany," 7.

may identify some or all of these individuals and institutions and discover where they were located.

The problems are even more daunting where African-Americans are concerned. Ironically, residential segregation by race was less pronounced in antebellum Louisville in many cases than in Louisville today.¹⁰¹ This pattern was not coincidental, nor did it reflect more relaxed racial attitudes. Rather, this residential pattern was designed to maximize white control over the African-American population. As Wade noted:

The basic housing pattern in Southern cities, then, was to keep the Negroes divided; to require that slaves live with their masters or their agents; to spread blacks throughout the town; to prevent concentration of colored people free from the control of whites. This objective was seldom directly expressed, but it was everywhere understood.¹⁰²

Thus by the 1840s, enslaved African-Americans lived throughout the rapidly growing city, but the absence of post-emancipation-style segregation did not mean that the African-American population was not clustered to an appreciable extent. For example, 54.1 percent of all enslaved African-Americans lived between First and Seventh streets. Free people of color were also scattered throughout the city, but 67.5 percent lived west of First Street, and by the 1850s growing numbers began to cluster west of Seventh Street on land owned and subdivided by Spradling and a few others.¹⁰³ This area, the eastern section of the present-day Russell neighborhood, was not segregated nor would it be for several generations, but it was becoming a focal

¹⁰¹ Curry, *Free Black*, 49-68.

¹⁰² Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 77-78.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 77.

point for Louisville's expanding free African-American community even at this early date.¹⁰⁴

Given the poverty and poor quality of housing available to the vast majority of free blacks, the physical reality and much of the material culture of the antebellum free-black community also disappeared long ago. In other words, the neighborhoods occupied by African-Americans in the decades before 1860 have been razed and rebuilt several times—even the old churches. Current research can identify where probable UGRR sites were, but only rarely have antebellum sites actually owned and occupied by African-Americans survived. For example, in 1832, Shelton Morris lived on Chestnut Street between Tenth and Eleventh streets.¹⁰⁵ However, by 1838, his residence was listed as being attached to his barbershop and bathhouse below the Louisville Hotel on the east side of Main Street, between Sixth and Seventh.¹⁰⁶

Similarly, Washington Spradling first appears in 1832 with a barbershop on the south side of Market Street near Third and with a home on Chestnut between Tenth and Eleventh, near his sister and brother-in-law. David Straws lived on the north side of Main Street near Sixth in 1832 and then moved to Seventh Street between Market and Jefferson by 1848.¹⁰⁷ In many other cases, once the name of a free person of color or an enslaved African-American (if the owner is named) appears in the record, it is often possible to identify or approximate where they lived through local directories, census data, and tax records. However, sufficient information is often lacking, and even if continued examination of basic documents and

¹⁰⁴ Curry, *Free Black*, 70-71.

¹⁰⁵ *Louisville Directory for the Year 1832* (Louisville, 1832), 60.

¹⁰⁶ Gabriel Collins, *Louisville Directory for the Year 1838-39* (Louisville, 1838), 59.

¹⁰⁷ *Louisville Directory for the Year 1832*, p. 76; Gabriel Collins, *Louisville and New Albany Directory and Annual Advertiser for 1848* (Louisville, 1848), 199.

neighborhood traditions yields greater clarity regarding where some persons lived, their actual habitations still vanished long ago.

Thus, while fortunate for fugitives, Louisville's role as a station is decidedly unfortunate from the standpoint of the historic preservationist. The Louisville region may prove to be as poor in UGRR sites as it is rich in UGRR history.

CONCLUSION

Based on the available evidence, only a fraction of which was reviewed in this study, it is clear that the region of north-central Kentucky centering around Louisville was one of the most important Underground Railroad harboring and crossing-points in the country. Continued research will only add to the richness of this history and illuminate the many Underground Railroad "corridors" that led through the state to the city and its environs.

The primary sources pertaining to fugitive slaves in Kentucky reveal other interesting facts as well. For example, efforts to understand slave escapes and to recapture fugitive slaves forced whites to recognize that many enslaved African-Americans, rather than being crippled by slavery, possessed intellectual powers and character traits (e.g., courage, determination, love of family, loyalty, a sense of self-respect, and personal dignity) that often drove them to flee bondage and enabled them to outwit their owners. While these troublesome facts could not be ignored, they could be misrepresented. In a society in which slavery was considered good and efforts to gain freedom were deemed criminal or psychotic, perhaps it was inevitable that African-American courage and intelligence would be viewed more often as a signs of bad character than as evidence of genuine mental ability and strength.

Of course, in the simplest and most fundamental sense, the frequency of slave escapes meant that African-Americans did not relish

being slaves. The reasons for this attitude should be self-evident, but the racial mythology to which most whites subscribed often made it difficult to see the obvious. The lives of both free and enslaved African-Americans were constrained by the powerful and paradoxical role of race in antebellum American society. Still, the humanity of African-Americans rendered their response to captivity profoundly different from that of pets or farm animals that could be domesticated and, if fed regularly and treated well, might become reconciled to their lot and love their masters. It was to the advantage of African-Americans often to seem to be what slaveholders wished them to be and, given the psychological violence of slavery and the constant pressure to accept one's own inferiority, the personalities of some African-Americans were sometimes warped to conform to the stereotype of the slave. But these slaves were made, not born. Most African-Americans wore the "mask," made the best of a bad situation, and awaited the right time and opportunity for escape.

The steady stream of fugitive slaves from and through Kentucky during the antebellum period also speaks volumes regarding how African-Americans experienced and often responded to slavery in the Commonwealth. Equally important, and contrary to the conclusions of most standard accounts, the simple fact that so many of these escapes received some form of assistance speaks volumes in support of the presence of the Underground Railroad movement in and near Kentucky. In a slaveholding state, this movement was, of necessity, buried deep underground and could assume no formal organizational trappings. Furthermore, given the decidedly "southern" shift in Kentucky's sympathies and sense of collective cultural identification after the Civil War, African-Americans and whites who had been secret Underground Railroad operatives in the antebellum period might declare themselves publicly only at the risk of ostracism or worse.

Thus in Kentucky these voices have been largely silent. However, through the voluminous evidence now emerging—community legends and traditions, and primary-source documentation—they are beginning, finally, to be heard.