

To Render the Private Public: *William Still* *and the Selling of* *The Underground Rail Road*

IN HIS BOOK *THE BLACK MAN* (1863), William Wells Brown, well-known abolitionist and author of the controversial *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter*, described William Still's interest in the plight of slaves: "The long connection of Mr. Still with the antislavery office, in a city through which fugitive slaves had to pass in their flight from bondage, and the deep interest felt by him for the freedom and welfare of his race have brought him prominently before the public." Brown's assessment of Still places his life and work in the public sphere. Although William Still (1821–1902) was a well-known antislavery agitator, the nature of his work as head of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee required him to be more circumspect in his actions than Brown implies. While Still performed Herculean labors on behalf of the fugitive slave population in the antebellum period, he chose to keep a low public profile. He lectured on the evils of slavery in the United States and Canada but was not a part of the influential transatlantic abolitionist community. Still was a visible member of Philadelphia's free black community, and this is where he exerted his greatest influence and earned his reputation as a prominent antislavery man. It was not until the postbellum period, however, that Still, through the publication of his book *The Underground Rail Road*, would be positioned to make the fruits of his private labors public. By doing so Still provided one of the most substantial records of how African Americans, through independent action and interracial alliance, undermined the institution of slavery.¹

The publication of *The Underground Rail Road* in 1872 heightened

¹ William Wells Brown, *The Black Man* (New York, 1863), 211.

Still's public visibility and popularity and simultaneously resurrected the memory of slavery and antislavery rhetoric. At a time when Americans were debating the place of African Americans in the reconstructed union and when both black and white reformers who had fought to end the peculiar institution struggled to redefine their cause, Still's eight-hundred-page work revived memory, recognized abolitionist work, and renewed the vigor of a waning abolitionist spirit. This article examines several layers of meaning in *The Underground Rail Road*, the construction of the text, and the uses of history and its dissemination in the wider abolitionist and African American communities in the mid to late nineteenth century.²

William Still, one of eighteen children, was born in obscurity in Medford, New Jersey, in 1821. His parents, Levin and Charity, had escaped from slavery. With little formal education, Still left home at twenty and found work on neighboring farms. In 1844, he arrived in Philadelphia where he found employment as a janitor and later as a clerical assistant in the office of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. The Philadelphia Vigilance Committee had begun assisting fugitive slaves in 1838 led by the militant Quaker Thomas Garrett, but was largely defunct by the late 1840s. In 1852, the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society convened a meeting to reorganize the Vigilance Committee. James Miller McKim, abolitionist and founding member of the new Vigilance Committee, provided the rationale for the meeting:

That the friends of the fugitive slave had been for some years past, embarrassed, for the want of a properly constructed active, Vigilance Committee; that the old Committee, which used to render effective service in this field of Anti-slavery labor, had become disorganized and scattered, and that for the last two or three years, the duties of this department had been performed by individuals on their own responsibility, and sometimes in a very irregular manner; that this had been the cause of much dissatisfaction and complaint, and that the necessity for a remedy of this state of things was generally felt. . . . It was intended now to organize a committee, which should be composed of

² William Still, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters &c. Narrating the Hardships, Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in their Efforts for Freedom, as Related by Themselves and Others or Witnessed by the Author; Together with Sketches of Some of the Largest Stockholders and Most Liberal Aiders and Advisers of the Road* (Philadelphia, 1872), 1–2. This article is part of a larger, book-length study of the development of African American historical writing in the nineteenth century titled "To Give a Faithful Account of the Race: History and Historical Writing in the African American Community, 1827–1915."

persons of known responsibility, and who could be relied upon to act systematically and promptly, and with the least possible expenditure of money in all cases that might require their attention.³

The new Vigilance Committee fulfilled its obligations inspired by the Compromise of 1850, which included the infamous Fugitive Slave Act. Still was named corresponding secretary and chairman. Other black Philadelphians held important positions in the new Vigilance Committee; prominent abolitionist Robert Purvis served as chairman of the General Committee which also included Professor Charles Reason and businessman Jacob White.⁴

Still aggressively involved himself in both the free black community in Philadelphia and the activities of fugitive slaves. These experiences deepened his resolve to pursue abolitionist activities. He championed the belief that African Americans, through both independent and interracial activity, could fundamentally alter their status in the United States and win the respect of their fellow citizens. Throughout the 1850s, he constantly strived toward this ideal.

In 1855, Still traveled widely in Canada, there befriending the abolitionist Mary Shadd Cary. A strong believer in the ability of blacks to fend for themselves before going to Canada, he inspected numerous black settlements and challenged the idea prevalent in the United States that African Americans, who had once been slaves, could not discharge their duties as free persons. Still followed the lead of abolitionist William Whipper, who also traveled to Canada in 1853 to assess free black communities and found the inhabitants "contented, prosperous and happy." Impressed with the conditions there, Whipper purchased land near the Dawn community in Dresden, Ontario, for his future home.⁵

Still also got involved, in 1859, in a campaign to end racial discrimination on Philadelphia's streetcars. As historian Philip Foner has noted, Still viewed the struggle by African Americans to desegregate the local streetcars as an important aspect of the larger fight for equal treatment and human dignity. In an open letter published in both the *Philadelphia North American* and the *United States Gazette*, Still lamented that white

³ "Organization of the Vigilance Committee," in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 611.

⁴ Larry Gara, "William Still and the Underground Railroad," *Pennsylvania History* 27 (1961): 34.

⁵ Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 735-40.

Americans disregarded the fact that African Americans, though taxpayers, could not enjoy the same benefits as white Philadelphians. He made a class-based argument disputing white assumptions that all African Americans belonged to a single "low and degraded class." Still pointed to the numerous attainments of men like Robert Purvis, William Whipper, and Stephen Smith, prominent black businessmen and associates of his. Still's letter was widely reprinted in the abolitionist press and won him critical acclaim in much of the African American community. When some members of the black community opposed his actions, he published *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of the Colored People of Philadelphia in the City Railway Cars* in 1867, which provided a complete narrative of the desegregation struggle as well as the rationale behind it. Although streetcar segregation persisted until the close of the Civil War, Still played an important role in agitating for significant changes in how African Americans were treated by the general populace throughout this period.⁶

His agitation for rights is also evident in the organization, in 1860, of the Social, Civil, and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Pennsylvania, whose mission was to work for black suffrage as well as to gather data about the condition of African Americans. Still knew that statistical information often proved useful in refuting biased charges leveled against African Americans. After the Civil War, Still joined the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and actively participated in the society's expansion of its charitable work. Still also served as vice president and president of the society in the last decade of his life.⁷ His continued interest in providing useful services to Philadelphians prepared him for one of the most challenging aspects of his new career.⁸

The writing of *The Underground Rail Road* originated in a resolution

⁶ Philip Foner, "The Battle to End Discrimination against Negroes on the Philadelphia Streetcars: (Part 1) Background and the Beginning of the Battle," *Pennsylvania History* 40 (1973): 275-80.

⁷ Roger Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia and Ours: On the Past and Future of the Black City in America* (New York, 1991), 105; Minutes of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁸ Biographical data on Still's life can be found in Henrietta Henkle, *Let My People Go: The Story of the Underground Railroad and the Growth of the Abolitionist Movement* (New York, 1941), 216, 218, 279, 284, 305. Gara, "William Still and the Underground Railroad," 33-41; Lurey Khan, *One Day, Levin . . . He Be Free: William Still and the Underground Railroad* (New York,

of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in May 1871:

Whereas, The position of William Still in the vigilance committee connected with the "Underground Railroad," as its corresponding secretary, and chairman of its acting sub-committee, gave him peculiar facilities for collecting interesting facts pertaining to this branch of the anti-slavery service; therefore

Resolved, That the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society request him to compile and publish his personal reminiscences and experiences related to the "Underground Rail Road."⁹

Given his extensive involvement in the abolitionist movement and his familiarity with all aspects of the Underground Railroad, Still was probably the best choice for this undertaking. He was alert to merging this historical sense with shrewd business practices to generate high sales by exciting reader interest. There were several factors that worked in Still's favor. First, prior to 1872 there were no expansive studies or accounts of the Underground Railroad. Second, Still understood that solid book production and generating sales depended on the authenticity and credibility of the account and the dramatic retelling of incidents in the lives of fugitive slaves. Later accounts produced by Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin* (1876), and Wilbur Siebert, *Underground Railroad* (1898), were radically different from Still's work. Coffin's *Reminiscences* were largely autobiographical and anecdotal and therefore lacked the power of Still's narrative. Siebert's *Underground Railroad*, published more than a generation after Still's study, belonged to a more formal category of academic history, which emerged concurrently with the professionalization of the discipline beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As historian Phillip Lapsansky has noted, "while other Underground Railroad histories focus mainly on the white agents, and the remote country houses with secret cellars and attics, Still's work and his book underscore

1972); Michael Winston and Rayford Logan, eds., *Dictionary of Negro Biography* (New York, 1972), 573-74; and Phillip Lapsansky, "Aboard William Still's *Underground Railroad*: Celebrating an African-American Classic." A talk before the Philobiblon Club of Philadelphia, Feb. 9, 1993. Elizabeth Raul Bethel provides a cursory examination of Still's *The Underground Rail Road* in *The Roots of African-American Identity: Memory and History in Antebellum Free Communities* (New York, 1997), 185-91.

⁹ For the resolution from the Vigilance Committee, see Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 1.

that in Philadelphia the muscle and backbone of the operation was the black community."¹⁰

Only authentic first-person accounts could give the book the readability and market appeal that Still desired. He prefaced the text with his own experiences, both professional and personal. This stylistic turn allowed him to assert black ownership in ways that slave narratives failed to do because of the necessity for an authenticating white voice in the preface. Given the sensational nature of some of the material, and the possibility that readers would think it fabricated, Still asserted that "the most scrupulous care has been taken to furnish artless stories, simple facts,—to resort to no coloring to make the book seem romantic," for he was "fully persuaded that any exaggerations or additions of his own could not possibly equal in surpassing interest, the original and natural tales given under circumstances, when life and death seemed about equally balanced in the scale, and fugitives in transit were making their way from Slavery to Freedom, with the horrors of the Fugitive Slave-law staring them in the face."¹¹

The authenticity of Still's work emanated from his personal ties to the slave community. As a result of his work with the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, Still reunited with his brother, Peter, from whom he had been separated shortly after birth. Other members of the African American community shared this personal experience. Still's description of his reunion with his brother heightened the account's authenticity: "But after the restoration of Peter Still, [my] own brother (the kidnapped and the ransomed), after forty years cruel separation from his mother, the wonderful discovery and joyful reunion, the idea forced itself upon [my] mind that all over this wide and extended country thousands of mothers

¹⁰ Lapsansky, "Aboard William Still's *Underground Railroad*," 4. Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the Reputed President of the Underground Railroad; Being a Brief History of the Labors of a Lifetime in Behalf of the Slave, With the Stories of Numerous Fugitives, Who Gained Their Freedom through its Instrumentality, and Many Other Incidents* (Cincinnati, 1876) and Wilbur Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1898). Reverend W. M. Mitchell, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (London, 1860); R. C. Smedley, *The Underground Railroad in Chester and Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, Pa., 1883); Eber Petit, *Sketches in the History of the Underground Railroad Comprising Many Thrilling Incidents of the Escape of Fugitives from Slavery and the Perils of Those Who Aided Them* (Fredonia, N.Y., 1879); Homer Uri Johnson, *From Dixie to Canada: Romance and Realities of the Underground Railroad*, vol. 1. (Orwell, Ohio, and Buffalo, N.Y., 1894); and Ascott Hope, *Heroes in Homespun: Scenes and Stories for the American Emancipation Movement* (London, 1894).

¹¹ Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 5.

and children, separated by slavery, were in a similar way, living without the slightest knowledge of each other's whereabouts praying and weeping without ceasing, as did this mother and son."¹²

Unlike the dramatic slave narratives and autobiographies rendered publicly as a means of heightening popular revulsion against slavery, Still's complex work in aiding fugitive slaves, although known in abolitionist circles, could not be made generally available to the public without compromising the integrity and secrecy of the Underground Railroad network in Philadelphia and beyond. His awareness of the deeply emotional and harrowing toll that slavery took on fugitives is apparent in his interviews, during which he took notes. Fugitives, once safe, wrote letters of praise and thanks to Still. He never thought this information would be published. He simply hoped to use it to help families reunite once freedom came. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Still knew that he and his records were extremely valuable to pro-slavery elements eager to disrupt the effectiveness of the Underground Railroad. According to Still, secrecy and privacy were uppermost in his mind: "The risk of aiding fugitives was never lost sight of, and the safety of all concerned called for still tongues." At several points, he hid his records in the loft of a remote barn and in Philadelphia's Lebanon Cemetery. These actions insured that the specifics of his operation remained private.¹³

Still also anchored his text in the experiences of slaves—old and young, men and women, and accounts from the letters of fugitives gave added poignancy to the narratives. One of the most gripping accounts concerned Romulus Hall, an elderly slave who lost his life trying to escape. His companion, a younger man, successfully negotiated the journey, but Hall, an elderly man, succumbed to cold and was left behind. He was eventually found, but not before suffering a mortal case of frostbite. Despite impending death, when questioned by the Vigilance Committee regarding the prudence of his escape, Hall replied: "I am glad I escaped."

¹² Ibid., 2–4. The slave narrative of Peter Still and his wife Vina is titled *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed; Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and His Wife "Vina" after Forty Years of Slavery* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1856). See also, "Catalogue of Children of Children of Levin Still and Charity, his wife"; William Still's "Recollections of Being United With His Brother, Peter," Aug. 7, 1850; William Still to Peter Still, May 10, 1852; William Still to Peter Still, Oct. 12, 1852; William Still to Peter Still, Dec. 18, 1852; William Still to E. Gray Sonsing, Apr. 29, 1853; and William Still to Peter Still, Nov. 9, 1853, Peter Still Papers, Rutgers University.

¹³ Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 4.

The Vigilance Committee provided medical services and he was buried in the same Lebanon Cemetery where Still hid some of his records.¹⁴

In other accounts, Still describes how some fugitives were forced to resort to the threat of physical violence to effect their escape. A group of three men and two women escaped from Loudon County, Virginia. At Cheat River, in Maryland, they were confronted by slave catchers, who demanded to know why such a large group of slaves was on the road without adequate documentation. The fugitives refused to answer the inquiries of the slave catchers, whereupon "one of the white men raised his gun, pointing the muzzle directly towards one of the young women, with the threat that he would 'shoot, etc.' 'Shoot! shoot! shoot!' she exclaimed, with a double barreled pistol in one hand and a long dirk knife in the other, utterly unterrified and fully ready for a death struggle. The male *leader* of the fugitives by this time had 'pulled back the hammers' of his 'pistols,' and was about to fire!" Seeing the determination of the party, the slave catchers retreated, and the party proceeded north.¹⁵

Still also carefully reconstructed the experiences of African American women, often making their stories an integral part of his text. An outstanding example of female heroism is the account of Lear Green. Green, like Henry Box Brown, escaped in a chest from Baltimore in 1857. She stayed in the chest for more than eighteen hours before arriving safely in Philadelphia. Another mother, Harriet Shepard, and her four children escaped from a plantation near Chestertown, Maryland, through sheer luck and determination. Shepard, her four children, and five other passengers escaped slavery simply by taking a team of her master's horses, a carriage, and proceeding north. Once the party arrived in Wilmington, Delaware, Underground Railroad agents assisted them.¹⁶

Still's concern about the authenticity of the text, his personal engagement with the slavery community, and his dramatic rendering of harrowing tales of escape from bondage that had previously been kept secret, combined to make *The Underground Rail Road* a very marketable product. Like his antebellum colleagues, Still included in his "postbellum slave narrative," a term popularized by literary historian William Andrews, all of the elements necessary to breathe life into the story. But Still's purpose,

¹⁴ Ibid., 51–54.

¹⁵ Ibid., 124–29.

¹⁶ Ibid., 281–84.

radically different from his predecessors', involved offering insights into the abolitionist movement and the meanings of freedom in the postbellum era. Still's marketing and selling of *The Underground Rail Road* brought these dynamics into bold relief.

The distribution of Still's *The Underground Rail Road* took advantage of an age that ushered in aggressive marketing. In the postbellum period, books and magazines proliferated, thanks to technological advancements in the printing industry, many in place before the Civil War. One of the most important of these advancements related to the reorganization of the printing industry. Early American printers had to master a wide variety of skills ranging from rolling and pressing the balls to ink the type to selling books and stationery. By the 1840s and 1850s, these functions were streamlined through the creation of publishing houses where book production took place in one factory. The steam-driven flatbed press produced more books more cheaply. The invention of electrotyping in 1841 played an important role in book production and promotion. It allowed an impressment of the set type, which could be fashioned into a relatively inexpensive permanent metal plate that could be used for subsequent editions. As a result, the size of the print run for a first edition was flexible. Because later editions could be easily printed, publishers were encouraged to engage in lengthy advertising campaigns that were designed to bolster sales of the book as well as the author's popularity. Moreover, if the book sold well, this encouraged continued use of similar advertisements and provided the catalyst for the quick production of a second edition.¹⁷

These innovations radically altered the nature of book publication and consumption and opened new possibilities for Still's publication. Instead of receiving scattered reviews in the black press and publication in one edition, historical works by African Americans could now be published in numerous editions, accompanied by sample books, and supported by aggressive advertising. Still marketed his book in a number of ways including the active solicitation and dissemination of sketches and comments regarding the book from Pennsylvania Abolition Society members

¹⁷ Ronald J. Zboray, "Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation," in *Reading in America: Literature and Social History*, ed. Cathy Davidson (Baltimore, 1989), 180–200.

and other notable antebellum and postbellum personalities, an advertisement campaign in the *Christian Recorder*, a paper published by the AME Church, and the establishment of a nationwide network of book agents.¹⁸

Many of the advertisements for his book included excerpts from endorsements by luminaries like James Miller McKim, corresponding secretary and general agent of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, and Reverend William H. Furness, a Harvard-trained Unitarian minister and fund-raiser for the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee; Charles Sumner, U.S. senator from Massachusetts and a prominent Radical Republican, also endorsed Still's work. Still's most notable supporter was Oliver Otis Howard, a Civil War general and commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau.¹⁹

Another important endorsement came from the dean of abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison examined the book "with a deep and thrilling interest," concluding that Still's work was "voluminous and well-executed." Moreover, Garrison wrote, Still's work represented "a most important portion of Antislavery History, which, but for your [Still's] industry, research, and personal experience and knowledge might nearly all have been lost to posterity." He also hoped the sale of the book would assist Still in covering his expenses. But more important, Garrison thought the message and the meaning of *The Underground Rail Road* was "for the enlightenment of the rising generation as to the inherent cruelty of the defunct slave system, and to perpetuate such an abhorrence of it as to prevent all further injustice towards the colored population of our land."²⁰

In addition to praise from white abolitionists, Still's work received tangible support from Africans Americans, including William Whipper and Francis Ellen Harper. In an indirect sense, these individual testimonials also helped to sell the book. William Whipper, co-owner with black merchant Stephen Smith of lumberyards in Philadelphia and Columbia, Pennsylvania, was one of the wealthiest antebellum African Americans and an important financier of the Underground Railroad. Between 1847 and 1860, he provided one thousand dollars per year to aid fugitive slaves.

¹⁸ Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York, 1993); Donald Franklin Joyce, *Gatekeepers of Black Culture: Black-Owned Publishing in the United States, 1817-1981* (New York, 1983).

¹⁹ Sketches of James Miller McKim and William Furness appear in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 654-55, 659.

²⁰ William Lloyd Garrison to Still, Apr. 7, 1872, Peter Still Papers.

During the Civil War, he provided roughly the same amount to the Union Army. Whipper actively participated in the conventions of free people of color between 1830 and 1835. In a letter to Still in 1871, he shared important information about his role in the Underground Railroad: "In a period of three years from 1847 to 1850," wrote Whipper, "I passed hundreds to the land of freedom, while others, induced by high wages, and the feeling that they were safe in Columbia, worked in the lumber and coal yards of that place." Whipper concluded his letter by stating his thanks for having the privilege of "laboring with others for the redemption of my race from oppression and thralldom; and I would prefer to-day to be penniless in the streets, rather than to have withheld a single hour's labor or a dollar from the sacred cause of liberty, justice, and humanity."²¹

Still's book also highlighted the role of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. His desire to present African American women in a new light is evident in his sketch of Harper. Still lamented that, while the "narratives and labors of eminent colored men such as Banneker, Douglass, Brown, Garnet, and others, haven been written and sketched very fully for the public, and doubtless with advantage to the cause of freedom," there was not to be found "in any written work portraying the Anti-slavery struggle, (except in the form of narratives,) as we are aware of, a sketch of the labors of any eminent colored woman." Still felt "glad of the opportunity to present a sketch not merely of the leading colored poet in the United States, but also of one of the most liberal contributors, as well as one of the ablest advocates of the Underground Rail Road and of the slave."²²

For Still, Harper, born of free parentage in Baltimore, was the quintessential woman. Like Phillis Wheatley, a slave who manifested literary talents, Harper also demonstrated poetic talent at an early age. Her first publication, *Forest Leaves*, published during her teens, established her as a poet of some merit. In the 1850s, Harper became a teacher as well as an active participant in the antislavery movement. Beginning in 1854, she served as a lecturer for the Maine Anti-Slavery Society and worked as an antislavery speaker in Canada and the Great Lakes region from 1856 to 1859. Harper often inquired about the status of the Underground Railroad. In characterizing her interest in antislavery work, Still noted

²¹ Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 735-40.

²² *Ibid.*, 755.

that Harper seemed unwilling simply "to make speeches and receive plaudits, but was ever willing to do the rough work and to give material aid wherever needed."²³

Demonstrating *noblesse oblige*, Harper traveled throughout the southern states in the aftermath of the Civil War. She visited plantations, cities, and towns giving addresses and lectures on the needs of African Americans as they adjusted to freedom. Still reprinted a series of Harper's reflections on freedwomen in the book. These reflections mirrored Still's own beliefs about the needs of African Americans throughout the first half of the nineteenth century: "Desiring to speak to women who have been the objects of so much wrong and abuse under Slavery, and even since Emancipation, in a state of ignorance, not accessible always to those who would or could urge the proper kind of education respecting their morals and general improvement, Mrs. Harper has made it her business not to overlook this all important duty to her poor sisters." In all, Still devoted more than thirty pages of his book to an examination of Harper's life, more than any other work of the early postbellum period.²⁴

In addition to his skillful use of the life experiences of William Whipper and Francis Ellen Harper to dramatize the plights and needs of the race, the sophistication of Still's marketing plan for *The Underground Rail Road* resulted in no small part from his previous business experience. Aside from his work in the Anti-Slavery Office, Still owned a small but profitable coal and ice yard, and during the Civil War he secured a contract from the federal government to supply Camp William Penn, near Philadelphia.²⁵ A member of the Berean Presbyterian Church, Still was frugal, a model of what historian Roger Lane termed the "Protestant bourgeois." Moreover, Still's business practices were influenced by the fact that he never reached the same level of business success as fellow abolitionists William Whipper and Stephen Smith. Rather he sold small quantities of coal and ice to grocers and served the needs of ordinary people in Philadelphia. Still's ability to communicate with ordinary people on a

²³ Francis Smith Foster, ed., *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader* (New York, 1990), 3–42.

²⁴ Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 772. Still's association with Harper is also briefly discussed in Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist* (New York, 1987), 64–66.

²⁵ Adjutant General's Office to Still, Washington, D.C., Feb. 4, 1864, Leon Gardiner Collection, box 9G, folder 17, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

small scale and his belief in the acquisition of capital by African Americans for the purpose of providing useful services to the black community served him well in the area of book publication.²⁶

Although advertisements for Still's *The Underground Rail Road* appeared in a number of papers during the 1870s, the advertising campaign in the *Christian Recorder* was the most extensive. Since Still lived in Philadelphia he used the city and his close association with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church as the marking base for his book operations. The *Christian Recorder*, the official organ of the AME Church, had a readership that included urbane and well-educated black community leaders. It circulated widely in AME strongholds in the Northeast, South, and Midwest. Thus, the style, content, and frequency of Still's advertisements link the production of the book to its sale and dissemination in black communities.²⁷

On January 29, 1872, Still entered into a formal agreement with Porter & Coates, a white-owned Philadelphia publishing house, to print ten thousand copies of *The Underground Rail Road*. The terms stipulated that the book would be published by subscription only, on good quality paper, and in a variety of bindings. Porter & Coates had the sole right to publish the book for one year. They would pay Still 62½ cents for each copy sold and give him monthly sales reports. Still could purchase copies at the customary rate for agents. Porter & Coates also agreed to insure the electrotype plates for \$2,500. Still later purchased these plates to continue publication of the book.²⁸

The five major advertisements used for *The Underground Rail Road* emphasized a variety of themes: intrigue, interracial cooperation, altered gender roles, and the impact of the peculiar institution on families. These advertisements, which included replicas of the illustrations featured in the text, provided potential purchasers and readers with a visual introduction to the dramatic stories of fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad.

²⁶ An assessment of the life and accomplishments of William Still can be found in Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia*, 104–6.

²⁷ The late antebellum and postbellum impact of the *Christian Recorder* as an organ of the AME Church, advocate for political and civil rights, and supporter of educational reform is discussed in Gilbert Anthony Williams, *The Christian Recorder, Newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church: History of a Forum of Ideas, 1854–1902* (New York, 1996).

²⁸ Agreement with Porter & Coates, Jan. 1, 1872, and Supplemental Agreement, Mar. 5, 1872, Society Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

The first advertisement was an advance notice, which appeared in July 1871. A fairly simplistic ad, it predicted with certainty that the contents of Still's book "will be devoured with avidity." By March 1873, a small advertisement appeared announcing the sale of the book and the need for agents. Just one month later, in April 1873, the first full-page advertisement appeared.²⁹

In the first advertisement of this campaign, the book's title appeared in bold letters across the top of the page. In the center of the page, one of the book's seventy illustrations, "Resurrection of Henry Box Brown," was prominently displayed. Brown's daring escape had captured the attention of antebellum America and Still no doubt sought to draw upon that allure. Still was one of several abolitionists who greeted Brown as he emerged from his crate in Philadelphia in 1848, making the image more meaningful to him.³⁰

Perhaps, the "Resurrection of Henry Box Brown" advertisement did not have the desired effect, for it appeared only twice more: May 1, 1873, and May 8, 1873. By May 15, 1873, another advertisement featuring the illustration "The Mayor of Norfolk Searching Captain Fountain's Vessel for Runaways," promoted Still's book. The Fountain illustration dramatized the great risk whites took and the role they played in helping fugitive slaves. Still's use of it reflected his belief in interracial cooperation and its power in helping to undermine slavery. This illustration, however, appeared only twice more: May 22, 1873, and May 29, 1873. One of the most popular early advertisements featured "The Death of Romulus Hall." The Hall illustration is particularly striking, suggesting the nobility and the tragedy of the struggle against slavery. In it, Hall, an elderly slave, reclines on his deathbed talking with a member of the Vigilance Committee. If Still wished to convey the horror of slavery, Hall's pleading yet tender and wise face accomplished this goal. Still used this advertisement in thirteen consecutive issues from June 5, 1873, to September 11, 1873.³¹

²⁹ Early advertisements for Still's *Underground Rail Road* appeared in the following issues of the *Christian Recorder*: July 8, 1871; Mar. 28, 1872; Apr. 18, 25, 1872; Aug. 15, 22, 1872; Apr. 3, 10, 1873.

³⁰ For the Henry Box Brown advertisement, see the *Christian Recorder*, April 24 and May 1, 8, 1873. Brown's involvement in the rescue of Henry Box Brown is discussed in William Switala's *The Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania* (Mechanicsburg, Pa., 2001), 1-4.

³¹ For advertisements in the *Christian Recorder* featuring Romulus Hall, see June 5, 12, 19, 26, 1873; July 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, 1873; Aug. 7, 14, 21, 28, 1873; Sept. 11, 1873.



A BOLD STROKE FOR FREEDOM.

See p. 125.

Fig. 1. "Bold Stroke for Freedom," from Still, *The Underground Rail Road* (Philadelphia, 1872), 125.

The use of another illustration, "A Desperate Conflict on the Underground Railroad—Women Facing the Enemy with Revolvers and Bowie-Knives," further demonstrates Still's effort to present as many facets of the slave experience as possible and illustrates how effectively he manipulated certain images. In the book, this illustration is labeled simply "Bold Stroke for Freedom" (fig. 1). As mentioned earlier, the knives used by the men and women were dirks, a sword-like dagger, and not bowie knives, with their large single-edged blades. In the illustration and advertisement, Still placed the women in the foreground, making the story even more sensational. This artifice forcefully demonstrated the unusual dangers and hardships women had to endure, and suggests that women assumed "male" attributes to escape from slavery. One could argue that Still's construction of black women dramatizes the gulf between their brutish treatment and the ideal of Victorian womanhood. This ad proved extremely popular and appeared in twenty-three consecutive issues, from

September 18, 1873, to March 26, 1874.³²

Another popular advertisement also featured the plight of black women. Its title is "The Father Died in the Poor House, a Raving Maniac, Caused By the Sale of Two of His Children. The Heroic Mother with the Balance, Sought Flight on the Underground Railroad." Here, again, Still sought to add drama to the picture for advertising purposes. In the book this illustration simply lists the names of Anna Maria Jackson's seven children. This advertisement, which appeared on April 2, 1874, featured assessments from reviews printed in the *New York Daily Tribune*, *Friends Review*, *Lutheran Observer*, and *The Nation*. With strong endorsements from the white press, Still was positioned to profit immensely. His use of the Anna Maria Jackson story demonstrated his recognition of the power of this subverted gender role as well as his determination to show the devastating impact of the peculiar institution on the African American family. The advertisement appeared in more than forty consecutive issues.³³

In addition to an extensive advertising campaign, Still's marketing strategy included creating a nationwide network of agents, a strategy which resembled that of the Underground Railroad. This network is partially revealed in Still's letterbook, which contains his letters to the agents. The best data regarding his dealings with agents is found in a series of letters Still wrote between 1873 and 1874. Beginning in 1873, the year he completed his one-year contract with Porter & Coates and regained exclusive rights to the printing and distribution of the book, Still began to create a network of agents, facilitated by his contacts in the AME church and new black schools. Still received help in promoting his book from such notables as AME bishop Daniel Payne, president of Wilberforce University and later founder of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association; William and Ellen Craft, husband and wife, who escaped from slavery because she could pass for white; General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, president of Hampton Institute; and William

³² For pictorial illustrations of "A Desperate Conflict on the Underground Railroad" in the *Christian Recorder*, see Sept. 18, 25, 1873; Oct. 2, 16, 23, 30, 1873; Nov. 6, 13, 20, 27, 1873; Dec. 4, 11, 18, 25, 1873; Jan. 8, 15, 22, 29, 1874; Feb. 5, 12, 26, 1874; Mar. 5, 12, 26, 1874.

³³ The Anna Maria Jackson advertisement appeared in the following issues of the *Christian Recorder*: Apr. 2, 9, 23, 30, 1874; May 7, 14, 21, 1874; June 4, 18, 25, 1874; July 4, 16, 23, 30, 1874; Aug. 6, 13, 27, 1874; Sept. 3, 10, 1874; Oct. 29, 1874; Nov. 5, 12, 19, 26, 1874.

Wells Brown, who often relied on Still for advice in selling his own book, *The Black Man*.³⁴

Still's approach to selling books relied on a practical understanding of the needs of both the agents and the subscribers. He insured that agents were college-educated. He employed both male and female agents as well as African Americans and whites. While not discriminating on the basis of sex or race, Still did insist that agents meet certain standards. They had to have "some knowledge of canvassing, be active and industrious, and be able to enter fully into the work thoroughly canvassing, one, two, 3 or more townships before stopping" to sell to customers of all classes.³⁵

Once an agent was appointed, Still offered very generous compensation. In his circular, "Terms for Agents," which he insisted agents keep confidential, he described his contract. For a minimum cost of \$3.75, agents could purchase copies of the book, a dummy volume for orders, and one hundred circulars. Initially, Still offered 40 percent of the sale to agents. In 1872 he raised the percentage to 50 percent, and for a prepaid order for at least one standard case of forty-eight books, he offered 60 percent. But Still also imposed a system of checks and balances on his agents. He maintained regular correspondence with them, preferring to send prepaid orders. If orders were not prepaid, agents were usually required to pay cash on delivery. Under these terms, Still enlarged his corps of agents from thirty to over one hundred in a few months.³⁶

Subscribers also benefited from Still's sales network. Agents constantly canvassing various parts of the country insured the book's availability. Having good agents also guaranteed timely delivery of the book, increasing confidence in the overall efficiency of the project and bolstering sales. Still encouraged agents to give copies to editors of major newspapers for promotional purposes at no charge. In addition, he offered the book in several

³⁴ For Still's correspondence with black notables, see William Wells Brown to Still, Feb. 2, 1865, reel 6, American Negro Historical Society Collection, 1790-1905 (microfilm; Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1997) (hereafter, ANHSC); Ellen Craft to Still, June 13, 1873, in ANHSC, 1790-1905, reel 6; Still to G. L. Smith, May 19, 1874, box 34, folder 7, Henry P. Slaughter Collection (hereafter, Slaughter Collection), Atlanta University Collection, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center; T. F. B. Marshall to Still, Apr. 30, 1874, ANHSC, reel 6, and W. H. Stanton to Still, Jan. 15, 1872, ANHSC, reel 6.

³⁵ William Still to F. W. Lawther, Fulton, Mo., Aug. 13, 1873, Still Letterbook, 1873-1874 (hereafter, Still Letterbook), 331, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

³⁶ Lapsansky, "Aboard William Still's *Underground Railroad*," 14.

attractive covers: fine English cloth for \$4.50, a paneled style for \$5.00, a sheep library style for \$5.50, and half turkey morocco for \$6.50.³⁷ Still's ability to offer his book in a variety of bindings reflected technological innovations in bookbinding made in the 1840s, such as the hand-operated stabbing machine, folding machine, rounder and backer, and a number of machines that assisted in marbling, cutting, and trimming the bindings. Still's prices for the bindings were consistent with the market.³⁸

At its height in 1874, Still's sales network included California, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Georgia, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas. He encouraged his agents to be creative and to take advantage of every opportunity to sell his book. He encouraged agents to have books on hand, for he believed that "all agents do better who are prepared to Strike while the iron is hot."³⁹ Agents were discouraged from canvassing large areas. Still preferred that they canvass a small area thoroughly before moving to a larger field for he knew that "canvassing [was] no holliday play. . . . It require[d] learning and much perseverance."⁴⁰

Still also mobilized a personal network to help sell the books. In addition to recruiting professional men such as W. H. Stanton, publisher of the *Freedom's Journal* in Clinton, Missouri, G. L. Smith, superintendent of schools in Bolivar County, Mississippi, and Marshall Taylor, the first black editor of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, an official organ of the Methodist Episcopal Church, he also used family members. His niece, Catherine Still, the daughter of his brother, Peter Still, canvassed in Syracuse, New York. His son-in-law, Edward A. Wiley, was a partner in several of his business interests and became an agent for the book in 1873. Wiley controlled several agencies in Harrisburg and Pittsburgh. In Pittsburgh, Wiley sold more than four hundred books in six months, earning more than \$1,500. He had similar successes elsewhere. Tragically, Wiley died of a brain hemorrhage while he was on a trip to promote *The Underground Rail Road* in Baltimore.⁴¹

Still appealed to race pride to bolster his agents' confidence in their

³⁷ The styles of Still's book appear at the end of every advertisement for the book.

³⁸ Zboray, "Antebellum Reading," 189-90.

³⁹ Still to William Vance, July 14, 1873, Still Letterbook, 227-28.

⁴⁰ Still to James William, Bloomington, Ind., Sept. 1, 1873, *ibid.*, 416.

⁴¹ Still to John Green, Jan. 15, 1874, *ibid.*, 724.

product. His interest involved promoting economic self-sufficiency and the Protestant work ethic as much as fostering an African American racial identity. He spelled out these priorities explicitly in an 1873 letter to an agent in Lawrence, Kansas, in which he connected race pride to economic advantage. "This book," he urged, "only need[s] to be presented by a man who appreciates and comprehends the value and importance of having our heroes and martyrs under slavery well represented in the history of our times—to make the work take exceedingly well."⁴² In a letter to an agent in Columbia, South Carolina, Still used the book's success among whites as a means of embarrassing African Americans into supporting it: "I can not say the UGRR is being appreciated by our people as well as by the whites for wherever it has been pushed among them, it has been well received. When we consider that we have no books or history produced by colored men (except now & then one few and far between) that our enlightened age is demanding of us some greater show of ability than we have hitherto had the opportunity to evince, it seems to me that such work would be heartily sought after."⁴³

Estimates indicate that Still had sold between five and ten thousand copies of his book by the late 1870s, and he proudly displayed the book at the Philadelphia Centennial in 1876. Despite tremendous success he, like other businessmen, encountered problems. Some agents did not fulfill their obligations and Still was forced to sever relations with them. One of the most highly publicized cases involved Felton Jones, an agent in Kent County, Delaware. In a deviation from his standard practices, Still sent thirteen books to Jones without prior payment in June 1873. Jones did not respond nor did Still receive any money for the shipment. In September, when Still had not received any word from Jones, he wrote a harsh note relieving him of his duties and threatening to "publish" him and to "take legal steps to have this matter sifted." In another case of fraud, William Perry, an agent in Delaware, after failing to pay for several shipments of books, wrote to Still complaining that the shipping crate had been opened, and allegedly burglarized. Perry, too, was dismissed as an agent and warned not to engage in any further sales of *The Underground Rail Road*.⁴⁴

⁴² Still to Rev. J. E. Embry, Oct. 14, 1873, *ibid.*, 547.

⁴³ Still to W. D. Harris, June 5, 1873, *ibid.*, 13–14.

⁴⁴ Still to W. D. Jones, Sept. 2, 1873, and Still to William Perry, Sept. 2, 1873, *ibid.*, 421–24.

Despite the unscrupulous behavior of a few agents, Still's work sold extremely well and agencies throughout the country prospered. In 1883, therefore, Still followed up with another edition of the volume titled, *Still's Underground Rail Road: With a Life of the Author*. An advertisement for the 1883 edition featured a portrait of a sample book, a replica of the actual book, and a standard marketing tool for booksellers, a lengthy introduction to the issues raised in Still's book, endorsements from prominent abolitionists and reviews, and excerpts from the work itself. In a summary of the work's import, Still boldly proclaimed: "For the colored man no history can be more instructive than this, of his own making, and written by one of his own race. The generations are growing in light. Not to know of those who were stronger than shackles, who were pioneers in the grand advance toward freedom; not to know of what characters the race could produce when straitened by circumstances, nor of those small beginnings which ended in triumphant emancipation, will, in a short time, be a reproach."⁴⁵

Still was equally aggressive in promoting the revised edition, which featured his biography and twenty additional pages. He sent it to President Grover Cleveland in 1886, and until his death in 1902, promoted the book on the lecture circuit. In addition to promoting the book, he continued to render valuable service to Philadelphia's black community. He served as president of the Berean Building and Loan Association in 1888. An extension of his church, this organization helped people purchase homes. Still used his extensive contacts with white philanthropists to raise seed money for the initial loans. In 1889, he served as a Pennsylvania delegate to the Nashville Convention of Colored Men. He also served as the hub of the black abolitionist networks. As president of the Home for Aged and Infirm Persons in Philadelphia, Still assisted in providing care for the residents. Sojourner Truth, sickly, nearly destitute, and in need of funds to stave off eviction from her home, asked Still about the possibility of procuring lodging for her in Philadelphia to sell copies of her book. Another correspondent inquired about the welfare of Harriet Tubman, "the Moses of her people." Still thought she was still alive in Albany,

⁴⁵ James P. Boyd, "The Underground Railroad With a Life of the Author," in William Still, *Still's Underground Rail Road Record: With a Life of the Author, the Only Book That Fully Explains the Secret Work of the U.G.R.R.* (Philadelphia, 1883), frontmatter.

New York, and promised to look for her.⁴⁶ Others wrote to ask Still to make recommendations for various remembrances of the abolitionist movement.⁴⁷

By the time Still died in 1902, he had emerged fully from the shadowy position he had found necessary for his Underground Railroad work. Now he was remembered as a respectable and honorable gentleman. His book, *The Underground Rail Road*, had endeared him to abolitionists and race men and women alike. Not only had he preserved the memory of a bygone era, he had merged an engaging account of the African American experience in slavery and freedom with emerging national book distribution networks to market the first comprehensive history of the Underground Railroad throughout the country. In addition to being an extremely reliable and readable text, *The Underground Rail Road* was also an expression of Still's approach to issues of economic self-sufficiency and the Protestant work ethic through the well-organized sales network he established. The network of efficient, entrepreneurial, college-educated agents incarnated Still's vision of American and African American possibility. It was an equal opportunity operation, with agents given wide latitude to canvass areas in the way they felt was best. Hard work and perseverance were rewarded through a generous profit percentage, and unscrupulous agents were relieved of their duties. Most important, Still believed that race pride was predicated on reconstructing accurate and reliable histories of African Americans and presenting them in the most sophisticated forms available, a priority reflected in his book design. Still captured these sentiments best as he described the importance of *The Underground Rail Road* to African Americans and the true meaning of heroism as he sought to render the private public: "The colored race may now read of its real heroes, its Joshuas, Spartucuses, Tells and Glendowers, among the list of those who silently broke their chains and dared everything in order to breathe the sweet air of liberty. They are not blazoned heroes, full of loud deeds and great names, but quiet examples of what fortitude can achieve where freedom is the goal."⁴⁸

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⁴⁶ Sojourner Truth to Still, Jan. 4, 1876, reel 6, ANHSC; and B. W. Austin to Still, Aug. 13, 1892, box 34, folder 7, Slaughter Collection.

⁴⁷ R. P. Hollowell to Still, Aug. 13, 1892, box 34, folder 7, Slaughter Collection.

⁴⁸ Boyd, "The Underground Railroad."

