

issuance of scholarly inquiries, the appearance of this volume should earn the gratitude of scholars and lay persons alike who are attracted to serious contemplation on America's past.

Kane, Pennsylvania

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The Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania. By CHARLES L. BLOCKSON. (Jacksonville, North Carolina: Flame International, Inc., 1981. Pp. vii, 227. Foreword, acknowledgments, introduction, appendixes, notes, selected bibliography, index. \$12.95, hardbound; \$6.95, paper.)

The history of the Underground Railroad (UGRR) remains one of the most exciting and significant issues in antebellum American history; exciting because it was both dangerous and illegal and because it tells the story of oppressed men and women who challenged their oppressors, braved the unknown, and, with the aid of a handful of supporters, attained freedom; significant because it showed quite clearly the extent to which black Americans and their white supporters were willing to go in an effort to undermine an oppressive system. It is a history filled with self-determination, resilience, and daring, on all of which nineteenth-century America placed great store. That is precisely why slave narratives were so popular, for they touched America at its most sensitive and proud spots. Few honest men could read the accounts of Henson's, Douglass's, and the Crafts' escapes without immediately identifying with their ordeal and ultimate success.

Unfortunately for historians the success of the UGRR demanded a large measure of secrecy, and, as a result, few records were kept. This has only compounded the problem of piecing together the history of this clandestine and highly protean network of organizations. As in all such things the problem is increased by an understandable yet unfortunate glorification of some of those who participated in aiding the fugitive slave to freedom. To date, the works of William Still and Levi Coffin, participants in the UGRR, and Wilbur H. Siebert and Larry Gara, its major historians, remain the most important accounts. These can be supplemented by tidbits from local histories, which invariably glorify the activities of some local figures without telling us much of significance. Still and Coffin have

left us invaluable records of the movement in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Siebert's work took decades to compile and, because of its dependence on local histories and recollections of those who participated, or knew someone who did, it is very much an account of small identifiable groups (mainly Quakers) who were prominent in the movement. As such it goes only a little way beyond the accounts found in many local histories. Its significance is that Siebert managed to bring all these accounts together. Working with many more resources, Gara was able to expand on Siebert's seminal work as well as raise some crucial questions about its conclusions. Gara clearly established that the UGRR's success also depended on the efforts of the fugitives themselves and the support they received from free blacks and whites of other denominations once they crossed the Mason-Dixon Line. But Gara's work was too broad to cover the many issues involved and tactics employed by local organizations, nor could he tell us much about precisely who were involved in the efforts of the UGRR. Those questions can only be answered after historians have undertaken exhaustive histories of local organizations.

This is why I was so anxious to read Blockson's history of the UGRR in Pennsylvania and even more so as I knew he had been researching the topic for some time. Unfortunately, little new has been added to our knowledge of the UGRR. In spite of his noble efforts, Blockson has effectively failed, because he has, like Siebert, with whom he seems unusually obsessed, placed too much reliance on traditional local histories. As a result, and contrary to Blockson's claim, the book is largely dominated by Quakers. A few important black conductors do manage to struggle through a forest of Quaker operatives. As such, Blockson has made some contribution, but it is in no way sufficient to substantiate his claims that the free black communities were the important link in the movement. The mere repetition of paragraphs like, "Wilkes-Barre's small black community participated in the emergencies often arising on the Underground Railroad. Members of the Bethel A.M.E. Church lodged fugitive slaves in their church for a short time and were an important factor in the local anti-slavery activities" (p. 133), does not prove the point. More than that, we have to know who these individuals were, what systems they employed, and who were some of the fugitives they aided or spirited away from slave catchers.

That is by no means an easy task, and one can understand why

it took Siebert so long to compile his history. Unfortunately for Blockson, as it is for so many of us, he had to work on a very limited budget and without support from a funding agency. That, however, is only part of the problem. If his footnotes are anything to go by, Blockson does not appear to have consulted the many abolitionist newspapers that are filled with accounts of fugitive slave cases. Nor did he seem to spend too much time in the unenviable task of ploughing through reams of local newspapers, which, always starved for news, anxiously reported on dramatic cases in their area. That, of course, would not tell us all we need to know about the organization, but it is surprising how these accounts do help the historian to piece together the rough contours of the movement. With the aid of these accounts one can discover the names of many of the local black participants, the organizations they developed, the routes of escape used, the defense systems employed, the ease with which they could call out the black community to defend a fugitive or intimidate a slave master, and the support received from the white community. The black organization in Pittsburgh, for example, was so sophisticated and well developed that it even spirited away free blacks who arrived in the city in the company of whites. It was safer, they argued, to assume that the person was a slave than to miss an opportunity to strike a blow at American slavery. It is only through this painstaking method that we can give to black Americans their rightful place in the movement.

One of Blockson's major objectives in this book is to show that unlike Siebert's claims for Ohio, Pennsylvania was the key state in the history of the UGRR. Blockson does show through his accounts of activities in the counties that Pennsylvania was an active participant in the movement. As to his claim that it was the pivotal state there is little evidence. One cannot claim a refutation of a previous position without a comparison of the available evidence. Surely it is more than just the fact that Pennsylvania borders on Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware. While it is reasonable to assume that slaves from those states would logically head for Pennsylvania, Blockson offers no evidence to show that the greatest number of escapees through Pennsylvania came from those states. By the same token, Pennsylvania's popularity with the fugitive must have been known to the slave masters, who, it is reasonable to assume, would have increased the number of slave catchers whose job it would be to intercept the

fugitive before that person even crossed the border. Aware of this, the fugitives may have chosen to cross into freedom at a different point. This is not to suggest that Blockson is wrong, but only that he has not compiled the evidence to substantiate his point. The evidence is there and waiting to be tapped. It can be found in the newspapers of Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware, which were filled with advertisements for the recapture of slaves. These advertisements not only described the slave, but on many occasions suggested a possible destination and often called on local newspapers in Pennsylvania to insert the advertisements offering a reward for the fugitive's recapture. When the Reverend James Pennington escaped from slavery near Hagerstown, Maryland, for example, his master, suspecting the route he would take, advertised in Lancaster and Philadelphia newspapers, and he was not far off the mark. This sort of evidence would have reinforced Blockson's argument. With it he could have challenged Siebert's claim for Ohio. Without it Blockson stands on very shaky grounds.

My concerns here are more than just academic. All history, and especially the history of the oppressed, whether academic or popular, has to aim at accuracy if it hopes to be lasting. Blockson has taken us partly along that road, but in doing so has left a number of tantalizing questions and issues unanswered. It is possible that all historians of the UGRR, especially those like Blockson who aim to tell us more about the role of the ordinary folks in it, have to devote a considerable portion of their life, as Siebert did, to the compilation of the evidence. Even with the vast amount of evidence that Blockson has amassed, the organization of the book leaves a great deal to be desired. As it stands it is no more than a collection of small vignettes on the activities of local UGRR organizations, with no attempt made to knit them together. It is indeed surprising that the book has no conclusion which attempts some kind of analytical summation. There are also an unfortunate number of small errors which further mar the author's presentation. William Wright, for instance, is placed in Lancaster County (p. 96) and Adams County (p. 145) without any explanation. We know from Still and from Pennington's narrative that Wright lived in Adams County during the late 1820s and 1830s, not in Lancaster County. Other errors, though nagging, are less significant. As if all this were not enough, Blockson's efforts have been plagued by some of the most incompetent editing. There

are numerous typographical errors, footnotes are wrongly numbered and in some cases (pp. 172-74) are completely in the wrong order. All in all this is not a very good book.

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Richmond Redeemed: The Siege at Petersburg. By RICHARD J. SOMMERS. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1981. Pp. xviii, 670. Foreword, preface, acknowledgments, illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.50.)

The September 22, 1864, defeat of Confederate General Jubal Early at Fisher's Hill in the Shenandoah Valley reassured General Grant that no new reinforcements could be spared from the Confederate Valley Army for the Petersburg defense line. This, then, was an appropriate time for another attempt to break through the Richmond-Petersburg defenses. Perhaps Richmond itself would be the prize this time. There had been signs that if General Lee was pushed hard enough he would be forced to give up the capital or at least his principal railroad center: the city of Petersburg. Grant planned a two-pronged attack on the Confederate defense lines. The Army of the James would attack the Confederate strongpoint at Fort Harrison north of the James River while the Army of the Potomac at the western extremity of the Petersburg defenses would attempt to cut the Southside Railroad, the last rail link to the Confederate interior, at Lynchburg, Virginia.

The Union assault began on September 29, 1864. The First Division, XVIII Corps of the Army of the James, was successful in capturing Fort Harrison but the X Corps failed in its attempt to take its objective: Fort Gilmer. While this action north of the James was taking place, two corps of the Army of the Potomac were extending their lines west of the Weldon Railroad in a series of battles aimed at reaching the Southside Railroad. The fighting by the two armies continued until October 2. Through skillful and successful Confederate counterattacks north of the James River, Richmond was temporarily saved. The stout Confederate defense against the advance