



# The Underground Railroad

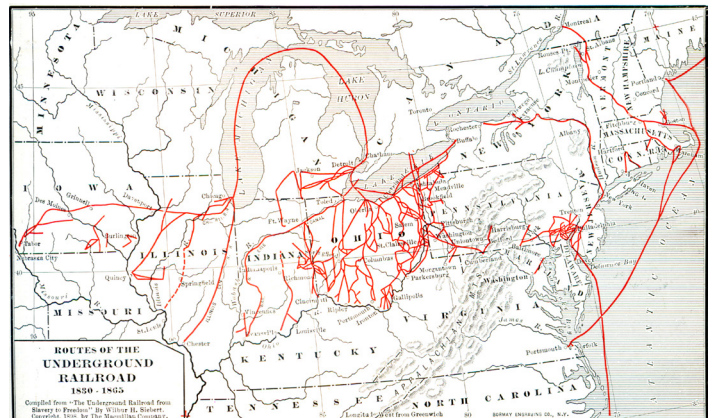
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## Framing Question

As the Underground Railroad helped guide fugitive slaves to freedom, what dangers and challenges confronted both the fugitives and those who helped them?

## Understanding

Political, economic, social, and moral issues molded the antebellum fugitive slave crisis in the US and in turn the Underground Railroad (UGRR). A metaphor for an interracial collaboration — at times formal, informal, visible, and invisible — the Underground Railroad helped direct thousands of fugitives toward freedom. The pragmatic civil disobedience practiced by both blacks and whites along the Underground Railroad demonstrated that fugitives were persons, not property.



## Text

[Letters from Thomas Garrett to William Still, 1857–1860](#)

## Background

The Underground Railroad (UGRR) was a metaphor for a large, interconnected network composed of smaller local systems that helped fugitives (runaway slaves) to make their way to freedom by providing money, transportation, food, clothing, other goods, and legal services. Fugitives, many of whom received no previous formal assistance to escape, reached the UGRR locations in a number of ways, including walking on foot at night, adopting disguises, and hiding on steam boats originating from Southern ports. While there are no reliable numbers about how many fugitives were successfully helped to freedom, estimates range from 25,000 to 50,000, only a fraction of all those held in bondage. Most fugitives were self-emancipating: they escaped by their own decision rather than being recruited by others.

The Underground Railroad grew and operated within the context of the larger fugitive slave debate. Laws distinguished between slaves and fugitives. As early as 1793 the US passed a fugitive slave law that authorized slave holders to cross state lines in order to reclaim runaways as specified in the fugitive slave clause in the US Constitution (Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3). Slave owners appeared before local law enforcement or court officials

to prove both ownership and that the slave had escaped, and the fugitive had no rights to trial or a writ of habeas corpus. Some states resisted the law by insisting that only federal magistrates could hear runaway cases or passing “personal liberty laws,” which gave to fugitives who were identified by slave catchers the right to trial by jury and the right to testify. Northern states also imposed stiff fines for kidnapping. By 1820 most Northern states had prohibited slavery by state statute more for political than economic reasons. The Compromise of 1820 prohibited slavery above the 36°30' line, and the abolition movement began to expand, encouraged by the Second Great Awakening and the fact that England outlawed slavery in 1833.

### Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

In *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (1842) the US Supreme Court ruled that personal liberty laws were unconstitutional, stating that a citizen’s right to recover property overrode any state’s effort to restrict that right. Additionally, the court ruled that enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 was a federal responsibility and state officials or private citizens could not be coerced into assisting in the capture of fugitives. To reinforce this provision, several Northern states passed statutes prohibiting state officials or jails from being used in the recovery of fugitives.

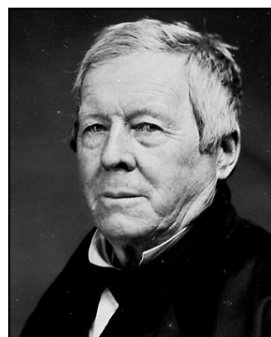
The fugitive debate intensified with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, part of the Compromise of 1850 that greatly expanded the power of Southerners to reclaim fugitives. Slave catchers brought a captured runaway before a special “federal commissioner” to determine a fugitive’s status. White witnesses or an affidavit from a slave state was all that was required to prove ownership: the slave catcher needed only to state that the accused was a slave unless there was documentation to the contrary. Slave catchers were paid a fee, and the commissioner was paid by the slave owner: \$10 if he ruled in the owner’s favor and \$5 if he ruled against the owner. Many saw this as a bribe to rule in the slave owner’s favor. Another element of the 1850 law that particularly angered Northerners was the fact that it required federal marshals to apprehend fugitives and permitted them to deputize private citizens to aid in the effort. The great irony of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was that the Southerners demanded federal power to support the return of fugitives, while the Northern states argued for state sovereignty to resist those efforts.

**CAUTION!!**  
**COLORED PEOPLE**  
**OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,**  
 You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the  
**Watchmen and Police Officers**  
**of Boston,**  
 For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as  
**KIDNAPPERS**  
 AND  
**Slave Catchers,**  
 And they have already been actually employed in KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY, and the Welfare of the Fugitives among you, Show them in every possible manner, as so many HOUNDS on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.  
**Keep a Sharp Look Out for KIDNAPPERS, and have TOP EYE open.**  
**APRIL 24, 1851.**

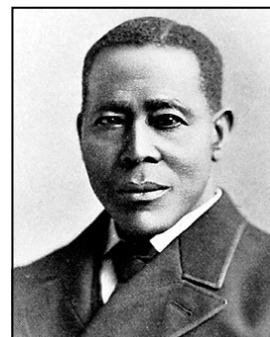
President Franklin Pierce (1804–1869) used the federal army and navy to enforce the 1850 law. For instance, one of the more famous examples of a fugitive return was that of Anthony Burns in 1854. In Boston, where rowdy crowds lined the streets, the US infantry was needed to march Burns to a waiting ship to return him to slavery in Virginia. The federal government spent thousands of dollars to return this one fugitive.

With the publication in 1852 of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Anthony Burns case, the fugitive issue became even more volatile. Northern states reacted to the Burns case by passing new personal liberty laws. The abolitionist movement expanded, and the activities of the Underground Railroad accelerated. Free blacks and escaped slaves, assisted by white abolitionists, continued to take a leading role in the Underground Railroad.

This lesson focuses upon letters written by Thomas Garrett to William Still, both vigilance agents, those who assisted fugitives, on the UGRR. William Still (1821–1902), the son of slaves, was born in New Jersey, the youngest of 18 children. At 23 he moved to Philadelphia to seek employment, and he joined the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in 1847. He advanced to become head of the Philadelphia UGRR office, working tirelessly to raise funds, arrange passage, and negotiate safe houses for fugitives, usually among the free black population of Philadelphia. He remained active in the African American community until his death.



Thomas Garrett, 1789–1871



William Still, 1821–1902

Still kept most of his letters and notes from his work on the UGRR not only to document the work of the UGRR but also to help fugitives find their families as he had done when his own brother came through the Underground Railroad network to Philadelphia. Although keeping such records was dangerous, with discovery resulting in large fines, loss of property, or recapture of the fugitives, he persisted, but after the Harper's Ferry raid he hid his records in a church building. At the request of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society in 1872 Still published his records and recollections in the book, *The Underground Railroad*. It is from this source that these letters are taken.

Thomas Garrett was a Quaker abolitionist who served as a vigilance agent in Wilmington, Delaware. He assisted as many as 3,000 fugitives, sending many of them to his friend William Still. While Garrett kept a count of the fugitives he helped, he did not retain actual letters or correspondence. He was also friends with Harriet Tubman, who passed through his office (Garrett owned a large shoe business) at least eight times. Vigilance agents were subject to arrest, fines, and imprisonment for their activities, and Garrett lost much of his personal wealth in a lawsuit brought against him by slave owners. Yet he continued his support of fugitives and free blacks until his death.

What happened to the UGRR? The outbreak of the Civil War allowed friendly US soldiers to take part in assisting fugitives. While Lincoln originally ordered the military to return fugitives to their masters, this was generally ignored, and by late 1861 Lincoln stated that any fugitive that reached the Union lines was free. In March of 1862 the US Congress prohibited the Northern military from returning fugitives.

In this lesson you will analyze five letters written from Thomas Garrett to William Still. As you analyze the letters pay attention to the dangers and uncertainties of the Underground Railroad.

#### **Activity: Vocabulary**

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



## Text Analysis

### **Letter 1: Thomas Garrett To William Still, March 27, 1857**

*This letter was sent seven years after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.*

WILMINGTON, 3d mo., 27th, 1857.

ESTEEMED FRIEND, WILLIAM STILL:— I have been very anxious for some time past, to hear what has become of Harriet Tubman. The last I heard of her, she was in the State of New York, on her way to Canada with some friends, last fall. Has thee seen, or heard anything of her lately? It would be a sorrowful fact, if such a hero as she, should be lost from the Underground Rail Road. I have just received a letter from Ireland, making inquiry respecting her. If thee gets this in time, and knows anything respecting her, please drop me a line by mail to-morrow, and I will get it next morning if not sooner, and oblige thy friend.

I have heard nothing from the eighth man from Dover, but trust he is safe.

1. Harriet Tubman was one of the best known guides on the Underground Railroad. According to this letter, what were her travel plans the previous fall?

2. Who may you infer were the "friends" she accompanied?

3. Tubman and Garrett worked closely together. What can you infer about her travels from the fact that he has not heard from her in several months?

4. From this letter, how do you know that Tubman already has a well-known reputation as a successful guide on the Underground Railroad?

5. When Garrett stated, "I have heard nothing from the eighth man from Dover, but trust he is safe," to whom is he referring? If he has no information, why does he mention the man?

6. Based upon this letter, what can you infer is one challenge faced by those traveling via the Underground Railroad network?

## Letter 2: Thomas Garrett to William Still, August 21, 1858

*Paragraph 2: Exordium, continued*

WILMINGTON, 8th mo. 21st, 1858.

ESTEEMED FRIEND, WILLIAM STILL:— This is my 69th birth-day, and I do not know any better way to celebrate it in a way to accord with my feelings, than to send to thee two fugitives, man and wife; the man has been here a week waiting for his wife, who is expected in time to leave at 9 this evening in the cars [on the railroad] for thy house with a pilot [a guide], who knows where thee lives, but I cannot help but feel some anxiety about the woman, as there is great commotion just now in the neighborhood where she resides. There were 4 slaves betrayed near the Maryland line by a colored man named Jesse Perry a few nights since. One of them made a confidant of him, and he agreed to pilot [guide] them on their way, and had several white men secreted to take them as soon as they got in his house; he is the scoundrel that was to have charge of the 7 I wrote you about two weeks since; their master was to take or send them there, and he wanted me to send for them. I have since been confirmed it was a trap set to catch one of our colored men and me likewise, but it was no go. I suspected him from the first, but afterwards was fully confirmed in my suspicions. We have found the two Rust boys, John and Elsey Bradley, who the villain... took out of jail and sold to a trader of the name of Morris, who sold them to a trader who took them to Richmond, Virginia, where they were sold at public sale two days before we found them, for \$2600, but fortunately the man had not paid for them; our Attorney had them by *habeas corpus* before a Judge, who detained them till we can prove their identity and freedom; they are to have a hearing on 2d day next, when we hope to have a person on there to prove them. In haste, thine,

THOS. GARRETT.

7. How old is Thomas Garrett when he writes this letter? What does this tell you about the ages of members of the Underground Railroad?

8. Describe the fugitives Garrett speaks of in this letter. Are they traveling together? Cite evidence from the text.

9. Why have these two fugitives been separated up to this point? Cite evidence from the text.

10. By what method of transportation are these fugitives to leave Garrett?

11. Who will accompany them from this point?

12. Who was Jesse Perry? What did he do?

13. What had Perry attempted to do two weeks prior to this letter?

14. How did Garrett deal with Perry's request?

15. From the Jesse Perry episode what may you infer about the security dangers on the Underground Railroad?



16. Who were John and Elsey Bradley?

17. What happened to John and Elsey Bradley?

18. From this letter, name three types of assistance offered to fugitives by the UGRR.

19. Based upon this letter, what were two dangers fugitives faced as they tried to escape?

### Letter 3: Thomas Garrett to William Still, August 25, 1858

*This letter was written only four days after letter 2.*

WILMINGTON, 8th mo. 25th, 1858.

ESTEEMED FRIEND, WILLIAM STILL:— Thine [your letter] was received yesterday. Those two I wrote about to be with thee last 7th day [Saturday] evening, I presume thee has seen before this. A. Allen had charge of them; he had them kept out of sight at the depot here till the cars [railroad] should be ready to start, in charge of a friend, while he kept a lookout and got a ticket. When the Delaware cars arrived, who should step out but the master of both man and woman, (as they had belonged to different persons); they knew him, and he knew them. He left in a different direction from where they were secreted, and got round to them and hurried them off to a place of safety, as he was afraid to take them home for fear they would search the house. On 1st day [Sunday] morning the boat ran to Chester to take our colored people to the camp at Media; he had them disguised, and got them in the crowd and went with them; when he got to Media, he placed them in care of a colored man, who promised to hand them over to thee on 2d day [Monday] last; we expect 3 more next 7th day night, but how we shall dispose of them we have not yet determined; it will depend on circumstances. Judge Layton has been on with a friend to Richmond, Virginia, and fully identified the two Bradley boys that were kidnapped by Clem Rust. He has the assurance of the Judge there that they will be tried and their case decided by Delaware Laws, by which they must be declared free and returned here. We hope to be able to bring such proof against both Rust and the man he sold them to, who took them out of the State, to teach them a lesson they will remember.

Thy friend,  
THOS. GARRETT.

20. Garrett speaks in this letter of the two fugitives who were to be sent to Still via the railroad line. Who was their pilot — who “had charge of them” — and what were his responsibilities before they left Delaware?

21. What happened to thwart the plan to leave via the railroad line? Why was it necessary to change the plan?

22. How did the two fugitives actually leave? What route did they follow?

23. Garrett states, “we expect 3 more next 7th day night, but how we shall dispose of them we have not yet determined; it will depend on circumstances.” From this statement what can you infer about Underground Railroad routes?

24. What happened to the Bradley fugitives?

25. What danger does the Bradley situation in this letter exemplify for free blacks in the North?

26. What other challenge for fugitives is implied by this letter?

#### **Letter 4: to J. M. McKim, head of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, and William Still**

*Paragraph 4: Refutatio*

WILMINGTON, 9th mo. 6th, 1858.

ESTEEMED FRIENDS, J.M. MCKIM AND WM. STILL:— I have a mixture of good and bad news for you. Good in having passed five of God’s poor safely to Jersey, and Chester county, last week; and this day sent on four more, that have caused me much anxiety. They were within twenty miles of here on sixth day [Friday] last, and by agreement I had a man out all seventh day night watching for them, to pilot them safely, as 1,000 dollars reward was offered for four of the five; and I went several miles yesterday in the country to try to learn what had become of them, but could not hear of them. A man of tried integrity just called to say that they arrived at his house last night, about midnight, and I employed him to pilot them to a place of safety in Pennsylvania, to-night, after which I trust they will be out of reach of their pursuers. Now for the bad news. That old scoundrel, who applied to me some three weeks since, pretending that he wished me to assist him in getting his seven slaves into a free state, to avoid the sheriff, and which I agreed to do, if he would bring them here; but [I] positively refused to send for them. Ten days since I received another letter from him, saying that the sheriff had been there, and taken away two of the children, which he wished me to raise money to purchase and set free, and then closed by saying that his other slaves, a man, his wife, and three children had left the same evening and he had no doubt I would find them at a colored man’s house, he named, here, and wished me to ascertain at once and let him know. I at once was convinced he wished to know so as to have them arrested and taken back. I found the man had arrived; but the woman and

children had given out [grown tired], and he left them with a colored family in Cecil. I wrote him word the family had not got here, but said nothing of the man being here. On seventh day evening I saw a colored woman from the neighborhood; she told me that the owner and sheriff were out hunting five days for them before they found them, and says there is not a greater hypocrite in that part of the world. I wrote him a letter yesterday letting him know just what I thought of him.

Your Friend,  
THOS. GARRETT.

26. What incentive was offered to surrender the fugitives described in this letter?

27. From the context of this letter what type of person can you infer is “a man of tried integrity?”

28. Summarize the two pieces of “good news” that Garrett conveys in his letter.

29. Garrett refers to Jesse Perry, the same man from letter two, who attempted to trap him into revealing the location of fugitives. Perry was a free black man who cooperated with slave catchers. Garrett found the fugitive in question but did not find the wife and children. Why had the group split?

30. What happened to the man from the group?

31. What happened to the wife and children of the group?

32. From this letter what can you infer about the prospect of families escaping?



33. From this letter what danger can you infer was always present for fugitives?

### Letter 5: to William Still, December 1, 1860

*According to William Still, this was Harriet Tubman's last trip south.*

WILMINGTON, 12th mo., 1st, 1860.

RESPECTED FRIEND, WILLIAM STILL:— I write to let thee know that Harriet Tubman is again in these parts. She arrived last evening from one of her trips of mercy to God's poor, bringing two men with her as far as New Castle [Delaware]. I agreed to pay a man last evening, to pilot them on their way to Chester county; the wife of one of the men, with two or three children, was left some thirty miles below, and I gave Harriet ten dollars, to hire a man with carriage, to take them to Chester county. She said a man had offered [his services] for that sum, to bring them on. I shall be very uneasy about them, till I hear they are safe. There is now much more risk on the road, till they arrive here, than there has been for several months past, as we find that some poor, worthless wretches are constantly on the look out on two roads, that they cannot well avoid more especially with carriage, yet, as it is Harriet who seems to have had a special angel to guard her on her journey of mercy, I have hope.

Thy Friend,  
THOMAS GARRETT.

N.B. We hope all will be in Chester county to-morrow.

#### Activity: From the Fugitive's View

Trace Frederick Douglass's escape from slavery and the dangers he experienced along the way.



34. According to this letter, what type of assistance was Garrett providing the fugitives?

35. Based upon your knowledge of politics in 1860 what reason could you suggest that might explain why there would there be "much more risk on the road?"

36. From context, who are the "poor, worthless wretches?"

37. What danger to fugitives does this letter represent?

## Glossary

**oblige:** be grateful to

**commotion:** noisy disturbance

**confidant:** person keeping a secret

**secreted:** hidden

**scoundrel:** dishonest person

**villain:** evil person

**ascertain:** to make sure of

## Text

- Still, William. *The Underground Railroad 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*. Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 822 Chestnut Street, 1872. Release Date: March 5, 2005 [EBook #15263] <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15263/15263-h/15263-h.htm>

## Images

- "Routes of the Underground Railroad, 1830–1865," Dixon Ryan Fox, *Harper's Atlas of American History* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1920). Florida's Educational Technology Clearinghouse, <http://etc.usf.edu/maps> [map #03312]
- "Caution!! Colored people of Boston...", poster, 1851. From the Collection of Louis Warren, Boston Public Library, 700 Boylston St, Boston, MA 02116. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Slave\\_kidnap\\_post\\_1851\\_boston.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Slave_kidnap_post_1851_boston.jpg)
- "Thomas Garrett circa 1850," ambrotype. BPLDC no.: 07\_05\_000028. Call no.: Cab.G.99. BPL Department: Rare Books Department. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas\\_Garrett\\_ambrotype\\_c1850.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_Garrett_ambrotype_c1850.jpg)
- "William Still, Abolitionist," from *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* by Wilbur Henry Siebert, Albert Bushnell Hart. Edition: 2. Published by Macmillan, 1898, pg. 74. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:William\\_Still\\_abolitionist.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:William_Still_abolitionist.jpg)