
Reviewed by Stan Harrold

Published on H-SHEAR (February, 2002)

What Was the Underground Railroad and How Did It Work?

The underground railroad has recently attracted considerable interest. In cities and towns throughout the Northeast and in portions of the South, both the National Park Service and local historians are unearthing records of fugitive slaves and those who aided them. Efforts to identify underground railroad sites are booming in Washington, D.C., Massachusetts, and Ohio. Western New York is as much a hotbed of such activity as it once was of abolitionism. Soon a national underground railroad center will open in Cincinnati.

In 1998 Carol Kammen identified several factors that may account for this surging interest. Movies such as *Schindler's List*, which deal with those who helped Jews escape from the Nazis, have produced curiosity concerning Americans who helped African Americans escape from slaveholders. Stories of underground railroading provide African Americans with an affirmation of their ancestors' determination to be free. At the same time, stories of white involvement in helping escaping slaves provide whites with a vicarious link to the freedom struggle and help assuage feelings of guilt concerning their ancestors. Among historians, a renewed focus on the underground railroad provides a means of reassessing the antislavery movement that preceded the Civil War.

Yet what the underground railroad was and how it operated are enormous questions that can be answered only through painstaking, extensive, and extended research into fragmentary and ambiguous documents. The underground railroad resists understanding because its operations were to varying degrees secret, because fugitive slaves were transients who often misrepresented themselves, and because legends concerning it are often unverifiable. The underground railroad extended over vast regions stretching from the deep South and upper South through the Northeast and Old Northwest to Canada and Great Britain. It varied from place to place and how it worked in one region and time does not reflect its activities in others.

These difficulties are complicated by interpretations of the underground railroad that either
question its existence or define it so broadly as to make the term meaningless. The first tendency is most evident in Larry Gara’s *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad*. This book, first published in 1961, maintains that—with some regional exceptions—an organized clandestine network to help slaves escape from the South never existed, that white abolitionists’ involvement in helping slaves escape was minimal, and that most slaves escaped on their own.[3] For nearly three decades, *The Liberty Line* discouraged scholarly investigations into the relationship between organized abolitionism and clandestine aid to slave escape.

The second tendency is encapsulated in C. Peter Ripley’s recent statement that "the Underground Railroad included every slave who made the difficult and dangerous journey out of bondage." Ripley goes on to write that the underground railroad also included "a secret network of fugitive slaves, free blacks, and whites of conscience who organized themselves to assist and protect the fleeing slaves." [4] But to suggest that both unassisted escapes and assisted escapes were part of the underground railroad is, to say the least, imprecise. No historian has argued that the underground railroad was a centralized organization whose agents guided fugitive slaves northward along invariable routes. But for the term to have meaning it must be restricted to assisted slave escapes along predetermined routes. The underground railroad’s relationship to organized abolitionism also needs to be established.

Kathryn Grover in her impressive *The Fugitive’s Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionists in New Bedford, Massachusetts* has taken an important step in dealing with these problems. An independent scholar who lives in New Bedford, Grover relies on tax records, relief roles, federal and state census returns, city directories, court records, ships’ rosters, genealogy, and such more accessible sources as newspapers and slave narratives to produce a history of this city’s involve-

ment with fugitive slaves from 1787 to 1863. Grover presents a sophisticated analysis, based on a thorough knowledge of the small city’s economy and culture. She places her subject in the contexts of race relations, black and white abolitionism, and a broader underground railroad network. By doing so, she contributes greatly to our understanding of all three subjects.

New Bedford had a reputation among African Americans, black and white abolitionists, and slaveholders as a city that was very hospitable to African Americans in general and fugitive slaves in particular. Grover shows the prominent role Quakers and former Quakers played in gaining this reputation for the city. More important, however, was that by the 1810s New Bedford had become the United States’ leading whaling port and attracted a large number of black sailors. Even before that decade it had an extraordinarily large black population for a northern city of its size. According to Grover, black residents, many of whom were originally from the South, provided most of the aid and protection that fugitives who reached the city received. She relies on statistical comparisons with other cities of the Northeast to establish that African Americans were indeed better off in New Bedford than elsewhere in the region. She is careful to point out, nevertheless, that even in this relatively friendly city, they suffered from racism, discrimination in employment, and white condescension.

Grover distinguishes between how New Bedford’s black and white abolitionists reacted to and engaged with fugitive slaves. She agrees with historians who have studied abolitionism at other northern locations that there were essential differences in orientation between the two groups. As she portrays them, the whites in New Bedford who were drawn into antislavery activism during the 1820s desired to impose order and morality on a growing transient population that included African Americans. With notable exceptions, they supported nonviolence and the existing social or-
der. They regarded slavery as a southern problem and had a patronizing attitude toward African Americans.

In contrast, black abolitionists in the city were more willing to advocate forceful means, recognized that racial oppression existed in the North as well as the South, and were more concerned with the welfare of fugitives after they had reached New Bedford. During the 1830s, the two groups organized separate antislavery societies affiliated with the American Antislavery Society. In response to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, they organized separate vigilance committees to defend fugitives against slave catchers. Nevertheless, Grover emphasizes that New Bedford’s black and white abolitionists cooperated to help escaping slaves and to frustrate attempts of masters or their agents to pursue them. According to Grover, abolitionists of both races who aided escapees regarded themselves as the real abolitionists. Fugitive slaves, she indicates, drew the city’s black and white abolitionists together into a biracial antislavery community.

Grover also achieves a great deal in showing how the fugitives got to New Bedford along well established routes. She often speculates. There are in The Fugitive’s Gibraltar plenty of may haves and might haves. But the cumulative impact of her research is persuasive. She follows David S. Cecelski in contending that from the late eighteenth century onward coastal trading vessels, which often employed black crewmen, played a central role.[5] She demonstrates that there was “an escape route along the East Coast” that was well known to slaves and northern abolitionists (p. 86). The number of fugitives reaching New Bedford increased during the 1840s and increased even more greatly during the 1850s in spite of the new fugitive slave law. In regard to that decade, Grover does very well in tracing assisted escapes from the Virginia port cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth through Philadelphia to New Bedford. Relying on the records kept by Philadelphia’s black vigilance association leader William Still, Grover leaves little doubt that this was an organized clandestine operation led by abolitionists that followed well established routes and procedures.

Again and again Groves traces the paths of slaves who reached New Bedford and provides accounts of the black and white people who helped them along the way. Most of those involved are now obscure. But others are well known to historians of the antislavery movement. Among the fugitives who reached New Bedford were Frederick Douglass, William Henry Johnson, Harriet Jacobs, and Lewis Hayden. Among the rescuers with ties to the city were Leonard Grimes, a black man who helped slaves escape from Virginia, and two white men—Jonathan Walker, who attempted to help slaves escape from Florida, and Daniel Drayton, who attempted to help slaves escape from the District of Columbia.

Grover organizes her book into eight chapters. The first discusses the Quaker impact on New Bedford. The second focuses on its whaling industry. The third deals with the relationship between coastal trade and slave escapes. The next four are each devoted to a decade, starting with the 1820s and ending with the 1850s. The final chapter deals with the early Civil War years and provides a brief conclusion to the book. Each decade chapter covers events in the city and nation, race relations in the city, black and white abolitionists, and the stories of fugitive slaves who settled in or passed through the city. Several of these chapters are long and unwieldy. There is also a good deal of repetition. For example, on three separate occasions Grover quotes New York City black leader Charles B. Ray’s statement that African Americans were “better off [in New Bedford] than in any other place” (pp. 16, 136, 287).

Although Grover’s research and interpretation are generally impeccable, it is worthwhile to raise a few questions concerning her utilization of sources and her analysis. According to Grover,
black and white abolitionists prior to the 1850s were almost always Garrisonians. She often relies on William Lloyd Garrison’s Liberator for accounts of events in New Bedford. She portrays negatively the few abolitionists she mentions who are not Garrisonians. She does not mention the Liberty party abolitionists of the 1840s and does not cite their newspaper, the Emancipator, which, like the Liberator, was published in nearby Boston. Yet Liberty abolitionists were generally more active in helping slaves escape than were Garrisonians and some Garrisonians denounced such aid. Therefore the Emancipator’s perspective on New Bedford might prove enlightening.

Another point worth further analysis involves the former slaves who reached New Bedford during the 1830s. With the exception of Frederick Douglass, the individuals whose stories Grover emphasizes in her chapter dealing with that decade did not escape from the South. Instead their masters brought them into northern jurisdictions where they were legally free and not subject to the Fugitive Slave Law. They left their masters while in the North, and this raises questions about the extent of the underground railroad during the 1830s. Finally, Grover does not consider the financial aspects of underground railroading. Raising money to pay for slave escapes was essential and must have been an important part of abolitionism in New Bedford. Desire for financial gain motivated many slave rescuers, such as Daniel Drayton, to undertake their dangerous missions. This is a central, if neglected, part of the underground railroad story.

The most important unresolved issue raised by Grover, however, is how representative of northern municipalities was New Bedford’s engagement in underground railroading? Grover mentions Salem, Ohio, Albany and Buffalo, New York, Medford and Worcester, Massachusetts, and Columbia, Pennsylvania as other locations that offered “a safe harbor for fugitives” (p. 265). But throughout The Fugitive’s Gibraltar she empha-

Notes
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5947

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.