

Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad

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Review

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Foner, Eric *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*. W.W. Norton, \$26.95 ISBN 9780393244076

The Underground Railroad, Black Agency, and the Coming of the Civil War

The momentum toward uncovering and understanding the Underground Railroad is deservedly reaching a crescendo. With the impetus provided by the 1999 publication of John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger's *Runaway Slaves*, historians in the twenty-first century who focus on African Americans' efforts to escape slavery, such as Keith Griffler in *Frontline of Freedom* and Kate Larson in *Bound for the Promised Land*, have combined with other scholars who have incorporated antebellum fugitive slaves into larger narratives, such as Matthew Mason's *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic*, William Link's *Roots of Secession*, David Williams's *I Freed Myself*, and Stanley Harrold's *Border War*, to lay a solid foundation for the case that fugitive slaves shaped the course of the nation from early in the nineteenth century up to and through the American Civil War. Eric Foner is arguably the 'biggest name' thus far to weigh in. His contribution builds on that solid foundation to erect a formidable edifice by smartly focusing on New York City. New York was not only the largest city in the North by a wide margin—more than twice the size of the next two largest cities combined, Boston and Philadelphia—its populace in general was also far more hostile to antislavery, abolitionism, and any efforts to help fugitive slaves than any northern city. Therefore, if a historian could demonstrate that even in New York City the Underground Railroad grew in significance, then the argument for placing escaping slaves at the heart of the national narrative could be virtually unassailable.

The structure of *Gateway to Freedom* is a model of how to construct an argument. The first chapter establishes the unique features of New York City that enable Foner to geographically, politically, and historiographically link its Underground Railroad activity to the national network. And nationally, the

Underground Railroad shaped the nation. On page 26, Foner sums up his thesis: “the fugitive slave issue played a crucial role in bringing about the Civil War,” which would not “have happened without the actions of the slaves who sought escape to freedom and the northerners, black and white, who took part in organized efforts to assist them.” The next chapter tracks the early and relatively inchoate stages of the Underground Railroad during the 1820s and 1830s. Foner then moves into the meat of the text in a chapter somewhat dubiously titled “Origins of the Underground Railroad, which locates the origins in the establishment of the New York Vigilance committee. Though I suspect many historians, myself included, would question calling this the point and place of origin, the chapter makes a strong implicit argument that historians should consider understand and employ the label ‘Underground Railroad’ with greater specificity. In terms of becoming an organized entity, coordination between the several abolitionist networks in the North was necessary. The New York Vigilance committee, led by David Ruggles, played a pivotal role generating that coordination. The committee became an important nexus that hinted at the potential of how the railroad could function with greater breadth and efficiency. Foner is not arguing that the railroad ever became a single, smooth, well-oiled machine. The fourth chapter makes clear that instability, driven both by external threat and by internal strife within antislavery organizations, was always a problem. But this simply buttresses for the importance of New York City—as Philadelphia and Boston struggled, activists in New York helped ensure the networks continued to function. Abolitionists throughout the North, despite some deep disagreements, appeared to be able to consistently surmount their internal divisions when working to help fugitive slaves, which continued to exacerbate sectional disputes. The southern and federal response, outlined in the fifth chapter, manifested itself in the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Despite its tremendous impact on black communities throughout the North, and despite the fact that New York City witnessed no demonstrations in support of apprehended fugitives as seen in other cities, New York City “consolidated its position as a crucial hub in a complex set of networks” (150) that saw over 1,000 African Americans escape to freedom in the 1850s.

The next two chapters detail many of the stories of those individuals and those who assisted them, in particular white abolitionist Sydney Howard Gay. One of Foner’s undergraduate students, Madeline Lewis, pointed him to Gay’s Record of Fugitives, which had previously been either undiscovered or ignored. This is part of the “hidden” history noted in the book’s subtitle. Though the vast

majority of Foner's sources are not 'hidden' or new, he skillfully uses Gay's record to connect New York City activists with his research in other, better known work like William Still's account to mount a powerful argument. This is one unique value of the book; Foner weaves together a web of sources historians have known about for quite some time along with Gay's meticulous records to create a clear image of the national scope and impact of the Underground Railroad. The final chapter shines a final light on that web by noting how slaves seeking freedom in the North remained a contentious issue right up to the eve of war, and how once war began they helped push the nation to emancipation.

There is one significant criticism that can be made not only of *Gateway to Freedom* but also of much historiography involving African Americans. With a few notable exceptions, such as Kate Larson and David Williams's work, it is debatable whether the black men and women who kick-started the railroad by running away, as well as the black northerners who were crucial in assisting them long before white activists became important allies, are the center of the story. Two examples illustrate this critique. First, though Gay's work was undoubtedly fundamental to the operation of the railroad in New York, so, too, was Louis Napoleon's role. Foner points to the vital work of this black activist—indeed, it seems that Napoleon may have actually been the real lynchpin of the railroad in New York City. Yet his story is subsidiary to Gay's. Granted, this in part is likely due to availability of sources. It is less understandable, however, why black activists are consistently introduced with racial identifiers whereas white activists are not. For example, Foner writes on page 177 that "in the 1840s, Gay continued to send fugitives to Joseph Ricketson Jr. in New Bedford and Francis Jackson in Boston, but the only person he mentioned in New England was Josephus Silliman, a black laborer living in New Haven." Though Foner did identify Ricketson as a white on p.104, white abolitionist Jackson is never identified by race in several references to him. This pattern that holds true for historical figures not just in *Gateway to Freedom* but in most historiography, in which whiteness as the norm is reinforced through the presumption that a person is white when a racial modifier is absent, and that the 'other' need be identified as such with a racial modifier.

This may seem a nit-picky critique. It certainly does not undermine the skillfulness with which Foner has put together a wealth of sources to tell an eminently readable story. It is an important work of scholarship that is accessible to a wide range of readers. That skillfulness is all the more reason to expect even more—that black people, in a book about how their actions generated a

movement that fundamentally changed the nation, are not situated as the other, but are at the center of the story in every regard, including prose.

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