

Vigilance: The Life of William Still, Father of the Underground Railroad

Matthew J. Clavin
University of Houston, mjclavi2@central.uh.edu

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Review

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Clavin, Matthew J.

Diemer, Andrew K. *Vigilance: The Life of William Still, Father of the Underground Railroad.* Alfred A. Knopf, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$30.00 ISBN 9780593534380 pp. 410

Today, William Still's name rarely gets mentioned alongside those of Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Tubman, and the other abolitionist icons who dedicated their lives to destroying slavery. Indeed, despite having directed the eastern branch of the Underground Railroad for nearly two decades, the free Black businessman, educator, reformer, and philanthropist remains largely outside of the public's historical consciousness. The only exception to Still's anonymity is his postbellum publication, *The Underground Railroad*, which, because of the internet, continues to find new audiences. Its reputation as the most important first-person account of the organized effort to assist fugitive slaves to freedom is secure.

As Andrew K. Diemer's well-written and deeply researched biography demonstrates, William Still's accomplishments went far beyond the publication of a seminal work. One of eighteen children born to two former slaves, he early demonstrated a fierce commitment to faith, family, and industry. Arriving in Philadelphia from New Jersey in the spring of 1844, he joined the metropolis's working class for several years until finding a position as a clerk in the office of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Working alongside an interracial cadre of the city's most prominent abolitionists, it was here that Still cut his teeth as an activist and author. It was also where he began to earn his reputation as one of the chief architects of the Underground Railroad. Within several years, Still not only helped make Philadelphia one of the busiest stations on the subversive line, but kept detailed notes of his encounters and correspondence with fugitive slaves—notes that would eventually provide the source material for his influential book.

Still's work on the Underground Railroad tells only part of his story. In Philadelphia, he raised several children along with his wife, Letitia, and remained in close contact with his siblings. Among several business ventures, he found his greatest success as a coal distributor to

both Black and White customers. A staunch advocate of civil rights in the North, Still took particular interest in the fights to secure Black suffrage and integrate Philadelphia's streetcars. As the biography makes clear, Black people daily experienced cruel and often humiliating racial discrimination across the city despite its reputation as the Cradle of Liberty. Middle age kept Still from military service during the Civil War, yet he quietly contributed to the Union war effort by raising supplies for southern contrabands and serving as a sutler to Black regiments stationed at Philadelphia's Camp William Penn.

With the work of the Underground Railroad completed, Still's attention shifted to chronicling its history. In the immediate postwar years, he set out to dramatize the efforts of enslaved people to free themselves from bondage. In the *Underground Railroad*, fugitive slaves take center stage in both the text and images that fill the book, while the author recedes into the background. No accident, this was part of Still's strategy to "keep fugitive slaves themselves at the center of the story of the Underground Railroad" (274). Where others in the postbellum era credited White abolitionists with freeing thousands of enslaved people prior to the Civil War, Still underscored the extent to which these Black men, women, and children freed themselves.

Despite his extraordinary success, Still's life was not without controversy. While White supremacists always posed an immediate threat to his life and livelihood, members of Philadelphia's Black abolitionists community often provided additional stress. The biography provides numerous examples, including a controversy involving a female fugitive slave named Ellen Wells. In a case of what many today might call *cancelling*, a group of Black Philadelphians publicly shamed Still for having written a private letter accusing Wells of misusing antislavery funds and in other ways demonstrating questionable character. A local court embraced the outcry and eventually found Still guilty of slander. As a result, it forced him to pay \$100 and spend ten days in jail as punishment. It is a reminder of the dangers even the most altruistic public figures face in an era of mass media.

If there's a flaw in *Vigilance*, it is that after having spent so many years in the Still archive, its author may have fallen into the trap—set by Still himself—of mistaking Still's modesty for moderation. Diemer concludes, "Still's enduring legacy was less as a towering, heroic individual than as a connector, as someone who empowered ordinary Black people to find their own paths to freedom" (312). There is another possible interpretation. By repeatedly risking his own life and that of his family for the freedom of others, Still proved himself as radical a

defender of freedom as any of his contemporaries. Though refusing the spotlight and strategically concealing his own contributions to the Black struggle, he nonetheless demonstrated a level of bravery, heroism, and resistance, that few others in American history have matched.

For its accessibility and exactness alone, *Vigilance* deserves a place on the shelf of new and important works on abolitionists, abolitionism, and the Underground Railroad. That it will likely rest alongside another biography of Still, which appeared less than a year ago, suggests that the “Father of the Underground Railroad” may finally be getting the recognition that he so truly deserves. This is a promising development. As the demands for equality and in particular the civil rights of Black people continue to escalate in our own day, his life story means as much as ever before.

Professor Matthew J. Clavin, the author of Symbols of Freedom: Slavery and Resistance Before the Civil War, teaches United States and Atlantic History at the University of Houston in Houston, TX.