



A RAILROAD THAT RAN ON WATER.



THE STORY

A GATEWAY TO FREEDOM.

In the early half of the 19th Century, tens of thousands of African American slaves escaped from the South to freedom in the northern United States and Canada.

Their daring escapes were made possible by a clandestine network of people, hideouts, and willing ship captains that history would eventually call The Underground Railroad.

This "railroad" didn't operate with tracks and trains, of course. It ran on water. And secrets.

It represented America's first non-violent resistance initiative, and some speculate that more enslaved African Americans departed the port cities of Virginia than any other area along the eastern seaboard.

How many? Hundreds at least. Perhaps thousands. No one can ever be sure.

We do know this: With 1,500 ships visiting Norfolk's waterfront each year, Virginia was the perfect gateway for slaves seeking freedom in the north.

EASY ACCESS.

None of this was lost on Virginia's authorities.

In fact, they were so concerned that slaves were escaping in large numbers that they passed countless ordinances from 1820 through the eve of the Civil War. The laws allowed for the search and seizures of vessels entering Virginia's waterways. Especially those from the North.

Yet the practice of using slaves to do much of the work in port areas also afforded black men and women easy access to the numerous ferries, sloops, and other ships that occupied the waterways throughout Hampton Roads.

Black men held the preponderance of maritime positions along the Chesapeake Bay and its numerous tributaries that drove the slave trade from the Carolinas to New England. In Hampton Roads, African Americans crowded the shipyards, wharves, and docks as part of the throng of laborers. Visitors to the area would have seen canal boats, scows, flatboats, and skiffs commanded by all-black crews.

SECRECYP, STRATEGY AND CONCEALMENT

The "agents" and "conductors" on Virginia's Underground Railroad were the most threatening group to slaveholders. Without their brave and heroic deeds, far fewer slaves would have been able to find freedom, or even see it as an option.

The conductors were often skilled slaves, free blacks or whites. Many of their names will forever remain anonymous because the success of their enterprise and their safety demanded the utmost secrecy.

Many remain anonymous. But not all.

Henry Lewey was a Norfolk slave who used the pseudonym "Bluebeard" to hide his identity. He escaped 1856 when word circulated that he was a suspected Underground Railroad agent.

William Bagnall. was a white Virginia Bank bookkeeper who was later credited with assisting in the escapes of numerous slaves and passing correspondence between those who had escaped and enslaved family members still living in Hampton Roads.

Indeed, the duty of an Underground Railroad agent was not limited to connecting slaves seeking freedom with sympathetic ship captains and underground agents in the north.

After the escapees reached the North, the local agent often served as the only connection to loved ones left behind.



TELLING SECRETS

It wasn't until years later that the heroic stories of the Underground Railroad began to be heard and told.

It was William Still, secretary and executive director of the antebellum Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, who collected thousands of stories from fugitive slaves through interviews and letters from 1852 until emancipation.

And it was William Still who gave the clandestine network its name.

He published his collection in 1872 in a work called The Underground Railroad.

The accounts in Still's book illustrate Norfolk's reputation as one of the most active ports on the Underground Railroad. In fact, two of the most famous cases involving Underground Railroad fugitives involved escapees from Norfolk — George Latimer and Shadrach Minkins.

SECRET PASSAGE

Of the roughly 90 former local slaves interviewed or referenced by William Still in The Underground Railroad, the majority reported escaping by ship from the Norfolk waterfront.

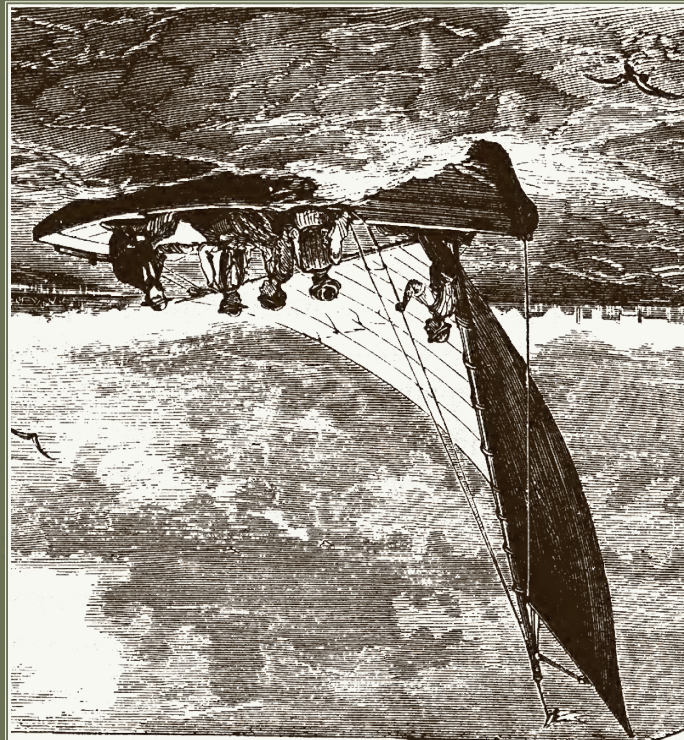
Since the 1830s, in fact, local newspapers had been announcing that the "villains" responsible for carting fugitives northward were ship captains whose vessels regularly navigated the waterways of Hampton Roads.

To be sure, certain ship captains were known in the underground community to be sympathetic to runaways, or at least willing to do it for a price.

Although some runaway slaves were secreted aboard vessels without the knowledge of captains and crews, most received assistance, either from captains or stewards.



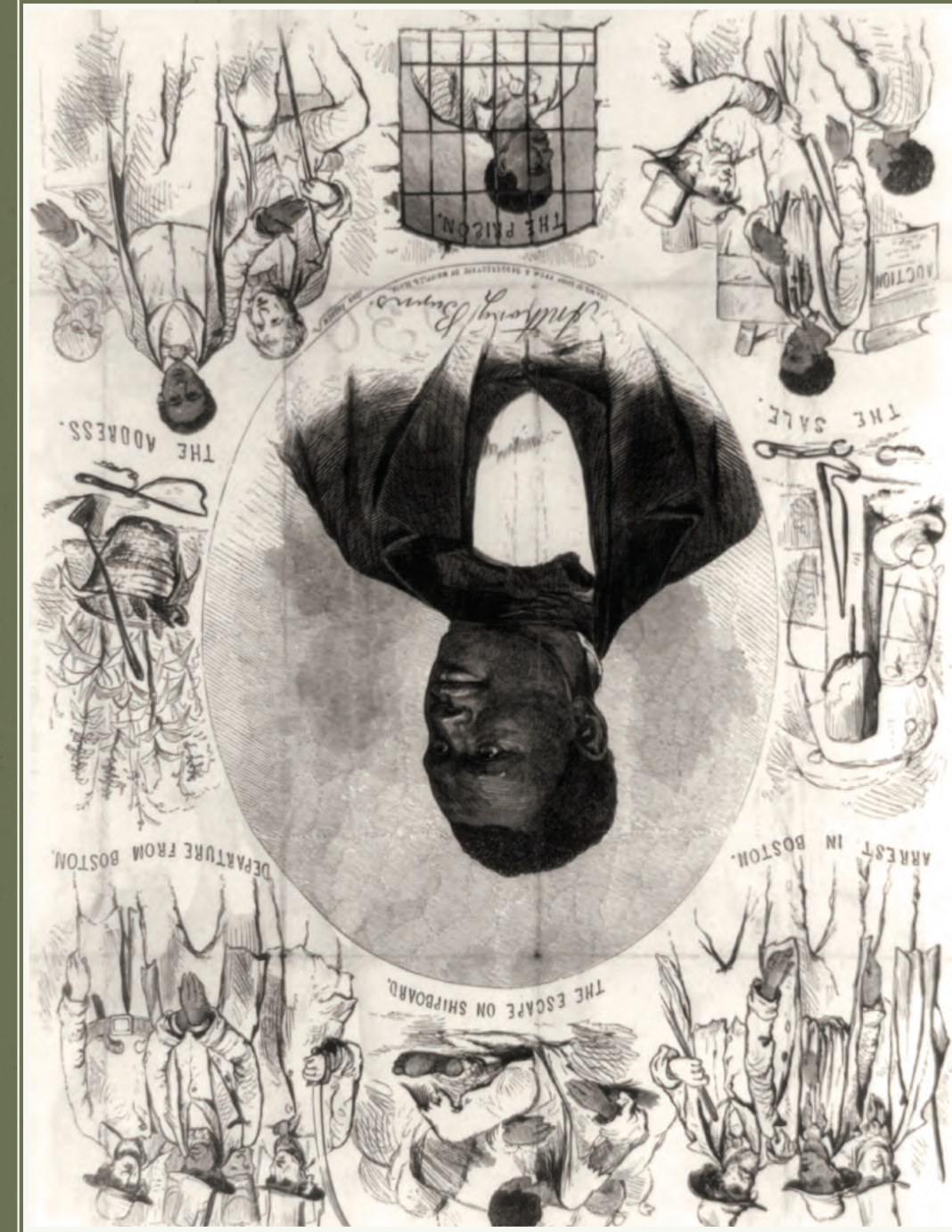
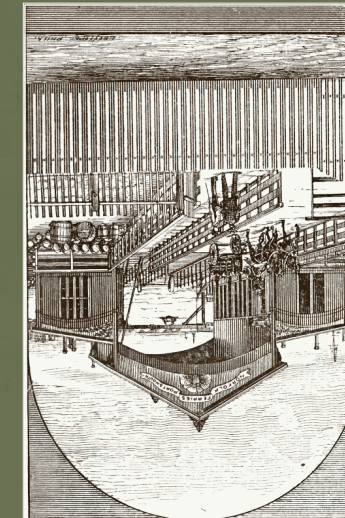
WILLIAM STILL



In 1857, Norfolk and Portsmouth fugitives—John Singer, Robert Emerson, Anthony and Isabella Fugh, and Stehney Swan—escape aboard Captain Edward Lee's skiff.



India Wharf Slave Yard, located just east of Higgins Wharf at 14 Nivison Street.



ABOVE: This 1855 broadside depicts the Boston arrest and trial under the Fugitive Slave Act

of 1850 of Richmond fugitive Anthony Burns.

TOP RIGHT: The Norfolk-Portsmouth Ferry traversed the Elizabeth River as an important

access point for Norfolk and Portsmouth fugitives.

MIDDLE RIGHT: Lewis Hayden, Boston abolitionist who assisted Shadrach Minkins.

RIGHT: In 1856, Harper's Magazine artist, David Hunter Strother, illustrated the image of



in and around the Town of Berkley. The wharves allowed fugitive slaves some degree of anonymity and protection as they sought passage aboard one of the many schooners and steamships docked in port.

Indeed, opportunities to depart aboard vessels were ample for daring or desperate enslaved African Americans in Hampton Roads, especially before the state-initiated mandatory ship inspections and the municipal paid night watchmen.

Moreover, fugitives may have been assisted in their escape by the Norfolk and Western Railroad whose track ran down Widewater Street past every major wharf along the waterfront in downtown Norfolk, or by the all-black crew operating the ferries that ran between Norfolk and Portsmouth.

TRUST. SUSPICION. AND FREEDOM.

Whites certainly played an invaluable role in the movement. Many white sailors, ship captains, and other travelers provided slaves with opportunities to escape.

However, it was the members of the black community who were most deeply involved. While individual slaves made the courageous decision to escape, he or she usually turned to fellow blacks for aid.

When slaves escaped, their black acquaintances and relatives were immediately suspected of helping, as were black sailors.

The slaves who ran away were young, healthy, and ambitious, and most ranged in age from the late teens to the mid-thirties. About 25 percent were females. It was not unusual for the escapees to be skilled in a trade and represented their masters' most valuable slave property. A healthy male in that age range was worth about \$1,500 in the late 1850s if he possessed a skill, and good female slaves commonly sold for \$1,200.

Some slaves contemplated the idea of escaping to freedom for months, or even years before leaving.

Using Virginia's waterways, they found freedom and a better life.

How many? No one can ever be sure.

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD SITES IN NORFOLK AND THE WATERFRONT OF PORTSMOUTH

1 A WILLING WHARF

Located at the far end of Widewater Street near New Castle Street, Higgins Wharf was owned John A. Higgins, former owner of famous runaway slave Shadrach Minkins. The wharf's isolated location near the footbridge to Berkeley and Norfolk's black neighborhoods created ample opportunities for runaway slaves to escape with help from willing steam ship captains. Since the 1830s, local newspapers had announced that the "villains" responsible for carting fugitives northward were white ship captains whose vessels regularly navigated the waterways of Hampton Roads. Consequently, northern captains were especially targeted as possible conspirators. Throughout the 1850s, The City of Richmond with Captain Mitchell and the Pennsylvania with Captain Teal were Union Pacific Steamship Company vessels that left from Higgins' Wharf every Tuesday and Thursday at noon. Both were used to transport runaway slaves north. The wharf sat where Harbor park baseball stadium is today.

2 SYMPATHETIC STEAMSHIPS

Like Higgin's Wharf, runaway slaves and sympathetic steamship captains used the isolated and adjacent Wright's Wharf at south end of King's Lane to secret slaves aboard steamships and schooners. Among them was the Augusta, captained by William C. Smith, which left every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday at 6:30 a.m. Like Smith, certain ships' captains were known in the underground community to be sympathetic to runaways, or at least agreeable to transporting them secretly for a price. Of the approximately ninety former local slaves interviewed or referenced by William Still of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee (The Underground Railroad, 1872), the majority reported escape by ship from the Norfolk waterfront.

3 RUNAWAY TRAINS

Runaways slaves were believed to have used the Norfolk and Western Railroad in their escapes. Norfolk and Western tracks ran down Widewater Street past every major wharf along the waterfront in downtown Norfolk, or were assisted by the all-Black crew operating the ferries running between Norfolk and Portsmouth.

4 TESTING THE LAW

Shadrach Minkins, whose 1851 arrest and trial in Boston became the first major test of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, escaped from slavery while working as a house servant at the home of John DeBree, a prosperous landowner and former Navy man who worked as a purser at the Gosport Navy Yard. The home was located at 117 E. Main Street in a fashionable district near where the Norfolk Marriott Hotel stands today. Born around 1814, Minkins was originally owned by Thomas Glenn, a New Kent County native who ran the Eagle Tavern and hotel near the waterfront at the foot of Market Square and Commerce Street. The business was easily accessible to officers stationed at the Gosport Navy Yard. As one of 12 slaves owned by Glenn, Minkins was familiar with whites and blacks from Portsmouth and Norfolk, and was glaringly cognizant that his situation was tenuous. Visitors to the tavern occasionally heard the shouts and cries of the city's slave auctions. Dealers collected and confined enslaved African Americans in its slave pens until a sufficiently large enough number could be transported to the lower South where their labors in the field were most needed. "Here they are kept. With as little food and clothing as is compatible with bare existence: for, regarding them as articles of traffic, they spend no more upon them than will suffice to keep them alive, and in traveling condition." It is believed that Minkins escaped aboard either the Alvaro Lamphir or the Vesper schooners destined for Boston. Like George Latimer, Minkins was also recognized after escaping to Boston and his owner had him arrested. When he went to court, however, a mob broke into the court, snatched him, and placed him in a carriage heading for Canada, where Minkins lived out the remaining years of his life.

5 "ALWAYS WANTED TO BE FREE"

Eliza McCoy escaped to Philadelphia in November 1854 to join her husband, Robert McCoy, who left a month earlier not knowing if he would ever be re-united with his wife again. Eliza had been treated harshly in slavery under her owner Andrew Sigourney, who lived in the rear at 70 West Main Street, near the waterfront in the heart of today's downtown. She later said that while enduring her hardships she had "always wanted to be free," but was forced to hide in close quarters for seven months before she could secure passage aboard a steamer to Philadelphia. Her harsh treatment as a slave, coupled with her months of uncomfortable concealment, required her to rest and recuperate in Philadelphia before being reunited with her husband in Massachusetts. The couple took the names of William and Mary Doner and in 1855 re-settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts.



6 CONDUCTING HIS OWN ESCAPE

Sam Nixon was an active and effective "conductor" in the Underground Railroad. He was the slave and dental apprentice of Dr. C.F. Martin, and because he could substitute for the doctor in all aspects of the dental trade, Nixon was able to travel about the city at all hours without being questioned. He was often sent out on house calls at night, and his privilege of moving about enabled him to render invaluable service to the underground station. He knew the captains who could be depended on to take fugitive passengers, and that aided his own escape to Philadelphia after he came under the suspicion of Norfolk slaveholders. He reached the north safely, but for a while caused anxiety among the abolitionists in the Philadelphia area because they thought that he was too intelligent to be a slave. He opened an office in New Bedford, and sought to improve himself in his profession by studying medicine, served in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment during the Civil War. He would later return to Norfolk, set up practice as a dentist, and within four years, was elected to the Norfolk City Council.

7 ESCAPING THE "SLAVE PEN"

For 16 years, slave Robert McCoy had been constantly in the clutches of the "Negro-trader" and speculator William W. Hall. Hall owned Hall's Slave Pen at 10 Brewer Street, where many caught fugitives and those awaiting sale were kept. Although his duties were confined to the house and not the slave pen, but he witnessed every painful, revolting aspect of the slave trade. When the trader threatened to sell Robert, he "took out" and escaped. He hid for five long months and eluded the hunters who repeatedly tried to recapture him. His health was poor and failing as he suffered from both chronic rheumatism and the symptoms of Tuberculosis. He escaped to Philadelphia in October 1854, not knowing if he would ever see his wife Eliza McCoy again. One month after moving on to New Bedford, Mass., he received word that Eliza had escaped and was on her way to New Bedford.

8 A SLAVE BECOMES CELEBRITY

George Latimer was the property of James B. Gray when he escaped to Boston with his wife Rebecca. Gray owned a waterfront steam saw mill on South Duke Street in what is today's Freemason neighborhood. After several unsuccessful attempts, Latimer and his wife Rebecca boarded a steamship in October 1842 that took them on a three-day journey to Boston. A day after reaching Boston, Latimer was spotted there by William R. Carpenter, one



of Gray's former employees. Gray immediately set off for Boston and told police there that Latimer had stolen goods from his Norfolk store. Word of Latimer's incarceration spread quickly through Boston abolitionist circles. Nearly 300 people – mostly of black men – assembled at Faneuil Hall to protect Latimer from being returned to Norfolk. John Quincy Adams, the Massachusetts Congressional representative, received a petition signed by 65,000 citizens and addressed to the state Legislature demanding Latimer's freedom. Fearing that he would lose his slave by the court or the mob, Gray reluctantly accepted \$400 and waived his claims as Latimer's owner, even though he had paid \$800 for him years before. Latimer was cleared of larceny charges and officially freed on November 21, 1842. However, still fearing that he would be kidnapped, he and his family continued residing in Underground retreats until 1860.

9 FAMILY OR FREEDOM

In November, 1855, Thomas and Frederick Nixon escaped to Philadelphia with 19 others aboard the famous Captain Alfred Fountain's schooner the City of Richmond. The Nixon's slaveowner, B. T Bockover was wholesale merchant and grocer at 25 Roanoke Square, near today's Town Point Park. Thomas Nixon was known as intelligent 19 year old who said he didn't have much reason for leaving, other than he was "tired of staying" with his owner and "feared he might be sold some day." He decided to save him the trouble. He left his mother and three brothers behind. Thomas never knew his father, who was sold away when he was an infant. His brother Frederick Nixon had a more urgent excuse for escaping than Thomas. His owner "treated him rough" and wanted "to work him hard without allowing him any chance." He left his wife, Elizabeth with four children in bondage in Eatontown, North Carolina. Remaining in Norfolk, he said, wouldn't give him the slightest prospect of being reunited to his wife and children. He had been already separated from them for about three years. This painful state of affairs only increased his desire to leave those who were brutal enough to make such havoc in his domestic relations.

10 DISGUST, FREEDOM AND DESPAIR

Henry Washington, alias Anthony Hanly, escaped to Philadelphia in June 1855. His owner March Seth sold groceries, iron and agricultural tools at 13 W. Widewater Street and lived in the rear of 31 N. Cumberland Street. Henry, age 50, left Norfolk and his "very mild master" out of sheer disgust for the patriarchal institution. He had only been allowed to keep \$1.50 per week to pay for his board, clothing and other expenses. That left him nothing to provide for his enslaved wife Sally. He was forced to leave her behind to make his escape. He ultimately settled in St. Catharines, Canada, with the assistance of the Reverend Hiram Wilson. While there, he received word that his wife had died.



11 AN AXE TO GRIND

In November 1855, Captain Alfred Fountain left for Philadelphia with 21 fugitive slaves aboard his wheat-packed schooner, the City of Richmond. Just after slaves and brothers Thomas and Frederick Nixon boarded the ship, a group of city leaders, led by Mayor William Lamb, boarded the ship to search for escaped slaves. Fountain's bravado saved the day when the men came aboard with axes to tear the ship apart. He said, "Now if you want to search," continued he, "give me the axe, and then point out the spot you want opened and I will open it for you very quick." While uttering these words he defiantly struck his ship with the axe several times, splinters flying everywhere. Soon, the men were convinced that no slaves were on board and Fountain left Norfolk with 21 fugitives.

12 FERRIES TO FREEDOM

All-Black crews operated the ferries that ran across the Elizabeth River between Norfolk and Portsmouth and were known to assist slaves in their escapes. The Norfolk Ferry, which began operation in 1829, landed at Market Square in downtown Norfolk where fugitives disembarked from Portsmouth to find a schooner or steamship from which to escape. The High Street Ferry began operating in 1856 from the heart of Portsmouth's business district and still runs today. It replaced the North Street Ferry, which had left from a remote section of Portsmouth with just a quarter-mile route across the river.