

The Underground Railroad in Vermont: Tall Tale or True Adventure

By Tom Calarco

The attraction of the Underground Railroad largely has been due to its mystery and adventure. It was the classic tale of good guys versus bad guys. Of course it was anything but that simple, and in fact the most recent studies by Vermont historians, Ray Zirblis and Jane Williamson, suggest that much of what oral tradition had told us was merely a tall tale. They contend that few fugitive slaves came to Vermont, that there was little organization, and that no slavecatchers ever came to the state. Their position owes much to the revisionist history developed by Larry Gara in his 1961 book, *Liberty Line*, which reached three significant conclusions:

1. The number of underground railroad passengers was vastly exaggerated
2. There was little organization in regard to the Underground Railroad and the work was mainly conducted by blacks; the role of whites was inflated by propaganda and self-promotion
3. The part fugitive slaves played in their escape has been vastly underemphasized¹

A cursory review of its sources suggested *Liberty Line* was thoroughly researched, and it made its case so cogently that the concept of the Underground Railroad has never been the same. Today, in large measure because of *Liberty Line*, most serious historians no longer view the Underground Railroad as a secret network of Good Samaritans protecting fugitive slaves in hiding places, nor as a set of established routes and covert rendezvous. In other words, the classic version of the Underground Railroad has become for them more myth than reality.

One of the essential components of Gara's argument was his criticism of the work of Wilbur Siebert, the first important historian of the Underground Railroad, who wrote four

significant books about the Underground Railroad, including one about Vermont.² Siebert's findings were based largely on a couple thousand responses to inquiries from those who participated in the Underground Railroad, or their relatives and friends, that he began circulating in 1892.³

For many years, such recollections comprised the accepted view of the Underground Railroad. Siebert's collection was part of a number of remembrances of the Underground Railroad published mainly in the 19th century. Most notable were William Still's, *The Underground Railroad: A Record*, Levi Coffin's *Reminiscences*, and Robert Smedley's, *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester County*.

All presented a story of a loosely organized network of individuals who through various means aided tens of thousands of slaves obtain their freedom, with most being sent to Canada. As the years passed the legend grew, and accounts became exaggerated, and the idea of secrecy and hiding places became emphasized so much that every old home with a crawl space began to be thought of as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Of course, historians like Siebert never suggested this.

Gara claimed that Siebert had accepted the remembrances of the aged white abolitionists at "face value," with little scrutiny. In his book, he reviewed some of the Siebert letters and attempted to show their lack of credibility. Gara's consideration of a letter written to Siebert by Rev. Joshua Young, who served as the minister of the Unitarian Church in Burlington, Vermont, from 1852-to-1859 is a good example.

Young was chosen by Gara as an example of someone whose involvement in the Underground Railroad had been exaggerated by Siebert. Gara wrote:

When Wilbur Siebert wrote to Rev. Joshua Young of Groton, Massachusetts, for any first-hand information he might have, Young replied that there was very little I could tell. “Perhaps my connection to the Underground Railroad has been exaggerated,” he explained, “owing to the circumstances of my being the only present and officiating clergyman at John Brown’s funeral, which gave me some prominence among abolitionists.”⁴

Gara quotes only this one sentence from Young’s eight-page letter. He uses it to suggest that Young, the notorious minister who presided at John Brown’s funeral thought to be heavily involved in the Underground Railroad, really did very little. It was a method he used in *Liberty Line* to bolster his theory that the Underground Railroad was more myth than reality. However, Gara’s evidence about Young demonstrated anything but the real truth.

Young, who witnessed the rescue in 1851 of Shadrach Minkins and the rendition of Thomas Sims, fugitive slaves who were living in Boston, was installed as the pastor of the Burlington Unitarian Church in 1852. He described his participation in the Underground Railroad in a letter to Siebert:

During my residence there together with my friend and parishioner L.G. Bigelow, a noble man now gone to heaven for he loved his fellow man; did considerable business. How many tales of cruelty I listened to, how many backs scarred by the slave driver’s lash and some not healed, I looked upon, how many poor scared creatures I secreted in cellars or garrets until the danger was past I cannot tell, only this I did again and again, both while living in Boston and in Burlington . . .⁵

Young’s letter includes a number of other interesting and insightful comments about the Underground Railroad:

The U.G.R.R was not . . . any elaborate system of running off slaves, or indeed of aiding them in their flight, but simply the aiding and passing on from one well known and trusty agent to another, of the fugitives on their way to Canada, and the methods of keeps and concealment employed to secure their safety were as various as the instances of rescue.

The abolitionists of New England were pretty well known to each other, at least by name and residence, through their contributions to the cause of anti-slavery, and their being subscribers to the *Liberator* We acted as expressmen, watchful and on the alert between the slave states and Canada, and did what was needed, as the case required.⁶

This is only one example of Gara's questionable methods.⁷ It indicates though that a more careful consideration of his work is needed. While Gara is not the primary concern of this paper, nor is there space to provide detailed consideration of his work, he is important because the most authoritative sources on Vermont's Underground Railroad, the studies of Jane Williamson (2001, 2004) and Ray Zirblis' Vermont Underground Railroad Report (1996), commissioned by the state of Vermont, were strongly influenced by him.

Williamson was extremely critical of Siebert, focusing on his book, *Vermont's Underground Railroad and Anti-Slavery Record*, published in 1937, the only major book as yet to be written about Vermont's Underground Railroad. Director of the Rokeby Museum in Ferrisburgh, the state's only museum with a strong Underground Railroad theme, she first clearly articulated her position in an Op-Ed piece she wrote for the *Burlington Free Press* in 1996. Vermont, she insists, was a totally safe haven for fugitive slaves and out of the reach of slavecatchers. In later published articles, she disparages oral traditions that claim significant

traffic of fugitive slaves through the state. One of the articles appeared in *Vermont History* in 2001.

Like Gara, Williamson not only disputed the credibility of the letters Siebert used but questioned his credibility as an historian. Not surprisingly, the letters to Siebert upon which Williamson focused were those written by members of the Robinson family who lived at Rokeby.

The first letter was written in 1896 by Rowland E. Robinson, the son of Underground Railroad agents Rowland T. and Rachel Gilpin Robinson. Williamson quotes the son, who was born in 1833, as stating that as many as four fugitive slaves at a time were assisted and that some also remained for a time and worked there. Later in the article she stated:

Were fugitive slaves pursued by slave catchers across the borders of Vermont during the antebellum period? That we are still asking this question in 2001 is testimony to the incredible tenacity and power of the mythological railroad, for I have been unable to find any evidence of slave catchers in the state.⁸

These comments are vital to Williamson's position. However, she conveniently omitted important information in the Robinson letter that contradicts the notion that slavecatchers were not a concern. While identifying those who collaborated with his father in aiding fugitives slaves, Robinson added that Samuel Barker of Vergennes was a "lookout for slavehunters." In addition, Robinson twice uses the phrase, "when there was an alarm of pursuit," in reference to forwarding fugitive slaves, and another time uses the adjective "hard pressed" to describe fugitive slaves that needed to be transported. Such language indicates that the threat of slavecatchers existed.⁹

A more careful reading of these letters might've prevented Williamson from writing the following in her *Vermont History* paper:

Pursuit is key to the legend of the underground railroad. All the conventions of the popular understanding— the need to operate clandestinely, to communicate in code, to travel at night, and to create hiding places—arise from the assumption of hot pursuit by a determined, ruthless, and often armed slave catcher. While many fugitives were in precisely such danger in the first days and miles of their escapes, it diminished steadily as they put more and more distance between themselves and the slave South.¹⁰

While the antebellum letters preserved at Rokeby to some degree support Williamson's claim that fugitive slaves were safe in Vermont, it would be more reasonable to describe the situation as "relatively safe" because such activities were illegal and subject to prosecution. In addition, the conditions she referenced describe a specific period at Rokeby from which she extrapolates to include the rest of the state during the entire antebellum period. She never referenced Rowland E. Robinson's implication of the possible threat of slavecatchers mentioned in his 1896 letter to Siebert.

The earliest of Rokeby's antebellum letters concerning fugitive slaves dates from 1837 and was written in behalf of a fugitive slave named Simon by Vermont native Oliver Johnson, who was on an antislavery lecture tour in Pennsylvania. He wrote that Simon had "intended going to Canada in the spring, but says he would prefer to stay in the U.S. if he could be safe I could not help thinking he would be a good man for you to hire he is very trustworthy, of a kind disposition, and knows how to do almost all kinds of farm work."

It was not the last such letter indicating not only that Robinson hired fugitive slaves but that it was safe for them there. Two others from fellow Quakers, one from Charles Marriott in Hudson, New York in 1842, and the other from Joseph Beale in Harrison, New York (Westchester County) wrote Robinson that they were sending fugitive slaves to him because they

thought it would be safer there.¹¹ Williamson also addresses the matter of a letter that Robinson wrote to the master in North Carolina of Jesse, a fugitive slave who was staying at Rokeby, in an attempt to negotiate the purchase of his freedom. She uses this to show that fugitive slaves were for all practical considerations out of reach from being reclaimed, and quotes the master's letter conceding that "at this time [Jesse] is entirely out of my reach," to support this.¹²

However, merely because it was safer in Rokeby than two downstate New York villages, one in notoriously proslavery Westchester County,¹³ or that it was unlikely for a slaveholder to come from North Carolina to reclaim his slave, does not necessarily mean there was no threat of slavecatchers. If no such threat existed, then why would Vermont pass a Personal Liberty Law in 1840 that guaranteed fugitive slaves the right of trial by jury, or a law in 1843 that prohibited the use of state law enforcement officials and jails in the rendition of fugitive slaves?

Williamson cited the book, *Runaway Slaves*, by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger as support for her belief that pursuing fugitive slaves into Vermont would not be worth the necessary expense of either traveling themselves or hiring a slavecatcher. She fails to acknowledge that not all slavecatchers came from the South. One celebrated abduction by slavecatchers not from the South occurred only 25 miles from the Vermont border in Saratoga Springs, New York in 1841. Free black man, Solomon Northup, was allegedly hired by two upstate New York con men to work in their circus in Washington, D.C., then drugged and sold into slavery.¹⁴ Saratoga Springs, in fact, was a popular summer resort for southerners during the antebellum period, and one account from 1853 by an abolitionist visiting there stated that many slavecatchers were in the city at that time.¹⁵

Other developments occurred in the region that influenced the amount of fugitive slave traffic in Vermont. This was the increased level of organization of the Underground Railroad in

neighboring upstate New York. In April, 1838, William L. Chaplin, secretary of the state society, called for the organization of vigilance committees, the euphemism for Underground Railroad organizations:

Cases proper for the action of a vigilance committee are occurring every week in the year in this city [Utica]. And what is true of this city is also true of Albany, Syracuse, Oswego, Rochester, Lockport, Buffalo, and Ogdensburg. Let these committees be organized immediately in all these and perhaps some other places and open a correspondence with the committee in the city of New York.¹⁶

This was followed in 1842 by the organization in nearby Albany, New York, of the Eastern New York Anti-Slavery Society, one of the most radical Underground Railroad organizations of the antebellum period. Founded by Abel Brown and Charles T. Torrey, it aided hundreds of fugitive slaves during its three-year existence, often advertising their efforts in its newspaper, *The Tocsin of Liberty* as well as the *Vermont Freeman*.¹⁷ While the advertisements were published in the North, their targets were southern slaveholders, to whom they sent copies of their newspaper.¹⁸ This brought attention to their Underground Railroad operations, whose location was close to the Vermont border, and is another factor that would have made Vermont a not only a destination for fugitive slaves but also slavecatchers.

Two letters from members of the Eastern New York Anti-Slavery Society (ENYAS) document their collaboration with Underground Railroad agents in Vermont. In a letter dated November 24, 1840 that accompanied two fugitive slaves being sent to Charles Hicks of Bennington County, Vermont, Troy conductor Rev. Fayette Shipherd wrote: “As the canal [the Champlain the canal that connected Troy with Lake Champlain] has closed I shall send my Southern friends along your road & patronize your house. We had a fine run of business during

the season We had 22 in two weeks 13 in the city at one time.” In the letter, Shipherd also mentions that a slavecatcher from Baltimore was in Troy looking for fugitive slaves.¹⁹ Another letter dated June 9, 1842, accompanied a fugitive slave sent by Albany conductor, Rev. Abel Brown to Hicks. It said in part, “Please receive the Bearer as a friend who needs your aid and direct him on his way if you cannot give him work he come to us well recommended was a slave a few weeks since.”²⁰

Further evidence suggesting ENYAS collaboration with Vermont conductors is their common affiliation with the Liberty Party, which had a strong following in Vermont, and its forwarding to Vermont of fugitive slave, Jeremiah C. Boggs, in 1843 that will be discussed later in more detail.²¹ Also, ENYAS members like Henry Highland Garnet of Troy, New York and Orrin Shipman of Fort Ann, New York were sent on Liberty Party-sponsored lecture tours through Vermont during the 1840s.²² Furthermore, Garnet, a documented Underground Railroad conductor and colleague of the New York Committee of Vigilance,²³ was an agent of the Vermont Liberty Party.

Nevertheless, the mountainous terrain of Vermont and the relative remoteness of areas like Ferrisburgh certainly added a modicum of safety. While it might be plausible to say that despite the considerations mentioned there was little threat of slavecatchers coming to Rokeby, this had changed after the passage of the second Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. In fact, most accounts of slavecatchers in Vermont are from after 1850.

A suggestion that Williamson was more interested in proving her theory, like Gara, rather than objectively examining the evidence comes through at the outset when she said of Gara’s book that “in permanently altering underground railroad historiography, [it] also seems to have brought it to a premature end.”²⁴ As a result she made some general errors of fact. For instance,

she stated that both the New York Committee of Vigilance and the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee were “relatively short-lived,” “had rather shaky existences,” “and were most effective only briefly after passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850.”²⁵ Both organizations actually had lengthy existences, the New York Committee organizing in 1835 and the Philadelphia Committee in 1837. Both had several incarnations and changed their names, and continued their efforts up through the Civil War. And both aided fugitive slaves numbering in the thousands.²⁶

Williamson also wrote that Levi Coffin and Thomas Garrett “operated openly and with impunity,” and “unmolested for years.”²⁷ While she referenced both Coffin’s *Reminiscences* and Garrett’s biography by James McGowan, she failed to read them carefully. Coffin did admit that he was known to harbor fugitive slaves, but because he was a successful businessman and influential in his community, he was left alone. He explained further that, “These slave-hunters knew that if they committed any trespass, or went beyond the letter of the law, I would have them arrested, and they knew also that I had many friends who would stand at my back and aid me in prosecuting them.”²⁸ Garrett also was a man of distinction in his community and had the support of local judges and politicians. However, it did not prevent him from being prosecuted and convicted of aiding fugitive slaves and being fined \$5,400, a huge sum in those days, which bankrupted him for a time. The story has been told in numerous books, so it’s surprising that Williamson missed it. She surely would not have forgotten the defiant words Garrett spoke in the courtroom after his conviction:

I now pledge myself, in the presence of this assembly, to use all lawful and honorable means to lessen the burdens of this oppressed people, and endeavor, according to ability furnished, to burst their chains asunder, and set them free; not relaxing my efforts on their

behalf while blessed with health and a slave remains to tread the soil of the state of my adoption . . .²⁹

One of the weakest elements of Williamson's argument is her failure to recognize the factors that made Vermont a reasonable destination for fugitive slaves and the historical developments that drove fugitive slaves through Vermont on their way to Canada.

Vermont was the first state to organize a statewide Underground Railroad organization in 1834, and numerous antislavery organizations were formed throughout the state during the early period of Garrisonian abolitionism.³⁰ Though they encountered a strong and vocal opposition in the beginning, numbers approaching 10,000 residents had joined one of the state's 89 anti-slavery societies by 1837.³¹ This illustrates the strength of abolition sentiment in Vermont during a period when nationwide, abolitionists were still a very small minority. It also indicates that the state was fertile ground for the Underground Railroad.

The only reference to the period after 1850 by Williamson is to Rowland E. Robinson's statement in his letter to Siebert that he doesn't recall a fugitive slave coming to Rokeby after 1850.³² Williamson gave a number of reasons to account for this: first, Robinson didn't join the Liberty Party which had absorbed the Vermont Anti-Slavery Society, and consequently lost his leadership role; second, the disownment of some of his Quaker collaborators for their abolitionist activities; third, his distressed finances; and fourth, his change of focus toward spiritualism.³³ However, her failure to mention other events occurring in New England is a clear example of her failure to account for circumstances outside the immediate vicinity of Rokeby.

As a result, she never referenced the historical developments that occurred after 1850 that increased fugitive slave traffic through Vermont. This came in the form of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, the second and stronger fugitive slave law passed by the federal government in an

attempt to stem the escape of slaves by the South being helped by the Underground Railroad. Not only did it make enforcement of the law easier through a system of judges specially appointed to hear fugitive slave cases, but it obliged citizens to aid in the capture of fugitive slaves. Furthermore, the executive branch made public its intentions to enforce the law.³⁴

Vermont was a likely escape route for the large numbers of fugitive slaves living in Boston who fled to Canada after the passage of the law.³⁵ This exodus became even greater after the attempted rendition in 1851 by federal authorities of the fugitive slave, Shadrach Minkins, who with the help of the Boston Vigilance Committee was able to escape from custody and flee to Canada through Vermont.³⁶

According to Gary Collison, the author of *Shadrach Minkins: From Fugitive Slave to Citizen* (1997), aid to more than 430 fugitive slaves was accounted for by the Boston Vigilance Committee after 1850, 230 of whom were aided from 1850-1854.³⁷ It is impossible to say how many fugitive slaves in all came through Boston during those years, but Rev. Joshua Young, who lived in the Boston area before moving to Vermont, stated that fugitive slaves passed through Boston daily after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law.

In “The Vermont Underground Railroad Survey Report,” which overall provides a good representation of the people and places involved, Zirblis discussed the Fugitive Slave Law. However, he sometimes misused his evidence. First, he erred in his discussion of Young, and then used the example of the period when fugitive slaves could work openly at Rokeby during the late 1830s and early 1840s as evidence that the 1850 law didn’t bring slavecatchers to Vermont.³⁸

Interestingly, Zirblis mischaracterized Young, who was maligned by Gara. Zirblis claimed that Young had written Siebert of an increase in fugitive slave traffic in Burlington after

the passage of the second Fugitive Slave Law when he actually was living in Boston.³⁹

However, neither Siebert nor Young wrote any such thing, and apparently Zirblis misread what Siebert had written.⁴⁰

Young wasn't the only Siebert respondent about whom Zirblis reported incorrect information. He wrote that "Siebert seems to inflate Mr. G.W. Sanborn's description of Lawrence Brainerd, an important St. Albans Underground Railroad activist,"⁴¹ and stated that Siebert attributed to Sanborn the erroneous information that Brainerd harbored fugitive slaves at his home. However, not only was Zirblis mistaken about the source of Siebert's information but also in stating that Brainerd never housed fugitive slaves. The source for the information that fugitive slaves were harbored at the Brainerd residence was Brainerd's son, Aldis, who included this information in an 1896 letter to Siebert: "Many poor fugitives were received and cared for in his [Brainerd] house . . ." ⁴² Zirblis did not document the source of his error, and may have relied on secondary materials. This misinformation may seem minor at first glance, but when one realizes that Brainerd was an important business leader in Vermont, being a steamboat and railroad entrepreneur,⁴³ and an important politician, serving for a time in the U.S. Senate, his harboring of fugitive slaves takes on some significance in assessing the reality of the Underground Railroad in the state.

One of the more questionable interpretations offered in the Zirblis report was his distrust of Joseph Poland of Montpelier, one of Siebert's sources. Both Zirblis and Williamson gave more weight to Poland's influence on Siebert than any of his other sources, though Siebert recognized that Poland's knowledge was only partial and relied as heavily on others in developing his history.⁴⁴ Poland wrote Siebert that, "Every large town had one or more reliable men to whom the fugitive could be consigned with perfect safety."⁴⁵ He wrote two letters, each

with long lists of participants and their residences, and described a western and an eastern route. He also stated that hundreds of fugitive slaves came through the state. This information was extremely useful for Siebert in tracing the routes through the state, something that was characteristic of his work. The publisher of two abolitionist newspapers, the *Voice of Freedom* and the *Green Mountain Freeman*, Poland was state chairman of the Liberty Party. This gave him particular insight about the state's Underground Railroad because Liberty Party members were among the most radical abolitionists and often involved in the Underground Railroad.⁴⁶

Zirblis' suspicions of Poland were based on a handwritten comment next to a reference to Poland in a copy of Siebert's first book, *The Underground Railroad: From Freedom to Slavery*, found at Rokeby. The words were, *A fraud*, but nothing else.⁴⁷ The implication was that R.E. Robinson wrote it because it was his book. Apparently, this was enough to make Zirblis doubt Poland's credibility. However, neither the context for this comment nor the reason Robinson allegedly wrote it, is known. Furthermore, because Zirblis distrusted Poland, he believed any information he might offer was unreliable. Zirblis' conclusion was that Siebert used the same erroneous methods for identifying Underground Railroad routes in Vermont that he had used elsewhere, which he explained as a "connect the dots approach."⁴⁸ His conclusion was that "Siebert found the routes he was seeking in Vermont by a credulous and simplistic application of this system."⁴⁹

Zirblis also stated that Poland failed to mention Rowland T. Robinson as an Underground Railroad agent, suggesting this to be another reason to doubt his credibility.⁵⁰ An explanation could be that Robinson was not a member of the Liberty Party.

The 1894 biographical history, *Men of Vermont*, has an entry for Poland that in addition to mentioning his contributions to public service, which include building a hospital for Civil War

veterans and acting as a trustee of the state library, commented on his integrity, quoting both the *Rutland Herald* and *St. Albans Messenger*:

Mr. Poland has acted well his part in Vermont journalism. His influence has been large, and it has been uprightly exerted But it is not so much in relation to the public as an able and conscientious journalist that we feel moved to write, but rather in his relations to the editors and publishers of the state. In these relations Mr. Poland has been most exceptionally free from petty jealousies, the spirit of detraction and disparagement, the narrow and unwarranted personal abuse which have prevailed too generally among the editors of the state, and in this respect he leaves to his professional brethren a very worthy example.⁵¹

To judge Poland's veracity on the basis of a cryptic note penciled in a book with no other context is itself suspect and does not support Zirblis' lack of faith in Poland's eyewitness to history. While Zirblis may have other reasons to doubt Poland, he didn't supply them in his report.

One issue about which both Zirblis and Williamson strongly agree is that no slavecatchers came to Vermont. Williamson even quoted Zirblis that, "There are no substantiated incidents of organized slave catching in the state."⁵² However, Zirblis took a more open minded approach, and she didn't mention Zirblis' references to an 1854 incident in Lower Canada involving a slavecatcher, "which could have involved Vermont," and a letter written in 1855 by a slavecatcher attempting to bribe a Montreal police official to help him capture a fugitive slave.⁵³ These incidents related by Zirblis suggest the possibility of slavecatching activity in Vermont.

The effect of the second Fugitive Slave Law on the appearance of slavecatchers in Vermont is significant. The federal mandate to enforce the law led to the high profile renditions

in Boston of Minkins, Thomas Sims, and Anthony Burns. For example, the federal government helped finance the Burns rendition, providing legal, military, and naval support totaling possibly as much as \$100,000 (a sum in the millions based on today's values).⁵⁴ It is no accident that most of the reports of slavecatchers in Vermont, whether documented or from oral tradition, come after 1850.⁵⁵

One of the earliest examples of a fugitive slave who left Vermont for fear of being apprehended was the aforementioned Jeremiah Boggs, who had fled from Richmond, Virginia. Boggs first went to Albany, where he was assisted by the Eastern New York Anti-Slavery Society.⁵⁶ They sent him to Vermont where he found work with Lawrence Brainerd. However, a year or so later, he was recognized by a Vermont resident, A.G. Tarlton, who knew his master. As a result, he decided to join the Colonization society and settle in Liberia.⁵⁷

A similar story comes from Springfield, Vermont in 1848. A fugitive slave staying with the Stafford family was shocked to see his master. Fortunately, the Staffords managed to keep him hidden until his master left, and thereafter the fugitive slave settled there, becoming the village barber and marrying another fugitive slave with whom he had three children.⁵⁸

One might think that a fugitive slave seeing someone in the North who knew his master is an unlikely coincidence, but this is exactly what happened to Shadrach Minkins when he came to Boston, though it is not known if this man was the one who led authorities to him.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the story of the village barber is oral tradition and needs further study to be confirmed.

Another story of pursuit from the pages of the *Vermont Freeman* and *National Anti-Slavery Standard* reported a family of fugitive slaves had been forwarded to Plainfield, where the citizens pitched in to pay for a horse and wagon to take them to Canada. Only nine hours later,

slavecatchers arrived in Montpelier, about eight miles east. But when they were informed how many hours earlier the fugitive slaves had left, they gave up their chase.⁶⁰

Oral tradition yields a second story, this time from Waterville, about three fugitive slaves who sought help at the home of Mary Marcy. She fed them then took them to the church on Church Street, where they waited while Joseph Merrick, Mary's future husband, went to Orse Hotchkiss, who took them in his hay wagon across the border to Canada. Shortly after, slavecatchers arrived but the fugitive slaves had already arrived safely in Canada.⁶¹

One of the more interesting stories of fugitive slave pursuit is another oral tale from the *Boardman Genealogy*. It involved the family of Stephen Carver Boardman in Norwich in 1854 and told in the words of his son, Charles, who was thirteen at the time. A family of slaves -- husband, wife, and four-year-old -- were brought to the Boardmans. Close behind were a posse of slavecatchers, law officers, and bloodhounds. At once they were fed and hidden in an underground chamber in the middle of their cornfield. When the slavecatchers and federal marshal arrived, Boardman demanded a warrant. While they went to retrieve one, Charles led the fugitive slaves out of the chamber and through the fields to a back road. They were met by Stephen who took them 25 miles to the Randolph Station of the Vermont Central Railroad, where they boarded the train that took them to Canada.⁶²

Two more newspapers accounts, one from the *St. Albans Messenger* in 1856, and the other from the *Vermont Tribune* of 1857 recorded in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, reported stories of fugitive slaves being pursued by slavecatchers who came to Vermont. The first told of a narrow escape by a man from federal marshals. Its report was taken from the *Montreal Herald*, which said the fugitive slave arrived in Montreal after a "narrow escape from the U.S. Marshal at St. Albans." The man had fled from Baltimore three months earlier and

remained in St. Albans where he found work. Somehow his master was alerted to his presence in the St. Albans area, but fortunately the master and federal marshals were diverted by locals to Waterbury. Meanwhile, friends took the fugitive slave by sleigh across the border, and placed him on a freight train to Montreal.⁶³

The second described a woman named Charlotte who had escaped from her master who was her father. She had undertaken an epic journey that took her from Baltimore to Philadelphia to Boston to Maine, where slavecatchers had tracked her, before finally reaching St. Albans, where she was led by Underground Railroad agents to Canada.⁶⁴

In fairness to both Williamson and Zirblis, the recent explosion of study by independent researchers stimulated by the 1995 National Parks Underground Railroad initiative has brought to light information about the Underground Railroad which was not readily available to them and which now needs consideration in order to present a more accurate view. This information supports a number of the original conclusions of Siebert, which after all were based on accounts of actual participants. A good example of this newly focused research is that of Don Papson, president of the North Country Underground Railroad Historical Association based in Clinton County, New York.

In attempting to document Underground Railroad collaboration between Clinton County and Vermont Underground Railroad agents, Papson examined the original handwritten copy of the 1896 letter written by Rowland E. Robinson to Siebert and an original diary of Mary Rogers, whose father collaborated with Rowland T. Robinson in aiding fugitive slaves. Papson pieced together a story that showed Underground Railroad collaboration involving Robinson, Samuel Keese, a Clinton County Quaker, and Isaac Orvis, a Vermont Quaker, who had moved to Canada

and had become a member of the Yonge Meeting. The diary, which is part of the Rokeby collection, was provided to Papson by Williamson. According to the diary:

. . . there was a colored boy who said that he was seventeen years old came here said he came from Maryland state was going to Canada and his Master was after him and had traveled two nights and R.T. Robinson thought it would be best for him to come here and stay all night and he would come up in the morning which he did and directed him to Isaac Orvis in upper Canada and to cross the lake at McKneels . . . (The McNeil ferry operated between Charlotte, Vermont and Essex, New York).⁶⁵

In examining the original Robinson letter, which mentions the Rogers diary and identifies the likely recipient of the “colored boy” mentioned in the diary, Papson found an error in the transcription of the name of the recipient. The transcription of the original stated that it was Samuel Parr of Peoria, but no such place as Peoria exists in Clinton County. Closer inspection of the handwriting revealed that the surname was not Parr but Keese, whose family members were known to be abolitionists and legendary conductors in Peru, New York.⁶⁶

An important piece of information in the diary mentions the pursuit of the fugitive slave by his master, which necessitated him being sent on the ferry to New York. This occurred in November of 1844.

“I don't know if Siebert did his own transcriptions or had students help him do that, but someone made a mistake, and he included it in his book on Vermont,” Papson said of the transcription error in the Robinson letter.⁶⁷

While the reports of slavecatchers in Vermont are not plentiful, enough exist to indicate with reasonable certainty that some slavecatchers did indeed enter the state. Also, the climate

that existed especially after 1850 and the numerous reports in surrounding states provide strong circumstantial evidence.

The reassessment of the nature of the Underground Railroad provided here might warrant a reconsideration of the letter written in 1935 by Rowland T. Robinson's grandson to Siebert. In it, he claimed that a room existed at Rokeby where fugitive slaves were hidden and that the Robinson family was visited by the county sheriff and the slave's master while hiding a fugitive slave there. Williamson has dismissed the letter as hearsay, maintaining that the younger Robinson, who was born in 1882, took it straight from the pages of his father's book, *Out of Bondage*, published in 1902, which included fictional stories about the Underground Railroad.⁶⁸

In a chapter for the book, *Passages to Freedom*, edited by David Blight, Williamson elaborates on the story told by Robinson in his 1935 letter, claiming that “. . . the story retains an aura of absurdity . . . [that] represents the triumph of wishful thinking over reason.”⁶⁹

Whether or not this hiding place existed, in light of updated research about the Underground Railroad, the question about whether the 1935 letter is myth or reality should be revisited. It also does injustice to the work of Wilbur Siebert to say that he reported the fictional stories of Robinson as fact, as Williamson suggested.⁷⁰ The following is what Siebert actually wrote:

Some very interesting stories *illustrative* [my italics] of the operations of the Underground Railroad in and about Ferrisburgh have been written by Rowland E. Robinson, who could draw upon his recollections of a score of years for his materials. He had actually heard most of the anecdotes which he wrote and published, although he made use of fictitious names for his characters.⁷¹

While no evidence exists that the stories in *Out of Bondage* are based on fact, plenty of evidence exists that similar incidents actually took place in Vermont during the antebellum period and that the threat of slavecatchers was very real.

But how active was the Underground Railroad in Vermont and how many fugitive slaves actually were aided here? A good place to start in making this determination might be a consideration of the number of fugitive slaves who were living in Montreal during the antebellum period. According to the 1861 census, there were 228 blacks living there. Collison, who did extensive research on the black population of this period, believed the figure was closer to 400 as estimated by the *Montreal Gazette* at that time. In addition, Collison's research found that most of those who admitted U.S. ancestry were born in southern states, an indication that most were likely fugitive slaves.⁷² These numbers also do not reflect fugitive slaves who may have settled in border towns south of Montreal and about which little is known. One must also consider, as Robin Winks stated in his seminal work on blacks in Canada during the antebellum period, that fugitive slaves in Canada often did not convey their true identity: "No accurate figures can be given for the number of fugitive slaves in the whole of the British North American provinces, or for the total number of Negroes. Many attempted to pass for white when in the Canada's, many were not enumerated, and census takers might reasonably have confused fugitive American with free American blacks, since the former often claimed the status of the latter, especially because of their misplaced fear of extradition."⁷³

All these factors suggest, at minimum, hundreds of fugitive slaves living in an area that implies a journey through Vermont and northern New York.

In assessing the current state of information about Vermont's Underground Railroad, Papson said, "The best way for us to get the story right is to take a critical look at everything that

has been written, search for primary sources, study them carefully, and then publish the needed corrections.”⁷⁴

New information about the antebellum period and the Underground Railroad is surfacing daily due to diligent researchers like Papson and many others around the nation. Zirblis also has been researching the activities of blacks in Vermont prior to the 19th century and has discovered that fugitive slaves were coming to Vermont from New York following the Revolution because of the state’s early prohibition of slavery.⁷⁵ Before we dismiss the legend of the Underground Railroad in Vermont, the subject demands our due diligence in more carefully examining its reality.

¹ Larry Gara, “The Underground Railroad: A Reevaluation,” *The Ohio Historical Quarterly* (July 1960): 217-230 (This article summarizes the position that Gara elaborated upon in his book, published the following year).

² These books are *The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom* (1898), *The Underground Railroad in Massachusetts* (1936), *Vermont’s Underground Railroad and Anti-Slavery Record* (1937), *The Mysteries of Ohio’s Underground Railroad* (1951).

³ These circulars included a survey with seven questions:

- a. What in your knowledge was the route of the Underground Road, (names and locations of “stations,” and “Station Keepers”)?
- b. Period of activity of the “Road”?
- c. Method of operation of the “Road,” with system of communication among the members?
- d. Memorable incidents (with dates, names of places and persons, as far as possible)?
- e. History of your own connection with the Underground Cause?
- f. Names and present addresses of any persons able to contribute other information on the subject?
- g. Short biographical sketch of yourself

⁴ Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: the Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1961): 181

⁵ Reverend Joshua Young to Wilbur Siebert, 21 April 1893, Wilbur H. Siebert Papers, Ohio History Center.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line*: 42, 45, 81; Gara used examples that support his theory and ignored evidence that counter it. For example, he selected a comment made by a Siebert respondent from Illinois to claim there was no Underground Railroad there, or he used the comment by William Wells Brown that he encountered no Underground Railroad during his escape to freedom through Ohio in 1834, or he stated that only a “certain few Quakers” were involved in the Underground Railroad. All of these examples are in error: See, Owen Muelder, *The Underground Railroad in Western Illinois*, Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2008 (This book details the operation of the Underground Railroad from Quincy, Illinois to Chicago); Ann Hagedorn, *Beyond the River*, New York: Simon &

Schuster, 2002 (This book shows that the Underground Railroad existed in southern Ohio, twenty years before Brown's escape); Richard Katshatus, *Just Over the Line: Chester County and the Underground Railroad*, West Chester, PA: Chester County Historical Society, 2002 (This book identifies 81 Quakers who were involved in the Underground Railroad in this county alone).

⁸ Jane Williamson, "Rowland T. Robinson, Rokeby, and the Underground Railroad in Vermont," 69 (Winter 2001): 26

⁹ Rowland E. Robinson to Wilbur Siebert, 19 August 1896, Siebert Papers.

¹⁰ Williamson, "Rowland T. Robinson": 25.

¹¹ Ibid: 23.

¹² Ibid: 25.

¹³ Tom Calarco, *The Underground Railroad in the Adirondack Region* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2004): 182

¹⁴ See: Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, edited by Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, (1853; reprint Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1968).

¹⁵ "Letter from Henry C. Wright," *The Liberator* 2 Sept. 1853: 137

¹⁶ "Vigilance Committees," *Friend of Man* 18 Apr 1838: 170

¹⁷ Catherine S. Brown, *Memoir of Rev. Abel Brown*, 1849:151; *Vermont Freeman* 1 July 1843: 3

¹⁸ Stanley Harrold, *Subversives: Antislavery Community in Washington, D.C.* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003): 88-89

¹⁹ Fayette Shipherd to Charles Hicks. Rensselaer County, N.Y., 24 November 1840, Vermont Historical Society.

²⁰ Abel Brown to Charles Hicks. Albany, N.Y., 9 June 1842, Vermont Historical Society.

²¹ *Annual Report of the Committee*, Albany: Eastern NY A.S. Society & Fugitive Slaves, 1843: 4

²² *Vermont Freeman* 2 August 1844: 3; *Vermont Freeman* 3 February 1844: 2

²³ Florence T Ray, *Sketch of the Life of Rev. Charles B. Ray* (New York: Press of J. J. Little & Co., 1887): 35

²⁴ Williamson, "Roland T. Robinson ...": 20

²⁵ Ibid: 24-25

²⁶ For information about these committees, see: Ray, *Op. cit.*; William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates) 1872; "First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837," New York: Piercy & Reed, 1837; Harrold, *Op. cit.*; Joseph A. Borome, "The Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 92, (January 1968): 320-351.

²⁷ Williamson, "Roland T. Robinson ...": 27

²⁸ Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin* (Western Tract and Supply Co.: Cincinnati, Ohio), 1876: 118

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- ²⁹ William J. Switala, *Underground Railroad in Delaware, Maryland, and West Virginia* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books): 53
- ³⁰ Second Annual Report, Vermont Anti-Slavery Society, 13
- ³¹ “Anti-Slavery Societies,” *The Liberator* 4 August 1837: 137 (47 of the 89 societies reported its member numbers that totaled 5957; there were no numbers reported for the remaining 42).
- ³² Rowland E. Robinson to Wilbur Siebert, 19 August 1896, Siebert papers.
- ³³ Williamson, “Roland T. Robinson ...”: 28
- ³⁴ Stanley W. Campbell, *The Slave Catchers Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968): 27-29; 106-108
- ³⁵ Gary Collison, *Shadrach Minkins: From Fugitive Slave to Citizen* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997):77
- ³⁶ *Ibid*: 163-165 (Minkins likely escaped on the Vermont Central Railroad and it is not known if anyone associated with the Underground Railroad in Vermont assisted him); Stanley J. Robboy and Anita W. Robboy, “Lewis Hayden: From Fugitive Slave to Statesman,” *The New England Quarterly*, 46, (No. 4. December, 1973): 605; *Boston Daily Evening Traveller* 24 February 1851
- ³⁷ *Ibid*: 83; Letter from the Boston Vigilance Committee, 17 June 1854, Boston, Massachusetts
- ³⁸ Raymond Paul Zirblis, “Friends of Freedom.” Vermont Division of Historic Preservation: Montpelier, 1996: 32-33
- ³⁹ *Ibid*: 32
- ⁴⁰ Siebert, *Op. cit*: 81-82; Reverend Joshua Young to Wilbur Siebert, April 21, 1893, Siebert papers.
- ⁴¹ Zirblis, *Op. cit*: 16
- ⁴² Aldis Brainerd to Wilbur Siebert, 21 August 1896, Siebert papers.
- ⁴³ *History of Franklin and Grand Isle Counties Vermont*, Lewis Cass Aldrich, editor, (Syracuse. N. Y.: D. Mason & Co., 1891): 275; 289; Siebert, *Op. cit*: 85-86
- ⁴⁴ Siebert, *Op. Cit*: 68, 89
- ⁴⁵ Joseph Poland to Wilbur Siebert, 3 April 1896, Siebert papers.
- ⁴⁶ Calarco, *Op. Cit*: 62-64; 87-90
- ⁴⁷ Zirblis, *Op. Cit*: 14
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*: 45
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid*: 16-17
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid*: 14.

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- ⁵¹ *Men of Vermont: Illustrated Biographical History of Vermonters & Sons of Vermont* (Ullery, Brattleboro: Transcript Publishing Company, 1894): 322
- ⁵² Williamson, "Roland T. Robinson ...": 26; Zirblis, *Op. cit.*: 35
- ⁵³ Zirblis, *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ Samuel Shapiro, "The Rendition of Anthony Burns," *The Journal of Negro History*, January, 1959: 50.
- ⁵⁵ Collison, *Op. cit.*: 107 (60 separate documented attempts to recapture 105 fugitive slaves were made in the North during the first four months after the passage of the second Fugitive Slave Law).
- ⁵⁶ *Annual Report of the Committee, Op. Cit.*: 4
- ⁵⁷ Aldis O. Brainerd to Wilbur Siebert, 21 October 1895, Siebert papers.
- ⁵⁸ Siebert, *Op. cit.*: 96; Mary Eva Baker, *Folklore of Springfield*, 1922: 64-66
- ⁵⁹ Collison, *Op. cit.*: 65
- ⁶⁰ "Another Fugitive Family Safe," *National Anti-Slavery Standard* 25 March 1854
- ⁶¹ *Coit's Gore* (no date): 42-44.
- ⁶² Siebert, *Op. Cit.*: 100-101; *Boardman Genealogy 1525-1895*: 509-510.
- ⁶³ "Escape of a Fugitive Slave," *St Albans Messenger* 24 April 1856
- ⁶⁴ "A Fair Fugitive Slave," *National Anti-Slavery Standard* 8 August 1857
- ⁶⁵ Diary entry of Mary Rogers, 3 November 1844.
- ⁶⁶ Interview with Don Papson, 10 April 2009
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁸ Williamson, "Rowland T. Robinson": 19-20
- ⁶⁹ Jane Williamson, "Telling It Like It Was at Rokeby: The Evolution of an Underground Railroad site in Vermont," David W. Blight, editor, *Passages to Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2004): 254.
- ⁷⁰ Williamson, "Rowland T. Robinson": 20
- ⁷¹ Siebert, *Op. cit.*: 76
- ⁷² Collison, *Op. Cit.*: 206
- ⁷³ Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971) : 235
- ⁷⁴ Papson Interview, 10 April 2009.
- ⁷⁵ Zirblis Interview, 1 May 2009