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Heroes in Petticoats: The Role of Women in the Underground Railroad

Andrea Korgan

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It was a dark and stormy night. The three figures were barely visible as they raced across the field and into the dark safety of the forest. But they were not out of danger yet. A cold chill crept up the man's neck as he heard the bloodhounds baying in the distance. Trembling, his wife and daughter clasped hands and ran blindly forward following the shadow leading them. There was no time to stop for rest; if they did not cross the river and reach the house with the lone candle in time, all was lost – permanently.

* * *

This could have been the beginning of innumerable accounts of runaway slaves. Slaves had been running away since the institution of slavery commenced millennia ago, and in America it began with the arrival of the first slaves. By the late 1700s when the colonies revolted and declared independence, slaves, too, were throwing off their shackles of servitude and attempting escape. Although there was no official beginning of the Underground Railroad (in fact the name would not be given until many years later), the Society of Friends (Quakers) were known abolitionists and could usually be counted on to assist fugitives. As early as 1786 they had a systematic method of passing the escapees further north to safety.¹

After a mere seventeen years of independence from England, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. This act stated that the owners of runaway slaves could pursue their property outside of their states – all the way to the Canadian border – and bring them back. But as quickly as the law was passed, the Road became more organized and more routes were created for the railroad. By 1842, the Underground Railroad was in full swing. Angry and frustrated with the success rates of the runaways, Southerners forced the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 through Congress. The more stringent version of the previous act stated that it was now a crime for anyone to assist the fugitives and that the fugitives could be pursued all the way to the

¹ Wilbur Siebert, *The Underground Railroad: from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), 33.

borders.² It also stated that it was the Northerner's duty to catch the slaves and return them to the South.³ With the new legislature, it became imperative to pass the runaways all the way to the Canadian border or get them out of the United States in some other fashion.⁴

Once the slaves officially reached "free territory," usually north of the Ohio River, they would generally fall into the caring hands of the Friends, or other abolitionists at some point and receive some sort of assistance. These conscientious men and women refused to bow to the pressure of the government and assisted the slaves by providing food, hiding, clothing, transportation, and, perhaps the most important, instructions, or more often, an escort to the next "safe house." South of the Ohio River, there was less organization as it was even more dangerous and illegal to assist fugitives, and fewer records existed of systems of escape; "even the men and women who assisted the fugitives north...had little knowledge of how those runaways reached free territory...few, if any, land routes, such as existed north of the Ohio, could be traced in the South."⁵ In the South, many fugitives stayed on or near their plantations, but in hiding. When there happened to be a conductor in the area, friends and relatives would arrange for the fugitive to escape with them. Fugitives would hide for years before they felt it was safe to travel north. When they did, it was usually through friends and family on various nearby plantations who would then pass them on to other friends.

The penalties for aiding and abetting fugitives were stiff. Imprisonment, flogging, tarring and feathering, and lynching were only a few of their favorites. Calvin Fairbanks, a famed abolitionist, was put into prison for merely having anti-slavery tracts in his possession. Several

² "Freedom and Slavery in the United States," *New York Times*, February 24, 1853.

³ "A Dialogue with a Kentuckian on the Cars....," *New York Times*, July 29, 1854.

⁴ Siebert, 23. The *New York Times* also published the article "The Underground Railroad" on November 30, 1855 stating that slaves were quickly passed north to the safety of Canada – implying that Southern slave catchers should give up their hunts.

⁵ Blaine J. Hudson, *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002), 97.

other men who were caught assisting runaway slaves were variously lynched or bound and thrown in the river.⁶ In the South, aiding runaways was punishable by death – and it was enforced. However, brave men and women willingly, and regularly, risked their lives. Men usually provided escorts while women provided food, clean and dry clothing, and a soft bed to sleep in. In the North, however, the courts were quite sympathetic to the fugitives and often would not prosecute those who assisted their escape attempts, or would impose only slight punishments.⁷

Escapees demonstrated a wide range of knowledge about the North, “abolitionists,” and routes to Canada. Some fugitives knew that there was a system of passing people north through “safe houses” and even knew how to contact some of them.⁸ Some of the slaves escaped with conductors, such as Harriet Tubman, and were thus put into the hands of the abolitionists immediately. Other runaways made their way north entirely on their own and, by happenstance, they would have to ask for assistance and then board the railroad to freedom. These were the slaves who, when hearing the term “abolitionist,” nearly ran in the opposite direction.⁹ Their masters in the South spoke about the malevolent northern “abolitionists” who would do various horrible things to them if they ever met them, such as eating them, torturing them, or paying them horrible wages while working them to death – and thus it was much safer to stay on the plantation where they could be protected from such evilness.

Some stories of the men and women who helped the escapees were recorded with careful attention to detail. Some of the runaways told their stories to those who assisted; some, because of their great fear, preferred to stay anonymous. A few were brave enough to thumb their noses

⁶ Mildred Danforth, *A Quaker Pioneer* (New York: Exposition Press, 1961), 94.

⁷ “A Very Singular Slave Case,” *New York Daily Times*, December 18, 1854.

⁸ “Underground Railroad,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1854.

⁹ Anne Hagedorn, *Beyond the River* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 37.

at their masters and went so far as to publish their escape stories in magazines and newspapers with correct names and locations. Fortunately for posterity's sake, these stories were protected, although many invaluable diaries were burned to prevent them falling into the hands of Southerners and inadvertently identifying important links in the Underground Railroad.

Historiography

By current historiographical standards, some authors almost discredited themselves by writing extreme attitudes toward their topics. One author took such a strong revisionist stance toward the Underground Railroad as to say that it did not exist, or if it did, not nearly to the extent claimed by others historians. Another author, also a revisionist, worked hard to cut away many of the myths that surrounded various actors in the Railroad. On the other hand, there were some who romanticized the people in their works to such an extent that they seemed to be writing more of a hagiography. Fortunately, not all authors have fallen prey to either of the camps and have succeeded in writing histories that neither deny peoples roles or existences, or turning their lives into myths for hero worship.

Larry Gara, author of *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad*, was an extreme revisionist who discounted any story, anecdote, or narrative of runaway slaves or those who worked in the Underground Railroad. First, he argued that not nearly so many slaves ran away as were claimed by many other authors. Second, he claimed that most did not pursue freedom because they were dissatisfied with their lives as slaves. Third, he argued that very few of the fugitives did use any sort of "underground railroad," and when they did escape, it was almost completely on their own volition and cleverness. When they were assisted by others, it

was usually freed Negroes who assisted them— not generous whites who desired to see the overthrow of the entire institution of slavery. Unfortunately he seemed to completely ignore the few records of those who did dare to write of the events. He ignored the fugitives' statements of why they escaped after they had reached Canada. He also ignored much of the harshness of slavery, stating that many slaves had benevolent masters who cared only for their well being and were hurt when they ran away or were abducted.¹⁰

In *Bound for the Promised Land*, Kate Larson provided a new picture of Harriet Tubman. As a revisionist, she corrected many misconceptions that sprang up about Tubman; Larson supplied a more complete portrait of Tubman that previously had been left only to myth and children's books. Larson, while contradicting much of the previous biographies of Tubman, wrote clearly about Tubman's life and role in the Underground. She wrote of Tubman's initial escape and how she was transported on the Railroad; and then later of how Tubman returned several times over to free friends, family, and anyone else who wanted to escape. In purifying much of the previous academia, Larson cut away much of the great and loved myths and left a much skinnier version of Tubman's life.

R. C. Smedley, in *The American Negro: His History and Literature*, almost fell to the opposite extreme. Although he did not completely romanticize the Underground, on several occasions he promoted the various stationmasters and assistants on the Railroad to saint-dom as he recorded the stories of the fugitives who barely made it to their houses and then did nothing more than accept and ride along the Lines as they were passed north. Although he did tend toward that extreme, he did an admirable job of examining the origins of the Underground Railroad, how it began in earnest with the Fugitive Slave Act, and provided innumerable stories, reports, first-hand interviews, and a few letters about the conductors and the safe houses along

¹⁰ Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967) 24, 26.

the road to freedom. He referred often to the Friends and their varying levels of interest and reaction to the Underground Railroad. While Smedley was not a player in the grand scheme himself, most—if not all—of his information came from interviews with the people who were living in the times and active in the Underground. In the preface, the author stated that he felt it his duty to record the events and motives of these heroes before their stories died with them.¹¹

Smedley's narrative was most useful for his treatment of women. Although his main focus was usually on the actions of the men, he regularly referred to the wives, daughters, and sisters of the men and related how they were instrumental in many escapes as well as the everyday occurrences of caring for the fugitives. It was interesting how often he recorded the matrimonial affairs of many of the people. Several of the accounts seemed almost to be afterthoughts: "On tenth month 16th, 1823, he married Susan P. Johnson, of London Grove...she was an earnest sympathizer...in the anti-slavery cause,"¹² and then he moved to a new chapter. Unwittingly perhaps, Smedley recorded many such instances of women working alongside their men. Although nearly all of the references were mere appositives in Smedley's records and interviews, these vignettes, combined, provided a round picture of the nitty-gritty tasks of women. These examples presented the specific actions women took to assist the run-away slaves—everything from keeping quiet about who was hidden in their back room to driving buggies of "shipments" such as "two volumes of the "Irrepressible Conflict" bound in black."¹³

Also staying a middle path, J. Blaine Hudson wrote in *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland* that while many slaves did escape unaided, or only partially aided, there would have been no "Underground Railroad" had various free

¹¹ Smedley, x.

¹² Ibid., 106.

¹³ Siebert 58, qtd *History of Clinton County, Iowa*, article on the "Underground Railroad" pp.413-416.

blacks and anti-slavery whites not been willing to assist the fugitives.¹⁴ Keith Griffler also stayed the middle path stating that the Underground consisted of both black and white conductors. He also stated that when the conductors traveled deep into the South, they deserved titles of grandeur because of the great risks they incurred. Both black and white conductors faced incredible penalties if they were caught in slave territory; however, he did not seem to romanticize their great bravery and heroics.¹⁵

Laura Haviland's biographer, Mildred Danforth, recorded the events of her life with understated awe, but not much over-romanticized heroism. In *A Quaker Pioneer*, Danforth wrote of her upbringing, which spurred her toward the abolitionist cause, and her role in the Road. While Danforth wrote a complimentary biography, she did not romanticize her or create her to be a hero of mythic proportions—only a gutsy lady with a drive to help humanity in whatever method possible.

Avoiding, for the most part, either extreme, Wilbur Siebert seemed to write fairly of both black and white conductors and the importance of Negro networks for forwarding runaways northward. First published in 1898, Siebert, in *The Underground Railroad: from Slavery to Freedom*, was able to interact with and interview people and access materials that have been lost to current academia due to death, purposeful destruction to protect identities, or were merely stuffed in attic trunks to be discovered in the future. According to the author's preface, the project began merely as a newspaper piece, but grew as he recognized the importance of rescuing this history before it died with those who had participated in it. He began with the origins of the Underground Railroad and linked the necessity of its existence with the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850. He also explained why there were so few written documents and then defended

¹⁴ Hudson, 4.

¹⁵ Keith Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 59-61.

the value of reminiscences.¹⁶ This, in itself, was of value because so much of the history of the Railroad was oral history. Smedley found the oral histories generally reliable when he compared them to written accounts in diaries and newspapers. He reprinted many of his sources in his work; these are quoted as such.

My topic may not be new inherently, but I hope to combine two topics, women's history and the history of the Underground Railroad, that have been well researched to provide a potentially larger and more complete view. There has been much research into the Underground Railroad as well as women and their roles in society. However, very little research has been done exploring the role of women in the Underground, how it impacted them, and how they impacted their societies. It is my goal to combine and synthesize some of this research on the Underground to discover and bring to light the roles of women into a narrative about women's participation and function in the Underground Railroad using anecdotes recorded in various histories, compilations, newspapers, and diaries. Also, I hope to show involvement at several levels, such as those of hiding fugitives, providing various supplies, conductors on the Underground Railroad.

Because of the fame of some of the women, much research has been done on their lives. Harriet Tubman was a fugitive who escaped and then became extremely important because of touring for the abolitionist cause, or by becoming conductors on the Railroad. Laura Haviland became a conductor on the Road after her husband's death. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Lucretia Mott, and others became lecturers and ardent supporters of the abolitionist cause and helped to start many abolition societies. A third group of women was a bit more difficult to

¹⁶ Siebert, 7. Siebert also explains the same problem in *Light on the Underground Railroad*, an article published in the *American Historical Review*, Volume 1, number 3 or the April 1896 publication. He recorded the story of a Mr. Purvis who kept fastidious records until 1850 when the second Fugitives Slave Act was passed. He then burned his diary for fear of endangering his family. In the introduction to Siebert's book, Albert Hart, on page vii, also defended the use of reminiscence and explained how Siebert cross checked various stories for correctness and truth.

identify individually. They were the wives, daughters, and sisters of the men who were conductors in the Underground Railroad. These women provided clothing, hot food, and hiding places for the fugitives as they passed through their houses. Sometimes they led the groups of slaves; other times they provided support and back-up for the men – either way, the Railroad was, without a doubt, assisted by their assistance. What were the roles of women in the Underground Railroad? How were they changed by their communities? What impact did they have on their communities?

Society's Impact on Women

Perhaps it was the society and communities in which these women lived that shaped these women into famous and anonymous heroes. These women usually did not think that they were doing any heroic work – only that which was necessary of them as humans and, specifically, as Christians. They saw their roles of feeding the hungry fugitives, clothing them, comforting and taking them in as necessary and quoted a passage in Matthew stating “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”¹⁷ This was their mantra and their purpose.

During this time, the Society of Friends was developing its policy on slavery. They had decided, as a group, that they would not hold slaves themselves, but there was a division among them as to how political they should be and whether or not they should aid and abet the runaways, thus breaking the law. Haviland was of the more “extreme” persuasion and believed that it was her Christian duty to do more than verbally condemn slavery; she felt driven to take an active role overthrowing what she believed to be wrong. Among abolitionists and specifically her contacts and friends in the Underground Railroad, Haviland was a hero for her work and

¹⁷ Matt. 25:40 (King James Version).

appreciated for her selflessness in giving time, money, and energy to the cause. The third “society” that impacted her was the reason for her mission – Pro-slavery minded people challenged, cursed, threatened, and condemned her. In this society she broke the law and had no regard for property or respect for persons (white ones, that is). Yet it was this society that spurred her on in her mission. Until the last slave was freed, be it by manumission, escape, or legislation, Haviland’s work was not done. The Underground Railroad was her calling, her mission, and her gift back to the world – it defined her.

Society’s impact on Haviland might appear to be obvious – the same impact that it would have on any woman who was an abolitionist and participated in the Underground Railroad. She saw the injustice of the peculiar institution and acted on her conscience to do her part to remedy the situation. However, for Haviland, the impact seemed to be a little deeper. When she was quite young, she read a book entitled *Middle Passage* about a slave boat and the horrors experienced by the slaves. As she grew up, she realized her calling more and more and eventually answered it.

Women Railroad Workers in the Home

The majority of the time overlooked and shadowed by their more famous husbands, brothers, and fathers, women played vital roles in the Underground Railroad. Without diminishing the men’s roles in the escapes, these women fed, clothed, nursed, hid and escorted escapees to the safe house on their journey north. There was not much written about many of these women because they were usually, only, and consistently referred to by their husband’s names, such as “Mrs. Jeremiah Cooper.” Many times their names were not given at all. Described as doing important things, sometimes outright heroic, the women were often

mentioned merely as “and [Sarah] married Eusebius Barnard, a minister in the Society of Friends, an earnest abolitionist, an enthusiastic reformer, and an active agent in the Underground Railroad.” Two pages later, Sarah was recorded in lovely eulogy stating that her house was a “refuge to the weary pilgrim fleeing for his freedom.”¹⁸ William Still, at the end of his diary, wrote small little biographies and descriptions of several important women – usually housewives and the like. Smedley probably recorded the most stories of women’s involvement. Siebert also wrote vignettes of many important women. However, these three men do not completely overlap in their records. If they each traced different stories and barely overlapped, one could assume that many more were lost through the cracks.

Mrs. Jeremiah Cooper provided “victuals” for a fugitive who escaped from slave catchers after being caught (his shackles were loosed by a boarding house lady where the slave catchers were eating). The reference did not mention whether or not her husband was a part of the Underground Railroad, or if she worked regularly in tandem with any other party on the Freedom Line. She did, however, go into the record for having carried food to the escapee for an entire week while he hid from his pursuers. When it was safe for him to keep journeying north, she provided him with a set of her husband’s clothes and sent him to the next safe house.¹⁹ An anonymous woman, she represented scores of women who stepped in when need knocked at their doors. Their stories were not recorded; because of their small roles? Possibly, but it might also have been that it was their duty to help their fellow man – the women saw no heroics involved and thus told no one the details of their involvement.

Hannah Gibbons, wife of Daniel Gibbons and given a half decent description, was a woman of

¹⁸ Robert Smedley, *American Negro* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 141-2, quoted from undisclosed newspaper announcement.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

fine intellectual capabilities, quick perception, excellent judgement, affectionate and amiable in disposition, fond of home and its endearments, and hence an earnest sympathizer with the poor slaves.²⁰

Specifically, she was known for her nursing capabilities and dedication in restoring runaways back to health before passing them further north. One story told of a man who developed small pox a few days after arriving at the home of Hannah and Daniel. For six weeks afterwards she nursed the fugitive back to health, allowing no one else to go near him for fear of contamination—but with no fear for herself.²¹ As her husband was well known in the Underground Railroad, they regularly heard quiet tappings on their windows in the dead of night when fugitives arrived at their house. While her husband took the fugitives to the barn to hide them and learn a bit of their story, Hannah gathered hot food and various other provisions, depending on how quickly the fugitive needed to be passed on to the next station.

Typical of the Underground housewife, Susan Johnson provided the food and lodging needed by those in hiding. But her more personal gift was of encouragement and counseling to the fugitives provided for other needs of the runaways. Her gifts, both physical and spiritual, helped to calm the fugitives and have faith in their success. Sarah Johnson, later Mrs. Bonsall, was one who had merely a few sentences to her credit, yet those few indicated a life work for the anti-slavery cause through physical as well as psychological ministrations. As they were Quakers, who were strongly abolitionist, their house was an important station on the Railway and as such, Sarah's role was much grander than the nine lines afforded her.²²

To “[aid] all who came, [clothe] those who needed, and gave especial care to the sick,” this characteristic motto could have fit any house wife but it was Micajah Speakman's modus

²⁰ Ibid., 55.

²¹ Ibid., 56.

²² Ibid., 106.

operendum.²³ While both she and her husband were intimately involved in the Underground Railroad, from Smedley's account it appeared that Micajah was the more active party. Like Haviland she hired many of the fugitives for good wages until they could afford to go further north, or were ready to leave. Like all of the wives, she provided warm food, dry clothing, and beds for each person who arrived. Because of her location in Uwchlan, Speakman was an important link in the north/east line of the Railroad.²⁴

Great-hearted, tender, and compassionate, Abigail Goodwin was known for her generosity and selfless assistance to the cause. Although I have not found that she hosted runaways in her house, she, nonetheless, took their trials upon herself in several ways. Whenever she could obtain money, she would send it to those more able and visible on the Railroad to either buy supplies, travel methods, or even to buy the slaves themselves. While many abolitionists were averse to paying slave holders for the freedom of human beings, Goodwin was chiefly concerned that they be free. She also sewed many of the clothes that the runaways were outfitted in at their arrival to the stations. As much as she could do, however, she realized that it was not enough and, in a letter she urges her fellow abolitionists to organize themselves into sewing groups. Even if only for an afternoon once a week, great good could be done for those in need. Goodwin preferred to sew women's clothing, but did ask in another letter if the fugitives were "mostly large" or if they were "small in stature" as might "slavery stunt the body as well as the mind." These questions were asked solely so that she would know the best sizes for the clothing so that it would "fit [them] as well as [could] be."²⁵

²³ Smedley 164.

²⁴ Ibid., 30, 33.

²⁵ William Still, *The Underground Railroad: A Record...* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872), 617-622. Abigail Goodwin's letters are printed in the appendix to William Still's diary.

Although unmarried, Grace Anna Lewis and her sisters, Mariann and Elizabeth fulfilled the roles of Underground wives. Born into the anti-slavery movement, they were educated by their parents about the horrors of slavery and the importance of abolition work. At age four or five, the three sisters witnessed the anguish of a man being carried off into slavery – this memory had a deep and lasting impact on their urging them to constantly support the anti-slavery cause. The sisters each had various talents that they put to use for the abolitionist cause. Grace Anna had an excellent business sense and, after their parents' deaths, she took over the books and accounting duties of the family. Mariann, described as “almost preternaturally quick” by her sister, was creative in devising escape techniques for various escapees and situations. Elizabeth had a “quick sensibility” that kept her on top of urgent matters and was the “wise counselor” with whom they counseled during especially desperate situations. Each of the sisters was known for their compassion and generosity.²⁶

Their house was a central and important stop on the Underground. They constantly and consistently had fugitives working for them, hiding in various places, and passing through. Although many of their neighbors were opposed to abolition, they did not, for the most part, interfere with their work. They did watch them, however, and were often aware of when and how many fugitives were passed through. Even with their watching, they, nevertheless, missed many of the escapees. On one occasion, one of their neighbors made the comment that “there used to be a pretty brisk trade of running off [Negroes], but there was not much of it done now.”²⁷ The sisters were quite amused at the statement as they had, during that week, passed forty such Negroes on to the north and safety.

²⁶ Ibid., 752-753.

²⁷ Ibid., 750.

Although unmarried, like all the other abolitionist wives, the three sisters provided new attire for the fugitives, many of whom were clothed in tatters. When the arriving groups were too large for their stores, they would gather trusted friends into sewing circles and quickly create the necessary attire.²⁸ And as would be expected of the compassionate, Grace Anna, Mariann, and Elizabeth provided a *home* for the ill and those who were too fatigued to travel further. They would care for them for weeks—as long as necessary—until the mothers and children were strong enough, in body and in spirit, to travel onward.²⁹ To their credit, several sources recorded that not one of the runaways they took care of were caught and returned to slavery.³⁰

These were only a few named examples of women who provided necessary provisions for the escapees. Their role in the home, being mostly out of sight, was immeasurably important. Without their assistance, the men who were working various other aspects of the Railroad would not have been able to do their jobs nearly as effectively without the women's participation. Considered merely normal household upkeep to the women involved, cooking and cleaning and sewing, to the fugitives, were graces that made their often harrowing journeys north much easier. Their role was critical to the operation of the Underground.

Women Railroad Workers Outside the Home

There were some women who did not limit their aid to just the home. Their duties on the Underground were more hands-on as they were often outside of the home and more visible in their communities. They sometimes snuck fugitives to nearby stations or moved them to various safe places. Sarah Pownall defended some escapees in a court room. Mary Ann Fulton made a journey to the next station – although she did not actually know where it was. Frances Harper

²⁸ Ibid., 750.

²⁹ Smedley 172.

³⁰ Still 750.

opened her home to fugitives when she was there, gave money when she was not, and lectured to many inspiring the audiences to start their own abolitionist societies and to aid fugitives whenever they could. These women filled positions that were not typically considered women's roles; in some cases they were much larger than even a man was expected to take up. These few examples were just some of the few mentioned in a smattering a sources. But if women were skipped over in the general writing of the Underground history, how much more did brave women do that went unrecorded?

Sarah Pownall's role in the Underground Railroad was a bit more glamorous than some (at least according to the records). As typical for a wife of a conductor in the Subterranean Way, she provided culinary provisions for the fugitives. In one specific example she, "with her characteristic thoughtfulness and motherly kindness" assured for their nutrition by sending a child out with a pillow case full of food to put under the tree far enough away to prevent suspicion.³¹ Atypically, Sarah had the opportunity to personally "rescue" three fugitives from arrest and return to the South. A couple of bounty hunters had come North and successfully identified and arrested three men as fugitives. However, when the trial came about, the warrant that they were using had an incorrect date on it. Sarah immediately recognized the error and called attention to the detail and thus allowed for temporary release of the men. This reprieve was just long enough for the runaways to escape to safer grounds before a new warrant was issued.³² Perhaps even more vindicating was the fact that she was able to turn the lawsuit around and accuse the slave hunters of destruction of property when they had arrested the men.

Mary Ann Fulton was a bit better remembered by later generations (and Smedley) for her activities and was even more proactive than some of the other women. At a young age, daughter

³¹ Ibid., 121.

³² Ibid., 124.

of Joseph Fulton, she carried food to a hidden fugitive in the barn because she could do so and attract less attention. When it was time for the man to continue north, she drew a map, provided a compass, and gave him safety instructions – all as a child. This must have been the spark that ignited her interest and action. Although only one other specific example was cited in *American Negro*, it was likely she did not stop her work.³³

When two women and a child arrived at her house sometime later, she immediately jumped into action. Mary Ann seemed to be working somewhat on her own. When she requested the carriage, her brother refused and only finally gave in after much begging and pleading. With a half-blind horse, she set off with her secret cargo for a house which, she thought, would assist the fugitives. Several houses later, however, she was no closer to finding safe refuge and time was beginning to be of the essence. She met a small black woman on the road and asked her for directions. The little woman instructed Mary Ann to take the women to her house and that she would be back later to help them.³⁴ I wish it were possible to find out more about this anonymous woman who stepped up without hesitation, unfortunately she is one of the nameless many who gave much but remained unidentified.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was, arguably, the “single most important black woman leader to figure in both the abolitionist and feminist reform movements”³⁵ While her role in the Underground Railroad was not as physically connected as some of the other women mentioned, she did immediately open her home when she became aware of the need as a young woman all alone in Philadelphia.³⁶ She also was continually sending gifts of money, clothing, and other

³³ Ibid., 88.

³⁴ Ibid., 91.

³⁵ Bettye Collier-Thomas, “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: Abolitionist and Feminist Reformer, 1825-1911.” *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*. ed. Ann Gordon (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 41-65.

³⁶ Still 758.

items that might be needed by those running the Road. Even out on the lecturing circuit, she remembered the Underground. She sent letters with her monetary donations stating her prayers for the fugitives and asking what she could do to assist them in their need. Because she was not staying in one place consistently she had to leave much of the actual work of the Railroad to those who were settled in one place; but when she could, she added physical labor and time to her gifts to the Road. In one letter she stated that her offering of thirty dollars was “not large; but if you need more, send me word.”³⁷

Harper’s main gift was as an orator and a lecturer. She filled schools and churches with young and old to hear her contend for her race and her gender. She was employed initially by the State Anti-Slavery Society of Maine to travel and lecture all over the Northeast. Later, many different groups paid her to travel and lecture. Powerful and persuasive, her impact on society was strong for several reasons. First, as an educated Negro, she was living proof that they were capable of education and higher forms of logic (one of the main arguments of Southerners who were caring for the “stupid” and “simple” slaves placed under their care). Second, as a woman and thus the “weaker sex,” she could not be ignored because of her great ability. Third, her lectures and speeches showed that she was “sensitive to issues of race, class, and gender,”³⁸ and thus had an excellent understanding of the many challenges of slavery and abolition.

Through her actions, lectures, and life, Frances Harper was a force to be recognized and contended with. She pricked the consciences of people, appealed to their sense of compassion and right, and challenged them to actually assist those in need. As a woman, she was among a few lecturers, even fewer as a Negro woman. Lucretia Mott and other white women did much to further the cause as far as public awareness was concerned. Mott was another who hosted

³⁷ Ibid., 761.

³⁸ Collier-Thomas, 42.

fugitives in her home but felt her calling to be in the more visible aspects of the abolitionist cause. Sojourner Truth's lectures were also particularly persuasive for opposite reasons of Harper. She was uneducated and illiterate – but because she had been a slave, she provided personal experience as proof of the horrors of slavery. But similar to Harper, she argued with logic and reason – again refuting the claims that slaves were incapable of higher levels of thinking.

Though they did not completely abandon the “women's sphere” in society, these brave women, and many other anonymous women, stepped out of the traditional roles to become heroes and “save the day.” Their participation many times was the crux as to whether or not a slave, or group, would make it to the next station in the Underground. They gave more than food, bedding and clothing. The women stepped into the spotlight of the public for just long enough to rescue the fugitive and then many time retreated back to their more comfortable role. Then there were the women who did not return to the comfortable role – they pursued the slave to encourage them to escape.

Women Conductors on the Underground Railroad

While many women worked in the home and assisted their husbands by cooking, sewing, and the like, some went outside the home to aid the Underground Railroad in a larger way by speaking out and being seen. There were even a few more who were even more active. These few women acted as conductors on the Underground. They traveled into dangerous places, helped arrange escapes, and personally led or accompanied the fugitives in their break for freedom.

Laura Haviland was one of those women. She was an ardent abolitionist in public, and behind closed doors she was a white counterpart to Tubman. Haviland worked outside of the home for the freedom of the slaves as evidenced in many ways. Haviland traveled into the South, like Tubman, and rescued various families and separated family members. Like Tubman she embraced all humanity and treated all as brothers and sisters. She not only desired their physical freedom, but sought to educate them as well so that they would be free and equal in education as well. Some abolitionists believed in the end of slavery but had no desire to place the freed blacks on the same social setting. Haviland's attitude toward equality was evidenced both in her school, the Raisin Institute, and in her practice of hiring runaways. At the Institute, she educated all races (including the Irish) and both sexes right beside each other with no discrepancy in curriculum.³⁹ Often, if it was safe for a fugitive to stay in Michigan, she would hire him, her, or the family to work on the farm while they received at least a rudimentary education.

Laura Haviland's life was devoted to all aspects of freeing the slaves but specifically to the escapees themselves. While other Friends focused on abolition as a movement, Haviland primarily focused on the nitty-gritty of assisting escapees. Typical of the role of conductors in the Underground Railroad, she conveyed concealed fugitives who had already made it north of the Ohio River to later station houses. However, Haviland also made some more daring (and uncommon) journeys into the South both to encourage slaves to escape as well as to arrange details for those who had family in the North and wanted them to join them.⁴⁰

³⁹ Danforth 38.

⁴⁰ Henrietta Buckmaster, *Let My People Go: The Story of the Underground Railroad and The Growth of the Abolition Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 145.

In her role as female conductor, Haviland was both restricted and enabled depending on the situation. Because of her blatant anti-slavery stance and visible activity in educating runaways, she was well known in many circles but without a face attached to her reputation. After she had gone to assist Calvin Fairbanks, the townsmen found out that she was in their city and were outraged. They were gathered in various groups deciding what should be done to her when she walked down the street in the midst of them completely unnoticed.⁴¹ After various trips into the South she became somewhat recognized by face after interacting with various angry slave holders. Eventually she acquired a \$3,000 reward offer for her – dead or alive.⁴² Unfortunately for the pro-slavers, Haviland had many friends among all classes of society on whom she could rely on to rescue her. Also, because society dictated what was proper for a woman of those days, Haviland was in many ways restricted from acting as freely as she might have.

However, Haviland, as a woman, also had several advantages. When she traveled into the South, she often passed herself off as a slave. Although this seemed questionable, several times she mentioned walking with women slaves who were fairer than herself and attributed this to the fact that it was a regular and common occurrence for “white” slaves to be working in the fields along with the blackest of Negroes.⁴³ Rarely did anyone question a group of female slaves heading back to their housing after a day in the field. Few expected an abolitionist woman to be in the South recruiting, arranging, and encouraging while in the heart of enemy territory. With

⁴¹ Danforth 104.

⁴² Ibid., 62.

⁴³ Ibid., 71. An article in the *New York Daily Times* quotes William Still who wrote of the escape of a man who was married to a slave. When the man escaped, he took along a daguerreotype of his wife who was of “fair complexion” north with him to show the Underground Railroad agents. “The Underground Railroad,” *New York Daily Times*, January 28, 1856.

disguises, she made escape arrangements and encouraged others to escape. On more than one occasion she gave advice or instructions on how to escape.

Mary French was one of those cases. She was desperate for her entire family to escape as they were slowly being sold off to other plantations deeper in the South. Weeping, she went to Haviland and begged for advice and assistance. Because Haviland was already working on a different escape she could not change her disguise to assist Mary. Instead, she gave her instructions on how to rescue her family. Unfortunately, because of her fear of being caught, Mary did not act quickly and lost more children. Several months later, when Haviland was in Cincinnati again, she heard of a small family who might fit the description of French's family. Haviland went to the hiding place and was greeted by a terrified but thankful Mary French who had followed Haviland's escape instructions and had gotten a few of her children and her husband all to safety.⁴⁴

Innovative as those who were sneaking away people who were wanted under the noses of slave-trackers must have been, Haviland concocted various different plans to sneak would-be-freemen to safety.⁴⁵ She often cross-dressed people, and occasionally even powdered their faces to make them appear whiter than they were. Haviland's legacy was that of a tireless worker for the downtrodden human chattel who desired freedom. She worked for fifty-eight years after being widowed to assist the cause. Abolition was her purpose and her passion.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most famous conductor on the Underground, Tubman's legacy was rich with truths and exaggerations regarding her role in the Underground. According to every story, the strong little lady carried either a pistol or a shot gun when assisting fugitives because she did not want any of the stations in the Underground compromised by weak and fearful fugitives. One of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 104-114

⁴⁵ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 84-92.

the more surprising misconceptions was that Tubman had assisted anywhere from 300 to 1,000 slaves to freedom, depending on the source. Larson stated that in thirteen trips into slave territory, “she personally brought away about seventy former slaves” and gave detailed instructions on how to escape to about fifty more people⁴⁷. This was a far cry from the hundreds of other sources. Wilbur Siebert, who personally interviewed the illiterate Mrs. Tubman, recorded that she had assisted over three hundred escapees and cites two other sources (published much closer to the time when the Underground Railroad was in full swing) supporting this statement.⁴⁸ Larson refuted the assertion and buttressed her claims stating that Tubman’s life and achievements were quickly changed to mythic proportions to make the point of her importance. Larson also stated in the same section that Tubman under-reported her own actions (thus the reason why those who reported her story exaggerated so much – it was to compensate for her modesty). Tubman stated that she only made eight or nine trips to rescue about fifty people.

Regardless of these discrepancies, none argued that Tubman did not do a daring and dangerous work. Larson and Smedley both referred to Tubman, not only as Moses, as was typical of her times and previous biographers, but also as a contemporary Joan of Arc. Benjamin Quarles titled her the “Queen of the Underground” and quoted Thomas Wentworth Higginson as giving her the title of “greatest heroine of the age.”⁴⁹ While some slaves returned after almost escaping, it was almost unheard of for a successfully escaped slave to return to slave territory. When masters did finally realize that there might be some “mastermind” behind all of the slave

⁴⁷ Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), xvii.

⁴⁸ Siebert, 186.

⁴⁹ Benjamin Quarles, “Harriet Tubman’s Unlikely Leadership,” in *Black Leaders of the Nineteen Century*, ed. Leo Litwack and August Meier, 43, 47 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

escapes in that particular region, they still did not know the race or gender of the instigator, much less were able to put a price on her head.⁵⁰

Women's Impact on Society

These brave women acted in response to the need that they saw around them. In and out of the home, as assistants to their husbands and conductors the women stepped out to play their part in the abolition saga. Compassionate, with the heart of servants, the women actively sought to make their world better. Some of these women lived in the sphere of Friends, whose views on slavery created a society of intolerance for cruelty and the concept of ownership of other humans. Within this world, they were merely doing what was expected of them. Others, acting somewhat alone in their society, also reacted to the need that they saw – however, in their case their society was not sympathetic to the plight of the slaves. The actions of the citizens of various communities and neighborhoods had varying impacts on the women as they were forced to define themselves in an assortment of ways.

Because of their passion, commitment, and action, the communities around these women did not stay the same. Through their efforts, both political and logistical, the public around them were changed. A few became even stauncher in their pro-slavery views, but the majority was either converted or was at least convinced to not challenge their work. For some people awareness of the horrors of slavery was raised by people such as Frances Harper. Some men were influenced by the sudden flux of women entering the public to fight for rights.⁵¹ On one

⁵⁰ Larson, xviii.

⁵¹ This later had an even larger impact when women pushed the issue of women's suffrage. They had become used to being public figures and had also learned how to organize themselves for success. Gerda Lerner, in her article "Political Activities of Antislavery Women" published in *The Majority Finds Its Past*, 1979, she states that the American Anti-Slavery Society was formed in 1833 and quickly grew into 1350 local chapters. Many of these were lead, organized, and supported financially by women. When they wanted suffrage, they already knew how to impact society to reach their goal.

occasion, Haviland got into a discussion with a pro-slavery, but non-slave-holding, gentleman about the Christian aspects of slavery. They had agreed to meet at a later date when both parties were equally ready to debate, however, when the time came, the doctor would not bring up the subject. When Haviland pressed the issue, he admitted that he had changed his mind when he realized that his platform could not be defended.⁵² On other occasions, proslavery neighbors turned blind eyes to the activities of the abolitionist neighbors. On another occasion, some abolitionists arranged for a pro-slavery (but non-slave holding) man to witness the reunion of a black family who had been separated during their escape. The man had argued that the slaves really did not have emotions and feelings like the whites did – they were stupid brutes who were created to do hard labor.⁵³ After the reunion, the man humbly conceded his point and returned home a changed man.

The Underground Railroad was a road of compassionate generous people who were willing to sacrifice to assist their fellow man. Those brave women who more than did their part in assisting fugitives shaped their world and was shaped by it. They gave time, energy, resources, emotional strength, and empathy to those who were without. They were women of strength who went on brave missions to rescue enslaved family members of those already free, snuck fugitives in boats and on trains, they hid them in carriages and took them to safer places. They fed them and clothed them. Those women were foundational to the functioning of the Underground Railroad. For women, working in the Underground Railroad gave them their voice. With their experience in all the various aspects of the Railroad, when it was time for them to focus solely on women's suffrage, they were organized and prepared. However, it was not

⁵² Danforth, 110-112.

⁵³ Danforth 121. A newspaper published a similar point of view made by a Tennessee judge. He stated that "slaves of African descent" were "a little lower on the human scale making them to differ no less in elevation, intellectually and physically than by color." "A Tennessee Judge on the Slavery Question" *New York Times*, 22 Nov. 1862.

with these forward looking ideas that women joined in with the Railroad; it was because of compassion and a deep sense of right, wrong and duty.

The women who sacrificed so much for the Underground Railroad also received much in return. The Road helped to give them voice, a sense of purpose, and the knowledge that they, when organized as a group, could be a force to be reckoned with. The experiences of the Underground Railroad helped the women to realize their potential strength as a group. When they started to work for women's suffrage, they had the experience of working in the Underground: teamwork, communication, realization of their influence and importance.

The impact of the Railroad women's actions still is felt today. It could be argued that the feminist movement started when the first woman found her voice in the lecture circuit arguing for the abolition of slavery. With this voice she gathered together the voices of her ardent sisters, she succeeded in getting women's equality in all aspects of society (as far as the Constitution is concerned). Their participation in the Underground was the spark that lit the tinder of a sense of self and purpose. These voices inspired the feminist movement that began with women's suffrage and spread to the women's movement in general.⁵⁴ With this voice she still reaches out to women today to inspire them to fight against the wrong, be proactive in initiating right, and not wait for good things to happen to her. The women of the Underground Railroad knew not of their importance and thus it is necessary that the successive generations remember and honor such great women.

⁵⁴ Blanche Herish, *The Slavery of Sex* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 39.

* * *

Wet and shivering in the cold night air, the conductor tapped on the window of the house with one candle. A well oiled door opened silently. "Who are you?" a hoarse voice asked. "A friend with friends."⁵⁵ With that the small party slipped into a warm kitchen and was fed the first wholesome food they had had since their escape. They had arrived at the first station on their rail way journey to freedom.

⁵⁵ Siebert 57, qtd Letter of Rev. J.B. Lee, Franklinville, N.Y., Oct. 21, 1895. Robertson also mentions this code phrase in her initial chapter of *Fire Bell in the Night*.

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**Southern Scholars Honors Program
Senior Project Proposal Information Sheet**



Name Andrea Korgan

Date 10 Oct '06

Major English & History

A significant scholarly project, involving research, writing, or special performance, appropriate to the major in question, is ordinarily completed the senior year. The project is expected to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant a grade of "A" and to justify public presentation.

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Under the guidance of a faculty advisor, the Senior Project should be an original work, should use primary sources when applicable, should have a table of contents and works cited page, should give convincing evidence to support a strong thesis, and should use the methods and writing style appropriate to the discipline.

The completed project, to be turned in in duplicate, must be approved by the Honors Committee in consultation with the student's supervising professor four weeks prior to the last day of class for the semester the project is turned in. Please include the advisor's name on the title page. The 2-3 hours of credit for this project is usually done as directed study or in a research class.

NOTE-Senior Project Proposal Due Date: The senior project proposal is due in the Honors Program Director's office two weeks after the beginning of the semester the project will be completed. The proposal should be a detailed description of the Honors Project's purpose and proposed methodology.

Keeping in mind the above senior project description, please describe in as much detail as you can the project you will undertake. Attach a separate sheet of paper.

Signature of faculty advisor Lisa Miller

Expected date of completion 12/7/06

NOTE: An advisor's final project approval does not guarantee that the Honors Faculty Committee will automatically approve the project. The Honors Faculty Committee has the final vote.

Approval to be signed by faculty advisor when the project is completed:

This project has been completed as planned (date) yes

This is an "A" project yes

This project is worth 2-3 hours of credit yes

Advisor's Final Signature Lisa Miller Date: 11/27/06

Chair, Honors Committee _____ Date Approved: _____

Dear Advisor,

(1) Please write your **final** evaluation on the project on the reverse side of this page. Comment on the characteristics that make this "A" quality work.

(2) Please include a paragraph explaining your specific academic credentials for advising this Senior Project.

My paper will be about the role of women, both black and white, in the Underground Railroad. I will examine the role of housewives, sisters, and daughters in the everyday aspects of feeding, clothing, nursing and hiding fugitives. Also, I would like to portray a few of the women who were actually conductors in the Underground Railroad - the most famous of these is Harriet Tubman. If time/space permits, I would also like to explore some of the lives of the women who lectured on abolition and their efforts there on.

I will use histories of the Underground Railroad and the abolitionist movement as well as primary documents such as diaries, letters, newspaper articles, and published pamphlets. I hope to analyze the significance of the work of these women as evidenced in the various primary documents and referenced in secondary sources.

Southern Scholar: Andrea Korgan
Advisor: Lisa Clark Diller

My credentials for evaluating Andrea's work lie primarily in my knowledge of the process of researching and writing. I have experience in finding primary sources and evaluating their usefulness for understanding the subject. While not an expert on the Civil War itself, I have experience in reading the historiography of a subject, finding a question, and then finding relevant evidence. I have done this in my own dissertation and I have supervised dozens of history majors in doing this for their senior thesis.

Andrea has undertaken to tell a story about the past for which there is little evidence. Her "A" is based on her ability to find rich details within the lines of primary and secondary evidence. The story of how women shaped the underground railroad has not been told in a coherent fashion and Andrea worked hard first in finding information on the Railroad (both primary and secondary) and then in reading the sources for finding stories about women's roles. Her lively writing is deceptive in its clarity because she had to read very carefully in all her sources to find these women. She had to decide how to handle oral histories and she had to deal with the disproportionate amount of information on a few figures like Tubman and Haviland. Her ability to integrate the ordinary women with the extraordinary was an important part of her research.