The Underground Railroad Emerges in Southwest Ohio and Kentucky: A Historiography Essay Of the Movement

By Dr. Eric R. Jackson

On a cold blustery winter day in 1838 cloudy, upon hearing that her owner, John G. Bacon, who lived in Mason County, Kentucky, was experiencing some financial troubles, which usually meant the selling of any enslaved African American, Eliza Harris decided to act on a plan that she had developed only in her mind to escape with her two year old son across the river to Ohio and eventually to Canada. Thus, with no really detailed planning or no other type of preparation Harris slipped out for some air on one cold night with her son and quickly traveled to Kentucky side of the Ohio River. Upon her arrival, finding that the River had been frozen to the point that on it were large broken pieces of ice, Harris jumped from ice plate to ice plate with her son tied to her back, until she reached the other side of the Ohio River. Once in Ohio she traveled to the home of Reverend John Rankin, who lived in Ripley, Ohio. In Ripley, Reverend Rankin and Harris developed a detailed plan for Eliza and her son to reach Canada with very little resistance.

Upon the completion of the plan, and after Harris had recovered from their horrible and deadly escape and traveling ordeal, she journeyed to Cincinnati, Ohio then to Newport, Indiana. In Newport, with the help of the well-known Underground Railroad leader Levi Coffin, Harris went to Sandusky, Ohio and eventually traveled Canada. Although very little details are known about her experience in Canada, in 1854, during a visit to a very populated Free African American community in Western Canada, the Coffin family accidentally ran into Harris and her son. On that day, the individuals expressed much greetings and happiness as they embraced each other (Hudson, Fugitive Slaves and
Several years earlier, in 1835, Henry Bibb (known as “Walton” to his owner) made his first escape attempt when he was hired out to Mr. Vires, who lived on a nearby farm in Newcastle, Kentucky. Although he was hoping to reach Canada with great ease, Bibb was captured in less than twenty-four hours, whipped and placed in isolation. However, determined to obtain his freedom, Bibb planned and executed another escape attempt but the same result took place. He was recaptured rather quickly and whipped once again. The determination of Bibb to ultimately gain his freedom was temporarily halted when he began to date and subsequently married an enslaved African American woman named Malinda, who resided in a nearby plantation in Oldham, County, Kentucky. Once married, Bibb soon became a father. However, the hardship of being a husband and father whose wife and child were owned by a white man soon reignited Bibb’s aspirations to escape once again. As a result, and with a promise to his wife to return to them after he was completely free, Bibb absconded on Christmas Day in 1837. (Hudson, Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland 2002, 131)

When he had reached Cincinnati, Ohio, with the help several local African Americans, Bibb was introduced to a group of abolitionists who helped him travel further north to Perrysburgh, Ohio. Bibb stayed in Perrysburgh several months before he eventually headed back to Kentucky to free his wife and child. When he reached them, Bibb developed a plan to help them escape by steamship once that reached the Ohio River. Unfortunately, they failed to reach the rendezvous point on-time and thus Bibb was recaptured by a slave catcher who had been posing as a local abolitionist, and subsequently shipped to Louisville, Kentucky to be sold. However, Bibb managed to once
again escape from his captor. After his escape, Bibb traveled to central Ohio, but several years later, in 1839, he returned to Kentucky once again to try to free his wife and child. But, again he was recaptured and shipped to Louisville. But this time his family was shipped with him as a way to keep him from another escape attempt. Furthermore, several months later, Bibb and his family, along with several hundred enslaved African Americans, were placed on a steamship that left Louisville, bound for Vicksburg, Tennessee and eventually New Orleans, Louisiana. Once in New Orleans, in 1840, Bibb and his family were separated, with his wife and daughter being sold to local gamblers and Bibb being purchased by a local Native American. However, the next year, in 1841, Bibb escaped from the Native American, for good this time, traveled to the Mississippi River, and then secretly climbed aboard a steamboat that was on route to Portsmouth, Ohio. (Hudson, Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland 2002, 132)

By the late 1840s Bibb had come to terms that he would never see first his wife and child again. As a result, he remarried in 1848 and overtime became an ardent African American abolitionist in several New England and Middle Atlantic states. As an abolitionist, to tell his story to a wider audience, in 1849 Bibb published his autobiography titled *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. The next year, in 1849, he and his new wife published the first African American newspaper in Canada titled *Voice of the Fugitive*. (Hudson, Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland 2002, 132-133)

During this same decade several individuals engaged in numerous Underground Railroad activities in other parts of the Bluegrass state. For example, Delia Webster and Calvin Fairbanks emerged as fiery abolitionists as well as Underground Railroad activists.
Webster was born in Vermont, in 1817, studied briefly at Oberlin College, in Ohio, and moved to Kentucky in 1842, while Fairbanks was born in New York, in 1816, studied for several years at Oberlin College, and eventually became a Methodist minister. Although Webster and Fairbanks went to Oberlin, they did not know each other until their Underground Railroad activities crossed paths in Kentucky. Specifically, in 1844 Fairbanks traveled to Kentucky to help an enslaved African American family escape the system of human bondage that he had heard about while he was studying at Oberlin. In need of some additional funds for the venture, Fairbank solicited funds and the assistance of Webster. At the same time, Webster introduced Fairbank to Lewis Hayden, an enslaved African American waiter who desired to gain his freedom by any way necessary. Eventually Fairbanks and Webster did help Hayden obtain his freedom via the Underground Railroad. However, upon hearing about the successful escape of Hayden, numerous slave catchers and law enforcement officers began to monitor the activities of Fairbanks and Webster, which eventually led to their arrest in 1844 as they were on route to Lexington, Kentucky. Convicted of helping hundreds of enslaved African Americans obtain their freedom through the use of the Underground Railroad, both individuals were indicated in a Fayette Circuit Court and sentenced to five and two years in jail respectively. However, outraged by the jailing of woman, on 24 February 1845, Governor William Owsley pardoned Webster. However, Fairbanks served most of his five year term, until Governor John Crittenden pardoned him on 28 August 1849. (Hudson, Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland 2002, 134)

At the same time, in southeastern Indiana, a group of religious and antislavery individuals spent many years helping enslaved African Americans gain their freedom. More specifically, the Bell family, Virginia born whites from Brandenburg, Kentucky, was
suspected by local residents of being abolitionists and thus aiding hundreds of enslaved African American gain their freedom. For example, on a raining day in 1857, Charles Bell, one of his sons, along with a former enslaved African American named Oswald Wright, aided a group of runaway Black Americans in the quest for freedom. (Hudson, Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railraod in the Kentucky Borderland 2002, 148-149)

The journeys, activities, and comments of individuals like Harris, Bibb, Webster, Fairbanks, Hayden, Ball, and Wright are just few examples of the experiences of thousands of enslaved Black Americans and many others who decided to emancipate hundreds of individuals from the horrible system of human bondage. This quest for freedom became more complicated after the American Revolution, when numerous states enacted harsher proslavery laws and the United States Constitution was ratified with a provision that protected the institution of enslavement from any interference from the federal government. Furthermore, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850 not only gave slaveholders the right and ability to pursue and recapture runaway African Americans anywhere in the United States but these laws also made it a crime for anyone who assisted enslaved persons of color in any escape activities. (Nash 1990, 77-78, Harrold 2001, 63) But despite the enactment of these decrees, many people, African Americans and non-African Americans, rich and poor, Christians and non-Christians, women and men, consistently broke the law to assist Black Americans in their quest for freedom from the institution of enslavement.

With the opening of the National Underground Freedom Center in 2004, the history of the Underground Railroad remains a dominant and important image in the minds and hearts of thousands of Americans today. However, the most common vision that many people have retained about this topic and period in American history is of one, two, three,
or four fugitive enslaved persons of color being assisted in their escape plans by one or two well-meaning, progressive whites, especially Quakers, to ultimately gain freedom. Without question such episodes did occur but there are an abundance of historical evidence that exist which demonstrates that hundreds of Free Black Americans aided numerous enslaved African Americans in their freedom journey.

Despite these two differing viewpoints or historical interpretation, it is hard to dispute the depiction of scholars such as the late J. Blaine Hudson, David Blight, Spencer Crew, and Prince Brown, who have depicted the Underground Railroad as the first multiracial, multi-class, multi-ethnic human rights movement in the United States that was dominated by person of African descent. (Hudson, Crossing the Dark Line: Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad and North-Central Kentucky Winter 2001) (Crew 2003) (P. Brown 2003) What is needed here, however, is an overview of some the major works that these and other scholars have published on this topic, especially studies that focus on the northern Kentucky and southeastern Ohio. In a way, this article seeks to perform this task. Specifically, this essay contends that four basic questions have influenced most of the writings on the history, development, and legacy of the Underground Railroad, especially the various studies that have been published since the 1960s: 1) What was the composition of the abolition movement?; 2) How much influence did the abolition movement have on the origins and development of the Underground Railroad; 3) Can the Underground Railroad be understood merely by focusing on only well-known and prominent leaders; and 4) Is a regional and local approach needed to gain a more “realistic” and “reliable” perspective of the Underground Railroad?

In 1960, historian Larry Gara published a very unflattering but interesting study on the Underground Railroad. In his article, titled “The Underground Railroad: Legend or
Reality,” Gara claimed that the Underground Railroad was “Like most legends[,] . . . vague and indistinct.” (Gara, The Underground Railroad: Legend or Reality 1961) Furthermore, he contended that, “The legend of the underground is a combination of fact and fancy. Many of the stories handed down by word of mouth had a factual basis, but frequent repetition has led to exaggeration.” (Gara, The Underground Railroad: Legend or Reality 1961, 335) One year later, Gara both repeated and expanded on these same points in his book titled The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad. In this volume, Gara described the Underground Railroad as “a reality, [with] much of the material of relating to it . . . in the realm of folklore rather than history.” (Gara, The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad 1961) He went on to contend that the Underground Railroad was based mostly on “legends” and that “few people can provide details when asked about the institution.” (Gara, The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad 1961, 3) Finally, the author concluded that white abolitionists were at the center of the Underground Railroad movement. (Gara, The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad 1961, 4-18)

Without question, Gara’s claims had a powerful and profound impact on the various books, articles, and documentaries that were published on the origins, development, history, and legacy of the Underground Railroad, particularly from the 1960s to today. Indeed, his findings stimulated many scholars to examine the backgrounds of various abolitionists with much vigor and potency. One of the first historians who sought to take on this task was Benjamin Quarles. In his book titled Black Abolitionists, Quarles skillfully documented the major role African Americans played in the abolition movement and the origins of the Underground Railroad. (Quarles 1969) His timely piece introduced readers to the countless number of both famous and obscure Black American former
enslaved persons of color and abolitionists, such as John Carter, William Crosby, John Curtis, Martin Delany, James Forten, George Evans, Charlotte Forten, Lewis Hayden, John Mercer Langston, James McCrummell, John P. Parker, Robert Purvis, Frances Jane Scoggins, James McCune Smith, as well as Jemima and Thomas Woodson. In short, Quarles asserted that “the Negro was, in essence, abolitionist’s different drummer.” To begin with, his was a special concern; he felt the fight against slavery was the black man’s fight.” (Quarles 1969, viii)

Many of these claims had been articulated in several publications that had appeared decades earlier such as in the classic work of Wilbert H. Siebert titled *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*. In this study, which was perhaps the most influential volume on the topic until the works of Gara appeared, Siebert highlighted the various activities of more than 3,000 individuals who willingly and passionately participated in the workings of the Underground Railroad. (Siebert 1898) In short, the author concluded that the antislavery and abolition movements contained both prominent and little-known African Americans and non-African Americans.

Two other path-breaking books that were published that mostly supported the claims of Siebert’s were William Still’s *The Underground Railroad* and Henry Bibb’s *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb – An American Slave*. (Still 1968) (Bibb 1969) In general, Still’s study illustrated that Black Americans abolitionists greatly shaped the abolition movement during the 1810s and 1820s, while Bibb’s volume asserted that his participation in the crusade to end the system of enslavement rested on this Christian beliefs that viewed human bondage as “a system of the most high-handed oppression and tyranny that ever was tolerated by the enlightened nation.” (Bibb 1969, xii)
With the publication of Quarles’ study, the involvement of African Americans in the abolition movement quickly became a dominant theme in the literature on the Underground Railroad from the 1970s onward, such as in Joan W. Coward’s *Kentucky in the New Republic*, David Brion Davis’s *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, Victor B. Howard’s *Black Liberation in Kentucky* and Ronald G. Walters’ *American Reformers*. The primary question that these types of studies sought to answer was—“What was the makeup of the abolition movement?” For example, John H. Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick edited a brief but very important book titled *Blacks in the Abolitionist Movement*. In this study, the editors claimed that despite the fact that African American abolitionists were excluded from major leadership roles in most antislavery organizations throughout the antebellum period, they greatly contributed to the ending the system of enslavement “through their lecturing, writing, and [various other] activities in the Underground Railroad, they [African American abolitionists] played a central role in the fight against slavery.” (John Bracey 1971, 2)

Some twelve years later historian R.J.M. Blackett echoed the same points that were made by Bracey, Meier, and Elliott in his book titled *Building an Antislavery Wall*. However, Blackett’s study introduced an international perspective when he argued that Black American abolitionists “kept the international movement alive at a time when it appeared that it might flounder on the rocks of sectarian dispute.” (Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830 - 1860* 1983, 28)

About ten years later, in 1993, C. Peter Ripley and his co-editors published a powerful and indispensable collection of letters, speeches, and editorials, titled *Witness for Freedom: African American Voices on Race, Slavery, and Emancipation*, that
expounded on the claims of Bracey, Meier, Rudwick, and Blackett. (C. Peter Ripley 1993) More specifically, Ripley and his editing team of Roy E. Finkenbine, Michael Hembre, and Donald Yacovone claimed that, Black abolitionism left the United States a benevolent heritage though its vigorous role in the antislavery crusade, its enormous influence of African American culture and institutions, and its generous contribution to the nation’s understanding of the meaning of freedom and justice.” (C. Peter Ripley 1993, 28) Also important were Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter’s *New History of Kentucky*, Marion B. Lucas’s *A History of Black in Kentucky* and Joel Strangis’ *Lewis Hayden and the War against Slavery*.

During same time period, numerous biographies were published that reinforced the claims that African Americans played a prominent role in the abolition movement and in the attack on the system of enslavement. Some of the influential of these studies were Stuart S. Sprague’s *His Promised Land*, Joel Schor’s *Henry Highland Garnet*, R.J.M Blackett’s *Beating Against the Barriers*, Leon Litwack and August Meier’s *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, David W. Blight’s *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War*, William S. McFeely’s *Frederick Douglass*, Joel Strangis’ *Lewis Hayden and the War against Slavery*, Paul Jefferson’s *Travels of William Wells Brown*, Richard Sears’ *The Kentucky Abolitionists in the Midst of Slavery, 1854-1864*, and Randolph P. Runyon’s *Delia Webster and the Underground Railroad*. (Sprague 1996) (Schor 1977) (Blackett, Beating Against the Barriers: The Lives of Six Nineteenth Century Afro Americans 1986) (Meier 1988) (Blight, Frederick Douglass’ Civil War 1989) (Strangis 1999) (Feely 1991) (Jefferson 1991) (Sears 1993) (Runyon 1996) In short, the appearance of these studies helped to usher in a “new” paradigm in the literature on the Underground Railroad that
placed the experience of both prominent and obscure African Americans at the center of all the “serious” works on the abolition movement and the Underground Railroad.

As some scholars continued to focus their attention on the activities and views of African Americans in the antislavery and abolition movement, another group of scholars began to challenge Gara’s assertions that the Underground Railroad itself rested mainly on fiction, repetitive exaggeration, and undocumented stories. To disprove these claims, many historians began to use a statewide, regional, or local perspective to explore the origin, development, and legacy of the Underground Railroad. For instance, Charles L. Blockson, in his book titled *The Underground Railroad*, based on an exhaustive array of both primary and secondary sources housed in state, regional, and local research facilities, claimed that the Underground Railroad began and expanded because of its direct connection to various African American communities across the nation. Furthermore, Blockson concluded that the Underground Railroad clearly emerged as a “secret avenue to freedom” and that its primary employees were African American “organizer[s].” (Blockson 1987, 1-3) Also important were William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek’s *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829 – 1865*, David F. Ericson’s *The Debate over Slavery* and Nikki N. Taylor’s *Frontiers of Freedom*.

A similar approach was used some ten years later in John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger’s book titled *Runaway Slaves*. (Schweninger 1999) As the nation’s preeminent historians on the history of African Americans at the time, the late Franklin, along with his colleague Schweninger, sought to create a riveting study on the frequency in which enslaved African Americans emancipated themselves. Based on a meticulous analysis of plantation documents, petitions, court records, and local newspaper runaway advertisements, the authors argued that between 1790 and 1860 thousands of enslaved
Black Americans decided to escape and “attain their freedom even if” the odds were against them being successful. (Schweninger 1999, xiv-xv)

During the past twenty years or so, regional and local studies have dominated the literature on the origin, development, and history of the Underground Railroad. Also a more inclusive and realistic tone about the nature of the Underground Railroad has been embraced by most scholars of this topic. Even Gara himself published a new edition of his 1961 book that recast some of earlier claims and conclusions. (Gara, The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad 1961, xi-xiv) Of these new works, the late J. Blaine Hudson’s The Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland, Keith P. Griffler’s Frontline of Freedom, and Caroline R. Miller’s Grapevine Dispatch are some of the best works that are currently available. (M. F. Brown 2001) (Hudson, Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railraod in the Kentucky Borderland 2002) (C. R. Miller 2011)

In particular, Hudson’s study showed how more African American fugitives escaped from and through Kentucky than previous historical accounts had revealed. In addition, the author asserted that although many Black American runaways in the Bluegrass state were assisted in their freedom journey by well-meaning whites, such “aid came primarily from other African American [Kentuckians].” (Hudson, Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railraod in the Kentucky Borderland 2002, 7-8) In comparison, Griffler’s Frontline of Freedom demonstrated that the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley region was organized and ran mostly by Black Americans who lived in the region and not by a group of progressive or well-meaning whites whose primary goal was to help ill-accompanied and confused African Americans to gain their freedom. (Griffler 2004)
Works like Hudson and Griffler clearly illustrate that a new era in the researching and writing on the origins, development, and legacy of the Underground Railroad has arrived. This focus should not, however, obscure the need to move from the particular to the general, for case study to over-arching synthesis. Indeed, the late John Hope Franklin articulated this very point when he noted in one his last publications, that “despite the large number of books and articles touching this subject, there is not a full-length study of runways slaves.” (Schweninger 1999, xiv) In part, this explains why the interest in the origins, development, legacy, and general history of the Underground Railroad show no signs of declining anytime soon. As we speak, many books and edited collections are rolling off the press. One example is David W. Blight’s edited volume titled *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory.* (Blight, Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory 2006) Another example is Tom Calarco’s volume titled *Places of the Underground Railroad: A Geographical Guide.* (Calarco 2011) These books, like many others, I believe, attest to the continuous quest of most Americans to find a link to our nation’s first multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-class human rights movement in the history the United States – the Underground Railroad.

Author’s Note: Portions of this article formed the basis of a similar piece that appear in the historical magazine *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History.*