

Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad

Kate Clifford Larson
kate.c.larson@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Larson, Kate Clifford (2021) "Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.2.04

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss2/4>

Review

Larson, Kate Clifford

Spring 2021

Walker, Timothy, ed. *Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad.* University of Massachusetts Press, 2021. PAPERBACK. \$27.95 ISBN 9781625345929

The paths to freedom for self-liberators escaping slavery in North America before the Civil War were varied, but all were extremely risky. Estimates of successful escapes during the latter part of the 18th century and through the antebellum period number in the mid-to-high tens-of-thousands. Thousands more tried and failed. Human and physical obstacles to reaching a free state, territory, or country were numerous and often insurmountable. And yet, enslaved people continued to escape and efforts to help them by those sympathetic to their right to freedom expanded over time, increasing their chances for success.

Euphemistically called the Underground Railroad (UGRR) in the decades before the Civil War, the term belies the reality that the paths to freedom for self-liberators escaping slavery in North America were often routes traversing waterfront hamlets and fishing villages, larger ports and harbor to bays and wide-open seas. Travel by water during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries was the equivalent of quick motor vehicle traffic along today's superhighways and local road systems. People and commodities were transported most efficiently by small watercraft, larger bay and ocean-going sailing vessels, and steamships rather than overland via terribly limited, unstable, and rutted roads. Yet nearly all the popular literature on the Underground Railroad for the past century has focused almost exclusively on land routes featuring the hidey-holes in cellars, barns, attics, false-bottomed wagons and other hidden spaces. Myths abound, particularly in poorly researched works and fictional depictions including 20th century fakelore featuring the use of quilt codes, lawn jockeys and other physical devices as signs and signals. These myths and half-truths have further obscured the rich, multi-layered documented histories of liberation through escape, especially via coastal seaways.

In this well-edited volume, Timothy Walker has brought together a series of essays written by some of the leading historians of North American slavery and the struggle for freedom

through escape, bringing to life the maritime world of clandestine networks manned by slavery's foes who helped facilitate the liberation of untold thousands.

Walker opens the volume with an introduction laying out the focus and goals of the collection of essays—that is, to bring awareness to the wealth of histories of the varied networks to freedom located in the North American Atlantic maritime worlds of the 18th and 19th centuries. The first essay is also by Walker—a brief bibliographical essay on the state of Underground Railroad scholarship over the past forty-or-so years, positioning the current status of the field. The nine chapters that follow shape the contours of the latest and most revealing UGRR research along the Eastern Seaboard—some new and freshly uncovered—carrying the reader from the Carolinas to New England and featuring both famous and heretofore unknown stories of self-liberators who sought freedom via the water. Individually and collectively, these essays show unequivocally that escape by water, through a vast network of maritime links, was far more common and possibly the dominant path to liberty elsewhere.

Michael D. Thompson's essay explores the vibrant maritime world of Charleston, South Carolina, teeming with free and enslaved laborers, watermen, and urban workers employed in that city's busy commercial networks. Among the different stories Thompson highlights is the escape of John Andrew Jackson, who took the opportunity to flee when his enslaver gave him a three-day Christmas holiday. Racing the 150 miles to Charleston, Jackson purposefully hid in plain sight by taking a job as a wharf-hand, bringing him close to northbound vessels and their crews without raising any suspicions. His plan was not an uncommon one.

David Cecelski charts the role of Carolina Low Country Black maritime communities in the clandestine underground networks to freedom. Through numerous first-person narratives and other primary sources, Cecelski reveals a spectacular communication and physical network of “ubiquitous” African American watermen and maritime workers, along with some poorly paid white boatmen, stevedores, swampers, and squatters (57). Beyond the watchful eye of bounty hunters, they seized the opportunity to use water transportation and maritime industrial work for their own illegal ends, delivering “race rebels” and runaways up the Carolina coast from Cape Fear to the Great Dismal Swamp and on to freedom elsewhere (57).

Hampton Roads and Norfolk, Virginia serve as the launching point for Cassandra Newby-Alexander's essay on the wealth of documentation of freedom seekers escaping by means of water transportation supported by workers from multiple maritime industries.

Commercial steamship lines and other merchant vessels carried many fugitives from the region to Philadelphia, where the famous African American Underground Railroad agent William Still recorded their stories of escape. Newby-Alexander uses their testimonies, as dictated to Still, to tease out remarkable details about the furtive and clandestine associations that stretched from the Great Dismal Swamp and coastal Virginia all the way to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Cheryl Janifer LaRoche closes out the section on southern maritime landscapes with stories of escape from and through Maryland. The state's enormous coastal footprint around the Chesapeake Bay supported that region's high numbers of escapes—the highest of all the slave states in the antebellum period. Situated on the eastern, western, and northern borders of the bay, with numerous deep rivers, bays, ports, harbors, and canals, Maryland's enslaved workers provided the labor for many maritime-dependent industries. Black watermen and seamen sailed their own family members to freedom, facilitated secret communications, provided shelter and transportation, and in collusion with dockworkers, shipyard laborers, and market vendors, helped self-liberators find their way to Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and New England.

Many of those Maryland freedom seekers landed on the wharves in New York City. Mirelle Lueke explores the world of a large urban waterfront, the “gateway to freedom,” or point of entry for so many whose first footsteps on free soil began there. In a city with a large African American population, the presence of Black people along the city's extensive waterfront drew little attention. New York's gradual emancipation laws had slowed the manumission process for many enslaved families during the early 1800s. In a crowded urban landscape, it was difficult to discern a person's free or enslaved status, enabling freedom seekers the opportunity to hide and live anonymously. The city's extensive international commercial trading networks also facilitated resettlement for freedom seekers far away from the United States.

Elysa Engelman moves the story to coastal Connecticut, where growing New England abolitionist communities influenced and mobilized a significant Underground Railroad network in the state. The director of exhibits of the famed Mystic Seaport Museum, Engelman tells the stories of freedom seekers and their allies in New London, Mystic and Stonington. Her essay shares the perspectives and processes employed by a public historian charged with interpreting history for a general audience. Engelman features the stories of a freedom seeker, Benjamin Jones, and the Greenmans, a white merchant family whose wealth was tied to the southern trade

in cotton, lumber, and other products and yet, they were also abolitionists. Engelman's essay shows us the complexities of this history and the challenges of interpretation.

Massachusetts, home to some of the most powerful and strident abolitionists of the 19th century, is the focus of Kathryn Grover's essay on fugitives arriving in the state from southern ports. Grover, whose earlier seminal work on New Bedford's maritime Underground Railroad networks, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar*, highlights here how commercial seaborne traffic to cities and ports with existing large Black communities experienced higher fugitive arrivals. Networks established by Black mariners in Boston, New Bedford, and Nantucket Island, likely contributed to high fugitive settlement. These cities sported organized abolitionist communities with active vigilance committees charged with protecting freedom seekers.

Len Travers picks up this thread in his deeper look into New Bedford's Black community, its demographics, relationships, and long-term stability. Travers mines census records, city directories, maps, first-person narratives and other sources to examine and illuminate the economic, social, and political landscapes of the Fugitive's Gibraltar.

The last chapter closes out this excellent collection of essays with Megan Jeffries's look at the digitized resources of the *Freedom on the Move* (FOTM) project, a Cornell University online database devoted to documenting the identities and stories of fugitive enslaved people. The database seeks to upload thousands of runaway and reward advertisements listed in colonial and antebellum North American newspapers for research into the lives of the enslaved, their communities, and their struggles for freedom. Jeffries's essay helps familiarize readers with the database and shares its potential to expand our knowledge and understanding of coastal and seaborne networks to freedom.

This volume just whets the appetite for more. The history is there, waiting to be uncovered. Collectively, these essays point to numerous avenues of research for the intrepid investigator, student, budding historian, and seasoned professional. They offer a vast array of fresh and exciting interpretive opportunities, methods, and perspectives. An excellent choice for undergraduate courses, *Sailing To Freedom* is as suitable for the general reader eager to explore this rarely told part of the Underground Railroad and maritime history, as it is for high school courses, museum and public history interpretation specialists, and tourism and marketing professionals seeking new and innovative ways to draw an ever-growing history and heritage-seeking traveler to their historic coastal communities.

Kate Clifford Larson is an award-winning historical consultant and a bestselling author of critically acclaimed biographies including Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero, The Assassin's Accomplice: Mary Surratt and the Plot to Kill Abraham Lincoln, and Rosemary: The Hidden Kennedy Daughter. Her latest work is Walk With Me: A Biography of Fannie Lou Hamer.