

# **Escaping the Land of the Free: History, Myth, and the Meaning of the Underground Railroad**

**Keynote Address  
Friends of the Network to Freedom Association  
Underground Railroad Conference 2009  
Indianapolis  
September 17, 2009**

**Keith Griffler  
Department of African and African American Studies  
State University of New York at Buffalo**

Sometime near the end of the Civil War, the last fugitive from American slavery found aid on the road to freedom from an institution that had held people of African descent in its iron grip for centuries. That one last dramatic act, the details of which we may never recover, brought to a close one of the truly epic chapters of the human freedom struggle. After more than a century of activity, spanning three continents, and involving perhaps hundreds of thousands of persons most of whose names are lost to history, the Underground Railroad ceased operations. So successful had its operatives and supporters been in keeping their clandestine activities secret, so wide-ranging their scope, so formidable an opponent had it been to American slavery, and so appealing its cause to the champions of liberty internationally, the movement literally became the stuff of legend. Over the course of the next century and a half, America embraced this heroic legacy and integrated the Underground Railroad into its national mythology. School curricula incorporate it; Congressional legislation commemorates it; the National Park Service designates sites to honor it; and one of the nation's major history museums is dedicated to it.

Then First Lady Laura Bush no doubt spoke for many in describing the source of the widespread interest in remarking at the dedication of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in 2002, "During the days of the Underground Railroad, through the end of slavery and during the Civil Rights Movement, Americans of all backgrounds stood together to secure those freedoms." And, she added, "The heroic stories of the Underground Railroad are powerful reminders of the mission that all Americans share in promoting the values of freedom, at home and around the world."<sup>1</sup> Historian James Horton puts it even more forcefully: "The Underground Railroad was as American in its values and goals as slavery was un-American in its consequences and rationalization."<sup>2</sup> Americans stood together to make the Underground Railroad as well as the Civil Rights Movement; all Americans share the mission of promoting freedom at home and abroad; freedom is as American as the suppression of liberty is un-American: these ideas are as appealing as they are misleading. When the Director of the National Park Service says that the popularity of the Underground Railroad stems from its service to "all Americans in search of a shared past,"<sup>3</sup> the Underground Railroad becomes the imaginary of an imagined community. The very ease with which popular and public history has succeeded in shifting the framing of the Underground Railroad to suit the sort of political agenda embodied in the remarks of Laura Bush raises troubling questions. Where is the critical public discourse about the uses of the Underground Railroad for political purposes? At a time so recently behind us when virtually

everything a Bush said was endlessly parsed and criticized, how could she so easily find at least the tacit support of silence for this historical revisionism? My point here is not a partisan one. Bush is articulating a common viewpoint. For in relating the facts, or what we believe to be the facts, we simply cannot afford to lose sight of its essential historical context. What do we owe to the victims of slavery when we discuss the story of their escape? What do we make of the movement we have gathered here to both understand and celebrate when we are faced with the realization that it took the paradoxical form of *escape from the land of the free*?

First of all, Bush exactly reversed the relation in saying that Americans “stood together” in the Underground Railroad, when it was both literally and figuratively a parting of the ways. In a nation that thinks of itself as a place where people come seeking such freedom, this was a movement of people leaving the United States to realize theirs—one of the largest emigration movements in American history. The actual, as opposed to the mythical, Underground Railroad typically smuggled African American runaways out of the North, not out of the South. Its site of resistance was as much the free North through which fugitives passed as the slave South where they had been held in bondage. Though the North was free soil, it was no promised land for African Americans. Indeed, it bore a surprising resemblance to the pre-Civil Rights South. Northern legislation frequently deprived African Americans of the right to vote, to trial by jury, to bear witness in court, and to attend public schools. Western states came into the Union attempting to extend the ban on slavery to African Americans as well. What the law did not do, custom did, hemming African Americans in politically, economically, and socially. Race riots were a regular part of northern African American life. Throughout the North African Americans could only maintain their communities by the determination to fend off the mobs that periodically attacked or threatened to attack them. The vulnerability of African Americans was nowhere more evident than in their terrifyingly regular disappearances—the victims of kidnapping. While America’s founding doctrines were premised on liberty, the entire nation’s politics, economy and social life bore the indelible stamp of slavery.

Consider the scene in Cincinnati some 173 years before Laura Bush rose to speak. In 1829, hundreds of African Americans—perhaps as much as half of the city’s black population—left en masse for Canada, just escaping the violent attempt at ethnic cleansing that followed. The irony of that choice is worth pondering: they left the territory of a free state for a land in which slavery as yet remained, technically at least, legal at their time of entry. Of course, they had effectively been expelled from the land of their birth—and most were actually born free and in the North—because they were—or at least were thought to be—encouraging fugitives from slavery to take refuge in their communities. Their testimony as to their feelings could provide little comfort—or potential text—for Laura Bush. They expressed themselves only too happy to leave the US for a nation that at least made the pretense of equality, which Canada, despite the stain of slavery, did. Rev. David Smith noted that northern African Americans were “devoured on every side by the wolves of slavery, prejudice and ostracism.”<sup>4</sup> Eli Artis deserted Ohio, the place of his birth, to escape what he called its “mean, oppressive laws.”<sup>5</sup> John Malvin, architect of the Cincinnati exodus of 1829, summed up the feeling when he wrote, “I thought upon coming to a free State like Ohio, that I would find every door thrown open to receive me”—a sentiment with frightening present day resonances. Instead, he “found every door closed against the colored man, excepting the jails and penitentiaries, the doors of which were thrown wide open to receive him.”<sup>6</sup> Ephraim Waterford perhaps best expressed the bitterness to be found among African

American émigrés at the hypocrisy of American liberty: ‘if that is a republican government, he declared, I will try a monarchical one.’”<sup>7</sup> African Americans could not help but recognize that the institutions of American liberal democracy proved perfectly compatible with the suppression of African Americans’ human rights. That such an understanding was expressed by refugees from the free North rather than the slave South increases its import.

For it gets to the fallacy contained in Laura Bush’s other claim, that “The heroic stories of the Underground Railroad are powerful reminders of the mission that all Americans share in promoting the values of freedom, at home and around the world.”<sup>8</sup> Whether we (let alone the rest of the world that was so suspicious of her husband’s administration) believe that all Americans share such a mission *now*, they did not *then*. Indeed, however large we believe the Underground Railroad to have been, it was unquestionably the work of a small minority. Above all, the significance of the Underground Railroad resides in its reminder of the irrepressible determination of African Americans to be free in a nation equally determined to maintain slavery and its manifold derivatives.

The participants in the African American freedom movement were all too aware that without northern support there could be no southern slavery. Received notions of a more racially liberal North are so strong that they tend to eclipse the history of its economic dependence on slavery and the long duration of its anti-Black sentiment. To take just the state of Ohio from which these freedom-seekers fled, during the Civil War the Ohio Democratic Party convention included in its platform the proposal that newly freed African Americans should be barred from the state. African Americans males in Ohio gained the right to vote at precisely the same moment as those in the South, with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment to the US Constitution. Parallel to the situation in the South, its Black Laws were rendered legally meaningless by the Fourteenth Amendment, and only finally taken off the books in 1887. Ohio’s Black Laws thus remained in existence for more than eighty years, as long as the South’s segregation laws. That duration represents quite a legacy to the dedication to liberty of the first state to enter the Union without a history of slavery. John Rankin, Presbyterian minister and champion of African American freedom, summed up the racial atmosphere he observed among his fellow white Northerners: “Still this relentless prejudice, dark fiend of hell, cried they shall not be free among us! They shall not be free among us!”<sup>9</sup>

For that reason, in an ostensibly democratic nation allegedly committed to the principle that “All men are created equal” it had been left to an *underground* to champion the cause of African Americans. The Underground Railroad was not underground as in the tunnels that we so commonly, and so wrongly, associate with it. It was underground in the sense that the French resistance to Nazi occupation was underground. It was underground in the sense that the Iranian resistance to the current regime is underground. It was underground in the sense that any movement is underground that fights for freedom against a regime that upholds tyranny. But this tyranny was not that of a foreign occupier—it was the tyranny of a home-grown government. It was not the tyranny of a religiously fanatical regime, it was the tyranny of the democracy and liberty of Jefferson and Madison and Washington—respectively the author of that remarkable treatise on liberty the Declaration of Independence, the main drafter of the world’s first modern liberal democratic constitution, including its Bill of Rights, and its first democratically elected president—slaveholders all. It was the tyranny of the self-described land of the free. The

undergrounds—such as the French—that attain mythic status in national memory are generally organized against foreign occupiers. But here was one constituted to achieve the liberties white Americans systematically denied their fellow Americans for centuries. The Underground Railroad had in a land of political liberty been an illegal movement conducted by a band of what were essentially guerilla fighters against the US constitution (with its fugitive slave clause), the laws of the nation, and the federal government, because all of those were founded on a basic injustice. The Underground Railroad was underground for a reason. It was illegal. It was treasonous. It was but one small step removed from a war on the federal government.

With good reason movement stalwart John Brown referred to his planned raid on Harpers Ferry, like every other slave rebellion an insurrection against an oppressive state, as the “Rail Road business on a somewhat extended scale.”<sup>10</sup> Frederick Douglass reports that Brown had even drafted a constitution and planned to create what amounted to a revolutionary regime.<sup>11</sup> The charges on which he was convicted included treason. True, Brown was accused of treason against Virginia instead of the federal government whose armory he had attacked. But as Douglass put it with his characteristic lucidity, Virginia was acting for the federal government: “Slavery seemed to be at the very top of its power; the national government, with all its powers and appliances, was in its hands, and it bade fair to wield them for many years to come.”<sup>12</sup>

What other choice did African Americans and their white allies have but to fight an essentially treasonous war against the very constitution that enshrined slavery (and that William Lloyd Garrison called a “devil’s pact”)?<sup>13</sup> What choice did they have but to act against the democratically elected government that turned Brown over to Virginia to be hung for treason as it had passed the Fugitive Slave Law that decreed the rendition of fugitive slaves to the slavery then “at the very top of its power”? It was from that federal government that Douglass himself fled to Canada to escape prosecution as a co-conspirator with Brown. Douglass, like all African Americans both enslaved and nominally free, whose heroic resistance to tyranny provided the basis of the Underground Railroad, knew that the enemy came not directly in the institution of slavery but the power behind it: the American state. If even a relative moderate like Garrison denounced the federal constitution, African American militants most involved in the underground could do so with considerably more urgency. For instance, Charles Langston declared when on trial in Ohio for his underground activities: “I know that the courts, the laws, the governmental machinery of this country are so constituted as to oppress and outrage the colored men. I cannot, then, of course, expect, judging from past history, any mercy from the laws, the Constitution, or the courts.” Langston drove home his point and simultaneously created what the papers called a “sensation” in the courtroom when he characterized himself “as a citizen of Ohio” and then quickly added, “excuse me for saying that, sir—[I meant to say] *an outlaw of the United States.*”<sup>14</sup> The Supreme Court, of course, agreed with him, as it would for a century after he spoke.

What do we then make of James Horton’s claim that “The Underground Railroad was as American in its values and goals as slavery was un-American in its consequences and rationalization.”<sup>15</sup> It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Professor Horton’s scholarship, including his contributions to public history, but this statement sends the wrong message. What is particularly “American” about the Underground Railroad? As a specifically transnational institution, borders recede in importance as the histories of Canada and the U.S.

intertwine. Canada as destination for tens of thousands of African Americans makes that nation central to African American history, since for millions of the enslaved it, and not the “free soil” of the North, embodied the Promised Land, even though freedom there was circumscribed. In that respect, the title of a recent piece of legislation enacted by the Congress of the United States in 1998—the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act<sup>16</sup>—might with some justice be taken to be one of the highest compliments that body has paid to Canadians for upholding liberties that the US denied many Americans. To be sure, the praise is entirely implicit, since Canada is never mentioned by name as the locus of that freedom. Still, there is at least a hint of irony that a nation consistently proclaiming itself, no less now than formerly, the world’s great beacon of liberty should pay such seemingly unconscious homage to its neighbor to the north by keeping this memory alive. And the same could be said of a less-celebrated destination of tens of thousands of fugitives: Mexico—in yet again a reversal of current notions. We could, then, say, “The Underground Railroad was as Canadian and Mexican as it was American.” Indeed, the Underground Railroad serves as one of the truly remarkable examples of a political struggle that, in Paul Gilroy’s terms, “transcend[ed] both the structures of the nation state and constraints of...national particularity” and thereby fundamentally displaced “the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national and political cultures and nation-states.”<sup>17</sup>

Conversely, what can it mean to say that slavery was “un-American”? To be classed with the *un-American* is to be consigned to a sort of political exile. The history of the Underground Railroad reminds us that it was not those who enshrined slavery in the constitution to whom that designation attached—those men we call our Founding Fathers. Political exile was forced, rather, on the “passengers” of the Underground Railroad. Keeping in mind that refugees from the despotism of slavery were forced to flee the US, would it not be more accurate to admit that slavery was nowhere more at home than in the world’s largest slave Republic, in a society that took root in the institution and expanded with it? Indeed, the US was so comfortable with the white supremacy that took root from racial slavery that it maintained it for a century and more after it allegedly outgrew slavery. Taking Horton’s view, the quintessentially “American” is found only in the exceptional periods and the most partial and incomplete results. Conversely, the “un-American” dominates the nation’s past, not only in the form of slavery, but in its legacy of racism. When Frederick Douglass contemplated the celebration of liberty every Fourth of July juxtaposed with the fact of the slavery and racial oppression directed toward African Americans—not to mention Native Americans—he was moved to remark,

There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States at this very hour. Go where you may, ...roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, ...search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.... [Y]our boasted liberty [is] an unholy license; your national greatness swelling vanity; your shouts of liberty and equality hollow mockery.<sup>18</sup>

How was it so easy to hold off the day of civil rights reckoning for decades with the profoundly suggestive claim that racial equality was “un-American”? That irony complements a related point about the African American freedom struggle: that it was left to the communists in the US for much of the twentieth century, as Glenda Gilmore has recently reminded us,<sup>19</sup> to uphold the principles to which the Western liberal-democratic tradition stakes claim when those principles

concerned black people. The heroes in the quest to extend democratic rights and freedoms to African Americans are revolutionaries, subversives, and communists, while liberalism sided with slavery, racial oppression, and white supremacy. The movement to extend liberal democratic freedoms to African Americans was forced underground in the antebellum North—a guerilla struggle for liberalism in a liberal democratic state.

That African Americans in the North had few alternatives in their quest for liberty represents not a triumph but a signal failure of American liberal democratic institutions. What Ephraim Waterford meant when he said “if that is a republican government, I will try a monarchical one” is that republican government in the US proved embarrassingly accommodating of white supremacy. The history of the Underground Railroad effectively subverts the narrative of American freedom. For the Underground Railroad symbolically shifts the land of the free north of the Canadian border, *because the United States was not the land of the free for the fugitive from slavery*. It was something much more familiar in world history: the land of tyranny which the migrating hero had to leave in order to find freedom somewhere else. We cannot ever forget this truth if we are to, as I suggested we must, pay our debt to the victims of slavery when we discuss the history of their escape.

This is not the simple feel-good story of Laura Bush let alone James Horton’s dubious tribute to Americanism. And so we must do more than simply celebrate the Underground Railroad. We *must* come to grips with its meaning. We must probe the question of why a movement that, despite Laura Bush’s (or perhaps her speechwriter’s) attempt to blend it so seamlessly with our national mythology, does so much to question our right to the name “land of the free.” In that context, it seems a little paradoxical that we are quite so eager to celebrate and remember it when we remain so reluctant to discuss not only slavery—but its legacy of racism.

It becomes easier to resolve the contradiction of the nation’s embrace of the Underground Railroad despite its fear of openly discussing its racist past when we realize that we do so not only because it was a noble endeavor but *also because it is unquestionably an easier way to remember and discuss slavery* (and therefore race and racism). It is easier because, first, it offers the illusion of escape from a permanent form of enslavement that in reality, for the vast, vast majority, offered no escape. Faced with the unthinkable, we cannot help but seek a way out as we imagine ourselves in that situation. The very popularity of the Underground Railroad promotes some rather absurd, even harmful illusions out of this psychological need. We must recognize the way this skews our understanding. When I ask my students to write their thoughts and feelings about slavery, they almost invariably respond if that *they* had been enslaved, they would have escaped. A few years ago, during the height of the diffusion of the Underground Railroad into American popular culture, I got a call from a reality TV producer who had an idea for a new reality show. He was going to have an interracial group of a dozen or more young people recreate the experience of the Underground Railroad for a national audience by walking north from Alabama. He asked me if I could help him make sure that they made it realistic. The Freedom Center has (or had as of the last time I visited) an interactive exhibit aimed at children that encouraged them to put themselves in the place of an enslaved African American and see if they could make the right decisions needed to claim freedom. You sometimes encounter the notion that the Underground Railroad served as a safety valve for slavery; what is far more certain is that the possibility of escape serves us today as a mental safety valve, and even a

fantasy, by which we avoid an unbearable truth: that for some two centuries the condition of enslavement in America was one from which there was no escape for African Americans as a whole.

We need to be aware that the idea behind the escape exhibit at the Freedom Center, indeed much of our approach to running away (including the ideas of quilts and the spirituals as coded messages to runaways), subtly, albeit unintentionally, shifts our attention to the capability of enslaved African Americans to claim their own freedom. The ones who did so were heroes, perhaps, and certainly worthy of freedom. But what of those who did not? After all, consider our usual explanation for the disproportionate rate of poverty among African Americans today, as we complacently conclude that the children we allow to grow up in impoverished, crime-infested inner cities, and attend not just inferior but, 50 years after Brown, *segregated* schools, is that they just do not want it enough to escape poverty. Such are the inherent dangers of using the Underground Railroad as a surrogate for a full examination of slavery (just as using Horatio Alger myths are for full investigation of America's racial present—still not post-racist after the election of our first black president). It becomes all the worse when this is done in the school curriculum. To be sure, slavery raises difficult issues for young children. But what does it mean if you teach children about escape from slavery before you teach them about slavery? Moreover, children in particular need to be educated first about the physical as well as the emotional obstacles to escape. Would we really choose to leave our loved ones behind—to lose all touch with them permanently, in all likelihood? Would we really choose escape if presented with the prospect Kentucky's Francis Fedric confronted. He wrote this about how he spent the day previous to his escape attempt:

How I longed to tell my mothers and my sisters, and bid them farewell. I hesitated several times when I thought I should never see them more. I turned back again and again to look at my mother. I knew she would be flogged, old as she was, for my escaping. I could foresee how my master would stand over her with the lash to extort from her my hiding-place. I was her only son left. How she would suffer torture on my account, and be distressed that I had left her for ever until we should meet hereafter in heaven I hoped.<sup>20</sup>

The poignancy of Fedric's words remind us that there was actually no escape from slavery for African Americans, that, as every black convention in the antebellum period declared, none can be free while any is enslaved.

That brings us to the deeper, and more troubling reason, behind the so surprisingly widespread attention to an Underground Railroad that so thinly conceals what historian Edmund Morgan called the American paradox.<sup>21</sup> The way we tend to remember the Underground Railroad provides, even more than a psychological exit that was no true exit, the comforting illusion of widespread white opposition to slavery—a vast northern conspiracy against an essentially southern institution. I say illusion because let's remember what the Underground Railroad actually was—not, for the most part, a clandestine movement to smuggle African Americans out of the South. It was an underground movement to smuggle them out of the North. If the North had really been free territory, if most northern whites were really steadfastly antislavery, then Canada would not have been the primary destination of the Underground Railroad. We owe a great debt to Larry Gara for ushering in the period of the modern historiography of the Underground Railroad in calling attention to what he called the *legend* of the Underground

Railroad that these persistent myths, and the partial understandings that lie behind them, epitomize.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the abundance of public attention—or, rather, precisely because of it—sorting fact from fiction is a difficult—and often controversial—task. The result is that it sometimes seems there are as many Underground Railroads as there are those of us here at this conference. But there is one commonality that underlies them all, no matter how we approach, delimit, and define the subject—and that is the slavery from which fugitives were escaping, directly or indirectly. We who make it the subject of so much of our attention cannot allow the Underground Railroad to simply become an easier way to talk about slavery, to avoid dealing with the terrible and terrifying implications of the American paradox.

The proliferation of public history has not been without effect on how the history of the Underground Railroad has been interpreted. Its most significant result has been, perhaps, to displace escaping slaves from their rightful location at the center of the story. However much fugitives do not belong at the center of the story of slavery, they absolutely belong at the center of the story of the Underground Railroad. Fugitives created the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad did not create the phenomenon of runaways. African Americans escaped slavery everywhere—help or no help. Most probably did not run away with *any* expectation of help. Escape was a spontaneous, centuries-long war on an institution that was a war on those it held in bondage.

What does it say when public history takes the standpoint of the sympathetic ally and not the hunted fugitive—the Underground Railroad of sites scattered throughout (mainly) the North, garrets, false-bottomed carriages, and most commonly, and least logically, of tunnels? Laura Bush took exactly that standpoint when her only specific mention of the history of the Underground Railroad in her speech consisted of quoting the words of William Wells Brown taken from the dedication of his slave narrative. It reads:

To Wells Brown, of Ohio.

Thirteen years ago, I came to your door, a weary fugitive from chains and stripes. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was hungry, and you fed me. Naked was I, and you clothed me. Even a name by which to be known among men, slavery had denied me. You bestowed upon me your own. Base indeed should I be, if I ever forget what I owe to you, or do anything to disgrace that honored name!<sup>23</sup>

Brown's are moving words, to be sure, particularly as read by so skilled a speaker as Laura Bush. Nothing seems to offer more eloquent testimony of the benevolence of Northern whites, who aided the helpless and succored the oppressed, than that of one of the Underground Railroad's former passengers (think about the implicit message conveyed by William Wells Brown saying "*what I owe to you*"?).<sup>24</sup> That was so true that Rob Portman quoted the very same lines in his speech at the groundbreaking ceremony. Of course, neither mentioned anything of the narrative that follows. Brown, equally distrustful of everyone, made his way across the Ohio River near Cincinnati in 1834 and northward through the state of Ohio *on his own*. Only once, after 15 days of solitary travel, when compelled by the threat of exposure, did he seek shelter, chancing upon Wells Brown. Lone humanitarian in southern Ohio, he suggestively had no contacts with other sympathetic whites, since Brown was forced to complete his journey as he had begun it—*alone* and left to his own devices. When he finally arrived in Buffalo, Brown joined its vigilance

committee, which, significantly, consisted solely of *African Americans*. It was Williams Wells Brown, not his namesake Wells Brown, who became a longtime activist in the antislavery underground. And Wells Brown was virtually the only white participant in the Underground Railroad whom William Wells Brown encountered through the mid-1840s. All of that is in Brown's narrative; none of it in his dedication. Bush's speech is an example of how to quote a fugitive from slavery and still be unfair to him and all runaways—and therefore a model of how to rip the story of the Underground Railroad right out of its historical context.

The same is true when we allow the public history of the Underground Railroad to remain encased in the mythology in which nineteenth century historiography left it: the misleading railroad imagery of “lines,” “stations,” “stationmasters,” and “conductors,” often accompanied by the attempt to link the principal known participants and centers geographically. Thus, for example, the National Underground Railroad Act of 1990 puts the emphasis on the preservation and interpretation of the “approximate routes used by slaves escaping to freedom before the conclusion of the Civil War,”<sup>25</sup> as though the key to understanding the institution lay in charting the paths along which fugitives *were conducted*. Unless we explicitly problematize the mythology, such an approach may convey a subtly reassuring message—almost anywhere a fugitive traveled in the antebellum North, she encountered aid, so widespread was the sympathy for her cause and the antipathy toward slavery. Focus on the network to freedom serves to simultaneously localize and universalize the institution, and thus lends crucial psychological support to the notion of a long and vibrant tradition of Northern racial liberalism, as do the dubious claims virtually ubiquitous in the North today of architectural and structural survivals (from tunnels to secret garrets) of a mass conspiracy. In effect, it reverses the reality. It is not merely the false appearance of the likelihood of success of flight, again raising questions as to why anyone would have stayed behind. It is also the notion that the entire North stood ready to aid any fugitive, when the very opposite was true.

And that brings us to another inconvenient truth: that we remember the Underground Railroad because it was *exceptional*. As much as we would like to look back today on a long and venerable tradition of white opposition to racial oppression, we find, rather, only episodic opposition that involved a tragically small proportion of white Americans. It is not a pleasant conclusion. But it is one that needs to be emphasized to avoid the sort of smug complacency that leads to the declarations that we now live in a post-racist world. To return to Laura Bush's speech, she said, “May the Freedom Center always remind us that when we are called upon to do what is right, we will choose what is right.”<sup>26</sup> But that is not the lesson of the Underground Railroad at all—or not the full lesson. The truth is that not only did the vast majority of self-professed freedom-loving Americans chose to do what was *wrong*, even those who made the right choices failed to do so consistently in later years. If we commemorate the epoch of the Underground Railroad as a period when African Americans found significant numbers of white allies, we must—if we want to understand not only the past but the present—juxtapose it with periods when they did not. We must make mention, for example, of the reign of terrorism in the South following Reconstruction, when there was no Underground Railroad, when African Americans were left to combat the most violent forms of racial oppression on their own. We must remember the nation's failure to pass an anti-lynching law against an evil that reigned for decades without sparking an appreciable national outcry. If we remember the one, honesty and decency require us to remember the other. In fact, the period after Reconstruction should be an

integral part of the public history of the Underground Railroad, because it was part of the experience of those who were enslaved and who found only the most hollow sort of freedom following slavery's abolition. If we do not make the effort to understand why, we cannot have the kind of serious national discussion on race we so badly need but never seem to manage to have. We again avoided it—settling for a casual chat over a couple of beers at the White House. Newsweek had a cover story just last week that the unexpected result of many parents' fear of openly discussing race with their children was not the color-blind children they hoped for, but kids displaying marked (if unconscious) evidence of prejudice.<sup>27</sup> It would be interesting to see the media take the time to inquire into the results for a nation that adopts the same strategy as those misguided parents. Those of us who study the history of the Underground Railroad—simultaneously profoundly inspiring but deeply destabilizing of American national mythology—have a special responsibility to take the lead in promoting that discussion of the past and the present.

---

<sup>1</sup> Laura Bush, "Remarks About the Underground Railroad at Freedom Center Dedication As Delivered in Cincinnati, Ohio, June 17, 2002," The White House, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020617-6.html>, Accessed 15 October 2008.

<sup>2</sup> James Oliver Horton, "A Crusade for Freedom: William Still and the Real Underground Railroad," in David Blight, ed., *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 174-93, quoted 175.

<sup>3</sup> *Underground Railroad* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1998), 1.

<sup>4</sup> David Smith, *Biography of Rev. David Smith* (Xenia, Oh., 1881), 71.

<sup>5</sup> Eli Artis narrative in Benjamin Drew, *North-side View of Slavery. The Refugee: Or, Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Boston: J.P. Jewett, 1856), 374.

<sup>6</sup> John Malvin, *North into Freedom: The Autobiography of John Malvin* (Cleveland: The Press of the Western Reserve University, 1966), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Ephraim Waterford narrative, in Drew, *North-side View of Slavery*, 373-4.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Bush, "Remarks."

<sup>9</sup> John Rankin, "Address to the Churches on Prejudice Against People of Color," in *Report of the Third Anniversary of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society, Held in Granville, Licking County, Ohio, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, 1838* (Cincinnati: Ohio Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), 30-38.

<sup>10</sup> Brown quoted in Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); 227.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), 385.

<sup>12</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 392.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: Norton, 2008), 313.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in John Mercer Langston, *Freedom and Citizenship. Selected Lectures and Addresses of Hon. John Mercer Langston* (Washington: R.H. Darby, 1883), 14-27.

<sup>15</sup> Horton, "Crusade for Freedom," 175.

<sup>16</sup> National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act, sec. 112, 144, Stat. 678 (1998).

<sup>17</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 19.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" in Josh Gottheimer, *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 45-54, quoted 49.

---

<sup>19</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Francis Fedric, *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky; or, Fifty Years of Slavery in the Southern States of America* (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1863), 103.

<sup>21</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: Norton, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (1961; Lexington, Kent.: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> I have quoted from the original, William Wells Brown, Narrative of William W. Brown, *An American Slave. Written by Himself* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849), i. Laura Bush's version, according to the official White House transcript, reads: "In one man's account of his journey along the railroad, he said, 'I found a friend who harbored me three days, and fulfilled the Scriptures to perfection: I was hungry, and he fed me; thirsty, and he gave me drink; weary, and he ministered to my necessities; sick, and he cared for me 'till I got relieved. He took me on his own beast, and carried me 10 miles, and his wife gave me food for four days' travel.'" Bush, "Remarks." Representative Rob Portman (Republican, Ohio) made up for Bush's mistake, reading the same dedication, in his case quoting accurately and completely.

<sup>24</sup> Though, at least according to the transcript, Bush, unlike Portman, omitted the phrase, "what I owe to you," she appended the following to the quotation she read: "People who cared for and supported those who traveled along the routes of the Underground Railroad put the interests of others before their own. These good Samaritans offered food and shelter, knowing full well the dangers that accompanied their kindness and the possible penalties for their compassion. Thanks to the Freedom Center, Americans will have one more way to honor those who defend the belief that all men are created equal." The clear implication is that the Freedom Center honors not fugitives like Brown, but "good Samaritans" like Wells. Herein, she claims, lies the lesson for the future: "May the Center always remind us that when we are called upon to do what is right, we will choose what is right. When people need solace and shelter, we will provide it. When we see injustice, we will correct it, and when we achieve peace and equality, we shall rejoice in it." Bush, "Remarks."

<sup>25</sup> S.2809. A bill to amend the National Trails System Act to provide for the study and designation of the Underground Railroad Historic Trail. Library of Congress, Thomas, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d101:s.02809>., Accessed 15 October 2008; (National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act, sec. 112, 144, Stat. 678 (1998).) and the formula is repeated in the National Park Service publication *Underground Railroad*.

<sup>26</sup> Laura Bush, "Remarks."

<sup>27</sup> Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, "See Baby Discriminate," *Newsweek*, September 5, 2009.