

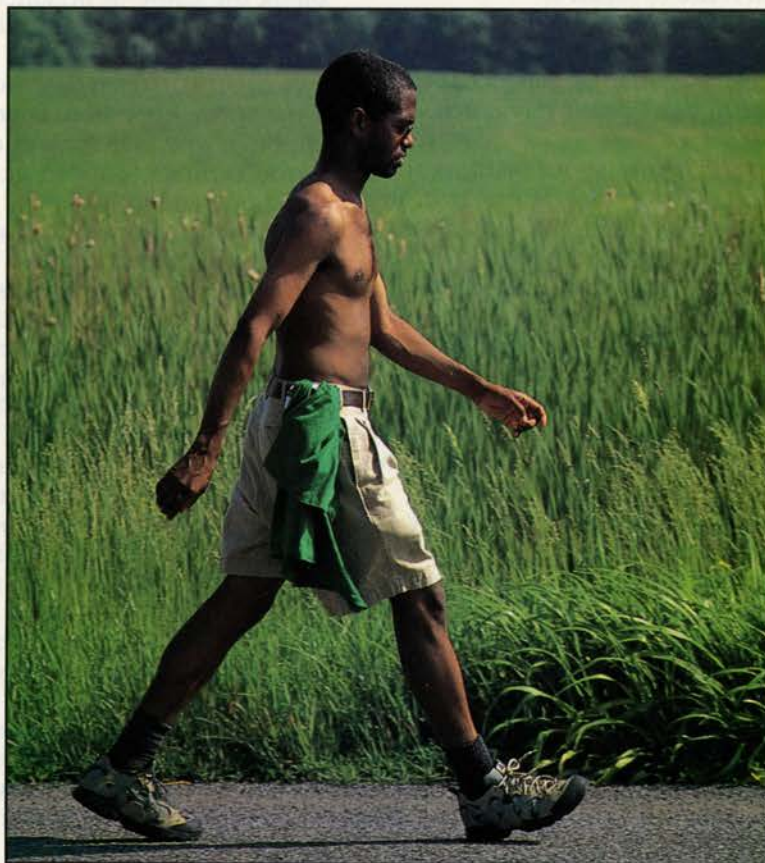
# A WALK ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

BY ANTHONY COHEN

**I**FIRST HEARD about the Underground Railroad when I was an impressionable 10-year-old. My fourth-grade social studies teacher told our class about Harriet Tubman, the fugitive slave from Maryland, who used its “underground rails” to guide hundreds of other slaves to freedom. I didn’t understand, at the time, that the railroad was a metaphor, and I envisioned a subway train transporting slaves hundreds of miles to Canada. I later realized that my teacher had not been talking about a literal rail system, but as I grew older (and more concerned with my future than with the distant past), the Underground Railroad, and all the other tales that belonged to my childhood, faded from memory.

But in 1994, while studying history at American University in Washington, D.C., I again stumbled onto the

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(Above) Anthony Cohen on his way north, tracing the routes of runaway slaves.

Underground Railroad, this time as the subject for a research paper. My task was to document some aspect of history that had gone largely unrecorded, and the Underground Railroad seemed as elusive a topic as one could find.

After all, it was the staple of ghost stories and children’s books, part fact, part fiction, and part inspiring legend. An informal travel network stretching from the plantation South to the free states of

the North and ultimately to Canada, the Underground Railroad was not a single path but many. It used the terminology of the railroad, which was then nearly as high tech as the Information Superhighway is today. Those involved in helping runaway slaves spoke of escape “routes” and “terminals” and secret “station houses” where “passengers” (runaways) were fed and sheltered by “stationmasters” (abolitionists) and from which they might be led to a new station by “conductors” (guides).

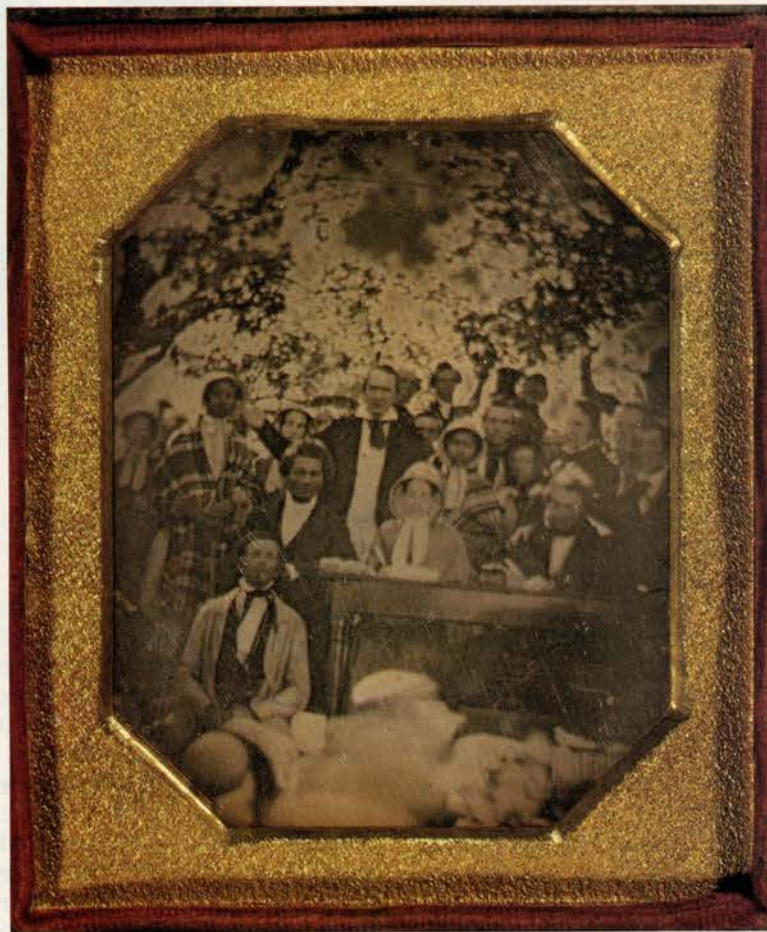
It’s impossible to establish the precise number of runaways guided to freedom by this network, and there is considerable disagreement over the probable

PHOTOGRAPH BY WAYNE SORICE



number. Only the bravest and most highly motivated slaves attempted to flee. Many runaways never left the vicinity of the places where they were enslaved, and many were recaptured. However, my research shows that during the years of the Underground Railroad's heyday—from roughly 1830 to 1865—as many as 100,000 slaves took advantage of this network to reach free soil in Canada, Mexico, the Bahamas, Europe, and Africa.

I began my own search for the Underground Railroad in my hometown of Rockville, Md., and its vicinity by searching for clues in archives, museums, libraries, and historical societies. When I examined 19th-century newspapers, I found numerous notices for runaway slaves, often vivid descriptions placed by masters offering rewards for the capture of their slaves. The ads sometimes mentioned possible escape routes and accomplices as well as disguises the slaves might have assumed and supplies they took with them. Courthouse records revealed names of local citizens who were



(Above) An abolitionist meeting with Frederick Douglass (to the left of the table) and Mary and Emily Edmondson (in plaid with light-colored bonnets), all three of whom had escaped from slavery. Black abolitionist William Still tells the story of the Edmondson sisters' difficult escape in his book, *The Underground Railroad*.

months of research, I had documented five routes of escape through the region and identified dozens of local landmarks connected with the Underground Railroad. And, I had plenty of material for my research paper.

A year later, intrigued by the possibility of finding more of this kind of information, I got the idea of retracing one of the routes formerly traveled by fugitive

tried and convicted of harboring slaves. And slave narratives—autobiographies written by escaped slaves themselves—frequently gave details of their passage north as well as naming the towns they stopped at on the way.

In addition to the documents I found, I conducted interviews with descendants of free blacks, abolitionists, and fugitive slaves. My informants, most of them 80 or 90 years old, had, as children in the early 20th century, learned stories firsthand from the people who had been directly involved in these escapes. Others I met had diaries and letters written by relatives who had worked on the Underground Railroad. After three

COURTESY OF THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES



slaves. I planned to use their means of transportation—foot, boat, and rail—to make my own journey. I would also stop in each town along the way to ask local people about information they might have on the Underground Railroad. I hoped that some would know of safehouses, roads, and hiding places that tradition said had been used by runaways, or perhaps direct me to the descendants of those families that had harbored the fleeing slaves. I planned also to seek out historical societies and libraries in each town in hopes of finding clues in their collections of artifacts, diaries, and manuscripts.

So in May 1996 I struck out from the Friends Meeting House in Sandy Spring, Md., on the long trail north, trudging six and a half weeks through five states and over 800 miles to Canada. I carried with me a backpack holding three changes of clothing, research notes, and just a few provisions since I had determined to beg my daily rations from people I'd meet along the way. This would allow me to travel lightly—and compel me to depend on the kindness of strangers as runaway slaves had done a century and a half earlier.

Despite my attempts at authenticity, I had some major conveniences that were not available to slaves: comfortable shoes, a cell phone in case of an emergency, and a *Walk to Canada* Web site on which to log progress reports. The Web site enabled people to trace my location, e-mail me questions, and offer clues as to which roads I should take and who on the trail might have knowledge of the Underground Railroad. Along with numerous leads and tips, I received daily invitations from people who lived in towns I was passing through and offers to host me for the night. Throughout the weeks, as I walked through Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York, the new Information Superhighway helped me uncover the old network for runaway slaves. I couldn't help but contrast my circumstances with those of the fugitives 150 years ago. Instead of being hunted, I was the hunter—and my quest was turning out to be very fruitful.

The path I followed revealed traces of the Underground Railroad in a number of towns. In Baltimore, I visited the Orchard Street Church in the Druid Hill section of the city, which according to legend, was a sanctuary for slaves traveling on the Underground Railroad. In Wilmington, Del., I found the Old Town Hall on Market Street with its dungeon-like prison where fugitive slaves who had been captured were held while waiting to be reclaimed or sold again. In Pottstown, Pa., another stop on the railroad, I visited the Pine Forge Academy, a private school on the site of an 18th-century iron furnace. In the cellar of the headmaster's house were the remnants of subterranean tunnels used to shelter the building's first occupants from Indian attacks. I was told that when the home was owned by abolitionists in the 19th century, slaves were harbored in these tunnels during their harrowing exodus north.

With many of these stories, I faced the problem—common for historians—of confirming the oral record as history. But they all offered valuable leads that I hoped to follow up later with additional research.

When I reached Philadelphia, I decided to stop for a



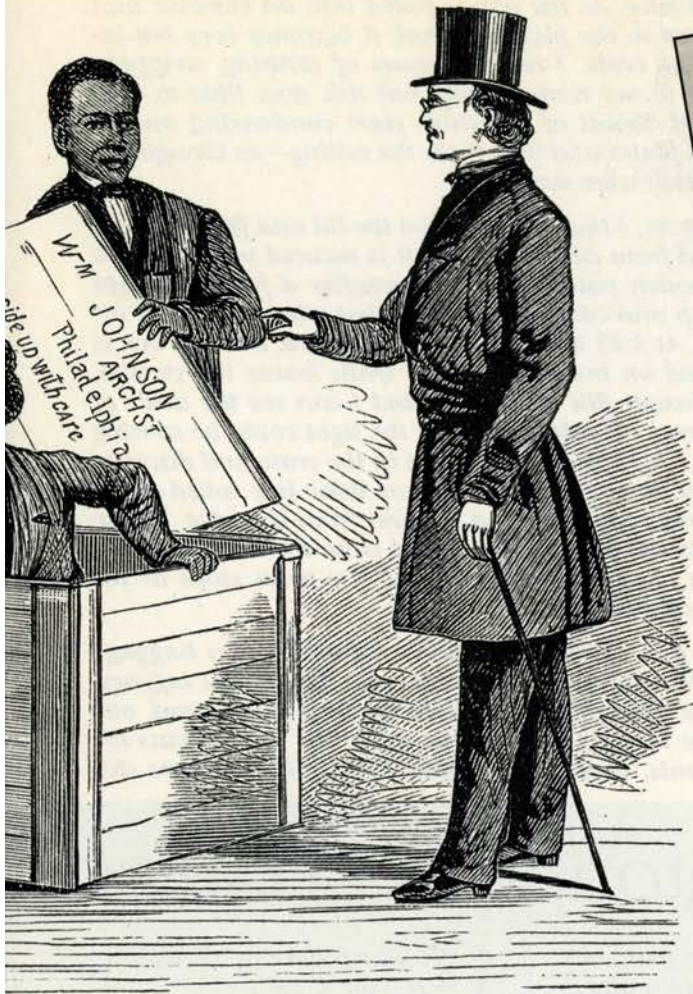
COURTESY OF THE MESSAGE FOUNDATION

rest. By then, having walked as much as 25 miles each day, I had discovered firsthand a little about the physical strains of traveling on the Underground Railroad. And for the first time, I began to see my journey from a human perspective instead of from a primarily historical one. Above and beyond the clues that slaves had left behind as to their escape routes and hiding places, I now longed to know about their feelings as they escaped and found themselves in a great unknown.

But exploring the minds and hearts of runaway slaves posed a problem. None of them were alive to describe their experiences, and despite the miles I had walked on an escape trail many of them had used, no slave-catchers or bloodhounds were hunting me down. Nevertheless, I soon discovered a way to come closer to experiencing the act of escape.

I had been asked, on my second day in Philadelphia, to speak at a local school and tell a fifth-grade history class the story of my journey thus far. In addition to questions about the supplies I'd carried and the number of miles I'd walked, I got one from a student who asked what I considered the Underground Railroad's greatest escape story. I told him about the flight of Henry "Box" Brown, a slave from Richmond, Va., who in March of 1849 was boxed up and shipped express to Philadelphia. He traveled for 26 hours by boat and train. After his box was turned upside down, he spent several agonizing hours on his head before being set free. Suddenly, I had my answer.





(Top) Henry "Box" Brown emerges from the box in which, traveling express, he successfully fled slavery. The print is from *The Underground Railroad* by William Still. (Right) Two newspaper notices advertising runaway slaves. The story of Ann Maria Weems (bottom) appears in Still's book.

Why not get myself boxed up and smuggled onto an Amtrak train in Philadelphia, I thought. Although I would not run the same risk as a fugitive slave if my presence were discovered, I would suffer from the same kind of physical danger and sense of fear. So with the aid of three friends, I constructed a wooden crate and arranged to have myself shipped to New York City. What follows is a step-by-step account of how I made my "escape" and what my 20th-century experience revealed about the flight of a fugitive slave.

#### May 17

Tonight we began the work of building the crate. It is a sturdy pine box measuring 24 by 28 by 30 inches. This will allow me just enough room to sit in a fetal position. The box has heavy-duty caster wheels and thick rope handles so it can be pulled along. Quarter-size vents drilled into three walls will give me fresh air to breathe, and if an emergency comes up, I'll be able to escape through the fourth wall, which doubles as a trap door. I call Amtrak and learn there is an 11:50 train the next

**\$100 Reward.**

RAN AWAY from the subscriber's plantation, near Upper Marlborough, Prince George's County, Md. on Wednesday, the 16th instant, Negro Man FREDERICK, who calls himself **Frederick Thomas.**

He is about 50 or 55 years of age, feet 8 or 9 inches high, black complexion; answers quick when spoken to; suffering from hernia, and wears a belt around his waist, under his clothing. He has relatives residing in Montgomery County, near Rockville. He had on when he went away a suit of country cloth (of Fawcett's manufacture) and a black overcoat, and wears a pair of heavy boots. His hair is not full, and is a little grey about his locks. He carried with him a large bay horse, with a wagon saddle and a wagon whip. The horse is about ten or twelve years old, with a small tail, and has one or two shoes off. No further marks recollected. The horse was bought by the subscriber just a few days ago, and is a pretty fast trotter.

I will give the above reward for the man and horse, no matter where taken provided they are brought home or secured so that I can get them again.

WILLIAM Z. BEALL,  
Near Upper Marlboro'.  
19-tf

**\$500 REWARD.**

RAN away on Sunday night, the 23d instant, before 12 o'clock, from the subscriber, residing in Rockville, Montgomery county, Md., my NEGRO GIRL "Ann Maria Weems," about 15 years of age; a bright mullatto; some small freckles on her face; slender person, thick suit of hair, inclined to be sandy. Her parents are free, and reside in Washington, D. C. It is evident she was taken away by some one in a carriage, probably by a white man, by whom she may be carried beyond the limits of the State of Maryland.

I will give the above reward for her apprehension and detention so that I get her again.

CHAS. M. PRICE.  
sep 29-3t

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morning from Philly to New York. The ride will take a little more than two hours.

### May 18

11 a.m.: I've had only a cookie and juice for breakfast so I won't need to go to the bathroom while I'm in the box. I plan to take with me my driver's license, a 12-ounce bottle of water, a quilt to sit on, a Swiss army knife, and my trusty cell phone in the event of an emergency. I crawl in, listen rather nervously as the trap door closes, and feel the thud as the crate is loaded in the back of our van. The weather is unseasonably warm so the temperature reaches 89 degrees before noon, and I soon break into a furious sweat. When we reach the station and the box is rolled inside, my friends discover it must go through check-in, be weighed, paid for, and inspected. With minutes remaining until the 11:50 departure, they opt for a later train. That will put our arrival in New York City—and my liberation from the box—at sometime after 6 p.m.

1 p.m.: I feel myself being rolled to the scales. As I later find out, the crate, with me inside it, weighs 210 lbs. and costs \$55 to ship one way from Philadelphia to New York. The whole process goes smoothly—the box is neither x-rayed nor scanned—and the ease with which I pass through security rejuvenates my

confidence. As the box is rolled into an elevator and lowered to the platform level, it becomes very hot inside the crate. I remove layers of clothing, stripping down to my boxer shorts, but this does little to cool me off. Beads of moisture start condensing on the screw plates and drip from the ceiling—as though the box itself were sweating.

1:45 p.m.: I hear a thump on the lid and feel the crate tipped from side to side as it is secured with ropes to a wooden pallet. Shortly thereafter a forklift scoops me up and carries me to the spot where the train arrives. At 3:45 it barrels into the station, and my box is carried on board. Once the train leaves the station, the boxcar fills with light, and I can see the walls of the crate. Wondering where the light could be coming from, I look through a crack in the crate and discover, to my horror, that the boxcar door has rolled open, and my crate is only a few feet from the edge. My instincts tell me to get out and close the door, but I remain closed in the box until the train stops at the next station.

4:30 p.m.: While the train is stopped, two baggage handlers climb into the car with additional luggage. As the train pulls away with the men still aboard, one comes over and sits on the crate. The men discuss the contents, and I worry that they will somehow dis-

## Arrival from Washington, D.C.: Harrison

The following story of Harrison Cary's decision to leave Richmond, Va., and slavery, is recounted by the African-American abolitionist William Still in his classic *The Underground Railroad*.

Still was a member, and for a number of years director, of the General Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia, which is said to have assisted some 9,000 runaway slaves between 1830 and 1860. Born to free parents—Still's father had bought his way out of slavery, and his mother was a runaway slave—Still went to work for the Vigilance Committee in 1844. He apparently started recording former slaves' stories of their escape when he discovered that one of the fugitives was his own brother, Peter Still, who had remained in slavery after his mother had escaped many years earlier.

Many of the stories in Still's book focus on the extraordinary difficulties runaway slaves faced and their daring improvisations—like Henry "Box" Brown's

decision to be sent by express, or Harriet Shephard's to commandeer two of her master's coaches and ride to freedom with her five children and five friends. In Harrison Cary's story, we have, instead, the reflections of an Underground Railroad passenger who has completed the first leg of his journey and, having arrived safely in Philadelphia, describes his life as a slave to a sympathetic Still.

The Underground Railroad, a compilation of these accounts, was first published in 1872.

—Editor

THE PASSENGER bearing the name of Harrison Cary who applied to the Vigilance Committee for assistance was a mulatto of medium size, with a prepossessing countenance, and a very smart talker. Seeking, as usual, to learn his history, the subjoined questions and answers were the result of the interview:

Q. "How old are you?"

A. "Twenty-eight years of age this coming March."

Q. "To whom did you belong?"

A. "Mrs. Jane E. Ashley."

Q. "What kind of a woman was she?"

A. "She was a very clever woman; never said anything out of the way."

Q. "How many servants had she?"

A. "She had no other servants."

Q. "Did you live with her?"

A. "No. I hired my time for \$22 a month." \*

Q. "How could you make so much money?"

A. "I was a bricklayer by trade, and ranked among the first in the city."

As Harrison talked so intelligently, the member of the Committee who was examining him, was anxious to know how he

\* Slaves who had special skills were sometimes hired out by their masters and permitted to retain some of the money they earned. However, from what he says later in the interview, Harrison Cary was obliged to "meet his monthly hire"—that is, earn enough to pay his owner a specified sum every month.



cover I am inside. One of them starts pounding out rhythms on the lid of the crate, and I have to suppress a wild urge to pound back—and give the man a real scare. At the next station stop the men disembark, and I'm alone again.

5:35 p.m.: Exhausted from heat and with my water bottle empty, I contemplate leaving the crate. But then the train slows to mark the descent from New Jersey to the tunnels beneath Manhattan, and soon the train pulls into the station. After fewer hours entombed than Box Brown—but more than enough for me—I eagerly await release from the box. And wait and wait. I later find out that my box, which had been mislabeled, was about to go on to Boston when one of my friends demanded a search of the freight cars and found me just in time.

6:15 p.m.: The crate lands on the streets of Manhattan just outside Penn Station. My friend taps on the lid and says, "Tony, you can come out now, you are a free man!" I open the trap door and rise from the box, thrusting my fists to the sky and turning my face to the sun. I think of Henry stepping from his crate onto free soil and finding himself no longer a slave. And for the first time ever, I think I understand what being free actually means.

\* \* \*

Once free of the box, I continued my journey for 400 more miles through New York state. I finally crossed the Niagara River into Canada near Buffalo on Father's Day 1996 and continued on to Amherstburg, Ontario, my last stop on the Underground Railroad. □

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## Cary

came to be so knowing, the fact that he could read being very evident.

Harrison proceeded to explain how he was led to acquire the art both of reading and writing:

"Slaves caught out of an evening without passes from their master or mistress, were invariably arrested, and if they were unable to raise money to buy themselves off, they were taken and locked up in a place known as the 'cage,' and in the morning the owner was notified, and after paying the fine the unfortunate prisoner had to go meet his fate at the hands of his owner."

Often he or she found himself or herself sentenced to take 39 or more lashes before atonement could be made for the violated law, and the fine sustained by the enraged owner.

Harrison having strong aversion to both of the "wholesome regulations" of the peculiar institution above alluded to, saw that the only remedy that he could avail himself of was to learn to write his own passes. In possess-

ing himself of this prize, he knew that the law against slaves being taught would have to be broken, nevertheless he was so anxious to succeed that he was determined to run the risk. Consequently he grasped the boon with but very little difficulty or assistance. Valuing his prize highly, he improved more and more until he could write his own passes satisfactorily. The "cage" he denounced as a perfect "hog hole," and added, "it was more than I could bear."

He spoke with equal warmth on the pass custom, "the idea of working hard all day and then being obliged to have a pass," etc.,—his feelings sternly revolted against. Yet he uttered not a disrespectful word against the individual to whom he belonged. Once, he had been sold, but for what was not noted on the record book.

His mother had been sold several times. His brother, William Henry Cary, escaped from Washington, D.C., when quite a youth. What became of him it was not for Harrison to tell, but he supposed that he had made his way to a free state, or Canada, and he hoped to find

him. He had no knowledge of any other relatives.

In further conversation with him, relative to his being a single man, he said that he had resolved not to entangle himself with a family until he had obtained his freedom.

He found it pretty hard to meet his monthly hire, consequently he was on the look-out to better his condition as soon as a favorable opportunity might offer. Harrison's mistress had a son named John James Ashley, who was then a minor. On arriving at majority, according to the will of the lad's father, he was to have possession of Harrison as his portion. Harrison had no idea of having to work for his support—he thought that if John could not take care of himself when he grew up to be a man, there was a place for all such in the poor-house.

Harrison was also moved by another consideration. His mistress' sister had been trying to influence the mistress to sell him; thus considering himself in danger, he made up his mind that the time had come for him to change his habitation, so he resolved to try his fortune on the Underground Railroad. □