

Flight to Freedom: A Legendary Underground Railroad Escape

By Peter H. Michael

Many regard the Underground Railroad as the noblest endeavor in American history. The Underground Railroad existed for more than a quarter millennium from 1585 when the first enslaved people from Africa arrived at the Spanish settlement of Saint Augustine, Florida, to the end of the Civil War in 1865. Though unnamed for another 250 years, the Underground Railroad would have begun when an enslaved person first escaped Saint Augustine and was aided by anyone else, probably a Native American.

Beginning in 1754 with the Quakers, churches condemned slavery, and in the 1780s northern states began abolishing the practice. By the early 1800s, anti-slavery societies, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and vigilance committees formed and began aiding fugitives from slavery. This opposition — collectively, the abolitionist movement — lent hope to enslaved people with the predictable result that more of the most daring sought freedom in northern states and Canada, creating a swelling tide of freedom seekers.

This long-lived, ubiquitous, illegal, clandestine moral imperative went unnamed until the 1840s when the enterprise adopted terminology of the nation's new transforming technology, the railroad. Freedom seekers became passengers or cargo, their guides along backways as conductors, those sheltering them along the way as agents or station operators. By 1842¹, the entire operation became known as the Underground Railroad.

Though actual railroads were sometimes used, and the journey's nature was "underground" by being clandestine, the Underground Railroad was neither a railroad nor subterranean, a distinction actually lost on some adults today.

A signal event of the movement was the abolition of slavery by Canada in 1833 and by most British Commonwealth colonies the following year, resulting in Canada and the British Caribbean becoming magnets for United States freedom seekers. After the 1850 passage of the second Fugitive Slave Act requiring American citizens to assist in apprehending runaways, like it or not, Canada became freedom seekers' main haven.

No reliable method exists for estimating the number of freedom seekers, with approximations running from low five figures to seven, the true number probably in the low six figures. Also unknown is what proportion of those who broke for freedom attained it.

The Underground Railroad vanished at the end of the Civil War, though many former Underground Railroad sites continued to be used by people migrating north, assisted by some who had served as Underground Railroad conductors and safe-house operators.

For 280 years, every American — black, white, Native American — knew of slavery, that every enslaved person craved freedom, that some would daringly seek it, and that a growing number of free people would risk all to aid freedom seekers' quests. Americans and Canadians were vividly aware of these things which were tightly interwoven into the fabric of daily life and formed a deeply rooted part of the very consciousness of the two nations. Thus, the long North American contest between freedom and slavery, good and evil, was, as author Fergus Bordewich has aptly put it, the war for the soul of America.² Indeed it was. It took 280 years — an extraordinarily long time — to win this war, but won it was. The moral certitude, perseverance and courage of safe-house operators and conductors but especially of freedom seekers themselves delivered the continent and the American democratic experiment from darkness.

Only about four percent of claimed Underground Railroad safehouses and routes today, almost entirely in northern states, have conclusive documentation of their Underground Railroad in-

volvement. The overwhelming majority of what transpired on the Underground Railroad was too dangerous to record making it especially dependent today on the stories handed down through families, property owners and others. Because most involved in the Underground Railroad were illiterate, the entire operation was illegal, those who had assisted freedom seekers were still persecuted after the Civil War, and many families and places remained divided over slavery, much Underground Railroad history has been lost, carried untold to the grave by the brave souls who were the Underground Railroad.

What remains through handed-down accounts and occasional documentation is precious but dwindling as stories die out with the passing of Underground Railroad descendants. Thus, it is vital to keep Underground Railroad stories intact while they remain with us and assure that they are not forgotten by over-emphasizing the small fraction of Underground Railroad sites fortunate enough to be documented.



Documented or not, it is hard to find an Underground Railroad escape account which is not rousing and evocative of what it means to be an American. A growing number of accounts involve Frederick County, Maryland.

James Curry escaped enslavement from North Carolina in 1833, stating in his autobiography that he crossed the Potomac River at Georgetown, walked the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal towpath through Frederick County to Williamsport, then turned north to Pennsylvania.³ Charles Bentley wrote in his autobiography that in 1842 he forded the Potomac at Point of Rocks and "went up along the side of Catoctin Mountain" into Pennsylvania.⁴ In 1843, Joseph Blanhum was arrested for ferrying freedom seekers from Harper's Ferry to Frederick County's Susquehanna Path.⁵ In 1844, a party of 39 freedom seekers crossed the Potomac, traversed Frederick County, and "came through Elmira [New York] and then through Oswego to Canada, aided by Mark Twain's future father in law."⁶ John Thompson wrote of being conducted in 1856 to Fredericktown, as the county seat was then known.⁷

Not all crossing the Potomac met success once reaching Maryland. For example, several capture accounts are provided by the National Park Service regarding its Ferry Hill Plantation property in Washington County. Referring to nineteenth-century Ferry Hill owners, a Park Service publication states, ". . . the Blackfords captured runaways belonging to others. Blackford family journals document the capture of people fleeing along the Potomac River. John Blackford captured a woman on July 29, 1829, who belonged to a slave trader named Malone; she was committed to the Hagerstown jail with the intention of returning her to her master. Franklin Blackford found five runaways hiding near the canal on June 1, 1839."⁸

Research by Frederick Countians Ann Lebherz and Kathleen Snowden, the National Park Service, the author and others has identified more than sixty documented or suspected Underground Railroad sites in Frederick County.⁹

On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, 1855, the county was the scene of one of the most famous and courageous Underground Railroad escapes.

Frank Wanzer recounted to William Still the flight of himself, Emily Foster, Barnaby Grigsby, Mary Elizabeth Grigsby and two unnamed others. Still included their story in his landmark 1872 book, *The Underground Railroad*.¹⁰ Emily Foster and Mary Elizabeth Grigsby were sisters, and, upon their escape, Frank Wanzer and Emily Foster were engaged to be married. The four were in their early to mid-twenties at the time.

Frank Wanzer was enslaved at Luther Sullivan's plantation near Aldie, Loudoun County, Virginia. One hears that this was the nearby Oak Hill, President James Monroe's home from 1794 until his death on July 4, 1831. However, both Wanzer family oral tradition and the Delashmutt family, current Oak Hill owners, state that Wanzer was never enslaved there. Wanzer's daughter Annie

did work at Oak Hill as a cook after the Civil War. Shown later here is an 1853 rendering of the Oak Hill mansion visited in 1980 by Allen Nelson, a Wanzer descendant.

Barnaby Grigsby was enslaved at William Rodgers' Pheasant's Eye plantation two miles west of Aldie. The home still exists. The two sisters were enslaved at Townsend McVeigh's Valley View Farm near Delaplane, Virginia, 14 miles from Aldie. The two unknowns escaped from an unidentified place in Fauquier County which begins two miles south of Aldie.¹¹

Frank Wanzer fled because his mother and siblings had been sold south by Sullivan four years earlier and he feared that Sullivan's precarious finances would cause his own sale. Sullivan, a lawyer, soon lost his plantation and the 1860 census shows him as a clerk in Washington, DC. The sisters stated their motivations to flee as the cruelty and drunkenness of Townsend McVeigh. Barnaby Grigsby related that his enslavement was milder and that he simply wanted his freedom.

Several key factors played into the six freedom seekers' successful escape. That they gathered for their flight reveals their being in frequent enough contact to plan their escape and arrange to meet at an appointed time and place. Most crucially, Frank Wanzer had become trusted enough by Luther Sullivan that Sullivan would send Wanzer unaccompanied on errands with horses and wagon. Wanzer, who had wavy reddish-blond hair, was light enough to pass for white, making it appear as if a white person were transporting five blacks, not at all unusual. Some enslavers granted time off and travel privileges to their slaves on holidays which might have been the case with the six that Christmas Eve. The six may have possessed permission papers typically issued to slaves travelling from their places of enslavement. The combination of these factors would make the party's flight appear as a white man driving his wagon for a holiday visit transporting five slaves with their papers in order. This ruse should have worked adequately, at least while the party was travelling the 12 miles in Virginia to the Potomac River, and perhaps for a while in Maryland. It would fail the following day.

The two couples and two unnameds began their escape near Aldie on Monday, Christmas Eve, 1855. Frank Wanzer's passed-down account has the group crossing the Potomac by wagon and on horseback at Edwards' Ferry which would appear to have been the safest crossing within easy reach of Aldie.¹² Though owned by whites, the ferry was manned by three generations of the African-American Newman family beginning with Basil Newman who died in 1852. After the Civil War, it was recorded that the Newmans had used the ferry to pole freedom seekers to Maryland. Mason Ellzey's remembrances¹³ recount the Newmans' transporting and guiding runaways, corroborated by his relative, Samuel Ellzey, who wrote that, "A free Negro, the ferryman at Edwards' Ferry, on the Potomac was the underground agent of these organized thieves . . . and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal [bordering the Potomac across the river in Maryland] was a part of the route which received, on certain boats, fugitives brought over by the ferryman."¹⁴

The enslavers of the six wasted no time posting a reward for the freedom seekers, having the hand bill shown later here circulating the day after the escape.¹⁵

Alighting from the ferry, the six were in Maryland and on their way. Still's recounting of the escape route which Frank Wanzer related to him has the party driving their wagon along roads "on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad," reaching Hood's Mill, Maryland, on Christmas Day. The only rail line from near Edwards Ferry to Hood's Mill in 1855 was the nation's first, still in daily use, the Baltimore & Ohio line running from Baltimore to Point of Rocks on the Potomac River. Going north, the line passes through Frederick County, enters Carroll County, and after six miles passes Hood's Mill, the scene of one of the most famous of all surviving Underground Railroad accounts.

Frank Wanzer's account told to his family and William Still relates that, after resuming their flight north on Christmas morning, the six drove alongside the tracks and "came to Hood's Mill, near the dividing line between Frederick and Carroll Counties, on Christmas day"¹⁶ where they were waylaid by whites. The couples defended themselves with guns and knives, drove off the assailants, abandoned their wagon, and fled on horseback. The two unnameds, on horseback far

enough behind to be unaware of the confrontation, were met shortly by the whites. One was shot and killed as he tried to escape, the other, captured, returned to Virginia and re-enslaved. Long effort by the author and others to identify these two has been unsuccessful. One wonders who these two brave ciphers in the nation's struggle were.

The drawing later here of the Hood's Mill confrontation, among the most famous surviving images from Underground Railroad times, was commissioned by William Still for his 1872 book. Hood's Mill, still standing, is reached on a gravel road just north of the South Patapsco River at Maryland Route 97.

Riding double bareback on the unhitched horses, the two couples fled north stopping at an unknown outdoor spot on a bitterly cold Christmas night. The two men tried to warm the feet of the women who were nevertheless afflicted by frostbite that night.

Reaching Columbia, Pennsylvania, the following day, the four were finally in a free state. In riding from Hood's Mill to Columbia, the party may have sought out Priestland, a Jesuit-owned farm and claimed Underground Railroad station near Frederick County's McKinstry's Mill, 16 miles north of Hood's Mill. We see the six freedom seekers using an inconspicuous wagon pace until the Hood's Mill encounter, and then the uncaptured four making another 52 miles in a hard overnight ride to reach protection in Columbia.

Uncertain is where the six spent Christmas Eve after entering Frederick County before leaving it Christmas morning. They could have bivouacked, or been sheltered along the Potomac-to-Doubs Underground Railroad Route which straddles the B&O rail line in southern Frederick County, or in one of the suspected Frederick County safehouses in Monrovia, New Market or Urbana along the B&O line. Given their planning, speed and direct route, it appears that the party did have the benefit of conductors or guidance from Aldie through Frederick County to Columbia.¹⁷

According to Frank Wanzer's account passed down through his family, the source of help in Columbia was key Underground Railroad figure William Whipper. A free Black and prominent Columbia businessman, Whipper owned lumber and coal interests, and 26 rail cars used to transport his commodities to market in Philadelphia. In his December 4, 1871, letter to William Still, Whipper describes Columbia as "the great depot where fugitives from Virginia and Maryland first landed," and wrote that, ". . . some I sent . . . to you in our cars to Philadelphia."¹⁸ Frank Wanzer's passed-down account states that Whipper moved his four charges to Philadelphia on New Year's Day, 1856, in one of his rail cars which had a false end for secreting fugitives. The likely reason for the five-day delay is that Whipper waited for the safest time, a holiday, to transport his "cargo."

The modest William Whipper, undersung American hero who helped hundreds of freedom seekers beginning in the 1830s, is shown later here. A few years ago, Pennsylvania granted landmark status to the Columbia section of the rail line used by Whipper.

There is a faint contending speculation that the Wanzer party's Virginia-to-Columbia route went south through Washington, DC, then jogged north, but this would have been very indirect, added time, risk and significant distance, is at odds with what Frank Wanzer told William Still and Wanzer's grand-daughter, Elizabeth Allen, distracts from the crux of the venture, and is stoutly refuted by Wanzer descendants today. The Hood's Mill encounter was reported in a Frederick newspaper.

In Philadelphia, the four were met by Whipper's fellow Underground Railroad agent, and coal and lumber client, William Still, who recorded their flight and in 1872 told their story in his celebrated book.

Beginning sometime probably in the 1850s, Still commenced a noble undertaking that would do as much as anything to preserve Underground Railroad history. After becoming a safehouse op-

erator and conductor, Still began recording the accounts of freedom seekers who passed through his care. Through the end of the Civil War and the Underground Railroad, and at great personal risk, Still recorded 190 accounts involving more than 900 souls. Still took care to use anonymity or pseudonyms in describing some freedom seekers and virtually all who had aided them. When safety mattered, he would also disguise place names as when referring to the South Patapsco River in the Wanzer escape as the Cheat River (which is actually in West Virginia). A portrait of Underground Railroad giant William Still is shown later here.

In 1872, Still compiled and published his accounts in his momentous epic, *The Underground Railroad*, which is still in print, and in 1883 released an update which includes his autobiography. *The Underground Railroad* contains a significant proportion of all known documented Underground Railroad escapes, and became an invaluable source in the study of the Underground Railroad, its personages and its sites. History owes a great debt of gratitude to William Still for his foresight and the risk he took compiling this book.

Before sending them on in January, 1856, Still interviewed Frank Wanzer, Emily Foster and the Grigsbys at length resulting in a seven-page account, among the longest in his book. Still had engravings commissioned to illustrate a few of the most outstanding escape accounts in *The Underground Railroad*, among these the fight at Hood's Mill which has since become one of the most legendary images surviving from Underground Railroad times. Still's engraving is shown later here. In fall 2011, in his memory, William Still's descendants will hold their 142nd reunion at which the author has been invited to speak. Still himself had organized the first in 1870.¹⁹

Sometime in January, 1856, Still sent the four former slaves on north by train to Syracuse, New York, and the safe-house of yet another major Underground Railroad figure, Reverend Jermaine W. Loguen. Until then, Frank Wanzer and Emily Foster had been engaged. They took the opportunity and were married by Reverend Loguen before completing their journey into Canada.²⁰

By not later than January 28, the two couples reached Toronto where they would spend the rest of their lives. In her letter that day to Still, who had written ahead to expect the four, Agnes Willis reports the arrival of the Wanzers and Grigsbys, and the assistance being rendered to them by the Ladies' Society to Aid Colored Refugees.²¹

The two couples found work, settled into a home together, and led free peaceful existences for the rest of their lives. The couples "shared a one-storey frame house on the lot next to Deborah and Perry Brown. . . . The Wanzers owned a horse and four pigs, all valued at \$15, and the couples lived on one-half acre of land. The two men were labourers and both couples worshiped in the Wesleyan Methodist faith."²²

However, Frank Wanzer had one last vital matter to discharge.

In August 1856, Wanzer returned to Virginia and in a daring rescue ushered his sister Betsy Smith, brother in law Vincent Smith, and friend Robert Stewart to freedom. Reaching the vicinity of those he would save, Frank Wanzer exercised high judgment and courage: "For two weeks, night and day, he avoided trusting himself in any house, consequently was compelled to lodge in the woods."²³ Biding his time, awaiting his chance during his two-week sylvan vigil, Wanzer made his move and swept the Smiths and Stewart to freedom in Canada. Using his route of the year before, Wanzer led the three to Still's safehouse where he told his second story.

The Smiths settled and lived out their lives in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Still wrote that, in carrying out the rescue, Frank Wanzer on this second trip had used "the mail route" on foot. This is another cautious choice of wording to keep secret actual routes and safe houses used. It was the B&O Railroad which carried the mail through Frederick County in 1856. Following his practice, Still's using "mail route," rather than again referring to roads alongside the B&O line, avoided casting suspicion on the farms and families along the line, deflecting attention away from conductors and safe-house owners in the area. Because Underground Railroad

agents were still being persecuted well after the Civil War, Still took care in 1872 when publishing his book to disguise their names.

The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Company's importance as a sympathetic component of the Underground Railroad is underscored by it and its president, John Garrett, being sued several times for knowingly aiding freedom seekers.

For the second time, Frank Wanzer was widowed as Emily perished long before Frank who died August 13, 1911, at age 82. His sister in law, Mary Elizabeth Grigsby, died a widow on March 16 that year at age 81. They are buried in the same rediscovered grave, number 1683, beside their spouses in Toronto's Prospect Cemetery. There are no known photographs of any of the four.



When he fled Aldie, Frank Wanzer was a young widower earlier married to Harriet Johnson who had died in August 1855. Escaping four months later, he left behind his two daughters, ages two and one, too young for Underground Railroad travel, with their maternal grandmother, also named Harriet Johnson, who raised them. After reaching Canada, Frank and Emily Wanzer had their own children, none of whom survived to adulthood, and so all of Frank Wanzer's descendants derived from his daughters Annie and Marietta who grew up in Virginia and moved to New Jersey later in the century. Marietta had twenty children doing much to account for the large family reunions held by Wanzer descendants today.

Frank Wanzer left an uplifting sense of determination to his descendants. His daughter Annie married Benjamin Allen of New Mountain Road, a half mile east of Aldie, a free Black born in 1849 who, far ahead of his time, had graduated from normal school, a teacher training institution. Side-stepping the era's restrictions, Annie and Benjamin Allen home-schooled their children. Their descendants include Ronald Dellums, a Member of Congress who for 15 terms represented Berkeley and Oakland, California, then became Mayor of Oakland; his son Eric Dellums, the actor; and Professor Emeritus Nathan Huggins who chaired Harvard's African-American Studies Department. The Wanzers are also related by marriage to President Andrew Jackson's wife, Rachel.

In the 1890s, two of Annie and Benjamin Allen's children, John Benjamin Allen and Elizabeth Allen, moved from Virginia to Toronto to be with their grandfather, Frank Wanzer. In the twentieth century, John Allen's son, Dr. John Ira Nelson, practiced dentistry in Tupelo, Mississippi, at the time an improbable island of relative racial tolerance. Two of Dr. Nelson's children, Winona and Allen Nelson, have spent decades researching Frank Wanzer, the escape, the couples' lives in Canada, and family genealogy. The Nelson siblings, Frank and Harriet Wanzer's great-great-grandchildren, were schooled well through mid-life on Frank Wanzer by their parents, grandparents and particularly their great-aunt, Elizabeth Allen, who was 28 when Wanzer died and lived to 109. Her grand-nephew, Allen Nelson, recorded her oral history when she turned 100.

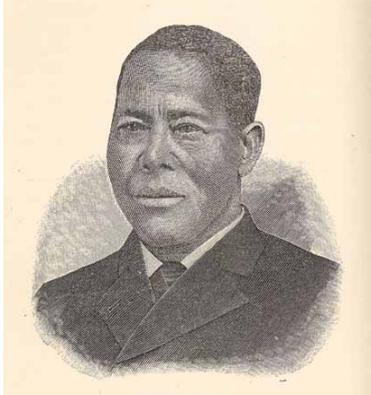
Allen Nelson, a mechanical engineer retired from the University of the District of Columbia, is an active sculptor with several large commissioned outdoor works permanently installed in Washington, DC.²⁴ Nelson commissioned a color rendition of William Still's engraving of the Hood's Mill encounter, and several fine drawings portraying the six freedom seekers' flight. It was Mr. Nelson who rediscovered the Toronto graves. He is of inestimable help to many including the author in their Underground Railroad research.

One rarely sees Underground Railroad figures listed in the pantheon of American greats, but it was they, more than the Nobelists, explorers, inventors or generals, who most clearly articulated the moral bedrock of what it means to be an American. When we think of who best exemplifies the United States, it ought to be such as the Wanzers, Grigsbys, Whipper, Still and Loguen who come to mind, and perhaps even more so the Unknown Freedom Seeker, the uncounted

anonymous souls who bolted for their freedom. Let us forever cherish them all for anchoring the American moral compass.



Underground Railroad educator and author Peter H. Michael is publisher of *Underground Railroad Free Press*, the nation's top-circulation Underground Railroad news publication, and owner of Frederick County's Cooling Springs Farm, an Underground Railroad historic site open to the public. Visit urrFreePress.com and CoolingSprings.org for more.



William Still



William Whipper



Oak Hill Mansion in 1853



The Grigsbys' reward poster



The fight at Hood's Mill

Endnotes

- ¹ "Earliest Use of the Term Underground Railroad," *Underground Railroad Free Press*, vol. 5, no. 23 January, 2010, p.2; and vol. 5, no. 24, March, 2010, p. 2
- ² Bordewich, Fergus, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*, Amistad/Harper Collins, 2005. This is the definitive Underground Railroad history.
- ³ Curry, James, his narrative of slavery, reprinted in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, John W. Blassingame, editor, Louisiana State University Press, 1977
- ⁴ Scheel, Eugene M., "Journey to Freedom Was Risky for Slaves and Guides," *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2001
- ⁵ National Park Service, *Book of the Harper's Ferry National Historic Park*, Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, for listing in the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, December 31, 2001
- ⁶ Private communication (email), Professor Emerita of History Judith Wellman, State University of New York, Oswego, to Peter H. Michael, 2004
- ⁷ Thompson, John, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave; Containing His History of 25 Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape. Written by Himself*, C. Hamilton Palladium Office, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1856
- ⁸ National Park Service, *Book of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park*, Sharpsburg, Maryland, for listing of Ferry Hill in the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, January 15, 2002, p. 6
- ⁹ Michael, Peter H., *Guide to Freedom: Rediscovering the Underground Railroad In One United States County*, Author House, 2008
- ¹⁰ William Still has the couple's name as Grigby. Still, William, *The Underground Railroad*, Porter & Coates, Philadelphia, 1872, reprinted by Johnson Publishing Company, 1970, pp. 116-122 in the reprinted edition. The couple's reward poster and the Canadian census of 1861 show a spelling of Grigsby. Shadd, Adrienne, Afua Cooper and Karolyn Smardz Frost, *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop, Toronto*, Natural Heritage Books, Toronto, 2002, pp. 39-40. Grigsby is accepted as correct here.
- ¹¹ The material on the names and locations of the places of enslavement of these six freedom seekers can be found in, among other sources, DeRamus, Betty, *Freedom By Any Means*, Atria Publishing Company, 2009, pp. 110-112.
- ¹² Nelson, Allen Uzikee, *1855 Christmas Freedom Confrontation on the Underground Railroad in Hood's Mill, Maryland*, Black Renaissance Art, Washington, DC, 1998
- ¹³ The Elzeys' papers are housed at the Virginia Historical Society.
- ¹⁴ Stevenson, Brenda E., *Life In Black and White: Family and Community In the Slave South*, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 252-253; Scheel, *op. cit.*; and Souders, Bronwen, *Bazil Newman, Ferryman*, unpublished manuscript.
- ¹⁵ Franklin, John Hope, and Loren Schweningen, *Runaway Slaves*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 58
- ¹⁶ From the *Frederick Examiner* (unattributed and undated) as cited in Still, *op. cit.*, p. 118. Still wrote that this article appeared in the *Frederick Examiner* "soon after the occurrence took place."
- ¹⁷ For a more detailed hypothesis of the route, see Michael, Peter H., *An American Family of the Underground Railroad*, Author House, 2005, pp. 56-63.
- ¹⁸ Whipper, William, letter to William Still, December 4, 1971. In Still, *op. cit.*, pp. 762-767.
- ¹⁹ See *Underground Railroad Free Press*, vol. 6, issue 30, May, 2011, for more.
- ²⁰ Still, *op. cit.*, p. 119
- ²¹ Willis, Agnes, letter to William Still, January 28, 1856, as provided in Still, *op. cit.*, p. 120
- ²² Shadd, *op. cit.*
- ²³ Still, *op. cit.*, p. 20
- ²⁴ Enjoy the sculptor's website at uzikee.com.