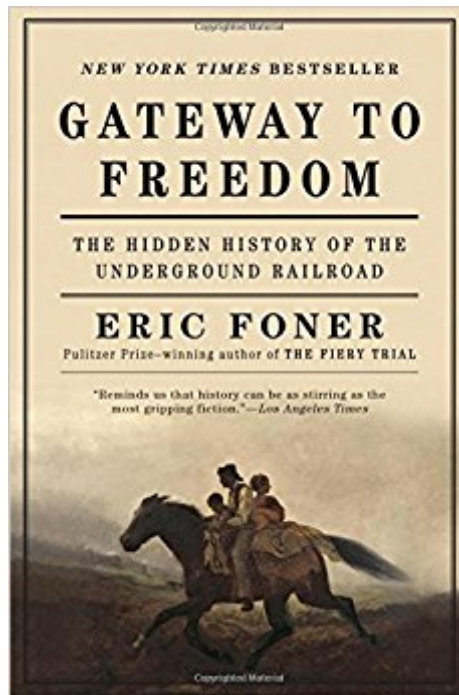


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Gateway To Freedom: The Hidden History Of The Underground Railroad



Synopsis

The dramatic story of fugitive slaves and the antislavery activists who defied the law to help them reach freedom. More than any other scholar, Eric Foner has influenced our understanding of America's history. Now, making brilliant use of extraordinary evidence, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian once again reconfigures the national saga of American slavery and freedom. A deeply entrenched institution, slavery lived on legally and commercially even in the northern states that had abolished it after the American Revolution. Slaves could be found in the streets of New York well after abolition, traveling with owners doing business with the city's major banks, merchants, and manufacturers. New York was also home to the North's largest free black community, making it a magnet for fugitive slaves seeking refuge. Slave catchers and gangs of kidnappers roamed the city, seizing free blacks, often children, and sending them south to slavery. To protect fugitives and fight kidnappings, the city's free blacks worked with white abolitionists to organize the New York Vigilance Committee in 1835. In the 1840s vigilance committees proliferated throughout the North and began collaborating to dispatch fugitive slaves from the upper South, Washington, and Baltimore, through Philadelphia and New York, to Albany, Syracuse, and Canada. These networks of antislavery resistance, centered on New York City, became known as the underground railroad. Forced to operate in secrecy by hostile laws, courts, and politicians, the city's underground-railroad agents helped more than 3,000 fugitive slaves reach freedom between 1830 and 1860. Until now, their stories have remained largely unknown, their significance little understood. Building on fresh evidence—including a detailed record of slave escapes secretly kept by Sydney Howard Gay, one of the key organizers in New York—Foner elevates the underground railroad from folklore to sweeping history. The story is inspiring and full of memorable characters making their first appearance on the historical stage and significant—the controversy over fugitive slaves inflamed the sectional crisis of the 1850s. It eventually took a civil war to destroy American slavery, but here at last is the story of the courageous effort to fight slavery by "practical abolition," person by person, family by family. 16 pages of illustrations

Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; 1 edition (January 18, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393352196

ISBN-13: 978-0393352191

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.9 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 91 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #25,329 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #29 in [Books > History >](#)

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Customer Reviews

“Illuminating . . . an invaluable addition to our history.” - Kevin Baker, New York Times Book Review

“Mandatory, and riveting, reading.” - Sam Roberts, New York Times

“[A] detailed narrative . . . infused with the spirit of freedom.” - Bruce Watson, San Francisco Chronicle

“Excellent . . . Mr. Foner, bringing to bear his well-honed research skills and his deep knowledge of slavery and race relations . . . vividly describes the key part that New York City played in the operations of the Underground Railroad . . . he merits high praise for contributing solid information and thoughtful analysis to the history of this shadowy, extensive network.” - David S. Reynolds, Wall Street Journal

“Riveting . . . a visceral chronicle of defiance and sacrifice.” - Edward P. Jones, O Magazine

“Bring[s] to bear the insights of a long and distinguished career writing about the Civil War and Reconstruction eras and a sharp sense of the ironies that involuntary servitude posed for a nation that proclaimed itself to be built on principles of liberty . . . highly readable.” - Michael D. Schaffer, Philadelphia Inquirer

“A terrific and powerful story.” - Billy Heller, New York Post

“Dramatic and compelling.” - David Hugh Smith, Christian Science Monitor

“Suspense and drama on nearly every page. . . . The art of historical narrative at its very best.” - Jonah Raskin, Huffington Post

“Eric Foner has won a place in the front rank of American historians with books that seem to vacuum up all available sources to produce bold new interpretations of the country, reckoning with the big questions of slavery and freedom.” - Jennifer Schuessler, New York Times

“Reminds us that history can be as stirring as the most gripping fiction.” - Wendy Smith, Los Angeles Times

“Tells a story that will surprise most readers . . . Compelling.” - Adam Goodheart, The Atlantic

“[Foner] carries the reader along, as if galloping through a valley of subterfuge and salvation that might also doom freedom at any time. Foner crucially delineates the profound challenge and existential risk that

engulfed an interracial generation as the nation thundered toward dissolution, or Civil War. — Kevin Lynch, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel — “Compelling . . . by turns scholarly and gripping.” — Alexander Nazaryan, Newsweek

Eric Foner is the preeminent historian of his generation, highly respected by historians of every stripe — whether they specialize in political history or social history. His books have won the top awards in the profession, and he has been president of both major history organizations: the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians. He has worked on every detail of *Give Me Liberty!*, which displays all of his trademark strengths as a scholar, teacher, and writer. A specialist on the Civil War/Reconstruction period, he regularly teaches the nineteenth-century survey at Columbia University, where he is DeWitt Clinton Professor of History. In 2011, Foner’s *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* won the Pulitzer Prize in History, the Bancroft Prize, and the Lincoln Prize.

The book chronicles the functioning and challenges of the ad hoc Underground Railroad system, and puts it in the context of the overall Abolition movement as well as documenting how the support for fugitive (ex) slaves became another hotpoint between the North and South. Like another reviewer, I wish more detail were spent on individuals participating in the struggle, as opposed to often tersely documenting the roles of so many. For instance, why would a wealthy silk merchant become such an ardent abolitionist? Other characters getting passing reference, more for their particular role in a committee or like, but seeming fascinating -- fugitives who became leaders of the committees; a Black pastor of a mostly white congregation, etc.. I’m sure many of these are hard to find information about; but I thought to really explain the railroad, it would help to understand the lives of individuals who participated in it, and understanding a few would help to understand the many. In my recollection, only one or two characters merit much examination of their personal lives. Saying that one person simply found it via “evangelical Christianity” doesn’t help much, when many other Christians didn’t follow suit. Instead, there is a good amount of discussion of the bickering between the various committees. I wish instead of documenting committees, there had been more discussion of the black communities (other than their numbers) in places like New York City and Canada. Since this is where slaves fled to, it seems worth understanding that piece of their story. Having written my critique, the book is well written, and it made me think of other current issues -- gay marriage, abortion, marijuana, and now “Selma” -- which seem similar in the sense of a schism between the states; the enforcement (sometimes extreme) and non-enforcement

elsewhere of laws; the use of arcane regulations or biased administrators; the use of courts and Congress to try to push the law one way or another. All this played out earlier, and I think one of the book's contributions is to point out how the escape of slaves undermined any portrayal of slavery as a "caring" institution, and, forced people to confront the issue and develop a point of view on the issue. In the North, it was to push out the remaining "loopholes" over time; in Congress, well, Congress is Congress; and in the South, alas, it hardened (or simply provided realism) that the North would act against slavery as it could. This seems similar to our current situation in many cases.

Suppose you were a member of a militant environmental action organization, some of whose members were willing to undertake extra-legal activities such as spiking trees or interfering with whaling. How open would you be about your activities? Now suppose that you are a historian 175 years in the future, trying to write a history of the environmental action movement. What would be your sources? This is the problem Eric Foner faced in writing "Gateway to Freedom," his new history of the Underground Railroad. Foner focuses on the route Philadelphia-New York City-upstate New York/Canada, used by slaves fleeing from western Maryland, northern Virginia (now West Virginia), and the Delmarva peninsula (Delaware then being a slave state). He describes the relationships among the various anti-slavery (a much more action-oriented term than "abolitionist") groups in those cities and the key activists, most of them black, many of them runaways, who formed the Vigilance Committees that were in charge of hiding and transporting escaping slaves. Foner estimates that 2,000 to 5,000 slaves per year escaped the South from 1828 to 1862, and pays special attention to the period after 1850 when the federal Fugitive Slave Law was passed. During this time, abolitionists were a minority in New York because of its strong commercial ties to the South (rich merchants formed the Union Safety Committee, whose job was to return runaway slaves). Yet they were able to form multiple organizations (supporters of William Lloyd Garrison, his opponents, and black self-help groups), hold fund-raising events, publish newspapers, organize legal representation for seized blacks, and carry out the activities of the Vigilance Committees. The heart of Foner's narrative comes from joining the records of William Still, the secretary of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, with those of Sydney Howard Gay of New York's Anti-Slavery Standard, with the Canadian and US Census of 1859 and 1860. Unless I misread his end notes, this work was done by Foner and his researchers. This allows him to trace the route escaped of slaves from the South along the Underground Railroad to freedom. Although somewhat repetitious, these stories tell us why slaves fled (usually ill-treatment), how they got to Pennsylvania, how they

found help, where they ended up, and how they attempted to reunite with their families. They carry forward one of Foner's recurring themes, black self-emancipation -- the act of fleeing, support from free black stevedores and sailors, outreach and organized response by black Vigilance Committees. As a general reader, I found the book clear and the narrowed focus essential. Had Foner focused on the organizations rather than the activities, we would have been lost in internecine politics arising from 19th Century religious thought. Had he focused on the people rather than the activities, we might have known a lot more about Lewis Tappan (a rich white abolitionist) but probably no more about Lewis Napoleon (a black "scout" who picked up newly arrived escaped slaves). While I missed any discussion of the Underground Railroad in Ohio, it would probably have cost us the rich, verifiable detail of the joined sources. As Foner puts it, "Stripped of previous distortions, the story of the underground railroad remains one with an extraordinary cast of characters and remarkable tales of heroism, courage and sheer luck. ... Fugitive slaves, wrote [Philadelphia abolitionist] James Miller McKim, represented 'some of the finest specimens of native talent the country provides,' and their actions offered 'simple proof' of everything abolitionists maintained about 'the capacity of the colored man.'"

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