

# Interracial Roads to American Freedom

# GATEWAY TO FREEDOM

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THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF THE  
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

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**ERIC FONER**

Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *THE FIERY TRIAL*

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Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2015. 352 pp., \$16.95.

No American historian has studied the meanings of freedom more closely than Eric Foner. The fundamental (though often misunderstood) term in our political language, freedom has permeated his scholarship for the last half century, from his earliest work on the ideology of the Republican Party in the antebellum period, to his definitive study of Reconstruction as America's "unfinished revolution," and most recently in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*. Foner has deepened our collective understanding of the human quest for freedom, the contested terrain it has occupied in America's past, and its enduring promises and limitations. "Indeed, the history of the United States," he has written in one of his textbooks, "is, in part, a story of debates, disagreements, and struggles over freedom." A living truth for millions of Americans, an avowed—even mythical—ideal for others, and a painful paradox for still others, freedom occupies a permanent place in our national consciousness.

In *Gateway to Freedom*, Foner examines yet another freedom struggle, this one involving the secret networks that helped transport and shelter fugitive slaves in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Shining new light on the "hidden history" of the Underground Railroad, Foner identifies a genuine patriotism that is unfortunately lost on too many contemporary Americans: the struggle to create a better country that might truly live up to its professed ideals. This struggle was real, courageous, and hard-fought. In 1845, the country's most prominent fugitive, Frederick Douglass, declined to reveal the details surrounding his escape, for the risk of recapture was great; slave patrols roved cities, stations, and seaports. In his *Narrative*, Douglass asked his reader to envision himself living "in a land given up to be a hunting-ground for slaveholders . . . where he is every moment subjected to the terrible liability of being seized upon by his fellowmen, as the hideous crocodile seizes upon his prey!"

While most Americans have heard of the Underground Railroad, Foner's new book reveals how little we actually know about it. Historians' interpretations of this system have run the gamut, with some dismissing it as legend and others exaggerating its functions and reach. Foner traces the origin of the phrase itself to an 1839 Washington newspaper article in which a slave spoke of his hopeful escape on a railroad "underground" that stretched from the nation's capital to Boston. Mirroring more recent scholarship, Foner dismisses the notion that the Underground Railroad was organized around distinct stations, routes, tunnels, and codes. Far from a single entity, it involved an "interlocking series of local networks" and was more commonly an "umbrella term for local groups that employed numerous methods to assist fugitives" (15). Between 1830 and 1860, possibly as many as 5,000 slaves per year escaped and ventured north into the free states and Canada via this series of passageways and safe houses. Exact figures, Foner notes, are "murky and incomplete," and

the sources are not only "fragmentary and hard to come by" but problematic when considering that slaveholders and abolitionists routinely exaggerated the numbers either to suggest a northern conspiracy to undermine slavery or to overemphasize the power of the antislavery movement (8-9). Moreover, Foner reminds readers of another obstacle to investigating the Underground Railroad: its activities were mostly illegal. Without mentioning the word slavery, the U.S. Constitution mandated the forced return of "fugitives from labor," and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 required states which had abolished slavery to respect the laws of states which had not. Enhanced in the infamous Compromise of 1850, the subsequent Fugitive Slave Law held the federal government—and its veritable army of marshals and commissioners—responsible for the return of runaways throughout the country, especially those who had traveled north. Proslavery southerners, whom the law permitted to travel north and repossess their escaped chattels, hailed this unprecedented exercise of federal power. Thus, the argument for slaves as property trumped the abused and misconstrued doctrine of states' rights as a catch-all. Southerners wanted their slaves back. Moreover, because the Constitution (in their view) guaranteed the protection of their property, Southerners demanded that the federal government help enforce the law.

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Foner's claim that Underground Railroad was primarily an intercity and interregional endeavor explains his focus on New York City, which, by the antebellum period, had become the nation's major metropolis and a corridor through which runaway slaves traveled, often from the Upper South to Philadelphia, New York City, upstate, and eventually into New England and Canada. Time, place, and historical contingencies are crucial to this story. New York City was no Boston. Its history with slavery was far more tortuous, and for fugitives, Brooklyn and Manhattan held both opportunities and dangers. New York did not emancipate its 3,000 remaining slaves until July 4, 1827. But abolition was imperfect, liberty still elusive, and equality came with a costly human price. New York's bankers and its tobacco, cotton, and sugar merchants profited immensely from commerce with southerners.

The profit motive, among other reasons, explains why even nominally antislavery New Yorkers detested abolitionists. Trade paid more than morality. After abolition, an 1817 law still allowed Southern tourists and businessmen to bring their human property into the city for up to nine months at a time. Free blacks in the city also endured shameful horrors as whites regularly kidnapped them, dummied-up documents claiming their legal bondage and, buoyed by the fraud and collusion of local officials, sold or transported them farther south. Foner's early chapters trace the activities of the state's free black activists such as David Ruggles and Theodore S. Wright and scores of other long-forgotten trailblazers, who, along with white abolitionists such as Arthur and Lewis Tappan

(who engaged in the sort of political and religious activism that the Garrisonians rejected), fought courageously to halt kidnappings, aid fugitives, and campaign for black civil rights.

Ruggles emerges as a crucial figure in the success of the Underground Railroad, utilizing what he called "practical abolition," best expressed in the Committee of Vigilance for the Protection of the People of Color, to provide coordinated assistance to fugitives via local individuals and interracial groups. Ruggles noted that whereas runaways prior to the establishment of the Vigilance Committee arrived in New York "friendless, poor, ignorant, and unprotected," new forms of networking aided them "in escaping to a land of freedom" (64-65). Sydney Howard Gay, editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, picked up in the 1840s and 1850s where Ruggles (who left New York ill and nearly blind in 1842) had left off. Gay, working closely with a free black man named Louis Napoleon and many agents throughout the city and region, helped more than 200 runaways into the city, providing them with shelter and food, arranging legal guidance, and sending them northward. Gay meticulously documented the inner workings of this secret system in his manuscript, "Record of Fugitives," which Foner calls a "treasure trove" of evidence.

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 (and reactions to it) united even the disparate wings of the antislavery movement and strengthened their desire to assist fugitive slaves in a state dominated politically by the pro-Southern Democratic Party. National politicians, antislavery Republicans such as Abraham Lincoln among them, bit their lips and supported the 1850 law along with the compromise that produced it, because placating both "slave" and "free" states was seemingly the only way to preserve the Union. The outbreak of war in 1861 effectively ended the Underground Railroad, as thousands of slaves braved self-liberation, in the process reshaping the Civil War into a war to abolish slavery once and for all. Yet countless others were returned to their masters; one Maryland newspaper contended that more slaves suffered this fate under Lincoln's watch than under his proslavery predecessor James Buchanan, that "Northern man with Southern principles." Such principles remained alive and well among New York's politicians in the early 1860s, and Foner's example of Mayor Fernando Wood, who proposed that the city secede from the Union in order to maintain its commerce with Southern businessmen, demonstrates the daunting challenges faced by freedom's real trailblazers in the Empire State.

These and other paradoxes abound in Foner's book, and his compelling narrative style forces readers to think critically about America's history of slavery and freedom as messy, painful, and yet inextricably connected. Perhaps most important, the fact that the Underground Railroad was an interracial enterprise helps us reconsider the promise—and the challenges—of American freedom. Foner's superbly written book highlights the white and black people who had the courage to work together to create a more perfect Union. Today's tensions over race and freedom pale in comparison to those of the nineteenth century, but the question as old as the country itself—whether a growing republic can embrace a diversity of peoples brought within its borders—is as real as ever. *Gateway to Freedom*

documents the experiences of those who answered it with gumption and heroism.

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