

**Eric Foner's "Gateway to Freedom" wonderfully uncovers everything about the Underground Railroad in New York except one of that city's greatest African American antislavery products—William Howard Day.**

**By Todd M. Mealy, January 26, 2015**

Motivated by the discovery of the previously unknown journal kept by New York abolitionist and newspaper editor Sydney Howard Gay, Eric Foner has composed the foremost work about the Underground Railroad. In his recent book, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*, published by W. W. Norton in January 2015, Foner tells tales about Gay, David Ruggles, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Charles Reason, and many more in an effort to reconstruct the bold risks taken by New York City abolitionists in the decades leading up to the Civil War.

Of late, many leading scholars like Fergus Bordewich have tackled the subject of the Underground Railroad. But certainly Foner, an award winning professor and author, is the individual who should take the lead in rewriting its history.

Over a decade ago, revisionists began the effort to prove that the Underground Railroad was the work of northern abolitionists who countered the epidemic of man stealing by raising money and forming vigilance committees to protect free blacks from being kidnapping by slave catchers. The position is contrary to the previously popular theory that the underground has always been a story about the flight of freedom seekers.

The digital age has enabled historians to redefine the Underground Railroad. Today's scholars have the benefit of digitized newspapers and census data. The "Find" function makes it easy for researchers to sift through innumerable articles that would otherwise take weeks of mind-numbing work looking through microfilm at libraries and historical societies. In the intervening time, previously unknown journals and fugitive records have been discovered by traditional research methods and, in some cases, luck.

Foner and his contemporaries have finally reconstructed a profound narrative that pays less attention to legends about codes and cubbyholes, instead casting a spotlight on black and white, but mostly black, abolitionists who risked their own freedom to protect both free blacks and runaway slaves living in northern cities.

At the center of Foner's *Gateway to Freedom* is the effort of New Yorkers who formed antislavery societies. He begins with the formation the New York City Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, followed two years later by the biracial Committee of Vigilance for the Protection of People of Color. Brothers Lewis and Arthur Tappan were the leading figures in the former; David Ruggles was the founder of the latter.

Generated by a New York statute finally abolishing slaveholding in 1827, the two abolition societies taken together, Foner argues, influenced abolitionism elsewhere, and ultimately ignited the Civil War by agitating Southerners into secession.

Dickinson College historian Matthew Pinsker calls *Gateway to Freedom* the “capstone” of Underground Railroad literature. Well, it is true that Foner’s book will definitely serve as the go-to source on the topic. However, for those who have already lunged deep into this history of the Underground Railroad may not agree with Pinsker’s appraisal; rather, Foner’s book is just a beginning. There are still many unexplored stories and documents that deserve necessary attention. And regardless of how deep Foner dug into the history of New York abolitionism, his work is no exception.

There is one particular unheralded hero from New York City that comes to mind.

Born October 25, 1825, William Howard Day grew up on Leonard Street in Lower Manhattan on the eve of the state’s emancipation. His mother, Eliza, was a runaway. She was an acquaintance of Sojourner Truth and was one of the earliest members of the A.M.E. Zion Church. His father, John, whose childhood status is unknown, died tragically in a shipping accident when Day was three years old. The New York shipyard where John died is described in Foner’s first chapter as a work haven for the city’s black citizens.

Those were tense days as the reality of being kidnapped was inescapable for any African American in Manhattan. Day had three brothers born free. At least one of them was kidnapped; only to be purchased and set free by his employer.

During the 1830s, Foner tells us, New York abolitionists were besieged by mob violence initiated by rivals of the American Colonization Society, a group with efforts directed at removing free blacks from the United States. At an antislavery meeting held at the Chatham Street Chapel on July 4, 1834, Day and his mother hid underneath the church’s pews as a vicious mob stormed through the doors. When police arrived, Eliza wrapped her eight-year-old son in her arms and slipped away unharmed.<sup>1</sup>

Two nights later, the Tappan brothers set up a patrol assigned to protect the homes of black citizens like the Days. Messengers kept residents informed about approaching mobs. Black owned households were made to look similar to white owned homes.

For 10 days the Days hid in their home. They moved their household items to the home of a white neighbor a few blocks away. Tappans friends kept watch, William recollected in a speech given in 1897, “to warn us of the mob’s doings, so that we might escape in the rear.” He recalled, “We had our home barricaded against a mob which threatened to destroy it and kill us.” Thankfully with the help of the Tappans, William said, “We were spared of any attack.”<sup>2</sup>

A few years earlier, William was enrolled in the New York Manumission Society's African Free School, another organization detailed so eloquently in Foner's book. The school's principal was Levi Folsom, who taught William to read from the Bible. One of Day's tutors at the school was 16-year old Charles Lenox Reason, the "travel companion" to Sydney Howard Gay that Foner praises in *Gateway* for his abolitionist activity. Others involved in the school were Henry Highland Garnet and David Ruggles.<sup>3</sup>

Together, the four young men represented the quartet of young African American activists. In the 1830s, they worked together in a civically minded club called the Garrison Literary and Benevolent Association. Foner describes the Garrisonian league as a motivated group of African Americans of various ages working to defeat racial stereotypes by concentrating on improving the intellectual capacity of black New Yorkers. He doesn't, however, mention William's important role as the Association's librarian.

At the age of 12, the Tappan brothers, originally from Massachusetts, looked to their Northampton roots to help the Day family. As William grew older, Lewis Tappan recognized that Eliza was agonizing over her son's safety. Tappan saw his potential, and in 1837, encouraged one of William's teachers, Rev. Frederick Jones, to reach out to white sympathizers in Northampton. In a letter addressed to John Payson Williston, a button manufacturer and newspaper publisher, Rev. Jones described William as a promising young pupil with an aptitude for literary skills, especially writing and debating. Mr. Williston was intrigued, and thought about the possibility of having the young boy come live with him for secondary schooling.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the school year, Williston and Tappan explained to Eliza that William "showed great promise" and that they wanted him "to have an education." Williston asked if he could "be allowed to take him to Northampton, Mass., and adopt him as almost his son." The decision weighed heavily on her. Late in his life, William remembered that his mother gave him up because she "recognized this as a call from God." With tears and a hint of reluctance, "Yes," Eliza told Williston. She explained to her son, "Education was the only way to keep poppa's sails soaring."<sup>5</sup>

William was confused as to why he was forced to move in with a white family. He knew it was for the better, but he questioned why it had to be in Northampton. Eliza, on the contrary, saw it as a way to remove her son from the hub of man-stealing, as Foner describes antebellum New York. Two weeks into the summer of 1838, she transported her son as far as Hartford, Connecticut, where William was to given to the Williston family. There, she grabbed William's hand, gave him one last hug and kiss. She struggled to let him go. But with great courage, she certainly did. It was Eliza's shining moment.

But for William, it was just the beginning.

William Howard Day remained in Northampton until 1843. The leafy river village that Foner describes as a comfortable community filled with sympathetic philanthropists was welcoming for Day as there were a few familiar faces. His mother's friend and famous antislavery lecturer Sojourner Truth was living there. Another associate from New York who ended up living in Northampton was David Ruggles. Ruggles's health was fading. Foner spent several pages detailing Ruggles's uneasy departure from the antislavery movement in New York and subsequent arrival to Northampton in 1842 to treat his developing ailments at a water therapy facility.

Before Day went off to college at Oberlin, he and Ruggles were able to build upon their friendship. Ruggles, and in truth, the environs of New York City, certainly had a lasting influence on Day.

William Howard Day endured through three eras of the nineteenth century—slavery, war, and freedom. He went on to lead Underground Railroad operations in Oberlin, Cleveland, and Chatham, Ontario. He worked on the refugee slave settlements in Canada. He debated Frederick Douglass several times over how to educate free black citizens. Months before the Harper's Ferry raid, the radical abolitionist John Brown paid Day to print his provisional constitution of a slave free United States. Day served as an itinerant preacher for the A.M.E. Zion Church. He published nine different newspapers during his lifetime. Day became the foremost orator for the Underground Railroad's successive organization known as the Equal Rights League. The role afforded him the opportunity to speak along side J.W.C. Pennington of New York. Day also became a leading activist in the New York and Pennsylvania public school systems.

It is a peculiar scenario; if one picks up virtually any book about the subject written before 1913, Day is included in the story along side Ruggles, Douglass, William Still, and Harriet Tubman. It was in that year when William Henry Ferris claimed that Day "had eclipsed Frederick Douglass and every other colored speaker." Even W.E.B Du Bois suggested in 1950, "It is our duty as men and women living in this new day to understand and understand thoroughly what has taken place since the death of William Howard Day."

It is unfortunate that existing scholars have not unearthed Day's contributions to the freedom struggle. Especially since his nineteenth century contemporaries spoke so much about him. Daniel Biddle and Murray Dubin's 2010 book, *Tasting Freedom*, about Octavius Catto, the slain Philadelphia civil rights leader, doesn't give Day a single mention. It is an unfortunate omission considering Day was just feet away from Catto when he was shot, and that Day helped carry Catto's body to the police station for medical assistance.<sup>6</sup> The oversight does not end there. Only a few John Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman biographers include Day in their stories. Yet still, Day gets a paragraph, maybe two, in those accounts.

For a really long time, Dr. Foner's *Gateway to Freedom* will be the first book people look to learn about the Underground Railroad. But with some unfortunate holes, it certainly is no "capstone." How could he include everything?

Foner claimed in his introduction, "the story of the underground railroad in New York is like a jigsaw puzzle many of whose pieces have been irretrievably lost." How sad? Because if you go through life and never learn about William Howard Day, then you will miss out on one of the greatest stories of courage that American history has to offer.

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<sup>1</sup> Richards, Leonard L., *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970) 26-28.

<sup>2</sup> Day, William Howard. "Speech by William Howard Day at the commemoration ceremony of two runaway slaves' burial site in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania." (Dauphin County Historical Society, Harrisburg, PA); Richards, Leonard L., *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970) 28-29; Kilde, Jeanne Halgren, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 38; *Liberator*, July 12, 1834; *New York Commercial Advertiser*, July 7, 1834; (New York) *Emancipator*, July 8 and 15, 1834

<sup>3</sup> Andrews, Charles, C., *The History of the New York African Free- Schools, From their Establishment in 1787, to the Present Time;: Embracing A Period of More than Forty Years: Also a Brief Account of the Successful Labors, of the New York Manumission Society* (New York: Printed by Mahlon Day, No. 376, Pearl-Street, 1830) 112-14, 125-26; Speech by William Howard Day, August 3, 1898, in Harrisburg, Pa. Found at the Dauphin County Historical Society, 219 South Front Street, Harrisburg, PA 17104; U.S. Census Report for Ransom F. Wake, Year: 1850; Census Place: New York Ward 8, New York, New York; Roll M432\_542; Page: 390A; Image: 386; (New York) *Colored Americans*, June 24, 1837; Ripley, C. Peter, *The Black Abolitionist Papers: The United States, 1830-1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 226-28

<sup>4</sup> Williston, Martin L., *Reminiscences From the Life and Character of Deacon John P. Williston* (typescript, in Forbes Library, Northampton), 4; Tyler, William Seymour, *A discourse commemorative of Hon. Samuel Williston, delivered in the Payson church at Easthampton, September 13, 1874, and also in the college church at Amherst, September 20* (Springfield, Mass., C. W. Bryan and company, printers, 1874) 30; *The Colored American*, October 20, 1838

<sup>5</sup> (Harrisburg, Pa) *Telegraph*, December 3, 1900; Speech by William Howard Day, August, 3, 1898, found at the Dauphin County Historical Society.

<sup>6</sup> (Harrisburg) *Telegraph*, October 14, 1871; Nash, Gary B., *The City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) 252-54; Avery, Ron, *City of Brotherly Mayhem: Philadelphia Crimes & Criminals* (Philadelphia: Otis Books, 1997) 19-21; Lane, Roger, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia and Ours: On the Past and Future of the Black City in America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 149.