
Review

Reviewed Work(s): Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad by Eric Foner

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slavery as a dynamic and modern social formation. *The Half Has Never Been Told* will undoubtedly shape debates in the field for many years to come.

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Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad. By Eric Foner. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015. Pp. 301. \$26.95 cloth)

In *Gateway to Freedom*, Eric Foner has provided us with an ample retelling of the underground railroad as it existed in its east coast incarnation. It situates our thinking about fugitive slaves within a postrevisionist framework that describes the willingness of northern whites and free black abolitionists to help runaways while still giving the proper nod to slaves themselves—who made those decisions on their own, took far more risk, and drove the entire business of what would become known popularly as the “underground railroad.”

In Foner’s railroad, there were plenty of random white and black northerners willing to help runaway slaves when given the opportunity. There were also more organized vigilance committees like the one in New York, which helped coordinate a variety of antislavery activities, from ensuring that runaways found a bed, found protection, and found their way upstate, ultimately en route to Canada, to more public and prosaic efforts to gain political and educational rights for free black northerners and to file lawsuits on their behalf. They raised money, published runaway accounts, and fought the persistent problem of kidnapping in the name of returning fugitive slaves. Such is the most important work that Foner does in *Gateway to Freedom*: he broadens the scope of what we think of when we think of the underground railroad, including many elements of activism

that were not underground at all. In this telling, all abolitionism that was willing, even simply in theory, to break an unjust law in aid of freeing a slave, was inherently part of the underground railroad.

It is an interesting line to draw. What makes Foner's work so necessary is that there really are meaningful disputes over the nature of the underground railroad (and even its very existence). One is reminded of the old joke that the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. Similarly, the underground railroad was not underground, and, although runaway slaves often did use trains to get north, their path was not exclusive to railroads and did not have anything approximating the corporate infrastructure of a railroad. In casting his net so wide, however, including abolitionist pamphlets and newspaper advertisements placed by city vigilance committees, lawsuits filed on behalf of runaways, and sustained arguments against the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 as part of the endeavor, the new blurred line becomes the one that separates the underground railroad and general abolitionism. Perhaps, however, that is Foner's point. The Holy Roman Empire might not have been so holy, but we have a good working conception of what it was. Foner expands our definition of just what constituted the underground railroad in New York, but that in itself is a demonstration that our definitions have not been working.

Of course, New York is the most persistent character in the story. *Gateway to Freedom* is imbued with a sense of place—of the Upper South as the eye of the slave storm, with runaways forcing the issue by weakening local economies and forcing northerners into moral choices against the law; of the stops along the way for fugitive slaves, from lonely outposts to larger northern cities, all of which eventually developed versions of New York's vigilance committee; but mostly of New York. There were similar networks of concerned citizens doing similar work in points west, but Foner's is a story of the most heavily trod route. He describes the history of slavery and antislavery in New York, the development of legitimate abolitionism, and the creation and work of the New York Vigilance Committee. Perhaps most

fascinating is the book's seventh chapter, which uses a rare record of fugitives kept by abolitionist editor Sydney Howard Gay to reconstruct the stories of those slaves, reminding readers that the broader esoteric discussions about definitions and organizational chains pale in comparison to the lived reality of being a slave who forced those chains into being through the courage of their own discontent.

Those who are familiar with Foner's previous work will not be surprised to find that gender is not a category that enters into the author's calculus, even though theorizing gender would seem particularly appropriate to the study of such a large and diverse undertaking. (A full revision of abolitionist revisionism will never be complete until it is more fully taken into account.) But with that exception, Foner does his usual masterful job dissecting one of the seminal movements of the nineteenth century. Whatever the definition of "underground railroad" might actually be, we can, after reading *Gateway to Freedom*, feel a fuller understanding of what providing a pathway for freedom was like in New York City. Like our knowledge of the Holy Roman Empire, we can now better understand each other when talking about the underground railroad, even when our descriptions belie our intent.

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Agriculture and the Confederacy: Policy, Productivity, and Power in the Civil War South. By R. Douglas Hurt. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. Pp. 349. \$40.00 cloth; \$29.99 ebook)

At its creation the Confederacy possessed one very important asset—a highly productive agricultural sector. Few southerners doubted the power of agriculture to both achieve foreign policy objec-