

The Underground Railroad in Oberlin *History and Memory*

by

Carol Lasser
Professor of History
Oberlin College^[1]

Presented at

"Threads of Freedom: The Underground Railroad Story in Quilts,"

a symposium co-sponsored by the Oberlin Historical and Improvement Organization and the Firelands Association for the Visual Arts

June 23, 2001

Please be sure to cite this paper appropriately.

Oberlinians--or Oberlinites as we would have been called in the nineteenth century--take great pride in the town's resistance to slavery in the years before the Civil War. We like to think of ourselves as "the town that started the Civil War," as the title of a recent book by Nat Brandt has put it.^[2] From the antislavery conversion of college and community in 1835 that was fostered by the influx of the so-called Lane Rebels, Oberlin has embraced a self image as a place committed to the struggle for racial justice--in today's language, a "commitment to diversity." In our cherished version of ourselves and our history, our essential founding story is the narrative of how, in the early days, antislavery

religion and politics joined together to foster a haven of interracial cooperation. Opposition to slavery found its expression not only in the election of antislavery state and national candidates, but also in the pointed assertions of African American equality. Oberlin had not only a college that was a pioneer in the higher education of African Americans; it also had public schools that educated white and African American children side by side at a time when the state of Ohio did not require black schooling, much less integrated classrooms. Oberlin even elected an African American man, John Mercer Langston, to the town's first board of education, and then chose him as its secretary.

It's a rich history, one in which we like to remember that Oberlin residents, black and white, college and community, were "practical emancipationists," aiding fugitives from slavery. And it is this vision of ourselves that makes us a particularly appropriate venue for the "Threads of Freedom" symposium and the exhibition of African American quilts.

I've been an Oberlinian for 21 years now, all this time engaged in the craft of history, while also enjoying living in a town with Oberlin's heritage. Today, I want to position myself in my two roles --historian and resident--as I talk about Oberlin and the Underground Railroad. And what I want to suggest is that Oberlin's history, and especially Oberlin's history as a station on the Underground provides us a heritage of pride but also one of ambiguity. This ambiguity is not unique to Oberlin, but is particularly apparent here.

Now when I say "ambiguity," I'm not concerned here with getting the "facts" straight. I, like many others, have heard the stories of the Underground Railroad in Oberlin that are just well beyond the boundaries of reasonable belief--like those stories of tunnels running under Tappan Square; or the more recent myth that the sculpture placed in front of the College's Talcott Hall at the corner of College and Professor represents "the place" where the Underground Railroad came "above ground"; or about the secret rooms for hiding slaves in houses that one soon learns were not built until the 1870s.

I'm actually quite interested in these stories, these created historical myths, because of what they tell us about the ways we construct our sense of ourselves and our past. Here, what we have

come to believe is, in some ways, as telling as what "really" was. I'm interested both in mythical constructions and in the real sites of resistance to slavery--and Oberlin has plenty of both.

When I talk about ambiguities, then, I'm interested in the many different ways we can tell the story of our past, about how different people make for our histories different meanings. When I think about Oberlin history in general, and Underground Railroad history in particular, I think of the different versions of our story that we can tell. Some of my more "progressive" students, for example, see in Oberlin's history a tale of decline; they believe that Oberlin's heroic antislavery commitment, so critical in the antebellum years, has never been equaled; and they think of Oberlin as a town that has fallen from the golden age of active racial radicalism. For some of my African American colleagues and friends, the story of Oberlin is one in which whites, however well meaning, have appropriated for themselves the narrative of the town's struggle to establish an enclave of racial justice in a racist era. And they feel robbed of a past that seems now to be promoted for purposes of heritage tourism, distanced from the lived realities of Oberlin's people of color today, who still struggle for racial justice. At heart, both these interpretations are not "the facts," but rather how we see them, and even more than that, how we use them.

The ambiguity then has to do with *who* is telling the story, for *what audience*, and *why*. The questions about whose past, and whose interpretation of the past we use in Oberlin--in looking at our long history in general, but also at the Underground Railroad in particular-- make Oberlin's history particularly challenging, complex, and, for me, both important and engaging. We struggle with the relationship of history and memory, of what *was* our history, but also about *how* we should tell the story--and *who* should tell the story. Race, a central issue in the story of the Underground Railroad, is very important to us in Oberlin today--not always easy to deal with, but then, as now, critical to our perceptions of ourselves, our history and our myths.

So, in the essay that follows, I want to trace some of the ways in which the history of Oberlin and the Underground Railroad have been written and how it has been fused into Oberlin's sense of self. But I also want to work toward a particular version of that history. I want to suggest the critical role played by Oberlin's vibrant antebellum free African American community in the town's success as

station on the Underground Railroad. White Oberlinians and abolitionists undertook important supporting roles; but in the end, it was the presence of a thriving African American community in Oberlin that allowed fugitives to "hide in plain view."

What, then, do we actually "know" about the history of the Underground Railroad in Oberlin? Participants in the Underground Railroad struggled to make its records elusive, to "cover their tracks," as it were. Since the Underground Railroad was, after all, an illegal operation, the people who were conductors and beneficiaries were careful to leave few clues, particularly in successful cases. Historians, especially white historians, looking for traditional forms of evidence about the Underground Railroad and its operations, have found themselves quite frustrated. A handful newspaper stories from the antebellum years detail debacles and disaster, but this suggests the question: for every mishap, how many unheralded journeys took place?

True, in the general history of the Underground Railroad, we do have the accounts of a few spectacular escapes, but here too, the tales tell of the extraordinary: William Box Brown, who mailed himself to Philadelphia, or William and Ellen Craft, who disguised themselves as master and manservant, are extraordinary. And of course, for our town, the impressive mobilization of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue to free John Price in 1858 was anything but a normal event. But how do we tell more about the day-to-day lives of those who were "practical emancipationists" in Oberlin?

For Oberlin, the first shard of evidence of the town's involvement in the Underground Railroad comes a private letter about an 1837 event. At that time, there were few, if any, black families in Oberlin, and only a handful of students of color in the college and its preparatory department. But one Saturday, a former Oberlin student brought a wagon load of escapees through Oberlin; they took supper in the college dining hall, where students crowded around them. On the Sabbath, they rested in Evangelical correction Oberlin, and on the following Monday were sent on their way with a guard of students assuring their safe passage.^[3] But the evidence is spotty when we come, for example, to documenting historian Delavan Leonard's claim that the first Oberlin rescue took place in 1841, when a Kentucky couple were seized by slave catchers, who were overtaken by Oberlinians who forced the pair to wait overnight to have their papers checked, whereupon the couple, committed to the Elyria

jail, disappeared. In part this story seems suspect because the sequence of events--capture of the fugitives, capture of the captors, the overnight stay for checking the validity of the writ accompanied by the escape of the fugitives--is reported on just too many occasions. We can perhaps verify that clever Oberlinians liked to oppose slave catchers by making them verify their warrants, but it seems unlikely that the Elyria jail leaked just so many times, even when our local historians celebrate these clever ruses and vanishing acts.^[4]

But there is "hard" evidence of the involvement Oberlin College Professors James Monroe and Henry Peck in 1858; we have a surviving note to from one H.G. Blake in Medina, delivered to them by five fugitives en route to Canada, and implying a request for assistance in their journey.^[5] And we have in the contemporary record a great deal of evidence about the townspeople and college students and professors who followed slave catchers to Wellington to free the fugitive John Price, the runaway who lived peacefully in our town until he was entrapped by bounty hunters. We can even piece together records that allow us to understand that the fugitive John Price was not alone in finding a haven in Oberlin, since we have records indicating that he was only one of several "transient paupers" supported from town funds and cared for by African American Oberlinians in the 1840s and 1850s. We also can infer from an 1859 speech by Oberlin's African American restaurateur, grocer and merchant--and Rescuer-- John Watson that the town, was indeed a sanctuary, at that time harboring 28 fugitives in its African American population of 344--eloquent testimony to Oberlin's antislavery activism.^[6] Moreover, the contemporary records from the trial of Price's rescuers underscore claim that no fugitive had ever been returned. And that record continued unblemished until the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution officially ended slavery, making the Underground Railroad no longer necessary.

But the evidence becomes more murky once we enter the post Civil War years, once the Underground Railroad became both history and memory. While black and white Americans, in Oberlin, as elsewhere, now could safely investigate the history without fear of legal reprisal, they were challenged by the deaths of critical participants, the failing memories of the old, the incomplete memories of their children, and the changing racial climate. Autobiographies by activists recorded in

the early years after the war have survived to become particularly influential in the writing of the national Underground Railroad history. William Still, the central figure in the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, published his memoirs in 1871. More important for Ohio was the work of Cincinnati Quaker Levi Coffin, who called himself "the Reputed President of the Underground Railroad." As he remembered his work, he spoke with great appreciation for his Oberlin associates, who could be counted on to insure that fugitives delivered to them would be successfully transported to Canada. Coffin carefully explained for those who had not yet encountered the well-hidden ways of the Underground Railroad that the Underground Railroad looked for "stockholders" who took an "interest" in the "freight," and conductors who helped fugitives on their way to new stations. [7]

While one suspects that these memoirs--even of such modest men-- may have been tinged by a kind of self-promotion, in most places, nostalgia for the days in which communities rendered assistance to fugitives was limited by the increasingly obvious emergence of a new "color line" in Ohio as elsewhere in the nation. And even when stories were told, they tended to overemphasize the roles of white conductors and agents, overlooking the critical roles of African American communities and the fugitives themselves. In Fall 1888, for example, the Firelands Historical Society convened a meeting in nearby Berlin Heights to remember the area's activities in the Underground Railroad. At it, the mayor of Clyde, related how news of fugitives sped across the area by means of the "grapevine telegraph," the communication equivalent of the railroad itself, connecting Norwalk, Sandusky, and Oberlin. [8] Little was said of the heroism and bravery of the escapees who struggled with climate and terrain, and with the everyday hazards of their journey. While we can celebrate conductors, and we can appreciate the need to document local achievement, we also need to appreciate that they collaborated and assisted those who had already taken the first and most dangerous steps.

In its October 30, 1885, issue, this town's paper, the Oberlin Weekly News, reflected this sense of the need to preserve local histories. The editor asked readers to submit material on the Underground Railroad, opining that, "as Oberlin was the grand central station on the line," much material would be found in town. It's not entirely clear what stories the editor was able to collect. But we do know that by 1895, Oberlin College president James Harris Fairchild felt it necessary to bring together his own

reflections on Oberlin and the Underground Railroad in a lecture he gave first in Cleveland to the Western Reserve Historical Society, and then as a benefit for Oberlin's free kindergarten. In his talk, he emphasized "the trials and labors of those who were laboring to bring about the emancipation of slave." But Fairchild realized well the risks that the fugitives themselves undertook, and thought "when the fugitive came starving and frightened to at every shadow, there was no one so destitute of humanity as not to feed him; few that would not offer him a hiding place."^[9] And Fairchild knew this role first hand; after all, it was at his home that John Price was hidden until he could be spirited off to the North.^[10]

Just about the time that Fairchild began reciting his reminiscences, Wilbur Henry Siebert, a professor specializing in European history at Ohio State University began collecting Underground Railroad material. His first publication on subject was in 1895; his most important, The Underground Railroad From Slavery to Freedom, in 1898 (reissued in 1967); his last, Mysteries of Ohio's Underground Railroad, was published in 1952. He became an avid collector of manuscripts, memoirs and photographs of alleged conductors and stationmasters for the road. How and when he turned from viewing Underground Railroad history as hobby to see it instead as his life's professional work is not entirely clear. But his efforts collected an enormous amount of material, including the famous map of the Underground Railroad in Ohio, memorialized on the quilt in the "Threads of Freedom" exhibition (and also famous for its omission of the "O" in "Oberlin"). Siebert talked to very old people, unearthed photos from the first half of the century that were too often without further identifying material, and tried to reconstruct a history of bravery and concerted effort before it evaporated. Siebert thought especially highly of Oberlin, stating unequivocally "there was no more important junction of the underground routes in Northern Ohio than Oberlin."^[11] Particularly important for telling the story of the Underground Railroad, he recognized the value of African American participation, collecting photographs, memoirs and stories that began to document the critical contribution made by African American individuals and communities in assisting fugitives.

Oberlinians too in this period become aware that human memory was a valuable, but vanishing resource, and so, began recovering individual recollections of Underground Railroad history. Following

Fairchild, Oberlin's William Cochran recorded his recollections; venerable African American citizen John Scott allowed the newspaper to capture his reminiscences; and others sent material to Jesse Lang for his use in a series of articles in the Oberlin News in 1911. As they did so, anecdotes came to abound, some perhaps verifiable, others perhaps valid but without corroboration, and yet others that fed myths. What are we to make of the numerous reports of cross-dressing in slave rescue; for example: the story of male slaves provided with women's clothes and the services of town mayor and portrait painter David Brocaw who judiciously applied paint to lighten faces so that the young white women emerging from a home might not be identified with the dark masculine fugitives who entered? Or of Oberlin's white male students donning women's clothes and darkening their faces to facilitate the escape of African American women fugitives? Decoys, cross-dressing, race crossing, legal maneuvering--For me, these Oberlin remembrances of fugitives and their struggles need not so much factual verification as a new interpretation, one that appreciates the unique role of Oberlin's vibrant antebellum African American community in making this town one from which no fugitive was ever captured.

The Oberlin of 1860 was about one-fifth African American. A substantial number of black household heads practiced skilled trades--saddle and harness making, carpentry, blacksmithing, masonry, wagon building and other artisanal occupations. There were black sailors and farmers, merchants, entrepreneurs, and the lawyer John Mercer Langston. The younger people were well represented in all the educational institutions in town, and black collegians were well known for their sartorial splendor. This was a town in which well dressed African Americans could regularly be seen on the streets. While the town included propertyless laborers (white and black), Oberlin's prosperous black community was daily testimony to African American capacity and achievement. Many, perhaps most, of the members of Oberlin's free had origins in slavery. They did not need to theorize about racial oppression. They knew the institution from which the fugitives were fleeing. And in their very numbers as free men and women of color, they created a refuge, a place where color alone could not be assumed to determine status. Oberlin's antebellum African American community was a sanctuary for free and slave.

So, to return for a moment to Oberlin's most famous fugitive, John Price, we can understand why he might feel comfortable hiding "in plain view," in the town of Oberlin, and why the town paid to lodge him with African American James Armstrong, a laborer with, according to the 1860 census, a remarkably flexible household that seems to have been able to incorporate the transient poor of color--both free and slave.^[12] It is this community that the wealthy African American farmer Sabram Cox remembered in 1911, even if memory may have altered details. Cox related how he rallied a party of Oberlin's black residents to act as decoys, allowing themselves to be held for trial in Elyria while the real fugitives crossed to safety in Canada.^[13] It is perhaps all too telling that, by 1911, the Oberlin newspaper reporting on his memories could not correctly his first name right when it sought to transcribe what it called the town's "unwritten history."

In 1920, another Oberlinian, William Cochran, shared his memories of the antislavery struggles of the Oberlin of his boyhood. Cochran recalled how, in August of 1858, while staying with his uncle, he paid numerous visits to Augustus Chambers. Chambers, one of a dense network of emancipated slave families that migrated from North Carolina in the mid 1850--the so-called Chambers group-- was a blacksmith whose shop on the edge of town abutted a swamp and dense forest in which Chambers hid fugitives. The third time he accompanied his uncle to see Chambers, Cochran says he was puzzled, since no smithy work was carried to Chambers, nor was any ordered. Instead, Cochran relates, he overheard his uncle tell Chambers of the town's successful effort to foil an attempt to seize a runaway mother and her children. The agitated Chambers, Cochran recalled, then seized his loaded double-barreled shotgun, knives and pistol, leading the surprised uncle to ask if he actually would kill a slave hunter. Chambers' emphatic positive reply made a lasting impression on Cochran, and probably on other townspeople whose work on the Underground Railroad was spurred by such evidence of black assertion.^[14]

Other stories also suggest how black Oberlinians drew themselves together into a community of resistance, one that sheltered fugitives. In 1858, we are told, fugitive James Smith, a black stonecutter, confronted Oberlin's notorious white (and suspectly Democrat) marshal Anson Dayton, who, as marshal was responsible for enforcement of the fugitive slave law. The fugitive Smith, who up to that

point had lived openly in Oberlin, accused Dayton of planning to deliver him to a master in North Carolina, and beat the marshal with a hickory stick. Brought to court for the assault, Smith was defended none other than John Mercer Langston, and Smith's fine was quickly paid by bystanders. When the marshal tried to find Smith the next day to even the score outside the system of legal justice, Smith was simply gone.^[15] In yet another story, it was the young African American employee of the family harboring the fugitive Johnston couple in 1842 who managed to escape the house and rouse the crowd who saved the two.^[16]

White Oberlinians did aid the African American community in its efforts, and we know that our history has many examples of cooperation: in the John Price rescue, townspeople and students of all races and joined together. And whites sometimes played important roles, as on several occasions when, perhaps inspired by the Sabram Cox masquerade white students blacked their faces to lead the pursuers of fugitives astray as decoys in the chase. But at root what was most remarkable about Oberlin's role in the Underground Railroad is that here, fugitives could hide "in plain view." And this was only possible because the town itself had persons both black and white, and in all ranks of society--and a sufficient number of persons of color that the presence of another well-dressed African American was not immediately itself a remarkable occurrence.

What I mean to suggest with these anecdotes is that when we begin to look at Oberlin's Underground Railroad history, when we probe the memory, we begin to see how memory shapes history with particular perspectives. True: I am interested in looking for-- re-viewing as it were--stories of African American agency, autonomy and action. We piece together the covert leavings, the tales, the memories, and connect in new ways. I look, for example, at the Oberlin 1860 census to find both that a man well known locally as a fugitive nonetheless reported himself to the census taker, while in another household, a well known member of the community did not report himself, although his wife and children are reported. I now suspect he was a fugitive.^[17] Were both these men, then, reacting in different ways to the shelter of Oberlin's African American community? I think so. And I am impressed by the strength of that community.

In perhaps the most critical accounts of scholarship on the Underground Railroad historian Larry Gara has campaigned since 1961 to revise downwards the estimates on the success of the Underground Railroad. Gara's books and articles aim at debunking the myths and legends about the work of "practical emancipation." Gara does not spare Oberlin. Rather, he testily notes his conversation with Oberlin's antebellum historian Robert Fletcher who, he says, before he died "told the author about persistent but entirely unfounded stories of a secret passageway in James H. Fairchild's home."^[18] Yet for every anecdote like Gara's, there is a counterpoint, an account such as that of an Oberlin landlady demonstrating "a wall door that led into a small 'blind' garret," in which she remembered her grandparents hiding slaves; or the relation of a daughter who remembered waking to find fugitives sleeping on the floor of her widowed mother's sitting room.^[19] Certainly, the line between myth and history will continue to be a blurred one for us. But we must ask ourselves, what does this line mean?

I'd like to close by suggesting that we look carefully and critically at all the evidence we can find, that we collect, record, and share all the many stories that are out there, knowing that, in the end, evidence alone will not answer our questions about meaning, about interpretation. Instead, we use evidence as we use our understanding of our need for myths and memories in constructing for ourselves a history that is useful--and one that is, I would like to think, idealistic and forward looking as well. Whether we tell the story in quilt, in plays, or in history lecture, the Underground Railroad story must be for us one that can guide us in becoming the town that we want to be. For me, it's about developing an appreciation for the critical and transformative role that our African American neighbors, friends, griots, and teachers have played, in the Underground Railroad, as in so much of our collective past. I close by pledging to do my part as a colleague, a collaborator, a student, not as one who would appropriate this history from the community to which it belongs.

^[1] I am very appreciative for the help from Gary Komblith and Patricia Holsworth in researching the history of Oberlin. Their work has enriched my writing. Special thanks to Phyllis Yarber Hogan, who is a wise person and a patient teacher.

[2] Nat Brandt, The Town that Started the Civil War (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

[3] Robert Fletcher, History of Oberlin College From Its Foundation Through the Civil War, 2 vols. (Oberlin: Oberlin College, 1943), I:395, quoting a letter by Nancy Prudden.

[4] Delavan Leonard, The Story of Oberlin (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1898), pp. 38, 45, 311, 419.

[5] Fletcher, I: facing page 396.

[6] Oberlin Students' Monthly 1(February 1859):160. See also, William C. Cochran, The Western Reserve and the Fugitive Slave Law: A Prelude to the Civil War. Publication No. 101, Collections of the Western Reserve Historical Society, January 1920, Footnote 195 for page 119: "The Cleveland Leader said, September 19, 1858, 'It is now ten years since any attempt has been made to get possession of fugitives from service in Oberlin. The effort then failed. From that time the few fugitives settled there have dwelt in comparative peace and safety. They have made themselves pleasant homes, accumulated property, improved their minds and educated their children, and have, in all respects, been good citizens;' and again, April 19, 1859, 'During the Marshalship of Mr. Jones and Mr. Fitch, the latter the immediate predecessor of Marshal Johnson, not a fugitive was seized in Northern Ohio.' And again April 30, 1859, 'During the whole of president Pierce's and the half of Mr. Buchanan's Administration no efforts were made in these parts, in a business so odious to the people, and so disreputable to the actors therein.'"

[7] William Still, The Underground Rail Road. A Record Of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &C., Narrating The Hardships, Hairbreadth Escapes And Death Struggles Of The Slaves In Their Efforts For Freedom, As Related By Themselves And Others, (Philadelphia, Porter & Coates, 1872). Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the Reputed President of the Underground Railroad. Cincinnati, Robert Clarke & Co.: 1880, first edition 1876) see especially pp. 333-334.

[8] Special Issue of the Firelands Pioneer, New Series, Vol. 5, 1888.

[10] "Fairchild Lecture," Oberlin Weekly News, March 7, 1895, p. 1 column 3; quoted in James H. Fairchild, "The Underground Railroad," Western Reserve Historical Society, Tract No. 87 in Vol. IV, 1895, p. 95.

[11] Wilbur Henry Siebert, The Mysteries of Ohio's Underground Railroads (Columbus: Long's College Book Co., 1951), p. 226. The Ohio Historical Society is now engaged in a project to digitize its collections of Siebert material.

[12] Fletcher, I: 402.

[13] "Oberlin Reminiscences," credited to Jesse H. Lang, Oberlin News, August 16, 1911, page 7, columns 1-4; for the ruse of face painting, see "Oberlin Reminiscences," August 23, 1911, page 2, columns 1-3.

[14] Cochran, pp. 123-124

[15] William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, John Mercer Langston And The Fight For Black Freedom, 1829-65 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989) p. 317.

[16] "Reminiscences," Oberlin News, August 23

[17] Perry Carter is listed in the census; Nancy Brown(e) is listed without her husband.

[18] Larry Gara, The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), p.11 fn. 22.

[19] Eck Humphries, The Underground Railroad (McConnelsville, OH: Herald Publishing Co, 1931), pp. 6-7 for the account of his landlady showing him the blind garret. See also Siebert, Mysteries of Ohio's Underground Railroad, p. 262 for story the Wattles' daughter finding slaves in Esther Wattles' sitting room.

1.

C.