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Cover: Cincinnati from Covington, Kentucky, ca. 1851, by Robert S. Ducanson (Oil on canvas). An African American artist, Ducanson painted this impressive panorama from an illustration, changing two of the white figures in the illustration to slaves. Cincinnati Museum Center

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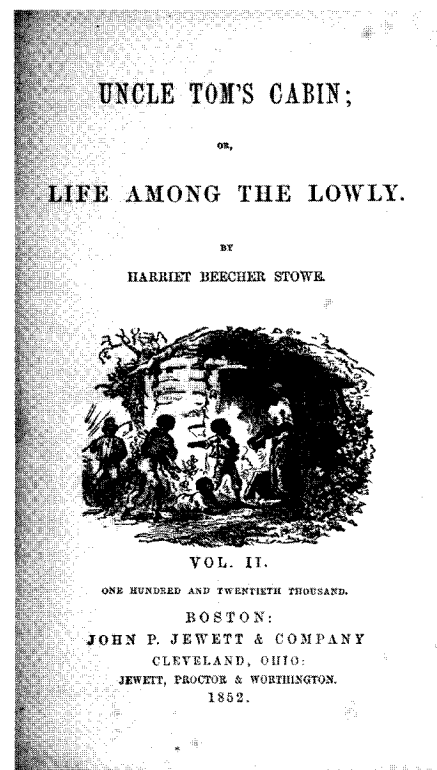
Beyond the Quest for the “Real Eliza Harris”: *Fugitive Slave Women in the Ohio Valley*

KEITH GRIFFLER

In the nineteenth century, the best-known story of a fugitive from slavery was not that of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, or Josiah Henson. It was that of Eliza Harris, a fictional character in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In that runaway bestseller, the most widely read work of the abolitionist movement, a young enslaved woman named Eliza flees her Kentucky home on the southern shore of the Ohio River and makes a daring escape across the frozen surface, already broken up into floating cakes of ice, to Ohio, where abolitionists conduct her to Canada. Millions of Americans and Europeans gained their introduction to the antebellum network for aiding fugitive slaves, the Underground Railroad, through Stowe’s work. Eliza Harris became something of a symbol for what was, in Victorian terms, labeled the “panting fugitive.”¹

The success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, though no doubt gratifying to the “conductors” on the Underground Railroad, might also have been just a little frustrating. The real heroes of the drama that played out north of slavery’s border were all but unknown to a public that took so much interest in mere figments of Stowe’s imagination. Left out of the memory of a clandestine operation that was on the way to achieving legendary proportions, they would be faced with the somewhat peculiar task of reclaiming a central role in an enterprise they had created and nourished.²

Nothing better demonstrates this dominance of what the historian Larry Gara has called the “legend of the Underground Railroad” over the actual entity than the quest for the identity of the “real” Eliza Harris. Harriet Beecher Stowe herself inadvertently set off this strangest of historical preoccupations a couple of years after the publication of her classic with the follow-up *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Under attack by proslavery forces for inventing a caricature of slave life, she provided a detailed volume purporting to be “the original facts and documents under which the story is founded.” Within the work, she included a reference to the Eliza Harris escape story as mirroring an actual



Title page of Uncle Tom’s Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The Filson Historical Society

occurrence, and the search for the "real" Eliza was on. Given license by the author, such Underground Railroad notables as William Mitchell, Levi Coffin, John Parker, and a son of Rev. John Rankin would include her story in their memoirs, finding themselves compelled to claim insider knowledge of the "real" Eliza to prove their Underground Railroad mettle.³

Perhaps predictably, almost all of these commentators pretending to be in the know about the "real" Eliza stuck to the details of her story and her person provided by Stowe, even though the latter admitted that she based the physical description of the character on "a beautiful quadroon girl" she saw but once on a trip through Kentucky. In meeting the expectations of their public, they endowed the "real" Eliza with attributes, the source of which had nothing to do with the purported case of a fugitive woman who crossed the icy Ohio River somewhere in the eastern portion of the state. They also all agreed that she passed through the hands of Ripley's John Rankin, though the story Stowe used appears to have stemmed from a Cincinnati incident (probably in accordance with her reference in

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KEY TO UNCLE TOM'S CABIN.

dent which brought the original to her notice may be simply narrated.

While the writer was travelling in Kentucky, many years ago, she attended church in a small country town. While there, her attention was called to a beautiful quadroon girl, who sat in one of the slips of the church, and appeared to have charge of some young children. The description of Eliza may suffice for a description of her. When the author returned from church, she inquired about the girl, and was told that she was as good and amiable as she was beautiful; that she was a pious girl, and a member of the church; and, finally, that she was *owned* by Mr. So-and-so. The idea that this girl was a slave struck a chill to her heart, and she said, earnestly, "O, I hope they treat her kindly."

"O, certainly," was the reply; "they think as much of her as of their own children."

punch as he did so, "ye venient at all p'int's aloi little jobs in our line qu does the knockin' down, in all dressed up,—sh' first chop,—when the s oughter see me, now!" professional pride, "he day I 'm Mr. Twicke 'mother day, I 'm just co Pearl river, where I w gers; then, again, I con to Henry Clay, or son Talents is different, yo roarer when there 's any be done; but at lying ye see it don't come nat if thar 's a feller in the anything and everything cumstances and flourish carry 't through better see him, that 's all! I get along, and make t were more particular th rather wish they was n be a heap more relishin' yer know."

In her Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin, Stowe admitted that she based the physical description of Eliza Harris on a "quadroon girl" she saw in Kentucky. The Filson Historical Society

the Key to "a Presbyterian clergyman of Ohio"), which most readers familiar with the territory would have taken to be Rankin. Beyond that, the accounts differed widely, with each cast in an improbable light necessary to the alleged involvement of its author. Mitchell claimed to have sheltered the "real" Eliza the second night out, though he was never close enough to Ripley to have done so. Coffin went a step better and asserted that his wife gave Eliza Harris the name by which she became famous, a doubly perplexing circumstance for the namesake of a fictional character. One should trust least of all these otherwise reliable sources on the Underground Railroad, given that their motivation to stretch the truth was greatest.⁴

The one exception to this general rule is the testimony left by John Rankin, Jr., son of the famous Presbyterian minister of the same name whose house atop the hill in Ripley has remained the Underground Railroad's most famous landmark. To be sure, in his case no more reason exists to assume its authoritative character than in that of his better-known contemporaries. On the contrary, as one of fourteen children of a man whom he felt had an insufficiently appreciated role in the Underground Railroad, John Rankin, Jr., likely had the largest stake in claiming a connection to Eliza Harris. In contrast to his far more prominent father and oldest brother, he

alone related the story of a Kentucky fugitive slave woman—actually two slave women rolled into a composite—as that of the “real” Eliza. What makes his narrative especially interesting is neither that he claims to have known her, nor that its details appear most authentic, but that his Eliza is so altogether different from all of the others, not only in how she appears, but, more important, in what she does.⁵

According to Rankin, Eliza’s involvement with the Underground Railroad did not end, as it does in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, when she, her husband, and her young child reached Canada. Instead, she returned to Ripley, intent on liberating more of her family. John Rankin, Sr., according to his son, “was astounded” and warned her against it. Returning whence she came could cost her her life. The woman whose winter crossing of the Ohio’s broken ice had captivated the American and British public and who had convinced the “noted negro hunter and a most noted ruffian” who found her that she deserved freedom was prepared to incur the risk.⁶

She brought with her a French Canadian man whom she employed to scout the location and prepare the ground for the rescue. He obtained work and the confidence of the slaveholders of the district. But Eliza insisted on taking charge of the escape plot itself so John Rankin, Jr., and one of his brothers—both accustomed to helping fugitives cross the river in a northward direction—rowed the woman described as “a stout, heavy woman of about five feet, four inches in height” back into the den of slavery. John Rankin, Jr., wrote, “I never knew my Father to be so anxious about anything that had ever happened, for he was always opposed to any one’s going over there and risking his life.”⁷

Eliza’s second crossing, as told by Rankin, though not nearly so dramatic as the one depicted in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, was perhaps even more poignant. She emerged once again, not only with her two daughters—one of whom gave birth almost immediately upon reaching Ohio—but also with four other fugitive slave children as well. Local white residents searched the African American homes in the vicinity, but found none of the fugitives. Because those in the area never spoke about the incident, it never made its way into the public’s consciousness. The youngest Rankin son wrote, “More people had the satisfaction of knowing that they had lent a helping hand to the largest known number of fleeing fugitives in one bunch, ever passing that way. And they were happy, both men, women and girls to keep the secret, and never to talk about it, as though it were their own.”⁸

The same might have been said about fugitive slave women in general. Tellers of the story of the Underground Railroad have focused on brave and

Last spring, while the author was in New York, a Presbyterian clergyman, of Ohio, came to her, and said, “I understand they dispute that fact about the woman’s crossing the river. Now, I know all about that, for I got the story from the very man that helped her up the bank. I know it is true, for she is now living in Canada.”

It has been objected that the representation of the scene in which the plan for kidnapping Eliza, concocted by Haley, Marks and Loker, at the tavern, is a gross caricature on the state of things in Ohio.

Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin.
The Filson Historical Society

daring men—black and white—to the exclusion of the many women who were known to participate. This omission is not owing to a lack of evidence. For example, Rankin’s father and brother corroborate that the woman who John Rankin, Jr., describes undertook the rescue mission, though neither connects it with the “real Eliza Harris.” John Rankin, Sr.—whose account may in the end be most trustworthy—ascribes the frozen crossing and the rescue to two different women, though he affirms the details of the rescue operation described by his son, including the lapse of time before the fugitive’s return for her daughters, his own suggestion that she don the attire of a man, his opposition to the plan, his extreme anxiety during their absence in Kentucky, and the necessity of leaving two children behind. Adam Rankin, too, provides a matching account of a fugitive who returned with a Canadian man to secure the freedom of family members. In his version, however, the fugitive in ques-

tion not only wore the clothing of a man, but was one himself. Rankin perhaps unconsciously succumbed to the notion that only a man would have hazarded such a trip. Levi Coffin relates the same history of a woman’s return for her children to the South via Ripley and the Coffin household, though omitting the participation of the Canadian and the connection to the famous fictional fugitive.⁹

To be sure, other contemporary sources also reveal similar bias with respect to the gender of fugitives. Estimates derived from advertisements for runaways convey the impression that adult males made up eighty percent of the fugitive population. Yet the historical record is far from devoid of the presence of women. On the contrary, the available evidence shows far more women fugitives—often with children—crossing through the Ohio Valley than estimates derived from runaway slave ads would lead us to believe. Many cel-

ebrated fugitive slave cases involved women, including that of the Ohio Valley’s most famous fugitive, Margaret Garner, tried for murdering her child in 1856 in Cincinnati rather than seeing her reenslaved. For his involvement in the Queen City of the West in the escape of a woman known only as Matilda in 1837, abolitionist James Gillespie Birney found himself convicted and fined. Moreover, if the reminiscences of participants are any indication, women were well represented in the fugitive slave population making its way through the Ohio Valley. A large proportion of the cases related by such leading Under-



Uncle Tom’s Cabin,
engraving by Charles
Rochussen. Collection of
Dr. Fritz Daguillard

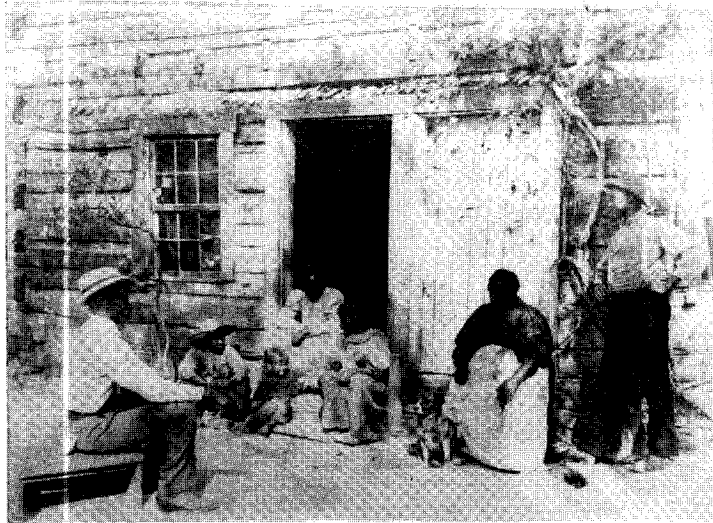
ground Railroad participants as Laura Haviland, John Parker, Levi Coffin, William Mitchell, and John Rankin detail the escapes of women acting alone or in groups including women. Even allowing for selection, more of the fugitives traversing the Ohio Valley must have been women than statistics derived from runaway slave advertisements suggest. While accurate numbers are impossible to ascertain, the conclusion seems warranted that women (and children) constituted a significant proportion of the fugitive slave population. The figure of the fleeing female fugitive was more common than has generally been thought.¹⁰

A second conclusion that emerges from contemporary sources and memoirs is that female fugitives, like John Rankin, Jr.'s Eliza Harris, were far more active in their own causes than the legend of the Underground Railroad might lead us to believe. The Eliza Harris escape in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was certainly brave, but desperation of the moment most certainly motivated it. Curiously, at the conclusion of her mad dash across the ice, Eliza reverts to the character of a Victorian woman. She falls at the feet of a man who determines her fate as his strong hand lifts her to safety, his heart "softened at the sight of that weak woman." Rankin, however, had enshrined in his mind the image of a quite different woman, one not suited to the role of the young heroine of a Victorian romance, but one "short, stout," middle-aged, strong, and determined to rescue her remaining children despite the evident apathy of her husband. John Rankin, Jr.'s Eliza is important not because she, in contrast to the other "real" Elizas, might bring us closer to the identity of the source of the fictional heroine. The significance of Rankin's Eliza lies in the clues she provides to a more important task: shedding light on the experience of the female fugitive slave.¹¹



Illustration from Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, 1849, a Kentucky slave narrative. The Filson Historical Society

Cincinnati, the city from which Harriet Beecher Stowe had first introduced the world to Eliza Harris, became the scene of an event a few years later that produced the most famous true-to-life fugitive. Like the fictional Eliza Harris, Margaret Garner's notoriety lay with her determination to prevent her two-year-old child from suffering through a life of slavery, but in other respects the mother of four presented to the world a very different picture of fugitive slave women. Having made their escape from rural Boone County, Kentucky, Garner, her husband, and their children crossed the Ohio to Cincinnati in January 1856 and lodged briefly with a cousin. As the posse led by their master surrounded the premises, Margaret Garner cut her youngest daughter's throat, rather than have her grow up in slavery, and would have done so to all her children had the posse not prevented her. Garner's



Old slave quarters in Boone County, Kentucky, 1868. The Filson Historical Society

case might have been unique, but her force of character, the degree to which she belied Victorian notions of women’s weakness and need for protection, and her bold defiance of a world determined to oppress her were not.¹²

Other fugitive women had to make what must have seemed to them an almost equally tragic choice: the decision to leave children behind in slavery. Certainly the woman who the younger John Rankin selected as the “real Eliza Harris” had to make such a fateful decision, but the same choice confronted Susan Hall, whom John Malvin assisted to free-

dom from a river steamer in Cincinnati’s public landing in 1829. Just before Malvin’s leadership role in the famous exodus of the African American population from the city in response to the city government’s announced intention to enforce Ohio’s Black Laws, he discovered that the two hailed from the same Virginia county and even that the woman was a friend of his mother. Malvin succeeding in getting Hall, in an advanced state of pregnancy with her third child, together with one of her children, to safety. Another daughter, however, was too closely watched, and Hall had to leave her behind, knowing that there was almost no chance of tracking her child down and successfully rescuing her.¹³

African Americans on either side of the Ohio seldom had the luxury of finding the same protections from which Eliza Harris benefited. When a slave catcher appeared in the early 1830s in the fugitive-dominated African American community of Cabin Creek, Indiana (in Randolph County, near the Ohio border) with a constable, a writ, and a posse of local “roughs,” the situation appeared hopeless for the two young girls they sought. Only the elderly grandmother of two fugitives from Tennessee stood between them and their return to slavery, and she was determined to forfeit her own life if necessary to save them from that fate. With her home surrounded, the old woman “seized a corn-cutter and placed herself in the only door of the cabin, defying the crowd and declaring that she would cut the first man in two who undertook to cross the threshold.” Her steadfast resolve stopped them just long enough for help to arrive. The young girls’ uncle, together with some other men, joined the woman barring the door, the small cabin’s only egress. But the dangers of the situation were by no means over, for the law was on the side of the bounty hunters, and they claimed the “fugitives from service,” as the Fugitive Slave Law deemed them. The girls’ uncle bought extra time by

demanding to see the writ and disputing its fitness and legality. The posse grew angrier and more violent. They demanded entry, and the residents finally had to yield to avoid a bloodbath that likely would have ended the existence of the community. They ransacked the premises, but could find no trace of the young girls. During the commotion, the girls had slipped out, dressed as boys, and neighbors took them away on horseback to safety.¹⁴

The role of protector fell just as heavily on enslaved women as on their spouses. After discovering in the early 1840s that her husband was to receive three hundred blows with a wooden paddle, Eliza Little, of Jackson, Tennessee, determined that the two had to escape. Local white slaveowners had always considered John Little, born in Murfreesboro, North Carolina, a troublesome piece of property, and he had ended up on a western Tennessee plantation as a result of numerous other unsuccessful attempts at escape. A field hand on a cotton plantation there, Little married another newcomer to the area, sixteen-year old Eliza, from Petersburg, Virginia. Eliza persuaded her master, who doubled as a slave trader, to purchase her husband, but less than a year later he sold John Little and the slave again escaped, only to be captured back in Jackson. Eliza intervened to ensure his survival,

immediately seeing to his concealment in the woods. When their master discovered her spouse's absence, he subjected Eliza to the torture that awaited all who attempted or abetted escapes. Years later, she recalled that "they whipped me in the same way they did the men," yet she refused to reveal the location of her husband. "I was put under a guard,—but I was too cunning for him, and joined my husband." Together they made their way one hundred forty

miles on foot to the mouth of the Ohio River at Cairo, Illinois. Even after her and then her husband's shoes had fully given out, Eliza made the journey to Chicago barefooted, her feet "blistered and sore," her ankles "swollen." After much hardship, they eventually reached Queen's Bush, Canada, where they became prosperous farmers. Eliza Little, who described herself as "brought up in the house" before her year in the Tennessee cotton fields, believed that the journey produced a great change in her. She forded rivers and streams and waded through bogs, side by side with her husband. She took her turns at



Illustration of escaping slaves from Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb. The Filson Historical Society

watch, as they never dared sleep at the same time. She faced a group of armed white men alone, managing to convince them that she was not a fugitive. “I got to be quite hardy—quite used to water and bush-whacking; so that by the time I got to Canada, I could handle an axe, or hoe, or any thing. I felt proud to be able to do it—to help get cleared up, so that we could have a home, and plenty to live on.” John Little saw his wife as anything but weak and in need of *his* assistance. From their Canadian home, John Little put their partnership in perspective: “I did not realize...that she was a brave *woman*.... My wife worked right along with me...for we were raised slaves, the women accustomed to work, and undoubtedly the same spirit comes with us here” (emphasis added).¹⁵

An enslaved African American woman named Judy had to do more than work beside her husband; she had to work in his place after a debilitating beating. Judy crossed the Ohio River with her son into Indiana, probably in the 1820s, in pursuit of her husband and the “gentleman” who had purchased him, in a desperate attempt to keep her family together. Though no longer legally a slave, her husband was compelled to work in Vincennes for the man as a bound servant for a fixed term. Judy struck a deal with this new master to allow her to work for him to purchase herself as well. Her husband received such a brutal beating as the result of a previous escape attempt that she ended up working for both of their terms. Before she completed them, however, her spouse died and her master sold Judy to a slave trader who took her to New Orleans, where she suffered having her son wrenched from her arms on the auction block.¹⁶

Self-reliance constituted a common theme among fugitive slave women, many of whom took charge of daring escapes involving a number of persons. Mary French’s northern Kentucky master permitted her to work as a domestic in Cincinnati in the late 1840s, believing the family she left behind across the Ohio River effectively bound her to him, though her mistress worried that such visits would “spoil” her. French, however, had other ideas. While in Cincinnati, she approached white abolitionist Laura Haviland for help. The latter provided encouragement and suggested a plan, but ventured no more concrete aid. Some time later, enacting Haviland’s approach with her own embellishments, French arrived in Cincinnati escorting a contingent of eight children out of Kentucky slavery, slave posse at her heels. With a reward of \$1,000 for their return serving as incentive for her betrayal, French took her charges to African American Baptist minister John Hall, a native of Kentucky. Some of his black Underground Railroad coworkers quickly alerted him that slave hunters were hot on the trail, and they dispersed the contingent throughout the Queen City’s extensive interracial network of activists. Mary French herself lodged with the Coffins. Cincinnati’s African American brain trust ensured their safe passage northward with an audacity and flair that revealed

the increasing boldness of the black population along the frontlines. As conductors spirited the nine fugitives out of the city, they rushed a large carriage to a location known to be under surveillance, where nine African American residents of roughly the same description “were hustled in with haste, and driven off with speed.” The slave catchers immediately hailed the police, who descended on the vehicle. Recalled Haviland, “[T]he [African American] man beside the driver demanded the reason why he and his ladies should receive this insult to hinder their pleasure ride. By throwing a light from their dark lantern in the faces of their pursuers, the hunters they had suspected were recognized, to their great annoyance. There were those among them who would not have been exposed, perhaps, for half the amount of the reward.”¹⁷

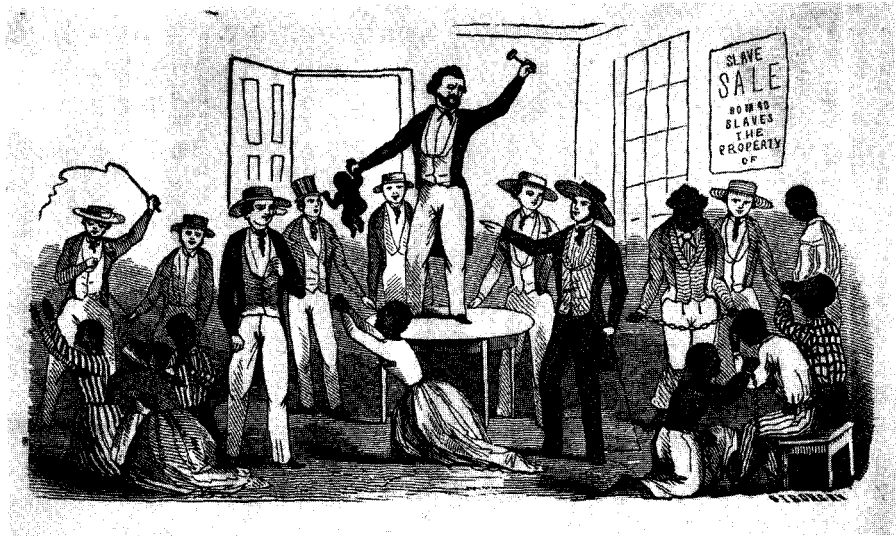


Illustration from Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb. The Filson Historical Society

James Adams recalled his escape from Virginia slavery as one of six children in a party that an enslaved woman led northward in 1824. Adams lost touch with her forever when she turned back in pursuit of her four children, whom locals had captured after false friends had betrayed them. Some enslaved women could do no more than assist their children to freedom, even at the cost of remaining in the institution themselves. The mother of a ten-year-old New Orleans girl named Lavinia instructed her child to take advantage of a riverboat trip to Cincinnati on which she was accompanying her master in order to effect her freedom. The woman apprised her daughter of the facilities that the city offered for escape, made known to her the legal ramifications of her sojourn onto free territory for her status as a slave, and warned her of the consequences if she did not take full advantage of this unique opportunity. Carefully carrying out her mother’s instructions upon arrival, the young girl located a sympathetic African American family that accomplished her rescue. For the mother of fugitive Francis Federic, the price proved high for remaining behind on the Mason County, Kentucky farm in the 1850s: brutalization at the hands of a vengeance-minded master combined with the searing pain of separation from her son. Her son did not let her into the plot to gain his liberty, assisted by a sympathetic “abolitionist planter” in the vicinity. As he prepared to leave, the specter of the

treatment his mother would receive nearly overwhelmed Francis Federic: “I could foresee how my master would stand over her with the lash to extort from her my hiding-place.” “How she would suffer torture on my account, and be distressed that I had left her for ever until we should meet hereafter in heaven I hoped.” John Parker’s benefactor, a woman who assisted him on his escape, was perhaps even more remarkable, especially because she had caught sight of this strange teenage runaway for the first time just before making up her mind to assist him. The woman held off her master while Parker made for the woods. Decades later he still marveled at her bravery and determination to aid a fellow slave: “The last I saw of her she was fighting, scratching, holding her man, like I was one of her own children. I have often wondered what happened to her, for she certainly was in for a severe whipping.”¹⁸

Occasionally, enslaved women escaped in the effort to reunite their families in freedom. An enslaved woman whom English traveler Edward Abdy encountered in Madison, Indiana, in the early 1830s was determined to blaze a trail of freedom for her husband and children. Having been sold into Cotton Belt slavery from the Lexington, Kentucky, farm where her husband and children remained, she slipped away from the slave trader and returned the four hundred miles on foot to Kentucky. Caught and imprisoned, she again escaped, and, after a wandering existence of some three months, made it as far as Madison. The African American community there assisted her with money for the journey to Canada, where she hoped fervently that her family would join her.¹⁹

Though female fugitives often struck for liberty in the company of spouses and children, large numbers of women acted in groups or alone, occasionally followed sometime later by a spouse. After the onset of the Civil War, Lucretia Harper Simpson, then in her forties, set her course for freedom together with three other women. She had lived all of her life on the same Lafayette, Kentucky, farm. Her husband had been a free man, but he had recently died, and she and her companions knew enough about the uncertainty that the war created to risk their lives for their liberty. The four traveled alone at night through the state of Kentucky from their home in Lafayette, crossed the Ohio at Maysville, and continued on to Toledo, where they found work and settled. Mattie Jackson also took advantage of the war to obtain her freedom. For six months, she got up daily at four o’clock a.m. to scout secretly around Louisville until she finally made contact with African American operatives of the Underground Railroad. On the pretext of attending a Sunday evening service, she slipped away, crossed the Ohio River with their assistance, and found freedom in Indianapolis. Similar scenes had taken place on the Ohio for decades. From Cincinnati, abolitionist editor James G. Birney reported in 1837, “Six weeks ago, a young married woman escaped from N[ew] Orleans by Steamboat and was successfully concealed by her colored friends. Yesterday,

her husband arrived, and at 5 o'clock in the afternoon they were both in the Stage on their way from this place to Canada."²⁰

African American women in the Ohio Valley were also heavily involved in the work of receiving fugitives. Historian Julie Jeffrey has written, "Although many of the stories about conductors on the underground railroad highlight the role of men, black women, like their white counterparts, did much of the routine work upon which the smooth operation of the underground railroad depended." They also did a great deal of the less routine work. Fugitives from slavery were also included in their ranks. Harriet Tubman, the best-known conductor on the Underground Railroad, who worked on the easternmost route, was a fugitive who always traveled armed. One of Cincinnati's Underground Railroad stalwarts, Catherine Doram (known to friends as Kittie), escaped from slavery at the age of twelve. With the thirty-six cents she brought with her, she established herself as a seamstress. By the time of the Civil War, she was materially well off, despite evidently never having married. Doram's friend, Calvin Fairbank, a noted Underground Railroad operative in his own right, wrote of her, "She rose in her dignity like Sojourner Truth." Doram was among the longest serving members of what Fairbank called the Cincinnati Underground Railroad's "directory," in which she had served since at least the early 1840s, her activism dating to a period before the involvement of Levi Coffin. She used her home to shelter fugitives and she had enough respect to be selected alongside "President" Coffin to the committee formed to raise money for Fairbank on his release from prison in 1864. And she was among the largest donors to his cause.²¹

Even when they were not themselves fugitives, most women who became involved in the Underground Railroad had experienced bondage. Frances Jane Scroggins, like many other African American Cincinnatians, had been born into Virginia slavery in 1819. Her grandfather, a white American officer in the War of the Revolution, emancipated his child, Frances's mother, together with her four young daughters. No longer enslaved, they were nevertheless left without means, forcing her mother to risk placing Frances into apprenticeship, often a direct avenue to re-enslavement. Though she suffered frequent beatings, Frances was fortunate; her mother remarried a freeman and they reclaimed her from bondage. The family then migrated to Ohio and, around the age of twenty, Frances took up residence in Cincinnati, where she boarded at the home of Major James Wilkerson. Wilkerson soon found that he had much in common with his young lodger. He, too, had been born into slavery in Virginia, his grandfather had been an officer in the Revolutionary army, and he also was a newcomer to Cincinnati, a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1841, when one of the largest antebellum race riots in American history broke out in Cincinnati, Wilkerson headed up the self-defense efforts of the African American com-

munity that succeeded in driving off the attackers. Frances Scroggins became an active member of the Wilkerson household.²²

Scroggins soon devoted herself to the cause of abolitionism and to the assistance of runaways. When a young African American woman named Caroline, who had stepped off a steamboat in Cincinnati with her master in hot pursuit, asked Scroggins for assistance, she did not hesitate. Though a newcomer to the city and to the excitement of its escape dramas, Frances Scroggins knew just what to do. She took the woman's hand and ran with her through Cincinnati's streets to the nearest place of safety. The master, who saw them enter that abode, forcefully demanded the return of his slave. While he was briefly detained at the front door, conductors rushed Caroline out the back and within seconds they had hidden her at a neighbor's house, a process that they repeated until she was safely out of Cincinnati and on her way to Canada. Scroggins soon thereafter married Thomas Brown, himself an activist in the Underground Railroad, and they relocated to Pittsburgh, where she continued her Underground Railroad work while raising two children. Her daughter became a prominent founder of the African American women's club movement and her son went on to serve in the Ohio state legislature after the war.²³

These women in the clandestine network provided some of the most efficient and effective operatives. When asked to relate the most notable Underground Railroad episode that came under his observance, noted abolitionist and former Lane Seminary student rebel Huntington Lyman recalled watching a Cincinnati African American woman row a skiff over to the Kentucky side early one morning to arrange the details of an escape. Unfortunately for her, she ran straight into the slaves' owner, who threatened to turn the dogs on her. Still, she managed to communicate her message to the slaves. As a result of her work, Lyman recalled, “The old man, who was a slave holder when he went to bed, was a non-slave holder when he awoke.” The story of a mysterious elderly woman known only as Jinney is perhaps even more remarkable. Operating from the southern rather than the northern bank of the Ohio River, she ferried fugitives from Parkersburg, Virginia, to Marietta, Ohio, never once availing herself of the freedom she assisted countless others to reach. She opted instead to remain in slavery.²⁴

Like their male counterparts, women operatives found themselves caught up in violent clashes between proslavery and antislavery forces. The Berry residence was a frequent stopping point for runaways, which meant it suffered frequent searches by slave hunting parties. In one encounter, members of a posse attacked Samuel Berry. As her husband endured a terrible beating, Mariam Berry sprang to his defense. This action almost cost her life, together with that of their small baby who she was carrying in her arms, when one of the assailants hurled a knife at her. Her daughter recalled, “she caught her wrapper in the door [of an old stove], just as a man cut at her with a spring dirk knife; it

glanced on the door instead of on mother. I have thanked God many a time for that stove door. But for it my poor mother would have been killed that night.”²⁵

With the exception of Margaret Garner, the female fugitives who passed through the Ohio Valley, together with the women who participated in the work of helping them, remained anonymous in their own time, and their names and their stories have been all but lost in the intervening century and a half. In their place, the fictional Eliza Harris has embedded in the figure of fugitive slave women at least some of the images of the Victorian ideology found in the description of her escape in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The quest for the “real Eliza” was both literally and figuratively the search for the identity of a figure who never existed. To that extent, it has already too long deflected scholarly attention from a much more important subject of inquiry, that of recovering a history, not of the alleged origin of a popular story about slavery and escape but of the thousands of women whose experiences have been, in effect, discarded because they did not match that of a more popularized character of melodrama and romance. ❧

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2. Memoirs of participants include: William Anderson, *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson* (Chicago: Daily Tribune, 1857); Austin Bearse, *Reminiscences of Fugitive-Slave Law Days in Boston* (Boston: Richardson, 1880); M. B. Butler, *My Story of the Civil War and the Underground Railroad* (Huntington, Ind.: United Brethren Publishing Co., 1914); William M. Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad, As It Was Conducted by the Anti-Slavery League* (Indiana: J. W. Cockrum Printing Co., 1915); Addison Coffin, *The Life and Travels of Addison Coffin* (Cleveland: William Hubbard, 1897); Levi Coffin, *The Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the Reputed President of the Underground Railroad* (Cincinnati: Western Tract Society, 1876); Calvin Fairbank, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank During Slavery Times: How He “Fought the Good Fight” to Prepare “The Way”* (Chicago: R. R. McCabe, 1890); Laura Haviland, *A Woman's Life-Work: Labors and Experiences of Laura S. Haviland* (Chicago: Publishing Association of Friends, 1889); H. U. Johnson, *From Dixie to Canada: Romances and Realities of the Underground Railroad* (Orwell, Oh.: Johnson, 1896); John Malvin, *North into Freedom: The Autobiography of John Malvin, Free Negro, 1795-1880*, Edited by Allan Peskin (Cleveland: The Press of Western Reserve University, 1966); William Mitchell, *The Underground Railroad* (London: William Tweedie, 1860); John P. Parker, *His Promised Land: The Autobiography of John P. Parker*, Edited by Stuart Seely Sprague (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); Alexander Milton Ross, *Memoirs of a Reformer, 1832-1892* (Toronto: Hunter, Burk & Co., 1893); R. C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, Penn: The Lancaster Journal, 1883); William Still, *The Underground Railroad. A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters &c.* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1822).
3. Gara, *Liberty Line*; Parker, *His Promised Land*, 12-14; Russel B. Nye, “Eliza Crossing the Ice—A Reappraisal of Sources,” *Bulletin of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio* 8 (April 1950): 105-12; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Cleveland: Jewitt, Proctor and Worthington, 1854), 34-35; Mitchell, *Underground Railroad*, 100-104; Coffin, *Underground Railroad*, 147-51; Parker, *His Promised Land*, 122-26.
4. Mitchell, *Underground Railroad*, 100-104; Coffin, *Underground Railroad*, 147-51; Parker, *His Promised Land*, 122-26; Stowe, *Key*, 34; Russel B. Nye, “Eliza Crossing the Ice—A Reappraisal of Sources,” *Bulletin of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio* 8 (April 1950): 105-12.
5. John Rankin, Jr., typescript in John Rankin Papers [hereinafter cited as Rankin Papers], box 1, folders 2, 3, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus [hereinafter cited as OHS].
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. John Rankin, “Autobiography, written by himself in his eightieth year,” ca. 1873, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus; Andrew Rankin, “Autobiography,” 1890, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus; Coffin, *Reminiscences*, 262-64. Coffin's account closely coincides with those of the John Rankin, Sr. and John Rankin, Jr., though he could have known neither.
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11. Salem [Ohio] *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, November 26, 1847; John Rankin, Jr., typescript in Rankin Papers, box 1, folders 2, 3, OHS.
 12. Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 15-176 and *passim*.
 13. Malvin, *North into Freedom*, 14-16.
 14. Coffin, *Reminiscences*, 171-78; Lacey Manuscript, "Underground Railroad," reprinted in Richmond *Palladium-Item*, January 15, January 17, January 19, January 22, 1962. The Cabin Creek community was linked to the one just across the state line in Ohio, and conductors sometimes transferred fugitives between the two in cases of danger. "Interview with Rev. Jacob Cummings, an Escaped Slave," Wilbur Siebert Papers [hereinafter cited as Siebert Papers], box 80, OHS.
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