Review: 'Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad,' by Eric Foner

Article by: GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
Special to the Star Tribune
February 21, 2015 - 4:26 PM

In 1855, James Miller McKim, a correspondent for the National Anti-Slavery Standard, expressed the hope that long after the extinction of slavery, the courageous and compassionate acts of the Americans who helped fugitive slaves escape would become "the themes of the popular literature of this nation."

They have, to some extent. Many schoolchildren learn, for example, that Harriet Tubman, herself a fugitive slave, was active in the Underground Railroad, rescuing (among many others) her parents and settling them in a house she purchased from William Seward in Auburn, N.Y.

Less well-known, however, are the methods Underground Railroad activists used, legal and illegal, and the impact they had.

In "Gateway to Freedom," Eric Foner, a professor of history at Columbia University, and one of our most distinguished historians of the Civil War and Reconstruction, draws on an impressive array of sources, some of them previously untapped, to demonstrate that the Underground Railroad played an important role in the struggle between slavery and freedom, with activists defying the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 to help more than 1,000 fugitive slaves pass through New York City alone.

Most important, in telling this inspiring story, Foner identifies a host of heroes who deserve to be remembered.

John Jay II, grandson of the first chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, risked his reputation to represent many fugitive slaves in court proceedings.

Thomas Garrett, a Quaker who operated an iron, coal and hardware business in Wilmington, Del., earned the title "President of the U.G.R.R." by assisting more than 2,200 fugitives.

Sydney Howard Gay meticulously recorded the arrival of 137 men, 44 women and 27 children to New York City, who escaped, individually and in groups, with his organizational and financial help. Gay's record, the most detailed account we have, is a "treasure trove" of information about the Underground Railroad.

And Louis Napoleon, an illiterate African-American furniture polisher, porter, messenger and janitor, was an "originator" of the Underground Railroad in New York City, who searched the docks
for individuals who hid on incoming vessels, met fugitives arriving by train at 3 a.m. and rented a room in lower Manhattan to
hide them. Asked by a sarcastic lawyer representing a plantation owner in Virginia if Louis Napoleon was the former emperor
of France, John Jay II replied, “A much better man.”

The greatest risks, of course, were taken by the slaves themselves, and they, too, appear in the pages of “Gateway to
Freedom.” In the 1850s, Foner reminds us, runaways had powerfully influenced the national debate over slavery. During the
Civil War, as their numbers increased, they — and the Underground Railroad Moseses — “helped propel the nation down the
road to emancipation.”

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin professor of American studies at Cornell University.

© 2015 Star Tribune