

CHAPTER  
1

WILLIAM STILL

*A Family Secret and a Dangerous Job*  
*1821 to 1847*

On a spring day in 1844, a young black man named William Still crossed the Delaware River from New Jersey to the city of Philadelphia. He carried with him a few articles of clothing, three dollars in money, and a carefully-guarded family secret.

The secret involved William's mother.

Long before William was born, his parents, known then as Levin and Sidney Steel, were slaves on a farm on the eastern shore of Maryland. Levin and Sidney had four children, two boys and two little girls.

The man who owned the Steels passed away, and his son, Saunders Griffin, inherited his father's property—livestock, land, and slaves. Levin Steel was horrified to see that he, his wife, and their children were handed from one person to another like

horses or oxen. Unwilling to continue in that condition, he told his new master he would choose to die rather than live as someone's property. Saunders Griffin realized that Levin was serious. Afraid of losing a valuable slave, he reluctantly agreed to let Levin buy his freedom.

Levin already worked long hours and hard days. Now, in every spare moment, he took on extra chores for pay. Finally he had scraped together the price of his freedom. But when Levin asked Griffin if he could buy his wife Sidney and his children out of slavery as well, the answer was no.

Levin would not accept Griffin's answer. Determined that his family would be free, Levin worked out a plan with Sidney. At the right moment, he left Maryland and made his way north to New Jersey to find work and a place for his family. Soon after, Sidney followed, bringing along their four children, all under eight years of age.

The journey was long and difficult. Sidney and the children struggled through woods and marshes, traveling by night and hiding by day, often hungry, always fearful that they would be seized. At last they reached Levin—but their joyful reunion didn't last long. Slave catchers tracked Sidney and the children to New Jersey and dragged them back to Maryland.

Sidney's owner watched her carefully, determined not to let her escape again, but Sidney wouldn't give up. To get away a second time, she'd have to travel fast. She couldn't manage this with four children along, so Sidney made a painful deci-

sion. She would take the girls and leave the boys, older and stronger, with their grandmother.

One night, Sidney bent over her sleeping sons. Her heart bursting with sorrow, she kissed them good-bye. Then she picked up her daughters and slipped off into the darkness.

Sidney's fierce determination brought success. She and the little girls reached Levin in New Jersey. Determined to outwit slave catchers, Levin moved his family deep into the pine woods near the town of Medford and changed their last name to Still. Sidney took a different name too—now she was called Charity.

Levin and Charity Still built a new life. Levin was able to buy land for a small farm, and he and Charity had more children, eighteen in all. The youngest, born in 1821, was William. But Charity never forgot the boys she had left behind. William often saw tears glisten in his mother's eyes as she spoke of the painful night when she had set off without her sons.

Charity's past was the dangerous secret the family had to guard from outsiders. Under existing laws Charity was still a slave, and every child born to a slave mother also belonged to the mother's owner. If Saunders Griffin found out where she was, he could claim Charity and every one of the Still children.

Levin and Charity worked hard and raised their children with a strong work ethic. The children helped on the family farm and did chores for neighbors. They attended school only when rain or snow

kept them from outdoor work.

Young William was eager to learn. He studied hard during the short time he spent in school and read on his own whenever he had a chance—while driving his father’s oxen, peeling apples for his mother, shelling corn in front of the pine fire.

When William was twenty-one, his father died. That painful blow made William think hard about his life. Working on the farm wouldn’t satisfy his hunger for education. In 1844 he set out for Philadelphia.

After growing up amid pine woods and cranberry bogs, William now found himself in a bustling city. Hackney carriages and horse-drawn cars clattered over cobbled streets. At wharves along the river, steamships from the South unloaded cargoes of rice, cotton, and tobacco. Gas lamps glowed, and in some neighborhoods fine brick houses rose above marble stoops. But William quickly learned that only white people rode the horse-cars and only white people lived in those tall houses.

Slavery had been abolished in Pennsylvania, and in 1844 the city had a large population of free black people. Most occupied tiny houses crowded around sunless courtyards or along narrow alleys. Many could not read, and few could write. Blacks generally held low-level laboring jobs or worked as servants in hotels or private homes.

White people in Philadelphia held conflicting opinions about slavery. A small number vigorously opposed it, and some of those people had founded the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, an organi-

zation devoted to ridding the country of slavery. Many members of the society were white Quakers, but a number of free black men also belonged.

A second group of Philadelphians took a neutral position. Often these were people who had relatives or business connections in the South. They insisted that matters relating to slavery didn't concern the North. Southerners should decide for themselves whether slavery would be legal in their states.

A third group of white Philadelphians disliked *all* black people, slave *and* free. An ugly current of prejudice ran through Philadelphia. One visitor from England remarked that there was probably no city in the world where hatred of the black population was stronger than in the City of Brotherly Love. In 1838, just a few years before William Still came to Philadelphia, the Anti-Slavery Society had erected Pennsylvania Hall, a meeting place for discussions about the evils of slavery. Four days after Pennsylvania Hall opened, a hostile mob burned the building to the ground.

William knew he faced serious prejudice in Philadelphia, but he was convinced that honesty and determination would win him success. To start out, he took any work he could get. He carried bricks, hauled wood, served broth in an oyster-cellar, dug wells, and waited on tables in a boarding house. None of those jobs lasted. None brought books and learning into William's life.

Then a wealthy widow hired William as a house servant. She encouraged him to borrow books from her personal library. William read as much as he

could—but the widow soon moved to New York, and William once again needed a job. Now he had a wife to consider. In 1847 William had married Letitia George, a skilled dressmaker who would be his loving companion for the rest of his life.

That autumn William learned of a clerk-janitor position open at the office of the Anti-Slavery Society. The salary was small, but he and Letitia liked the idea that he would work for an organization opposed to slavery.

William submitted a letter of application to James Miller McKim, the agent and corresponding secretary of the society. William wrote that he would consider it an honor to hold a position where he would be considered an intelligent being. The salary offered was small, only \$3.50 per week, but William hoped he would be better rewarded in the future. William's letter concluded: "I go for liberty and improvement." He got the job, and increases in his salary soon followed.

At first, the chores weren't demanding. William kept the office clean, mailed out anti-slavery pamphlets, and prepared copies of the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, an anti-slavery newspaper, for distribution.

But McKim often had to be away attending to anti-slavery business and, in his absence, William was left in charge. As he took on more responsibilities, members of the executive committee realized that William was a highly capable person—a man of energy, intelligence, and integrity. They invited him to become involved in other work. Dangerous work.

The Anti-Slavery Society publicly opposed slavery. That role was legal, but some members went further, working secretly with the Underground Railroad to provide food, clothing, and shelter to runaway slaves. Those activities were illegal.

The Mason-Dixon Line that formed the border between Pennsylvania and Maryland also separated slave states from free states. Because Philadelphia was the first major city on the north side of the line, fugitives frequently headed for Philadelphia. At age twenty-six, William was asked to become manager of the Philadelphia branch of the Underground Railroad.

He and Letitia thought hard about the matter. William had strong reasons to say no, for he and Letitia now had a baby daughter named Caroline. If authorities found out he was helping runaway slaves, William could be fined, even sent to prison. But William remembered how fiercely his parents had struggled to break free from slavery. He and Letitia decided that he would undertake the dangerous work. Almost at once, William began to meet runaway slaves who had faced incredible challenges in order to find a way out of bondage.



**The following pages contain stories of fugitives William Still helped during the years leading up to the Civil War.**