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Gateway to freedom: the hidden history of the Underground Railroad by Eric Foner

Discussion questions used at SPL June 8 & 14, 2016

1. How has your view or image of fugitive slaves changed, if at all?
2. What image/knowledge did you have of the Underground Railroad before reading this book? Has it changed after reading this book?
3. Does the book provide new information about the struggles of enslaved people and those helping them? Please share one accounting that the book covers which resonated with you.
4. What myths about The Underground Railroad does the book debunk? One example: the myth that the Underground Railroad did not exist when in fact it did exist but not exactly to the scale that we see in movies and have heard that there were “stations” everywhere.
5. Abolitionists are shown as people who genuinely were change agents during this period of American history. How much do you know about abolitionists from that era? Has history shown them as positive historical figures? Has this book changed your view or opinion about abolitionists?
6. Let’s talk about present day political actions-immigration, voting rights, racial inequalities, social injustices, mass incarceration, LGBTQ legislation, etc. Do you think we still have more work to do to secure the liberties of all in the country? What things would you suggest?
7. Page 15 “The underground railroad should be understood not as a single entity but as an umbrella for local groups that employed numerous methods to assist fugitives, some public and entirely legal, some flagrant violations of the law.” Do you agree or disagree with this definition/description?
8. Members of the Vigilance Committee were viewed by some as “law breakers” while others credit them as individuals fighting to ensure the freedoms and rights of people who were both fugitive slave and free people of color. After reading this book and learning more about these committees what do you think? Would you say that they were freedom fighters, social/civil activists, and humanitarians trying to change the world for the better?

9. Russwurn, a journalist of 1820s, believed that “racism was so deeply embedded in American life that blacks could never enjoy genuine freedom except by emigrating”. Do you think that this sentiment is still true today in 2016?
10. Now that you have finished the book, what are your general feelings about Sydney Howard Gay? Do you find it curious that he did not mention the African Americans who were a large part of the anti-slavery movement in his historical account of the era? The author, Eric Foner gives us, the reader, some explanation as to why this occurred, do you agree or disagree? Why do you think that Sydney Howard Gay failed to mention people of color-fugitive slaves, freedmen, and abolitionists- when he was documenting the antislavery movement in his book? How do you feel about him? Does his omission say anything about his beliefs or how you now view him?
11. Do you think there is one right way to approach or correct injustices? We read how the anti-slavery movement and abolitionists parties splintered after some disagreement over ideology as well as how to address systemic racism vs individual fugitives’ safety and freedom. What can we learn from their plight?
12. Let’s talk about the women of the antislavery movement/underground railroad. They were instrumental in a lot of the grassroots and practical things utilized. Does one woman take a front seat in this book? Have the roles changed much from 1830s to now in the 21st century with women and social justice movements? How so or how not?
13. Louis Napoleon was a key figure working with Sydney Howard Gay, do you think we learned enough about him and other people of color who were instrumental in their own freedom as well as fighting for the freedoms of others (fugitives and free people of color) at great risk to themselves?

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General discussion questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author's writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author's use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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Additional Resources for Gateway to freedom by Eric Foner

David Ruggles-Vigilance Committee

<http://www.blackpast.org/aah/ruggles-david-1810-1849>

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As the main activist arm of the Abolition Movement (see [abolitionism](#)), the society was founded in 1833 under the leadership of [William Lloyd Garrison](#). By 1840 its auxiliary societies numbered 2,000, with a total membership ranging from 150,000 to 200,000. The societies sponsored meetings, adopted resolutions, signed antislavery petitions to be sent to Congress, published journals and enlisted subscriptions, printed and distributed propaganda in vast quantities, and sent out agents and lecturers (70 in 1836 alone) to carry the antislavery message to Northern audiences.

Participants in the societies were drawn mainly from religious circles (e.g., Theodore Dwight Weld) and philanthropic backgrounds (e.g., businessmen Arthur and Lewis Tappan and lawyer Wendell Phillips), as well as from the free black community, with six blacks serving on the first Board of Managers. The society's public meetings were most effective when featuring the eloquent testimony of former slaves like [Frederick Douglass](#) or [William Wells Brown](#). The society's antislavery activities frequently met with violent public opposition, with mobs invading meetings, attacking speakers, and burning presses.

In 1839 the national [organization](#) split over basic differences of approach: Garrison and his followers were more radical than other members; they denounced the U.S. Constitution as supportive of slavery and insisted on sharing organizational responsibility with women. The less radical wing, led by the Tappan brothers, formed the [American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society](#), which advocated moral suasion and political action and led directly to the birth of the [Liberty Party](#) in 1840. Because of this cleavage in national leadership, the bulk of the activity in the 1840s and '50s was carried on by state and local societies. The antislavery issue entered the

mainstream of American politics through the [Free-Soil Party](#) (1848–54) and subsequently the [Republican Party](#) (founded in 1854). The American Anti-Slavery Society was formally dissolved in 1870, after the Civil War and Emancipation.

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National Anti-Slavery Standard

...was the official weekly newspaper of the American Anti-Slavery Society, an abolitionist society founded in 1833 by William Lloyd Garrison and Arthur Tappan to spread their movement across the nation with printed materials.

Using the motto “*Without Concealment–Without Compromise*” the Standard sought to extend the rights of slaves across the country. It implied not only suffrage rights for colored males, but also advocated suffrage for women.

<http://www.accessible-archives.com/collections/national-anti-slavery-standard/>

Additional Readings:

The Long Walk Home: Runaway Slave Narratives by Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise

Norton Anthology of African American Literature by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie A. Smith

Harriet Jacobs: A Life by Jean Fagan Yellin