

Thomas Garrett and the Underground Railroad

BY BURTON FOLSOM, JR.



On March 27, 1857, an elderly Quaker abolitionist named Thomas Garrett climbed the stairs to his office in Wilmington, Delaware, and penned the following letter to a fellow conductor on the underground railroad: “I have been very anxious for some time past, to hear what has become of Harriet Tubman. . . . Has thee seen or heard anything of her lately? It would be a sorrowful fact, if such a hero as she, should be lost from the Underground Rail Road.”

Garrett’s words remind us of three things. First, the institution of slavery directly contradicted the spirit of liberty that was wafting through America in the 1800s. Second, the Underground Railroad was a key to freedom for fugitive slaves. Third, for the Underground Railroad to be successful, black and white had to work together—effectively and courageously.

Historians often neglect this last point, but it is critical to understanding the story of freedom in America. Blacks, of course, risked their lives when they tried to escape from their masters. But the white “conductors” on the Underground Railroad, who housed and then transported the slaves northward, risked jail terms or large fines. According to the Fugitive Slave Act, slaves were property, economic assets; helping runaway slaves, therefore, was theft—the transporting of stolen goods across state lines. Slave owners were allowed to go into free territory in the North, using the power of the state to recover their property, and to prosecute those who trafficked in stolen goods. For the Underground Railroad to function, black and white had to share risks and work together to fulfill the goals of the Declaration of Independence.

Thomas Garrett was perhaps the busiest station-master on the entire Underground Railroad. From his

hardware store in Wilmington, which had a secret panel, he helped over 2,300 fugitive slaves slip through the last 20 miles of slave territory into Pennsylvania. The audacious Garrett also tried to feed the often exhausted blacks and give them each a pair of shoes before smuggling them toward the border. His most frequent guest was Harriet Tubman, who had escaped from a plantation in Maryland and who not once but dozens of times courageously crisscrossed the Delaware Pennsylvania border to help over 300 of her fellow fugitives secure freedom. Garrett, as his letter indicates, came to care so deeply for Tubman that he was in anguish whenever she was endangered.

On one of her excursions she could not get to Garrett’s store because the local police had been aroused and had posted sentries at the Wilmington bridge into the city. Tubman had a secret note sent to Garrett explaining her problem, and the imaginative Quaker hatched the following plan. He hired a group of sympathetic bricklayers and had them leave the city crossing the Wilmington bridge in two wagons, seemingly off for a day’s work on a farm. The police, of course, noted the wagons and expected their return later. Once Garrett’s henchmen were safely outside the city, they rendezvoused with Tubman and carefully hid all the fugitives in the bottom of the wagons, under blankets and tools. Later that day, the bricklayers returned to Wilmington and, with gaiety and song, recrossed the bridge, ambled through the roadblock, and fooled the unsuspecting guards.

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Once the fugitives were safely inside the city, Garrett emerged to direct them north to freedom.

Life-Threatening Dedication

Garrett's and Tubman's decision to challenge slavery angered many Americans. When one enraged slave owner threatened to shoot Garrett, he boldly visited the man, opened his arms, and said, "Here I am, thee can shoot me if thee likes." The bewildered slave owner was so startled by Garrett's demeanor that he let him go. Garrett was regularly watched by local police and was even denounced by U. S. Chief Justice Roger Taney.

Meanwhile, Tubman had problems of her own. Her husband had denounced her and tried to turn her in. Had he been able to do so, he might have become a wealthy man because his wife's capture, dead or alive, would have fetched a \$12,000 reward.

Such a sum tempted another escaped fugitive, Thomas Otwell, to try to catch her. Tubman entrusted him to help sneak eight more fugitives to Garrett and then to freedom. Otwell almost delivered her and the fugitives to the police, but Tubman left the group early, and when Otwell took the others to the Dover, Delaware, jail, they managed to break out. Six of them made it safely to Garrett, who quickly rushed them to Pennsylvania before the police could stop him.

As these stories show, one of the most startling truths of the Underground Railroad is that much of the conflict was black versus black and white versus white, rather than black versus white.

The elusive Tubman never was caught, but Garrett once was. The court fined him \$5,000 to compensate the slave owner for his loss of property. Such a steep fine left Garrett nearly bankrupt and at the mercy of the local authorities. "Thomas," the sheriff admonished him after the trial, "I hope you will never be caught at this again." After a brief silence, Garrett replied, "Friend, I haven't a dollar in the world, but if thee knows a fugitive anywhere on the face of the earth who needs a breakfast, send him to me."



Thomas Garrett
courtesy of the Historical Society of Delaware

Garrett not only survived his fine, but rebuilt his hardware business and helped more slaves than ever. "Esteemed friend," he later wrote a black comrade in Philadelphia, "this is my 69th birthday, and I do not know any better way to celebrate it in a way to accord with my feelings, than to send to thee two fugitives, a man and wife."

Garrett lived to see slavery abolished and died in 1871 at age 81. White and black together commemorated his life, and thousands lined the streets of Wilmington for half a mile to view the black pallbearers carry him to his church.

The Thomas Garrett story is omitted from almost all American history texts. Telling it to students can instruct and inspire them about a crucial chapter in the triumph of freedom in American history. Just as Garrett and Tubman worked for liberty together, so blacks and whites can work together today to strike down racial barriers and promote racial harmony.

