

Clues for William Still

1. In the 1700s his parents Levin and Sydney Steel were slaves on a Maryland farm with their four children. Levin worked over hours and bought his freedom and headed North alone because he feared of being enslaved again.
2. Sydney being tormented by the separation attempted escape once unsuccessfully with all four children and then successfully with the two youngest girls. They were united near Washington Township New Jersey soon William the fifth child was born in 1821.
3. William at the age of eight helped a former slave escape the slave catchers by guiding him to safety some twenty miles away to hide in a forest.
4. Even though he wanted to go to school where he was bullied, chores on the farm came first because there was a large family to feed. Finally, at the age of 17, he learned to read and write. Often reading the Colored American an anti-slavery newspaper owned and published by Black people. This newspaper made him recall his parent's stories about slavery, stories about escape, stories about his older brothers left behind to suffer in bondage.
5. In 1844 with three dollars in his pocket he moved to East Philadelphia, finding only low paying jobs like threshing clamshells, digging wells, and hauling wood while often sleeping outdoors.
6. In 1847, he lands a job as a low paying clerk in the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery which sponsored meetings, signed petitions, and published newspapers against slavery. Here he swept floors, sorted mail, and emptied trash, earning the respect of his employers who made eventually him the manager and then a leader in the organization.

7. His home became a station on the Underground Railroad a secret network composed of houses, churches, rivers, and swamps which helped slaves escape to Philadelphia the nearest free city to the slave holding South.

8. For the next fourteen years both at home and work, he painstakingly recorded hundreds of stories about people seeking freedom including: their ages, sex, hue of their skin, where they escaped from, and who enslaved them.

9. One evening he interviewed a middle -aged man looking for his family. After listening to his story, he realized that this stooped -back man was his long-lost brother of forty years.

10. In 1850 the Fugitive Slave Law required the return of runaway's who had been captured even if they found their way to freedom. Everyone in the country had to cooperate. Knowing that his records were evidence of crimes committed, William hid his records in a graveyard in a dark vault among the rats and the dead.

11. In 1860 he left the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery and started a coal and ice company whose profits made him one of the richest Black men of his time and allowed him to create many philanthropic organizations.

12. In 1872 he published The Underground Railroad which was a collection of stories that helped reunite families torn apart by slavery.

13. His parents changed their name from the Steel to Still to throw off the slave catchers.