

The Clerk's Black History Series

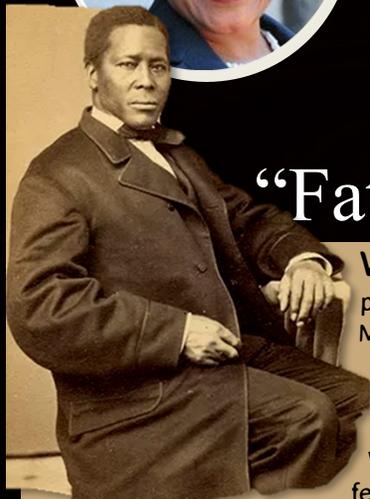
Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



William Still

(October 7, 1821 - July 14, 1902)

“Father of the Underground Railroad”



William Still was born on October 7, 1821, in Shamong Township, Burlington County, New Jersey. His parents were from Caroline County, Maryland. His father, Levin, bought his freedom in 1798, but stayed in Maryland until 1805 to watch over his wife and children - who were not yet free. His mother, Sydney, attempted an escape with her four children, but was quickly captured. On her second attempt, only she and two daughters successfully made it to New Jersey, where they met Levin. Sydney changed her name to Charity and the family assumed the name of Still - to conceal their identity. The couple had 14 more children, the youngest being William Still. Although their children were born in the free state of New Jersey, under Maryland and federal slave law they were still legally slaves, as their mother was an escaped slave. However, in New Jersey, they were free. The couple's two oldest boys, who were left behind, were sold and sent further south to Alabama and Kentucky. Levin, Jr., was whipped to death, but his brother, Peter, along with his wife and children, escaped to Pennsylvania when he was nearly 50 years old.

In 1844, William moved to Pennsylvania and married Letitia George. In 1847, he began working as a clerk with the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, where he was asked to assist a new arrival by the name of Peter. William listened to Peter's story and after hearing details about his parents and their brave escape, he realized that this was his brother. William then reunited his mother with one of her two sons she was forced to leave behind, 42 years earlier.

William and his wife Letitia moved into a relatively new rowhouse on the east side of Ronaldson Street between South and Bainbridge Streets, which still stands today at 625 S. Delhi Street, and became a part of the Vigilance Committee. Their home became a safe haven stop in the Underground Railroad system. It was in this home that William and Letitia received a shipment of an old steamer chest, containing a woman, Lear Green, who had shipped herself to their location from Baltimore to escape slavery. Several others would escape in the same manner. In 1855, he and several other members of the committee were sued for giving refuge to Jane Johnson, a slave woman that sought help in gaining her freedom after she was brought to PA, a free state, by her owner. He was charged assault and kidnapping, by failing to return Jane to her enslaver. The case went to court and William and the others were acquitted. Jane received her freedom.



William and Letitia worked tirelessly to assist travelers through the Underground Railroad system, helping more than 800 men, women, and children escape to freedom. They worked closely with Harriet Tubman as well as John Brown, sheltering many travelers fleeing the 1859 raid of Harpers Ferry. With each person they assisted, William kept detailed records documenting their experiences, noting names, plantation locations, family members, children and intended final destinations. He knew that one day, those who were freed, would desperately search for their separated family members and that were sold and sent away - so they could be joyfully reunited as his mother was with her son Peter.

In 1961, William founded the Social, Civic, and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Pennsylvania to document the conditions, achievements, and statistics of Black residents. During the Civil War, William operated a store at Camp William Penn, the training camp for the U.S. Colored Troops. In 1862, he published his first book, *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of Colored People of Philadelphia in the City Railway Cars*. Before the Civil War, William had destroyed many of his records about aiding fugitives, because he feared they would be used to prosecute escapees. After the war, his children persuaded him to write the story of his exploits and the people he helped. His 1872 book, *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts*, is considered one of the most important historical records written as it documents the history of those courageous individuals who fought for their freedom. He was very successful in the coal business and continued his social activism and philanthropy.

For 25 years, William served as board member, vice president, and president of the Home for the Aged and Infirm Colored Persons (est. 1864), where his daughter, Dr. Caroline Still Anderson, one of the first Black women physicians in the country, served as a physician. The Home's founders and organizers believed that elderly formerly enslaved persons were among the most vulnerable victims of the institution of slavery, having been robbed of their health, youth, families, and left without support. William also helped establish the first black YMCA in Philadelphia. The other Still children were also very successful. William Jr. completed a master's degree before entering into business. Frances also attended Oberlin before becoming a kindergarten teacher and Robert attended Lincoln University before his careers in journalism and printing.

William Still died on July 14, 1902, at the age of 88. He was buried in Eden Cemetery in Collingdale, PA, the country's oldest Black-Owned cemetery. Letitia died four years later.

