

# William Still

October 7, 1821 – July 14, 1902

## Teamwork



“The man who counts his blessings will not have time to count his enemies.” William Still

**W**illiam Still preserved approximately 1000 stories of refugees utilizing the underground railroad. His book, *The Underground Railroad*, published in 1872 and exhibited at the *Philadelphia Centennial Exposition* in 1876, remains one of the most important historical records of the era. The book recognizes the struggle that many endured for the freedom from slavery as well as the entire network of contributors that he linked together — from the courageous fugitives to the white abolitionists. Although Still's **soft skill of teamwork** enabled safe passage of so many fugitives, he was not recognized due to the fact that he left his own efforts out of his narrative. In turn, his documentation of the *Underground Railroad* did not highlight his role.

William Still was born the youngest of 18 children in New Jersey to Levin Steel, a former slave who purchased his own freedom. His mother, Sidney, who escaped slavery, was only able to bring two of her children with her, one of whom was William.

While William Still had little formal education, he studied when time permitted. He moved to Philadelphia when he was 23 and eventually found a job as a clerk for the *Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery*, later becoming chairman. It was there that he began helping slaves find shelter and safe passage to more northern destinations. He was also in charge of fund-raising to

provide services in support of safe passage. He kept a record of every person, expenditure, process and outcome.

While in this role, his older brother, Peter, who had been left behind when his mother escaped, managed to buy his own freedom and arrived in the area looking for information about his parents in an attempt to reunite. Peter's search brought him, unbeknownst, before his youngest brother. After meeting Peter, William Still became more acutely aware of the importance of record-keeping in order to help others who had made similar journeys. Still's role would connect those seeking asylum to a safe network of shelter, food, and necessities on their journey to a more permanent location in which to settle.

Prior to the *Civil War*, tensions rose and he became afraid that his records might be found, and he destroyed many records in order to prevent putting refugee families in danger. He was only able to preserve approximately 1000 files. After the war was over, he penned his book.

All who fled were aided in their travel by William Still. His quiet organizational role enabled Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and many others to help “conduct the railroad” for so many, guiding them through the network and helping to ensure safety.

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