

WALKING DOWN MEMORY LANE ON... *DELHI STREET*

By Marie-Line Germain, Ph.D.

In this newsletter series, *Walking Down Memory Lane On...*, we shed light on the history of our Bella Vista street names based on the records available.

Last fall, we published Part 1 of the history behind the name **Delhi Street**. In this **Part 2**, we present a notable place on Delhi Street: The William & Letitia Still House located at 625 South Delhi Street.

Situated on the east side of S. Delhi Street in Philadelphia, the William & Letitia Still House and Underground Railroad Way Station is a typical pre-Civil War-era row house that was refaced in the 20th century. The home is one of the most important surviving stations of the Chesapeake-Pennsylvania-New York-Canada network of the eastern Underground Railroad. In 2018, it earned the designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.



Left and center: 625 S. Delhi Street as it appears today.

Right: the subject home as depicted on the Philadelphia Historic Resource Nomination form by The Keeping Society of Philadelphia 2017, photographed in 1935.

Far right: William Still

Source: Phillyhistory.org and <https://econsultsolutions.com/the-william-still-house-was-added-to-the-philadelphia-register-of-historic-places-this-year/>

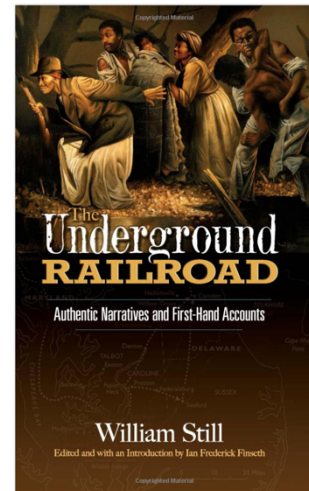
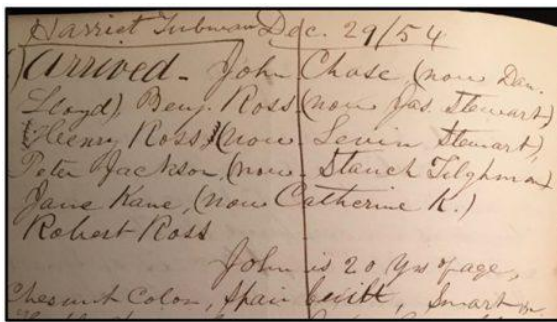
Who was William Still?

William Still (1821-1902) was an African American abolitionist, the youngest of 18 children (yes, 18), businessman, historian, writer, civil rights activist, and leader on the Underground Railroad.

At the age of 23, Still moved to Philadelphia in hopes of finding better employment prospects. He arrived in a city that was plagued by the depression that followed the Panic of 1837. During his first two years in Philadelphia, he found only short term, seasonal, and menial work and eventually conceded to go into household service for an elite elderly widow, Elizabeth Langdon Elwyn (1777–1860). She opened her library to Still, shared intellectual conversations, and treated him without prejudice. The experience, reputation, and literacy he attained enabled him to gain employment with the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society (PAS) in 1847, just three years after his arrival in Philadelphia. Also in 1847, William Still married Letitia George. While he began as a janitor and messenger at the PAS, he quickly rose to the function of clerk and in 1850. The PAS revitalized its Vigilance Committee and made Still chairman. The committee's purpose was to aid escaping enslaved people who had arrived in Philadelphia, providing resources to ensure their freedom and future, while also providing immediate care and shelter. Still was an active agent on the Underground Railroad, making him the "Father of the Underground Railroad"

It appears that upon receiving his chairmanship with PAS, William and Letitia Still moved from their cramped quarters in the rear of 22 Washington Street (present-day 1128 Rodman Street) to 17 Ronaldson Street (present-day 625 S. Delhi Street). The Stills rented the house from 1850 to 1855. Between December 1852 and December 1855, Still's journal reflects that 238 fugitive enslaved people passed through Philadelphia; many of whom were housed in their house. Enslaved people were sheltered, healed, and fed while on their journey from the Upper South to Canada. Letitia Still was a partner in William's work, aiding him in sheltering "fugitive guests" in their home. Her work as a dressmaker contributed to the household expenses. Her dressmaking skills were also used to help clothe and disguise fugitives. It is estimated that as many as 1,000 enslaved people per year had "taken their liberty" through the larger national network.

The Stills gave shelter to several well-known historic figures such as Harriet Tubman and Jane Johnson (ca. 1820–1872). Johnson and her two sons were rescued by William Still and Passmore Williamson in the summer of 1855 when her master, John Hill Wheeler, was traveling through Philadelphia to New York on his way to Venezuela. Under Pennsylvania law, she was entitled to seek her freedom as soon as she set foot in the state. Williamson and Still effected a daring rescue in front of her master when she and her children were on board the ferry for Camden at the Philadelphia dock. While Williamson and some African-American dock workers detained Wheeler, Still whisked Johnson and her children away and they spent the night in the Still's home. The ensuing arrest of Still, Williamson and the dock workers made the national news. Williamson's 100-day imprisonment by a pro-slavery Philadelphia federal court judge garnered much support for the abolitionist cause. Jane Johnson's surprise and daring appearance at Still's trial where she stated unequivocally that she was not forced off the boat and wanted freedom for herself and her children helped to put an important human face to the case. Her story was the inspiration for Lorene Cary's novel *The Price of a Child*, among other works.



Left: William Still's entry in Journal C of Station No. 2 noting Harriet Tubman's arrival in Philadelphia on December 29, 1854 (as found on the Keeping Society of Philadelphia's Philadelphia Historic Resource Nomination form, 2017). Source: Journal C of Station No. 2 of the Underground Railroad, 1854-57, HSP. Right: the marble stoop of 625 South Delhi Street as it appears today.

Source: Econsult Solutions, Inc. (September 7, 2018)

Right: William Still's journals published as *The Underground Railroad*. It is considered the most complete firsthand account ever written of the men, women, and children who rode the legendary "Railroad" to freedom.

After he ended his tenure with PAS, William Still established himself in the stove business (initially repairing and selling second-hand stoves) in a store in the former Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society office on North 5th Street. He also began a coal business, which proved very successful. He also managed to invest in real estate in West Philadelphia, and was buoyed by the increased value of the parcel to make small investments from time to time.

Still's Notes and Subsequent Book

Beginning around 1854, Still kept notes, which he hid in a shed in the African American Lebanon Cemetery (Est. 1848, closed in 1903, near present-day 19th St. and Snyder Ave.). After the War, he used these journals to reconstruct the flights of slaves from bondage. Around 1867, Still wrote a book documenting the perilous struggles of the African American men and women who had been assisted by the Vigilance Committee. Still's *Underground Rail Road* was first published in 1872. The 800-page document is filled with the stories of fugitives whom Still had interviewed when they arrived in Philadelphia. The work was like no other history of the antislavery movement in its focus and gripping, real-life stories of escaped slaves. It is the only first-person account of African American activities on the Underground Railroad. Still's book reinforced that Blacks were key actors in their self-liberation and contrasted with narratives that focused on white abolitionists. While it praised many White "Aiders and Advisers of the Road," it emphasized the actions of African Americans.

Still's accomplishment in showing the brutality of slavery, the ways it had severed families, the vigorous and brave actions taken by freedom seekers, and the successful lives they had established (through letters sent to Still from their new homes) underscored African Americans' claims to the nation's history. He worked tirelessly to get his *Underground Rail Road* printed, distributed, endorsed, reviewed, and sold. He singlehandedly organized commission agents throughout the nation to hawk the work, and encouraged them when book sales lagged in the depression of 1873. He promoted the book on the lecture circuit. His target sales goals were ambitious (50,000), but the stories riveting.

William Still served in a number of other positions to advance the African American community. In 1888, he was President of the Berean Building and Loan Association. A year later, he traveled to Tennessee as Pennsylvania's delegate to the Nashville Convention of Colored Men. He also served in executive positions for the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored Persons, where he was president between 1887 and 1901. William Still died in 1902.

William and Letitia Still raised four children: Caroline, Frances Ellen (named after the contemporary African American poet, author, abolitionist and friend Frances Ellen Watkins Harper), William Wilberforce (after the British activist who fought to end the slave trade), and Robert George. Caroline received a medical degree from the Woman's Medical College of Philadelphia, and went on to work as a community and social reformer.

Other interesting facts about S. Delhi Street

- The 1847 Quaker census of African Americans has 13 entries for Ronaldson Street (Ancestry.com, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, African-American Census, 1847, pp. 22–23, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College).
- Templeton is listed in the city directories at 5 Ronaldson (now 611 Delhi St.) from the late 1840s to 1851 and Durham also around the same period but with no house number.
- In the 1860s, Henry Lundy lived in a “neat little house in Ronaldson street” at 615 Ronaldson (Christian Recorder, November 4, 1865; Deed: Jacob Reed, of Camden, NJ, waiter, and Euphemia, his wife, to Harry Lundy, Doctor of Medicine, city, 8 February 1859, for \$1,500 (PDBk A.D.B., No. 53, p. 47).
- Though the first houses built on Ronaldson Street (now South Delhi Street) were all owned by whites, the renters of these homes were predominately if not all African American. This pattern persisted into the early twentieth century. The first residents were relatively prosperous in comparison to most African American Philadelphians at the time. They included community leaders such as Rev. Benjamin Franklin Templeton (ca. 1808–1854) of the Second African Presbyterian Church, Rev. Jeremiah Durham (1797–1857), and medical doctor Harry/Henry Lundy (1802–1867). There was a mix between property owner residents and renters. During the period that the Stills lived on this street, close to 80% of the properties were owned by African Americans. A number of the African American owners held these houses as investment properties, which they rented to the other African Americans. The near majority African American presence on Ronaldson Street made it a perfect setting to help those escaping slavery because it allowed them to blend in with the local population. Aside from the many people who passed through the Still's home, at least one of Still's neighbors also assisted those seeking freedom. Ann Laws, who rented 20 Ronaldson Street (now 622 S. Delhi St.) was paid by the Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia multiple times beginning in 1856 for boarding freedom seekers.
- In 2022, the house located at 611 S. Delhi Street, a few steps from Still and Laetitia Still's house, was demolished and a single townhouse was erected in its place. The house was purchased in 1847 by Ann James, a single Black Woman who continued to live there while William Still also lived on Delhi Street.

If you have any historical facts about a Bella Vista street (and perhaps even some vintage photos), we'd love to feature it in our next newsletter. Please email Marie-Line Germain at mgermain99@hotmail.com with the subject line, “Bella Vista Street History”.

Selected references

- Blumgart, J. (2018, March 10). *Found in South Philadelphia, an underground Railroad station*. <https://why.org/segments/found-south-philadelphia-underground-railroad-station/>
- Econsult Solutions, Inc. (2018, September 7) <https://econsultsolutions.com/the-william-still-house-was-added-to-the-philadelphia-register-of-historic-places-this-year/>
- Gara, L. Still, William (1821–1902), abolitionist and businessman. In *American National Biography*. <http://www.anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e1500657>.
- Hall, S. G. *To Render the Private Public*, 54;
- Berhanu, A. *The Home for the Aged and Infirm Colored Persons*.
- Morley, C. (1920). *Travels in Philadelphia*. David McKay Company. https://books.google.com/books?id=NUIUHOv1sj8C&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&dq=ronaldson%20delhi%20st%20philadelphia&pg=PA52#v=onepage&q=delhi&f=false

Nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

<https://www.phila.gov/media/20190401092648/625-S-Delhi-St-nomination.pdf>

Still, W. (1867). *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of Colored People of Philadelphia in the City Railway Cars*. Merrihew & Son.

Still, W. (1872). *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters &c.* narrating the Hardships, Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in their Efforts for Freedom, as Related by Themselves and Others or Witnessed by the Author; Together with Sketches of Some of the Largest Stockholders and Most Liberal Aiders and Advisers of the Road Porter & Coates, page 92.

Still, W., & Finseth, I. (2007). *The Underground Railroad: Authentic Narratives and First-Hand Accounts (African American)*. Dover Publications.

Still, W. *An African American Abolitionists*.

<http://stillfamily.library.temple.edu/stillfamily/exhibits/show/william-still/people-and-places/home-for-theaged-and-infirm-c>.

If you have any historical facts about a Bella Vista street (and perhaps even some vintage photos), we'd love to feature it in our next newsletter. Please email Marie-Line Germain at mgermain99@hotmail.com with the subject line, "Bella Vista Street History".