

**Telling It Like It Was:
The Evolution of an Underground Railroad Historic Site**

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Abstract

Rokeby Museum is a 90-acre historic site that was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1997 for its underground railroad history and is one of the best-documented such sites in the country. Rokeby presents a unique case study because the Robinson family, who made this place its home for nearly 200 years, was involved in both the “doing and the telling” of the underground railroad: sheltering runaway slaves in one generation and writing highly embellished stories about it in the next. Rowland Thomas (1796-1879) and Rachel Gilpin (1799-1862) Robinson were devout Quakers and radical abolitionists who believed that slavery was a sin to be opposed to by every acceptable means, including aid to fugitive slaves. Their correspondence from the 1830s and 1840s is concerned almost wholly with abolition, and several letters provide documentation of the African Americans they sheltered and employed on their farm: Simon, Jesse, John and Martha Williams, and Jeremiah Snowden. These letters are remarkably consistent; all stress how safe Vermont was and how much runaways needed work. Rowland Evans Robinson (1833-1900), the youngest child of the abolitionists, was a popular author, and late in his career he published several stories with underground railroad themes. Taken at face value for obvious reasons, these stories contrast sharply with the contemporary evidence and with the contents of a letter Robinson himself sent to underground railroad historian Wilbur H. Siebert in 1896. This paper will recount the Robinson’s story and

explore the changes in how the site has been interpreted to the public. The underground railroad is one of the most popular themes in American history, which gives sites like Rokeby a rare opportunity to bring important new scholarship to a broad and diverse audience.

I'm very happy to be here today and grateful to the Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition for the opportunity to speak to you—if a little anxious about appearing before such a scholarly audience. The Center's mission is to “increase public understanding of the role of slavery and abolition in the modern world” and to “translate scholarly research into public knowledge.” I am the director of an underground railroad historic site, so I guess that makes me one of the translators, operating with one foot in each camp.

I was lucky to be in this auditorium back in July for a conference on Slavery and Freedom in New England at which David Blight gave a wonderful talk. He spoke of what he called the “vexing relationship” of history and memory, and I have been thinking about his comment ever since. I don't have to tell you that the interplay between history and memory vexes historians of the underground railroad perhaps more than any others. In fact, the underground railroad has gotten so touchy, it's almost impossible to say anything that isn't qualified in some way. Someone, it seems, is always ready to disagree. Nevertheless, that relationship is my topic today, and I am going to try to disentangle the strands of history and memory in one very specific case.

Rokeby Museum, [slide] once described by a British travel writer as “Vermont’s most under-rated museum,” may be a little-known treasure, but it has a lot to teach. Rokeby was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1997 for its considerable underground railroad history. Today, it is a 90-acre historic site; from 1793 to 1961, it was home to four generations of Robinsons, a remarkable family of Quaker farmers, abolitionists, artists, and authors. During the 1830s and 1840s, it was a prosperous sheep farm and an “unshackled space” that provided refuge to many who had escaped from bondage.

Rowland Thomas Robinson [slide] was born at Rokeby in 1796 shortly after his parents had emigrated to Vermont from Newport, Rhode Island. He and his wife Rachel Gilpin were devout Quakers, religious perfectionists, and radical abolitionists. Rowland and Rachel believed slavery was a sin to be opposed by every acceptable means, and that included offering work and shelter to enslaved African Americans who sought freedom in the North. They were part of overlapping networks of abolitionists and of Quakers who demanded an immediate end to the despised institution.

Luckily for us, the Robinsons were also a bunch of pack rats who saved everything. Literally thousands of letters and other documents [slide] span the generations and tell us what the abolitionist Robinsons believed, how they put their beliefs into action, and how their efforts were remembered by their children and grandchildren. And eventually, by all the rest of us.

Let me start with a document created decades after the underground railroad had ceased to operate. In 1896, Wilbur H. Siebert sent this questionnaire [slide] to the descendants of Rowland Thomas and Rachel Robinson. Siebert, of course, was a young professor of history at Ohio State University, who used this modern and rather novel approach to gather data for his magnum opus on the underground railroad, published in 1898.¹ The abolitionist Robinsons had been dead for 20 years and more when Siebert sent this request, so it was answered by their son, Rowland Evans Robinson, [slide] who was then 63 years old himself.

Rowland Evans Robinson was a naturalist and an author, temperamentally the opposite of his parents, and he had little interest in their causes. Nevertheless, he took this opportunity to record their work seriously. His lengthy reply was clear, thoughtful, and to the point. Although he had been a child during the 1830s and 1840s, his detailed recollections ring true. He recalled “seeing four fugitives at a time in my father’s house and quite often one or two harboring there.”² His memory of the four was still vivid because one “carried the first pistols I ever saw and the other the first bowie knife.” As you read this letter, Robinson’s effort to remember and record his experience as clearly as possible is almost palpable. He says nothing of concealing fugitives at Rokeby and mentions that they sometimes stayed for months, working on the farm.

Siebert was to return to this subject forty years later, and he contacted the Robinsons again in 1935, for his book on the underground railroad in Vermont.³ Now yet another generation removed, this request was answered by the abolitionist’s *grandson* and

namesake. His response is brief, but contains an important piece of information in the last line. It says, “You can get the book *Out of Bondage* in your local library.”

Published in 1905, *Out of Bondage*⁴ [slide] included some dozen or so stories by Rowland Evans Robinson, who was a successful and popular author. He has been compared to his more famous contemporary Joel Chandler Harris, for he, too, employed a variety of dialects in folktales that romanticized and expressed his admiration for the early residents of the Green Mountain state. He clearly understood the fiction market of the time and during the last few years of his life, penned several stories in which ailing or otherwise compromised runaways in hiding with Quaker families were discovered and eluded capture only through the humanitarian and clever efforts of their Yankee benefactors.⁵

Siebert had obviously gone to his library and borrowed a copy of *Out of Bondage*, for these stories are related in some detail in his Vermont book. But he presented them as fact, explaining that Robinson “had actually heard most of the anecdotes he wrote and published, but he made use of fictitious names for his characters.”⁶ Siebert no doubt believed this, but he offered no evidence of it, and there is none in the historical record.

Although written at about the same time, Robinson’s underground railroad stories and his letter to Siebert paint strikingly different pictures. Rowland Evans Robinson died in 1900, shortly after these stories appeared. And as his generation passed on, his stories were what remained to inform future generations of Vermonters. And inform us, they have.

The underground railroad is one of the most familiar and popular themes in our history. In a nation with soaring rates of historical illiteracy, there isn't a school child, grandparent, or baby boomer who doesn't know some version of this story. How fugitive slaves took off under cover of darkness and found freedom in Canada guided by the North Star and aided by sympathetic white northerners. These popular stories are full of daring and altruism and also full of hidden doors, loose floorboards, and attic hideaways. And that is what visitors to Rokeby come seeking.

Until the mid-1980s, that is what they found. Visitors were conducted to a small chamber in the oldest part of the house, dubbed the "Rokeby slave room" in the early years of the twentieth century. Let's look again at that 1935 letter [slide] to Siebert from the last Robinson. It says, "In a chamber of this house, there was in one corner, a built out clothes press, which to persons not knowing the secret looked innocent enough, but to we uns the back opened into a room beyond, where the slave was kept and where a slave was hiding once when the house was searched by the slave's master and the County sheriff. After they had gone the slave told Grandfather, 'I suah thought I was kotched.'"⁷ (Where, you may be wondering, does a fourth-generation Vermont farmer come up with "we uns," "suah," and "kotched?" Straight from the pages of *Out of Bondage* is where.)

Like other underground railroad stories, and they abound, this one was very widely known and much loved, despite its patent absurdity. The room he mentions [slide] is one of two spaces in the second floor of the oldest part of the house. The notion that blocking its door with a clothes press could make this room disappear—a room that occupies fully

one-third of the second floor area and contains three windows and a dormer, no less—represents the triumph of wishful thinking over reason.

This view of the underground railroad at Rokeby changed dramatically when staff and volunteers began to plumb the Museum's phenomenal correspondence collection in the late 1980s. More than 15,000 letters spanning the decades from 1760 to 1960 document the site and the family and inform all of our interpretation. Letters to and from Rowland Thomas and Rachel Gilpin Robinson from the 1830s and 1840s are full of abolition, nonresistance, the evils of slavery, and the necessity of taking action. Several document formerly enslaved African Americans in some detail and introduce us to Simon, Jesse, John and Martha Williams, Jeremiah Snowden, and unnamed others. These letters dictate a new interpretation of the site and a fresh understanding of how the underground railroad operated in Vermont.

Let's look at a few. Letters from abolitionists Oliver Johnson and Charles Marriott tell a new, but remarkably consistent story. First, these letters make clear that Vermont was truly an unshackled space—a safe haven for those who had escaped from bondage. Oliver Johnson [slide] wrote from western Pennsylvania, where he was traveling as an antislavery lecturer, in 1837.⁸ He explained that, being so near Maryland, the area “had at all times no small number of runaway slaves, but they are generally caught unless they proceed further north.” Johnson wrote on behalf of one of those runaways, Simon. He said that Simon had “intended going to Canada in the spring, but says he would prefer to stay in the U.S. if he could be safe. I have no doubt he will be perfectly safe with you.”

Charles Marriott thought it best to send John and Martha Williams further north, “either to you or to Canada,” after the Supreme Court struck down state personal liberty laws in the *Prigg* decision of 1842. Weighing the merits of Canada versus Vermont, he concluded, “If they can be taken in by thee, we should think them safer.”⁹

Among the most fascinating letters in the Rokeby collection are those exchanged in the spring of 1837 between Rowland Thomas Robinson and Ephram Elliott, a slave owner in Perquimans County, North Carolina.¹⁰ Robinson wrote on behalf of Jesse to negotiate the cost of a freedom paper that was “the most anxious wish of his heart.” In doing so, of course, he revealed Jesse’s precise whereabouts. Surely this indicates just how confident Robinson must have been that Elliott would not take action.

Just as revealing as Robinson’s letter is Elliott’s reply [slide]. He admitted that, “Jesse’s situation at this time places it in his power to give me what he thinks proper.” But he went on to name his price at \$300, “which is not more than one-third what I could have had for him before he absconded if I had been disposed to sell him.” Robinson wrote to present a counteroffer. “Since leaving thy service he has by his industry and economy laid up \$150 & he is willing to give the whole of this sum for his freedom ... if Jesse was in possession of a larger sum he would freely offer it all for his freedom.” Robinson urged Elliott to accept Jesse’s offer, noting that “considering his present circumstances & location, it must be ackgd liberal.” Elliott conceded that “at this time [Jesse] is entirely out of my reach,” but held firm on his price nevertheless. Elliott is only one slave owner,

but he clearly considered the prospect of reclaiming a fugitive slave from Vermont to be out of the question.

The second clear and consistent message from these letters is that fugitive slaves needed work and were being sent to Rokeby for that reason. The Johnson and Marriott letters read like job references. Simon, according to Oliver Johnson, “appeared to me to be an honest, likely man ... I was so well pleased with his appearance ... that I could not help thinking he would be a good man for you to hire. Mr. Griffith says that he is very trustworthy, of a kind disposition, and knows how to do almost all kinds of farm work. He is used to teaming, and is very good to manage horses. He says that he could beat any man in the neighborhood where he lived at mowing, cradling, or pitching.”

Charles Marriott assured Robinson that John Williams was “a good chopper and farmer” and that his wife Martha was “useful and well conducted in the house.” And Jesse, of course, proposed to pay for his freedom paper with \$150 he had saved while working on the farm, a sum that would have taken at least a year to accumulate.

Writing from New York in 1844 [slide] Quaker Joseph Beale addressed the issues of work and safety, counterposing them directly.¹¹ Concerned that Jeremiah Snowden had been discovered, he said that it would be “safer for him to be in Massachusetts or Vermont *if* [emphasis added] work is to be had for him.” And that “we were unwilling to risk his remaining, *although* [emphasis added] we had abundance of work for him at this busy season.”

Discovering these letters was a museum curator's dream—like finding a copy of the Declaration of Independence backing an old painting or a Gutenberg Bible in the attic. No doubt you can imagine how these letters have transformed our interpretation. Instead of stowing fugitives for a night on their way to Canada, the Robinsons welcomed Americans of color into their home, hired them to work on their farm, and provided a measure of safety and security in a hostile world. We know that bringing people to life is the key to bringing history to life for our visitors. In delving beyond the melodrama to the human story, we provide visitors with a much more complex and meaningful understanding of the real people involved in these easily sensationalized events. There are no secret rooms, no slave catchers, no subterfuges here; just individuals from vastly different circumstances who met—incredibly enough—across boundaries of geography, race, law, class, and social convention. This is an interracial story of resistance and of refuge. A story of enslaved African Americans who resisted their own subjugation by risking everything in a run for freedom. And of privileged white Vermonters who also resisted the powerful institution of chattel slavery by offering refuge to those in flight from it. It is a story of justice and of hope, and one that we hope continues to inspire both in visitors today.

I want to give the Robinson's the last word. So let me read from one final letter. Rachel Gilpin Robinson penned this postscript to an absent family member in 1844. I think this passage hints at the personal concern and interaction that is at the heart of this story.

“Oh, before I forget it, thee must be told that we have had two of the fugitive slaves who fled from bondage in a whale-boat, and were pursued by an American vessel of war! Noble work! They have gone on to Canada, for they were afraid to remain anywhere within our glorious republic lest the chain of servitude should again bind soul and limb. They tarried with [us] only one night & were very anxious to journey on to Victoria’s domain. Poor men! They left wives behind, and deeply did they appear to feel the separation: they felt it so keenly that one of them said he would not have come away, had he not supposed he could easily effect the escape of his wife also when he was once away. Both seemed very serious, as though grief sat heavy on their hearts.”¹²

¹ Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1898).

² Rowland Evans Robinson to Wilbur H. Siebert, 19 August 1896. Siebert Papers (Volume 41) Houghton Library, Harvard University.

³ Wilbur H. Siebert, *Vermont’s Anti-Slavery and Underground Railroad Record* (1937; reprint Negro University Press, 1969).

⁴ Rowland Evans Robinson, *Out of Bondage* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1905).

⁵ See “Out of Bondage” and “The Mole’s Path.” The real action of these stories and what interests Robinson, are not the plight of the fugitive slaves, but the transformation of the characters enlisted to help them. Circumstances in both stories dictate that initially unwilling, and certainly unmotivated, Vermonters are recruited to provide critical aid. Although from opposite ends of the social and economic spectrum, Robert Ransom and Joe Bagley both experience a transformation of character by performing benevolent acts.

⁶ Siebert, *Vermont’s Anti-Slavery Record*, p. 75

⁷ Rowland Thomas Robinson to Wilbur H. Siebert, 28 October 1935. Siebert Papers, Ohio Historical Society.

⁸ Oliver Johnson to Rowland Thomas Robinson, 27 January 1837 and 3 April 1837. Rowland Thomas and Rachel Gilpin Robinson Papers, Rokeby Museum.

⁹ Charles Marriott to Rowland Thomas Robinson, 14 March 1842. Rowland Thomas and Rachel Gilpin Robinson Papers, Rokeby Museum.

¹⁰ Ephram Elliott to Rowland Thomas Robinson, 9 April 1837; Rowland Thomas Robinson to Ephram Elliott, 3 May 1837; and Ephram Elliott to Rowland Thomas Robinson, 7 June 1837. Rowland Thomas and Rachel Gilpin Robinson Papers, Rokeby Museum.

¹¹ Joseph H. Beale to Rowland Thomas Robinson, 12 July 1844. Rowland Thomas and Rachel Gilpin Robinson Papers, Rokeby Museum.

¹² Rachel Gilpin Robinson to Ann King, 9 January 1844. Ann King Papers, Rokeby Museum.