

The Crafts:

An Extraordinary Path to Freedom

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Cover image: William and Ellen Craft after their successful journey. Illustration by Awadh Baryoum (M.F.A., painting, 1997).

Facing page image: William and Ellen begin their quest for freedom. Illustration by Awadh Baryoum (M.F.A., painting, 1997).

William and Ellen Craft



Born into slavery in Georgia, fair-complexioned Ellen was often mistaken as the white daughter of her owners. At the age of 11, Ellen was given to her mistress's daughter as a wedding present. William Craft, also born in Georgia, belonged to a man who sent him to be a cabinetmaker's apprentice. William rapidly became proficient at the trade and began earning money as a skilled artisan for his owner.

In 1848, with the permission of their owners, Ellen and William were married in Macon, Georgia. For years, the couple contemplated how they might embark on a journey from their captivity. At that time, it was unlawful for any public **conveyance** to take them as passengers without their masters' consent. Despite this, they continued to dream of freedom.

Late in 1848, a plan emerged. Since her fair complexion would allow Ellen to pass as white, William believed that by disguising her as an invalid gentleman, she could travel at liberty with him by her side, taking on the role of her attendant. Ellen hesitated, realizing she would have to sign her name as they registered for travel tickets. Neither she nor William could read or write, for to teach slaves those skills was unlawful. Ellen devised a way to **circumvent** this challenge by binding her right arm in a sling. As a result, officials would likely sign on her behalf. To complete the disguise, William cut her hair and Ellen added bandages around her beardless chin and cheeks. Dressed in men's clothing and spectacles, Ellen adopted the convincing appearance of a gentleman. She and William were ready to embark on their perilous journey.

Highlighted glossary terms may be found on page 6.



“Directly and indirectly, the fugitive slaves probably did more to bring about the abolition of slavery than any other one agency. The Northern people learned from the lips of these fugitives — from the strange, romantic, pathetic and tragic stories they told ... They learned from the sufferings of these fugitives, from the desperate efforts which they made to escape, that no matter what might be said to the contrary the slaves wanted to be free.”

Booker T. Washington

An Extraordinary Path to Freedom

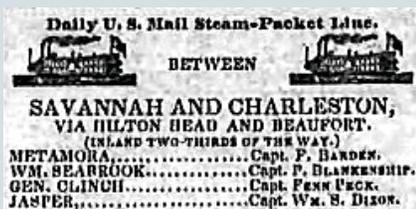
The train to Savannah

On December 21, 1848, William and Ellen Craft departed Macon, Georgia, in secret to begin their trek. With Ellen disguised as a gentleman and William acting as her attendant, they boarded a train to Savannah. A man she had known since childhood seated himself next to Ellen, but failed to see through her disguise. Meanwhile William, confined to a separate car for enslaved people, saw his employer searching the train platform. To his relief, the train departed before he could be discovered.



Steamship voyage

At dusk, the Crafts arrived in Savannah where they boarded the **steamer** General Clinch to carry them to Charleston. To avoid suspicion, Ellen retired early while William slept on the deck. Before disembarking the following day, the captain advised Ellen that her slave would likely run away once she arrived in the North, and another passenger offered to buy William. In Charleston, as they prepared to board a steamer bound for Wilmington, North Carolina, the registering officer refused to sign for Ellen despite her bandaged hand. A fellow traveler intervened to vouch for the pair and the Crafts were granted passage.



By rail to Philadelphia

At the Wilmington, North Carolina, station, Ellen sat in a train compartment with a man and his two daughters. The young ladies bundled their shawls as a pillow for Ellen's head as she pretended to nap. On Christmas Eve, the Crafts arrived in Baltimore — their last stop before the free city of Philadelphia. Lacking documentation, the Crafts aroused the suspicions of a train agent who barred them from boarding the next train. Others witnessed his callous treatment of an "unwell gentleman" and voiced their disapproval. The agent relented and allowed the Crafts to board. On Christmas Day, the fugitives arrived in the free city of Philadelphia, where **abolitionists**, astonished at the boldness and ingenuity of their escape, welcomed the Crafts and gave them shelter.



Fugitives once again

Due to the laws of nearby slave-holding states, the Crafts' freedom remained uncertain. They resumed their journey, continuing by train to Massachusetts. For nearly two years, they lived contentedly in Boston. To their sorrow, the passing of the **Fugitive Slave Act** endangered their freedom. Advised to seek asylum in England, the Crafts began by traveling to Halifax, Nova Scotia. During a leg of that journey, a steamer required unexpected repairs, stranding them in Portland, Maine, for two days. Fortunately, a gentleman offered them safe haven in his home, risking a prison sentence for his act of compassion.

GREAT EXCITEMENT IN BOSTON—THE RIGHT COURSE.

The attempt to enforce the Fugitive Law in Boston has given rise to more excitement than has been witnessed in any other city. The slave catchers are from Georgia, and it is understood that they obtained warrants from Judge Woodbury for the arrest of William Craft and his wife, alleged to have escaped several years ago from slavery in that State. The warrants having been placed in the hands of the United States Marshal, he undertook to serve them, but thus far, owing to the opposition of white and colored citizens, has been unable to accomplish his purpose. The newspapers report that the colored

ARRIVAL OF FUGITIVE SLAVES IN LIVERPOOL. We understand that William and Ellen Crafts, about whom there was such an excitement in Boston a short time since, reached this port by the *Cambria* more than a fortnight ago; but their arrival was made known only to a few friends, in consequence of Mrs. Crafts having been attacked by a severe and serious illness, brought on, beyond doubt, by the fearful season of agitation and suspense she passed through just before escaping from "the land of liberty." She is now convalescent, and is staying at the house of the Rev. Francis Bishop. Mr. Crafts has left Liverpool to meet and consult with a friend at Edinburgh; but his wife was not well enough to accompany him.

Liverpool Mercury.

Safe in England

Once in Halifax, the Crafts took a British steamer to Liverpool, England. It was a trying voyage for Ellen, who became seriously ill during the crossing, but recovered fully after her arrival. They eventually settled in London, where they authored their memoir, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, and became vocal anti-slavery activists and educators. William also traveled to Africa to encourage the production of cotton, hoping to provide an alternative to the capture and enslavement of natives.

Returning to assist freed men and women

In 1870, after 19 years overseas, the Crafts returned to Georgia, settling just outside of Savannah. Three years later, they founded the Woodville Co-operative Farm School, designed to educate newly freed slaves and assist them in securing employment. In 1890, the Crafts retired to their daughter's home in Charleston, South Carolina, where Ellen died in 1891 and William followed her in 1900.



A steam-powered train transports William and Ellen on their voyage. Illustration by Awadh Baryoum (M.F.A., painting, 1997).

Reflect on characteristics of success



The Crafts' creativity was an essential quality that made possible their novel plan for escape and was the initial step in a lifelong journey to realize their dreams. What other essential characteristics contributed to the Crafts' success?

characteristic	evidence
EXAMPLE <i>Creative</i>	<i>The Crafts successfully prepared an imaginative plan for escape.</i>

Find where the William and Ellen Craft commemorative bronze medallion is installed inside the SCAD Museum of Art. When you do, tell the museum staff at the lobby front desk where you found it. You will receive a small pin to keep as a reminder of the Crafts and their heroic journey to freedom.

The William and Ellen Craft bronze medallion, designed by SCAD alumnus Andrew MacDonald (M.F.A., illustration, 2014), commemorates the couple's daring escape to freedom.



Newborn Ellen cradled in her mother's arms. Illustration by Awadh Baryoum (M.F.A., painting, 1997).

Glossary

abolitionist *n.* A person who favored or supported the abolition of slavery in the United States

circumvent *v.* To find a way around

conveyance *n.* Something that carries people or things from one place to another

Fugitive Slave Act *n.* A law passed by Congress in 1850 that allowed Southern slaveholders to capture enslaved people who had escaped to the free states and made assisting runaway slaves a violation of federal law

steamer *n.* A boat or ship that moves by steam power; oceanic steamers were equipped with sails

Curriculum Connections

Additional Resources

Book The Crafts' memoir, written from William's perspective, provides intimate insights into their perilous journey.

Craft, William and Ellen. *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. Project Gutenberg. 3 Aug. 2008. gutenberg.org/cache/epub/585/pg585-images.html

Book This narrative elucidates social and historical context surrounding the Crafts' daring escape. Hall, Megan; Kopp, Kappie; and Snook, Sarah. *The Crafts: An Extraordinary Path to Freedom*. Savannah College of Art and Design. 2016.

Book This researched account of the Crafts places their dedication to activism within the social and political contexts of their time, unearthing press clippings and accompanying historical sources.

McCaskill, Barbara. *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory*. University of Georgia Press. 2015.

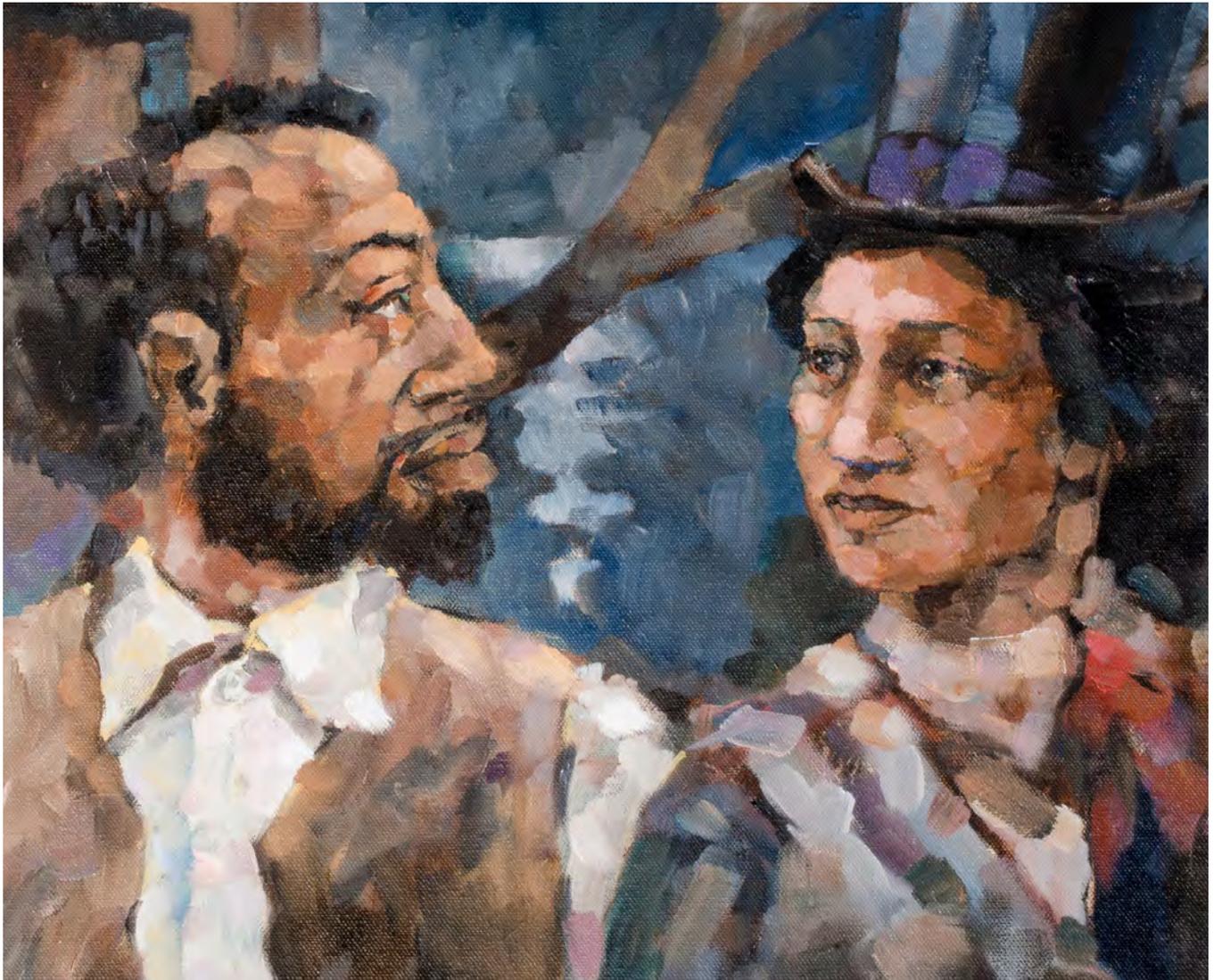
Quotes

p. 2 Washington, Booker T. *The Story of the Negro*. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2005. Philadelphia, PA. p. 231.

p. 9 Wallace, Paula S. *The Crafts: An Extraordinary Path to Freedom*. Foreword. Savannah College of Art and Design. 2016.

Image Credits

- Cover Illustration by Awadh Baryoum (M.F.A., painting, 1997).
- p. 1 Washington, Booker T. Cited by McCaskill, Barbara. *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory*. University of Georgia Press. 2015. p. 87.
- p. 3 "Ellen Craft, a Fugitive Slave." *The Illustrated London News*. Hathi Trust Digital Library. v. 18. The Illustrated London News & Sketch Ltd. Jan.-June 1851.
babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027902827;view=1up;seq=309
- p. 3 "U.S. Mail Steam Line." *Savannah Daily Republican*. Digital Library of Georgia. J. L. Locke & Co. 27 Dec. 1849.
dlg.galileo.usg.edu/savnewspapers/id:svr1849-1211
- p. 3 "Great Excitement in Boston - The Right Course." *The National Era*. Library of Congress Digital Collection. vol. 4, n. 45. G. Bailey, Editor and Proprietor; Beull & Blanchard, Printers. 7 Nov. 1850.
chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026752/1850-11-07/ed-1/seq-2/
- p. 3 "Arrival of Fugitive Slaves in Boston." *The Weekly North Carolina Standard*. Library of Congress Digital Collection. vol. 17, n. 853. 5 Feb. 1851.
chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84045030/1851-02-05/ed-1/seq-3/
- p. 4 Illustration by Awadh Baryoum (M.F.A., painting, 1997).
- p. 4 Medallion design by Andrew MacDonald (M.F.A., illustration, 2014).
- p. 5 Illustration by Awadh Baryoum (M.F.A., painting, 1997).
- p. 9 Illustration by Awadh Baryoum (M.F.A., painting, 1997).



“It is a great privilege to tell the story of the Crafts and to bear witness to their journey, which took them through Savannah. The very first stop on their 1,000-mile trek was the Central of Georgia Railroad complex, and from its ruins the SCAD Museum of Art rose.”

Paula S. Wallace, SCAD President and Founder

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