Among the first runaways from the South to reach Connecticut was William Grimes. He came into the state on his own two feet, with little guidance from others, for at this early date—just after 1800—the Underground Railroad as even a quasi-organized entity was still years in the future. Yet he had started on his journey north to freedom with the complicity of some Yankee sailors and even a couple of men in positions of authority. According to the account of his life that he wrote in later years, it happened in this fashion:

Grimes was a mulatto slave in Savannah when his owner decided to go to Bermuda, leaving the bondsman behind “to work for what he could get.” The brig Casket, out of Boston, lay in the harbor taking on a cargo of cotton for New York; Grimes saw a chance to make “a few dollars” by helping with the loading. While engaged in this work, he became friendly with some of the seamen. As they laid up the bales on deck, they left space between where a man might lie hidden. “Whether they then had any idea of my coming away with them or not, I cannot say,” wrote Grimes, “but this I can say safely, a place was left.” He slipped ashore in the evening with a colored seaman to buy some “bread and dried beef” for the journey; then he lay low among the cotton bales while the brig
edged slowly out of the harbor. As it passed the lighthouse, "the sailors gave three hearty cheers" and Grimes realized he was on the way to being a free man.

The voyage itself was uneventful:

During my passage, I lay concealed as much as possible; some evenings, I would crawl out and go and lie down with the sailors on deck; the night being dark, the captain could not distinguish me from the hands, having a number on board of different complexions. . . . When there was something to be done some one would come on deck and call forward, "there, boys!" "Aye, aye, sir," was the reply; then they would be immediately at their posts, I remaining on the floor not perceived by them.

There was a tense moment for Grimes, however, as the brig neared the quarantine station in New York Harbor. Standing in the forecastle, he felt hopeful as he saw the dark outline of the city becoming clearer through the sea mist. But when the captain approached and questioned him about his status aboard, he just stood there, wordless and tense. "Poor fellow, he stole aboard," said the captain with a knowing stare. And he gave orders that Grimes was to be put ashore safely.

Another tense moment awaited him as, accompanied by a Negro sailor, he was herded toward a line of seamen who were being examined by a doctor on the wharf. Then, he confessed, "I felt as if my heart were in my mouth, or in other words, very much afraid that I should be compelled to give my name, together with an account of where I came from, and where I was going and in what manner I came there." But his guide stepped up and spoke quietly to the doctor, who simply gave the order "Push off." Grimes "rejoiced heartily," thanking his companion a number of times before they parted.

Now he was on his own in a crowded, friendless city.
New York was dangerous too for men in Grimes’ position, for among its colored population were some who “for a few dollars” would betray fugitives to Southern slave-catchers. Not knowing of this peril, he approached a colored girl and asked her to “walk with him a little ways, in order to see the town,” explaining that he was “a stranger there, and was afraid of being lost.” So they walked “for some time,” after which he found a lodging for the night.

Grimes did not feel comfortable in New York, however. Early the next morning he bought “a loaf of bread and a small piece of meat” and set out on foot toward the northeast, with no particular destination in mind. Trudging mile after mile over dirt roads, he crossed the Connecticut line at Greenwich. At first he fancied he was pursued by every “carriage or person” behind him; often he ducked off the road to lie down until those in the rear had passed. But soon he realized that his money would not carry him far, and he resolved to be more temperate, more prudent, and more courageous. Thus he persuaded a teamster to give him a ride for a short distance, and he bought some apples from a couple of boys he met on the road. At length, with just seventy-five cents in his pocket, he reached New Haven, where he paid for one night’s lodging in a boarding house “kept by a certain Mrs. W.”

Now he needed work, and he found it the very next day with Abel Lanson, who kept a livery stable. “He set me to work in a ledge of rocks,” wrote Grimes, “getting out stone for buildings. This I found to be the hardest work I had ever done, and began to repent that I had ever come away from Savannah to this hard cold country. After I had worked at this for about three months, I got employment taking care of a sick person, who called his name Carr, who had been a servant to Judge Clay, of Kentucky; he was then driving for Mr. Lanson.”
This job ended suddenly when Grimes was recognized by a friend of his master, who was apparently visiting in New Haven. The fugitive's first thought was to “inform his friends”; his second, to leave town. He went to Southington, where he stayed a few weeks picking apples on Captain Potter's farm; then back to New Haven; to Norwich, where he worked as a barber for Christopher Starr; to New London; and to Stonington, where he had been told that a barber might do well.

But Grimes found it difficult to make a living in eastern Connecticut, so he returned to New Haven. There he found work at Yale College, shaving, barbering, “waiting on the scholars in their rooms,” and doing odd jobs for other employers on the side. Six or eight months later he heard that a barber was needed at the Litchfield Law School—Tapping Reeve's famous establishment—and there he went in the year 1808. He became a general servant to the students and was also active as a barber, earning fifty or sixty dollars per month. “For some time,” he said, “I made money very fast; but at length, trading horses a number of times, the horse jockies would cheat me, and to get restitution, I was compelled to sue them; I would sometimes win the case; but the lawyers alone would reap the benefit of it. At other times, I lost my case, fiddle and all, besides paying my attorney. . . . Let it not be imagined that the poor and friendless are entirely free from oppression where slavery does not exist; this would be fully illustrated if I should give all the particulars of my life, since I have been in Connecticut.”

Back in New Haven in the year 1812 or 1813, Grimes met and soon married Clarissa Caesar, a colored girl whom he called “the lovely and all accomplished.” She was also a “lady of education,” teaching him all the reading and writing he ever knew. Because his situation was not entirely
safe—he was still a runaway slave and still, before the law, his master’s property—Grimes and his bride returned to “the back country” of Litchfield, where they bought a house and settled down. And just as he had feared, his owner eventually learned of his whereabouts and sent an emissary, a brisk and rude fellow called Thompson, to reclaim him. This man confronted the fugitive with a plain choice: he could buy his freedom, or Thompson would “put him in irons and send him down to New York, and then on to Savannah.” Grimes described his state of mind and his subsequent actions as follows:

To be put in irons and dragged back to a state of slavery, and either leave my wife and children in the street, or take them into servitude, was a situation in which my soul now shudders at the thought of having been placed. . . . I may give my life for the good or the safety of others, but no law, no consequences, not the lives of millions, can authorize them to take my life or liberty from me while innocent of any crime. I have to thank my master, however, that he took what I had, and freed me. I gave a deed of my house to a gentleman in Litchfield. He paid the money for it to Mr. Thompson, who then gave me my free papers. Oh! how my heart did rejoice and thank God.

Thus William Grimes became a free man, to live out the rest of his long life as his own man in a free state. Yet, as he came to set down his memoirs in later years, he viewed the condition of slavery and the condition of freedom in a somewhat ambivalent light:

To say that a man is better fed, and has less care [in slavery] than in the other, is false. It is true, if you regard him as a brute, as destitute of the feelings of human nature. But I will not speak on the subject more. Those slaves who have kind masters are perhaps as happy as the
generality of mankind. They are not aware what their condition can be except by their own exertions. I would advise no slave to leave his master. If he runs away, he is most sure to be taken. If he is not, he will ever be in the apprehension of it; and I do think there is no inducement for a slave to leave his master and be set free in the Northern States. I have had to work hard; I have often been cheated, insulted, abused and injured; yet a black man, if he will be industrious and honest, can get along here as well as any one who is poor and in a situation to be imposed on. I have been very fortunate in life in this respect. Notwithstanding all my struggles and sufferings and injuries, I have been an honest man.

William Grimes, escaping in the first decade of the nineteenth century, found only chance friends to help him. A quarter-century later, when Daniel Fisher came out of Virginia and took the name Billy Winters, the Underground Railroad was already partially organized, as his own story shows:

I was born in Westmoreland County, Virgina, about the year of 1808. I had five brothers and two sisters and was known as Daniel Fisher. Our master’s name was Henry Cox. When I was about twenty years of age my master was obliged, on account of heavy losses, to sell me, and I was sent to Richmond to be sold on the block to the highest bidder. The sale took place and the price paid for me was $550. I was taken by my new master to South Carolina. This was in the month of March. I remained there until October when, in company with another slave, we stole a horse and started to make our escape. In order not to tire the animal, we traveled from 10 o’clock at night until daybreak the next morning when we ran the horse into the woods and left him, for we knew what would happen to us if two slaves were seen having a horse in their possession. We kept on our way on foot, hiding
by day and walking by night. We were without knowledge of the country, and with nothing to guide us other than the north star, which was oftentimes obscured by clouds, we would unwittingly retrace our steps and find ourselves back at the starting point. Finally, after days of tedious walking and privations, fearing to ask for food and getting but little from the slaves we met, we reached Petersburg. From Petersburg we easily found our way to Richmond and thence, after wandering in the woods for three days and nights, we came to my old home at Westmoreland Court House.

One of the greatest obstacles we had to contend with was the crossing of rivers, as slaves were not allowed to cross bridges without a pass from their masters. For that reason, when we came to the Rappahannock we had to wait our chance and steal a fisherman’s boat in order to cross. Upon my arrival at my old plantation, I called upon my young master and begged him to buy me back. He said he would gladly do it, but he was poorer than when he sold me. He advised me to stow myself away on some vessel going north, and as the north meant freedom I decided to act upon his advice. While awaiting the opportunity to do so, we (the same slave who had accompanied me from South Carolina being with me) secured shovels and dug us three dens in different localities in the neighboring woods. In these dens we lived during the day, and foraged for food in the night time, staying there about three months. At the end of that time we managed to stow ourselves away on a vessel loaded with wood bound for Washington. We were four days without food and suffered much. When we reached Washington the captain of the vessel put on a coat of a certain color, and started out for the public market, telling us to follow and keep him in sight. At the market he fed us and told us in what direction to go, starting us on our journey, giving us two loaves of bread each for food. We took the railroad track and started for Baltimore. We had gone scarcely
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a mile before we met an Irishman, who decided that we were runaways, and was determined to give us to the authorities. However, by telling him a smooth story that we were sent for by our masters to come to a certain house just ahead, he let us by. Thinking our bundles of bread were endangering our safety by raising suspicion, we threw them away. After that we went several days without food, traveling day and night until we reached the Delaware river. We walked along the bank of the river for some five miles in search of a bridge. We finally came to one, but on attempting to cross were stopped, as we had no passes. It was a toll bridge, and there was a woman in charge of it, who upon our payment of a penny for each and the promise to come back immediately, allowed us to go by. By this time we were very hungry, but had no food. At the other end of the bridge we were stopped again, as the gates were opened only for teams. However, by exercising our ingenuity and pretending to look around, we finally managed to slip by in the shadow of a team, and then, glorious thought! we were at last on the free soil of Pennsylvania.

We again took to the woods, knowing that we were liable to be apprehended at any time. We made a fire, which attracted attention, and we were soon run out of our hiding place. We sought another place and built another fire, and again we were chased away. We made no more fires. In the course of our further wanderings we were chased by men and hounds, but managed to escape capture, and finally arrived in Philadelphia, being three days on the road. In Philadelphia we found friends who gave us the choice of liquor or food. I took the food, my companion the liquor.

As kidnappers were plenty, it was thought best for our safety that we separate, and we parted. I saw no more of my companion. The only weapon for defense which I had was a razor, one which I had carried all through my wanderings. In company with some Philadelphia colored people, I was taken to New York, and it
was there I first met members of the Abolition party. At New York I was put on board a steamboat for New Haven. Arrived in that city, a colored man took me to the Tontine Hotel, where a woman gave me a part of a suit of clothes. I was fed and made comfortable, and then directed to Deep River, with instructions that upon arriving there I was to inquire for George Read or Judge Warner. I walked all the way from New Haven to Deep River, begging food by the way from the women of the farm houses, as I was afraid to apply to the men, not knowing but what they would detain me and give me up. I traveled the Old Stage Road from New Haven to Deep River and in going through Killingworth I stopped at the tavern kept by Landlord Redfield but was driven away. Upon reaching the “Plains” this side of Winthrop, I could not read the signs on the post at the forks of the road, and asked the way of Mrs. Griffing. She drove me away, but called out, “Take that road,” and pointed to it. Further on I met Harrison Smith, who had a load of wood which he said was for Deacon Read, the man I was looking for.

I reached Deep River at last, weary and frightened. I called at Deacon Read’s, told him my circumstances and gave him my name as Daniel Fisher. All this was in secret. The good deacon immediately told me that I must nevermore be known as Daniel Fisher, but must take the name of “William Winters,” the name which I have borne to this day. He furthermore told me that I must thereafter wear a wig at all times and in all places. After that I worked at different times for Ambrose Webb and Judge Warner in Chester, and for Deacon Stevens in Deep River, getting along very nicely, though always afraid of being taken by day or by night and carried again to the South.

In spite of Winters’ anxiety, he was relatively secure in Deep River. In those years it was “a sort of out-of-the-way location and all Abolitionist,” which made it “a pretty
safe refuge for runaway slaves.” It was largely self-contained and self-supporting; there was no Valley Railroad, no Shore Line; even the steamers, recently introduced on the river, ran at inconvenient hours. “The first colored man there,” a native wrote in later years, “was Billy Winters, a real Christian man, a runaway slave. . . . We boys flocked to see him carry up from the brook a large tub of water on his head without spilling any. Deacon Read took Billy to his home, and he always sat at meals with the family.”

This domestic arrangement was quite in line with Deacon Read’s reputation as a “very generous and public spirited” man who had a significant role in the growth of a “thoroughly democratic village,” where the word “servant” was never used. Read, in fact, was for years an active stationmaster on the Underground Railroad, like Judge Ely Warner and his son Jonathan in Chester. In such an atmosphere, Uncle Billy Winters lived a life that was apparently happy enough. He was a great favorite among the village’s children, and with their help taught himself to read, going about among them with a spelling book and asking them what was this word or that. The street on which he lived is known to this day as Winters Avenue.

If the Underground Railroad operated adequately for William Winters in 1828, it ran even more smoothly ten years later when James Lindsey Smith journeyed over its tracks from Philadelphia north. But he had many fears and difficulties before he reached that entry port of freedom. Smith was born in Virginia, where he passed his early years as a slave. In boyhood he suffered a serious injury when a timber was dropped on his knee; through his master’s indifference he did not receive proper treatment, with the result that he was lamed for life.
In spite of this handicap, Smith made a break for freedom in 1838, along with two other slaves, Lorenzo and Zip. At their suggestion, he joined them in commandeering a boat on the Cone River, by which they meant to escape to Maryland and beyond. It was quite calm as they started on a Sunday, but once out in the bay they found a good wind. With sails set, they made brisk time as they headed up Chesapeake Bay, and on the Tuesday night they landed near Frenchtown, Maryland. “We there hauled the boat up as best we could, and fastened her,” wrote James in after years, “then took our bundles and started on foot. Zip, who had been a sailor from a boy, knew the country and understood where to go. He was afraid to go through Frenchtown, so we took a circuitous route, until we came to the road that leads from Frenchtown to New Castle. Here I became so exhausted that I was obliged to rest; we went into the woods, which were near-by, and laid down on the ground and slept for an hour or so, then we started for New Castle.”

As they walked on, however, James found it difficult to keep up with his companions, who occasionally had to stop and wait until he caught up with them. Finally Zip said, “Lindsey, we shall have to leave you for our enemies are after us, and if we wait for you we shall all be taken; so it would be better for one to be taken than all three.” Then, telling James the roads he should follow, they went off and left him behind. James was in despair:

When I lost sight of them, I sat down by the road-side and wept, prayed, and wished myself back where I first started. I thought it was all over with me forever; I thought one while I would turn back as far as Frenchtown, and give myself up to be captured; then I thought that would not do; a voice spoke to me, “not to make a fool of myself, you have got so far from home (about two
hundred and fifty miles), keep on towards freedom, and if you are taken, let it be headed towards freedom.” I then took fresh courage and pressed my way onward towards the north with anxious heart.

Going on in the darkness, James toward morning was following a railroad track through a cut in a high hill. Here he had a terrifying experience:

I heard a rumbling sound that seemed to me like thunder; it was very dark, and I was afraid that we were to have a storm; but this rumbling kept on and did not cease as thunder does, until at last my hair on my head began to rise; I thought the world was coming to an end. I flew around and asked myself, “What is it?” At last it came so near to me it seemed as if I could feel the earth shake from under me, till at last the engine came around the curve. I got sight of the fire and the smoke; said I, “It’s the devil, it’s the devil!” It was the first engine I had ever seen or heard of; I did not know there was anything of the kind in the world, and being in the night, made it seem a great deal worse than it was; I thought my last days had come; I shook from head to foot as the monster came rushing on towards me. The bank was very steep near where I was standing; a voice says to me, “Fly up the bank”; I made a desperate effort, and by the aid of the bushes and trees which I grasped, I reached the top of the bank, where there was a fence; I rolled over the fence and fell to the ground, and the last words I remember saying were, that “the devil is about to burn me up, farewell! farewell!”

How long he lay there James did not know, but when he came to himself the “devil” had vanished. Despite his fright, he resumed his journey, shaking and trembling. Soon after sunrise he heard the rumbling sound again, and the “devil” came rushing toward him once more. As the infernal machine charged by, James could see through the
coach windows the souls whom the fiend was carrying to hell. They were all white; not a colored face among them. As the train thundered out of sight, James pressed on in relief, for it was obvious that the devil was not interested in him even though in his former home he had been “a great hand to abuse the old gentleman.”

By this time he was famished, and despite a close search of the ground he could find nothing fit to eat. At length he came to a farmhouse, where he screwed up his courage to ask for food despite his fear that he might well be turned over to slave-catchers. However, the farm people accepted without question his statement that he was going to visit friends in Philadelphia. For twenty-five cents they gave him a hearty breakfast, and he went on, feeling like a new man.

By noon he reached New Castle, where he ran into Lorenzo and Zip once more. Together, they went to the waterfront, where they learned that a boat made the short run to Philadelphia twice daily. When the afternoon sailing was ready to leave, all three went aboard. James said:

How we ever passed through New Castle as we did without being detected is more than I can tell, for it was one of the worst slave towns in the country, and the law was such that no steamboat, or anything else, could take a colored person to Philadelphia without first proving his or her freedom. What makes it so astonishing to me is, that we walked aboard right in sight of everybody, and no one spoke a word to us. We went to the captain’s office and bought our tickets, without a word being said to us.

At Philadelphia the three parted on the dock. Lorenzo and Zip took a ship to Europe; James walked into the city, not knowing where he was going. Coming to a shoe store, he went in and asked the white proprietor for work as a shoemaker. The man told him No, but suggested that
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he might find work at another shoeshop up the street, whose owner was a colored man named Simpson.

James was perhaps overcautious with Simpson, for he did not reveal his identity as a fugitive slave. Instead, he sat there talking "till most night," then asked the shoemaker for a place to sleep. That would not be convenient, said Simpson, but he had a brother who might be able to help. James, however, could not understand the address given him, and as Simpson was preparing to close his shop for the night, he felt himself as badly off as before. At this point help appeared in an unexpected way:

My heart began to ache within me, for I was puzzled what to do; but just before he shut up, a colored minister came in; I thought perhaps I could find a friend in him, and when he was through talking with Simpson he started to go out, I followed him to the side-walk and asked him "if he would be kind enough to give me lodging that night." He told me "he could not, for he was going to church; that it would be late before the service closed, and besides it would not be convenient for him."

Here the same heavy cloud closed in upon me again, for it was getting dark, and I had no where to sleep that night. Circumstances were against me; he told me "I could get a lodging place if I would go to the tavern." I made no reply to this advice, but felt somewhat sad, for my last hope had fled. He then asked me if "I was free." I told him that "I was a free man." (I did not intend to let him know that I was a fugitive.) Here I was in a great dilemma, not knowing what to do or say. He told me if "I was a fugitive I would find friends." "If any one needs a friend I do," thought I to myself, for just at this time I needed the consolation and assistance of a friend, one on whom I could rely. So thought I, "it will be best for me to make known that I am a fugitive, and not to keep it a secret any longer." I told him frankly
that "I was from the South and that I was a runaway." He said, "you are"; I said "yes." He asked me if I "had told Simpson"; I said "no." He then called Simpson and asked him "if he knew that this to be a fact," Simpson asked me if "that was so?" I said "it was." He then told me to "come with him, that he had room enough for me." I went home with him and he introduced me to his family, and they all had a great time rejoicing over me. After giving me a good supper, they secreted me in a little room called the fugitive's room, to sleep; I soon forgot all that occurred around me. I was resting quietly in the arms of sleep, for I was very tired.

But the Underground Railroad agent into whose hands he had stumbled was not resting. He passed the word among his fellow abolitionists, and the next day, wrote James, "many of them came to see me, they talked of sending me to England; one Quaker asked me if I would like 'to see the Queen.' I told him that 'I did not care where I went so long as I was safe.' They held a meeting that day, and decided to send me to Springfield, Massachusetts; this was the fifth day after I left home. The next day, Friday morning, Simpson took me down to the steamboat and started me for New York, giving me a letter directed to David Ruggles, of New York."

In that city, with the help of a lady he encountered on the dock, James found his way to Ruggles' house, and the two "had a great time rejoicing together." He rested there through the week end, but on Monday Ruggles put him on a steamer to Hartford, with letters to a Mr. Foster in that city and a Dr. Osgood in Springfield. James was by now pretty well in the clear, although he did not think so when he went to the clerk's cabin to pay his fare:

I asked "how much it would be?" He told me it was three dollars. I told him it was a large sum of money, more
than I possessed. He then asked me “how much I had?” I told him “two dollars and fifty-eight cents.” He told me that “that would not do, and that I must get the rest of it.” I told him “that I was a stranger there, and that I knew no one.” He said: “You should have asked and found out.” I told him “I did, and was told that the fare would be two dollars, and that was nearly all I possessed at that time.” He requested me to hand it to him, which I did, and it robbed me of every cent I had. I then took my ticket and went forward and laid down among some bales of cotton. It was very chilly and cold, and I felt very much depressed in spirits and cast down.

Penniless, hungry, and weary, the fugitive fell asleep among the cotton bales bound for Connecticut’s mills. Later in the evening a waiter found him there, led him to the now deserted dining cabin, and gave him an excellent supper that “cost me nothing.” A short while thereafter, he experienced a further alarm:

Before I retired for the night, some one came through the cabin and told the way-passengers that they must come to the captain’s office and leave the number of their berth before they retired for the night. I did not know what he meant by that saying; I thought it meant all the passengers to pay extra for their berths. Now, thought I, if that is the case, and I sleep in the berth all night, and in the morning have no money to pay with, I shall be in trouble sure enough. As I was very tired, I desired very much to lie down and sleep till daylight. I reached Hartford quite early the next morning, so I lay till I thought the boat was along-side the wharf; I then got up and dressed myself and looked at the number of my berth, as I was told to see what it was, so if I should meet the captain I could tell him.

As it happened, he did not see the captain anywhere. Coming on deck and wondering how he could find Mr. Foster, he began to look around:
While I was looking, I saw a colored man standing, and seemed to be looking at me; I went up to him and asked him if "he knew a man by the name of Foster?" He replied: "Yes." So he went along with me, and I found Mr. Foster’s residence, by directions given; and, finding him at home, I presented the letter. After he had read it, he began to congratulate me on my escape. When he had conversed with me awhile, he went out among the friends, (Abolitionists), and informed them of my circumstances, in order to solicit aid to forward me to Springfield. Many of them came in to see me, and received me cordially; I began to realize that I had some friends. I stayed with Mr. Foster till afternoon. He raised three dollars for my benefit and gave it to me, and then took me to the steamboat and started me for Springfield. I reached there a little before night.

James now had reached the end of his appointed journey. Dr. Samuel Osgood, pastor of a Congregational church, turned out to be a genuine friend. He made James welcome in an atmosphere of Christian fellowship, found him work as a shoemaker, and saw to it that he obtained an education at a school in Wilbraham. With this training, James became an active abolitionist, making tours and giving antislavery lectures throughout southern New England. Eventually he settled in Norwich, Connecticut, as shoemaker and as pastor of a Methodist church. There he married and in due time raised a worthy family of three daughters and a son.

William Grimes, Billy Winters, and James Lindsey Smith all found a refuge in Connecticut itself, but such was not the case with the bulk of the fugitives who came into the state. For most of them, freedom lay farther north. Such a one was the young man called Charles, whose story was written down by another hand shortly after the event:
About two years since, whilst on board of one of the Connecticut River Steam Boats, I observed a young well dressed colored man, whose appearance and manners particularly attracted my attention. There was something unusual in his whole bearing, and had a favorable opportunity offered, I should have made inquiries respecting him.

A few months after the above occurrence, whilst attending a meeting at the office of the Connecticut Anti-Slavery Society in H———, a respectable gentleman of that city came to the door, evidently in haste and somewhat agitated, and enquired for Mr. B. After a short absence Mr. B. returned, and stated that the gentleman who had called him out, was under great anxiety on account of a young colored man who had been in his employ about three months, and who had just come to him in the deepest distress, confessing that he was a runaway slave, and stating that he had that moment seen his master and a noted slave dealer pass by, evidently in search of him and suspecting his residence. The gentleman and his family had become much interested in the young man, and were distressed at the thought of his being carried back into slavery. No time was to be lost, as Charles, (the name of the young man,) was confident he had been seen by his master. Directions were given, that he should go immediately, and as privately as possible, to a house designated in the outskirts of the city, and a gentleman present undertook to take him to F——— without delay.

I saw Charles for a few moments before he left H———, and when my eye first fell on him, I recognized the young man who had attracted my observation on board the Steam Boat. . . . Now, when I knew that he was a slave, that one, who I could not but feel was endowed by his Maker with qualities, (to say the least) equal to any that I myself possessed, that such an one should, in this land of boasted freedom, and in Connecticut too, be claimed
as a slave, and be compelled to flee before his fellow man, though guilty of no crime, this greatly increased my interest, and I felt that there was a law, infinitely superior to any human laws, that called upon me to assist him in this his extremity.

The friend who had undertaken to convey him to a place of safety, was not long in keeping his appointment; and, all whose interest had been excited, breathed more easily when assured that Charles was, for a time certainly, out of danger. They were soon convinced too that promptness had probably saved him, as an officer was searching that vicinity in a few minutes after his departure.

Charles had one day's rest in F——, when Mr. B. came from H—— in great haste, and advised that he be immediately removed to some other place, as large rewards were offered for his apprehension, and search would no doubt be made here. I shall not soon forget Charles' quivering lip nor his expression of eye, when told that he could not remain here; that the pursuers were on his track. Had the baying of bloodhounds fallen upon his ear, his spirit could not have sunk more within him. This feeling, however, was but for a moment. A rigidity of muscle, and a determined expression soon followed, and no one could for an instant suppose that it was an idle threat, when he said, "I will die rather than go back to slavery."

Charles' trunk had been sent to my care, and at about ten o'clock, one of our most respectable citizens, with a worthy colored man, a resident of the town, called for the trunk with Charles. The tones of his voice, and the pressure of his hand, as I bade him "good bye," touched my heart; and it was also affecting to see the disinterested benevolence of those, who had undertaken on a night of almost pitchy darkness to guide this poor stranger to a place of safety. They found a willing friend in a secluded part of the town, who secreted him for a few days, when
another devoted friend of the slave, rode forty miles, between nine o'clock in the evening and daylight the next morning, placing the poor fellow entirely out of danger. He remained in this last place some weeks, whilst negotiations were pending between Dr. Parish and the master; which, however, did not result successfully, and poor Charles was obliged to leave his country for Canada, where he arrived in safety. Queen Victoria has thereby gained a valuable subject, and we have lost one, besides adding to the long list of wrong and oppression, which already disgraces us in the eyes of the civilized world, and which cries to Heaven for vengeance.

As the story of Charles and those citizens of “H——” and “F——” who helped him makes clear, the Underground Railroad in Connecticut was a well-established, going concern by the late 1830’s. Among its “employees” were many solid citizens; and in some places at least, they could count on the acquiescence or even the outright help of officers of the law.

Such was the case in Meriden, where two fugitives named Eldridge and Jones came in disguise as “jockeys and grooms to the two famous racing horses Phantom and Fashion.” They found refuge with Homer Curtiss, a stout Underground man, who employed them in the lock shop he ran in partnership with Harlowe Isbell. The runaways had been thus engaged for some little time when word of their whereabouts seeped back to their owners in the South. The masters thereupon wrote to the sheriff in Meriden, offering him a reward if he would kidnap the pair and return them to bondage. The sheriff did nothing of the sort; instead, he relayed the message to Meriden’s leading abolitionist, the Reverend George Perkins. The latter then wrote the owners to tell them that “under no circumstances would they be allowed to regain possession of the men.”
The matter did not end there, however. Presently one of the owners appeared in Meriden and “demanded of Mr. Curtiss that he give up the men, blustering and threatening the intervention of the U. S. government.” Curtiss, replying bluntly that he had no intention whatever of surrendering the fugitives, “ordered the man from his premises.” Getting nowhere with the locksmith and receiving no cooperation from the local authorities, the slaveowner returned home, leaving Eldridge and Jones behind him.10

In Meriden it was a sheriff, in Plainfield it was a judge who sought to act against the slave-catcher. The case had its origin in the little village of Hampton, where in 1840 a young Negro girl arrived and found employment. Although they realized that she was probably a runaway, the townspeople accepted her readily enough. After a time, one Doit Price appeared to seize her as a fugitive slave, filing a claim in the manner prescribed by law at the Plainfield court. He alleged that the girl was the property of his mother; but he could not produce the supporting materials required by Connecticut’s Personal Liberty Law. The case was continued until the next day. At the appointed hour, Price reappeared with a document—which the defense attorney, in a pre-trial conference, immediately recognized as a fake. He advised Price to forget the girl and leave town via the stage that was about to depart for Norwich; and Price, caught in a blatant forgery, did so at once. The judge, when he learned of this development, was not content to let matters rest; he directed the sheriff to apprehend Price immediately and return him to court. But the order came too late. The slave-catcher, now himself a fugitive from justice, had already made his escape. As for the girl who was the cause of the action, the community’s abolitionists entrusted her to Samuel J. May in Brooklyn, who saw her safely on the road to Canada.11
Perhaps the most notable of the runaways who came to Connecticut was the Reverend James W. C. Pennington, pastor of a Hartford congregation and holder of a doctor’s degree from the University of Heidelberg, whose story is told elsewhere in this book. The most spectacular, however, were the more than forty fugitives who arrived in New Haven in 1839, not from the American South but from a foreign country. These were the captives of the Amistad.